

# Revival and Preservation: South India as a Haven of Vedic Culture

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Eventhough South India is far removed from the geographical area in which most of the Vedic hymns were composed, it has been a safe haven of the Vedic culture for centuries, preserving, reviving and enriching the tradition with institutional support, pedagogic tools, explanatory texts, as well as ritualistic and textual performances. It is not therefore surprising that eventhough the Vedic tradition is long extinct in the places of its origin, it is preserved in tact till date in many southern provinces like Kerala. The very fact that Prof Fritz Staal who was the pioneer researcher to have ventured to document the Vedic sacrificial tradition selected Pāññāl, a village of central Kerala to organise a sacrifice in its authentic tradition is an eloquent testimony to the unbroken continuity of this tradition. Many near extinct recensions of the Veda are till date studied and preserved orally in the South. The very fact that the voluminous project of composing the first ever *Bhāṣya* for Vedic *Samhitā* texts was meticulously planned and executed in the South shows the seriousness with which Vedic studies were undertaken in various royal dispensations like the great Vijayanagara empire. It is the lavish royal patronage extended to Vedic scholars by various empires of the South as well as the relentless zeal of the practitioners which kept the tradition alive. The present paper aims at the review of the systematic manner in which Vedic tradition, both oral and textual was revived, preserved and rejuvenated in the South as well as the historical circumstances which facilitated the growth of the Vedic culture in the South. Keeping in mind the constraints of time and space, I would focus on two instances of the Southern attempts in this direction, viz. the Vedic culture as preserved in Kerala and the unique hermeneutical project of Sāyaṇa belonging to the great Vijayanagara empire. These cases are selected for

close examination because of their long standing impact on the Vedic legacy of India as a whole.

The first iconic name symbolic of the expansion of the Vedic culture to the South is sage Agastya whose name appears profusely in the tenth Maṇḍala of the *Rgveda*, which by common consent constitutes the later strata of the text. Sage Agastya is venerated as the father of Tamil grammar and literature and associated in mythology with the process of the Aryanisation of the South<sup>1</sup>. There are evidences to suggest that even the early Cera kings, immortalised by court poets like Māmūlanār, Paranār, Gautamanār and Kapilanār had commissioned these Vedic scholar poets to conduct sacrifices for them<sup>2</sup>. In fact, they paid homage to Vedic deities even when worshipping the fierce Goddess Kottavai living in the high mountain. In fact, during the Sangham period, Jainism, Buddhism and Vedic Brahmanism flourished side by side in ancient Tamilakam, as is evident from works like *Cilappatikāram* and *Manimekhalai*. Kerala had a significant presence of Jainism which must have spread to inland through from Śrāvana Belgola through the Wynad region in the North, from the modern Tamil region through Palghat pass in the Central parts and, Nagercoil and Pottiyilmalai in the south. The presence of Buddhism in early times in Kerala can be inferred from the number of Buddha idols recovered from different parts of Kerala and the profuse references to the ancient monastery at Śrīmūlavāsam in historical records. This was gradually superseded by the advent of the Brahminical culture ushered in by the Kadamba invasion in the fifth and sixth centuries which led to a fresh wave of Āryan Brahmin migration to Kerala. The *Keralotpatti* accounts of the Namboodiris record that Mayūravarman of the Kadamba dynasty was their patron during the period after the legendary Paraśurāma, who is supposed to have invited them to Kerala. By 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD, a chain of thirty-two Brahmin settlements was established in Kerala. These ancient Villages are Payyannūr, Perincellūr, Ālattūr, Kārantole, Cokiram(Sukapuram), Panniyūr,

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<sup>1</sup> See M.P.Sankunni Nair, *Points of Contact between Prakrit and Malayalam* 1-5

<sup>2</sup> *Kerala through the ages*, Department of Public Relations, Govt of Kerala, p.7.

