

## REVISITING THE BUDDHIST PLACES: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT BUDDHIST RITUALS, FOLKLORES AND CUSTOMS

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Buddha was perceived as an iconoclast who demolished the devilish hierarchical System's precipices, demonstrating people's liberation and creating the world more equal by smashing the offenders and the bourgeoisie sections of the society. Individuals from many walks of life were drawn to his democratic and equitable Sangha society by his teachings of universal truth and humanity. Gautama Buddha was hailed as the first humanist as well as the first feminist who treated everyone as equal regardless of their caste, creed, race or gender. Buddha pointed man's inquisitive mind to the power that resides within him. Buddhism rejected the study of hegemonic texts as a prerequisite for education or membership in a group or cult. So, irrespective of class, religion, gender, or social level, the Buddha embraced or acknowledged everyone as 'human beings with blood.' There were many regional places and temples following the principles of Buddhism all across the Kerala.

**Methodology:** One prism that looks at culture as a local development is the regional turn in cultural studies. Regional culture is an amalgamation of regionally distinct activities, customs, rituals, food culture, games, Buddhist culture, behavioural tendencies and so on. It is a collection of written, oral, and performative traditions of numerous ethno-linguistic groups in various locales and communities that, although extensive intrinsic mobility, may nevertheless be described as having unique geographical contexts or identities. The regional paradigm to culture analyses regional narratives as distinct cultural manifestations.

**Finding/Result:** Cultural Studies has radically turned its attention to regionality, prompting a reconsideration of culture as a way of life derived from localised actions, rather than as a globally generated uniform concept. The aim of this article entitled *Revisiting the Buddhist Places: An Analysis of Select Buddhist Rituals, Folklores, and Customs* is to rediscover and examine Buddhist-related places, temples as well as re-read the customs and ritualistic practises that exist there.

**Paper type:** Exploratory research paper.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Rituals, Folklores, Customs, Hegemonic, Regional culture

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Buddha was regarded as the epitome of a global social tempest that shattered the cliffs of Varna System, evincing people's emancipation and making the world more equal by slamming the perpetrators and the privileged. His doctrine of universal truth and empathy drew individuals from all walks of life to his democratic and egalitarian Sangha community. The untouchables and women, along with kings and emperors; masters and slaves; the untouchable ones, found their way in, and at times the humane one also laid back his stringent rules and democratic norms of the order, for the integration of all, such as the downtrodden community and women, along with monarchs; masters and enslaved people; the untouchable and even the quasi, harmoniously. He was carrying out the mission that history had assigned to him, commencing India's remarkable socio - religious revolution. The Ashokan missionaries established and fostered Buddhism as a democratic social philosophy and societal practise of enlightenment, integrity, empathy, and solidarity in Kerala during the early Theravada phase in the third century BC.

The historical and ethnographic traces for these early encounters with the ancient missionary groups is now being retrieved from Kerala and South India. Millions of empirical evidences to support the usages of begging bowls, as well as a writing script known as Dhamma Lipi or Ashokan Brahmi, have recently been discovered in Kerala and in other regions of South India. There are also artistic and sculptural Buddhist instances retrieved from Kerala that are still surviving, albeit in a changed state, and significant discoveries are ongoing. This article entitled *Revisiting the Buddhist Places: An Analysis of Select Buddhist Rituals, Folklores*

and Customs aims to revisit and analyse the places deeply rooted in Buddhism as well as re-reading the customs and ritualistic practises at the concerned places.

The Buddhists were the ones who first taught Keralites how to utilise ploughs and brought scientific agricultural practises as well as Ayurveda. They erected temples and countless clinics around the country as a revolutionary development in the realm of education. For Keralites who were practising witchcraft at the time, their treatment clinics, known as medical centres, brought about a profound turn around. The Dharma inscriptions carved by Emperor Ashoka on the Girnar rock in Gujarat are the earliest and most authentic evidence tying Kerala to Buddhism. Buddhism was practised in Kerala and other regions of South India as early as the second century BCE, according to Ashoka's inscriptions. Theravada Buddhism arrived in Kerala around the third century, according to the evidence. Buddha sculptures have been discovered in Kozhikode, Mavelikkara, Karumadi, Karunagapally, Maruthukulangara, Bharanikkavu, Pallikkal, and Kottapuram. Many Hindu temples, like Sabarimala, were formerly Buddhist monasteries. Several idols were shattered and thrown into adjacent ponds. This is a sign of a forcible occupancy and seizure.

