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## Mamangam: History, culture and myth of an Era in Kerala

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### Abstract

Whenever Cheraman Perumal's sword appeared in the Zamorin's mammoth box and was snatched from its scabbard, all the while the suicide bombers were stabbing the fat crowd on the west side of the walk - just to stab at the sharp lance head of the Nair army guarding the Zamorin, wrote William Logan in his work Malabar (1879). Mamangam has a great role in the history of Kerala. It is not only a tale in which Valluvanad Konathiri's spies gains brave death from the Zamorin's army, but also an ancient festival in which people from all around the world reaches Thirunavaya, a place in Thrissur to see the performance of Keralite traditional artists, happens once in every twelve years. The paper titled "Mamangam: History, Culture and Myth of an Era in Kerala" is a study on the great Meghamasa Magham or Mahamagam - a festival enriched with bravery, hope, pain, power, and vengeance in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Culture, festival, history, Mamangam, myth, power and revenge

### Introduction

History is the study of past or events occurred in past with written records whereas Myth refers to events or incidents which are believed to be occurred in past without evidence told by unknown people, which gives insights about the world and influences culture. "Even when a culture no longer believes that its myths are true explanations, however, these stories often survive as receptacles of important cultural values" (Murfin 284). Mamangam invokes the history, culture, and myth of our past whereas it is the history of an era in Kerala. This research paper aims to provide insight into the great Meghamasa Magham or Mahamagam - a festival enriched with bravery, hope, pain, power, and vengeance in Kerala. Chandroth Valiya Panicker, a character enacted by Mammooty in the movie Mamangam (2019) [5] said: The glory that glows even after death. They're scared of it. If even one person still goes for Mamangam from Valluvanad it's because the women prepare a pyre of revenge in their minds. It's on those furious flames that they burn their ancestor warriors' mortal remains. You and I were born in the womb of such women. We grew up drinking their lifeblood. (*Mamangam* 1:58:26-50)



**Fig 1:** Bharathapuzha (The holy river in Kerala)

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Mamangam was a festival took place once in every twelve years on the banks of the river Bharathapuzha at Thirunavaya starts from Thaipooyam of Paush month and ends at Maka in Maagha month.

William Logan regarded Mamangam as “Maka Makham” which means “great sacrifice”. Thirunavaya is considered as a sacred place by Hindus all around Kerala where the holy river Perar or Nila or Bharathapuzha flows between the temples of thrimoorthies, where Lord Vishnu on the right side of the river and Brahma and Shiva in the left bank of the river Nila. It was celebrated in the months of Makaram and Kumbam, two months in Malayalam considering the climate of Kerala since it requires a month to celebrate and the climate should not be against the celebration.

Maaga Masam is a time when Bharathapuzha dried out and a time after the harvest. It is a time when the sky and the soil in Kerala are equally clear. Mamanga Maholsavam was crowded with dishes like music concerts, literary examinations, sports practices etc. pleases the eyes and ears of people around the world. It is also one of the best agro-industrial fairs where people from all around Kerala comes to sell their goods. Above all these, Bharathapuzha is considered as a holy river like Ganga from ancient times. It is believed that there will be a presence of Goddess Ganga in Bharathapuzha during the Maaga maka and people from everywhere around Kerala comes for a holy bath and obligations for their parents and ancestors. If Mamangam conducts in Maaga Masam, people can visit the Maholsavam as well as they can do the obligations in Bharathapuzha, was the reason for extending Mamangam to Maaga makam.

### The Origin

Nobody knows about the origin of Mamangam and historians had marked their views on its origin but we cannot find any records of the festivals in ancient texts except a few one. Mamanghodharanam Kilipattu by Kaadancheri Namboodiri is one such work which describes the Mamangam held in 1694 during the reign of Bharanithirunaal Saamoothiripaadu and the thaiipooyam during his reign. Zamorin’s Notes on Mamangam and the Pulluva Songs of Valluvanad, Kozhikode Ghrandhavari, Keralolpathi, Keralamahatmya are a few records which mark the Mamanga Maholsavam from which we will get to know more about the rituals of Mamangam but its origin is still a question mark.