Karikād, Isānamangalam, Trīśśivaperur, Peruvanam, Cāmuṇḍa, Irīññālakkuṭa, Avittattūr, Paravūr, Airāṇikulam, Mūzhikkulam, Kulavūr, Aṭūr, Cengamanādu, Ilibhyam, Uliyannūr, Kalutanādu, Ettumānūr, Kumāranallūr, Kaṭamuri, Āranmula, Tiruvalla, Kitaññūr, Cheññannūr, Kaviyūr, Veṇmaṇi and Nīrmaññu. The Namboodiri Brahmins, who claim that they originally came from Ahicchatra brought with them *Kauṣītaka* and *Āśvalāyana* recensions of the *Rgveda*, the antique *Baudhāyana* and *Vādhulaka* recensions of the *Yajurveda*, as well as the *Jaiminīya* recension of the *Sāmaveda*. These settlements became the citadels of Brahmin culture including the Vedic tradition and temple centered organisation of the society. The temples in these villages provided food and other facilities for students to learn Vedas

It is interesting to note that in *Keralotpatti*, the legendary chronicle of Kerala history, we find references to *Cāttirars* or *Śātrakas* attached to *Śālais* or *Ghaṭikās* which were institutions attached to temples where Brahmins proficient in Vedas, *Śāstras* and military skill lived under the patronage of kings. The *Śālais* were actually boarding schools in which young Brahmin boys got free boarding and lodging and instruction in Vedas and other branches of Sanskrit learning<sup>3</sup>. The *Śālais* were concentrated in the Southern part of Kerala. The most famous *Śālais* were those of Kāṇṭalūr, Pārvaṭīśekharapuram, Tiruvalla and Mūzhikkulam. *Śālais* of Kāṇṭalūr and Pārvaṭīśekharapuram, were patronised by the Āy kings while *Śālais* of Tiruvalla and Mūzhikkulam prospered under the patronage of Kulaśekhara. The Huzur Office plates inscription states that the Pārvaṭīśekharapuram *Śālai* admitted 95 students. Seats were distributed among students of *Pakaziyam* (*Āśvalāyana* branch of *Rgveda*), *Taittirīya* ( a branch of *Yajurveda*) and *Talavakāra* ( a branch of *Sāmaveda*)<sup>4</sup>. From historical records, it appears that that Rājarāja I of the Cola empire had destroyed Kāṇṭalūr *Śālai* and the possible reason is that the *Śālai* like other *Śālais* imparted training in martial arts also, along with the Vedas. The students were supposed to

<sup>3</sup> A.Sreedhara Menon, *Cultural History of Kerala*, p.170.

<sup>4</sup> See Anil Narayanan, Vedic institutions of medieval and modern Kerala, paper presented in the International Vedic Conference, Calicut, January, 2014

study *Mīmāṃsā*, *Vyākaraṇa* and *Paurohitya* and there were elaborate codes of conduct applicable to them. Probably side by side this, and definitely slightly later, the *Sabhāmaṭhas*, described as temple universities also functioned as centers of Vedic learning in the Northern and Central parts of Kerala. There were eighteen such centers in ancient Kerala. Ādi Śankara himself is reputed as having established four *Maṭhas* in Trichur, being presided by his four disciples.

All the Brahmins of Kerala were supposed to learn by heart the particular *Śākhā* of the Veda to which they belonged. The temples of Kerala provided ample scope for practitioners of Veda to show their skill. For the Rgvedins, there was the *Trisandhā* rite, consisting of the recitation of the *Samhitā*, *Pada* and *Krama pāṭhas* of the text, which would last for three months. The *Vāram* ceremony, performed in the *sanctum sanctorum* in front of the deity provided the occasion to recite the *Padapāṭha*. For the Yajurvedins, *Ottūttu* provided the occasion to recite their text which was to be accompanied by a feast. For Sāmavedins, there was the regular singing of the hymns called *Ūha* and *Ūsani*. Yajurvedins used to recite the text in three tempos.<sup>5</sup> *Murajapam* was yet another ceremony in which the Vedic hymns are recited in front of the deity. The *Murajapam* instituted by King Mārtāṇḍa Varma of Travancore in the famous Padmanābha Svāmi temple every six years was a famous ritual in which Namboodiris continuously recite the entire *Rgveda* in about two months.