## **2. TRACING THE HISTORY OF BUDDHISM IN KERALA**

Even before preaching in other nations, Emperor Ashoka tried to promote the Buddhist doctrine across India. The Maski inscriptions confirm this perspective. The Yerragudi inscription in Karannur district is another vital inscription. Ayurveda was favourably welcomed by the Buddhists who disseminated it in Kerala. Hospitals were built, wells were constructed, and medicinal and chola trees were planted, according to documents. According to the Mahavamsa, a Buddhist chronicle, the Buddha visited South India and Ceylon several times. Buddhists did not travel to Kerala to disseminate Buddhism through the students of Mahasangharakshithan, a notable Buddhist teacher dispatched by Ashoka to spread his faith in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Kerala grew up with not just Hinayana but also Mahayana and Vajrayana thinkers. The Mahayana monks were given the chance by AD Meghavarnan, who ruled Sri Lanka from 240 to 253, and Makala, who reigned from 253 to 275. However, sixty Mahayana Buddhist monks were exiled on grounds of heresy under King Godakadayan's reign, which lasted from 305 to 316. They all arrived in Kerala and established their homes there. These sixty sages dedicated their lives to the spread of Mahayana Buddhism in Kerala.

The efforts undertaken by monks to promote the Buddhist teachings are referred to as Sangha era works. Manimekhalai is a famous Buddhist work. Vanchi was home to South India's most prominent Buddhist temple. Whether this Vanchi is in Thiruvanchikulam or Kodungallur is still a point of contention. A Pallibanaperumal from Kerala is said to have departed the nation as a Buddhist monk, according to legend. The Kilirur Temple in Kottayam Taluk and the Nilamperur Temple in Alappuzha Taluk are both linked to this mythology. Pallibanaperumal monuments may be found in both temples. Many temples, including Kilirur, Kuttamperur, Kodungallur, Sabarimala, and Arthunkal, are said to have formerly been Buddhist temples. At the Paruvassery Durga Temple in Thrissur, a Buddha meditation statue was discovered. Many Buddhist idols discovered in the taluks of Kunnathoor, Karunagappally, Mavelikkara, and Ambalapuzha demonstrate the expansion of Buddhism in Kerala. Buddhism began to fade in the early eighth century. The reports of Chinese visitors showed that it began to deteriorate by the seventh century. However, the poems in Tirunizhal mala revealed that Kerala was still not demarcated under the chathurvarnya system when they were composed in the 12th century. The rulers turned against Buddhism once Brahmanism resurfaced. As a result, Buddhism's impact began to fade. Buddhism nearly vanished during the reign of Vaishnava Kulasekara in the eleventh century.

In Kerala, Sree Moolavasam (near Thrikkunnapuzha) was a well-known Buddhist centre. The famed (Sreemoolavasam) Buddhist pilgrimage place is reported to have been preserved by the Ay king Vikramaditya Varaguna. He gave the temple a vast piece of land. The Mangalacharana in the Sasana, which exalts the Buddha and the Dharma, is particularly noteworthy. The centre, however, had lost its identity by the tenth century. During the Hindu era, Buddhist sculptures are thought to have been destroyed or Hinduized. Rare Buddha statues, on the other hand, have been discovered in good condition. In the Kollam district, they are mostly found in Mavelikkara, Maruthur, Kulangara, Karumadi, Bharanikkavu, Kunnathoor, and Pallikkal. The Pallikkal Temple's idol was decapitated. And it is now on display in a museum in Thiruvananthapuram. The head is built from a similar stone. Mavelikkara's idol was discovered in a field near the Kandiur Shiva Temple. According to S. N. Sadasivan, a historian, it was the principal deity of the Kandiur Shiva Temple till A.D. 450. The sculptures are all made of stone. They are all in the shape of yogasana and measure around 2-3 feet from the feet to the turban. The majority of the idols are supposed to be meditating in the lotus position. The monument in Maruthur Kulangara is the earliest of its kind, according to anthropologists. It was constructed during the seventh century. And it was discovered near the temple in a pond. Karumadikuttan is the name of a black meditating figure located near Thottappilly in Ambalapuzha. The Buddha statue beside the guest home in Mavelikkara is located near the Sri Krishnaswamy Temple on the public road. Two historians, P. C. Alexander

and S. N. Sadhasivan, have written extensively about Buddhism in Kerala. These Buddha sculptures, they claim, were crafted in the Anuradhapura style.

