

# The Etymology of the Word Kerala

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"It might perhaps be advisable to discontinue deriving the names of Indian localities from Sanskrit words, as has been usually done hitherto, unless such derivations are well supported." *Dr. G. Oppert*.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

AN investigation into the etymological origin of the word *Kerala* must be an interesting point of study not only to the student of history, but also to the general public of the present age. When specialisation is being encouraged by our Universities, and a critical spirit is being developed in our students, a discussion such as this helps the student to realise the practical application of the canons of historical criticism, and the nature of the help rendered to historical investigations by such auxiliary sciences as astronomy, archaeology and philology. In an age when

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1 "The Original Inhabitants of India," page 42.

curiosity has found its expression in tracing the origins of civilisation in different parts of the world, a study of etymological queries connected with the origin of peoples, states and nations, must be an object of interest even to the general reader. As Prof. Bury observes, "The monuments of stone which have remained for more than three thousand years above the face of the earth, and the objects of daily use and luxury which were placed in the houses of the dead, have been unearthed, chiefly in our days, by the curiosity of Europeans seeking the origins of their civilisation."<sup>2</sup> Similarly the vast collections of Dravidian and Sanskrit literary works which have remained with us, in partial oblivion, for nearly three thousand years, have begun to be revealed to the student of Indian history through such journals as the *Indian Antiquary* and the *Tamil Antiquary*. Through the medium of such reviews as *The Modern Review* and of such magazines as *The St. Joseph's College Magazine*, the fruits of the labours of specialists in astronomy, epigraphy, archaeology and philology, must find their way to the vast student population of the present day.

As in the case of all problems of the history of antiquity, there is a division of

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<sup>2</sup> "History of Greece," 1913, page 20.

opinion on the etymological origin of the word *Kerala*. For the convenience of reference, we may reduce the different views to two—the theory of Sanskritic origin and that of Dravidian origin. According to the first theory, the cocoanut tree which grows abundantly on the Malabar Coast, has given its name to the country, that is, the word *Kerala* (केरलः) is derived from the word *Nalikera* (नालिकेरः)—the Sanskrit names for the coast and the tree respectively. But the second theory holds that the country has given its name to the cocoanut tree, that is, the word *Nalikera* is derived from the word *Kerala* and the word *Kerala* comes from the Dravidian word *Cherala*.

Of these two theories, the generally<sup>3</sup> accepted one is the first—that of Sanskritic origin. But this theory does not seem to contain the true etymological origin of the word *Kerala*. An attempt will be made to

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<sup>3</sup> The Sanskrit word *Kerala* is mostly used in Malayalam literature. That great scholar of Dravidian Grammar, Dr. Caldwell, truly observes, “The proportion of Sanskrit words, adopted by the Dravidian languages, is least in Tamil and greatest in Malayalam.” (“Comparative Dravidian Grammar,” Introduction, page 3, II edition, 1875.) As a result of this practice, the Malayalees generally consider that the word *Kerala* and *Kera* have Sanskritic origin.

establish Dravidian origin, that the Sanskrit word *Kerala* has been derived from the Dravidian word *Cherala*. In proving this statement a double line of argument will be followed—the first is negative—proving that the word *Kerala* is not derived from the word *Nalikera*; the second is positive—proving that the Sanskrit word *Kerala* is derived from the Dravidian word *Cherala*.

# I

## **“Kerala” is not derived from “Nalikera.”**

If we find that the word *Kerala* was in use in Sanskrit literature before the tree was introduced into the Malabar Coast, it is plain that the cocoanut tree could not have given its name to the country, *i. e.*, the word *Kerala* could not have been derived from the word *Nalikera*. It is admitted by all scholars that this tree is not indigenous to the Malabar coast, but that it was introduced from another land washed by the Indian Ocean.<sup>4</sup> The date of its introduction into this coast, can be approximately fixed by examining the two important documents—“*Periplus Maris Erythrae*”<sup>5</sup> of 100 A. D. and “*Christian Topo-*

<sup>4</sup> For our argument it is immaterial whence the tree was introduced. This point is discussed in *The Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 3, page 86.

