

Remaking the Past: Identifying Sramanic Traditions from Kerala

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Abstract

For historians and researchers, reconstructing the glorious but hidden Jaina and Buddhist antiquity of the Kerala region has proven to be a great challenge in the absence of necessary sources. But its influence in Kerala society is unquestionable. A wide range of socio-economic, political, and artistic endeavours expanded heterodox faiths like Jainism and Buddhism throughout centuries and across numerous geographical regions, from the mid-Gangetic valley to Kerala. The contributions of the Jains and Buddhists to the development of society and culture in Kerala have not been adequately highlighted and integrated into the mainstream of Kerala historical studies, despite the empirical and conceptual advances made in Kerala historiography over the last two decades. The history of the Jains and the Buddhists was pushed to the back burner in favour of the major focus of Kerala history and culture, centring on Brahmin settlements and temple-oriented sociocultural structures. To understand the socio-economic aspects of the spread of the heterodox Jain and Buddhist religio-cultural groups to Kerala, my article suggests setting a few epigraphical examples from the Jain and Buddhist relics in Kerala against the backdrop of Kerala's medieval history.

Keywords: Jainism, Buddhism, Brahmanism

Introduction

One of Kerala's most intricate and fascinating historical chapters is the impact of religion on its society. Kerala has long been the hub for the exchange of ideas across all of the Indian religions and schools of philosophy. In addition to Buddhism and Jainism, other worldwide religions have found secure environments inside our borders including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The mainstream of Kerala historical studies has not adequately emphasized or incorporated the contributions made by Jains and Buddhists to the growth of Kerala society and culture. While the socio-cultural systems centred around temples and Brahmin settlements which received most of the attention, the histories of the Jains and Buddhists were marginalized and merely included as appendices to the main body of Kerala history and culture.

The earliest traces of Jainism may be found in significant literary works such as Suka Sandesa and Koka Sandesa in the Sandesakavya and Silappadikaram, Akanannuru, and Purannanuru in the Sangam writings. The eulogies, temple remains, architecture of buildings, and the idols in temples are evidence of the presence of Jainism in Kerala. The early years of the Christian era saw the peak of the religion.

It appears that Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka were more welcoming to Jainism. Their architectural designs for their temples and other religious buildings were largely similar to those of the Hindus; this

similarity has endured over the ages. The gods or objects installed for worship and their corresponding symbols formed the decorative elements of such temples, marking the credal difference only.

In recent times, there has been a better understanding of the metamorphosis of the pre-Aryan cult spots into temple sites in the period from the third century A.D. Structures didn't elevate the cult spots.' They were spots of socio-religious interaction.'¹ In the Harappan sites, we don't find any substantiation of a temple.² The first millennium A.D. had witnessed the gradational appropriation of the cult spots of the indigenous populations by the dominant faiths. The emergence of the temple as a centre of deification roughly from the 3rd century A.D. onwards had needed the absorption of numerous of the beliefs current among the ethnical groups.³ In the early centuries of the Christian period, Brahmanism assimilated popular religions known for the veneration of animals, trees, mountains and rivers.

Appropriation of popular deities, beliefs, and cult spots is a process which has been going on through the centuries which ultimately converted an exclusive Brahmanical faith into one representative of the varied belief systems. The very history of Hinduism shows numerous exemplifications of freer relinquishment of features from other religions, which included tribal and monastic. This process gained momentum after the transformation of Brahmanism into Puranic Hinduism. Contriving connections to the divinities of the dominant faiths and temple structure were among the most effective styles which eased the objectification of rudiments from other faiths into Puranic Hinduism. The belief systems of the ethnical groups whose religion represents a continuation of the prehistoric religious traditions were set up to give a popular element to faiths like Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. In the south, including Kerala, there were several cases of conversion of Buddhist and Jain deities and temples into Hindu deities.⁴

Methodology

To conduct the study, an analytical method of historical research is applied. There is the use of both primary and secondary sources. Books, journals, and websites constitute the majority of secondary sources, while various reports and other documents gathered from different repositories constitute the primary sources

Jain Tradition in Kerala

The neighbouring regions of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are home to all of Kerala's oldest Jain temples. Tamil Nadu's Madurai and Tirunelveli districts are well-known for their Jain traditions. The history of the Jain tradition dates back to prior to Common Era reveals the Tamil Brahmi Inscriptions found in the Pazhi caves. Sravanabelgola, in particular, in Karnataka, is linked to the Chandra Gupta-Bhadrabahu legend. In short, these are locations that can lay claim to a long-standing historical custom. Before investigating the ancient Jain temples of Kerala and their socio-economic relations, it is necessary to say that there is no proof, either from written or archaeological sources, that the Jain sites neighbouring Kerala are older than the eighth or ninth century AD. Here, the goal is to draw attention to the lack of historical evidence rather than refute the locations' connections to nearby regions.⁵

¹ Rajan Gurukkal, *Social Formations of Early South India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010

