Chapter 4 : Governance System

When we arrived in the Mannan settlements, the first thing that struck us was how deeply decentralised, well-structured, and intricately distributed their governance system is. This system of governance is known as ‘Naalu Mannan - Naalu Vaathi - Onpathu Kaani - Pathulamthaari Pathulamthaarichi Chattam’.

The community follows a monarchic style of governance, led by a single King who serves as the prime decision-maker. Kingship is transferred matrilineally through the marumakkathayam system of inheritance. The King acts as the head of the community and presides over all major decisions, supported by a structured hierarchy of leaders and advisors. The administrative headquarters of the Mannan community is located at Kovilmala in the Idukki District. In the Mannan language, the King is referred to as Varakku Malan or Valiya Moopan.

The major governing positions of the Mannan governance include :

(i) The King (Rajamannan),

(ii) Nine Kaani individuals, execution committee, consisting of elderly chieftains (Kaani)

(iii) Four Moopanmar individuals, sub-rulers who governs various regions of the designated Mannan kingdom

(iv) Four Vaathi individuals, who are elders well versed with magic and spells

(v) Urali Samithi, individuals who are designated for law and order enforcement within the community.

(vi) Pathulamthaari and Pathulamthaarichikal, youth members in the community who are assigned tasks during community events.

Even though the Mannan governance system is highly structured, we observed in the community several disruptions in its practice and continuity. In many hamlets, traditional systems are not fully functional as described, due to multiple factors. The passing of elders and the resulting interruptions in the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations emerged as a major contributor to these disruptions.

Cultural shifts have also contributed to the gradual weakening of this indigenous governance system and its underlying values. The changing aspirations of the younger generation have likewise played a role in this transition.

We also noted differences of opinion regarding leadership positions and their associated powers across regions and hamlets, which will be discussed in the following section. These variations appear largely due to the absence of written documentation, as well as the differences that arise from oral transmission of histories and the regional diversity of narratives.

The Mannan Kingdom, Regional Divisions and 4 Mannans

Along with the King, there exist four different moopans, referred to as 4 mannans, who govern the various regions of the Mannan kingdom. We have found that these Moopans are assisted by Yuvarajakanmar in some regions. These regions are defined based on geographical divisions.

There are multiple narratives within the community on the formation of the four Mannans and transition to a single King. Some share their stories with the King being selected from the initial system of four Mannan governance for the ease of governance. But some believe the King was always there and the four Mannans were later appointed to assist the King. All four individuals are considered equal in the system of Mannan governance within their designated region. With the existence of said variations and current broken systems, it is difficult to arrive at a singular narrative on the exact nature of functionality and relationship of the single King and four Mannans.

The multiple narratives on the four Mannan moopans and the division of sub kingdoms, their nomenclature can be found in Annexure – IV.

The Mannan King (Valiyamoopan / Varakkumalan)

The King serves as the supreme head and guardian of the Mannan community, overseeing welfare, administration, and ritual matters. The title passes through a matrilineal succession system in accordance with the community's customs. Alongside the King, there is an Ilaya Moopan or Ilaya Rajavu, who assists in governance at Kovilmala. The king is termed as Valiyamoopan or Varakkumalan in the Mannan system.

The current King, Raman Rajamannan, is considered by many community members to be the sixteenth ruler in this line. Others believe he is the fourteenth. This variation reflects a general uncertainty among the people regarding the exact number of past rulers, as there is no written documentation to confirm the succession sequence. The community collectively recalls three previous Kings: Ariyan Rajamannan, Thevan Rajamannan, and Nayan Rajamannan.

The Origin

A few elders narrated that the four Moopans, who were initially equal in power, once met together and collectively decided to crown one among them, Varakkumalan, as the King. This was to ensure unity and easier coordination, as frequent travel between regions was difficult in the olden days. Raman Rajamannan has a different narrative to the origin and evolution of Varakkumalan. He believes the King and his other 4 Moopans evolved naturally when the initial kings understood he couldn't manage governing the whole of Mannan territory alone.

There are multiple narratives within the community regarding the identity of its first king. One such account, attributed to Raman Rajamannan, identifies Veeran Thevan as the first ruler. This narrative situates Veeran Thevan's origins within a ritual and marginal social context, tracing his rise to authority through a combination of ritual power, royal recognition, and territorial conflict.

According to Raman Rajamannan, Veeran Thevan was the son of a poojari who performed ritual duties at the Kanjiyar temple. Despite this association, Veeran Thevan was not publicly recognised and is described as having grown up engaging in disruptive behaviour, particularly troubling traders and travellers. These actions eventually led to his arrest and presentation before the Poonjar rulers. Upon learning of his son's detention, the poojari is said to have approached the royal court to explain his son's circumstances.

The narrative recounts that the court initially dismissed Poojari's claims. In response, the poojari is believed to have demonstrated his ritual power by sitting on the court floor on a folded blanket and summoning ants throughout the space. This act was interpreted by the court as evidence of

extraordinary ability, prompting a reconsideration of their decision and the subsequent release of both father and son. At this point, the poojari is said to have requested formal recognition and authority for his son, who had previously been denied social standing. He asked for land within the Poonjar kingdom for his son to govern. The account states that this request was granted, along with symbolic objects of authority, specifically a sword and a rope.

