

TEMPLES IN TRAVANCORE

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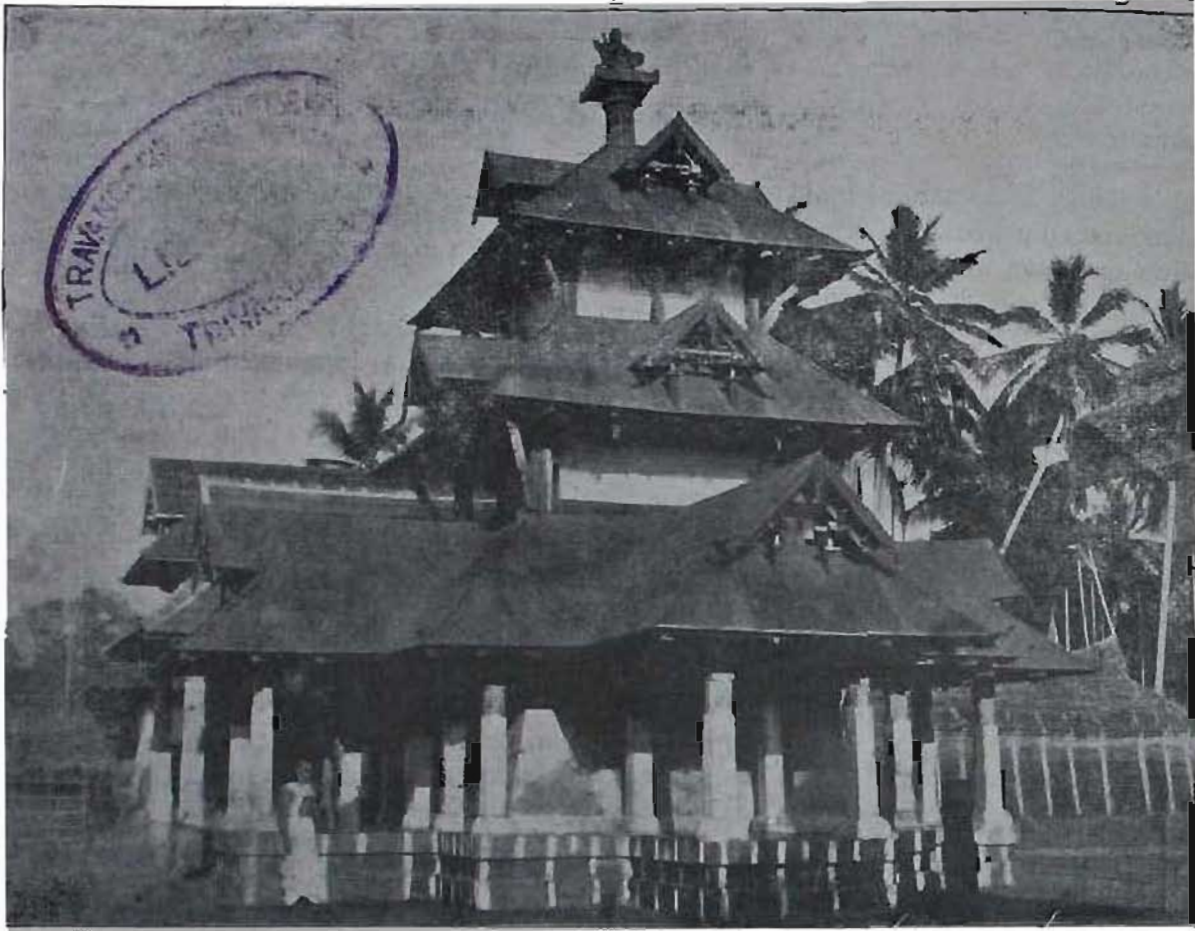
There is no part of India where one finds such a wealth of Hindu shrines as in the State of Travancore. From the earliest times kings and people, who have all along been deeply religious-minded, have erected temples and made large endowments to them. The tradition is that Sri Parasurama, the sixth Avatar of Vishnu, himself founded and consecrated some of the most important of these temples. There is no doubt that several of these are very ancient and have acquired a sanctity of their own which attracts pilgrims to them from far and near in all parts of the year. One advantage which Travancore has had the unique good fortune of enjoying is that it has never been subject to foreign rule, and that, as such, acts of sacrilege at the hands of votaries of other religions, *e. g.* Muhammadanism and Christianity, have been almost unknown. The rulers of the country have been devout followers of Hinduism from time immemorial, although a stray instance of a local chieftain in South Travancore in the 9th century A. D., who was a staunch Buddhist, is not wanting. The Muhammadan religion was introduced into the country in the 8th century A. D., and the Christian religion a few centuries earlier. To the followers of both these religions every kind of help has been rendered by the rulers at all times and in the fullest measure, and in the result there has been no religious strife in Travancore at any period in its history, and all the three religions have flourished in harmony. Some of the Dravidian deities, such as Kali and Sasta

