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Kalari, Caste And Chronicle: Exploring Caste Dynamics In Vadakkan Pattukal

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Abstract: Kerala, famously known as 'God's own country', has a diverse collection of *orature*, similar to other parts of the country. The ballads of Kerala, traditionally divided into *Thekkan Pattukal* (Songs of South) and *Vadakkan Pattukal* (Songs of North) strengthen the oral literary tradition of the state. *Thekku* and *Vadakku* are two Malayalam terms which represent south and north. As the names suggest, the settings of *Thekkan Pattukal* and *Vadakkan Pattukal* are the southern and northern sides of Kerala. It is believed that these stories were written in the medieval period. Northern and southern ballads of Kerala are centred around the numerous battles between princely states and rich families. Even though many of these stories are hero-centric, the stories of women warriors are also given the same importance. These ballads also reflect the social structure and culture of the society of medieval Kerala. Even though the characters of these ballads are real their stories are exaggerated to a certain extent, as it is transferred orally from one generation to another. This paper is a thematic study of *Vadakkan Pattukal*.

Keywords: Angam, Battles, Ballads, Caste, Chekavar, North, Warrior

1. Introduction:

The *Vadakkan Pattukal* set in the northern region of Malabar, especially *Kadathanadu*, *Kolathirinadu*, and *Vadakara* regions. The stories of northern ballads are centred around two ancestral houses of different castes, namely, Puthooram House and Thacholi House. The Puthooram family belongs to the *Thiyya* community and the Thacholi house belongs to the *Nair* community. It is important to note that the Nair and Thiyya communities belong to different strata of the four-tier caste system, where Thiyyars are considered as a lower caste, Nairs are categorised as a higher caste. Based on this division, northern ballads can be divided into Puthooram songs and Thacholi songs.

2. Statement of the Study

This study explores the *Vadakkan Pattukal* (Northern Ballads of Kerala) through the lens of caste, gender, and power in medieval Kerala society. While these ballads are widely celebrated for their heroic narratives and martial valour, they also reveal deeply embedded social hierarchies, including caste-based divisions, patriarchal norms, and feudal power structures. By focusing on both Puthooram and Thacholi songs, which are rooted, respectively, in the Thiyya and Nair communities, the study aims to understand how the oral tradition not only reflects cultural pride and heroism but also preserves and transmits the social boundaries and inequalities of the time.

3. Methodology

This is a descriptive study that uses a thematic analysis of selected ballads, focusing on stories of Puthooram Chekavar and Thacholi Kuruppu lineages. The paper draws from secondary sources, including works on folklore, oral traditions, and caste studies, to interpret the deeper social meanings embedded in the ballads.

4. Analysis

4.1. Puthooram Songs

These songs centred around Puthooram House which has a legacy of many warriors, including brave women warriors from Thiyya community. Male warriors of this particular community are identified as *chekavar*. Some historians opine that 'Chekavar' is a sir name commonly used for Thiyyas or Thiyyans who won a particular '*Angam*'. there is a popular dictum, 'one who wins the ankam will be the chekon'. Following are some of the famous chekavar and notable battles:

4.1.1. Aromal Chekavar

Puthooram Veettil Aromal Chekavar, often known simply as Aromal Chekavar, was a legendary warrior believed to have lived in the 16th century. He was the celebrated head of the Puthooram family and the chief of the famed *Pathinettu Kalari* (Eighteen Kalaris) — traditional training schools dedicated to the martial art of *Kalaripayattu*. His sister, Unniyarcha, remains renowned as one of the greatest women warriors in folklore. Aromal's son, Kannappanunni, and his nephew too followed in his martial footsteps.

Aromal Chekavar is closely associated with the historic Puthariyankam, a famous *ankam* (duel) arranged to resolve a bitter dispute. This conflict arose between Unni Chandror and Unni Konar, two nephews of Kaimal Karungadi, the head of a powerful matrilineal family. As tensions escalated, it was agreed that the dispute could only be settled by an *ankam*. Unni Chandror secured the support of Aringotar Chekavar, a seasoned but unscrupulous warrior known for disregarding the ethics of battle. Determined to overcome his rival, Unni Konar hired Aromal Chekavar, offering a generous *Ankappanam* (fee for participating in *ankam*). Chandu Chekavar, the nephew of Aromal's father, accompanied Aromal as an assistant in the duel. However, Chandu bore a deep resentment towards Aromal for having opposed his proposal to marry Unniyarcha.

