

Traveller's account of Chavers of Kerala

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We have many references in the account of foreign travellers to the “Chavers” (Suicide Squads) of Kerala. The Hindu practice of self-immolation is also mentioned by the Arab travellers. They give vivid descriptions which thrill the reader of devotees sacrificing their lives to the God. People drowning themselves in the Ganges was a common sight and, in some ways, more awe-inspiring than sati. The Arab travellers also refer to the custom of royal servants of the Kings who used to sacrifice their lives for their masters or burn themselves at their death. Abu Zaid is the first foreigner mentions this peculiar custom. Writing in the 10th Century Abu Zaid records a very peculiar custom that “Some of the Rajas (Rulers) of Kerala after *ariyittuvaycha* (inauguration of the reign on a grand scale), have a quantity of rice cooked and served on banana leaves. He invites from among his companions three or four hundred men, and those who are willing, present themselves to the king without any compulsion on his part. When the King has eaten some of the rice, he gives it to his companions, each in his turn approaches takes a small quantity and eat it. All those who so eat the rice are obliged, “when the king dies, or is slain, to burn themselves to the very last man on the very day of the King’s decease. This is a duty which admits of no delay.”¹

Hodivala’s Study in Indo-Muslim History, Srivastava claim that “from the records of the ruling dynasties of Southern India, like the Cholas, the Chalukyas, and the Hoysalas that they retained suicide squads in their service who were called Garudas.² It is also believed that these persons were called as “Jolikkara, Velaikkaran,” because they received their remuneration in Foli or Choham, that is millet. The Arabs seems to have causally picked up this word by the ear and then shaped it as foreigners often do in their own way into *balanjaria* (from Persian word Biranj for rice).

From Reneoudots translation, K.J. Joseph, says that the origin of Chavers was before ninth century and Cheraman Perumal was the originator. Edgar Thurston supported the former claim.³ Merchant Sulaiman completed his work entitled *Silsilat al Tawarikh* in the middle of the 9th Century C.E i.e., 851, the second part was completed by another person Abu Zaid C.E 916 but he never travelled to India and China he himself expressed in this work. If he did not record this account Sulaiman’s account was lost to the World.

Marco Polo describes Chavers of Makbar (Coromandal) he says “They live with the King and die with the King, when the King is dead, and his body is burning on the pyre, then these barons, who were his lieges during his life-time, throw themselves in to the flames, and burn together with the King, in order to keep him company in the next World.”⁴ The Italian, Cesar Frederic 1563-1581 also supplies valuable information of the Chavers of Cochin Raja, he says “The King of Cochin had a great number of Amochi and Nairi and they die for the King.”⁵ The Dutchmen Neluhoff John (1653-1670) in his remarkable voyages and travels into the best Provinces of the west and East Indies says the Nair’s give their lives for the King in the field of protection, he also calls them Amouko. Nobody can prevent a person who took a vow to revenge, so all are afraid of them.⁶

The Portuguese call them *Aniyçi ir Anycj ir Amochi*.⁷ In all probability it seems that it comes from Sanskrit word *Amokshya* meaning (invincible, which cannot be loosed).⁸ This word is described by Barbosa to Javanese and calls them *Guanicos (Ganico or Amouco)*. Dalgado states it is from the Malay ganas, (man slayer).⁹

Quoting from Giovanni Maffe’s account, Donald F Lach says “Nayars were the hereditary warrior caste”, “The Malabar rulers had a military aristocracy called Naires. Though all Nayars pride themselves on their aptitude for war, elite exists among them called “Amoques” who pledge their lives, family, and children to avenge their masters or their fellow. Reckless and impetuous warriors, the “Amoques” are held universally in great esteem and the strength of a King is measured by the number of “Amoques” are held universally in great esteem, who have pledged themselves to him.”¹⁰