² . R.S. Sharma, *India's Ancient Past*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, p. 83

³ shereen Ratnagar, *Understanding Harappa*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2001, p. 10

⁴ Bradley K. Hawkins, *Asian Religions*, Pearson-Longman, London, 2004, p. 1

⁵ . Raghava Varier.M.R, *Jainamatahm Keralathil.*,NBS Trivandrum,2016,p.19

The beginning of the Kollam Era (825 A.D.) was an age of drastic changes in Kerala's political and socio-economic history. We started getting epigraphic and literary source material, including information about the Jains and Buddhists, from the 9th century of the Christian era.⁶

Jainism is one of the oldest and organised religions in the Indian subcontinent. The historical penetration of Jainism into Peninsular India before the Common Era is a fact.⁷ Wayanad, Central Kerala, and South Travancore are the areas in which the Jain remains in Kerala are concentrated. Talekkavu, Tiruvannur, Kinalur, Alathur, Matilakam, Kallil, Tiruchcharanam, and other sites have solid proof of Jain remains. The fact that the artefacts are found near the well-travelled trade routes that once linked Kerala to Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and other places is noteworthy. Jainism's subcontinental foundation in trade is well known. The Jain centres of Kerala also had strong ties to major hubs for commerce. Enough clues exist to demonstrate the intimate relationships that existed between these locations and the nearby Jain communities in and around Madurai, the Kongu region, and Karnataka across the Western Ghats' mountain passes.

Jainism is believed to have spread into Kerala, as per the legendary accounts, in the 3rd century BCE soon after Chandragupta Maurya came to Shravanabelagola. The Jaina monks who accompanied him are said to have moved further south, into present-day Kerala and Tamil regions, in search of suitable places for their meditation and the propagation of their faith. By the end of the Pre-Common Era, Jainism seems to have been well established in Kerala. The Ceras were the native rulers of Kerala. Asokan edicts called them Keralaputras (Ketalaputo).⁸ Studies on the Ancient Ceras up to the first half of the 20th Century relied entirely on the literary evidence in the form of Tamil Sangam and allied literature such as Pathitruppathu, Akananuru, Purananuru, Pattupattu, Manimekalai, Silappadikaram, etc. The Pathitruppathu text deals exclusively with the ten Cera kings who ruled over the regions of present-day Kerala and contiguous parts of present-day Tamil Nadu.⁹

Rediscovering the Jain tradition in Kerala is a sensitive task since numerous non-Hindu shrines and centres of settlement were assimilated to the Hindu fold either by force or by contingency. The artistic and architectural remains undoubtedly prove that Kerala had a sufficient number of Jain followers in history. The concept of Yakshas and Yakshis in the Kerala society along with the discovery of Jain relics speaks about the Jain tradition of Kerala. The first Jain settlement in Kerala appeared around the 8th century.¹⁰ The Jains must have entered Kerala through the Palakkad gap from the Kongu lands of Tamil Nadu during the early historical period when the Ceras ruled over the territory to the west of the Chola kingdom and the coastal strip from the Palghat gap to the Cape.¹¹ The Kongu country, controlled by the early Ceras, had been a major centre of Jainism right from the pre-Christian period onwards. The Palakkad gap

⁶ Elamkulam, Studies in Kerala History, N.B.S., Kottayam, 1970, p. 217

⁷ Desai, P.B. (1957). Jainism in South India and Some Jaina Epigraphs. Sholapur: Gulabchand Hirachand Doshi, Jaina Samskriti Samrakshaka Sangha, P1-3,32

⁸ Hultzsch, E (Ed).1925 (New Edition).Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum (CII).Vol. I. Inscriptions of Asoka. Oxford: Clarendon Press, P-2-3

⁹ M. S. Dhiraj, Jainism under the Ancient Ceras, of Kerala, South Asian History, Culture and Archaeology Vol. 2, No. 1, 2022, PP-87-88

¹⁰ Dr. P D Padmakumar, Jainism in Kerala, Mathrubhumi books, Kozhikkode,2006, p. 25

¹¹ P.N.Chopra, T.K.Ravindran and N.Subramanian (ed) History of South India, Vol. 1 : Ancient Period, S. Chand & Company Ltd., N

connected the Kongu lands to the port towns of Kerala similar to Kodungallur, Ponnani and Calicut in ancient times. Inscriptions, dated to the 10th and 11th centuries testify to the presence of traders from Tamil Nadu engaged in trading activities in the region during the Chola times.¹²

Once Kerala was a part of Tamizhakam. Chithral, also known as Chitharal Malai Kovil now in Kanyakumari district, Tamilnadu was a part of Kerala. The images of Thirthankaras on the walls of the Saraswathi temple and the icons of the 23rd and 24th Thirthankaras erected in the Sanctum Sanctorum of the temple, prompt us to believe that the Saraswathi temple at Chithral was a Jain Basti at least upto 13th century. Nagercoil, in the south, once a part of the Travancore area was a prominent Jain centre from the 8th century to the 12th century. At the Nagarajaswami temple of Nagercoil, six Jain icons have been set up. We can see the icons of Parswanatha and Mahavira inside the temple even now.¹³

