

God's Own Land: A Reading of Land and Religion in Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithiyamala*

**Sreedevi N S
Dr. Lima Antony**

Aithiyamala (or The Garland of Legends) is a popular classic that has an indispensable place in the literary history of Kerala. This voluminous compilation of 126 legends, authored by Kottarathil Sankunni (1855-1937), encompasses the literary manifestation of the socio political and cultural associations of the land. The paper probes into the issues of land, the problematics of its ownership, the reforms, and the subsequent repercussions, and how they had been handled in *Aithiyamala*. It also analyzes the role of the authorial markers into the present, in revealing the class ideologies. Sankunni's authorship imparts an ideological dimension to the text that elevates it beyond a mere compilation of legends.

Key Words: Land Grants- class ideologies- temple legends- legitimization

This paper analyses *Aithiyamala*, the compilation of legends penned by Kottarathil Sankunni (1855-1937) and the social history of Kerala. The legends taken up for the discussion on land relations are listed below. The names are as they appear in *Aithiyamala*.

1. The *Mannaarshaala Maahaatmyam* The Significance of *Mannaarshala* (669 -677)
2. *Chengannur Bhagavathy* or The Goddess of *Chengannur* (717 - 726)

3. *Mannadikkavum Kambithaanum* or The Kali Temple Of *Mannadikkau* and its Priest (417 - 426)
4. *Kollam Vishaarikkavu* or The Kali Temple in Quilon (520 - 526)
5. *Panachikkaattu Saraswathy* or Goddess Saraswathy of *Panachikkad* (689 - 692)
6. *Kochi Sakthan Thampuran* (269 - 307)
7. *Puruharina puresa Mahaatmyam* or The Temple of *Ettumanoor* (441-450)
8. *Aaranmula Devanum Mangaattu Bhattathiriyum* or The Lord of *Aaranmula and Mangaattu Bhattathiri* (654 - 658)
9. *Saasthaankottayum Kuranganmarum* The Fort of *Saastha* and The Monkeys (390 - 404)
10. *Achankovil Sasthavum Parivaaramoorthikalum* or Lord *Saastha* of *Achankovil* and His Subordinate Gods. (466 - 484)
11. *Kumaranellur Bhagavathi* or The Goddess of *Kumaranellur* (134 - 138)
12. *Kumaramangalathu Namboothiri* (875 - 879)
13. *Thirunakkara devanum avidathe kaalayum* or The God of *Thirunakkara* and his Bull (138 - 141)

The analysis has been divided into three specific categories:

a) Land Grants – Accumulated Through Temples examines how legends show the pivotal role gained by temples in procuring and maintaining the land; b) Land reforms – Reversal of Fortunes considers how a new feudal class emerged in Kerala by the second half of eleventh century and the new change disturbed the political sovereignty of the central government in the next few centuries; and c) Land Relations – A Morphological Study of Land includes an examination of how land was concentrated in three power centres – Devaswam (belonging to the temples), Brahmaswam (belonging to the Brahmins) and the King.

Land Grants – Accumulated through Temples

In fact, the legends themselves do not explicitly address the theme of land, despite numerous overt references. Except for the legend involving Sakthan *Thampuran*, all the other legends listed above are temple legends. Among the wide variety of legends, the issue of

land relations find place in legends associated with temples. The religious narratives address the issue of soil and land reforms more than the other secular legends included in the text. Many of the land transactions mentioned in *Aithiyamala* are grants for temple establishments in the name of atonements, favors, gratitude, *nercca* and as gift for social services. A brief glance at the history of Kerala will point to the nature of the social system prevalent in the state over the centuries.

The documented histories agree that the rigid bonds of caste system were unfamiliar to the Malayalis before the Christian era in the *Sangam* period. According to Sreedhara Menon, the noted historian, even the landlord-tenant relation of the later centuries was absent (209). The Aryan invasion brought in the caste system which gradually took deep roots in the society, and made Kerala* a Hindu domain after eighth century AD. Brahmin supremacy in the social structure was established in the due course (209). These changes with respect to the land relation have been traced in William Logan's *Malabar*:

The Vedic Brahmins in their passage southwards spread abroad their influence chiefly by claiming for themselves the gift of being able to compel the gods to do their will by reason of sacrifices conducted in sonorous Sanskrit and in particular they claimed the power to secure the benefits in the next world for their every passage into the Heaven of Indra (Logan, 1887, p.673).

He has also noted that in the grants of the lands conferred upon the Brahmins in return for their services, the act of giving is always accompanied or preceded by "libations of water" (Logan, 1887, p.673). The use of water in making a hereditary grant of land was introduced by Vedic Brahmins. These water grants assured the receiver the birthright (*janmam*) over the property.

