

KNOWING THE HISTORY OF NILESHWAR THROUGH PLACE NAMES

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Abstract

The history of place names and its origin are very helpful in the reconstruction of history of a place. The history of Nileshtar, a municipality in Kasaragod district of Kerala can also be unleashed with the help of identifying various places nearby it and inquiring into the history of origin of these places and place names. The geographical features, ancient monuments and structures of the land, information from present and trees existed in the place, the presence of employed entrepreneur groups, specifics of the flora and fauna of the region, human migrations and occupations to the region, governing bodies, expansion of farming, existence of trade, trade centres and trade routes, worship practises, rites and rituals, expansion of martial arts so on are reflected in the place names of various regions surrounding Nileshtar. The present study is an attempt to unravel the history of Nileshtar through studying the place names.

Keywords: Toponymy, historical sources, occupation groups, Nileshtar.

As a small town of North Malabar, Nileshtar has an important place in the historical map of Kerala. Politically, it was the seat of Nileshtwaram Rajahs. During the medieval period when there existed the political authority of swaroopams in Kerala, Nileshtar was under the Allada swarupam, situated to the north of the erstwhile Kolathunadu. [1]

Nileshtar or Nileshtwaram is referred as the cultural capital of Kasaragod District in the state of Kerala. The place has a rich cultural heritage. Many temples surround the region and many festivals are celebrated throughout the year. The place is an abode of folklore and of many performing arts like Theyyam and Poorakkali. The place is very near to the coastal belt. It was one of the important commercial markets of Malabar for the trading of spices, hill produces and various cash crops from the eastern highlands of the district.

The rich history of Nileshtar can be reconstructed by making use of a wide variety of sources. Apart from the various written sources, other sources illuminating the past have to be traced and used. The study is an attempt to know the historical significance of Nileshtar by locating various places nearby it and the analysing the nature of origin of names of these places.

Toponymy in History

Toponymy is the scientific study of place – names, based on etymological, historical and geographical information. A place name is a word that denotes a geographic locality such as a town; a river

etc. Toponymy is concerned with the linguistic evolution of place – names and the motive behind the naming of the place which can be historical or geographical.

The systematic use of place names as a historical source in the writing of history especially for local or regional level history is very helpful. Place names hold potential historical treasure. It can be used a major source where there is absence of abundant written sources. There may be much hearsay behind the places names; many myths and legends or local ideas about the origin of the place name which are orally transmitted through various generations. It is the duty of the historian to sieve through these sources for the proper use of these source types.

Place names of Nileshtar and suburbs

The geographical features, ancient monuments and structures of the land, information from present and trees existed in the place, the presence of employed entrepreneur groups, specifics of the flora and fauna of the region, human migrations and occupations to the region, governing bodies, expansion of farming, existence of trade, trade centres and trade routes, worship practises, rites and rituals, expansion of martial arts so on are reflected in the place names of various regions surrounding Nileshtar.

There are many different opinions on the origin of the name 'Nileshtar'. One among is that the place got its name from the Lord Neelakandeshwara, the chief deity of the Taliyil temple associated with the royal dynasty established there by about 14th century. Another opinion is that the place got its name after the visit of the holy saint Neelmaharshi. According to Chirakkal T. Balakrishnan Nair, Neelichuram became Neeleshwaram. Nileshtarwaram is referred to as 'Neeleeshwaram' during ancient times and in old maps and other documents.

Historical scholars on their recent debates over the 'Pattanam Excavation' have suggested that the major ports referred in the ancient documents such as Musiri and Nelcynda were in the northern part of Kerala. If this is so, we can assume that Musiris would be Manguluru and Nelcynda would be Nileshtar, sixty miles away. The positions recorded in ancient maps strengthen the idea. From the descriptions of ancient Greco - Roman travellers such as Pliny's descriptions, it is found that Barzillo, Musiris and Nelcynda lie between Goa and Thalassery. The evidences of trading transactions made by the Dutch and the French in later years prove the assumption that the term '*Nelkunda*' has been used for Nelcynda by the foreigners and that '*Nelkunda*' had been the ancient place name for Nileshtar. There is a place named '*Nedumkanda*' is on the way to the Neeleshwar beach. A road starts from '*Nedumkanda*' to Kazhinjikkadavu which is considered as the primitive sea access to Nileshtar. Though the spices were the major export, iron ore mined from the eastern highlands of Nileshtar was also warehoused at Nileshtar torches the light to the claim. There are so many place names related with iron and other metals located to the east of Nileshtar proving the existence of metal industry. *Parappa, Kollampara* are some of them. The

ancient settlement, '*Koodamkutty Mani*', which is raised using gigantic stones in the might have been an iron smithy in Malom Forest Division (a place to the eastern part of Nileshtar).

