



## LITERATURE AS SOCIAL TEXT: BRAHMINS AND SANDĒŠAKĀVYAS IN MEDIEVAL KEALA

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### Abstract:

The socio-cultural landscape of medieval Kerala was shaped by the dominance of the Brahmin community, whose influence infused religion, politics, and literature. This paper examines the depiction of Brahminical power and identity through the lens of Maṇipravāḷam literature—a linguistic blend of Malayalam and Sanskrit—specifically focusing on the Sandēśakāvya (message poem) tradition. By analyzing key texts such as Uṇṇunīlisandēśam, Uṇṇiyacci Caritam, and Śukasandēśa, the study explores how these works document the transition of Namboothiri Brahmins from disciplined Vedic scholars to a ritually dominant and politically influential elite. The research highlights the Namboothiri's role in establishing temple culture, their ritual authority in social engineering—such as upgrading social statuses—and their complex involvement in the dēvadāsi system and Sambandham relations. While these literary works celebrate Brahminical intellectual prestige and luxurious lifestyles, they also reveal underlying social tensions, caste hierarchies, and the moral contradictions of the era. Ultimately, the paper suggests that Sandēśakāvya serve as vital historical evidences to the transformation of Kerala's social structure and the central role of Brahminism in forging a medieval regional identity.

**Keywords:** Maṇipravāḷam, Sandēśakāvya, Namboothiri,

The socio-cultural landscape of medieval Kerala was deeply shaped by the ascendancy of the Brahmin community, whose influence extended across religion, politics, and literature. The emergence of Maṇipravāḷam literature—an elegant blend of Malayalam and Sanskrit—served as a powerful medium that reflected and reinforced Brahminical values and authority. Within this literary tradition, the Sandēśakāvya (message poems) occupy a unique place, offering vivid portrayals of the luxurious lives, ritual dominance, and moral complexities of the Namboothiri Brahmins. These works not only mirror the hierarchical social order and caste interactions of their time but also document the deep intertwining of temple culture, sexuality, and intellectual life in pre-modern Kerala. Through an examination of key texts such as Uṇṇunīlisandēśam, Uṇṇiyacci Caritam, Uṇṇicirutēvi Caritam, Uṇṇiyāṭi Caritam, Candrōlsavam, and Śukasandēśa, this paper explores the depiction of Brahminical power and identity in the Sandēśakāvya tradition and their role in constructing the social narratives of medieval Kerala.

From the eighth century onwards the roots of Chentamil are shackled, and Cēra kingdom declined in 12th century AD. The period between these two incidents marked the emergence of Brahmin domination in Kerala society, which was visible in the temple inscriptions of that period. The changes that occurred during that time helped in the emergence of Maṇipravāḷam literature. This literary form is the mixture of Malayalam (indigenous language) and Sanskrit (the language of migrants).<sup>1</sup> The emergence of Sambandham relations between Brahmins and Śūdra women helped in the growth of the intermixture of the two languages.<sup>2</sup> The migrated people became the advisors of rulers and founders of various temples. Their ritual superiority established in Kerala society by the 10th century.<sup>3</sup> The Maṇipravāḷam literature itself is the product of the initiation of Brahmins, rulers, lords and other Antarāḷa group in society. Most of the Sandēśakāvya give a picture of the luxurious life of the Namboothiri Brahmins. Maṇipravāḷam texts represented the dominance of Namboothiri Brahmins with their norms of socio-cultural practice and sexuality called as 'orgiastic season of the Namboothiris'.<sup>4</sup> Uṇṇunīlisandēśam refers to a caste group called Paṭṭar, they were considered as foreign Brahmanas. The description of Paṭṭar shows that they eat the food prepared in the previous day.<sup>5</sup> It indicates the habits of foreign Brahmins as different

<sup>1</sup> Anil Vallathol, *Maṇipravāḷa Mālika* (Mal), Trivandrum, 2013, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, *Studies in History*, Kottayam, 1970, pp.281-82.