were absorbed into the Aryan pantheon from very early times, and both these classes of deities have been worshipped with equal reverence in Travancore as in the rest of Kerala. Kali is, according to Puranas, the daughter of Siva and Parvati and Sasta the son of Siva and Vishnu in his feminine form of Vishnumaya. Legends ascribe to Sri Parasurama the construction of several temples of Bhagavati (Parvati or Kali) on the sea coast and of Sasta along the eastern mountain range for the protection of Kerala from foreign enemies. Snakes are worshipped in groves specially consecrated for the purpose in the premises of almost every house of note. Snake worship and the worship of Sasta by Brahmins are peculiar to Kerala. The *Tamasic* worship of Kali in some of her more terrible aspects with the accompaniment of animal sacrifices has gradually given place to the *satvic* worship of Parvati, and there have been several instances of such transformation even in recent times.

Picturesque Situation

Every village in Travancore contains a temple picturesquely situated and adorned with magnificent structures with a tank in its vicinity. It is the centre of almost every form of socio-religious activity in the village inculcating piety, eradicating sin, and influencing the thought and life of the people in manifold ways. Many temples in the State contain an immeasurable wealth of archaeological, historical and artistic material. The contents of these institutions and the properties attached to them were for a long time vested in *ad hoc* committees enjoying

*T. A. S. Vol. I, pp. 187-193.



The Sri Vallabha Temple, Tiruvallah

unlimited powers and even rights of sovereignty. Provision was made in some of them for the study of Vedas and Śāstras. *From an inscription dated 864-65 A. D., it is seen that Karunandakkan one of the chieftains of South Travancore erected a temple named Parthivasekharapuram, in which provision was made for feeding 95 Vedic students, one condition of admission being that they should be proficient in Vyākaraṇa, Mīmāṃsā and Paurohitya (priest-craft). This temple is in existence even at present. There is provision in every important temple for

musical performances and Puranic recitation. Thus these institutions were seats of free learning from early times, and centres from which charity flowed along several useful channels. In some temples, such as Takazhi and Tiruvizha, there are arrangements for the treatment of certain diseases.

Distinguishing Features

The distinguishing feature of Travancore temples from an artistic and archæological point of view is their wood sculptures and peculiar gable style of architecture. Wood carving is one of the specialities of Travancore, and many of the temples abound in some kind of wood work or other of great

*T. A. S. Vol. I, pp. 1-14.

beauty and delicacy. Several temples in the Tinnevely district of the Madras Presidency formerly belonged to Travancore; and there also there are similar wood carvings. In the same manner the circular central shrine, surmounted with a conical dome consisting of one or two storeys, the square mandapa in its front and the quadrangular walk round these, the small hall in front of the temple accommodating the Balipitha, the carved triangular gables and above all the dormer windows, are all characteristic features of typical temples in Travancore.

