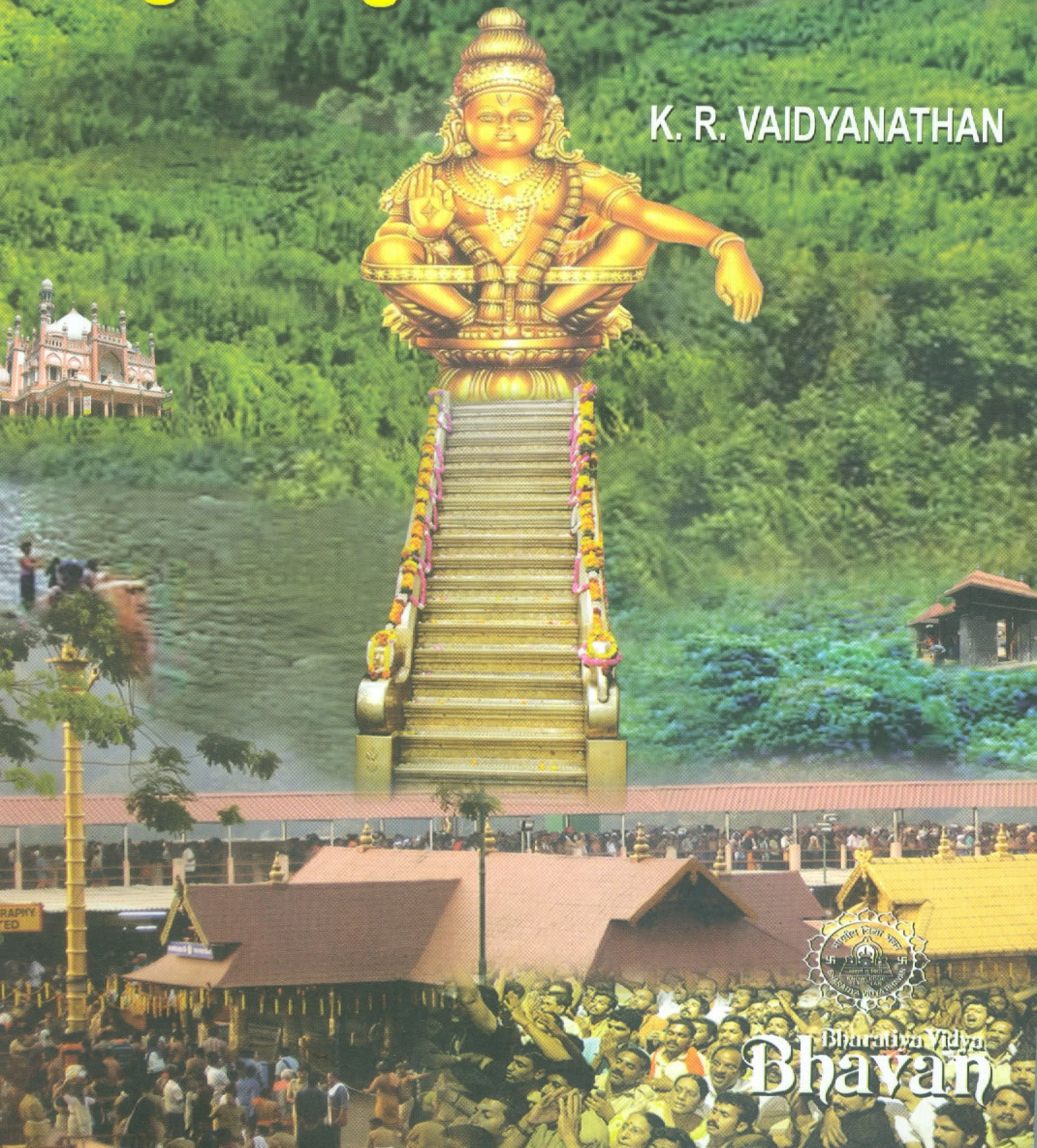


BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

Pilgrimage to Sabarimala

K. R. VAIDYANATHAN



Bharatiya Vidya
Bhavan

PILGRIMAGE TO SABARIMALA

By

K. R VAIDYANATHAN

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

-Rigveda 1-89-i

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2016

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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**DEDICATED
TO
MILLIONS OF AYYAPPA DEVOTEES
SERVICE TO WHOM MEANS SERVICE TO THE LORD**

KULAPATI'S PREFACE

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan - that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay - needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulses of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand, almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 500 pages.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the framework of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this *series*, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H.V.Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic: it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival: but above all, it has for its core the *Gita* which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, Queen Victoria Road,
New Delhi.

3rd October 1951

FOREWORD

During the last few years, there has been a revival of interest in religion among our people; there is a spurt in the people's demand for books on religion; old temples are being renovated; new temples are being built; and millions are going on pilgrimages to these temples every year. Among these pilgrim centers, scattered over all parts of India, there are two located in the state of Kerala, namely, the Sri Krishna Temple of Guruvayur near the sea coast and the Ayyappan Temple of Sabarimala in the Western Ghats.

Sri K.R. Vaidyanathan, who had already written an informative book on the former: *Sri Krishna: The Lord of Guruvayur*, which has already gone into its second edition, has now produced his second book: *Pilgrimage to Sabarimala*.

Since our political independence in 1947, our nation is engaged in various measures to wipe out the centuries-long material poverty of millions of our population. Fifty years earlier, Swami Vivekananda had expressed, in the course of his lecture at Ramnad, the desire that our nation would adopt 'some sort of materialism, toned down to our own requirements', and he had this good word to say, in the course of his lecture at Paramakudi a few days later, with respect to the positive contributions of modern Western materialism:

‘That you are here today to welcome one who went to Europe to preach Vedanta, would have been impossible had not the materialism of Europe opened the way for it. Materialism has come to the rescue of India in a certain sense, by throwing open the doors of life to everyone, by destroying the exclusive privileges of caste, by opening up to discussion the inestimable treasures which were hidden away in the hands of a very few who have even lost the use of them.’

Along with this, he exhorted his countrymen to keep their hold firm on their millennia-old national tradition of renunciation and spirituality, and take energetic steps to resist the incoming of the tidal wave of a cheap form of materialism and worldliness into the country. And, speaking in Calcutta a few weeks later, he said:

‘Renunciation-that is the flag, the banner, of India, floating over the world, the one undying thought which India sends again and again as a warning to dying races, as a warning to all tyranny, as a warning to wickedness in the world. Ay, Hindus, let not your hold of that banner go. Hold it aloft’

‘We want orthodoxy, even the hideously orthodox, even those who smother themselves with ashes, even those who stand with their hands uplifted. Ay, we want them, unnatural though they be, for standing for that idea of giving up, and acting as a warning to the race against succumbing to the effeminate luxuries that are creeping into India, eating into our very vitals, and tending to make the whole race, a race of hypocrites.

‘We want to have a little of asceticism. Renunciation conquered India in days of yore; it has still to conquer India....There may be thousands..., who have drunk deep of enjoyment, this curse of the West-the senses-the curse of the world; yet, for all that, there will be other thousands in this motherland of mine to whom religion will ever be reality, and who will be ever ready to give up, without counting the cost, if need be.’

This is the background against which we have to view the present active interest in our people to protect and cherish their spiritual heritage in the modern revolutionary transition. Apart from offering valuable information and guidance about the Sabarimala temple to intending pilgrims in East and West, Sri Vaidyanathan has also, in this book, highlighted the ever-widening spiritual appeal of the Ayyappa cult with its unique stress on a healthy asceticism, religious fervour, the spirit of equality, and openness and welcome extended to the followers of not only all the sects of the Hindu religion but also to the followers of all the other religions of the world.

- SWAMI RANGANATHANANDA

*Ramakrishna Math,
Hyderabad,
Andhra Pradesh*

22 November, 1978

PREFACE

The north-east monsoon ends in Kerala by the middle of November. The landscape presents a beautiful picture with sprawling rice fields and groves of palms, a constant study in green. The climate is pleasant and cool. The mild winter contributes to devotional feelings in the minds of people. Hundreds of bearded, black-clad men are seen everywhere with their foreheads smeared with *vibhuti*, sandalpaste and *Kumkum* giving them a radiant and ascetic look.

They are the devotees of Lord Ayyappa who presides in His temple set in primordial splendour atop the high hill of Sabari or Sabarimala ('mala' meaning mountain). They go through a 41-day penance abstaining from sex, meat and intoxicating drinks before undertaking one of the most arduous treks up the forested mountain chanting the celebrated three words, "*Swamiye, Saranam Ayyappa*", - Oh Lord Ayyappa, I come to Thee for refuge.

Apart from engendering mystical and spiritual feelings among the devotees, the pilgrimage inculcates *bhakti*, equality of all men before God and tolerance. The temple doors of Sabarimala are open to everyone, irrespective of caste, creed, religion or social status. The high and the low meet on equal terms in the presence of the Lord who is known as Dharma Sasta - one who teaches and upholds *dharma*.

Who is Lord Ayyappa or Sasta that evokes such great veneration among so many? What is it that impels hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to undertake this pilgrimage disregarding the hardships and hazards of the journey?

Ayyappa is one of the three Saiva deities, the other two being Ganesa and Muruga. While Ganesa is popular throughout India, Muruga and Ayyappa are generally known only in the south. Muruga is claimed by Tamils as exclusively their own deity while Ayyappa, the son of Siva by Mohini (Vishnu in the guise of an enchantress) is the deity of the Keralites, because according to legend, he played his human drama in Kerala. From distant Kerala, Ayyappa has been however, gradually casting his halo over other states, and even abroad. The feeling of ecstasy and the spiritual solace one

derives after visiting the shrine is something unique and indescribable. This explains the increasing popularity of this none-too-easily accessible shrine.

We have heard of inspiring accounts of the arduous pilgrimages to the great Himalayan shrines -Gangotri, Yamnotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath. But little is known to those outside the southern states about the great pilgrimage to Sabarimala. There are a few books in Malayalam and other southern languages, and one or two booklets in English. This book is an attempt to provide a more comprehensive account of the origin of this great deity, the significance of the rigorous austerities one has to observe, the adventurous trek itself and the esoteric meaning of the entire pilgrimage in order to satisfy the curious reader and to equip the devotee with full knowledge of the pilgrimage he undertakes.

The author had the privilege of writing a book, "*Sri Krishna: The Lord of Guruvayur*", the most popular deity of Kerala. Published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, the book has found favour with devotees all over India and is in its second edition. Sabarimala Sasta is another popular deity of Kerala. As one who has been undertaking the annual pilgrimage to this holy shrine since 1970, the author thought he would share his experiences with readers and find fulfillment in presenting a book on this unique deity.

The writer has referred to several books and magazines in the preparation of this book and these have been acknowledged at appropriate places, by way of footnotes. His thanks are due to authors of these publications, especially to Swami Srikrishandas Achyutha, author of "*Srimad Bhagawatham*" and Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, author of '*Self Realisation*' from whose works he has quoted freely. He is also thankful to Mr. T.T. Vijayaraghavan, Assistant Editor, *The Economic Times*, Bombay, for going through the manuscript and making many valuable suggestions.

Lastly, the author is extremely grateful to Swami Ranganathananda for blessing this work by writing a foreword.

- K. R. VAIDYANATHAN

16th November 1978

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The author is grateful to the devout public for the ready acceptance of this book, like his other two works, “*Sri Krishna: The Lord of Guruvayur*” and “*Temples and Legends of Kerala*”.

A new Chapter 9-Experiences of some Devotees-has been added to the second edition as also an Appendix 'B' indicating the periods when the Sabarimala shrine will remain open to the pilgrims.

- K. R. VAIDYANATHAN

16th November 1983

PREFACE TO THE THIRD, FOURTH AND FIFTH EDITIONS

During the past decades there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of pilgrims visiting Sabarimala and in the income from devotees. In 1970-71, the income was only Rs.24 lakh in 1976-77, the revenue shot up to Rs.160 lakh. Twenty nine years later, during the 2006-2007 pilgrimage season, the temple earnings tipped the scales at a record Rs.25 crore, pointing to the ever-increasing popularity of Lord Ayyappa.

Then there has been other interesting developments. In 1983, a major dispute arose in Kerala on the lines of the Ayodhya controversy over the find of a granite cross in Nilackal, one of the 18 holy hills in Poonkavanam. While the Christians tried to build a church there, several Hindu organisations opposed the move. However the dispute that raged for months was happily resolved with the Christian leaders agreeing to shift the church's location from Nilackal to Angamuzhi, thus reinforcing the religious harmony that always marked the Sabarimala pilgrimage.

In 1985, a *Devaprasnam* (astrological investigation to know the divine will) conducted at the temple revealed the declining efficiency of *pujas* performed at the temple, defilement of the “Poonkavanam” and the temple premises and the inadequate facilities provided to the pilgrims. As a result, the *Devaswom* launched a fresh programme and provided several amenities like comfort stations, pilgrim shelters, fly-overs etc.

The renovation of the *Patinettampadi* in 1986 by covering the granite steps which were decayed with *panchaloha* was another significant development.

From time immemorial, Sabarimala shrine is forbidden to women between the ages of puberty and menopause. The controversy whether the restriction is justified has been raging for some years now but no one has been able to offer any plausible reason.

Another subject of controversy is the *Makara Jyoti*. While the Rationalists Association alleges that the phenomenon is man-made, the faithfuls simply assert: “Man-made or God-made, not every one goes to Sabarimala to see

Makara Jyoti. It is man's faith and quest for peace that sends him there. The 41 days' abstinence and the trek through the hills go to make a new man of the pilgrim and that is what matters."

In view of the importance of these topics, a new chapter entitled "Mandalam - Makara Vilakku Festival — An Overview" has been added to this edition, in addition to updating the text wherever necessary.

- K. R. VAIDYANATHAN

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CHAPTER – 1

INTRODUCTION

A tourist from Chile, Miguel Serrano, returning from his long and arduous pilgrimage to Badrinath, came down to the beautiful mountain town of Pauri from where he had an immense view of the Himalayas which stretched for hundreds of miles like a chain of white giants or titans across the wide horizon. Gazing towards these snowy ranges he began to think of the extraordinary people - the Hindus - who had created a mythology as gigantic as the mountain tops which surrounded their country.

He wrote in his book, *The Serpent of Paradise*: “These very mountains were united to their soul. One summit was the throat of Siva, another the throne of Vishnu or the abode of their Messiah. Each mountain has its history and is a living symbol.”

“We in Chile also have magnificent mountains, but we have not interpreted them yet, and we have not incorporated them into our souls. We have not discovered the Gods and titans which the Hindus have found in the Himalayas. Yet the same divine force which has been found in the mountains of India may also be discovered in the rocky *cordillera* of the Andes.”

What the tourist observed about the magnificent Himalayas in the North is also true of other great mountain ranges in India, namely, the Vindhya and the Satpuras in Central India, the Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats in the south. The various hills in these ranges have mythological associations and figure in the *Puranas* and the epics. The *Markandeya Purana*, for instance, gives a list of seven *Kula Parvatas* in India, which are: Mahendra (in Orissa), Malaya (southern part of Western Ghats), Sahya (northern part of Western Ghats) Suktiman (in the east), Riksha, Vindya and Pariyatra (all parts of the Vindhya). These mountains are considered as those of heaven. *Srimad Bhagawata Purana* adds an illustrative list of another twenty sacred mountains to the seven mentioned above.

Indeed these ranges are so wrapped up in India's story and legend that they are still held in reverence and are very much a part of the people's lives.

Several of them are crowned by temples which have been attracting pilgrims from very ancient times.

For instance, the famed temple of Balaji or Sri Venkateswara, the Lord of the Seven Hills on the Eastern Ghats at Tirupati is the richest and the most popular in India. The sage Suta was once requested by Sownaka and others to enlighten them on Vishnu shrines. "Which was the holiest of holy Vishnu *Kshetrams*?" they asked. "The Vengadam or the Venkata hill is the holiest", was the answer. It is one that bestows all boons and prosperity on mankind.

The hill called Seshachalam is a *Varaha Bhumi* or a place holy to Lord Vishnu in his *avatara* of the white Boar. When the entire universe was submerged at the time of *pralayam* or the primeval flood, Vishnu took the shape of a white boar to rescue the earth from the waters of the flood. The *asura*, Hiranyaksha who opposed the Lord was killed by him. The earth was thus preserved and Vishnu commanded Brahma to recreate life on earth. He himself agreed to the request of the celestials to stay on the Hill and grant the wishes of his devotees.

It is well-known that holy shrines of the Hindus are generally situated on spots which are attractive on account of the bounty provided by nature like mountain tops, river banks or sea shores, where it is possible to practise penance and meditate. Of these, the hill-top shrines are especially fascinating not only because of the religious and mythological appeal they provide but also for their apparent inaccessibility. It is widely believed that the difficulties encountered on a journey increase the benefits to be derived from the pilgrimage and thus enhance the sanctity of the pilgrim centre. Such pilgrimages offer a severe challenge to pilgrims not only because of the difficult terrain they have to negotiate - this in itself provides an adventure - but also on account of the presence of wild animals on the way, which adds an element of terror to the journey.

The annual trek across the sylvan and wild life-infested Western Ghats to the holy Sabarimala or Mount Sabari, the forest abode of Sri Ayyappa in Kerala, is one such. In addition to the hardships to be endured on the long and arduous trek, devotees have to observe rigorous austerities like adherence to strict celibacy and a regimen of abstinence from social functions and the ordinary pleasures of life for 41 days prior to the trek.

Yet the deity, open to *darshan* only during specific seasons in the year, attracts millions of pilgrims from all over India and is the most popular in Kerala next only to the Sri Krishna temple at Guruvayur. Lately aspirants from far-off Europe and America have also found a haven of everlasting peace and bliss at this shrine. Pilgrims who go there once visit it again year after year seeking spiritual solace and feeling elevated after worshipping the deity.

Indigenous Deity

The advent of Dharma Sasta, as Ayyappa is called, is unique in the annals of Hindu religion and peculiar to Kerala. Legend and history are so intermingled in the genesis of this deity that it is difficult to sift one from the other. According to some *Puranas* and folk songs of Kerala, He was born out of the union of Vishnu and Siva. The story is that Siva was captivated by the charms of Mohini in which form Vishnu appeared at the time of the churning of the Ocean of Milk to entice the *asuras* so that the *devas* could divide the nectar among themselves. Siva succumbed to the beauty of Mohini and Sasta is believed to have been born out of the union. Thus He is called Hariharaputra - Son of Vishnu (Hari) and Siva (Hara) and is regarded as the third son of Siva, the other two being Ganesa and Muruga or Kartikeya.

This is how His Holiness Jagadguru Sri Shankaracharya of Kanchi describes it: "When the merciful charm of Narayana and the serene *jnana* (Knowledge) of Siva combined, an effulgent light (*tejas*) was the outcome. Out of this *tejas* was born Ayyappa also known as Ayyanar, Sasta or Hariharaputra." The word Ayyappa is derived from *Aryan* (one worthy of reverence) and *appa* or *appan* meaning 'Father' in Malayalam.

Ayyappa thus embodies in Himself the qualities of both Siva and Vishnu. He keeps guard over us, from evil spirits and also endows us with *jnana* leading to salvation. He manifested Himself in various forms at various times. In Kerala He descended as the child Manikanta (so called because of the golden bell around his neck) and grew up known as Bhutanatha, Lord of the Elements; Ayyappa, Lord of the Senses; and Dharma Sasta, Lord of the Verities.

As far as history is concerned, it revolves round the troubled times that prevailed in the kingdom of Pandalam at the very early period when the depredations of a robber chief called Udayanan rocked the whole country. The hill tracts of the Western Ghats were dotted with several villages and each village had Ayyappa as the guardian deity¹. Udayanan and his followers, bent on defilement and plunder, laid waste these villages and shrines including Sabarimala.

The purpose of the *avatara* of Lord Ayyappa was to restore order in the country and to renovate the temple at Sabari Hill. Ayyappa fulfilled the mission in due course and thereafter entered the sanctum sanctorum and disappeared. It is believed that He reunited with the Supreme. Thus the Sasta temple at Sabarimala has the additional halo of Ayyappa, an endearing name to everybody.

There are temples dedicated to Dharma Sasta all over the state of Kerala - and now, of course, in other states and countries also. Even in temples dedicated to other deities in Kerala there will be generally a Sasta shrine. However there are five important temples along the hilly tracts of the Western Ghats founded by Sri Parasurama who, according to legend, raised Kerala from the sea by heaving his battle-axe. Dharma Sasta is represented in different stages in these temples.

Thus at Kulathupuzha near Thenmala, the first of these, he appears as *Balaka* or child, at Aryankavu as a *Brahmachari*, at Achankoil as a *Grahashta* with his two consorts, Poorna and Pushkala, at Sabarimala as *Vanaprastha* and at Ponnambala *medu* (the hill of the Golden temple) or Kantamala as the highest *yogi*. The last mentioned temple is believed to have been built by sages on a forest-covered mountain opposite Sabarimala on the eastern side. This shrine has not yet been explored. The 'miraculous' appearance of the celestial light at Sabarimala every year on *Makara Sankranti* day is believed to emanate from this spot.

The Sabarimala shrine is thus the most important and popular of the Sasta temples in Kerala. It is also the most significant because the pilgrimage to the shrine symbolises the struggle of the individual soul in its onward journey to the abode of bliss and beatitude. The path of the spiritual aspirant is always long, arduous and hazardous. And so is the pilgrimage to

Sabarimala, what with the observance of severe austerities and trekking up forested mountains, risking attacks from wild animals.

Feeling of Ecstasy

There are many temples in the plains dedicated to every deity in the Hindu pantheon. These can be easily reached, and there one can pray to one's heart's content. Yet, how is it that shrines were established in far-off and inaccessible regions like Badrinath, Kedarnath and Sabarimala? And what impels thousands of pilgrims to visit these shrines after undergoing severe trials and tribulations? The reason is that our sages thought that unless an element of rigour and sacrifice was added to worship, belief in God would not be firm and enduring.

A long and arduous pilgrimage is surely one way of communing with God. One sees nature in all its ruggedness and sublime beauty. The whole atmosphere is permeated with a deep and abiding faith in God. And it is this faith that impels the pilgrim to move on towards the shrine, however weak he may be in body and mind. He feels that he is on a mission and his only wish is to reach His shrine and have the eye-filling *darshan* of the Lord. Finally as he stands in His presence, with veritable tears of joy and thankfulness, he feels he has achieved the near impossible having surmounted the physical hazards of the trek, and experiences a profound sense of fulfillment. It is just for this feeling of ecstasy and spiritual elevation that devotees, who once undertake the *yatra* repeat it year after year. Such is the magnetic charm of this hallowed mountain shrine.

The ever-effulgent and merciful Lord of the Sabari Hill has thus been a magnificent refuge to millions who seek His *darshan* annually. He sheds light and peace as *Kaliyuga varada*; He is a giver of boons in this degenerate age of Kali. He is also described as *Tarakabrahma* - one who helps mankind to cross the ocean of *samsara*.

The trek to Mount Sabari which is about 3000 feet in height (though there are peaks on the way which are as high as 6000 feet) is not as rigorous as the treks to the popular Himalayan shrines like Badrinath which is at a height of 10,200 feet and Kedarnath at 11,750 feet. Yet the pilgrimage is unique in several ways.

First and foremost there is the physical and mental cleansing of the devotees by the hard penance (*vritham*) they have to observe for at least 41 days preceding the pilgrimage. During this period the pilgrims wear a *rudraksha* or *tulsi* garland as a token of their avowal and determination for the observance of bramacharya (celibacy). They grow beard, wear blue, black or ochre and partake of only satvic food. They eschew anger and lust and spend their time in constant prayer and worship.

The temple doors of Sabarimala are open to everyone irrespective of caste, creed, religion or social status. Yesudas, the well-known playback singer and Carnatic musician is a Christian by birth. But like hundreds of devout Hindus he has made this annual pilgrimage to Mount Sabari. He had no child for nearly seven years after his marriage. He was blessed with a son after his pilgrimage though he himself neither believes nor disbelieves in miracles. But what attracts him to Sabarimala is that it is the one Hindu pilgrim centre where every one can go freely and worship without considerations of caste or community or religion.

"At Sabarimala" says Yesudas, "there is no difference between a Brahmin and a Chandala, the lowest of the lowly or between the high and low or the rich and poor. All are alike - Ayyappas - as the devotees are called, after the deity itself. Indeed nowhere else can one see such amity and brotherhood in practice."

It is noteworthy that both at Erumeli, the base and at Sabarimala, there are shrines for the Muslim saint Vavar, a close associate of Lord Ayyappa. Devotees worship at these shrines with equal fervour and receive prasada from Muslim priests.

When towards the end of the last century, *Swami* Vivekananda visited Kerala, he found the state to be so greatly caste-ridden that he was provoked to describe it as a "lunatic asylum." Kerala has come a long way since then, thanks to the life and teachings of Sri Narayana *Guru* (1854-1928) who gave his celebrated message - One caste, one religion, one God for man." This spirit prevailed in Sabarimala even before the advent of the *Guru*.

A Unique pilgrimage

Shouting of “*Saranam*” (Surrender to God) is another feature of the pilgrimage. Pilgrims trekking to Badrinath and Kedarnath, shout "Jai Badri" and "Jai Kedarnath" as the case may be. But Sabarimala pilgrims shout "*Swamiye, Saranam Ayyappa ! - Lord Ayyappa*. I come to Thee for refuge day in and day out, in fact during most of their waking hours right from the time they take the vow till they return from the trip. When devotees congregate one would shout a full-throated "*Swamiye*" ! or any other name of the Lord like "Hari Hara suthane", "Dharma sastave" and so on. Others would answer in chorus "*Saranam Ayyappa*." The shout is repeated in a full throated manner by all around and is answered with increasing intensity. Even when two pilgrims meet they do not pass the time of day as we do in normal life. Instead, they greet each other. "*Swami saranam*". Thus during the season the whole atmosphere gets surcharged with intense devotional fervour.

The offering to the deity is also unique. It is a *ghee*-filled coconut which is carried in a two-compartment cloth bag, called *Irumudi*. The front portion of this bag contains the coconut along with other offerings like camphor, rice etc. while the rear is filled with the personal requisites of the pilgrim on the way. The pouring of the *ghee* on the idol marks the consummation of the pilgrimage.

This *Irumudi* forms the sole travel kit which the pilgrim himself has to carry on his head throughout the pilgrimage. Only those who observe the strict regimen for a minimum period of 41 days and carry the *Irumudi* can step onto the sacred "*Patinettampadi*" (flight of 18 steps) leading to the sanctum. This is again without parallel as nowhere else are the steps leading to a temple held as sacred as those of the Sabarimala shrine.

Adolescent girls and young women are prohibited from undertaking the trip. Little girls, and aged women who have attained menopause are permitted. This is why very few female pilgrims are seen during the trek. The belief is that since the Lord is an avowed celibate, young women should not enter the shrine. Just as a male pilgrim is called ‘Ayyappa’ or ‘*Swami*’ the female counterpart is addressed as ‘Malikappuram’ after the Devi deity at Sabarimala, ‘Malikappurathamma’ which literally means the Mother-Goddess sitting in a tower.

The Sabarimala shrine is open only during specific occasions. These are *Mandalam* - 41 days from mid-November to December end, *Makaravilakku* - around *Makara Sankranti* in mid-January, Vishu (mid-April), the day of the vernal equinox which is also New Year's day for Malayalis, *Prathistha* day on Atham asterism in the month of *Edavam* (May-June), during *Onam* festival in the month of *Chingam* (August-September), and *Pankuni Utram* day in the month of *Meenam* (March-April).

No daily pujas are conducted here except for 5 days from the 1st of every Malayalam month. (See Appendix B).

Different Routes

There are three routes to Mount Sabari² - the Erumeli route, the Vandiperiyar route and the Chalakayam route. (See Route map at the end of the book and Appendix 'A' showing the distance from different towns in Kerala). The Erumeli route is the conventional and the most arduous of the three routes. Erumeli is 12.8 Km. to the east of the 41.6 km. stone on the Kottayam-Kumili Road. During the season buses ply up to Erumeli. Beyond Erumeli pilgrims have to go on foot to cover 60.8 Km. through forest and hill track.

Vandiperiyar route - Vandiperiyar is a hill station on the 94.4. Km. stone on the Kottayam-Kumili road and 19.2 Km. beyond Peermade which is a tourist centre. There is an Estate road covering a distance of about 12.8 Km. to the Mount Estate *satram* up to which vehicles ply. From here the distance to Sabarimala is 12.8 Km. which has to be covered by foot. The first 1.6 Km. is a steep ascent through forest, the next 5.6 Km. is through hilly terrain (*Pulmedu*) which rises to a height of 4500 feet. The third lap-5.6 Km. is a descent through dense forest.

Chalakayam route - Sabarimala is just 8 Km. from Chalakayam near Pampa up to which vehicles ply. The Kerala State Transport Corporation during the festival season runs special buses from all important places in Kerala. Pilgrims coming by train from Madura, Tirunelveli etc. through Shencottah can alight at Punalur railway station on the Ernakulam - Quilon section and catch buses to Chalakayam via Pathanamthitta covering a distance of about

98 Kms. From Pampa onwards there is just one mountain – Neeli - to be crossed.

This is the easiest route and therefore preferred by majority of the pilgrims. It is a pity that there is an increasing trend these days to bring all idyllic spots into the stream of modern civilisation by building motorable roads which can take people very near the spot or right up to the doorsteps of the sanctuary by automobiles. Once these conveniences are provided, the quietness and natural charm of the hill-top shrines are disturbed and they become just tourist spots.