What is an ancient tradition among the Jaina community's surviving members in Palakkad is that the Jains were originally from Karnataka. This version states that four Jaina merchants left Kellam-pulli in Mysore in the fifteenth century to migrate to Palghat. They settled in Manikkapattanam and Muttupattanam after buying land from the Palakkad Raja to avoid persecution by the Mysorean ruler at the time.¹⁴ Given that Jainism was severely strained in Karnataka in the thirteenth century, there is some truth to the tradition.¹⁵ Jain remains were seen at Thirucharanam in the Kuzhithurai area of Nagercoil in South Travancore. They were also seen at locations like Kilirur, Neelumperur, in Kottayam district, Perumbavoor, Kallil cave temple in Ernakulam district, Alathoor, Kongad in Palakkad district, Panamaram, Kalpatta, Pulpalli in Wayanad district.¹⁶ The majority of the significant Hindu temples in modern times are Jain temple structures from ancient times. Jainism is the religion of our country, and many of the temples belong to this sect.¹⁷ Jain temples were converted into Hindu temples during this transformation. Matilakam was also the centre of Jainism in ancient Kerala. Matilakam is located at Cherthala taluk of Alappuzha district.¹⁸ Mathilakam or Thrikannamatilakam was famous during the Perumals. ¹⁹ Here, till recently, Brahmins did not enter the temple. Thrikannamatilakam is not only a cultural centre but also a busy market. Jain merchants arrived here through Palaghat. Important places like these are located near many Jain temples and Jain Sanketam. ²⁰This is mentioned in the Malayalam work Kokasandesham.

The Koodalmanikyam temple in Irinjalakuda, near Thrissur, was originally a Jain temple. Irinjalakkuda is one of the 64 (32 in Kerala) Brahmin Settlements that appear in Kerala records. The temple's image is that

¹² M. G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*. Cosmo Books, Thrissur, 2018.

¹³ Ibid, Dr. P D Padmakumar, *Jainism in Kerala*, pp 36- 37

¹⁴ V.C.Vijaya Chandra Jain, 'The Jain Temple at Palghat', in *Government Victoria College Magazine*, Vol.V, no. 3, February, 1939, p.205

¹⁵ P.B. Desai, *Jainism in South India*, Ootacamund, 1957, p.401

¹⁶ S. Achuthawarrier, *Kerala Samskaram (mal)*, The State Institute of Languages, Thiruvananthapuram. 2014, p. 48

¹⁷ Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 1876, p. 270

¹⁸ Vilakkudi, Rajendran, *Kerala Sthalanama Kosam, (Mal)*, State Institute of Languages, Thiruvananthapuram, 2007 p. 232

¹⁹ M. R. Raghava, Varier and Rajan, *Gurukul, Kerala Charithram, (Mal)*, Vallathol Vidyapeetham, Edapal, 2011, p. 181

²⁰ Velayudhan, Panikkassery, *Keralacharithrathinte Ullarakallilekku (Mal)*, Current Books, Kottayam, p. 25

of Sri Rama's brother, Bharata.²¹ However, some historians believe that the image installed inside the Kudalmanikam temple is that of Bharateshwara, a Digambara, rather than Bharata. This assumption appears to have some validity because this area was once a stronghold of Jainism.²² An old Jain shrine has been found in Kallil, near Perumbavur.²³ The temple's interior is a natural rock-cut cave. Inside the temple, there are images of Parswanatha, Mahavira, and Padmavati. It is now a Bhagavati temple. Nambudiri Brahmins perform poojas. Ganavathy Vattom of Sulthan Batherry in Wayanad, also a Jain centre in Kerala, is the most important cave in south India in Ambukuthy Mala, discovered by Fred-Fawcett in 1890. The Bhagavati temple, located on the hills, is also believed to be one of the earliest Jain Shrines. In addition to these Jain temples in Kerala, there is a Jain temple in Chitharal village, Kanyakumari district, at Thirucharanattu Malai. It has a cave with rock-cut sculptures of Thirthankaras and attendant deities dating back to the 9th century A.D. The temple was converted into a Bhagavati temple in the 14th century. Even as late as the 13th century, the Bhagavati temple appears to have been a place of Jain worship.²⁴ The town of Nagercoil, where this temple is situated, is also known as the Nagaraja temple. Nagercoil's Nagaraja temple was also a Jain temple. The image of Parswanatha was transformed into Anantakrishna. An old Jain temple ruins were also discovered in the Palakkad district's Alathoor taluk.²⁵ There are also Jain shrines in the Kasarcode district that cater to the spiritual needs of the locals.

