RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN INVESTIGATION ON THE SACREDNESS OF TIRUNAVAYA: IN A MYTHICAL PERSPECTIVE

*Aparna, M.P. and Dr. Narayanan, M.T

Research Scholar, Department of History, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Ernakulum, Kerala, 683574

ABSTRACT

The concept of space is one that varies from one cultural context to another. Space is an identity of a geographical terrain created by the human beings as a part of their life activities. The concept of sacred is the part of the broader idea of space. It is multi- dimensional in its form and content. In India there are so many famous sacred centers, which are known as a part of Itihasas and Puranas. The Bhakti literature contains the hymns of several deities in Tamil language. The sacredness of Tirunavaya can be traced from the Bhakti movement onwards. Navamukunda deity has many legends and stories connected with it. It is located at the sand banks of Bharathapuzha or Nila or Perar. The many Brahmanical myths and legends that became associated with the place as a result of the Bhakti movement. The Mamankam and Taipuyam festivals were conducted as great festivals on the sand banks of the Perar with these temples as its backdrop by which probably holiness rubbed off on to these festivals at that point. This paper tries to look at the legends, myths and stories associated with Tirunavaya.

INTRODUCTION

***Bhakti* Movement and the Creation of Sacred:** A sacred site is a place in the landscape, occasionally over or underwater which is revered by people, culture or cultural group as a focus for spiritual belief and practice and likely religious observance.[1] In India, there are so many sacred hills, rivers, and cities connected as a geographical network of pilgrimage routes.[2] According to Hindu mythology the term *Tirtha* means crossing places *or* fords. As the *Mahabharata* puts it, "Just as certain parts of the body are called pure, so are certain parts of the earth and certain waters called holy."[3] According to the Indian myths and legends, the *Tirthas* are associated with the deeds and presence of the great heroes, Gods and Goddess. The important sacred centers in India are Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridvar, Kashi, Kanchi, Ujjain, Dwaraka, etc.[4] George W Spencer said that, "Tamil *Bhakti* movement was created regional consciousness among the Tamilians. Eric Isaac calls "Sacred geography" as "the landscape of myth."[5] The *Shaivite* and *Vaishnavite Tevaram* songs reconstructed the sacred geography and it spread regional identities through traditional channels such as *Itihasas* and *Puranas*.[6] David N Lorenzen said that "every religious movement - whether it is organized as a compact sector as a more loosely defined religious current

- fosters and inculcates a fairly specific ideology that is, normative set of beliefs and attitudes about how the social system should be structured."[7] By about 600 A.D, so many myths related to the Gods and Goddesses were codified in *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and in the *Puranas*. Almost all the sects were influenced and inspired by the *Bhakti* Movement.[8] The *Puranic* as well as *Itihasa* myths spread among the medieval societies by the *Bhakti* Movement.[9] Champaka Lakshmi notes that there are "three major themes" in the *Bhakti* hymns: First 'the idea of devotion to a personal god, i.e. *Bhakti'*, second 'a protest against orthodox *Vedic Brahmanism* and the exclusiveness of the *Brahmans* in their access to divine grace and salvation', and third, 'a vehement denunciation of the Jains and the Buddhist as non - believers, heretics, and hence as "heterodox."[10] According to Burton Stein the *Bhakti* movement is the important cultural element in Medieval Indian society. The central characteristic of the *Bhakti* movement is the openness in the textual terms, and it is accepted by all men without caste restrictions.[11] The *Saivism* and *Vaishnvism* are the two divisions in which the followers practiced and propagated the *Bhakti* cults in rural and urban areas.[12] The *Siva*

*Corresponding author: *Aparna, M.P.,*
Research Scholar, Department of History, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Ernakulum, Kerala, 683574

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[1] http: //sacred sites.com.
[2] Diana L. Eck, *Banaras City of Light*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1993, p. 34.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 34.
[4] *Ibid*., pp. 34-38.
[5] George W. Spencer, *Sacred Geography of Tamil Shaivite Hymns*, Brill Publication, 1970, p. 233. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3269705.
[6] *Ibid*.,pp. 243-244.