The occupations that resulted in the establishment of a royal dynasty in Nileshtar had resulted in the emergence of a number of place names there. To the eastern part of the Nileshtar *Kovilakam* lies the 'Kizhakkan kozhuval' and to the west 'Padinjatam kozhuval' and these were formed as the resident centres of the native Nair militia who were elevated to the status of royal soldiers and those who came for military service to the dynasty. The word '*kozhuval*' refers to those closely associated with the '*Kovilakam*'. The term 'Kozhuval' is also related to agricultural practices as well. Also it is also opined that the term *koyil* may be used as a term for respect to Nairs. Anyway, the terms 'Kozhuval' and 'Kovval' signify the residence of Nairs. The writings of Chirakkal T Balakrishnan Nair mention the invasion of Nairs to Nileswaram, from the south.

The place where the *Kovilakam* was built in connection with the royal dynasty in the area is still known as *Kovilakam* and the place to its east is known as '*Kovilakam chira*' where a small pool exists. The place associated with the '*Kovilakam chira*' is also known as '*kaithottu*' and '*Chira kaithottu chira*.' On the west side of the famous *Thaliyil* temple there was a watery field. During the construction of housing colony, the ruins of the massive trees were discovered from the soil. Water was poured into the '*chira*' constructed in front of the *kovilakam* from this field by making a river of 200 metres by removing mud using the hands. So the area came to be known as '*Kaithottu chira*'. *The name of the field on the west side of the Thaliyil temple is known as 'Panthrandilekandam'. The term 'kandam' means field. This area was dealt by the members of the royal family known as 'Moothamma rajavu' and 'Illayamma rajavu'. Similarly, the place named 'Pathilakandam' is a ten-footed land that has been allotted for farming.*

The narrative of the Francis Buchanan, who visited Nileswaram in 1801, reveals that Nileshtar had a fort. The '*Kottakadavu*' in *Kottappuram* is a term derived from the word "crossing to the fort". If so the name '*Kottappuram*' indicates the presence of the fort. However, since the ruins and structures of the fort cannot be found, it can be assumed that the Nileswaram Fort is located close to '*Kadinjikadavu*', one kilometer away from *Kottappuram*. Or otherwise the fort had been at '*Kokkarni Korothe*', south of Neeleswaram bus stand, the first settlement of the royal family. The place called '*Thervayal*' is associated with the chariots. '*Koracham Vayal*' is a field in the eastern part of *Kokarani Korothe*. It is where the present day Nileswaram Service Co-operative Bank Building and the nearby trading area exist. The gold makers lie to the east of the *Kokarani Korothe*, cloth manufacturers to the west, the laundrymen to the south and the Nair soldiers to the north. Muslims and other communities lived beyond that. The epicenter of the Namboothiris is at '*Pattana*', a calm place where freshwater is available. According to British records, the Nileshtar fort was captured by the Britishers In 1736, and in 1737 the Treaty of Neeleshtar restored the fort to the king's authority.

With the establishment of the Thali temple at Nileshtar , lord Vishnu became a subordinate deity and the place where the temple of Lord Vishnu situated came to be known as ‘**Kadinjathoor**’, as the place of the first Maha temple. Similarly, there is also a place called ‘**Kadinjimoola**’ in Nileshtar meaning ‘*the first*’. The place called ‘**Kadinjikadavu**’ came to be called so probably as the first crossing from Nileshtar to the outside world. The **Kadinjikadavu** was the main water route to connect to the North before the Nileshtar Bridge was established. The crossing near to Kadinjikadavu is also known as **Kacherikkadavu**. After the Anglo-Mysore War, the British established its authority over Nileshtar and founded a court there. The South Canara Gazetteers recorded the institution and litigation of the Court. The court was locally known as ‘**Kacheri**’. Thus the crossing to the court came to be known as ‘**Kacherikkadavu**’. The court may have been established at the place where the fort also stood.

It has been argued that Kottapuram was a trading center, where the French had established a factory in the middle of the eighteenth century. This factory might have been called a fort, but the origin of the place name might not have been so. Being the center of trade, the place formerly known as Kottapuram also came to be known as **Angadi Kottapuram**. The teyyam songs also mention Angadi Kottapuram. The Dutch also centered at Kottapuram who traded at the factory at Veeramalankunu before the French.

Tirthankara is the place name to be associated with the pond (*theerthakulam* in Malayalam) which was constructed in relation with the funeral ceremonies of the royal family. In addition to the Nair occupation in connection with the establishment of the dynasty, various labour groups have begun settling in Nileshtar and many place names originated based on it. The place where the goldsmiths inhabited came to be known as the **Thattacherri**, who were brought to make jewellery items of gold, silver and copper. It was because of this job that the members of the community had long been able to maintain a good and standard life. **Shaliya Street** (saliya theru in Malayalam) is the name of a place associated with the invasion of Shaliya community associated with the textile industry.

