

[Sacrifice for Sabari](#)

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SPECIAL FEATURE

Sacrifice for Sabari

In Kerala, 50 million pilgrims just spent twelve million dollars in three months doing hard penance to earn the grace of Lord Ayyappan.

Vrindavanam S. Gopalakrishnan, Kerala, India

Some say the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, which is performed by millions every year in the southern state of Kerala from November through the middle of March, is over before it starts, meaning its blessings are sown during the elaborate preparation for it. This consists of "mandalakalam," an intense 41-day penance. The pilgrimage, which is like a celebration for completing the preparation, may be taken via one of several routes which varies greatly in length and difficulty. But no pilgrimage route, challenging or not, is ever embarked upon without first completing the rigors of mandalakalam.

During mandalakalam, the devotee prepares an offering of ghee in a very special way. He husks and cleans a coconut and pours the milk out through a small pierced hole. He then fills the coconut with ghee and seals it shut with wax. Throughout the pilgrimage, he carries one, two or three of these ghee-filled coconuts like gold, because at Sabarimala this golden ghee will be ceremoniously poured upon the icon of Ayyappan.

The ghee-filled coconut symbolizes man's ego shrouding his soul essence. When the ghee is released from the coconut and anoints the icon of Lord Ayyappan, the essence of the soul of the devotee is said to unite with the essence of God, thus bringing the pilgrimage to its zenith. Few who have taken this spiritual journey would say their lives have not been transformed. Mine was. Here is my story.

Journey's Preparations

My penance began with the donning of a rosary of rudraksha beads on November 16, 2001. My uncle was my "guruswami," or pilgrimage guide. He has taken this journey every year for 18 years. On that special day in November, after taking a bath before dawn and dressing in a black lungi, I walked with guruswami to an ancient Siva Temple. There we offered prayers for a successful pilgrimage and got our rudraksha rosaries sanctified by the priest. After we circumambulated the sanctum sanctorum three times, guruswami instructed me to break a coconut before the Deity and stand facing East while chanting, "Aum Namasivaya." As I did so, he put the rosary around my neck, chanting, "Swamiye saranam Ayyappa," which literally means, "Lord Ayyappan, I take refuge in you." After circumambulating the shrine once more, we took a vow before the Deity to strictly practice the penance according to tradition.

"Now there is no difference between Lord Ayyappan and you," guruswami told me. For the next 41 days, we called each other "Ayyappan." My uncle told me that everything is created by God and that God is everywhere. He said that Lord Ayyappan

is a form of this God and therefore dwells in all. Hence, he said, because we are all Ayyappans, there should not be any discrimination, hatred, vengeance or envy among us.

From the moment I put on the rosary, the transformation began. I started controlling my mind from galloping and wandering. Each morning after taking a bath and lighting a lamp, I spent about an hour doing pujas, chanting Ayyappa hymns and meditating. This I repeated in the evening upon returning from work and after taking a bath. I lived like a brahmachari (celibate monk) in an ashram.

I wore a black shirt and dhoti (a wrap-around waist cloth) and applied sandalwood paste and kumkum (red powder) to my forehead. Traditionally, on this pilgrimage Kerala pilgrims wear purple clothes, Tamil Nadu pilgrims wear black and those from Karnataka wear blue.

I kept the home spotlessly clean. In the evenings, I joined guruswami at temples to meet and be with other Ayyappans. We enjoyed each other's company and sang songs to God. These kinds of activities were routinely organized by all Ayyappans daily during the period of penance. Unity among the Ayyappans is an important aim during the preparation.

We were all trying to discipline ourselves in many ways. We tried to maintain our emotional composure and were very careful not to inflict injury on another person or creature in thought, word or deed. We treated everyone equally and respected gurus and elders. We did not

drink liquor, tea or coffee. "We must do this," Guruswami assured me, "because the body is the temple of Lord Ayyappan."