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[7] David .N. Lorenzen (ed.), Religious *Movements in South Asia 800-1800*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 16.
[8] *Ibid*., pp. 16-17.
[9] R.S. Sharma, The Feudal Mind, D.N. Jha (ed.), *Feudal Order State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India*, Manoharlal Publishers and Distributers, New Delhi, 2000, p. 458.
[10] R. Champaka Lakshmi, From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanars, in David N. Lorenzen, (ed.), *Religious Movements in South Asia 800-1800*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 55.
[11] Burton Stein, Social Mobility and Medieval South Indian Hindu Sects, in David .N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Religious Movements in South Asia 800-1800*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 81-101.
[12] M.G.S. Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat, Bhakti Movement in South India, D.N. Jha,(ed.), *Feudal Order State, Society and Ideology in Early*

saints called *Nayanars* and *Vaishnava* saints called *Alvars.* Saints and temples mentioned by Nathmuni (10th century A.D) who edited the Tamil *Vaishnava* canon and Nambi Andar Nambi (11th century A.D) who was the earliest compiler of the hagiology.[13] This movement had begun under the patronage of the Pallavas in the late sixth and early seventh century A.D. many temples like, Chidambaram in the south and Tirunallur, Tiruvarur and Srirangam to the south - west part of the Pallava kingdom. During the eighth century the movement spread further south from the Pallava - Cola territory to the Pandyan territory. Temples such as Madurai, Tirunelveli, and Kumbakonam became active centers of this movement. From ninth century onwards it reached the soil of Kerala on the west coast and temples like Tirunavaya, Tiruvanjaikkalam, Tirukkatkarai, Tirumuzhikkalam, etc., became the important centers of devotion.[14] The Second Cera kingdom with its capital Mahodayapuram or Makotai was found in the 9th century A.D and their rule extended up to the first quarter of the 12th century A.D. *Brahmanas* had an important power behind the throne of the kingdom. The temples represent the common *Dravidian* style and there were three types of Sanctum Santorum such as circular, apsidal and rectangular structure as can be seen in medieval Kerala.[15] Tirunavaya is considered as a sacred centre. The sacredness of Tirunavaya can be traced from the *Bhakti* movement onwards. *Navamukunda* deity has connected to many legends and stories. It is located at the sand banks of Bharathapuzha or Nila or Perar. The areas along with the river are historically important from the early time onwards. There is evidence of the megalithic settlements on the river banks of the Perar. Tirunavaya *Navamukunda* Temple is situated on the northern banks of the Perar. Tirumankai *Alvar* and Nammalavar were the *Bhakti* saints, who were praised the greatness of the deity. It was famous at the time of Perumals. The *Manipravalam* works such as, *Brahmarasandesam*, and *Kokilasandesam* of Udandasastrikal and *Kokasandesam* of Mathridatha describe the *Navamukunda* Temple and Tirunavaya. The *Mamankam* and *Taipuyam* were the two festivals conducted on the banks of Bharathapuzha. These are the two state festivals held under the direct control and participation of the Zamorin. Tirunavaya *Navamukunda* Temple was under the control of the Valluvakonatiri and it was captured by the Zamorin and this led to the political conflict among them. The suicide squads of Valluvakonatiri participated in the *Mamankam* to recapture the temple and *Rakshapurushasthanam* from the hands of the Zamorin, but it was a difficult task and the *Chavers* were killed and they could not reach their victory even at once.[16]

Tirunavaya *Navamukunda* Temple-Myths: The mythical story of the creation of Kerala as a land by Parasurama considered as the creation of the incarnation of *Mahavishnu*. So the propagators of this myth intended to create a sacred belief and geography. In Kerala there are eleven *Vaishnava* Tirupatis and Tirunavaya is one of the more famous temples among them. This temple is connected to so many mythical stories like *Trimurti Sanagamam* or the conglomeration of the three main deities such as *Siva*, *Vishnu* and *Brahma* and famous for obsequies. According to the *Keralolpatti* legend

Parasurama, the sixth incarnation of God *Mahavishnu*, selected Tirunavaya as his headquarter after the formation of Kerala and established *Brahman* settlements.[17] Tirunavaya is a sacred centre as per the *Keralolpatti* because of the following factors: it was the headquarter of Parasurama, the decision of establishing the *Brahman* villages in Kerala was taken here, the first *Brahman Sanketam* was conducted that took the decision for bringing rulers from the north and selected Perumals as their protector. This legend also shows sacredness of Tirunavaya. Another myth is connected with origin of the *Navamukunda* temple. The story of Nava yogis is the myth related to the origin of the Navamukunda temple. Once, nine brothers were lived in Ayodhya, eight brothers were brought *Salagramam* and attempted to establish it on the banks of the Bharathapuzha but, all attempts were failed and finally the ninth brother had collected water from the Nila and he attributed the *Salagramam* in the form of *Mukundan*, offered salvation. He completed the *Puja* satisfactorily. He made as usual rituals for the worship of this *Mukundan* deity, with lamp and *Neyvilakku*, the flower for offering is to be necessarily the Lotus flower and the *Nivedhyam* the *Palpayasam*. Then this place came to be called as *Tirunavayogi* and which later became Tirunavaya.

