

## CHEMBAKASSERY KINGS AND CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE OF MEDIEVAL KERALA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Rulers of medieval Kerala were benevolent towards the Christians in their principalities. Christian churches in Kerala were often constructed under the patronage of Hindu rulers and with the support of the local Hindu community. The royal patronage of the Chembakaserry Rajas in church building is particularly noteworthy. Despite being Namboodiri Brahmins, the Chembakaserry Rajas were known for their religious tolerance and broad-mindedness. They initiated the construction of prominent churches at Kudamaloor, Purakkad, and Champakulam, fostering the growth of Christian settlements in these regions. This article delves into the historical context of the Chembakaserry Kingdom's emergence and its rulers' patronage of the Christian faith, highlighting their contributions to the Kudamaloor Church as an act of penitence, the Purakkad Church in honor of military victory, and the Champakulam Church, which became a key religious site. The study underscores how the Rajas' support for Christians not only facilitated the spread of Christianity but also contributed to the economic prosperity of the kingdom through trade and loyal service.

### INTRODUCTION

Chembakaserry rulers, who were Namboodiri Brahmins and ruled from the twelfth century to the eighteenth century in central part of Kerala were religiously broad-minded. It was with their initiative, churches at Kudamllor, Purakkad, and Chambakulam were built. The church at Kudamaloor was built by the first ruler as penitence for having killed his fellow Brahmins. The church at Purakkad was a mark of respect for the victory in the war against the Vadakkenkoor kingdom. The Chambakkulam Church was established in 427 AD. The construction and renovation of the second church as well as the construction of the present church in the eighteenth century were undertaken by the Chembakaserry Rajas. The Rajas invited Christian families from other *nadus* and made them settle near these churches. The Christians in the area were great traders who brought prosperity to the King. The history of the Chembakaserry kingdom is associated with the development of the Christian community in the Kingdom.

### THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHEMBAKASSERY KINGDOM

The Chembakaserry Kingdom was founded in the 12th century by a Namboothiri brahmin, which had its headquarters in Kudamaloor near Ettumnoor, Kottayam, Kerala. The tradition says that the kingdom originated from the '*Pulikal Chembakaserry family*' situated in the western part of Kumaranelloor Temple, near Ettumanoor, Kottayam. This family had only two inhabitants a young boy and his widowed mother. They were living in extreme poverty. The young boy was affectionately called Unni. He had his Upanayana at the age of 7 and he started his education. Being an intelligent boy, he excelled in his studies which caused a conflict between him and some of the other rich Namboodiri brahmin boys. They tried to put him down for being poor whenever they get an opportunity. One day a group of Nair soldiers of Zamorin's army numbering around five hundred reached Kumaranalloor temple to pray to Devi. The wars and the long march from Northern Kerala in the summer months had exhausted the soldiers. They enquired about food and sustenance in the temple but unfortunately, the food was not available in the temple. At this time Namboodiries in the temple notices boy of Pulikal Chambakaserry family coming out of the temple. They told the soldiers that this boy was the scion of a wealthy family and was known for his charity and kindness and he would provide them with all that they needed.

The Nair soldiers not knowing the truth went up to the boy and requested food. He took the soldiers to his home and asked the mother what they should do. Mother was a kind-hearted lady and decided to give his necklace to soldiers and asked them to sell it and find some food. Soldiers understood the condition of the family and since there was no other way, they did what the boy asked. They were awed by the charity and honor of the young Brahmin boy. These soldiers decided to take revenge on the Namboodiries who had sent them to him. They stayed with the family of the boy and decided to find a way to bring them out of poverty. In medieval Kerala mercenary soldiers offered their swords to whomsoever would pay them abundantly, and such men used to be entertained by the various Rajas.