On the first day of mandalakalam, I was taught by guruswami how to fill a coconut with ghee and seal it. Guruswami also taught me how to prepare a small packet called irumudi kettu, literally, "two tied bundles." This packet had two compartments. One compartment was for ghee-filled coconuts and coconuts for ceremoniously breaking as well as for camphor, incense sticks, saffron and other puja items. The second compartment was for two towels, two sets of appropriate clothing, and food to be eaten en route. A bag tied in the middle kept the two compartments separate. The portion carrying the offerings to the Lord is always kept in front.

At the appropriate time near the conclusion of the 41-day penance, I prepared my irumudi kettu in the proper way with the ghee-filled coconuts. Many of us did this together. It was such a joyous event. When we were done, our packets were all simultaneously blessed by guruswami.

Life-Transforming Pilgrimage

As this blessing was concluded, we heard the distant chanting and singing of more Ayyappan's. It was a large group of our relatives and friends coming to join us. Guruswami turned to me quickly, as if there was very little time left. He told me to offer dakshina (a small gift) to my parents, uncles and all senior members of the family present. I gave them each a coin with a ripe areca nut placed in a betel leaf. As the other Ayyappans arrived at our gate, we hoisted our irumudi kettu onto our heads, broke a coconut and piled into waiting vehicles, chanting, "Swamiye saranam Ayyappa." Without looking back, we drove toward Pamba, around 50 miles from our ancestral home.

Of the several routes that can be taken to Sabarimala, the traditional and longer one is via Erumeli. From there pilgrims trek barefoot for 15 miles through dense forests to arrive at Pamba. It takes about two days. Another route is about six miles long and is usually taken by those coming into Kerala from Tamil Nadu through Vandiperiyar. Recently, a third route has been made available. This is the fastest and easiest of all. Following this route, a pilgrim can drive straight to Pamba and from there trek only about three miles to Sabarimala.

Soon our vehicle reached Nilakkal, a beautiful place famous for its ancient Siva temple constructed inside a pookavanam, a garden of flowers grown just for worship ceremony. Immediately, we saw a large number of vehicles mostly from outside Kerala. Every year, tens of thousands of ardent devotees arrive in Nilakkal, Chalakkayam and Pamba from out of state during this special festival season, starting on November 17.

Arriving at Pamba, we parked our cars facing the Pamba river and hoisted the irumudi kettu upon our heads. Chanting the Ayyappa mantra, we waded across the river, which was then only about knee deep.

Thousands of pilgrims were bathing. Many were washing their clothes. Hundreds of latrines dotted the shores of the river amidst makeshift shops catering tea, coffee, snacks and food to pilgrims who were lined up as far as the eye could see. Wherever there was room on the banks of this sacred Pamba river, pilgrims were busy doing something.

We emerged from the water and kept moving through the crowds toward the Pamba Ganapati temple. Up a flight of steps we went until, suddenly, there we were in the temple complex. Each of us took out a coconut and broke it at a designated spot in front of the temple and then offered prayers at all the secondary shrines in the complex. It was now about four in the afternoon, an ideal time to climb the hill.

Mild, pleasant breezes wafted as we arrived at the foot of the temple mountain called Neelimala. We plucked a few leaves from nearby plants to offer in reverence at the beginning of our hike. Then we began to climb. The first portion was muddy and wet. As the trekking progressed, the path became steep. Climbing for nearly a mile up steps that were unevenly constructed turned out to be arduous. Even the youth had to rest intermittently. Aged devotees who were unable to endure the strain of the hike were carried on a simple palanquin made of cane that could be purchased for ^{US}\$17 in Pamba.

