STUDY AREA:
ECOLOGICAL, SOCIO - POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

The present state of Kerala lies between 18°17’ 30” north latitude and 74 ° 51’ 57” and 77 ° 24’ 47” east longitudes. It comprises a narrow strip of land down in the west coast with an area of 38,862 km². The shape of Kerala resembles a scalene triangle with its base on the long coast and its apex on the Western Ghats. Width of the States ranges from a minimum of 11 km and maximum of 124 km (Fig 2.1).

Fig 2.1. District Map of Kerala
Based on the physiographic characters, Kerala region can be classified into five zones and the elevation of each land zones are following:

- Mountain peaks (above 1800 m)
- Highlands (at altitude of 600 – 1800 m)
- Midland (at altitudes of 300-600 m)
- Low land (at 10-300 m)
- Coastal plains and lagoons (below 10 m).

The percentages of areas coming under the different geographical zones are also explained for the better understanding of the study region. About 6.40% areas falls under the category of Coastal Plains and Lagoons (0-10 m), whereas 54.17% belong to Low lands (10-300 m). Midlands of 300-600 m cover an area of 8.44% only. Last two zones comprise areas of 20.35% Highland and 0.64 mountain peaks. Near about 50% percentages of total habitation in Kerala live in lowlands. The present research area, central portion of Kerala comes under last aforementioned four zones the region i.e. Highland, Midland, Lowland and coastal plains. Again the major part of central Kerala comes under lowland adjacent to the coast (Soman1997; Nair 1991).

**Highlands:**

This area is characterized by thick and dense vegetation. It slopes down from the Western Ghats, which rises to an average height of 900 m and also having a number of peaks about 1800 m in height from the sea level. These peaks not only protect the land from the dry winds of eastern plateau but also act as natural boundaries. It also supports in providing stable flow of monsoon. Anaimudi (2694 m), the highest peak in India after the Himalayas, is located in the Munnar division of the Western Ghats. It supports the
river systems. The River Periyar and Chalakkudy originate from the Western Ghats and watered the central Kerala (Shajan 1997). This area had dense forest in the past. This was in many places cleared during British rule for plantation. This is the area of major plantations like tea, coffee, rubber and various spices. Only 20% people of total population inhabit this area. Most of them belong to tribal communities like *Muthuvans*, *Malapandarams*, *Chōlanāikkar* and *Malayarayan* (Iyyar 1941).

**Midlands:**

It lies between the mountains and the lowlands. It is made up of undulating hills and valleys ranging in height between 300 m to 600 m. It is interjected by gneissic and lateritic hills and interrupted by rivers, lakes and streams. This is an area of intensive cultivation. Cashew, coconut, areca nut, tapioca and some spices like cardamom, nutmeg and pepper are cultivated in this area. Some of the indigenous communities such as *kānis*, *coppālan* and *tiyya-malayar* also inhabit the area.

**Lowlands and Coastal plains:**

Lowlands mostly fall in the coastal and upper to the coastal area. It lies below an altitude of 10 m to 300 m. Numerous plains, valley fills, colluvium and sedimentary formations are parts of the lowland. Most of the areas in these coastal plains are within a height of 4 to 6 m from the MSL. Beach dunes, ancient beach ridges, coastal alluvial plains, marshes and lagoons constitute in this category. Alappy (Alappuzha district), Aluva (Ernakulam district) and Kalady (Trissur district) regions comes under this zone. This area is very fertile and mostly under rice and paddy cultivation (Fig 2.2).
Fig 2.2 Map of Central part of Kerala

Rivers, Lakes and Backwaters/Water bodies:

There are a total of 44 rivers which drain Kerala. Among these 41 are west flowing river whereas rest three are east flowing. Six rivers are draining through the Central part of Kerala (Fig 2.3). They are Periyar (244 km), Bharathappuzha (209 km), Chalakkudi (130 km), Meenachil (78 km), Achankovil (128 km) and Manimala (90 km).
The network of tributaries, streams and rivulets play an important role in making the land green and fertile besides the heavy tropical monsoon rains. It also helps to develop the domestic water ways. Aside from these rivers, the region is bestowed with lakes and backwater and lagoon. The chain of water bodies which is known as “kāyals” are the major characteristics of Kerala coast. At present there are 27 estuaries and 7 lagoons so far identified in Kerala. Among this, Paravur includes in estuaries whereas Kodungallur–Varappuzha has natural lagoons (Menon 1975 & 1965; Chedambath 1997).