The Tirunavaya was the temple of the Ceras according to the *Keralolpatti*. It is one of the oldest temples in Kerala. The locality including Tirunavaya was under the Vettathuraja. Then it passed in to the hands of *Valluvakonatiri*, from whom it was captured by the Zamorin and now it is under the Samutiri *Devaswam*.[18] The present priests of the Tirunavaya brought to here by the Zamorin. The *Brahmans* were come from the Arikkal near Balusseri. The Zamorin granted lands to the family of the priests also.[19] The sub deities of the Temple are *Adiganesha* and *Sree Mahalakshmi*. The origin of the *Adiganesha* in this temple was associated with the story of *Gajendramoksham*. Indradyumnan, a Pandyan king went to Sahyadri spent life as a saint after his regime, during the meditation he did not listened Agastyamuni*,* and he cursed the king to become an elephant. *Agastyamuni* said that he would get salvation after the arrival of *Mahavishnu*. Once an*,* alligator called *Huhu* came to attack this elephant but, *Gandarva* was on the river, and it hit elephant and he was called *Mahavishnu* for help. The lord *Mahavishnu* graced him allowed to him to sit the right side of *Navamukunda*. Later the spiritual energy of *Ganesha* was understood and implanted his Idol.[20] Another myth is related with the temple is that, worship of Lakshmi. It is the volition of *Lakshmi Narayana*. In every day at the *Brahma Muhurtha*, *Adiganesha* had taken bath and collected lotus flowers from the lotus pond and offered it to the *Navamukunda*. In the day of *Akshya Tritiya*, *Ganesha* went to the Lotus pond, but he did not get any lotus from there. He reached in front of the deity and recounted his sorrow. He was astonished by seeing the deity adorned with lotus flowers. On seeing sorrow *Mukunda* appeared and told *Ganesha* that, it was done by his wife *Lakshmi* and also said that Goddess *Lakshmi* has expressed an interest to worship her. *Mukunda* blessed *Ganesha* he so that he would not find it difficult to collect lotus from there. It was that thus Goddess *Lakshmi* was put on the left side of *Mukunda*. According to the Tamil devotional text

Medieval India, Manoharlal Publishers and Distributers, New Delhi, 2000, p. 385.
[13] *Ibid*., pp. 385-387.
[14] *Ibid*., pp. 387-388.
[15] *Ibid*., pp. 24-25.
[16] V.V Haridas, *Kshetram, Uthsavam, Rashtreeyam,* Purna Publications, Kozhikode, 2008, pp. 87-123.

[17] Herman Gundert, *Keralolpatti*, Basel Mission Press, Mangalore, 1868. p. 22.
[18] Interview with Parameswaran (50), Executive Officer of Tirunavaya Devaswam on 19/09/2015.
[19] Interview with Prakash (40), *Santi* of the Tirunavaya Temple, on 19/09/2015.
[20] *Ibid*., pp.19-20.

Divya Prabhandham, the main deity of this temple is *Lakshmi Narayana*.[21] This mythical story is particular to this temple and shows the propagation of devotion of Lord *Vishnu* by the *Vaishnava* saints. From this myth we can understand the importance of Goddess *Lakshmi* as a sub deity and this myth also shows the importance of the day of *Akshya Tritiya,* the birthday of *Balarama*. This myth shows the belief that prosperity would be attained by the worship of Goddess *Lakshmi*. These above mythical stories had given a sacred image and it enlarged the sacred circle by the establishment of the sub deities in an around the *Srikovil*.[22]