The long and arduous path via Erumeli is indeed a trekker's paradise, passing as it does through three majestic mountains - Azhutha, Karimala and Neeli - and grand valleys and thick forests. This is also the most sacred route as it is said to have been trodden by Lord Ayyappa Himself in His forest expedition. Hence lovers of nature and adventure and those who are imbued with devotion prefer this route and they are amply rewarded at the end of the pilgrimage both physically and spiritually.

A mysterious incident took place at Sabarimala in 1950 when the temple was burnt down by some unknown miscreants. The news of the shocking destruction reached the plains only a month after the event. As the news trickled by word of mouth and was later flashed in newspapers, the people of Kerala were stunned. Many rushed to the site and were horrified to witness the magnitude of the havoc. Not only were the temple buildings destroyed, but the sacred idol was smashed to pieces. Even Mohamed Gazni the bigoted invader who destroyed the Somnath temple and plundered its riches did not dare to destroy the idol.

Here there was no wealth to plunder; yet even the idol was not spared. Who perpetrated this heinous crime? Nobody knew except that it was done by some persons out of sheer religious animosity or jealousy. Nothing came out of the long investigation. No culprits were booked. To this day the mystery remains unsolved³.

But even out of evil cometh good. If the iconoclasts thought that the destruction of the temple would adversely affect the faith of the people, just the opposite happened. The people and the Government swung into action.

The then *Devaswom* Board reconstructed the temple in a very short time. This to some extent assuaged the feelings of the devotees and healed their wounds. The glory of Ayyappa spread beyond the boundaries of Kerala especially in Tamil Nadu where a model of the idol made in gold was taken in procession. This in a way has been responsible for the large influx of pilgrims to Sabarimala from Tamil Nadu and other states during the last few years.

The present temple is the one renovated after the 1950 fire. The temple and the new idol were consecrated in 1951 in the Malayalam month of *Edavam* (May-June) on *Atham* asterism day. The *Prathistha* ceremony was conducted by the traditional high priest of Sabarimala, Shri Kantaru Sankararu Tantri of Thazhamon Madhom, Chengannur. According to him, the shrine had been destroyed by fire two or three times before. But the previous fires were accidental, not wanton as in 1950.

1. Before the reclamation of the sea Kerala was entirely a land of the hills or Malanad which cascaded from the Western Ghats. The Malayalis or the people of Malanad inhabited the mountain slopes and built shrines for Ayyappa, their guardian deity and the indigenous god of Kerala from ancient times. Dr. Gundert in his dictionary describes Ayyappa as 'Hunting Deity'. In those days, the Malayalis lived as one community. There was no caste system among them which came only with the advent of Aryans into Kerala. With the coming of the Aryans, the indigenous god also got assimilated into Aryan deities like Siva and Vishnu. Ayyappa came to be called Sasta.

With the reclamation of the land fringing the foot of the Western Ghats people came down to the plains. With them their patron deity too. The hill shrines were thus neglected and became ruins though some of them still survive.

Goddess Bhadra Kali has been another deity popular with the Malayalis. This explains the presence of innumerable Bhagvati shrines throughout Kerala. Even at Sabarimala there is a shrine to a Goddess, known as 'Malikapurathama' in the vicinity of the sanctuary of Ayyappa.

2. A Guide to Holy Pilgrimage (Sabarimala) - A publication of the Travancore Devaswom Board.

3. Mr. N. Chandrasekharan Nair, Retired, I G. in his "Memoirs of an I.G." published in *Manorqjyam*, dated September 13, 1978 refers to one "Kotaliswami", literally, the Swami with an axe, whom he suspects to be the perpetrator of the heinous crime. The bearded "Swami" who lived in the hollow of a big tree near the temple used to be known to many pilgrims in those days. He smeared his body with holy ash and sat in meditation in the hole. Devotees paid their respects to him and made offerings of money. He in turn blessed them.

The "Swami" was missing immediately after the fire incident. This aroused the suspicion of the police. Their enquiries revealed that a group of persons who had been to Sabarimala a few days after the Makara vilakku to collect honey, found the "Swami" cooking meat in the temple premises. They belaboured him mercilessly for polluting the holy shrine and handed him over to the police. He was subsequently awarded one month's imprisonment. It was a bitter and enraged "Swami" who, on coming out of the jail, decided to take revenge and the result was destruction of the temple by setting fire to it.

Soon the "Swami" escaped to Pondicherry and the police could not arrest him as the state was not part of the Indian Union then. It turned out that the "Swami" was actually a Christian by birth though he lived as a Hindu and was a devotee of Lord Ayyappa. The motive of the crime, according to Mr. Chandrasekharan Nair, was not religious animosity, but just a revenge taken by an individual. However, Political pressure mounted. The investigation of the case was entrusted to another A.I.G. Mr.K Kesava Menon who could get no clue to identify the culprit though "Kotaliswami" was also brought to Kerala and interrogated. In short nothing came out of this investigation and the culprit escaped scot-free.

CHAPTER – 2

A DIVINE BABE IS FOUND

FEW temples in Kerala are more steeped in legend and history than the shrine of Lord Ayyappa atop the Sabari hill. As mentioned earlier, legend and history are so intermingled that it is difficult to sift one from the other. The story of the origin of Dharma Sasta as a progeny of the union of Vishnu and Siva and Sasta's incarnation of Ayyappa, a warrior prince of the royal household of Pandalam, are part of the folk songs of Kerala. These are also narrated in *Bhutanathopakyanam*, an ancient Sanskrit text. According to this, Sage Suta of Naimisaranya, situated on the bank of river Gomati, narrated the story of Ayyappa to his disciples who were waiting to hear the *Purana* from their Guru.

When the Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu and Siva took up human form to establish *dharma* in the world there emerged from them a *shakti* or force which they named Dattatreya or Datta. Simultaneously the consorts of the Trinity - Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati by their *yogamaya* took birth as the daughter of Sage Galava. The sage named her Leela and in due course gave her in marriage to Datta.

The couple fulfilled their *grahasthasrama* for a long time. In due course Datta became conscious of his divine nature and expressed to his wife his desire to withdraw from family life in order to attain *jnana* and *moksha*. But Leela would hear nothing of the kind. Her desires in this world were still unsatiated and she therefore pleaded with her husband not to leave her.

Datta delivered her some homilies: "The desire for worldly pleasures is endless", he said, "and pursuit of them would lead only to sorrow. Therefore overcome it. That which you desire most in the world will be the cause of the greatest sorrow and unhappiness. This body is transitory. The riches of the world are transitory. Physical pleasures are momentary. There is nothing in this world that is everlasting. Therefore be above mundane pleasures and seek eternal happiness."

Thus Datta tried his best to enlighten Leela and to restrain her but she was so blinded by desire that she challenged him saying: "You cannot forsake

me thus and go away I am your "*mahishi* !"

Datta got angry and cursed her to become a '*mahishi*' (she-buffalo) itself in the family of *asuras*. Leela was also enraged and she too cursed her husband to become a '*mahisha*' (buffalo).

In course of time, Leela was born as a Mahishi as the daughter of the *asura*, Karamba. She had a grouse against the *devas* whose machinations, she thought, caused the death of her cousin, Mahishasura.

The Story of Mahishasura

Now we must digress to know the story of Mahishasura. He was the son of Ramba, Karamba's

(Mahishi's father) elder brother. Both Ramba and Karamba, sons of Dhanu, undertook severe penance - Karamba standing neck-deep in water and Ramba in blazing fire - to propitiate Lord Agni. Devendra, the Lord of the heavens, apprehended danger to his throne and therefore killed Karamba by assuming the form of a crocodile. Ramba got frightened and he was about to commit suicide. At this juncture Lord Agni appeared before him and asked him what boon he wanted. He prayed for a son who would not be killed by *devas*, *asuras* or men. The boon was granted.

Pleased with the boon, he was returning home when he met a beautiful she-buffalo and was so enamoured of the beast that he took her to the forest and made love to her. This infuriated a buffalo which charged at Ramba and killed him. The grief-stricken she-buffalo also gave up her life by jumping into the funeral pyre of Ramba, and from this funeral pyre was born Mahishasura.

Mahishasura propitiated Lord Brahma and got a boon to the effect that he would not be killed by a male person. He waged war with the *devas*, vanquished them and became supreme ruler of heaven. The *devas* supplicated the Trinity and sought deliverance. Goddess Durga under the name of Chandika was created out of the combined energies of the *devas* and the Trinity. Chandika took her abode on the summit of the Vindhya mountain. She provoked Mahishasura by her laughter to wage war with her.

Mahishasura accepted the challenge and a fierce battle ensued in which Chandika killed Mahishasura and his followers.

It was thus Mahishi decided to take revenge upon the *devas* who were the cause of the death of her cousin, Mahishasura. Mahishi undertook severe penance and propitiated Lord Brahma, and obtained a boon from him to the effect that she would attain her end only through an incarnation born to Hari and Hara, who had spent twelve years serving a king as a human being in an earthly kingdom.

Blessed by the boon, the demoness deposed Devendra, the Lord of heaven and oppressed the Devas. They turned to the Trinity for redress. Datta was made to take the form of a buffalo, named Sundara Mahisha. Thus Leela's curse on Datta took effect. Lord Vishnu asked Sundara Mahisha to lure Mahishi and take her down to earth. When Sundara Mahisha went to Devaloka to fetch Mahishi, she was so enamoured that she forgot herself and all about the revenge. She blindly left her throne and followed Mahisha to earth. This was, of course, a temporary measure and the threat of Mahishi to Devendra had to be checked permanently.

But how could she be killed? Only by one born of Hari and Hara, both positives, which was apparently impossible. Mahishi's aim in getting such a boon was to attain physical immortality and thus remain a perpetual terror to the gods. The *devas* went to Lord Siva, praised him and sought succour at His feet for deliverance from the atrocities committed by Mahishi. Here comes the story of the churning of the Ocean of Milk by the *asuras* and *devas* for getting *amritha* or nectar, the partaking of which made one immortal.

The mountain, Manthara was used as the churning-stick and the snake, Vasuki as the rope. First came *Kalakootha*, worst poison one can imagine, which would have destroyed the whole universe. Lord Siva, therefore, swallowed it, but before it reached his gullet, his consort Parvati throttled him. Thus it remained at the throat forever.

Then came the life-giving nectar. There arose a quarrel between the *asuras* and *devas* as to who should take it first. The *devas* did not want to part with it at all. Lord Vishnu, therefore, assumed the form of a beautiful maiden

called Mohini to entice the *asuras* away. Thus the nectar was shared among the *devas* alone.

The Enchanting Mohini

Lord Siva desired to see Lord Vishnu in his enchanting Mohini form. When he saw her, he lost control and from their union emerged Hariharaputra, son of Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Siva) or Lord Bhutanatha, the *Tarakabrahma*, a force created by the union of the two Divines, Siva and Vishnu.

There is another version about the appearance of Mohini. Once upon a time a certain asura worshipped Lord Siva and performed severe penance. The Lord was pleased and He granted the *asura* a boon that whoever he touched with his hand would be turned to ashes. Hence he was known as 'Bhasmasura'. The *asura* was not confident of the efficacy of the boon. Therefore, he decided to test it on Lord Siva himself. The Lord ran away and sought the help of Lord Vishnu to rescue him.

Lord Vishnu appeared before the *asura* in the form of an alluring damsel—Mohini. The *asura's* passions grew wild and he lost control of his senses. He wanted Mohini to be his consort. Mohini agreed subject to one condition that the *asura* should promise her by touching his own head that he would not take another wife. Overcome by passion, Bhasmasura forgot himself and touched his head, and alas! what remained of him was a heap of ashes.

Thus Lord Siva was rescued. But on seeing Mohini he was himself enticed by her beauty. He succumbed to her charms and the result was Sasta.

Dharma Sasta was born on the last day of the month of *Dhanus* (corresponding to about 13th January) on a Saturday when the star *Utram* was in ascendance. The *devas* rejoiced at the birth of their saviour and prayed to him for their relief from the harassment of Mahishi Mukhi.

Lord Siva informed the boy of the purpose of his life's mission i.e. annihilation of Mahishi for which he had to live a mortal life and serve an earthly king for 12 years. For this purpose he was abandoned on the banks of the river Pampa.

The king Rajasekhara of Pandalam, who belonged to the Pandya dynasty and whose forefather had been blessed by the Lord, came to the forest near Pampa for hunting. After hunting for some time the king was resting when he heard the melodious cry of a little baby nearby. Surprised to hear such a cry in the midst of the dense forest, the king ran to the spot and found a beautiful baby lying on the floor, his face radiant like the light of a thousand suns with a golden bell tied around his neck.

The king did not have any issue and therefore he felt the child was a godsend. But he was puzzled and surprised. Not knowing what to do he stood for a while when he had a vision in the form of a holy *Brahmin* appearing before him and advising him to take the boy to the palace and bring him up. The *Brahmin* also prophesied that the boy would bring him all glory.

The king took the baby to the palace. The queen was jubilant and welcomed the unexpected gift of a baby for which she had been longing and praying. The lamp of happiness was lit in the palace. The gloom in the childless home was transformed into immeasurable joy. The boy was called Manikanta because of the golden bell adorning his neck.

Manikanta - The Divine Boy

Manikanta grew up into a fine boy. He was put under the charge of a *guru* to receive his education and physical training. In a short while the boy excelled in his lessons and surpassed his friends in the extraordinary proficiency he displayed in archery and sword-play. The teacher was happy at the achievements of his disciple, and knowing his divine nature, he held him in respect and always treated him with reverence. One day on completion of his education, Manikanta appeared before his *guru* and offered him the customary gifts - *gurudakshina*. But the teacher did not want any material gift. He requested Manikanta to bless his son who was both blind and deaf. The dutiful disciple by his miraculous touch restored the boy's sight and speech bringing happiness and joy to his teacher who blessed him declaring that he would be a king of kings.

Many more such feats followed, the most important being the milking of a leopardess as unfolded in the following story. Even today similar miracles

are experienced by those who undertake the yatra in full faith and utter surrender. The dumb often speak, the deaf hear and the lame walk crossing the huge mountains, reminiscent of the famous words of the *Gita Dhyanam*:

*Mookam karoti vaachaalam
pangum langhayate girim;
yatkripaa tamaham vande
paramaananda—Maadhavam.*

Subsequent to the arrival of Manikanta in the Pandalam palace, the queen also conceived and gave birth to a son. Both the boys grew up as brothers though the queen naturally turned her maternal love to her own son.

The time came for the appointment of the heir apparent to the throne. According to the custom in those days, the king decided to crown Manikanta as the *Yuvaraja* as he regarded him as his elder son. He asked his *Dewan* to make immediate arrangements for the coronation. The news spread like wildfire amongst the people who regarded Manikanta with love and affection and they hailed the event with great joy.

It however distressed one person, that is, the *Dewan*, who nursed a deep dislike for Manikanta ever since he came to the palace. He had made plans to end the boy's life so that he himself would get an opportunity to rule the land but his attempts proved abortive. He was waiting for an opportunity and here was one to make another attempt.

He decided to work through the queen and sought her connivance. He played the role of Manthara in the "*Ramayana*" and told the queen how foolish she was to remain a silent spectator to the crowning of Manikanta while her own son who was the rightful heir remained an ordinary subject. The scene of the Kaikeyi episode in the "*Ramayana*" was re-enacted. The *Dewan* dinned into the queen's ears the adverse consequences that would follow if Manikanta became king and therefore advised her to foil the plan by acting quickly. He suggested to her she should feign some serious illness and should prevail upon the attending physician to include leopardess's milk in the medicine prescribed. Then Manikanta would volunteer to go to the forest and undertake the dangerous task of fetching the milk, and in the

process he would be killed by wild animals and the queen's son would become the sole heir to the throne.

Leopardess's Milk As Cure

The queen agreed to carry out the sinister plan and accordingly "fell ill" in the midst of hectic preparation in the palace for the joyous event. The king felt uneasy and asked the *Dewan* to summon an expert physician to bring about the cure of the queen. Events took shape strictly according to plan. The physician was bribed, and after examining the queen said that one of the essential ingredients for the preparation of the medicine was leopardess's milk and without that the medicine would not be effective.

The king stood aghast at the incomprehensible remedy prescribed. "How could a leopardess be approached, let alone milked," he asked. "And who would undertake the impossible task?" he wondered. Seeing his predicament, Manikanta appeared before the king and offered to undertake the task. But the king would not hear of such a thing from his beloved son who was about to be appointed as *Yuvaraja*. But Manikanta prevailed in the same way as Rama did with Dasaratha and departed for the forest.

The king advised him to take a coconut representing *Trinetra*, Lord Siva, his family deity, to protect him against all dangers on the way. Manikanta accordingly put a coconut and also some food to sustain him on the way into a cloth bundle and carried it on his head. The king stood helpless as the little boy walked alone to the forest. The *Irumudi* which pilgrims carry today is said to represent this bundle.

As soon as Manikanta reached the forest several lieutenants came at the command of Lord Siva and stood in attendance. Blessing them he traversed the forests and reached the banks of the Pampa. The *Rishis* living in the vicinity came and made obeisance to him. Thereafter they seated him in a golden temple, believed to be about 16 Km. from the Pampa, constructed on a hill top by their *tapasic* power. The Ponnambalamedu (the hill of the Golden temple) referred to by devotees and mentioned in the last chapter is believed to be this hill, which has not yet been explored.

The *devas* knowing that Manikanta had come to the forest on his mission thought the time had come for killing Mahishi Mukhi. They prayed to Him

for achieving the aim of his *avatara*. Manikanta blessed them and gave Mahishi Mukhi battle. Having been blessed with several boons she gave a tough fight to Manikanta who at last caught hold of her horns and killed her as per her prayer. The battle took place near the river known as Alasa (Azhutha) on whose banks Mahishi fell dead.

The *devas* praised the Lord as Mahishi was killed. Lord Siva came down to the world to witness the destruction of evil.

The place where the body of Mahishi was dumped is known as *Kallidumkunnu* and according to some legends, the place where Lord Siva tethered his bull when he came to witness the destruction of Mahishi is called *Kalaketti* (*kala* meaning 'ox' and *ketti* meaning, 'tied') *Ashram*.

As the Lord danced on the fallen body of Mahishi, Leela emerged, redeemed from her curse and prayed that she be taken as His consort. The Lord declined her request since He was a brahmachari but agreed that she be assigned a place as his *Sakti* on his left side. Mahishi Mukhi was from then onwards known as 'Panchambika' and she has a temple on the Sabari Hill to the left of Ayyappa which is the Malikappurathamma shrine referred to earlier.

Embracing Manikanta on his accomplishment Lord Siva advised him to return to Pandalam and relieve the king of his distress. Lord Siva ordained that Rajasekhara who was a great devotee would build a temple for Ayyappa on Sabari Hill which would become famous and the deity would reside in the hearts of innumerable devotees.

Thereupon Manikanta bade Devendra to take the form of a ferocious tiger on which He mounted and commanded an army of leopardesses and proceeded to Pandalam. (The popular picture of Sasta seated on a tiger and with a bow and arrow in his hands represents this scene). At Pandalam terrified by the sight the people ran helter-skelter for safety. Hearing shrieks of horror and shouting, the king came out and saw Manikanta mounted on a tiger. Dismounting from the tiger, Manikanta requested the king to take as much leopardess's milk as required to relieve the queen of her illness. The king was overjoyed and the queen contrite. They were convinced that

Manikanta was an *avatara* of God Himself. They prayed for mercy and forgiveness.

Manikanta embraced the king and asked permission to leave as the purpose of his *avatara* as Manikanta was over. The king requested the Lord to make his abode in his kingdom. He should be blessed to build a temple for him wherever He chose in his territory.

The Temple On Sabari Hill

The Lord condescended to accept the offer and stated that the temple should be located on the Neeli Hill on the north-east of the river Pampa where the great *tapaswini* Sabari was awaiting immortality at His hands. To indicate the exact spot, he shot an arrow and said that the place where the arrow fell would become famous as Sabari Hill. He further stated that leading to the sanctum of the temple facing east there should be eighteen steps representing the five *Indriyas*, the eight *Ragas*, the three *Gunas*, *Vidya* and *Avidya*. He also directed that at some distance, on the left there should be a shrine for his *Sakt* – Malikappurathamma and niches for his various lieutenants, Vavar, Kadutha etc. The Lord declared that the Pampa would equal the Ganga in sanctity and the Sabari Hill would equal Varanasi.

The Lord then gave instructions as to the nature of the austerities to be practised before the pilgrimage, the route the pilgrims should follow and the various formalities to be observed. He specifically observed: "Those who come to see me without the proper austerities will not derive any benefit from the pilgrimage. A pilgrimage without proper austerities is like going to the bazar without money. The auspicious day to come and have my darshan is the day of *Makara Sankranti* when I will reside in eighteen temples in Kerala of which Sabari Hill is the most important."

So saying Manikanta departed. Needless to say the king was overcome by grief and emotion at the departure of the Lord who spent 12 years as his son in his palace. Presently sage Agastya appeared as though to relieve his distress. He came to advise the king on the construction of the temple for Dharma Sasta. He also enlightened him on the importance and sanctity of the Pampa, and Kumbhadala *tirtha* in Sabari Hill, with which the king's previous life was connected.

As narrated by the *Maharshi*, the story goes that once in Pandya *desa* there lived a *Brahmin* by the name of Vijaya. He had everything in life except children. He spent his time in devotion to God and spent all his money on charities and in religious activities. One day a *sadhu* came and addressed him thus: "I know the reason for your grief. It is because your desire for a child remains unfulfilled. Be of cheer. You can attain your desire by praying to *Tarakabrahma*. To the north of this place lies the river Pampa. To the east of that, on the mountains, lives a great *tapaswini* Sabari. Go straight and seek her favour. She will tell you what to do next."

The story of Vijaya

Accordingly Vijaya approached Sabari in her *ashram* and prayed to her for guidance and enlightenment. Sabari advised him to go northwards for a short distance where there was a great waterfall and immerse himself in that water before it touched the earth. This would rid him of all his sins and his desire would be fulfilled. This water came from Ponnambalamedu after the *abhisheka* by *devas*. She gave him a pot too to collect the water in.

Carrying the vessel, Vijaya proceeded northwards and reached the place. He held out the pot to collect the water but it broke into pieces. At the spot where it fell, a pit was formed in which the water collected. Vijaya immersed himself in it. And his sins also vanished. The *devas* praised him. He stood bewildered closing his eyes. After a while when he opened his eyes he saw a beautiful boy smiling and standing before him. Realising that the boy was none other than Lord Bhutanatha Himself, Vijaya praised Him. The Lord asked him to choose any boon he desired. Vijaya expressed his mundane desire to have a child and requested that the Lord Himself should become his son. The Lord agreed and said in his next birth he would live as his son.

Vijaya also requested the Lord to tell him what his past sins were. He was told that betrayal of trust was his great sin from which redemption was not easy. Now that he had bathed in this all-redeeming *tirtha* he was redeemed though there was still some desire left in him. Hence he was to take one more birth in which the Lord would live as his son.

Vijaya listened to the Lord with reverence. Overcome by emotion and with tears in his eyes he prayed to God to reveal to him His universal form. Pleased with the devotion of Vijaya, Lord Bhutanatha did so and revealed to him the whole universe, good and evil, past and future, all the *devas*, *Vedas*, *Ithihasas* and *Puranas*, the great *Rishis* and all the different worlds on the Timeless and Spaceless being. Vijaya was overwhelmed and prayed with hands raised for mercy. The Lord became once again the boy and subsequently disappeared. Rajasekhara was none other than Vijaya in his previous birth.

The Sage Agastya next explained to the king the sanctity of the Pampa. This sacred river is at the confluence of all the holy rivers of Bharat Varsha brought into Kerala by Parasurama. A dip in this river is said to redeem man from all his sins.

After concluding the story, the Maharshi advised the king not to waste any more time and to proceed with the construction of the temple. He then left.

The Installation

The king accompanied by his *Dewan*, *brahmins* and architects set out for the noble purpose. At Erumeli, at the foot of the mountains, temples for Dharma Sasta, and Vavar, the Lord's trusted lieutenant, were erected. After installation of the deities and *pujas* the king and his party crossed the river Alasa and the two mountains ahead—Azhutha and Karimala—and reached the banks of the Pampa. Here they made their ablutions before starting for Sabari *ashram*. By the time they reached this holy *ashram*, it was night and therefore the party rested. They fell asleep immediately as they were tired.

The king, however, was lying awake. At that moment Vavar came to him at the bidding of Dharma Sasta and took him to Ponnambalamedu. There in the temple built of gold and precious stones, Lord Bhutanatha was sitting on his golden throne, radiant and dazzling with the light of a thousand suns, praised by great *Rishis*. The Lord explained to him that he was giving him *darshan* “as king of kings” as blessed by his *guru* after his education at Pandalam. Then the Lord advised the king of the form in which he would appear in his Sabarimala shrine. Said He, “I desire to be adorned in a figure wearing a *Pattabandha* (a belt around the knees) and with *Chinmudra* (the

sign of *Tatwamasi*) You will get proper guidance in due course for the carving of my idol. Oh King ! The body is the world, the heart the temple and the life inside it is myself." With this blessing the Lord presented the king with a sword and said, "Consider Vavar as myself and Panchambika as my Sakti."

The king was soon brought back by Vavar to the place where he was resting. No one in the party knew about the vision the king had had.

The very next morning the building materials were assembled. The following day - 1st of *Vrischikam* (mid-November) - Viswakarma, the celestial architect appeared and directed the construction of the temple. After the completion of the temple there remained the carving and installation of the idol. As the king stood puzzled a stone-carver came and showed him several images of Dharma Sasta. The king was astonished to see so many idols. The stone carver was Parasurama himself who, revealing his identity, said that the Sabarimala shrine was the most important of Dharma Sasta shrines and the idol should be one with *Pattabhand*a and *Chinmudra*. The idol was duly installed by Parasurama himself on the auspicious day of *Makara Sankranti*.

Parasurama instructed the king on the *pujas* to be performed and the celebration to be conducted. All other installations were also completed when a celestial voice was heard: "Oh king! you have attained immortality."

CHAPTER – 3

TRADITIONAL HISTORY

The legends narrated so far about Ayyappa are based on the *Puranas* and mythology. We now turn to history according to which Ayyappa was a human incarnation of Dharma Sasta. He took birth in Kerala as a human being some time after Sankaracharya to put down the evils arising out of the anarchy prevailing in those days and to restore order by his superhuman adventures which transformed him into a divinity. Once the purpose of his avatara was over he merged with the deity at Sabari Hill. Thus the Dharma Sasta at Sabarimala and Ayyappa are one and the same. Because of the additional halo of Ayyappa this temple is considered the most important and sacred of the Sasta temples in Kerala.

There are no historical records available about the life of Ayyappa. Therefore the exact period of events are not known. But there are descendants of some of the entourage of Ayyappa. Then there are folk-songs like *Vavar Mahatmya*, Song of Ayyappa, *Pandalassevam*, *Vavarangam*, *Pandyssevam* and *Pulippalssevam* (about tigress's milk). These songs describe the story of Ayyappa and extol his superhuman qualities and adventures.

From these and other historic evidences a coherent life-history of Ayyappa has been pieced together.

According to this, Ayyappa did not come to the royal family of Pandalam as a babe found abandoned on the banks of the Pampa. He came under entirely different circumstances as explained below. Further, his advent into this world was not to kill Mahishi but to annihilate so many "*Mahishis*" represented by marauders who wrecked the lives of the people.

Indeed anarchy prevailed in those days in Kerala. People lived in perpetual fear of attack from robbers who committed dacoity and murder. The chief of the robbers was Udayanan whose very name struck terror into the king and his subjects. The robbers built large fortifications on the mountain tops of Thalappara, Inchippara and Karimala from where they launched their attack on helpless citizens, many of whom fled the country.

They laid waste whatever they found on their way and indulged in loot and arson. Even the sacred shrine of Sabarimala was not spared. They plundered the temple, destroyed it and broke the idol into pieces. Not satisfied with this, they murdered the priest so that it would no longer be possible to conduct *pujas* there.

Murder of The Priest

The priest had only one son aged 12. The boy, distressed to hear about the gruesome murder of his father decided to take revenge by killing Udayanan and his band. For this he trained himself in the use of weapons as also in the *Vedas* and *yogas* under a guru.

Then he sought the help of the local chief in fulfilling his object. But since they were afraid of Udayanan, they declined to help. Disappointed, the boy went to Ponnambalamedu and sought refuge in Dharma Sasta by resorting to severe *tapas*.

In the meantime, after the murder of the Sabarimala priest Udayanan grew stronger. He subdued many local chieftains who did not offer any resistance and collected annual rent from them. He decided to marry a girl from the royal family of Pandalam and started negotiations for this purpose. But the Pandalam Chieftain did not respond. Udayanan, therefore, launched an attack on the kingdom and in the process abducted a very beautiful daughter of the king. The entire family was immersed in grief. They did not even let the people know of this sorrowful incident. All that the chief could do was to pray to his guardian deity, Dharma Sasta, for the safety of his daughter.

The same day that Udayanan ran away with the girl, the boy meditating upon the Lord at Ponnambalamedu had a dream in which Dharma Sasta appeared before him and advised him to rescue the girl from the clutches of the robber and accept her as his wife. The Lord would then take birth as their son on earth, and would bring glory and establish *dharma*.