A little less than a mile before the sannidhanam (the main Sabarimala Temple), we arrived at a holy altar. There, we offered prayers and lit devotional camphor fire. Several hundred feet beyond that, we came to saramkuthi aal, a sacred banyan tree famous as the place where Lord Ayyappan asked His legion to throw their weapons down and prepare for worship (See page 26). Some pilgrims actually placed arrows here. Continuing on, we followed a narrow path for a long time through a dense forest, finally arriving at a valley dividing the mountains of Neelimala and Sabarimala. On a slope facing Sabarimala, a barricaded platform had been erected to contain the crowd and keep them in queue. This platform could accommodate about 6,000

pilgrims at a time. From here it took about two more hours for us to reach the temple. The crowd was so thick that the famous 18 steps could not even be seen. Each of these 18 steps symbolizes one of the 18 Gods of the 18 surrounding hills. Police standing on both sides of the stairs were supporting pilgrims to keep them from falling. I took out the coconut to be broken at the base of the steps, holding it in my right hand as I inched ahead in a four-line queue, rubbing body to body with everyone around me. When I finally reached the first step, I threw the coconut down hard. The area was filled with other broken coconuts and coconut milk. So great is the number of coconuts broken here that an entire soap-making industry has been developed to use them.

The Crowning Moment

Now I was being moved as in a river flowing up the steps, being carried and pushed so that walking was hardly necessary. It took about one more hour to arrive at the final destination in front of the sanctum sanctorum, where simply having a glimpse of Ayyappan is considered the blessing of a lifetime. This particular Ayyappan icon, called "Panchaloha," or "five-metaled," was very powerful. It drew me close.

To the right of the main sanctum was a small shrine to Lord Ganesha. We paid our homage there and prepared

for the main puja (ceremony) to Panchaloha. This special puja, called "Neyyabhishekam," consisted of anointing the Panchaloha icon with the huge amounts of ghee brought by the thousands of devotees.

We found a suitable place under a tree and spread a blanket on the ground. There we sat quietly for a short time. Soon, guruswami directed each of us to take out our ghee-filled coconuts filled. He then broke them all open and poured the contents into one clean steel vessel. Offering the ghee individually for anointing the icon would have been too difficult in this crowd. We decided to do it collectively.

As our guruswami carried the ghee-filled vessel, we all followed. At the main shrine, he gave the vessel to the priest, and we observed as it was ceremoniously poured. It was a magnificent moment. The primary goal of our pilgrimage was now fulfilled.

Yet, there were many other ceremonies and activities going on. Individual archanas (small personal worship ceremonies) continued from dawn to dusk. A very special ceremony called padipuja, which included ceremonial worship at each of the 18 steps and could only be booked in advance (the next available time is in 2014), was being performed

over and over. The one we attended was booked in 1990 by a flower merchant from Tamil Nadu.

Following guruswami, I joined thousands of Ayyappans to chant, "Saranam, swamiye. Saranam, Ayyappa," as we all left this holy retreat to return to our homes.

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I Can't Wait to Go Back

A Silicon Valley virtuoso
says "It was all about
tapas"

By Shankar Nathan

I had been on pilgrimage to Sabari once before while living in Silicon Valley. This year I went again. Now, as I sit in my new Hawaiian home looking back on the journey, all the special thoughts and feelings associated with it come flooding back. It was all about tapas, the fires of austerity that one willingly brings upon

oneself in order to elevate consciousness to a higher level. Like the hiker who endures the difficulty of a climb up a steep slope knowing he will enjoy a fabulous view on top, I happily endured the rigor of my journey and now feel the exhilaration of having risen above the ordinary, even if only for a short time.

By the time I got to Chennai, I was already about 20 days into the vratam period of penance and was feeling really quite good. We reserved our train tickets and made arrangements for a taxi from Kottayam to Pamba. From Pamba, we would walk the four miles up to the temple. My guruswami, a 30-year-old man who had been

pilgrimaging to Sabarimala with his father and later his Uncle for the past 12 years, took me to a shop next to the Kapaleeswar Kovil in Mylapore where he helped me buy a tulasi maalai (tulasi necklance), just like the one he and his father before him had worn. I suppose that this is how each guruswami and his "group" create

specific traditions
alongside the greater
common experience of all
the people who make the
journey up Mount Sabari.

