



ISSN: 2454-9177
NJHSR 2025; 1(58): 267-270
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The Influence Of Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ In The Field Of Sanskrit Education

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Key Words

Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ, Sanskrit Education, Ayurveda, Dr. Hermann Gundert

Abstract

The Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ play a crucial role in the field of Sanskrit education. They contributed to the dissemination of knowledge, particularly through the Gurukula system. They endeavored to make Sanskrit education, once limited to certain groups, available to the general populace. Their efforts led to the widespread acceptance of Sanskrit. This paper explores their lives and the important impact they had on advancing Sanskrit education.

Introduction

The Renaissance played a significant role in the development of the Sanskrit language. During this period, various branches of Sanskrit knowledge such as Ayurveda, Astronomy, Astrology, Architecture, Mathematics and Literary Theory also saw considerable advancement. Previously, the study of Sanskrit had been limited to a particular section of society, but over time, it became more widely accessible. As Dr. Muthulakshmi points out, any subject written in Sanskrit including fields like Ayurveda, Astrology, Astronomy and Architecture was regarded as part of Sanskrit studies. Since different communities in Kerala were engaged in various traditional fields, knowledge of Sanskrit naturally became widespread among them.¹ People began learning Sanskrit as part of their professional requirements. For example, Kaṇiyan, Vaidyar and Āśāri acquired Sanskrit to study texts relevant to their respective fields. In this way, Sanskrit learning and knowledge extended to the common people. As Dr. Muthulakshmi observes, even though these groups were considered lower castes at the time, they played a key role in preserving and promoting Sanskrit through their involvement in disciplines such as Ayurveda, Astrology, and Architecture.² Although Sanskrit learning was widespread, historical records also reveal the considerable challenges faced by lower castes in accessing the language. As noted by M.K. Gurukkal in his work Kalāvidyāvivarāṇa, people from lower castes were frequently denied the opportunity to study Sanskrit grammar.³ Despite these barriers, history acknowledges several persons who managed to overcome such difficulties, learn Sanskrit, and contribute to making it more accessible to the wider public. However, many of these contributors remain largely unrecognized for various reasons.

Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ

The Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ were a group of scholars who have received little recognition in historical accounts. Hailing from the Ūrācceri family in Chokli, near Thalassery in Kannur, these five brothers, Kuṅjikāṇṇan, Kuṅjikorān, Kuṅjicāntān, Cāttappān, and

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Otenan were collectively known in Malayalam as the Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ. Their parents were kaṇṇan Vaidyar and Uṇṇicciruta. They were well-versed in various disciplines, including Vyakarana, Nyaya, Ayurveda, toxicology, Vedanta, astrology, and mathematics. The renowned scholar Dr. Hermann Gundert studied both Malayalam and Sanskrit under their guidance. Because of their poetic talents, their home was also referred to as Kaviyoor. In his autobiography, C. Kesavan refers to them as "Putuśseri Gurunādhanmār," based on their mother's family name, Putuśseri, hence they were also known as Putuśseri gurukkaḷ.⁴

Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ lived between 1764 and 1874, during the height of the caste system. Because they belonged to the tīya community, they were not allowed to get an education. Vanidas explains that the Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ, who were Sanskrit scholars, were initially stopped from learning Sanskrit because of their caste.⁵ They depended on upper-class people for support. Due to financial problems, kaṇṇan Vaidyar's oldest son, Kuṇṇikaṇṇan, was asked to take care of cows for a Nambiar family. When the Ezhuttupalḷikūdādam started, Kuṇṇikaṇṇan was given the job of taking Nair children to school. The teacher was Kumāraguru from Payyannur. Kuṇṇikaṇṇan waited outside while the children were in class.

