

# **Agricultural Perspective on Kerala Culture, History and Geography**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this study is the evolution and progress of Agrarian culture and its current situation in Kerala. The study tries to explore agriculture's contribution in the growth and development of socio-economic cultural and political character of Kerala. Indeed, the study tries to find out the contribution of agriculture in the growth of art and literature. The method used for this study is descriptive. Data for this study is collected from reference books

Study starts from the stone age life of tribal people practicing agriculture and progressing through various stages like aryanization, foreign invasion and ends towards the present condition of agriculture in Kerala and the study tries to find out certain problems faced by the agriculture sector today. The study ended up with a warning that the deterioration in agriculture culture would lead to total destruction of our social cultural and environmental condition in Kerala and also pointed out the unsolved health problems due to unrestricted use of chemicals and pesticides in agriculture field.

## **Key words:**

- Stone age - *a pre-historic period when weapons and tools were made of stone or of organic materials such as bone, wood, or horn.*
- Kallara - *tomb in mahasilaugam*
- Samkhamkrithikal - *the most ancient literature in Tamil*
- Parra, Changazhi- *tools used for measuring grain.*
- Menpulam – *land used for agriculture*
- Illamnira - *the festival associated with the agricultural harvest.*
- Panam - *type of currency issued in south India*
- ASEAN - *Association of South East Asian Nation*

- Barter system-system of exchanging goods and services between two or more parties without the use of money

**Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to analyze the evolution of agriculture from its earliest stage to the present . Through this kind of analysis it is possible to draw conclusions with historical support as to how agriculture originated and developed in each period . The study also points out how agrarian culture has become the basis for the growth of art and culture

**Content**

Agriculture is an area that is closely linked to the cultural life of Kerala.A large section of Kerala was also a village. The culture of Kerala is shaped by these. The villages of Kerala have a cultural background that is shaped by the agrarian economy and has grown and developed in the shadow of the agrarian culture. It is an agricultural sector that has contributed more than any other sector to the growth and development of our society today.

From the Stone Age onwards, agriculture and the people of Kerala became closely intertwined. The Stone Age aborigines were regular travelers in the forest, and these practices began to change as early as the Stone Age. The lifestyle of living in a permanent place has been adopted by human beings since the Stone Age

Permanent residence created conditions conducive to farming practices. Gradually, the hunting life of man began to change. In Mahashila culture, human life was undergoing changes in every sense. Human habitation began to concentrate in areas where there was availability of fertile soil and access to water for cultivation. Remains of Mahashila culture have been found in most of the districts of Kerala such as Thiruvananthapuram, Idukki, Thrissur, Kannur, Wayanad and Palakkad

The kallara are the only surviving evidence of the Mahashila culture. One thing becomes clear when one examines the places where the kallara (tombs )are located. They are surrounded by the most suitable conditions for cultivation, and the tools obtained from the kallara reveal the connection of the people who lived there with the agricultural work. At the same time, it can be seen that they have developed preventive measures to combat the invasion of wild animals into the farms.

The first rays of culture began to fall on the mind of man who interacted with the soil. Honesty in farming, collective effort, care for the seeds that are sown for tomorrow, and above all, the hope that is kept in mind from the time of sowing the seeds, all these have created meanings that human life did not have until then.The special circumstances that prevailed in agriculture gave birth to the arts. Repeated life situations will motivate the human mind to explore new areas of entertainment, which is the situation that led to

the creation of the earliest form of farming songs. Such folk songs have made a great contribution to the development of the language. In terms of language, the stream that includes folk songs that are very close to the spoken language and less artificial can be termed as real Malayalam in Malayalam Shakha or Shuddha Malayalam Shakha. Earlier, the language of the landlord was great and the language of the agricultural workers was vulgar. From this it is clear that the contribution of folk songs and farming songs to the real Malayalam stream.

### **Tribal communities associated with agriculture**

The tribes closest to agriculture are the Vader, Kuravar, Ayer and Uzhavar tribes. Other aboriginal communities also had direct and indirect links with agriculture. Human settlement began along the riverbanks, which they found to be the most suitable areas for agriculture. Gradually, such communities evolved into farming communities.