Pleased with the turn of events the youth proceeded to the place where Udayanan and his followers were camping. He impressed Udayanan with his skill in *mantras* by which he could accomplish anything. Udayanan was so pleased that he accepted him as their accomplice. Thus he had an opportunity of meeting the princess who was still in their custody. The boy

and the girl made secret plans, and one midnight, when everyone was fast asleep, they escaped and made their way to Ponnambalamedu.

They lived together as husband and wife. In due course she conceived and as predicted by the Lord she gave birth to a boy - Ayyappa. The boy was extraordinarily brave and intelligent. His father – Jayanthan - educated and trained him in all fields including religion, science and military art. Even at the age of 12 he had the prowess and strength of a youth of 25. One day one of the local chiefs of Poonjar, by name Manavikraman, was waylaid and attacked in the jungle of Vandiperiyar. Manavikraman prayed to his family Goddess, Madura Meenakshi to save him. Ayyappa came to his rescue mounted on an elephant. At the very sight of him the robbers ran away. Ayyappa presented the chieftain with a dagger and stick and escorted him to his palace. It is said that the descendants of the Chief's family at Poonjar still preserve these weapons.

Ayyappa's Mission

When the time came for Ayyappa to fulfil the purpose of his *avatara*, Jayanthan called him and narrated to him the events of the past, the atrocities committed by the wicked that rocked the country and how his (Jayanthan's) own father was killed and the vow he had taken to avenge his death. So saying he tied a bell around his neck and called him "Manikanta". He then sent him to the chief of Pandalam with a secret message. Ayyappa prostrated himself before his parents and left for Pandalam with their blessing in full measure.

He reached the palace without any mishaps on the way. The people of Pandalam were at once struck by the extraordinary personality of the youth who had arrived suddenly in their midst. The chief embraced Manikanta and at his request the youth made demonstrations of the military art which he had learnt. This surprised everybody. The king gave him full powers to rule the country. In those days attacks from the sea by pirates were common. They came under the pretext of trading in salt but once ashore indulged in looting. They were led by a powerful Muslim from Arabia named Vavar who was skilled in military art and well-versed in *mantras*.

Ayyappa met his match in Vavar and there ensued a trial of strength between the two heroes. Though Ayyappa excelled, he admired Vavar all the same for his extraordinary skill and attainments. Vavar too was overawed by Ayyappa's superhuman qualities and he prostrated himself before him. Ayyappa blessed him and made him commander of a division of the Pandalam army.

Ayyappa asked Vavar to proceed with the army to Erumeli at the foot of the mountain ranges and camp there. There Vavar built a fortress and also a mosque.

There were other great warriors of the day who on hearing of the glory of Ayyappa, came to meet him in combat. One such was Kochukadutha, a Nair youth skilled in sword-play. Ayyappa easily defeated him and made him his disciple. So were Rama and Krishna who were renowned in fisticuffs and in wielding the bow and arrow, and the mace. They were also subdued by Ayyappa and became his disciples. They are known and revered as Talappara Villan and Talappara Mallan. There is a shrine dedicated to Kochukadutha atop Sabari Hill.

All these combats proved Ayyappa's supremacy beyond doubt. He became supreme Commander of the country's army and organised it to meet any eventuality. He asked every house to nominate one youth to be enrolled in his army without any distinction of caste, creed, religion or status. With the organization of such a large and powerful army peace was restored in the land.

But even this did not deter Udayanan from attacking Pandalam. At the time when Ayyappa's attention was diverted to combats with Vavar and others, he unleashed the huge army he had kept in hiding in the fort of Talappara. The poor Raja was helpless. But through his divine insight Ayyappa apprehended danger and hurried back to defend the Kingdom. He was accompanied only by a small army but through his *siddhi* (miraculous power) he made it appear that an endless army was following him. A frightened Udayanan retreated with his army. The king was immensely pleased with Ayyappa's strategy and presented him with a gold bracelet. The people were also happy at the restoration of peace in their land.

Ayyappa asked them to prepare men and materials for the renovation of the Sabarimala temple and the re-installation of the deity there.

In his efforts to raise a trained army Ayyappa visited the house of a *kalaripayatu kurrikal* (*kalari* meaning 'gymnasium' *payatu* meaning martial arts of Kerala, *kurrikal* meaning 'guru') called Cheramoopan at Shertally to learn about the training conducted there and also to bring him under his influence. For this he had to stay there for some days. During this period it so happened that the beautiful daughter of the teacher fell in love with Ayyappa and requested him to accept her as his wife. The girl's father also acquiesced in this as he had come to admire the qualities of Ayyappa.

Ayyappa however could not agree to the proposal as he was bound by a vow to remain celibate. She then pleaded with him to remain as her companion which Ayyappa accepted. He also gave her his bracelet, which the king had presented to him. After Ayyappa left the place she became a *tapaswini* and returned to Sabari Hill.

At Madura

Ayyappa's next sojourn was at Madura, the seat of the Pandyan Kingdom which also went through troubled times like Kerala. The folk songs concerning his trip to the Pandyan kingdom describe his journey through dense forests and mountains. He believed in peace and harmony and wanted the two neighbouring countries to live in amity so that both could prosper.

The same welcome which was extended to him at Pandalam awaited him at Madura also. People admired his noble qualities and considered his visit among them as very auspicious. The king was so greatly attracted and impressed by the youth that he appointed Ayyappa as an important official of the royal household. Ayyappa carried out his duties which included management of the army as well in a brilliant manner.

But events were not allowed to run smoothly for some time. There was a clique among the ministers who became jealous of Ayyappa and his popularity. Yet they could do nothing to halt his spreading influence or to get him ousted in the normal way. They therefore resorted to foul means. They spread rumours that he was a spy and cooked up a conspiracy to kill him. Nothing came of this.

Then they approached the queen and inveigled her into a conspiracy. Accordingly a drama was enacted in the palace. The queen pretended that she was suffering from acute pain in the stomach. The king brought all the royal physicians but they could not cure her. At last the ministers brought a physician after bribing him. This man examined her and pronounced that unless she drank the milk of a black tigress she would not recover from her illness. And as expected by the conspirators Ayyappa was of course deputed to undertake the risky and dangerous adventure.

Ayyappa's hunt for the milk is the subject of a separate group of songs. He was only sixteen years old. The hill tribes helped Ayyappa to search out the tigresses. Ayyappa collected not one tigress but several, and drove them, as easily as a flock of sheep, to the palace of the Pandyan king. The people and the palace officials ran helter-skelter in fear. The innocent king at once knew that Ayyappa was a superhuman being.

Ayyappa also frankly disclosed to him the purpose of his visit and urged him not to help the looters and raiders but to extend all help to him in annihilating the common enemy. (It is also said as described in the previous chapter that Ayyappa brought the leopardesses to the Pandalam palace. Only one of the two versions can be true, though Pandalam was also part of the Pandyan kingdom.)

Thus Ayyappa completed all arrangements and was ready to launch the attack against Udayanan and his men. Soldiers from different principalities and castes began to assemble at Erumeli, the base for launching the attack. The soldiers included Saivites, worshippers of Kali, Muslims etc. They enjoyed full freedom in the matter of religion, food and dress while camping and lived as brothers.

The entire army was organised into three companies on a regional basis. The company which belonged to the north of Vaikom was called *Alangat Yogam*, that from the south of Vaikom, *Ambalapuzha Yogam*, and that from the extreme south *Pandalam Yogam*. The first two were put under the command of Kochukadutha and Vavar and the third under the two brothers Villan and Mallan.

Onslaught on Udayanan

Ayyappa who was in overall command, marched the armies through the forests. All the wild animals behaved like domesticated ones. Ayyappa mounted an ox. At one place he got down and tethered the animal to a tree. This place is also known (see legend on page 27) and revered as Kalaketti (*kala* meaning 'ox' and *ketti*, tied). From here the strategy to launch an attack on the fort of Inchippara, the stronghold of Udayanan was planned.

Anticipating the march of Ayyappa's armies, Udayanan had also made elaborate preparations. He strengthened the fortifications of Karimala, Inchippara and Talappara and gathered strong armies to defend them.

Ayyappa's armies marched upon these forts from three directions so as to surround them and exterminate or capture them. As the soldiers of Ayyappa advanced, his enemies ran for their lives. The battle was carried to a successful conclusion and the forts were captured without much difficulty. Then there remained Udayanan. He offered much resistance but Kadutha ultimately killed him.

After the victory all the armies crossed Karimala and reached the valley of the great river Pampa. They celebrated the victory with a feast accompanied by the lighting of hundreds of lamps and fireworks. The next morning everyone woke up before sunrise and conducted rituals for the perpetual rest of the souls of those who were killed in battle.

They then proceeded to Sabari hill to conduct the consecration of Dharma Sasta in the temple there. About 2 Km. before the temple there was a *peepal* tree on reaching which Ayyappa advised every one to deposit their armour and arrows. This place is known as *Saramkuttiaal* - the *peepal* tree on which all the armour has been stuck. There is no tree here at present but it continues to be the armoury of arrows, the symbolic arrow carried by pilgrims being deposited here.

From this spot everyone shouted "*Saranam*" (Surrender to God) and marched towards the temple. The Pandyan king and the Chief of Pandalam had already come there. So also had Ayyappa's parents. The arrangements for the consecration had been completed. As they heard the shouts of "*Saranam*" from the distance those assembled at Sabari answered back with

similar shouts. Ayyappa was received with due respect and reverence by the kings. On arrival he prostrated himself before his parents.

Next started the rituals connected with the consecration. The idol of Dharma Sasta was made holy with the recitation of the *Vedas* by the saints. A platform had been built to install the idol. Eighteen steps had to be climbed to reach this platform. Each of these steps was dedicated to one weapon with which the enemies had been fought and defeated.

The Consecration

Along with the installation of the idol, the Pandyan king was also requested to consecrate the idol of Goddess Meenakshi, the family deity of the Pandyas at Madura. Ayyappa readily agreed to this and himself installed the deity - now known as Malikappurathama - in a separate shrine to the north of his own temple.

On the occasion of the great installation Ayyappa made an oration for the benefit of those assembled. He stressed the importance of *Ahimsa* or non-violence towards everyone including animals and beasts. He promised that the land would be safe from enemies if every year a man from each family came and conducted worship in this temple. This installation ceremony was on the first day of the Malayalam month of *Makaram* (mid-January) which is the most auspicious day to visit the temple.

Then climbing up the eighteen steps, Ayyappa himself led the soldiers to the raised platform. As they climbed they offered worship to each weapon placing one on each step. Ayyappa presented his eight main weapons and his *Churika* or sword to the Pandalam chief after placing it on his head and blessing him. He also blessed Vavar, Kochukadutha, Mallan and Villan.

The time for consecration came. Ayyappa stood in silence and meditation. Amidst sounds of "*Saranam*", conchs and pipes and drums Ayyappa transformed himself into a stroke of lightning and got absorbed in the idol of Dharma Sasta. The shouts of "*Saranam*" reached its crescendo and everyone fell prostrate before the deity with tears of joy flowing down their cheeks.

Thus Ayyappa, the incarnation of Dharma Sasta, was re-united with the original deity at Sabarimala making it the most important of Sasta temples in Kerala with the additional halo of Ayyappa.

Thereafter there was peace in the Pandalam kingdom and the subjects lived in prosperity for several years. Finally the kingdom merged with the erstwhile Travancore. Thereby the proprietary rights of Sabarimala also passed on to the Government though, for ceremonial purposes, the Pandalam royal family are still considered the owners of the temple.

It is a historical fact that the Pandalam kings were originally Pandyan kings from Tirunelveli and Madura who migrated to the neighbouring Travancore state following attacks on them by Thirumalanaickan of the Vijayanagar kingdom. Those from Tirunelveli settled in Poonjar while the Madura kings found asylum in Tenkasi, Achankoil and Shencottah before they finally settled in Pandalam. That was about 1000 years ago.

Manavikraman Raja of Poonjar, who was rescued by Ayyappa from the attack of robbers is said to have established his kingdom at Poonjar between the years 290 and 300 according to the Malayalam era i.e. roughly between A.D. 1115 and 1125. Ayyappa was about 12 then and he came to serve the Pandalam king at the age of 16 or so. Accordingly it may be said that he lived on earth between A.D. 1105 and 1121.¹

It is also believed that even while the Pandyan kings were at Madura they had connections with Sabarimala, since Sasta and the Goddess Madura Meenakshi were their family deities. This accounts for Ayyappa's sojourn in the Madura kingdom as described earlier. Whether he served at Madura or Pandalam, the fact remains that he served a Pandyan king when he undertook the forest expedition for getting tigress's milk.

1. Shri Dharma Sasta Sarvasvam by Vidwan Srivaram E.V. Piilai.

CHAPTER - 4

AUSTERITIES

In the two previous chapters the genesis of Lord Ayyappa based on legend and history has been given. Whatever the basis of these stories, the pilgrimage to the shrine of Dharma Sasta at Sabarimala is in commemoration of the Lord's journey to the forest to fetch either tigress's or leopardess's milk.

The pilgrimage is symbolic of the pilgrimage of the individual self or *Jivatma* to *Paramatma*. The soul has to pass through various sadhanas or spiritual practices before attaining Self-realisation or God-realisation. The 41-day austerities preceding the pilgrimage consist of rigorous disciplines like prayer, meditation and celibacy which help the pilgrim to get rid of his ego; to withdraw his mind from the objects of the senses and to turn it towards God. Indeed, the purpose of Ayyappa's avatara was not only to establish the divine rule of righteousness, harmony and peace but also to spread the doctrine of the oneness of all existence, the identification of self with all life and of all life with the Divine.

Shri Santhanagopalachariar, the well-known seer, when asked as to who were the most religious among the people of India replied, "The Keralites". "The people of other states" he said, "have to learn a lot from the reverence with which the people of Kerala approach their temples. The 41-day penance prior to the pilgrimage to the sacred Sabarimala temple during which period the highest *Brahminhood* is conferred on all castes alike is unique to Kerala."

Not only the Hindus but also people belonging to other religious faiths can offer worship at Sabarimala. Thus all man-made differences of caste and creed are forgotten; only the glory and grandeur of God shine. Each pilgrim seeing God in all and serving Him, reminds us of the Upanishadic truth that every mortal is but a reflection of the *Paramatma* ever present within him: "*Tat Tvam Asi* - Thou art that."

Thus all the devotees who take the vow by wearing a *mala* or garland are Ayyappas themselves and are addressed as such. When two pilgrims meet

they greet each other, "*Swami saranam*"- Oh Lord! I surrender to Thee. The spirit of equality and fraternity that animates all the pilgrims alike is indeed striking. Irrespective of social status the pilgrims mingle unreservedly thus nurturing piousness and tolerance among everyone.

Puthezathu Rama Menon, the Malayalam litterateur, in his "*Ente Sabarimala Yatra*", (My pilgrimage to Sabarimala) gives an example of this brotherhood by relating the poignant story of a fellow devotee who lived in his neighbourhood at Trichur. He belonged to the barber community and in normal times kept a respectable distance from people of socially advanced sections like Shri Menon. All the same he was a great devotee of Ayyappa and proceeded to Sabarimala every year. Whenever he visited the writer's house, he stood on the verandah and never ventured beyond. But when he came to know that Shri Menon had also taken the vow and become an 'Ayyappa' he walked up to his study and conversed with him without any reserve, overcoming the caste difference.

He met him prior to his departure on pilgrimage. Shri Menon as usual asked him if he required any help to which the humble devotee replied "No, nothing now. Since you are also coming to Sabarimala we will meet there and you may extend to me whatever help I require then." These were pregnant words. The poor man did require Shri Menon's help for his last journey. He suddenly died at the temple premises after completing the pilgrimage. It fell to the lot of Shri Menon to cremate him and bring back his earthly belongings to Trichur and entrust them to his family. Such is the spirit of brotherhood that prevails among the pilgrims.

Wearing of Garland

The first step to mark the beginning of austerities is for the prospective pilgrim to wear a garland of *tulasi* or *rudraksha* beads. This ceremony known as *Maladharan*, betokens the pilgrim's vow to observe the austerities faithfully. The garland is worn for at least 41 days-called *mandalam*-before the pilgrimage. In Kerala the *mandalam* season begins on the first day of *Vrischikam* (mid-November) and lasts till the end of December. Most of the pilgrims have the *Maladharan* on the first of *Vrischikam* whether they proceed to the Hills to participate in the *Mandalam* festival (December-end) or *Makara Vilakku* on the first day of *Makaram* (mid-January). But

nowadays the shrine is open right from the first of *Vrischikam* and therefore devotees wear the garland on any suitable day so that they can complete 41 days before they visit the shrine.

Maladharan is performed before a temple deity or in one's own house after offering *puja*. The garland must be received from an elderly person or from the temple priest or from one's *guru* (each group is led by a *guruswami* who because of years of experience in the pilgrimage acts as leader and guides pilgrims during the trek) in the midst of loud chantings of "*Saranam*". After the performance of *maladharan* the pilgrim becomes an Ayyappa himself as mentioned earlier and fully carries out the demands of a pious life. He withdraws from all social activities and spends his time visiting temples, praying and attending religious discourse. He dons coloured clothes, blue, black or ochre and grows a beard. He bathes twice, partakes of only *satvic* food and abstains from meat, intoxicating drinks and drugs. In short, he leads the life of an ascetic, his activities being strictly regulated.

Here we should pause to understand the real significance of *tapas* or austerities. Says Sant Keshavadas: "A man who practises any spiritual discipline rigidly, at any cost, is really doing *tapas*. The inner meaning of *tapas* is burning. It burns all *karmas* and all ignorance. The daily practice of *Sandhya vandana*, or morning and evening meditations, daily reading of the holy texts, daily chanting of the "*Gayatri Mantra*" for a number of times, daily worshipping God, are all *tapas*. If it is rigidly practised at least for forty days at a stretch one should certainly reach one step higher than before in the path of truth. The *Vedas* declare: The foundation of all creation is *tapas*.¹

Again, the word *tapas* means to melt. Useful metals are extracted by melting ores. Gold and scrap metals are renewed by the same process of melting. The life of man can similarly be renewed and rejuvenated by *tapas* or austerity. Blessed is the man who applies himself to this spiritual means so that he may emerge from manhood to godhood.

According to the *Gita*, *tapas* may be performed in body, speech and mind of which man is constituted. When these three components are modified by *tapas* man automatically changes for the better. The process of transformation is presented in the following "*slokas*" of the *Gita*:

Austerity of the Body:

*Deva dvija guru prajna pujanam shaucham arjavam:
Brahmacharyam ahimsa cha sariram tapa uchayate.*

-XVII-14.

Worship rendered to the gods, to the twice-born, to the teacher and to the wise, purity, uprightness, continence and non-violence are said to constitute austerity of the body.

By worshipping various deities worthy of adoration, the *brahmana*, the teacher and the wise who are awakened to *Brahmavastha*, the spiritual aspirant gets himself cast in their divine moulds. Bodily purity is maintained by regular baths and clean clothing. Uprightness is to execute all bodily activities in a clean, open and ethical way. When all sense-indulgences in general, and sex-indulgence in particular are eschewed and the body is dedicated only to the service of the divine, it is continence. Recognizing the sacredness of all beings and refraining from hurting any of them is non-injury. All these sacred observances put together are called bodily austerity.

Austerity of Speech:

anudvegakaram vakyam satyam priyahitam cayat

Svadyayabhyasanam cai'va vangmayam tapa ucyate

—XVII-15

The speech that causes no annoyance which is truthful, pleasant and beneficial, the study and recitation of the scriptures-these are declared to be austerities of speech.

The harm done through speech is often more painful than that caused by physical violence. Words of excitement and words that hurt people should by all means be avoided by the spiritual aspirant.

Truth is often unpleasant and untruth pleasant. The best course is to present truth in as pleasant a way as possible.

The words uttered should not only be pleasant but also beneficial. They should never pander to one's vanity. Beneficial words form a benediction.

The *Vedas* are the oldest works known to humanity and are held most sacred. Unfortunately they are not within the reach of all. However, there are sacred books available in all languages. Reading with devotion daily forms an aspect of spiritual discipline.

Austerity of Mind:

*Manahprasadah saumyatvam maunam atmavinigraha
bhavasamsuddhirity etat tapa manassam uchyate*

-XVII-16

Tranquillity of mind, gentleness, silence, self control, purity of thought—these constitute austerity of mind.

Avoiding depression and confusion and being established in a blissful calmness is tranquillity or serenity of mind. Being kindly disposed towards all is gentleness. Control of the mind is superior to the control of the tongue and the body. Permitting pure thoughts and noble emotions alone to crop up in the mind is self control. When a person's temperament is congenial and his attitude felicitous, he is said to be imbued with purity of disposition. Maintaining this benign state of mind under all circumstances is austerity of the mind.²

Further, the *Gita*³ lays down that *tapas* should be practised without desire for any selfish objects and as being good in itself. When undertaken with the object of just gaining the respect of men or for ostentation, it is worthless, and when undertaken in order to hurt others or in a spirit of mere obstinacy it is wicked.

Diet plays an important part in the observance of *vritham*. Even in ordinary circumstances restricting the intake of food to the minimum needed to sustain ourselves is good for us. But during austerities, especially, consumption of *satvik* food helps very much in the observance of continence. Here again let us be guided by the *Gita* ideals. The food we daily take has its effect on our psychology and character. It may be *satvik*,

good and strengthening to the spirit; or destructive of serenity, passion-producing, *rajasik*; or wholly bad causing deterioration of mind and intellect and increasing inertia, *tamasik*. The three kinds - *satvik*, *rajasik* and *tamasik* are described below:

*ayus sattva balarogya sukha priti vivardhanah;
rasyah snigdha sthira hrda adharah satvikapriyah*

-XVII-8

The foods that promote long, life and vitality, bodily vigour, health, joy and amiability, which are pleasant to the taste, soft, substantial and satisfying are liked by *satvik* natures.

*Katvamala lavanatyusana tiksna ruksa vidahinah
ahara rajasasye sta duhkha sokamaya pradah*

-XVII-9

The passionate desire foods that are bitter, sour, saline, over-hot, pungent, dry and burning. These produce sickness, pain and grief.

*yatayamam gatarasam puti paryusitam ca yat
ucchistam api ca medhyam bhojanam tamsapriyam*

-XVII- 10

Food that is not freshly made, food that has lost its flavour, stale food, that has gone putrid, left-over food and food which is filthy, appeal to men of *tamasik* nature.

It is clear from the above description of different kinds of food that only *satvik* food strengthens the spirit and provides vitality and bodily vigour. Hence the injunction that pilgrims should take only this kind of food.

Brahmacharya

Perhaps the most important and also the most difficult discipline which the pilgrim has to practise is *brahmacharya* or continence. In fact it is the

foundation of all spiritual disciplines. It is not merely abstaining from sex, it is elimination of sex in thought and word also.

The true meaning of *brahmacharya* is to make our mind move towards Brahman. Thereby the mind keeps itself away from the pleasures of the senses.

Through *brahmacharya* the physical energy in man gets converted into spiritual energy. Even a formidable task can be accomplished with the help of this spiritual power. Hanuman, who is considered the greatest of all *yogis*, provides a good example. He lifted mountains, destroyed demons, flew across the ocean, and became worthy servant of Sri Rama because of this power.

Sukhabrahman was perhaps the most illustrious of the *brahmacharyas* who was ever absorbed in Brahma and saw Brahman in everything. One day he was running to the forest seeing Brahman everywhere. His father, Sage Vyasa, was running behind him because of his attachment to his son. On the way there was a tank in which a few celestial women were bathing. When they saw Sukhabrahman coming, they came up and stood gazing at him. But when they saw Sage Vyasa following him they got into the water.

Sage Vyasa became curious and questioned them, "When my son, Sukha, was walking all of you came up from the water and when I, who has seen enough of life, came here you ran into the water. Why?" Then the women replied, "O Sage, your son Sukhabrahman sees Brahman everywhere and has no body-state-of consciousness. By virtue of his brilliance we never felt we were women. So we were drawn towards him. In your case you still hold attachment to your son. Therefore, no sooner did we see you than we were reminded of the body. So we ran into the water."

Sage Vyasa understood, and when Sukhabrahman returned from the forest, he sent him to king Janaka to receive the stamp of a *guru*. When king Janaka came to know that Sukhabrahman was coming, he decided to test him severely. First, he made no arrangements to receive him. Sukhabrahman stood at the gate for three days and nights without being perturbed. Then he sent very young beautiful women to attend on him in a

luxurious home, with flowers, rich food and all sorts of attractions. Being absorbed in Brahman, it made no difference to Sukha at all.

Immensely pleased at Sukhabrahman passing these two tests, Janaka questioned him. "From where have you come?"

Sukha: "I have come from the city of sweetness."

Janaka: "Where have you come?"

Sukha: "I have come to another city of sweetness."

Janaka: "Where have you been all these days?"

Sukha: "Well, I was in a house of sweetness where many sugar dolls were taking care of me."

Janaka: "Now, what are you doing?"

Sukha: "Well, one sugar doll is questioning and another sugar doll is answering. All this is the sweetness of Brahman."

Janaka blessed him with the stamp of a guru.⁴

Now the story is all the more interesting because Janaka was himself a married man. Yet he was a *brahmachari*. A man could be married and may have children. He could still maintain *brahmacharya* by absorbing himself in Brahman.

This is the type of *bramacharya* an Ayyappa *bhakta* is expected to observe - a *brahmachari* who, untouched by lust, is as pure as a baby in thought, word and deed. Apart from its importance in his spiritual quest it helps him to keep perfect health and strength of body and mind and to endure the physical strain during the trek.

Total Surrender

This is the greatest of all disciplines and very difficult to practise. "*Saranam*" or surrender as an essential feature of the Ayyappa cult has been mentioned before. It needs to be reiterated here to understand its true import

as otherwise the mere mechanical repetition of "*Swami Saranam*" any number of times will have no meaning.

Saranagati is unconditional. It is total surrender to the Lord. Self-surrender has been given the highest place in all world religions.

Says Jesus Christ, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done." Christ invites all to take shelter in Him, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In the same vein Lord Krishna taught Arjuna, "Give up all scholastic disputation and fly unto Me as a refuge. I shall absolve thee of all sins and give thee eternal rest."

Sant Keshavadas describes beautifully in his *Self-Realisation* the philosophy of surrender by quoting the example of how God takes care of all responsibilities when we surrender to him in totality. Sometimes we think we have surrendered but when difficulties come we take the law in our hands instead of waiting for God to deal with it.

A man was chanting the holy names of God when a few of his enemies came to hit him. When devotees suffer, the all-knowing Lord feels disturbed. In the Transcendental Abode of God, Heavenly Father, Lord Vishnu, suddenly got up from his seat, went a few steps but came back and sat on his throne. Lakshmi, his dazzling spouse questioned him on his strange behaviour. The Lord replied, "There was a devotee on earth who was hit by some evil people even as he was chanting my holy names. I rushed in order to save him but I found he had stopped singing and had taken the law in his own hands. Since I was not needed I came back." The message is that God protects only those who have unflinching faith in Him and surrender to him in totality.

But then what about self-effort? Has it not been said: "God helps those who help themselves." Lord Krishna Himself teaches in the *Gita*: "One should lift oneself up by one's own efforts and one should not de-grade oneself. One's own self is one's friend and one's own self is one's own enemy." Thus man is given a free will for making efforts and is in fact the maker of his own destiny. But this is not wholly true. In our daily lives, despite our best efforts, we see something else that changes our plan, and we feel some higher will dominating over everyone and everything. We feel the

individual will is imperfect and the Divine will is perfect and dominates. Knowing that the Divine will is done, man understands the language of self-surrender as an inevitable factor. The golden rule, therefore, is "Do your best, leave the rest to God."

Two examples from the *Puranas* help us to enlighten our own conduct. There was a king of elephants called Gajendra. He had thousands of queen elephants with whom he used to bathe in a huge lake. On a particular summer day he was arrogantly bathing with them spraying water all over them with his trunk. At this moment a crocodile from below caught him by the foot and pulled him to the bottom of the lake.

The elephant fought vigorously with the crocodile for a thousand years till he was completely exhausted. All the queen elephants also left him, one after another. At this stage Gajendra realized the futility of his efforts and decided to pray to the Almighty. Lord Krishna heard his prayers and rushed to his devotee on his vehicle, Garuda, with a discus in hand. Seeing Sri Hari, Gajendra as a mark of total surrender to the Lord plucked a lotus with great effort, lifted it up and said "*Narayana, preceptor of all, Bhagawan; I bow down to you.*" And he was instantly released from the grip of the alligator.

As Sant Keshavadas describes it: "This is a highly symbolic story. The egoistic soul is the elephant. As long as we are young, healthy and wealthy, we feel many people love us and we become egoistic. The crocodile is death, which ends everything. When we are caught in the jaws of death there is no one who can save us. Friends flee, relatives disappear. Our own body fails us miserably. Even as the elephant in the story turned towards God, like that we turn towards Him. In the moment of that utter surrender, God rushes to our aid, destroys death, and releases our soul from the clutches of death - and that is the liberation or freedom that comes by the grace of Supreme. The message is effort should be made, and after making all efforts, the only way is self-surrender. There the impossible is made possible, by the strength of the Lord."

Pilgrims negotiating some peaks during the trek to Sabarimala feel the same way as Gajendra did. And they cry out to the Lord from the bottom of their

heart for help in a mood of utter surrender. Many do feel the helping hand of the Lord and proceed further easily.

