

A HANDBOOK ON KERALA

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
GOVERNMENT OF KERALA

EVOLUTION AND INCURSIONS

To a large extent the ancient history of Kerala is shrouded in the mists of tradition. The most popular legend would have it that the land crust that forms Kerala was raised from the depths of the ocean. Parasurama, the Brahmin *avatar* of Vishnu had waged an epic series of vengeful war on the Kshatriyas. Came a moment when Parasurama was struck by remorse at the wanton annihilation he had wrought. He offered severe penance atop the mountain heights. In a mood of profound atonement the sage heaved his mighty axe into the midsty of the distant ocean. The waves foamed and frothed as a prawn-shaped stretch of land extending from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari surfaced from the depths of the sea.

Legends apart, the first set of people who left their imprints on the soil of Kerala may be identified at present only with reference to their burial practices. Though records are lacking, a reasonable assumption is that they spoke an archiac form of Tamil. They constructed strange burial monuments in granite, laterite and pottery, most of which are strikingly similar to the megalithic monuments of west Europe and Asia. These monuments are, however, younger than their counterparts in the rest of Asia. Historians have postulated a time bracket between 10th century B.C. and 5th century A.D. for those people. It is clear from the grave relics, including iron tridents and daggers, that the megalithic builders had long emerged out of the stone age into the iron age without passing through a bronze age. In fact, there is very little evidence of the old stone age and the new stone age in Kerala.

It is quite possible that the Mauryan invaders who reached the Mysore borders in their onslaught southwards encountered the megalith-making tribes under their own chieftains who lived in hill forts and controlled the surrounding country-side. Fortunately, a whole corpus of ancient Tamil literature known to scholars by the name of Sangham literature has been preserved. It has been suggested that in the period of Asoka, the Great the southernmost tribes were just emerging from the tribal status to civilization. It may even be that contacts with the more advanced Mauryan world accelerated the pace of political and social movement among the Cheras and the minor chieftains of Kerala.

The Cheras had their capital in Vanchi in the interior. There were the famous harbour towns of Tyndis and Muziris on the Arabian sea coast. The Cheras ruled over the central portion of the present-day Kerala. They seemed to have attracted a good deal of Roman trade. There are vivid descriptions in Sangham literature of Yavana ships coming to Muziris, laden with gold and waiting for pepper—the black gold of the Romans—at some distance from the shore. The hoards of Roman gold coins unearthed from Kottayam and Eyyal in Kerala lend authenticity to such statements. There were a number of other minor chieftains who flourished in different parts of Kerala. The Ays near the Pottiyil mountains were among those chieftains. The Pottiyil mountain, incidentally, is associated in tradition with the Sage Agastya, the father of Tamil grammar and literature. The entire social world of Kerala, as part of Tamilakam—Tamil land—is reflected in the rich collection of secular poems which form the characteristic legacy of the Sangham age.

Contact with the Mauryan empire gave the first impulse for the transformation of tribal polity into civilized polity. The stimulus of overseas trade provided by the Roman empire in the first three centuries of the Christian era

triggered off the next phase of development in Tamilakam. The abundance of pepper and the other spices, the navigability of the rivers connecting the high mountains with the seas and the discovery of favourable trade winds which carried sailing ships directly from the Arabian coast to Kerala in less than forty days—these geographical advantages combined to produce a veritable boom in Kerala foreign trade. The harbours of Naura near Cannanore, Tyndis near Quilandy, Muziris near Cranganore and Bacare near Alleppey owed their existence primarily to the Roman trade. The Roman contact with Kerala might have given rise to small colonies of Jews and Syrian Christians in the chief harbour towns of Kerala. The Jews of Cochin believe that their ancestors came to the West Coast of India as refugees following the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century. The Syrian Christians claim to be descendants of the converts of St. Thomas, the Apostle. Arab contacts were very ancient and Muslims are noticed in Kerala as far back as the 9th century.

The fourth and fifth centuries witnessed the decline and fall of the western Roman empire. A shrivelling of the Roman sea trade followed, leading in its turn a decline of harbour towns like Tyndis and Muziris. Further political incursions from the North into Tamilakam took place. There was a fresh wave of Aryan Brahman migration to Kerala. The traditions of Nambudiris (Kerala Brahmans) recorded in the *Keralolpatti* chronicle refer to Mayuravarman, the Kadamba King, as their patron during the period after Parasurama. A Kadamba record of Vishnuvardhana of the 5th century at the Edakkal cave in Wynad bears testimony to the Kadamba presence in Kerala.

The last phase of the Sangham age coincided with a silent revolution that was overtaking the social system in Kerala. By about the 8th century, a chain of thirty-two Brahman settlements had been completed in Kerala.