There are many popular myths in Kerala about the origin of Mamanga Maholsavam. One such myth is that it was started by Parasurama who created Kerala. It is written in the history of Jews in Kochi that Mamangam began as a ceremony to give homage to the Ashoka Pillar which was erected at Kodungalloor about 2300 years ago. But the people around the world believe that the origin of Mamangam relies on King Cheran Chenkottuvan, who in a triumphant journey to north India, saw the Kumba Mela on the banks of the river Ganga, wish to celebrate such festivals in Kerala started celebrating it at Thirunavaya where the Kumba Mela becomes Mamangam or Magamasa Maholsavam.

Mamangam begins when Zamorin was picked as the saviour of the land by the god. It is believed that the position of the saviour was there from the times of Kodungalloor Perumaal and after the fall of Chera dynasty, the power and position of saviour came into the hands of the king of Perumbadappu (Kochi). When he couldn’t carry on the role, Valluvanad Kolathiri took over the position of the superior i.e., ‘Rakshapurushan’ in the Maholsavam. Historians say that the Zamorin later defeated Konathiri in a battle and seized

the right to perform Mamangam. From then on, every twelve years, the Chavers from Valluvanad would return to Thirunavaya with the blessings of Konathiri to regain the lost pride of Valluvanad and to kill the Zamorin. However, some connect Mamangam to the Perumals who ruled Thirunavaya whose duration on power was twelve years. It is believed that on the day of expiration, people around Thirunavaya joins together at the banks of Bharathapuzha where the old Perumal give away his power to a new person who will become the new Perumal. Some scholars in Kerala opines that the twelve years long rule of Perumals didn’t exist in Kerala in the past.

Heirs:

After the fall of the second Chera dynasty, Kerala came under the control of small countries and the princes over there. Some of the historians wrongly recorded that since Thirunavaya comes under the territory of Valluvanad Konathiri, he had the right to conduct Mamangam and hold the position of ‘Rakshapurushan.’ But this isn’t true. It was the royal family of Perumpadappu (current Kochi) who had the power to conduct Mamangam. They held the position of temple ruler over religion and temples. For sometimes the kings of Perumpadappu performed Mamangam. But later Chera dynasty was overthrown due to some attacks. It was then that Valluvanad Konathiri was given the power to preside over Mamangam a per an agreement. The agreement was that if the kings of Perumpadappu came to the Vanneri gallery where the gods and goddess were crowned, they would have to leave the bell floor in Mamangam to stand and guide. In 1164, when king Godha Varma of Kochi came to the throne, Valluvanad Konathiri gave him the power to stand in the mammoth box of Mamangam. At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Zamorin defeated Valluvanad Konathiri and took possession of the Rakshapurushan in Mamangam. The victory of the Zamorin was with the help of Kozhikode Koya, Thirumala Namboodiri and Kalpakasher Thamburans. The covenant with the kings of Perumpadappu still existed. So, the zamorin conquered the Vanneri region to prevent them from reaching Vanneri and wearing the crown.



**Fig 2:** A Nilapaaduthara (A place where the Zamorin takes an oath as the Rakshapurushan)

Padmakumar had added a scene in the movie *Mamangam* where the Chandunni says about his wish to see Mamangam and the Zamorin to Chandroth Valiya Panicker:

**Unni:** I would like to see Mamangam.

**Panicker:** Though it’s not as grand as it used to be, it’d dazzle in your eyes. The city of Mamangam fest. A magical market filled with countless tents, shops and trades.

