

Behind the Memory Lane: The Toponymy of Select Places in Thiruvananthapuram

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Abstract: We are shaped by a plethora of tales. They elucidate, educate and escort throughout our lives, sometimes adding a sparkle to our lives. Behind the place names in the city of Thiruvananthapuram is a colourful blend of its age-old memories and contemporary lifestyle. This paper explores how the city got its name and takes us towards its camouflaged past. There is a veritable mine of memories intertwined with myth and mystery. Delving into the toponymy of the place revives, through a cognitive process, the splendid images of its by-gone days. It is then carved into our memory, giving us a sense of belonging to this land of magnificent origins that is surrounded by the towering Western Ghats and the vast Arabian Sea.

Key Words: Toponymy, Thiruvananthapuram, memories, place names, history, identity

A person will die, but a place associated with his name lives on, unless the march of Time and the clash of civilisations do not start a pogrom of erasure that seeks newer significances and histories. The name of a place is a slice of its history- its coded identity. These names are the links that connect us to generations and landmarks that provide an insight into the history of Man. They are the repositories of the knowledge that contain within them a ready compendium of who ruled it once, or perhaps a historic event, a battle, the outcome of the battle, a sentiment or perhaps a distinctive geographical feature. Place names thus hold the reverberations of a tale left unsaid.

The study of names of the places of a region is referred to as Toponymy. The word is derived from the Greek word *topos* meaning 'place' and *onoma* meaning 'name'. A toponym is a place name, and toponymy refers to "the systematic study of the origin and history of toponyms" (Monmonier, 2006, page 9). Toponymy, therefore, is the love towards 'his story' or rather a history.

An enthralling city located at the extreme southern tip of the Indian subcontinent, Thiruvananthapuram, is a land that holds variant names in its narrative history. It is the capital city of the south Indian state of Kerala. 'Travancore' to its sobriquet 'Trivandrum', the very name of Thiruvananthapuram indicates a transition from the earlier recorded names. The transformation of these names showcases the extent to which the manners, institution, customs, and religion is still preserved in its name.

'Travancore' is the abbreviated English form of *Tiru-Vithan-Kodu*, once the capital of the kingdom and the residence of the court, but now a petty village thirty miles to the south-east of Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram). *Tiru-Vithan-Kodu* is said to be a corruption of *Sri-Vazhum-Kodu*, i. e., a place where the Goddess of Prosperity dwells. Fra Bartolomeo, who resided for a long time in Travancore, says that the country was called *Malai-Nadu* - the land of hills.

The city is surrounded by seven hills like Rome. It was also known as the Land of Contentment as it is said to be an altered form of *Aanandapuri*.

The city was known by different names of which *Syanandapuram* and *Anandan Kadu* were perhaps the more popular ones. In *Varahapuram*, written in the sixth century AD, the place is referred to as *Syanandapuram* whereas in Mathilakom Records it is referred to as *Thiru Ananda (Anantha) Puram*. Thiru Anantha Puram, or the city of the Holy Anantha, is said to be named after Ananthan, the cosmic serpent with a thousand heads, on whose coils Lord Mahavishnu reclines (iconic representation of the chief deity in the Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple). *Vanchidesham* or the land of treasure; *Dharma Bhumi* or the land of charity; *Vanavarnad*, abridged into *Venad* (*Venad*), or the land of the celestials; *Tripapur* or the land of the bearers of the sacred feet; Rama Rajyam or the kingdom of Rama Raja and *Kerala* or the land of coconut –palms are some of the names. Its last denomination was *Travancore*, which is a form of the Sanskrit *Srivardhanapuri* or the land where the Goddess of prosperity resides.

Travancore is also known by the names of *Venad*, *Vanchi-desham*, and *Tiru-Adi-Desam*. *Vanchi-Desam* means either the land of treasure or the land of bamboos. *Tiru-Adi-Desam* is probably derived from *Tiru-adikal*, one of the titles of Chera kings. *Tiru - Adi* means 'holy feet' or 'the Royal feet' and represents the usual form in which the kings of the land were addressed. (Travancore State Manual, Vol 1)

But how did the place gain its name? Well, how did these places and names come to be? What influenced them? Which language families played a decisive role in shaping them

into the form they take at present? And taking the wheel of time into account, how did these names manage to survive the decay of time and survive as a perennial force?

