

Introduction to gods country kerala history essay



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The state of Kerala, which occupies the south-western corner of the Indian map, was created on 1st November, 1956, and is flanked by Karnataka in the north, Tamil Nadu in the east and south and the Arabian Sea in the west. Malayalam being the predominant language and its capital residing at Thiruvananthapuram, this state boasts of the highest literacy rate in the country and was also bestowed with the honor of being the least corrupt Indian state in 2005.

Etymologically, the word 'Kerala' could be interpreted in a number of different ways but for its natives, the Malayalis, the name of this land is 'Keralam'. This word could either be a fusion of two Malayali words 'kera' meaning coconut tree and 'alam' meaning land or location, or could alternatively have originated from the phrase 'chera alam', the land of the Cheras. Its veracity as being a rich production ground for spices was established as early as 3000 BC when this land was referred to by Emperor Ashoka as Keralaputra. Although spice trade is still a major source of income for the state, over the years the focus has shifted to backwaters, greenery and Ayurvedic heritage as the main themes of marketing.

Sandwiched between the Lakshadweep Sea and the Western Ghats, Kerala experiences equatorial tropic climate implying 120 to 140 days of incessant downpour courtesy of the southwest summer monsoon. While the quantity of rainfall varies in accordance with the area, overall it could be described as featuring a wet and dry climate which is neither too hot in summers nor too cold in winters. The entire state could be segregated into three climatic regions based on its topography namely the cool mountainous regions

occupying the east, the rolling hills playing the role of the central midlands and the coastal plains bringing up the west.

Being a southern-most Indian state, Kerala is particularly prone to seismic and volcanic activity due to its close proximity to the Indian tectonic plate, a fact validated by the presence of Pre-Cambrian and Pleistocene geological formations dominating the skyline throughout the state. As the unbroken Western Ghats continue into the state, their link is broken in a place named Palakkad, wherein the Palakkad gap connects the state of Kerala with the rest of the country.

Although this chain of mountains lies in the rain shadow area, it gives birth to many of the main rivers of the state out of which 41 flow west into the Arabian Sea and 3 flow eastwards. Some of the well known rivers which serve as lifelines for the people of the state are the Periyar, Bharathapuzha, Pamba, Chaliyar and Valapattanam and these along with Lake Vembanad form an intricate network of interconnected canals, lakes and estuaries, popularly known as the backwaters. Majority of the rivers are seasonal in nature and depend on the monsoon rains, not to mention that they are extremely susceptible to natural as well as man made hazards, the former being floods, lightening and droughts and the latter being pollution and sand mining.

Historically, the state was divided into six regions and these have been re-arranged to form the fourteen districts of contemporary Kerala. These are further divided into 63 taluks which comprise of innumerable small villages and gram panchayats to complete the administrative set up. The only

exception to this rule and governance is Mahe, which although surrounded by Kerala on all landward sides, belongs to the Indian Union Territory of Pondicherry.

While most of the inhabitants of the state are of Malayali descent, Jewish and Arab ancestry can also be traced thanks to the Jewish families which resided in the state till the twentieth century after which they migrated to Israel. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are the predominant religions in this one of the exceptional states in India which boasts of a higher female population compared to that of males. All the main religions are further subdivided into their respective castes and sub-castes and preferences may oscillate between a matrilineal or patrilineal system as per the lineage. Over the years, Kerala has experienced a sizeable migration of its population to Gulf countries to the result that the state is dependent on its expatriate community for financial remittances.

Kerala is a land of eclectic cultures, having derived its heritage not only from its neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka but from the alien culture to which it has been exposed to due to trade practices. While Kathakali and Mohiniattam are two most widely recognized traditional dance forms hailing from this state, Koodiyattom as a performing art has been honored by UNESCO as an unparalleled expression of heritage and Margam Kali remains one of the ancient group dances belonging to the Syrian Christian sect of Kerala. Carnatic music bears the most seminal influence on the vocal arts and is ceremonially performed by Melam, a group of 150 musicians involved in a performance which might last for hours at a stretch. Alternatively, it is the filmy music which blares out of most of the roadside <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-gods-country-kerala-history-essay/>

shops and stalls for the sake of entertainment. Likewise, Malayalam literature has also had a rich poetic history while during contemporary times it is the authors who have won international acclaim for the state.

Agricultural and religious activities are planned in accordance with the Malayalam calendar and a typical Kerala feast, known as sadhya, is served on banana leaves. Fish is an integral part of the menu as are dishes like idli, payasam, puttu, sambar, appams and iddiyappams. Due to the tropical climate, people feel comfortable in unstitched clothing, the men donning mundu and the women dressed in saris or salwar kameez.

Elephants are respected all over India but their reverence in Kerala is incomparable. Having accorded the status of state animal, the elephant or ana, as it is called in Malayalam, is considered as being the son of the 'sahya' and hence apart from featuring on the emblem of the Government, it forms an integral part of all aspects of daily life.

Such is the natural as well as man-made development of the state that it is often referred to as 'God's Own Country'. Having been blessed with uncountable natural resources within the narrow surface area that it has, the state is an embodiment of natural beauty which needs to be felt and apprehended in order to be enjoyed to the fullest.