**Unni:** How is it like?

**Panicker:** What do you want to see there?

**Unni:** Zamorin.

**Panicker:** Zamorin is... if not one person, then another one. He isn't one person. There are many. It is a position that continues to exist. In order to annihilate him, suicide warriors come from Valluvanad. (1:28:15-29:04)

As I said before, the last Mamanga Maholsavam was held in 1755. But two centuries later, the festival got resurfaced, where the Zamorin, accompanied by the procession, stood on the floor of the mammoth box. The spies of Valluvanad Konathiri stabbed from the crowd and the Zamorin's soldiers cut them down. But the river Nila did not turn red. Because all these were made in connection with the Malabar Pepper Fest, where they recreated the festival, the Modern Mamanga Maholsavam at Thirunavaya under the guidance of the historian Dr N. M. Namboodiri.



**Fig 3:** Marunnara (A place used by Zamorin's men to store explosives)

Captain Alexander Hamilton, who witnessed the Mamanga Maholsavam in the year 1695 at Thirunavaya, wrote about what he saw and heard about Mamangam in his book *A New Account of the East Indies* (1727). The Zamorin won't be in power for more than twelve years. This is a tradition that has been followed since time immemorial. The Zamorin can escape the practice of publicly committing suicide if he dies prematurely. On such occasions, the king will host a grand banquet for the nobles and dignitaries of his country, and after the banquet, the king will pay homage to the guests. Then he cut his neck and die. His body will be cremated flamboyantly. After that, the natives will elect a Zamorin right there (Hamilton 306). However, historians say that there was no suicide or execution on Mamanga day and that the Zamorin's position was vacated. It is the same Hamilton who had described the Mamanga Maholsavam which resembles the movie directed by Padmakumar and to the ancient historic records.

#### Hamilton adds

In A D 1695, one of those jubilees happened, and the tent pitched near Ponnani, a seaport of his (Samutiri of Kozhikode), about fifteen leagues to the southward of Kozhikode. There were but three men that would venture on that desperate action (of killing the Samutiri on dias), who fell in with sword and shield, among the guards, and, after they had killed and wounded many, were themselves killed. One of the desperados (Valluvanatu Chavers) had a nephew

of fifteen or sixteen years of age, that kept close by his uncle in the attack on the guards, and, when he saw him fall, the young got through the guards into the tent and made a stroke at Samutiri's head, and had certainly dispatched him, if a large brass lamp which was burning over his head, had marred the blow; but, before he could make another, he was killed by the guards; and, I believe, the same Samutiri reign yet. I chanced to come that time along the (Kerala) coast and heard the guns for two or three days and nights successively. (308)

But it is said that this incident took place in 1755 not 1695 as recorded by Hamilton.

#### Chavers

Chavers in Mamangam are the warriors of Valluvanad Konathiri who came to Mamanga Maholsavam to revenge on Zamorin who took away the position of 'Rakshapurushan' from Konathiri. They, who came to kill the Zamorin, gain brave death from the Zamorin's army and Chanthrothil Panicker, Puthumana Panicker etc. belong those Nair families who sacrifice their lives for their land. These Chavers won't return to their homeland, their bodies will be dumped in the Manikkinar, a place where Zamorin's men throw away the dead bodies of Konathiri's warriors. The only body which returns to Valluvanad was that of Chanthunni, a sixteen years old boy who had a brave death in Mamangam. Gaspar Correia in his *Lendas de India (Introducao e revisao de M Lopes de Almeida)* remarked the Chavers as:

a community of bodyguards of the ruling families, who is in pledging their lives to the royal households (of Valluvanatu) in avenging the death of the two princes these guards dispersed, seeking wherever they might find men of Calicut, and amongst these they rushed fearless, killing and slaying till they were slain (...) they like desperate men played the dent before they were slain, and killed many people, with women and children. (Correia 1975)