Most of the grants of land were made for temple establishments as noted in the legend of *Kumaranellur Bhagavathi* (134 - 138) or to the eminent people for social services as told in the legend of *Kumaramangalathu Namboothiri* (875 - 879) wherein the Raja of *Kayamkulam* conferred on the sorcerer (for evicting a *Yakshi*)

a *desam* along with all the authority in it. Land was given along with other emoluments to people who served the kings well. Marthanda Varma, famous as “the creator of Modern Travancore” had made such a grant to a family (namely *Nellimoottil*) that had served him in distress. He had performed the rite of *Thrippadi Danam* on January 1760, an act which implies that he surrendered his kingdom to lord Vishnu (Dayanandan, p.5). Many people gave away their property willingly either for the favors they got through divine help or by the orders said to have been received by them in their dreams. In the legend *Kiliroor Kunninmel Bhagavathy*, (134-138) the Raja of *Thekkumkur* as well as *Palliyil Menon*, a local chief were visited by Goddess *Karthyayini* in their dream and advised them to honour *Kothayamma*, her faithful devotee. An astrologer was consulted who had affirmed their dreams. The orders were carried out the next day itself. The divine orders were mediated by such agents as dreams, priests and supernatural messengers

Properties were given away to temples as penance too as told in the legend, namely *Thirunakkara Devanum Avidathe Kaalayum* or The God of *Thirunakkara* and his Bull (138-141) where the king of *Thekkumkur* came to know that a *parayan* had thrown stone at a white bull, supposedly belonged to the god, and leaves the plot for the temple as penance. But the author did not mention whether the *parayan*, who happened to be the custodian of the plot, was compensated or not. Apparently, the proceedings of the story in that direction have been neglected. In the legend *Puruharinapura Mahaathmyam* (441-450), it is said that Travancore army, during their 1752 attacks on *Vadakkumkur*, destroyed the land owned by *Ettumanoor Devaswam*. As a result of a number of bad omens, predicted as the results of *Ettumannurappan*’s anger on the Travancore King, he had to surrender 168 *para* land in *Manikkam desam* along with other gifts. He had to face such misfortunes because of the violation of the sacred land. The legend clearly suggests how even the conquering king could not upset the prevalent land-holding rights, and the social relations tied to the land were fought over and maintained at all cost. The complex nature of the land-holding rights

gives a uniqueness to the Malayali notion of land. This legend also reinforces the popular belief that property or land, once given over to God turns sacred, a notion planted deep in to the mindset of the Hindu society centuries before and strengthened by *Ardha Sastras*. I.V. Babu, in his study on *Namboothiris* observes:

The main reason for the evolution of Brahmin domination over life and land was the grants of land made to the temples and Brahmins which had the divine sanction from dharma sastras. A large portion in the “Anusasana Parva” of *Mahabharata* praises land grants made to Brahmins and temples. No Judiciary or police had authority over those lands (53).

The legend *Achankovil Sasthavum Parivaaramoorthikalum* (466-484) deals with the ancient Sastha temple in Quilon division. One of the legends mentioned on it is about how the temple devaswam had acquired a “*thollayirappara nilam* “ (90 acres). The land was given away by a *paradesi* Brahmin from *Pandya* Kingdom.

Later, when the British government defeated the kingdom of Pandyas, the then Collector decided to confiscate the above-mentioned land as well. But, according to the legend the attempt failed.

Sankunni writes:

After the inclusion of the northern territories under Travancore state, the then *Diwan* and British resident Munroe had revised the budgets in the temples of these areas. He did not believe in the popular belief that the idol in *Chengannur* temple got regular periods and special rituals were to be performed on those days. He cut down the expenses kept for those rituals. It is said that his wife got uncontrolled bleeding for no specific reasons and it stopped after he promised to atone for his negligence and surrendered separate amount for repentance. The Goddess was pleased when he revised the allowances (724).

The legend implies that the jurisdiction, power, and influence of any temple, including Chengannur, is asserted to extend even over

colonial and foreign rulers, not just the local community. Temples acted as autonomous power centres inaccessible to governmental interventions. Babu points out that It was the pinnacle of *sangetham* or centres upon which even the king enjoyed no powers except the role of a protector. These centres, which stood part of the feudalism, were the best example to show how political power was subsidiary to the religious and ritualistic power (54).

The legend conveys a message and it is directed not only at the British Government, but also at the people who have less faith over the powers of a particular god/goddess. It is a unilateral action to bind the community under the customary adherence to belief. The fear of penance also pays well to this effect.