Prominent Sites

All the chief temples in the State have been built on prominent sites according to rules laid down in the Silpa-sastras, either on the top of a hill, like the Tirunakkara temple, or at its foot, as is the case at Tirunandikkara, or by the side of a river, like the temples of Chengannur, Aranmula and Tiruvattar, or on an elevated place, like the Janardhana Temple at Varkala, or by the side

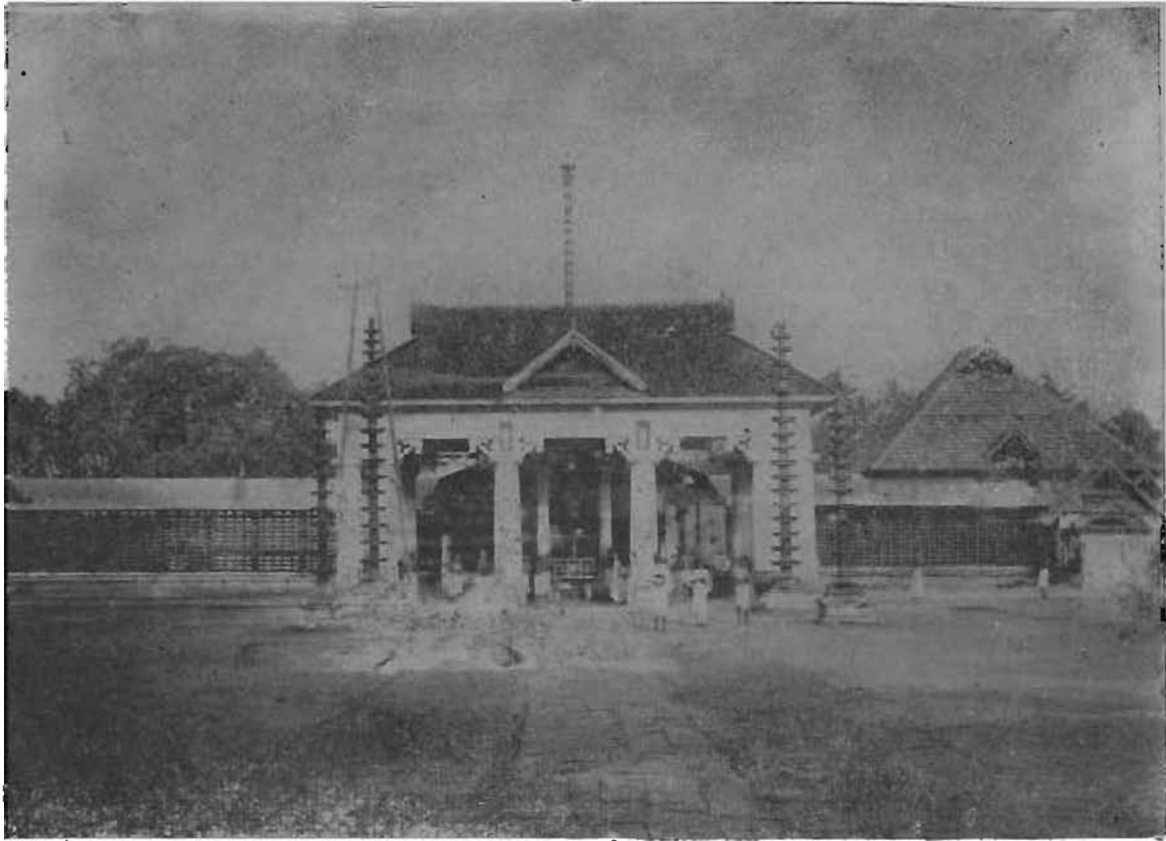
of the sea, as at Cape Comorin. Most of these temples face eastwards. Instances, however, are not rare of temples turned westwards. There are also temples turned towards the south.

Structural Details

In a typical Travancore temple we have a central shrine called the Srikoil which may be square, oblong or circular in shape, consisting of one or two storeys, over which a sloping roof is built. Within it is the Garbhagraha or cell where the idol of the deity is placed. In front of the central shrine is situated the Namaskara Mandapa, square in shape and built with a pyramidal roof. Surrounding these is a corridor or pillared hall, known as Nalambalam. The outer portion of the Nalambalam is known as Balikkalpura containing the Balipitha or sacrificial altar with a flag-staff or Dhvajastamba in its front. The outside of the Nalambalam is lined with five to nine rows of lamps fixed on a masonry base and wooden framework. On the outside of

The Adi Kesava Temple. Tiruvattar.