Buddhism has a significant impact on Kerala culture. Buddhism has influenced the way Ezhuthu Palli and Pallikoodam designate their schools. The phrase '*Namostu Jinatam*' (*Namotu Chinatam*) is used in the commencement of education training in Kerala till the end of the eighteenth century in honour of the Buddha. A supplication to Jinan or Buddha, for instance. At the time, Kerala's whole manuscript is recognized as *Nanam Manam*. The Pali verses are abbreviated as *Naanam*, *Monam*, *Ettanam*, *Thuvanam*, *Jeenam*, *Ennanam*, *Thanam*, and *Ummanam*. The correct perspective, the right purpose, the right speech, the right action, the right manner of life, the right focus, the right concentration, and the appropriate effort are the eight noble ways. Buddhist contributions or customs comprise *Vedikettu*, *Katina*, *Parayeduppu*, *Padayani*, *Pooram*, *Kettukazhcha*, and *Rathodsavam*. They also managed schools and health clinics in addition to the Buddhist monasteries.

### 3. BUDDHISM AND KARUMADIKUTTAN STATUE

The places having Buddhist idols as well as temples based on Buddhist beliefs follow diverse customs and cultural practises apart from other Hindu temples. The offerings to Buddha are distinct from that of the Hindu gods and also, they follow unadorned customs with respect to Buddhism. There are several temples and places following the principles on Buddhism in the Alappuzha district of Kerala as well as in the other districts. And the people residing these concerned places have folk stories and myths which are being transmitted by the medium of orality about Buddhism. The customs and traditional practises offered to the Karumadikuttan Buddha statue located in Karumady near Alappuzha, Kerala are also scrutinized and analysed in this article. Kuttanad, which is located at sea level, was the preceding Buddhist centre in Kerala. People refer to it as Kuttan's Land or Buddhan's Land. Karumadikuttan, a stoned Buddha from the 8th century, stands as a testament to the regional way of address. This three-foot-tall black granite figure, presumed to date from the ninth to fourteenth centuries, was found abandoned in a local creek known as "Karumady thodu" for centuries. Sir Robert Bristow, a colonial British engineer, discovered the monument later in the 1930s and took suitable measures to conserve it. The statue is currently under the protection of the Kerala state government. The statue's left side is damaged. The reason for the statue's partial demolition is still unknown, which has sparked historical dispute. According to the Travancore State Manual, Karumadikuttan's idol is of Jain Theerthankara. The idol's style is more likely to that of a Jain idol. The occurrence of this half-demolished statue is explained by myriads of folklores. Despite the fact that the Buddha statue is in a calm and tranquil pose, it was believed that as it got mercilessly demolished by a Mughal ruler. This was done to halt the slow but steady infiltration of Buddhism into Kerala at the time. Another popular legend or lore among the villagers is that the monument was shattered when an enraged elephant charged in and destroyed it. This is in sharp contrast to the widely lauded narrative of Buddha's birth. Before giving birth to her son, Buddha's mother, Maya, had a dream about an elephant. She, on the other hand, saw it as a positive sign because the elephant is a symbol of greatness. Whatever the case may be, Karumadikuttan is a silent witness to a tragic history. It is protected by a pagoda that is said to have been erected by Dalai Lama during his visit to Karumadi. And It faces the Punnamada lake.

The customs and ritualistic practises offered to Karumadikuttan are investigated in detail and are as follows:

- **Offering coconuts to Karumadikuttan**(*Enna Theppichu Kulippikkal*)

Karumadi village is known for its coconut plantations. Majority of the people are farmers and they depend on their cultivation for their livelihood. Coconut Plantations will sometimes may result in bad yields. So there existed a common belief that in order to flourish their cultivation with good yields, the local people at Karumadi offer coconuts to the Karumadikuttan statue.

