

Chettikulangara Bhagawathy

By

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(I have used the write up on this temple in the Wikipedia in many places verbatim. My acknowledgements are due to that great work.)

Chettikulangara, Bhagawathy temple is one of the very renowned temples of Kerala. It is about 5 km from Mavelikkara and 6 km from Kayangulam. In this temple the Goddess appears like Goddess Saraswathy in the morning, Goddess Lakshmi in the noon and Goddess Durga at night. The temple is believed to be 1200 years old and is in the middle of 13 Karas (Residential areas of Nairs). It is one of the temples with very high income running to several crores in Kerala. Nairs and Ezhavas play a major role in the worship and conduct of festivals in this temple.

The idol of the temple is made using Jack wood. It seems once the idol got slightly dilapidated and the people decided to have a new idol. They after arduous search located a suitable Jack wood tree in a private compound in Aranmula. But the owner of the tree refused to give the tree for making of the idol. That day it seems the owner of the tree dreamt that he was being beaten by The Bhadrakali. When he woke up next day all over his body were the mark of the beating. Immediately he offered the tree and the present idol was made from that tree.

There are several stories about the origin of this temple. It seems the people of this area used to attend the festival in the *Koypallikarazhma Bhagavathi* temple before this temple was built. That chieftain of that village humiliated the people of this area. Because of this they prayed Goddess Bhagawathi to come to their country. In the dream of one of them, the Goddess appeared and told that she will come to their country. After a few days an old woman was seen walking towards the temple. She needed to cross a river to reach this place. A Christian boat man helped her to cross the river and also started helping her to reach her destination. On the way that old lady became very tired and sat down below a tree. The boatman went to a nearby house, where some work was going on and brought some Kanji (rice gruel) and chutney made using horse gram. The old lady took them and went to a near by tank to wash her hands. There was a Brahmin lady in steps of the tank. She saw the old lady getting in to the tank and vanishing there. She also saw a very bright light there. The people of the village called the astrologers who found out that that lady was Bhagawathy herself. So they built a temple for her there. The family of the Christian boatman were entrusted the job of the Fire cracker worship in the temple. They also offer daily to the Goddess the rice gruel and Horse Gram Chutney. Below the tree where the goddess took rest, they also built a temple for her called Puducherry temple.

According to another version, this temple was consecrated by Padmapadacharyar (a leading disciple of Adi Shankara) on the Uthrittathi day of Makara month in A.D. 823. There is a firm argument that the goddess here was a family deity, and later emerged as the village and regional deity. Local historians oppose the argument that the temple is not

as ancient as the nearby *Kandiyoor Mahadeva* temple or Mavelikara *Krishna Swamy* temple as it had not been mentioned in *Unnuneeli Sandesam* written in the 14th century. According to late *Kandiyoor Mahadeva Shasthri*, *Samudra Bandhan*—a leading courtier of *Ravi Varman*, an ancient King of Venad had visited this temple and wrote poems on Bhagavathi. Similarly *Aadithya Kulasekharan*, the King of Venad (1374 A.D. to 1389 A.D.) also had visited the Chettikulangara temple, argues them. However, it is to be said that the present *Sreekovil* of the temple is only 450-480 years old, and the *Chuttambalam* is not more than two centuries old. Local historians say that the temple infrastructure and the surroundings were developed by various local chieftains from time to time. The present *Sreekoil* was revamped during A.D.1540. Because of a small fire at this temple, the *Chuttambalam* was slightly modified during the Malayalam year 1002.

It is also believed that Chettikulangara Amma (the main deity) is the daughter of Kodungallur Amma, brought to that place for the well being of all people at *Onattukara*(Mavelikara).

In front of the temple there is a huge lamp in which you can put thousand wicks. One of the major offering at the temple is lighting the lamp. Since the statue of the Goddess is made of Jack tree wood, it is coated with red paste of Kumkum(called Chandadal often.

Besides the main deity there are also temples for Yakshi, mukoorthi, Rakthakshi, Thevara Murthy, Kannampalli Bhagawathy, Ganapathy , Naga raja, Naga Yakshi, Brahma Rakshas, Valia Achan and Balakan in this temple.

