



Chavara at the crossroads of sea and spirit: Cultural significance of a coastal village in Kerala

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Abstract

The geographical makeup of Chavara, which is a coastal village in Kollam district of Kerala, has created a unique cultural and spiritual heritage influenced by its economic livelihood and religious institutions. Chavara's cultural expressions are examined in this article, which includes temples, mosques, churches, folk art traditions, and reformist movements. The study utilizes historical and interview techniques to demonstrate how rituals like Chamayavilakku and Karadikali, as well as the reformist Panmana Ashram, keep cultural memory and identity alive in modern times.

Keywords: Chavara, Kollam, cultural heritage, temples, folk art, Chamayavilakku, Karadikali, Panmana Ashram, religious pluralism, oral traditions, economic history, geography, kadhprasangam

Introduction

Chavara is a village that is highly culturally significant and can be found approximately 14 kilometers north of Kollam city in Kerala. The Arabian Sea and Ashtamudi Lake border its unique geography, which is also intersected by the T.S. Canal, placed it in direct contact with maritime trade and inland agrarian networks. Chavara's history was connected to the bustling port of Kollam (Quilon), which is one of the oldest port cities in India.

The village is known for its mineral-rich sands, fishing, coir-making, and agriculture, but it is also notable for its temples, mosques, churches, folk traditions, and reformist institutions, which are economically important. Through the exploration of geography, economy, and religion, this article examines how Chavara's cultural significance has been shaped.

Methodology

Both historical and interview methods are utilized in the study.

1. Historical methods involved examining archived sources, inscriptions, temple records, and local chronicles along with secondary works by historians.
2. **Interview Method:** The preservation of unique traditions like Chamayavilakku and Karadikali was achieved by recording oral testimonies from priests, community elders, folk artists, and residents of ashrams.

Significance of the Study

Chavara's socio cultural and economical life is a significant subject for three reasons:

1. It preserves unique rituals like Chamayavilakku that challenge social hierarchies.
2. It highlights how geography and economy have supported religious and cultural practices.
3. The ethos of religious structure in Kerala is shown through temples, churches, mosques, and reformist ashrams coexisting.
4. To know about the cultural contributions of important personalities in Chavara

Geography of Chavara

Chavara lies between the Arabian Sea and Ashtamudi Lake, with the T.S. Canal, providing inland connectivity. Its strategic location links the village to Indian Ocean trade and internal agricultural markets. Both its economy and cultural rituals are shaped by the dominance of coconut groves, backwaters, and sandy coasts in its landscape.

Economic History of Chavara

The economy of Chavara historically revolved around:

1. Fishing and marine economy were central to survival, with rituals like Karadikali celebrating prosperity.
2. **Coir and Agriculture:** Coconut cultivation and the coir industries employed large sections of the community, particularly women.
3. **Mineral Industry:** In modern times, Chavara became internationally famous for its black sand minerals (ilmenite, rutile, and zircon), which have integrated it into global markets, but also pose ecological and cultural challenges.

Cultural Aspects of Chavara

Temples and Ritual Traditions

Temples in Chavara are central to its cultural identity:

The Kattil Mekkathil Temple

1. Location and Deity

The Kattil Mekkathil Temple located at Panmana, close to Chavara in Kollam district, Kerala. Bhadrakali (Bhagavathy) is the important deity and is worshiped in her fierce yet protective form. The spiritual heritage of Panmana Ashram, which was started by Chattampi Swamikal, is closely connected to the temple.

2. Historical Background

The Mother Goddess worship is profoundly rooted in the custom of the temple in Kerala. The temple became an essential religious and cultural center for the region over time, attracting significant amounts of devotees during festivals.

3. Rituals and Offerings

The temple is well-known for the 'Chamundi Velakku' and 'Guruthi Pooja', religious ritual that relate to Goddess Bhadrakali's protective and fierce aspects. Traditional offerings include Kuruthi (lime and turmeric mixture), Vilakku Pooja (lamp worship), Thulabharam, and Neyvilakku. Devotees believe that the Goddess provides protection against evil forces, fulfills vows, and blesses families with prosperity.

4. Important Festivals

The yearly festival (Utsavam) of Kattil Mekkathil Temple is celebrated with grandeur, featuring chenda melam and traditional music, Thalappoli (women carrying lamps and plates with flowers), procession of the deity (Ezhunnallathu), and ritual performances connected to Goddess worship traditions. The temple also celebrates the Navaratri and Karthika festivals with special rituals.

