



MYTHS AND LEGENDS IN KERALA; AN OVER VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended to furnish a brief account of few Legendary/Mythical traditions circulated in Kerala pertaining to the period between Puranic epochs till about beginning of seventeenth century. Although all of them cannot be located in a given space and time, few of the stories have a defined space and time in which they said to have taken place. In spite of these stories cannot necessarily be kept on par with the documented historical narratives, the belief revolved around these traditions give them ample space occasionally to remember and cherish the memories around it.



KEY WORDS

Parasurama, Mahabali, Vamana, Onam, Cheraman Perumal, Zamorin.

INTRODUCTION

Myths and legends can generally be defined as sacred narratives of traditional societies generally involving superhuman beings etc, an accepted uncritically by a culture or speech-communityⁱ, a set of unexamined assumptions as authoritative and decisive final pronouncements. Many a time these myths rooted in popular beliefs often press one to believe them to be a reality of the past. Unlike many documented historical phenomenon, many of these myths or legends like any other myths of different regions are impossible to locate them chronologically, though often they can be located in a given space. Like many other societies worldwide Kerala also have a tradition of myths and legends. In the following part of this article the emphasis is on few different varieties of myths that are circulated/ being circulated in Kerala exhibiting different socio-cultural traditions of this region belonging to a wide range of period.

MYTH ON THE ORIGIN OF KERALA

Traditionally Kerala is believed to have created by Parasurama one of the incarnation of Vishnu as recoded in the old Puranas. Parasurama having destroyed the Kshatriya raceⁱⁱ twenty-one times thought of redeeming his sin by granting of a land to the twice born Brahmins. Subsequently, he prayed to Varuna, the God of Oceans to create some land for this purpose. The Sea God commanded the Arabian Sea which then stretched far unto to the Ghats to recede. Having obeyed, the sea receded as far away as its modern boundary leaving dry the strip of country now known as

Kerala and this he granted to the Brahmins. Ever since, Kerala has been a Brahmin country dominated by a Brahmin aristocracyⁱⁱⁱ.

Parasurama, the incarnation of Vishnu for doing penance granted the land to the Brahmins and not to anybody else clearly shows the kind of power structure existing at that time wherein the infallibility of the Brahmins was apparent. It is also to be noted that by stating that he granted the land to the twice born caste, it legitimized the Brahmins to have absolute claim over Kerala in the centuries followed as it was created for them by Parasurama.

The battle of Ramayana and the origin of English race

As is known the war of Ramayana was fought among the armies of monkeys. However at the conclusion of the war the remnants of the victorious army grouped and entered in a large ship to which a tremendously powerful push was given. The ship which of course was destined for India, owing to the adverse circumstances on the way it did not reach India, instead arrived at an unknown country far away which was subsequently known by the name of blathi, a corrupt form of *belal ethi* which means reached by force. This blathi is now identified as England. The monkey ship reached this land; and the crew disembarked and peopled it^{iv}.

By bringing this connection of the origin of England to the Ramayana battle, the myth explains that the myths of this period not just confined to India but has connections with the world across the oceans, perhaps indicating the knowledge spread even in those days about the unknown world.

The legendary Mahabali and Onam Festival

Onam as the important festival in Kerala is in commemoration of the reign of Mahabali. The period of his rule is considered as the ideal period in the tradition of Kerala. His reign is believed to have been one uninterrupted period of peace; plenty and prosperity. And other crimes of any kind such as cruelty and oppression were altogether unknown. Theft, robbery, murder were unheard of. Honesty of purpose and probity of character were the dominant traits of everybody's action. The sanctity of contracts was fully realized^v.

