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# Problems in Fixing the Regnal Years of the Rulers of Mahodayapuram from Ninth Century AD to Tenth Century AD – A Historical Reappraisal

Aneesh S.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Department of History, Christian College, Angadikal, Chengannur, Alappuzha – 689122, Kerala, India (Email: aneeshhistory@yahoo.com)

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**Abstract:** *The history of the reign of Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram, still remains a matter of debate and discussion among the scholars. After the study of M. G. S. Narayanan, no significant progress has been made in the history of early medieval Kerala. Neophyte researchers are reluctant to do further research on this particular area, as it is quite difficult for them to find out the drawbacks of the existing knowledge. This paper tries to talk out the problems and shortcomings of different views of various scholars on the history of early medieval Kerala.*

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**Keywords:** Kollam Era, Mahodayapuram, Nadus, Koyiladhikarikal, Rasi, Nakshatra, Vattezhuthu

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## Introduction

A re-reading of the history of early medieval Kerala seems more appropriate as certain facts need more clarity. An important hazard which prevents scholars from reconstructing the history of early medieval Kerala is the lack of sources. But, recently new sources were discovered through excavations, explorations and observation<sup>1</sup>. Scholars like Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai and M. G. S. Narayanan tried to throw light on the history of early medieval Kerala mainly by depending on various epigraphical, literary sources. But both the scholars have different views in fixing the chronology of various rulers. Their studies are contradictory in nature. Hence the interpretations generate much confusion in the minds of emerging scholars and students in understanding the history of the early medieval Kerala.

## Contradictions in the Views of Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai and M. G. S. Narayanan

By the time of M. G. S. Narayanan, about 150 inscriptions were found out. Among them 138 are on stone and 12 are on copper plates. These inscriptions are dated in various eras. In 25 dated inscriptions, some are dated in Kali era<sup>2</sup>, some are in Kollam

era<sup>3</sup>, and the rest of the inscriptions bear local eras<sup>4</sup> only. 80 inscriptions have the regnal years of authorities. The rest are without any date. There are a number of Chola, Pandya, Pallava and Rashtrakuta records which shows the relation with the rulers of Kerala (Narayanan 2013).

The attempts of various scholars and epigraphists of Travancore helped Ramanatha Ayyar to suggest a chronological scheme for the first time, from Rajasekharadeva to Rama Kulasekhara (Narayanan 2013). The discovery of Kota Ravi's Nedumpuram Tali inscription dated in Kali year by Cochin government epigraphists compelled them to avoid the names of the rulers such as Rajasekhara, Kulasekhara and Rama Kulasekhara. As per their view, these kings were rulers of Venad. Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai proposed new suggestions in the dates of various rulers and put forwarded a new revised chronology of rulers. M. G. S. Narayanan modified and generally accepted the views of Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai. He added some new rulers and changed the regnal years of some other monarchs (Table 1). Both the scholars are unanimous in stating that the emergence of a new dynasty took place in AD 800, without any inscriptional evidence. They also state that from the very beginning, the dynasty got full control and authority over Kerala. We cannot accept this argument blindly. In history it can be seen that every prominent dynasty emerged and extended their authority only by waging wars. But, here the implication is that various Nadus and kingdoms like Venad, Kolathunadu accepted the suzerainty of Kulasekhara rulers without waging any war. This questions the validity of their argument.

**Table 1: The Chronology of Second Cheras according to Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai and M. G. S. Narayanan**

| Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai |                 | M.G.S. Narayanan          |                       |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Name of Rulers                | Chronology      | Name of Rulers            | Chronology            |
| Kulasekhara Alwar             | AD 800 - AD 820 | Rama<br>Rajasekhara       | AD 800 - AD 844       |
| Sthanu Ravi                   | AD 844 - AD 885 | Sthanu<br>Kulasekhara     | Ravi AD 844 - AD 883  |
| Rama Varma                    | AD 885 - AD 917 | Kota<br>Vijayaraga        | Ravi AD 883 - AD 913  |
| Kotha Ravi Varma              | AD 917 -AD 947  | Kotha<br>Kerala Kesari    | Kotha AD 913 - AD 943 |
| Indu Kotha Varma              | AD 944- AD 962  | Indu Kotha                | AD 943- AD 962        |
| Bhaskara Ravi Varma I         | AD 962 -AD 1019 | Bhaskara<br>Manukuladitya | Ravi AD 962 - AD 1021 |
| Bhaskara Ravi Varma II        | AD 979 -AD 1021 |                           |                       |

