

CHAPTER 5

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

In the history of Chengannur examined in the earlier chapters setting it in the background of the generality of the history of Kerala important characteristics regarding the evolution of community life were discussed. These discussions had inevitably absorbed some of the religious aspects that affected the social life. In these discussions it was found how Chengannur shared the advent of various religions in Kerala. The discussions on land and the people and the information provided therein show that the religions that survived over the years in Chengannur were the Christian, the Hindu and the Muslim religions. Jainism and Buddhism had declined by the 8th century although leaving their imprints on many aspects of life. In terms of population and institutions Christian and Hindu religions flourished considerably in Chengannur. The Muslim population in Chengannur is small in number and limited to few pockets. Their institutions are also few. This has reflected in our study too with Muslim institutions getting a relatively smaller space.

CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS

The evolution of the churches and worship centres of Christians of Kerala springs from several sources.¹ The work of Apostle St. Thomas, the Syrian traders and missionaries and the works of the western missionaries and local tradition and factors are the important of them. The tradition has it that

¹ P.J.Cherian, *Essays on Cultural Formations of Kerala*, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, P. 285.

St. Thomas who landed in Muziris in 52 A.D. had set up seven and a half churches built in Kerala at Kodungallur, Chayal, (Nilakkal) Palur, Paravur Kollam, Niranam, Kokkamangalam and Thiruvithamcode.

The trade the Middle East and Europe had with Kerala from very ancient times, even much before Christ, is an accepted fact. From the writings of several travellers who came to Kerala a picture of the various ports of Kerala at that time are available. Accordingly Kodungallur (Muziris which finds mention in the Bible also), Niranam and Kollam were among the important ports of Kerala. The presence in Kerala of some of the foremost foreign traders including Jews of ancient periods is also an avowed fact. These are the circumstances that support the inference of the coming of St. Thomas to Kerala, a claim traditionally made by the Syrian Christians. Writings of some of the travellers also indicate the presence of a Christian community on the Malabar Coast in the early centuries, a period much before Christianity went to Europe.

Ptolemy speaks of Bacare as the emerging point from River Baris. I.C.Chacko has established that this place is Purakkad. There are documents to prove that the river Baris of Ptolemy was actually River Pampa. The inland towns of Keraputra has been described by Ptolemy like this: Panthipolis (identified as Panthalam) and Nilakkal smiles southwest of Sabarimala.² The historical background of Nilakkal is based on its geographical position. The merchants travelling with trade items between Tamil Nadu and Niranam, Purakkad, Muziris, and such port centres of the western coast got a respite at

² Kesari Balakrishnapilla, *Charitrathinte Adiverukal*, Trivandrum 1984, .P.175.

Nilakkal during the arduous climbing up and down the hill. It is held by some that the name Nilakkal came from the old name Nilakkal Thavalam; the second part viz. Thavalam got out of use only very recently. There is a view that the name Nilakkal had been accorded to denote it as the place of 'Nilavayya', the deity of the Sastha temple. These legends and circumstances suggest that Nilakkal was a place of worship of both the Buddhists and the Christians during the first century A.D. The palmleaf records and other documents, mainly Unnunilisandesam, claimed that Thulukkapada destroyed Nilakal.³ The calamities in this region during the first half of the 14th century A.D. may be recalled here. Nilakkal became an abandoned place in course of time.

Chayal or Nilakkal before the calamities was one of the important marketing centres and it is located 35 miles away from the sea. The merchants used to buy pepper, cinnamon, ginger, cardamom and other spices directly from the cultivators. It was reasonable to infer that the presence of such an important market centre in those times had attracted to it the Jews who were trading in spices. It points to the possibility of the arrival of St. Thomas to announce the message of Christ to the Jews in this part of the world.⁴

Since the early Christians lived in isolation far from the main centres of Christianity in other countries in the Middle East they were not aware of the church building conventions elsewhere. It was only natural that for church building they adopted the pattern of architecture and models that were locally available. In the sixth century Christians from 72 families belonging to seven

³ N.K Jose, *Nilakkal*, Kottayam 1983, p.72

⁴ C.V.Chcrian, *A History of Christianity in Kerala*, Kottayam, 1973, p.33.

tribes in Baghdad, Nineveh, and Jerusalem under the leadership of the merchant Knayi Thoma (Thomas of Cana) migrated to Kerala. All these years till this day they had remained a separate group of Christians in Kerala keeping their racial purity. There is one view that settlers from Syria both at Quilon and at Crangannore seem to have absorbed the Christian communities found on the spot, so that later generations reckoned themselves as descendants of the Syrian settlers.⁵

However the story that ascribes ancestral lineage of St. Thomas Christians to Syrian settlers is not accepted seriously. The St. Thomas Christians of Kerala community betrays no Syrian physical traits nor there is any concrete evidence to support such a view. The probability is that the name Syrian Christians came out of the tradition of the liturgy that was used for worship by the Christian community here viz. the Syriac liturgy. In fact the vast majority of the Syrian Christians in Kerala themselves do not believe and never have believed they are the descendants of the Syrian settlers. Only the 'Knanaya' community, the descendants of Knayi Thomma (Thomas of Cana) and his people and a few families descending from Mar Sabir Iso make a claim that they are the descendants of the Syrian settlers and infact it is true also. Even today the former are known as 'Knayakar' in Malayalam and the sect has its members living clustered in several pockets in Kerala. They have maintained themselves as a separate Christian community with their own churches. Even today their complexion and other physical features betray their Syrian identity

⁵ C.B.Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, Madras, 1983, p.24.

visibly and distinctly. All these years, they have succeeded in maintaining their racial purity, not having marital relationships outside the community, although in recent times a few violations are occurring here and there in the wake of the freedom modern life permits and facilitates.

The liturgy of the Syrian Christians, in several versions, got evolved through many years and in several stages and in patterns largely through the work of Syrian missionaries who visited 'Malabar' from time to time and in some cases through common agreement in various councils, synods, committees etc. and also the efforts of individual local Christian clergy and learned laity. Therefore the Syrian prefix of St. Thomas Christians in Kerala cannot be a reason to regard them as descendants of the Syrian settlers. On the contrary the oral tradition holds that the St Thomas Christians are the descendants of the natives who accepted the Christian faith in response to the preachings by St Thomas (whose language was also Syriac or a close dialect of Syriac viz, Aramaic).

Historical evidences suggest that migrant Christians from abroad came from Syria which followed the persecution of Christians in Persia. According to the narration of Byzantine monk Cosmos, Kerala had many churches by the 6th century A.D. From the inscription of Sthanu Ravi of 9th century, it can be seen that the Christian communities enjoyed many rights and privileges which were the prerogatives of the upper castes. They also played a vital role in trade and commerce. The residential buildings of the Syrian Christians were akin to the native architecture. The external features of the Syrian Churches retained some

of the indigenous features of the Kerala style.⁶ The church and the ancillary buildings were enclosed in a massive laterite wall. There was an open cross in front of the main entrance in a massive basement in the model of a balikallu, the altar stone. A church also had the flag mast (the dwajasthamba) in front. In the old Syrian Church at Chengannur Peter and Paul occupy the place of dwarapalkas of the guarding deities of a Hindu shrine. Sometimes a gateway like the temple gopuram with a ‘kottupura’ (music room) for playing the drums was also provided on the upper storey. It cannot be said categorically as to when exactly these structures were made as there might have been renovations and additions from time to time. It could be that the original church which is dated back to the 3rd century A.D. had a simpler structure than what it is today.

Old Syrian Church⁷ : The contribution made by the Christian community to the social and cultural heritage of Chengannur is very great. A stage in the history of Chengannur begins by the construction of the Old Syrian Church. Several historical events exerted their impact on the Christian life in Chengannur. The Old Syrian Church of Chengannur has a distinct historic tradition related to the churches established by St. Thomas. The church is called in historical records as Thiru Chengannur Matha Pally. Those who migrated from Chayal or Nilakal church area settled in areas like Chengannur, Kadambanad, and Kanjirapally.

⁶ Balagopal T.S.Prabhu, *Kerala Gazetteer*, p.285.

⁷ *Malayala Manorama*, March 5, 2006,p.8.

The Mampally Copper Plate of Vallabhankotha is connected to the name of Chengannur Matha pally. In the ensuing centuries this church progressed as almost a diocese of Central Travancore. The Synod which was conducted here in 1686 and very many Episcopal consecrations were some of the main events in the history of the church.⁸ Mar Ivaneos Metropolitan of Malankara is buried here. The centuries old stone and wooden statues and the single stone cross point to the ancient artistic excellence. The giant 33.5 feet high single stone cross is awe inspiring. This church is one where we find stone lamps. Earlier there was a round building which was demolished fifty years ago as it was dilapidated.

The history of the Old Syrian Church of Chengannur dates as far back as the third century A.D. That the church building remains to this day in all its earlier splendour is a proud confirmation of the high esteem that the people of the locality gave to tradition, customs, heritage and faith even in this era of the craze for modernity. The old church structure with the rooms on the first floor, the tall and proud single stone cross, the images sculptured on the stone walls, the beautiful scenic pictures painted on the doors, walls and even the various parts of roof are eternal monuments of the past architecture. Some of the stone edicts are valid historical records of the ancestry of Christians in Chengannur.

