

Travancore Dynastic Records

(FOURTH SERIES)

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In my previous articles I had promised to give detailed information on the *Padiyettam* ceremony of Travancore Sovereigns when they first visit the important Major Devaswams (temples). It will be opportune to do it now, when the country is rejoicing over the Investiture of our Beloved Young Sovereign, H. H. Sri Chitra Tirunal, with regal powers.

In olden days, the *Padiyettam* was an important ceremony. It had not only a religious but also a political significance which in the modern democratic materialism has dwindled into mere spectacular demonstration. To appreciate its original importance it is necessary to understand the constitution of Devaswams and their *Sankethams*.

The Devaswams were originally autonomous institutions like the Free Cities of the Middle Ages or the Swiss Cantons of today. Each Devaswam had a territorial jurisdiction, which was called the *Sanketham* and all matters, civil or criminal, social or religious, were adjudicated and executed by the *Yogam* consisting of the Ooralars and the *Akakkoyma*, the latter being the president and chief executive officer. The Devaswam owed no allegiance to any Sovereign. On the contrary, Kings were compelled to pay penalty for breaches of the customary laws of the *Sanketham*. Technically such breaches were called *Sanketham Azhikkal* (സംസ്ഥാനപ്പണി). Several instances of payments of such penalties both by Sovereigns and other people are

mentioned in the *Granthavaris* or temple chronicles. I would refer the readers to page 190 et seq. of the late Mr. K. P. Padmanabha Menon's History of Cochin in Malayalam, where he has given details of the instances in which such penalties have been exacted. He also refers there to the *Chatta variola* prepared by the Travancore and Cochin Governments in 958 M. E. and produced as an Exhibit in the Elankunnappuzha Arbitration Case. It will be evident from that document that the Devaswam exercised Sovereign powers including those of taxation. (Vide extract given in the Appendix).

These autonomous corporations were so numerous and powerful that no Sovereign could afford to rule the country without their goodwill and co-operation. The *Padiyettam* was really the grant to the Sovereign of the Freedom of the *Sanketham* and therein lies its political significance. Even so late as the time of Martanda Varma, the Great, Travancore History is resonant with the struggles between the State and the Devaswams. It was only after his complete subjugation of the country and its consolidation by his illustrious successor that Devaswams lost their power and the ceremony became a mockery of their former glory.

The question then arises why the formality is kept on. The explanation lies in the spiritual and religious significance of the *Padiyettam*. Although the village organisation might superficially appear to be different in

Malabar from what is found on the other side of the Ghats, intrinsically it is the same, with the only difference that the latter is more compact than the former. Every village is built round a central shrine, the spiritual influence of which pervades the whole area. According to the Tantra Sastras, the consecration of a Deity involves a sphere of influence over which the divine spirit holds sway. Its restricted perimeter is represented by the several *Prakaras* or boundary walls such as the *Kshetram*, *Balivattam*, *Mathikagam*, etc, but its extended area is the *Desam* or village itself. All those who live in the village have to pay homage to the Divinity as well as those who enter the *Sanketam*. As one who enters a municipal area has to abide by the rules of citizenship, so he who goes into the *Sanketam* has to observe the rules of that *Sanketam*, be he even a mighty Prince. It is this obeisance that a Sovereign pays by the ceremony of the *Padiyettam*; and no Hindu King will be devoid of that spiritual faith which animates his whole life. To the ears of the modern socio-religious reformer, it might sound somewhat strange when he is told that even non-Hindus, not to speak of the non caste-Hindus, who are residents of Devaswam Sanketams or are tenants of temple properties do not fail to observe the customary laws and pay the customary fines.

Document (j) of the Third Series already published (vide pages 347 & 348 of the Kerala Society Papers, Vol. I) contains a description of the *Padiyettam* ceremony at

Suchindram gone through by King Rama Varma on the 16th Chittira 896 M.E. Another extract of the same event is appended to this paper (See Document I *infra*). Both of these are incomplete. I therefore append a copy of a later *pulitharam* of the *Padiyettam* at Suchindram by Maha Raja Martanda Varma who ruled the State from 1022 to 1086 M. E. (Document II *infra*). The elaborate procedure and the ceremonials prescribed on such occasions are noteworthy as relics of the ancient homage ceremony. The payment of nazar (Kanikka) to the Deity in the form of ornaments, elephant, cloth and cash, the presents to the Devaswam authorities, servants and even menials, and the grants made for special and daily services have to be reckoned as the fee in token of allegiance to the presiding Deity, and through Him as a petition for the Freedom of the *Sanketam*. The giving away of the Sword of State to the shrine and taking it back from the chief priest is a clear gesture of allegiance. The grant of the *Vattaka Prasadam* is the sign of acceptance of the homage. If the residents of the *Sanketam* have any grievances or complaints, the Sovereign has to adjudicate and give them relief before he is permitted to become a free man of the *Sanketam*. This is clear from the extract of the document of 896 M. E. The elaborate procedure prescribed at every step is evidently meant to impress upon the Sovereign the solemnity of the function consistent with his dignity. Although each Devaswam has its peculiar functions the cardinal idea is the same in all.

The expression '*Padiyum Padiyettavum*' (പദിയും പദിയേറ്റവു) is significant as *Padi* means fee.