The founder of Second Chera Empire was Kulasekhara Alwar says Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai. As all the kings adopted the official title of Kulasekhara Perumal, it can be deducted that the founder of the dynasty was Kulasekhara (Kunjanpillai 1970). He also argues that since the term Kulasekhara is seen to be a title after AD 825, the

founder Kulasekhara must have lived before that year. His arguments could not be accepted. The ruler Rajasekhara, the successor of Kulasekhara Varma, didn't adopt the official title of Kulasekhara Perumal<sup>5</sup>. He also claims that Kulasekhara Alwar (author of *The Mukunda Mala* in Sanskrit and the *Perumal Tirumozhi* in Tamil) and Kulasekhara Varma (author of *Tapati Samvarana*, *Subhadra Dhananjaya*, *Vichchinnabhisheka*, *Ascharyamanjari*) were in fact the same person. But there is no evidence to prove that Kulasekhara Alwar was the ruler of Kerala at that time.

The Vazhappalli inscription issued by Rajasekhara is considered to be the first available inscription of a Chera King (Rao 1992). It was brought to light by V. Srinivasa Sastri. The ruler, Rajasekharadeva who is mentioned in this inscription, bears a number of imperial titles such as Sriraja, Rajadhiraja, Parameswara and Battaraka. The inscription was issued in the 12th year of the reign of the king. It describes the meeting of the people of eighteen Nadus belonging to Tiruvarruvay and the townsmen of Vazhaippalli under the presidency of the king. Since the inscription does not bear any date, historians have various opinions regarding the year in which the inscription was issued. Gopinatha Rao states that 'the paleography of the inscription does not warrant us to assign the record to a period earlier than AD 750 or later than AD 850' (Rao 1992). Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai argues that Rajasekhara or Cheraman Perumal Nayanar was the successor of Kulasekhara Alwar. As Stanu Ravi came to the throne in AD 844, it can be concluded that Rajasekhara's reign came to an end in AD 844. He also identifies Rajasekhara with Cheraman Perumal Nayanar (Kunjanpillai 2005).

According to M. G. S. Narayanan the earliest Perumal is Rama Rajasekhara. He makes this statement by using Vazhappalli copper plate (Rao 1992). M. G. S. Narayanan claims that Rajasekhara was a Perumal and the inscription was issued by a Perumal. He states that the king started his reign in AD 800 and his rule came to an end in AD 844.

But it is to be noted that along with his name, Rajasekhara used the honorific 'Rajadhiraja Parameswara Bhattaraka'. It shows that he was not a local ruler but a great sovereign. His inscription begins with the word 'Namasivaya'. The rest of the inscriptions of this period begin with the word 'Svasti Sri'. Recently, in 2011, a new inscription was discovered at Kurumathur temple in Malappuram district. Raghava Varier deciphered the inscription and said it serves as a direct evidence to fix the date of first Perumal Rama Rajasekhara (Naha 2011). The date of the issue of inscription was calculated as AD 871 (Naha 2011). Thus his period of reign must be fixed in the third quarter of ninth century AD.

