Mathileri Kanni, A Heroic Ballad of North Malabar: The Past Voice and its Documentation

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Introduction: Nothing, perhaps, serves as an excellent introduction to medieval Kerala than a glimpse at the manner in which it was preserved in the heroic ballads popularly known as vadakkanpattukal (ballads of North Malabar). Vadakkanpattukal still survive as an important source of Kerala’s medieval history. Interestingly, Mathileri Kanni occupies a high position in the ballad tradition of Northern Malabar. It extensively shares the heroic adoration that commonly characterizes vadakkanpattukal. The political setting of the ballad denotes an era in Kerala history that was ruled by feudal kings, landlords and barons. The ballad’s presentation of the heroic endeavours, ornamental narrative style, chivalric personalities, rivalries and promises necessarily categorize it into the class of heroic ballads. Analyzing its ballad structure M.K. Panikkotti says that unlike those vadakkanpattukal which are meant for the peasants and other working class sections of society, Mathileri Kanni was particularly constructed with the intention of amusing and entertaining the women folk of the feudal families. Though it possesses heroic adoration, this particular folk ballad is significant in itself as it contains lower myths, romance, foreign influences, diverse regional histories, invasions etc. This study would be incomplete unless the socio-historical understanding of the significance of the ballad is examined.

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1. Introduction

Nothing, perhaps, serves as an excellent introduction to medieval Kerala than a glimpse at the manner in which it was preserved in the heroic ballads popularly known as vadakkanpattukal (ballads of North Malabar). Vadakkanpattukal still survive as an important source of Kerala's medieval history. Interestingly, Mathileri Kanni occupies a high position in the ballad tradition of Northern Malabar. It extensively shares the heroic adoration that commonly characterizes vadakkanpattukal. The political setting of the ballad denotes an era in Kerala history that was ruled by feudal kings, landlords and barons. The ballad's presentation of the heroic endeavours, ornamental narrative style, chivalric personalities, rivalries and promises necessarily categorize it into the class of heroic ballads. Analyzing its ballad structure M.K. Panikkoti says that unlike those vadakkanpattukal which are meant for the peasants and other working class sections of society, Mathileri Kanni was particularly constructed with the intention of amusing and entertaining the women folk of the feudal families. Though it possesses heroic adoration, this particular folk ballad is significant in itself as it contains lower myths, romance, foreign influences, diverse regional histories, invasions etc. This study would be incomplete unless the socio-historical understanding of the significance of the ballad is examined.

Among the heroic ballads of Northern Malabar, Mathileri Kanni distinguishes itself attractively, mainly for its complex plot structure. The ballad revolves around three significant aristocratic women, namely Mathileri Kanni, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni. The story can be briefly summarized as follows. The title character Mathileri Kanni was the daughter of Chirakkara Lord of the Kolathiri province. She lost her mother at a very young age and was brought up by her father who taught her martial arts in which she became adept and proved herself to be a great warrior. It was during her visit to the temple festival of Valarmundakavu with her maids that she met the Venadu Prince for the first time. Both fell in love with each other and subsequently they got married with her father's consent. A week after their marriage, the Venadu Prince was informed about Odanadu Pandipada's intention to attack Venadu province in his absence and so he left his newlywed wife in her father's care and went back to his land. Three long years of war followed and when the Venadu Prince was on the verge of defeat, he asked the Chirakkara Lord to send him a chieftain with sufficient military aid. He also made it a point to caution his father-in-law to keep Mathileri Kanni unaware of the situation. But unexpectedly his letter was read by Mathileri Kanni herself. Over the objections of the Chirakkara Lord, Mathileri Kanni resolved to go to Venadu to help her husband. Subsequently she disguised herself as a male warrior with the assumed name Ponnan and went to the battle with an army of ten thousand soldiers.