Myths of Bharathapuzha

This river originated from Anamalai in Tamil Nadu and flowing 209 k.m and ends at Ponnani on the Arabian Sea. It called Perar, Nila and Ponnanippuzha. Its tributaries are Kalpathippuzha, Gayatrippuzha, Tuthappuzha and Kannadippuzha. It flows through Pollachi, Palakkad, Thrissur and Malappuram. It is known as *Dakshina* Ganga, as many famous temples are situated on the banks of Nila.[23] Once, Parasurama had requested *Brahma*, to conduct *Yagam* for the prosperity of the people in Tirunavaya. This *Yagam* was conducted at *Sahyadri* with the support of all Gods and Goddesses.[24] This myth is also emerged as a part of *Bhakti* movement and attributing sacredness to the river as Goddesses. All over India we can see the trend of the personifying of rivers to Goddesses like Ganges, Yamuna, Brahmaputra, Kaveri etc. Rivers are considered as sacred because of this reason. The belief is connected with this temple is the *Pitirdharpanam* or *Pitiryanjam*. It is done for the attainment of salvation for the ancestors. The *Sraddhamuttu* is ritual practice conducted at the time of *Pitiryanjam*. There is a myth regarding the origin of this ritual. Once, a *Brahman* man called Nimi*,* a hermit belonging to the Atri gotra, had a son called *Sreeman*, who died after meditating continuously for thousand years. Nimi invited seven *Brahmanas* and gave them *Chama chorus* without adding salt. Then tied the *Dharbha* plant on his fingers and turned towards the southern side and recited the prayers by saying the gotra of his son and put the *Pindam* for the ancestors. From that day *Sraddhamuttu* became an important funeral ritual. This ritual is also called *Bali*. There is another belief connected to the *Bali* is that, once the King Maruthan had conducted a *Maheswarasatram* in the presence of the Gods of Heaven. On hearing this, Ravana reached there but the Gods who feared him escaped from there by as birds. At that time *Yama*, the god of death took the form of a crow. From that day, he loved crows and he blessed the crows that, they were the ones to whom the *Balichoru* was given.[25] There are three *Brahman* settled villages near to the Tirunavaya region. The Chokiram or Sukapuram and Panniyur are the early *Brahman* villages. Chokiram is the old name of Sukapuram, and is situated ten miles east of Ponnani, the port town.[26] Chokiram has been one of the most prominent *Brahman* settlements of Kerala and they were seen, together with Panniyur, in the *Viraraghava Copperplates* of A.D. 1225. The Sukapuram *Dakshinamurti* Temple is one of the oldest

temples in Kerala. It is dedicated to *Siva*.[27] Panniyur is another *Brahman* village. The *Varahamurti* temple is situated at Panniyur, six miles to the West of Pattambi on the bank of river Perar.[28] Alattur was a village situated five miles to the South of present Tirur Railway station.[29] The *Brahman* families were the traditional priests of Trikkandiyur *Siva* temple, which was under the Vettathunatu. Alattur have so many *Siva* temples and *Kavus* of *Hanuman*, *Bhagavati*, and *Kuttichathan* are located. This area was under the Zamorins, the Vettathu Raja had loyal to him and provided military and other service to the Zamorin.[30] The barman settlement in an around the Tirunavaya region is the main reason for the spread of myths related to the main diety and sub deities as well as surrounding temple networks.

Cherutirunavaya

Cherutirunavaya or Thavanur is located on the southern side of the river Perar. This area is the part of Tirunavaya *Navamukunda* temple. It is believed that, Thavanur was called *Thapasannur*. It is one of the famous *Brahma* temples in Kerala. The place where it was believed that *Siva* and followers settled for *Yagam* became a temple of *Siva*.[31] These legends thus attribute sacredness to the area where temples of the *Trimurtis* such as *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Siva* located in the Tirunavaya and Cherutirunavaya. This place is called as *Trimurti Sanagamam.*

Triprangod *Mahasiva* Temple: It is mentioned in the medieval literature such as in *Swetaranya Mahatmyam*, *Brihatjatakam* of Vrahamihira, *Kokila Sandesa* of Udhanda *Sastrikal*, *Kokasandesam* and folk songs. Triprangod is situated ten kilometers from the myth of the origin of this temple related to the *Markandeya Purana*, one of the eighteen *Puranas*. It is also the part of *Siva Purana*. It is situated on the banks of Nila and the place called Vellottinkara.

Trikkandiyur *Maha Siva* Temple: It is believed to be one of the 108 *Siva* Temple constructed by Parasurama. This temple is mentioned and its importance in the medieval period can be seen in *Vanjeri Granthavari*.[32] This temple was under the Vettathu Raja.[33] The temple is a large complex now in ruins. In earlier time worship was done by village of Alattur *Brahman* settlement.

