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# ***Agram/ Uttu* in Medieval Kerala Temples: A Study of Inscriptions**

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**Abstract:** *Medieval Kerala temples served as pivotal centres for socio-cultural and economic activities, attracting patronage from the ruling class and other elite segments of the society. The temples received generous grants in the form of land and money, with a significant portion allocated for Brahmin feeding, known as agram or ūṭṭu. The present paper explores the social history of Brahmin feeding in medieval Kerala temples, utilizing inscriptions as historical artifacts to uncover various aspects of the socio-religious significance of Brahmin feeding, the extent of land grants allocated for this purpose, functioning of temple feeding houses known as agraśālas and ūṭṭupuras and the underlying power dynamics shaping these practices. The inscriptional gleanings indicate that specific donations were earmarked for hosting Brahmin feasts, with detailed instructions on provisions, cooking methods, and timing. This paper sheds light on the intricate socio-religious dynamics surrounding Brahmin feeding in medieval Kerala temples, demonstrating how these practices reinforced social hierarchies and showcased power and status in society.*

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**Keywords:** Medieval Kerala, Temples, Brahmin Feeding, Donations, Grants, Inscriptions, Social Status

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## **Introduction**

In medieval Kerala, the temples were the epicentres of all the socio-cultural and economic activities. The ruling class and other elite sections of society patronized them. Hence, the temples received enormous donations and grants in the form of land and money. Most of these donations and grants were given to obtain religious merit and display the donors' power and social status. The inscriptions reveal that a significant portion of the donations and grants received were allocated for organizing Brahmin feeding, known as *agram*. The Brahmin feedings were quite prevalent during this period, as offering food to Brahmins was seen as the most virtuous act and the easiest means to acquire religious merit. Moreover, these Brahmin feedings primarily served the purpose of showcasing the power, prestige, and social status of the donors. The present paper aims to explore the social history of Brahmin feeding in medieval Kerala temples from the ninth to fourteenth-century AD. Using inscriptions as artifacts, it delves into various aspects such as the socio-religious significance of the Brahmin

feeding, the extent of grants and donations, the working of the temple feeding houses and underlying power dynamics behind the feeding.

In the eighth-century AD, far-reaching changes happened in Kerala due to Brahmin migration, leading to the emergence of the *chaturvarṇya* system and the establishment of Brahmin settlements and numerous temples across Kerala (Sreedhara Menon 2007:90). All of these elements mutually supported one another in forming social hierarchies and upholding power hierarchies.

### ***Agram/ Ūṭṭu***

The Sanskrit term *agram/akkiram* meant feeding, especially Brahmin feeding. *Amṛtēth* and *pirāmaṇan ūṭṭu* were the other similar terms used for the Brahmin feeding. There is no considerable difference between these terms, which are simultaneously used in the inscriptions to denote Brahmin feeding. The term *amṛtēth* literally meant feeding *amṛt* or nectar, and *ūṭṭu* meant sacred feeding. In some inscriptions, the words *agram* and *amṛtēth* can be seen with the prefix *tiru*, such as *tiruvagram/ tiruakkiram* and *tiruvamrith*. The prefix *tiru* is used in the Malayalam language to indicate reverence and sanctity. It is mostly used when referring to gods, Brahmins and rulers. While *tiruvakkiram* stands for Brahmin feeding, *tiruvamirth* is mainly used for denoting *naivēdya* or *nivēca*, the food offerings to gods. Sometimes, *tiruvamirth* is also used in the context of Brahmin feeding. Thus, using *tiru* in association with Brahmin feeding underscores the significance and sanctity attributed to Brahmin feeding.

The inscriptions show that the Brahmin feeding called *agrams/ūṭṭus* was conducted to attain religious merit, prosperity, and better health. The sources also point out that the *agrams* were even conducted as *prāyaśchitha* or penance (Ramachandran 2007: 108). In some instances, the Brahmin feeding was conducted in the names of deceased persons for their *mōkśa* (Ramachandran 2007: 349).

In medieval Kerala, several donations to temples were explicitly meant to offer *naivēdyams* to the deities and host feasts for the Brahmins. The inscriptional references of these donations are enriched with the provisions given for the *ūṭṭu* or feeding, cooking instructions, and the timing of the *ūṭṭu*, etc. The grocery items, including rice, vegetables, pulses, coconut, tamarind, salt, ghee, *jaggery*, ripe and unripe plantains, and curd, were donated to the temples to prepare food for *agram/* feast. Additionally, after the feast, there were also ceremonial offerings of betel known as *thāmbūlārchana*.