Festivals of the temple

The Temple has a number of festivals. The important ones are

Parayeduppu

In the numerous temples of Onattukara, the "Parayeduppu" period is the festival season. It all begins when the deity ("Devi") of Chettikulangara temple is taken out in procession for Parayeduppu on the *Makayriam* star of the Malayalam month *Makaram*(*January-February*). The festivals continue to the end of *Medam*(*April-May*). The main part of *Parayeduppu* is the *Jeevatha* constructed in the model of the temple structure itself. This box-like carriage for the deity rests on two teakwood poles about two meters long, and is in the form of a palanquin . The front resembles "*Thidambu*" behind which is a kind of *pettakam* (small chest) built as per *Thachusaasthra* calculations. Up front is a woollen cloth embroidered with shining, colourful pictures and gold trinkets. Behind that is kept the deity's holy dress, starched and pleated, and decorated with small mirror pieces. More than 100 families form the entourage of *Parayeduppu Bhagavathy's* - five month long visit to the homes of people who lives in her *Karas*

The rhythms used during *Jeevatha Ezunnallathu* (procession) are quite noteworthy. Starting with very slow beats, it builds up a crescendo and ends in fast beats. The ensemble consists of *Veekkan chenda*, *Uruttu chenda* (both drums), *Elathaalam* (cymbals), *Kombu* and *Kuzhal* (both, wind instruments).

Although Jeevatha Ezunnallathu and Parayeduppu are centuries old customs, the "Chuvadu Vechu Kali" (a peculiar dance with unique steps) is relatively recent.

Kumbha Bharani

The major festival at Chettikulangara is ***Kumbha Bharani*** Festival. This is in the month of march or April. The date is determined according to the Malayalam Calendar *KollaVarsham*. In that this day comes in the month of *Kumbha* and the day which has the star *Bharani* and hence the name *Kumbha Bharani*. The highlight of the festival is [***Kuthiyottam***] and [***Kettukazha***].

The preparation for *Kumbha Bharani* starts 7 days before the actual day and incidentally that day will be the *Shivarathi*. People who had pledged for ***Kuthiyottam*** will start training their children for the offering on that day. All these 7 days these people will host public get-togethers and arrange food for them. The children will be taught a special dance steps called ***Kuthiyoota chuvadukal*** etc. Meanwhile the people from 13 *karas* of chettikulangara will arrange for the construction of [***Kettukazhcha***] to the temple.

The *Kuthiyottam* processions starts early morning on that day and will last until afternoon. Those who had offered *Kuthiyottam* to Devi will bring their children to the temple as a procession and will offer the children before Devi as sacrifice. The boys will be playing the *Kuthiyootam* dance before the Devi. During the evening hours it will be turn of the *Kettukazhcha*. People from each area will pull the *Kettukazhcha* from the construction sites (usually in their respective *karas* itself) to the temple to preset them before the Devi and after having *darshan* the parties take up their respective position in the paddy fields lying east of the temple

During the night, the image of Devi will be carried in procession to the *Kettukazhcha* stationed in the paddy fields. On the next day these structures will be taken back. A big bazaar is also held at Chetikulangara as part of this festival.

Ethirelpu Ulasvam

This is the annual temple festival. On the tenth day following the *Kumbha Bharani* the annual festival is celebrated in the temple for 13 days. Each day of the festival is organized by residents of each *Kara* numbering 13. special rituals are held in the temple premises. Every afternoon, cultural processions start from each *Kara* to the temple premises, with the accompaniment of drums, ornamented umbrellas, *kuthiyottam* songs, display of events from the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana, classical art forms, folk art form, different type of music, decorated structures and caparisoned elephants.

During the rituals at the temple *Thottampattu* is sung. *Thottampattu* is a devotional song sung by a certain section of the community residing in the far off Trivandrum. This song is sung in the temple only during the *Ethirelpu* festival.

Performance of classical arts and other temple arts are conducted in the evening in the temple premises

Aswathy Ulasvam

The unique rituals during the *Aswathy* festival clearly convey the firm bondage and human pathos at the time of separation between the people and their beloved Bhagavathy. Held in the Aswathy day in the month of *Meenom* (March-April), this festival is attracting a large number of visitors. This festival is imagined as a send off to the deity on her journey to visit her mother at [Kodungallur](#). In the evening, 100 odd decorated [*Kettukazhcha*] and different effigies are brought to the temple mainly made by the children. Though the size of these *Kettukazhcha* are comparatively smaller than the ones made for Bharani festival, the number of *Kettukazhcha* provide a visual impact even challenging the aesthetic effect of Bharani. During the day, Bhagavathy visits the four karas surrounding the temple for Parayeduppu and official Anpolis are given by Kara leaders at Kuthirachevudu, the place where Kuthiras are made. After that she visits and blesses the offerings displayed at the temple premises.

