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Divine Demarcations: Re-reading the select Religious and Ritualistic spaces in Kerala

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Abstract:

The panoramic coastal landscape of Arabian Sea was the ploughing ground for a mélange of cultures. Kerala located in the southernmost part of India is regarded as a treasure trove of diverse cultures, religions, rituals, legends and myths. According to anthropologists, the autochthonic tribes of the land worshipped the aniconic mother goddess as their tutelary deity in the lap of sacred groves (*kavus*). The *kavus* were accessible to all. With the passage of time, due to cultural acculturations these secular landscapes of *kavus* got converted into temples. With the installation of Gods and Goddesses in temples, the spaces became clearly demarcated. The norms of sacredness and profanity entered into the dictum of worship system. As a result, certain sections of society and their accessing of the sacred spaces came to be connected with impurity. The forbidding of women from many of the religious rites and rituals highlights the gendered spaces in the worship system. The paper tries to have a glimpse of the transformation of religious spaces in Kerala and strives to explore the engendered ritual spaces, with reference to selected rituals popular in Kerala.

Keywords:

Caste, Demarcations, Gender, Groves, Profane, Sacred, Spaces, Temples.

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Kerala, the land of lush green paddy fields and panoramic coastal beauty is resplendent with a wide array of cultures, religions, rituals, legends and myths. An enquiry into the religioscapes of Kerala throws light to a past where the autochthonic tribes of the land worshiped the aniconic mother goddess as their tutelary deity in the lap of groves (*kavus*). The *kavu's* which evolved from the tree worship practiced by the indigenous tribes were accessible to all. Space is not a monolithic entity as it reshapes, redefines and restructures itself within the moulds of time and circumstances. According to Lefebvre, "(social) space is a (social) product" (35). With the passage of time, due to cultural acculturations and appropriations, these secular landscapes of *kavus* also got converted into temples. The transformation of deities from secular *kavus* to temples also expounds a narrative intertwining the notions of space and sacralisation, both of which can be read more often as a fabrication or hegemonic construction of a particular socio-cultural milieu.

Temples demonstrated structures of power with its innovative architectural styles and rituals. "The temple-centred nature of the society and economy led to the formation of groups, classes and castes under the institutional influences and directions of the temple" (Gurukkal, 312).With the passage of time, temples developed as cultural centers with sophisticated infrastructure and umpteen numbers of Gods installed in its compound in separate shrines. "The discursive construction of sacredness usually goes together with spatial practices, such as physical demarcation, ritualised movement (e.g., pilgrimage), and the construction of buildings designed for worship, thus producing and reproducing a particular place as a 'sacred place'" (Rots, 79). The architectural style of the temples was in strict contrast to the 'openness' exhibited by the *kavus*. The deity was installed inside the four walls of *garbagriha* or the inner chamber. "Invariably, there is a central unit surrounded by layers of structures converging on the central point. In a temple, this point is the garbagriha" (Narayanapanikkar, 133). A considerable distance has to be maintained by devotes from the idols of deities. The *garbagriha* is surrounded by *naalambalam* on the four sides and it is constituted of separated spaces for teaching of Vedas, preparation of food and for storing the musical instruments. A *gopuram* is also situated outside most of the temples as a threshold to the temple compound. The temple structures are marked with doors on all four sides. Elliade states: "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier, that distinguishes and opposes two worlds- and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible" (25). Nowadays there are clear markers in many temples which indicate the directions of the doors through which the devotee is supposed to enter and exit, and they believe that transgressing these rules will arouse the wrath of the deity.

The sacred spaces of the sanctum sanctorum became accessible only to certain sections of the society. "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an eruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different" (Elliade, 26). The term 'sacralisation', then, refers to 'the process by which the secular becomes sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge, (Demerath, 66) The natives of the land as in the case of *pulluvas* who were engaged in naga worship were banished to the margins of the temple. Even now the pulluvas can be seen in periphery of temple premises near *sarppakvus* singing with *pulluva veena[ii]* for livelihood, as their singing is believed to eradicate all *sarpa doshams* or curses of serpents. They can visit the temple as devotees or can sing near kavus, but are not permitted to enter into the sanctum sanctorum of temple to perform rituals. The upper caste male wear the mantle of priests and 'interacts' with the deities' idols from close quartets, while ordinary devotees were not allowed to trespass into the 'divine' space. Priests are seen as influencing gods "as part of the functioning of a regularly organized and permanent enterprise that is distinct from the activities of individuals or magicians" (Weber, 28).