Generally, the place names in Kerala show the importance of the specific areas like the existence of a tank or a reservoir or a water body in the areas having the place names ending in *kulam* (Kunnamkulam, Ernakulam, Tiruvanjikulam), *puzha* (Murukkumpuzha, Moovaatupuzha), the existence of a forest in the area having place names ending with *kaadu* (Chavakkad, Kalliyenkad, Palakkad), the existence of a market or bazaar in the areas having place names ending with *angadi* (Parappanangadi, Tiruangadi, Pazhavangadi and *chanta* (Meenchanta, Puthenchantha). The habitation places like Ur and Cheri can be noticed from Thalasseri, Kannur, Payyannur, Balusseri, Chenchery, and so on. Some place names reflect the geographical peculiarity of certain names. The elevated region is commonly known with *medu* and the garden lands with *paramba* (Peerumedu, Cheraamanparambu). The names ending with *palli* (Kadakampalli) denote the existence of an educational centre in a particular area. Those place names ending with *chungam* is connected with the check posts of the earlier period. Similarly, the small geographical units in Kerala were given separate names based on the nature of fauna and flora, presence of rivers, tanks, palaces, forts that is closely interwoven with the memory.

Name and place are the two sides of the same coin. This is because they are the key to memories and experiences. The etymological evolution of the name is something which is considered at a secondary level. The place is pivotal in embodying the experiences amalgamated with the memory of the societies. It stores, reproduces, represents and reminds. It is the knowledge of the bygone days and the warehouse of this same knowledge. Social and cultural memories can be disentangled from the name of a place. These memories sandwiched between different memories that we possess can be unearthed by recalling. Thus the memory that the place holds is transferred to an individual and the place, in turn, become part of his/her memory.

Memory refers in its literal meaning to “the faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information; the mind regarded as a store of things remembered; or something remembered from the past” (Oxford Dictionary).

Eliminating a name that perches on memory gradually makes the autobiographical or the collective memory insecure. Memory relations with the place are very essential in assembling the collective memory. A place from its end to end has strong roots to its

memory. Thereby, the city in itself forms the part of collective memory. These forms that a particular place holds as memories are those that belong to the whole society.

The most organic way of naming a place was largely colloquial. Urban relocation, commemorative attribution, and in some cases even international negotiation paved the way to name a place. The names which are conceived as a result of these aspects stimulate and ignite the autobiographical memory (the facts or experiences related to the self). This autobiographical memory of individuals or the society, formed as a ramification of such constituents is closely knit with the toponyms. These very well mirror their emergence over the years and their characteristic existence as something societal, although it is a construct. They are never permanent but immutable.

Keith H. Basso highlights the qualities of place names in the following way:

Because of their inseparable connection to specific localities, place names may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations – associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life. (Basso 1990, 144).

A place name as mentioned earlier, never stands alone. It is a combination of anthropology, history, folklore, culture, myths, invasions, oral traditions, religion, architecture, geography, personalities, and the list goes on with the connections that humans attribute to. Along with these, the influence of other languages both in terms of oral tradition as well as written shreds of evidence adds to these existing combinations. The oral or recorded forms are thus catered to either by phonetic transfer, by oral translation or by folk etymology that was in existence once. These would have formed a part of their identity upon being passed down through generations. Historical information, that includes settlement history, religious changes, population dispersal and heritage traces the lineage of these toponyms. All these aspects constitute the naming of the places of Thiruvananthapuram.

Though it's early history, the extent of its territory and other particulars are mostly buried in obscurity, the toponymy of the places in Thiruvananthapuram takes us back to the by-lanes of antiquity. In the *Heritage of Kerala-Thiruvananthapuram*, it is mentioned that the city became a town in as early as 1049 AD as per the Almanac of 1881. The growth of the town and that of the Sree Padmanabha Swami Temple were complementary. The temple is surrounded by forts. The presence of these forts reminds us of how the city was the seat of power of the erstwhile kings. The Fort area has witnessed the growth of this city from

its rural setup to a glorious province to a sprawling metropolis. Today, Eastfort is an artery that connects the city to its heart.

