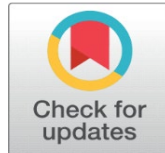
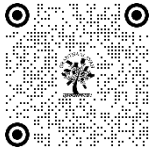


# A CASE STUDY OF SRIVALLABHA TEMPLE IN KERALA: THE BRAHMANA TEMPLE DEPENDENTS OF EARLY MEDIEVAL KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the Srivallabha Temple in Kerala during the early medieval period, focusing on the role of Brahmana temple dependents in shaping the region's temple-centric society. The Srivallabha Temple, a prominent Vishnu shrine, served as a nucleus for religious, administrative, and cultural activities, embodying the interconnectedness of spiritual practices and local governance. By analyzing inscriptions, historical records, and temple manuscripts, this research explores the organizational structure of temple administration, highlighting the pivotal role of Brahmana dependents in land management, ritual practices, and the dissemination of Vedic traditions. The study also investigates how the temple acted as a catalyst for economic redistribution, fostering agrarian expansion through land grants and endowments managed by Brahmanical elites. This interaction between the temple and the agrarian economy underscored the integration of religious and material domains in medieval Kerala. Furthermore, the research contextualizes the evolution of temple patronage under royal and local chieftaincies, examining how these dynamics shaped social hierarchies and communal identities. This case study contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical processes that underpinned Kerala's temple-centered society and offers insights into the broader framework of temple economies and Brahmanical authority in South India.

**Keywords:** Srivallabha Temple, early medieval Kerala, Brahmana dependents, temple administration, land grants, agrarian economy, Vedic traditions, temple patronage, South Indian temple culture, socio-economic dynamics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

South Indian medieval historians place a high value on temples. Several academics, including M.G.S. Narayanan, Kesavan Veluthat, P.M. Rajan Gurukkal, and M.R. Raghava Varier, have focused on the pivotal role that temples played in the social, economic, and cultural history of medieval Kerala.<sup>1</sup> However, there is currently no precise study on temple dependents of a given temple. By considering the dependents of the Srivallabha temple at Tiruvalla in Central Travancore, the current attempt is made in that direction.

This temple's dependents include administrators, chief priests, and subordinate priests, menial laborers, teachers, drummers, stage actors, garland makers, Brahmin pupils, and vendors of necessities. As a result, it is exceedingly challenging to cover them all in our conversation. Therefore, the Brahmin and non-Brahmin dependents of this temple have been separated for ease, and the current paper solely addresses the Brahmana dependents of this temple.

The transcriptions of Tiruvalla copper-plates in the Travancore Archaeological Series<sup>ii</sup> and the materials published through the Kerala Society<sup>iii</sup> Papers serve as the major source for this study. The *Sri VallabhaKshetraMahatmyam*, a traditional text concerning the temple's beginnings, is also cited. Additionally, it is common practice to use the ideas and interpretations of different scholars that are offered in secondary sources.

Two factors make the Srivallabha Temple case particularly noteworthy. First of all, it was one of the most significant temples in early medieval Kerala and was noted by the Azhvar saints of South India as one of the thirteen *Padalpettadivvyadesams*, or sacred sites of Vishnu devotion, in Malainadu. Second, it has the most inscriptional source material from the same time period. These inscriptions, which are composed of 630 lines on 35 copper plates, detail several facets of the temple's operations, including *poojas*, festivals, staff, and administration.

Copper plates from Tiruvalls describe a wide range of individuals who relied on the temple in the early middle Ages. Those who relied on the temple either directly or indirectly were among them. While some of them worked at the temple on a regular basis, others were irregular employees – that is, their services were only requested on exceptional occasions like festivals.

The *uralar*, or administrators; *santikkar*, or the priestly class; *caitirar*, or students; and *bhattar*, or teachers, are the temple's Brahmana dependents.

*Uralar* literally translates to “the village rulers,” which includes the headmen and city fathers.<sup>iv</sup> It is unknown how many Uralar are there in Tiruvalla. The legendary work, *SrivallabhaKshetraMahatmyam* states that King Kulasekhara ordered the tulu Brahmins, whom he deemed to be worthy, to erect the image in Cakrapuram when it was discovered from the depths of the Netravati River. He also appointed pujaris for the image. The local Brahmins were named trustees, and the kings of his family were designated as the temple's guardians. In an agreement dated 27<sup>th</sup> Meenam, 895 M. E. (A.D. 1720) there is a mention of seventeen Brahmin families of Tiruvalla. M.G.S. Narayanan states that the *uralar* were known by other terms like *Nattar*, *Sabhaiyar*, or *Sabha*, *Taliyar*, or *Taji* and *Srivaishnavar* also.<sup>v</sup> Tiruvalla copper plates contain a mention of twenty five Srivaishnavas who enjoyed the privilege of being feasted at the temple. If M.G.S. Narayanan's statement is taken for granted there were twenty five *uralar* to the Tiruvalla temple in the early medieval period.