The norms of 'sacredness' and 'profanity' got inscribed into the discourses of worship system. Sacredness is a multi-dimensional concept that is an output of the social and

cultural milieu in which it is produced. As a result, certain sections of society and their accessing of the sacred spaces came to be connected with impurity. Even though many temples still carries the suffix *kavu* with their names, many of these groves exist in rudimentary forms in the temple premise (except for some temples like Mannarasala) and are considered of less significance when compared to the sanctum sanctorum, where the idol of the main deity is installed.

The *kavus* were also not free from appropriations and hence became a product of ideological conditioning. These groves which got re-oriented in the upper caste milieu therefore reflected the power structures present in the society; assuming itself the position of consecrated spaces in the process. These 'sacred groves' hence began to solidify the debris of caste and gender inequalities present in the society. Kala Chandran, in her work *Kavum Kaliyattavum* provides a detailed description about the casteist agenda prescribed in the ritual of *Kavutheendal* in the *Kaliyattakavu* of Thiruurangadi. The usage *Kavutheendal* itself is problematic as *theendal* is a term associated with impurity or pollution and *kavutheendal* refers to the entry of the so called 'lower caste' people into the kavus (50). In this sense, *kavutheendal* is not a subversive ritual that enhances the agency of the subaltern rather it is a ritual fabricated by the upper castes to consolidate the notion that the treading of some sections of people into the *kavu* will pollute it. She further suggests how many of the *gramdevtas* are getting appropriated and are connected to other popular Gods like the deity of *Thirumandhamkunnu* or *Kodunaglloor Bhagavathy*, which is in a way a discursive process which strives to create a divine geography. Taking cue from her study it is pertinent to note how notions of impurity of women's' body and the hierarchy of caste circumscribe these *kavus*, professing and propagating social exclusions. The words like *gopuram, punyaham* (holy water)*, thidappalli* (place for preparing food for the deity)*, theertham*, and *sreekovil* also entered into regular usage in *kavus* as the architectural style of temples gradually assimilated into it.

> In many cases relics and venerable icons were established as a core, a kind of pivot in forming a concrete spatial environment. This milieu included permanently visible architectural forms and various pictures as well as changing liturgical clothes and vessels, lighting effects and fragrance, ritual gestures and prayers, which created a unique spatial complex every time. (Lidov, 63)

The location of Gods in the temple premises is also a matter of clear demarcations and spatialisations. When the much popular Gods of Vedas and Upanishads are positioned in the main shrine, the native aniconic deities like *madan*, *marutha* etc are placed outside the *garbagriha* of the temples. Even though assimilated into the Hindu pantheons, these native Gods are clearly segregated from the mainstream worship system and are always placed in the interstices of the sacred and the profane.

'Sacred' is a much contested term that is connected to religion and religious institutions. Sacredness is neither a transcendental entity nor is a product of any divine intervention. It is constructed by discursive practices drafted and maintained by those in the pinnacle of power structures. Diverse notions of sacredness envelop a temples structure. In order to establish a communion with the deity many temples formulate codes of conduct for the devotees. In many temples in Kerala, men are supposed to take their shirts off while entering to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Strict dress codes for women like wearing of *duppattas*, tying of hair and restriction to wearing of *salwars* are also maintained. Thus spaces of temples are clearly segregated from the ordinary public spaces.

As mentioned earlier, sacred is a subjective, multidimensional concept, an idea or an ideology fabricated and propagated by those in the higher strata of society. It is a by-product of human performance accompanied by the contemporary social and cultural milieu. "The sacred does not have an autonomous ontological referent. It is always culturally produced within the culture-specific systems of categories, distinctions and arrangements of human behavior" (Anttonen, 38). With the installation of Gods and Goddesses in temples, the spaces for devotees, priests and even deities thus became clearly delineated. Even in the contemporary times, these visible and invisible demarcations are not fading away; the spaces are evolving re-defining and re-drawing new contours in par with the shifting and drifting contexts.

