

KANTHALLUR SALAI – A STUDY

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Various historical records available today proclaim the existence of many Universities in ancient *Bharatavarsha*. The chief among them was Nalanda University which has been mentioned by Chinese traveler *Yuvan Chuang* in his writings. Taxila was also very famous. These Universities attracted students from Malaysia, Central Asia, Mongolia and so on. In South India, Coimbatore was educationally forward, which has in fact produced the scholar *Dharmapalabodhisatvan*.

Certain inscriptions found from *Thekkarkkadu*, *Chenkalpettah*¹ and so on explain about certain South Indian institutions like *Kanthallursalai*, *ParthivasekharapuramSalai*, *Sri Vallabhaperunjalai*, *Tirunelli*, *Kottarakkara*, *Muzhikkulam Salai* and so on. From these inscriptions we can understand that Kanthallur Salai was an important temple institution which imparted Vedic education & military training to many. It is an institution of great historical importance.² These institutions seem to reflect the impact of the Dravidian, Aryan, Buddhist and the Jain tradition.

The Ay rulers of South India in the ninth and tenth centuries also made their contributions in the field of temple education.³ Temples were built on a large scale in different parts of Kerala during this period. It served as centers of all cultural activities. A number of Vedic schools and colleges also sprung

¹ V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *Puravrittadipika (mal)*, V.V.Press Branch, Tvm, 1940, p. 38.

² K. Sivasankaran Nair, *Venadinte Parinamam (mal)*, Kerala Government, 1993, p.39.

³ S.R.Balasubramanian, *Middle Chola Temples*, Oriental Press, Faridabad, 1975, p. 178.

up in different parts of Kerala by the result of temples.⁴ Temples were of three types *Grahakhathram*, *Dasakharsam* and *Gramakhathram*. There were provisions in the Gramakhathrams to give instruction about the Vedas, science, grammar, priesthood etc. Further there were arrangements in the temples for *Chakiyarkooth*, *Koodiyattom* and other entertainments in connection with important festivals.

According to Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, Aryan culture became more popular in Kerala than in Tamil Nadu. It has been found that during the medieval period Sanskrit and professional education flourished in Kerala. Apart from the temple, the *ghatikas*, *salais*, *mathas* and *agraharams* also served as centers of formal education. These were kept under the care of the temple locality.⁵ Vedic literature and secular subjects were taught here by eminent scholars. The spacious mandapas of the temple provided space for the classrooms. Ghatikas were the outstanding residential college of higher learning. The pupils of the ghatikas were said to have been given training in Vedas as well as in military discipline. These teachers were paid about 400 kalam of paddy per year.⁶

The educational institutions attached to the temples were known as Salai. They were the integral part of the temple complexes. For their maintenance and upkeep they depended on the generous help of the rich. Most of the Salais were established by the rulers of Kerala. In ancient Kerala there were many Salais. The Salai of Kanthallur was the most famous of all. There were specific rules and regulations for running the Salais. The rules and regulations of the Salais of Kanthallur were a model for others.

The Kanthallur Salai, and the Parthivasekharapuram Salais owed their origin and growth to the patronage of the Ay kings while those of *Thiruvalla* and *Muzhikulam* assumed considerable importance

⁴ A. Sreedhara Menon, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, D.C. Books, Madras, 1978, pp. 186-187.

⁵ K.V. Raman, *Some Aspects of Pandyan History in the Light of Recent Discoveries*, University of Madras, Madras, 1972, p. 65.

⁶ R. Nagasamy, *Studies in Ancient Tamil Law and Society*, Tamilnadu State Dept. of Archaeology, Madras, 1978, p. 85.

under the Kulasekharas.⁷ Of the above, Kanthallur Salai figures prominently in many of the famous inscriptions 'of the age including the Chola inscriptions. This salai seems to have had the pride of place among the educational institutions of the period. Referring to Kanthallur salai, S. Desiavainayagam Pillai says, "Kanthallur Salai was an ancient institution, the Nalanda of the south and it was looked upon as a model by the people of that time".⁸

Historical Background

It is said that Kanthallur Salai provided both Vedic & Military education.⁹ Those Brahmin students who got trained here in martial arts were known as *Chatiranmar*, *Chattanmar* etc. Kanthallur Salai was a Vaishnavite institution & it was mainly known as *Nalanda of the South*. It functioned mainly on royal patronage.

Complete details about the functioning of Kanthallur Salai is not available & hence features of Parthivapuram Salai are connected with it. The Salai & Vishnu temple at Parthivapuram was established according to an old ritual. A female elephant is decorated with ornaments & it is made to run around an area. This area is later selected for the establishment.¹⁰ So Kanthallur might have followed the same ritual. However, much evidence is not available. But most scholars agree that the Salai must have been established even before *Kolla Year*. The destruction of this institution is a large loss to Kerala history.