Later the boy and the soldiers went to *Naduvazhi*, the ruler, who was Thekkumkur Raja, and addressed the petty condition of the Pulikal Chambakaserry family. The ruler realized the situation and asked him to take as much land of his kingdom as he could in one day. These soldiers within one day reclaimed a large area near to Kumaranalloor temple of the Thekkumkur kingdom. This created a small Nadu or kingdom, within the Tekkumkur kingdom. Thekkumkur Raja could not resist because he had been permitted to do so and also, he didn't want to have a conflict with the soldiers of the Chembakaserry family. That was the beginning of the Chembakaserry Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Since they reclaimed the land by using the sword (*Koduval* in Malayalam), the land he conquered came to be called Koduvaloor which in course of time began to be called Kudamaloor. The first ruler of this kingdom was Mahipal Rajendran who was the so-called Unni or boy of the PulikalChambakaserry family. Using his strong Nair militia all the rebel wealthy landlords and

Nambudiries were sternly dealt with. They were put to death and their properties were confiscated by the Raja. Their houses were razed to the ground. Thus, he established a strong administration under the aegis of the ruling sovereign. Chambakaserry Rajas were known in the history as 'Devanarayan<sup>2</sup>'. They conquered the neighboring principalities intending to enlarge the boundaries of the kingdom. They took over Purakkadu an important port city near Ambalapuzha in the sixteenth century. They constructed a temple at Ambalapuzha and dedicated the kingdom to the chief deity Lord Krishna. They made Ambalapuzha their headquarters. Thus, this kingdom came to be known as the Kingdom of Ambalapuzha and also the Kingdom of Purakkadu. When Nueihaff, the Dutch ambassador visited Purakkadu in the seventeenth century he recorded that the north of this Kingdom is Cochin, south Kayamkulam, to the northeastern side it is Vadakkumkur and Thekkumkur kingdom and western part of the kingdom is the Arabian Sea.<sup>3</sup> Purakkadu was the important port city of the kingdom where they had traded with foreign countries especially with the Dutch East India Company in the early modern period. The kingdom had a fine fleet that was under the command of the *Purakkad Arayan* and it participated in several military operations of the period. Marthanda Varma in 1746 annexed the Chembakassery kingdom to Travancore on the pretext that its ruler had helped the Kayamkulam Raja against Travancore.

### **CHEMBAKASERRY RAJAS AND CHRISTIANS**

Chembakassery rulers were tolerant of Christians. Christians were agriculturists and traders and so the rulers of the Chembakaserry dynasty took a keen interest in inviting them and giving them land and privileges in his kingdom. The Christian community was loyal to the king and they contributed greatly to the development of the economy of the state. Syrian Christian families like *Kallukulam*, *Madathiparambil*, *Muttathupadam*, and *Payanadan* flourished under the auspices of Chembkasseri Raja. Christians were allowed to construct a church and to have belfries in the church building. The rulers prohibited building temples, synagogues, or mosques near the church<sup>4</sup>. They welcomed missionaries and gave grants to Jesuit missionaries. Though they were devoted Hindus they were never against the conversion of their subjects to Christianity. They permitted those who wanted to become Christians. A considerable number of Christian soldiers were recruited in the army of Chembakaserry Raja who fought for Raja against his enemies. He trusted the Christians that he appointed them as the bodyguards of royal women. The relationship of the Christian community towards the rulers was loyal and cordial.

### **CONSTRUCTION OF KUDAMALLOOR CHURCH**

Chembakaserry Rajas took initiative in building churches in their kingdom. Their patronage could be seen in the construction and renovations of churches at Kudamloor, Purakad, and Chambakula. Among these churches, the dynasty had a devotional attachment to the Kudamloor church which was the early center of the Chembakaserry Kingdom. The first ruler Mahipal Rajendran took initiative in building a Christian church at Kudamloor in the 12th century. At that time there were no Christian families in and around Kudamloor as it belonged to Kumaranalloor Sangetham which was the stronghold of Brahmins. The story goes that King was haunted by the spirits of those Brahmins whom he has killed and left the bodies in the pond called '*Mannumkulam*'. He conducted poojas but in vain. At last, he consulted *Jyothishis* or astrologers and asked their advice. They advised him to build a Christian Church in the name of Mother Mary near *Mannumkulam* and he will be healed. Thus, raja ordered the building of Kudamloor Church and donated land near *Mannumkulam* for the church building. But there was no Christian family to take charge of church construction and also for conducting church rituals. So, the raja instructed *Aymanam Kaimal*, who was his chief military commander to find a Christian family and to bring it to Kudamloor. He went to Meenachil Kartha, Samantha of Thekkumkur Raja for help because there were many Christian families in his Kingdom. He promised to help and asked one of his Christian soldiers Aviran Chacko to go to Kudamloor and help Chembakaserry Raja. Aviran Chacko accepted the invitation and went to Kudamloor along with his family and settled at *Aymanam* with the house name Parayil.