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**Geology**

To understand human history of a region, the study of geological formation of the particular area is very essential. Man and land relationship is very vital for human
sustenance. On the geological background, the whole regions of Kerala can be divided into three groups: Achaean Rock formation of crystalline gneisses, Laterite and old alluvium formations, recent formations along the coastal belt. The oldest rock formation *i.e.* Archaen group is succeeded by Dhārwad formation, Champion Gneiss, Peninsular gneiss, Charnokite, Granite and Precambrian system. Among these, peninsular gneiss, Charnokite, and Precambrian system can be seen in the study area. The minerals noticed in the peninsular gneiss formation include quartz, feldspar, biotic and garnet. In this study area, they are found in fine grained condition and are characterized by hornblendic and biotic types. The Charnokite is also a wide spread Archaen exposures in the mid and high land region of this study area. This formation is characterized by quartz and feldspar. This has granular structure and they are devoid of garnets. Precambrian system is characterized by the basic dykes, a volcanic rock they are fine to medium grained, and major type noticed in the Periyar river basin is dolerites (Rajendran 1989; Soman 1997; Gurukkal 1999; Mathai 1991).

Another important geological formation is the laterite and it can be divided into two types: primary and secondary. Laterite formed due to the weathering of rocks. So it can be seen in the foothills of Western Ghats. In the Periyar river basin laterite formation is found about 5 km away from the coast. The third category of geological formation is the recent formation along the sea coast. It consists of sand and silt. There are different types of soils which can be classified into 10 broad groups. The classification of the soils can be done on the basis of morphological features. Among this, lateritic soils are more common in Central Kerala. This covers almost all parts of lowlands. There is a strong
connection between lateritic soil or blocks and Nāga worship. This will be explained in the forthcoming chapters (Chedambath 1997; Thampi 1983).

**Flora and Fauna**

Different plant and animal species have been flourished in the above mentioned region due to the amiable environment. Such flourished flora and fauna of a region form part of the present environment. These plants and animal diversities are started to live together and started to make ecological balance with the existing soils, landforms, climate and other morphological process operating in nature today.

**Flora:**

The wealth of vegetation in Kerala is basically concentrated into the forest zones. Actually in Central Kerala, the forest zone starts from Low land (200 m and above). Forests in Kerala generally and Central Kerala in particularly are classified into tropical evergreen (dense forest), semi evergreen (higher humid forest), Sub tropical evergreen (mild temperate forest), temperate grass land, tropical humid deciduous forest (broad leaf forest) and tropical dry deciduous forest. Kerala is very famous for its floral wealth. There are so many medicinal plants and non-herbal plants growing in these above mentioned forests. The tribal communities from Idukki such as Muthavāns, Kānis and Malapulaya are known to have several local Ayurvedic medicines. So the diversity in the forest types allows the development of a rich variety of flora. Kuntherekka Pine, Pala, Vediplavu, Maravuri, etc. are some of the trees which flourish in tropical forests. Teak, Maruthi, Karimaruthi, Rosewood, Bamboo, Venteak, Vengal, type of expensive and lasting trees are seen in the moist Deciduous Forest. Apart from these the flowering and non-flowering plants are also advent in these forest. The existence of different variety of
spices like pepper, cardamom, clove and cinnamon are also available in these forests. The existence of such spices was played an important role in making the history of Kerala particularly of Central Kerala during the earlier history.

Fauna:

The diversity of animals is also visible in the above mentioned forests. Zoographically Kerala belongs to Indo – Malay or oriental region (George 1975). The regions in the central part of Kerala include variety of domestic and wild animals. The mid land and the high lands regions (300 to 1800 m) represent one of the different biodiversities and there are witnessed rare and vanishing floral and faunal species. Above mentioned different types of forests makes suitable for inhabited by various animals such as the sambar deer, gaur (wild bison), King Cobra, Common Indian Cobra, Viper, Kraits Nilgiri tar, elephant, leopard, tiger, bonnet monkey, the rare lion-tailed macaque, the Hanuman and Nilgiri langurs, spectacled and king cobras, peafowl and hornbill (Menon 1965).

A small canopy or similar to the forest can be seen in south western or north eastern side of each house compound of all Hindu Malayālē family. This is called as sacred grove or Sarppakkāvūs. Such types of places are left for consecrating Nāga images for propitiating Nāga gods. In brief, the representation of rich vegetation are copied and pasted into the places and are also considered as a ritual space for all Nāga related worships. The details will be observed in concerned chapter.