Another example where all efforts failed and total surrender alone saved the situation is that of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas who was chastised by Duryodana's brother in an open court. He pulled her *sari* in the midst of the large assembly.

She appealed to everyone but they all sat mute out of fear. Then she took refuge in the Lord and lifting one hand up to the heavens called out to Krishna. But Krishna also did not come to her aid because her surrender was not total. With her left hand she was holding the knot of her sari thinking that if Krishna failed she could protect herself. But when she felt utterly helpless, lifting both her hands up to the Lord, she prayed with total surrender.

Now the Lord came to her protection. As Duryodana's brother went on pulling the *sari* one after another, new *saris* appeared on her body. Finally he became exhausted and fell unconscious. This example shows us that God demands our total self-surrender so that He may give Himself totally to us. This is the spirit behind the concept of "*Saranam*" in Ayyappa worship.

The various austerities described in the foregoing paragraphs, it will be seen, cover the whole field of physical endurance, mental purity and moral upliftment, culminating in the complete eradication of ego-sense and the consciousness of utter surrender to Him Who Alone Is.

A feature during the season of pilgrimage, from mid-November to mid-January, is the conducting of *pujas* and *bhajans* to propitiate Lord Ayyappa. These are conducted by individuals, in their homes or collectively in community halls or *pandals*. In either case a large number of pilgrims gather and participate in the worship.

The worship conducted by Tamil *Brahmins* is called *Sastapreethi* which consists of *pujas*, singing of songs in praise of Ayyappa and an elaborate feast. Every village, every locality in a town conducts these *pujas* where the faithful congregate and sing in praise of God, recounting His legends. As the singing continues, its rhythm gradually increases until it becomes frenzied and everyone present catches some thing of the ecstasy. And some

of them lose themselves so much in trances that they become transformed into the very God whose praise is sung. They shake vigorously and utter some benedictions making the devotees believe that Lord Ayyappa Himself has come in their midst to bless them.

Like *Sastapreethi*, community festivals like *Mandala puja* and *Makara Vilakku* are also held representing the festivals held at Sabarimala. These programmes run for a few days, when apart from *pujas* and feasts, entertainment and cultural programmes are also arranged in which eminent artistes participate. They are like the community Ganesh festivals held in Maharashtra, in which all sections of Hindus participate.

In Kerala there is a ritual called *Ayyappan pattu* conducted by the pilgrim in his house before leaving on his journey to Sabarimala. This is a sort of ritualistic dance-drama lasting either a night or a whole day and night. A hut is erected in the yard of the house. Stools, either seven or nine, are placed in this hut. Gods and Goddesses like Ganapati, Subramanya, Sasta, Malikappurathamma, Vavar etc. are imagined to be sitting on them. Lamps are placed before them and coconuts, molasses and popped corn are offered as holy food. A group of singers starts singing songs which are usually about the life of Ayyappa. In the night, a procession is conducted in which Kali or Malikappurathamma is taken out. The next part is dramatic. Two actors come forward and as the singers sing, they dance in rhythm. This is supposed to be the fight between Ayyappa and the pirate Vavar. Their singing continues till the end.⁵

These *pujas*, *bhajans* and rituals are so frequent in a village or in locality of a town, that pilgrims are constantly subjected to the discipline of *puja* during the *vritham* period. The idea is to engage your sense organs like the eyes, ears, etc. in things divine so that senses will be controlled, purified and calmed to enable the mind to be forced always on God. This is how it happens. "You see the image or the symbol of God, you sing the songs or chant the *mantras*, you smell the flowers, you hear the songs and chants, you offer the flowers, ring the bell, wave the light, you circumambulate and salute the Lord, finally you partake of the prasad or the sanctified food offerings. Thus, your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, hands, legs, the whole body as such, participates in the worship service and thereby is sanctified." That

is why *pujas* and rituals engage a major part of the pilgrim's life during *vritham*.

Kettunira

Now there remains the *kettunira* ceremony or "*Palli kettu*" - the filling up of the holy bundle which is the most important adjunct of the pilgrimage. This is done on the day the pilgrim is scheduled to start on his pilgrimage. It may be conducted either in one's own house or in a temple. It may be a simple function conducted by an individual or an elaborate one held in a specially erected *pandal* with decorations, music, feasting etc. in which lots of friends, relatives and neighbours participate.

The *Irumudi* literally means two portions in a specially designed cloth bag with two compartments. The front portion is reserved for keeping all the puja articles and offerings to the deity while the rear part is meant to hold the pilgrim's personal requirements for the way.

The main offering to the Lord is the *ghee*-filled coconut. A hole is pierced through the soft eye of a ripe coconut, the water is emptied out and the coconut is left to dry. After the *pujas* the devotee bows before his *guru* and the elders present. He then fills the coconut with pure ghee uttering "*Saranam*" loudly and the same is repeated by everyone else. The opening of the coconut is then corked and sealed. Then, into a small bag a handful of rice at a time is dropped three times. Over the rice, the coconut along with money offerings with *pan* leaves and *supari* are placed. Various other puja articles like camphor, incense sticks, rose water, jaggery, sandal paste, sacred ashes (*vibuthi*) etc. are also dropped into this bag, each item being separately wrapped.

Malar, (puffed rice), *avil* (beaten rice), turmeric powder and *Kumkum* for Malikappurathamma, pepper for Vavar and other items are dropped into this bag which is then tied and kept in the front portion of the *Irumudi*. The small bag so kept is removed and the contents taken out only after reaching the sanctum. Before placing the small bag members of the family also fill rice in the front portion of the *Irumudi*. Two coconuts are also kept - one for breaking at the time of climbing up the eighteen steps leading to the *sanctum* and the other while climbing down these steps after the pilgrimage.

The rear portion of the *Irumudi* is then filled with all the personal needs of the pilgrim like eatables, provision, clothes, etc. The *Irumudi* thus filled and tied is imagined to be the deity itself. Thereafter it is handled reverentially and always placed on a woollen rug. Morning and evening *pujas* are held as also *arati*. The bundle which is all that forms the travel kit can be balanced on the head. The pilgrims also carry a sling bag on the shoulder. This contains all other personal requirements, vessels etc.

The *Kettunira* ceremony is thus over and the pilgrim is ready for the journey.

1. Self-realization by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
2. The Bhagavad Gita by Swami Chidbhavananda.
3. The Bhagavad Gita by C. Rajagopalachari, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan.
4. Self-Realization by Sadguru Sant Keshavadas, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
5. The Secret Chamber by V.T. Induchudhan, The Cochin Devaswom Board.

CHAPTER – 5

MANDALAM-MAKARA VILAKKU FESTIVALS - AN OVERVIEW

WHILE every month the Sabarimala shrine is open on certain days or for short periods to perform monthly *pujas* or celebrate festivals like Vishu (Malayali New Year Day), Onam etc, it is the 64 - day annual Mandalam Makara Vilakku festivals that draw huge crowds. The occasion marks the installation of the head priest (*Melsanthi*) appointed for the season/ year both at Ayyappa, and Malikappuram Devi temples. The ritual is conducted by the chief priest (*Tantri*). It begins after he performs the *Ashtadravya Ganapathi Homam* early morning on the first of the Malayalam month of *Vrischikam*.

By then hundreds of devotees from Kerala and from different states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka would be camping at Pampa and *Sannidhanam*. They would wait for hours together in long winding queues for darshan.

The sanctum sanctorum opens daily at four in the morning and closes at 1.30 at noon. It reopens at 4 o'clock in the evening and closes at 11 o'clock at night amidst singing of '*Harivarasanam*' by the devotees.

After the *darshan* of the Lord, the very first act to be performed by the pilgrims is *ghee abhisheka*, that is pouring the *ghee* on the idol. The devotee sits at a convenient place, breaks open the *ghee*-filled coconut brought in the holy bundle, removes the *ghee* in a clean vessel and offers it to the priest for *abhisheka*. This alone marks the consummation of the pilgrimage. The *ghee*, after the *abhisheka* is the most sacred Prasad taken home by the devotees.

The broken coconut pieces after being emptied of the *ghee* are thrown in the *homakunda* on the south side below the temple near the eighteen steps.

After worshipping the main deity, the pilgrims proceed to Malikappuram shrine about hundred metres away. This is on a small hillock. Devotees address the Goddess: "Malikapurathamma *Devi Loka Mathave*"- Oh!

Malikapurathamma, the universal mother. They offer coconut and turmeric powder. The coconut, however, is not broken; it is rolled on the ground around the temple.

When finally the pilgrims leave Sabarimala after the *darshan*, they pray to the Lord and go down the 18 steps facing the Lord, not with their backs.

A major facility provided to the pilgrims at Sabarimala in recent times, is *Annadanam* (free food) by the Travancore Devaswom Board, which administers the temple. Of course, the superior quality rice brought by devotees is used for the service. Also care is taken to segregate rice at the collection center.

The Akhila Bharatiya Ayyappa Seva Sangh, the Chennai-based Akshaya group and other prominent social organizations also pitch in and serve free food to devotees. To the tired pilgrims, it is manna from heavens.

However a major concern is crowd management system, like that of Tirupati and the absence of a proper mechanism to supply food, drinking water, etc in a clean and hygienic manner either on the trekking path or at the *Sannidhanam* and at Pampa.

A good number of pilgrims get tired by the time they reach the temple precincts. There have been instances of pilgrims who are fatigued and they faint inside the barricade. Medicated drinking water supply kiosks opened by the Travancore Devaswom Board on the trekking path and the Ayyappa Seva Sangh Volunteers supplying drinking water is a boon to the pilgrims.

Besides, the Health Department draws up plans to maintain health care facility at Sabarimala and enroute since there have been a number of deaths due to cardiac ailments during the pilgrimage season. The department therefore provides a health screening system for risk patients at Pampa where they can undergo medical checkup before resuming the trek to the *Sannidhanam*.

The first phase of the pilgrimage culminates with *Mandala puja* performed on December 26 at 12.30 p.m. On this occasion, the Ayyappa idol is adorned with the sacred golden attire – *Thanka - Anki* prior to the *puja*. The

golden attire is brought to the Sannidhanam in a ceremonial procession from the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple.

The *anki* weighing 400 sovereigns was offered to Lord by the late Sree Chitra Tirunal of the Royal family of erstwhile Travancore state in 1973. It has been the custom since then to decorate the deity with the anki prior to the *deeparadhana*.

The temple will be closed after the *Athazha puja* marking the culmination of the *Mandala puja*. It will re-open on December 30 for the *Makara Vilakku* festival, the highlight of which is the appearance of *Makara Jyothi* on the north-east horizon as explained in Chapter 8 - "Atop Mount Sabari".

CHAPTER – 6

THE HOLY TREK

ONCE the *Kettunira* is over the pilgrim does not wait long in the house. He takes a meal and then sets out on his journey after prostrating himself before the elders and receiving their blessings. The *guru*, who leads the batch, or an elderly member of the family, places the holy bundle on the pilgrim's head chanting *saranams* loudly and repeatedly. The pilgrim then leaves the house breaking a coconut on the doorstep. He does not take leave of anybody nor does anyone bid him farewell and see him off. He does not even look back at his house or at his parents, wife and children or relatives. He simply walks out barefoot. The idea is that he leaves his worldly attachments behind and proceeds to realize the Self and attain God. Thus his only refuge is "Ayyappa" and his march song, "*Swamiye, Ayyappa*" - one shouts "*Swamiye*", others respond "*Ayyappa*".

As mentioned in the Introduction, there are three routes to the hill but the one via Erumeli is the most arduous and the longest-about 72 Kms. It is also the one prescribed by the Lord and therefore considered the most sacred. The other routes are no doubt easier and less strenuous but the adventure, the thrill and the splendid opportunity to meditate and commune with nature on the conventional route are badly missed if one goes by the shorter route. Further, the devotees taking the longer route and braving the vagaries of the elements, feel their nearness to the Supreme Being and derive utmost satisfaction from the pilgrimage.

This route, however, involving as it does the crossing of three formidable mountains - Azhutha, Karimala and Neelimala—can be traversed only in the company of seasoned and experienced trekkers who have the necessary equipment for camping, cooking etc. *en route*. The author was fortunate enough to be in such company in 1971 in a *yatra* which Hariharaputra Bhajan Samaj, a religious and social organisation of Bombay, devoted to the Ayyappa cult, organizes every year. About 100 pilgrims of this Samaj who trek to Mount Sabari for the annual *Makara Vilakku* festival (which comes on *Makara Sankranti* day, usually January 14) have their *Kettunira* function in Bombay on or about the first of January. Carrying the *Irumudi*

with them they visit scores of temples in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala by bus before they congregate at Erumeli, the base camp for Sabarimala on the conventional route.

The Three Sasta Shrines

The last three temples the pilgrims visit in Kerala before proceeding to Erumeli are the Sasta shrines at Kulathupuzha, Aryankavu and Achankoil referred to in the Introduction. According to legends and folk songs Ayyappa is believed to have passed through these places on his return to Madura with leopardess's milk. Hence these spots are hallowed and are generally visited by pilgrims *en route* to Sabarimala.

The author joined the group at Kulathupuzha on a cold wintry night on January 9. Kulathupuzha is about 50 Km. from Trivandrum by road. The nearest railway station is Thenmala, the fourth station from Shencottah on the Shencottah-Quilon section of the Southern Railway (Metre Gauge). The temple is on the bank of the river Kallada and is surrounded by waterways and forests. Cold winds blew throughout the night making the pilgrims shiver. We huddled together in a shed in which several hundreds were already sleeping. By four in the morning (January 10) we got up having been awakened by the sound of bells and the sound of men saying their prayers in a loud voice.

It was a problem to take a bath in the ice cold water of the river so early in the morning. This was the case everywhere during the trek. But one has to take the plunge, and once you dip your body in the water it is so refreshing that all the tiredness vanishes. Within an hour we had all had our dip. Wearing fresh clothes and smearing our bodies with sacred ash we were ready for worship at the temple. In the stillness of dawn this small sleepy village resounded with our chanting of *Vishnu Sahasranama*, the thousand names of Lord Vishnu and our *bhajans*.

The deity here is the child Dharma Sasta housed in a small temple which can be reached only by ferry. Free ferry services are provided by the Government and one sees cheery boatmen plying their country craft to and fro ceaselessly.

We heard an interesting story about the origin of this deity. Once a *Brahmin* returning from his pilgrimage to Rameswaram camped on the bank of this river for the night. While he performed his *Sandhyavandana* he asked his servants to cook the night meal. They found a fixed stone and brought two more stones to set up a makeshift oven. As the fixed stone was at a greater height they placed small stones atop the other two stones to bring them to a level. But lo! the first stone started rising mysteriously. However much they tried to raise the level of the two stones the first one went higher and higher. Their patience was exhausted and one of them in a fit of anger hit that stone with another stone. To their surprise they saw blood coming out. They reported the matter to their master who took the sacred *tirtha* brought from Rameswaram and sprinkled it on the stone. There emerged the beautiful form of child Sasta. Hearing this the local king raised a temple for the deity and arranged for regular *pujas*.

There are two main deities in the temple - a Siva *linga* in front and Sasta in the rear which is a stone image. There is also an exquisitely carved Vishnu image which is believed to have been recovered from the river. Outside the temple there are shrines for Ganesa and Devi.

After the worship at the temple we refreshed ourselves with a cup of hot steaming coffee. A word about our food arrangements. In the tradition of self service some of the Ayyappas were well-trained in the culinary art and they took care of the needs of the pilgrims. On treks like these good food, it must be said, is not only necessary for sustenance but also essential to keep one's spirits high. It is usual for a band of selfless devotees to go in advance carrying provisions, to set up a suitable camp and keep the meal ready for the rest of the members. This arrangement kept us always fit and the rigours of the trek were minimized.

It was bright and sunny and very pleasant by the time we packed up and boarded the bus for our next stop, Aryankavu, about 25 Kms. away towards Shencottah. (Aryankavu is also a railway station near Shencottah). The road to Aryankavu is through the Ghat section through Thenmala and it took us about an hour to reach the temple, where Dharma Sasta is depicted as an adolescent. The idol is of *panchaloha* and when dressed looks like a prince. On the wall around the *sanctum* there are beautiful paintings of Ayyappa legends. Sandwiched between two mountains hundreds of acres of land

around the temple once belonged to Pandyan kings. Even now the first measure of paddy harvested from these fields is earmarked for the deity. Food is an important offering at this temple and as such the deity is often called *Annadanaprabhu*.

After spending about half an hour in going round the temple and in worship we made our way to the third Sasta temple – Achankoil - which is a hilltop temple on Tirumala.

The 30 Kms. journey to Achankoil is thrilling since for most of the time the road passes through a beautiful ghat road with its curves, heights and falls. From the bus one enjoys a glorious view of the surrounding hills, forests and valley with the glistening waterfalls. The journey is tortuous, though, with several hairpin bends - we counted eleven. Wild animals abound in these forests. Any miscalculation on the part of the driver would mean unimaginable disaster. In fact at a place called Kottapadi Kavu in the midst of thick forests everyone gets down and prays to the deities here - Karuppaswamy and Ganapati - making offerings and cracking coconuts for a safe journey up the ghats.

We reached Achankoil at about eleven. The deity here is also Dharma Sasta but unlike the posture of the deity at Sabarimala, he keeps his right leg folded and bears a sword-like weapon in his right hand. He is seated on a horse (*peetha*), flanked by *Devis*—Poorna and Pushkala—though Dharma Sasta is always considered a *brahmachari*.

How did the shrine get the name of Achankoil? It is probably, because in Malayalam, father is addressed as "*Achan*", hence Ayyappa here got the name "*Achan*". According to legend, a priest, a Nambudiri *brahmachari* who was deeply devoted to Ayyappa virtually considered the Lord as his father ("*Achan*"), and once when the temple caught fire, the devotee declaring, "I will never forsake my father", came out of the temple carrying with him the Lord's idol even at the risk of his life. While the entire temple went up in flames, the "*Archaka*" and the "*Achan*" were saved.

The same priest once intensely desired that he should have, the darshan of "*Achan*" who was blessing his devotees in the form of a *jyoti* in Kantamala. Because of his deep piety and yearning Karuppaswami appeared before him

and told him to touch him. Both of them were instantly transported to Kantamala and the Nambudiri was delighted to have a darshan of the Lord he was daily worshipping in Achankoil in Kantamala where everything appeared golden - the resplendent rays emanating from the Navaratna ornaments adorning Ayyappa made him dance with joy. It was a feast for the eyes and food for the soul.

The priest realized that it would not be possible for him to stay for ever at Kantamala however much he so desired. Yet he did not wish that his visit to Kantamala should remain a mere dream. He therefore prayed to Ayyappa that the Lord should give him a memento to take with him to Achankoil. And the Lord gave him the golden sword which the priest carried to Achankoil, accompanied by Karuppaswami. It is said that this sword is kept in the safe custody of Kottarakkara *devaswom*. It is brought here along with other ornaments during the 10-day festival in *Dhanu* (December-January) when it may be seen by the devotees.

Another great event of this temple is the *pushpanjali* (offering of flowers) performed on *Revati* asterism in Makaram (January-February).

Behind the temple under a Peepal tree is a Naga (Serpent) *prathishtha* and behind that on an elevated platform there is a Devi image without any roof over it. The Bhagawati is revered on a par with the Malikapurathamma in Sabarimala. We could see rows of small black bangles here neatly kept on wooden stands. These are the offerings of mothers when their children fall ill and get well after prayers offered to the Goddess.

After the *darshan* at Achankoil we all assembled on the vast *maidan* in front of the temple. It is here that our *guruswami* formed us into batches of 10 to 12 persons each, with a leader for each group to facilitate an orderly trek through the mountains without any confusion. The leader and nearly half the number of followers were well experienced in the trek and guided others who were first-timers. This arrangement turned out to be a very good one as the less experienced ones were properly guided and no one got lost. Each group functioned as a self-contained unit and all the groups joined together at appointed places where camps were set up for stay and rest.

Our next programme was to return to Shencottah for lunch. It may be mentioned here that devotees of Ayyappa during the pilgrimage season are treated everywhere with special consideration and shown due courtesy and respect. Seeing groups of saffron-clad devotees like Bombay Ayyappas - moving from temple to temple and from one place to another, one is reminded of the great religious procession in Maharashtra in July, which trudges a 224 Kms. route from Dnyaneshwar's temple at Alandi near Pune to the Vithoba temple at Pandharpur, in Sholapur district. Thousands of devotees holding saffron flags and wearing garlands of *rudraksha* beads participate in this centuries-old sacred trek. The *Warkari* movement as it is called, like the Ayyappa cult, preaches bhakti, equality of all men before God and tolerance. As the procession wends its way through south Maharashtra, the towns and villages on the way resound with the pious singing of *bhajans* and slogans singing the praises of the great saints of Maharashtra.

One felt the same atmosphere while passing through the streets of Shencottah to the accompaniment of *nadaswaram* and songs.

After lunch and some rest we left Shencottah around 4 p.m. for Erumeli, the base and transit camp for all pilgrims before they undertake their trek through the mountains. The distance from here to Erumeli is about 150 Kms. and we reached our destination by 9 p.m.

At Erumeli - The Transit Camp

Erumeli is about 65 Kms. south-east of Kottayam, the nearest town in Kerala, and is set in a hilly terrain against the backdrop provided by the mighty Western Ghats. There are several rubber, coffee and pepper plantations here. The only open land is the small village in the midst of these plantations. This sleepy village is transformed into a sea of humanity reverberating with the chants of thousands of Ayyappas. Pilgrims pour in by State Transport buses, private conveyances and on foot. They accommodate themselves in open *maidans* which look like a vast *dharmasala* under the benevolent sky where everybody seeks only one object - the *darshan* of the Lord at Sabari hill.

Erumeli is supposed to derive its name from Mahishi referred to earlier in legends associated with Ayyappa, which in the vernacular, is known as ‘*Erum*’. It is believed that the trunk of Mahishi after she was killed fell here. The ritual of *petta thullal*, the dance of the hunters, observed here is also associated with the killing of Mahishi.

Here also there is a temple for Dharma Sasta who is depicted in the form of a hunter (*Kiratha*) armed with bow and arrow, to commemorate the role played by Ayyappa in his forest expedition as a hunter to kill his foes whether represented by Mahishi or the robbers of Udayanan in the stories described earlier. This is the main temple here in front of which flows a rivulet in which pilgrims bathe. About half a Km. to the northeast of this temple is another small shrine of Ayyappa and one dedicated to Vavar whose role as Ayyappa’s lieutenant is now well known to readers. In the vicinity there is a locality called Kottapadi where there is a temple for Karuppaswami.

It is noteworthy that there is a sizeable Muslim population here and both Hindus and Muslims worship in the mosque for Vavar. The *petta thulla*, which is a peculiar custom starts from this spot. It is a “must” for *Kannis* as the first-timers are called, though others also fully participate in the ritual. The pilgrims paint their faces and torso in dots and weird designs in different colours and carry a jungle rod over the shoulder decorated with leaves and vegetables. They look rather strange in their make-up, the idea probably being that one must give up one’s ego and surrender oneself to the Lord. They dance in groups to the accompaniment of drums, singing in ecstatic joy, *Swami thinthakathom*, *Ayyappan thinthakathom*. They go round the mini Sasta shrine and Vavar shrine whence they dance their way to the main Ayyappa temple. There also, they circumambulate the temple three times, pray and proceed straight to the river for a dip. They again come back to the temple, make offerings and pray to the Lord for permission to tread the sacred hills and for safety during the trek.

The prayer reminds us of the hymn which starts: "Father hear the prayer we offer"; and includes the verse,

*"Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly."*

We also participated fully in these age-old rituals, and prayers. we picked up arrows - these are available for sale - for depositing at the *Saramkuttiaal* in Sabarimala.

We occupied a large *maidan* near the temple as the weather was good except for the cold wind that blew and the dew that fell during the night. After a day-long journey we were all tired. After a light supper we spread our mats on the uneven ground and went to sleep covering ourselves with blankets and mufflers to keep warm and to protect ourselves from the falling dew. We thus slept virtually under the sky and the stars.

The next morning (January 11) we woke up at four. After ablutions we said our prayers and chanted *Saranams*. Whenever we camped, it was customary to keep all the *Kettus* or *Irumudis* (for purpose of identification each bundle

is marked with a number) in an isolated place and offer worship and *bhajans* followed by *arati* both in the morning and the evening. We then prepared ourselves for the trek proper.

As per the programme chalked out at Achankoil the first one or two groups left earlier. They were mostly active workers who precede others in order to set up the camp and prepare food. They are also accompanied by porters (they are called *Kotta Ayyappas*, *Kotta* being the basket used to carry provisions and vessels). Thereafter each batch left at an interval of about half an hour. As each pilgrim was ready to start he slung his sling-bag on his shoulder, put the blankets (neatly folded to about 2 feet in length) over his head. The leader of the group placed the holy bundle on the head and after all the pilgrims were thus ready they started the trek chanting "*Swamiye Ayyappa*" and substituting names of different deities for variety like "*Bhagwan Saranam, Bhagwati saranam*", "*Deva Saranam, Devi saranam*" and so on.

The Morning Trek - A pleasure

It is always a pleasure to walk in the morning which finds the trekkers in high spirits however tired they may have been at the end of the previous day's trek. This is not only because of a good night's rest but something more; it is the invigorating, unpolluted air of the high mountain forest, and the enthusiasm and faith that make one feel ever ready to move on to the next stage of the journey.

About 4 kms. from Erumeli to the east is a rivulet called Perur *thodu* (*thodu* meaning canal). The path up to this is on level ground and the rivulet is actually the boundary dividing the forest from the village. This is the first place where Ayyappa himself is believed to have rested during his forest expedition. From here as the ascent gradually begins, so the pilgrim feels the evolutionary process of his Self. Here, after crossing the river there is a narrow road on either side of which a number of beggars sit and beg for alms. The beggars are young and old, men and women, those with maimed bodies, natural deformities and incurable diseases. They have some torn cloth spread before them or some tin or some old earthen vessel. The pilgrims give alms - not in cash but in kind. Invariably it is puffed rice which they carry in good quantity from Erumeli. Puthethathu Raman

Menon in his travelogue *Ente Sabarimala yatra* describes the scene beautifully. The spirit behind this alms-giving act of the pilgrims is, according to him, like abandoning all *dharma* and seeking refuge in the Lord as Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to do in the *Gita*: "*Sarvadharmam parityajya* (abandon all dharma) *mamekam saranam vraja* (and take refuge in me); so that He could redeem him from all sins."

Beyond the Perur *thodu* the land of Ayyappa starts where the Lord in his human form moved and had his being. Here the pilgrims feel as if they were transported to another realm. Traversing through the forests their minds fixed only on the Lord, they experience serenity and tranquillity of a kind which words can hardly describe.

In the company of masses of pilgrims all moving on the same mission, the devotee feels the merit of *satsang* and sings with Adi Sankaracharya:

*"Satsangatve nissangatvam
Nissangatve Nirmohatvam;
Nirmohatve nischala tattvam,
Nischala tattve jeevanmuktih."*

(Through the company of the good, there arises non-attachment; through non-attachment there arises freedom from delusion; through delusionlessness there arises steadfastness; through steadfastness there arises liberation in life).

There are seven important landmarks (they are called *Kota* or Fortress) hallowed by Lord Ayyappa during his forest expedition between Erumeli and *Sannidhanam*—the sanctuary of Sabarimala. The area near Perur *thodu* is the first one, called *Kotapadi*. The other six in order are: Kalaketti, Udumbaramala or Inchipparakota, Karimala, Sabari *peetham*, Saramkuttiaal and Thiruppadi or *Patinettampadi* (eighteen steps).

The forest beyond Perur *thodu* is called *Poonkavanam*, the Lord's garden, so called because of the lush vegetation and flowering trees and plants. According to traditional belief no one except the pilgrims proceeding to Sabarimala had access to these divine forests. Wild animals were in plenty, but they gave right of way to the pilgrims when the whole forest resounded with their '*Saranams*'. It is a pity that this kind of sanctity is no longer

preserved. These forests are being gradually denuded and in their place one sees rubber plantations and teak groves today!

The next holy spot is Kalaketti, 10 Kms. away. *Kalaketti* literally means the place where the Ox was tethered. According to one legend Siva came on his mount, an Ox, and tied it there while he was witnessing the dance of Ayyappa after the killing of Mahishi. Kalaketti is a beautiful valley. We reached the place at about 10 in the morning when the sun was up and it was becoming sufficiently warm. Here there is a small shrine where devotees light camphor and break coconuts. After another 2 Kms. walk at about 11 o'clock we reached our next halt, the river Azhutha - Alasa as it is called in Sanskrit.

At Azhutha

Azhutha is a tributary of the famed Pampa river flowing in the east-west direction with a forceful current. On the other side rises the steep mountain also called Azhutha. The panoramic view of this thickly forested mountain from this side of the river where we camped is the endless stream of devotees climbing up the mountain. Dressed in clothes of different hues - black, white, blue and saffron - they look like painted figures on a canvas of green. While the Ayyappas of earlier batches were already busy with preparing not merely a meal but a full-fledged feast as per the custom here, several of us went down to the cool river to have what we felt was an unforgettable bath. The flowing water so caressed our weary limbs that we felt instantly invigorated. The quiet afternoon made many of us look back on the week (or the fortnight for most of the members of the party) we had been away from our homes. What a different world we were in, in the quiet, serene and soothing environs of the mountain - and away from our usual mundane, humdrum existence.