<sup>5</sup> A sort of marine guide-book for the Erythrean (or Arabian) Sea, by an unknown author.

graphy" of 535 A. D.<sup>6</sup> by Cosmos Indicopleustes. In the list of exports from Malabar no mention is made of the cocoanut in "the Periplus" of I century A. D., whereas in the "Christian Topography" of VI century A. D. we see a full description of the cocoanut. From this fact we are led to conclude that the tree must have been introduced at some period between I and VI centuries of the Christian era. But long before this period, in the *Kapur Di Giri* version of Asoka's edict in III century B. C., the king of the Malabar Coast is called *Keralamputra*.<sup>7</sup> From these two facts it is obvious that the word *Kerala*, used in Sanskrit literature during III century B. C., could not have been derived from the word *Nalikera*, the name of the tree introduced into Malabar during the period between I and VI centuries A. D.

## II

**"Nalikera" is derived from "Kerala."**

When we analyse grammatically the word *Nalikera* (नालिकेरः), we find that it is

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<sup>6</sup> These dates are the same as those adopted by Radhakumud Mookerji in his "History of Indian Shipping and Maritime Activity," pages 131 and 140.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Caldwell, "Comparative Dravidian Grammar," Introduction, page 22.

derived from *Kera* (केरः), another form of the word *Kerala* (केरलः). *Nalikera* is a compound made of two words नालि and केरः; नालि is from the root णल् which becomes नालि by the addition of the termination इण् to the root णल् | (णल् becomes नल् and ण् of इण् is dropped and अ of न is prolonged into ना and ल् becomes लि by the addition of इ in इण्) | According to Bhattoji Dikshit,<sup>8</sup> the root णल् means (1) गन्धे (= in smell), and (2) बन्धने (= in binding). The two words नालि and केरः are compounded thus:—(1) नलति केरम् इति नालिकेरः (active voice), meaning that which gives smell to Kera or that which binds Kera, or (2) नल्यते केरेण इति नालिकेरः (passive voice), meaning that which is bound by Kera. Thus the word *Nalikera* (नालिकेरः) may mean either (1) that which gives smell or fame to Kera, or (2) that which is inseparably bound or associated with Kera.<sup>9</sup> Hence the word *Nalikera* is derived from the word *Kera*, the name of the country.

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<sup>8</sup> सिद्धान्तकौमुदी (=guide to Sanskrit Grammar) with commentary, page 362.

<sup>9</sup> The inseparable association of the cocoanut tree with the Malabar Coast cannot be perceived by the people of South Canara, although South Canara was also included, later on, in Kerala, as seen in "The Imperial

Bhanuji Dikshit<sup>10</sup> derives the word in a different—rather far-fetched—way. According to him *Nalikera* (नालिकेरः) is a compound of two words नालि and केर from the root णल् meaning गन्धे (=in smell), and कः (=wind). णल्, as explained above, becomes नालि meaning “that which gives smell,” and कः becomes केर (कः + ईर + घञ् = केर) whose meaning is (केन ईर्यते इति केरः) “that which is waved by the wind.” According to Bhanuji Dikshit, therefore, नालिकेरः is a compound of नालि and केरः (नालिश्चासौ केरश्च नालिकेरः) and means “that which gives smell and that which is waved by the wind.” I have, indeed, seen cocoanut trees waved by the wind. But this is no distinguishing feature of cocoanut trees.

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Gazeteer of India” Vol. VII, page 377; for this tree flourishes luxuriantly, not in the South Canara District, but in the Malabar District and the Native States of Cochin and Travancore. And it is the district of Malabar that is denoted by the word *Kerala* in Kalidasa’s *Raghuvamsa*, as seen from the map कालिदासीयं भारतवर्षम् (=India according to Kalidasa) given in रघुवंशविमर्शः (-criticism of Raghuvamsa) by R. Krishnamachariar, M. A. (Sri Vani Vilas Press, Srirangam, 1908).

<sup>10</sup> अमरकोशः (Amarakosha) with commentary, page 212.

Regarding the smell of the cocoanut tree or the cocoanut, I must confess that I have not enjoyed it yet. Cocoanut trees are not remarkable for their smell as flowers are. This derivation is, indeed, far-fetched if not absurd. When we examine some typical classical works in Sanskrit literature, we do not meet with this sense of the word *Nalikera*. We may just examine the use of the word in Kalidasa's रघुवंशः (Raghuvamsa) and in हितोपदेशः (Hitopadesa).

In Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa (Canto IV, verse 42) the word नालिकेरः is used:—

ताम्बूलीनां दल्योस्तत्र रचिता पानभूमयः।

नालिकेरासवं योधाः शात्रवं च पपुर्यशः॥

“There his (Raghu's) warlike soldiers, having constructed their drinking grounds, drank up, in betel leaves, the ale produced from the cocoanut trees and also the glory of their enemies.”<sup>11</sup>

In Hitopadesa (हितोपदेश) (Section I, verse 94), taken from प्रसङ्गरत्नावली (page 20, sl. 66), the word नालिकेरः occurs in another form नारिकेलः—

नारिकेलसमाकारा दृश्यन्ते हि सुहृज्जनाः।

अन्ये बदरिकाकारा बहिरेव मनोहरः॥

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<sup>11</sup> Nandargikar's translation (1897). “The liquor they drank was, it appears, the glory of the enemy liquified.” (Note, page 94).



“Friends appear of the form of cocoanuts (rough and rugged to outward appearance but sweet at heart); others are like jujubes attractive from the outside only.”<sup>12</sup>

From these uses of the word नालिकेरम् we see that Sanskrit poets have observed some characteristic features of the cocoanut—the whiteness and sweetness of its juice; but we do not find any allusion to the meaning given by Bhanuji Dikshit—the smell of the cocoanut. Therefore, for two reasons, that cocoanut trees or cocoanuts are not noted for their smell and that in Sanskrit literature this meaning is not seen, we may safely reject the derivation of *Nalikera* (नालिकेरः) according to Bhanuji Dikshit, and adopt the derivation given by Bhattoji Dikshit.

Therefore, arguing on historical and etymological grounds, we conclude (1) that the word *Kerala* is not derived from the word *Nalikera*, for historically the word *Kerala* was in use in Sanskrit literature before the cocoanut tree became a conspicuous feature of the Malabar Coast, and (2) that the word *Nalikera* is derived from the combination of the two words, नालि and केरः

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<sup>12</sup> हितोपदेशः of Narayana Bhatta by M. R. Kalle, (Oriental Publishing House Company, Bombay).

Having proved that the word *Kerala* is not derived from the word *Nalikera*, we have now to establish that the word *Kerala* is derived from the Dravidian word *Cherala*. The proof of this statement runs on two lines of argumentation;—first, we must establish that *Cherala* is a classical *Dravidian* word for the coast, at least till the time of the *Ramayana* or the Aryan colonisation of Southern India about the beginning of the first millennium B. C.,<sup>13</sup> and secondly, we must prove that *Kerala*, the Sanskrit word, is derived from the Dravidian word *Cherala*.

### III

#### **“Cherala” is the classical Dravidian word for the Malabar Coast.**

To show that the words *Cheralam*, *Cherala*, and *Chera* are *classical* Dravidian words, we have simply to examine a few passages from Tamil classical works:---

(1) In *Pura-Nanuru*, II Lyric, composed by Mudi-Naga-Nayar, the court poet of the

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<sup>13</sup> For our line of argumentation, it is immaterial whether we adopt the date assigned by the orthodox pundits, in the dim light of the remotest past, or the date 964 B. C., recently assigned to the birth of Sri Rama by the Hon'ble Divan Bahadur L. D. Swamikannu Pillai, M. A., B. L., LL. B., F. M. U.

Chera King, the title of the King is "*Cheraman Perum Choru Udiyan Cheralattan*."<sup>14</sup> In this name both *Cherala* and *Chera* occur.

(2) In *Pura-Nanuru*, the 39th lyric, by Nappacalaiyar in praise of Valuvan, the Chola king, the word *Chera* is used. "How shall I tell of thy glorious prowess that withered the fadeless Vanji, destroying the *Cheran* king with chariot huge of cunning work, who planted his guarded bow banner on the long gold-tipped peaks of Imayam, whose bounds none measures?"<sup>15</sup>

(3) In *Pura-Nanuru*, 126th Lyric, also the word occurs:—

"No rival bard, I sing! We're little barks,  
That sail not on the Western main,  
Where *Cheran's* warlike fleets are seen,  
Our poverty compels, we add our mite of praise  
To him Lord of the fertile land."<sup>16</sup>

(4) Again, in a lyric addressed to the king of Chera, by the Tamil poet Tayan Kannanar of Erukattur, the word *Cherala* is used:—

"The thriving town of Muchiri, where the beautiful large ships of the Yavanas, bringing gold, come splashing the white foam on the

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<sup>14</sup> Tamil Antiquary. Vol. 1, No. 1, page 46.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Pope's translation, Tamil Antiquary. Vol. I, No. 6 page 54.