The Tiruvattuvai Copper plate inscription dating back to the ninth-century AD, records a unanimous agreement made by the *tiruvāṭṭusabha*, or temple assembly, regarding a land donation by a local resident and his wife for the *āvāṇiyōṇam* festival at the temple (Ramachandran 2007:12). The copper plate-1 of the inscription clearly states that “*tiruvakkirathinu pāyathukku dānam cheitha pūmi*”, the land donated for feeding *pāyatham/ pāyasam*, milk pudding in *tiruvakkiram*. This inscription provides detailed instructions on the required provisions for feeding *pāyasam* the milk pudding to the

Brahmins, including the ingredients, food preparation methods, and the specific timings to commence the cooking process. The inscription shows the grocery items needed for preparing *pāyasam*, including ghee, green gram, and sugar and plantain fruits. The inscription also instructs that the cooking should begin at twelve feet time of the day and be continued until the evening (TAS Vol.2 Part-ii:86). Moreover, this inscription provides evidence of the prevalence of the *ōṇam* festival during the early medieval period and the importance of *pāyasam*, milk pudding in the *ōṇam* feasts. Still, *pāyasam* is an inevitable item in *ōṇasadyās/ōṇam* feasts.

Thiruvananthikkara copper plate (892 AD) records King Vikramaditya Varangunan's land grants to the temple *sabha* during his daughter's consecration ceremony to the temple as a *dēvadāsi*, the temple dancer. The inscription refers to these donated lands as "*vithupādams*", the paddy lands. Hence, the inscription states that the surpluses from these *vithupādams* should be used for feeding the members of Parthivapuram perumākkal and mentions the purpose as "*ūṭṭū vathināi dānam cheithath*", which means donated for conducting *ūṭṭu* or feeding (Ramachandran 2007:128). Here, the perumākkal must be Brahmins or Brahmin Vedic students called Cāttirars.

A tenth-century Moozhikkalam temple inscription mentions *uttamākkiram* as a ritual feeding or *agram* to the uttamar. Puthusseri Ramachandran points out that this uttamar denotes Brahmins, especially cāttirars of the Vedic *śālai* (Ramachandran 2007:44).

Sometimes, the tenants and agricultural laborers were also exchanged along with the land grants made for *agrams*. One of the Trikkakara series describes a collective donation of land and gold made by feudal lords and other elites to the temple. It explicitly mentions that the *agram* should be conducted in everyone's name who had contributed the gold and lands for the *agram*. The surplus from the land should be spent for the *Brāhmaṇa bhōjanam* or Brahmin feeding with twelve *kalam* rice and also provision made for *karkkidaka kañji* or rice porridge made with some medicinal plants during the *Karkkidakam* month of the Malayalam calendar (Ramachandran 2007:49). *Karkkidakam* is the rainy season of Kerala. Partaking of this *karkkidaka kañji* is believed to boost people's immune systems.

Furthermore, it also states that if the tenants of these lands failed to give the surplus to the temple for *ūṭṭu*, they were liable to pay twice the amount required for buying the groceries of *ūṭṭu*. The same inscription records that the *rakśābhōgam* or the protection tax collected from the lands should be used for organizing *ūṭṭu* with 100 *nāzhi* rice in every *karkkidakam*. It was the responsibility of the tenants to provide the seeds and paddy to the temple for *tiruvamirthu* for gods and *tiruvakkiram* for Brahmins; failure to do so resulted in the temple authorities suspending their tenureship and authorities conducting the *ūṭṭu* (Ramachandran 2007:49-51).

Trikkakara inscription II records land donation made by a queen called *kiḷānadikal* for conducting two *tiruvagrams* in the temple along with a specified dish. The grocery list given in the inscription consists of ghee, tamarind and coconut, curry leaves, and salt,

which seems like a recipe for *cammani* or chutney (Ramachandran 2007:45). It also states the penalty for obstructing this feeding.

Eleventh-century Peruneyil temple inscription lists the groceries used in feeding conducted in the temple and refers to an officer called *vilavāriyar*, who seems like a manager of agricultural products. As per this inscription, 1000 Brahmins may be fed each year during the festivals conducted by the *Tirunālgaṇattār*, the festival organizers in the harvesting month of *Kanni*. It states that every year, the donor and temple servants will be feeding 100 men per day during the ten days of the festival. Additionally, it records that the *vilavāriyar* should be responsible for arranging two bunches of unripe plantain, one bunch of plantain fruits, ten coconuts, and two kinds of vegetables, pure salt, good tamarind, good curds, and good buttermilks for preparing the feast. It was the duty of the *poduvāl* (a class of temple servants) to measure the feeding items, and he also had to bring the vegetables for frying. The document also states that the festival can commence only after the completion of the feeding. If the feeding failed, the *gaṇattān* or the authority who failed to bring the dues must pay the fine of gold with betel leaves and nuts (TAS Vol.5 Part-ii: 37).

