

Lidia
Sudyka



The Language of the Gods in the World of Royal Ladies of Kerala

Toward a History
of Women's Writing
in Sanskrit
in the 18th- to 20th-century
Kerala

THE LANGUAGE OF THE GODS IN THE WORLD OF ROYAL
LADIES OF KERALA. TOWARD THE HISTORY OF WOMEN'S
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Kraków 2019

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Cover photo:
Raja Ravi Varma, Lady with Veena, Wikimedia Commons

Proofreading:
Ramon Shindler

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The book was published thanks to the financial support of
Faculty of Philology, Jagiellonian University.

ISBN 978-83-8138-089-8 (print)
ISBN 978-83-8138-355-4 (on-line, pdf)
<https://doi.org/10.12797/9788381380898>

Published in the e-book form plus paper copies.
The primary version of the book is the paper format.

Księgarnia Akademicka sp. z o.o.
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Acknowledgements

The present monograph is a result of the project OPUS 4 2012/07/B/HS2/01294 financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

The title of my book obviously alludes to Sheldon Pollock's famous and voluminous *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. My modest work acknowledges the presence of Kerala women in Sanskrit cosmopolis in premodern and modern times. It shows those "women who were not only articulate, but the script which they read was their own too" (Shah 2017: 80).

My gratitude is offered to the members of the poetesses' families, without whom it would not have been possible to present their biodata, their family background and, most importantly, their literary works. Special thanks go to Dr. R. P. Raja, who offered his vast knowledge of the culture and history of Kerala at my disposal. He was ready to answer all my questions and kindly organised my short stay in Punjar as well as a meeting with Sri-mati Chandravali Thampuram, belonging to the Royal Family of Cochin. But I would not have come to know Dr. R. P. Raja, had it not been for Sri Chemprol Raja Raja Varma. It was also he with whom I spoke for the first time about women writing in Kerala. He reacted immediately by inviting me to the Kowdiar Palace, where I was given a copy of the *Daśakumāracarita* written by his grandmother Ambadevi Tampuratti.

I have also collected many more debts of gratitude. These are Prof. Rajendran C., Prof. Cezary Galewicz, Dr. Kumuda Bayi,

Dr. Geethakumary K. K., Dr. E. K. Govinda Varma Raja, Dr. Maciej Karasiński, Ms. Agata Lenard, Mr. Ramon Shindler to whom I would like to thank. In fact, it would be a much longer list of people I would gladly mention, were it not for the lack of space. Still I hold them dear in my grateful memory.

To understand literary production, be it created by men or women, one needs historical and social background. Unfortunately, one can notice that pre-colonial Kerala is somehow neglected in the historiography of India. Dick Kooiman tries to provide an explanation for this fact noticing that ‘the bewildering variety of numerous coastal kingdoms does not seem to offer the historian a solid base for the construction of more enduring frameworks.’ (Kooiman 1992: 587). Obviously, this or any other reason should not and does not exclude Kerala from historical perspective. The number of works on the pre-colonial and early colonial history of Kerala is steadily increasing,¹ although there are still deficiencies in this area. I have not devoted too much space to the history of kingdoms of Cochin (Mal. *kocci*), Travancore (Mal. *tiruvitāṅkōṭṭu*, *tiruvāṅkōṭṭu* *tiruvitāmkūr*) or the Zamorins of Calicut (Mal. *kōlikkōṭṭu*; Kozhikode) as many authors have already concentrated on those issues. However, the history of the Kadattanad (Mal. *kaṭattanāṭu*) principality is not very well-known and researched, although the name of the realm and its rulers frequently appeared in English and French annals. Sometimes it is even difficult to connect all the names in the form given by French and English sources with this particular territory and its kings, and some authors are not ready to provide proper