The majority of the Cera kings of the Middle Ages supported Hinduism, particularly Saivism and Vaishnavism. However, considering certain inscriptional evidence, we must reconsider the religious association of Mahodayapuram's final Cera Perumal, Rama Kulasekhara, also known as Kulasekhara Chakravartikal (c. 1089-1122 CE). His Kollam Pillar Inscription is essential to comprehend the state of Jainism in Kerala in the first few years of the 12th century CE. This epigraphic record represents the last Cera ruler to rule from Makotai. On the four sides of a granite pillar, this record is written in 151 lines of old Malayalam using the Vatteluttu and Grantha scripts. The record is extremely worn, making it challenging to read in its entirety.²⁶

This record unveils some facts like the historical mistake committed by the king or his ancestors to the Arya Brahmins of Kerala is documented in the inscription, along with a list of atonement measures. It speaks of Trikunavay, a temple to which the king gave paddy in honour of the Koothu festival. It's hard to identify the temple that received the donation, Kirradichchuvaram. The inscription also speaks of gathering paddy from tenants to be worshipped at the temple of Trikunavay, which is located right next to the king's court. It implies that worship was performed under the direct supervision of King Rama

²¹ Cover file. 15595, Iringalakkuda temple, 1829, State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 2

²² A. V. Shankara Naryanan, Rao, Temples of Kerala, Vasan Publications, Bangalore, 2001, p. 84

²³ O. K. Johnny, (Ed), Edakkal Caves and The History of Wayanad, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozhikode, 2008, p. 395

²⁴ T.K. Velu Pillai, The Travancore State Manual, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, Vol. 11, p. 183

²⁵ 4 Ramanatha, Ayyar, Travancore Archaeological series, Vol. VI, Part. 1, Government Press, Trivandrum, 1927, p. 153

²⁶ M. S. Dhiraj, Kollam Pillar Inscription of Rama Kulasekhara: The Last Cera Record of a Jain Perumal of Makothai, Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 6 (2018), p.488

Kulasekhara, who was a follower of the Jain religion. It is thought that Trikunavay, also called Thrikanamathilakam or Kunavayir Kottam, is close to the Cera capital. ²⁷

Jain influence in Kerala-

Every Jain inscription that is currently accessible in Kerala refers to their commercial ties. Based on inscriptional evidence, it has been noted that the Jain Palli of Tiruchcharanam participated in banking activities. Inscriptions reveal the socio-economic foundation of Jain groups, with a prominent institution being the trade guild. The Talekkavu inscription mentions Nalpattennayiravar, the Forty-Eight Thousand, which founded a town or marketplace. The same guild is mentioned in the Alathur inscription of the 10th century AD. Valanciar is another trade guild mentioned at Alathur. These corporate bodies participated in agreements and protected the Palli and its property. The Palli of Talekkavu was an establishment of Nalpattennayiravar, similar to the Manigramam of the Kottayam Syrian Copper Plates and the Tarisappalli at Kollam in the 9th century AD.²⁸

The rulers of Mahodayapuram, known as Kulasekharas or Perumals, were interested in Jain centres, as evidenced by King Vijayaraga's association with the Palli of Vijayaragesvaram and the presence of a governor at Tiruvannur. The privileged bodyguards or Companions of Honour like Arunurruvar and Elunurruvar, were tasked with protecting the Jain Pallis' property.²⁹

Jainism in Kerala has had a minimal impact on the country's culture and life. During ancient times, various customs and systems existed, with Jainism maintaining its identity. The Vadakirikal custom, practiced by Jains who fasted until death, is considered a legacy of Jainism in Kerala. Important terms like Pallipadu (temple wealth), Nalajiar (the guru of Jain vihara), and Pacha Parameshtical (Acharyan or Upadhiyan) are still used. Jain architecture is evident in temples and mosques in Malabar, with some constructed with Jain architecture. Texts like Vastu, Agma, and Tantra reveal the architectural style and ritual elements of ancient Jainism traditions³⁰. One of the most significant religious practices that emerged in Kerala as a result of Jainism's influence is Naga worship. Regarding the worship of the Nagas, the entire state of Kerala began to practice the worship of Kavus, or sacred groves. In these hallowed groves, the worship of Parswanath and Padmavati gave way to the worship of Nagaraja and the Naga queen (Naga Yakhshi).³¹ The Jain centres in medieval Kerala experienced gradual cultural absorption despite their separate cultural and religious affiliations. They shared a significant cultural totality with the temple-centered society, economy, and feudalized polity, as seen in Jain inscriptions. The extent to which they were absorbed into the temple-oriented society is uncertain. The traditional social hierarchy of Kerala had no theoretical space for accommodating traders, leading to various groups of traders, including the Jains, operating in Kerala. The process of the Jain Pallis becoming Hindu temples was influenced by the Bhakti movement. Cultural vestiges of the Jains in language, place names, rituals, and folk culture can provide insight into the latter

²⁷ Ibid p.290

²⁸ J. Packia Rani, Dr. N. Mohamad Hussain, The Socio-Economic Base Of The Jain Religio-Cultural Groups In Medieval Kerala: An overview, Paripex - Indian Journal of Research, P-82