By this time, I had a
reasonable amount of
facial hair, having not
shaved since my vratam
(vow) began, and had
begun to look and feel

like an ascetic. I had moderated my diet and avoided all intoxicants. This made me stronger and more focused than ever before.

The effects of the temple evening prayers were still reverberating within me as the head priest of the Chennai Ayyappan Kovil

put the tulasi maalai around my neck. After this, I no longer wore shoes. And for clothes, I wore only a simple veshti (sarong).

The maalai added another dimension to my everyday life. It would get entangled when I was bathing and would

constantly need to be patiently and lovingly untangled. Every time I'd see or feel them, they would serve as a reminder of the journey that I was on and the unraveling of karma.

Just before going to Sabarimala, I visited some of major temples in

my Indian home state of Tamil Nadu and received the darshan (grace) of Kumari Amman at Kanya Kumari; Lord Murugan at Tiruchendur, Palamuthirsolai and Tiruparakundram; and Lord Siva and Parvati at Madurai and Rameshwaram. Being in the presence of such divinity while I was in this pure state of mind and

body allowed me to more specifically feel the powerful vibration that pervades all these wonderful places. On the train back from Rameshwaram to Chennai, I thanked the Gods for these life-enriching moments.

It was time to leave for

Sabarimala. Five of us gathered at an Ayyappan temple in Chennai and made ready for the trip into Kerala. From Pamba we made the final climb on foot.

There I was, standing at the Sannidhanam, observing the beautiful "Abhishekam," the

bathing of the deity with
our ghee, and the
glorious "Pushpa
Alankaram," the
ceremonial waving of the
five-flamed camphor
lamp before the icon
completely engulfed in
thousands of pink and
red flowers. Suddenly,
the austerities of the past
two months, as well as
the glorious thoughts,
dreams and visions all

merged within my consciousness. I could only feel bliss. Swamiye, saranam Ayyappan! I take refuge in you, Lord! As I began the trip back to my computer, I thought, "I can't wait to come back."

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living in Kauai, Hawaii,
with his wife, Vidya, and
their two children

Rubbish in Paradise

50 million visitors

leave a mountain of stuff on the holy mountain

By Vrindavanam S.
Gopalakrishnan,
Kerala

When the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple closed at the end of the festival season and most of the people had gone, I was stunned. Suddenly, the place looked like a concrete jungle in a tropical rain forest.

The significance of the temple seemed trashed. Actually, the physical temple itself was trashed. Except for the top portion of its golden flagstaff, it was not even visible from any direction. There was rubbish

everywhere.
Something was
wrong.

My mind rolled back
to December 22,
1959. That was the
first day I visited
Sabarimala. Then it

was just a small shrine nestled high on a hill, and it was the only structure there. It stood majestically in the serene forest, sanctifying the entire region around it. The environment was clean and

hygienic. The air was rich and healthy. The cold breeze of December was soothing to the skin and fragrant with the scent of wild flowers. This was truly Lord Ayyappan's pookavanam (flower

garden).

Now, 42 years later,
it stank literally.

Used bottles,
polyethylene bags,
dried excreta and all
kinds of garbage
littered the ground.

Except for the small area surrounding the shrine, everything was dirty. Even the accommodations in the multi-storied living quarters were besmirched. All of the drainage ditches around the temple reeked of a most

foul smell. All of this not only spoiled the sanctity of the temple grounds, but also made the adjoining township of Sabarimala feel like the worst slums of India.

The usual reasons for this squalidness are always given, of course: the enormous flow of pilgrims during the season from November through January and the shortage of land. But are these excuses

valid? Nine months out of the year the temple is virtually people-free. That leaves plenty of time to clean up. And hardly one-third of the 65 acres is used by the temple.