There is proof that Chengannur was a civilizational centre in the history of Kerala. In works of the Sangam period Thiruchengannur is mentioned. Chengannur was one among the 64 gramas which Parasurama, according to the

⁸ Malayala Manorama, March, 2006,p.8.

legendary story, carved out for the settlement of Brahmins after he reclaimed Kerala from the sea bed. All these point to the ancientness of Chengannur as a cultural centre. Its proximity to the port of Niranam where St. Thomas is said to have landed and its location on the trade route to Nilakkal, another early Christian centre, suggests the probability of the arrival of Christianity here in the first century A.D. itself. In course of time Chengannur became a famous Christian centre of Central Travancore. This truth is held out by the judgement about this church from the district court of Mavelikara on October 23rd 1943. The Judgement says. “This case is about one of the oldest churches of Syrian Christians in the state namely the Chengannur Syrian Christian Church”. In the evidence presented in the court it is shown that the church was established around 300 A.D.⁹ Today it is one of the few churches owned and used for worship by people of two Christian denominations viz. the Orthodox Church and the Marthoma Church. The court verdict used the name Syrian Christian Church. It got its popular name over the years as the Old Syrian Church (Pazhaya Suriyani Palli).

The church in Chengannur was the place of worship of all the Christians in the taluq until two or three centuries ago. The 16th century was a crucial period in the history of Malankara Sabha. The political supremacy of the Portuguese prompted them to take the Malankara Church under the control of the Roman church. The Synod of Diamper tells this truth. Arch Bishop Alexis de Menezes of Goa visited the important churches of St. Thomas Christians of

⁹ *The Church Udampady 22-7-197*,p.21.

Kerala and destroyed the ancient records and Syriac books. History records that he visited Chengannur Church also.

The later events recorded in history bring out the importance of the church of Chengannur in the Malankara Church. In the 17th century there was a synod and an Episcopal consecration. In 1913 the second Catholicos of Malankara, Basalios Geevarughese I and the Niranam Thumpamon Metropolitan Eyuhakim Mar Ivaneous were consecrated here. Mar Ivaneous who came to Malankara in 1749 with Ignatious Sukarulla patriarch assisted Dianasious the great during his life in Chengannur. Dianasious stayed in the Chengannur Syrian church where he died.

The main material asset of the church was the landed property which was in the Vanjipuzha Principality. It is held that the architectural beautification of the church and the adjoining many storied structures which were added to the original structures were facilitated by the Vanjipuzha Chief. It is held that the church has the native architectural attractions and foreign ornamentation.

Towards the end of the 19th century differences of opinion arose in this church also. This was part of a conflict in the Malankara Church in the 19th century following the reformation movement initiated by Abraham Malpan and subsequently piloted rigorously by Mathews Mar Athanasius, the Metropolitan who headed the Malankara Church then. This period saw a bitter schism in the Malankara Orthodox Church between the factions that supported the movement led by Mathews Mar Athanasius and those who opposed it under the leadership of Bishop Mar Divanyosis. The schism ended with the Royal Court Verdict of 1899 that favoured the opponents of the reformation movement. Mathews Mar

Athanasius and his followers left the Malankara church and formed the Marthoma Church which was registered in 1899. The Marthomites left all their claims over the churches and the properties of the Malankara church where they were members. They built up, then, churches afresh and grew from there. However, the story of the Old Syrian Church of Chengannur became different as the agreement to share the facility of the church between the two factions in Chengannur led to the amicable settlement sanctified legally by a separate court verdict. This event and the sharing of the church facility stands out as an exception in the whole story of the conflict. The very disturbed atmosphere was peacefully settled by the tolerance and broadmindedness of the then members of the church. The trust contract between orthodox faction and Marthoma faction approved by the parish and legalized by the court verdict is a grand rarity. The believers of the two churches fall apart in faith and yet rituals continue to coexist thereafter most peacefully. The worship in the Church goes on all Sundays shared by both the factions alternately. The thousand five hundred and odd families of both the denomination bury their dead ones in a common symmetry measuring 80 feet long, 40 feet broad, and 35 feet high. The two storied common symmetry with 208 cells itself speaks volumes about the unity and co-operation of the two denominations. The Church Executive Committee has laid the foundation stone for an ecumenical study centre at the historic Mills Ground in the heart of Chengannur as a mark of co-operation and unity.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Malayala Manorama*, March 5, 2005, p.8.

Bethel Orthodox Church: A Christian church with Bethel as its name was established in Chengannur in 1942. This was named after Bishop Mar Gregorios of Parumala (Parumala Thirumeni), the declared saint of the Orthodox Church. This Church is the result of the earnest efforts of Puthenkavu Mar Philexinius Metropolitan, (Puthenkavu Kochuthirumeni). He transformed a slump into a beautiful church. The dream of establishing a diocese with Bethel as its headquarters was realised in 1985.¹¹ Thomas Mar Athanasius became the first diocesan Bishop.

The prayer group of Thittamel got 14 cents of government waste land in the heart of Chengannur town registered in their name and this was the beginning of the Bethel church.

Parumala Church: The Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church at Parumala is a famous church now and is popularly known as Parumala Palli. It is an important destination of pilgrims from far and wide. This stature it acquired in the minds of vast number of people because of the faith which grew in them in the effectiveness in their material and spiritual lives of the mediation prayers by St. Gregorios (1848 – 1902) who is popularly known as Parumala Thirumeni. Such a faith owed to the saintly life of Mar Gregorios who was Metropolitan in the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church. Many stories of miracles have been linked to Parumala Thirumeni. They speak of the miracles that had happened both during his life time and afterwards.

¹¹ *Bethel Aramanapally Souvenir*, 1993, p.47.

The church had its beginning in a plot donated in 1872 by Korula Mathen of Arikupuruthu family to Mar Dianesius who was a Metropolitan of the Malankara Church. It was a period of a rift in the Malankara Church between the supporters of the reform movement initiated by Abraham Malpan and carried on by Mathews Mar Athanasius, and those who opposed it under the leadership of Mar Dianesius. At a particular stage the latter group felt that the Malankara Seminary at Kottayam would not be available to them for training the priests as it was under the control of Mathews Mar Athanasius. So it was necessary that they had a new seminary. The premises of the Parumala Church was chosen for developing a seminary for imparting training to the priests. Mar Gregorios was given the charge of the new seminary and it grew then onwards. The Parumala Church runs a hospital at Parumala and a nursing college attached to it. The annual festival (perunal) of the church takes place in the month of Thulam (October – November) in commemoration of Parumala Thirumeni who had passed away on November 2, 1902. The church was reconstructed recently which gave it an altogether new appearance. Charles Coria was its architect.

Marthoma Centre at Thittamel: The headquarters of the Chengannur Mavelikara diocese of the Marthoma Church is at Olivet Aramana in Chengannur.¹² Chengannur is a noted activity centre of the Marthoma church. In the 1930s this was the centre of the Southern diocese of the church. The aramana was established in 1949 by Bishop Mathews Mar Athanasius. The Bishops of the Marthoma Church with administrative jurisdiction of the

¹² *Malayala Manorama*, October, 1997 p.2.

parishes outside Kerala used to stay here and administer the parishes. On November 1, 1993 Olivet became the headquarters of the Thumpamon diocese. Rt. Rev. Joseph Mar Barnabas was the first diocesan Bishop. He was succeeded by Philiphose Mar Chrisostum Marthoma Metropolitan. Now Rt. Rev. Zacharias Mar Theophilous Suffragan Metropolitan controls the affairs of the diocese. He belongs to the Mattakal family of Niranam. He was brought up by his maternal grandfather Joseph Aykerathu in Puthenkavu who took special care in moulding his character. As a result he developed as a teacher educator of the Marthoma Church. The Chengannur Christian College and Mathews Mar Athanasius Residential School are getting special care of Thirumeni. Upliftment of the downtrodden and concern for the sick and marginalized are the special projects of the Chengannur Mavelikara diocese. The cancer care and counselling centre of the diocese focuses on getting special care for patients.

The Marthoma Mathilikam Assention Church of Puthenkavu came into existence in 1900. The church was built by the families that supported Mathews Mar Athanasius following the separation from the Malankara Church. Thereafter this new parish flourished under the various Marthoma Bishops.

The St. Andrews C.S.I. Church of Chengannur established in 1839 is one of the very ancient churches. It was known as the English Church during the times of the British. This parish is part of the Central Kerala C.S.I. (Church of South India) diocese situated in the heart of Chengannur. This church produced very many eminent Christian leaders in the past. The Anglican influence in and around Chengannur took place with this church as the headquarters.

The St. Thomas Malankara Catholic Church situated in the heart of Chengannur is the northernmost point of the Trivandrum Arch Diocese of the Malankara Catholic Church. The church is constructed very beautifully with granite stones. This church is a dream come true of Bishop Mar Ivanios. A new church under the Arch Diocese of Chengannacherry called Mary Matha Church was established recently in Chengannur. The Latin Catholic Church on the banks of Pampa at Kooriathu near Niranam is one of the oldest of Catholic churches in Chengannur Taluk.