Revisiting the Gendered Spaces of Ritual Arts

Most of the rituals and rites associated with temples proscribe women from holding the position of priests in temples (except for Mannarasala temple). The rituals inside the temples are considered as a monopoly of upper caste men. Even in a land where mother goddess is the most popular deity, women are clearly banished from most of the religious and ritualistic spaces. *Padayani*, *Kuthiyottam* and *Mudiyettu* are the most popular ritual arts of central Travancore. They are performed as both ritual and art, as they serve both the purposes of devotion and entertainment. All these ritual arts are intricately linked to the agrarian landscapes. Sarah Caldwell in her work *Oh Terryfying Mother* implies that all these ritual arts and the cult of the Bhagavathi are closely associated with the landscapes of Kerala. Caldwell here also suggests that, for Malayalees, Bhagavathy is important "not only as a legendary protectress, but as a deity of the land" (23). These ritual arts especially *Padeni* and *Mudiyettu* are performed in *kalams* or in specially prepared spaces. The word 'kalam' in Malayalam is related to agriculture. Earlier it denoted a place where harvested paddy is stored. The mother goddess who was deemed as the scion of agriculture and fertility was worshipped in these kalams. "The kalam in the Kali cult denotes a floor painting of the goddess" (Narayanapanikkar 48). Nowadyas, *kalam* denotes a space where *mudiyedupp* or *kolamthullal* (the ritual of dancing with massive head gears called *mudi*[iii] or *kolam*[iv]) takes place. In the contemporary times, these rituals are not only performed in the courtyard of shrines or *kavus,* but also in *kalams* prepared in other public areas, which

kindled up many debates. Thus shifting spaces of *kalams* has evolved over the years acquiring new meanings. These are ordinary lands which are converted into sacred spaces only at the time of performance.

The ritual art of *Kuthiyottam is* popular in central and southern parts of Kerala. The ritual pulsates with rhythms of an agricultural landscape. This artistic form which is intricately linked with the agrarian landscape and fertility cults echoes the native mother-goddess worship. The metaphorical sacrificing of boys to the deity by the ritual of *chuural muriyal*[v], the ritual art of *kuthiyottam a*ccompanied by *kuthiyottam* songs and *kettukazhcha*[vi] marks the vibrant festival of *Kumbha Bharani*[vii] at Chettikulangara temple. The ritual performances are conducted in veneration to Goddess Bhadrakali, who is considered as the ultimate source of feminine energy. But, all the performers in the ritual art are males, including the dancers, musicians and orchestra. There is a popular belief among the folk that women should refrain from singing *kuthiyottam* songs. The ritual art is performed in the precincts of temples or *kavus*. *Kuthiyottam* is also performed in the courtyards of houses. Similar to most of the rituals the notions of impurity is bestowed upon women to prevent them from taking part in the rituals. The myth making as a discursive process thus constructs sacred spaces forbidden to women, whose body is considered as 'impure'. In the magnificent ritual of *kettukazhcha* which involves the bringing of *kuthira* (the giant artificial, hand-made horses) to temple from the *kara*[viii]*s* also demonstrates less participation of women. The entire landscape transforms to a space of masculine euphoria permeated with howling, boisterous laughter and dancing of men. All the activities from pulling of the gigantic *kuthira* to announcements and beating of drums are all dominated by men. In this grand fiesta, which is deemed as the insignia of the cultural geography of Onattukara (earlier name for a geographical area in Kerala, which is presently scattered between three taluks of two districts), women have no significant role to play. Except for their cooped up role of taking *thalappoli* (a vessel with lighted lamp and other items), they can resort to their positions as mute spectators.

Padayani, also known as *Padeni* is one of the most popular ritual arts performed in the *bhagavathi kavus* of central Travancore. *Padayani* is a kaleidoscope of diverse art forms. It is an exquisite amalgam of music, painting, dance, satire and other art forms which create a vibrant ambience for the demonstration of rituals. *Padayani* starts as a procession which is comprised of various *kolams*, musical accompaniments, indigenous torches etc. The significant part of the ritual art and cynosure of the event is the *kolamthullal* ceremony, were various *kolams* like *pisachu, madan, marutha, bhairavi* and *yakshi* perform on the *kalam*. *Kolams* that perform at the *kalam* are taken by upper caste men. Women were not allowed to take up *kolams* by attributing biological inferiority and impurity on them.