The Vaikam Temple

this whole structure there is a paved pathway.

The Theatre Hall

In the case of some of the big and important temples there is, in addition to the above, a separate edifice known as Kuttambalam or theatre-hall for dramatic performance and for theatrical recitation of Puranic stories as at Hari-pad and Tirunakara. This function is assigned to a separate caste known as Chakkiyars whose performances attract large crowds of people. They are experts in expounding Puranic stories in a most-humorous and attractive manner; and the educative value of their work is beyond all praise. In the case of temples where there is not a separate edifice for this purpose, the front-side of the quadrangular corridor round the

central shrine is used for this purpose. Every temple has a well, situated generally on the north-east corner, supplying water for bathing the idol and for preparing food offerings to the deity. A portion of the corridor round the central shrine is used as kitchen or Madappalli, another for feeding Brahmins and the third for keeping rice, oil, ghee and other articles required for use in the temple. Small shrines circular and square in shape dedicated to Siva, Parvati, and Ganesa and other minor deities of the Hindu pantheon are also found in every temple. Images of Nagas set up round a banyan tree for worship also form a special feature. All these are enclosed by a rectangular wall in the centre of each side of which at the four cardinal points are entrances surmounted by peculiar Gopuras; and where they are not found, gateways are

built for passage into the precincts of the temple.

Dravidian Architecture of the South

Side by side with the indigenous style of architecture, there are found in the southern parts of the State, temples built in the Dravidian style consisting of Vimanas, Mandapas and Gopuras. "The temples constructed in this style of architecture consist of four parts:—

- (i) the principal part, *i. e.*, the actual shrine called the Garbhagraha, square in shape, surrounded by a pyramidal roof of one or more storeys and containing the cell in which the image of the God is placed;

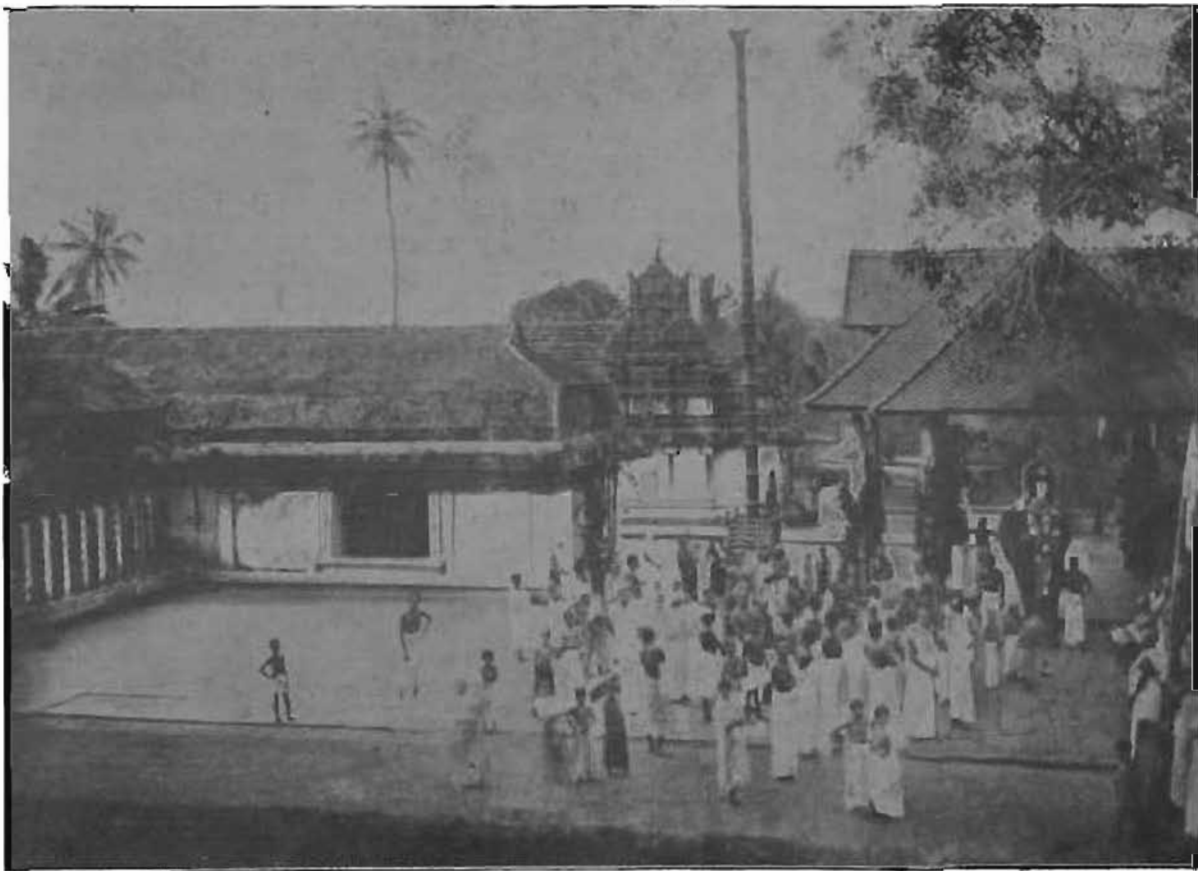
- (ii) the porches or Mandapas, which also cover and precede the door leading to the cell;