⁷ A. SreedharaMenon , *op.cit.*,p. 187.

⁸ A. Sreedhara Menon, *Social and Cultural History of Kerala*, Orient Book Distributors, New Delhi, 1979, p.283.

⁹ Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, *Charitrathinte Adiverukal* (mal), Kerala Sahitya Academy, Thrissur, 2012, pp.130-131.

¹⁰ V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp.41-42.

It is confirmed that Ay ruler Karunandakkan (857A.D.-885A.D.) established a university in Parthivapurasekharam in 864A.D. & for this he gave property and wealth. This information is given in his *Hajoor inscription*.

“KanthallurMariyaathaiyalThonnuttaivar

ChattakkurchalayamCheythanShriKarunandakkan”¹¹

Ay country during its zenith covered areas from Karamana to Nagercoil & Vizhinjam was its capital.

Geographical Distribution

There has been a great deal of controversy in regard to the identification of the place Kanthallur Salai & the interpretation of the words KalamAruthuAruli. According to one school of thought Kanthallur Salai is a place near Vizhinjam.¹² The fact that Vizhinjam & Kanthallur are often coupled together in the inscriptions of the Cholas & that there is a place called Kanthallur near Vizhinjam even today lends some support to this view. The consensus of opinion among scholars is however, that Salai is identical with Trivandrum, a suburb of which is even today known as Valiyachalai.¹³ The Salai covered the geographical areas of what is today known as Valiasala, Chinnasala, Aaryasala, Pantakasala or Chala, Chempupanippura etc. Due to its exceptionally expansive dimensions it came to be known as ‘Valiya’ or ‘big’, ‘Sala’ or ‘university’.¹⁴ In 14th century A.D. literary work “AnanthapuraVarnanam”

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹² A Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, D C Books, Kottayam, 2015, p.115.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *Rudrakshamala (mal)*, Poorna Publications, Kozhikode, 2013, p.97.

these localities have been referred to as Kanthallur Salai. “Kuvalayamala”, a text of 8th century A.D., authored by Udyotana Suri, a Jain scholar said that there was a huge university near Makarakaara (Karamana) river. Since the river is mentioned it has to be understood that at that time Sala was located in the city.¹⁵ Archaeological researcher Late Shri.T.A.Gopinatha Rao M.A. has explained in his book *Travancore Archaeological Series*, that the *Valiyasala Mahadevar Temple* located at Thiruvananthapuram has an inscription explaining the location of Salai.¹⁶

In addition to this location details ie., the Kanthallur Salai which is considered to have existed in Trivandrum there are indications about certain other Salais with the same name in other places.

a) Chendamangalam Kanthallur salai :-

The *oottupura* in *paliyamkunnu* of Chendamangalam (Mayura rajya as mayura’s synonym is Kanthapakshi the rajya is also known as Kanthallur) was also known as Kanthallur Salai.¹⁷

b) Kaveripoompattanam

Kaveripoompattanam was established by *Kakanthakan* son of Chola king Kanthan. So Kaveripoompattanam came to be known as Kanthallur as Kakanthakan’s father’s name was *Kanthan*.¹⁸

c) Kanthallur near Neyyattinkara

Certain records give details about the location of this Salai as a place near Neyyattinkara. A temple with the same name is located somewhere near the region. But historians and scholars reject this fact.

¹⁵ *Ibid*,pp.97-98.

¹⁶ T.A.Gopinatha Rao M.A, *Travancore Archaeological Series*, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum 1920, p.4.

¹⁷ Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp.130-131.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.,p.133.

d) Vizhinjam

Certain records certify that the University was located near a port. The discovery of a cave temple near Vizhinjam add evidence to the detail. Moreover Vizhinjam was the capital of Ay dynasty. But recent analysis claim that Vizhinjam was once the location of the Salai but later it was shifted to Valiyasala (a region within the city) due to Chola invasion.

e) Valiyasala

Almost all the historical records details record the location of Kanthallur Salai as Valiyasala, a region within Trivandrum city. There is an old Shiva temple adding evidence to the fact. Certain books verify that the temple and university might have been transferred to Valiyasala from Vizhinjam during 9th century A.D. or before, due to Chola attacks.