Although the Custom stated above by the travellers is based on facts, figures, conditions and history, the derivations of the name still remain a puzzle. The proper Malayalam term for the suicide squad is Cavettu Pada. Pada means “army” or “squad” and Cavers one who vowed oneself to death of course, for the honour of one’s King and Country.¹¹ The word Chaver itself has been used by Castenheda to denote a member of the Suicide squad.¹² The testimony of Castenheda is of special importance in this connection, he is the first man to use the term Chaver. He attributes it to Malay word, Chaver, which he says in our language, means dead, but in India they are generally called *amoucos*. Dalgado explains Chaver by the Malay *shavurra*, ready to die, and *shavurravan*, one determined to die fighting. Correa, use the word *amouco* in 1503 at the time he was at Calicut and which he uses in Malacca in 1511. There is other good evidence among later writers that the word was in use in Malabar and on the whole it seems most probable that it found its way to Malacca from India, but

it did not displace the original Malay terms at once.”¹³ Elankulam says *Payyannur Pattola*, a very ancient Malayalam work of 13th century, makes mention of suicide squads “*Covalarai ppole ni yakale ppovum, cangalam venam parikayippol.*” Here the words cavalari (plural) form and Cangalam are used.¹⁴ From *Payyannur Pattola*, it is established that chaver is in use in Kerala even before Portuguese use it.

The Jesuit Newsletters says: “On the death of a King in Southern India, it was also customary for his retainers to run amuck in order to avenge his death or to die in the attempt.”¹⁵ There are different types of Chavers existed. The Chavers protect king and country, they protect forts and temples, and they make easy travel to traders, travellers and *Mamankam* Chavers.

The beginning of the rule of Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram was peaceful. However by 999 C.E the Cholas had started on their career of aggression against Cheras and the whole of the 11th Century witnessed the great conflict between the two imperial powers and led to far reaching effects in various fields. This war led to a total mobilization of the resources of the state under the leadership of the Kulasekharas. The Namboothiri Brahmins who were at the apex of the social hierarchy helped the rulers in mobilizing the resources of the community in the fight against Chola aggression. Several of them gave up their traditional priestly occupation and scholarly pursuits and took to arms. The ancient educational institutions called *salais* wherein the Namboothiri youth of the land were given instruction in Vedic studies were converted during the period into military academies. During the period of war compulsory military training was introduced in Kerala. Several classes of people had to give up their time-honoured occupations and take to the sword. The establishment of *Kalaris* (Gymnasia or military academies) all over the country was an important feature of the age. The common people who were enlisted for military service were given training in the use of arm in these *Kalaris*. Along with the establishment of *Kalaris* a new institution called Chavers (Suicide squads) also sprang up.

The Suicide squads were comprised of the more valiant members of the armed forces who had banished all fear of death from their hearts and accepted “Do or Die” as their motto. It was the Chavers army which ultimately turned the tide of the war against the Cholas¹⁶. If we look through Kerala history during the period of Chera-Chola war, in the period of Rama Varma Kulasekhara (1090-1101 C.E), he to crush away chola ruler Kulattunga put up Chavers.¹⁷

Kulasekhara took the firm resolve to beat back the Chola aggressors and regain the freedom of his country.

He rallied all patriotic forces under his banner in a war of liberation against Cholas. A large body of the Chera

army transformed itself before long into suicide squads (Chavers). There is historical evidence indicating its existence in the Cholapuram record (1100 C.E) which furnishes a long historical introduction enumerating the achievements of Kulattunga Chola refers to his retreat to Kottar.¹⁸ This was rendered inevitable by the heavy losses sustained by the Chola army at the hands of the newly formed Chaver army of the Cheras. His Cholapuram records of the 30th year reads” While all the heroes in the western hill-country ascended voluntarily to heaven.¹⁹ The incident marked the virtual end of Chola domination over Kerala. The political and religious ascendancy as the *Janmis* of Kerala, the introduction of compulsory military training and the formation of the Chavers army to meet the threat of Chola’s were some of the compelling circumstances which brought about the adoption of the Marumakkathayam system by the people of Kerala in the 11th Century.²⁰

If any Chaver was killed in battle his family would be given lands free of taxes to be enjoyed for all times. This tenure was called *cavettuvirutti*. It would appear that military service was compulsory for the holders of these lands.²¹ Writing from Revenue Accounts of the States of Travancore and Cochin, Padmanabha Menon says these types of *Chavettuvirutti* lands (matyr’s share) as a separate class. But they are, now, brought under Inam lands leaving their origin in obscurity.²² Anecdotes about such heroic men are not rare in the literary works of Kerala. M.G.S. Narayanan mentions some folksongs. One was collected by Kurumappally Sreedharan Nambudiri, Chengazhi Nambiyar Paattu, and Kandar Menon Paattu.²³