The next ruler followed by Rajasekhara was Sthanu Ravi. A discussion on the reign of this particular ruler is inevitable. Let's have a look at the inscriptions issued during the reign of Sthanu Ravi. Scholars have discovered inscriptions of Sthanu Ravi from different parts of Kerala. Unfortunately, all these lack the exact date of his coronation. They just mention the number of regnal years of the monarch. Among them the most

important inscription is Tarisappalli inscription which was issued during the 5th regnal year of the king Sthanu Ravi. The inscription is written in Vattezhuthu characters and the language of the record is Tamil. By issuing this copper plate certain rights and privileges were given to a church at Terisappalli in Kollam. As the church is no longer in existence, it is impossible to find out its exact location. The Venad ruler Ayyan Adikal Thiruvadikal issued this inscription. One of the notable personalities who was present there in the copper plates was Vijayaragadevar, the then Koyiladhikarikal.

All the available inscriptions of Sthanu Ravi lack exact date, scholars depended on paleography for determining the age of inscriptions. T. A. Gopinatha Rao tried to determine the age of the documents by using paleography. He examined Kottayam Syrian Christian Plates and found out the fact that the inscription No. I, which is older than No. II, is written in fine Vattezhuthu characters of about the latter half of the ninth or beginning of the tenth century AD (Rao 1992).

Since the document does not give anything beyond the bare regnal year, it is insufficient for the calculation of the date of the king Sthanu Ravi. The discovery of Tillaistanam inscription gave impetus to the efforts of historians to fix the regnal years of Sthanu Ravi. With the help of Tillaistanam inscription (Rao 1992), scholars came to the conclusion that the king Sthanu Ravi ruled over Kerala in the ending decades of ninth century AD. T. A. Gopinatha Rao believed that it was issued during the reign of Rajakesarivarman Aditya I, the Chola ruler, who uprooted the Pallava Dynasty and extended his dominions over the whole of Tondainadu. Aditya I lived in about the second half of the ninth century AD. The appearance of Sthanu Ravi along with Aditya Chola I in the inscription was a strong evidence to fix the date of Sthanu Ravi no earlier date than the last quarter of the ninth century (Rao 1992).

The Tirunandikkara Inscription (Subrahmanyaaiyer 1999) gives more details regarding Vijayaragadevar who appears in the Tarisappalli inscription as the then Koyiladhikarikal. It gives the details of a gift of gold to the temple of Tirunandikkarai by Kizhanadikal, the queen of Vijayaragavadeva and the daughter of Kulasekharadeva. From the details given by the inscription it can be inferred that Vijayaragadevar was the son-in-law of Sthanu Ravi, because his wife Kizhanadikal was the daughter of Sthanu Ravi. The Tiruvottiyur inscription (Sastri 1987) of Paranthaka Chola registers a gift of gold by princess Nili the daughter of Kerala king Vijayaragadeva. With the aid of these facts, the early historians fix the date of Sthanu Ravi in the closing decades of 9th century AD.

There are other available Inscriptions of Sthanu Ravi. A copper plate which was discovered from Muvidathu Mercherillam at Thiruvalla belongs to the seventeenth year of the reign of the king Sthanu Ravi. Irinjalakuda stone inscription belongs to the 11th year of his reign (Narayanan 2013). All these inscriptions provide nothing beyond the bare regnal year and it is therefore not possible to fix his age from these records.

With the help of Sankaranarayana's commentary on '*Laghubhaskariyam*' Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai was able to fix the regnal years of Sthanu Ravi (Kunjanpillai 1970). It was the interpretation of Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai that ended the controversy of the regnal years of Sthanu Ravi. It also gave a strong foundation for the reconstruction of the chronology of Second Chera dynasty rulers. With the help of the commentary on *Laghubhaskariyam*, composed in the Chera court by Sankaranarayanan in AD 869, Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai proved that Sthanu Ravi's coronation was in AD 844. The astronomical work was written when the ruler had completed 25 years of reign.

Here, M. G. S. Narayanan considers the date of Tillaisthanam inscription in AD 844-45 and says the Tillaisthanam record was not issued during the reign of Aditya Chola, but it was issued during the reign of Sri Kanda (Mahalingam2012). '*TondainatuPavinaCholanPalayanaiKoKandan*' alias Rajakesari was a Potapi Chola ruler called Srikanda Chola who ruled from AD 817 and AD 845. As the coronation of Stanu Ravi was in AD 844, the joint action of both the rulers was placed in AD 844-45. So, M. G. S. Narayanan claims that Sthanu Ravi did not continue up to AD 885. As per his view Sthanu Ravi continued up to AD 883 (Narayanan 2013).