Part of the problem is related to construction. If accessory buildings had been designed so that they merged with the surrounding landscape, and if they were stationed at some distance from the temple,

aesthetic and sanitation problems could have been lessened. The ill-conceived location of buildings left a shortage of necessary space for erecting temporary tents to serve masses of devotees

during festival time.

"Such negative physical conditions at Sabarimala most certainly have an adverse impact on the sanctity of the temple," said

Jagadguru Swami
Sathyananda
Sarawathi, Chairman
of Hindu Unity
Forum (HUF).

And there are other
problems. Scarcity of
pure drinking water

and a massive lack of general sanitation pose a serious threat of an epidemic. Latrines and toilets constructed too close to the inner shrine and the bhasmakulam (holy pond) are obvious health risks. Then

there is a lack of power. A central power supply needs to be properly planned from a perspective that views the distant future. Additionally, temple medical facilities must be improved, and

adequate hospital facilities should be made available.

The yearly number of devotees coming to Sabarimala is steadily increasing. This year on Makar

Sankranti day alone, not less than 300,000 pilgrims congregated at one time in and around the temple. There was not enough space, facilities or manpower to manage them properly.

Like most temples in India, Sabarimala is administered and controlled by government officials. This means that management is often not religious, and the temple is perceived as little more than a source

of money. "There is no comprehensive master plan for the development of Sabarimala," asserted Mr. Kummanam Rajasekharan, Kerala State Organizing Secretary of Vishwa Hindu

Parishad.

Yet, there is. Hindu
Unity Forum has
prepared such a
master plan for
temple
reconstruction at
Sabarimala entitled

the "Harivarasanam Project." In 1995 this plan was presented to then state Chief Minister A. K. Antony, who directed the Travancore Devaswom Board to study the proposal. The Board

advertised in the newspaper to call for the opinions of interested Hindus and Hindu organizations. About 360 responded, advocating the proposal. However, according to some forum officials, the

subsequent
communist
government shelved
the project.

"The project
involving an
investment of an
estimated US\$108

million, could be implemented in phases," agrees Mr. Rajasekkaran, but "the temple is administered by the government. Decisions on development of Sabarimala are taken up by the officials. No Hindu

sanyasi, thntri, or religious leader and tempole architects will be involved."

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of sincere devotees are making plans for next years

pilgrimage to Sabarimala. Their devotion, their worship and their sincerity only grows. So will their number and unfortunately, their garbage. Things aren't what they used to be.

The Legend of Ayyappan

A God comes to life
in a story more fact
than fiction

By Vrindavanam S.
Gopalakrishnan,
Kerala, India

According to Hindu mythology, Lord Dharma Sastha was the son of Lord Siva and Lord Vishnu. He

was proclaimed to be the God of the Kali Yuga (a vast period of time) and was born on Earth as Lord Ayyappan.

Admittedly, myth should be subject to

the same scrutiny
as any speculation.
But the birth of a
man named
Ayyappan who
accomplished
miraculous things is
a historical fact,
even though there
are several and
varied versions of

his story. The most reliable of these are accounts based on writings of eminent 17th and 18th century authors.

According to those chronicles, Lord

Ayyappan was the foster son of the king of Pandalam, a small princely state in the erstwhile region of Travancore. The people that formed this Pandalam dynasty had come to Kerala 1,098

years ago from a
place called
Thenkasi in Tamil
Nadu's Pandya
dynasty.

It was a time of
chaos and anarchy.
There were also

threats from dacoits
(treacherous
thieves) and Arab
sea pirates.

Temples were rich
in those days and
often the targets of
these dacoits.