Some inscriptions explicitly state that land grants were intended solely for exclusively hosting Brahmin feeding. For instance, Tiruvalla Copper Plate-V from the twelfth-century mentions explicitly the allocation of land exclusively for hosting *agram*, referring to '*akkirachalaippunam*' or *agraśāla* and "*agrathinulla bhūmi*", the land solely dedicated to this purpose. This inscription also mentions that the feeding Brahmins and Cāttirars were considered a part of *tiruvarādhana*, the sacred worship (TAS Vol.1 Part-i:136-140).

Moreover, the gleanings from inscriptions show that sometimes, the grant for Brahmin feeding was as huge as the donation of an entire village. Kilimanur record (1168 AD) (TAS Vol.5 Part-i:70) describes the donation of a complete village for feeding Brahmins in the *brahmōlsavam* festival of the temple.

Even more interestingly, there are some instances where around six villages were even given away for organizing grand feasts for Brahmins. A twelfth-century inscription from Tirumulikkalam Vishnu temple records a donation of six villages by a king to conduct a grand feast for Brahmins, which cost a huge amount equal to the annual yield of six villages (TAS Vol.1 Part-i: 12-13). Tiruvidaikkodu temple inscription of the fourteenth-century talks about a *sarvagrastaka vastu-dāna*, an absolute gift of land for *agram* to feed twelve Brahmins during the *viśākham* annual festival (TAS Vol.5 Part-ii:143). It was a massive donation of one part of the Vēṇād kingdom by the Vēṇād ruler. All of these evidences cement the importance of feeding charity to the Brahmins in Medieval Kerala.

### ***Agraśālas: Temple Feeding Houses***

For the conduct of *agram*, the temples had feeding houses called *agraśālas/ akkiracālas*. Since the term *agram* meant Brahmin feeding, the *agraśāla* was the place where

Brahmins were fed. The term *agraśāla*/ feeding house/feast house might have derived from the word *śālai*. The *śālais* were Vedic study centres attached to the temples with residential setups and mess facilities. Here, the Cāttirars, or Brahmin Vedic students, received free food. Scholars like Gopinatha Rao and M.G.S Narayanan's opinion the term *śālai* means a hall generally used for a feeding house attached to the temples (Narayanan 1970:126). One of the earliest evidence of the working of a *śālai* of the early medieval period can be seen in the Parthivapuram copper plate inscription of the ninth-century AD. This inscription documents a donation intended to feed the Cāttirars/Vedic students of Parthivapuram *śālai*. It also mentions that the students who violate the rules and regulations of the *śālai* may risk expulsion from the *śālai* mess (Ramachandran 2007:115-126).

Since the Sanskrit term *agram* was called *ūṭṭu* in Malayalam, the later records widely used the term *ūṭṭupuras* to refer to *agraśālas*. These feeding houses, called *ūṭṭupuras*, were very prevalent even in the nineteenth-century (Padmanabha Menon 1937: 107). The upkeep of these *agraśālas/ūṭṭupuras* was mainly sustained through the donations made by the kings, chieftains and other wealthy individuals, seeking religious merit and social status in return.

### **Punishment for Ūṭṭumuṭṭikkal**

The inscriptional records show that obstructing these Brahmin feedings often led to punishment and fines. Obstructing *ūṭṭu* was referred as *ūṭṭu muṭṭikkal*. A 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription from Trikkākkara shows that the person or the authority that obstructed the Brahmin feeding had to pay fines and to conduct the *ūṭṭu*, or they had to cultivate the items needed for *ūṭṭu* mentioned as *ūṭṭuvattam*. The cultivation of this *ūṭṭuvattam* was referred to as *ūṇu kṛśi*, the meal cultivation (Ramachandran 2007: 12). The success of *agram/ūṭṭu* was the responsibility of the temple authorities. An inscription from Nedumpuram Tali temple records a land grant allocated for Brahmin *ūṭṭu* in the temple and mentions that if the *adhikāris* or the temple authorities fail to carry out this *ūṭṭu*, they are obliged to cover the expenses of the *ūṭṭu*, even if it requires borrowing (Ramachandran 2007: 52-53).

Tirukkadithanam temple inscription specifies that the fund assigned for the *tiruvarmirthu* offered to the deity and *tiruvogram* to the Brahmins must not be diverted to any other purposes. Additionally, it states that anyone who opposes or hinders these sacred feedings of gods and Brahmins will be required to pay a fine in gold to the *kōyiladhikāris* (temple authorities), *nāduvāzhi* (feudal lord) and *dēśavāzhi* (ruler) (Ramachandran 2007: 65).