- **Offering oil to Karumadikuttan**(*Enna Neral*)

People used to offer oil to Karumadikuttan statue as a ritual. There are many beliefs based on this custom, as it will result in achieving their goals or dreams and overcoming all their hurdles in between the course of their life time. Offering oil is a common ritual practised in majority of the Hindu temples where they consider this oil as a fuel source to light the lamps in temples. But the oil offered to Karumadikuttan is not only treated as mere fuel source for the lamps but also it is believed to have many medicinal properties. Local people unanimously believe that this custom will cure their ailments and illness in general. And they used to store a small proportion of the oil in their homes for the same. Even they follow this ritual for saving the lives of cattle as well as goats if they get suffered from illness. People recall this custom as "*Valyachanu Enna Neruka*."

- **Shower with oil massage**(*Enna Theppichu Kulippikkal*)

People used to shower the Karumadikuttan statue with oil. All the adorned accessories and jewels are made to remove from the statue and thereby applying oil all over the statue. This ritualistic practise has a close resemblance with that of the *Nirmalyam* practised in Hindu temples. But the major difference is that the *Nirmalyam* is being offered by Namboothiris or Brahmin priests and the common people offer this ritual to the Karumadikuttan statue as it shackles away the chains of casteism.

- **Offering coins**(*Naananyameriyal*)

During ancient times, the merchants used to sail through the Karumadithodu for trade purposes. And they offer coins to the statue for the prosperity of their trade.

- **Offering Sheaf**(*Katta Neral*)

Karumadi is surrounded by numerous paddy fields. So, villagers offer sheaf for Karumadikuttan in order to protect their yields from heavy monsoons, floods as well as from rats.

- *Murukkan / Vetteaman kodukkal*

The people of Karumadi village proffers Areca nuts with Betel leaves as it is traditionally being known as *Murukkan / Vetteaman Kodukkal*.

- *Dhanduchaaral*

*Dhanducharal* is a famous ritual practised here. Rice and jaggery are mixed together. And it is being offered to the statue to show their gratitude. The practise of *Dhanducharal* custom has diminished over the ages.

Karumadikuttan is the cultural and historical relic of Kerala's Buddhist tradition. Karumadikuttan' is now a renowned Buddhist pilgrimage site in Kerala. Under the aegis of the Kerala Buddhist Council, the 2017 Budhapoornima event was conducted in 'Karumadikuttan.' For the past two years, several Buddhist cultural events have been organised at 'Karumadikuttan.' It was migrating away from Hindu forms of ceremonial devotion, and today, as a result of local opposition to authoritarian inclinations, a nascent Buddhist presence has emerged. Myths and folklores based on Karumadikuttan are conveyed over generations via the medium of orality.