Both the scholars accept the argument that the coronation of Sthanu Ravi was in AD 844. But a re-reading of the work *Laghubhaskariya Vyakhya* or the *Commentary on Laghubhaskariyam* gives a new picture about the ruler. We cannot emphatically argue that the king who is mentioned in the work is Sthanu Ravi because, in *Laghubhaskariya Vyakhya*, the word '*sthanu*' appears in the opening stanza only. The meaning of the Sanskrit word '*Sthanu*' is Lord Siva. In the work, the name of the king is clearly mentioned as Ravi Varma and not Sthanu Ravi. As there is no word '*Sthanu Ravi*' in the work, it is clear that Sankaranarayana, the author of *Laghubhaskariya Vyakhya*, was praising the God Lord Siva in the Opening Stanza. Thus, the king who was mentioned in *Laghubhaskariya Vyakhya* is not the king Sthanu Ravi but, another ruler called Ravi Varma Kulasekhara. The new interpretation given to Tillaisthanam inscription also rejects the view of Elamkulam that the king Sthanu Ravi's initial year was 844 AD (Mahalingam 2012). Thus it is clear that Ravi Varma Kulasekhara succeeded his father Sthanu Ravi.

Rama Varma Kulasekhara (AD 885 – AD 917) was the successor of Sthanu Ravi says Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai. He rejected the opinion of some scholars that Sthanu Ravi was succeeded by Vijayaragan who appears in Tarisappalli inscription and other inscriptions. Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai strongly argues that Kulasekharas were Makkathayis. So he says Rama Varma Kulasekhara was the next ruler (Kunjanpillai 1970). Unfortunately, no inscription of Rama Varma Kulasekhara has been discovered yet. M. G. S. Narayanan does not accept Rama Varma as the successor of Sthanu Ravi.

Kotha Ravi Varma was the next ruler who succeeded Rama Varma Kulasekhara says Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai. With the help of Nedumpuram Tali Temple inscription that was issued in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of king's reign, Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai fixes the

period of Kotha Ravi Varma. In the inscription it was written 'Kaliyukamnalayirattumuppata' means 'Kali year 4030'. But this does not agree the position of Jupiter in Mithuna (Kunjanpillai 1970). So he suggested another date 'Kaliyukamnalayirattumuppattancu' means 'Kali year 4035'. It suits the position of Jupiter in Midhuna also. Kali year 4035 stands for AD 917. Thus Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai reaches the conclusion that Kotha Ravi Varma started his reign in AD 917. Another inscription issued in his 30<sup>th</sup> regnal year was found in Santana Gopaldaswami temple at Trippunnithura which shows that his rule ended in AD 947. But the discovery of Tiruvorriyur inscription of Chola king Parantaka I which mentions the name Keralaraja Vijayaraga in AD 936 questions the sovereignty of Kotha Ravi Varma.

According to M. G. S. Narayanan, in AD 883 a new ruler named Kota Ravi Vijayaraga ascended to the throne. In the Syrian Christian Copper plate, the name Vijayaraga is mentioned as the Koiladhikarikal. In the copper plate of Parantaka Chola, the name of Vijayaraga is described as the ruler of Kerala. The copper plate was issued in AD 936. Nedumpuram Tali record of Kota Ravi in the 17<sup>th</sup> year recorded in the Kali year was interpreted by M. G. S. Narayanan as 'Kaliyukamnalayirattumoppata' (Narayanan 2013). Thus he stated that the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Kota Ravi Vijayaraga is AD 900. So he concluded that Kota Ravi started his reign in AD 883. A record mentioning the 30<sup>th</sup> years of Kota Ravi was found in Trippunnithura. Thus his rule ended in AD 913. M. G. S. Narayanan places another ruler named Kota Kerala Kesari in AD 913. Though Kota Kerala's Kavuntara and Kerala Kesari's Trikkakara records resemble Kota Ravi record's in script and language, M. G. S. Narayanan says it belongs to another ruler called Kota Kerala Kesari. He tentatively placed the king mentioned in these two records in the period AD 913 to AD 943.