The narrative further describes an encounter on their return journey, during which Veeran Thevan and his father were attacked by members of the Urali community. Veeran Thevan is said to have killed the attackers using the sword he had been given. Following this incident, the land associated with the Urali community is believed to have come under Veeran Thevan's rule, with the community required to provide annual tributes. The account concludes by noting that Veeran Thevan and his father subsequently expanded their authority, incorporating the Mannan community into their emerging system of governance.

In contrast to Raman Rajamannan's account, V. R. Kumaran, a senior elder within the community, identifies Madurayanda Karanavar as the first king of the Mannan community. According to him, the Mannan system of governance did not originate in Poonjar but has its roots in Madurai. In this version of the narrative, the episode involving the summoning to the Poonjar court is attributed not to Veeran Thevan but to an individual named Ramanjan.

Kumaran recounts that Ramanjan was summoned by the ruling authority and asked to explain or share the Mannan system of governance. During this encounter, Ramanjan is said to have narrated the system while seated on a blanket folded seven times. By the time the narration was completed, the blanket was reportedly almost consumed by termites. This event is interpreted within the narrative as a demonstration of ritual power and authority, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Mannan system and its origins in Madurai rather than Poonjar.

The names of some of the very senior elders of the community are mentioned in many of the chants and verses in the Mannan prayers namely Madurayanda Karanavar, Madura Chokkan, Madura Veeran, Veeran Thevan, Veeran Ariyan, Thoshanidathan, Ashamporumban, Periyanayan, Chakkan. While some believe them to be the previous kings, some of the community members have differences of opinion. Some say they are only a list of great elders within the community and need not necessarily be of previous Kings. The chants also have different names as you move from family to family. Thus whether this list represents symbolic remembrance or actual history remains uncertain.

It is unclear if the system originated from Madurai itself. Some of the members believe the system of governance is as old and is practiced from Madurai itself, with the blessing of Madura Meenakshi goddess. Some believe the system came from the west, where they believed their great ancestors Panchampoolan and Periyanankan learnt many of their artforms and knowledge.

The Duty of the King:

The King's duties include calling meetings with Kaani (chieftain) from various hamlets to discuss welfare matters of people concerning health, death, and religious rituals. Based on the information gathered, the King instructs the ritual performers to perform the ritual of 'Nellu itt nokuka' to identify the causes of community issues and determine remedies through divine interpretation.

Selection Procedure:

Traditionally, after the passing of a King, the position is passed through the Marumakkathayam system of lineage. Members of the matrilineal family gather at the residence of the King, where some elders are said to enter a trance-like state known as Uranju Thulluka. During this state, divine will is believed to guide the choice of the next ruler. Once a successor is identified, the elected King is seated on the Koymakattil, a bamboo ritual platform, and is pressed down on it. This ritual, known as Rajavine Vaazhikkal, marks the selection and appointment of the new King in Mannan culture.

The previous King, Ariyan Rajamannan, passed away soon after taking charge of the community from Thevan Rajamannan. Ariyan was the elder nephew of Thevan Rajamannan and the brother of the current King, Raman Rajamannan. He could only serve the community as their king for a span of four years (2007-2011). His passing was often interpreted by the community as an omen and a punishment from the Gods, as he was not widely regarded as someone who followed the community's beliefs and systems with strict adherence. This created considerable concern within the community.

After extensive prayers and rituals, Raman Rajamannan, the younger nephew of Thevan Rajamannan, was elected as the next King, as the direct nephews of Ariyan were considered too young to assume the role. His selection was also regarded as a cautionary measure intended to address any issues believed to have emerged from the previous appointment.

A Dream by Raman Rajamannan

“I was working over the weekend in Thrissur, near the Vadakkumnathan Temple. The next morning received a call from my family informing me about the death. I relate this news to a dream I had th previous night.In the dream, I was lying on a sofa, similar to what one might see in a royal setting. guard came up to me and called out to me. When I turned to look at him, I woke up.”

9 Kaani Committee

The Kaanis are referred to as senior executives to the Mannan governance, spiritual, and social matters. There are nine elderly Kaanis in total to assist the King. These elder 9 Kaanis belong to the Aayiramperumkuda region of Mannan administration. There are a total of 40+ kaani in total, each bestowed with specific settlement to oversee. It is believed that initially 9 Kaani were assigned to help the King in administration and later the number expanded as the Mannan community expanded and took up different settlements.