#### **4. REREADING THE SELECTED BUDDHIST PLACES AND TEMPLES IN KERALA**

In Kerala, the majority of the thousand-year-old temples are refurbished Buddhist temples. Between the eighth and sixteenth centuries, Brahmanism emerged and transformed the temples, according to historians. Buddhism and Jainism arrived in south India in the third century BC, establishing the casteless and democratic Sramana culture of Kerala. In ancient Tamilakam, they also propagated literacy and scripts. In the monumental work of Kerala titled *History of Kerala*, A Sreedhara Menon states that the current Hindu temples in Malabar are architecturally reminiscent to Sramana temples. Kasaragod's temples demonstrate this striking resemblance and the crucial connection. Prof. P O Purushothaman asserts in his linguistic and cultural analytic book titled *Buddha's Footprints* that all historic sites of worship in Kerala were initially tied to Buddhism and Jainism through his linguistic archaeology. Near Kumbala, the Ananthapura temple resembles a Buddhist lake temple. Its analogues were found in China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand, among other places in Asia. The inscriptions on the shrine's wall also depict Buddhist motifs, such as representations of Bodhisattvas, however they have been significantly changed numerous times throughout the centuries during expansions. The mythology linking this temple to Padmanabha temple in Thiruvananthapuram also reflects the temple's Buddhist heritage, as Padmanabha temple was a Buddhist shrine prior to the eighth century. A reclining Padmapaani (lotus in hand) Buddha statue has been transformed into a Padmanabha (lotus from the navel) Vishnu image. The ancient tradition of conserving the crocodile in the pond also exemplifies Buddhism's environmentalist mentality, which included the establishment of hospitals for animals and birds, as evidenced by Asoka's second edict, which mentions Kerala in relation to wild life protection. Both geographical names contain the term Anantha, which might be a later variant of Ananda (Buddha's foremost pupil and the Buddhist notion of "bliss and pleasure"). In any case, the temple resembles a Japanese lake temple or a hovering Korean Buddhist pagoda even today. The Hindu temples in Adoor and Madhur have architectural similarities with Buddhist and Jain structures. Archaeologists frequently relate the three-tiered sanctum in Gaja Prishtha style in both temples to the Sramana architectural style. Many other Hindu temples with Buddhist pasts, such as Kilirur temple in Kottayam, Kerala, have the same Gaja Prishtha (elephant butt) structure. Temple constructions and ritualistic practises were usurped from the Sramana traditions of Jainism and Buddhism, according to a detailed comparison of ancient sites in Kerala. Internal imperialism used religion, power, and politics to seize control of the country. Around the eighth and ninth centuries, Brahmanism transformed these temples with the support of tribal chieftains, slave troops,

and minor monarchs. The partially ruined Buddhist statues and Jain exemptions excavated in central and southern Kerala attest to this deadly and furious invasion, which began in the third century BC with the advent of Sramana monks and corrupted Kerala's ethical and egalitarian democratic culture. However, the Sramana culture's traces may still be evident in Kerala's folk as well as classical architecture and ceremonial traditions in association with historic temples and carnivals.

The festivals such as *Mamankam* of Thirunavaya, the *Kettukazhcha* of horses and oxen in Thrissur and Kollam, the *Annamkettu* and *Paravathookam* of Kottayam and Alappuzha districts are all enduring assertions of Kerala's ancient Sramana democratic culture. Kilirur and Neelamperur, both of which have substantial Buddhist cultural histories, are located on the outskirts of the Vembanad wetland region. Kuttanellur and Kuttankulangara, both in Thrissur, are linked with the regional rendition of the Buddha. Kudayampadi and Kudamaloor are linked to the spherical globe, much like the Chaityas of Buddhism, who regarded ceremonial pavilions, spherical urns, and stupas as metaphorical emblems of the enlightened one. Muttambalam, a place name in Kottayam, might serve as an analogy here (a worshipping place like an eggshell, literally). Kudamaloor is littered with wrecks and destroyed Buddhist holy groves and Sangharamas. On the banks of the northern branch of the river Meenachil, they have survived as *Sarpa Kavus* and holy woods or sacred groves. Kumaranallur might be a Brahmanical alteration of Komaranallur from the ninth century. Pre-Brahmanical rituals and cultural manifestations such as *Pallyodams* (holy snake-boats associated to the Pally) and *Garudan Parawa* (a ceremonial performance honouring a bird) are still alive and well, albeit in a Hinduized form. *Garudan Parawa*, which is similar to the *Annam Kettu* or *Pakki Kolamin* the Padayani ceremonies of Neelamperur in the south, is a recollection of the Buddhist performance honouring the sacred Annam or Swans and Storks. During his boyhood, the humanitarian winner is claimed to have rescued the life of a swan. In Japan, Korea, and the far east, swans and storks are still revered. Kumarakom's unique cultural and natural heritage, as well as its biodiversity, must be preserved from the invasion and preponderance of visitors and vested interests, and it must be integrated into a larger eco-cultural circuit that includes the ancient sites nearby. Buddhism's ecological and ethical traditions may offer a prudent insight for developing these cultural landmarks all around Lake Vembanad. Kumarakom, Chengalam, Kudamaloor, Kilirur, and Neelamperoor have the potential to become Kerala's Nalanda and Takshasila, and might be developed in the same way that historic Buddhist cultural centres in the north are being resurrected under Prof Amartya Sen's pan-Asian project.