Climate:

Central Kerala is known for its rich water sources, rainfall, cool and calm temperature. The south–west monsoon (June - September) and northeast monsoon
(October - December) provide about 90% of the annual rainfall in particular zones. Local names of such monsoons are “Edavappathi” for south west and “Thulāvarśam” for north-east. Thus it can be clearly visualized that the dominant feature of climate is monsoon. Nāga related main festival is conducted before first monsoon “Edavappāthi”. Central Kerala has diverse climatic conditions largely owing to the diversity in the land forms. High land region usually have cool climate whereas mid and low lands are hot and humid. The temperature varies from 27° to 32° C. Usually temperature of these regions varies with the months. Period from March to May is the hottest whereas December to January gets lowest temperature. As mentioned above, these hottest days are the perfect time for giving yearly offerings for propitiating Nāgas. The snakes are more visible in these hotter days and come out of the hide (Murthi 1991; Menon 1975).

SOCIOT POLITICAL HISTORY:

The political history of central part of Kerala starts from the early centuries of Christian era. In ancient time, Kerala was known as the land of 'Keralaputrās' as evidence from the II Rock Edicts of Aśoka (Valath 1997) suggest. The political history of Kerala however remained in obscurity. Some of the scholars have tried to explain the history of Kerala specially Central Kerala with the help of some inscriptions and ancient Tamil literature called as Sangam literature. The first known kingdom in Kerala is Chēra. The scholars on the basis of the inscription have placed the Chēra rule around 2nd century A.D. Prior to that time the socio-political history of Kerala remained a mystery. However, from very early period (later part of 1st millennium B.C) the region has the trade contacts with the West Asians and Roman countries. The evidence comes from the explorations and excavation of coastal area of Central Kerala particularly the site of
Pattanam in Ernakulam district, Kottappuram in Trissur district and Alattuchira in Idukki district. Apart from the excavation, there are some literary evidences which show the details of the trade and the name of a trading center i.e. Muziris. In first century A. D, Pliny has given the details of the rulers of Central Kerala called as Cerobothra. Ptolemy and the Periplus of Erithriyan Sea also have given the same name for the rulers of Kerala as Pliny has given. It is believed that the location of the ancient port town Muziris is somewhere in the coastal part of Central Kerala and a point was identified at Cranganore (Kodungallur) in the earlier time. The excavations also helped to identify several other points in the ancient port town; Muziris rather than Cranganore (Narayanan 1996; Sarkar 1978; Schoff 1912).

Central part of Kerala was completely occupied by Chēra in two times. According to the accepted version, Udayanjeral had established Chēra kingdom somewhere in mid of second century A. D. Two other dynasties occupied the southern and northern Kerala, which was called as Āy chieftains and Nannanans of Ezhi-malai respectively. There were ten rulers in Chēra kingdom and their names are Nedum Cheralathan, Palyanai Sel-Kelu-Kuttavan, Narmuducheral, Kadalottiya Vel Kelu-Kuttavan etc. and the last ruler was Ilam CheralIrumporen (Ayyar 1997). These names and the places are somehow given by the early literatures of Sangam Age like Patittupattu, Puranānūr, Akanānūr and Silappathikāram. Patittupattu describes the capital of Chēra is in a bank of river Periyar and near the sounding ocean (Menon 1975). Likewise there are several references that have referred to the existence of first Chēra Empire in Kerala. The foreign trades reached its peak during this time. Unfortunately there is no evidence to show the story from fourth century A. D to eight century A. D.
The excavations at Pattanam, Ernakulam district and Kottappuram at Trissur district also do not yield any kind of cultural materials pertaining to this period. The stratigraphical analysis has shown the habitational traces over Pattanam around mid of fourth century A.D. whereas Kottappuram explains the habitation starts from the later times of Eight century A. D. There are some inscriptional evidences which showed that the connection between Pāndyas and Āy of south Kerala during seventh century A.D. During this time the neighboring regions were occupied by different dynasties like Chālukya of Badāmi, Pāndyās of Madurai and Pallavās of Kānchi. Among this, there is a mention that one of these dynasties claimed a victory over the Chēras too (Narayanan 1996; Sarkar 1992).