By dawn, she decides to leave, and seeks their permission to leave for Kodungallur. The people of the first four karas make *Polavilakku* (a large structure drawn on wheels decorated with tender banana stem and lighted with numerous traditional lamps) during her farewell procession. They offer her a grand farewell procession with *Aappindi* [a unique slow paced dance carrying a pyramid shape box on head). *Aappindi* will be embellished with crackers, *pookkula* (cluster of coconut flowers - inflorescence), and will be covered with tender banana stems and *Thalappoli* (traditional sacred lamps carried by ladies).

People from Kaitha North and Kaitha South participate in the function with *Thiruvantham*. It is said that *Thiruvantham*, a palanquin type structure with fireballs and carried by four people, is the light of Darika , which incenses the Bhagavathy. She scares them away. After the procession, she again visits the *Upaprathishtas* and asks the people and other gods to let her visit her mother at Kodungallur.

By dawn, she proceeds with lightning speed towards west. Normally, within the 100 meters, the Poojaris carrying the *Jeevatha* will fall down unconsciously, and the *Jeevatha* will be taken back to the temple.

The temple will remain closed for the day, and will be opened only the day after. The Aswathy festival concludes the five month long festivities at this temple.

Kettukazhcha

Kettukazhcha is an offering of the people of Chettikulangara to their beloved deity known for her spontaneous blessings on true devotees as a mark of gratitude, devotion, unflinching faith, and for showering prosperity and protection to their lives. *Kettukazhcha* displays deftly sculpted and decorated forms of six temple cars known as '*Kuthiras*', five

Therus (Chariots) and icons of Bhima and Hanuman. All the temple cars, chariots and the icons are all incredibly gigantic in size and are many times larger than any other similar Kuthiras and *Therus* built during the festivities at other temples in the Central Travancore region. On the move, these out of the world sky scrapping colourful decorations are electrifying, and will create an unforgettable artistic impression in union, especially during the night in the back drop of illuminated lights. Chettikulangara Kettukazhcha heralds the architectural and aesthetic acumen of the ancient people of Chettikulangara, who could convert an improbable out of the world concept to an enormous artistic reality, achieved by collective hardships and will power.

Lineage according to historians

Historians attribute the concept of '*Kettukazhchas*' - similar to the architecture of the '[Buddha](#)' tradition in square, rectangular and pyramid shapes, to the remnants of the Buddha culture which was widely prevalent in the Central Travancore region a few centuries ago.

Many historians cite that the famous Chettikulangara Kettukazhcha in the present form is not more than 180 to 200 years old, and was started during the early part of the 19th century.

According to a popular legend, a group of village chieftains and their workers went for civil works to construct the Kollam–Chavara Thodu (canal), about 50 km away from Chettikulangara, in accordance to the decision from the then ruler of the region. But they could not return to their native place due to the unforeseen inordinate delay in completion of the canal. They pleaded with the authorities, but their request was turned down. During the period, they got an opportunity to visit the temple festivities at Kollam Mulankagakam temple, and were attracted by the Kettukazhcha there. They vowed to their local deity Chettikulangara Bhagavathy, that they would construct Kettukazhchas for her every year, if they were allowed to leave for Chettikulangara immediately. To their surprise, they were allowed to return to Chettikulangara the very next day, and as promised, they made huge Kettukazhchas and took them to their Bhagavathy's premises.

Kuthiras

Kuthiras have a height of about 70 to 75 feet, and are a union of four parts– *Adikkoottu*, *Kathirakal*, *Edakkodaram*, *Prabhada* and *Melkkoodaram*, one above the other respectively.

Adikkottu the basic structure also known as *Vandikkoottu*, form the basic foundation which consists of four big wooden wheels interconnected with four other beams above it. *Kuthiras* have *Thandu*, two long huge wooden poles helpful to control the direction while on the move. *Thandu* and the basic structure are interconnected and have reinforced wooden bearings similar to the modern shock absorbers.