²⁹ Ibid p.82

³⁰ Kapila, Vatsyayan, K.G. Paulose, T The Arts of Kerala Kshetram, Paico Press, Erunkulam, 1989, p. 31

³¹ Aju, Narayanan, *Keralathila Budhamathaparamparyam Nattarivukallilude*, (Mal), Anugraha Kottayam, 2005, p. 30

phase of their history in Kerala. The history of the Jains, which began outside temple-centered agrarian corporations, became part of the temple-oriented society and culture by the time they were absorbed into the Hindu fold. The Jain vestiges in Kerala are evidence of a cultural transaction that produced cultural symbols, which became part of the Jains' legacy in Kerala history and culture.³²

The reality is that the presence of Jain relics in Kerala indicates how much of an impact Jainism has had on the populace. However, the advent of Saivism and Vaisnavism in the eighth century, the Bhakti movement, the Sankaracharya and Advaita cult, and others all had an impact on the decline of Jainism in Kerala. In the seventh century, Chinese traveller Huan-Tsang saw a decline in Jainism.³³ The vegetarian diet and reclusive lifestyle of Jain monks contributed to the religion's lack of popularity. The decline of Jainism was also influenced by the expansion of Islam and Christianity. The majority of people were also discouraged from practising Jainism by prevailing taboos and beliefs.

Jain inscriptions from Kerala reveal some key aspects of Jain rituals and traditions. The main ritual in temples is to worship with incense such as flowers and sandalwood paste. The meritorious effect of incense worship is stated in Vasunandisravakacharam and Paramarthaprakasam. The majority of these rituals were based on ancient mythology, which serves as the source of these types of rituals and worship. Yakshi as well as Yaksha worship has its roots in mythology as well.³⁴

Jain temples were financially prosperous institutions. That wealth provided a means of subsistence for those who relied on the temple for various purposes. After spending, the surplus should be distributed as a loan to the needy. In short, financial assistance was provided to those in need. At this point, we can assume that Jain temples had a direct impact on the community's social, economic, and cultural activities. Jain temples, like other temples, served as a community centre.³⁵

Kerala was inspired by Jainism and Jain ideals for a very long time. Despite having not originated from Kerala, it had a significant impact on its way of living and its cultural heritage. It affected not just people's thoughts but also their way of life. Through the monuments strewn throughout Kerala, one can observe the remnants of Buddhism. This hints at the growth and dissemination of Jainism in this country in an oblique manner.

Buddhism in Kerala

The Sangam literary masterpieces Manimekalai and Silappadikaram originate from Tamil Nadu's pre-Pallava era. The Malabar Coast and the Cera dynasty are mentioned in both literary works. The author of Silappadikaram, Cera prince Elango Adikal, is thought to be the brother of Cera king Senguttuvan. The author of Manimekalai, Koolavanihan Sathanar, was a close companion of Senguttuvan the Cera King. It seems like there is no record of worshipping Buddha images in Manimekhalai. The protagonist mentions seeing symbolic images of Buddha, such as his footprints, seat, or throne under the Bodhi tree etc³⁶

In Manimekhalai, the term Sangha refers to Buddhist Sangha. Buddhism spread throughout Kerala, as

³² Raghava Varier.M.R, *Jainamatahm Keralathil.*,NBS Trivandrum,2016,p.57

³³ K.N. Gopala Pilla, *Kerala Mahacharithram* (Mal), Subbaya Rediyar, Book Depot, Thiruvananthapuram, 1948, p. 97

³⁴ Opcit. Raghava Varier.M.R,2016,p.57

³⁵ Ibid,p.58

³⁶ Nandakumar, Prema (trans.), *Manimekalai*, Tamil University, Thanjavur, 1989, p.47.

evidenced by the finding of Buddhist idols from various parts of the state. ³⁷The origins of Buddhism in Kerala remain a matter of debate. Some historians believe that Buddhism originated in Sri Lanka and made its way to Kerala, while others believe that Buddhism first appeared in Kerala during Ashoka's reign. Theravada were the first branch of Buddhism to arrive in Kerala, subsequently, Mahayana Buddhism gained ground.³⁸ According to K.P. Padmanabha Menon, there was a rift in Sri Lankan Buddhism during the reign of Godhakabhayan (AD 302-315). This was caused by the king's deportation of sixty Mahayana Buddhists from Abayagiri vihara to the opposite bank. These Mahayana Buddhists reached Kerala and propagated Buddhism.

Between the third and the seventh centuries CE, the Kalabhra (Kadamba) dynasty may have ruled South India, particularly Tamizhakam. Although little is known about their rule in Tamizhakam, they are thought to have promoted Brahmin settlement in the south and given the Buddhist and Jain teachings the upper hand. ³⁹The Andhra region may have maintained its Buddhist tendencies during this time. Buddhists in Kerala appear to have taken some time to adapt to the shifting philosophical trends in the area. Kerala was also experiencing political unpredictability.