After sunset the river scene is enchanting, what with rows of incandescent light and the melodious sound of musical instruments and songs sung in praise of the Lord emanating from every camp. It is a meeting point for a variety of musical talents and pilgrims vied with one another in extolling Ayyappa's adventures. Supper is always light during the trek as it should be. Looking forward to another day of adventure, both physical and spiritual, we went to sleep. The cool breeze that came whispering through the jungles

helped the travel-weary pilgrims to fall asleep. The night was dark and silent except for the occasional howl of some wild animal.

We rose early as usual the next morning (January 12) and set out in batches. Our task was to cross the river full of round pebbles. The water was ice-cold. Then we had to climb the famed Azhutha mountain noted for its difficult track, encumbered as it was with boulders, creepers and big roots of giant trees. It is a steep climb for nearly 2 Kms. and in scaling this we had our first taste of mountaineering. It is said that there is hardly anyone who does not shed tears before reaching the top of the mountain. Pilgrims slog on this path - one slow step after another, now pausing for breath, now sitting for a minute or two and starting again. Added to the physical strain is the fear of wild animals whose cries we could hear. We could also see on our way the fresh droppings of elephants which indicated that the animals had just crossed our path. In the days of our childhood, we had heard blood-curdling stories of tigers eating up pilgrims who had committed a breach in the observance of the austerities. No one knew whether anyone was actually killed in this manner unless some solitary pilgrim strayed into the deep forest and exposed himself to wild animals. Such occurrences are common during every pilgrimage season. However, the sight of fresh animal droppings did send a chill down our spines. Only the constant chanting of God's names kept our spirits up.

At the summit of the climb there is a place called *Kallidumkunnu* but all that remains now is a boulder 3 or 4 feet high. Pilgrims pick up a pebble from the Azhutha river in their very first dip, carry it here and drop it. Hence it is called *Kallidumkunnu* - the hill where pebbles are thrown. There are so many stories connected with this ritual. One is that the mortal remains of Mahishi were dumped here and covered with stones. Another version is that the pebbles represent the past sins of pilgrims which they deposit here. There is also an old belief that there was an obstruction here in the form of a gap which the devotees were asked to fill up. Some say that the pebbles were *Salagramas* presented to the *devas* who assembled at the time of the killing of Mahishi. Others believe they are *Sivalingas* brought from Azhutha to propitiate Siva when he appeared before Dharma Sasta. Historically, the pebbles are meant to fill the canal which surrounded *Inchippara Kota*, the fortress of the robber chief Udayanan. Thus, there are different versions. Whatever the basis of this ritual, it is observed

scrupulously during the trek and no one questions the custom or the *rationale* behind it. We too picked up stones and dropped them here ceremoniously. After negotiating the steep climb we heaved sighs of relief at having accomplished a formidable task.

Next came Inchippara Kota or *Udumbaramala*. Apart from the historical importance mentioned earlier, here there is a shrine for *Kotayil Sasta*, where pilgrims pray, break a coconut and burn camphor. This place is notorious for its scarcity of water. Hence water is collected from a small stream deep down the valley and stored here. It is boiled to kill any possible germs and spiced with *jeera* and some other ingredients. This is undertaken by a service organization called Sri Bhutanatha Dharma Stapanam, which helps quench the thirst of thousands of pilgrims.

After drinking the life-giving water and resting for a while, we started the descent which is even more difficult on account of the damp and slippery path. Slowly, one by one, with careful steps we descended. As we did so, we found ourselves between two mountains, Azhutha behind and the Karimala in the front, with its peaks shooting skywards. Our track terminated in a canal called Karimala *thodu* or Karivelam *thodu* which is the next resting place for trekkers. We reached this place about 12 noon.

The convenience for camping here is comparatively less though there is plenty of water as the place itself is named after the *thodu* or canal. Interestingly, the canal is full of leeches and one has to be wary as one or two may stick to one's legs and literally suck one's blood! Because of the lack of facilities and the eagerness to cross the next mountain, Karimala, many pilgrims leave the place after resting for a while. But the crossing of two mountains at a stretch is really difficult and proves tiresome. But in our camp nearly half the number left immediately to be at the more salubrious Pampa by sunset. The author, however, stayed back along with the rest.

Nightmare In The Camp

Those who camp at this place know and are always warned never to venture far away from the resting place or go deep into the forest or canal because the place abounds in wild animals, especially elephants and tigers. The name Karimala itself suggests the home of elephants and elephants often

come to the canal to drink water and the camps are set up on the banks of the canal itself. We heard a herd of elephants approaching the camp. The ever alert Ayyappas loudly chanted the Lord's names and some enterprising devotees from Tamil Nadu who had brought crackers with them put them to the best use to drive away the fright.

There is a system of lighting camp-fires called *aazhi*. This is to protect the inmates from extreme cold and also to frighten away wild animals. Moreover the worms and insects that abound in the forest regions and that might crawl into the camps are destroyed by the fire. Like everything else during the trek the *aazhi* is also thought of as a ritual and the ashes are considered sacred and taken home.

We cannot say we had a restful night at Karivelam *thodu*. Since we were eager to reach the Pampa river we got up very early next morning (January 13) and started climbing the Karimala at about five. Unlike Azhutha which is climbed straight up, Karimala is climbed in stages in a winding manner because this mountain consists of seven layers and on each layer the pilgrims can rest for a while. The ascent is 5 Kms. There is a saying in Malayalam that goes like this, "*Karimala kayattam kadinam entayyappa - O Ayyappa!*" The climbing of Karimala is most difficult. Hence the Lord is the sole refuge of the trekkers and they have no other thought.

In order to test the devotion of a *bhakta*, Ramakrishna Paramahansa is said to have immersed him in the waters of the Ganges and held him in that position for a pretty long time. The man was gasping for breath and trying desperately to wriggle out of the water for his life when the *swami* released his hold. On coming out, Ramakrishna asked him what was uppermost in his mind when he was struggling inside the water. The man replied that his only thought was to have some air. "The same eagerness to attain God was the test of true devotion" said Ramakrishna. Similarly those climbing up the Karimala had but one thought - that of God and nothing else.

Scaling Karimala

To lovers of nature, mountaineering is delightful. It is so pleasant to watch the rising sun in the morning, to feel the invigorating breeze and to hear the twitter of birds. One might recall what Rama said to Sita as they climbed

the Chitrakoota hill: "How beautiful is the forest unspoilt by human interference! Look at the beehives hanging there! Look at the ground entirely covered with fallen flowers! Listen to the birds. How beautifully they sing to one another and live in joy!"

We got to the top by about 8 a.m. The terrain is flat here and so it is quite convenient to set up a camp. In the cool breeze that blows your tiredness vanishes instantly. Many pilgrims stay here in spite of the haunting fear of wild animals. Our group, as planned earlier, were however eager to push on and reach Pampa by 10 o'clock. One attraction atop the mountain here is *Nazhikkinar*, a well in which a small inner well is filled with water like a spring. It is something of a wonder to have a well atop a mountain. Like so many other places in the hills, Karimala is also sanctified by the presence of several deities. There is an idol of Karimalanathan, about 4 feet in height. People sprinkle turmeric powder and burn camphor here. Then there are images of Kochukaduthaswami and Karimala Bhagawati. There is an old belief that these gods never allow those pilgrims who commit a breach in their *vritham* to cross over Karimala and proceed further to the Sabarimala shrine.

After worshipping these deities we started to descend the Karimala. The descent proved dangerous as the gradients were perilously steep. Any false step would hurl the victim down the depths of the dark valleys. The very thought was chilling. Even otherwise, in mountaineering generally, while climbing, breathlessness is a problem which may be got over by resting at frequent intervals. Moreover, once you reach the top you regain normalcy. Whereas while descending one's legs, particularly the shins and calves, the knee-cap, and the thigh bones and muscles are put to so much strain and pressure that pain in the muscles lasts for days together.

After a strenuous descent which is also about 5 Kms. we were thrilled at the sight of the long awaited heavenly Pampa river. Its rushing waters were glistening in the sun. The very sight of this holy and hallowed river makes one forget all the hardships one had undergone in crossing Karimala. One looks forward to a period of rest and tranquillity in this enchanting place. At the end of the descent there are halting places called "*Cheriana Thawalam*" and "*Valiana Thawalam*" (both are frightening names indicating that they

are abodes of elephants, but now only in name), and "*Kurunkayam*". Our camps were in Kurunkayam to which we repaired shortly.

CHAPTER – 7

THE ENCHANTING PAMPA

THE Pampa river is the most holy spot of the pilgrimage next only to Bhagawan's *Sannidhanam* at Sabari hill. Its banks are also the most favoured camping ground where vast crowds of devotees arriving from different routes converge. This is not only because from here the temple is within easy walking distance - One has to cross only one mountain i.e, Neelimala - but the banks are also hallowed. It was here, according to legend, that the Lord was found as a babe – Manikanta - by King Rajasekhara of Pandalam. It also evokes among the devout, memories of the Pampa and Sabari mentioned in the Ramayana.

"Go to the beautiful banks of the Pampa and seek the help of Sugreeva living there on the Rishyamooka hill", said the *Rakshasa*, Kabandha to Rama. While passing through the forest, Rama and Lakshmana were caught by this monster. They killed him and set fire to his body as desired by the *Rakshasa* himself so that he might be freed from the curse of Indra. There emerged from the flames a lovely form which, while ascending to the celestial world, advised Rama to go to Sugreeva who, driven out by his brother Vali, lived on the Rishyamooka hill in constant fear.

Thus, Rama and Lakshmana set forth towards the Pampa. In that lovely region they visited the *ashram* of the aged *sanyasin*, Sabari, the disciple of *Rishi* Matanga and accepted her hospitality.

Sabari was a woman of a forest tribe and a faithful serving sister in the *ashram* of the old saint Matanga. When he departed from this world she wanted to die too; but the sage advised her that the time had not yet come and she should await the arrival of Rama for the bliss of his *darshan* was in store for her. So the old lady lingered on, looking after the *ashram* and keeping it ready to receive the royal guests.

When the princes came, she offered them fruits which she had gathered and kept for them and took them round the *ashram*. After they left, she kindled a fire and entering it ascended to heaven. The meeting with this saintly

woman and the sacred waters of the river Pampa revived the sagging spirits of the princes. Such is the story of Sabari.

It is believed that Mount Sabari was named after this saintly woman. Sage Matanga had his *ashram* on the Neeli hill. The Sabari *peetham* which one comes across after climbing Neelimala is held to be the dwelling place of Sabari.

On the banks of the Pampa, about a kilometre to the east of Triveni (where the Pampa and the Kallar rivers meet) there is a cluster of rocks through which the river rushes. It is a beautiful spot. On one of the huge rocks there are footprints. The faithful worship it as Ramapada, the sacred feet of Rama. Further about 5 kms, in the south-west direction there is another rocky

place, a picturesque spot with its exquisite waterfalls and trees bedecked with flowers. This is known as Kishkindha of the Ramayana, the capital of Sugreeva and his elder brother, the mighty Vali. And like Kishkindha there are some caves¹ here and dwellings of *Rishis*.

The identification of the Pampa in Kerala with the river mentioned in the Ramayana is an open question: because in the Ramayana it was the Tungabhadra which was known by the name Pampa, which flows through the region of Rayalaseema and Raichur. While Sabari after whose name the mountain - Sabarimalais named, could be the *tapaswini* mentioned in the historical legends in Chapter 3, the association of other holy spots from the Ramayana, namely, Matanga *ashram*, Kishkindha etc, with the Pampa region in Kerala appears to be far-fetched. All the same the Pampa is holy in its own right. Sage Agastya who appeared before king Rajasekhara to advise him on the construction of the temple at Sabarimala explained to the King the sanctity of Pampa *tirtha* thus: "The sacred Pampa is the confluence of all the holy rivers of Bharata Varsha brought into Kerala by propitiating Lord Siva through intense *tapasya*. A dip in the Pampa waters will redeem you from all sins." The very sight of the river evokes such feelings that one feels one is transported to a different world.

We hurried to the river and sat down on a boulder watching the placid waters flowing past us, lapping at our feet. The very touch of the -icy water

was soothing. On one bank of the river one can see a sea of humanity, people improvising shelters with bamboos and leaves. Smoke rising from cooking fires shroud the area. The other bank is untouched by human beings. Nature is at her wildest, grandest and most magnificent there! Words cannot describe the hauntingly beautiful scene. This place, the abode of wild animals has now been turned into a veritable township with numerous huts and shops. Pilgrims get guidance through announcements from loudspeakers. This is interspersed with soul-stirring devotional songs in praise of Ayyappa.

The Pampa Feast

We had a very refreshing bath in the cool limpid waters of the Pampa. That was the day when the great Pampa feast and the Pampa *vilakku* (festival of lights) were conducted. Each group was busy arranging its own *sadya* or feast and every Ayyappa had to give a helping hand. Provisions were taken out from the rear portion of everyone's *Irumudi* and these were pooled. In some of the major camps like ours, however, elaborate preparations had been made, since an advance party with all the paraphernalia had come directly from Erumeli. Hundreds of tired pilgrims were fed. Where else may one witness such brotherhood with men from all walks of life and belonging to different castes and creeds eating together and helping each other without any distinction?

Indicative of the feast that was being provided in every camp were the roasted *pappads* of varying sizes that were hoisted on the top of each hut. This is a sign for any pilgrim to drop in and participate in the feast. Nothing would gladden the hearts of the inmates of a camp more than a fellow-devotee walking in and joining them. *Pujas* were of course held.

After the feast, *gurudakshina* followed, that is each pilgrim fell prostrate before the *guru* and offered him a small amount as a token of respect and thanks-giving for the valuable guidance he gave. It is not the amount that counts but the respect with which it is offered by the pilgrims and accepted by the *guru*.

Because it is the *guru* in the *yatra*, literally and figuratively, who shows the pilgrims the path leading to the highest, he is considered to be the Lord

Himself as proclaimed in the words:

*Gurur Brahma, Gurur Vishnuh
Gurur Devo Maheshwarah;
Guru sakshat param brahma,
tasmai sri Gurave namah.*

(The *Guru* is Brahma, the *Guru* is Vishnu, the *Guru* is Siva, the *Guru* is verily the supreme Brahman. Salutations to that *Guru*).

As *Swami Vivekananda* said: "The worshipping of one's *Guru* is the first duty inculcated in the Vedas. God can only be known in and through man... Vibrations of light are everywhere even in the darkest corners, but it is only in the lamp that it becomes visible to the man."

In the afternoon while we were resting, we observed some pilgrims moving from kitchen to kitchen with a vessel and spoon. They collected from each oven a spoonful of ashes which are considered sacred. We knew that at Vaikom Siva temple, where conducting a feast and feeding people is considered sacred, it is the ashes of the oven that are served as *vibhuti prasad*. So we were not surprised to observe this practice. But the story behind it, as we learnt, is interesting. It is believed that on the day of Pampa *sadya* Lord Ayyappa is present in Pampa disguised as a devotee. Like numerous others He is also busy cooking and serving meals to others. Since no one knows in which camp He is present and at which oven He cooks, the devotees collect ashes from all the ovens. The collected ashes are offered to the deity at Sabarimala with camphor lit and taken back home as *prasad*.

Sunset provides a glorious view at Pampa. The day before *Makara Sankranti* is Pampa *vilakku*. It is believed that the Lord will be present at Pampa on this day. All the camps and huts are decorated with lights and candles. Lamps are lit before the holy bundles and bonfires in front of the camps. Then small boats decorated with lights are made and launched into the river. The myriad lights provide an enchanting and unforgettable sight in the darkness that surrounds the area.

The night was extremely cold in Pampa. We were exhausted, but at the same time we were excited at the prospect of climbing the third and last mountain – Neeli - on the morrow, so we slept soundly in that thick forest

under the tender protection of the Lord. In the early hours of the morning we rose to the lilting melodies of Yesudas floating from the mike. We were shivering with cold. A chilly wind was blowing. The water was icy. A dip in the river seemed impossible. But some of the Ayyappas in our group were active as ever. They had already taken the ritual plunge into the river. "Just one dip banishes all cold and we feel so warm and invigorated!" they exclaimed. Ultimately everyone followed suit. In an hour's time we were all ready and fresh after our bath. From then on we discarded our coloured clothes and changed over to white as was the practice.

The day was *Makara Sankranti* (January 14) which marks the sun's entry into Makara known as Uttarayana. The scriptures lay down that "taking of holy baths, offering of gifts and performing *sraadha*, *havans* etc. on this occasion are capable of endowing highly beneficial results on the person." Hence hundreds of pilgrims offered oblations and performed *pitru tarpan* for their ancestors. It was a moving ceremony when so many persons assembled offered oblations to the chant of *mantras* by priests, something which enabled one to remember the departed member of one's family in holy surroundings. It was thus with our spirits very much buoyed up that we prepared ourselves to undertake the last lap of our journey before we reached our goal - the *sannidhanam*.

Yeoman Service

We wound up our camp and bade farewell to the Pampa most reluctantly. It was nearly eight. The sun shone in glorious splendor - and the waters and the forests glistened in its rays.

Two things remain in one's memory even after leaving the Pampa. One is the breathtaking scenery of the region and the other, the numerous announcements, instructions, sermons and devotional songs over the public address system. The men behind the mike are often volunteers of the Ayyappa Seva Sangam, a major service organisation whose efforts to provide yeoman service and comfort to the devotees should not be forgotten in any account of the pilgrimage.

The Sangam organizes camps at all important halting places all along the mountain paths with a corps of volunteers and medical supplies. Those who

come to the camps get the help they want including medical aid. At every resting place volunteers are posted whose job it is to give instructions on environmental hygiene, to provide drinking water - both hot and medicated - and to maintain a religious atmosphere through devotional programmes. Indeed the help rendered by the members in the true Ayyappa tradition of service is such that they have carved a niche in the heart of every pilgrim.

Before climbing Neelimala, we worshipped at the shrines of Ganapati, Rama and Hanuman at the foot of the hills. These temples are of recent origin and there are no legends attached to them. A little beyond these temples a representative of the Pandalam Raja sits on a raised platform with all the royal insignia. According to legend the Sabarimala temple and the deity of Dharma Sasta are considered the king's 'own', hence no one can proceed to the shrine without the knowledge of the king and his permission. It is to facilitate pilgrims in obtaining the necessary permission that the king or his representative camps at the foot of the hill. The pilgrims offer a token amount and receive *Prasad – vibhuti* - from the hands of the royal representative. This custom is still observed.

From here to *sannidhanam* it is about 6 Kms. One can see the towering heights of the majestic Neeli hills and the stream of pilgrims wending their way up. Only the prospect of reaching the *sannidhanam* and having the *darshan* of the Lord makes the trek less tiresome. In fact the Neelimala is loftier and more steep than Azhutha and Karimala, and to ascend the soaring heights of this mountain is much more difficult. Sometimes the trail is very steep and at other times slippery. It looks as though a human river is flowing through the place - the way the pilgrims move on slowly, one behind the other, the Lord's names ever on their lips.

Most of the pilgrims in our camp walked together during this last lap of the journey while the trek over the other mountains was done in small groups, one group following another at intervals. As we continued our ascent we heard the one refrain that was repeated with greater and greater force. That was the chanting "*Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa*". Whenever a pilgrim passed us he would shout "*Swamiye*" and we would answer him with "*Saranam Ayyappa*". As we moved higher the chanting was repeated with increasing intensity. Such was the joy we experienced as we were getting nearer and nearer the sanctuary of Sasta.

Moving Sights

We witnessed many moving sights on the way. An old man was so exhausted on going half way up the hill that we thought he would collapse. A young sturdy Ayyappa, who was walking beside him, seeing his plight took hold of his bundle and kept it on his head in addition to his own. He then put his arm under the old man's shoulder and supported him till we reached the top. That was the Ayyappa tradition of service! The two men exchanged "*saranams*", and making a supreme effort the old man smiled, expressing his gratitude.

There was a man ahead of us whose leg was badly swollen. He was hardly able to crawl. But he kept on moving though very slowly, singing and chanting "*Swami Saranam*", his eyes expressing an ecstatic joy. We had heard that in the Gita, the Lord made the dumb speak and the lame cross the mountains. Here we saw in action what the Lord preached.

At one point, half-way through the climb we saw a middle-aged Ayyappa struggling with his son who looked about seven years old. The boy was dumb and he stood rooted to the spot refusing to move any further. We thought it was just one of the pranks of the boy and therefore went ahead. After climbing some distance we looked back and saw the man still struggling. He looked desperate. We retraced our steps. On reaching the spot we shouted "*saranams*" repeatedly. Slowly the boy smiled and started moving. We kept up this exercise till we reached the summit with the boy.

We heard of a Muslim youth aged 22 from Wynad in Kerala. He had been suffering from epilepsy from the age of four. Medical treatment had not been of any avail. He undertook a pilgrimage to Sabarimala. Even during the 41-day preparatory vow he felt considerable relief. Subsequently he was well on the road to recovery.

Yet one more instance of a miracle; Joshua, a Christian by birth, was involved in a lorry accident. He broke one of his legs. He was treated for months together. Still he was not able to walk. He became desperate. On the advice of his neighbours he took a vow that he would undertake a pilgrimage to Sabarimala if he was cured. He was. He trekked to the Mount like any normal person.

We reached the top of Neelimala in about an hour and a half. We did not feel any strain, because our minds were engaged in trying to relieve the suffering of others, in rendering some service to them and in thinking of God's various miracles. The top of the Neeli hill is known as Appachimedu where pilgrims rest for a while enjoying the scenery around, which is something exquisite and soothing. A look at the deep, dark valley on either side of the pathway is, however, terrifying. Here there are two yawning abysses called Appachi Kuzhi ('*kuzhi*' meaning pit) and Ippachi Kuzhi over which pilgrims throw rice balls. This is done mostly by *Kannis*, the first-timers to appease the evil spirits hovering around the place and to prevent them from doing any harm to the pilgrims. It is a certain Kaduravan, one of the Lord's trusted men, so the story goes, who controls these spirits and keeps them out of harm's way.

From that point it was almost level ground and we experienced no difficulty. After walking some distance we reached Sabari *Peetham* which is the fifth *kota* or fortress of the seven mentioned earlier. There are tall trees here and plenty of sunlight. This was the place where Sabari did *tapas*. Pilgrims worship here breaking coconuts and lighting camphor.

From here the sanctum is a little over 1 Km. About mid-way there is Saramkuttiaal, the peepal tree where arrows carried by pilgrims from Erumeli are deposited. There is no tree there now but the place is considered holy and is the sixth fortress or *kota*. That was the place shown to the king of Pandalam, by an arrow shot by the Lord, as the site suitable for the construction of the temple. Looking around from there we had a panoramic view of beautiful mountains, green valleys and deep ravines.

Another ten minutes walk from there, and lo and behold! the *Patinettampadi*, the eighteen steps, the last and seventh fortress, the sight of which gives us a great thrill. From every throat comes a long scream, "*Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa*" indicating the end of the long and arduous pilgrimage. From quite a distance we can hear the sound of "*saranams*" and see the temple shining in the morning sun in all its splendour and glory.

But it was a long, long wait, for hours on end, for the pilgrims who had to stand patiently in the queue before reaching the eighteen steps. Finally we made it, our hearts throbbing and eyes filled with tears of joy. Slowly we

climbed the steps, one by one, breaking a coconut on that step which corresponded to the number of the pilgrimage*.

Standing at last on the eighteenth step we were right in front of the portal of the great temple of Sabarimala - straight ahead was the image of the Lord, Dharma Sasta, Ayyappa - resplendent in all His glory. We moved round the temple in a clock-wise direction and came right in front of the sanctum sanctorum to have a closer view of the idol. Standing in His presence we experienced a strange feeling. There were veritable tears of joy and thankfulness to the Lord through whose mercy we had been able to make the pilgrimage after undergoing all the hardships. We felt a rare sense of contentment and quiet. It was an ecstasy which we had never experienced before. We felt our life's mission had been fulfilled and were at peace with ourselves and with the world outside. A full-throated shout came out automatically:- "*Swarniye Saranam Ayyappa*".

1. According to the Ramayana a *Rakshasa* named Mayavi came at midnight and challenged Vali to a combat. When Vali who never refused a fight rushed forth, the *Rakshasa* fled and disappeared into a great cave, Vali also entered this cave plunged in darkness, instructing his brother Sugreeva to wait till he returned. Sugreeva waited long. Since Vali did not return he thought he might have perished in the struggle and returned to the palace after blocking the mouth of the cave with a huge rock. He also occupied the vacant throne. While he was enjoying the pleasures of power, one day Vali suddenly appeared, Bursting with anger he accused Sugreeva of treason and drove him out of the Kingdom. Sugreeva took asylum in the forest, It was then that Rama and Lakshmana met him as directed by Kabandha.

* However, since 1986, with the covering of the granite steps with metal, the practice of breaking coconuts on steps is stopped. Nowadays coconuts are broken at the base of the steps.

CHAPTER – 8

ATOP MOUNT SABARI

AFTER the first *darshan* of the Lord, the very next act to be performed by pilgrims is *ghee abhisheka* that is, pouring the *ghee* on the Idol. This alone marks the consummation of the pilgrimage. The devotee sits at a convenient place, breaks the *ghee*-filled coconut brought in the front portion of the *irumudi* and removes the *ghee* in a clean vessel. He then proceeds to one of the *vazhivadu* (offerings) counters and obtains a receipt. This and the vessel are then passed on to the priest at the sanctum, who performs *abhisheka* and returns the *ghee* and the vessel. This *ghee* is the most sacred *prasad* taken home by the devotees after undergoing so much penance. It is said to have curative powers.

It must be pointed out here that the coconut pieces, after the emptying of the *ghee*, are thrown out in a *homakunda* on the south side, below the temple, near the eighteen steps. This is something symbolic. The soul represented by the *ghee* merges with the deity—and the body symbolised by the coconut is consumed by the fire. Of this more in the next chapter.

Another important *abhisheka* performed is with *Vibhuti* which is also brought by the devotees in the holy bundle. The *vibhuti*, after *abhisheka*, acquires a pleasant smell (or so we feel), something of its own. As a devotee amongst us said: "The most appealing *darshan* is after wiping the *ghee* when the priest sprinkles *vibhuti* on the face of the idol. It looks as though the Lord smiles and He appears in His most happy self."

One wonders whether at any other temple *ghee* can be seen flowing in such large quantity. There are many who out of ignorance or for any other reason pour the *ghee* in a *vallom* (wooden boat) kept in front of the sanctum. Indeed so much quantity is collected in this manner that the temple authorities even use it for torches during the procession. The surplus *ghee* is preserved in tins and sent to other temples also.

Since there was a large number of pilgrims in our group we all repaired to our camp after our first *darshan*. There all the *ghee*-filled coconuts were collected and a dozen or so volunteers sat down to remove the *ghee* in large

vessels and to collect and sort out the various *puja* articles. Ours was thus a mass *abhisheka*. After the *abhisheka* each one of us was given a quantity of *ghee* in a neat plastic container along with other *prasad*.

The Holy Eighteen Steps

We shall now take a round of the temple premises and the various deities. First about the *Patinettampadi* or the sacred eighteen steps which in Malayalam are referred to as *Satyamaya Ponnu Patinettampadi* that is, the sacred eighteen steps that represent truth. During the accidental fire in the temple on two or three occasions even the *vigraha* had been destroyed but not the sacred eighteen steps described as a ladder to Heaven.

The temple is situated on a plateau of about 40 feet in height, probably to prevent wild animals from entering it. The deity faces east and to enter it from the east side eighteen granite steps -*Patinettampadi* are constructed. All the steps are of the same size, about 5 or 6 feet long and about eight inches wide. These are not just ordinary steps leading to a temple. Indeed, at no other temple is so much importance attached to the steps leading to the sanctum.

There are many legends associated with *Patinettampadi*, but the number eighteen it appears, has special significance. The first five steps signify the five *indriyas*, i.e. eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin. The next eight represent eight *ragas*, i.e. *tatwa* (the truth), *kama*, *krodha*, *moha*, *lobha*, *madha*, *matsraya*, *damba* (arrogance) and *ahamkara*. The next three denotes three *gunas*, namely, *satwa*, *rajas* and *tamas* followed by *vidya* (knowledge) and *avidya*, (ignorance). Crossing all would take the aspirant on the path to self-realisation.

Eighteen can also be taken to typify the path of an aspirant so lucidly explained in the eighteen chapters of the *Gita*. Or it may represent the eighteen-day war of the *Mahabharata* between the Kauravas and the Pandavas or else the eighteen *Puranas*.

A devotee must fulfil two conditions to qualify himself to tread on these holy steps. He should have observed the 41-day penance prescribed for the pilgrimage, and he should carry the *Irumudi* on his head. Further, these steps can be used only twice - once while entering the sanctum with the

Irumudi and then while finally leaving the temple after the stay at Sabarimala is over. On other occasions the pilgrims can go up to the temple but through the flight of concrete steps provided at the northern and western sides of the plateau.

Then a coconut should be broken while climbing up as well as while descending. The right leg is to be placed first while going up and while coming down the devotees should face the Lord as he retraces his steps and not turn his back to the idol. The police help the pilgrims to cross the steps both ways safely. The climb is so regulated that one hardly hears of any stampede or mishap even during the peak periods of the festival.

