FactsDid you know

Samkēthams: temple-run republics of pre-modern Kerala

People called major temple domains Samkēthams in pre-modern Kerala. They were almost self-ruling temple republics. A council of elders (Yōgam) held power over them. The council had full civil, judicial, and criminal power over their lands.

These temple groups could punish crimes with death. The management committee (Samudāya Yōgam) investigated local crimes, as the Vaikom temple's records (Grandhavari) show. Ancient custom forced them to hang murderers in public inside the sanctuary limits. Until 1802, the hanging happened before the ceremonial flag rose for the yearly temple festival (Utsavam). At the Elangunnapuzha temple, similar business codes (Chattavāriyōla) let temple authorities put murderers to death directly.

Regional kings and feudal chiefs had no protection from the law inside these sanctuary boundaries. They had to obey the temple assembly's discipline. A ruling prince or his men might commit violence or break a rule in the sanctuary. Then the temple assembly formally declared the Samkētham closed under its own rules. All temple work and rituals stopped until people paid enough to put things right.

Even the ruler who protected the sanctuary, the Raja of Cochin (Mēlkōima), faced punishment. In a recorded incident from 1522, the Raja of Thekkumkūr put a man, Peroomparayan, to death within the holy area. The Samkētham closed at once and stayed shut for twelve months, until a panel of arbitrators met. The arbitrators made him give up an elephant with its usual driving hook and stick (thōtti and vālaru). That was his penalty for not restoring the sanctuary's lost holiness earlier.