5. The significance of culture and social life

In Kollam district, the temple is regarded as a powerful place to worship Shakti. It attracts thousands of devotees, particularly women, who offer prayers for health, prosperity, and protection from misfortune. The temple also reflects the deep-rooted tradition of Bhadrakali cults in Kerala, which is linked to fertility, protection, and social harmony. Being in proximity to Panmana Ashram, it is both a religious site and a cultural-spiritual center that connects Kerala's ritual traditions with reformist spirituality.

Kottankulangara Devi Temple: Kottankulangara Devi Temple is known for Chamayavilakku, where men dress as women to offer lamps, symbolizing inclusivity and fertility.

Panakkattodil Devi Temple: Panakkattodil Devi Temple is celebrated for its Pooram festival with elephants, percussion (Chenda Melam, Panchavadyam), fireworks, and feasts believed to protect fishermen from epidemics and sea storms.

Vadayattukotta Temple: Serpent worship and fertility rituals (Naga Aradhana and Kalam Paattu) are associated with Vadayattukotta Temple.

Thrikkovil Mahadeva Temple Thrikkovil Mahadeva Temple is a Shaivite shrine that hosts Maha Shivaratri with fasting, devotional songs, and temple fairs.

Other Shrines: Numerous small temples dedicated to Bhadrakali, Vishnu, and Ayyappa preserve localized forms of religiosity and annual festivals.

Folk Arts and Festivals

Kottankulangara Chamaya Vilakku Festival

1. Location and Temple

The festival is being held at the Kottankulangara Devi Temple, which is situated in Chavara near Kollam in Kerala. Bhagavathy (the Goddess) is the presiding deity of the temple, and she is symbolized by a sacred lamp (vilakku).

2. Men in women's attire have a distinctive feature

A defining characteristic of this festival is that male devotees wear women's attire (chamaya) to pay homage to the Goddess. They parade around the temple carrying

decorated oil lamps on their heads. The attire includes sarees, jasmine garlands, ornaments, and traditional makeup, which symbolically represent both devotion and the symbolic surrender of the self to the Goddess.

3. Ritual Observances

Sarees, jasmine garlands, ornaments, and traditional makeup are used in the attire to symbolize both devotion and the symbolic surrender of the self to the Goddess. The festival has other significant rituals such as Vilakku Pooja, Thalappoli, and devotional music that enhance the sacred atmosphere.

4. The background of mythology and culture

According to local tradition, the festival originated when a group of cowherds, in playful devotion, dressed themselves as women and offered lamps to Goddess Bhagavathy. The Goddess was content with their worship and blessed it, resulting in the ritual being established as an annual celebration.

The festival is a symbol of the transcendence of gender boundaries in devotion, where participants temporarily take on feminine identities to honor the Goddess. This is interpreted as an act of humility and self-effacement, symbolizing the dissolution of the ego before the divine. Scholars also suggest that the practice is linked to fertility cults and ancient traditions of Mother Goddess worship prevalent in Kerala.

Karadikali: A vigorous Onam dance with masks, symbolizing fertility and abundance.

Pooram Festivals: Major temple festivals with elephants, percussion, and trade fairs.

Villadichan Pattu and Harikatha: Oral traditions narrating epics and local lore. Bhajans and devotional songs shared across temples, mosques, and churches.

Important Personalities of Chavara

O.n.v kurupu

Ottaplakkal Neelakandan Velu Kurup (known as o.n.v. kurup; 27 May 1931 – 13 February 2016) was a Malayalam poet and lyric writer from Kerala, India, who won the Jnanpitha Award, the top literary award in India for the year 2007. He received the awards Padma Shri in 1998 and Padma Vibhushan in 2011, the fourth and second-highest civilian honours from the Government of India. In 2007, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Kerala, Trivandrum. O N V was well-known for his leftist leaning. He was a leader of All India Students Federation (AISF). He died on 13 February 2016 at KIMS hospital in Thiruvananthapuram due to age-related illnesses, aged 84.