A section of those who were assigned cloth making began to weave nets for the fishing activity, and gradually settled on the beach and thus the **Weaver’s Colony** has been formed. **Arayikkara** is a place that belongs to the worship of Areekara Bhagavathi. This is the residence of the Mokaya caste group who worshipped the deity. M.Balakrishnan Nair comments that the Mokaya unit, which has a good body structure, has been in the forefront of carrying the palanquin and boat rowing through the **Kadinjikkadavu**. **Puthukkai Muchilottu** is the center of the Vaniya caste that was responsible for the production of oil for the royal family. They distributed oil to the local population during some ceremonies related to the royal palace.

The necessary weapons to resist the later invasions were made by the caste group named *karuvan* and the place they inhabited came to be known as **Karuvacherry**. The Brahmins who assisted the kings in

their accession ceremonies inhabited the area from Mekkad to Pallikkara, but the main settlement is at **Pattena**. The earthen pot making community lived at Erikkulam and Koyamburam, where good quality clay were available. The earthen vessels were made by heating the clay and thus the place name **Erikkulam**. **Koyampuram** is the place where the pot makers (kushavan in Malayalam) resided. The place of inhabitation of *koyenmar* came to be known as Koyampuram. The people of vannan caste resided at a place called Vannapura. They were associated with the cult of teyyam. The people called '*Kanisha*' who lived their life on astrology settled at a field and that place came to be called *kanishavayal* and later *Kaniyavayal*.

The existence of Jainism in Nileschwaram is evident by the place names like **Pallikkara**, **Choornalli**, **Moolapalli** etc have been identified. In ancient times, the term 'Palli' denoted jaina bastis. The place name called '*Nagachari*' is a proof for the presence of Jaina followers in Nileschwaram. With subsequent invasions and occupations, the Jaina followers might have centered in **Nagachari**. The place name called '**Palichon**' is related to the presence of the Palichon shrine which was built under the influence of the ideas of Sree Narayana Guru. The area associated with the Palichon shrine is known today as 'Palichon'. **Narayanaapuram** was named after the temple of Lord Vishnu. The place where the **Siyarathunkara** mosque situates is called as *Siyarathunkara* and the place where a convent of the Christian missionaries exists is known as Convent junction.

The names of places have also been derived from the name of trees. From this we can understand the presence of the respective trees and the importance given to preservation of trees. The place called '*Kunjaalinkeezhil*' got its name because of the presence of a banyan tree ('*aal maram*' in Malayalam) there. '**Alinkeel**' also came into use with the presence of banyan trees. The name '**Perol**' is thought to have been derived from the name '*peraal*' (banyan tree).

Places such as Onakkilivayal, Thervayal, Koracham Vayal, Nedumkanda, Pathilakkandam, panthrandilaKandandam, Aanachaal, Nanjal, Orcha, Ramaram Vayal and Puthariyadukkam are the names of the places that have been associated with paddy cultivation. As mentioned earlier, the place 'Thervayal' used as the royal training grounds for chariot racing, later transformed into paddy cultivating fields with the coming of British. 'Onakkilivayal', a place situated in the centre of town, is a fertile paddy field which was harvested in every Malayalam month of *chingam*. With a low level of water availability, it would not be enough to cultivate a second crop. Small birds used to inhabit this field before.

Geographical features also contributed to the origin of the names of the places. The coastline of the Neeleswaram are known as **Thaikkadappuram** where a lot of young coconut trees are grown. **Azhithala** is the place where the river joins the sea. The name '**Chirapuram**' is said to be the location on the outskirts of Chira built for irrigation purposes.

There are also place names that have been formed as a part of the modern administrative system. Place names like **Karuvacheri Store, Kadappuram store, Gudam, Meenappees, Blockaappis, Kacherikkadavu, boattjetti, Market, karutha Gate, Moonamkutty** etc. show the history of urbanization and development of Neeleshwaram. The name Karuvachery Store and Kadappuram Store show the presence of ration shops that are a common public distribution center. Neeleswaram was a block in Kasaragod district before. When Neeleswaram became a municipality, the Neeleswaram block was changed to Thrikkarippur block and the office was shifted to Thrikkarippur. But still the place is known as block office show the significance of the study of place names in historical studies. The fact that the town of Kacherikkadavu had a court was found to have been ruled out of the district and local history scriptures that the Neeleswaran had a court had during the British era. The British gazetteers kept in the Archives of Mysore record the activities took place in nineteenth century at the Neeleshwaram Court. The place where the weekly markets were held came to be known as market road. Even now the place has the same name. Thursday was the market day. Market Junction is the name of the road that connects the bus stand with the National Highway.

Studying the place names are very helpful to understand some historical facts in myths that reveal the history of the Neeleshwaram and the dynasty that are not available in the history records. Place names that signify the geographical, socio- economic- political changes of Neeleshwar highlight the cultural heritage of Neeleshwar. The unique nature of the place is that we can make more of the history of the place through further study of the place names of this area. Neeleshwar may be the only small place in north Malabar that have over 150 small place names which signify centuries old history.

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