Each area or *desam* had a separate temple the deities of which would look after the welfare of the inhabitants. This was made customary eventually for which the oral transmission of such legends also played a vital role. As these stories were passed down through generations, they acquired a realistic aura due to the way they were narrated, referencing readily verifiable familiar geographical details and relying on culturally available characters. Hence legends are often regarded as closer to historical narratives. As said by Ronald. L Baker (1972), “To the folk who pass them on, legends are by no means false; legends are believed and serve as folk history, right or wrong” (369). Legends play pivotal role in the evolution of local history as well. The fact that many of the place-names find their origins in the local temple legends show how these legends infuse a sense of identity to local space. In more than one place the author affirms that the place got its name only after the particular temple had been built. Places like *Thirunakkara* (139) *Manjoor* (137), and *Kaalakkandam* (141) are examples. Baker agrees that “even the scholar interested in the ‘true origins’ of place-names should also be concerned with legends as local names are sometimes derived from folk legends . . . but often the legend comes first; and the place, the setting of the legend, takes its name from the story” (370). Moreover, the local flavour and the cultural aspects add on to the sense of identity to that place. Hence,

we can say that periodic narration and *sthala puranas* have indispensable role in legitimizing the hold of its claimants on land.

Temples also acquired strategic status at the time of distress. When an invasion either from foreign lands or the neighboring *desams* takes place, the victorious will loot the properties of the defeated area. But the chances are less that they will plunder the temples. Such crisis was strong after the disintegration of the kingdom of *Cheraman Perumal*. There are a number of references to the political turbulences prevalent among the local chieftains of Kerala. In many of the legends included in the text, *naduvazhis* are said to have met renowned sorcerers before diplomatic meetings with their counterparts in neighbourhood *desams* to avoid strategic advancements. For instance, to avert the foreign invasions, when *Poonjatil* king sent the gigantic *Kulappurathu Bheeman* (416), Kochi Raja used the magical arrow given by the priest of *Kadamattathu* (440).

Land reforms – Reversal of Fortunes:

Land played a significant role in the social structure of Kerala. Hence the land reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which came as a result of the colonial interventions in the administrative affairs destabilized the well-established social structure. Many of the legends in *Aithiyamala* contain references to the existing land relation among the different levels of the social hierarchy. Certain usages like *kaanam*, *karayma* make direct reference to the land relations of the times. Since the timeline of most of the legends begins from the mythical past and land was looked upon as a commodity even in those times, the discussion is confined to a limited number of legends.

The political organization in Kerala is said to have begun with the arrival of rulers from beyond the ghats who came to be known as Perumals. The *Chera* Kings of the Ninth century were known by the family name *Kulasekharas*. Some of the legends of *Aithiyamala* have references to their regime. Documented history says that the reign of Perumals came to an end by 825 A.D. The political integrity of the kingdom which was made intact during ninth and tenth centuries by the centralized rule of *Kulasekhara* kings as well as his *naduvazhis*, the representatives at the lower level of administration

started diminishing by then. The history given below has been taken from Sreedhara Menon' *Kerala Samskaram* (or Kerala Culture).

The Hundred-year war between *Cheras* and *Cholas* affected the central governance. Central administration became weak by the end of the tenth century. *Naduvazhis* cemented their liberty and powers over the territories under their control. With the disintegration of the *Kulasekhara* Empire small power centres and *desams* were formed and rivalry among small chieftains started. The legend of *Pakkil Sastha* (346-348) recounts this short history of open rivalry among chieftains for land and power. When the Portuguese came, there existed a weak rule of chieftains all over Kerala. Political power was mainly with Kozhikode and Venad royal families. Under them were a number of *naduvazhis* and *desavazhis*. To get a better understanding of feudal set up in Kerala, this political history is essential to get acquainted with.

Feudalism is said to have originated in Kerala after the 100 years' war. When a big part of country's resources as well as man power was aligned for the war, the Malayali Brahmins who had migrated from central part of India started getting significant status in the socio – economic life of Kerala. By the time the war came to an end the social scenario of Kerala had underwent a major change. Caste system had been implemented effectively. The creamy layer of the society was constituted by the Malayali Brahmins as they were known earlier (later it became *Namboothiris*). They had temple *devaswams* under their control. They entered every walk of life excelled with their knowledge, intelligence and dedicated services to the kings (Menon, 1978, p. 217).

While the social hierarchy in Kerala was rigid, it was generally satisfactory to the people. There was a dogmatic acceptance of the new system, though it was externally imposed. The disturbances came with the foreign interventions in the state functions. The studies of historians like Sreedhara Menon and Bhaskaranunni have proved that the emergence of feudalism in Kerala followed the same pattern as that of England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The small-scale land owners and tenants gave their properties in the hands of *Namboothiris* or to the temple *devaswam* in the hope that enemies would not plunder Brahmaswam properties as well as *Devaswam* properties and they need not pay tax on those properties. European feudalism also formed because weaker section of the society entrusted strong and influential people to safeguard the formers' properties. In return of the safety of their properties, some people pledged their services at times of distress (Menon, 1978, p. 217).