During the first three centuries of the Christian era trading hubs were located near the coastal Tamilakam ports. The Sri Lankan ports flourished and began to draw trade vessels travelling the Indian Ocean between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. According to Cosmas (6th century CE), the Malabar Coast and the Sri Lankan Coast were closely linked through trade. As traders and their guilds were major donors to Buddhist monasteries, an increase in maritime trade and interactions with Sri Lanka may have contributed to the survival of Buddhism in Kerala.⁴⁰ The Ays kings' inscriptions and monuments reveal that they showed nearly equal support to Buddhists (Srimulavasam), Jain (Chitral), and Hindus (Parthivashekarapuram).⁴¹

In the 7th century CE, the Ay rulers in the south rose to prominence as a powerful and independent group. Between the 7th and the centuries CE, there appears to have been a resurgence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Kerala under the Mahayana Buddhists, thanks to favourable trade and political patronage.⁴² There is more evidence to refute the theories of Buddhist migration from Ceylon to Kerala. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai was the most eminent scholar to demonstrate a significant interest in Kerala's Sramanic traditions, following Gopinatha Rao. He made a few well-informed historical assumptions about Kerala's Jain and Buddhist customs. A comparison was conducted between the Buddha idols discovered in southern Kerala and those found in Anuradhapura, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Elamkulam also examined the

³⁷ Gopinathan, R. *Malayalam Basha Tholkapiyathil*, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Basha Institute, p.46

³⁸ Sugathan, K. *Buddhanaum Narayanaguruvum*. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2014

³⁹ Narayanan, M. G. S., *Social and Economic Structure of South-India, Re-interpretations in South Indian History*, College Book House, Trivandrum, 1977, p.17.

⁴⁰ Sastri, K. A. Nilakanta, *Foreign Notices of South India from Megasthenes to Ma-huan*, University of Madras, Chennai, 1939. p. 89

⁴¹ Rao, T.A. Gopinatha, *Travancore Archaeological Series. Vol-1, Govt of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1908 pp 15-40 , pp275-290*

⁴² Deegalle, Mahinda, *A search for Mahayana in Sri Lanka* "Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies" Vol 22 , No 2, 1999, PP.355

inscription on the Paliyam plate belonging to Ay King Varagunan.⁴³ It appears that he was equally interested in the Jain heritage of Kerala. In his studies, there were significant allusions to Srimulavasa Vihara and Puttharachan images (a local term for some Buddha idols). Thus, he concluded that Buddhism was more common than Jainism in early Kerala.⁴⁴

A few noteworthy observations were made in P. Alexander's doctoral dissertation on the subject of Buddhism in Kerala. According to him, the spread of the Bhagavati cult in Kerala occurred only after Buddhism declined. The Sastha cult and its relationship to Buddhism, the historical viability of the theory of the Ezhava migration from Ceylon, and the textual analysis of Silappadikkaram, Manimekhalai, Kerala Mahatmyam, Musikavamsam, etc. are some of the themes he covered in his study. It was a cutting-edge historical analysis. Further investigation is necessary into these observations in light of additional data.⁴⁵ Several noteworthy observations of new scholars regarding the Buddhist traditions in Kerala include the fact that Buddhism, which had long been popular here, lost ground as Brahman's dominance grew stronger. There was no overt hostility between Brahmanical Hinduism and the Jain-Buddhist religions in Kerala's history, which sets Sramanic religious traditions unlike those of many other regions. Additionally, it is believed that the architectural patterns and styles of the Sramanic and Brahmanic traditions were identical.⁴⁶ The Jain shrines, such as Nagaraja temple, Kallil, Chitral, Kinalur Tiruvanvundur, and Irinjalakuda, Trikkana Matilakam, were abandoned or neglected and taken over by the local Hindu population. It is possible that the lay followers were assimilated into the castes and local communities. Neither archaeology nor modern literature exhibit any indications of persecution or struggle. These Sramanic groups in Kerala declined and fell because of the expanding power and prosperity of the agricultural Brahman settlements and a decline in long-distance trade under the feudal system.⁴⁷

Buddhist Sites in Kerala

Buddha images have been reported from sites such as Onampilly (near Kalady), Kottapuram (Kodungallur), Karumadi (near Ambalapuzha), Bharanikkavu, Mavelikkara, Marudurkulangara (near Karunagappalli), Pallikkal, Ramapuram (near Pala), and Kovilkadavu (near Marayoor), despite the destruction of the temple and image of Srimulavasam. All of these places attest to the existence of Buddhism in Kerala.⁴⁸ It's interesting to note that, except for Marayoor and Ramapuram, nearly all of these sites are situated close to ancient coastline trade routes. Buddhist traders from Sri Lanka seem to have contributed to the spread of Buddhism along Kerala's coast. Finding Buddha statues or temples along the

⁴³ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, 'Some problems in Kerala history', Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative society L.T.D., 1955, pp.220-230