Ponnan fought against the Pandipada army tactfully and defeated them. The Venadu Prince was so much pleased with him that he compelled Ponnan to stay with him in Venadu and entrusted him with new administrative charges. The plot gets further complicated when the Venadu Prince's sister, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni who was entrusted with the dominion of half of the Venadu province, was so charmed by Ponnan's charisma, she madly and deeply fell in love with Ponnan whom she believed to be the man of her dreams. Thus in order to escape from such a bewildering situation, Ponnan without the Venadu Prince's knowledge escaped from the palace. When the Venadu Prince came to know about his friend's absence, he went to Chirakkara in search of him. He continued his journey through many lands and when the Venadu Prince was tired, he decided to get some rest near the palace of Churiyamani Kanni, a relative of Mathileri Kanni. She gazed at the Venadu Prince spellbound. Even when Churiyamani Kanni came to know that the Venadu Prince was her brother, she was determined to gain him at all cost. She tactfully found a reason to stay at Mathileri Kanni's mansion for three days, during which time she tried hard to seduce the Venadu Prince. She attempted everything a woman could do to seduce a man. And when she found that he was least interested in her, she determined to murder Mathileri Kanni and thus win over the Prince subsequently. And consequently, she conspired with one of Mathileri Kanni's maid servants, Nangyaru, who poisoned her. Soon Mathileri Kanni was down with serious illness and finally died of choking. Before she died in the lap of her lover, she managed to reveal the real identity of Ponnan. Witnessing the death of his only

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daughter the Chirakkara Lord died heartbroken on the very same moment. With a heavy heart the Venadu Prince gave due funeral rites to both his wife and father-in-law and on the way back to his home he also died. Thus the ballad ends tragically with the death of all the three main characters.

II. The Origin of Mathileri Kanni — Reflecting on the Social and Historical Context of the Ballad

Before shedding light on the significance of the ballad Mathileri Kanni, it is important to trace the origin of the ballad. The origin of Mathileri Kanni goes back to a period in the history of Kerala of which no written record exists. It is hard to trace the origin of this ballad by studying primarily the linguistic aspects of the ballad. The only other option left for us is to examine the various socio-historical events portrayed in the ballad. Not many historical studies are done on Mathileri Kanni and among the most prominent works of scholars, those of M.K. Panikkoti, Dr. Thikkurissi Gangadharan, Dr. M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri, Dr. Thonnakkal Vasudevan and V.T. Kumaran, may be counted.

Deriving his conclusion from historical and social details portrayed in the ballad, V.T. Kumaran claims that Mathileri Kanni was composed between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. His observation regarding the ballad’s origin is rooted in the cultural history of Kerala. V.T. Kumaran examines the feudal history of Kerala and comments that it is only after the disintegration of the Chera dynasty in the twelfth century that the feudal lords attained freedom and this consequently resulted in the emergence of independent feudal states. The initial lines of the ballad clearly refer to these states:

A ballad most celebrated and esteemed
Among eighteen lands and ten clans. (My translation)

These lines specifically inform the readers about the erstwhile political geography of Kerala that existed at the time of the ballad which fundamentally comprised eighteen separate districts. The ballad Mathileri Kanni is mainly centered around the regions of Venadu1, Odanadu, Kadathanadu and Chirakkal2. One could certainly assert that the story of the ballad basically develops from the historical battle held between Venadu and Odanadu regions. At this juncture, I may attempt to locate the two feudal states within the current political state of Kerala. The region of Odanadu as described in the ballad, comprised the towns of Chegannur, Mavelikara, Karunagappally and Karthikappally, with Kandyoor as its initial capital which later got transferred to Kayamkulam. While Venadu was relatively a small state which comprised towns such as Chirayinkeezhu, Kottarakara and Kollam, with its capital at Kollam. Since the ballad clearly specifies a period where the independent feudal states had already established themselves, one could necessarily trace its origin around the twelfth century.

Moreover, V.T. Kumaran substantiates the origin of the ballad around twelfth century by alluding to a vital historical document, the ordinance passed by the Odanadu king regarding the renewal of Kandyoor temple3. The ordinance had specific details that confirm the ascendancy of Venadu and consequently, Odanadu was completely under the rule of Venadu king. It is only after Odanadu became an independent state in the twelfth century, the war broke out between the two. Drawing from these observations one would necessarily agree with V.T. Kumaran’s opinion that the ballad had its origin around the twelfth century. Again, if we examine the history of the traditional martial art of Kerala, ‘kalaripayattu’, we could also able to trace the ballad’s period of composition during the twelfth century. The cultural history of Kerala indicates the origin of ‘kalaripayattu’ in the latter half of the eleventh century. Since the ballad, Mathileri Kanni, denotes a society where ‘kalaripayattu’ has already been established and extensively practiced, we could clearly place the ballad’s origin in the twelfth century.

