



# Akam and Puram of City Spaces: A Diachronic Exploration of the Public and Private Spaces in Calicut

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*City spaces are usually perceived in connection with cityscapes and thereby it revolves around dynamic spaces which people share together. The predominance of public spaces in the city often homogenise diverse experiences in those shared spaces through subjectivation and simultaneity. But the anonymity that a city provides ensures privacy even in the most public spaces. The experiences in a city are therefore collective and simultaneous yet exclusively personal. The tinai definition of Akam and Puram, which explores private and public spheres, is manifested differently in city. The negotiations of individuals in both these realms are varied. The paper intends to explore the city of Calicut in terms of its Akam and Puram. The monotony of mushrooming residential structures is juxtaposed with the heterogeneity of public and private spaces. The research pre-empts to map the city by converging the multitude of negotiations that simultaneously take place in the public and private spaces. The idea of public spaces in the city itself will be revisited in connection with the concept of privacy that one could claim in a city due to anonymity. A city is monumental in history and time. The historicity of Calicut is explored in the paper through analysing cultural negotiations. The paper would broadly map the city through the lens of gender, religious communities and caste as the perception of Calicut demands adequate exploration of these areas. It intends to explore the city of Calicut across the colonial and postcolonial epochs. Hence the Akam and Puram of the city would be analysed in connection with modernity and globalisation too. The research intends to take photographs, testimonials and specific city spaces into account for further exploration.*

**Key words:** Akam and Puram, Simultaneity, Modernity, Caste and Community

Kozhikkodu is a city that usually is associated with nostalgia. The city's pre-eminence historically, as its encounter with the imperial forces is earliest in the entire country, often make the spatial reality of the city accompany memory. The city space has the residue of its past along with the evolving aspects of modernity. The erection of sculptures which have specific significance to the region's literary and cultural history like *Pathummayude Aadu*, titular character in Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's novel, evidences for

the transcendence of the old into new without sacrificing the past. These sculptures in public spaces which represent music, literature and cultural artefacts evoke the personal experience of each individual's engagement with those texts and thereby it becomes a very personal space too. Even in the modifications that are made to different parts in the city, the authorities remained mindful of retaining the personal aspect of the public space that Kozhikkode has always been associated with. So, beautification endeavours were never at the expense of the old. It often does not limit itself to the preservation of the old. New structures are made to evoke the past or memory of the city. The music of Baburaj or writings of Basheer are not directly the city's inheritance, but these towering figures shared a personal relation with the city spaces of which they were overtly eloquent. The recent installations are innovative ways in which the city is trying embed their memory and retain its essence in the presence. These pieces are reminders and not metaphors for their literary or musical origins. Hence, they are not fossilising the text but functions as a souvenir for each individual reader who has enjoyed the writing or music enthusiast who has listened to those melodies.

The private enterprises in the city too are following the footsteps of the urban authorities. The revival of the traditional Malabar based tastes and recreation of spaces that are similar to old structures and spaces too are seen in the city. Café spaces like *Adaminte Chayakkada* are examples for that. Inside the café “in the place of cushions on seats, you have sacks just like the ones that used to be unloaded at the bazaar. The boards are in Malayalam with a Malabar accent. Like Kazhicholee (please eat), Kerikkolee (welcome), Selfie mukku (selfie corner), Qitab mukku (recipe corner)...” (Nath, N.p.). The popularity of such spaces suggests the marketability of the unique confluence of the tradition and modern in the city. One of the major factors that draw people from Kozhikkode to these spaces are the newness of those spaces which are triggered by the past. It becomes a collaboration of taste, touch and language of Kozhikkode in the past century and thereby are reiterating the idea of nostalgia that is traditionally attributed to the city.

When some café spaces are artificially weaving different markers to recreate an organic memory of the past, there are dining centres which are old and original. *Zain's* restaurant has been a part of Kozhikkode for the past two decades. The restaurant functions in an old structure near the beach and cuisine consists of the traditional Kozhikkode based homely food. Though a public space, the domestic structure of the building and the cuisine make the space proximate to one's individual memories. Through food, they try to bridge the gap between personal and commercial. The claim of homeliness of the cuisine is unique in this

case as some of those dishes are exclusively part of households and are not exotic enough to find commercial viability. The space is not an invocation of the past but an attempt to transfer contemporary domestic taste of the city to a public sphere. The taste adds to the physical structure and thereby a space is created where home metamorphose into a public space through the negotiation of the ‘personal’.

The incorporation of the personal aspects of individual experience with the public space has recently been identified as a strategy for better productivity as well as enhanced popularity in city spaces. The attempt brings in the “home” in other public spaces are proven to be effective in terms of their marketability due to consumer preferences and they seem to aid the customer in increasing his or her productivity too. The domestication of the public sphere has become a discussion in urban development and city planning across the world.