Kuṇṇikaṇṇan listened carefully to the teacher's lessons and memorized everything. One day, while Kumāraguru was teaching Astrology, he stepped outside the classroom. The teacher noticed Kuṇṇikaṇṇan outside, who had drawn the Rāśicakra and was studying with stones while listening. Kuṇṇikaṇṇan didn't know the teacher had seen him. When he heard a sound and saw the teacher, he got scared and ran away. The teacher sent someone to bring him back. Kuṇṇikaṇṇan was shaking with fear. The teacher asked him many questions about what he was studying and realized that Kuṇṇikaṇṇan understood the lessons better than the other students in class. Kumāraguru then spoke to the school owners and asked them to allow Kuṇṇikaṇṇan to sit in class and be taught properly. Kuṇṇikaṇṇan started attending the class and studying. He would go home and teach his four brothers everything he learned. When Kumāraguru found out, he decided to teach all of them at the school. That's how Kuṇṇikaṇṇan and his brothers received their education. They became great scholars in Chokli, skilled in Sanskrit and Malayalam. They studied subjects like literature, Astrology, Ayurveda and Vedanta.

The Role Of Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ In Sanskrit Education

The Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ played a very important role in the development of Sanskrit. They helped promote Sanskrit studies in the 19th century. They were experts in many areas like literary theory, Nyaya, Vedanta, Vyakarana, Ayurveda and more. Unfortunately, none of their works have survived. However, a verse dedicated to Kumāraguru by Otenan has been found. Although he wrote many Sanskrit verses, only one is available now. The verse as follows:

“Sāndrāvabodha rasamasta samasta doṣam
Dharmmārtha bhakṣakamalākṣa kadākṣa pātram
Bhaktaiva matsara mamatsara hr̥tswabhāvam
Vande vadeśwarakumāra gurum bhajeham”.⁶

K. Sekharan, a member of the family of the Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ has written and published a few verses about them. The verses as follows:

“Ūrācceri gurūn natwā
gurūṇām ca vadeśwaram
kumāragurum tam devam
vande guru parambarām”⁷

Many scholars visited Kaviyoor and engaged in intellectual debates with the Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ. People from various regions came to learn from them. On one occasion, a group of Brahmins from Palakkad arrived in Kaviyoor with the intention of defeating the Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ in a debate. The discussion began with Kuṇṇikaṇṇan and continued for an extended period. After him, Otenan took over the debate and successfully defeated the Brahmins. Impressed, they requested Otenan to clarify their doubts on various subjects. Otenan responded that their questions could be answered if they agreed to become his disciples and remain there. However, the Brahmins declined his offer and returned home.

The Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ shared the knowledge they had acquired with everyone, regardless of caste or religion. In his autobiography Jivita Samaram, C. Kesavan notes that Kuṇṇikaṇṇan Gurukkaḷ even taught Sanskrit to members of the upper castes. They held prestigious positions as Gurus to the royal family of Kadattanād and the prominent Nāluvīṭṭil Nambiār family of that period. Notable scholars such as Melūṭṭi Kuṇṇikaṇṇan Gurukkaḷ, Mādāyi Mandan Gurukkaḷ, Pārambatt rairunair, K.T. Kṛṣṇan gurukkaḷ, Ātmānanda Swāmikaḷ, and Kakkuzhi Kuṇṇibāppu Gurukkaḷ were among their disciples. Their primary mission was to make education accessible to the lower castes. The educational institution they founded for this purpose is today known as Gurukulam L.P. School in Chokli.

As the Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ promoted Sanskrit education in the Thalassery region, numerous Sanskrit schools were established in and around Thalassery. According to K.P. Narayana Pisharody, there were over thirty Sanskrit schools in the Malabar region between 1880 and 1885.⁸ The institution they founded is recognized as the first public school in the area.

Gurukulam L. P. School, Chokli

Gurukulam L.P. School served as the primary center of educational activities led by the Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ, who were instrumental in promoting education in the Chokli region. The institution was officially recognized as a school in 1912. Prior to that, Kuñjikaṇṇan gurunādhān, the eldest of the Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ, along with his brothers Cāttappan and Otenan, had been running it as a center for educational outreach. The school received official recognition during the tenure of the Koran Gurukkaḷ. It provided education without any discrimination based on caste or religion. At a time when no high school existed in the surrounding area, the school offered facilities for S.S.L.C. students to continue their studies. Additionally, it provided opportunities to learn subjects such as Sanskrit and Hindi.