With the fall of the Kulasekharas, different kingdoms like Kozhikkode, Venadu, Kochi, Kolathunadu, etc came into existence and the Zamorin of Kozikkode had established supremacy over the Raja of Kochi and the Kolathiri. All these rulers as well as the chiefs and the landed gentry had their own suicide squads.²⁴ When Zamorin invaded cochin this Chaver can again be seen. In the war that took place between Cochin and Calicut, three cochin Princes including Marumahan Raja the heir-apparent were killed in 1503 at Edappalli. Three Princes of Perumpatappu fell.²⁵ There upon two hundred *chavers* of the heir-apparent, who survived their master, shaved of all their hair, even of their eye-brows. They made their way to the enemy’s territory and slaughtered all they met. Twenty of them managed to reach the neighbourhoods of Calicut, killing as many as possible. In turn, they were killed off one by one to the last man by the army of the Zamorin. But it took five years to achieve this. Krishna Ayyar mentioned this incident as Changazhi Nampiyar with his nine hundred and ninety-nine followers took the Chaver’s vow and tried to avenge the death of the Cochin Princes

at the *Mamankam* festival of 1505 C.E. at Tirunavay, but they were all cut down.²⁶ In 1510 C.E., When Cutinho and Albuquerque made a sudden attack on Calicut then these Chavers and the Moors defeated them.²⁷

Again in 1550 the adopted prince from Vadakkamkur wanted to return to his original family as a prince had been born in the Zamorin's family. Then his younger brothers, supported by the cochin Raja and the Portuguese, disputed his claim. In the fight that took place the adopted prince was killed.²⁸

Like the Chavers, *Changathams*, (Skr. Sanghatham) were also suicide squads. They were rewarded with a share from the offering that was received at the temple. The share was called *Kaaval Panam* (remuneration for guarding) or *Rakshabhogam*. It was with the military backing of these *Changathams* that the Brahmins established social and political hegemony. The *Changatham* was a group of warriors who ensured protection and safety to a Desam. The Portuguese used to engage a company of *chavers* in each and every fort they owned. These companies were called *changathams*. Most of the temples in Kerala had *Changathams* attached to them. In 1544 De Sousa, the Portuguese Governor led an expedition to attack the temple at Thevalakkarai. There were to *Changathams* attached to it. But one of the captains with almost all the guards was absent. The temple authorities offered money, on condition that De Sousa should return without plundering the temple. But it was of no use. Everything in the temple was looted and plundered and he was returning when a Nair, dressed with scrupulous care with all his ornaments, followed by 10 or 12 others flung him on the Portuguese ranks. It was the remaining *Changatham* who thus tried to wipe out by their death the stain upon their honour. Another duty assigned to the *changathakkar* was to render help to travellers who were to be safely conducted from one place to another without receiving any remuneration.

Many travellers have described about *Mamankam* Chavers, and the 12 yearly festival, were the Chavers mount the assault on the Zamorin are described with great fascination that attracted foreigners and native alike. These young men are not expected to come back; they must fight and die for the sake of the honour and prestige of Valluvakkonattiri. These men, known by the name Mamakachaver, are credited with rare feats of valour and bravery in the history of Medieval Kerala. *Mamankam* is a festival held once in twelve years at Tirunavayi on the banks of the Bharatappuzha. We cannot locate its origin but it had an earlier origin with Perumals. According to Keralolpatti, Cheraman Perumal divided his kingdom and gave the privilege of conducting the *Mamankam* festival to Valluvakkonattiri. Later the Zamorin conquered Polanad and capture the Tirunavai and killed Valluvakkonattiri, the festival then came into the hands of Zamorins. To avenge the death of

Valluvakkonathiri, his successors used to send Chavers under Puthumana Panikar to kill his adversary during the *Mamankam* and recover the long-lost right.²⁹

