

Exploring Utopia in Agrahaarams : Early Tamil Brahmin settlements in Kerala

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Abstract:

*This review examines the concepts followed in the planning of **Agrahaarams - Tamil Brahmin Villages** in various parts of South India, stressing upon the social aspect of the community living. It is also intended to highlight the various traditions and customs followed over centuries by Tamil Brahmin sects mainly **Iyers and Iyengars**. Some five centuries ago, a majority of Tamil Brahmins, fearing the invasion of a muslim ruler, migrated and settled down in various parts of Kerala and established their own communities and villages-Agrahaarams based on Traditional aspects of Vedic Town Planning. Over the years, times have changed but the villages are in a time-warp, continuing the traditions and customs of their ancestors.*

Keywords:

Utopia in Agrahaarams, Early Tamil Brahmin settlements, Iyers and Iyengars, traditions and customs

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Introduction:

This review examines the concepts followed in the planning of **Agrahaarams - Tamil Brahmin Villages** in various parts of South India, stressing upon the social aspect of the community living. It is also intended to highlight the various traditions and customs followed over centuries by Tamil Brahmin sects mainly **Iyers and Iyengars**. Some five centuries ago, a majority of Tamil Brahmins, fearing the invasion of a muslim ruler, migrated and settled down in various parts of Kerala and established their own communities and villages-Agrahaarams based on Traditional aspects of Vedic Town Planning. Over the years, times have changed but the villages are in a time-warp, continuing the traditions and customs of their ancestors. An Agrahaaram may be considered as an early form of Indian Utopia with closed knit communities, and a sustainable lifestyle with low-cost dwellings and vernacular architecture, where everyone followed what the Temple priest said and the village functioned with active public participation from everyone. This review examines the Spatial & Social Planning of Agrahaarams and tends to correlate the Utopic concepts with the ones followed by Agrahaarams. **The Question really is “Was the Agrahaaram planning unintentionally Utopic?”**

The review is mostly based on readings available online, research papers, blogs and first person accounts of persons who have lived in such Agrahaarams since their childhood including my parents. I remember spending my two month long

vacations in my native village known as **Nurani in Palakkad, Kerala** which is a compact Agrahaaram, and the simple lifestyle of the people is still etched in my mind. Nurani , a small sleepy village is caught in a time-warp but people are content with their lifestyle, my perception about Nurani has changed over the years and now I identify it as a mini-Utopic society, and a Utopia in disguise which was unintentional yet perfect in its own way & has a unique identity.

For years, researchers have published papers and articles on the Agrahaarams of South India, the vernacular architecture of Agrahaarams has been well documented, it is quite challenging to trace the authenticity and history of a community which has sustained itself through time for over 5 centuries and preserved its heritage well. And as a Tamil Brahmin, hailing from an Agrahaaram but born and brought up in North India, it's quite difficult for me, yet interesting to know more and more about my roots. The sole question of the whole review is regarding the unintentional Utopia that Tamil Brahmins created years ago, in simple, yet sustainable community villages.

History & Background

The mass migration of Tamil Brahmins to Kerala 6 or 7 centuries ago was triggered by several factors pertaining to the Muslim invasion, restructuring of the territorial limits and the continuous drought over many years in the Kaveri Delta. The first village to be established was perhaps **Sekharipuram**, which could have been

named after **Raja Sekhara Varma** of **Palakkad** as a token of gratitude. The acclaimed village of **Kalpathy** has also been recorded as a forerunner (*K.V. Krishna Iyer*). Palakkad Kings had their own reasons to welcome and settle these Brahmins in their area with a hidden strategy of breaking the hegemony and the authority that the local **Kerala Namboodiri Brahmins** held sway. The Tamil Brahmins who migrated were not rich but were essentially businessmen and spread all over Kerala. With the encouragement of local kings they were able to establish Agrahaarams (Brahmin streets) in Trivandrum, Kollam, Kayamkulam, Kochi, Thrissur and Palakkad (<http://www.keralaiyers.com/>). Gradually they established several villages and carved an identity of their own. Some of the prominent Agrahaarams are Nurani, Kalpathy, Sekharipuram, Vaddankanthara & Lakshminarayanapuram.