<sup>5</sup> Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, ed., *Uṇṇunīli Sandēśam*, (Mal), (1954), Kottayam, 1976,



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from indigenous Brahmins. The Smriti text prohibits this habit among Namboothiris. Uṅṅiyacci Caritam refers to various caste groups in medieval society. The Tirumarutūr temple and Triśśilāśśēri Śiva temple are mentioned in the text.<sup>6</sup> The text shows that Triśśilāśśēri temple belongs to Kāmbattu Illam. They were the teachers of Kottayam Raja.<sup>7</sup> Uṅṅiyacci Caritam gives information regarding the various rituals performed by the royal priests to convert non-Kshatriya to Kshatriya (Tampurān).<sup>8</sup> This indicates the ritual power of Namboothiri Brahmins to upgrade the social status of people. They read Mahābhārata in front of the house of Uṅṅiyacci. The Brahmins are always boastful of their superiority in the Varna ladder.<sup>9</sup> The text provides a reference of the untouchability practised by the Brahmins in medieval society also. The text mentions that the pūṅṅū wearers, i.e., the Brahmins, were not ready to share seats with the non-brahmin community.<sup>10</sup> Uṅṅiyacci Caritam does not elaborate on the life of Namboothiris but gives a clear indication of their supremacy in medieval society.

Uṅṅicirutēvi caritam of 13th century Kerala provides a detailed description regarding the two rival Brahmin settlements of Kerala that is, Cōkiram and Panniyūr. The pramāṅṅis of Cōkiram village were Ālvāncēri Tamprākkaḷ and Akavūr Tampurān.<sup>11</sup> The poet of Uṅṅicirutēvi caritam belongs to Cōkiram village. He vehemently criticises the activities of Panniyūr villagers. Cōkiram village was under Vaḷḷuvakkōnātiri and Panniyūr was under Zamorin.<sup>12</sup> By the middle of the 13th century, Zamorin defeated Vaḷḷuvakkōnātiri and destroyed the Cōkiram village.<sup>13</sup> The description infers that the Brahmins of Cōkiram village was a well-organized group, and had great knowledge in Vedas.<sup>14</sup>

The Brahmin group called Sōmayāji Brahmins and their domination in Cōkiram village was a noticeable factor. Sōmayāji Brahmins were the ritually dominant group and well educated in Vedic knowledge. The Sōmayāji Brahmins always protested against Panniyūr villagers and were enthusiastic about the protection of Cōkiram village.<sup>15</sup> The Brahmins of Cōkiram and Panniyūr villages are visitors of the house of Uṅṅicirutēvi.<sup>16</sup> The Kēraḷōṭṭatti tradition says that the Panniyūr Brahmins practised Marumakkattāyam and their differences in inheritance pattern also may be a reason for Cōkiram Brahmins treating them as inferior.

Another group of Brahmins described in Uṅṅiyāṭi caritam is Chenganniyūr Brahmins. They were an elite group of people having a noble hood in society.<sup>17</sup> The Brahmins wear only white colour dresses and chew betel leaf. They had a kuṭuma (top knot) also.<sup>18</sup> The Namboothiri Brahmins of medieval times regarded themselves as the Devan of Kerala.<sup>19</sup> Another group of Brahmins visited the home of Uṅṅiyāṭi were Vaḷḷikkōḷ Brahmins.<sup>20</sup> They tried to bribe the maid of Uṅṅiyāṭi to visit her at her illam. The work shows that Uṅṅiyāṭi belongs to Cherukara illam.<sup>21</sup> It indicates that the women belong to Brahmin illams also accept the profession of dēvadāsi system.

The text Candrōlsavam of 16th century AD describes the crucial and prestigious role of Namboothiri Brahmins in medieval Kerala society. The blessings of Namboothiri Brahmins were regarded as auspicious. Candrōlsavam indicates that the dēvadāsis of medieval society tried to please the Namboothiris by giving sumptuous feast and precious gifts, to be get a baby girl as offspring.<sup>22</sup> They believed that the blessings of Namboothiri Brahmins enable them to achieve their desire. This indicates the supreme status of Namboothiri Brahmins in medieval Kerala.

<sup>6</sup> N. Gopinathan Nair, ed., *Uṅṅiyacci Caritam*, (Mal), Kottayam, 2016, p.69.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134

<sup>11</sup> Sundaram Dhanuvachapuram, ed., *Uṅṅicirutēvi caritam* (Mal), Trivandrum, 2005, p.35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.42-43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.