Then only began the custom of sending Chaver soldiers or suicide squads to the festival to dispose of the Zamorin. These Chavers were sworn soldiers who preferred death to defeat, and who sacrificed their lives to avenge the death of their princes in the Thirunavaya war. The death of the *vellaattiri* princes also started a period of intense hatred and war between the two kingdoms which was to last for more than four centuries. During the *Mamankam* festival all other Rajas used to send flags as a symbol of regard to the Zamorin at Thirunavaya. Valluvakkonathiri who did not recognize the Zamorin as the legitimate Rakshapurusha but considered him only a usurper used to send Chavers from four Nair families instead.³⁰ The four Nair families were Chandratt Panicker, Putumanna Panicker, Kokat Panicker, and Verkot Panicker. Along with them went a number of soldiers drawn from arms-bearing castes including Muslims who opted themselves to die. Most of these Chavers soldiers had lost their relatives or elders in previous wars with the Zamorin, and were fuelled by Kudippaka against the Zamorin. They came from various parts of Malabar, assembled at Thirumanamkundu under *vellaattiri*, and were led by commanders from one of the four houses. If these men could kill the Zamorin, who was protected by thousands of soldiers, the right of Rakshapurusha would have devolved on the Valluvanad Raja. Quoting from Calicut Granthavari, Krishna Ayyar says: “the subjects of the Vellatri unable to bear the oppression of their master, gave up all earthly pleasures and comforts, and prayed to the Bhagavati, residing on the sacred hill called Tirumanamkundu for a means (of deliverance in this life and) of salvation in the next. She told them that they would obtain salvation if they sacrificed their lives in battle near the temple of Vishnu on the river bank at Tirunavaya in the month of Magha when Jupiter was in Leo. Hence, from the land, sacred to the aforesaid Bhagavati’s persons, whose Karma had been worked out, used to come, possessed with the divine spirit, and die fighting with our soldiers during the *Mamankam* festival.³¹ They believed that they went straight to the hero’s paradise, Veeraswarga. The true reason for the appearance of *chavers* during some of the festivals has thus been lost sight of and the significance of the festival in the social and political life of Kerala misunderstood.³²

He further says it is unfortunate however that Logan and Padmanabha Menon should have lent the weight of their authority to Hamilton’s fantastic interpretation and derived the word, *Mamankam* from Maha, great and Makham, sacrifice. Vellattiri (Valluvanadu Raja) after losing Thirunavaya and the right of the rakshapurusha

began to conduct the Pooram festival in the place of *Mamankam*, at angadippuram (Valluvappally), his capital. Here in the temple of his tutelary deity Thirumanamkundu Bhagavathi, he stood on a raised granite platform from where in the olden days his predecessors started the procession to Thirunavaya for the *Mamankam* festival. It was from here that the Chavers were sent to the *Mamankam* festival afterwards when Zamorin usurped it. There is one Manikkina (a deep well) located on Kodakkal-Alathiyur Road, it was the place where the dead bodies of the Chaver pada were dumped. Angadipuram Thirumanthamkundu Temple, close to Perinthalmanna is very famous and historically important too. The chaver Sangam started from this temple after their prayer on their way to Thirunavaya, the location of the *Mamankam*. A memorial structure called the chaver thara (platform of the martyrs) can be found in front of the main entrance of the Thirumanthamkundu Temple.

In 1683 C.E Chavers came as usual and step forth from the crowd and receive the last blessing and farewells of their friends and relatives. They have just partaken of the last meal they are to eat on earth at the house of the temple representative of their chieftain. Puthumanna Panikkar heads the fray. He is joined by seventeen of his friends-Nayar or Mappila or other arms-bearing caste-men for all who so wish may fall in with sword and target in support of the men who have elected to die. Kandar Menon after put to sword so many came in front of Nilapatutara but in the difficult situation Nambra Moli vaidyan made a cut to him, Kander Menon in back also made a cut, in this melee vaidyan's left hand (valam kai) put down. The timely help of Chetuvapanikar cut back to Kander Menon, his hand put down and made a foot smash. Thus, end Kander Menon.³³ Captain Alexander Hamilton while recounting the festival in his *New Accounts of the East Indies* makes a significant observation of *Mamankam* in 1695 C.E., so it is worthwhile to quote from him. "There were but three men, after they had killed and wounded many, were themselves killed. One of them is of fifteen or sixteen years of age, that kept close by his uncle in the attack on the guard, and when he saw him fall, the youth got thought the guard into the tent and made a stroke at His Majesty's head and had certainly dispatched him, if a large brass lamp which was burning over his head, had not marred the blow; but before he could make another, he was overpower by the guards."³⁴ The fifteen-year-old boy mentioned was Chandrath Panicker. Presently Valluvanad and Tirunavaya located in Malappuram.