Spatial Planning of Agrahaarams

'Agaro harscha harischa', the meaning is *temple on either side*, defines the colony of Brahmins residing place as the one where Temples are located on either side of the locality. *A garland of houses was the simplest synonym to an agraharam*. The word could also be interpreted as a grant of land given by the kings (to Brahmins) for sustenance. These pieces of land were granted generally on the banks of rivers where the Brahmins built row houses (two rows facing each other) with the upper end culminating in a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva (*Sriparasukhanandanadha, P.K. Ramakrishnan*). Agraharam has also been

cited as a word of mixed origin with the Sanskrit part 'agra' meaning first, foremost, fore runner and the Tamil part being 'akaram' which relates to either a house or a settlement. Thus an Agraharam could be translated as a collection or a grouping of houses or a community or a settlement with the temple being the central crux with the houses around it. Some temples (*as in the case of Nurani, Palakkad*) also have a village pond used for bathing situated nearby the temple premises. (*Fig.1*). Linear in organization, the culmination point being the temple because the early settlements were designed by the priests who were Vedic scholars who attached themselves to the religious activities. The temple tank forms an interactive community space with the Peepal tree (*sthalavriksham*) forming another focal element.

The Agrahaaram represented an ideal society of Tamil Brahmins who were orthodox in their approach and craved for perfection. It was a form of social Utopia and moreover it was based on religious ideals followed by the Brahmin community. *"Intra-Religious utopias are based on religious ideals, and are to date those most commonly found in human society. Their members are usually required to follow and believe in the particular religious tradition that established the utopia."*

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopia>)

.Agrahaarams were certainly based on the religious ideologies evolved through ages by the Brahmin priests. This can be further clarified with the aid of further aspects of the Agrahaaram society.

Socio-Cultural Facets

Hinduism being the predominant religion, **Kshethrams** and **Ambalams** were built to worship the presiding deities. The **Kaavus** (for the serpent worship) and **Kovils**(temples) were dedicated to specific gods. Carnatic music, classical dance, literature and poetry have a very special mention in these Agrahaarams. There are several festivals such as *Kalpathy Radholsavam, Nurani Sasthapreethi* and the *Manappullikavu Vela* which are a part and parcel of the religious fervor typical to this area. **These festivals mark the coming together of the people from all the nearby villages, a sign of communal interaction which is an essential aspect of a Utopic society**, what's interesting is the fact that these festivals are being celebrated without fail for over 5 centuries now and some families have been residing there since 4 generations. Thus the central factor of every settlement is the culture and socio – economics. And gradually, these societies have become a unique blend of the Tamil Nadu & Kerala Cultures in terms of language, festivals, art and communities as supported by several authors- *“There has been a long debate on the linguistic background of the Kerala Iyers, most Kerala Iyers came to Kerala as early as the 13th century, Thus there constant interaction with Malayalam and Malayalis eventually highly increased the level of Sanskritisation into their Brahmin dialect of Tamil which in itself was sanskritised thus as time flew most of them started to speak a form of Tamil highly concentrated with Malayalam.”* (P.Sangunny Menon: A History of Travancore)

Vernacular Architecture & Uniformity in dwelling units

Another aspect of the Utopic societies is uniformity, where every house is identical, and the rich and the not-so-rich co-exist in complete harmony with each other and live in same dwellings of almost equal size and shape. This is observed in the dwelling units of Agrahaarams where the houses were traditional and an ethnic and innate approach to the building up of spaces followed. *The whole Agrahaaram was laid out on the principles of Vedic Town Planning which has been considered synonymous to perfection in City Planning.* Vernacular Architecture is the art of the truth of the inhabitants of the region. *“It is the architecture without architects”* (Arboleda). The indigenous architecture responds to the vagaries in climate, blends with the topography, vibrates the cultural trends, lifestyle, spiritual and religious parameters. They exude skill and craftsmanship, appreciation of culture, respect to local materials and methods of the building science. The houses were mostly two-storied and had a verandah in the front.(Fig.2)

Organization of Spaces:

The houses responded well to the climate of the place and were in harmony with nature as every house had a backyard and the planning was punctured by courtyards, facilitating the ventilation and keeping the micro climate of the house at comfortable temperatures. The house of the Brahmins perfectly fits the laws of linear organization with a clear demarcation of spaces as public, semi-public and private areas (Fig.3) The porch (*thinnai*) forms the semi public

space – a transition from the public arena (*theruvu – street*) to the realms of the habitable space – the house. The *arai*, is the store and the *pathayam* (*granary*). This then led to a large hall (*koodam*) with an open area (*nadumittam*) which was a feature similar to the courtyard. The rooms (*aria*) were attached to the hall which was then followed by the kitchen (*adukalai*) which finally culminated in another open space (*mittam*) which completed the typology of an *onaamkettu* (*first stage*) house. There were no *pucca Toilets* in those times, so the people used to defecate in specially marked outdoor spaces and the waste was carried out later to be dumped and making the compost, which provided the essential manure required for plantations and agriculture, which was the primary occupation in earlier days, thus the whole subsystem was self-sustaining. (N.V.Thailambal & K.S.Venkitaraman)

This interrelates with what the Ecological utopian society describes as new ways in which society should relate to nature. They react to a perceived widening gap between the modern Western way of living that destroys nature and the traditional way of living that is thought to be more in harmony with nature. According to the Dutch philosopher Marius de Geus, ecological utopias could be sources of inspiration for green political movements.

Occupation & Lifestyle

The Brahmins engaged mostly in Agriculture on the lands given by royal families and later on leased out lands. The lifestyle of the Tamil Brahmins followed the rules formulated by their religious texts and the Temple Priest. “The women had to take

bath early in the morning before entering the kitchen. Taking into account the fact that bathing was always done in ponds, streams, and rivers, they used to go out very early in the morning. Early morning women clean the front part of the house with a cow dung solution that is supposed keep away all the insects. Then they religiously draw a kolam, which is known as rangoli in modern days.” (www.keralaiyers.com). “A typical day for an Iyer woman started at early hours of the morning and followed by the strenuous routine of cleaning, cooking, washing and other household chores such as laying out the agenda for the day.” (N.V.Thailambal). Some authors have pointed out the fact: “The Agrahaarams were meant essentially for Tamil Brahmins, with a view to maintain purity in ritual and daily life. Though apartheid like idea, the houses are not what you see in the walled off gate communities you see today, the families were tightly knit, the rooms small and austere, and there was a temple round the corner.” (*Thirty letters in My Name: Hari Jagannathan Balasubramanian*). The study reveals that the Utopic concept of having a disciplined and ideal society is very much evident in the lifestyle of the people.

Conclusions & Inferences

My study started from recalling my days back in Nurani, my own native Agrahaaram, followed by mostly online and a little bit of library research, and interviews with my mother, father, other members of my family and other people who have lived in Agrahaarams. *The aim here is not to prove the Agrahaaram communities entirely as Utopic but to correlate the Utopic concepts with the ones followed in the planning of*

Agrahaarams, and it's an attempt to look at the Agrahaarams as an early example of Indian Utopic communities with the help of several published & unpublished literature. The readings illustrate how the concept was driven with the attempt of creating an idealistic Brahmin society uprooted from their own native place, and finding a place in a foreign land. The Agrahaaram planning succeeds and highlights the Utopian aspects in more than one ways. It has sustained itself through centuries, and has managed to retain its ethnicity in terms of vernacular Architecture and careful articulation of spaces. Also, the socio-cultural aspect is predominant in the Agrahaaram way of living. Thomas Moore's Utopia describes an ideal society with the social aspect forming the whole crux of living. The Agrahaarams succeed in this genre as there is always an active public participation involved. "At times, during marriages, most of the arrangements, even the cooking was handled by expert people living in the same locality."(K.S.Venkitaraman) The village people followed and maintained a strict decorum and relished the traditional way of living. People did what the temple priest advised them and they were content with it.

Also, looking at the planning aspects, linear organization and low-cost dwellings spell Utopia in their own way, where Brahmins from different economic backgrounds had similar houses, regardless of their financial status. They celebrated the festivals together in complete harmony and co-existed in a village which was pedestrian friendly and in sync with nature- lots of greenery, coconut trees and the village pond. Even the houses were designed in a

way that they were cool in summer and provided comfort against the Hot & humid weather of Kerala. The courtyards provided the houses with ample amount of light and ventilation. The drainage and sewerage system was impeccable & the houses are energy efficient, there was no electricity 500 years ago, yet people managed to live comfortably in the houses. People realized the importance of a sustainable community, and wanted their upcoming generations to carry forward their traditions. The people engaged in Agriculture, which provided them with food and business, and there was hardly any need to rely upon the neighboring villages or districts for any financial or economical aid. Thus, the community was tightly knit by its own set of policies.