Similarly, *Attakulangara* may have been on the embankment of a pond infested by millipedes. However, it has a larger spiritual history. The oral stories that depicted *AshtaMoorthy* or Attamoorthy (a colloquialism) which was a pilgrim spot beside the bank of the pond (*Kulangara*) could most likely have later evolved into *Attakulangara*. Similarly, the central part of the city, *Thampanoor* got its name as it was the home or *ooru* of Kunjunni Thamban who used to get a grant from the then Maharaja of Travancore as a retainer for the use of his palanquin and the slaves who were to carry it. It was *Thampante Ooru* that evolved. This name harkens back to a time when slavery was an accepted practice.

Nemom seems to have evolved from the word 'Niyamam'. In all probability, it would have been a trading spot located close to the *Chalai* market which was a University (Shalai), back then. To the opposite side of *Chalai* was *Pazhaya Angadi* or the old market which later came to be known as *Pazhavangadi*. The exhibition ground that we refer to as *Putharikandam* today takes us back to the agrarian lifestyle that the people here were involved in. The name underwent alterations from *Puthan Ari Kandam* orally. This was the place associated with the Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple as it was the harvest from this farm that was presented to the deity as part of the custom.

The Government Secretariat, which is the administrative center of the state, was known to those who lived here some 120 years ago as *Huzur Kacheri*. The building was designed as a *darbar* with a huge entrance called the *Aana Kavaadam* which is still preserved as such. The building was designed by Walthew Clarence Barton, who was the first chief engineer of the then Trivandrum. In his commemoration, the place where he resided and his bungalow is located was named Barton Hill. This place was also known as *Peppatti Kunnu* and *Gundu kaadu* as it housed a centre to treat rabies and because gunshots were fired from this place to mark the time respectively.

In the words of the historian V.V.K. Valiyathu, *Vanchiyoore* had a greater significance than Travancore. *Vanchinagaram* was the capital of *Aadi Chera Kulam* which had been the seat of power during the Sangham era. It is said that the present-day Kodungalloor was the capital of the Chera dynasty. It was *Chera* that supposedly became *Kerala* after the roots of Tamil language disappeared to give way to Malayalam. The people at that time, followed Buddhist and Jainist traditions and it is said that Ilango Adikal composed

Silappathikaram while staying to the north of *Vanchinagaram*. As the Vaishnava sects gained prominence, the focus shifted to areas around the Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple. The name Ananthapuri and later Thiruvananthapuram evolved from the association with this temple. Thus, the old Vanchiyoore of Venad got immersed in history (Venad was the old name of Tiruvitankur upto the time of King Marthanda Varma. Venad if split into Vezham and Nadu can be interpreted as ‘the country abounding in elephants’).

Vanchiyoore was called so, as the *ooru* was connected to the *vanchidesam* or village. The names ending with *puram* evolved again giving rise to *Kesavadasapuram*, *Keraladityapuram*, *Mangalapuram*, *Kaniyapuram* and the like, but the *ooru* still prevails in places. There is also an assumption that Thiruvananthapuram might be a literal imitation of the name Mahodayapuram which was once the capital of the Chera kingdom.

The earlier name assigned to *Tiruvitankur* was *Kalkulangara* which was later changed to *Padmanabhapuram*, probably because the Travancore kings considered Lord Padmanabha as their tutelary deity and underwent the ceremony of *Trippadidanam* through which they designated themselves as *Padmanabhadassans* (servants of Lord Padmanabha).

Coming down to *Chackai*, it is said to be a place given as a gift to *Chackiyars* who perform the *Chakiyar-koothu* art form which was also known as *Chackaikoothu* in Tamil Nadu. Pettah which is close to it was originally Thiru-madhura-pettah that gradually shrank to Pettah. The place was then known for its flourishing cloth industry and was the centre of the province. But today, it just exists as a name.