ONV Kurup was born to O. N. Krishna Kurup and K. Lakshmikutty Amma, on 27 May 1931 at Chavara, Kollam (Quilon) in Kerala. He loses his father when he was eight. His young days were spent in Chavara, where he enrolled the government school. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in economics from SN College, Kollam, he relocated to Thiruvananthapuram city where he joined Travancore University (now Kerala University) and pursued a Master of

Arts in Malayalam literature. O.N.V. was a lecturer at Maharajas College – Ernakulam University College Thiruvananthapuram, Arts and Science College – Kozhikode, and Brennen

College – Thalassery. He joined Government Women's College – Thiruvananthapuram as the Head of Malayalam Department. He was also a visiting professor at Calicut University. He retired from service in 1986.

He awarded the Jnanpitha Award, India's highest literary award, for the year 2007. He was the fifth Jnanpith recipient from Kerala and the second Malayali poet to win the Award. According to an announcement by Bharatiya Jnanpith, the trust which presents the award, Kurup began his career as a "progressive writer and matured into a humanist though he never gave up his commitment to socialist ideology." He was settled at Vazhuthacaud in Thiruvananthapuram, with his spouse Sarojini, who was also his student in his early days. ONV Kurup died on 13 February 2016, due to age-related issues Ailments at KIMS Hospital in Thiruvananthapuram.

V. Sambashivan

Velayudhan Sambashivan (4 July 1929 – 23 April 1996) was a famous "*kadhprasangam*" artist of Kerala, India. He was born on 4 July 1929 in Chavara Thekkumbhagom in Kollam district, as the eldest son of Meloottu Velayudhan and Sarada. He had seven siblings. After schooling in his native village, he joined Sree Narayana College, Kollam for higher studies where he was the member of the Communist Party of India and its student wing AISF. His gift for singing and acting helped him to become a pioneer of *Kadhprasangam*.

He started his career as a teacher but he resigned from the job to become a full-time performer. With his unique style in story-telling, he soon became one of the most influencing artists of Kerala with immense mass support. He presented more than 50 stories on stage including Shakespeare's *Othello* and Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Being a member of the Communist Party of India, he was arrested and imprisoned in 1975, during the Indian Emergency declared by the then regime headed by Indira Gandhi. He died of lung cancer on 23 April 1996, aged 67.

V. Sambashivan received the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi Fellowship in 1980. He has acted in a feature film 'Pallamkuzhi' also

V Sambashivan was married to Subhadra. His eldest son vasanthakumar sambasivan, a Professor of Chemistry at Sree Narayana College, Kollam follows his father's way. V. Sambashivan and his troupe travelled across various countries and covered more than one thousand stages.

Baby John

Baby John (25 October 1917 – 27 January 2008) was a veteran leader of the Keralas Revolutionary Socialist Party (Baby John). Previously, he was General Secretary of the Revolutionary Socialist party in India. He was known in the Kerala state political circles as '*Kerala Kissinger*' for his abilities to manage political crises at times when the state was passing through difficult political phases, with reference to Henry Kissinger, an American diplomat and an advocate of a pragmatic approach to geopolitics. Baby's legislative career began in the early 1950s, when he was elected to the *Travancore-Cochin Assembly*. After the formation of Kerala state, he was elected to the Kerala

Legislative Assembly (1960 to 1996) from his home constituency chavara. He had served as minister; handling different portfolios in coalition governments led by the C. Achutha Menon, K. Karunakaran, A. K. Antony, P. K. Vasudevan Nair, and E. K. Nayanar.

Ravi Pillai

Ravi Pillai (born 2 September 1953) is a Dubai-based Indian billionaire businessman. He is the founder and chairman of the RP Group. As of May 2023, his net worth is estimated at US\$3.1 billion. Ravi Pillai was born on 2, September 1953 at Chavara at Kollam, in the state of Kerala in Kadappa Pillai Veetil family. He graduated in Commerce from the University of Cochin. During his time at university, he launched his first business, a *chit* fund in Kollam on reportedly borrowed money. Later, he started an engineering contract business and worked for some of the major industrial companies in Kerala such as Fertilisers and Chemicals Travancore Limited, Hindustan Newsprint Limited, and Cochin Refineries. However, a labour strike forced him to stop his business, after he went to Saudi Arabia in 1978 where he started a small Business. Two years later, he moved into construction field and established Nasser S. Al Hajri Corporation (NSH) with 150 workers, which has over the years grown to become the flagship company of his business group, RP Group, which is known to employ over 70,000 employees across its businesses. The shopping complex South Kerala, RP Mall at Kollam city is owned by Ravi Pillai. He has expanded his business to other countries including the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain, and has interests in construction, hospitality, steel, cement, and oil and gas industries. RP Group is famous to hold stakes in hotels such as Leela at Kovalam, Hotel Raviz at Kollam, and Welcom hotel raviz kadavu, Kozhikode in his home state of Kerala. He is involved in health care through Upasana Hospital and Research Centre, a 300-bed multispecialty hospital in Kollam.