The ancient Knanaya church of Kallissery was established in 1580 to keep up the distinct faith of the Thekkumbhagar the followers of Thomas of Cana who came from Syria. Their tradition goes back to the arrival of Thomas of Cana and the 72 families established by him. It is believed that they came to Kallissery immediately after the synod of Diamper (1599) and the oath of Coonan cross (1653). They received 72 privileges and special trading rights from the various rulers of Kerala. They were able to establish themselves very well and became leading business men. Even now they keep up that position. Chingavanam, Ranni and Pavukkara near Mannar are the nearest important centres of Knananites. Some of their customs are akin to the Hindu customs.¹³

The Puthenkavu Church: Christians from the ancient Christian centres like Kuravallangad and Nilakal had to migrate out and settle at places like Kadabanad, Kanjirapally and Chengannur as a result of the attacks of Tippu

¹³ Kallissery Jacobite Knanayapally *Charithrasamkshepam*, Kottayam, 1951, p. 31.

Sultan and Pandipada.¹⁴ These ancestors of Chengannur settled at places like Puthenkavu, Arattupuzha, Mangalam, Pandanad, Kurichimuttom, Mulakuzha, Venmony, Puliur, Perissery, Nellikal, Kurthumala, and Edanad. For long all of them worshipped at the Old Syrian Church of Chengannur. Those who lived east of Chengannur found it very difficult to reach Chengannur during the Monsoon rains. Hence they wished for worship centre at Puthenkavu. Puthenkavu was then a very famous trade centre.¹⁵ Even before this settlement it was famous for trade which was carved out by migrant Christians. Later when Christians prospered in trade and swelled in number a large extent of contiguous land came in their possession resulting in a situation where the population of Puthenkavu comprises only of Christians.

These flourishing tradesmen requested the then Malankara Metropolitan Marthoma VI to help them to build a church. The Metropolitan wanted to make Puthenkavu the headquarters of the Malankara Church. It was then that the site where the church stands now was chosen.¹⁶ The Maharaja of Travancore Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma helped the Metropolitan and the famous business magnate Mathoo Tharakan to procure the necessary land from the Brahmin landlord of Punnuritta Madham. Earlier Anthrayose Baba who was the patron of Puthenkavu church from Syria had come and settled here doing missionary work. They came by boat along River Pampa as it was the main mode of transport in those days.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Chengannur Marthoma Platinum Jubilee Souvenir*, 2004, p.17.

¹⁵ St Mary's Orthodox Cathedral, Puthenkavu, *Sathabdhi Smaranika*, 1993-1994, p.15.

¹⁶ Paul Manalil, *Niranam Granthavari*, Government of Kerala, 2004, p.166

¹⁷ *Renovated Church Dedication Souvenir*, Puthenkavu, March, 2004, p.10.

Some of the faith groups like The Salvation Army, Brethren Mission, Church of God, Jehovah's Witness and various Pentecostal Missions have their worship centres in and around Chengannur. The membership of these groups are on the rise. However reliable accounts of their history in the area are not available. These groups have their own faith patterns, forms of worship and places of worship. One common trait is that they all have places of worship in simple forms, in many cases limited to prayer halls avoiding the forms which the church have.

HINDU INSTITUTIONS

Temples have been described as the corner stones of the socio-economic structure of Kerala in the medieval period.¹⁸ A study of the social significance of temples in Kerala must start invariably from the study of Brahmin settlements in Kerala. Ecological factors have rendered the rural settlements in Kerala very much dispersed contrasted to the patterns of nucleated villages in other parts of India. Actually there is no core of the village or there is not a separate village.¹⁹ However, the temple formed the core of the village so far as the Brahmin settlements were concerned. Each settlement had its 'grama kshetra' or village temple. Even to this day Brahmins all over Kerala claim to belong to one of the original thirty two settlements and the temples attached to it.

¹⁸ Elamkulam Kunjan Pilla, *Studies in Kerala History*, Trivandrum, 1970, p.332

¹⁹ Kesavan Veluthat, *The Role of Temples in Kerala Society*, Journal of Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, 1976, p.183, For more details refer Veluthat Kesavan's *Aryan Brahmin Settlements of Ancient Kerala*, pp41- 67.

The coming of Brahmin settlers to Kerala towards the eighth century of the Christian era brought about a change, inter alia, in the religious scene of Kerala. The settlement around the temple and the temple itself formed into an important institution in the social life of medieval Kerala. Apart from the original thirty two Brahmin settlements there had arisen many other settlements around the temple. The small and big Brahmin settlements around these temples were influencing the society in such a way that the socio economic life of Kerala was totally reoriented during the later Chera period.

At the same time and almost parallel to this development was the Bhakti movement in Kerala. We have names of at least two Chera rulers, viz. Cheraman Perumal Nayanar the Saiva saint and Kulasekhara Alwar the Vaishnava saint. The close association of other saints like Sundaramurti Nayanar, Viralminda Nayanar, Nammal Alwar, Tirumangai Alwar with the Bhakti movement is also a well known fact. The first structured Hindu temple was established in 8th century. That was the Trikkandiyur temple near Mavelikkara. Also testifies to the fact that Bhakti movement as spread by the Saivite and Vaishnavite saints had reached Kerala at least by the 8th century. This also must have had, by virtue of the royal patronage it had, a tremendous influence in causing the chieftains to take to brisk temple building activities. As a result of these twin forces, the temple became an integral part of the social and religious life of Kerala by the time of the revival of the Chera rule.

A large number of Kerala inscriptions from the 9th century onwards record transactions of the temple entered Brahmin settlements.²⁰ These inscriptions throw considerable light on the constitution and character of settlements and also on certain immediate post chera inscriptions, which record the establishment of original settlements. In examining the character of the settlement we may start with some inscriptions which record the creation of new settlements. Kollur Madham Plates purported to be the renewal of a charter thought to have been issued by the mother of Srivallabhan Kothai, ruler of Venad. According to it, land is set apart for meeting the various expenses of the temple, viz. rituals, festivals, payment to temple functionaries etc. and also as private property or Brahmaswam of the twenty three Brahmin families settled there. A similar case is described in the Kilimanur Record of A.D.1169. Accordingly ten different Brahmins from eight of the original Brahminical village settlements were brought to South Kerala and established around a newly consecrated Tiruppalkkadal temple. These Brahmins were given the right to enjoy certain properties as remuneration for the management of the temple affairs. The above instance shows that the Brahmin settlements revolved round the temple and that the village property, the collateral ownership of which was enjoyed by the temples, was virtually the property of the Brahmins, While each individual managed personally his private property called the Brahmaswam, the common property of the temple called Devaswam together with other temple affairs was looked after by the entire Brahmin population of the village. This

²⁰ Kesavan Veluthat, *Organization and Administration of the Brahman Settlements in Kerala in the Late Chera Period –A-D 800-1100*. See Elamkulam Kunjan pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, Kottayam ,1969,p182.

was the essence of the administration of the village and it meant virtually something like the management of property. The general body of the village administration was constituted by this Brahmin population. This body was called the 'Ur', 'Urar', or 'Uralar', meaning literally the village, inhabitants of the village and the owners or proprietors of the village, respectively; but very often they are used as synonyms. The term Uralar is used even now in Kerala to denote trustees of temples and temple properties; and almost all of them are Brahmins too. However, the inscriptions tell us that the administration of the temple affairs was carried out by the Urar and this would mean that the Brahmin inhabitants of the village were members of this assembly and that the common property of the temple was virtually their properties. These temples played an important role in creating the social, cultural and economic history of the land. Structured temples arose in Kerala round about A.D. 750. The Dravidian gods and their shrines (Kavus) gradually lost importance. Many Buddhist shrines were destroyed while others were converted into Hindu temples. Although Jain shrines continued to exist for some more time, gradually their character also changed. The chieftains who became the new Kshatriyas promoted the Vedic religion by constructing temples and along with them schools, hospitals, 'Agraharams' and rest house for Brahmins. When a temple was built it was usual to endow it with property, the revenues of which would suffice to defray the expenses of daily worship, festivals, schools and feeding Brahmins. The management of such property was vested in a board of trustees or 'uralar'. As temples increased in number, landed property came to be increasingly under the control of these trustees. It is clear from inscriptions that

the ruling chieftains south of Tiruvalla were Yadavas.²¹ There are reasons to believe that the Yadava family at Trippappur was successor to the family of Ay kings. By about 12th century this Trippappur family, the Kizhperur family of Venad and the Chiravai family (based at Alamthuruthi between Niranam and Chengannur town) to which Vanjipuzha family belonged united into one. Vanjipuzha Chieftain managed temples of Chengannur as is Protector and as one of the trustees.

The Vanjipuzha chief became the protector of the temple by a decision of the temple council to request the king Aditya Varma, the King of Venad to facilitate it which the king did accede to. While agreeing to hold the position the Vanjipuzha chief placed the condition that

In the early centuries of the Kollam era the temples in Kerala went beyond their role as places of worship. Art, scholarly achievements and religiousness grew and spread with the patronage and encouragement extended by the temples. Educational Institutions were attached to Muzhikulam. Muzhikulam was a model for the functioning of the temple-centered Brahmin settlements all over Kerala. 'Muzhikulam Vyavastha' referred to as 'Muzhikulam Kacham' quoted at least from the end of the 9th century till the end of the reign of the last Cheraman perumal and in records from Pullur in the Kasargod district in the north to Tirunandikkara in Trivandrum district in the south. Historians had tried to interpret the Vyavastha of Muzhikulam as intended to protect the interest of the tenants of temple properties against the

²¹ Elamkulam Kunjan Pilla p.182. See also for more details Kesvan Veluthat, *Political Structure of Medieval Kerala*, Delhi, 1993, p.209

caprices of the temple trustees. Education was free. Food, lodging and dress were provided to students by the temples. The temples performed the same functions as of present day schools, libraries, religious seminaries, cinema houses, theatres and public parks. This pattern of temple life represents a development in Kerala's social life. Because of their close association with social and cultural life of the people and their ownership of extensive property, the temples had need of an efficient system of control and administration. In view of this each of the important temples was placed under the management of a board of trustees. Trustees elected a 'variyaam' (executive committee) of two persons to administer the affairs of the temple for a specified period. The period of office was usually one year though in certain cases it was two years. In the 12th century, the administration of the Kizhperur Tiruppalkadal temple was vested in a board of ten trustees consisting of six Nampoothiris and four Nampoothiri chieftains. The Brahmin Chieftains elected were Vanjipuzha from Chengannur and Vilakieelimangalam from Thiruvalla.