Kannammoola has a very interesting past that is linked with one of the rebellions that broke out against the British. It is said that the most daring rebellions against British, especially towards the tyrannical interference of Macaulay, in the administration of Travancore was led by Velu Thampi who was the then *Dalawa* (Diwan) of Travancore. Later, he committed suicide in the sanctum sanctorum of Mannadi temple. It is said that his body was brought to Kannammoola and was hanged on a gibbet. His brother Padmanabhan Thampi was also hanged.

The Kannammoola hills and stories associated with it that are related to Velu Thampi are clearly mentioned in *Travancore- A Guide Book For The Visitor* (1937) by Emily Gilchrist. A drive through Cannamoolay, a suburb of the city, leads past Cannamoolay hill, a place connected with the exposure of Velu Thampi's body. There are many stories told of a headless ghost dragging his chains, haunting the hilltop.

In Achuth S. Shankar's words, he is quite unsure about why Velu Thampi's body was desecrated at Kannammoola.

Why Kannammoola was chosen is not known. If they came by road, then the Kannammoola-Ulloor road may have been in use and they chose the first hilly spot inside the town and also overlooking a flat valley of Petta (many people of European origin were living in nearby Petta) and Vanchiyoore. If they came by boat also, Kannammoola is the first hilly terrain, from Chakka.

Similarly, Medical College and Vazhuthacaud with their skyscrapers and busy intersections that we see today, used to be thick forests. The former was some ninety years ago, known as *Kuzhiyathumukku* and the latter got its name from a plant called *Vithazha chedi* which was abundantly found in the forest. *Ulloorkunnu* (the present-day Ulloor) adjacent to *Kuzhiyathumukku* was the place where death sentences were executed. It is assumed that Velu Thampi was hanged at Kannammoola because it would have been difficult to reach Ulloorkunnu.

Kesavadasapuram, which is yet another major place that connects the city to its suburbs and other districts, has its older version referring to it as *Kattachakonam*. It is *KalThacha Konam* referring to the group of workers who were the residents of this place and practiced their traditional form of masonry. Later, the name was altered as Kesavadasapuram in memory of Raja Kesavadas who was the Diwan of Travancore in the 18th century. He was the master brain behind the main central road connecting Thiruvananthapuram to other districts and also in designing the Alappuzha town that we see today.

Similarly, *Peroorkada* was a place where toddy was available in plenty. One of the hypotheses is that it might have been a *Kada* (trading place) run by the Peroor family. *Peroor Makkal* based on the usage in the ancient text means 'sons of the thriving city'. It is a known fact that Peroorkada comprises areas which were directly owned and controlled by the Maharaja.

Poojapura might have acquired its name from the famous Navarathri festival that centred on the place. *Cotton hill* gained its name from the mansion where GWD Cotton (Cotton Sayyipp in colloquial terms) resided. He was the resident of the then British governor. *Maruthamkuzhy* is referred to as a marshy land. 'Marutham' meant marshy. The place acquired its name from this geographical peculiarity. Likewise, *Palayam* is said to be the place where soldiers camped. The grounds where they marched are stadiums now. In a way, each place has a story to tell. Though the city that we see today is much different from

the thoughts that evolve from the images depicted in the history of the place names, the new light to the land where we stand is a strong form connecting us to our culture, beliefs, history and identity. We are the result of all these though we come and leave alone.

Though just a few places are studied here, each of them has a strong association with the present time. Though the current generation is quite unsure about the way these names evolved, oral transmissions and phonetic transfers connect these names to their roots.

Names and memory have a very significant connection with each other. When the place names undergo an alteration, it is not just the name that changes. For instance, when the names shifted from Bombay to Mumbai or Madras to Chennai, it was the history that was being invoked when we look at it through a post colonial angle. Reclaiming of the city is thus a reclaiming of the tradition. It is the rejection of the foreign and the adoption of the native. Thus, the renaming of streets names or an area that happens through cultural, political or regional ways is an invocation of different histories.