The Chēra re-established their mighty rule in 800 A.D under Kulaśēkharavarman. He is also known as Kulashēkhara Ālvārs; one of the Vaiśnavite saint. The Chēra rule flourished till the beginning of the 12\textsuperscript{th} Century A. D. During this time most part of Kerala came under their rule. But the capital was located in Mahōdayapuram which was also called as Makōtai or Mahōdaypattanam. It is identified as new Thiruvanchikkulam at Kodungallur; Trissur district in Central Kerala. There were more than twelve kings belonging to this particular dynasty and their details were found from different inscriptions. They ruled over different parts of Kerala till the early 12\textsuperscript{th} century A. D (Narayanan 1996).

During the ruling period of second Chēra Empire, once again the western coast of Central Kerala flourished because of foreign trade. The evidence is found from the excavation at Kottappuram (Personal communication with Dr. S. Hemachandran). The evidence of foreign wares found from the excavation shows the profundity of trade over this time. There are lots of varieties seen in the ceramic collections such as TGP, Chinese
porcelain, celadon, glazed wares, stone wares, lustrous painted ware, monochrome ware etc. All these materials tell the trading activity and the history of the early medieval to late medieval period of the central part of Kerala. Soon after that the Chōla Empire turned into the western coast for controlling the foreign trade which was earlier controlled by Chēras. This makes Chēra – Chōla conflict or also known as ‘hundred years of war’ of the history of Kerala (George 1975).

After the collapse of second Chēra dynasty the foreign trade continued in these areas. Second Chēra period has a well-defined administrative system on all over their territory. So, after the decline of Chēra dynasty, the minor principalities got independent power to rule over their jurisdictions. These minor principalities are called Perumpadappuswarōpam (erstwhile state of Cochin). Gradually the monopoly of these foreign as well as hinterland trades was controlled by three neighboring chieftains. They were, Zamorins (Nediyiruppu Swaroopam) of Calicut, Vēnād in south and Kolōthirirāja on north. Gradually central part of Kerala witnessed the rise and development of mighty regional rules under both Cochin princely state and Travancore princely state along with Malabar at the north.

Central Kerala witnessed the rule of Europeans from the early part of 16th century A. D. European colonial power and Portuguese were entered into the central part of Kerala and built a Church at Fort Cochin, fort at Pallippuram in Ernakulam district and Cranganore Trissur in 1502 and 1503 respectively. Followed by Portuguese, Dutch, the next colonial power captured the most of the Portuguese powered areas in the western coast. Then several regular invasions from northern part of Karnataka through Hydarali and Tippu Sultan made central part of Kerala into a multicultural, political and religious
region. All along these periods, beginning from prehistoric times to the historical period, people with different socio-cultural behaviors, ideologies moved to this part of the state. Meantime British started capturing from one side to almost all over Kerala during the end of 18th century and the early of 19th century A.D.

Hence, central part of Kerala came under the rule of many non-indigenous and indigenous groups for last 2300 years. Later Kerala state was organized in 1956 November 1 and administration came on under the government.

**RELIGIOUS HISTORY:**

Kerala is mentioned as a great seat of religions in ancient literature (Achyuthavaryar 2008). The archaeological remains also corroborate the ancient available religious spaces (Variyer and Rajan 1999) at the central part of Kerala. Since the ancient time Central Kerala has patronized almost all the major religions i.e. Brahmanism, Jainism, Buddhism as well as other minor sub sects. Moreover, some other religions also took their space in Kerala generally and Central Kerala particularly in the earlier centuries of Christian era. The Christianity, Jewish and of course Muslim were the most important world religions other than the existing religions were settled in these parts. The important aspect is that these religions initial establishment happened in Central Kerala. For example, it is believed that Cheraman Juma-Masjid built during 8th or 9th century A. D at the capital city Mahōdayapuram (Kodungallur, Trissur district) is the first mosque ever built in India so far (Plate 2.1). At the same time Christianity has been rooted here probably during the first century A. D (Plate 2.2) through the trade in Paravur regions, at Ernakulam district. Likewise Jewish people came here for trade and established their religion at Mattanchery (Plate 2.3), Paravur, Kottayilkovilakam and
Mala in Ernakulam and Trissur district respectively in the form of Synagogues (place for worship) (Plate 2.4). Apart from this, remains of temples (rock-cut and Brahmanical temples), pillars and sculptures are abundantly found in central Kerala which suggests its association with different religions from the early centuries up to the present day. Different types of local ethnic gods and goddesses have been worshipped before the advent of all above mentioned religions in to the central part of Kerala. Most of these gods and goddesses were the representation of nature, totem and ancestors. These are, Madam, Muthappan, Ayyappan, Rakṣas, Pathimörthikal, Kuttichāhan, Kōli, Puliyampulli, Vaduthan, Karāli, Vaduthabhadran, Vaduthala, Chāthan, Sambannagulikan, Mōlapritru, Yāgiswaran, Māriamma and Marutha deities worshipped locally by lower caste peoples in Central Kerala.