Chavara parukkutty amma

Chavara Parukutty Amma (12 February 1943 – 7 February 2019) was an Indian women artist of the Kadhakali dance drama. She was one of the few women exponents of this dominant male tradition. For her contribution to the art of Kerala, she was honoured with the Kerala Kalamandalam and the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi awards. Chavara Parukutty Amma was born to Naniyamma and N. Shankaran Achary, a goldsmith, at Chekkatu Kizhakkethil at Kollam, the youngest of their three children. She obtained an undergraduate degree in economics from the Fatima Matha National College. Trained as a classical dancer, she switched to Kathakali in her young years. Her first teacher was Muthupilakkadu Gopala Panikker. Parukutty Amma had a daughter, Dhanya, who is also a dance artiste. She died at Chavara near Kollam on 7 February 2019.

Parukutty Amma's first performance was at the age of 14, at the Kottankulangara Devi Temple at chavara. At the time, women were hesitating in taking up the *kadhakali*. The field of *Kadhakali* has traditionally been dominated by men, who would play both male and female characters. She took on female roles mainly, but has portrayed male roles as well. In her youth, Kathakali was mean mainly to women of upper castes, who took a dilettante's approach to it. As the daughter of a goldsmith, Parukutty had to struggle for admission to a rural dance school, Leelamani

Nrithakalalayam. She was relegated to minor roles, and even when she began to perform major role in the dance drama, having joined the Poruvazhi Sreekrishnavilasm Kaliyogam, her name would barely appear in festival brochures. Parukutty Amma was fortunate in obtaining admission to a Kathakali institute; without credentials from the academy, other women were severely disadvantaged. Even she faced unfortunate odds in her career, scarcely being able to make a living from it. Parukutty Amma's debut was with the dance drama Poothanamoksham in 1958, in the role of Lalita, the sympathetic manifestation of the demoness Poothana who was sent by Kamsa to destruction the baby Krishna. She then began learning herself in male roles under Poruvazhi Gopala Pillai, the first presentation being of Bhima in Kalyanasaugandhikam. Mankulam Vishnu Namboothiri, a Kathakali doyen, saw her performance and undertook her further training in every female role in Kathakali. Her essaying of the role of devayani was particularly lauded for her command of nuance and emotion, as Devayani first beholds kacha. Indeed, she often played the male role of Kacha as well. In 2003, Parukutty Amma opened Kerala Natya Dhara, a school for dance at Sankaramangalam. Parukutty Amma received the Kerala Kalamandalam and the Mathrubhumi Grihalakshmi awards. A film on her life and achievements, Chavara Parukutty: Kathakaliyile Sthree Parvam, was produced by P.R. Sreekumar.

Reformist thought and Panmana Ashram

A reformist dimension is added by the Panmana Ashram, which is connected to Chattampi Swamikal. Supported equality, women's education, and stood up against caste. Annual commemorations, discourses, yoga training, and Annadanam (feasts) are hosted.

Religious Pluralism

Kerala's pluralist ethos is represented by Chavara. St. Joseph's Church is a historic Christian center where Hindus and Muslims gather for feasts. Chavara Juma Masjid is an old mosque with shared histories of interfaith cooperation. Mutual participation - Hindus, Christians, and Muslims support each other's festivals and institutions.

The outcome and discussion

Key findings include:

1. Chavara's cultural contributions were shaped by geography, which linked sea trade with inland agrarian life.
2. Chavaras Economy influenced rituals, such as fishing dances, temple feasts, and agricultural festivals.
3. Temples, Churches, Mosques, and Ashrams ensure institutional diversity and interfaith harmony.
4. Despite modernity, Tradition remains, with folk arts like *Chamayavilakku* and *Karadikali* still survive industrialization.
5. Pluralism and reform movements (Especially Panmana Ashram) sustain inclusivity, making Chavara as a cultural microcosm of Kerala.

Conclusion

Kerala's cultural heritage is portrayed in Chavara, where geography, economy, and culture come together. Kerala's dynamic heritage is depicted in Chavara, where geography,

economy, and culture come together. Chavara is both a historic settlement and a living cultural landscape.

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