Two well-known etymological interpretations are proposed for the place Kottayam. Ayam of a Kotta refers to a Kotta's pond or a Kottam's pond. The innards of a fort are made by the akam of a Kotta. Although the second is more prominent, the first appears to be more historically significant. In all instances, the location is attributed to a Kotta or Kottam, which refers to a pre-Hindu centre of worship in southern India, frequently related with Sramana or Chamana culture. Kottam, Vattam, Kutti, Ambalam, and other names for Jain and Buddhist temples are ubiquitous. In Pali language, Pally was a religious term that referred to more entrenched Bodhisattvas, Chaityas, and Basatis with higher holiness. These words of common denomination and popular currency were used to refer to rudimentary pagodas, pillars, turrets, Stupas, Platforms with ponds adjacent, and so on. Kottayam was clearly the home of Kottams, ponds, and Ambalams before the eighth century. Place names like Muttambalam, PallipurathuKavu, Mariyappally, Gautamapuram, and others, which have survived centuries of cultural assaults, allude to Kottayam's Sramana antiquity. Pallipurathu Kavu, located on the banks of the Kodurur near Lake Vembanad in the west, literally translates to "old sacred forest outside yet near the Pallipurathu" (Buddhist temple after disseminating the slurs). Mariyapally might be a renamed Maariyapally or a different shrine. As relic worship was prevalent in many Buddhist schools, Muttambalam might refer to a spherical Stupa of Buddhist devotion. Neelamperoor Palli Bhagavathyi Temple, a few miles south west, and Kilirur Kunnummel Bhagavathi Temple, a few miles west, are also medieval Buddhist sanctuaries. These temples, according to historians, were Buddhist until the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

Thiru Gautamapuram temple is another old temple onsite. Though Krishna is worshipped here presently at the central shrine, as in Kilirur temple, locals; particularly the Avarnas, claimed that it was formerly a Buddhist shrine. However, the other caste people perceived this with a different outlook that it is known as Gautamapuram as a sage named Gautama conducted the edifice. S Sanku Iyer analyses Gautamapuram and its Buddhist background in his magnum opus *Kerala and Buddhism*. It was called after Gautama Buddha by the early missionaries who arrived in Kerala in the third or fourth century BC, according to him. He also quotes Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai, who claims that a Buddha idol was discovered in the remnants of Gautamapuram. In his controversial book, N K Jose endorses this viewpoint and rehabilitates local legends and oral tales by the Avarna people of the area, who had been extinct in the area due to fast urbanisation and pressures from the newly wealthy elites. It is also worth noting that the same tales exist among Dalit Bahujans about Thirunakkara temple, which is about a mile away to the west. It is noticeable that the official historical versions of Kottayam, which initiate with the Thali rule, and Thekkumkur, which begins with the Brahmanical

Savarna hegemony in the sixteenth century, are wholly inadequate and redundant in construing the people's greater and primitive legacies, cultural heritage, and dynamics of resistance against internal caste imperialism, cultural hegemony, and ultimate despotism by powers of brutal victimisation, Varna system and so on. Cognitive violence associated to the distortion and eradication of cultural heritage through lexical and semantic doctoring may require millennia of de-colonizing and rewriting.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With respect to the contemporary era, 'Nature' plays an imperative role in the concerned Buddhist customs as well as in the ritualistic practises. Nature is in the merge of its devastation due to the adverse impacts of globalisation. So, ecology acts as a foremost facet in the cultural practises of Buddhism. Buddhism is closely related to nature and all the living beings in nature, folklores, myths can also be read with an ecological perspective. The regional shift in cultural studies is one lens through which culture may be seen as a local phenomenon. Regional culture is a synthesis of locally distinct activities, customs, rituals, culinary culture, diversions, and behavioural characteristics, among other things. This article entitled *Revisiting the Buddhist Places: An Analysis of Select Buddhist Rituals, Folklores, and Customs* traces the regional history of miscellaneous places as well as temples in Kerala which are linked with Buddhism directly and indirectly. Many regional places and temples follow the doctrine of Buddhism by breaking away the manacles of casteist hierarchy and thereby hailing the principle of universal truth. This article also serves as a prism in re-analysing the customs and ritualistic practises that exist in Buddhist related places and temples.

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