- (iii) Gate pyramids or Gopuras which are the principal features in the quadrangular enclosures which always surround the inner shrine; and,

- (iv) Pillared halls used for various purposes which are invariable accompaniments of these temples.

Besides these, a temple always contains wells and tanks of water to be used either for sacred purposes or for the priests, dwellings for all the various classes of people attached to it and numerous other buildings. A flag-staff also is an invariable accompaniment of every temple. The pillared halls are

*History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, Vol. I.
James Fergusson 1910, Page 309.



A procession in the Varkala Temple.



The Sri Padmanabhaswami Temple, Trivandrum.

most exquisitely and delicately carved to represent Puranic stories."

Kerala vs. Dravidian Styles

In point of architectural grandeur, the temples constructed on the model of the indigenous gable style of architecture cannot compare with the lofty structures of the Dravidian style. They are, as regards elevation, of a very diminutive size; but some of them are of great extent. The pediment is generally of laterite, but wood-work with singular neatness enters largely into their composition. They are not durable structures. Ward and Connor in their Memoirs on the Travancore Survey remark: "Their style of architecture is sufficiently complicated, but never remarkable for design, elegance or magnificence of dimensions; it consists

of a series of low buildings encompassed by a strong wall. The centre is frequently occupied by a temple or temples occasionally of a circular form and covered with a conical top, the whole often being roofed with copper though covered with minute complexity."

From a survey of the temples in Travancore, it is seen that the most ancient of them go back to about the 8th to the 9th century A.D. A passing phase of Pallava influence is seen in at least two of them, as is evidenced by the close resemblances of the cave temples at Kaviyur and Tirunandikara to Pallava work outside. We also find good specimens of both early and later Chola architecture as well as of the Vijayanagara period in Travancore.

The Vimanas, Gopuras and Mandapas, characteristic of the early Chola, later Chola and Vijayanagara periods respectively have even now survived in the State and are found in a fairly good state of preservation in South Travancore. But the Kerala style of architecture with its gable roofs, wood carvings and absence of spires is the most common in the State.