As they transformed into communities, customs, rituals, and practices gradually began to take shape among them, and the land they used to cultivate was called 'Menpulam'. Paddy was the major crop. Gradually the group began to form other categories as seen in the sankhamkritikal. (*sankham works*) It is also related to agriculture that man began to be classified into different categories according to his occupation. Various sections such as blacksmiths, carpenters and potters worked in connection with agriculture.

Abundance of water in Kerala rivers and prolonged monsoon helped agricultural production in the right way. At the same time, Kerala's natural landscape helped to develop irrigation systems. Agriculture became stronger with the improvement of irrigation system. With this, more and more sections were evolved in the society based on agriculture.

Those who engaged in hard work were classified into the underprivileged or lower class and those who were engaging in activities other than hard work were classified into privileged or upper class in society. The upper class in society considered agriculture as inferior labour. The farmer was only considered as ignorant because of his hard physical activities. During this time life lifestyle was in harmony with nature. There are descriptions in ancient texts about women making cotton and cotton garments made from plants and plants materials. Plant materials were also used for building houses. Paddy straws and palm leaves were used for roofing houses and cow dung was used for waxing floor.

The growth of agricultural development also paved the way for gender segregation. Such divisions began to occur on the basis of occupation. Occupations that required more physical labour became the responsibility of men. The men took over the activities like preparation of the land for farming, driving with animals, and carrying

loads. The world of women became more and more connected to the home, as women had to do the work of sowing, weeding, and transplanting, as well as childcare and household chores. Thus, the indigenous people of Kerala formed their own way of life and habits and laid the foundation for a real Kerala culture. Agriculture and allied occupations formed the basis of this culture.

The influx of Buddhists and Jains and the migration of Brahmins brought about great changes in the agricultural practices and culture of Kerala and gradually new methods began to be implemented. From the beginning of A D 7th century onwards Brahmins belonged to ethnic race became dominant in Kerala. New methods were gradually introduced and began to determine the boundaries of the farmland. 'Measurement' has become mandatory. Those who grow a crop also need other products. Yields need to be collected and handed over to meet such needs. Therefore, 'quantification' was made mandatory for the purpose of collecting and transmitting yields, thus barter system introduced

The area of the land was calculated on the basis of quantity of sowing grains and the vessels used for measuring grains was Parra. Other grain measurement vessels were changazhi, naazhi, uri and pot. It was in Sangam Era, the long-lasting farming practiced in Kerala became deep rooted. There are clear references about farming methods in the poem Erezhupath, which is believed to have been written by Kamper.

Agriculture flourished further when scientific chronology was combined with local knowledge among the indigenous peoples of Kerala. The observations of the Brahmins and the scientific knowledge of time and climate have been useful for agriculture. Land acquired in various ways made the Brahmins great landowners and the donation of land to the Brahmins was considered great. They were reluctant to do labour on the donated land. But this land was used for agriculture. The Brahmins got very high-quality land. Most of this land was at riverbanks. The Brahmins treated rivers and water as idols and with this attitude they got the soil from the river banks and used it for agricultural purposes. When used, the river basins became very well cultivated.

Ownership of lands by temples and the Brahmins helped to keep the farms from falling apart. Giving land to temples was considered a sacred act. Hence a lot of land came under the ownership of temples. This land was as safe as ever. No one had encroached on the temple land. This domination in land ownership gradually divided human beings into many layers. The caste system became severe and the caste hierarchy led to labour exploitation. Provincial rule and domination of certain upper caste persons made people's life miserable and landlords wielded all power. Landlords need workers to farm. Only because of that they were allowed to live in a corner of the farmland. The temporary right to live close to farms became known as 'tenancy'. Jobs and

accommodation are available only if the landlords are pleased. In order to achieve this the tenants were forced to work for minimum wages in land