Writing from Govt's Journada, K.K. Joseph says: The Mar Thomas Christians Chavers are not Christians.³⁵ The private person who hires Nayars as bodyguards may even be able to escape the king's wrath, so great is

their prestige and influence with the crown. In war they never give up until they are all slain. From the *Grantavari*, Logan establishes that there were Mappila Chavers.

The Chavers were not from *Valluvanad* alone. These fighters came to be known in Kerala from 11th century C.E. The Chaver system might have originated from family feuds. If a person died in an encounter his relatives' nurtured feelings of revenge against the assassins and took revenge on him and his family. The feud lasted for generations. Duels to settle disputes *Ankam* is a fight between two warriors. Each side in a dispute would engage warriors to fight for them. They would fight for them at a fixed place and at an appointed time. The victorious warrior would be declared to have won the dispute. Usually, the *Ankam* ended with the death of one of the warriors. They were professionally trained fighters. They got training from *Kalaris*. They cannot be easily defeated. They give strength or courage to every ruler. Their primary duty was to assist the king or the *Naduvazhi* in battle. They commit suicide for one's country or King in a battle and die happily. They face death bravely but only after a struggle or fighting. In course of time these *chavers* become extinct. Many old customs are gradually dying out. From the beginning of the 1st Century to the 18th century, it was the Nairs that commanded the army. Under the Sangam Cheras, the Nagas, Mashavar and the Ayinar had also enjoyed important positions in the Chera army, but the majority of them were Nairs. The traditional occupation of the Nayers was soldiering. It is wrong to believe that all Nayers were soldiers, they were not. There was also no other fighting class superior to the Nairs, and no other caste could ever rise to the position of a fighting class as the Nair's.³⁶

From the traveller's account we can conclude that these suicide squads (*Chavers*) were drawn mainly from the Nayar community. They were the Military class, and *chavers* is a military rank among them. Among the Europeans the Nayers are held in high esteem as warriors.

Though they are mercenaries, they abide by their oath to die for their lords. Should a master be killed, his Nayers relentlessly search out the slayer without regard for their lives. The *Chavers* of Kerala will attract the attention of any person, who began to study the history of Kerala. The safety and punishments that we boast of among the society will be vested in him. They tried to upkeep the traditional benevolence and the *Dharma's* without fail. The new civilized society may view them as uncivilized and blood-thirsty. One cannot lose sight of their bravery that they have shown to their duties without fear or favour upon historical traditions. Hence

it is our duty to treat them the beloved children of this country. The Chaver Padyalis (Soldiers) enjoy special privilege and certain rights. From the account of travellers, we can see that they were the hereditary Militia of the country and they alone enjoyed the privilege of carrying arms. Because of their activity Kerala is safe. Many travellers says: Calicut as perfectly safe, Abur Razzak says: Such security and justice reign in that city that rich merchants bring to it from maritime countries large cargoes of merchandize, which they disembark and deposit in the streets and market-places, and for a length of time leave it without consigning it to any one's charge, or placing it under a guard.³⁷ This was supported by ibn Battuta, he says: I have never seen a safer road than this, for they put to death anyone how steals a single nut, and if any fruit falls no one picks it bp but the owner.³⁸ The common people may not understand the hardship and dangers that they have to undergo in exercising their duties. Many travellers described the special powers and privileges enjoyed by the Chavers. But if we closely watch their descriptions, we can understand it is the one side of the picture. Their mind may have been filled with fear of attack of the enemies at any time, and imminent death. His life was a struggle for life and death. The Chavers always bear swords and they are roaming here and there to safeguard the interest of the country. This system is viewed as bravery and sometimes stupidity it is a unique recorded event in the history of Kerala. From travellers account some scholars depending on fragmentary hearsay information hastened to distort the history of this land, and the local scholars got confused. To sum up we cannot but appreciate the valour and courage of the *chavers* to up keep and strengthen the traditional values of Kerala.

End Notes

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