Driven by jealousy and vengeance, Chandu secretly conspired with Aringotar. He also bribed the Kollan, the blacksmith who crafted Aromal's weapons, ensuring they would fail at a critical moment. Despite the sabotage, Aromal Chekavar managed to kill Aringotar during the fierce combat, even after his shield shattered at a decisive point. Exhausted and wounded but still alive, Aromal lay on the battlefield. Seizing the moment, Chandu thrust the rod of his Kuthuvilakku (traditional oil lamp) into one of Aromal's wounds, leading to his death. Before dying, Aromal revealed Chandu's treachery to his father and sister.

The tragedy did not end there. According to legend, Chandu was later responsible for the death of Aromalunni Chekavar, the son of Unniyarcha. Eventually, Unniyarcha avenged the betrayal. Chandu Chekavar, met his end when he was beheaded, and his story remains one of deceit and downfall. Chandu had briefly prospered by marrying Aringotar's daughter and inheriting his wealth and estate, but his legacy became synonymous with betrayal. The tale of Aromal Chekavar, rooted in the *Vadakkan Pattukal* (Northern Ballads), continues to echo through Kerala's folklore, a saga of heroism, treachery, and tragic destiny.

4.1.2. Unniyarcha

The *Vadakkan Pattukal* (Northern Ballads) of Kerala are remarkable not only for glorifying legendary male warriors but also for giving equal space and voice to formidable women fighters. Among them, Attummanammel Unniyarcha — known simply as *Unniyarcha* or affectionately as *Archa* — stands out as an enduring symbol of beauty, bravery, and fierce independence. Her name continues to resonate among Keralite women as an icon of empowered womanhood.

According to folklore, Unniyarcha was unmatched in the martial art of *Kalaripayattu*, with stories crediting her with winning sixty-four Kalari duels. Many Thiyyar families today trace their ancestry to this storied Chekavar lineage, connecting themselves with mythic heroes like Unniyarcha and her brother, Aromal

Chekavar. Her husband, Attummanammal Kunjiraman, also maintained a renowned *kalari* named Puthussery Kalari, which still exists in Kannur district, a silent witness to the martial heritage of that era.

One of the most celebrated episodes in Unniyarcha's legend is the Nadapuram fight, a story of unflinching courage. Not long after her marriage, Unniyarcha expressed her wish to attend festivals at the Koothu in Allimalarkavu, the Vilakku in Ayyappankavu, and the Velapuram in Anjanakavu. Her family, knowing that the bazaar route was frequented by the feared Mappilas (Jonakas), strongly disapproved. But Unniyarcha, resolute and fearless, insisted on going. Her husband, Kunhiraman, had little choice but to accompany her.

As feared, they were waylaid at Nadapuram by the Mappilas. While Kunhiraman trembled with fear, Unniyarcha drew her sword, standing her ground almost single-handedly. The headman of the Jonakas, taken by her striking beauty, ordered his men to seize her. But Unniyarcha's blade struck down several attackers, forcing the rest to retreat. Realizing she was the sister of their fencing master, the headman himself rushed to the scene and, overwhelmed by fear and guilt, pleaded for her forgiveness.

Unniyarcha refused to yield easily. She demanded an unconditional promise: that no woman would ever again face harassment on that route. Even the appeals of the ruling chieftain's wife and the respected Chetti, a friend of Chekavar, failed to soften her resolve. Finally, her brother Aromal Chekavar arrived. Only after the Muppan offered heartfelt apologies and valuable gifts did she finally lay down her sword.

The incident concluded when the local chief intervened and secured the headman's solemn vow to ensure the safety and dignity of women in the area. It was only then that Unniyarcha agreed to peace, her courage forever enshrined in Kerala's cultural memory. Through tales like these, the *Vadakkan Pattukal* preserve not only the valor of legendary warriors but also the unwavering strength and dignity of women like Unniyarcha, whose defiance shaped both legend and social values.