There is a belief that one who climbs the *Patinettampadi* eighteen times in a row, or in other words one who completes eighteen pilgrimages consecutively, should plant a coconut sapling in the vicinity of the temple. It is said that there are quite a few coconut trees grown out of saplings planted near the temple. Now, as the entire area is developed to cope with the increasing rush of pilgrims such saplings have to be planted far away from the temple. However, the custom is still in vogue as we saw a number of pilgrims carrying saplings.

Right at the top of the *Patinettampadi* is the majestic, gold-covered *Dwajasthamba* or Flagstaff. The small temple, newly constructed after the 1950 fire, consists of a sanctum sanctorum or *Srikoil* with copper-plated roof and with four golden finials or *thazhikkudams* shining at the top. In front of this are two *mandapams* or raised platforms, called *Valiambalam*, on either side of the passage. Beyond this is the *belikalpura*, the shed housing the altar. Then comes the flagstaff. A peculiarity is the absence of *mukhamandapa* in front of the *Srikoil* which is an essential part of Kerala temples and on which devotees prostrate themselves before the deity.

The beautiful idol made of *Panchaloha* - an alloy of five metals, is about one and a half feet in height. This was also installed after the 1950 fire when the temple was newly built. Before this there were one or two fires in the temple but they were accidental. The previous image was of stone made by the famous Silpi, Veluvachari and was very beautiful. The present one was made on the same model by smiths in Chengannur who are adepts in casting images.

Incidentally, it was Mulam Thirunal Rama Varma (1885-1942), one of the *Maharajas* of Travancore who was credited with the reconstruction of the temple after one of the devastating fires before 1950. In those days when there were no transport facilities all the building materials had to be transported either on the heads of workers or on mules or horses. A certain Polachirakkal Kochumman was entrusted with the task which was really stupendous considering the numerous difficulties they had to face.

As mentioned earlier, the consecration of the present temple, renovated after the 1950 fire, and the *punah prathishta* of the idol, as also the other deities at Sabarimala - Ganesa, Nagaraja (Snake God), Malikappurathamma, etc., the consecration of *dwajasthamba* and the temples on the banks of the Pampa were all performed by the High priest of the temple, *Brahmashri* Tazhamon Sankararu Tantri.

The author was privileged to meet this 86-year old saint who is an acknowledged authority in Tantric rites and without whose explicit consent and association no function is performed at *Sabarimala* shrine. Simple, unostentatious and a great devotee of Ayyappa, the Tantri explained that our *Puranas* contained references to the Lord's incarnation as Sasta to kill the wicked and protect the righteous.

The Abode Of Happiness

The Sabarimala *prathishta* is in the meditative pose - *yogasana* - which the Lord assumed after annihilating evil. He is with *Pattabandha*, a band around his folded legs, and *chinmudra* with the forefinger of his right hand touching the thumb indicating "Thou art That". His left hand is stretched and rests on his left knee-cap. He grants *abhaya* (refuge) to his devotees, fulfilling all their desires. He is *Sasteethi* Sasta - one who disciplines his devotees in right conduct and also protects them from all evils. He is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* Existence- Knowledge - Bliss personified.

As there is always a crowd for *darshan*, devotees can see the deity only by going round and round the sanctum. And the more one sees the more effulgent the Lord looks. His face is like the full moon, ever smiling. His rich diadem shines with brilliance. His crest jewel illumines all directions. His neck is decked with divine flower garlands and glittering jewels. He

wears blue silken robes. His ruby lips and lotus eyes bestow grace, Oh! this is the abode of happiness - just to gaze at His face is to be in bliss always.

Shri Sankaruru Tantri explained to this writer how the Lord at Sabarimala came to be called "Ayyappa". At the time of consecration of the shrine the Raja of Pandalam who constructed the temple for Dharma Sasta was standing with Ayyappa who was absorbed in meditation and suddenly attained *samadhi*. At this sudden and unexpected disappearance of his devoted "Ayyappa" the King shouted "*Ente* (my) Ayyappa!" From then on the name "Ayyappa" stuck to the deity of Sabarimala. The Tantri said that this was narrated to him by a very old *Tampuran* of the Pandalam household, some fifty years ago.

To the south of the main temple is a Ganesa idol. Ganapati *homam* (*havan*) is the offering made to this deity, called *Kannimel* Ganpati. There used to be a huge *homakunda* in front of this shrine, which was kept burning continuously, the flames leaping quite high. It was fed by the coconut shells thrown by devotees after emptying the coconut of the *ghee*. As the coconut shells burn and are consumed by the fire, the sins of the devotees of Ayyappa are also likewise believed to be burnt. Owing to the heavy rush in the courtyard this *homakunda* has been shifted to a place below the temple a few metres beyond *Patinettampadi* to its south. On the top of the *Patinettampadi* - a little to the south is another *homakunda* - a smaller one in which all the camphor brought by the devotees burns continuously.

To the left of the Ganesa shrine are the idols of Subramanya (Kartikeya) and Mala, a goddess.

Breathtaking View

From the temple plateau which overlooks the small township that crops up during the season one has a glorious view of the mountain, forests and valleys around. It is a breathtaking view and a very soothing experience. The surrounding hills look like a fortress built by nature for the protection of the temple. It is from one of the hills in the north-east direction that emanates the luminous light called *Makara Jyoti* on *Makara Sankranti* day. This is known as Kantamala where the Lord shines as Supreme Brahman in his transcendental abode.

Lately the temple courtyard has been extended on the north-side by a few metres so as to accommodate the ever-increasing number of pilgrims. Below the terraced extension are housed various establishments of *Devaswom* as also a huge *hundi* in which the offering made by the devotees in front of the shrine at the top are directly dropped through a conveyer system.

We now proceed to the shrine of Malikappurathamma, about 100 meters away, stepping down the concrete steps provided on the western and northern sides of the courtyard or directly through the fly-over. On the way is the temple tank called, *Bhasma Kulam* in which hundreds of people bathe as a ritual. The tank is frequently drained out and filled with fresh water to prevent its pollution through constant use. This bath is in commemoration of the *tapaswini*, Sabari, who entered the fire which consumed her mortal remains.

The Malikappurathamma shrine is on a small hillock. The shrines of both Devi and Kadutha swami are located in the same compound. Besides the image of Devi, a trident and a lamp are objects of worship here. Devotees address the Goddess, "*Malikappurathamma loka mathave*" - Oh! Malikappurathamma, the universal Mother. Incidentally the women pilgrims to Sabarimala are addressed as "*Malikappuram*" after the Devi just as the men pilgrims are known as Ayyappas.

Here also the devotees offer a coconut but it is not broken but simply rolled on the ground around the temple. The turmeric powder on the steps of the sanctum is taken by pilgrims as *prasad*.

A little to the left of this shrine are idols of Nagaraja and Nagayakshi, snake god and goddess. Here tribals keep beating on drums and play stringed instruments. They sing "*Sarppa pattu*" or snake songs to propitiate snake gods to ward off the devotees from the evil effects of snake-bites and for progeny.

Coming back to *Patinettampadi* one finds on either side of these steps two small shrines. The one to the south is Kaduthaswami and the other to the north is Karuppaswami. They stand like *Dwarapalakas* or Guards it is believed, to see that the holy eighteen steps are not polluted by those who

tread on them without fulfilling the rigid conditions like the 41-day *vritham* and the carrying of the *Irumudi*. They also, it is held, protect the devotees from the evil spirits that haunt the forests. Some believe that both these deities are one and the same.

Vidwan Kuramallur Narayana Pillay in his book *Sri Bhutanatha Sarvaswam* has traced briefly the history of Kaduthaswami from the references in *Bhutanatha Purana* and some records available with the descendants of Kaduthaswami. The *Pujari* at Kaduthaswami temple is traditionally a Nair who belongs to a house called *Malamel veedu* in Kallisheri near Chengannur. Generations ago Kadutha who belonged to this family was a great warrior and a dependent of a Pandalam king. He was an expert in mountain warfare and was instrumental through various strategies employed by him in defeating the armies of Udayanan, the *Maravars* and some Pandya kings. Later, after these conquests, when the king of Pandalam proceeded to Sabari hill to reconstruct the temple, Kadutha was there to help him and to serve his master. After the consecration of the temple Kadutha became so greatly attached to Ayyappa that he decided to spend his last days at the feet of his beloved deity.

Story of Kadutha and Vavar

The story goes that once when Kadutha was in deep meditation some *Maravars* tried to plunder the temple again. Kadutha ran into the sanctum and took refuge in the deity hugging it and praying to the Lord to save him. When the king's army marched to the temple hearing the attack Kadutha was still there clinging to the idol. They were moved by this sight and wondered at the mercy of the Lord who protected his steadfast devotee in such extreme peril. Kadutha was praised for his single-minded *bhakti* and his gallant efforts in saving the *vigraha*. After his death the temple authorities immortalized him by providing him a niche at the very feet of the Lord. They also allotted some funds and certain rights to his family which are still maintained as is evident by the presence of a Nair *Pujari* who conducts *Pujas* here. This is the story of Kaduthaswami.

Another prominent deity near *Patinettampadi* is Vavar. His shrine which is a few meters to the east of the eighteen steps and just to the north of the main entrance to the temple complex, is an ancient one. According to a note

recorded in A.D. 1914 by the then High priest of Sabarimala, Kantaru Krishnaru Tantri, the Vavar deity is as old as the Ayyappa deity, There are also records to show that the present shrine is the one renovated in A.D. 1905.

Here the *pujas* are conducted by a Muslim priest. There is no idol. On the eastern side of this small shrine there is a wall - the other three sides are open - on which, a stone slab is fixed with some carvings. A green silken cloth with a crescent mark is hung across the wall. An old sword is also kept against the wall.

The main offering is pepper which several pilgrims bring in their *Irumudi*. A *hundi* is kept in which coins are dropped. Rose water, sandal paste, incense sticks etc. are offered besides coconut and *ghee*. Live goats which are brought by some pilgrims are meant for Vavar. These goats need not be specially guided or goaded while tracking through the forests to the temple. They are said to walk on their own behind the pilgrims and reach the *sannidhanam* safely. These are later auctioned off by the Devaswom authorities.

This writer met two priests present there, one Abdul Karim and another Badherdeen Musalia. They came from a village called Vaipur near Tiruvalla in Alleppey district. According to them there are nearly seven families in the area, claiming to be the descendants of Vavar. They themselves belonged to the 14th or 15th generation. The sword found in the shrine is traditionally kept in the Kannagar house of Musalia who brought it every year to Sabarimala during the festival season.

What did they do for a living? They are traditionally *Vaidyas* practising the *Unani* system of medicine. Musalia revealed that they were once *Brahmins* belonging to *Brahmiya gotra* and were later converted to Islam. In fact they were Muslims only in name; they mingled freely with their Hindu brethren in their villages.

According to another account, like the King of Pandalam, the family of Vavar also originally belonged to Pandya *desa*, that is, Tirunelveli, Madura, etc. From there they migrated to neighbouring Travancore following attacks from Thirumalanaicken, a Minister in the Pandyan kingdom. They first

settled in Kanchirappally near Chenganacheri. Later they moved to the present village - Vaipur.¹

The Muslim priests affirmed that true to tradition, the Travancore *Devaswom* Board still allowed them certain rights. Three-fourths of the income at the shrine goes to them and the balance is retained by the *Devaswom*. According to a written order of December 3, 1904, in the reserved forests between Erumeli and Sabarimala, the priest of the Vavar shrine and his entourage should have free access and no government official should place any restriction on their movements.

There - are many legends about Vavar and his association with Ayyappa. Some believe he was a Muslim saint from Arab countries who came to India to spread the religion among the people. According to a folk song on Vavar he was the son of one Alikutti and Pathumma. He was skilled in the use of arms. He came as a pirate in a ship to loot and plunder. During his encounter with Ayyappa who came mounted on an elephant, he was defeated and subdued by Ayyappa. Ever since, Vavar became a close associate of Ayyappa and helped him in his mountain war against robbers and in defeating the enemies. He later became an ardent devotee of Ayyappa like Kaduthaswami, and the Lord instructed the king of Pandalam to enshrine them along with the shrine built for him. Thus we see the mosque for Vavar at Erumeli and a niche at Sabarimala.

Pilgrims who spend at least a day at the *sannidhanam* should not forget to visit a favourite resort in the hills, that is, the *Kumbhala thodu* and *Urakuzhi tirtha*. The sanctity of this *tirtha* has been explained earlier. Apart from its sanctity, this place is worth visiting for its salubrious climate. The *Kumbhala thodu* is about 1 Km. to the north-east of *sannidhanam*. From Malikappuram it is about half a km. to the north. It is from this canal that water supply is made available to the *sannidhanam*. Even for the *abhisheka* of the deity this *tirtha* is used. There is a waterfall here and the place where the water falls is smooth. There is a small hole at this spot in which one can hardly sit. Yet when you get into it you feel there is enough space like a bath tub and you enjoy your bath under the waterfall. You come out feeling fresher than you've ever felt before.

A word is necessary to pay tribute to the service rendered by the police. Thousands of pilgrims visit the hill every day during the two-month festival of *Mandalam-Makaravilakku*. On days like *Makarasankramam* some lakhs of pilgrims assemble. Maintenance of order is therefore a stupendous task. Yet the huge police station set up atop the hill is, as a correspondent described it, "a police station where no case is registered and a lock-up where no one is ever locked up." The pilgrims who keep constantly flowing have just one aim, to have the soul-stirring *darshan* of the Lord. Hence there is no question of any crime.

But this does not mean that the police have an easy time here. Far from it. They work as hard, if not more, as they do in the plains but purely in rendering service to the pilgrims. Many of them are themselves Ayyappas and have only one motive - service.

Vazhivadus

Apart from the various offerings mentioned above, which devotees make for each deity there are other common *vazhivadus* like *archana*, *abhisheka*, *Vella naivedyam* (plain cooked rice), *payasam* - a preparation from rice, *jaggery*, *ghee*, coconut milk condiments etc. in varying proportions - and *appams* or sweetened rice cakes fried in *ghee*. Among these, the most important and lasting which devotees take home for distributing among friends and relatives are *aravana* - a special kind of *payasam* made to last - and *appams*. These are available in the numerous *vazhivadu* counters to the south of *Patinettampadi*.

Another popular *vazhivadu* not only at the *sannidhanam* but at different sacred places along the route is the exploding of *kathina*. This is a metal cylindrical container about 6 inches in height and two inches in circumference. It is filled with ammunition and hundreds of them are kept ready. When it is ignited it explodes with a big bang echoing through the mountains. Devotees can pay the cost at a counter and hear the bang from a distance.

Yet another offering is *sayana pradakshinam* which, as the name indicates, is prostrating oneself before the deity and rolling on the ground around the main temple. This is undertaken in fulfillment of a vow for the cure of some

mental or physical disease or simply as a mark of utter surrender to the Lord and praying for his mercy. Hundreds of pilgrims go through this physical ordeal in spite of the crowds in the temple courtyard.

Arrival Of Sacred Jewellery

The most sought-after event at Sabarimala comes in the evening of *Makara Sankranti* day - it is watching the arrival of *Thiruvabaranam* or sacred jewellery followed by the celebrated *diparadhana* or *arati* at dusk for the Lord with these jewels on and the miraculous appearance of *Makara jyoti*, celestial light simultaneously on the horizon. A million devotees assemble to witness this rare event, the forested mountains reverberating to the chant of "*Saranam Ayyappa*". The devotion of the refugees reaches a crescendo.

The three boxes counting the jewels of the Lord are still the private property of the Pandalam royal family and are kept in their custody. The head of the family is by belief regarded as the father figure of the deity and the traditional *Thiruvabaranam* procession signifies that the father takes the ornaments to adorn the child and a member of the royal family is deputed to accompany the procession.

A *Devaswom* official takes over these boxes two days before and keeps them in the Valiakoikkal Dharma Sasta temple at Pandalam which is 88 Kms. from Sabarimala, for public view and veneration. The devotees deposit *kanikka*, offering of coins in the *hundi*. This money goes to the royal family. There are certain officials, representatives of the *Devaswom* board and the royal family as also some individuals who traditionally accompany the procession of the jewellery boxes. The procession is escorted by the police.

The procession provides a grand sight. Thousands of devotees line up on the route to have a glimpse of the boxes and, if possible, to touch them reverentially. The oracle who carries the box is in a trance and jumps and shakes vigorously. Yet the box sticks on his head as though glued to it and it never falls. There are also oracles representing Kadutha and Karuppa.

The procession leaves the Sasta temple the previous day at about one in the afternoon and follows a fixed route and camps at fixed resting places - usually a temple. The very first night they pass at Ayiroor Puthia Kavu

temple. The next day at dawn they resume the trek and reach Perunattil temple at noon where they rest for a while. By evening they are at Vlakkai. Early next morning they light a ritual fire – *aazhi* - and start after circumambulating the fire. The next resting place is Nilaikkal Siva temple. Thereafter they cross a mountain called Vellachimala and reach Pampa in the afternoon. By five in the evening they reach Sabari *Peetham* where the procession is received ceremoniously by *devaswom* officials. From there, accompanied by lights, torches and music the procession wends its ecstatic way to *sannidhanam*. Up above in the sky a garuda hovers around and flies in the direction of *Sabari Peetham* as though to welcome the divine procession. The eagerly waiting crowds cheer as they sight the procession. The police have a hard time controlling the crowds as everyone tries to touch the sacred jewellery box and feel the thrill of it. In the process the police themselves get inspired and they jump and dance as if in a trance.

As the procession reaches the *Patinettampadi* a million cries go up echoing through the mountains. Hundreds of *kathinas* and crackers explode. Wading through the milling crowds the processionists climb the eighteen steps and enter the temple. The Chief priest receives the boxes which contain a diamond diadem, golden bracelets, necklaces and the Lord's sword. Adorned with these glittering jewels the idol shines like a million suns. Then follows *arati*. *Arati* in any temple is sacred and is the most important ritual. But on *Makara Sankramam* day at Sabarimala the *arati* after adorning the Lord with sacred jewellery is most important to witness and the pilgrims surge towards the *sanctum*. The shining brilliance of the deity on this occasion is indescribable in words.

At the same time there looms on the north-east horizon a luminous light of extraordinary splendour which lasts about 15 minutes. This is known as *Makara jyothi* said to emanate from Kantamala, the abode of the Supreme Brahman for whom the *devas* and *rishis* hold *arati*. This marvellous phenomenon which marks the climax of the pilgrimage occurs regularly year after year and no one has been able to explore this region though many offer different explanations.

However, during the year 2011 - *Makara Vilakku* celebration it was proved that *Makara Jyothi* was not a miracle but a man-made fire artificially created. It is said that employees of the Kerala State Electricity Board and

Police in connivance with the Travancore Devaswom Board lighted camphor in a huge vessel and then covered it by blankets to create a blinking effect.

Even a writ petition was filed in Supreme Court pointing out that five persons were killed during the *Makara jyothi* in 1999. In 2011, 102 lost their lives due to stampede.

It was therefore stressed that the state of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra and others concerned should take immediate steps to hold awareness programmes to inform the devotees that the light appearing on the hills of Ponnambala medu is not a miracle but a man-made fire.

Makara Vilakku

The next event which marks the *finale* to the pilgrimage is the *Makara Vilakku* at night. This is the procession of Malikappurathamma mounted on an elephant from Her shrine up to *Patinettampadi* and back. The procession starts from *Mani mandapam* near the Devi shrine where the pictures of Lord Ayyappa mounted on the tiger are drawn and worshipped. Accompanied by torch-bearers and musicians the procession slowly moves towards *Patinettampadi*, on reaching which a call is given. Then the procession turns back and returns to the Devi shrine. It is midnight by then and the pilgrims start leaving the place. Their mundane life will soon start again.

There are several stories revealing the *mahatmya* of *Makara Vilakku* without seeing which the pilgrims should not leave Sabarimala. Vidwan Kurumallur Narayana Pillay cites in his book *Sree Bhutanatha Sarvaswam* two incidents which are moving and inspiring. One relates to two youths who in 1935 made their pilgrimage and decided to leave Sannidhanam before *Makara Vilakku*. They talked lightly about this event and were keen on reaching their homes quickly. Some elders advised them against such indecent haste but they did not pay any heed to the advice. They reached Sabari *Peetham* where they rested for a while. Then they started going down the Neelimala. They walked and walked but there was no sign of the foot of the hill. In the thick forests haunted by wild animals they lost their way. Except for one or two lights they carried they had no other means of

knowing the way. Fear gripped them and they cried in desperation to the Lord to protect them. Presently there appeared a *Swami* holding a torch that illumined the surroundings. The youths related to him their story upon which the *Swami* told them that it was sacrilege to leave the temple and to wander off into the forests while the sacred *Makara Vilakku* celebration was going on near *Patinettampadi*. The misguided young men repented and, led by the *Swami*, went back to the temple. They witnessed the *Vilakku* which was still going on and left the Mount along with the others only the next morning.

The other incident said to have taken place much earlier concerns a certain Kesava Pillay who was in Government Service and a great Ayyappa *bhakta* and who regularly visited Sabarimala to witness *Makara Vilakku*. One particular year he was as usual about to have the *Kettunira* and start on the pilgrimage when he was called to Trivandrum on urgent Government work. There he was delayed and his request that he be granted leave to enable him to proceed to Sabarimala in time was turned down. He somehow hurried and completed his work but by the time it was too late, there being only one or two days left for *Makara Sankranti*.

Anyhow he did not lose hope. At home his old mother was anxiously waiting for him, having kept everything ready for *Kettunira* eight days previously. She was overjoyed to see her son back. The *Kettunira* was conducted on Makara Sankranti day and with the blessings of his aged mother Kesava Pillay left home still hoping to reach *sannidhanam* in time for *Makara Vilakku*! In those days it took several days of arduous trekking to reach Sabarimala. Kesava Pillay, fixing his mind on the Lord, and chanting His name walked several miles that day. At sunset he met an old *Brahmin* who was also on his way to Sabarimala. They both decided to rest at a nearby temple. It was time for *arati*. The Brahmin gave Kesava Pillay a stick and a small bag containing holy ashes and asked him to wait there. He then went inside the temple to conduct his *sandya vandana*. The *diparadhana* was over yet the Brahmin did not return. Kesava Pillay waited for some time but he was so tired that he fell asleep. In his sleep Pillay felt someone waking him up to see *Makara Vilakku*. Pillay woke up to find himself standing on *Patinettampadi* with his *Irumudi* on his head". He saw the entire crowd of Ayyappas and the glorious sight of the Lord at the temple and *Makara Vilakku*. In short, Pillay saw everything that had to be

seen and enjoyed at *Sannidhanam*. He concluded that it was nothing but the *lila* (play) of the Lord who fulfilled the desire of his ardent devotee to see *Makara Vilakku*.

The *Makara Vilakku* festival lasts for seven days after it starts on Makara Sankranti. Many pilgrims do stay till the end of the festival when *Guruthi* (an offering of water mixed with *chunnam* and turmeric alongwith other adjuncts) is conducted. This is an offering to all *Vanadevatas* (forest deities). Once this is over no one stays at Sabarimala. Even those who leave after the *Vilakku* on *Makara Sankranti* day continue to observe *vritham* in their homes till the end of the seven-day festival at Mount Sabari.

Apart from *Makara Sankramam*, other important festivals at Sabarimala are *Onam* in the month of *Chingam* (August-September); *Mandalapuja* (from Mid-November to December end). During this period a ten-day festival is conducted beginning with *Atham* asterism, *Pankuni Utram* i.e. *Utram* asterism in *Pankuni* (March-April) and *Visu* (Malayali New Year day). See Appendix B.

As mentioned before, while finally leaving Sabarimala after the darshan, devotees pray to the Lord and go down the *Patinettampadi* facing the Lord. They may return home by any route. On reaching home they announce their arrival by shouting '*saranam*.' In fact the members of the family eagerly await them praying for their safe return. They welcome the devotees by lighting a lamp before the family deity. The devotee, before stepping into the house, breaks a coconut. He prostrates himself before the family deity and takes out the garland thus ending the *vritham*.

1. Shri Bhutanatha Sarvaswam, pages 222, 223 by Vidwan Kuramallur Narayana Pillai.

CHAPTER – 9

SELF REALIZATION¹

Now there remains to understand the philosophical significance of the pilgrimage. It has already been mentioned that the pilgrimage is symbolic of the journey of the individual soul or *Jivatma* merging with the Supreme or *Paramatma*. This is known as Self-realisation or God-realisation which is the purpose of life.

In the *Irumudi* which each pilgrim carries, the front portion is said to represent the man and the rear portion his *Prarabdha* Karma. This consists of some of the *vasanas* and actions carried over from our previous lives. These are consumed on the way and there remains only the front portion - the soul represented by the *ghee* and the body represented by the coconut - when we stand face to face with the supreme deity, and the *ghee* is poured on the idol, the merging of the *Jivatma* in the *Paramatma* takes place and the body is consumed in the fire when the coconut, after emptying the *ghee*, is thrown away in the *homakundam*.

Life verily is a pilgrimage of the soul to the Supreme Lord or *Paramatma* through successive steps of *yoga* and devotion. The soul wanders in this world owing to attachments to material sheaths. It is necessary to purify one's heart by the practice of austerity, worship and devotion to the Lord which is what is meant by the 41-day penance prescribed for the pilgrimage. Thus when all the impurities of the heart are burnt in the fire of knowledge developed through *bhakti* to *Bhagwan*, the soul attains self-realisation. This is the essence of the teaching of the pilgrimage to Sabarimala and with each successive pilgrimage the soul is taken nearer and nearer to the Blessed Abode of the Lord.

Now let us understand the principles of the *Paramatma* and *Jivatma*, the relationship between the two, i.e. between God and man, the various obstacles that come in the way of God-realisation and how to overcome them and realise the purpose of life.

The *Jivatma* gets a human body and mind. Prior to acquiring this body he undergoes births and deaths as trees, insects, worms, beasts, etc. At long last by the grace of God he comes to acquire a human body. Again after death he undergoes another long cycle of births and deaths. Thus our life as a human being is preceded by and succeeded by many many years of other lives.

It is the purpose of this rare and precious life as a human being to know who we are and to realise the self and thereby cut off all sorrows at one stroke. This is not possible in any other life because among all creatures man alone has the wonderful equipment of the intellect which enables him to know THAT which is the ultimate reality called by various names such as *Atman*, *Brahman*, *Parabrahman*, *Bhagwan* and so on.

Jivatma And Paramatma

Thus the total cessation of all miseries is possible only when we know the self. The self is called *Atma* because it permeates everything - the man, the ant, the elephant and the whole universe, as the *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishad says, - and is called the *Brahman* because it is greatest. *Atma* is spoken of as the *Jivatma* and the *Paramatma*. *Jivatma* denotes the individual self and *Paramatma* the cosmic self.

The *Jivatma* is small and the knowledge of the *Jivatma* is limited by time, space and matter. The knowledge of the *Paramatma* is unlimited. The *Jivatma* is a miserable creature subject to the dual experiences of joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure. The *Paramatma* is beyond all joys and sorrows. He carries on the mighty action of creation, preservation and destruction of the huge cosmos by employing his power called MAYA which is under His control. *Paramatma* is the master and Maya is his servant. The *Jivatma* is oppressed by his Maya, and under its control is constantly subjected to the dual experience of joy and sorrow.

Thus there is apparently a vast difference between the petty *Jivatma* and the mighty *Paramatma*. Yet, Vedanta proclaims that *Jivatma* and *Paramatama* are identical and that there is not the least difference between them and that the *Atma* is ONE only, ever immutable and

unchanging. When we acquire this knowledge that the *Jivatma* and *Paramatma* are one and the same we will be freed from all miseries and pains.²

How does one acquire this knowledge? Our highest equipment to know anything is the mind and the mind only. In fact, *Jivatma* actually means the Self + the mind. The mind is a bundle of *vasanas* or the past *karma*. *Vasana* is explained thus: When we perform an action, say drinking tea, it leaves in our mind its reaction, namely, the tendency to drink tea again. This tendency or disposition to drink tea again is called the *vasana* to drink tea.

Again the mind develops *raga* (attachment for pleasure) and *dvesha* (aversion to pain). It is involved in action to secure pleasure and to avoid pain. Thus, the mind is made up of *vasanas* - *vasanas* to perform certain actions which bring pleasure and *vasanas* to perform certain actions to avoid pain.

The totality of all our *vasanas*, of the actions in all our previous lives, is called *sanchita karma*. Out of a huge pile of *sanchita karma*, a small portion becomes nature and we are born with this small portion called *prarabdha karma*. While executing the *Prarabdha karma* we perform many acts producing fresh *vasanas* which are called *agamika karma*, which goes to increase the *sanchita karma*. In order to liberate ourselves from the cycle of births, and deaths, all these three *karmas* - the *sanchita*, the *prarabdha* and the *agamika* - must be exhausted. But these are very powerful and they drive our mind and senses outward in pursuit of the pleasures of the world. So we have to go through a process of undoing these *vasanas* through a rigorous spiritual discipline. By the fire of austerity we burn our *vasanas*, and the mind, rid of ego, turns towards God spontaneously like a needle towards the magnet or the sunflower towards the sun.

Again, *vasanas* will be formed only when there is action i.e. voluntary action like reading, walking, working etc. in which the mind takes part. In case of involuntary action like breathing, blood circulation, sneezing, etc. they are automatic and do not require our consciousness or mind to be fixed on them.