Every morning Chengannur town was thrilled by the chanting of mantras and religious songs. As very many temples flourished in Chengannur it was qualified as the town of temples in Central Travancore. The location of most of these temples in proximate distance imparted an aura of divine presence to the region in those times when other institutions or structures were scanty. There are about twenty three temples in the municipality region: These are Chengannur Mahadevar Temple, Kunnathu Mahadevar Temple, Sasthamkulangara Narasimha Temple, Angadical Bhagavathi Temple, Pulikkunnu Subramania Temple, Pandavanpara SriKrishna Temple, Vandimala

Devasthanam, Amaravathi, Amman Kovil, Mada Swami Temple, Kunnumpuram Kshetram, Thittamel Bhagavathi Kshetram, Vadasserikavu Bhagavathi Temple, Kodiyattukulangara Krishna Swami Temple, Bhagavathi Mukkham Devi Kshetram, Vazhar Mangalam Devi Temple, Mangalam Devi Temple, Edanadu Arattu Kadavu Siva Temple, Vanjipuzha Madham Temples and Tazhamon Madham Temples.²²

Viswakarmajas and the Temples : Viswakarmajas are considered as temple moulders.²³ They were brought to Chengannur from Thanchavoor for the construction of the Mahadevar temple. There were four families and they first settled at Adikattukulangara and then entered Chengannur for the construction of the Mahadevar temple. These four families are Kuthiravattam, Kunnumpuram, Kizhakkevila and Valiaveetil. They had their own deities installed in their own sphere viz. Amaravathy Ammankovil, Kunnumpuram, Madaswami, and Vandimala Devadevasthanam. These four families together accomplished the moulding works including idols and constructed Chengannur Maha Deva temple and as rewards got many properties in the heart of Chengannur. But they frittered away their wealth and in full debt left the land²⁴ Their idols became guardian less. As a result the three families together installed their deity at Vandimala Devasthanam. The Valiaveetil family took their settlement at Mannar. They settled on the northern side of the famous Pannayannarkavu temple which was the source of all their prosperity. There are

²² Krishnankutti, *Chengannur Innu Innale*, Y.M.CA.,P.10

²³ Vijanakairali, *Sabarimalapathipu*, 1990p18

²⁴ Nalamkal Krishnapillai, *Mahakshetrangaludemunpil*, Kottayam, 1997, p.626.

now hundred households settled in and around Mannar. In course of time one branch of the Valiaveetil family had to return to Chengannur and the four families

Chengannur Maha Devar Temple: Chengannur is the seat of an ancient and well known temple dedicated to Siva and Parvathy with many legends of its origin and importance.²⁵ The tradition is that a great sage called Sakti rishi was performing ‘tapas’ (long and arduous meditation) at Chengannur and that Siva pleased with the devotion of the sage appeared before him and asked what boon he would have. The sage sought the consent for the consecration of the Lord along with him Parvathy and the ‘Sivagana’ (His consort at Chengannur). The sage Agastya had also been granted a similar boon and therefore Siva and Parvathy appeared for a brief moment before the mortal eyes. Thereafter at the place where they revealed themselves the sage Agastya consecrated a temple dedicated to their worship. Later the original temple was rebuilt by the local chieftains called Nayanars. Subsequently it passed into the hands of Potti janmies (Brahmins) and finally still into the control of the Devaswom Board.

Another legend ascribes a role to the local ‘Arayans’ or fisher community in the founding of this temple. It is said that on a sivaratri day in ancient times the Arayans living on the banks of River Pampa were fishing in the river when they caught in their net a Sivalingam which they set up for worship.²⁶ Immediately a divine personage appeared on the scene, performed

²⁵ *Kerala District Gazetteer*,p, 529.

²⁶ Kalloor Narayana Pilla,*Chengannur Kshetramahatmayam*,Trivandrum,1911,p.6

the puja and telling the Arayans that the 'lingam' had once been worshipped by great sages and that it must be reconsecrated and set in a temple and then he vanished. A temple was accordingly built and the lingam was consecrated. Even now there is a ceremony known as 'parisaveppu', which is related to the coming of Alappattu Arayans to the temple on the Sivaratri day. They had some rights to conduct the pujas.

Another story on the origin of the temple connects it with Maha Vishnu. It is said that Lord Siva was carrying the charred body of Parvathi who was consigned to the flames by his father Daksha during his famous yaga. The ensued wandering of the aggrieved Siva caused disturbance to all normal activities Mahavishnu sent his 'chakra' and cut the dead body to pieces which fell at different places including Chengannur. A temple was consecrated at all those places. Chengannur was then known as Sonachalam and the present temple was built at the place where the part of the body had fallen.²⁷ Mention may also be made of the legend which associates this temple with the Kannaki cult. The story is told that Kannaki who wrought vengeance on the Pandayan king for killing her husband Kovalan came to Chengannur and did tapas there. The legendary Chera king Senguttuvan erected a temple at the place and consecrated Kannaki there in the form of Chengamavalli.

Although both Siva and Parvathi are installed in the temple at Chengannur worship of the Bhagavati is more popular. There is a unique periodic three day ceremony famous all over Kerala which is called

²⁷ Nalamkal Krishna Pilla, Ibid p453

‘Tiruppuṭhu’ observed in the temple.²⁸ It takes place for about 11 times a year. Each time the cloth which drapes the metal image of the Goddess gets discoloured with red spots believed the devotees as a divine occurrence. The discoloured cloth is sent to the Tazhamon Madham and the image is removed to a separate shed and kept there for three days. The Srikovil is closed for the period. On the fourth day, after purificatory ceremonies, it is reinstalled in the central shrine. The discoloured cloth is treasured as a holy relic by devotees. A story goes round even now that Col. Munro, who went to Chengannur to fix the pative for the temple, was disinclined to believe this strange phenomenon and stopped all expenses on its observance. It is said that following this his wife suffered from intolerable gynaecological ailments, which stopped only when Munroe restored the expenses and the observances, and, as additional propitiation endowed a fund, the interest from which would meet the expenses of the rituals for the first occurrence of the spotting every Malayalam year. There is a gold bracelet engraved with his name which, as the local belief goes, was offered to the Goddess. The shrine of the Goddess was also the site of a trial by ordeal. It is believed that a terribly poisonous cobra lives in a hole at the threshold of the shrine. An accused person desirous of proving his innocence had to insert his finger in the hole; if guilty he would be instantaneously bitten and would die. Patients suffering from mental ailments are brought there for freeing them of the evil spirits causing their trouble and put to dance around in trances. The temple supported expert granite carvers who, it is reported, could

²⁸ Chitrimezhuthu K.M.Varughese, *Thiruppuṭharattu, Desabandu Visheshalprathi*, 1921, p55

even make Nagaswaram musical pipes out of this hard substance. The annual festival at Chengannur temple lasts for twenty eight days in December- January and some times even longer, if the above ceremony (Tripputharattu) occurs in the meantime. The worship of the deities are in a special sequence, first Ganapathy, then Siva, Parvathy, Nandy, Sastha, Nilagrivan, Ganga Devi, Krishnan, Thaliyil Bhagavan and finally Chengannur Mahadevar. Worship in Chengannur has certain unique features of its own when compared to the practices elsewhere in Travancore.²⁹ Chengannur had connections with Taliparamb in the northern Kerala which is a Saivite centre. This is borne out by the traditions of Nayanars. Even today in ‘Pradakshinam’ (going around the temple in worship) at the Chengannur temple worshippers, when they are at the northwest corner of the temple, salute northward contemplating Taliparamba Siva. An idol of a Bhutha also is installed there which represents the Bhuthagana of Siva. Chengannur temple is called Mathalikam. Even today the name of a family at Angadical is called Mathalikam which is believed to have been the dwelling place of the Chengannur Nayanar. These Nayanars ruled over a principality which extended from Ranni Mathalikam in the east to Trikoratti and Veeyapuram in the west with borders Pampa River in the North and Achenkovil River in the South.

It appears that there was originally a ‘Koothampalam’ (structure as part of the temple where performing arts like ‘Chakiyar Koothu’ was staged) of peculiar structure and a gopuram of five storeys in the Chengannur temple. The

²⁹ Achariya Narendrabhooshan’s Reports on Chengannur Temple.

construction of the Koothampalam is credited to the legendary Uliyannur Perunthachen who was endowed with rare skills of architecture and carpentry. The Koothampalam was an architectural puzzle; as the pillars supporting the structure were so designed as to yield no shadow either in the day time or in the lamp light.³⁰ Sadly only the foundation of the 'koothampalam' remains today. Both the 'Koothuampalam' and 'gopuram' were destroyed in fire.