Interestingly, V.T. Kumaran in his study of Mathileri Kanni particularly examines the name of the towns mentioned in the ballad. He notes that there is no kind of reference made about Kozhikode (Calicut) district. Consequently, he says that it was in the thirteenth century that Kozhikode as an independent feudal state came into existence and since the ballad does not mention it, we can definitely assert that the town was not yet formed then. Drawing from V.T. Kumaran’s observation we can locate the ballad’s origin around twelfth century. Furthermore, he examines the ballad’s description of the battle and says that since there are no references made about gun, he confirms that the ballad was composed before the Portuguese incursion in the fifteenth century.

Contrary to V.T. Kumaran’s observation regarding Mathileri Kanni’s date of composition around twelfth century, the critic Thonnakkal Vasudevan locates it in the fifteenth century, specifically after the Portuguese incursion. He bases such an argument mainly on the ballad’s reference to the ships and the trading of food grains. For instance, he quotes the line,

1 Herman Gundert in his Malayalam Dictionary, published in the year 1872, describes Venadu region as the seventeenth district of Kerala and “one of the twelve districts of low Tamil”. He also states that under the Venadu king there were 130,000 to 350,000 Nairs.
2 Gundert in his dictionary mentions Chirakkara as the residence of Kolathiri Raja.
3 Generally considered as the first temple of Kerala, constructed in the 8th century. It is situated near Mavelikara in Alappuzha district. The primary deity is Lord Shiva.
To import five hundred ships of rice. (My translation)

Accordingly, he states that such a line necessarily informs us about the period in the history of Malabar that had already established its commercial relationship with European countries like Portugal.

However, when both the observations of V.T. Kumaran and Thonnakkal Vasudevan are critically examined, I would consider the former as more convincing. Moreover, the argument advanced by Thonnakkal Vasudevan seems inaccurate when analyzed in relation with the history of Malabar. This I would substantiate by alluding to another reference mentioned in the ballad namely, ‘chinakuzhal’, a kind of binoculars used in medieval Kerala. In the ballad, there is a clear reference to ‘chinakuzhal’ used by the character Churiyamani Kann in order to enjoy the sight of the Venadu Prince from her mansion. The word ‘chinakuzhal’ when split into two, ‘china’ and ‘kuzhal’ (pipe or tube) evidently suggest that the binoculars historically reached the Malabar Coast from China. This further informs us about the history of Malabar, way before the coming of Portuguese in the fifteenth century. Drawing significant cues from William Logan’s historical work Malabar Manual⁴, Kathleen Gough reflects on the ancient trading history of Kerala. From this historical study we come to know that the Chinese had established their commercial relation with Kerala early in the sixth century and later recommenced it in the thirteenth century. Accordingly, Gough says that,

Chinese had resumed trade with Kerala sometimes in the Perumal period, and in the thirteenth century this trade greatly expanded under the empire of Kubla Khan. Concomitantly, two coastal Nayar chiefdoms with strategic ports expanded into small kingdoms by conquering the surrounding inland chiefdoms and monopolizing their trade. In the north was the Kolathiri kingdom centered about Mount Eli, and in the south the kingdom of Travancore or Venad, centered about Quilon [Ricci,1931: 326–330; Logan, 1951, I: 282–283]. Chinese trade declined in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (304).

