

# Tradition of Ayyappa God in Kodagu Culture

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With the decline of the Roman empire, the spice trade with the Kerala coast was taken over by the Arabs, long before the advent of Islam itself. Precisely when Islam came to Kerala is not definitively known. But Arabic tradition suggests that a few missionaries sent out by the Prophet in his fifty - seventh year might have reached Kerala. If this is true, Islam might have entered Kerala in the seventh century itself. According to Sheikh Zainuddin, the 16th century historian who visited Kerala, an important missionary group consisting of Malik Ibn Dinar, Sharaf Ibn Malik, Malik Ibn Habib and others landed in Cranganore (Kannanur) in 642- 643 A.D. and was warmly received by the ruler. The group divided by itself into two, both moving along the coast, one northwards and the other towards the south. The tolerance of the native rulers enabled them to establish eleven centers in the first phase itself. Around the Mosques which began to be constructed, colonies of Muslims grew up and owing to the continuance of the mercantile tradition of the Arabs, these colonies became important commercial centers linking the west coast with west Asia and North Africa.

We have now to move on to a fascinating Hindu religious tradition which established a fine contact with Islam amidst the vicissitude of medieval history. This tradition is that of Sastha or Ayyappa. Originally, Ayyan or Ayyappan seems to have been the protective deity of Dravidian villages, on either side of the ghats, that is in Tamil country as well as in Kerala. Village shrines showing the deity mounted on a charger and armed with bows and arrows can be seen even today in Tamil country, where however, the evolution seems to have been arrested at this level. As the occupation of Kerala was by migrant groups from the east coast through the mountain passes, and as the first settlements were made by clearing the thick forests, the deity of the village became the deity of the forest. This recalls the growth of myth in the Greco-Roman world, where Pan was the protective deity of Arcadian shepherds and Arcadian forests and later, as Faunus, the god of agricultural communities in ancient Italy. Ayyappan thus became a forester, his hunting pack consisting of tigers, not dogs, and his most ancient and important shrine is in the forested Sabari hill on the spine of the ghats overlooking the central plain of both Tamil country and Kerala.

When Buddhism spread to Kerala, Ayyappan seems to have been worshipped as the Buddha. The fact that the worship of Ayyappan, throughout the ages, tolerated no caste distinctions

and that even today the pilgrims to his forest - shrine chant the salutation Ayyappan saranam, reminding us of the sarana Traya of the Buddhist orders, recalls this phase in the growth of the myth. When the saivite religion displaced Buddhism, folk imagination regarded him the son of Siva, When rivalry developed between saivite and vaishnavite cults, Ayyappan again become a reconciler. There exists a fantastic legend according to which Vishnu once took a female form, and Siva became enamoured by her and the fruit of the union was Ayyappan.

The next phase brings us to a historical figure. The second Chera empire collapsed in the conflict with Cholas in the eleventh century. The realm disintegrated into small principalities, none of which was strong enough to arrest the growing anarchy. From across the Ghats, the Pandyan rulers began to encroach into Kerala and claim overlordship over the principalities. The Maravas, lawless tribes of the ancient Dravidian realm who lived by plunder like the Vikings of Europe, occupied the forested spines of the Ghats and frequently raided the plains of central Kerala. The west coast similarly, saw the frequent visit of Arab pirates.

Pantalam was a small principality in central Kerala. In one of the raids by the Maravas, a princess disappeared and was believed to have perished. But she had been rescued by a Brahmin youth. They fled to a forest retreat near the Sabari hill. In course of time a son was born to them. The father brought up the boy in both an intense spiritual and military discipline, the latter because he wanted his son to rescue Kerala from anarchy. When he came of age, the youth was sent to the court of Pantalam where the ruler recognized him as the son of his long - lost sister and made him the commander of his army. Ayyappan, as the youth was called, later visited all the principalities of Kerala, mobilizing their support for a united onslaught against the Maravas and establishing Kalaris (military gymnasias) all over the land.