Chengannur enriches its spiritual importance by the presence of the Siva Parvathy Temple. Siva, the father of Ayyappa, is the chief deity here. Among the three holy centres of the 'Thrimurthies', Kailasom in the Himalayas is the most important one, because of the presence of Siva with Parvathy. The Maha Devar Temple in Chengannur is known as "The second Kailasom".³¹

Narasimha Moorthy Temple in Chathankulangara: This temple is situated within a few foot steps away from the Siva Parvathy Temple. The fourth avatharam of Mahavishnu as Narasimham is the deity here. This is one of the few sacred temples in India where his spiritual existence can be seen. The temple is under the management of a private trustee viz. Munchira Madham Swamiyar of Thiruvanathapuram.³² It is not known how this came about as the Swamiyar had no known relationship with the principality or the local people. There is a Vattezhuthu inscription engraved on its entrance which records the execution of repairs of this temple. On palaeographic grounds this record has been assigned to the 14th century.³³ This temple has an abundance of wood

³⁰ Nalamkal Krishna Pilla, Op.Cit ,p 447.

³¹ Kerala District Gazetteer, Op.Cit.P.594.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ronald M.Bernier, Temple Arts of Kerala, Delhi, 1992, P.105.

carvings, which too, on the evidence of the above inscription, have been ascribed to the same period. There are twentyone important panels of deific figures and puranic scenes, all expressing the tender sentiment. One of the panels depicts the story of the theft of the garments of the 'gopa' ladies by Lord Krishna. Three of the ladies are shown as standing on the branches of a tree, one in the process of climbing it, and two at the foot of the tree, on which Krishna is seated with the stolen garments. The nudity of the female figure is made less glaring by depicting her endeavour to cover herself with one hand while lifting the other to receive cloth from Krishna. An ornamental pillar decorated with floral designs on one side of the panel adds to the splendour of the above carving.³⁴ Among the other 'Leela' (plays) of Krishna carved on the panels is the stealing of the butter and opening the mouth before the reprimanding Yesoda. Another picturesque scene depicted here is the Sethubandhanam described in Ramayana.³⁵ The figures of monkeys and monkey chiefs carrying boulders on their heads to be thrown into the sea to build the bridge are carved in bold style. Close by is the carving of a gateway in relief. The door screen at the centre represents the scene of Child Krishna killing Arishtasura who assumed the form of a bull to attack him at the instance of Kamsa. In this child Krishna is shown standing on the humped bull with one leg on the hump, his right hand holding one of the horns of the bull already plucked by him and his left hand plucking the other horn. The pillars on either side of this carving of the gateway are connected at the top by an ornamental panel of magnificent foliage

³⁴ Ronald M. Bernier, Op.Cit., P.105.

³⁵ *Kerala District Gazetteer*, p.595.

rising in receding ranks. The figure of the door-keeper or Dwarapalaka on another panel shows a high degree of artistic perfection. The ornamental headgear resembling headgears used in kathakali, ear-rings, necklaces shoulder rings and bangles which decorate the images elegantly. A scarf with floral decorations is also seen hanging from the neck on either side. A lady holding a mirror in her left hand and dressing the hair with the right hand is depicted on another panel. Her plump body left naked above the loins is carved with remarkable realism while the ornaments which decorate her are both exquisite and delicate. On the front side of the sanctum sanctorum (srikovil) is an impressive carving of Narasimha killing Hiranyakasipu. One of the hands of Narasimha holds the torn out bowels of Hiranyakasipu, another the conch and the third one the fiery discus. The left lower hand presses down the legs of Hiranyakasipu while the right lower hand is engaged in keeping down his head. However, the image is damaged rendering one hand broken. The figure is 1' 6 ½ 'high. Hanuman appearing before Sita in the Asokavana is another piece of exquisite wood carving in this temple. Sita is seated in the shade of an Asoka tree with her head resting on the right hand and Hanuman is shown first perching on the top of the tree and then appearing before Sita with the message of Sree Rama. The height of the figure is 9 ¼' and 6" in one of the panels. In the words of Stella Kramrisch, "... she (Sitha) sits in the cloak and canopy of her long hair and her enormous hands demonstrate her abandon and grief. Hanuman in the tree and Hanuman approaching her, the tree which links the figures, fills the composition with algae like leaves such as grown in fairy land. Every child

must delight in this setting. It is clear as wood cut.”³⁶ Among the other puranic scenes depicted on the panel are the Kirtarjuneeyam, Palazhimathanam, Poothanamoksham, Markandeyapuranam, Kaliyamardanam, Dasavathara, Ananthasayanam etc. The annual ‘utsavam’ in this temple starts on Sivarathri day in the month of Kumbham in the Kollam Era (February- March) and lasts for ten days. There is also a ‘chirappu’ during the Mandalam season in Vrischikam and Dhanu (December- January). The connection of the temple’s exterior art is proven by the lotus bud termination of a ‘pranala’, a southern element that is also present at Suchindram temple and numerous other shrines in the area such as Kunnathumalai Siva. Chengannur is known to have been an important and early religious centre and the earliest inscription that is attached to a building belonging to Kollam Era 663. (1465 A.D.) A recent addition is a new gateway which however, has attracted adverse observations. One comment is that the superstructure of the gopuram looks more a dignified inspection bungalow than a part of a temple structure that it is meant to be. It is such hideous combinations which have to be guarded against in making renovations of temples.³⁷

The temple of Narasimha has an inscription honouring Devan Sankaran of Melkkadu as repairer of the building and partial donor of funds for feeding devotees on days of puja. The building faces west with its plan of the type of Sama Chathurasra ‘Ksudra-vimana, (a variety square) from base to top and there is nothing simple about it because of the wooden additions to its surface.

³⁶ *Kerala District Gazetteer, p. 596.*

³⁷ *Ibid, p.596.*

The Sreekovil proportions are small. The lowest band of wooden wall is a row of lions, the simha 'nala'. One functional doorway face each of the directions. Each door has a pair of life-size guardians made of wood measuring 21 feet square.

Pulikkunnu Devasthanam :³⁸ This unique temple is located in the heart of Chengannur town at Kizhcherymel just 100 metres apart from the main road and near the Chengannur Government Hospital. The temple and its precincts together are known as Pulikkunnu Devasthanam. It is on a hill top. In very early times the hill was the habitat of leopards from which the name was derived. The uniqueness of the temple is that it is owned and managed by the members of the local Pulaya community.

About a century ago when it was started its membership was only four, but over the years it grew to forty seven. The origin of the temple must be evaluated in the state of affairs that prevailed in Travancore when untouchability was at its height and lower castes were denied entry into the temple. The founders of the temple were members of farm, labour, families attached hereditarily to certain land-lord families.

Kalloor Narayana Pilla, the freedom fighter and the champion of progressive movement in Chengannur was a force behind the Pulaya community in promoting the temple. He encouraged them in every respect. It was through his efforts that the temple got ownership of three and a half acres

³⁸ The information was obtained on the basis of interview with Smt. Ammini of Vishwavalauzhathil House and Shri Gopalakrishnan of Modiyuzhathil House.

of land from the government. Honouring his name there is a Smrithimanadapam in the temple where his ashes are kept. The temple lamp was donated by Baiju belonging to Ezhava community. The deity here is Subrahmania. The daily functions of the priest in this temple are performed by Shine and Rajeev. The two boys were trained by Vasudeva Pilla, an assistant of Thantri Kantaroo Maheswar of Thazhamon Madham. During festivals priestly functions are performed by Kantaroo Maheswar. The worship takes place in the morning and evening. The morning attendance is thin as the labourers hasten off for their works.

During the festival Kaavadiyattam, Ammunkudam, Soolam Eduppu, Naranga Malayidiyil and Nirapara are the main rituals. Special items offered to the deity are paayasam and rice.

The temple does not receive any financial help from anywhere, not even from KPMS (Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha). Therefore its development is not undertaken.

Vandimala Devasthanam : This is another temple of great significance located near Chengannur Railway Station.³⁹ The deity worshipped here is Lord Siva and Goddess Parvathy in their disguised costume of tribals. Lord Siva and Parvathy disguised as 'Kattalan' and 'Kattalathi' (kirathan and wife) (jungle man and jungle woman) to experiment the fighting skill of Arjuna and to offer him the pashupathastram (a versatile and powerful weapon). This temple is the living devotional institution memorizing this part of purana. It is faced to south;

³⁹ *Sabarimala Information Guide*, p. 8.

Ganapathy, Murukan, Muthu Raman, Chechiamma, Bhairava Swami, Yogeswaran, are also installed in this temple. The temple festival is conducted in the Meena Bharani day and the important activities are 'kuthiyottam' and turmeric bath.

Madaswami Temple : This temple is situated to the north of Chengannur Mahadevar Temple.⁴⁰ The important idols of this temple are Madaswami and Madathiamma (Dakshan and his wife Parasuthi). The idol of Daksha was moulded like the body of goat. The idol of Yogesheraswami was also installed in the kovil. The festival in the temple is conducted in the month of Makaram and the day of Revathy asterism. The important offerings are Panchamurtham and silver. It is believed that the offering to this temple helps to overcome the diseases of the cattle caused by the evil spirits.