Kathirukal with about 35 feet height, consists of four long poles interconnected with Arecanut poles known as '*Alaku*' and reinforced with coir and Panavalli knots. These are again strengthened with '*Kuthukathrika*' or criss cross formation of *Alakus*. *Kathirakal* is

again bifurcated to two parts—the lower portion consisting of four to five extended layers of *Thattu* and *Charippu* (slanting pyramid shaped boxes, made of interconnected *Alakus* and coir formation, then decorated with white cloth known as *Vella*, colourful glittering clothes and embellishments called '*Thookku*').

Prabhada consists of exquisite wooden carved sculptors narrating stories from the Puranas, elephant caparisons called *Nettipattoms*, *Thalekkettu* and *Aalavattom* displayed in the backdrop of colourful clothes and sculptors. Many of the *Prabhadas* have stories like *Gajendramoksham*, *Vasthrapaharanam*, *Krishnavatharm*.

Edakkoodaram almost half the size of *Kathirakal* with four to five *Charippu* made as in the lower portion, comes above the *Kathirakal*. It also has glittering different clothes and *Vella*, interlaced with colourful *Thookku* embellishments.

Melkkoodaram the top structure is exactly having a pyramid shape, and pivotal to it is an extended long sculpted wooden pole in white colour known as '*Nambu*'. All the separate units are pulled up and placed one above the other with the help of wooden pulleys, giant coir ropes called *Vadams* with a length of over 100 fts. and with huge iron structures, drawn by hundreds of people.

Theru

Theru does not have the *Prabhadas* and *Edakkoodarams*. Their *illithattu* and *charippu* are larger than that of the *Kuthiras* and diminishes in size upwards. *Therus* are also relatively smaller in comparison to the *Kuthiras* height

Bhima and Hanuman The wooden icons of *Bhima* made by *Mattom North* and *Hanuman* brought by *Mattom south* are probably the largest of its kind in the world, and are sure to be the largest in Kerala. *Bhima's* icon is postured as the *Pandava* en route to kill *Baka* on *Pothu Vandi* (vehicle drawn by buffalos) with food for the *Rakshasa* King. *Mattom south* kara also brings the icon of *Panjali* along with *Hanuman*

Preparations for constructing the *Kettukazhchas* start from *Shivarathri*, about six to ten days prior to *Kumbhabharani*. On the evening of *Kumbhabharani*, the *Kettukazhchas* are dragged to the temple by hundreds of people, and are paraded at the paddy field in front of the temple. After *Bhagavathi's Ezhunnellippu* to bless the *Kettukazhchas* and people, the *Kettukazhchas* are taken back to the respective *Karas* by next morning. The dismantled parts of *Kettukazhchas* are kept at the '*Kuthirappura*' of each *Karas*.

Kuthiyottam

Kuthiyottam is performed as an important offering to the deity. Some people believe that this is the modified form of *Nara Bali* in which men were killed and their blood was allowed to fall on the Goddess. This is a ritual dance practiced and perfected through several centuries. It used to be done only in houses in the 13 *Karas* of the *Chettikulangara* Temple but after a recent *Deva Prashnam* it was allowed to conduct *Kuthiyottam* in the houses outside of the 13 *Karas*. The houses are decorated, and the portrait of the deity is

installed in temporary structures. Kuthiyottam starts a week before Bharani day. It is a type of folk dance performed by youths with the accompaniment of folk music and other musical instruments. Young boys between 8 to 14 years are taught this ritual dance in the house amidst a big social gathering before the portrait of the deity. Feasts are also provided for all the people.

Early in the morning on Bharani, after the feast and other rituals, the boys whose bodies are coiled with silver wires, one end of which is tied around his neck and an arecanut fixed on the tip of a knife held high over his head are taken in procession to the temple with the accompaniment of beating of drums, music, ornamental umbrellas, and other classical folk art forms, and richly caparisoned elephants.

All through the way to the temple tender coconut water will be continually poured on his body. After the circumambulation the boys stands at a position facing the Sreekovil (Sanctum Sanctorum) and begins to dance. This ceremony ends with dragging the coil pierced to the skin whereby a few drop of blood comes out.