Deities Worshipped

The seven chief deities of the Hindu pantheon to whom temples are dedicated in Travancore are:—

1. Vishnu
2. Siva
3. Sankaranarayana
4. Durga or Kali
5. Subrahmanya
6. Ganapaty
7. Sasta.

Vishnu is worshipped in his most popular Avatar as Sri Krishna and also in other Avatars such as Sri Rama, Vamana, Narasimha, Varaha and Parasurama. There is a temple dedicated to Parasurama at Tiruvallam near Trivandrum which according to tradition, is assigned by Parasurama himself for the performance of the Sraddha ceremony by the non-Brahmins of Kerala. Some of the Vaishnavite temples in Travancore are very ancient and of all-India importance. Eleven of them *viz.*, Tiruppatisaram, Tiruvattar, Trivandrum, Chengannur, Tiruvalla, Aranmula, Tiruvandur, Puliur, Trikkadittanam, Trikkakarai and Tirumzhikkulam, are specially sacred to the Sri Vaishnavas (followers of Sri Ramanuja) who make it a point to visit them at least once in their life-time. The praises of all these



The Suchindram Temple.



Rajarajeswari—A mural in the Sri Padmanabhaswami Temple.

shrines have been sung by Saint Nam-malvar, known as Sathakopa (the greatest of the twelve Sri Vaishnava apostles) who lived about the ninth century of the Christian era, and of three among them *viz.*, Puliur, Tiruvalla and Tirumuzhikkulam, by Tirumankai Alwar also. In this connection, it may be of interest to note that one of these twelve Alvars was Kulasekhara himself, a Chera ruler, an ancestor of H. H. the Maharaja of Travancore. The most celebrated among these temples is of course that of Sri Padmanabha at Trivandrum known as Anantasayanam. From the records of the temple it is seen that this temple was thoroughly renovated towards the close of the 10th century A. D. Even so early as the 14th century A. D., *it is seen from lithic records that the Maharajas of Travancore called themselves *Sri Padmanabhapadakamala Paramaradhakas* or the greatest worshippers of the lotus feet of Sri Padmanabha. Other

important Vaishnavite temples are Tiruvarpu, Ambalapuzha and Varkala. Ambalapuzha was the temple in which Sri Krishna, the family deity of the Rajas of Chempakasseri, was worshipped before it became part of Travancore in the 18th century A. D. Varkala, otherwise known as Janarddana is perhaps, of all temples in the State the best-known in North India; and a large number of pilgrims daily visit it even from the remotest corners of India.

Saivite Shrines

Among the famous Saivite shrines of Travancore, prominent mention should be made of Suchindrum, Vaikam, Ettumanur, Tirunakkara and Trikkariyur. The wealth of the lithic records in the Suchindrum temple is marvellous. † It was largely endowed by several Pandya and Chola Kings and the Vijayanagar rulers. Vithaladeva built a gopura there in front of the Tiruvenkatanatha (Vishnu) shrine in 1544 A. D. Vaikam is noted for its

*T. A. S. Vol. II, pp. 58 59.

† T. A. R. for 1096 M. E. p. 8.

feasts and festivals. Trikkariyur was a temple of very great importance in the early centuries of the Christian era. Sri Sankaracharya, the great sage well-known throughout the world as the expounder of Advaita Vedanta philosophy, was born of Nambudiri Brahmin parents at Kaladi on the banks of the Periyar in North Travancore in the latter half of the 8th century A. D. The only important temple of Sankaranarayana is at Navaikulam which is under private ownership.

Durga Temples

Among the numerous temples of Durga in the State, mention should be made before all others of Cape Comorin. This temple is referred to so early as the 1st century of the Christian era by the author of the Periplus who has recorded: "Those who wish to consecrate the closing part of their lives to religion come hither and bathe and engage themselves to celibacy. This is also done by women, since it is related that the Goddess once on a time resided at the place and bathed." The Mahabharata makes specific mention of the purifying effect of a bath at Kanyakumari. * Manimekhalai, a well-known Tamil work of the 2nd century A. D. narrates a tradition to the effect that Sati, the wife of a Brahmin at Benares, walked all the way to Cape Comorin, bathed there, worshipped at the feet of the Goddess and became purged of her sin of unchastity. The Bhagavatapurana alludes to the fact that Balabhadra in the course of his pilgrimage undertaken for killing Sauti, the reciter of Puranas, worshipped at this shrine. Other prominent temples dedicated to Durga are Mantakkaud, Melankod, Anandavallisvaram, Chettikulangara, Mullakkal, Kumaranallur and Shertalai. In certain

temples such as Bhutappandi, Nilakanthaswami shrine at Kalkulam and Chengannur, Durga and Siva are given equal prominence in the matter of worship.