⁴⁴ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, 'Cera empire', Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka society Pvt Ltd, 1961, p.121

⁴⁵ P.C Alexander, 'Buddhism in Kerala', Annamalai Nagar: Annamalai University, 1949

⁴⁶ Padmakumari Amma. B, 'Jain Buddhist centres in the early history of Kerala', Phd Thesis, Calicut University, 1995

⁴⁷ Narayanan M.G.S., 'Cultural Symbiosis', Kerala Historical Society, 1972

⁴⁸ Rao, T. A. Gopinatha', 'Jain and Buddha vestiges in Travancore' Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol' II, Part II' Government of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1920, pp 121-122

coastal and inland navigational route made sense because, in Buddhism, Buddha, and Bodhisattvas—especially Avalikotiswara—are revered as rescuers of sailors and travellers in need.⁴⁹

Every image that was discovered was of granite stone, and many of them appeared to have been vandalized. Their height ranges from 60 to 100 centimetres. Every image of the Buddha is carved in the round and shows him sitting in Padmasana with his hands in the Dhyana Mudra. Despite their relatively small stature and stylistic similarity to Sri Lanka, the Buddhas found in Kerala were imported or brought there by merchants and devotees. Visually, these pictures date between the eighth and ninth centuries CE and the tenth and eleventh centuries CE.⁵⁰

Buddha images in Kerala can be categorised into different groups which include early images from Marudurkulangara, Ramapuram, and Kottappuram. These images share a common feature of short curly ringlets in their hair. Curly hairs appeared during the Kushan period in Mathura and later in the Amaravati-Nagarjunakonda and Gupta periods, possibly influenced by Sri Lanka. These images match the styles of Toluwila and Anuradhapura Buddha images. Buddha/Buddhist monks wear three cloth pieces: Antarvasa, Uttarasanga, and Samghati. The Samghati, or outer cloth, is visible in Buddha images. The fold of the Samghati runs over the left hand and shoulder. The earlobes extend to the shoulders in Ramapuram-Pala. The second group represented images from Mavelikkara, Bharanikavu, and Karumadi, with stylistic commonality in curly hair and the presence of a Siraspata, a flame-shaped ornament symbolising supreme intelligence. This feature became popular in Sri Lanka art and spread to South East Asia. A folded piece of cloth over the left shoulder is also common. Pallikal and Onampilly's images follow the same pattern in drapery treatment, but the head of Karumadi's image is broken and hence the identification is difficult. The third group is represented by a small image from Kovil Kadavu-Marayoor, with clear ridges and a ribbon-like Samghati. It seems to have come from Tamil Nadu.

The last group is represented by a bronze Buddha image from the Palli Bhagavathi temple complex in Neelamperoor and the Kunninmel Devi temple complex in Kiliroor. The image worshipped as Sastha, does not bear iconographic similarity with stone Buddha images from the 13th-14th century CE. It features a male figure seated in Padmasana, surrounded by a floral pedestal with gem-like decoration. The adornments are similar to the Nagapattinam and with a bronze Buddha image from Ariyalur, Tamil Nadu. A bronze Torana and a Pipal tree are placed behind the image at times.⁵¹

Buddhist influence

Though Buddhism is not as widely practised as it once was in Kerala, there are still some socio-cultural customs that seem to have Buddhist roots in Kerala culture. It is significant to note here that some scholars believe that the widely recognised Hindu deity Sastha, also known as Ayyappan, is a Hinduized form of Buddha and that visiting the Sastha temple at Sabarimala reveals Buddhist influences.⁵² Some academics also note that the forms and postures of the Sastha and Buddha figures bear a remarkable resemblance. The forms of worship and other ritualistic activities also bear a lot of parallels. For approximately two

⁴⁹ Ray, H. P., *The Archaeology of Seafaring in Ancient South Asia* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p' 258

⁵⁰ Ajit Kumar, *Buddhism in Kerala and its Socio-Cultural Ramification*, *History Today*, No-19, 2018, P.181

⁵¹ Alexander, P. C., *Buddhism in Kerala*, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, 1949, p.75

⁵² Aiyangar, S.K.. *Beginnings of South Indian History*. Pune: Oriental Book Agency, 1941 pp-143-144

months before their pilgrimage, the Sabarimala pilgrims uphold severe vows of non-violence, vegetarianism, and abstinence from worldly pleasures. This is thought to be a practice that is similar to the Buddhist concept of ahimsa. The pilgrimage also brings to mind Buddhism's emphasis on cosmopolitanism and castelessness. The millions of worshippers reciting "Saranam Ayyappa" in unison also makes one think of the triple Saranam formulas of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Buddhist Sangha. Additionally, Vavar Swami, who is worshipped at Sabarimalai, is thought to be a Buddhist monk by the name of "Bavari." Buddhism's Sutanipata tells the story of Bavari. Even though not everyone agrees with the above justifications for the Buddhist theory of Sastha, it is undeniable that Buddhism had an impact on the growth of the Sastha cult in Kerala and that the Cera Kings had a role in popularising the deity Sastha among the populace.