¹ These are the works of M. G. S. Narayanan, Kesavan Veluthat, K. N. Ganesh, the recently published monograph on Ali Rajas by B. J. Mailaparambil (Mailaparambil 2012), a study of early colonial period by Margaret Frenz using Nicholas Dirks’ concept of a ‘little kingdom’ (Frenz 2003), Hugo K. s’Jacob’s analysis of Cochin political situation between 1663 and 1720 (s’Jacob 2001), and many other contributions to the subject.

explanations. Additionally, the same event of the Malabar² history in the 17th and 18th centuries will be described differently by English, French or other sources taking into consideration different attitudes and evaluations of their participants. Unfortunately, as for now, it seems that the point of view of Kadattanad *rājas* cannot be taken into account as no sources expressing their opinions on what happened and why during the most turbulent periods of their history have been preserved. From other sources we learn that they were very skilful players, and had to be, reigning over a very small principality but geographically located in the region of utmost interest for Europeans arriving in India. To deal with their enemies, they employed various strategies trying to protect their inheritance. They not only fought courageously against the local powers, then the Portuguese, but also negotiated with native kings or the English, the French or Mysore invaders. They periodically left their ancestral palaces and then came back. All of them had woven each his own thread into the magic fabric which is the history of the Malabar Coast kingdoms.

In contrast, the history of Punjar³ *rājas* seems to be less tumultuous. The scion of Pandyas (Skt. *pāṇḍya*, Tam. *pāṇṭiyar*) who fled from Madurai (Tam. *maturai*) secured a more peaceful place for himself and his descendants. A place where life could be lived far from political tensions, one could assume. Of course, it would be misleading as the involvement in the region's history is unavoidable. The history of this family has been touched in very few sources. There is no detailed study on Punjar's history. That is why in the present monograph I devoted some space to explain at

² During the British domination in the region lasting 150 years, Kerala consisted of three parts: Malabar (Mal. *malabār*), i.e. the northern part of Kerala, which was a part of Madras Presidency, and the native states of Travancore and Cochin, formally independent upon separate bilateral treaties. In 1956 they were joined and formed a state known as Kerala (Mal. *kēraḷa*). See the map on Fig. 5, p. 83.

³ Also Anglicized as Poonjar, Mal. *pūññār*.

least their beginnings as told by the family, the places where they still live and the temples where they still worship their gods. The approach presented here owes much to the attitude of a microhistorian: narratives concerning small principalities, their rulers and the intellectuals of that period in the south of India, individuals' biographies and an attempt to reconstruct their *Alltagsgeschichte*. Much can also be gained by looking at their portraits and photos, if there are any. But the focus of this research is on Kerala women writers as objects of memory.

The profiles of some poetesses have already been presented in the form of concise articles published in journals. These are: 1. 2016. "Zapomniana poezja. Sanskrycka twórczość kobiet z rodu władców Koczinu" in *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* 1–2 (257–258), pp. 217–230; 2. 2018. "The *Santānagopāla* as a narrative opening up intimate spaces. Lakṣmī Tampurāṭṭi and her poem" in *Opening up Intimate Spaces: Women's Writing, Autobiography and Biography in South Asia in Cracow Indological Studies*, vol. 20, No 2., pp. 71–87; 3. 2018. "Kerala Women's Writing in Sanskrit. Ambādevi Tampurāṭṭi of Cempul Kōṭṭāraṁ—her life and literary oeuvre" in *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*. Vol. LXXI, No. 2, pp. 187–197; 4. (forthcoming). "In search of women's Sanskrit writings in Kerala" in: *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*. This last article, which appears simultaneously with my monograph, is a kind of summary of the activities undertaken so far under my project, although it does not close it. Its continuation would be advisable and necessary.

Note on Transliteration

A number of Malayalam and Sanskrit words are frequently used in this book. The Sanskrit terms and quotations are given according to IAST. As to the Malayalam I apply ISO http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/ISO_15919.