<sup>17</sup> Sundaram Dhanuvachapuram, ed., *Uṅṅiyāṭi caritam*, (Mal), Trivandrum, 2007, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.158-63.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14

<sup>22</sup> Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, ed., *Candrōlsavam*, (Mal), (1962), Kottayam, 2016, p.38



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The Namboothiri Brahmins engaged in marital relations with dēvadāsis also. For instance, Punam Namboothiri married Māralēkha.<sup>23</sup> The relationship with dēvadāsis was considered as prestigious for Namboothiris during this time. The people invited for Candrōlsavam (Moon festival) included mainly the aristocratic Namboothiri men with their wives. They were leading patrons of dēvadāsi system in medieval Kerala. The poet of Candrōlsavam is a Namboothiri Brahmin. They eulogized the profession of dēvadāsis. Elamkulam argues that the period of Candrōlsavam (i.e., the period close to Portuguese invasion) was the orgiastic period of the Namboothiris in medieval Kerala history.<sup>24</sup> But that reference does not suffice to argue that Namboothiri Brahmins were morally degenerated people during the entire medieval period. They were well educated, a well-disciplined intellectual group in the early medieval period of Kerala history.<sup>25</sup> However, the Maṇipravālam literature illustrates the lustrous and sensual life of Namboothiri Brahmins. Śukasandēśa of Lakshmidasa gives an elaborate picture of the prominent status of Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala.<sup>26</sup> The text points out that Panniyūr and Śukapuram were under Matilakam.<sup>27</sup> It mentions the boundary disputes related to Matilakam temple and the decline of Matilakam temple and the growth of Iringālakkūta.<sup>28</sup> All the villagers participated in the Mahāyōgam of Brahmins conducted at Matilakam and they discussed the subjects like education, religion, state administration, customs, and so on.<sup>29</sup> Śukasandēśa refers to the instruction of Paraśurāma to Brahmins to rule the country by giving arms. The text mentions that Kerala was ruled by Brahmins before the coming of Perumāḷs in the country.<sup>30</sup> The four Kaḷakams called Payyannūr, Panniyūr, Paravūr and Chengannūr are also referred to in the text.<sup>31</sup> According to Śukasandēśa, because of buying graft and bad rule, the Namboothiri rule came to an end in Kerala.<sup>32</sup> The important temples of Kerala like Trikkatittānam, Tiruvāranmuḷa, Tiruvanmaṅṭūr, Trippuliyūr, Chingapuram Taḷi, Trikkulaśēkharapuram, Trikkākkara, Matilakam, Suchīndram Kīḷtaḷi, Mēḷtaḷi, Vaṭataḷi, etc, are mentioned in the text.<sup>33</sup> The famous fire ordeal conducted at Suchīndram temple also elaborated in Śukasandēśa.<sup>34</sup> This Sandēśakāvya gives a vivid picture of the life of Namboothiri Brahmins related to the temple.

The socio-cultural landscape of Medieval Kerala was deeply shaped by the supremacy of Brahmin community, whose influence extended across religion, politics and literature. The emergence of Manipravalam literature – an elegant blend of Malayalam and Sanskrit-served as a powerful medium that reflected and reinforced Brahmanical values and authority. Within this literary tradition, Sandesakavyas occupy a unique place, offering vivid picture of the luxurious lives, ritual dominance, and moral complexities of the Namboothiri Brahmins. These texts not only celebrate Brahmanical ritual authority and intellectual prestige but also expose the social tensions, caste hierarchies, and moral contradictions embedded with in that order. The depiction of Brahmins as both spiritual leaders and participants in worldly pleasures reveals a society negotiating between sacred ideals and secular realities. The evolution from disciplined Vedic scholarship to the sensuality of later Maṇipravālam works symbolizes the broader transformation of Kerala's social structure before the onset of European colonial influence. Thus, the Sandēśakāvyas serve as both literary achievements and historical testimonies to the complex role of Brahminism in the formation of Kerala's medieval identity.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.13.

<sup>26</sup> Kunhikuttan Thamburan, ed., *Bhāṣa Śukasandēśam*, (Mal.), Trivandrum, 1958.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*., pp.55-56

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*. p.56

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*. p.89-90,107.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*. pp.61-62.