**BUDDHISM:**

This was the earliest organized religion in Kerala. The earlier evidences of Buddhism have not been recovered from the central part of Kerala so far. But the evidences related to the Buddhism of 10\textsuperscript{th} - 11\textsuperscript{th} century A D recovered from several places like Cherthala (Plate 2.5), Mavelikkara and Karumadi at Alappuzha in the form of sculptures (Plate 2.6). There are also some inscriptive evidences which have given evidence of the influences of Buddhism in the 8\textsuperscript{th} – 9\textsuperscript{th} century A D. The most important evidence was the existence of one Buddha Vihāra at Srēmōlavāsam, a place near to Trissur. The details of Vihāra was known from one of the copper plate (Paliam Copper Plate) of Āy King; Vikramaditya Varagunan (885 – 925 A.D) (George 1973) (Plate 2.7). Also, one of the Sangam literatures; Manimēkhala mentioned about the propagation of Buddhism in Kerala. Quite a number of Buddha images were found in Alappuzha district.
and these were in the disdain sate. In the meantime Southern Kerala particularly Kollam, had a well trade contact with Ceylon. So it is possible that Buddha remains in this areas is an outcome of the trade relationship with Ceylon (Sarkar 1978). Simultaneously, it is clear that, the socio-cultural and religious life of the people of Kerala developed on the basis of customs and rituals which were prevalent in the contemporary temples and religious activities. Apart from this the existences of Buddhism lead to the inclusion of some typical words into the Malayalam language such as Palli, Kettukāzhcha, thēvar, pallikkōdam and Ayyan.

**JAINISM:**

Jains believe that their faith was founded by a lineage of 24 teacher or saints, the ‘Tirthankarās’. Among this, 24th Tirthankara, ‘Vardhamāna’ and later known as Mahavīra played a crucial role in the development of Jainism (Bhattacharya 1974). It is believed that the Jains were migrated to the southern part of India through Badrabhāhu. The paleographic evidences from Palakkad and other districts of central and northern Kerala explains that Jains were laid their vestiges in these regions in the early part of ninth century A.D. to sixteenth century A.D. Most of the Jains probably migrated through northern and north eastern parts of Kerala. Sangam literature has also mentioned that some of the Chēra rulers were the supporters of Jain religion (Menon 2013). The most important poem in Sangam literature is Silappathikāram. This was written by a Jain saint Ilanko Adikal. It is believed that he prepared this particular poem by living in Mathilakam or Trikkanāmathilakam in Trissur district. The scholars also believed that Trikkanāmathilakam were the major center of Jain Math in central Kerala. Remains of Jain temples and sculptures have been found from different places in Central Kerala.
Among this Kallil temple at Ernakulam (Plate 2.8), Kōdalmānīkyam Bharatha temple at Trissur and Chandranāthā temple at Palakkad has given the evidence of Jain temples. Apart from temples, two Jain sculptures were also found from the district of Palakkad; one is the image of Mahavīra and the other is Pārśvanātha image (Panikkassery 2008; Achyuthavaryar 2008; Gopalakrishnan 1996).

All of these Jain temples are changed deliberately by Brahmanical religions and the images were started to worship as brahmanical gods and goddesses. The rise of Vaiśnavism and Śaivism however forced Jainism to decline by the end of 14th century in most of Southern parts of India generally and Kerala particularly. However, Jainism was flourished as a religious as well as social thought during the earlier period and had spread all over in Kerala. The association of snake with Mahavīra might have indirectly influenced the all acceptance of preservation of snake and hence giving impetus to snake worship (George 1975; Narayanan 1996).

**BRAHMANISM:**

Brahmanism is the primogenital thought of all living religions. This was not founded by any prophet like the higher religious thoughts as Buddhism, Christianity and Mohammedanism. Though the dates for the above mentioned religions are fixed and no such date can be given for Brahmanism. It is not based on a set of dogmas orated by a particular set of teachers or institutions. It has gone through a long process of development and modification suitable to the then society. So that it is free from all kinds of religious rigidity.