The names of contemporary Indian writers, scholars, etc. are given in the form as they themselves use nowadays, i.e. Romanized. The names of the Malayali authors from the past are given in ISO in brackets when they appear for the first time and then in their Anglicized form. The titles of Sanskrit works and their authors, mythological personages as well as Sanskrit literary terms, etc. are given in IAST. As far as Kerala geographical names are concerned I try to provide the name in ISO (e.g. Mal. *tiruvananthapuram*), also its Anglicized form introduced during the British presence in India (e.g. Trivandrum) is given and sometimes the Romanized version of Malayalam words that one can find in different sources nowadays (e.g. Thiruvananthapuram). Some words may appear both in their Anglicized form as well as in Sanskrit or Malayalam transliteration, e.g.: Kathakali and *kathakālī*, Brahmin and *brāhmaṇa*. They do not connote any conceptual difference.

I. Background

1. Introductory remarks

*yasyāḥ svarūpam akhilam jñātuṃ brahmādayo 'pi na spaṣṭāḥ /
kāma-gavī sukavīnām sā jayati sarasvatī devī //*

keralyāḥ

Victory to the goddess Sarasvatī,
who is the cow of plenty to the great poets,
and whose real nature cannot be clearly known
in its entirety even by Brahmā and others.

Keralī

What is the best way to start a book or a poem if not with a hymn addressed to Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning? It was a usual practice in India but here the eulogy has a peculiar feature—it is attributed to Keralī, whose name not only betrays links with Kerala in South India, but first of all reveals the female gender of the writer. Unfortunately, no further information has been preserved about the authoress, her verse found in Veṇḍatta's *Padyaveṇī*⁴ and repeated in Jatindra Bimal Chaudhuri's anthology of Sanskrit verses attributed to Indian poetesses (Chaudhari 2001 vol. I: 15, transl. 81).

⁴ *Padyaveṇī* is an anthology containing 889 verses ascribed to different poets. According to Aufrecht it was composed in 1644. The author, Veṇḍatta, introduced himself as a son of Jogaḥveṇa and a grandson of Nīlakaṇṭha (Sternbach 1974: 28).

The present book focuses on Kerala women's writings in Sanskrit, an interesting and significant subject, yet hardly researched in Indology so far. Among the very few publications on the topic, we can find "Contribution of Kerala to Sanskrit Literature" written by Kunjunni Raja. The book itself is fairly informative, yet as regards to women writers it mentions only a handful of names and just a few titles of their compositions and as a rule it does not give any detailed information about their lives and works. Similarly, S. Venkatasubramonia Iyer, in his "Kerala Sanskrit Literature. A Bibliography", published in 1976, refers to women writers only six times. Considering such limited participation of women in literary creativity in Sanskrit, one can wonder whether we get its real picture indeed.

The famous spiritual master of the 19th century Swami Vivekananda, while travelling all over India and visiting Malabar, noticed, with perhaps utmost admiration, an astonishing fact that women in that region could speak Sanskrit. "When I myself was in that country, I met many women who spoke good Sanskrit, while in the rest of India not one woman in a million can speak it", he commented (Swami Vivekananda 1989: VII. 52).

It is an undeniable fact that the ability to speak Sanskrit must have entailed the ability to compose literary works in it. Although their compositions have not been made known to a wider public, be it for the lack of recognition for women as such and the reception of their oeuvre limited only to family circles or, if they had become true Sanskrit scholars, the lack of pupils who could take care of their *gurvīs*' fame, still it is possible to find traces of their literary activities in rare copies of forgotten publications or the vast abyss of family archives and glimpses of their life in the memory of their relatives.

Women's voices were not strong enough to spread widely through the ages, however, it is apparent that we cannot consider the history of Sanskrit literature as well as the picture of Indian society as complete without taking women's writing into account.

Kerala women's literary creativity will be treated here as a part of the cultural process showing the specificity and rank of Sanskrit literature in the South of India. Thus, the right point to start our investigations would be Sanskrit education in Kerala. The historical and cultural background of the region will be taken into consideration. Then the biographies of the authoresses will be provided and their oeuvre will be discussed.