Indu Kotha was the next ruler followed by Kotha Ravi. This ruler's reign was placed in between that of Kotha Ravi and Bhaskara Ravi. Perumanakkottathu Kesavan Sankaran one of the witnesses in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Indu Kotha's inscription, is present as a witness in Bhaskara Ravi's 6<sup>th</sup> year inscription. Thus Indu Kotha's reign was fixed before the reign of Bhaskara Ravi. Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai says that his reign started in AD 944. But Kotha Ravi's rule came to an end only in AD 947. From AD 944 to AD 947 Indu Kotha served as a Crown Prince (Kunjanpillai 1970). Then only he became the real sovereign of the land. He ruled for 17 years as the last available inscription was in his 17<sup>th</sup> regnal year. But M. G. S. Narayanan says that Indu Kotha started his rule in AD 943 and continued up to AD 962.

Assessing the coronation year of Bhaskara Ravi was a matter of dispute among the historians for a long period. The discovery of Bhaskara Ravi's forty-third-year inscription (Thirunelli inscription) by M. A. Cammiade helped the scholars calculate the exact period of his reign. The date is written in the inscription as the thirty fifth year opposite the sixth which was opposite to the second year of the reign of the monarch (Rao, 1992). That is forty third year of his reign. The inscription contains

astronomical details as well. It was issued on a Wednesday, eighth day of solar month Mina. On that day the Nakshatra (star) was Uttara Phalguni and the position of Jupiter was in Tula Rasi. L. D. Swamikkannu Pillai calculated the exact date with the help of this inscription and reached the conclusion that the most suitable date comes on Wednesday, 1 March, AD 1021. Thus it was concluded that his reign started in AD 978. But another inscription that was issued in the fourteenth regnal year of Bhaskara Ravi was discovered from Perunna temple near Changansseri in Kottayam District. This inscription contains astronomical details like Thirunelli inscription. The inscription was issued on twentieth day of solar month Mina; Nakshatra was Punarvasu and Jupiter was in Makara Rasi. L. D. Swamikkannu Pillai calculated the date and put forward some dates. The first date was AD 1060, Sunday, March 12 and the second was AD 1155, Sunday, March 13 (Rao 1992). The first date was generally accepted by the scholars. As the second date falls in AD 1155 it was rejected by the scholars because, by the beginning of twelfth century AD, the Chera kingdom disappeared. As Bhaskara Ravi's fourteenth year falls in AD 978, how it is possible to say that his forty third year falls in AD 1060? This was the most important hazard in front of the scholars.

Finally, Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai was able to find out another possible date of Perunna inscription (fourteenth regnal year). He discovered that AD 976, March 12 could be used in lieu of AD 1060. Thus he places another Bhaskara Ravi before the donor of Tirunelli inscription. The first Bhaskara Ravi became the ruler in AD 962 and continued for fifty-eight years, that is up to AD 1019. The second Bhaskara Ravi started his reign in AD 979. He continued up to AD 1021. The ruler, who issued the famous Jewish Copper Plate in his thirty eighth year, was Bhaskara Ravi I says Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai.

He further extends his arguments that there are three rulers named Bhaskara Ravi. There are three inscriptions of which the date is recorded as the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Bhaskara Ravi. In the first inscription, the position of Jupiter is in Makara Rasi. In the second, the position of Jupiter is in Edava and in the last one, Jupiter is in Tula Rasi. The first ruler Bhaskara Ravi I started his reign in AD 962 and ruled for 58 years. His rule came to an end in AD 1019. It was this Bhaskara Ravi I who issued Jewish Copper Plate in AD 1000. The Bhaskara Ravi II ascended to the throne on AD 978. His rule ended in AD 1021. But Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai says he was a crown prince and not a sovereign ruler. The third Bhaskara Ravi's reign was fixed from AD 1043 to AD 1082.