<sup>16</sup> Idem. page 66.

waters of the Periyar which belongs to the *Cherala* and return laden with pepper.”<sup>17</sup>

From these poems we see that *Chera*, *Cherala* and *Cheralam* are the classical Dravidian words for the Malabar Coast.

But it may be urged that the word *Cheralam* might have been borrowed from Sanskrit into Tamil literature. That this is a false view can be inferred from the etymology of the word *Cheralam*. *Cheral*, from the root *Cher* (Tamil) “join,” and the formative *al*, means “the range.” The derivative *Cheralam* means “the region of *Cheralan*,” *Cheralan* meaning “the owner of *Cheral* (or the mountain range).”<sup>18</sup> To the Tamilians, the Western Ghats were so conspicuous that they called the land between the Ghats and the sea by the name *Cheralam* i. e., land joined to the mountain range. This fact derives its strength from the colloquial Dravidian word for the coast—*Malayalam* derived from *Mala* (Dravidian), meaning “a hill” and from *alam* meaning “depth” or “sea.” Hence we conclude that the words *Chera*, *Cherala* and *Cheralam* are classical Dravidian words and are of purely Dravidian origin.

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<sup>17</sup> Idem, page 76, and Radhakmud Mukerji's “History of Indian Shipping and Maritime Activity,” page 135.

<sup>18</sup> Tamil Antiquary, Vol. I, No. 1, page 63.

“**Kerala**” is derived from “**Cherala**.”

The next step in the line of argument we have been following, is to prove that *Kerala* is derived from *Cherala* either *directly* by the phonetic change of the surd *ch* (Tamil) into sonant *k* (Sanskrit) or *indirectly* through Kanarese. The law of the convertibility of surds and sonants in Tamil language, is given by Dr. Caldwell.<sup>19</sup> “A Sonant cannot commence a word, neither is a surd admissible in the middle, except when double; and so imperative is this law, and so strictly is it adhered to in Tamil, that when words are borrowed from languages in which a different principle prevails, as the Sanskrit or the English, the consonants of these words change from sonants to surds, or *vice versa*, according to their position; e. g., *dantam* (Sanskrit = a tooth) becomes in Tamil *tandam*; *bhagyam* (Sanskrit = happiness) becomes *pakkyam*.....A similar rule applies to the pronunciation of *ch* (the Tamil ‘s’), the first consonant of the second ‘varga’.” According to this law of phonetical change, *ch* in *Chera*, *Cherala* and *Cheralam* in Tamil became *k* in *Kera*, *Kerala* and *Keralam* respectively in Sanskrit.

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<sup>19</sup> Dr. Caldwell's “Comparative Dravidian Grammar”, Part I—“Sounds,” pages 21 and 22 (II edition; 1875).

The Dravidian word *Cherala* might have crept into the Sanskrit language either directly as explained above, or indirectly through the *Kanarese* language; for the Northerners might have learnt the name of the Malabar Coast, from the people on the border—the Kanarese. Even in that case the same phonetic change must have taken place as shown below.

ENGLISH.	TAMIL	KANARESE
Small	<i>Chinna</i>	<i>Kinna</i>
Ear	<i>Chevi</i>	<i>Kivi</i> or <i>Kimi</i>
Head	<i>Chenni</i>	<i>Kenne</i>
The Malabar Coast }	<i>Cheralam</i>	<i>Keralam</i>
	<i>Cherala</i>	<i>Kerala</i>
	<i>Chera</i>	<i>Kera</i>

### Conclusion.

Hence we have to conclude:—

(1) The Sanskrit word *Kerala* is not derived from the word *Nalikera*.

(2) The Sanskrit word *Nalikera* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Kera* another form of *Kerala*.

(3) *Cheralam* is a pure Dravidian word, used in classical Dravidian (or Tamil) works.

(4) The Sanskrit word *Kerala* (केरलः) is derived from the Dravidian word *Cherala*.

Hence the theory of the Sanskritic origin of *Kerala* has to be abandoned in favour of the Dravidian origin from *Cherala*.