f) Valiyasala Mahadevar Temple

This temple is located within Thiruvananthapuram city. In Ananthapura Varnanam it is mentioned as a Trimurti (trinity) temple of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. Within the temple, on the back wall of the main Siva consecration, Rajendra Chola's inscription in old Vattezhuthu finds a place. A fragmented inscription again of Rajendra Chola I is said to be in the first enclosure. There is also a statue on a pillar which is considered to be of Sree Sangramadheera Ravi Varma Kulasekhara's . A fragmentary inscription on stone gives details about Birudas (titles) Of this mighty king. Details about this temple can be found in 'Mathilakam Churunas', Travancore Archeological Series, Travancore State Manuals etc. The God in the temple of Valiya Salai ie; Shiva of Kanthallur Salai is also known as Kanthallur Jwala Mahadevar. Jwala means flame in Sanskrit.¹⁹ The Salai might have been there even before the erection of the temple. It is said that there are certain inscriptions on the temple walls but they have been painted

¹⁹ S.Desavinayakam Pillai, *A Short Note on Kanthallur Salai*, London Mission Press, Nagercoil, 1936, p.9.

over with white paint. This temple was later renovated by Venad king Sangramadheera Ravi varma.

Mathilakam records give details about the renovation conducted in the middle sanctum and Mandapam of the temple and a ritual known as Kalasham . Since there were continuous renovations it has to be believed that it was an important temple. The date of erection of the main deity of the sala might have been around 9th century A.D. during the shifting of idol and Sala from Vizhinjam to the city.²⁰ Even the presence of such a large mandapa inside the Valiyasala temple implies the notion that classes of Kanthallur Salai might have been conducted there.

It is evident that Kanthallur was located in the sea coast of Chera country from the paassage occurring in one of the lithic records of Rajakesari Varman or Rajadhirajan. Dr. Hultzsch vaguely surmises that Kanthallur is a place in the Malainadu. While Mr.K.V. Subramania Aiyer locates it in the Taluk of Neyyattinkara. In support of his statement it maybe added that the reference to the Travancore Davaswom handbook shows that a temple is situated in the Kulathur Pakuti of the above taluk. But Mr. Gopinatha Rao identifies it with Valiyachalai in Trivandrum.²¹ He has ably supported his view with extracts from temple chronicles and inscriptions both published and unpublished. Some of the documents included in the Fifth volume of The Travancore Revenue Manual clearly refer to a Kanthallur Chalai Mahadevar Temple as existing within the town limits of Trivandrum. But on enquiry it is found that the name of the village in the Neyyattinkara Taluk is Kulathur . But Desikavinayakam Pillai also opines that the Temple at Neyyattinkara might have been a private temple erected by some devotee.²²

²⁰ Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *op.cit.*, pp.98-99.

²¹ S. Desikavinayakam Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp.v-vi.

²² S. Desikavinayakam Pillai, *op.cit.*, p.2.

In Vizhinjam, about eight miles south of Trivandrum, there are two compounds called ValiyaCholaSalaPurayidam and CheriyaCholaSalaPurayidam ie; the compounds in which the big dinner hall and the small dinner hall found by the Chola king were situated.²³

Further Developments

The Chattanmar who got trained in the salai had to maintain celibacy & they were the ones who were supposed to protect the income & assets of both the Salai & the associated temples. These craftsmen were like subsidiary paramilitary forces. There were about 95 or 96 students there all their expenses were met by the University. Of the students 45 are engaged in *BhavisiyaCharana*, 36 in *TitiriyaCharana* & 14 in *Takvakaraharana* according to the above inscription.²⁴ Knowledge in Grammar, *Mimamsa*, *Purohityam* & *Trirajyavyavacharam* are the criteria for the entrance. These students who have knowledge in these subjects are tested by a group of 5 senior students & then given entry.

It is said that there were about 61 systems of knowledge under one roof in Kanthallur Salai and as such was a vast university. The subjects discussed in the Mandalis were Vyakarana, Buddha Darsans,, Samkhya Darsans, Vaisesika darsans, Mimamsa Darsans and Lokayata Darsans.²⁵ The Vyakanamandali on Vyakarana discussed Lopa, Agama, Adisa, Visarga and so on. Materialistic philosophies ike Lokayata or Charvaka philosophy were also taught here. Discipline was well maintained. Punishment and fines were given for offenders.

Declining Period

²³ S.Desikavinayakam Pillai, *op.cit.*,p.9.

²⁴ V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *op.cit.*, pp.41-42.

²⁵ Achuth Sankar S. Nair, "Lest We Forget", *The Hindu*, 14th February, 2014.