Tracing Kerala's Journey through Annals of Time

Ever since its inception, the human civilization has had a penchant for settling down in close proximity to any water body and in case of Kerala, it happened to be the Arabian Sea. It was owing to this unique geographical location that the state has enjoyed prominence in the world economy not

only in terms of trade but along religious and cultural parameters as well.

Having been located on the shores of the Arabian Sea meant playing an active role in world trade and being a part of global travel routes and hence enjoying an elevated economic status.

As confirmed by inscriptions existing around 269 B. C. when the mighty Mauryan Emperor Ashoka ruled majority of the northern Indian states, Kerala was one of the four southern states which maintained their autonomy. The rulers of the state during that epoch believed that staying at good terms with King Ashoka was the only way in which they could retain their independence and hence went to great lengths to establish amicable relations with him. On his part, Ashoka referred to these rulers as Keralaputras or Cheras and treated them with utmost respect.

It was during the Sangam age that followed that Kerala as a state enjoyed the spotlight due to a number of factors. This epoch was witness to the composition and evolution of Sangam literature which is in vogue even today in form of many myths, legends and stories. The importance of Sangam literature could be realized by the fact that many of the works mention the arrival of Roman vessels to trade with the Dravidian Kings gold in exchange for pepper and spices. These works also throw light on an essential aspect of trade during that era namely the Southwest Monsoon winds - depending on the force of the wind, ships sailing from Egypt could reach the coast of Kerala within 14 days.

While the mythological origin of the state revolves around Parasurama, who was the sixth avatar of Mahavishnu, there are a number of variations of this

legend the main difference among them being the identity of the main character. However, one basic fact on which all the stories share a common ground is that it was after a weapon - an axe or a spear - having been thrown into the sea that the land of Kerala emerged. Subsequent to its emergence, it was ruled by King Mahabali whose benevolence resulted in the land being an embodiment of prosperity and happiness.

When the Sangam literature was being compiled, politically Kerala was ruled by three different powers with each of the clans reigning within their own well defined kingdoms. It was an era of glory for the state which was unfortunately followed by a long period of darkness for the next four centuries. This cultural hiatus, referred to as ' Kalabhra Interregnum' represented a time in the history of the state when it was conquered, plundered and superseded by all the other neighboring South Indian kingdoms.

In keeping with the universal rule, what goes up invariably comes down and vice versa and therefore after having been plunged into darkness for the last four centuries, it was time for the state of Kerala to emerge once again and regain its position of glory. The wheels were put into motion through a reform movement led by the renowned sage, Adi Shankaracharya, who was born in Kalady, 25 kilometers to the northeast of Kochi, and ended up traveling extensively throughout the length and breadth of the country in an attempt to revive Hinduism. Unfortunately, the accomplished theologian passed away at a young age of 32 but not before achieving his target of establishing the four mathas of Hinduism in the four corners of the country.

It was time for the second Chera Empire to raise its head and once again the state enjoyed trade ties and good diplomatic relations not just with its neighbors but with the visiting Arab merchants as well. However, this was once again followed by a spell of political instability and amidst all the confusion of feuds between the royalty and hostilities with the neighbors emerged the northern seaport of Calicut which came under the reign of the Zamorins. The port of Calicut, located in the northern part of Kerala, enjoyed flourishing trade with the Chinese and the Arabs and thrived in art and cultural aspects as well. Increased dealings with Arabs brought hordes of wealth into the kingdom and helped its rulers consolidate themselves in the area as undisputed monarchs.

Then the Europeans discovered Kerala and the honor of being the first European to set his foot on Indian soil in 1498 goes to Vasco de Gama, a Portuguese whose love of spices drove him to Calicut. While hostilities continued at the local level, the Portuguese followed by the Dutch continued to trade in rising volumes with each passing day and soon became involved in the power struggle.

This era was witness to the emergence of Travancore as a parallel commercial and cultural center which had the good fortune of being ruled by a long lineage of elite monarchs. Next, it was the turn of Haider Ali to turn his sight towards Kerala and his battles, although not decisively victorious, were carried forth by his son Tipu Sultan as well. The fighting came to an end with the British forces emerging as supreme winners both while contending with Tipu and e adding Kerala to its already expanding political stronghold in India as well.

Like the rest of the country, people in Kerala expressed their discontent against the British rule through numerous revolts and uprisings during the 18th and 19th century and the state takes pride in its freedom fighters Thampi and Achan who sacrificed their lives for their motherland. The patriotic fervor continued with Malabar being the stronghold of political agitation and Cochin and Travancore joining in the fray.

Post independence, Kerala has mostly been a communist state, with social factors cited as being responsible for the ascension of the communist Government. Over the years, the state has been witness to radical reforms introduced in favor of farmers and laborers and has also experienced mass exodus of people to the Middle East Asian countries in search of wealth and employment. In this contemporary era, Kerala is bereft of its Syrian Christian population as well who have migrated to the Malabar region in search of fertile and cultivable land.