Origin of the Nine Kaani Story
After the time of Veeran Thevan, there is a story of Varattu Nayan, who is said to have ruled sever generations later. During his time, the system of rule is believed to have become more organised. large, centralised house called the valiya koora is described as being surrounded by farmlands, along with cattle and poultry. The community is said to have worked for the king and lived togethe with him as a collective within the valiya koora.
At some point during this period, ideas regarding the division of land and housing emerged, along with differences of opinion about styles of governance. According to the narrative, a faction of the community living under the king left the land overnight, abandoning the king.
The next morning, upon realising what had happened, the king is said to have been deeply saddened. As he remained at the valiya koora, nine members of the community arrived and discussed the situation with him. They persuaded the king to go in search of the people who had left. With their support, the king set out and eventually reached Vadakkudesham, towards Mannankandam (present-day Adimali).
Upon reaching this area, the king and his nine companions encountered a powerful individual who was believed to have control over wild animals. According to the stories, this person used elephant to plough the land. The king and his companions explained their situation to him. The man advised the nine companions to assist the king in governing the land and the people and bestowed names upon them.
The names given were:
(i) Naattumalan
(ii) Kadaadu Koombulan
(iii) Varakkooraliyan
(iv) Kattathopran
(v) Chadean Purambulaan
(vi) Kandamekidadan
(vii) Kuthiyathukolan
(viii) Muthuur
(ix) Kalkoonthal
He also named the king, who stood last, as Vanamchuvanna Varakkumalan, as the king is said to have prayed while looking up at the sky upon greeting him.

As in the case of four Mannan Moopanmar, the names and designation of nine Kaani also have differences within the community as we go from region to region, which is further elaborated in Annexure - IV.

Urala Samithi - The law and order enforcers

This group is responsible for maintaining law and order within the Mannan community. Their duties include settling disputes, enforcing community norms, and implementing punishments where necessary.

These officials are described as following a strict hierarchical system. While there are variations across narrations regarding the exact titles and identities of individuals, the accounts consistently indicate that decision-making authority rests with those at the top of the hierarchy, namely figures such as Ayiramkudiyanavan, Periyakudiyanavan, and Valiyulamthari. Towards the lower end of the hierarchy are officials responsible for implementing decisions at the ground level, including roles such as Ilayavattam, Thandakkaran, and Thannipatha. There are multiple narrations within the community concerning the precise order of these roles and the positions that exist between the upper and lower levels of authority. Details of these variations are provided in Annexure – IV.

Traditionally, individuals who disobeyed community laws were subject to punishment administered through these local governing systems. In more recent times, however, community members and leaders have increasingly adopted state law and order mechanisms in place of these customary practices.

Law and order, punishments, mudra vadi etc.

The community shared with us that they traditionally had their own system of law and order, maintained by officials within the community. Strict punishments were enforced to ensure adherence to these rules. In the early days, practices such as Ooruvilakku were present as part of this governance system.

We were informed about the Mudra Vadi, a stick of authority carried by the Mannan bureaucratic leaders. According to community members, the Mudra Vadi was held by both the king and the Kaani chieftains and was respected as equal to the person it represented. Messages and orders were often communicated in the presence of the Mudra Vadi, which served to identify the person of authority. The sticks were carried in order of authority by the law and order officials of the community. Community members explained that the Mudra Vadi is made of a cane stick, with kunnikuru seeds affixed using bee wax from cherutheenicha.

A community elder explained to us that when a person carrying the Mudravadi appears, everyone is expected to rise immediately. Community leaders use this staff as a means of enforcing discipline, administering light punishment to those who fail to follow instructions. A local proverb encapsulates its intended purpose: “The stick used to strike should not break, and the snake which gets hit should not die.” In other words, the Mudrakol is not a weapon for harming, but a tool for delivering measured, symbolic correction. Elders recalled vivid memories of being lightly struck with the Mudrakol in earlier times, describing it as a formative element of community life.

Pathulamthaari Ulamthaarichikal

Pathulamthaari - Ulamtharichikal refers to the youth in the community, both males and females, who will be tasked with work during community events such as festivals, marriage, death etc.

Vaathi - Spiritual Intermediaries

There are four principal Vaathi within the Mannan governance structure. They function as intermediaries between the community and the gods, interpreting divine messages and conducting rituals, particularly during periods of hardship or calamity. The Vaathi are also described as possessing knowledge of magical spells, which they use to influence and control the environment. Historically, these figures held significant power within Mannan society and cultural life. However, during our travels across Mannan hamlets, we observed a disruption in this cultural continuum. Many senior elders who were considered knowledgeable have passed away without transmitting their knowledge through established lineages, and several Vaathi positions now appear to persist only as vestigial roles.

There are multiple viewpoints within the community regarding the naming of the four principal Vaathi as per the regions of the Mannan kingdom to which they are assigned. We encountered these varying narratives during the course of our research which are mentioned in Annexure – IV.

Story of Aanavaathi & Pullivaathi :

Due to increasing wild animal conflict, it is believed that a meeting was adjourned and a resolution was reached by the Mannan community. This was to instill a fifth vaathi, Adukkattu Nagamalean (sub clan) as Aanavathi and similarly, Kandamalath Paneekudi (sub clan) was given charge of bein Pulivaathi. They were assigned to protect the community from attacks predominantly from tigers and elephants as it was getting common. In case of deaths occurring due to such an attack, vaathi were assigned to conduct rituals and take care of the burial. This act is known as ‘kali adakkuka’ b the Vaathi.
From the research input by Biju Ponnayan.

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