Mudiyettu is popular in the regions of Central Travancore and Cochin. It is deemed both as a ritual and a theatre. The term *mudiyettu* implies wearing of *mudi* or crown. Mudi in Mudiyettu is similar to some *kolams* in Padayani and both are performed in

kalam. All these rituals are based on Kali-Darika myth. In *Padayani* and *Mudiyettu*, the actor who takes up *kolam* or *mudi* is in a liminal state; a human and God simultaneously which Victor Turner denotes as "betwixt and between" (95) and is believed to be possessed by the deity. The *kalam* is thus a patch of land being made sacred by the performance of a ritual and in turn this *kalam* imparts an aura of divinity to the ordinary human. Unlike these two, *Kuthiyottam* doesn't involve such an in-between state of the performers, except for the occasional 'possessions' happening to the performer.

All these ritual arts are performed in praise of the mother goddess Bhadrakali. The female deity is worshipped but women are not allowed to perform in the *kalam*. Sarah Caldwell in her article "Bhagavathy: Ball of Fire" notes that "it is striking that women are prohibited from participating in the rituals of Kali, except in the *talappoli* (the welcoming of the goddess with a procession of lights) and as spectators (…) women are never permitted to enact the role of Kali or perform as oracles" (208). In her article "Masked Ritual and Performance in South India", Caldwell opines about the absence of women in *Mudiyettu*:

> Although the ritual actor must find some resonating consciousness within himself that allows the goddess to enter and express herself to the audience, ritual strictly proscribes females from putting on the mask. The female body is said to be too impure, and females too weak of mind and body, to endure the rigors of the ritual possession. While one may regard the male donning of the female guise as an expansion of gender categories and hence of the possibilities of reality itself, negative attitudes toward the female body among Kerala male ritualists suggest another hidden dimension being masked in the performance: that of gender inequality. (194)

Women are absent not only as performers, but also as singers or even as organizers. Bhargavan Pillai opines that long ago, vulgar languages were used abundantly during *Padayani* mixing humour with 'obscenity'. Even though such obscenities are used for three or four days, in the last day a harmless or decent *Padayani* is conducted for women on the last day (50). Thus, the ritual space of *Padayani* is not only gendered and casteist, but also it strives to maintain the 'purity' of woman. All the festivities associated with the rituals such as *Mudiyattam*, *Pulavritham* and *Kalakettu* related with *Padayani* or *Kuthirakettu* connected with *Kuthiyottam* or *Kumbhabharani* of Chettikulangara temple shows the participation of women as spectators. The processions and fiesta most often turns to be exhibitory spaces of masculine euphoria. Women are bestowed with the role of mute spectators, obviously not inside the *kalam*, but in the marked or unmarked boundaries of the space.

Thus, the notion of sacred spaces offers a contested realm as both the complex terms the 'sacred' and the 'space' are intertwined carrying a baggage of hegemonic discourses. The sacred spaces are usually revered upon as a divine intervention; the

areas clearly demarcated by God for the followers. But the concept of sacredness itself is a human construction so are the spaces. Sacred spaces are not formed all of a sudden. They are both discursive and material spaces redrawn and reshaped in the ossified hegemonic practices of the contemporary society. The temples and are constructed and rituals are created based on discourses written and manipulated by those wielded power and hence the spaces are not an endowment bestowed by the divine, but are subjective spaces demarcated to ensue, profess and propagate the power structures in the society. The secular spaces are in a process of eroding from the society. The discursive spaces which demarcate the sacred from the profane are being redrawn with bold strokes, dissecting and segregating our religoscapes and mentalscapes.

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[i]. Sacred groves

[ii] A musical instrument.

[iii] head-gear mostly made of wood

[iv] Headgears or masks usually made of arecanut sheaths.

[v] a ritual which resembles a form of blood sacrifice, in which slender silver thread is penetrated through the waist of young boys, as a sign of offering them to the deity.

[vi] The procession of giant artificial horses from each Karas, which will be displayed mostly in front of the temple. Kettukazhcha marks a grant festivity in which the creativity of the populace mingles with devotion, celebration and the agrarian culture of the land.

[vii]Annual festival of Chettikulangara temple which falls in the Malayalam month of Kumbha.

[viii] Small geographical areas or provinces located near the temples and are closely associated with it. The concept is similar to the concept of *gramadevata* or village deities, where some particular deities are believed to rule a particular area of land.

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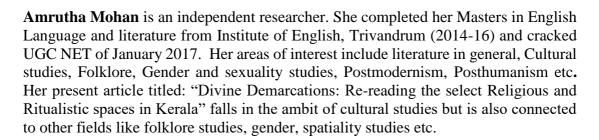
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BIO-NOTE

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