It can be thus argued that the ‘kappalari’⁵ that Thonnakkal Vasudevan refers to in his work, therefore, necessarily corresponds to Malabar’s commercial relationship with China in the thirteenth century and not necessarily to the Portuguese. This can be further substantiated by referring to the historical records of Travancore State Manual:

The trade with China, which had very much decreased in the previous centuries, revived with great vigour in the eighth century. According to the records of the Tang Dynasty [618 A.D. to 913 A.D], Quilon was their chief settlement and they gave it the name of ‘Mahlai’. Several were the embassies sent by the Malabar Kings to the Celestial Emperor. The King of Quilon and the neighbouring districts is referred to in these records as Benati or Venad, the name by which Travancore is designated even today. This Chinese trade decreased again about 900 A.D., and was not revived till the 13th century (Aiya 311).

Consequently, deriving from the above historical observations we can agree with V.T. Kumaran’s presumption about the ballad’s origin around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. V.T. Kumaran further substantiates his argument by examining the history of ‘kathakali’. ‘Kathakali’ as a performing art is believed to have originated in the seventeenth century. Consequently, he argues that though the ballad refers to other early performing arts such as ‘koothu’ and ‘koodiyattam’, it fails to mention any details about ‘kathakali’. Again, in order to substantiate this observation I would now bring in another significant historical reference. According to the history of Malabar, the Samoothiri Royal family ruled over Kozhikode between twelfth and eighteenth centuries. Since, the ballad made only a passing reference to the Samoothiri⁶ of Kozhikode we can reach a conclusion that Mathileri Kanni was composed at a time before the Samoothiri rule had established itself in Malabar. This presumption further validates the above conclusions regarding the ballad’s origin in the twelfth century.

Again, the social custom of ‘marumakkathayam’, the matrilineal system of inheritance presented in the ballad also necessarily gives a clue to the ballad’s period of composition. A. Sreedhara Menon in his book Cultural Heritage of Kerala quotes A.L. Basham’s observations on the matrilineal system that pervaded in the society of Medieval Kerala. According to A.L. Basham, as quoted by Menon,

In the early days of the Chera Kingdom of Kerala inheritance was through the male line but about the twelfth century a matrilinear system became regular, according to which the heir to the throne was the son not of the king, but of his eldest sister. This system, called Marumakkathayam, continued in Cochin and Travancore until very recent times, both for royal succession and the inheritance of estates (231).

Thus, from this detailing of ‘marumakkathayam’ one could necessarily locate Mathileri Kanni in the twelfth century. Furthermore, the first matrilineal king of Venadu was Vira Udayamarthanda Varma (1177–1195) and since the ballad, Mathileri Kanni, is clearly located in a society where ‘marumakkathayam’ was well

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⁵ Ships that carry rice and food grains.

⁶ It was Ibn Batuta, a Moroccan explorer, who for the first time in history collected details about Samoothiri in the fourteenth century.
established, we could also trace the ballad’s origin in the twelfth century.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BALLAD — SOCIO-POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RELEVANCE

In many ways the ballad Mathileri Kanni proved its significance by disclosing diverse contemporary issues. The ballad does reflect on the conflicts, struggles and troubles of medieval Kerala. It consequently reveals the history, successfully mirrors the evils of the society and polity of various regions, and imparts insights on the social life and different religious and social institutions. Commenting on the historical significance of the ballad, V.T. Kumaran observes that the socio-political details mentioned can be necessarily considered as true records of medieval Kerala. Mathileri Kanni’s significance primary lies in the portrayal of the politics of that age, mainly the representation of the socio-political relations shared by the Kolathiri region with other medieval provinces like Chirakkara, Venadu, Churiyamani and Odanadu. The most important historical event illustrated in the ballad is the battle between Venadu and Odanadu which was supposed to have happened between 1250 to1300 AD. Significantly enough, the ballad also reflects on the diverse contemporary regional histories. This can be substantiated by the portrayal of the different feudal families and their ruling and social policies.

Though the ballad mainly focuses on the individual characters, it also throws light on important medieval noble families of Kerala, like Chirakkara, Venadu, Churiyamani and Odanadu. It indeed clearly reflects on the distinctive practices, beliefs, rituals and laws exercised in such noble families, and which will be later dealt in detail in this chapter. The ballad also informs us about many contemporary religious and cultural practices exercised in these feudal lands. One such social practice that needs to be mentioned here is the custom of paying the Brahmins gold coins and sending them to far-off lands in search of better life partners for the young people of the aristocratic families. Such a reference is made in the ballad when Churiyamani Kanni’s mother promises her daughter of sending the Brahmins to find her a Prince more worthy than the Venadu Prince.