The advent of new higher religious thoughts caused for the changes in the religious order of native peoples in Central Kerala. As a result of this, Vedic religious
gods underwent several changes and made a new philosophical background for a new thought and later called it as Brahmanism (Basham 1954; Veluthattu 1978). It is essential to understand these new thoughts by knowing the various sects and cult worship which were existed during the earlier time. Central part of Kerala witnessed the most important brahmanical religious revivalism under the leadership of Sri Śankarāchāryar.

**SAIVISM:**

Śaivism is the formal name for the group of traditions that worship ‘Śiva’ as the supreme divinity. Central part of Kerala witnessed emergence of Saivism during the latter part of 10th century A.D. The influence of Śaivism was very much affected in the central part of Kerala and can be seen in the form of structural temples dedicated to Śiva. Thiruvanchikkulam Mahādēva temple (Plate 2.9) and Kizhthali Siva temple at Trissur district are the two examples of earlier Śiva temples in Central Kerala (Plate 2.10). Kerala is also called as a great seat of Śaivism and have the evidences in the form of 108 Śiva temples. Nāyanār were the name denoting Śiva saints and their presence were seen in many parts of Central Kerala. One of the second Chēra rulers named as Chēramān Perumāl Nāyanār was a Śiava saint (Nāyanār) and some rituals have been dedicated to him in the Thiruvanchikkulam Śiva temple during the month of July every year. This temple was placed in the first phase of the developments of structural temples in Kerala (Krishna 1984; Sarkar 1978). Snake has a strong association with Śīva in various ways. Sculptural representation of Śīva often seen snake adoring his body.
VAISHNAVISM:

The origin of Vaishnavism can be traced back to the Vedic period. Textually, Vaishnavites is revered, in addition to the Vedas and Upanishads, Epics, Bhagavatgītā, Vishnu Purāṇa and the hymns of the Ālvārs (Bhandarkar1965; Cahmpakalakshmi 1968; Dube1984; Gonda 1970; Rengarajan 2004). Vaishnavism is more prevalent in the central part of Kerala and the importance is given more to lord Krishna instead of Viśnu itself.

The evidence of Vaishnavism in Central Kerala can be found in Sangam literature. Puranānūr refers the worship of the God Viśnu by different peoples of Chēranādu (Narayanankutty 2003). The evidence of worshipping Viśnu by offering tulasi garland and devotional fasting also are mentioned in the earlier texts. It also mentions the names of deities which the people were worshipping like Skanta, Subramanian and kōravi; a counter part of Durga along with Viśnu.

Silappathikāram written by Ilango-Adigal, a Chēra prince, explains the existence of Viśnu and Śiva temples at Vanji now traced at modern Thiruvanchikkulam, Kodungallur in Trissur district. He explains Senguttavan’s (hero of the epic) visit to his tutelary deity Śiva at Vanji before his departure for the northern conquest and also mentions the existence of Viśnu temple at Vanji, very close to the Śiva temple. Viśnu has been described there as ‘the god who is in conscious sleep’ housed in a golden hall or temple and identified with the anathasāyi form of Viśnu. The next evidences about the earlier existence of Viśnu cult in central part of Kerala has seen during the time of Kulaśēkharavarman (800 – 820 A D). He is also identified as Kulashēkhara Ālvārs; one of the twelve famous Vaiśnava saint. He popularized the Vaiśnava tradition in Kerala.
Most important and earliest temple dedicated to *Viśnu* is *Trikkulašekharapuram Krśna* temple at Thiruvanchikkulam, Trissur district.

**ŚAKTISM:**

The term *Śaktism* refers a female centered religious tradition that evolved out of *Mother Goddess* worship found in civilizations across the globe (Harshananda 2002). It is the worship of feminine power and indicates a worshipper of the Goddess. *Śakti* is also referred as *Durga, Ambika, Bhadrakāli, Pārvati, Mahālalakshmi, Bhagavati, Ćāmundā* and by other names. *Śakti* cult is very much popular in the central part of Kerala. One of the earliest temples in Kerala is belonging *Śakti* cult and called as *Bhagavati* temple located at Kodungallur, Trissur district. The cult of *Śakti* was also a very popular thought even before the existence of all other religions in Kerala. Most of the indigenous peoples in the central part of Kerala have been worshipping *Kāli* or *Bhagavati* since the earlier periods of Christian era (Achyuthavaryar 2008; Bhattacharya 1996; Chandrasekharan 1990; Menon 1959; Pushpendra, 1974; Mukerjee1988; Sinha, 1966; Tiwari1985).

