

MARTANDA VARMA AS A MAN

By MR. SURANAD KUNJAN PILLAI

THE personality of the Great Martanda Varma deserves the worshipful homage of every Travancorean and every Keraliya. His was a life of heroic exploits and magnificent achievements.

The tenth century of the Malabar Era which witnessed a political revolution in Kerala has become memorable in the history of Travancore on account of Martanda Varma's exploits. He was a truly great soul who added lustre to a family which produced sovereigns of the eminence of Kulasekhara Alwar and Samgramadhira Ravi Varma. The founder of Modern Travancore, he also re-established the culture of Kerala which was given a rude shock by the impact of foreigners. His memory will go down to posterity as one of the greatest Kings of South India.

Impressive Physique

A born ruler of men, he was endowed by nature with all the traits of a great

national hero. His physique was well-formed and impressive. The beauty of his natural features was enhanced by long discipline in the art of arms. The histor-

ian has described him as "a well-trained warrior, tall, possessing a powerful frame and long arms. He learnt from his boyhood gymnastic exercises in all their branches and was a perfect master in the use of the sword, lance and dagger, besides being a precise marksman. He was equal to any single man in combat and he was able to command a whole army in the field."



Maharaja Martanda Varma the Great.

His mental make-up equalled his physical features to a remarkable degree. He possessed an indomitable will and fearless disposition which served him in all circumstances.

Unification of Kerala

A great hero, he had a clear vision of the destiny of his life. His ambition was

the unification of Kerala and the consolidation of its strength for the establishment of Kerala-dharma. He realised that if the numerous petty kingdoms of Malabar were allowed to continue their existence in a state of perpetual mutual warfare, the whole of the West Coast would fall a prey to the Dutch intrigue. The Dutch Company was at that time the most powerful element in the politics of Malabar. They fomented disputes in the royal families and traded on the mutual jealousies of the several princes and potentates of Malabar. The Maharaja, therefore, made up his mind to crush the growing power of the Dutch once for all. The only way to attain his object was to consolidate the strength of Travancore by adding to it the neighbouring states and thus to present a strong front to the outsiders. To this great task of national consolidation which he set before himself to attain the Maharaja devoted his entire energies, and in his programme of political regeneration he was able to achieve truly enviable success. History has to record gratefully that, had it not been for Martanda Varma's timely action Kerala would have passed into the hands of the Dutch Company or to the Sultans of Mysore.

Simple Ways

His manners and personal habits were extremely simple and his devotion to duty was marvellous. He never cared for physical comforts, and lived the rough life of a warrior, always seeking the welfare of the country. He never indulged in magnificence, and was satisfied with dress and equipages of the most ordinary kind. His palaces were elegant, but not magnificent, and it is said that he preferred what was useful to what was showy or gorgeous.

He travelled from place to place, planning military movements, supervising public

works, attending to administrative measures, studying the conditions of the people and doing everything to stabilise the kingdom and strengthen the Government. He beautified his capital by renovating the Sri Padmanabha Temple, building forts, and creating several institutions for the benefit of the people. To all these works calculated to promote the public weal he devoted personal attention. The story is wellknown that when he was supervising the building of the Ponmana dam he sent away the servant who was bearing the umbrella over his royal person to attend to some other work, causing the umbrella to be planted in a hole made on the rock. On another occasion he set the example of clearing the debris from the Sri Padmanabhaswami temple on the eve of the Utsavam after its renovation.

Devotion to God

His disregard to personal comfort was equalled only by his great devotion to God. He was a devout Hindu and was very strict in the observance of religious rites. He conducted all the Mahadanas enjoined by the scriptures, performed the Tulabhara and Padmagarbha ceremonies, and assumed the title of *Kulasekhara Perumal*. He built several temples, established numerous charitable institutions and made arrangements for feeding the poor. In respect of such religious charities Onad and other territories newly annexed by conquest received as much attention as Venad itself. Ramapurathu Varar in his Kuchela Vritham Vanchi Pattu praises the Maharaja's charities saying that had it not been for his benevolence, suffering and starvation would have been the lot of thousands of people. But his crowning act of religious devotion was the dedication of the State to Sri Padmanabha which raises him to the position of a royal-Saint, a Rajayogi who did

everything in the spirit of self-abnegation (*Nishkama Karma*). It must, however, be made clear in this connection that this devotion to his own religion never prevented him from showing due regard to other faiths.