There is a lot of credible information about the various practices that existed in the field of agriculture in Kerala from the descriptions of foreign travellers. Mahwan, Jordanus pastor, Nichole Conde, Marco Polo, Ibn-Battuta and Kamprol are all foreign tourists who have visited Kerala at different times. Authoritative descriptions of foreigners such as Mahwan, Pastor Jordanus, and Nichole Condi provide insights into the production of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century coconut, palm, and other tree-derived fruits. Europeans are starting to come here by the sixteenth century. Foreign plants such as rubber, cashew, etc. are propagated in our country by Europeans. The Europeans needed spices. As a result, spices became the mainstay of Kerala's economy, and coins such as cash, panam etc...became popular. The emergence of markets changed the style of farming. When India became a colony under foreign domination, Kerala's production system and agrarian system changed.

The economy and culture of Kerala are all based on agricultural resources and forest resources. The speciality of Kerala economy is that its share of agricultural income to its revenue is much greater than the share of total agricultural income in national level, as such, the role of the industry is much less.

### **Changes over time in agricultural culture.**

After India became independent, the Central Government decided to divide the states on the basis of language. Complaints for this were high from the southern states. Kanya Kumari, who was very much in touch with the landscape of Kerala, was annexed to Tamil Nadu. The paddy fields in Kanyakumari, which would have helped in the food security of Kerala, were thus lost. Despite having to depend on neighbouring states for food grains, Kerala has an irreplaceable place in India's agricultural economy.

Spices are a feature of Kerala and play a vital role in the economy of Kerala. Kerala's natural landscape, soils and climate control the agricultural sector including spices. Paddy, coconut, pulses, rubber, spices, coffee, tea, cashew, tapioca, pepper, ginger, turmeric, cocoa, cloves and nutmeg are the major crops grown in Kerala. Rubber, coffee, cardamom and tea are considered as horticultural crops.

### **Crisis in the agricultural sector**

The agricultural sector in Kerala is going through many crises today. Paddy fields are declining in a manner that is dangerously affecting the food production of Kerala. Coconut cultivation is also in a big crisis. Various diseases are destroying the coconut cultivation in Kerala today. Decreased immunity to new seeds is also a threat to this sector.

Most of the practices associated with agriculture are disappearing. Nira or illamnira is a ritual performed at home paying pooja to new nelkathir (paddy bunch) at an auspicious time. Niraputhari is a ritual performed at temples with paddy collected from its own paddy fields. Nowadays these kinds of rituals are only nominally performing in some parts of Kerala.

The present situation in Kerala is that the losses in agriculture and agrarian culture are destroying the social life and environment of Kerala. Vegetables and food items from other places are highly toxic. The case for fish and meat is even worse. This contains deadly chemicals that can even cause genetic defects. This is the same case of agriculture in Kerala also. Excessive use of fertilizers and harmful pesticides is also practiced here. It was clear in the third decade of the 20th century itself that the uncontrolled use of pesticides became known to cause cancer. In agricultural villages like Kuttanad, the use of pesticides is causing great loss to farming families in the form of cancer.

Babies born with genetic disorders in the homes of cashew plantation workers and neighbours in Kasaragod district are becoming a disaster in present day Kerala. The presence of imported plants has a detrimental effect on our climate. Filling of fields and waste land increase the scarcity of water. The hilly region is also under great threat. International agreements as part of globalization paved the way for the free trade of spices. For an example while taking.

India-ASEAN Agreement alone taken for consideration, which poses a major threat to Kerala's cash crop cultivation. Due to the high production capacity and low production cost of ASEAN countries, cash crops from ASEAN countries across India are available at lower prices. The ASEAN countries generally have a very similar climate and geography to Kerala. Almost all the cash crops grown in Kerala are same grown there. Productivity there is much higher than Kerala. The cost of production is very low. Therefore, raw resources from other countries are very cheap and are sold all over the country. This is a setback for Kerala, which currently dominates the spice trade

Imports of Kerala products, including rubber, are a major threat to farmers, who are gradually abandoning farming due to inadequate prices. In addition to this, the number of wild animals in the forest is increasing due to the good management of the forest. Their encroachment on farms also increases the suffering of farmers. Many farms in hilly areas are abandoned or used for other purposes as farming is not profitable. One of them is quarries".