Conclusion

Tirunavaya is thus considered as sacred site. The holiness that was ascribed to it was through the various legends, myths and stories both of *Puranic* origin and local origin. There are two sets of temple complexes connected to it, one the *Brahmanical* temple complexes and other the network of *Kavus*. The place was part of the sacred geography of the *Bhakti* movement and the Tamil *Bhakti* literature has been helpful in mapping its sacred geography and networks. Tirunavaya is a sacred center and the protectorate of the ancient 12 yearly festival of *Mamankam* (*Maha Magha*) held there formerly belonged to

[21] *Ibid*., pp. 21-24.
[22] *Ibid*., pp. 22-24.
[23] https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php=Bharathappuzha &action
[24] *Ibid*., p.16.
[25] *Ibid*., pp. 28-29.
[26] Kesavan Veluthat, Brahman *Settlements in Kerala Historical Studies*, (1978), Cosmo Books, Thrissur, 2013, p. 46.

[27] M. G. S Narayanan, *Atistanasilakal, Op. cit*., pp. 52-54.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 47.
[29] Kesavan Veluthat, *Op. cit.,* p. 45.
[30] M. G. S Narayanan, (ed.), *Vanjeri Granthavari*, University of Calicut, 1983, p. xii.
[31] *Ibid*., p. 17.
[32] M.G.S. Narayanan, *Vanjeri Granthavari*, University of Calicut, 1983, pp. xv-xx.
[33] M.G.S. Narayanan, Perumals of Kerala, Cosmo Books, Thrissur, p. 371.

the Valluvanatu or Arangottu *Swarupam*.[34] It is considered that they belong to the *Samantha* sub-caste of the Perumals. The president ship or *Rakshapurushasthanam* of this festival had undertaken by the Valluvakonatiri.[35] In the late medieval period as a part of *Mamankam*, different *Tharas* developed. They are *Manithara, Kuriyal Thara, Nilapatu Thara, Achan Thara, Kali Thara* and *Kuriyal Thara* etc. which were considered as sacred. The *Mamankam* and *Taipuyam* festivals were conducted as great festivals on the sand banks of the Perar with these temples as its backdrop by which probably holiness rubbed off on to these festivals at that point. Thus the geography of this place is impregnated with religious and the political which overlaps each other. But one also has to keep in mind that currently its religious significance is connected not only with the sacred geography of the *Bhakti* movement but also with the funerary rites that are conducted on its banks. Tirunavaya temple is the sacred centre. It surrounded by the temple networks. The nodal point of the network is Navamukunda temple. The surrounding temple networks has the temples of *Brahma* and *Siva* at Cherutirunavaya, Triprangod *Mahasiva* Temple, Trikkandiyur *Mahadeva Kshetram*, Alattur *Hanumankavu*, Vairankode *Bhagavati*

temple, Chandanakkavu *Subramanya* temple Panniyur *Varahamurti* Temple, Sukapuram *Dakshinamurti* Temple, Malmalkkavu *Ayyappa* temple etc. These networks and the sacred centre created a sacred geography of the Tirunavaya region. There are so many *Kavus* surrounding the Tirunavaya region. Thrikkavu at Ponnani, Tirunavaya *Ayyappan*, Vyrankodu Bhagavati Temple, Bhayankavu Bhagavati Temple, Chandanakkavu, Kodikunnu Cherumakkara *Kavu*, Alattur Hanumankavu, Malmalkkavu *Ayyappa* Temple, Vettathu *Kavu*, Alankotttu Kalady *Cherikkal Kavu*, Kadavallur *Kavu*, Ammanjeri *Bhagavati Kavu,* Chandana *Kavu* and Trikkandiyur Vettakorumakan *Kavu* etc are the main *Kavus* of the Tirunavaya region. These sacred groves that surround Tirunavaya have their own festivals from early time onwards.[36] Many local deities were worshipped *Pottan, Thondan, Kuli, Villi, Otta Villi, Chathan* and *Kuttichathan* etc.[37]In conclusion, the myths and legends have an important role by making a region as a sacred center. Tirunavaya is the best example of making a sacred geography through the prolonged centuries of the human interaction with this area.

[34]   M. R Raghava Varier, ed., *Keralolpatti Granthavari, Kolathunadu Tradition*, Calicut University Historical Series, Department of History, University of Calicut, p. 42.
[35] M. G. S Narayanan, *Perumals, Op. cit*. p. 186.

[36]   N.M. Nambutiri, *Mamankam Rekhakal*, Vol. II, Vallathol Vidhyapitam, Sukapuram, 2005, pp. 64- 65.
[37]   Interview with Suresh, (58 year), a retired teacher, Malmalkkavu, 20/10/2015.

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