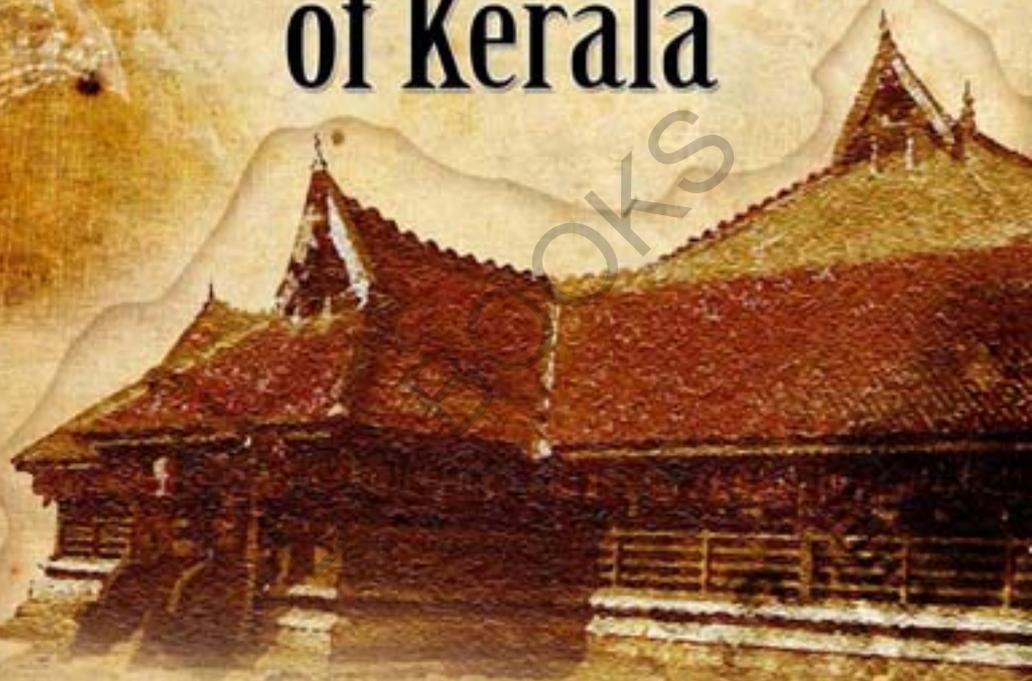


Cultural Heritage of Kerala



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To
the memory of my parents
the late Kovilakathumparambil Padmanabha Menon
and Alappat Narayani Amma

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From the Preface to the 1978 Edition

In 1967 I wrote the book *A Survey of Kerala History* which was published by the Sahitya Pravartaka Co-operative Society, Kottayam. In the preface to that publication I had expressed my hope that it would be possible for me to write a more detailed history of Kerala at a later date. However, owing to my official pre-occupations as Registrar, University of Kerala, I could not devote any time to this work. In the meantime, the reception accorded to my *A Survey of Kerala History* by the reading public and the academic community was indeed heartening and recently when I got some leisure, I thought that I should attempt a new volume with emphasis on the content of Kerala Culture following the principles of modern Historiography. The book *Cultural Heritage of Kerala-An Introduction* is the outcome of the attempt made by me in this direction.

In giving final shape to the present volume too, I have followed, as I did in the case of *A Survey of Kerala History*, the dictum that an ideal, complete, perfect book that is never written is the enemy of a good book that would have been published. In this context, I should like to record with gratitude that the guidance I received from such a mastermind as the late Prof. Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai in studying Kerala History and the rich and varied experience that I gained while compiling the Kerala District gazetteers during 1958-68 when I could visit almost every part of the State, form my own impressions and discover the cultural heritage of Kerala in its true spirit, have stood me in good stead in giving shape to the contents of this volume. I have planned this primarily as a companion volume which would supplement my *A survey of Kerala History* and it is my earnest hope that it would be received as such by the readers. Nevertheless, I have at the same time made a conscious effort to make this volume as self-contained as possible even at the risk of some overlapping in the treatment of certain topics.

Trivandrum
1st December 1977

A. SREEDHARA MENON

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1. Kerala Culture in the Indian Background

India has a composite and cosmopolitan culture to which the peoples of all the regions of this ancient land have made their distinct contributions. Among the people who have thus enriched Indian cultural heritage and helped the cause of national integration, the people of the Kerala region of South India have a place of honour. Kerala culture is, in fact, an integral part of Indian culture. There are many basic similarities between the two. The Kerala region, like the Indian sub-continent, can claim to have a culture the history of which runs into the dim recesses of antiquity.

Composite Culture

Kerala culture is also a composite and cosmopolitan culture to which several peoples and races have made their significant contributions. In fact, the secret of the vitality and strength of Kerala culture lies in its composite character. The gradual evolution of a composite and cosmopolitan culture led to the emergence of a spirit of tolerance and catholicity of outlook which still persist among the people of Kerala. Its history unfolds the romantic and fascinating story of a unique process of cultural synthesis and social assimilation. In response to every challenge Kerala has demonstrated through the ages its genius for adaptation and fusion of old traditions and new values in every sphere of human thought and endeavour.

Unity in Diversity

It may really be said of Kerala culture, as of Indian Culture in general, that its salient feature is 'unity in diversity.' It was Kerala's foreign contacts from the earliest days which helped in the evolution of a way of life and culture noted for its catholicity and universality. The neighbouring states of TamilNadu and Karnataka have also exercised some influence on the evolution of the life and culture of the Kerala people. At the same time the peculiar geographical position of Kerala as the southernmost part of the Indian peninsula separated from the rest of the country by the natural barrier of the western ghats and from the rest of the world by the high seas has helped the people of the land

2. The Formative Phase

Megalithic Culture

The antiquity of Kerala is an undisputed fact, though the prehistory of the land is a *terra incognita*. The palaeolithic man does not seem to have lived in Kerala. The region is, however, noted for its megalithic monuments which belong to the megalithic complex common to South India. Some scholars assign these megaliths to the period 700-400 B.C. while others ascribe them to a much earlier age and some even to a later age. It may be pertinent to note in this context that there is a view which connects the South Indian megaliths, including those of Kerala, with the megaliths in other parts of the world, eg., the lands bordering on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, in the Caucasus in Iran. If this view is accepted the megalithic culture of Kerala should be regarded as part of a world-wide megalithic culture.

References in Ancient Sanskrit Literature

Kerala attracted the notice of people in other parts of India even from time immemorial. This is evident from the many references to the land in ancient Sanskrit works. The *Aitareya Aranyaka* is the earliest Sanskrit work which specifically mentions Kerala. The great Epics, *Ramayana and Mahabharatha*, show awareness of Kerala on the part of their authors., Katyayana (4th century B.C.) and Patanjali (2nd century B.C.) show their acquaintance with the geography of Kerala. Kautilya's *Arthasastra* mentions the river Churni where pearls abound. The *Puranas* also mention Kerala. It is clear from the beautiful description of Kerala in Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* that the land had become familiar to the writers of North India by the 4th century A.D.

Kerala looms large in the accounts of the classical writers of Greece and Rome. The Chera kingdom is mentioned by the Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, in his *Indica*. Pliny (1st century A.D.), the anonymous author of the *Periplus* (1st century A.D.) and Plotemy (2nd century A.D.) are the most outstanding classical writers who give information about Kerala. They deal particularly with the brisk trade in spices between the Kerala coast and the Roman Empire through the ports of Muziris, Tyndis and Barace. Later foreign writers like Sulaiman (9th