The pedagogical method of the *Rgveda* consisted of the students sitting cross legged in front of the teacher and repeating the texts with all the proper accents until the preceptor was satisfied<sup>6</sup>. One peculiar feature of the Kerala method was that the teacher would toss the head of the student in different directions so that the proper intonation is fully internalized. Another method was the employment of various *Mudrās* to be employed with the right hand to indicate the nature of the syllables. Of all, there were eighteen *Mudrās*<sup>7</sup>. After completing the *Samhitāpāṭha*, the *Pada*

<sup>5</sup> E.R.Sreekrishna Sarma, *Vedic Tradition in Kerala*, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> C.M.Neelakandhan, 'Rgvedic Tradition of Kerala and Katavallur Anyonyam,' *Veda, Society, Modernity*, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

*pāṭha* and *Kramapāṭha* were taken up for study. These three constituted the *Prakṛti pāṭha*. This was to be followed by *Jaṭā* and *Rathapāṭhas*, which were the *Vikṛtipāṭhas* taught in Kerala.

Festivals and friendly competitions organized in ancient Kerala provided ample scope for students to show their proficiency and skill in Vedic recitation, the most important one of which was the *Kaṭavallūranyonyam*, solemnized at the Srirāma temple at Kaṭavallūr, near Kunnamkulam. The students of Tirunāvā and Trichur *Maṭhas* were involved in a competition which would last for sixteen days. The competition tested the proficiency of the students in the *Kramapāṭha* of the *Rgveda*. In the competition, everyday, four pupils were involved with one person from one side being confronted by four persons from the other and two examiners representing the two sides supervising the whole thing. A unique feature of the competition was that questions were asked in the form of *Mudrās* upon which the student was required to recite the relevant portion properly, failing which he was supposed to withdraw from the competition. The examination culminated in the mass recital of the Veda involving all the students. At the time of the feast, more complicated *Ratha* and *Jaṭā pāṭhas* were recited. The successful candidates were honoured with the titles described as *Mumpirikkal*, (preliminary examination) *Kaṭannirikkal*, (Examination in the Interior temple) and *Valiya kaṭannirikkal* (Advanced examination in the Interior of the temple)<sup>8</sup>. Those who emerged victorious were felicitated and the unsuccessful candidates could reappear in the next year for the competition. The Tirunāvā *Maṭha* was maintained with the help of the Zamorin of Calicut while the Trichur *Maṭha* thrived on its own property.

One of the main reasons of the preservation of Vedic culture in Kerala seems to be this strong ritualistic orientation which required thorough knowledge of the performative aspect of the Vedic legacy. The most popular sacrifice performed in Kerala was *Somayāga*, which has many forms, among which *Agniṣṭoma* is the main

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<sup>8</sup> C.M.Neelakandhan, Vedic Tradition of Kerala, p.10.



one, being the source of all the other *Somayāgas*. It is no exaggeration to state that there was hardly any eligible Namboodiri family of which at least one did not perform the *Somayāga*.<sup>9</sup> There are also plenty of documents indicating that other sacrifices like *Aśvamedha*, and *Atirātra* were also performed in Kerala from ancient times onwards. Those who performed *Agniṣṭoma* were known as *Somayājins*, while those who performed *Atirātra* came to be known as *Akkittiris*. The most prominent name associated with the Vedic ritual is that of Mezhattur Agnihotri, who is regarded as the eldest son of the famous grammarian Vararuci, and if we are to believe tradition, born out of the wedlock with an outcaste, who is supposed to have performed 99 sacrifices on the bank of River Nilā.