Before moving on to serious social and political significance of the ballad, I would begin by outlining its cultural significance. A significant dimension that we can add to the study of medieval culture represented in the ballad is mainly by looking at the different contemporary dressing styles, ornaments, beauty secrets, food etc. The ballad Mathileri Kanni evidently throws light on the luxurious life of feudal families. I would begin by examining the different kinds of dressing style portrayed in the ballad which essentially informs us about the extravaganza of the contemporary feudal families. Since clothing can be used to denote social status, in the ballad there are many references to different clothing styles used by the feudal families which confirms their superior social status. Most notable are ‘ponkuppayam’, ‘aanatholu chatta’, ‘veeralipattu’ and ‘kacha’.

Again, much can be said about the early traditional jewellery worn by the royal women and their beauty tips. More fascinating is the extensive list of antique Kerala jewellery mentioned in the ballad. There are more than twenty two kinds of traditional jewellery that get mentioned in the ballad. To name a few from a very long list, ‘nagapuli vala’, ‘kambithoda’, ‘kuzhalthalam’, ‘mullathali’, ‘ambalarimala’, ‘manikandamala’ etc. Most of the jewellery seem completely strange to contemporary society. Furthermore, the ballad also gives us an idea about the contemporary herbal heritage. For instance, in the section where Chiravapanikkad Kunjikunky teaches Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni about the techniques of seducing men, certain secret herbal ingredients are mentioned. Thus in the ballad, both the female characters Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamani Kanni are seen using such herbal mixes. There is also a particular reference to beauty secret in the ballad where Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni asks her maids to manicure and redden her nails with a herbal mixture of henna, haldi (turmeric powder) and ‘manthalar’ tender leaves of the mango tree. Similarly, towards the end of the ballad when Churiyamani Kanni determines to murder Mathileri Kanni, she prepares a poisonous potion made up of herbs. All such details presented in the ballad clearly reflect on the place of herbs in the life and culture of medieval Kerala.

As food plays a significant role in every culture, I would now examine the different types of food that get

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7 The history of Kerala clearly mentions the successful military expedition of the Pandyan army under the king Vikrama Pandya to Venadu.

8 ‘ponkuppayam’ = dress made up of golden threads, ‘aanatholu chatta’ = dress made up of elephant skin, ‘veeralipattu’ = a kind of silk, ‘kacha’ = a kind of loincloth worn by men of feudal family.

mentioned in the ballad. The ballad indeed reflects on a large variety of ethnic foods and sweets prevalent during the period. For example, in the part where Chiravapanikkathy Kunjikunky comes to visit Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni after a long time, she presents different kinds of sweets to the princess as a token of respect, namely ‘kurathyppalayappam’, ‘karelappam’, ‘neyappam’ ‘palada’, to mention a few. The significance of the ballad, therefore, indeed lies in its brilliant portrayal of the cultural background which further can be variously determined by the particular style of clothing and food and the role of herbs in the daily life of that period.

The serious question that the critic V.T. Kumaran raises in his book seems very relevant as it helps open up new doors in the understanding the socio-historical background of the ballad, Mathileri Kanni. The ballad essentially holds a wide range of information regarding the social background and politics prevalent during the period. Unlike any other Vadakkanpattukal, Mathileri Kanni can be considered as a strong critique of the upper class section of the society. The lecherous and lavish lives of the feudal lords are blatantly exposed and criticized. This may be one of the reasons why the ballad had been kept hidden for centuries. In order to prevent the royal bedchamber secrets from being sung by the commoners, they arrested its popularity.