A remarkable encounter with the Arab pirates resulted in a great friendship between Ayyappan and their leader, Vavar (Babur). Today Vavar's shrine stands near Ayyappan's temple on Sabari hill and not only Muslims but Hindu pilgrims also offer worship here. From the family which traces its descent from Vavar, the eldest in every generation participate in the annual festival of the Sabari hill temple and this Vavar Swami is revered as a saint by the Hindu pilgrims. The syncretic vitality of the Ayyappan myth, thus, could unite not only the

different cults of Hinduism, but the different religions as well. Ayyappan later visited the Pandyan court to ensure that when he finally moved against the Maravas, the Pandyan ruler would not give the latter any support. This was necessary because the Maravas were, nominally at least, the subjects of the Pandyan king and provided recruits for his army although the bulk of them were freebooters who ignored his authority. The rest of the story deals with the brilliant military operations against Marava strongholds in the hills where Vavar was one of Ayyappan's most trusted lieutenants. After the campaign, the temple which had been destroyed decades ago was restored and according to the legend, Ayyappan himself mysteriously disappeared, as his mission was over.

Today the figure of this national hero of the eleventh or twelfth century has indissolubly merged with that of the traditional deity. The Ayyappan cult has had a phenomenal growth in recent years which deserves a detailed sociological study. The annual pilgrimage to the forest - shrine attracts increasing numbers every year, and from the educated classes. Probably, the entire experience is felt to be a vigorous toning up of the otherwise routine life in civic occupations. Before the pilgrimage, for thirty days the devotee adopts a strict regimen of physical and mental cleanliness. Neither caste nor class barriers are tolerated among the pilgrims who address one another as "Ayyappa Swami" (Lord Ayyappa). It is this intense democratic spirit which enabled the cult to link up smoothly with the Islamic tradition as well.

Village-deities are an All - India phenomenon. By this it is meant that the deities who are worshiped in villages in various parts of India have more or less the same character and attributes, and that the technique of propitiating them is broadly similar. These statements no doubt sound vague and general, but any attempt to make them more precise will have to take account of exceptions at every point.

While the phenomenon is broadly similar all over India, there are important regional variations. Generally speaking, within India, each region or district has a greater unity than the larger area of which it is a part. Inside peninsular India, for instance, each linguistic area represents an area of greater cultural homogeneity and social solidarity. But there are also cultural forms which are common to two or more linguistic areas. Malayalam and Tamil areas have certain cultural forms in common; and similarly Kannada, Telugu, and Marathi areas have some cultural forms in common. Within each linguistic area too there are differences; cultural forms present in the centre of a linguistic area might not be present in the peripheral regions or present only in an altered form. Geographical barriers also usually represent Cultural barriers. For instance, cultural forms found in the littoral stripe have great difficulty in spreading into the mainland of peninsular

India. A country like Kodagu, which lies at the periphery of three linguistic areas, Karmada, Malayalam, and Tulu, has certain cultural forms in common with each of them and it mainly due to regular contact and diffusion of cultural elements.

Throughout south India village - deities are represented by crude images of stone or wood. They are either housed in shrines which are usually not very elaborate, or simply embedded in the earth without any roof above them. In Kodagu an Ayyappa deity dedicated to a *keri* [hamlet] is frequently found either at the foot of a tree or in the shade of a grove on a raised earthen platform with a pack of earthen hunting dogs. This cult might have been entered to Kodagu in 12th century A.D. from Kerala. In Kodagu, Shasta is referred to as Ayyappa, or Saasthaavu, and he inhabits the forest in which he wanders at night with his favourite pack of dogs. At night, in the forest, he can be heard whistling to his pack. Votive offerings of representations of dogs and bows and arrows are made to his shrines. Some forests are reserved for Ayyappa exclusively, and nobody may hunt or cut down trees there. Kodavas do not hunt on Wednesday and Saturday because Ayyappa hunts on those days. Formerly, liquor and fowl were offered to him by Kodavas after a successful hunt. At some Ayyappa shrines non-vegetarian offerings are made, whereas at others only vegetarian offerings are made.

Kodavas are fond of hunting, and every ancestral house has a pack of dogs which accompany their master during hunting. Ayyappa is extremely popular with kodavas as the deity presiding over hunting, and very many kodavas are named after him. The forests reserved on the name of Ayyappa are called as *Devera kaadu*. Worship may or may not be offered daily at these shrines. There is no uniform rule applicable in this matter. Practices vary from village to village, and in some temples worship is offered once a week, while others come to life only annually, or once every few years, when the festival of the deity is being celebrated.

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