Ammaravathy Ammankovil : This temple is also situated to the southern side of the famous Mahadevar Temple. It is adjacent to the Kunnumpuram Kshetram. The idol installed here is Annapurneswari. The important offering is rice. The festival is in Dhanu Makaram the month of Malayalam era and this day of Thiruvathira. The important offerings on this day are rice, slaked lime and milk.

Kunnathumala Mahadevar Temple: The legend has been that when Keralam was ruled by Perumals it was divided into 64 gramas of which one was Chengannur. Vanjipuzha thampuran was the 'grama adhipan' (Chieftain of the

⁴⁰ Krishnan Kutti, Op.Cit., p.8.

⁴¹ Krishnankutti, Op.cit., p.10

Gramam). The chief god of this gramam was Kunnathumala Mahadevar.⁴¹ This temple is located to the north of the Chengannur Mahadevar temple. In the 'puranas' and 'ithihasas' there is mention of a place of height and red in colour named Shonadri or Kunnathumala. As noted earlier according of one view Chengannur derived its name from the word Shonadri which meant red hill. Dakshina Murthi or Siva is the chief deity here. The establishment of the temple relates to Dakshan, the father of Sathidevi and father in law of Siva. He conducted a Yagam in which his daughter and son in law was not invited. Sathidevi appeared before the sabha (assembly) and Dakshan at once made fun of her. She caused life to death. Siva took the charred body of his wife and wandered all over the land. Mahavishnu shot arrows the body of Sathidevi and the arrows and part of the body fell at the mount of Kunnathumala in Chengannur. Siva engaged in tapas (meditation) at the mount and it derived its holiness thus. There is also a view that the sage Agastia Muni installed the idol of Siva in this pose. Nearby people of this area call him as 'Kunnathappan'. Those who come here to pray to the Mahadevar also worship Kunnathappan. This is the usual practice. On the Chengannur Mahadevar Arattu day Kunnathappan is retinue to him. Near the kovil of the temple there is a deep well occupying vast area. It is said that the water in the well has divine power and medicinal qualities. It is said around that those who drank the water got relief from several diseases and evil spirits. The area in and around the Kunnathumala temple is inhabited by the Hindus only. They have deep faith in

the power of Kunnathappan. The offerings to him include sandal paste, lamp with oil, garland and payasam. This temple has no flag and no important festivals in the usual practice. But during the time of Mandala puja (Sabarimala pilgrimage) nearby worshippers of this temple conduct worship of 41 days. Recently they have started the ritual of the reading of Bhagavathi- Ramayanam.

Vadasserikavu Bhagavathi Temple: This temple is situated 1 ½ kms away from Chengannur K.S.R.T.C bus station and on the northern side of the M.C.Road. The sacred river Pampa is flowing on its northern side. Bhadrakali is the deity of this temple. Kali originated from the third eye of Siva. It is related to the cultural history of the land.⁴² Kalipuja has a history of very ancient past. Every region had an important Kavu or Kalari. Kali idols were at first installed at the foot of the papal trees and black palm trees that would attract the attention of the people and would evoke their feelings.

Subramania Devan (Lord Subramania) was at first installed as the chief deity in this temple by the chief of Vanjipuzha while the area was under his control. But when the administration of the temple was in the hands of the 'karayogakkar' (association of local Hindus) they installed Kali as the first deity and Subramania occupies second in status. After the killing of Darakasura by the son of Siva, mother (Kali is thirsty of blood who is in war craving for getting blood again and again. The idol of Kali in this temple bears a fierce expression of this blood thirst. Contrasted to this the idol of Kali installed in the Vadasserikavu temple has a pleasant face, an expression of satisfaction at the

⁴² K.Vidyasagar, *Anushtanam, Puravritam, Porul*, Government of Kerala.1998, p.1.1

devastation of Asuras who committed the murder. Bhadrasreni festival is conducted in order to please the Devi. Bharavi thullal or dance has been annually conducted and then Devi bears a pleasant face.

Bhadrakali, Subramania, Yakshi, Ganapathy, Sivan, Sasthav and Nagadevatha are the idols of this temple. The administration of the temple is in the hands of different karayogas (N.S.S.). They are Vadasserimel, Mundenkavu, Uliyanattusseri and Kodyattukara. The administration of the temple has been carried on by an elected body and conducted once in three years through secret balloting. The systems of election promote the broadmindedness of the people of the locality. Fourteen important festivals are performed here. Among these Kumbabharani, Meenabharani, Bhadrasreni, and Noottonnukalam are important. Bhadrasreni festival the most important of all is celebrated even today with all its antiquity. However, generally all these ancient art forms are in a state of decline. Four families namely Kottur, Azhikode, Paracha and Vellur observe these art forms in all their past glory. Karayogakkar conducted a very large festival of Bhadrasreni. 'Kalamezhuthupattu' conducted during Kumbha Meena Bharani day, Bhagavathiseva is very important a ceremony in this temple.

Kodyattukara Sri Krishna Swami Temple: It is situated north east to the Vadasserikavu Bhagavathi temple and on the banks of the River Pampa. Along its western side the railway line passes. This temple was instituted for the purpose of reciting Vedic mantras by all the Brahmins of Chengannur residing in its 3000 Brahmin 'illams'. The temple premises were used to give classes to

the Brahmin students of these ‘illams’ (Brahmin Houses). The administration was in the hands of Pengattu Madham. The power of the Brahmin gramas declined in importance due to the new customs and practices that come up. This Vedic school became degraded. In spite of that Pengattu Madham Brahmins continued their authority but gradually their power and income declined. They gave their administrative right to Tazhamon Madham and left Chengannur. In course of time the management of the temple came to in the hands of the Karayogam. An elected committee from the Karayogam manages the affairs of the temple. The idol of this temple is Mahavishnu. The annual festival of the temple used to be held for a period of eight days. Now a day no festivals are observed. Ashtamirohini festival was observed and annually they conducted Sapthaham ceremony. This ceremony is conducted with the purpose of improving the popularity and prosperity of this land. The main offering to god is ‘palpayasam’.

Tazhamon Madhathil Family Temples: In the cultural history of Kerala Chengannur Tazhamon Madham has a significant role. In descriptions relation between Tazhamon Madham and temples of Travancore has been stated to be as old as Keralolppathy. These men were pioneer masters in puja ritual, thantras, and mantras. They were experienced and well devoted Brahmin thantris. Their authority in these matters is still continuing.⁴³

⁴³ Krishnankutti, Op.cit. p11

There is a legend on the origin of this Madham.⁴⁴ Parasurama after creating Kerala and settling the Brahmins in the gramas constituted Brahmin management and administration of the temples newly set up. The legend reveals the incentives of these two madhams, even if the legend and the chronology are not evidenced. In fact the chronology is suspect in view of the fact that Brahmin authority in Kerala was institutionalized only after 8th century and in fact firmed up only much later. Further structured Hindu temples had originated in Kerala only by the 8th century. The legend is that in his journey to find suitable men for this Parasurama formed two brothers on the banks of River Krishna and He asked them to serve the people of Kerala, The elder brother reached Kerala by travelling on a leaf. There began the Tharanallur family of Kochi. The youngest brother reached Mudencavu in Chengannur by walking under the river water. His family is called Tazhamon. Tazhamon Madham was first settled at Attingal. They received 180 acres tax free land and a madham to live. Their family unit at Chengannur has a history of 2000 years. Major ‘thantris’ known to the present generation of Thazhamon are late Krishnaru and his son Rajeevru, late Nilakantaru and Maheswaru the Valia thantree of Sabarimala and his son Mohanaru. These three thantrika branches live in three madhams located close to each other.

Ganapathy Temple: This Thazhamon Madham is situated in the ‘madham’ of Rajeevru. The idol of the temple is believed to be gifted by Parasurama. Ganapathy is considered the family god and at the same time the god of the

⁴⁴ *Kshetranadam, Sabarimala Special*,1994-1995,p.11

‘karayogam’. Daily puja is conducted in this temple. Once in a year in the month of ‘karkidakam’ (K.E) ‘Appam’ a food delicacy is the offering here.

Raktheswari Temple: This is situated in the madham of Maheswaru. The deity here is also the family god of Thazhamon. Once in a year in the month of ‘karkidakam’ ‘guruth’ offering used to be conducted here. Now a days, ghee with a lamp is burnt once in a month. The important offerings to god are therali appam, plantains and ghee with a lamp.

Vanjipuzha Madham Gods: Thevelli Bhagavathi⁴⁵: For centuries the administrative head of Chengannur grama was Vanjipuzha Chief. The family deity has been Cheruvally Bhagavathy. Beside these, Vettakkorumakan, Sivan, Ganapathy, Saraswathy and Salagramam Santhanagopalam are also worshipped here. The belief is that wherever Chief took residence these gods were also with him. Vanjipuzha Chief’s powerful reign is marked by conducting pujas twice a day in these temples. Eight ‘idangazhi’ (local unit of measure) of rice was the offering made to god. Kalamezhuthupattu for fortyone days from the first of the month of Vrichikam (K.E) onwards is an annual feature in the temple premises. Every year about 12,000 coconuts in three days were offered here. ‘Kalamezhuthu’ for Vettakorumakan in the month of Medam (K.E) However, at present due to the decadent power of this madham the condition of the gods is also in a stage of decline. The main offerings here are the delicacies of milk payasam, kadum payasam, unniappam etc. Till recently the people of South

⁴⁵ *Kairali, Sabarimala Special*, Vol 1, 1999, P.7

Travancore used to reach these temples and receive the blessings of the eldest woman of the Madham.