5. Thacholi Songs

Thacholi songs are comparatively new than Puthooram songs as it is believed to be originated in 17th century. Thacholi songs are centred around the warriors of Thacholi house, a famous family of Nair community. Thacholi Chandu and his nephew Thacholi Othenan are belonging to this lineage. These warriors are often called *Kuruppu* as an indication of their caste.

5.1. Thacholi Chandu

The Thulunadan Fort Fight is a legendary tale that highlights the unmatched courage and cunning of Chandu Chekavar. According to the story, Kandar Menon, the formidable owner of Thulunadan Fort, was himself a master of martial arts. Protected by an army of one lakh soldiers and an arsenal of 17,789 weapons, his fort had never fallen — not even the great Thacholi Othenan could breach its walls.

One day, while Chandu's wife, Mattu Kutty, was on her way to the Omaloor Kavu temple, Kandar Menon caught sight of her and, captivated by her beauty, abducted her. When Chandu heard of this outrage, he devised a daring plan to rescue her and take revenge. Disguising himself as a sage, Chandu approached Thulunadan Fort, knowing that Kandar Menon held holy men in great respect. His plan worked. The gates were opened, and he was welcomed inside.

Under the cover of night, Chandu silently made his move. With calculated precision, he killed the entire garrison of soldiers who guarded the fort. When dawn broke, Kandar Menon awoke to find his fortress drenched in the blood of his slain army. It was then that Chandu revealed his true identity. Stepping forward, he challenged Kandar Menon to an *Angam*, a formal duel. In the fierce battle that followed, Chandu displayed his mastery of *Kalaripayattu*. He finally used a deadly technique known as *ullivettu* to strike down Kandar Menon, avenging the wrong done to his wife and proving his legendary bravery. The story of the Thulunadan Fort Fight remains a powerful testament to Chandu Chekavar's valor, skill, and unyielding resolve.

5.2.Thacholi Othenan

Thacholi Meppayil Kunjhu Othenan, also known as Mepayil Tacholi Manikoth Kovilakathu Kunji Othena Kurup or simply Thacholi Othenan, is a legendary hero believed to have lived in the 17th century in the North Malabar region of Kerala, India. Celebrated in the *Vadakkan Pattukal* (ballads of North Malabar), Othenan remains one of the most iconic figures in Kerala's martial folklore. His son, Thacholi Ambadi, also gained fame as a skilled martial arts expert.

From a young age, Othenan showed remarkable creativity and brilliance in his studies under Mathilur Gurukkal, his respected teacher of *Kalaripayattu*. One notable episode from his youth recounts an incident when Othenan and his friend Chappan were traveling through the Naru Passage. There, they encountered Payanadan Chindan Nambiar, a renowned master of *Kalaripayattu*, accompanied by his students.

Neither Othenan nor Chindan Nambiar stepped aside to let the other pass, and as they drew closer, their bodies collided, knocking them both into the surrounding rice fields. After regaining their footing, Chindan Nambiar, angered by the confrontation, challenged Othenan to an *Angam*, a formal public duel to the death.

Othenan trained with Payyampalli Chandu, who taught him a special technique known as *Poozhikadakan* to prepare for this decisive fight. This move stirred up dust so thick that the spectators had to step back, temporarily blinded by the swirling air. When the dust finally settled, they saw Othenan gripping Chindan Nambiar's body firmly. Then he executed Nambyar by cutting off his head.

Othenan's legendary life continued with many other feats. At Ponnyam *Angam*, he met his heroic end, attaining *Vira Swarga* (the warrior's heaven). Before his death, during a fierce battle, Othenan decapitated Kathirur Gurukkal using the deadly *Urumi*, a flexible sword unique to *Kalaripayattu*. Victorious, Othenan and his followers celebrated their triumph. However, on their return journey from the battlefield, one of Kathirur Gurukkal's students ambushed them, firing a gun at Othenan. The student was swiftly killed by Othenan's men, who shot him down with a bow and arrow. Stories of Thacholi Othenan's courage, skill, and indomitable spirit have echoed through generations, ensuring his place among Kerala's most revered warrior legends.