The politics of nationhood and language hegemony conjoin to rewrite history to suit the temperament of the current times. For instance, in October 2018, Allahabad was renamed as Prayagraj. This change evoked the accounts of the Mughal reign where it was called Ilahabad by the emperor Akbar. Allahabad was the name attributed by his grandson Emperor Shahjahan. The place also reminds us of the story of the first *yagna* (the ritual sacrifice) conducted by Lord Brahma. Thus this place is entrenched in traditions and myths where we could also find the Indic, Islamic and a strong European presence as well. Not to forget the ethnic incursions of the Greeks, Scythians, and Huns. Changing the name from Allahabad would be a forced migration for many who were rooted there.. It is not just Allahabad but also Benares, Kashi or Varanasi that are also as affected as Prayagraj is the meeting point of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati.

Recently, the VJT (Victoria Jubilee Memorial) hall in Thiruvananthapuram, which epitomizes the Victorian gothic model of architecture was similarly changed to Ayyankali Hall paying respects to his contributions. But such changes that happened before were not recorded properly which deletes the major part of the histories of our ancestors and questions the reality of how we see ourselves. Sometimes this face of the places that we reside in makes us realise that we are in a mythical world of realities.

The elements of constructed memory bear a great resemblance to fiction. Fiction takes us to different places, to different lifetimes and makes us travel through different histories. In

Malayalam literature, we can see these remembered histories portrayed very effectively. Through the depiction of a particular place the readers are made to travel through its due course of historic events, be it pre-colonial memory or post colonial memory. Starting from *Indulekha*, the journey of Malayalam Literature takes us through *Naalukettu*, *Verukal*, *Agnisakshi*, *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*, *Aadujeevitham*, *Aaracharand* so on, and the histories suited to the settings and characters. Here we can see the literal history in alignment with a place's history.

To this *Oru Deshathinte Kadha* and *Mayyazhipuzhayude Theernagalil* which dealt with the history of people of Athiranippadam and the colonial Mahi heading towards decolonisation respectively give us a different picture of this remembered history. This takes us to Pierre Nora who spoke about the 'Sites of memory' mostly known as the 'lieu de mémoire'. It refers to the importance and experience that a place holds in terms of material or non material things, be it monuments, events and the like.

In Nora's words, earlier there were many particular memories and one national history. But today its one national memory that stems from a divided patrimonial demand. Thus they become 'invented traditions'.

Thus, history and memory become contentious categories. Transmission of history thereby represses memory because it is sectioned according to an individual's interest. This further injects the agenda of forgetting into all discourses of a place's memory. This continuous play reveals to us that even the history of modernity is a construct. Modernity can be temporal or textualised. History of modernity is the history of forgetting as modernity seems to be a desire to wipe out and the definition of modernity holds to be different at different points of time. It is a transition and rupture from what has existed. It is the desire to know with wilful forgetfulness that takes us to the memory that we have today.

History and memory that conjoin to form identities of a community rely on the toponyms. Exclusion and inclusion of places directly influence their emotions. Oral names entitle the natives to a land. The meaning associated with a place is created by their experience. This experience further carves the names. They are memorised in distinct ways through markers such as monuments, architecture, inscription and the like. Places thus memorised have been the result of a constant battle between those included and excluded from society. Communities thereby use toponyms to remind themselves and others of these events or monuments from the past and the present, thus promoting the collective identity.

The place names depicted here, though of a land, is a story about us. This was the past that we were unaware of; the story that was never written. They managed to survive the sands of time. And would sometimes, make their presence felt as stories or anecdotes. A man without a memory is equal to a man without a life. It is in these stories or events that we exist; our identities exist. They are the roots that bind us to the place we claim as ours. ‘Who are we?’ ‘Where do we belong?’

Salman Rushdie, in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*, talks about the protagonist of his much-debated work *Midnight’s Children* as one who “is cutting up history to suit himself”. All versions that we see around us of place names are also a similar dissection into the history that may change in accordance with the different perspectives of the general public. Over here, memory acts as the *modus operandi*. Thus, the act of remembering becomes a personal experience parallel to a nation’s or a place’s history.

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