"Swamiye, Saranam Ayyappa" Exult Sixty Million Pilgrims
Category : May 1996
Published by Anonymous on May. 02, 1996

"Swamiye, Saranam Ayyappa" Exult Sixty Million Pilgrims

Demands to Open Temple to Women and Commercial Development May Change Kerala's Remote Refuge

Vrindavanam Gopalakrishnan, Kerala, India

It was in the early hours of January 14th--Makar Sankranti day--when I arrived at Pampa. A river of people a million strong and all dressed in black or blue surged ahead of me toward the hilltop shrine of Lord Ayappan at Sabarimala in Kerala. The trail was lined with stores and tea stalls, shrines and small temples.

Near dusk we came to a clearing overlooking a smoke-filled valley. Below I could see the Ayyappa temple. It was small and simple compared with the huge edifices in Tamil Nadu. A square platform surrounding the temple was absolutely packed with men. Buildings, hotels and lodges filled the valley, transforming this once remote place into a concrete jungle

We approached the temple and before us stood the glittering eighteen steps, covered in gold, majestic and welcoming. They were steeper and narrower than I had imagined. We took a small coconut out from the irumudi[a traditional offering bag] that each of us was required to carry, walked to the foot of the

steps and after a brief silent prayer hurled the nut against the bottom step. Each coconut exploded in a shower of spray and slid through a large slot to some unseen, coconut-filled chamber.

The surging crowd pushed forward while barefoot Kerala policemen standing on both sides of the steps gently helped us to move up to the platform surrounding the sanctum sanctorum.

We circled the temple on an elevated ramp and then passed through the main building and past the sanctum sanctorum. There was no room even to put my hands together in prayer as I was pushed along by thousands of men and boys. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of the small golden figure of Lord Ayappan covered with jasmine garlands illuminated by oil lamps in an otherwise black room, and then it was gone.

Later, our leader unpacked our irumudibags and prepared the offerings we had carried, filling metal basins with sacred ash, kumkuma, rosewater, sandalwood paste, camphor, betel nut, sugar, cashew nuts, raisins and money. The "swamis," as each pilgrim is called, then packed the items and brought them to the temple. Because of the huge crowd, special counters with attending priests have been opened just to handle the offerings. Fifty people work in a massive counting room, sorting and counting monetary offerings, all during the festival season. After completing our offerings, we--and hundreds of thousands of others--started our return that same day.

There are two traditional and overlapping stories of Lord Ayyappan. In the Puranas, He is of divine origin, the offspring of both Siva and Vishnu, hence a brother to Lord Ganesha and Lord Murugan (to whose temples Ayappan devotees often pilgrimage). Ayyappa is considered a Saivite Deity. In these puranic accounts, Ayyappa is the original deity of the temple. But His worship may also have a historical origin, for there are numerous Malayalam folk songs about Him that point back to a real person living about the 10th century who merged in samadhi into the murthiof the Sabarimala temple. In either case, He is distinctly a God of Kerala, and Sabarimala is His only temple. The name Ayyappais derived from aryan, "one worthy of reverence" and appa, meaning "father."

The Pilgrimage Preparations

The Malayalam folk songs about Ayyappa convey both the stories of His advent and the traditions of the pilgrimage to Sabarimala. As He was a brahmachari, the original pilgrimage was essentially for men observing brahmachari or chastity, though pre-adolescent girls and women beyond child-bearing age could also participate.

The required two-months of preparation entails 18 observances: wearing a mala of rudraksha or tulsi beads; a vegetarian diet; no shoes, no sex; no smoking, drinking or drugs; cold water bath twice a day; no shaving or haircuts; visiting a temple once a week; wearing a black or blue veshti; wearing sandalwood paste and kumkuma daily; eating one meal a day; keeping away from women of child-bearing age; maintaining a temple composure; addressing all other pilgrims

as "Ayyappa" or "swami;" no lying, stealing or cheating; sleeping on a straw mat with no pillow; no TV or other entertainment; and finally, to always think of the Lord, gathering daily to sing His praises.