Ayurveda Tradition

The Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ have traditionally been renowned experts in the field of Ayurveda. They also provided treatments at Kovilakas in regions such as Kadattanād, Nilambūr, and Cirakkal in Malabar. Their father, kaṇṇan Vaidyar, was a specialist in eye treatment. The Ūrācceri Parambu was given to Kaṇṇan Vaidyar by a patient as a reward for curing his illness. There are many stories associated with the family and their legacy. A story is as follows-

Cirakkal Tampuran had a Keṭṭilamma in the Poyyapratt Kovilaka. She had a severe headache. One day, Otenan went there to treat her. Since he belonged to the Tīya community, he was not allowed to see the patient. He found a way to do this. Take a long thread and give one end to the Keṭṭilamma and the other end to his hand. The king followed his instruction. But thinking that he wanted to test Otenan. The king tied one end of the thread to the cow's leg and gave the other end to Otenan. After closing his eyes for some time, he said that "there is no serious illness. It is enough to spin it once instead of twice". The Otenan understood that the thread was tied to the cow's leg. That's why he prescribed the necessary treatment for the cow. The King realized Otenan's talent, and invited him to the Kovilaka. He began the treatment and after some time,

Keṭṭilamma's illness was cured. The King honoured him with rewards.

Dr. Hermann Gundert

Dr. Hermann Gundert (1824-1893), a great scholar, arrived in India from Germany and settled in Illikunnu, a tiny village near Thalassery in Kannur, in 1859. Gundert learnt Malayalam and Sanskrit from Kuñjikaṇṇan. To teach him, Kuñjikaṇṇan would walk every day from Chokli to Illikunnu. Gundert has mentioned Kuñjikaṇṇan in his diary. His diary reveals that he was called Kuñjikaṇṇan as Kuñji Vaidyan. He also recorded in his diary that Kuñjikaṇṇan died on January 11, 1841, at the age of 77. Gundert referred to him as "Grand Old Philosopher". Kuñjikaṇṇan also helped Gundert in writing the Malayalam Dictionary.

Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ Memorial, Chokli

The Chokli Grama Panchayat established a memorial in 2010 to honor the memory of Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ. A picture gallery has been set up at the Ūrācceri gurukkaḷ Memorial, offering a glimpse into the life of Gurukkaḷ as well as other prominent figures from Chokli. The gallery also features books and articles about these scholars. In addition, the memorial preserves oil paintings, rare books, and palm leaf manuscripts. On display are the Sanskrit translation of Cintāviṣṭṭayāya Sīta and Ayurvedic texts authored by V.C. Kunjiraman Vaidyar, as well as the autobiography of Moyyaratt Sankaran. Information about other notable individuals such as Kuñjilakṣmikuṭṭy keṭṭilamma, Pārambatt Rairunair and others is also featured.

Conclusion

The Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ, who worked to popularise Sanskrit and its growth, are not recorded much in Kerala history. Dr. Hermann Gundert is remembered by many, but the Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ who taught him is largely forgotten. Just like Gundert, he too deserves recognition and respect. Unfortunately, historical records do not adequately acknowledge Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ's contributions. They made significant contributions to making Sanskrit accessible to the common people. As Sanskrit education gained popularity through their efforts, numerous Sanskrit schools were established. It is truly unfortunate that Ūrācceri Gurukkaḷ remains unknown to the current generation. Therefore, it is crucial to uncover these hidden legends and their contributions in order to utilize them for the advancement of Sanskrit.

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Footnote

- ¹ Parvathy B. (2017), *Thalasseryude Navodhanacharithram*, p 43
- ² Parvathy .B, (2017), *Thalasseryude Navodhanacharithram*, p.44
- ³ Gurukkal M.K, (1993), *Kalavidyavivaranam*, Appendix
- ⁴ Kesavan.C. (1999), *Jeevitha Samaram*.
- ⁵ Vanidas Elayavooru, (1998), *Vatakkal Eithiyamala*, p 49
- ⁶ Sekaharan.K, *Gurusmarana*, p 24
- ⁷ Sekharan.K, *Gurusmarana*, p 54
- ⁸ Parvathy.B, (2017), *Thalasseryude Navodhanacharithram*, p 45