Eventhough the Vedic tradition of Kerala was centered on its performative aspect, the scholastic aspects of the Vedas were also not altogether neglected here. The famous Vedic works written by Kerala scholars include the *Sukhapradā*, *Mokṣapradā* and *Abhyudayapradā* commentaries on *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, *Aitareyāranyaka* and *Āśvalāyanasūtras* respectively by Ṣadguruśiṣya, belonging to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the *Sukhadā* commentary on *Kauṣītakabrāhmaṇa* written by Udaya, the *Dīpaprabhā* commentary on *Sarvānukramaṇī* by Akkittam Nārāyaṇa, and the *Śrautaprāyaścittasangraha* of Nīlakanṭha Yogiya. The metrical *Niruktavārttika* of Nīlakanṭha of Koṇṭayūr is a commentary on Yāska's *Nirukta* and it throws much light on the Vedic ritual. Both the Prābhākara and Bhāṭṭa schools of the *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy, which is concerned with hermeneutic issues of the Vedic texts, flourished in Kerala as is vouchsafed by the testimony of famous scholars like Uddanḍa Śāstri<sup>10</sup> and by works like the *Mānameyodaya* of the great Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhāṭṭa. Nārāyaṇa Bhāṭṭa has also penned two important Vedic works, the *Āśvalāyanakriyākrama* and *Sūktasloka*. The former deals with the *Grhya* rituals of Brahmins belonging to *Āśvalāyana* branch of *Rgveda* and the latter is a collection of nine verses in *Sragdharā* meter dealing with the structural features of the *Rgveda*.

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<sup>9</sup> E.R.Srekrishna Sarma, *Vedic Tradition of Kerala*, p.9.

<sup>10</sup> C.f *Kokilasandesa*, I .79.

Side by side the Vedic study, the *Vedāṅgas* like *Jyotiṣa*, *Vyākaraṇa* and *Gaṇita* were also studied with great diligence in Kerala.

The magnitude of the contribution of the South to Vedic scholarship can be gauged from the voluminous commentaries and independent works penned by Sāyaṇa the scholar politician ,who flourished in the Vijayanagara empire in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Hailing from a Brahmin family belonging to the *Taittirīya* branch of *Yajurveda*, he held the post of the chief minister of a number of Vijayanagara kings, under whom Hinduism was revived in the South. His political career began in 1346 and lasted for forty years. He initially served King Kampana and when the king died in 1325, he had left the care of his son Sangama to him and Sāyaṇa looked after him with utmost care. When Bukka,I ruled Hampi, commissioned Sāyaṇa to write a commentary on *Rgveda* for which the king received the title *Vaidikamārgapravartaka*. Bukka passed away in 1377 and his son Harihara II also urged Sāyaṇa to continue his commentary project on other Vedas for which the king was honoured with the title *Vaidikamārgastāpanācārya*. Apart from his other works and commentaries, Sāyaṇa had enriched the Vedic hermeneutics by writing commentaries on *Rgveda*, *Taittirīyasamhitā*, *Kāṇvasamhitā*(20 *Adhyāyas*), *Sāmaveda*, *Atharvaveda*, (*Śaunakīya*) *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*, *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*, *Aitareyāranyaka* , *Tāṇḍyabrāhmaṇa*, *Ṣadvimśabrāhmaṇa*, *Ārṣeyabrāhmaṇa*, *Devatādhyāyabrāhmaṇa*, *Upaniṣadbrāhmaṇa*, *Samhitopaniṣadbrāhmaṇa* and *Vamśabrāhmaṇa*. Sāyaṇa's commentary is lucid, detailed and elaborate. He mentions the name of the seer, deity and meter of every hymn in his commentary of *Rgveda*. He gives the meaning of every word and etymology of important words<sup>11</sup>. He refers to different interpretations and brings out the mystic significance of each hymn. The allusions and background of each hymn are elaborated wherever necessary. In short, the hermeneutic project undertaken by Sāyaṇa shows the vitality and persistence of the Vedic tradition even in relatively

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<sup>11</sup> 'Sayana', *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*, Vol V p.3885

modern times in the South, even when the meaning of the Vedas became increasingly obscure due to the passage of time. The prestige of the Vijayanagara rulers, enhanced by his project was immense and it helped them to be endowed with a spiritual aura which in its turn gave them a unique stature in the minds of people.

In conclusion, let us recapitulate some of the major findings of the above survey.

- 1.The Vedic tradition continued with all its vitality in the South
- 2.Both textual and oral aspects of the Vedic corpus of literature were preserved in tact.
- 3.There was continued institutional and royal patronage for Vedic studies.
- 4.Performances reinforced the utilitarian aspect of Vedic studies
- 5.The Brahmin communities of the South evolved ingenious curricula for the preservation of the Vedic legacy.
- 6.Vedic scholarship enjoyed immense prestige in society.