6. Major Themes

6.1.Caste System

The evidence of caste system of medieval Kerala society is evident in Northern balladas. Apart from Nair and Thiyya castes other lower castes such as *Pulluvan*, *Vannathi* and *Kollan* are mentioned in various parts of the songs. Names of various deities and temples mentioned in the songs such as Lokanar Kavu, a famous temple in Vadakara of Calicut district. Lokanar Kavu Bhagavati is mentioned as ancestral deity of Thacholi family. Temples like Allimalarkkavu and Anjanakkavu are mentioned in Puthooram songs.

Pulluvan, *Vannathi* and *Kollan* belong to the lower strata of the caste system. *Pulluvan* is a scheduled caste group in Kerala. They belong to the Hindu religion. The term *pullu* means a bird of omen. Their songs are considered a prayer for the betterment of health and wealth. This community acted as the role of balladeers in northern ballads. They spread the heroic stories of warriors through their songs within and around the *Kadathanadu* region.

Women who belong to the Vannan community are named as *Vannathi*. This community is associated with the job of laundry. The woman who belonged to this community was assigned *mattu* to high caste women during menstruation and delivery and thereby purified them. These kinds of purificatory duties (during the time of menstruation and delivery) were confined only to the higher class. *Vannathis* were kept away from home while giving *mattu*, which shows the hollowness of that custom and the depth of inequality.

The caste of *Kollan* is also mentioned in *Vadakkan Pattukal*. They are blacksmiths. They design armour. The story of Aromal Chekavar says that the villain Chandu influenced the *Kollan* to cheat Aromal by giving him a useless armour.

The hierarchy of caste is very visible in each episode of *Vadakkan pattukal*. So, one can assume that it is a reflection of the society of medieval Kerala.

6.2.Nadu Vazhi System

Nadu means land and *Vazhi* means ruler in Malayalam. In other words, one who rules the land is called *Naduvazhi*. *Naduvazhi* system is the most important political organization of *Vadakkan pattukal*. Those who had power imposed their power and domination upon the powerless class, and thus they became masters rather than rulers. The relation between *Naduvazhi* and people was like that of masters and slaves. Thus, the domination of power also existed in addition to caste and gender domination. Warriors fight for *Nadu vazhi* to keep his prestige and pride high.

6.3.Battles and Society

Battles in *Vadakkan pattu* cannot be included in the category of modern wars. It was called as *Angam* which means fight. Small version of these fights are called as *payattu* as many of the techniques associated with this is related to *Kalari payattu*, a form of martial art originating in *Kadathanadu* region. Each *Angam* ends with the death of one of the main warriors. One who kills the other is considered as the hero or the winner. Majority of the *Angams* were paid.

Each fighter had given *angappanam*, an amount for the fight. There was a separate stage for each *Angam*, so that the people can witness the fight. *Angam* in another way was considered a form of sport which satisfied the sport spirit of society. Those who won the *Angam* gained fame and money. As it was a fight includes a few people, there was no destruction or trauma happened to the entire society. Also, warriors were happy to be died during the *Angam* and they considered it as a privilege. Fighters considered this a proud job. They inherited the techniques of *Kalari* from their family itself. Some of them, like Aromal chekavar, owned *kalaris* to teach people those who are interested. It is important to note that even women were interested in *Kalari* and many of them were skilled warriors. Apart from *Unniyarcha*, *Mathileri Kanni*, *Thumbolarcha* and many more names of women warriors can be counted.

7. Conclusion:

Almost all these ballads show strong connections to *Kalaripayattu*. However, like any other oral cultural forms northern ballads are sung by communities even today, especially in *Kadathanadu* region and they still follow the lineage of *Kalari* practice. Like other folk songs, these songs also show great flexibility and a repetitive pattern in their lexicon. The *Vadakkan Pattukal* remain powerful cultural texts that celebrate heroism and martial skill, but they also reflect the layered realities of caste, power, and gender in medieval Kerala. Stories of *Puthooram* and *Thacholi* families highlight not only family pride but also the underlying caste-based distinctions between *Thiyyas* and *Nairs*. Women warriors like *Unniyarcha* appear as symbols of female strength, though still within patriarchal frameworks. The *Naduvazhi* system, *Angam* duels, and the oral transmission of these ballads helped reinforce social hierarchies while also keeping cultural memory alive. Together, these ballads reveal how folklore can function both as resistance and reinforcement of existing social orders.

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