M. G. S. Narayanan says there is only one ruler named Bhaskara Ravi Manukuladitya. He ascended the throne in AD 962 and ruled for 58 years. M. G. S. Narayanan says that there were two rulers, namely, Bhaskara Ravi I and Bhaskara Ravi II. But the first was the real ruler and the second was the junior prince or the crown prince. But the junior prince used his own regnal years. He further argues that Bhaskara Ravi was a minor of eight years when he became the king. But his regular coronation was performed when he reached the age of twenty-five. A land gift by king Manukuladitya was mentioned in Tiruvalla copper plates. At that time the king was a crown prince or boy-king. When

he attained the age of twenty-five he became the real sovereign. Thus M. G. S. Narayanan reached his conclusion that there was only one ruler and his name is Bhaskara Ravi Manukuladitya (Narayanan 2013). He does not accept the existence of Bhaskara Ravi III. The views of Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai and M. G. S. Narayanan are not entirely free from suspicion because, the calculation of Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai on the position of Jupiter itself says that the planet had not reached Makara Rasi on March 12, AD 976. The position of Jupiter on the above mentioned date was in Dhanu Rasi (267.8 Degree). M. G. S. Narayanan's view on Bhaskara Ravi Manukuladitya also raises some doubts as he tells nothing about the thirteenth Year inscription of Bhaskara Ravi III.

**Table 2: Chronology Suggested by the Present Author**

| Name of Rulers         | Chronology      | Sources                  |
|------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Sthanu Ravi            | AD 800 - AD 844 | –                        |
| Ravi Varma Kulasekhara | AD 844 - AD 871 | Laghubhaskariya Vyakhya  |
| Rama Rajasekhara       | AD 871 - AD 883 | Kurumathur Inscription   |
| Kotha Ravi Varma       | AD 883 - AD 917 | –                        |
| Vijayaraga Deva        | AD 918 - AD 944 | Tiruvottiyur inscription |
| Indu Kotha             | AD 944- AD 962  | –                        |
| Bhaskara Ravi Varma I  | AD 962 -AD 1019 | –                        |
| Bhaskara Ravi Varma II | AD 979 -AD 1021 | –                        |

## Conclusion

The following conclusion has been based on the analysis presented above. Various scholars such as Gopinatha Rao and Ramanatha Aiyer have laid the foundation of the genealogical analysis of rulers of early medieval Kerala. Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai sought to modify the then existing chronology of Kulasekharas with the help of new evidences and put forwarded more acceptable chronology of rulers of Kerala who had their capital at Mahodayapuram. M. G. S. Narayanan modified the views of Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan Pillai and suggested a new genealogy of rulers. But his views are not completely free from defects which were already discussed in this paper. Moreover, after the research of M. G. S. Narayanan, this area of research remains largely untouched. So, the knowledge that we had acquired before forty years had not progressed further. Thus it demands more empirical and comprehensive research on this particular area, so that we can create more reliable and comprehensive history of early medieval Kerala. In the light of new findings, the rulers such as Ravi Varma Kulasekhara, Rama Rajasekhara and Vijayaraga kulasekhara can be included in the chronology of Second Cheras (Table 2).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Kodavalam temple inscription at Pullur, Chalappuram temple inscription at Eramom and kurumathur Vishnu temple inscription near Areekode. These inscriptions have not been officially published.*



- <sup>2</sup> *From ninth century AD to tenth century AD, three Kali era dated inscriptions are helpful in calculating the reign of rulers.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Mampalli Copper Plate is the only Kollam era dated inscription available before eleventh century AD.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Local eras are temple eras which calculate the date from the establishment of Hindu temple.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Since the available sources are very limited in number, we are not in a position to say anything emphatically about the tradition existed there.*

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