A gang led by the dacoit king Udayan attacked a famous temple dedicated to Lord Dharma Sastha and killed its priest, desecrating the temple in the process. The priest's 12-year-old son Jayanthan

swore that he would eliminate the dacoits and reconsecrate the temple. Having dedicated his life to this purpose, Jayanthan went to Aranmula town, where he learned Vedas, yoga and

martial arts. After concluding his studies, he pilgrimaged to various religious centers. This preparation gave him enough righteous self confidence to face the dacoits in

battle. However,
one day in the
midst of all this, he
had a dream in
which he was told
he should seek the
guidance of a sage
who was meditating
near
Ponnambalamedu,
deep in the dense

forests. The next morning he went in search of the rishi. On the way he met a sadhu who guided him to an ashram where lived a great sage named Maharishi Brahmananda. At the first sight of

him, realizing he was the rishi in his dream, Jayanathan surrendered fully to him as his disciple.

Meanwhile, the dacoit Udayan, who wanted to establish

a link with the royal family, kidnapped a princess from the Pandalam Palace. Through his divine sight, the sage came to know about this and located the princess in the forests near a place called

Karimala. He directed Jayanthan to lead the tribals to that place and release the princess.

Ayyappan as God and man: .

Jayanthan did so
and brought the
princess to the
ashram.

After a couple of
days, the sage
told Jayanthan

and the princess
that they should
be married. The
king then
arranged,
conducted and
solemnized their
wedding, telling
them afterwards
that they would

bear a son with
divine powers,
and that this boy
would eliminate
the evils of the
kingdom and
re-establish
righteousness. As
predicted, a son
was born. He was

indeed brilliant
and supernatural.
They named him
Ayyappan.

Ayyappan grew up
with the tribals in
the forest. Wild

animals, birds and even plants were his friends. In this idyllic environment, he completed his education at Maharishi Brahmananda's ashram. He also

learned of his
divine mission.

When Ayyappan
was ten years old,
he traveled with
his guru and
parents on a

two-year
pilgrimage to holy
places in the
Himalayas. On
their return to
Ponnambalamedu,
Maharishi
arranged for
Ayyappan to leave
the ashram to do

what he was born
to do.

Ayyappan's father
wrote a letter to
the Pandalam king
and sent
Ayyappan to the

palace with it.
When the king
received the
youth and read his
letter of
introduction, he
realized he was
his nephew, but
he kept this
knowledge secret.

Ayyappan was loved by everyone and admired for his supernatural abilities. As time went on, he was given the duty of developing Pandalam's royal army and did so

with great
success. The army
became famous
for its strength and
discipline.

When a fierce
Arab pirate named

Bavar attacked the kingdom, he was defeated by Ayyappan and his powerful army. The mighty defeat at the hands of such a young man humbled Bavar and made him a

disciple of
Ayyappan. In a
similar way, an
influential
Christian priest
defeated by
Ayyappan in
philosophical
debate also
became his

disciple.

It was at this time that Udayan, the dacoit, decided to attack the kingdom of Pandalam. He,

too, was routed by
Ayyappan's army.
Gradually,
Ayyappan became
instrumental in
ending the
long-standing feud
between the Chola
and Pandya kings.

Yet, his
considerable feats
were quite
unnerving to
many in the
palace. It had
become
unpalatable to the
prime minister
and his caucus

that such a young boy could accomplished so much in such a short time. Feeling threatened by his influence on the king, the prime minister conspired to get rid of

Ayyappan forever.
Toward this end,
he devised a
strategy involving
the palace
physician and the
queen.

They convinced
the queen that if
Ayyappan
continued to be
allowed more and
more participation
in royal affairs,
her own son might
be deprived of his
rightful place on

the throne. Thus she was drawn into the evil scheme. Following a plan devised by the physician, she pretended severe stomach pain. The physician then proclaimed that

the only way she
could be cured
was to drink the
milk of a tigress.

Everybody was
perplexed and did
not know what to

do. How could milk be gotten from a deadly tigress? Ayyappan came forward and offered to obtain the milk. The royal physician and the ministers were delighted, and the

king was
distressed.