When the devotee leaves his house, he does so without taking leave of anybody or even looking back. He simply walks out barefoot in the spirit of complete renunciation. The starting point for the pilgrimage was Erumeli, 72 kms from Sabarimala. It was originally an arduous journey to the temple through jungles and over mountains. Now pilgrims can start from as little as six kilometers from the temple. Unfortunately, the trend at Sabarimala is to treat the pilgrimage as a tourist excursion, rather than a religious pilgrimage, and many do not observe the eighteen disciplines today.

Restriction on Women

Devotees expressed to me their opinions on the barring of women. "Of late, there is also a hue and cry from the modern womenfolk arguing for entry into Sabarimala," observes K. K. Prafullan, special officer, Cochin Devaswom Board at Chottanikkara Temple. "But allowing women of childbearing age, in my opinion, would definitely profane the sanctity of this holy shrine".

Ms. K. B. Valsalakumari is the district administrator of Pathanathitta. She disagrees. "I am of the opinion that the restrictions on women were imposed for security reasons when the trek was through inaccessible forests. But now the

situation has changed. If it is still considered to be a cause for social problem, then it would be advisable to throw open a couple of days during the pilgrimage season exclusively for the women devotees. Even in the famous Sri Vallarha Temple at Thiruvalla where women were hitherto not permitted to enter they are now allowed."

Mr. P.P. Balasubramaniam, senior Indian Government official, Cochin, observes, "Sabarimala is situated in a dense forest, a difficult spot for women to reach and do offerings. Furthermore, for women in the age group of 13 to 45 years it is difficult to keep physical purity without which entry to the premises of any temple for them is difficult. Changing such customs will be difficult."

Mr. P. Venugopal, a writer and banking official states, "The rigorous austerity measures a devotee has to undergo before undertaking the pilgrimage has got historical ritualistic standing and justifications. It is aimed at helping a devotee to attain mental and physical purity before having the darshan of the Lord. This, in fact, further enlightens the divinity embodied in a true pilgrim. Pilgrimage to Sabarimala is not a picnic or tourist trip, and it should not be allowed to be changed into such an exercise. There shouldn't be a scintilla of erosion in the tradition and rituals followed for centuries. And to uphold and upkeep these traditions the women of childbearing age should also not be allowed."

Chandra Babu, an expert on personal and business management, concurred, "To preserve the sanctity of the holy shrine, women of childbearing age shall not be allowed to visit

in view of the inconveniences associated with women of this age group to keep purity of mind and body."

A Brahmachari Journey

Sabarimala is a unique temple in requiring the 18 austerities and forbidding women of childbearing age to participate--they are dutifully stopped by women police officers at Pampa, 6 km before the temple. Since pilgrims are required to embark in a state of brahmachari, it is natural and traditional that they stay away from women during that time and especially are not tempted during the trek through the dense jungle. This discipline is in keeping with the observances of many organizations today, such as the Swaminarayan Fellowship of Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj which strictly keeps the brahmacharis separate from women. Two months of brahmachariya is a demanding yoga practice, aimed at intensifying the spiritual forces. The presence of girls and women of child-bearing age could easily prove a distraction for the male pilgrims and put the women under distinct threat too. Other temples don't require brahmachari for men as part of a pilgrimage, hence do not have the same restrictions on women. As Sabarimala becomes more and more accessible to the casual visitor and fewer and fewer people actually follow the required disciplines, then naturally the esoteric logic behind the traditions becomes obscured, for it doesn't really apply to most anymore. Nevertheless, should the temple abandon this restriction, then it will lose its special stature and style, papam[sin] will enter and the aspirants spiritual punyam [merit] will diminish.

Controlling the Christians

The pilgrimage has always been open to all castes and creeds of Hindus, and now even Muslims and Christians are found among the pilgrims. Hindus make no particular objection to this. "However," states Chandra Babu, "some tangible norms have to be introduced for a non-Hindu if he wishes to visit the shrine. Faith is more important than the label of religion. During the last season, Christian pastors masqueraded as pilgrims and distributed leaflets belittling the Hindu religion and the pilgrimage to Sabarimala. Such activities will become more and more easy if it is made a place free to all."

Economic Impact

The pilgrimage to Sabarimala has become so monumental that it now significantly impacts upon the economy of Kerala. The total annual commercial activity generated by the pilgrimage is estimated by the Travancore Devasom Board as Rs3,000 crore (US$880 million). Thousands of families in the local districts earn substantial sums during the two-month pilgrimage season from commercial activities, enough to keep them going till the next season. Even beggers pour in from neighboring states. Crores of rupees are paid towards state taxes and other levies. Other departments benefited are sales tax, excise, transport, forest, health, water authority and electricity board.