Mind, the Cause of Bondage and Freedom

It is interesting to observe how the mind causes actions in human beings through the five organs of perception or *Jnanendriyas* (eye, ear, skin, nostrils and tongue) and the five organs of action or *Karmendriyas* (speech, hands, legs, the organ of reproduction and the organ of excretion). The mind itself according to its particular function at a particular time is known as (i) the mind, (ii) the intellect, (iii) the egoity or 'I' ness, (iv) the mind stuff and *Chita*.

A lorry is speeding along the road. The mind registers the image of the lorry. The intellect with its inherent *raga* (attachment) or *dwesha* (aversion) interprets it either as good or bad for the ego. If the lorry speeds against a person then he decides on the action of running to a safe side of the road. If it is speeding in any other direction, no action follows. The mind, the intellect, and the ego are all modifications of the mind stuff of *vasanas*. The intellect determines what to do, namely to run to a safe side of the road. The mind gives the order to the (*Karmendriya*) organ of action or the leg which does the action of running. The example given here regarding the eye will apply to the other four organs of perception also in the same way.

The *Jivatma* or the man thus has a mind and a body made of matter. In the body there are five *jnanendriyas* - organs of perception. Through these *jnanendriyas* man comes to know the stimuli (form – sound – touch – smell - taste) emanating from the objects of the outer world. Man reacts to the stimuli with the *Karmendriyas* - five organs of action, in his body. But all these ten organs of the body just will not work unless the mind (which also consists of the intellect, the egoity, the mind stuff) desires to do a thing (*samkalpa*) and then thinks of innumerable ways and means to execute that desire (*vikalpa*).

The *Jivatma* because of his connection with the mind thinks that he is the doer and becomes responsible for the sins or the virtue of action and gets into a series of births and deaths. Then there is a consciousness in man which prompts his sense organs and body and respiratory systems to enable him to perform actions. The Consciousness in man is the substratum on which the mind, the

body, the organs and vital air depend. This is the *Jivatma*, the life force.

Similarly there is a much bigger Consciousness in the universe controlling the rising and setting of the sun, the moon and stars and bringing about seasons and rains at appropriate times and controlling the tides. The substratum on which the universe depends is called the *Paramatma*.

But as stressed earlier the *Jivatma* is not different from *Paramatma*. The space inside a pot is not different from the space in the room where the pot is kept. Similarly the space in a room is not different from the universal space outside the room. Even so the Individual Consciousness is the same as the Universal Consciousness. The apparent difference of pot space and cosmic space is because of the adjunct of the pot. Similarly when the adjunct of the body and the mind are removed the *Jivatma* and *Paramatma* are one and the same. The individual soul, the *Jivatma*, the Universe in which he has various experiences and the *Paramatma* are all one and the same. This is true wisdom.

The ordinary man, however, sees the self, which is the one and only Reality, as three - the *Jivatma*, the *Universe* and *Paramatma*. Only the realized man sees all the three as one. Why? Because of God's unthinkable power called *Maya*, which has two forms Ignorance (*avidya*) and Enlightenment (*vidya*). Because of ignorance the *Jivatma's* mind became impure. The impurity is the *vasana* - the veil - the superimposition. The substratum the *Atma* (*Jivatma* and *Paramatma*) becomes superimposed by the impurity of the mind and therefore the man forgets that his real form is that of the *Atma*. It is just like a rope which is mistaken for a snake in the darkness. The rope is the substratum. The snake is the superimposition. The cause of the mistake is not the rope or the snake. It is the ignorance of the mind which created a snake of the rope. When a light is flashed he realises that the thing is nothing but a rope. Thus light only helps the mind to ascertain the reality of the rope and the falsity for the snake which are simultaneous occurrences.

Similarly, the *Atma* that we really are, corresponds to the rope. The darkness corresponds to the impurities of the mind accrued as the result of our innumerable actions in innumerable previous births in the form of *Kama* (desire) *Krodha* (anger) *Lobha* (the desire to have more and more) *Moha* (delusion that we are the body) *Mada* (arrogance) and *Matsarya* (the hatred for a man who stands in the way of achieving our object). Collectively these six things form the darkness that veils the *Atma*. The *Atma* (like the rope) is not seen, is forgotten and in its place, firmly instituted, is the body.

We know the body changes and dies unlike the self or *Atma* which never dies because it is never born and is indestructible. Yet we get attached more and more to our bodies. The feeling comes "I am the body of flesh and blood." Then follows the feeling of "mine". My body and *indriyas* must be nursed. A wife is wanted, the children are born. Wealth must be procured to build a house, to buy cows, vehicle and endless creature comforts. To this end we are involved in many actions, both virtuous and sinful. Then so many afflictions come, disease, poverty, disappointments and so on. The result is more action. Thus the *Jivatma* is constantly engaged in action after action for the acquisition of material objects. The resultant *karma* brings about further births and there is no time to think of the self - "My real form". This is bondage (*bandha*). This bondage is created by the mind. And it is the mind alone which can give deliverance (*moksha*) from the bondage. Mind attached to the body causes bondage and grief. Mind attuned to the Truth or Self frees our soul from the clutches of ego and delusion. Mind is thus the cause of both bondage and freedom.

Seek His Grace

The natural tendency of the mind is, however, to run outside with the help of the senses to enjoy the objects of senses. Running after the *Vishayas* (stimuli) of the outer world it creates bondage. Herein comes *Vedanta* which warns us that the chains of bondage are increasing its coils on us. It cautions us, "Enough of it, now turn back". But we get increasingly fettered and immersed in *Maya*. The only course is to turn to *Mayadhinatha* or the Master of *Maya*,

Bhagawan and seek His grace. Without His grace the *Maya* dog will go on barking and springing at us. Only Bhagawan, the Master of the *Maya* Dog can silence the dog and call it aside.

And how does one gets His grace? Start by calling Him always - His divine names like Sri Krishna, Govinda, Hare-Murare and so on. Then what about action? Go on doing action repeating the divine names. Try performing acts for Bhagawan's sake and surrendering the fruit of the actions at His feet. When you eat say "Krishnarpamastu", when you work, repeat "Krishnarpamastu" not merely by the movement of the vocal mechanism but from the bottom of the heart, visualizing Bhagawan's form standing before you.

Develop more and more *prema* (love) for Bhagawan. As the love for Bhagawan, which is *bhakti* increases, our mind will not go in search of worldly acquisitions. It will realize that happiness and misery are the two sides of the same coin. With such an experience the mind seeks the place beyond this duality. Then it becomes receptive to the great teachings of the Masters and the holy scriptures. More and more time will be spent on Bhagawan by sitting in a place and calling Him, meditating on His beautiful form and hearing the elevating stories of His *leelas*. Less and less time will be available for the mind to ramble about and run after the objects of the senses. This is *bhakti Marga*, the path of love. When the mind is saturated with devotion it spontaneously turns towards God. This divine experience inspires the mind to meditate on God more and more until it is illumined by the intuitive light of Truth. Then the soul attains freedom.

Superiority of Bhakti Marga

There are three main ways of achieving final deliverance. They are the paths of *karma* (action), *jnana* (knowledge) and *bhakti* (devotion) depending upon one's constitution, temperament and personality. The path of *karma* or *karma yoga* is the path of action, of service, of duty for duty's sake, of work dedicated to the Lord without any desire for the fruits thereof. By dedicating one's actions

to the Lord one is in due course freed from all attachments and becomes a realized soul.

Jnana yoga is for those who are averse to all objects of pleasure and have no attachments. They are men who have no sense of ahankara - I-ness.

Then there is the third class of people who have not become sufficiently detached either to follow the path of *nishkamakarma* or that of *jnana*. They have, however, faith in the Lord and sing his praises. Their devotion ultimately serves the same purpose as that of the karma yogin or the *jnana* yogin for they too become detached and earn *moksha*. Theirs is the path of devotion - bhakti marga.

It will be seen that unlike the *jnana* marga and the karma marga, the bhakti marga is the easiest way to salvation for the common man. A *jnani* has to attain mastery over his senses and become aware of the Supreme in an intellectual sense. The path of *karma* with all its fasts, vows and rituals entails considerable physical and mental hardship. The bhakti marga can be followed by the humblest of devotees. That is why even a supreme *jnani* like Adi Sankara indicated in his *Vivekachudamani*: "*Moksha karana samagrayam bhaktireva gareeyasi*" that is, of the means to attain *moksha*, *bhakti* is the best.

What is *bhakti*? It is a continuous effort to be in tune with the Infinite. For this the *bhakta* has an *ishtadevata* or chosen deity and imparts to it all the finest qualities. As he meditates on this deity day after day a time comes when he sees Him everywhere, and in all.

The superiority of the Bhakti marga stems from the fact that it leads one to final emancipation in a single life apart from its being the easiest to practice. For a *jnani* to have an awareness of an indeterminate Brahman he must have mastery of difficult texts like the Upanishads. This is not easy to acquire in one life; so perforce he is born again and again before he finally attains his goal.

Similarly, the practice of karma yoga requires qualifications as enjoined by the *sastras*. Moreover the fruits of karma are transitory, because though the aspirant attains heaven, he continues to be attached to pleasures. Thus when the merit he has earned is

exhausted he is born again in the mortal world and as such does not attain final deliverance.

A Way of Life

Considering all this the best path is of Bhakti which can be practised even while clinging to worldly attachments. It may be asked how true devotion to the Lord is consistent with worldly attachments. The point to note is that *bhakti* is a way of life. Prayer, *namajapa* and bhajan will in course of time help the devout to give up worldly attachments one by one. This achieved, there is sufficient inducement to fix one's mind exclusively on the Lord, and this will eventually lead to *chittasuddhi* or purity of mind and consciousness.

Srimad Bhagavatham deals elaborately with the importance and superiority of bhakti yoga in Chapter 14 of the eleventh canto which contains the cream of spiritual teaching. In this exposition, Lord Krishna tells His friend Uddhava that devotion is the best means of obtaining happiness and that no happiness can equal the ecstasy born of love of the Lord. The *Bhagavatham* describes how the ordinary devotee gains control over the senses and becomes a superior man exulting in that pure unalloyed devotional love to the Supreme.

In the beginning, due to lack of control over the senses the ordinary devotee finds it difficult to free himself from worldly pleasures. But by persistence, he becomes so much imbued with the spirit of devotion that he succeeds. As the blazing fire consumes firewood, so intensity of devotion to the Lord burns up all his inborn inclination or *janmantara vasana* for the gratification of the senses. Thus control of senses and aversion to worldly pleasures naturally follow in the wake of development of devotional love to the Lord.

With worldly object and pleasures holding no more attraction for him, the devotee becomes a free man. He sees nothing but happiness all around and beholds the Lord in everything. Just as the fish in the deep sea thinks that everywhere there is naught but water, so the devotee in exultation of his love of the Lord who is bliss supreme thinks that all the world is bliss and bliss alone. Such is the state of a highly evolved *bhakta* that he does not even bother about his

personal salvation and knows nothing other than the *ananda* or joy of the Supreme.

The *Bhagavatham* describes the several *sattwic* manifestations, mental and physical, born of devotional love. The mind of the superior devotee is tempered in the exultation of devotion. He feels a thrill of joy and awe and tears of ecstasy come to his eyes in contemplating the Lord. How bhakti conduces to purity of mind and the consequent dawn of true knowledge is described by this Purana thus: Just as the eyes gain keenness of vision by constant application of collyrium, so the mind of the devotee by constant reading, reciting, hearing and meditating upon the glories of the Lord becomes purged of all worldly desires and passions and reflects the light of true knowledge and spiritual wisdom.

The concluding chapters of the eleventh canto referred to above then describe how the mind after being purified through devotion becomes fit for the meditation of the Lord and how this meditation is to be practised. A comfortable posture, keeping the body erect and fixing the gaze on the tip of nose, rhythmic breathing (*pranayama*) are the successive steps for practising meditation.

The ordinary mind, shrouded in Maya, is aware only of objects of pleasures and pain. By the development of *bhakti* through meditation the mind is purified and is fixed on the beautiful form of the Lord. The next stage in the final evolution of meditation is absorption of the impersonal form of the supreme which is of the nature of true knowledge and is self-luminous. This is the ultimate goal of a *bhakta* and when he realizes it, all distinctions between concentrator and the object concentrated cease.

It will be seen from the brief description above how an ordinary devotee beginning with the simple process of adoring his *ishtadevata* overcomes sensual and worldly pleasures, attain purity of mind and evolves into a superior devotee and ultimately reaches his final goal through absorption of his *atman* in the Supreme. In other words *bhakti* is the easiest way to *jnana*.

It is this *bhakti* that the Sabarimala pilgrimage fosters on millions who undertake the trek year after year. Indeed, as Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa says. "He lives in vain who does not utilize the human birth which is very rare to obtain, for attainment of Divinity."

1. Based on Srimad Bhagawatham by Swami Srikrishnadas Achyutha.
2. The relationship between God and man is elucidated in the Upanishad by the allegory of two birds. They were seated on the same tree. One was superior and was established in its own glory. The other was ordinary and partook of the sweet and bitter fruits in the tree, thereby subjecting itself to pleasure and pain. Whenever it was overwhelmed with pain it viewed the other sitting in beatitude with admiration. Every experience of bitterness drove the afflicted bird nearer to the serene bird above. As the distance between the two narrowed, its afflictions were thinning away. In the presence of the superior or bird all pain vanished and the bliss-seeking bird realized that it was merely a reflection of the bliss-emanating original one. Finally the reflection got itself merged into the original. The consummation of the *Jivatma* in the *Paramatma* has been construed in the Upanishads in this manner.

CHAPTER – 10

EXPERIENCES OF SOME DEVOTEES

LAKHS of people undertake the trek to Sabarimala carrying *Irumudi* and shouting *Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa* in a full-throated voice. What could be the motivation that makes them undertake this hazardous pilgrimage year after year after undergoing all the tribulations? Srivatsa S. Jayarama Sarma, well-known for his contributions to the religious discourses, had made a sample survey of the pilgrims who went to Sabarimala and has recorded his views in an interesting article, "Miracle of the Miracles" published in the Souvenir of Sree Dharmasaastha Koti Archana conducted at Bangalore in 1982.

Sarma first records the case of a sick man limping on his right side trekking through the forest. He is alone because he cannot keep pace with the other pilgrims in his group. To the question what makes him walk up to the shrine in spite of much pain and difficulty he replies: "This is the fifth year I am making this pilgrimage. During my first year I had been seriously affected with paralysis and I reached the shrine after being carried in a '*doli*'. I prayed to Lord Ayyappa that if He only reduced my agony I will repeatedly try to have His darshan by walking up the mountain. That you see me trekking today proves that my prayers have been answered." Sarma is non-plussed by this answer.

Sarma then saw to his right a totally different group of devotees - young students from colleges carefree, but full of devotion and bubbling with energy and enthusiasm. To the question as to why they undertake the pilgrimage, their answer is frank and is typical of their younger generation: "We have heard and read a lot about the unique God Ayyappa - His grace and divinity and the experiences of His devotees. We really wonder whether these experiences and numerous miracles are real or only in the imagination of the devotees. We decided to examine this aspect and learn of the experiences at first hand by ourselves undertaking the trek. So here we are."

Next Sarma encountered a batch consisting mostly of businessmen, professionals and farmers. They belonged to Tamil Nadu and were visiting the hills for ninth or tenth time. They looked contented and prosperous and yet found the need for repeatedly seeking the darshan of the Lord. One of them, a businessman was outspoken. He found his profits were steadily going up ever since he started the trek ten years ago. Another member of the batch, an agriculturist, reaped bumper harvests year after year after he undertook the pilgrimage while a third, an official, pointed out that his lot was much better than it was years ago before he made the pilgrimage and he led a happy and contented life.

Finally there was an old man in his eighties who looked radiant with lustrous eyes. He climbed the hills gently, step by step, and yet with the confidence of a veteran pilgrim. He had been undertaking the pilgrimage for the past forty years, sometimes two or three times a year. The reason was that he enjoyed the whole experience. He did not ask anything of God but to give him the strength and the requisite frame of mind to have His darshan again and again and - thus ultimately realise the omniscient, formless and nameless Brahman.

Sarma concludes that the devotees, innumerable as they appear, fall neatly into the following four categories occurring in this significant verse in the Gita:

*Caturvidha bhajante main jamah sukritino Arjuna
aarto jijnasu artharthi jnani ca bharatarshbha.*

(Four types of virtuous men worship Me; O Arjuna: the man in distress, the man seeking knowledge, the man seeking wealth and the man imbued with wisdom, O the best of the Bharatas).

The sick man Sarma saw is *aarthi* (the distressed), the student group, *jijnasu* (the seeker of knowledge), the businessmen and professionals, *artharthi* (the seekers of wealth) and the old man, *jnani*, (the wise).

Whatever may be one's motive, Lord Ayyappa gives His grace in abundance to fulfil one's prayer and strengthen one's devotion to Him.

This is how Swami Chidbhavananda explains the import of the Gita sloka in his commentary on the sacred text:

"Distress comes to being in one form or another and at some time or the other. Avoidance of it is impossible to the embodied. Just as medicine is resorted to, to cure disease, the way of the devoted is to supplicate the Divine for deliverance from distress. When the modesty of the Queen Draupadi was at stake in the assembly of the Kauravas, she piteously sought the protection of Sri Krishna and His help did come to save her from that situation. The lives of many a devotee bear testimony to the fact that Lord comes to the rescue of the pious in distress.

"The man seeking knowledge is here designed as *jijnasu*. It is not given to all to become seekers of God-knowledge. The rare few who seek obtain it unmistakably; The Lord sees to it that the spiritual thirst of the devotee never goes unslaked. A recent seeker of God-knowledge was Swami Vivekananda and Providence made provision for his obtaining it.

"The man seeking wealth usually works for it and that is the proper way. One type of devotees work for it praying to the Lord at the same time for the easy acquisition of wealth. Another type of devotees has no time to toil for wealth; at the same time they are in need of it for their holy undertakings. They ardently appeal to the Lord and He sends them the required resources.

"The man imbued with wisdom is here classified as *jnani*, the one who has realized the truth. He is one who has gained the insight that Brahman is the Reality while the universe and the beings are all mere superimposition on it. Adoring the Reality to the exclusion of the appearance is but natural to him.

"Among the people who believe in God, these are the four types who seek to contact Him, each according to his understanding and

attainments. All the four groups are virtuous because of their right understanding and right doing."

But who stands supreme among these virtuous four? The answer comes in the next sloka. It is the *Jnani*, of course, the wise man who is ever steadfast and devoted to the ONE, who excels. "Because", explains Swami Chidbhavananda, "the *Jnani* cognizes Brahman as the real entity and the very essence in himself. He is therefore supremely attached to the Reality in himself. That reality gives the *Jnani* his true individuality. This is how the *Jnani* excels."

Does this mean that the other three are undervalued? "No," the Lord asserts in next verse, "Noble indeed are all these; but the wise man, I deem, to be My very Self. For, steadfast in mind he is established in Me alone, as the supreme goal."

The Swamiji further elaborates on this subject thus; "As the fuel consigned to fire becomes itself fire, the *jnani* absorbed in Iswara who is a blaze of *jnana* becomes one with Him."

All of us may not become *jnani*s straightaway but the *sadhana*, observed during the Sabarimala pilgrimage takes one on the road to it. Indeed the whole purport of the pilgrimage is to enable one to view all beings as veritable divinities and the *sadhana* elevates one in his spiritual stature. This is the benefit directly derived by the devotees while the indirect benefit consists in the others around him being unconsciously divinized, thereby helping to curb the devil in man.

There have been numerous accounts of Ayyappa devotees experiencing divinity themselves and the merciful Lord granting their prayers, no matter to what type they may belong—*aarthi*, *jijnasu*, *artharthi* or *jnani*. An attempt is made here to recount some of these just to serve as a guidance to probe into the mystery of life and tide over the many difficulties and problems that life bristles with.

S.V. Pillai (popularly known as "Ratnam") who was Chairman and Managing Director of Bombay-based Pfizer Limited, an international pharmaceutical organization, rose to this position from

the ranks. When he was barely 16 he lost his father. He was thus compelled to discontinue his studies in college and take up a job as a Bank clerk at Alleppey, a coastal town in Kerala, on Rs. 31/- per month.

Then he migrated to Bombay, like several other South Indians seeking fresh pastures. He joined the East Asiatic Company as a clerk and later switched over to Dumex which was taken over by Pfizer Inc. of America in 1958.

Attending evening classes Ratnam Pillai qualified himself first as Company Secretary and later as Cost Accountant. Thereafter his rise was meteoric - from Head Clerk he became an accountant, then Manager (Finance), General Manager and so on till he was promoted as Managing Director in 1970.

Ratnam feels diligence, hard work and, above all, devotion to God will always help a person. He is a staunch devotee of Lord Ayyappa and has undertaken the pilgrimage to Sabarimala for several years despite heavy odds. In January 1981, for instance, when he had planned to leave Bombay on his pilgrimage - that was the seventeenth time - Pillai was under some tension, due to certain problems in the company.

However, he fixed his date of departure for Sabarimala from Bombay for January 5. But the day before he was summoned to Hong Kong for some urgent meeting. He flew back to Bombay on January 7 still determined to undertake the pilgrimage. But even as he alighted at Santacruz he was told that his brother at Ernakulam had suffered a severe heart attack and that he should rush there with some rare drugs. Ratnam rang up some chemists, got the drugs and flew to Ernakulam on the morning of January 8.

"The next four days" recalls Ratnam Pillai, "were most agonizing for me. My brother did not respond to the drugs and his condition was causing anxiety. All I could do was to pray to Lord Ayyappa that my brother should get well so that I could still visit His shrine before it closes for the season. Thank God, He did answer my prayers."

On January 11 the patient's blood pressure came down and the doctor opined that he was out of danger. The very next day Pillai started on his pilgrimage. "I had good darshan of the Lord," he said, "and my agony turned into ecstasy. And what is more, on my return I found my brother hale and hearty."

Such is the faith of this busy executive that every year he observes austerities for 41 days preparatory to the pilgrimage which he made at all costs.

How did Pillai come to undertake his first trek to the hills? Here is his story. His mother who had already two daughters was pregnant for the third time. His father who was a lawyer teased her that she would give birth to another daughter. The poor woman had no answer.

That very day as she was sitting in her verandah after her husband had gone to the court, an Ayyappa beggar (usual during the pilgrimage season) came to her house and asked for alms. The pious lady immediately went inside and returned with a handful of rice. The latter noticing that she was in the family way blessed her and uttered these words: "The child is none but Ayyappa himself. When he comes of age you must see to it that he visits the Lord atop Sabarimala."

The mother was overjoyed. She delivered a male child. He was Pillai. Years passed and every season she sent her offerings to Lord Ayyappa. Subsequently her husband died. Poor Ratnam was left to fend for himself. That is why he left his native place in Nagercoil and came to Alleppey where he took up the job of a bank clerk, as stated earlier.

Then it happened. The pilgrimage season had started and thousands had put on the *mala* in token of their 41-day vow. The atmosphere around Mullakkal Devi temple where he was staying was surcharged with devotion and reverberated with chants of *Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa*.

It was a Saturday afternoon in 1946. Ratnam had returned to his lodging and was having his siesta when his father appeared in his

dream and reminded him as to why he was not preparing himself to go to Sabarimala. Ratnam woke up with a start, had his *maladharan* (wearing of *mala*) the same evening and undertook his first pilgrimage fulfilling his mother's (and father's) wish. Incredible as it may seem, his mother too had similar dream almost at the same time. How is one to know the mysterious working of God? It is thus that S.V. Pillai became an ardent devotee of Lord Ayyappa to Whom he attributes all that has happened to him materially and spiritually.

The circumstances under which another devotee began his first pilgrimage to Sabarimala were entirely different but no less inspiring. Mr. V. was well employed in an economic daily. He was quite healthy and led a normal life till 1967. Then his troubles started. He had frequent cough and breathing troubles. His doctor diagnosed the complaint as asthma but he could not cure him. He tried ayurvedic and homoeopathic medicines but it was of no avail. He suffered for nearly ten years.

During this period he had problems in his office also. His promotion long overdue did not come about. He was in great mental and physical stress. It was then that his mind turned to God. He thought of undertaking the pilgrimage to Sabarimala. But he didn't know how to go about it. With whom to go? Which route to take? When to go? During *Mandalam* or *Makara Vilakku*? and so on.

It was at this juncture a friend introduced him to one of the active members of the Hariharaputra Bhajana Samaj in Bombay. After he had his *maladharan* on the appointed day with the other members of the Samaj all his problems seemed to disappear like the morning mist before the rising sun. He trekked across the three mountains effortlessly, had a wonderful darshan of the Lord and of *Makara Jyoti* and returned to his work thoroughly refreshed.

That was in 1976. Within a couple of months he got his promotion too. His asthma also did not recur. A happy and contented man he has been visiting the shrine every year since then, rendering all possible assistance to fellow pilgrims. His daily prayer to the Lord is: "Let me have your *darshan* at least once every year."

The problem faced by V's colleague was different. Let us call him Chandran. Normally a young man coming from Kerala landing a stenographer's job in a decent firm without much difficulty should consider himself lucky when compared to others who struggle in Bombay. But that was not to be in Chandran's case. He could not stand the separation from his kith and kin. He therefore gave up his lucrative job and returned to his village. That was in 1972.

However, thanks to the persuasion of his relatives, he came back to Bombay again in 1974. But this time, he found it difficult to get a suitable job. So he took up a typist's job on a meagre salary. But homesickness continued to trouble him. At the same time there was no question of any going back. He felt miserable and his letters to his home made his already helpless mother even more miserable. She turned to her Saviour, Lord Ayyappa and prayed to Him to give them courage and proper guidance. Her prayers were answered. Her son got a job once again as a stenographer. In 1976 he went home on leave and undertook his pilgrimage to Sabarimala.

Both the mother and son are now happy. Chandran got a well-paid job in a financial daily in Calcutta. However due to a prolonged strike there he was transferred to its Bombay office. Thus Chandran is back in Bombay. The city which did not make him happy took him back and offered him great comfort. All this he attributes entirely to the Grace of Lord Ayyappa.

Sunita, the four-year old daughter of P.P. Shankar of Bombay was a normal, healthy child. On July 10, 1980 Shankar returned from office late in the evening and was relaxing thinking that everything was alright with him and with the world. Around 11 p.m. his daughter suddenly complained of a severe stomach ache. The doctor was called and medicines were given but there was no relief.

The doctor advised that she be admitted in a nursing home for observation. As Shankar was leaving his home with his child, his uncle came with a beautiful picture of Lord Ayyappa to be given as a present. His uncle was certainly not aware of the child's serious condition. The divine hand was evidently at work and this incident gave the family a lot of comfort.

The child was admitted into the nursing home. After two days she was operated upon for intestinal obstruction. It was a major operation and the child's condition remained serious for the next four days. On the 4th day at 1 a.m. she developed complications and caused much anxiety to the doctor and the parents.

At the dead of night Shankar had nobody to turn to except the all-seeing God. He poured out his heart to Ayyappa shouting and sobbing "*Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa*." Presently the condition of the child seemed to improve and she was normal the next morning. Firm in his belief that only Ayyappa brought about the recovery of his child, Shankar started on his first pilgrimage to Sabarimala in the ensuing season.

K. Ramamurthy (42) is a practising advocate at Madras. In 1963 he was operated upon for tonsillitis but the operation was not successful. In the result he continued to suffer from cold and other ailments and he was not able to lead a normal life. This affected him professionally since he could not argue his case in the court without frequent interruptions. In 1974 he consulted the renowned ENT Surgeon of Madras, Dr. V. S. Subramaniam, who ruled out any operation as it might prove fatal and said that he might have to live with it.

One day in 1975 when Ramamurthy had given up all hope of leading a normal life, an Ayyappa friend of his advised him to go to Sabarimala to get relief from his complaint. Thus began the pilgrimage for this advocate who has been visiting the shrine every year since then. He has now absolutely no trouble whatever and he is thriving in his profession.

Amalraj Arogyaswamy (34) is a Tamil Christian hailing from Bangalore. He is employed in the railways in Bombay. He started his pilgrimage to Sabarimala in 1979. What was it that drew him to this Hindu shrine though it is true its doors are open to all irrespective of caste, creed and religion? The fact was that Amalraj at a young age of 20 lost all his hair and became completely bald. He tried all kinds of medicines but there was no sign of hair growing on his pate. He took a vow that he would go to Sabarimala and the miracle

happened. Even as he started his penance hair started growing and now he has thick lush hair.

To many of us, all this may look too trivial. But to Amalraj, it made all the difference. What is more, the pilgrimage to Sabarimala renewed his faith in God. He lost his mother while he was only 8 years old. His father married off his four sisters while he himself remained single. What has Ayyappa given him? "Contentment and mental peace which any amount of money cannot buy" is his simple answer.

Appadorai (34) is another Christian. He started his pilgrimage in 1980. Why? No particular reason, he says. He had a keen desire to have darshan of Lord Ayyappa, which he fulfilled despite stiff opposition from his family members including his wife in undertaking this hazardous trek.

After returning from Sabarimala he found that his nine year old child could not stand on her feet due to polio and utter weakness. She was admitted to hospital and remained there for three weeks. His relations pointed out that all this happened because of his visit to Sabarimala. But Appadorai was unshaken in his faith. He vowed that if the child was cured he would take her too. Suffice it to say that the child was with him on the trek when this writer met him in 1981 and she was quite healthy and cheerful.

