

AN OLD PORTUGUESE WORK ON KĒRALA BELIEFS

By PROF. L. V. RAMASWAMI AIYAR, M.A., B.L.

*The "Livro da Seita dos Indios Orientais" of Father Jacob Fenicio
—edited with an Introduction and Notes by Professor Jarl
Charpentier of Uppsala.*

This 16th century Portuguese account of Hindu religious beliefs and customs current in Kēraḷa, edited and published about a decade ago by the late Professor Charpentier, has remained more or less a sealed book to Kēraḷa scholars on account of the lack of an English translation. Even the very learned English Introduction of Professor Charpentier, tracing elaborately the contacts of Europeans with India from the earliest known times, contains so many untranslated passages in Latin, Portuguese, Italian and French as to make it very difficult for the average scholar unacquainted with these languages, to utilise the rich materials collected by the late Swedish savant.

Father Fenicio appears to have served as a priest at Cochin and Porcad from about 1584 to the early years of the 17th century. He stayed at the Zamorin's court for some time, and founded the missionary station at Tānūr. He died at Cochin in 1632-

Latin accounts of contemporaries and later writers give us more details about the life of Fenicio. Here, he is described as an earnest student of the Kēraḷa language and customs which he learnt so well that he was able to 'discomfit' Hindu religious men in the discussions held publicly at Calicut and elsewhere. He is said to have utilised the writings of the Malabar poet, presumably Pākkanār, for refuting Hindu orthodoxy. He is also said to have composed the political differences between the Zamorin and the Raja of Cranganore.

He was a zealous missionary missing no opportunity of preaching the doctrine of Christ to the people of the land.

A careful examination of Fenicio's work shows that this missionary's knowledge of Hindu religious mythology was essentially derived from the popular versions and floating traditions of Kerala. It is doubtful if he knew much of Sanskrit; and there are no indications in the Portuguese text pointing to the author's having consulted any literary sources at all. A list of the main contents of the book would give us an idea of the sort of topics that he has reproduced.

The work is divided into eight Books. The first book treats about the creation of the world, about Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, the Earth, the Sun, the Moon and the Stars, and Hindu cosmogony and chronology; Book II deals with Śiva, his exploits, his sons Gaṇapati and Subrahmanya, and the ceremony of Vināyakacaturthi; Book III with Viṣṇu and his avatāras, the Mahābali story and the origin of the Ōṇam festival; Books IV and V give a fairly long account of the Rāmāyaṇa story; Book VI concerns itself with Kṛṣṇa and with the fight of the Pāṇḍavas with the Kauravas; Book VII treats about Ayyappan's origin and adventures, Kēraḷa temples, pollutions and ablutions, fasts and penances, śrāddhas and Keṭṭukalyāṇam.

While it is the last two chapters that treat primarily about Kēraḷa customs and beliefs, references to Kēraḷa practices are contained in the other chapters also. Further, the mythological traditions narrated by Fenicio in the first six chapters, derived as they are from Kēraḷa sources, have a Kēraḷa "bias" about them.

I shall list below some of the topics that convey a special appeal to students of Kēraḷa antiquities.

1. The origin of the letters of the alphabet as traceable to the sounds (or words) used by Śiva and Śakti in their first talk to each other.

2. A conversation between Fenicio and the Zamorin's astrologer.

3. Fenicio's dispute with learned men about Hindu cosmology.

4. The ridicule poured by a gentile poet on Śiva and Viṣṇu, through a poem describing the refusal of a maiden to marry either of these gods.

5. The tradition (in Kēraḷa) of the disappearance from the calendar, of one day of the week, known as *Poṅgalālcca*, on which day Śiva is said to have cut off one of the heads of Brahmā.

To say that something will be done on *Poṅgalālcca* means among the people of Kēraḷa (according to Fenicio)¹ that it will not be done at all.

6. A very curious story of the origin of toddy and the toddy-palm.

"The Brahmins, however, do not drink wine, nor do they eat anything containing wine, on pain of being outcasted. A certain Brahmin ruler would not write with our ink, suspecting it to have been made with wine.

"This year, the Zamorin of Calicut killed with his own hand a brother-in-law of his with two slashes, for appearing in a drunken state before him.

"A prince of the royal family of Cochin used to go about in disguise, killing Nairs found drunk".

7. Gaṇapati's curse on the moon of the caturthi day in

1. I am unable to trace this tradition or idiom in modern usage.

August, as explaining the practice of avoiding the sight of the moon on the Vināyakacaturthi day.

8. The seat of Bhagavati is said to be Cranganore, a great centre of pilgrimage. Numerous "fanois" are offered here on the festival day, and this is the largest source of revenue for the ruler of Cranganore. "The ruler of Cochin, wishing to have a part of this money, stationed armed men on the roads along which the pilgrims passed, seizing from them the money they carried and compelling them to go to another temple of Bhagavati, which for this purpose he caused to be built in his own kingdom in 'Palurti'."

9. The Ōṇam festival falls on the Tiru Ōṇam day of August when Māvēli (Mahābali) who had been made by Viṣṇu the "gateman of Paradise" after the conquest of the three worlds by Viṣṇu, is allowed to see his former subjects rejoice and make themselves as merry as in days of yore when he was their ruler. Viṣṇu ordered that on that day the high and the low should dress themselves in new clothes, eat *five* curries and celebrate the day. During the season, there are tournaments in cities and villages, where the people dividing themselves into parties engage themselves in fights, some with wooden sticks or with bows and wooden arrows, others without weapons but with bare hands giving slaps on the face and punches on the belly.