**Fig 4:** Manikkinar (A well where Zamorin's men throw away the dead bodies of Kolathiri's warriors)

S. Rajendu in his book *History of Valluvanad from Pre-Historic Times to A. D. 1792* (2012) [8] regarded Chanthunni Panicker of Chanthrothil Tharavadu as a young boy and as the only one who stands at the floor of Nilapaduthara and to kill the Zamorin. He wrote that "the bravado heroism and his young age impacted the people so much that he was adored as a veeran by one and all in Valluvanad" (The Times of India 2019). William Logan narrates the bidding ceremony of Chavers of Valluvanad in his *Malabar Manual* (1951):

Amid much din and firing of guns the Morituri, the Chaver Nayers, the elect of four Nayar houses in Valluvanad, step



forth from the crowd and receive the last blessings and farewells of their friends and relatives. They have just partaken of the last meal they are to eat on the earth at the house of the temple representative of their chieftain; they are decked with garlands and smeared with ashes. On this particular occasion, it is one of the houses of Puthumanne Panicker who heads the fray. He is joined by seventeen of his friends – Nayar or menon or other arms – bearing caste – men – for all who so wish may fall in with sword and target in support of the men who have elected to die. (Logan 168)

#### The Ceremony:

There are references in the court records of Kozhikode on the Mamanga Maholsavam held in the year 1683. A rough outline of the Mamanga ceremonies is clear from these documents. A few months before Mamangam, a letter (Eyuthola) will be sent by the Zamorin to the feudal lords to bring the woods, bamboos, which are needed for making ghats and pantaloons. Materials for the pantaloons and koodaram (buildings) will be transported from Aaliparambu through kettuvallams (riverboats). The Zamorin arrives at Thirunavaya, the day after his feudal lords and followers have reached the city. The pantaloons for Nilapaduthara was set up on a fallen hill 30-40 feet about the level of the paddy fields. When the Mamangam begins, the Zamorin with the sword of Cheraman Perumal in his hand arrives as the Rakshapurushan to the Nilapaduthara.

Around 30000 Nairs of Eranadu, 10000 Nairs of Cholanadu, the feudal lords and their army with swords and shields, guards the Zamorin on the Nilapaduthara. On the right side of the Nilapaduthara and the other side across the river, guards the second lord who comes after the Zamorin and his followers a week before the Maholsavam begins. The other lords will stand behind the temple. Each of the feudal lords had pre-determined places to stay and watch people comes for Mamanga Maholsavam secretly. The area where the Maholsavam takes place will be decorated with flagpoles. The festival begins with tying the 115 linked golden chain around the neck and legs of the gajaveeras (elephants) and when a Nettipattam, shield wear on the forehead, is adorned on them. From the Kavaadam (entry gate to the festival) to the Nilapaduthara wooden fences will be erected at a distance of about one kilometre on either side of the Mamangam loft on which the Zamorin enters. The Chavers and people who visits can only reach through the middle of these fences. On either side of the fences, the Zamorin's armed men will be standing with truncheons along the sidewalk to the Nilapaduthara.



**Fig 2:** B Nilapaaduthara

Thalachennor, a character enacted by Siddique in the movie *Mamangam* narrates a painting drawn on the walls of the house of women:

The city of Mamangam comprised of the river Nila and its golden banks. The temple... The bathing ghats... To the east of banyan tree platform, a Nilapaduthara for women... West of the temple, an elevated path from the temple dome to Vakayur Manor. Mangattachan's (Zamorin's Prime Minister) mansion. On the other side of the river, next to Tekekara temple, situates Eralpadu's Nilapadu Thara. Tens of thousands of guards. This can be drawn only by someone who has seen it in person. (1:02:35-1:03:12)

#### Conclusion

Mamangam is not just a festival, but a part of our Keralite heritage and culture which is erased from the memory of Keralites all over the world. When it comes to Mamangam, people remember the one which held in Thirunavaya but Mamanga Maholsavam was held in many other temples in Kerala which came to be known with the name of those temples like Mayoottu Mamangam, Machattu Mamangam etc. Mamangam invokes the history, culture, and myth of our past whereas it is the history of a myth. This study has attempted to bring to light the great Kerala festival which revokes our culture, past as well as history.

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