The time span covered in the present monograph encompasses the 18th up to the beginning of the 20th century. The 18th century brought a lot of political, social and economic changes in the region. The politics of Martanda Varma (Mal. *mārtāṇṭavarma*; r. 1729–1758) in Travancore and Saktan Tampuran (*śaktan tam-purān*; r. 1790–1805) in Cochin caused a break-up of the old feudal system, reducing the power of *nāyar*⁵ chieftains and *nampūtiri*⁶ landlords and gave grounds to the rise of strong centralised monarchies.⁷ The royal courts in both kingdoms became influential centres of learning and arts and it seems only natural that the better possibilities of education for the women of these royal families and their way of life more open to the outer world⁸ could make them aspire to the position and fame as Sanskrit scholars and poetesses, at least in the royal or family circles. Their situation was quite different than that of thousands of anonymous Keralan women writers developing their literary skills in the seclusion of their houses themselves and in fact for themselves. There are also

⁵ Mal. *nāyar* (Anglicized as Nair, Nayar): 1) honorific plural from Mal. *nāyakan* (Skt. *nāyaka*), i.e. a leader, 2) the *sūdras* of Kerala, 3) Keralan soldiers of all castes.

⁶ Mal. *nampūtiri* (Anglicized as Namputhiri, Nambudiri or Namboodiri)—a high strata of Malayali Brahmins (Skt. *brāhmaṇa*).

⁷ Read more about state-building strategies in: Bayly 1984 and de Lannoy 1997.

⁸ As Gianna Pomata notices: “At the court, the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and personal, had little significance indeed” (Pomata 1993: 16). And this statement is also valid for India.

better chances that at least some part of literary oeuvre of royal poetesses has been preserved by their families proud of their talent and education. That is why this research concentrated on the contribution of royal ladies to Sanskrit literature of Kerala. It should also be mentioned that these families were matrilineal and as K. Saradamoni notices, summing up her research on transformation of matrilineal society in twentieth century Travancore, “Matriliny, when compared to patriliney, gave women some amount of autonomy (...)” (Saradamoni 1999: 15). Before entering the subject of royal women writings, some issues pertaining to the social and community customs should be explained.

2. A few words on the Keralan society structure

The region of Kerala⁹ is a narrow piece of land between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, isolated by its geographical features from the rest of India, which, on the one hand, made the external communication difficult, and, on the other, created a special ambience to develop a very specific culture and helped in protecting it. The early history of the region is poorly documented.¹⁰ The Cheras (Tam./Mal. *cēra*, Skt. *cera*) or Cēramāṇ Perumāḷs, as they use such a royal title, brought unity to this territory but due to the wars with Chola kings (Tam. *cōla*, Skt. *cola*), they lost their power in the 11th century and finally disappeared from the scene in the 12th century.¹¹ Their local vassals proclaimed

⁹ William Logan, for many years Collector of the Malabar District and the author of voluminous compendium *Malabar*, when for the first time reached Kerala in 1864, noticed that this land where people speak the Malayalam language is also called Malayalam (Mal. *malayāḷam*) or Keralam (Mal. *kēraḷam*) (Logan 1981: 1).

¹⁰ More about the Iron Age in South India in Sudyka 2014.

¹¹ More about Cēramāṇ Perumāḷs of Makōtai in Narayanan 1996.

The study, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Royal Ladies of Kerala. Toward a History of Women's Writing in Sanskrit in the 18th- to 20th-century Kerala*, addresses the subject of Sanskrit culture in Kerala and women's participation in it. Each chapter, depicting literary activities of poetesses belonging to different contexts, raises different questions. Each of the biographies included in the book brings new details concerning the life of women-writers at that time. An attempt is made to reconstruct historical reality and material culture, the practices of writing, daily routine of poetesses, objects surrounding them, etc., in each case under discussion.

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ISBN 978-83-8138-089-8



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