Subramanya Worship

Two of the most important temples dedicated to the worship of Subramanya in South India are situated in Travancore, viz., Velimalai and Haripad. The best-known and most-frequented temples dedicated to Sasta are also in Travancore viz., Kulathupuzha, Aryankavu, Achchankovil and Sabarimalai. Sabarimalai year after year attracts an ever-expanding concourse of pilgrims for the



A Lady's Toilet—Another mural in the Padmanabhaswami Temple.

* Manimekhalai, canto XIII.



Subramania and Narada—Mural painting in the Padmanabhaswami Temple.

Makaravilakku (the lamp lighting festival in the month of Makaram). In the temple of Suchindrum, worship is offered as in some of the east coast temples to the sixty-three Saivite saints whose pious deeds have been sung in Periapuranam, a famous Tamil poem. The famous Nanda and Kannappa, who came of the Paraya and Veta castes are two among these sixty-three. The name of Cheraman Perumal, one of the great ancestors of the Maharaja, finds a place in the list.

Relics of Buddhism and Jainism

Although Buddhism had some votaries in Travancore upto the 10th century, it became extinct soon after, owing to the reformation brought about in the Hindu religion by the teachings of Sankara and the Vaishnavite and Saivite saints, and five stone images of Buddha found in some parts of central Travancore are all that now remain as relics of that religion in the State. There are, similarly, vestiges of Jainism

at Chitalar, Nagercoil and Kallil. * Both Chitalar and Nagercoil are at present Hindu temples dedicated to Durga and Nagaraja respectively, but there is unmistakable proof of the fact that it was Parsvanatha, Mahavira and Padmavati that were worshipped in them in former times. † A lithic record of 1521 A. D. shows that until that time, at any rate, Nagercoil continued to be a Jain temple. In the cave temple at Kallil also, which belongs to a private individual, worship is offered according to Hindu rites. Not only the old Chera sovereigns and the Kings of Travancore, but also the

* T. A. S. Vol. I., pp. 193, 194.

† T. A. S. Vol. II, p. 127; and

T. A. S. Vol. VI, pp. 153-169.

Madura Nayaks and the Vijayanagar rulers made endowments to Travancore temples on a substantial scale. From the inscriptions much valuable information may be gathered relating to them and also of local self-Government.

Artistic Wealth

Equally important is the artistic wealth which one finds in the Travancore temples. Excellent stone sculptures of antiquity are seen at the Suchindrum temple, while splendid examples of wood work are found at Ettumanur and Kaviyur. Similarly fine bronzes of Siva, Parvati and Saivite saints are preserved in the temples at Suchindrum, Parakkai, Trivandrum etc. They have a unique and distinguishing

Sasta on horseback—Mural in the Padmanabhaswami Temple.



charm of their own on account of their excellence of workmanship and their peculiarly artistic and rhythmic poses.

Exquisite Murals

Exquisite mural paintings dating from about the 9th century A. D., are also found in some Travancore temples, the best specimens of which may be seen at Trivandrum, Padmanabhapuram and Ettumanur. They reveal not only the glory of a great and prosperous people, but also their exquisite feel for an amazingly perfect expression in the realm of fine arts. They indicate also to a large extent the religious enthusiasm of the people and their taste for decoration and embellishment. In very few parts of India can one see such an exquisite variety of lamps and jewellery as in the

great temples of Travancore, such as Trivandrum, Suchindrum and Ettumanur; and the makers of these works of artistic excellence have produced some of the best examples of arts and crafts in the State.

On the whole, if there is anything in Travancore which, as Ruskin says, "so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man for whatever uses that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power and pleasure," it is unquestionably the temples of the State "whose spirit of antiquity enshrined in sumptuous buildings, vocal in sweet song, in pictures speaking with heroic tongue, and with devout solemnities entwined, strikes to the seat of grace within the mind."



The Ariyankavu Temple.