Raja Raja having assumed himself to be sovereign of the Earth evidently desired to have all the charities in his name for which he conquered the various countries and reinstated the charities conducted by others in those countries and called them after his own name. He is represented to have discontinued the Salai attached to the temple of Karikkandeswaram and another at Talaikkulam.²⁶ Pandya & Chola kings continued to attack the salai. Once a Chola ruler visited Java island. Cholas had a strong navy. The Java king requested the Chola king that he should help him in acquiring a seat for his son in Kanthallur Salai. Soon Chola king became jealous of the fame of Kanthallur Salai and thus he attacked Vizhinjam and the Salai. This is considered to be the main reason for its decline. Anyhow the Salai discontinued to exist after a period of time. This might have been due to various other reasons such as;

1) Many of the pupils of the Salais lost their interest in intellectual pursuits and took to military training.

2) They also began to consort with the Devadasis or dancing girls.²⁷

It is considered that the final destruction of Kanthallur Salai occurred in 12th century A.D. But the attacks against the institution had started even before 8th century A.D. Some scholars also hold the view that ValiyaSala Mahadeva Temple got Kanthallur added to its name due to migration. With the shadow of Chola invasion and consequent fall of places near Vizhinjam, it is possible that the Brahmins migrated to Thiruvananthapuram from Kanthallur near Vizhinjam with the idol and installed it in a temple in the city.²⁸ This is put around 9th century A.D. or earlier. So at this time the university might have also shifted its position.²⁹ The words Kalam Aruthu Aruli are interpreted by some scholars to mean that the king destroyed the ships at the roadstead of Kanthallur. According to another view the king

²⁶ Mr.T.A.Gopinatha Rao, *op.cit.*, p.4.

²⁷ P.N.Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in Kerala History*, NBS Books, Trivandrum, 1970, p.269.

²⁸ Interview with Mr.Vettakulam Sivanandan (Valiyasala resident), 28th December, 2017.

²⁹ Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, *op.cit.*, p.98.

discontinued the Kalam (plate) in Kanthallur Salai. Most probably, the words refer to the destruction of the military institutions at Kanthallur Salai where the Brahmin youth of the land were given training in the use of arms.³⁰

Notes and References

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Field study:

- 1) West Fort (Thiruvananthapuram) - conducted on 27th December, 2017.
- 2) Kanthallur Mahadevar Temple (Thiruvananthapuram)- conducted on 28th December, 2017.
- 3) Valiyasala Agraharam (Thiruvananthapuram) - conducted on 28th & 29th December, 2017.

Interviews:

- 1) Interview with Mr.Karunakaran (Directorate of Archeology) on 27th of December, 2017.
- 2) Interview with Mr. Vettakulam Sivanandan (resident of Valiyasala) on 28th of December, 2017.
- 3) Interview with the Dewaswom Board employee of Valiyasala Kanthallur Mahadeva Temple on 28th of December, 2017.

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- 1) Mr. Rao T.A.Gopinatha M.A, *Travancore Archeological Series*, Government of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1920.
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- 2) Gopalakrishnan P.A., *Keralathinte Samskarika Charitram* (mal), Indira Enterprises, Aryanad, Trivandrum, 1987.

³⁰ A.Sreedhara Menon , *op.cit.*, p.115

- 3) *Kerala State Gazette*, Volume 2, Part 1, Kerala Books and Publications Society, Trivandrum, 1986.
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- 12) Rehman S.A., *The Beautiful India*, Kerala, Oriental Press, New Delhi, 2005.
- 13) Vidvan Pillai V.R. Parameswaran, *Puravrittadipika* (mal), S.T. Reddiar & Sons, V.V. Press Branch, Trivandrum, 1940.

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- 1) *Kanthallur Vartha Patrika*, Valiyasala Kanthallur Nagar Residence Association, Valiyasala, Thiruvananthapuram.

Newspaper:

- 1) *The Hindu*, 14th February, 2014.

Web sites:

- 1) <http://www.thehindu.com/news/thiruvananthapuram>.
- 2) www.entecity.com.

Appendix - 1

Statue of Sangramadheera Ravi Varma Kulasekhara



Appendix – 2

The image of the mandapa inside the Valiyasala Temple which is considered to have been the place where classes were taken during the time of Kanthallur Salai.



Appendix – 3

Rock-cut temple in Vizhinjam associated with Kanthallur Salai



Appendix - 4

Achuth Sankar S Nair's article "Lest We Forget" on Kanthallur Salai published in *The Hindu* on 14th February, 2014.



SAVE OUR SCHOOLS: As the juggernaut of time grinds forward, many institutions in society vanish into thin air and educational institutions are no exception. From the more-than-1,000-year-old Kanthalloor Shala to many of the Government schools in the city, which are on the verge of extinction, the list of vanished and vanishing schools is really long. This four-part series do a thousand-year scan of the city's educational history. The first part explores the legendary Kanthalloor Shala, known as the Nalanda of the south.