Panchapandava Temples: ⁴⁶ A structure evidencing another spiritual tradition of Chengannur is Pandavanpara where the Pandavas are believed to have rested during their stay in forest (vanavasam). The Pandavas installed five deities of Lord Maha Vishnu in and around Chengannur. They are well known temples in Central Travancore and are located at Trikkodithanam, Thripuliyur, Thiruaranmula, Thriuvanvandoor and Trichittat.

Trichittat Temple: Among the Pancha Pandava temples Chengannur Thrichittat temple is considered as the earliest one. This temple is situated on the banks of a rivulet 'Chittar' branching from River Pampa. It is 120 kms. away from the capital city of Trivandrum and is on the Pandanadu road, 2kms away from the Chengannur town. There are two versions of how the temple got its name. One and the more straight and simple and most probable, says that it is the combination of the words 'Thru' short form of Thiru meaning holy, 'Chitt' meaning small 'att', the adjective form of 'ar' meaning river Thrichittat together meaning 'temple by the side of the small river'. The other version, rather tenuous, is that it is from the word combination of Thiru 'Chitha-thae (meaning heartening) which qualifies the temple as that which attracts the heart.⁴⁷ The installation of the idol of this temple is attributed to the holy Yudhishtira, the eldest among the five 'pandava' brothers.

⁴⁶ Sabarimala Information Guide, p.12

⁴⁷ Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bai, *Thulasiharam*, Kottayam, 1999, p.225

This temple structure has relatively a simple style in the make of its sreekovil, mandapas etc. Nammalwar, Kulasekhara Alwar and Thriumankai Alwar were some of the Alwars who enriched 108 Divya Kshetras (Thirupathis). This is one of the 'thirupathis' praised by the Alwars.⁴⁸ The temple is the most renowned among the five temples mentioned to men that the people started from here their journey of pilgrimage to the five temples.

The story of Mahabharatha tells that Dronacharia (the guru of the pandava brothers) was cheated by them by giving him wrong information on Aswathamav. As penance and to get peace Yudhishtara installed the idol. The faith is that the sins extorted by are taking a dip in the Thrichittar followed by worship at the idol. Another legend connected with this temple is that Yudhishtara implored his four brothers to believe that Kaliyuga was coming nearing and that they must shed their earthly bodies and ensure their heavenly reach by doing virtues to people and by installing the idol of Lord Vishnu at an auspicious place. The place chosen by them was Thrichitat.

This temple is faced towards the East and the Thrichitat Shangh Thiritham is situated in front of the gateway of the temple. The temple is walled around with appropriate entrances. The copper plated flag is made of teak wood. The altar stone is placed in front of the temple within a small house. The pillar of the altar stone has only single architecture with no decorations. The relatively low high roof of the prayer hall is full of tiles adding to the architectural simplicity and attraction. The inside wall of the prayer hall was decorated with

⁴⁸ M.G.S.Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, Calicut.1996, p.142.

figures of gods. The sreekovil of the temple is circular in shape and made of rubble. The roof of the sreekovil is also made attractive with tiles.

The idol of the temple is carved in granite. This decorated idol has a difference with the other idols of Vishnu temples. The 'Sang' (shell) is held in the right hand instead of the usual left hand. This figure pronounces the ideology of peace and charity and avoidance of conflicts battles and wars. The left hand holds the wheel and the flower is held in the second right hand and a pistol of the figure is in mind. The 'oottupura' and the koothuampalam are on the outside of 'vimana' or pradhana (the main) mandapa. On the backside of the temple is the idol of Dharma Sastha and Gosalakrishna. Idol of Gosala Krishna is walled around. There is an altar stone and the Sreekovil bears good sculptural works. There of it is not tiled.

The temple belonged to the Vanjipuzha chief and won its place among the most important temples of Malanadu. The Mampalli Pandarathil reconstructed the temple. The temple is now placed under the control of the Dewasom Board.

Thripuliyur Mahavishnu Temple: The temple of Thripuliyur has a special place of pride. It was one of the 108 divya desams of Vaishnavas. Thirumankai Alwar and Nammalwar had praised the greatness of this temple in their works.⁴⁹ Secondly the idol here was worshipped by Bhimasena the second of the Pandava brothers. The place got its name from the leopards which were very common here. Reaching the temple needs many arduous steps up the hill of

⁴⁹ Aswathy Thirunal Lakshmi Bai., Op. Cit.,p.229.

Karimanikathumala. The temple is well protected by walls around. Carved on the main door is the figure of Sri Padmanabha Swami. A tall brass - covered flag mast has replaced the ancient gold - covered one. The stone for sacrifice bears some writings made in ancient scripts, unclear and not yet deciphered. The temple faces to East and has three main parts: Vilakkumadam made of stone. Nalambalam reached through a passage protected by wooden railings and the Namaskara mandapam (platform for worship) highly attractive with plenty of sculpture. A mirror is installed representing Yakshi in place of Sri Bhuvaneswari. This benign Devi is believed to put an end to the fear of the night in children. She is the subgoddess of the temple. The circular sreekovil is unusually vast and high which are features attributed to its by Bhima. Renovated in A.D. 500 the temple has two 'dwara palakas'proclaiming the artistic skill of the sculpture. The main idol of Lord Vishnu is tall and in standing position. Shangh, chakra and lotus are found in three hands, while the fourth hand is kept resting on the lap. The temple courtyard has groves like the 'Kavu' where ritual worship is conducted. The tribal people and backward people had special place to worship in this temple. Peruveli grandhavari, Kizhthrikovil grandhavari, Tharayil Kuzhikattu grandhavari and such ancient records refer to this temple. 'Maparatha -- pattathanam' was colloquial expression of Mahabharathapattadanam was conducted here in 810 K.E.⁵⁰ This was common in the famous temples as these learned Brahmans educated the

⁵⁰ Unnikrishnan Nair, *Thripuliyur Grandhavari*, Kottayam, 2002, p.9 .

people in Vedas. Festival was conducted in the month of makaram. 'Kavadiattam' (a form of frenzied devotional dance) was part of this festival.

Thiruvandoor SreeMahavishnu Kshetram: This Vishnu temple is situated on the banks of Manimala and Pampa rivers. It is situated 120 kms. away from the capital city. It is famous as one of the 13 divya desams of Kerala sacred to the Vaishnavites.⁵¹ The temple is believed to be located where the images of Vishnu and Galakrishna were worshipped by Nakula the fourth of the five pandavas. The images are believed to be consecrated by the legendary Bhrgu Muni Thiruvandoor. It may be mentioned here that Thiruvandoor is one of the five sacred places where the Vishnu images worshipped by the Pandavas had consecrated, the other four being Thrichitat, Thripuliyur, Thiruaranmula and Thrikkodithanam. All the five places are visited on the same day by the Vaishnava devotees. Some believe that Thiruvandoor is corruption of the word Thirupandavayur implying that the place was sanctified by the stay of the Pandavas. According to the local tradition the Pandavas lived in the forests of the region along with Panchali during their 'Vanavasa'. Some other places in the vicinity evoke even today memories of their association with the Pandavas. A place in the neighbourhood is called Pandanad (believed to be the shortening of Pandavanadu).

The shrine of Thiruvandoor is extolled in the Tiruvaimozhi of Nammalwar,⁵² the great Tamil saint assigned to the 9th century A.D. We find in

⁵¹ Aswathy Thirunal Lakshmi Bai, Op.Cit. ,p.240

⁵² Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol. V,p.51.

Puranas the place Tiruvanandur that is one among the 18 Puranas namely Narada Puranam was composed. Puranas mention that Markkandeya Muni derived divine inspiration from Tiruvanvandur. The temple faces to the west and has a vast compound evoking the glory of its past. Equally striking is its unusually tall gold plated flag. Inside the Nalambalam is housed the tiled Namaskara Mandapam. Its ceiling is full of carved pictures of Brahma and the 'Ashta Dikpalaker' (keepers of the eight directions). The circular sreekovil is plated with copper and set in two rows. Beneath the roof the idols dedicated are Brahma in the north, Vishnu in the east, Siva in the south and Narasimham in the west.

The temple which fell within the territory of Nanthuzhinad flourished during the period of the Kulasekharas as is evidenced in the lithic records.⁵³ The inscriptions found in the temple of the Venad ruler Sri Vallabhan Kothai who was appointed by the Chera emperor to rule over Nanthuzhinad also show the high esteem in which the temple was held in those days. During the period following the fall of the Kulasekharas early in the 12th century the affairs of the Tiruvanvandur temple were mismanaged and it fell on evil days. In the 16th century the temple was owned by the local Nampoothiri illam of Gnazhapally. It is believed that the Chempakasseri Raja made a bold bid to obtain possession of the idol of Gosalakrishna at Tiruvanvandur and consecrate it in his newly built temple at Ambalapuzha which was foiled by the chief of this illam by drowning himself in a nearby tank carrying the idol. The Vishnu shrine however

⁵³ *Kerala District Gazetteer*, Op. Cit.,p. 627.

continued to exist. During the reign Sri Mulam Thirunal (1885-1924) it was renovated. The present lofty Srikovil was built then at a cost of Rs.80, 000/-.