Once more, these *uralar* were categorized into a number of *ganams* or trusts. Thus, phrases like *Uttirataganam* (line 618), *Dwadasiganam* (lines 361, 352), and *Tiruvathiraganam* (line 573) may be found in Tiruvalla copper plates. *Pooraganam* (line 573) and *Tiruvonaganam* (line 621) had a diverse membership. There were twenty members of the *Dwadasiganam*. *Ganattar* were the members of the *ganam*. It's possible that a single Ura family has membership in multiple *ganams*. Large landed plots were granted to these *ganams* to cover the costs of the ceremonies and festivals of that day. The *ganam* members received an equal share of these endowments and were given the responsibility of managing the relevant temple operations in the donor's name.

In a strict sense, these *Uralar* were not landlords. They simply handled temple matters in accordance with the laws in place and served as trustees of the temple's lands. They were in charge of renting out the temple grounds, collecting rent, disciplining non-payers, selecting temple employees, and keeping an eye on spending. Collectively, *Uralar* wielded the immense abilities that were bestowed upon them. They were prohibited from criticizing the temple's expenditures. In Tiruvalla's case, the *Uralar* were prohibited from finding fault with the *pandiratipuja*'s expenses and thereby preventing it from happening.<sup>vi</sup> Doing so should be interpreted as killing one's own father and getting married to one's own mother. However, if *anuralan* violates the laws, the grama's people should get together, take away his house and lands, and must be credited to the God. This makes it clear that the *uralar* undoubtedly lacked total property rights, including ownership of their homes.

In the Tiruvalla temple, the *Muzhikkalamkacham*, or accord or contract, was the one that prevailed. It was to protect the interests of the community over those of the individual, the *Uralar* were subject to all these tight limitations. No one would dare to incite others to break the law if those who assist such detracted *uralar* were also subject to the same punishment. There was a strong sense of togetherness among the *Uralar* because no one could overcome such social exclusion on their own. All of the *sabha*'s or the village's vigilance, however, was in vain because these *uralars*, who were originally appointed as hereditary trustees of the temple, eventually came to own the temples and, more significantly, their landed property. To this day, they genuinely pose as the true owners of the temples that are under their supervision. The sociopolitical changes brought about by the fall of the second Chera Kingdom in Kerala should be investigated as the origins of these subsequent events.

The *santikkars*, or regular priests, who oversee the daily *poojas* or rituals, and the *tantric*, or high priest, are among the Brahmins of the priestly class. However, the tantric post is not mentioned in the Tiruvalla copper plates. But, the *SrivallabhaKshetraMahatmyam*, a fabled account of the establishment of the Tiruvalla temple, refers to *pujaris*, or priests, and trustees. According to legend, the Tarananallur Namburi family was the temple's first *tantri*. The Bhattathiri

of the Kuzhikkad family and the Namburi of the Mulamana family were the temple's *tantri* and *parikarmi*, or assistants to the high priest, respectively, according to a document dated 27<sup>th</sup> Meenam, 895 M.E. (A.D. 1720).<sup>vii</sup>

Another significant position held by the Brahmanas is that of *Melsanti*, or the chief priest. They were known as *melemerumakkal* and *santiyadigal*. Two *melsantis* are mentioned in a section that details the distribution of the gold that the Tiruvalla temple obtained. The *santi*'s term of office is typically restricted to three years. It's unclear if the two *melsantis* in this temple rotated or operated simultaneously.

*Melsanti*'s primary responsibility is to perform *poojas*, which include *abhiseka*, or the holy bath, burning lights, applying sandal paste to the image's body, and adorning it with garlands of flowers, presenting food, waving the lighted camphor, and burning incense. According to the Tiruvalla copper plates, he should be fined twelve *nali* of rice if his responsibilities at *pandiradipuja* were not completed on time. The *santiyadikal* would take the fines collected from the other temple servants. It is his responsibility to ensure that the costs incurred for *pandiradipuja* adhere to the established budget when the *samanjitan* or secretary is not there.. The two *Melsantis* were entitled to twenty *nali* of rice for the Onam festival in the month of *Avani*.

The temple of Tiruvalla had five *kilsantis* or subordinate priests.<sup>viii</sup> Their primary responsibility was to support the principal priest. The image was bathed with twelve pots of water and it was brought by *kilsantis*. They handed over all essentials for *poojas* to chief priest. They received two hundred *nali* of paddy for the *pandiradipuja* performance. The *kilsantis* received the fines that were collected from the drummers. The five *kilsantis* received fifty *nali* of rice at the Onam festival.<sup>ix</sup>

Additionally, there is a lengthy list of land parcels from which the *santikar* should receive varying amounts of paddy. It consists of about fifty land parcels and a total paddy gathering of over 1500 para. According to a rough calculation based on the facts currently available, one *santikaran* would receive about 210 para paddy per year.

*Cattirar*, or students, were the next significant group of Brahmins who relied on the temple. In general, a school known as *calai* (*salai*) was supported by the major Brahmanical temples of medieval Kerala to teach Brahmin students archery and the Vedas. They received free housing and meals. Three *cattirar* were to be fed one portion of cooked rice made for *pandiradipuja* at the Tiruvalla temple. During *pandiradipuja*, they should also be given one and a half coconuts, nine *kalanju* of tamarind, and one *ulakku* of salt. The *Cattirars* were entitled to 500 *nali* of rice on the day of Onam. The prevailing consensus is that two *nali* of rice should be provided to a Brahmana. By considering the lands earmarked for feeding *cattirar* it can be assumed that there were 300 students attached to this temple.\*The promotion of the Brahman settlements in Kerala was greatly aided by these *cattirars*, who were skilled in both archery and the Vedas. It is possible that they were created specifically to propagate brahmanic culture.