Having heard of the popularity of this Asura king Mahabali whom and whose prosperous reign the devas entertained a deepest-hatred and jealousy. With this object the devas approached and implored Vishnu to adopt means to debilitate the increasing prosperity of the king. Vishnu readily complied with the request and appeared as Vamana, the fifth incarnation of Vishnu, unto the king in all the glory and freshness of his youth. This king was so madly besotted with this youth that he disposed to welcome him at any cost. He asked the youth what he wanted to which he replied, only three feet of earth. The demand was at once conceded, however, the boy immediately assumed a gigantic figure, and with his huge feet began to measure the earth. By this way the whole of the land measured in less than three feet, and for the rest of the preferred earth Vamana trode upon Mahabali's head and pushed him down to the infernal world. This way Mahabali's reign was brought to an end by Vamana, But the popular outcry consequent upon Mahabali's disposition was so great that the ex-ruler was eventually allowed to return to the earth once a year. And his return is considered to be the festival of Onam.

The myths on Kerala being a region of honesty

A Chetty from the East Coast was engaging in trade with Mecca in Arabia for many years. Once his ship overloaded with rich cargo was about to be wrecked near Calicut^{vi}. He got the ship

anchored in this port, and paid his respect to the king. With the permission of the Zamorin, the king of Calicut, he stored his gold and riches in a granite cellar prepared for him there. When he returned after sometime, he found that his treasure was intact. As a sign of gratitude he offered half of it to the Zamorin, however, the king refused it. The Chetti having convinced that he was the most truthful among kings he contacted had decided to settle down there. The ruler himself helped him to organize a street for the Chetties (Chettitheruvu). His name was Anbarasen Chetti, and his granite cellar "Anbarasen Kettu" for a long time^{vii}.

A Rich merchant from Masqat in Arabia was sent by his father across the Arabian Sea to settle down and start maritime trade. Then he went to several chieftains and entrusted a huge jar to each of them for safe keeping for a year until he returned. They were told that the jar contained pickle, but indeed it was filled with gold under the pickles. But on seeing the staff all of them were tempted except the king Zamorin of Calicut. Therefore this Arab merchant being convinced of this decided that Calicut was the city of truth and settled down there^{viii}.

The legendary Crocodile of Oath and the test of honesty

In this same land of Cochin, there was an alligator or crocodile in the river which the people called the crocodile of the oath. , when they wanted to asseverate the truth of any plea, they would appeal to the crocodile. People used to go to the river bank and there he who was to swear placed himself on the crocodile and said these words: if I swear falsely, you must throw me into the middle of the river; and if I swear the truth , you must bring me back again and deposit me in this same place;

It happened once that the son of a rich man after his father's death appropriated the whole estate by refusing to share with his brother. Hence they appealed to the Oath of the Crocodile. This youth pledged to make an oath took a staff and put into it half of the property he had appropriated after having converted it all into precious stones. They in fact were the property of his brother. With this staff in his hand, he came to the riverside and called the crocodile. He then proposed to his brother to take the oath in this form, "I owe you nothing; what was mine I took and what was yours I made over to you, I speak the truth". He further suggested him to hold on the staff until he comes back. He placed the staff in his brother's hand. When he had done speaking these words, he mounted on the crocodile that carried him round in the river without harming him and brought him back to the same place in safety. The Magistrate and those present shouted out at the great abuse done to the man who had the staff in his hand. He further enraged at the injustice done to him by the crocodile and struck the staff angrily on the ground thereby breaking it by the blow. The precious stones in it fell out, and everyone present perceived the deceit and trick of the first brother, the correct conduct of the crocodile, and the plaintiff's innocence. All that was in the staff was made over the claimant, and thus he obtained his inheritance^{ix}.

Kerala the land of legendary magicians

This legend is about a great woman magician or sorcerer called Lunna^x belonged to the city of Cochin. She made her living by the sale of devil dolls in the shape of rats, rings, jewels, buttons, flowers etc. within them were enclosed the demons, which would upon her orders. There was a young man who aspired to obtain illicit possession of an honorable woman. Not having money enough to buy one of these troubling demon dolls, he had approached Lunna to acquire something from her. She directed him to bring a hair of the woman that he coveted from her head. The youth took steps through a servant girl of the woman, who made a fool of him by giving him the hair out

of a sieve^{xi}. Consequently, when he was ordered to be at his house waiting for the women whose hair he believed to have acquired, he saw a swain appearing in his room and began to mount on him and worry him. The young man further approached Lunna so that he could get rid of the trouble of the swain, she did what was required to save him and he was released. He then realized the trick played by the servant of the Negro women^{xii}.