Conquests Justified

A conqueror is apt to be misunderstood in regard to his motives; and to superficial observers Martanda Varma's acts may appear to be the outcome of personal ambition. But it must be clearly understood that the Maharaja acted primarily in defence of himself and his country. He was forced to take up arms first against the Tampi pretenders who aspired to usurp his throne. Later the Raja of Kayamkulam provoked him by conspiring against his person and by planning to capture his country. The Rajas of Ambalappuzha, Tekkumkur and Vatakkumkur threw their weight on the side of Kayamkulam. The Dutch Company with its avowed policy of doing everything against Travancore blessed the enterprises of the anti-Travancore combination. It was against this alliance of hostile forces that he had to wage war, and the righteousness of his cause and his superhuman capacity won for him victory. But victory never made him revengeful or vindictive and he was just and humane in all his dealings. His treatment of the vanquished kings of Ambalappuzha, Tekkumkur and Vatakkumkur shows him to be large-hearted and generous. But he never allowed his kindness to stand in the way of his political programmes and national policies.

His heroism was of a striking character and he was remarkably firm in resolve. His indomitable spirit never yielded to inducement, intimidation or even actual violence.

He met Alagappa Mudaliar who espoused the cause of the Tampi pretenders with irrefutable arguments; and when the Dutch Governor Van Imhoff threatened to invade Travancore the Maharaja paid him back in his own coin by an intimidation to invade Holland in return. The Tampi brothers attempting to take the Maharaja's life were themselves made a prey to the Maharaja's sword. The Maharaja was equal to any occasion, and overcame all obstacles that came in his way with dauntless courage and marvellous fortitude. No other leader of men ever used his talents with greater effect or to the greater good of the people committed by providence to his care. He rewarded those who stood by him in adversity and crushed his adversaries never to rise again. He gave away the desam of Kilimanur to the family of the Koil Tampuran who heroically saved the heir-apparent by giving up his own life. Before him his enemies bowed down their heads and victory greeted him wherever he went. The Dutch dreams of political ascendancy in Malabar faded away before the rising splendour of the Maharaja's prowess.

Magnetic Personality

His was a most magnetic personality, and this kept his subjects and servants bound to him with unbreakable ties of loyalty. The vast bulk of his people regarded him as an avatar and paid homage to his divine personality. His officers cheerfully dedicated themselves to the service of their royal master and his soldiers obeyed his behests with absolute faithfulness. The memories of the Maharaja bring in their association those of his devoted Dalava Ramayyan, and others like Arumukan Pillai and Aiyyapan Marthanda Pillai. The story of Marava mercenaries in his army is a myth. People

of all parts of Travancore were drawn to his banner by his bewitching personality and it was this organisation of military strength that made his victories possible. Prominent among his generals were Ramayyan, Ayyappan Marthanda Pillai, Kunchu Parappakkutti Pillai and Kunchathicha Pillai, who have become examples of selfless devotion and patriotism. The Maharaja's presence in the battle-field often decided the fate of the day. There was a mysterious element of attraction in his character which drew even foreigners like D'Lannoy and Donadi to dedicate their lives to his service. The people of the newly conquered States of Kayamkulam, Thekkumkur and Vatakkumkur, it is stated, so far forgot their grievances at his sight that they cheerfully became his devoted subjects.

Patron of Fine Arts

The Maharaja's love of fine arts and his appreciation of intellectual values are inadequately known even to careful students of Travancore history. All the fine arts had a profound appeal to his mind, architecture and literature exercising greater influence. The present Sri Padmanabha Swami temple so exquisitely adorned with sculptural workmanship is a monument of his piety as much as his love of architecture. His patronage of *belles lettres* has become the subject of grateful panegyric of poets like Kunchan Nambiyar and Ramapurattu Varar, both originally dependents of kings whom Martanda Varma vanquished. Several others like Deva Raja, the author of *Balamartanda Vijaya*, also enjoyed his support and patronage. They have sung of his glories with hearts overflowing with gratitude and admiration. Martanda Varma has equalled the greatest patrons of letters by his munificent gift to the author of *Kuchela*.

vrittam Vanchippattu, who was pleasureably surprised by the Maharaja's generosity as was Kuchela by that of Bhagavan Sri Krishna.