In a very realistic manner the ballad very effectively sketches the splendid and luxurious life of the feudal families of that period. The lavish life enjoyed by the feudal princess Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni in her palace amidst hundreds of maid servants who in turn are assigned with diverse odd duties necessarily reflects the spectacular image of feudalism of Malabar. The following lines taken from the ballad to an extent reflects the grand life of Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni:

Four maids to do her dense hair; 
Five to help her wear the royal attire; 
Two other maids to carry the casket; 
Seven other maids to walk along with her; 
And four maids to hold the mirror to her; (My translation)

It is a long list of the maidservants attending different odd duties such as to help the Princess climb the stairs, to wipe her legs dry, to bathe her and even to pick lice out of her thick hair. Apart from these royal duties, the maids also engage in gossip and spicy royal scandals of the period thereby triggering off the Princess’s desires. The character Chiravapanikkathy Kunjikunky is seen in the ballad narrating some of the contemporary royal scandals to which Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni listens intently. Again, Kunjikunky elicits Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni’s feelings for Ponnan, by giving a detailed description of the latter’s good looks and fine physique. To the princess’s doubt regarding the decency in maintaining a relationship with someone of a lower rank, Kunjikunky claims that for an illicit relation, a male chieftain is always a perfect choice in royal families. Thus replying to the Princes doubt Kunjikunky says,

For a secret illicit royal affair
A male chieftain seems perfect, my Lady. (My translation)

Furthermore, Kunjikunky is seen giving guidance to Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni of different ways to seduce Ponnan, which according to the critic Thonnakkal Vasudevan, exhibits a close similarity with the ancient Devadasi tradition of seduction. Again, when the Princess raises doubts regarding the chances of conceiving from such an unlawful affair, Kunjikunky further suggest that the Princess could then marry a Namboodiri from the Kaloor family and thus save face. Here the ballad evidently throws light on the debauchery of feudal women in medieval Kerala. Consequently, the maid Chiravapanikkathy Kunjikunky’s replies, along with the other royal scandals mentioned in the ballad, seem very significant as they give us a picture of the social depravity that was quite common in feudal families of that time. Commenting on this, V.T. Kumaran claims that in most upper class feudal families, the women married Brahmins in order to save the family’s honour. Regarding the Kaloor family[10] mentioned in the ballad, V.T. Kumaran also confirms that such a family is known to have existed in medieval Kerala.

All these add to the ballad’s significance as an excellent social critique of an age shrouded in the mists of time and uncertain traditions. Contrary to other ballads of the contemporary period, for instance Thacholi Othenan, that essentially purport an ideal feudal society which cared for the serfs who worked on their fief, Mathileri Kanni never attempted to camouflage the reality. The ballad exposes the true identity of feudal lords by portraying their lecherous and lavish life.

The ballad, Mathileri Kanni, thus stands out among other vadakkanpattukal for its brilliant portrayal of the everyday life of the commoner class, and the lewd and licentious life of the feudal class. Moreover, its presentation of both the domestic and social life of an age almost three hundred to four hundred years back evidently demands praise. Apart from its historical and literary significance, Mathileri Kanni’s importance also lies in its reflections about the social-military forces that were prevalent during that period. The ballad distinctly portrays the dominant propensity of the landlords and feudal kings to indulge in unnecessary battles to establish their authority. Furthermore, it also informs us about the diverse customs that defined the everyday life

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[10] The Kaloor family is located in Malappuram and is mainly known for tantric rituals.
of the commoners, marriage practices and other social practices like ‘marumakkathayam’ prevalent during that age.

Most important among the different social practices that the ballad exposes is ‘marumakkathayam’, the matrilinial system that had established itself in the twelfth century. The ballad projects a society were matrilinial system (‘marumakkathayam’) of inheritance had already been established. This clearly gets enunciated in the ballad through the character Venadu Poonkoyilom Kann who is entrusted with the rule of Venadu province. Such an issue clearly outlines the period of the ballad, since it was only after the disintegration of the Chera dynasty in the twelfth century that the patrilinial system (‘makkathayam’) of inheritance gave way to the matrilinial system (‘marumakkathayam’). Moreover, according to historical records, it was after the twelfth century, that the Venadu Prince was seen dictated by the authority of Brahmins and consequently the age marked the beginning of Brahminic power. Validating this historical presumption, Mathileri Kanni also has many references that exhibit the Brahminic authority. There are references made about certain social custom which allow the Brahmins to marry from a royal family. Unlike other ballads that have only a few references to the Brahmin community, in Mathileri Kanni we note a vast number of positions assigned to Brahmins. For instance, the different kinds of holy rites (‘poojas’) mentioned in the ballad such as ‘Bhagavati pooja’, ‘Shiva pooja’, ‘Surya pooja’, ‘Kamadeva pooja’, ‘Ganapati pooja’, ‘Pitru pooja’, ‘Bhumi pooja’ and ‘Namboodiri pooja’ are said to be performed frequently. Again, one may also find the frequent mentioning of the Brahmins in various contexts. For example, the following lines,