“In fact, in the second decade of the new millennium, along with playground, house has made its appearance as a typological and spatial reference, progressively identifying the public sphere not as separate from the private dimension... Thus, in a series of contemporary public projects, the house becomes the ultimate symbol of an interpretative flexibility that, today, seems to be required by the whole urban space” (Klanten et al. 2012, 216-49)

Though studies on urban spaces suggest this tendency as a recent universal phenomenon, Kozhikkode does not adopt it as a part of the new urban developmental theory but due to the inherent presence of the home in the city. The city’s reputation as a “foodie’s paradise” (Nath N.p.) has much to do with it. The gastronomy of the resident finds the traces of his home in different public spaces in the city. Similarly, the association of nostalgia and memory to the city in terms of music, literature and other cultural markers contribute further for the domestication of Kozhikkode’s urbanity.

The claims regarding the organic manner in which the city is associated with the private in most public spaces should not overbear the universal strategies of urban planning that the authorities follow as a part of the city’s beautifying projects. The installation of street side benches is a commonly seen act of introducing the idea of private in public spaces which finds its origin in the 15<sup>th</sup> century streets from Pienza to Rome (426, Loveratto). However, Kozhikkode is no exception to this universal overture of domesticating the public space to redefine urban development. There are street side benches in the crowded S.M. Street, which is the shopping street in the city, the beach as well as the parks. People are instigated to find solace in

their privacy that the city would provide them as they become one among the thousands of the faces that the city accommodates. The isolation that one would long for from the ruckus and cacophony of any urban space is an allowance that the anonymity of a city would account for.

The attribution of private to the domestic space and public to the streets and commercial spaces has been a norm since Victorian days. There has been traces of similar notions in different cultures too. The spatiality of the private and public has a deeper connotation in the indigenous knowledge systems of our country. The geographical division of *Tinai* of the Sangam era explores that. “*Tinai* is a type of land-based societies which includes all organisms including human beings” (Selvamony 39). The division in geography finds its manifestations in poetics too. The ecopoetics of *Tinai* dwells upon the intertwined existence of human beings and eco-spaces. “The poetry of such a poem depends on a taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions – an ecosystem of which a man’s activities and feelings are a part” (Ramanujan, 50). So *Tinai* becomes a reading of texts in connection with its spatio- temporality. *Tinai* poetry of the Sangam age is written in compliance with the poetics of the context like the classical tragedies succumbing to Aristotelian definition. However, the application of *Tinai* poetics to contemporary texts is practiced as an exercise of indigenous literary criticism. Hence, the poetics becomes a commentary on the relevance geo-spatiality to the human experiences which are moulded through those realities. It aligns human emotion with the region than attributing human emotional equivalents in the eco-space to which the character belongs that functions as a mere background to the story. The space is not considered a background but a crucial part of the character as well as the narrative itself.

The ecological significance of *Tinai* may seem to make it difficult to find its manifestations in the urban spaces. The notion of cityscape has to be explored further to establish the significance nature in the city. “Landscapes are... a way to negotiate between organic and manufactured worlds (326 Kolodney and Kallus).” The cityscapes are about the continuous negotiation between the Levi-Straussian binary. Being a city that is developing and geographically positioned next to the sea, Kozhikkode has to accommodate the negotiation. The beach is beautified with street lights and benches without felling trees which have been a significant part of the beach forever. The Manachira water tank is protected along with the small garden and ground not only as a drinking water reservoir but also a part of preserving the greenery of the city. Mananchira square has been a popular park to sit and relax in the town irrespective of its economy of space

and position in the middle of the city. Leisure of the residents and visitors to the city gets associated with this green approximate quietude which struggles to remain in the repelling noise that comes as a product of the relentless traffic on the road surrounding the ground.

“Sarovaram” park was another exemplary addition to the city space in terms of human accessibility. The abandoned marshy land on the outskirts was renovated and incorporated into the city’s space as a bio-park. Maria Kaika’s coinage of “urban nature” describes the construction of artificial spaces in harmony with nature in urban spaces. She defines urban nature as “urban landscapes that are products of nature, technology and urban design (13).” It becomes an integration of economic, political and social processes. The privacy that Sarovaram offers often entitles the space as a usual centre of urban courtship and clandestine meetings. The public space of a park ironically is expected to bear the confidentiality of a private meeting.

Individuals are convinced of the secrecy of the space as they come to Sarovaram. Mananchira square, though another public park in the city, does not make such enticing offer of confidentiality. The privacy in Sarovaram is dictated to the individuals by the authorities. They are convinced of their anonymity because the urban power centres regulate their interventions in the area accordingly. The actions of an individual in a specific space are indirectly dictated to him. “Enduring landscape phenomena are rooted in power relations, enforced by hegemonic control, and immersed in socio-economic cycles (Lefebvre 21).” So the landscape is created or constructed in relation to these power relations. The understanding of a space or a space itself is created through such definitions. The natural ambience of the park and its distance from the city’s crowded streets are not exclusively responsible for the creation of privacy in the park but it is the authority’s decision to abstain from interventions to the individuals’ private space. The park is not independent of surveillance but non-intervention creates an illusion of privacy and makes it a pseudo-personal space.