The influx of the Brahmans and the prosperity of their colonies eventually paved the way for the social, cultural and political separation of Kerala from the Tamil country in due course. These colonies were capable of producing a great philosopher of the stature of Sankaracharya. Shri Sankara was born in the village of Kaladi in central Kerala. But he had his philosophical training mostly in Kanchi. It is interesting to note that this intellectual giant of the 9th century, who saved Hindu orthodoxy through the synthesis of cults and who can well be ranked with St. Thomas of Aquinas in clarity of thought and sweep of understanding, was a product of the post Sangham, new Aryan settlements of Kerala, far removed from the cradle-land of the Indo-Gangetic civilization.

The whole of Kerala came to be covered by a network of temple-centred Brahmin settlements. Under their control these settlements had a large extent of land, a number of tenants and the entailing privileges. With more advanced techniques of cultivation and socio-political organization and a strong sense of solidarity, the Brahmans gradually formed the elite of society. They succeeded in raising a feudal fighting class of Nayars and ordered the caste system with numerous gradations of upper, intermediate and lower classes. In due course, the consolidation of these settlements and the establishment of their ascendancy gradually led to the evolution of a new Malayalee language and new Malayalee culture. The separate identity of Kerala was in the making.

The 9th century raised the curtain of a new epoch in Kerala history. The ancient capital of Vanchi had fallen into the hands of the Pandyas. The vanquished rulers founded a new capital near the old harbour city of Muciri (Muziri), now known as Cranganore or Kodungalloor. The new capital was called Makotai or Mahodayapura, and was built around the great Siva temple of Tiruvanchikulam. No trace of the palace at Makotai remains today.

The author of the *Kokasandesa* found it in ruins even in the 16th century. He saw in the ruins yet another example of the fickle nature of the goddess of prosperity.

The revival of the Chera kingdom was actually a by-product of the Aryan Brahman settlements and the symptom of the socio-political dominance that they had established. The Perumal was the Lord of Mahodayapura and the overlord of Kerala (Kerdaohinadha). But his sovereignty was constrained by the pre-existing power of the Brahman settlements and the hereditary chieftains. Each *nadu* or district had its own hereditary or nominated governor. Thus the great feudatories were the hereditary governors of Kolathunadu, Purakizhanadu, Kurumpranadu, Eranadu, Valluvanadu, Kizhmalanadu, Vempalanadu and Venadu.

The northern most district of Kolathunadu was almost independent and was brought under Chera sovereignty by force towards the end of the 9th century. Venadu, the southernmost district, was carved out of the ancient territory of the Vels. A new harbour city named Kollam was established here in A. D. 825. In course of time it became a second capital of the Cheras of Makotai. Kollam gradually gained in trade and prosperity under the leadership of Mar Sapir Iso, the Syrian Christian merchant prince. The foundation era of Kollam city came to be employed all over Kerala and parts of the Pandyan kingdom and even Ceylon by astronomers and officials who tagged it on to the Saptarshi era. The Kollam era came to be known as the Malayalam era.

The beginning of the 12th century marked a period of troubled times for Kerala, with an attack by the combined forces of the Cholas and the Pandyas, and internal conflicts in the Chera kingdom. Rama Kulasekhara, the Perumal, decided to leave the country in the company of some Arab Muslims. He is believed to have become a convert to Islam

and died at a place called Sapher in Arabia. This event has been referred to as the partition of Kerala. In the absence of a central power, the divisions of the Chera kingdom soon emerged as principalities under separate chieftains. The flight of the last Perumal, his conversion to Islam and the emergence of small principalities marked the end of an era. These were crucial events which shaped the destinies of Kerala for many centuries to come.

In this period Kerala was chiefly a land of agricultural villages. Society had a feudal complexion, with a graded hierarchy, hereditary occupations and well-defined duties and responsibilities for each class of people. Proprietorship of land was closely related to political power and administration. A peculiarity of the social system in Kerala comes to notice in the epigraphic and literary records of this age. This is the matrilineal form of inheritance.

In spite of the predominantly agrarian character of society, trade and commerce flourished. The hill products from the Western Ghats, carried down by the many rivers to the natural harbours on the Arabian sea, secured an expanding market in West Asia and Europe. A number of Jewish and Christian tribes exploited this situation with the help of the monsoon. The native chieftains overlooked the differences in faith and race and extended to them religious tolerance as well as social equality. These merchants were not inclined to or capable of disturbing the established order. In fact, Syrian Christian and Jewish leaders like Mar Sappir Iso and Joseph Rabban came to the rescue of Chera Kings in times of war and thereby earned their gratitude in full measure.