Like the Brahmin waiting for the feast
Like the Namboodiri waiting for copper coins. (My translation)

The ballad Mathileri Kanni reflects the regional history of Kerala as it evidently throws light on the political geography of that period. Though the ballad mentions that there were eighteen chiefdoms and sixty four fencing schools, known as ‘kalarikal’, but there is no clear idea of what these regions were. However, it mentions about fourteen provinces, namely Venadu, Cheran Chiravayupuzha, Odanadu, Kakakkarkinadu, Karanadu, Eral Perumpdappu Nadu, Vellattiri, Vettahunadu, Samoothiri, Thali, Puramalamukkathm, Kadal, Kadathuwainadu, and Churiyathilam Koyil. Apart from naming, the ballad also attempts a detailed geographical

11 The matrilinial system of inheritance which was prevalent in Kerala was later completely abolished in 1975 by the Kerala State Legislature.
12 In the ballad, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kann is deputed with the title ‘llamuupp’.
13 The Venadu Prince is also popularly known as ‘Chirvaswarupam’.

description of these lands by distinctly portraying their characteristic features. The most striking aspect of such an enumeration is the fact that certain lands, identity of which still remains obscure, are represented in the ballad. For instance, places like Kolatihiri, Thuuluvamadu, Maloor Iliam Koyil, Nanjiperunadu, Nanjanadu and Madayiperumkoyil are still completely unknown to many people. For instance, Thonnakkal Vasudevan tries to solve one such uncertainty about the land Nanjanadu represented in the ballad. He locates Nanjanadu as a part of Venadu province.

It is worth detailing some of the important historical references that we can derive from the ballad. Mathileri Kanni’s reference to the Kandiyoor Temple further draws our attention to the Kandiyoor Temple decree of 1281 which in turn discloses a clear picture about the contemporary politics of Odanadu and Venadu. Thus the ballad historically informs us about the battle between Pandiyan and Venadu and that the Odanadu king was helped by the Pandipada, commonly known as ‘pandiyachuranmar’.

Again, another significance of the ballad is that it largely explores many social vices that were prevalent during that time. In the ballad there are references to certain social evils that are supposedly eradicated by Mathileri Kanni mainly in the province of Venadu. For instance, the social evils like ‘arukola’, ‘marukola’ and ‘mannapedi’ are mentioned in the ballad. ‘Mannapedi’ was a social vice that was prevalent in medieval Kerala, where women of the upper caste were cast out of their community if they were struck by a stone or stick by an outcaste during night in a particular month of the year. Thus, the ballad also throws some light on the caste system of the contemporary period. The ballad also reflects certain religious festivals and customs that were prevalent during that point of time, like Valrumundakavu ‘thalapoli’ and Purammombu, Purakali. Moreover, there are also references made about Kodungallur pepper offering and the myth of Kannaki indicating the popularity of Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple.

Moreover, the ballad also draws light on the lecherous feudal life of the period. The aristocracy comprises the Nairs which forms the military class. Through characters like Venadu Poonkoyilom Kann and Churiyamani Kann, the ballad shows the aphrodisiac of such royal women who were strictly confined to their
royal palaces surrounded by hundreds of female maid servants. The excellent lyrical quality of the ballad effectively portrays a wide range of human emotions and desires, and even exhibits the regional tradition and culture in its richness. Thus, the ballad Mathileri Kanni remarkably reflects on the feudal system, politics and social laws of the time. The diverse socio-political and historical details that get exposed in the course of its reading largely mark the current relevance of its study.

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