The Travancore Devasom Board, an autonomous body which controls and administrates the famous hill shrine at Sabarimala

and 1,185 other temples in southern Kerala reported its income as Rs25 crores (US$7.3 million) during last pilgrimage season from November 15, 1995, to January 14, 1996, N. Bhaskaran Nair, TDB President, told Hinduism Today. There was an increase by about 40 percent over the previous season.

According to Nair, an estimated sixty million pilgrims visited Sabarimala during the last season. Pilgrims came from Andhra Pradesh (31%), Tamil Nadu (27%), Kerala (26%), Karnataka (15%) and the remaining 1 percent from other states and abroad. Each stayed an average of two weeks in Kerala.

Proceeds from the Sabarimala pilgrimage are used to support 900 of the additional 1185 temples under the TDB as they do not earn a sustainable revenue, explained Nair.

Sidebar: The Development Debate

The Sabarimala temple is administrated by the government-appointed Travancore Devaswom Board [TDB]. Its recent proposals to make the Sabarimala pilgrimage more comfortable have drawn sharp criticism from devotees. The TDB's overall concept is to construct a motorable asphalted road up to Marakkoottam, a place close to the hill shrine, and to provide quality hotels and similar luxuries nearby. While in Sabarimala, I found few devotees favorably disposed to the proposal.

"We are not against providing basic amenities, such as shelters, bathing and toilet facilities and medical services, to

the pilgrims. But we cannot conceive of Sabarimala having a residential and commercial complex well connected with a highway, totally ignoring the traditional rituals which are being followed by the pilgrims for centuries," the activists of Hindu Ikyavedisaid.

A. Muraleedhan, a devotee from Thrissur complained, "This plan would attract more people to Sabarimala, but definitely not as pilgrims. This would also pave the way for bringing classism to this holy place, a phenomenon hitherto nonexistent."

K. B. Valsala Kumari, the District Collector, Pathanamthitta, is of the opinion that the pilgrims should not be allowed to stay overnight at Sabarimala. They should be provided with accommodation at places at least 10 kms. away from Pampa wherefrom the pilgrims could drive down to Pampa for trekking to Sabarimala.

Sukumaran Nair, Secretary of the Pampa River Protection Councilbelieves any disturbance to the existing forest will certainly destabilize the soil system and ground water flow pattern. This may lead to minor and major landslides in the immediate vicinity of the temple.

Rajeev Srinivasanis originally of Kerala but now living in California. He considers development "a very dangerous trend, because it would cause the destruction of one of the few remaining Kerala rainforests."

"Any construction around the temple would lead to the transformation of this holy place to a touristic and picnic area," grumbles K. K. Prafullan, special officer, Cochin Devaswom Boardat Chottanikkara Temple. "Besides, raising skyrise buildings in the vicinity of the temple is against traditional Hindu temple architecture."

Mr. P. P. Balasubramaniam, a senior Indian government official,Cochin states, "The calm atmosphere should be maintained as is being done in Tirupati where the number of pilgrims every day are more than at Sabarimala. Constructions of huts which are ecofriendly and which do not disturb the natural purity of place and detract the attention of the pilgrims will be sufficient. The buildings, roads, bridges, etc., should be in a manner which clearly depicts the ancient culture of Kerala and cottages that look like the shelters of rishis and munis of the epics. "

Bhaskaran Nair, president of TDB, replied to these concerns: "Construction of highrise buildings were done with the approval of the Thanthris [temple priests] who felt that the Lord had no objection." He explained that the government is of the opinion that only a project acceptable to all--retaining the sanctity, traditions, and maintaining environmental and ecological balance of the area--would be pursued. The important problems to be addressed immediately are the lack of sanitary facilities, other hygienic aspects, wide and safe roads, parking spaces, medical facilities and accommodation to meet the ever growing demand of the pilgrims. Nair says that paucity of funds is one of major constraints faced by the board. The state coffer is beefed up during the pilgrimage season with hundreds of crores of rupees levied as various

taxes. Yet the grant given to the TDB is a meagre Rs40.5 lakh (US$1.2 million) annually, according to Nair.