Policies and guidelines were evolved with a clear understanding of the community and its inhabitants and were drafted with the futuristic aim of retaining the vernacular and paving way for constructive changes that would enhance the total environment where the past, present and the future would be cited in harmony and speak the vernacular language. The Agrahaarams of present day are an interesting mix of culture, language and traditions both from Tamil & Malayalam communities. Though there is a shift in paradigm lately, still the roots of the community lie in a community established more than 500 years ago. Further research in this field can elaborate the "Explored" idea of Utopia in Agrahaarams and an in-depth analysis is required to carry forward the idea and finding possible answers to the question of "Unintentional Utopia" as suggested in the beginning of the review.

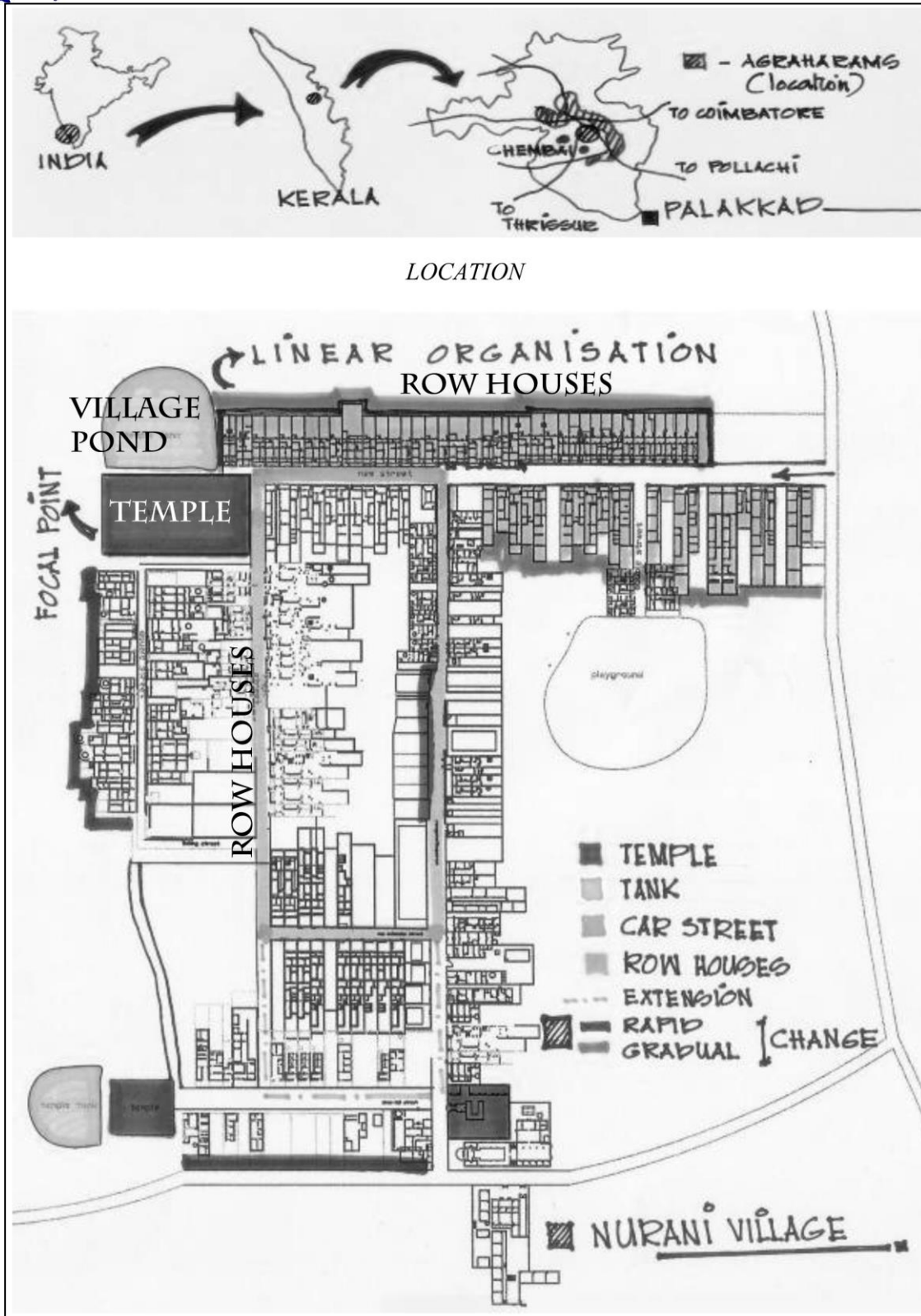


Figure 1 Layout of Nurani Agrahaaram Source: Vernacular Architecture-Changing Paradigms