The negotiation or convergence of private and public realms are distinctly addressed in *Tinai* stratification of the land. “*Tinai* falls into two broad categories, *akam* (the inner) and *puram* (the outer). *Akattinai* deals with situations involving not more than two persons who enjoy an intimate relationship with each other... *Purattinai* encompasses situations involving any number of people (39 Selvamony).” The geographical division of the region into five types of land are supposed to have the *Akam* and *Puram* aspect



to it. The landscape dictates the types of conversations that the individuals would have in each *Tinai* poem. The spatial aspect of an individual's identity is reiterated in *Tinai*. The nature of transactions between an individual, the number of people who are involved in that transaction and their reaction are all predetermined in literature in relation to spatiality. *Tinai* is not a dictum for social transactions but rather a literary observation of those transactions. Hence, the definition of *Akam* and *Puram* in *Tinai* are not put in place to avoid transgressions but to point out the most common human engagements in each of those spaces.

The understanding of *Akam* and *Puram* are extended further in the context of Kerala. The eco-zones of *Tinai* are not thoroughly explored as the stratification was specific to its time and space. But, the manifestation of *Akam* and *Puram* are present in the discourse around space. The *Tinai* finds its origin in the primal society that is characterised by orality and lack of literacy and absence of technology prior to the introduction of a society under a state. The stratified *Tinai* society advanced and manoeuvred those wants. However, the state and caste are deemed characteristics of post-*tinai* society which are stratified too. So, the categorisation of *Akam* and *Puram* underwent changes after the era. So the notion has been accommodative of the regional specificity of the land. The cultural as well as caste specific practices were dependent on the region and were not homogenous to a caste or a community across the state. So the understanding of *Akam* and *Puram* differed too. The intersectionality of individual identity in every space made the definition of private and public complex.

The imperial and post imperial era defined *Akam* as the interior space of different communities. The *Akam* of Samoothiri illam differs from the *Akam* of a Mappila household. The identities of men and women and their performativity in terms of gender and class varies too. The upper caste households in the city had lower caste women as servants. The mobility of female servants was comparatively more than that of the mobility of the upper caste women due to their forced adherence to the practice of purity and pollution. Mappila women's mobility depended on whether they belonged to the Sunni sect or the Mujahid sect. When the former was inclusive of other communities in their society but were very adamant in their practice, the latter promoted reformed practices in the religion thereby promoted education and mobility of women along with men. So the negotiations in the interior spaces changed from one household to another. The lower caste people were merely considered as work force, so their physical capacity was their identity. Hence, men and women got equality in terms being in the receiving end of mistreatment by the upper caste sections. The

lower caste women were often seen as sexual objects by the upper caste men who preyed upon them to satisfy their carnal desires. Some parts of the city still prevail as the centres of prostitution where women who belong to the lower rungs are still working as sex workers.

Common residential facilities in the city blurs the compartmentalisation between the public and private. The multiple paying guest facilities and hostels become private spaces for multiple individuals simultaneously. The Government Employees Hostel for Men is one of the oldest lodging facility in the city. The practices of caste are often subtly followed in such spaces but class differences are clearly visible. However, the spaces are often satisfactorily private for individuals but are accompanied with common dining areas and restrooms. Hence, privacy is limited to the four walls of the rooms and is dependent on the number of occupants of that space.

*Puram* or exterior is the space of recreation, vocation, polity and society. The trading centres of the city and the beach are examples for the public sphere of Calicut. The domestication of public spaces has already personalised *Puram* considerably. The caste based differences that was attributed to individual's identity too personalise the public space. The lower caste women who occupied the public space for their vocation were often expected to be sexually adventurous. They were expected to provide sexual favours and services to the men in the city. In the contemporary city space, these caste-based gender identities are not overtly present. But the seeming appearance of women which would make them belong to the lower class in specific parts of the city like Tali temple's vicinity may still be considered as an attempt to solicit sex. Identities are defined in terms of spatial negotiations along with other markers.

The negotiation of private and public differs in city spaces due to the transformations that city spaces are undergoing in the era of globalisation. The historicity of cities like Kozhikkode redraw those boundaries due to their region specific significance too. The intersectional identities which are diverse in spaces like Kozhikkode create the simultaneous experiences of multiple cities in the same geographical area as negotiations of individuals too vary. However, *Akam* and *Puram* often overlapped with one another and thereby domesticated the urban spaces and opened up the homeliness of certain spaces.

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