Thus, a new feudal class emerged in Kerala by the second half of eleventh century and the new change disturbed the political sovereignty of the central government in the next few centuries.

Land Relations – A Morphological Study:

Land was concentrated in three power centres – *Devaswam* (belonging to the temples), *Brahmaswam* (belonging to the Brahmins) and the King. These lands were given over to zamindars (*Janmis*) either for *pattam* (lease) or *kanam* (supervision) which in turn was distributed to the agricultural class of the society. The unit of the Hindu's social system as Logan points is "the family" (669).

The association of such units had distinct functions to perform in the social structure and they were strictly hereditary. They followed strict rules both in the social organization as well as in the administration of land. The guilds of *Nayars* and *Tiyars* formed the agricultural population. *Nayars* were given the duty (*karayma*) of regulating the distribution of water for the irrigation purposes. They had also higher functions in the body politic as the protectors or governing class. They were also supervisors (*Kanakkar*). They were entrusted to give the land in trust to proper workers (*paattam*) in the body politic and of gathering from them in due course the shares of produce to the persons in authority. There were 600 nayars, the heads of the Nayar militia of the nadu (country) who were the Kanakkar (Logan, 1887, p. 672).

Being an agrarian society land was the major source for economic resources. From the *Namboothiri* who occupies the apex of the edifice of the caste, claiming pure uninterrupted descent from the Aryan immigrants, down to the *Parayyas* and *Pulayyas*, who are

regarded as representing the ancient inhabitants, the gradation of classes took part in the land either directly or indirectly. They followed the ancient system of customary sharing of the produce. But the bulk of the agricultural population had limited share in the ownership of their lands. Small land owners and average tenants had little command over agencies of production. Land was considered under hereditary properties and its conveyance followed different patterns in different regions. Differences had begun with the end of the regime of Perumals in 825AD. In Malabar, the king's share was directed into the hands of the *kanakkar* whereas in Cochin, the share went into the last Perumal's heirs. Travancore and Malabar shared more differences than similarities as Travancore chieftains were stronger in their dominions than their Malabar counterparts.

The European focuses solely on the soil, whereas the Malayali places greater emphasis on the people inhabiting the land. Therefore, the land transactions described in the legends convey more than just the transfer of soil; they take on a different dimension. When *naduvazhis* (chieftains) gave away lands to *dewaswams* or particular people, they were also given the authorities as well. Thus, when goddess *Karthyayini* visits *Thekkumkur* Raja in his dream and asks him to reward *Kothayamma*, he writes off a part of his hereditary (*janmam*) property to the elderly woman. Similarly, *Mannadikkavu kambithan* receives a *desam* (region) along with the authority over the *desam* as a reward for his service to the king of Travancore. He got the authority to distribute fields and to collect tax from them. Though the region was attached to Travancore state after his death, it is said that the next *kambithan* have the legal rights to claim the property.

Early British administrators had considered *janmam* as being equivalent to the Roman *dominium*, the right of property, control and ownership of a physical space confined by fixed boundaries (in the case of land). The points wherein they differ is the conveyance of such objects like authority in the *desam*, rank, battle wager, and customs (Logan, 1887, p. 675).

Apart from Logan, whose understanding of the Malayali land was closer than many of his contemporaries, Velu Pillai, author of

The Travancore Manual also agreed that “janmam has long been regarded as the ‘*plenum dominium*’ in the soil and *janmi* as the possessor of that. . .” (5).

Aithiyamala exemplifies the Malayali conceptions of land and shows its distinctiveness. But more than that it preserves and carries forward the ideologies and claims of the elite class of the society. When these legends are passed down from generation to generation as cultural reflectors, the claims gradually get legitimized. At times Sankunni even dilutes the viscous caste bias with a secular rendering. The legends by themselves take a stand even without taking into account the author’s point of view. They reveal whose claims they support, the beneficiaries in terms of their caste, class and position of social authority. The victims of subjugation were not only the socially deprived, but also those who questioned the power structure. In short, *Aithiyamala* encompasses the literary manifestation of the socio political and cultural associations of the land. Thus, one can identify land issues forming one of the main concerns of the text.

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Sreedevi N S

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sree Sankara College Kalady
Pin 683574
Email: ns.sreedevi@gmail.com
Ph: +91 8281694729
ORCID: 0009-0005-3290-2572
&

Dr Lima Antony

Assistant Professor and Research Guide
Postgraduate Department of English and Research Centre
St. Xavier's College for Women
Aluva 683101
India
Ph: +91 9446552360
Email: limaantony@stxaviersaluva.ac.in
ORCID: 0000-0001-6077-4890