Appadorai, working in a printing press in Bombay narrated his experience as to how he started on his first pilgrimage. His wife had a swelling on her right leg for some years which somehow would not get cured despite several kinds of treatment. An Ayyappa friend suggested to him to undertake the pilgrimage to Sabarimala if she was cured. But even before that he filled a *mudra* (ghee-filled coconut) and sent it through his friend. Ever since his wife got considerable relief. This incident invested him with faith in Ayyappa and made him undertake the trek to the shrine. Now all his family members are devotees of Ayyappa.

During the pilgrimage in 1981 the author met Mr. S. With him was his sprightly five year old daughter. We in our group were curious to

know as to why he took the child at such an early age. Mr. S. narrated his experience thus. He was a small-scale industrialist based in Baroda. He had everything he could wish for in this world except a child. He had been married eight years and a leading obstetrician in Bombay whom he consulted told him that his wife would not conceive. Another doctor in Madras even advised him to adopt a child if he so desired. Desperate as he was, S. prayed intensely. He visited several temples and capped it all with a visit to Sabarimala. The very next year he was blessed with a female child and we found the grateful father fulfilling his vow.

One is amazed at the bewildering variety of offerings made at Sabarimala which will indicate how deep and widespread is people's faith in Lord Ayyappa. Here is a sampling culled from newspapers during the pilgrimage season in 1981-82:

A devotee from Tamil Nadu offered Rs. 2,000/- for permitting him a two-minute darshan. (Normally devotees get only a fleeting sight because of the never-ending queue.) He approached the Devaswom Board member, Sankaran Nair, and placed the amount before him. But the official did not accept it. He was allowed to stand right in front of the sanctum sanctorum and feast his eyes on the resplendent image of the Lord and thus fulfil his desire. Overjoyed the devotee ultimately donated the amount to the temple.

Apart from cash offerings, gold articles weighing 3 Kg., and silver articles weighing 24 Kg. were found deposited in the hundi. The gold articles included six bangles, a necklace, two golden coconut saplings and two chains. A vigraha of Ayyappa carved in sandal wood, several daggers, foreign currencies, watches, fountain-pens were among the numerous curious offerings.

Political pleas too were found in the hundi. One such representation prayed for the blessings of the Lord for making the Congress (I) leader, K. Karunakaran, the Chief Minister. In fact, Karunakaran himself had trekked to the shrine during the season. (And he was sworn in as Chief Minister on December 28, 1981.)

There are Marxists who are very religious in Kerala. They go on pilgrimage to Sabarimala. It is probably from one of them that a representation was found with the plea that the Marxist leader E. K. Nayanar should be made Chief Minister.

Yet another representation requested that the duties in connection with university examination should not be entrusted to erring teachers and staff. This was in the context of the mark scandal in which several persons including an assistant registrar of Kerala University were arrested for allegedly obliging candidates with duplicate mark lists with inflated figures.

Kerala is notorious for its labour unrest. But, during the 1979 pilgrimage season, three workers of Kottayam Textiles - Moosa, Murali and Vasu - attached an appeal to Ayyappa with the five rupee note they had offered. They sought the blessings of the Lord for the re-opening of their mill which had been closed for nearly one and half years, rendering 400 workers jobless. The very next day, a news item appeared that the Centre accepted the Kerala Government's request to take over three sick units, including Kottayam Textiles.

The following account of how the Lord came incognito and saved the lives of a group of pilgrims has been sent by Kambangudi* K.S. Hariharan from Bangalore. They were in all 64 Ayyappas from Bangalore travelling in one bus and 2 cars. They left Madras on the afternoon of 3rd January 1978 en route to Chidambaram via Kanchipuram. On arrival at Kanchipuram they learnt that his Holiness Jagadguru Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal, the Senior Pontiff of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, was camping at Tenampakkam and naturally they wanted to have darshan of His Holiness - a rare opportunity. They reached Kalavati at about 8.30 p.m. when the Swamigal who had gone to a nearby temple was due to return.

Meanwhile the pilgrims joined together and started chanting *rudra japam*. When His Holiness returned with his retinue with a hurricane lamp he, was immensely pleased with the presence of so many devotees at that late hour. He blessed them saying '*keshemamai poyi varuvel*' - you will return happily.

Overjoyed at the darshan and His Holiness's benediction the Ayyappas returned to Kanchipuram around 10 p.m. They resumed their journey for Chidambaram in three vehicles. In one of the cars were Hariharan and his elder brother Veeramani Iyer in the back seat and two others in the front seat. Upto a place called Pavratti all the three vehicles travelled together. But from this place - it was past midnight - the car was left behind and it missed the other two vehicles. It was pitch dark but the driver knew the route and was confident of reaching Chidambaram alone. So he drove on while the other two vehicles were nowhere in sight.

After a while Hariharan dozed off for a few minutes when he had a dream that his car was going without touching the ground. In a few seconds the car actually crashed against a huge banyan tree and they heard a thundering sound. Nothing could be seen in that darkness. Only the groaning sound of the driver could be heard. Fortunately the doors were open and he came out asking his brother and the two Ayyappas sitting in front to remain in the car.

He tried to stop a passing vehicle but he did not succeed. He stood helpless, not knowing what to do. In his anguish he cried from the bottom of his heart and prayed to Lord Dharma Sasta to come to their rescue. He had heard that whenever they prayed to Him for help He would be there. And Lo! He was there. Presently the bus and the car which started with them and which they thought had gone ahead were actually behind them, pulled up at the spot.

All the Ayyappas came out and took the driver, his elder brother and the two occupants of the car to the bus. His elder brother cried that he was dying and asked for some water from his other younger brother Krishnan who was in the bus. Except Hariharan all others were seriously injured and were taken to the Government Hospital, Cuddalore.

The car itself had been smashed but what was incredible was that the photograph of Ayyappa they had tied on the top had come down and lay at the bottom of the tree facing the car and tree to protect them.

The next day when the Police Inspector visited the spot his first question related to the number of casualties. He could not believe after seeing the condition of the car that all of them were alive. They learnt that the place and the banyan tree had become notorious for such accidents as though some ghost was inhabiting the tree to suck the blood of the travellers.

The injured were detained for treatment for 2/3 days while the other Ayyappas proceeded on their journey. They got another car from Bangalore and they met again at Shencottah from where all they wanted was to go to the hills and return immediately after darshan. But as Hariharan said, "God's ways are not known to us and here is the second part of the drama."

After reaching Pampa Hariharan, along with his elder brother and the other two Ayyappas who were injured were resting in a hotel near the Ganapathi shrine at the foot of the hill. Hariharan arranged dholis for carrying them up the hills and went to Krungayam to see if the rest of group had reached there. Suddenly he heard the announcement about a fire near Ganapathi temple. Readers might recall how this fire gutted several shops and caused unprecedented destruction in January 1978.

Hariharan had his second shock and came back running to rescue the three who were resting in the hotel. To his surprise he saw them coming carrying all their belongings. How they got the strength to walk was puzzling. But had not Lord Krishna declared that he would make the dumb speak and the lame walk. He evidently did the same in this case.

Ultimately the entire group walked up the mountains except those injured who were carried in dholis. All had a satisfactory and wonderful darshan, they made their offerings and returned home safely true to the words of the Sage of Kanchi.

Any account of Sabarimala *yatra* by what is called *pazhamakar* or old-timers is always interesting. Novices would always listen with rapt attention to the narration of their experiences. The author was fortunate in getting a detailed account of pilgrimages by one who

had *Makara Vilakku darshan* for 54 years continuously from 1930, the year he undertook his *Kanni mala* (first pilgrimage). Besides *Makara Vilakku* he has visited Sabarimala on such occasions like Vishu (Malayali New Year day). Panguni Uttram etc. He had lost count of the number of times he has visited the shrine.

This veteran was Bhaskara Iyer of Palai with whom the author also had occasion to undertake the trek. To several regular devotees he was familiar as the *velichapad* or oracle who along with *Melsanti* or chief priest and other temple officials proceeded in the evening of *Makara Vilakku* to *Saramkuttiaal* where they received the *Thiruvabharanam* or the Lord's jewellery coming in procession from Pandalam and accompany it upto sanctum sanctorum. This sacred duty he had undertaken from 1957.

Bhaskara Iyer was born in 1914 of humble parents at Palai. He started his pilgrimage at the age of 16 in 1930 when he was a student. From very early age he displayed great interest and participated with fervour in pujas conducted for Dharma Sasta. In the month of *Vrischikam* - the beginning of Sabarimala season - in 1930 he was at Alleppey where he expressed his desire to go to Sabarimala to his relation Kameshwara Sarma who was a great Guruswami in his time. Bhaskara Iyer had *maladharan* at his hands and for his *yatra* his Guruswami was the temple priest, Narasimhan Potti.

In those days they trekked via Erumeli, the only route that was available and also returned by the same route, a stupendous task. Like disciplined soldiers they marched behind Guruswami without whose permission they could not budge an inch. In those days there were only 3000 to 4000 pilgrims in all. They were mostly from the erstwhile Travancore State as also a few from Cochin, Paravur, Alwaye etc., but hardly any from the Malabar side. Of course there were Ambalapuzha and Alangad groups, traditionally the last to have the *pettathullal* (dance) at Erumeli.

Pilgrims in those days could stay in the temple courtyard itself around the sanctum at Sabarimala. The overflow of pilgrims stayed on either side of *Patinettampadi*. Whenever they camped during

night they kept the fires burning around them to keep the wild animals away. Immediately after *Makara Vilakku* there would be no one in the temple except the chief priest and his associates. For nearly 15 years Bhaskara Iyer proceeded to Sabarimala and returned via Erumeli. It was from 1945 onwards they could return via the easier Padinjare para route (Mount Estate) though they continued to go via Erumeli only.

Bhaskara Iyer vividly remembered the shocking news of the disastrous fire to the temple in March 1950. He was among the groups of pilgrims who visited the shrine on Vishu day following the incident. They were shown the damaged vigraha by the then chief priest Thiruvalla Sri Krishnan Potti. In those days he came in contact with several prominent guruswamis. Among them was the venerable Lakshmi Narayana Iyer (Laksham patta to devotees) of Kambangudi family who in 1948 asked Bhaskara Iyer to sit on the *mandapam* in front of the sanctum and distribute *vibhuti* to devotees after deeparadhana.

Earlier in 1946 he was advised *moola mantra* of Dharma Sasta by none other than the late Chelakkara Sundaram Iyer of Kambangudi family. He was the father of Veeramani Iyer and Hariharan mentioned earlier. From then on he was prominent in all Sasta pujas and functions and had a place of honour everywhere.

Bhaskara Iyer recalled two incidents which almost took him near death's door. One was the accidental fire in 1952 to the munitions stored for firing *kadinas* below the *patinettampadi*. Nearly 10 persons died of burns and about 20 were injured. It was on *Makara Vilakku* day around 3.30 p.m. As a result the Thiruvabharanam procession had to be delayed that year as the sanctum was closed. It was only after the purificatory ceremonies were held that the sanctum was opened and deeparadhana performed around 7.45 at night. Utter chaos prevailed and pilgrims got separated and were missing. As Bhaskara Iyer was close to these happenings it was providential that he was saved and he called it *punarjnama*, rebirth.

The second time his brush with death was in March 1956, when hundreds of Brahmins collected together and conducted a

Maharudram at Sannidhanam. It was a feat in those days since it was very difficult to reach the shrine. It was Bhaskara Iyer's desire to participate in this rare event. Accordingly he was to join a group from Palai going by jeep up to Mount Estate from where they were to undertake the trek. Unfortunately to his utter disappointment he slept away and could not join the group. He did not know what to do. His wife and young children did not want him to go alone.

But Bhaskara Iyer was bent on making the trip, come what may. Much against the wishes of family members, he performed the morning pujas and set out at 10.40 a.m. on a Saturday i.e. after *raaghu kalam*. He caught a bus, nay several buses, enroute and reached Mount Estate at 7 p.m. From there he walked 2 miles through jungles to reach the *satram*. He saw a few buses and cars which had brought devotees there. But there was no one at hand to give him company, all of them having left long before. He sought the advice and blessing of the *Satram* guardian, Pannikkar who was well known to him. Pannikkar advised him that he had another eleven miles to walk through mountains and forests which was unthinkable as he had to go alone at that part of the night. Even so he said: "If you have the courage you can go, Ayyappa will come with you". They burnt camphor before the Lord and with his *mudra vadi* (sacred stick) as his sole companion Bhaskara Iyer set out chanting the *moola mantra* and *Swami Saranam*, a venture even the bravest would not undertake.

The moment he started, a rare sakti possessed him and he walked as though in a trance. Strangely enough in that pitch dark, his path which was single foot wide, was lighted by a ray of light. In between there came hills and mountains which he did not know how he crossed. There was in front of him someone on a horseback to guide him through this difficult terrain. At last when he reached a plain called *uppu para* the horse and rider disappeared. In the distant *Poonkavanam*, the Lord's garden, there were some flickering lights like glow-worms apparently from some teashops.

Bhaskara Iyer finally reached this place. He fell down dead tired on a mat in a shop and rested for a while. He was sweating profusely.

One of the persons there told him that there was a bundle of plantain leaves to be carried to the Sannidhanam for the next day's feast following *maharudram* and also one kerosene tin. Thinking it was all God's test, Bhaskara Iyer, already fagged out, carried the bundle of leaves on his head and resumed his trek with the man carrying the kerosene tin following him. He continued chanting the *moola mantra* and at last the *patinettampadi* was visible. The moment he spotted the sacred steps he ran as though in a trance and jumped on to the base of the eighteen steps. The *Maharudram* was in full swing in the vast pandal and every one thought he was being chased by some wild elephant.

It was only after some time he came to his senses when he was carried to the mandapam and water sprinkled on his face. It was then that he realized all that had happened. He was garlanded after deeparadhana by devotees and from then on he became the real *velichappad* or oracle. It was nothing but Ayyappa's grace that he could do the trek in a few hours something which normally took several days and reach the sanctum in time for the great occasion. He was simply overjoyed and bathed in *ananda*.

There was another incident recalled by Bhaskara Iyer, in which he felt the presence of God. In 1957 he had taken both his young sons to Sabarimala for *Makara Vilakku*. As usual they had their 'viri' (resting place) in the verandah behind *Melsanti's* quarters. The boys were very fond of famous *aravana-payasam* (a delicacy special to Sabarimala prepared from rice, jaggery, ghee, condiments etc.) and were naturally keen on getting it. Unfortunately the stock kept for sale had exhausted and would be available only the next day. Bhaskara Iyer tried all his known-sources and there was not a drop to be got anywhere.

He had planned to leave the *Sannidhanam* at 2 a.m. immediately after the *Vilakku* (elephant procession) as it would be difficult to trek in the hot sun. But the children were stubborn and would not agree until they got the *payasam*. Bhaskara Iyer was greatly worried and did not know how to console them. However, as they were extremely weary they fell asleep.

After some time Bhaskara Iyer woke up with a start and tried to wake up the children, when to his utter surprise he found near their heads two Brooke Bond tins filled with *aravana* with the words *Swami Saranam* written over the lids. He could not believe his eyes at this extraordinary show of mercy of the Lord. His children were besides themselves with joy. They took one tin each in their *irumudi*, went to the Ganapati shrine, lighted the camphor and left. They reached Palai by the evening and there were many friends and neighbours to partake of the divine Prasad and hear the story with wonder.

It is not possible to include all the wonderful incidents which Bhaskara Iyer used to narrate, in this chapter. But this cannot be closed without mentioning one particular incident. On January 10, 1978 a bhakta on his trek near Azhutha was injured on his leg by a thorn. The pain was unbearable and therefore he had to return to Erumeli to proceed to *Sannidhanam* via Chalakayam. With great difficulty and suffering from excruciating pain he succeeded in having his darshan and returned to his place, Bangalore to be admitted to a hospital for operation as advised by the doctor since the wound had become septic. Bhaskara Iyer was at that time (January 28) in Bangalore for attending a marriage.

Friends and well-wishers of Nathan - that was the name of that Ayyappa - approached Bhaskara Iyer and apprised him of the agony of the patient since the doctor even felt that the leg below the knee might have to be amputated. Bhaskara Iyer went to the hospital immediately and saw the patient who was so upset that he was in tears. '*Swami Saranam*' prayed Bhaskara Iyer and gave vibhuti to Nathan saying that he should on his recovery conduct *maladharan* for a *Bramachari* and take him to Sabarimala next year after feeding 108 devotees. The patient readily agreed to the vow.

There was immediate improvement in his condition and the doctor said he would watch another two days and perform the operation only if it was absolutely necessary. Meanwhile Bhaskara Iyer returned to Palai. That was on January 29th and on February 2, he received a telegram from Nathan that there was no need for

operation and he had completely recovered. The very next year he fulfilled the vow.

Bhaskara Iyer is no more, but his stories will continue to inspire the devotees.

- According to legend, Ayyappa while returning with tiger's milk entered a village. Taken unawares, the villagers were awe-struck with the appearance of a herd of wild tigers and hurriedly closed the door of their houses. But one poor Brahmin house was open. Ayyappa entered this house and was reverentially received by the inmates who served him Kanji or gruel. The Lord gave them Viswarupa darshan and blessed them. This was the 'Kambangudi' family descendants of whom are living in Bombay, Bangalore, Madras and other places. Ayyappa is their Kuladaivam and the members utter moola mantra and offer pujas and are thus specially revered by Ayyappa devotees.

CHAPTER – 11

OVER THE YEARS

THE call of the hills and of the shrine on top attracts millions year after year to Sabarimala. There is no generation gap here - the young, the old and the youth are all there, partaking in the seasonal congregation which is next only to those in the Vatican and Mecca.

The pilgrims include students, doctors, engineers, professors, lawyers and judges. Says a report in *The Times of India* dated December 20, 1983: "Mr. Justice Chandrasekhara Menon of the Kerala High Court was recently rubbing shoulders with other pilgrims. A 23-year old chartered accountancy student, Sunil Datt, was on his ninth trip to Sabarimala this year. Despite his initial disinclination, with the approach of the season, he said he was tempted to make the pilgrimage."

Apart from religious reasons, the element of challenge, whether the devotee can last the rigorous penance and return well, appears to be the reason why, of late, the increasing number of youth participates in the trek to the forest shrine.

Writes V. Suresh in his article, "Sabarimala, redefining identities" in *The Hindu*, January 19, 1992:

"A silent and unnoticed religious fervour has been sweeping the southern states in the last two or three years. In numerous towns and villages, hundreds of boys are joining thousands of their elder menfolk in donning the black garb indicative of the Ayyappa bhakta. From street hawkers to auto drivers, bus conductors to salaried employees, skilled artisans to professionals... irrespective of wealth or riches, the Ayyappa fever seems to have infected everyone. At last count, in 1990, over 2.5 crore devotees visited Sabarimala."

The most important feature, as the writer reiterates, is that it is the lack of caste differentiation that attracts many people from both rural and urban areas, not once, but again and again. What is more, he adds: "Many of the traditionally relegated lower castes have found in the non-caste based

Ayyappa ritual a good way to even out discriminating status difference vis-à-vis upper castes".

Above all, the Ayyappas, irrespective of the caste or status, will be on their best behaviour during the preparatory *vrata* period. A friend on his first ever visit to Bangalore was sceptical of the behaviour of autorickshaw drivers known for their avarice and rudeness. "Do not worry", assured his brother. "This is the Sabarimala season, get into any auto manned by black-clad bearded Ayyappa greeting him *Swami saranam* and just tell him your destination. He will reach you straight there without charging an extra paisa and with all courtesy." This happened and the friend wondered: "If only this happened throughout the year!"

Phenomenal rise in pilgrims.

It is interesting to note how, over the years, the number of pilgrims has been increasing phenomenally and co-respondingly the income too, turning Sabarimala into one of the most prosperous places of worship in South India. In 1970-71 the income from the devotees was just Rs.24 lakh. In 1976-77, the revenue shot up to Rs.160 lakh. Ten years later, during the 1986-87 season, the temple income tipped the scales at a record Rs. 7.5 crore.

The income continues to increase around 20% every year. According to the then Travancore Devaswom Board president Mr. Bhaskaran Nair, there was spurt in the number of pilgrims coming from other states and from abroad as well. He said there was a cent percent rise in the number of pilgrims from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Devotees came from as far as the U.S., Canada, West Germany, the Gulf countries and Singapore. In all 15 million people were estimated to have made the pilgrimage during the season ended with Makara Sankranti on January 14, 1987. The number has since swelled to 25 million as mentioned earlier.

Off season also, the monthly pujas conducted at Sabarimala attract devotees in increasing number these days. Among the notables, film star Rishi Kapoor had darshan of Lord Ayyappa on October 17, 1985. According to press reports, he was wearing a saffron *jibba* and *dhoti* and carrying

irumudi kettu in the traditional manner. He climbed the Patinettampadi, went round the shrine thrice and descended backwards as per custom.

"An extraordinary experience," said an elated Rishi Kapoor. "The environment, the spiritual ecstasy I experienced is indescribable," he added.

Another famed film star to visit the shrine during the season in 1984 was Amitabh Bachchan. He was accompanied by an entourage of 24 persons. Wearing saffron *dhoti* and slacks he carried the *irumudi* and chanted *saranam*, sticking to tradition. The matinee idol who survived an injury sustained during a film shooting in 1983, stayed at Sabarimala overnight and worshipped the next morning also.

Interestingly, drama and cinema were the media which were responsible for spreading the Ayyappa cult outside Kerala half a century ago. In Kerala itself majority of the pilgrims were from the erstwhile princely states of Travancore, only a handful from Cochin state who braved the forests and wild animals to undertake the trek and practically none ventured from Malabar area.

In 1941, Nawab Rajamanickam who had founded Madurai Devi Balavinoda sangeethasabha, staged for the first time a soul-stirring drama, titled 'Ayyappan' at Alapuzha. This attracted huge crowds and between 1941 and 1949 and when C. P. Ramaswamy Ayyar was Dewan of Travancore, the drama was enacted at several places. Indeed people, instead of undertaking the hazardous trek to Sabarimala found fulfillment by witnessing the drama and became staunch Ayyappa bhaktas.

M.N. Nambiar, the popular film star was one such who undertook his first trek in 1942. Since then for 54 years, without any break he was visiting the shrine, leading hundreds of pilgrims in four or five buses. These included such popular actors like Gemini Ganesan, Shivaji Ganesan and Karnataka actor Rajkumar. Naturally their numerous fans followed suit which account for the predominance of pilgrims from Southern states.

Nambiar started his career on Rs. 3/- per month in Madras and he attributes his meteoric rise as a top film star to the grace of Ayyappa. He is Guruswami to numerous fans and indeed sets high standards for his followers by observing rigid austerities.

Eventually Rajamanickam's drama, was filmed by Maryland Subramaniam which along with other films on Ayyappa popularized the deity among the masses. Then there is Yesudas, late Veeramani and other musicians whose divine songs moved millions to ecstasy.

How High Priests Are Chosen

The tenure of the much coveted post of high priest at Sabarimala is one year effective from the 30th of the Malayalam month of Thulam (mid-October). The eligible priests, well experienced and qualified in mantratantra can apply to the post in response to the Devaswom Board notification published in leading newspapers in the month of Karkitakam or Chingam (July-August.) Those who have officiated as high priest in one year cannot apply again.

The Devaswom Board shortlists the applicants who are called initially for a personal interview. Those selected at the interview are subjected to lucky dip. If 20 persons are selected, each name is entered on a slip of paper and folded and twenty such are deposited in one pot. In another pot, 10 blank slips, plus one slip with the word "Melsanthi" written on it are deposited.

Both these vessels, closed securely, are taken by the Tantri inside the srikovil and offered puja. Thereafter they are taken outside and one small child is asked to take out one slip at a time from each vessel. Whenever a blank slip from the second vessel appears against any name taken from the first vessel that candidate is rejected. When the slip with 'Melsanthi' written on it appears against the slip with an aspirant's name he is chosen as the high priest. It is a matter of luck and God's grace which not only enables the aspirant the rare privilege of conducting pujas for Ayyappa for one year but also fetches enough wealth to last his generation and probably the next one also!

Ayyappa Seva Sangam

No account of Sabarimala pilgrimage will be complete without a mention of the yeoman service rendered by the volunteers of the Akhila Bharata Ayyappa Seva Sangam during the past four decades and more.

The year was 1945*. Those were the years when there were hardly any amenities for the Sabarimala pilgrims as we see today. Thousands of pilgrims had congregated on the banks of the Pampa river. There were no sanitary arrangements worth the name. The pilgrims who were so tired after the trek that they could not even walk, had to put up shelters themselves after cleaning up the area used by previous batches.

Then there were old people, children, the sick, the injured and the incapacitated among them who suffered for lack of medical care. There were pilgrims who got isolated from their group in the rush and were left high and dry in the vast assemblage.

The plight of these people set some good Samaritans thinking and they decided to do something to relieve their sufferings. Thus was sown the seed of the now famous volunteer organization Akhila Bharata Ayyappa Seva Sangam which has centers all over India.

At a meeting convened at Chitra Theatre hall in Thiruvananthapuram in March 1945, presided over by Justice Shri K.S Govinda Pillai, the Sangam was given shape with a committee of 15 members with Justice Pillai as president, Dr. P. A. Velayudhan Pillai as general secretary and Shri P. Subramaniam as treasurer. Subramaniam's was the first contribution of Rs 601, comprising Rs 1, the admission fee and Rs. 600 his donation. From these humble beginnings the sangam grew into an All-India service organization helping the ever growing pilgrim population in countless ways.

From the very next pilgrimage season, the Sangam started drinking water distribution at key points like Azhutha, Karimala and Neelimala. Its volunteers also conducted bhajans and religious discourses using loudspeakers at Pampa. They received Rs. 800 by way of donation from the public but spent Rs. 2000 that season. But what mattered was the satisfaction of a good job well done.

In March 1945, the first branch of the Sangam was set up and subsequent years saw several springing up in Cochin and Malabar regions. In olden days pilgrims to Sabarimala emanated mainly from the former Travancore State. Now with the setting up of the Sangam sakhas at other centres, pilgrims started coming from Cochin and Malabar regions also.

The 1950 fire incident at Sabarimala which destroyed the temple and the deity (see Introduction) sent shock waves among the Hindus. To restore faith and popularise the Ayyappa cult, the Sangam made a replica of Ayyappa in Panchaloha and took the idol in procession to several places like Madura, Tirunelveli, Palni and Tirupati, thus attracting pilgrims from neighbouring states also. This idol was finally installed in the Sabramanya temple at Thiruvananthapuram.

In recognition of the service rendered by the Sangam the state government has been giving a grant of Rs.8000 per annum. Service to the sick is high on the Sangam's agenda and this explains the establishment of Ayurvedic and Allopathic medical centres at vulnerable points on the pilgrims' route. Its distribution of boiled water spiced with jeera and other condiments is a speciality of the Sangam's service. Other activities include publication of devotional books and magazines and helping in renovation of dilapidated temples in the states.

* Based on Ayyappa Seva Sangam by Swami Athuradas, former President, Akhila Bharata Ayyappa Seva Sangam.

Appendix – A

ROUTE AND DISTANCE FROM IMPORTANT TOWNS IN KERALA BY FOOT

1. Erumeli to Pampa	(via Peroorthodu, Kalaketti, Azhutha, Kallidamkunnu, Azhuthamedu, Inchiparakotta, Kariyilamthodu, Karimala, Valiyanavattam - on foot through mountains and forest 47 Kms
2. Vandiperiyar	(K K Road) to Mount Estate (Vehicle) 8 Kms Mount Estate to Sabarimala on foot (This route excludes Pampa) 11 Kms

BY VEHICLE

Erumeli-Pampa	80 Kms
Kottayam-Erumeli via Kanjirappally	55 Kms
Kottayam-Erumeli via Manimala	54 Kms
Kottayam-Pampa via Manimala	116 Kms
Kottayam-Pampa via Thiruvalla, Kozhenchery-Vadasserikkara	119 Kms
Kottayam-Pampa via Thiruvalla	123 Kms
Chengannur-Pampa	93 Kms
Ernakulam-Pampa via Kottayam	200 Kms
Alleppey-Pampa via A.C. Road	137 Kms
Punaloor-Pampa	101 Kms
Pathanamthitta-Pampa	65 Kms
Trivandrum-Pampa	180

	Kms
Ernakulam-Erumeli via Vaikom, Pala-Ponkunnam	121 Kms

APPENDIX – B

DETAILS OF THE DAYS/PERIOD WHEN SANCTUM SANCTORUM IS OPEN AT SABARIMALA AND PUJAS ARE CONDUCTED

January	1 to 20	Makara Vilakku festival
February	13 to 17	Monthly puja
March	14 to 18	Monthly puja
March	20	Panguni Uttram festival
April	11 to 18	Puja in connection with Vishu (Malayali New Year day) and monthly puja.
May	15 to 19	Monthly puja
June	11	Pratishta day puja
July	15 to 19	Monthly puja
July	16 to 20	Monthly puja
August	17 to 21	Monthly puja
September	10 to 12	Onam puja.
October	17 to 21	Monthly puja.
November	16 to December 26	Mandala puja

Please Note: The above dates and nakshatras are based on Malayalam Calendar, and therefore there may be a difference of one or two days according to the English calendar.

About The Author



A well-known railway writer, **K. R. Vaidyanathan** retired from the Indian Railways after four decades of service. His other books, 1) **Sri Krishna**, **The Lord of Guruvayur** (2) **Lord of Guruvayur —Divine Experiences** and f(3) **Temples and Legends of Kerala**, published by **Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan**, have found favour with devotees all over India and abroad.