There was a Portuguese youth who lived on friendly terms with Lunna, the magician. He pressed to provide him the news of his wife living in Lisbon. Surprisingly she told him that his wife is already engaged to be married. Subsequently, he had recourse to suggest her means to keep her away from that. Then Lunna bound up his eyes and put a staff into his hands with its end on the ground, ordered him to turn his body three times and after that let go off the stick and finally to open his eyes. Doing as he had been told by Lunna, he found himself in his house at Lisbon, and by his arrival he stopped the marriage, confessing himself to the holly office he was absolved^{xiii}.

There was a married woman lived in Cochin while her husband was in Portugal. Her desire to meet her husband took her to seek the service of Lunna. Then she sent her to Portugal to visit her husband on the condition that she should do what is necessary to bring him back a second time to India and taught her what to do in Portugal to succeed in her efforts. In one night the woman reached Portugal and visited her husband. Without being recognized by husband, she could covet a ring from his finger and returned on the same night to Cochin. After the lapse of few months the husband arrived at the same port, and having disembarked went to his house. His wife came out to greet him, made over his ring to him, and declared that she was pregnant. Then she told him the facts detailing the particulars of their meeting at Lisbon. The husband having ascertained it was truth said nothing^{xiv}.

The three varieties of narratives given above are belonged are either to the origin of Kerala or explaining Kerala as land of honesty where everything is run based on mutual trust, or Kerala as land of magic. The first kind of narrative as stated above legitimizes the vertical power structure and the Brahmin's right over the region of Kerala. Here the myth plays the role of an element of strengthening one's belief that the land of Kerala is created for Brahmins alone. The second set of narrative elucidates the celebrated nature Kerala as land of honest people. With regard to the traders who settled, or the crocodile of oath, it clearly presses one to believe that this land where the Arabs or the chetties settled is merely based on the experience they had while engaging with the kings or the rulers of this area. And the stories at Cochin about the Crocodile, it established the value attributed to honesty and truth. There are similar kinds of stories to explain though all of them are not detailed here; the above stories show how truth and trustworthiness was held in high esteem. The stories on the Lunna the magician gives Kerala as land of magicians where supernatural powers were employed to meet the necessities of life or to caste out the problems effectively in day to day life. It is some time hard not to believe few stories as some of them are said to have happened just few years before the stories were narrated.

ⁱ Peter Hees, Myth, History and Theory, p.3, Vol,33, No1, (February.,1994),pp.1-19

ⁱⁱ Francis Buchanan, Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Kerala, p, 348, Vol-II, Cadell and Davies, Leidenhall street, 1807

ⁱⁱⁱ TK Goplana Panikar, Kerala and its folk, Madras, Natesan and Co. printers, 1900, p.,1

^{iv} TKGopalan Panikkar, op.,cit,p,69-70

^v TKGopalan Panikkar, op.,cit,p 90-91

^{vii} MGS Narayanan, Calicut; The City of Truth Revisited, Calicut, Calicut University Press, 2006 ,p, 65

^{viii} MGS Narayanan, op.,cit, p, 66

^{ix} William Irvine (Trans.) *Stori do Mogor* of Niccolao Manucci , Delhi, Low Price Publications, 2010, p, 212-213

^x Lunna the magician lived in Cochin is said to have died only forty years before Niccolao Manucci the seventeenth century Italian traveller recorded these events in his travelogue titled *Storia do Mogor*.

^{xii} William Irvine, op.,cit p.,,210-211

^{xiii} , William Irvine, op.,cit p 211-212

^{xiv} William Irvine, op.,cit p,211-212