All Her Children
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WORSHIP

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Devotees of every faith come for blessings at this Kerala Goddess temple

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It is a Hindu Temple, but each week one in four devotees seeking blessings at the Malayalapuzha Devi Temple is a Christian or a Muslim. Administrator Jagmohan said the temple's always been popular with non-Hindu Keralites, but in the past, they would conceal their identity or send a proxy. "Now they come quite openly," he said. A hundred thousand devotees worship at the temple weekly, with Tuesday and Friday the most popular days for darshan (viewing) of Goddess Bhadrakali, a form of the Goddess Parvati. She is popularly known as "Malayalapuzha Amma"--Mother of Malayalapuzha--for this village and hill of the same name. The shared worship stands in ironic contrast to intense efforts elsewhere in Kerala to convert Hindus to other faiths. But the power of the Mother is such that those who reach Her lap once, whoever they be, are not able to live without visiting the temple at least once in a month.

Many temples in India sport "Hindus only" notices, but here

one finds even Muslim ladies, clad in their traditional dress, queued up for the morning worship. Jagmohan relates that, "A Christian, owner of two pachyderms [an indication of substantial wealth], visits the temple at least once in a month and makes offerings. He goes inside the temple, receives the sandalpaste and kumkum from the head priest and applies them on his forehead." "A group of Christian businessmen from Thrissur," he said, "a town over 100 kms away, come to the temple every month and make valuable offerings to the mother which often includes golden bracelets, gold chains, etc." K. Varughese, a non-Hindu native of Ranni, told me that he has staunch belief in the Malayalapuzha Amma. "In fact, my daughter's marriage had taken place only after I vowed to present a golden mangalya sutra [marriage pendant] before the Mother. It was just recently I came to the temple to submit the offerings," he said.

Malayalapuzha Ramesh, who has written a book on this temple, told me the Goddess is noted for getting the unmarried girls married, protecting the devotee from enemies, helping businesses flourish, getting employment and in general extending prosperity to all the devotees. The arrival of non-Hindus in large numbers week after week is a standing testimony to the Malayalapuzha Amma's unlimited blessings to the devotees.

By the grace of the Mother around 2,000 people are directly and indirectly employed. This small hamlet on the remote hill ranges is today a township. Not less than 500 vehicles, buses, jeeps and cabs arrive on the favored Fridays and Tuesdays, the days most important for the Goddess. The temple's cash income was us$200,000 in 1998?sufficient to make the small

temple the third richest among all 1,000-plus temples under the Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) in the state of Kerala, after Sabarimala and Chettikulangara (Devi temple)," Jagmohan said. The temple's annual operating costs are about $70,000. Excess income from this and other profitable temples goes toward upkeep of poorer temples and other projects.

The temple is part of everyone's life in the surrounding area. Fishermen from the coastal belt here in southern Kerala take their fishing boats out to sea only after visiting the temple. They receive at the temple a small torn piece of the Amma's pattu [the sari worn by the Deity] and tie it to the boat. According to 82-year-old M.G. Narayanan Nair, not only the believer but also his property is protected by Amma. "Hardcore thieves don't dare to touch anything that has been vowed to be offered to the temple," he said. The farmers protect their produce, such as banana, elephant foot yam and other crops, from theft by taking a vow to offer the first harvest to the Mother. They receive a piece of the red sari after worship and tie it to a plant in the farm. Even newly-built buses--be they owned by the communist state government, a Muslim or a Christian--are brought to the temple to be blessed by the Mother before plying their route. Last month, a bus of the state

transport corporation was brought by a Muslim driver, Jagmohan said.

As I visited, I witnessed many devotees approaching the temple in thanks for boons fulfilled. Mr. Ayyappan Pillai, proprietor of Fashion Textiles, presented a calf before the Mother for favors received. Other devotees were having special puja for driving away evil spirits. Only a certain red flower known as "Raktha Pushpanjali" is used for this worship. Offering of mangalya sutra, such as made by Varughese, is very common. This is a small, gold banyan leaf which the groom ties around the neck of the bride during the wedding ceremony, and is most often offered by women for successful married life as well as getting married in a timely fashion.

The central image of the Goddess is made neither of granite nor the compound of five metals. The 5.5-foot tall icon is made of a mixture of molasses, clay and herbs. The temple is believed to be more than 3,000 years old, says the temple's head priest, W. Sukumara Bhattathiri. For centuries the senior male member of his family has been

appointed to this post, and is known as the thantri. There is a Sivalingam on the southeastern corner of the temple, which according to the devotees, surfaced on its own and is in fact growing.

H.H. Garudadwajananda Theerthapadaswamigal of Vazhoor Theerthpadasramam explained the temple's prosperity. He told me this is normal when the pujas, worship, and the yagnas, fire sacrifice, are performed according to scripture. Mr. Kummanam Rajasekharan, State Organizing Secretary, VHP said that the temples are a nucleus point where that great natural power which controls everything in this universe is felt. "It is a psychological engineering science," he said, "not matched by other religions." Temple devotee Mr. Bhattathiripad agreed and said the Malayalapuzha temple is crystal-clear proof of this phenomenon.

According to Kerala history, it was for the well-being and prosperity of the people that Lord Parasuraman had consecrated 108 Siva temples and 108 Durga temples in the region. The proper

maintenance and running of the temples inevitably brings well-being of the people in a village. The religious camaraderie seen in this temple was the norm, especially in South India, prior to the arrival of the British. It was disrupted with lasting impact by their "divide and rule" policies.

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