"Thus are all the festivals of these gentiles, according to the law which they profess, sensual and without any spiritual fervour", moralizes Fenicio.

10. A tradition attributes the origin of the Brahmins to fishermen who were appointed by Paraśurāma as guardians of the temples he built; the sacred thread is a memento of their past profession; and the ancient practice of the bridegroom and the bride (on the occasion of marriages) of catching with a piece of cloth (instead of the net) from inside a big

vessel filled with water, the fish which they put into it for this purpose, is referred to as another relic of their past.

11. Arjuna happened to chew the betel-leaf when he was in heaven for a time, and enjoyed it so much that he stole a branch and showed it to Kṛṣṇa who, in his turn, finding that he had never eaten anything so tasteful in his life, planted it on earth.

12. Ayyappan is the son of Viṣṇu by Śiva. 'Some say that Viṣṇu opened his body and delivered Ayyappan; others say that he vomited Ayyappan through the mouth, wherefore Ayyappan is called *Chārtava* from the verb "charticunnu" which means "vomits"'

13. Ayyappan served the Pandyan king as a Nair soldier, brought a live tiger to him, and returned to Malabar where temples were erected to his honour and offerings made to him.

14. The Kerala method of choosing sites for temples, the ceremonies connected with the consecration of images, the offerings, the exorcisation of the devil, the small-pox goddess, the god kuṭṭiccāttan, and connected topics.

15. "The Zamorin of Calicut worships and makes offerings to an iron sword of Cēramān Perumāḷ, the Emperor of Malabar. It is certain that the sword is worshipped not for the iron material but because of its being a relic of an illustrious master of the past.

"The cross is like a bough of God with which we Christians protect ourselves against our enemies, just as the natives of

1. Fenioi, has tripped woefully here. His etymology is all wrong, "*Chartava*," "the other name of Ayyappan", is obviously a mistake for *Śāstāvu* which really has nothing to do with the verb "*Charticunnu*".

Malabar protect themselves with a sheaf of green leaves symbolic of their king's authority. They show the same reverence to this sheaf that they show to their rulers".

"The green boughs of Malabar rulers other than those of Cochin and Calicut are tied together both at the bottom and at the tip; this would signify the limited character of their power; but the bough of the Zamorin of Calicut has the tips of the leaves turned downwards, which is a symbol of overlordship over all other rulers except the ruler of Cochin whose green bough has its loose leaf-tips turned upwards, which shows that the ruler of Cochin is subject to the authority of none."

"The Malabar people have so much respect for these green boughs of their rulers, that it would be enough for anyone keeping valuables at some place of embarkation, to place a bough of his ruler on his articles, in order to ward off interference by others.

"Similarly, if any person who is injured by another requests with green leaves in his hand, in the name of his king, for the cessation of the offence, the other at once leaves him without doing him any injury."

16. Having described the bath-observances, Fenicio says: "if you were to ask them why they alone in Malabar observe these bath-ceremonies while there are numerous other gentiles

1. Prof. Charpentier cites in his notes the following French passage from Paulinus' "Voyage aux Indes Orientales" which I translate:—

"These two rulers, the Zamorin and Perumpadappu (പരമ്പപ്പാപ്പു) alone had the privilege, as overlords, of causing to be carried before them a sheaf of coconut branches, tied below but free and loose above, which indicates that their authority and domain were vast, free, absolute and not restricted, while the other small chiefs of Malabar carried coconut boughs tied above and below which would show that they were subject to the authority of the above two overlords".

of diverse castes and nations who do not observe these ceremonies of pollutions and baths, they reply that there are two laws, *karma* and *jñāna*, of which the former is internal meditation and remembrance of gods, and that when Paraśurāma made the sea retreat from the land of Malabar, he asked the settlers to practise Karma Yōga. For this reason, this land of Malabar is called *Karma Bhūmi*. People of other provinces observe only *jñāna*, just as Malayālis do the same when they go out of Malabar".

16. The ashes made from the dung of the cow claim the attention of this missionary to an unusual extent, perhaps because it was a topic on which he could vent all his ridicule. "In short, among the gentiles there is no purification except with cow-dung. They attribute so many excellences to the cow.....in its two horns reside Gaṇapati and Subrahmanya, in its eyes the Sun and the Moon, in its two ears the two wives of Brahmā, Īśwara in the nose, Viṣṇu in the tongue, the *dēvagaḥ* in the teeth, the Rsis in the hair, the four feet are the four laws, the milk is Ambrosia which is called *amṛdam*, the urine is the *tīrtham* or the water which washes away all sins. For this reason, when the cow happens to urinate in the presence of some of them, they receive the urine and drink a portion of it and sprinkle a portion over their bodies and faces.' Finally, they declare the dung to be a universal purifier".

17. "After remaining some time in Paradise and not being satisfied, Dharmaputra said, "this does not suffice for me, I will be born again in Kaliyuga"; and he was born as Cēramān Perumāḷ, Emperor of Malabar. Bhīma was born as Kulaśēkhara Perumāḷ; Nakula as Cōḷa Perumal; Sahadēva as Pāṇḍi Perumāḷ. All of them lived lives of Dharma, died and reached Paradise".

1. That is the limit of the fervour of Rev. Father Penicão. In spite of such sarcasm, the Hindus use the ashes, not on any one particular day of the year, but twice a day all through the year. Western science is gradually recognising the dung as a germicide, while the urine is an ingredient in the Ayurvedic Pharmacopoea. But one is yet to hear of drinking and sprinkling it. [T. K. K. M.]