Udyotanasuri from Jalor, Rajasthan, wrote Kuvalayamala, a Jain Prakrit text from the eighth century, which provides a realistic depiction of such an institution.

Kuvalayachandra is the story's protagonist, according to this work. He arrives in the large city of Vijayanagari, also known as Vijayapuri, which is located in the western region of South India, most likely in Kerala. He walks into a large *cattar* monastery, *ormadha*. He discovers *Cattar* there, who were indigenous to several nations. They were practicing archery, sword and shield combat, dagger practice, etc. at one location. He discovered that other people were learning to paint, sing, and play an instrument, stage plays, or dance. Other groups were learning *vyakarana*, *buddhadarshana*, *mimamsa*, *naivayikadarsana*, *anekantavada*, or *lokayatika*, inside the building.<sup>xi</sup>

It is evident from the description above that the *cattirars* came from several locations. However, there is little proof that these colleges were as well-known worldwide as ancient Takshasila or Nalanda Universities. The Brahman families of the local hamlet may have accounted for the majority of the students.

The Brahman community also included the Vedic instructors, or *Bhattar*, who were affiliated with the temple. On important occasions, they were supposed to participate in Vedic lectures, teach the *cattirars*, and read and interpret *bhakti* poems to the general public. In these inscriptions, they were referred to as *pattakal*. The Tiruvalla copper plates designate four *nali* of rice to the *bhattar* and five *nali* of rice to each of the *bhattars* who gave a speech inside the temple on Tiruvonam day in the section that lists the costs for the Onam festival.<sup>xii</sup> It's possible that the first *bhattar* mentioned was permanent. The postof *Mahabharatabhatta* can be found in a number of temples in southern India. The phrase isn't used in Tiruvalla copperplates, nevertheless. The popularity of this epic poem in subsequent times is attested to by *Unnunilandesam* (15<sup>th</sup> c.) which mentions it while recounting a trip through the countryside, indicating that the practice of such recitation persisted in Kerala for many years.

According to the aforementioned data, there were 208 Brahmanas who directly relied on the Srivallabha temple, with the exception of four *Bhattar* who were speaking on Onam day. There were 175 *cattirars*, 2 *melsantis*, 5 *kilsantis*, 25

*uralars*, one *bhattar* on the list. In exchange for their services, they received things like rice or paddy and lands as service tenures. They were also got income in the form of penalties gathered from other lower servants; some of them were also given gold.

## CONCLUSION

In early medieval Kerala, these Brahmanas were the primary beneficiaries of the temple establishment. There is already a mention of a particular system of feeding the temple's twenty-five Brahmanas. For the purpose of feeding Brahmanas in the temple, 12634 *kalam* seed capacity of paddy fields and a few garden plots were set aside. This suggests that there would be more than enough revenue from these lands to support 25 Brahmanas. The practice of feeding every Brahmana present in the temple at the designated hour may have existed. In this sense, the temple gave its dependents the most important means of surviving. The temple also conducted festivals and theatrical shows, including *kutu* and dancing, to amuse its dependents. Thus this medieval temple in Kerala offered free food, pleasure and employment to these Brahmanas. The most contented people of that era were these temple-dependent Brahmanas. Additionally, they have much free time, which is evidenced by the abundance of literary work in.

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<sup>i</sup>MGS Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, 1996, Kesavan Veluthat, *Brahman Settlements in Kerala*, Calicut, 1978, P M Rajan Gurukkal, *The Kerala Temple and The Early Medieval Agrarian System*, Sukapuram, 1992, M R Raghava Varier and P M Rajan Gurukkal, *Keralcharithram* (Mal.), Sukapuram, 1991

<sup>ii</sup>T A Gopinatha Rao (Ed.), *Travancore Archaeological Series*, Vol. II, Part III, *Huzur Plates of Tiruvalla*, pp. 57-94

<sup>iii</sup>Kerala Society Papers, Combined volume I&II, Series 2, *Annals and Antiquities of Tiruvalla*, V Raghavan Nambyar, pp. 57-94

<sup>iv</sup> T A Gopinatha Rao, *op.cit.*, p.139

<sup>v</sup> MGS Narayanan, *op.cit.*, p.110

<sup>vi</sup>Tiruvalla Copper plates, lines 28-30

<sup>vii</sup> Kerala Society Papers, *op.cit.*

<sup>viii</sup>Tiruvalla Copper plates, p. 414

<sup>ix</sup>Ibid, *loc .cit.*

<sup>x</sup> MGS Narayanan, *op. cit.* p.191

<sup>xi</sup> MGS Narayanan, *Aspects of Aryanisation in Kerala*, 1973, pp.26-27

<sup>xii</sup>Tiruvalla Copper plates, line.414