Kerala, has a rich history of Buddhism, with some scholars claiming that Adi Shankara's Advaita philosophy, monasticism, and establishment of mutts were influenced by Buddhism. Shankara's Maya Vada is also believed to be a recycled version of Buddhist teachings. There are also beliefs that Shankara took over Buddhist Viharas at Kanchi and established Kamakotipeetha and Kamakshi temples, which were originally dedicated to Tara.⁵³ Kerala's circular temples, with a central Dravidian Vimana enclosed by pillars, resemble the Vatadage in Sri Lanka, with lineage traced to Indian Buddhist sites like Amravati and Junnar. It is interesting to note that no other southern state has a proliferation of circular temples as Kerala. During the Brahmanical resurgence in Kerala, some Buddhist temples were converted into Brahmanical ones. Some Devi temples in Kerala practised obscene songs and animal sacrifices, with rituals like the forceful entry in Kodungallur temple. These practices are believed to have been undertaken to remove Buddhist practitioners from their precincts. Some Devi temples with the word "palli" are considered to have been initially Buddhist/Jain shrines. These temples are believed to have been owned by the Buddhists. Kettukazhcha, a Buddhist chief tradition, is prevalent in the coastal districts of Kollam and Alappuzha. It involves creating bull images from hay, cloth, and timber and presenting them in processions to temples. Temple cars or 'teru' are also made from timber and cloth, and used to carry gods and goddess images to temples for annual fairs. This tradition is exclusive to the northern Kollam and Alappuzha Districts, where the largest number of Buddhist images have been recovered.⁵⁴ Kerala's tradition of parading elephants with portable idols of deities during festivals, known as 'Utsavam', may have been influenced by Buddhist celebrations. In Sri Lanka, the Tooth Relic of Buddha was publicly exposed on sacred days, and this tradition continues today. Buddhists pioneered in establishing of Viharas, which became centres of learning and knowledge generation. Mutts established by Shankara took inspiration from Buddhist teachings and attached boarding schools to temples. Temple-centric Salais or boarding schools may have borrowed administrative systems, discipline, curriculum design, and physical training from Buddhist education and monastic tradition.⁵⁵ The term Palli is commonly used to denote learning establishments in Kerala.⁵⁶ still, the term referred to as either Eezuthupalli or pallikudam.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ramachandran, T. N., The Nagapattinam and other Buddhist Bronzes in the Chennai Museum, Director of Museum' Chennai' 2005, P.12

⁵⁴ Rao, T. A. Gopinatha, P.124

⁵⁵ Ibid,p.16

⁵⁶ Alexander, op.cit., PP.75-76.

⁵⁷ Ibid, pp.168-169

Ashoka's rock edict mentions hospitals for animal and human welfare in Kerala. Some scholars believe the Ayurvedic tradition in Kerala also has a Buddhist lineage. Some temples offer treatments for skin diseases, leprosy, and mental illness. The Buddha image at Mavelikkara Krishna temple, Puttracchan, is believed to protect animals.⁵⁸ The martial art form of Kalaripayattu in Kerala is believed to have originated as a self-defence martial art practised by Buddhists. The Thiya/Ezhava community in Kerala is believed to have originated from Sri Lanka, where they were skilled combatants and soldiers. Some of the best-known Kalaripayattu schools are nurtured by this community. The art of self-defence travelled through Buddhist missionaries to China and Japan, and some experts in martial arts were employed by Sri Lankan kings in their armies.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Tantric Buddhism might have existed in Kerala during the final stages of the religion's development. However, because Buddhist monks disregarded monastic rules and discipline, Buddhism in Kerala declined in the post-chola era between the 12th and the 3rd century. The protracted conflicts between the Cholas and Pandyas had severely damaged Kerala society, and the Cholas had supported Buddhism in Tamilakam and possibly Kerala as well. Buddhists were forced to either embrace Brahmanical beliefs or convert to Islam and Christianity because they were afraid of reprisals from Brahmanical and fanatical elements due to their lack of political patronage. During the 13th and 14th centuries CE, Chinese or West Asian travellers who visited Kerala did not mention Buddhism or Buddhist statues, implying the obliteration of Buddhism as a religious form. Kerala had a rich history and philosophical tradition of Buddhism, during the Cera Kingdom, where it left an indelible mark on people's minds due to the Catholic outlook and deep philosophical vision of ancient rulers. Despite Buddhism's decline from Kerala in the 12th century CE, its influence on Kerala's culture and civilization is evident, particularly in education. Buddha and his religion played a significant role in refining Hinduism, rescuing Kerala from crude religious practices and social evils. The contributions of rulers and scholars to this legacy deserve attention.

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⁵⁸ Menon, T. Madhava', A Handbook of Kerala, Vol-II-International School of Dravidian Linguistics, Trivandrum, 2002.

⁵⁹ Menon, op.cit-,2002 P.439

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