A later inscriptional record from Tiruvidaikkodu temple highlights the spiritual rewards gained from this feeding charity, equating it to the merit earned by presenting a tawny cow at the banks of the river Ganges. Moreover, it also warns that obstructing this charitable act of feeding would incur a sin equal to killing a tawny cow (TAS Vol. 5, Part-ii 1924:149-151, TAS Vol.7 Part-ii, year: 131). A similar mention is found in an inscription from Kaliyangadu temple (TAS Vol.5 Part-ii 1924:157).

## About Feeding Servants

A series of Trikkakara from the tenth-century AD is enriched with information on grocery items, feeding servants and their payments, and, more interestingly, this inscription also reveals the hierarchical structure among the feeding servants included in the entire cooking and serving, often reflecting their caste identities. The Trikkakara inscription I records the land donation made by King Kerala Kesari Perumal to the temple to meet the daily expenses of the temple. It mentions that the temple will get around 214 *kalam* paddies yearly from this land. Here, the donation is vast because the donor is a king. Twenty *kalam* will be shared among the cultivators in these amounts of paddies, and the rest, 194 *kalam*, will go to the temple *pattāyappura* or granaries. Out of these 194 *kalam*, a significant share should be spent on *naivēdyam* and *brahmana bhōjanam* (Ramachandran 2007: 40). Here, the cook who makes *sadya* or feast, those who serve leaves and firewood, those who pound rice, refuse sweeper and dishwasher are eligible for some remuneration in the form of paddy.

The conducting of an *agram*, the feast for Brahmins, employed many cooking servants in the temples. This Trikkakara series gives a clear idea about the feeding servants of the temple. Here, the *akkiramāduvan* or cook who makes *sadya* or feast; *ilayitunnavan*, those who serve leaves and *virakitunnavan*; the firewood supplier, *arikuthunnavan*, the one who pound the rice are eligible for some remuneration in the form of paddy and gold. More interestingly, there is a provision for providing paddy to the food refuse sweeper, called *ecchileduppan*, and *kaiaayunnavan* or dishwasher. Looking more closely, we can see the hierarchy of the servants included in the feast-making. Here, *akkiramāduvan* receives more payment of ten *kāṇam* gold, standing first in the hierarchy. Secondly, *virakitunnavan* or the firewood supplier, also receives ten *kāṇam*. The rest of the workers, *ilayitunnavan*/ leaves supplier, *arikuthunnavan*, the rice pounder, *ecchileduppan*, the refuse sweeper and *kaiaayunnavan*, the dishwasher stands in the lower rung of this hierarchy, and they combined received five *kāṇam*. This hierarchy clearly follows the caste identity of the servants. The temple cooks usually come from the strata of Brahmins, mostly Tamil Brahmins (Kurupp 2018:86). Moreover, others like rice pounders, refuse sweepers, and dishwashers can be comparatively from lower strata than the cooks and firewood suppliers.

## Conclusion

The sources clearly show that the primary beneficiaries of feeding conducted in the temples were Brahmins. They could be ordinary Brahmins, Cāttirars or Vedic Brahmin students and Brahmin mendicants. Even though *annadāna* was the greatest of all charities, it was exclusively meant for feeding Brahmins. There is no reference to lower castes, and women were fed in the temple feeding houses, possibly due to concerns about ritual purity and social taboos. This leads to the assumption that feeding was a special privilege enjoyed by Brahmin men.

The act of feeding Brahmins, either alongside deities or afterwards, elevated them to the pinnacle of social hierarchy. There was an explicit hierarchy that worked within

and outside of these feeding institutions. The semiotic analysis of the terms used to denote feeding, like *tiruvamirthu*, *tiruvakkiram*, *amṛtēth*, etc., clearly state that the feeding conducted in the temple for deities and Brahmins has distinguished them from ordinary people and demarcated boundaries, therefore, sustained hierarchy in the society. It should be noted that terms like *agram/amṛtēth/ūṭṭu* were exclusively related to Brahmin feeding and sometimes used to denote the eating manners of the Kings (Gundert 1872:149). These usages cannot be seen in the case of common people. Moreover, the study of the inscriptions unmistakably indicates that these *agras/ūṭṭus* were not just feeding but grand feasts that included a variety of delicacies. A similar term, *amṛtēth* or feeding *amṛt*, clearly shows that the foods served in the *agras* were special. These feasts played an important role in reinstating power differences and to maintaining hierarchies in the society. The extent of the feast was determined by the amount of the donation and the social standing of the donor and vice versa. In most cases, the donors were the ruling class and feudal elites. By leveraging the appeasement of the priest class, the Brahmins they could legitimize their political power and showcase their status and prestige in society.

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