Bringing back the unique agrarian culture can solve most of the problems we face today. Many diseases that have never been heard of in history are still plaguing humans today. Human immunity is declining. Many diseases spread rapidly among human beings. Lifestyle diseases are more prevalent among white collar workers. Diseases like

cancer are more common. The main reason for such problems is the abandonment of unique lifestyles. At the same time, the effects of climate change need to be considered. There is a need for a scientific study on the causes of climate change, which is the expansion of the cultivation of exotic plants for economic gain and allowing them to grow uncontrollably in our country.

Agricultural life and its culture would not exist without agriculture. With the advent of mechanization, traditional methods and practices should not be abolished. Today there is a great change in the shape and character of farms. And there is a huge increase in the number of people leaving agriculture and migrating to cities. The pervasive education system is accelerating this trend. It is necessary to motivate the new generation to continue farming and allied occupations even after getting education. The fact that the new generation is leaving this sector is a big threat and it may affect the food security of the next generation.

It is important that the government and the media focus on doing what is necessary to attract the new generation to the agricultural culture and find out what motivates the new generation to give up farming and should address such issues. The main problem faced by those who choose to work in agriculture is that they have to work hard and get paid very little. With proper mechanization, physical activity can be simplified. Another major problem faced by those who choose agricultural employment is that they do not receive income in proportionate to their labour. Farmers are increasingly being exploited by middlemen. Farmers receive only very small amounts as a reward for their produce. But when these produces reach the market, the price may increase many times over. The intermediaries reaping the benefits of this price hike. The solution to this problem is to activate the co-operative societies in this sector. When the co-operatives are actively involved in agriculture, the exploitation faced by the farmers will be greatly solved. They can experience the results of their labour on their own. Consumers also benefit from this method. The extra cost to them will gradually disappear and the gap between farmers and consumers will narrow and both will get a fair price.

Attempts to utilize agricultural land in other ways should be stopped. Paddy cultivation was first transformed into coconut groves in Kerala. Many agricultural lands were later converted into fish farms. And now many of these are being converted into resorts. The only important fact that can be found when investigating why these changes are is that farming is becoming less attractive. Naturally, people are reluctant to do anything unprofitable. News of continuing farmer suicides is raising fears among farmers. It is essential that all changes be made to this condition. Otherwise, the food security of mankind itself will be endangered. We need to model the benefits and support that developed countries provide to farmers. We also need to realize that we need to

maintain the agricultural culture that exists in our country as different to that of foreign countries. Otherwise, the next generation will face unforeseen dangers. Signs of such tragedies are beginning to be seen in the present. Take, for example, the village of 'Enmakaje', located in Kasaragod, a border district of Karnataka and Kerala. It is known as a village where a great agricultural culture existed due to the great calamities. The people of this place still carry the memories of the Jain period inside. People who are not even ready to light a lamp in the evening. They are prevented from doing so because of the fact that if they light a lamp, the insects will fall into it and die. Today, the disaster caused by the industrialization of agriculture has affected the agricultural village of Enmakaje and various parts of Kasaragod district. Tragic stories tell of how endosulfan, a pesticide sprayed by helicopter to protect cashew plantations in various parts of Kasaragod district, is affecting the health of an entire population.

Such threats, fears and anxieties are rife in the agricultural sector of Kerala. There must be a release from this condition. We need to reclaim the eco-friendly and organic farming culture. That is to say, the greatest virtue that Kerala can do to future generations is not just to adopt farming practices. Kerala needs the recovery of the agrarian culture that existed in Kerala and was lost to our society in the Middle Ages, otherwise our way of life and culture will be irreparably damaged.

### **Conclusion**

The present problems can be solved by bringing back the lost values of the agrarian culture. Agrarian culture can only continue if the new generation is brought on the path of agrarian culture. The new generation will move into the future by learning the good lessons of the past experience through the study of history.

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