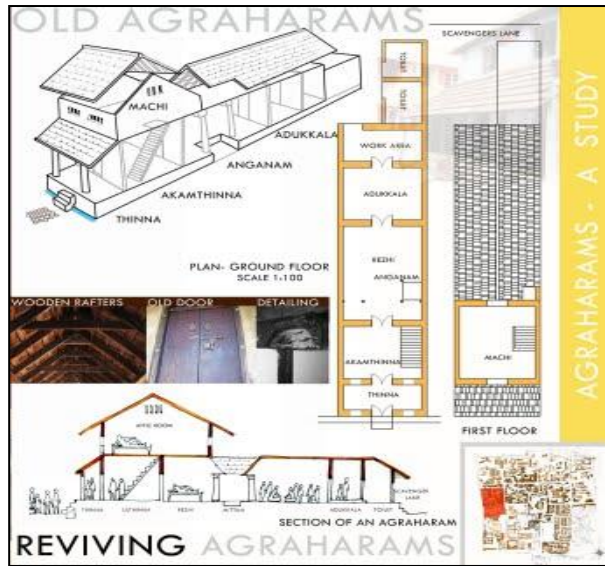


Figure 2 Layout of a House in Agrahaaram Source:Internet

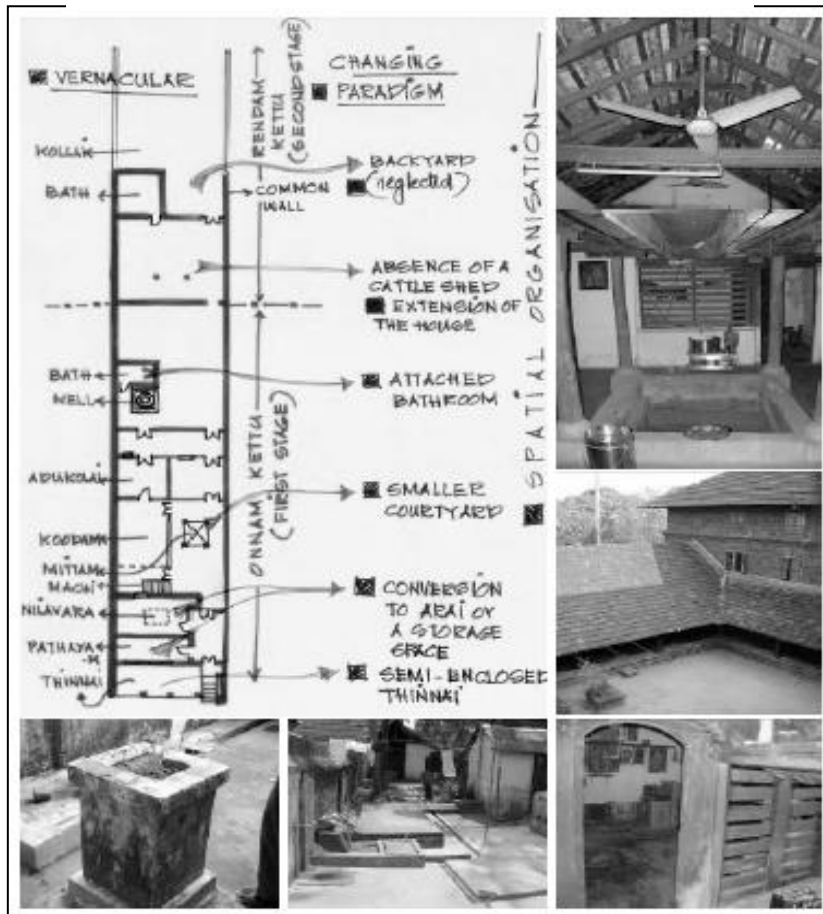


Figure 3 Organization & Articulation of Spaces Source: Vernacular Architecture-Changing paradigms

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