Great Administrator

Although Martanda Varma is here considered more as a man than as a king or conqueror, his kingly virtues also deserve notice. He was a great administrator who dedicated his entire energies to advance the material and moral welfare of his people. "His energy and decision enabled him to establish internal tranquillity. His sagacity felt no difficulty in selecting the most efficient instruments for carrying on the administration. His ambition and enterprising spirit led him to extend his dominions almost to the present limits of Travancore. His wisdom and moderation made it easy for him to consolidate his conquests and to endear himself to his subjects." He knew that consolidation was far more difficult than conquest, and he paid careful attention to settle the land by undertaking a survey of the whole kingdom. He established an organised agency for the collection of revenue and the administration of public affairs. To ensure the protection of the newly established kingdom he formed a standing army and maintained amicable relations with the English East India Company. Expansion of agriculture and trade received his particular attention, and this paved the way for the economic prosperity of the State. He framed rules for the guidance of officers and personally supervised the collection and expenditure of public revenue. He rewarded faithful service and loyalty by conferring titles and dignities and in suitable cases by granting lands free of tax. He showed himself to be a farsighted statesman and a great diplomat in his relations with foreign powers.

such as the Dutch Company, Hyder Ali of Mysore, and the English East India Company. It must be recorded that these acts of the Maharaja enabled Travancore to continue her existence during the eighteenth century when the history of India was reshaped owing to external influences and conflicting interests.

Foreigners' Tributes

The Maharaja has received praise not only from the contemporary poets of Kerala but also from European writers and administrators. The supreme authorities of the Dutch East India Company in Amsterdam warned their officers in the East against Martanda Varma who they realised could not be dalled with. The English East India Company always treated him with the utmost consideration and regarded him as a most dependable and powerful friend. His name was an inspiration to his subjects, and has been an inspiration to future poets and writers. Fr. Paolinoda Bartolomeo speaks of Martanda Varma as "a man of great pride, courage and talents, capable of undertaking grand enterprises." About Martanda Varma's conquests Bartolomeo continues, "Thus was humanity avenged; and thus were crimes punished, and the licentiousness suppressed, by which the country had been distracted ever since the tenth century."

Martanda Varma was thus not only a great king who founded the modern kingdom of Travancore but was also a great man who redeemed the country from chaos and the resultant disruption of society both by personal example and by the establishment of the rule of *dharma*.

Summary of Malayalam talk broadcast from the T. B. S.

Do You Remember

That Maharaja Martanda Varma the Great created an Order of Knighthood to which were admitted those persons who distinguished themselves by rendering conspicuous service to the State and that those who were thus honoured had the privilege of adding to their name the title of Cheempakaraman?

That the first Code of Regulations of Travancore was drafted and printed in 1886 in the reign of His Highness Maharaja Swati Tirunal, that it consisted of eight Regulations, the first five treating of the Civil Procedure and the constitution of the Munsiff, Zillah and Appeal Courts, the sixth vesting the Tahsildars with Police authority and the Zillah Courts with Criminal powers, and the seventh and the eighth authorising Judges of the appellate Court to perform the functions of Sessions Courts?

That the Mukunnimalai hill which rears its lone height east of Trivandrum has been a landmark with mariners from time immemorial and was called Brinjal hill probably a corrupted form of Vizhinjam hill, as, observed from the sea, it stands inland from the port of Vizhinjam?

That Maharaja Uthram Tirunal (1847—1860) had a great aptitude for the healing art and grew to be quite an adept both in medicine and surgery?

That a gold medal struck in commemoration of the capture of Seringapatam (at which Travancore troops played a notable part) which had been sent by the Court of Directors of the East India Company to the Madras Government in 1808, for being presented to the Ruler of Travancore, was actually forwarded to the Maharaja only on 31st December 1866, it not having been delivered at the appropriate time by "some unaccountable oversight"?

That the nucleus of the present Law College was the Law Class opened in 1874 to prepare candidates for the B. L. degree examination, with Judge Ormsby as Professor?