The evidences of major religions as well as local or rural traditions have been made together a clear religious history of Central Kerala. The peoples in rural areas have been worshipping different types of local gods and goddesses. But the independent cults also were seen both in lower and higher caste communities. Among this *Nāga* got prominent place in these lower and higher caste communities in Central Kerala.

**NĀGA CULT:**

It is difficult to trace out when *Naga* worship emerged in Kerala. There is no direct and persistent evidence found so far regarding the origin of *Nāga* worship in the
region. However, Nāga is worshipped independently in Sarppakkāvūs as well as sub deities in several brahmanical temples. Nāga can be seen in association with all the above mentioned religions in Central Kerala.

Snake deities in the region are appearing in form of Theriomorphic, Anthropomorphic and symbolic. Therio-anthropomorphic figures are seen only in the mural paintings of several temples. For instance, such mural paintings can be seen in the outer portion of garbha-griha in Guruvaīyur temple (Vaiṣṇavite Sect), Śiva temple at Vaikkom (Plate 2.11) and Ettumannūr Śiva temple, the doors and walls of the Amedamangalam temple (Mother goddesses’ sect)and Pambinmekkat Nāga temple (Plate 2.12). There are some ancient temples having the theriomorphic representation on the walls of gōpuram and these temples were dated to early phase of temple construction in Kerala as well as Central Kerala (Thiruvanchikkulam Śiva temple, Trissur district). The worship of Nāga can also be seen in Kallil Jain temple at Perumbavur24 km from Ernakulam. There are many Nāga icons and scared groves (Sarppakkāvūs) found in Central Kerala during the field exploration.

Ritual Space for Nāga Worship: Sarppakkāvu or Sacred Snake Groves:

Sarppakkāvu means sacred Groves, which are usually a cluster of wild jungle trees ornately draped with sophisticated creepers, are found in south- west corner of each house compound of Malayālē Hindu family (Vogel 1926). Sarppakkāvūs do not have any particular architectural form. Small pieces of stone with or without carvings placed in the area and should keep open to the nature without making any kind of roof structures. This places itself serves as a shrine and called as Sarppakṣētram or Nāga temple. The deities are fixed together but it does not have any particular position to fix in the sacred groves.
Now the sacred grove (*Sarppakkāvu*) system has been shrinking day by day. The major threats against the existence of sacred groves are the disappearance of old joint family system and partition of family properties along with changing socio-economic scenario. All *Nāga* related rituals and customs like *Pulluvanpattu, Sarppampāttu, Kalamezhuthu* and *Sarppabali* are conducted in these particular ritual spaces almost all over Central Kerala. However, folk-art *Theyyam* (*Nāga theyyam, Nāgakāli theyyam, Nāgakandan theyyam and Nāgakanni theyyam*) are conducted in the premises of temple as well as sacred groves. The details of mode of *Nāga* worship will be explained in the succeeding chapters.

Besides the religious background of central Kerala, the environment, the people lived over their land had a constant association or relationship with the snake. The large variety of snakes and their favorable ecological factors for snake habitation most probably played an important role for such a strong affiliation to the snake in this part of the country.
Plate 2.1: Cheraman juma Masjid, Trissur Dist.

Plate 2.2: St. George Church, Ernakulam Dist.

Plate 2.3: Jewish Synagogue. Mattanchay
Plate 2.4: Chendamangalam Jewish Synagogue, Ernakulam

Plate 2.5: Sasta Image, Karunagapaly Museum

Plate 2.6: Karumadikkutan, Allapuzha Dist.
Plate 2.7: Paliam Copper Plate, Tripunithura Hill Palace museum

Plate 2.8: Kallil Rock cut Jaina Temple, Ernakulam Dist.

Plate 2.9: Thiruvanchikkulam Siva Temple, Trissur Dist
Plate 2.10: Kizhthali Śiva Temple, Trissur Dist.

Plate 2.11: Mural Painting, Vaikkom, Kottayam Dist.

Plate 2.12: Pambinmekkat Nāga temple, Trissur Dist.