Aviran Chacko took responsibility of church construction. Raja provided materials and local workers for the construction. As the church was constructed, he brought a Priest and some Christian families from Meenachil and they settled near the church. When services were started in the church Raja was healed from demonic attacks. Thus, this church was built by the Chembakaserry ruler even before the Christian settlement in the area. This church is dedicated to the mother of Christ whom the locals of Kudamloor devotionally called '*Mukthiyamma*', redeemer of all sorrows. Christian families settled here during the early times are *Mukkungal*, *Chakkungal*, *Karimpalil*, *Kuthukallan*, *Thekkedam*, *Vadakedam*, *Vanchipura*, etc. Later Christian families began to migrate from other Christian centers such as Kuravilangadu, Aruvithura, Angamaly, etc. For the day-to-day, expenses of the church Raja donated acres of land to the church which is still in possession of the church.

When the Christian families increased in number the church built by Raja was not sufficient to accommodate the whole community. So there arose a need for the construction of a new church in the sixteenth century. Chembakaserry Raja granted permission to build a new church near the old church. The parishioners raised funds and by their dedication, they build a new church in the name of Assumption of Our Lady. In church records, it is dated that the

church was built in the year 1505 August 15th.<sup>5</sup> But this date 1505 cannot be authentic because, in Kerala, stones and mortar began to be used in 1506 by the Portuguese. Portuguese used this new method of construction using stone and mortar in the building of Santa Cruz Church at Fort Kochi in Cochin. Later most of the churches in Kerala of the 16th century modeled this church in construction.

Chembakassery Raja who was a friend of Cochin Raja requested Portuguese governor Francis De Almeda to send workers from Cochin to build a church in Kudamaloor in the Portuguese style. Almeda granted the permission and workers were sent from Cochin. The help of Francis Almeda in church construction is recorded in Kudamaloor church records.<sup>6</sup> The new church was built without demolishing the old church. It was highly ornamented and the rafters are connected without a girder.<sup>7</sup> The pulpit inside the church was built on a wooden elephant and the main beam is decorated with an elephant's head. An old Church bell with inscriptions has been kept in the church which is said to be donated by the ruler. It is also believed that a Chalice in the church, which is not used for Church services, is the donation of one of the Chembakaserry rulers to Mother Mary. The Payasam offering in Kudamaloor church was started in 1515 when a raja of Chembakaserry kingdom was blessed with a child after praying to Mother Mary of Kudamaloor church. The old people of this Parish attest that the first church was there intact till the beginning of the twentieth century. The first church must have been demolished in the twentieth century.

### **CONSTRUCTION OF PURAKAD CHURCH**

Purakad Church in the port city of Purakkad near Ambalapuzha was also built by the initiative of the Chembakaserry ruler. This was built after they transferred their headquarters from Kudamaloor to Ampalapuzha. In church records, it is stated that this church was erected at the beginning of the fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In his book *Jornada*, Gouvea reports that the Purakkad Church was constructed by the Chembakaserry ruler as gratitude and favors he received from the Christian God during his war with the Queen of Wadakkumkur. He had many Christian soldiers in his army, so he asked a Christian priest to pray for his army. The priest blessed the Christian army and asked the king to have a flag with a cross in it for the Christian army. He won the battle with this flag. As gratitude, he founded a church at Purakkadu in the name of the Holy Cross (MarSleebea). The King himself planned to carry a big cross on his shoulders to the church site, but he fell ill and so his brother carried it and planted it there.<sup>9</sup> Later this church was handed over to the Jesuits.