Being a master of
yogavidya (special
knowledge of
yoga), Ayyappan
had no trouble

finding a milking tigress. Nor was it difficult for him to win her over. As he rode her to the palace, her cubs trailing behind, some leopards and a few lions, the subjects of the

kingdom, were
dumbfounded.
Seeing Ayyappan
on the tigress,
striding to save
the queen, the
king received him
with great pomp
and ceremony and
showered flower

petals on his
head. Everyone
shouted "Saranam
Ayyappa," which
means,
"Ayyappan, I take
refuge in you."
The wicked
conspirators
repented and

prostrated before
him. He
exonerated them
graciously.

Not forgetting his
original vow,
Ayyappan advised

the king that the reconsecration of the icon of God Dharma Sastha should be done on the next Makar Sankranti day (a popular Hindu festival). The king agreed and it was

arranged for all
the subjects of all
the surrounding
realms to convene
at Sabarimala for
the grand event.
On his way there,
Ayyappan and his
warriors
thundered

through the
camps of dacoit
king Udayan and
defeated them
one and all.

The route that
Ayyappan took to

eliminate the
dacoits, as well as
the specific
disciplines he
gave his warriors
to follow, later
became the path
and penance of
pilgrims seeking
solace at the

Sabarimala temple. Hence today, one of the most famous starting points of pilgrimage to Sabari is a town called Erumeli (see map, page 25), and the

disciplines to be followed are "brahmacharya" (celibacy), mental purity, vegetarianism and cleanliness of body.

When Ayyappan and his army arrived at Pampa, they made camp on the banks of the holy river. He advised his men to perform a special ceremony for their ancestors

and for all those killed in past wars. Here Lord Rama, he told them, had performed this ceremony, called tharpanam, for his ancestors. They cooked food and had a feast.

The next morning they left for Sabarimala. After prostrating before Lord Ganesha at the temple of Pamba, they ascended Neelimala. Halfway through

the the three-mile
walk, they arrived
at Sabaripeedam,
where it is said
Sage Sabari
attained salvation
after hosting Sri
Rama on his way
to Lanka. About a
half mile before

Sabarimala, they came to a huge banyan tree where Ayyappan asked his men to drop their weapons. This place later came to be known as "Saramkuthi" (the

arrow dropping
point).

The Pandya king
and his legion,
along with
Ayyappan's
parents, relatives

and friends were
all present at the
temple at
Sabarimala to
greet Ayyappan
and his warriors.
As the
reconsecration
ceremonies were
about to begin,

Ayyappan asked all those present to take a bath in a natural rock pond nearby. At the request of the Pandya king, Ayyappan consecrated the icon of Goddess

Madurai
Meenakshi at a
small temple
nearby and
declared that this
Devi would be
known as
"Mallikapuratham
ma."

Near the
auspicious time,
Ayyappan
ascended the
temple's 18 steps
and took his
proper place. His
father chanted
mantras as he
held the icon of

the Lord Dharma
Sastha in his
hands. Ayyappan
spoke briefly,
conveying deep
spiritual truths. In
conclusion he
proclaimed, "What
divine power the
icon being

consecrated here
reflects, there is
no difference
between that and
me. That very
Sastha is me. That
divine light and
power that
emanated from
the union of Hari

(Vishnu) and Hara
(Siva) is my
strength." Thus
Ayyappan
enlightened the
gathering with the
nectar of
Sanatana Dharma
(the eternal Truth)
and exhorted the

importance of observing the penance he had just outlined for a minimum of 41 days before undertaking the Sabarimala pilgrimage.

Finally, the main ceremony began. The atmosphere reverberated with the sound of conch shells and temple drums. Yet even this was drowned out by voices of devotees

present as they
chanted in unison:
"Swamiye
saranam
Ayyappa."

As the
consecration

began, Ayyappan was standing directly behind the icon being installed.

Amazingly, just at the instant the icon was fully consecrated, Ayyappan

disappeared. The icon began to emit rays of light and, lo and behold, a necklace with a small bell as a locket, which Ayyappan had been wearing around his neck,

suddenly
appeared on the
icon.