Tiruvanvandoor shot into the limelight in 1963 with the discovery of an idol of Gosalakrishna from a nearby tank. It is believed that this is the same image with which the Nampoothiri trustee drowned himself in the 16th century in order to elude its capture by the men of Chempakasseri Raja's men. The image was obtained under sensational circumstances. Local devotee by the name Damodaran who was a teacher in the nearby Government Primary School claimed that he had a dream in his sleep one night in March 1963 informing him of the existence of an image of Gosalakrishnan in an ancient tank lying to the east of the existing shrine. The tank had been filled since long and was no longer visible to the human eye. The devotee was informed in his dream that the image which lay 7 1/2 f.t. deep buried in mud in the tank should be reclaimed and installed above the ground level in the temple premises. In pursuance of this dream the local people offered sramadan and carried on a major digging operation at the place until they obtained a perfect image of Gosalakrishna, a Shangh and several pooja utensils. While the image was obtained on May, 19, 1963, the 41st day of the Sramadan, the others were obtained earlier. The image was consecrated with due ceremonies in a small shrine specially constructed for the purpose in the premises of the old temple. Stories began to spread of the miraculous powers of the new deity. Thus Tiruvanvandur regained its old place of prominence as a centre of Hindu pilgrimage. A new temple was built at the place and the deity reconsecrated here in May 1967. The administration of the temple is in the hands of the famous Thantries of Tazhamon Madham of

Chengannur and Thukalasseritharayil Kuzhikattu Bhattathiri. The shrine is now being visited by hundreds of devotees from all parts of South India.

Thiru Aranmula Temple: The most renowned river in ancient Travancore was Pampa and it is no surprise that on its banks was dedicated an important temple to Lord Krishna. This ancient temple has a place among the 108 divya desams of Bharathakhandam and was one among the 13 thriupathis of Malanadu. The Tamil Alwar Nammalwar who composed Thiruvaimozhi in the 8th or 9th century praises the Aranmula Bhagavan in his songs from 2843 to 2853.⁵⁴ In the 13th century certain tribal people performed 'guruthis' to remove the evil decade of the Devan and this work is mentioned as Thirunizhalmala.⁵⁵ A song composed and sung by the Pulluvass (pulluva) (a community of the region) in the 13th century certain tribal people performed 'kuruthis' to remove the evil decade of Devan.

The deity at Aranmula temple is Vishnu in the form of Parthasarathi, i.e. Sri Krishna in the guise of Arjuna's charioteer. Tradition is that the installation of the deity was performed by Arjuna himself. It was originally consecrated at Nilakkal, in those days a populous village of Ranni Pakuthi. The menace of the wild animals made the place uninhabitable in course of time, but the people who were devoted to their god and his temple were unwilling to leave the locality. However, the danger from wild life grew in dimensions and compelled the people to desert the place. But the god did not stay behind His

⁵⁴ Aswathy Thirunal Lakshmi Bai, Op.Cit, p.234.

⁵⁵ *Sahityalokam* literary Bimonthly in Malayalam Vol.28 No.3Thrissur.2003, p.36.

devotees. He took the guise of a Brahmachari. Some men of the lower caste who lived at Nilakkal is said to have made a raft with six bamboos for the Lord to cross Pampa and He reached a place about a mile to the West of Kili Trikkovil. Attracted by a small light at a distance He went towards it and spent the night there. The place is even now called Vilakkumadam. He then returned to Kili Trikkovil and persuaded the people to build a temple at the place where it now stands. The famous snake boat regatta on Pampa held annually at Aranmula on the day of Utrattathi asterism in connection with the Onam festival in Chingam (August- September) is said to commemorate the crossing of the river by Lord Parthasarathy. There is no element of competition in the Aranmula regatta unlike in boat races in other places of Kerala. The crew regard the occasion as one for rejoicing and merry making and cheerfully row up and down the river to the rhythm and tune of songs. Even though the festival is of Hindu origin and is associated with the Aranmula temple, it is an all community affair and the participants include members of all classes and communities living in and around Aranmula. In this respect the donation of thoni for carrying food item for the feast by a Christian is a conspicuous instance still remembered in the locality. (A photo of this now dilapidated thoni is given in Appendix No.23.). The festival is now organised by the Palliyotam Seva Sanghom. The regatta in the past constitutes a ground festival for the people of Central Travancore. The local people celebrate the day by feasting and merry making. The Vallasadya is an important vazhipadu in the temple.

Aranmulayappan as the deity is locally known is credited with great favour to children and a special feast is arranged for them afterwards. People

who are childless are known to defray such feasts as offering to the deity. The lighting of the children's beacon in front of the temple towards the middle of January is an annual festival which attracts people from all parts of the locality.⁵⁶ The Aranmula temple represents the typical Travancore style of architecture. The inner shrine has been roofed with copper plates out of donations raised from the public during the annual boat race. There are four mural paintings on the walls of the Sreekovil. Each of them measures 63' in length and 50' in height, painted in pairs on either side of the façade of the central shrine. Aranmula has derived its fame also from the famous metal mirror of the village popularly known as 'Aranmula kannadi'. Among the many curios of the world it deserves a high place.

Thrikkodithanam Sree Maha Vishnu Temple: This lists the last of the Panchapandava temples. Nammalwar himself visited this place and sang songs to praise the Devan.⁵⁷ It is here that Nammalwar attained Devan's divine inspiration. Later another saint Ramanuja also got divine inspiration from here. The temple was consecrated by Sahadevan, the last of the Pandava brothers. The idol of this temple is described as Albhuthanarayan. The place has its name from the word Thiriuhadikasthanam the place where the Vedas, Sanskrit and Logic were taught. Gradually the name is said as Thrikkodithanam. There were 'salas' where Brahmin youths were taught. The temple is situated 135kms. away from the capital city of Trivandrum and it is located near the town of

⁵⁶ Kerala District Gazetteer, Op.Cit.P.591.

⁵⁷ Aswathy Thirunal Lakshmbai, Op.Cit.p.259

Chagnasserry. The idol is faced to the east and nearby there is a pond known as Panchathirthakulam. The temple walls have inscriptions related to Chera ruler Bhaskara Ravi Varma Thiriuvati. They reveal the glory of the past. The rules of conduct of different temples of Central Travancore are also listed here. Another inscription of Gothamarthandan of Venad proclaims the appointment of the chieftians of Nanthuzhinad as an offer of 'Vazhipad' to the temple

The temple has a feature similar to that in the temple of Thrichambaram in Kannur. The festival in this temple is conducted in the month of Vrichikam It is a ten day festival and ends by lightening of the lamp.

ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS

The Muslims of Kerala by and large have their tradition from Malik Ibn Dinar.⁵⁸ In Chengannur region Muslims are found signifiably in Mulakuzha, Kollakadavu and Mannar. They are mainly engaged in trade and consequently are seen in relatively large numbers in urban and semiurban areas. There are mosques in all important Muslim centres.

The Eramathur Muhayu Deen Jun: This Masjid situated in Mannar is a very ancient Muslim centre of worship in Central Travancore. It is believed to have been constructed by Hussarath Malik Ibn Dinar who came to Kerala to propagate Islam and Muslim religion. The mosque is believed to be thousand years old. Some inscriptions on the old stones found at the time of renovation indicate the ancientness of the worship centre. Dinar established many other

places of worship also. The Muslims of this area maintained close relationship with the Travancore royal family. Titles like Asan, Panikkar, and Kunju were awarded to Muslims in return for valuable services rendered to the royal family. The kings were very hospitable to Muslims coming from outside the state. The pond south of the worship centre is as old as the worship centre. The Muslims here celebrate the common Islamic festivals and do not have any other festival confined to any locality or attached to any particular Mosque. The Muslims do not have any spiral pilgrimage centre here.

It appears that the study of the religious institutions in Chengannur (and for that matter Kerala) cannot be approached solely on the basis of any uniform definition of any religion. This is because within each of the two major religious groups in Chengannur viz. the Hindu and Christian religions there are several shades of beliefs and practices which take their genesis and forms from diverse sources. In the case of Islam, perhaps because their number is limited, any such pronounced difference or division is not noticed in Chengannur; even the Shia - Sunni division could not be identified in the region. But that was not the case with the other two religions. It is not only beliefs and practices in worship that have given rise to religious institutions within these groups, but a number of other factors have been at work as determinants. They emanate from diverse sources: tradition, reconciliation of diverse and even warring forms of worship; social factors like caste divisions; myths and legends; personal glory and rivalry of individuals; schism among the clergy; issues of pontifical lineage and rights; wealth or property claims, external influences; etc. This is a complex and challenging area for study indeed. However, in this study attempt is not made to

delve deep into the determinant factors. The study has confined to identification of some of the most prominent visible or observable institutions in the 'Historical Region of Chengannur' which have their origin, practices and belongingness historically evolved in one or several of the aforesaid circumstances. There is a view that the purely religious roots of Kerala culture have always been weak among the religious groups although traits of it have been imbibed or incorporated in them.⁵⁹ Accordingly for several centuries past, there has been nothing like a well defined universal religious ideology for any group and that there has always been a dominant attitude verging on the thaumaturgical towards religion and religious practices among those who had the benefit of congregational worship. It is further held that religion has been thought of as a means of coping with life and not letting life itself to be dominated by it.

⁵⁹ B.N.Nair, *Kerala Culture and religion*, A Cultural Anthropological Overview, Journal of Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, 1977, .p.81.