### **CONSTRUCTION OF CHAMPAKULAM- KALLOORKKADU CHURCH**

Chempakaserry rulers were also the patrons of the Chambakulam-Kallorkadu Marth Mariyam Church. Champakulam and the Church rose to prominence during the time of Chembakaserry rajas when the Kaloorkadu market was a famous commercial center on the way to the port of Purakkad. The first church was founded in AD 427. There were only a few Christian families in this area. Later a new church was built by the initiative of the ruler in AD 1151 on the land reclaimed from the river. The Champakulam rock cross has an inscription that confirms that it was present even in AD 1151. As per the Poothara manuscript in ME, 320 (AD 1145) Chembakaserry ruler built the new church and invited Nasrani families with Priests to come and settle in Champakulam. With the establishment of a christian settlement near the Church, the worship and prayers at the church became regular. In 1544 this church was renovated with the interest of Chembakaserry King. The architects and artisans employed for the construction of the church were through the appointment of the Portuguese at the Cochin fort. A new Madbaha was built which was taller than Haikkala. The roof was thatched with coconut palm leaves. The front of the church was not very high when compared to the Haikkala. The entrance had a door with round shaped top section. There was a narrow veranda for each of the side walls. The veranda had doors to the outside of the building and windows with wooden square grills. Also, a vicarage house, for the priest to stay, it was built with bricks on the northern side of the church building.<sup>10</sup>

The present church at Chambakulam was constructed in the first half of the eighteenth century. The sanction for the construction was given by the Chembakaserry Raja and thus construction started in 1720 and was completed in 1730 AD. Chembakaserry Rajas donated land to the church for daily expenses. The last ruler donated some property to the church for the expense of the Moonu Noyambu<sup>11</sup>. They also exempted the church from payment of tax. A palm leaf document kept in the Department of Archaeology, Government of Kerala in Trivandrum dated ME 996 *Edavam* signed by Maha Raja of Travancore shows that when the Kingdom was taken over by Marthanda Varma, the Travancore Government honored the same tradition, but decided a tax of 23.5 *kalippanam* and donated this sum to the church every year for lighting lamps in the church.<sup>12</sup> Champakulam Kalloorkkadu church and the Christian communities in the area flourished under the rule of Chambakaserry Rajas.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Chembakaserry rulers played a pivotal role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of their kingdom, particularly in relation to the Christian community. Their broad-mindedness and inclusive governance fostered the growth and prosperity of Christian settlements, leaving an indelible mark on the region's history. Through their patronage, the construction and renovation of churches at Kudamaloor, Purakkad, and Champakulam were made

possible, not only as expressions of faith but also as strategic moves to strengthen their kingdom economically and socially. The Rajas' tolerance and support for the Christian faith, despite their deep-rooted Hindu beliefs, underscore their commitment to the welfare of their subjects, regardless of religion. Their actions laid the foundation for a thriving Christian community that contributed significantly to the kingdom's prosperity through trade and agriculture.

As custodians of religious harmony and cultural patronage, the Chembakaserry rulers ensured that their legacy would be remembered not just for their conquests or political maneuvers, but for their unique role in fostering a pluralistic society. Even after the fall of the Chembakaserry kingdom, the Christian communities they nurtured continued to thrive, bearing testimony to the lasting impact of their reign on the region's history. The churches they helped establish stand today as monuments to their vision of a kingdom where faith, culture, and community could coexist and flourish.

### **End Notes**

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<sup>1</sup>Mani Joseph Arekkatil. Charithram Urangunna Kudamaloore Palli, Mukthi Publications, Kudamaloore, 2014. p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Nellikunnathu (ed), Changanaserry Athirupatha Innale Innu Vol II, p. 261-262

<sup>3</sup> K Sivasankaran Nair, Nuiehaff kanda Keralam, Kerala books and publications society, Cochin, 1996, p.21

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> T.K Varkey, Kerala Maria Therthankal, St Joseph's Press, Mannanam, Cherthala, 2000, p.139

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.140

<sup>7</sup> Mani Joseph Arekkatil, opcit, p.33

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Barnard Thoma Alenchery, Marthoma Christiyanikal (Vol I), Mannanam, 2021, p.429

<sup>9</sup> Pius Malekandathil (ed), Jornada of Dom Alexis De Menesis, LRC publications, Kochi, p.370-371

<sup>10</sup> Joseph G Poothara in Chambakulam Kalloorkadu Marth Mariyam Basilica, NSC Network, Changanaserry 2017, p. 37

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Nellikunnath, opcit,p.261

<sup>12</sup> Antony Vallavanthara Pazhamayile Paramarthangal, , Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Leo XIII Library, Chambakulam p.127