

TIRUKKAKARAI

SITUATED in Northern Travancore, about 2½ miles south-east of Edapalli station on the Cochin Railway is the tiny village of Tirukkakarai with its famous temple dedicated to Vishnu, in his avatar as Vamana.

Tirukkakarai is one of the thirteen *divya-desams* (holy places) of Malainadu (Kerala) held sacred by the Vaishnavas, and the temple is resorted to by Vaishnava pilgrims from all over India.

But its significance is even greater to the people of Kerala, for Tirukkakarai Appan (the Lord of Tirukkakarai temple) is invoked and worshipped in every Kerala Hindu home on the occasion of the annual national festival of Onam (which this year falls on the 22nd August). Early in the morning of Onam day a portion of the front courtyard in every house is cleaned and smeared with cow dung. Here is placed a group of pyramids and cones, large and small, made of clay and painted red, and decorated with the green leaves and lily-white blossoms of the *thumba* plant. These clay pyramids and cones are symbolically worshipped as Tirukkakarai Appan.

According to tradition, the festival of Onam is celebrated in honour of Mahabali, the great Asura King and grandson of the pious Prahlada. Mahabali ruled wisely and justly and his reign is harked back to as a golden age of Utopian perfection. Mahabali was, like his grandsire, a great devotee of Vishnu, but suffered from an overweening pride which ultimately proved his undoing. He conquered *swarga* (heaven) whereupon the devas appealed to Vishnu to save them from the Asura King's sway. Vishnu then incarnated himself as Vamana (dwarf). He approached Mahabali and prayed of him for a plot of land large enough only to be covered by three of his tiny footsteps. Mahabali agreed to grant the request against the advice of his preceptor, Sukracharya. But behold! the dwarfish mendicant assumed immeasurable proportions and with but two steps covered earth and heaven. Mahabali, proud though he was, was a true devotee of the Lord.

Exultingly, therefore, he offered his bare head for the third step and the Lord placed his foot on it and thrust the King to Patala (the nether world), granting, however, his prayer that he might be permitted to revisit the earth once a year. This Mahabali is supposed to do on Onam Day.

As Mahabali was a true *bhakta* of Vishnu and welcomed his humbling by the Lord, it is only appropriate that Tirukkakarai Appan (Vamana) should be worshipped on Onam Day when the Asura King is supposed to revisit his ancient realm.

In olden times the princes and potentates of Kerala, it is said, foregathered at Tirukkakarai to celebrate the festival of Onam which lasted for 28 days. Each of them seems to have had a duty assigned to him in this connection. The place where the Zamorin of Calicut used to take his station is still pointed out. The Brahmin Raja of Edapally officiated as priest and the memory of that lingers even to-day in the still preserved right of the Raja of Edapally to nominate the person who performs puja in the temple. Another picturesque survival of the gathering of the Kerala princes at Tirukkakarai is the ceremony of Attachamayam still celebrated by the Zamorin and the Maharaja of Cochin on Attam asterism. On this day the Maharaja of Cochin goes in a grand procession along the streets of Trippunitura; the Zamorin does likewise at Calicut. These processions are said to be in memory of the annual journey which the ancestors of these Rajas used to make to the Tirukkakarai temple.

The Tirukkakarai temple has a large number of lithic records, some of them of great historical importance. The Archaeological Department of Travancore have copied them and published the historically valuable among them. Several of them belong to the period of King Bhaskara Ravi Varman who, it has been calculated from certain other inscriptions, ruled between 978 to 1036 A. D. and whose kingdom is said to have extended from Wynad in the North to Changanacherry in the South.

Thrikkakarai Temple



Situated about ten miles from Alwaye this shrine at Thrikkakkurai dedicated to Vamana, one of the ten Avatars of Vishnu, is a famed place of pilgrimage, particularly for Vaishnavites.



**MAHA BHARATA
LAC PALACE**

At a place two miles east of the Thrikkokkarai Temple guides point to a cave as the remains of the Lac Palace of the Maha Bharata. Here is the entrance to the cave.

The exit to the cave.



The earth at the site, which contains a large percentage of iron is prized for its medicinal properties.