

# THE WORSHIP OF SASTA

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## Sasta the popular tutelary Deity

THE worship of Sasta or Ayyappan is universal in Kerala. It has grown from strength to strength and, today, several lakhs of pilgrims go to his shrine at Sabari Malai. It is generally agreed that Ayyappan of the West Coast is identical with

## Sasta's names and Paraphernalia.

In the ancient Pinkala Nighantu,<sup>(1)</sup>(circa 9th century A. D.), several names of Sasta are listed, and these are highly informative. He is called Satavahanan,<sup>(2)</sup> Kolikkodiyon, Sattan, Vellaiyanai Vahanan, Kari, Chendayuthan, Kadalniravannan, Puranaikelvan,



## ON THE WAY TO SABARIMALA

Ayyanar of Tamil Nad. In both parts of South India, he is believed to watch over the countryside. He is definitely a post-Vedic deity, though tradition says that he is born of Vishnu and Siva. Without launching into discussions about the identity and origin of Sasta, we will consider here the light that Tamil literature throws on this god.

(1) Chapter II. வானவர்வகை-Sutras 117 & 118—"சாதவாகனன், கோழிக் கொடியோன். சாதத்தன், வெள்ளையானை வாகனன், காரி, செண்டாயுதன், கடல் நிறவண்ணன், பூரணை கேள்வன், புட்கலை மனனான். ஆரியன், அறத்தைக் காப்போன், யோகி, அநிகரபுத்திரன், ஐயுன் பெயரே."  
"காரியூர்தி, கோழிக்கொடியே."

(2) Skt आतवाहन.

Putkalaimanalan, Aryan, Arathaikkappan, Yogi and Hariharaputra. (3) From these names, we gather that he had the figure of a cock in his special banner. His consorts were Puranai and Pushkalai. He rode on a white elephant (4) and a black horse. His colour was blue like that of the sea; he was a guardian of Dharma and a yogi. His chief weapon was the chendu, a whip-like instrument, for driving horses. In this connection, it is noteworthy that one of the ancient Cholas—Karikalan—is stated to have been favoured by Sasta with his chendu (5) with which he caused the Himalayas to whirl. (i. e. conquered it). The favourite garland of the god was made of Kurinji flowers (6) which belong in a peculiar sense to the mountains.

### Sasta an exponent of the Shastras

Sasta is called Pashanda Sathan (7) and Pashandau. (8) This epithet is explained by Adiyarkunallar, the commentator of Silappadikaram as one learned in the

(8) 'சாத்தனை மகனுவைத்தார்'—அப்பர் தேவாரம். பக். 853, பாட்டு 4. (சாமிநாத பண்டிதர் பதிப்பு.)

(4) In the temples of Sasta, elephants and horses of his train are prominently displayed. The following illustration from the Tamil Grammar may be cited in support of the above.

"பவளக்கோட்டு நீலபாணை  
சாதவாகனன் கோயிலுள்ளும்  
இல்லை".

(5) கச்சி வளைக்கைச்சி காமக்கோட்டங்  
கரவல்  
மெச்சி யினிதிருக்கு மெய்ச்சாத்தன்-  
கைச்செண்டு  
கம்பக் களிற்றுக் கரிகாற்பெருவளத்  
தான்  
செம்பொற் கிரிதிரித்த செண்டு.  
(Adiyarkunallar's commentary, Silappadikaram, Chapter 5, lines 95-98.)

(6) செங்குறுஞ்சித் தாரார் நறுமலைச்  
சாத்தற்கு தான் பின்னும்  
கேராதன் வொன்று நேர்ந்தான்.  
(Siriya Thirumadal-Couplets 16-17.)

(7) Silappadikaram. Chapter 9, l. 95.

(8) Ibid, Chap. 30 l. 69.

ninety-six Shastras falling outside orthodox religion. (9)

There are many links between Sasta and the Chera country and one such special link is seen in the Periya Puranam, of Sekkilar. In this book, (10) we read that when Cheraman Perumal and Sundaramurti Nayanar went to Kailasa, the Kerala King recited his poem, the Adiyula, in Lord Siva's presence. The Great One was highly pleased with the devotion and genius of the Chera King and made him a Gananatha. Mahasasta who heard the poem at Kailasa kept it in his mind and made it known for the benefit of the world at large, in Thiruppladavur. Mahasasta is thus responsible for a signal act of service to Tamil literature as well as the Chera country. This is in keeping with his unique scholarship in all the arts.

The God's temples outside the limits of villages and towns

Ilango Adigal, in the Silappadikaram, speaks of a temple to Sasta in Kaviripumpattinam. (11) He mentions it along with other shrines dedicated to Subramanya, Indra, etc. This would suggest that he was deemed as equal to the other deities of the Aryan pantheon. The fact

(9) Elsewhere in the Silappadikaram, Court-jesters are required to be proficient in these Shastras to amuse people (Chapter 26 lines 80-1). The Prahasana natakas bear witness to this. The Buddhist traveller Fa-Hien during the course of his travels (circa fourth century A. D.) speaks of a place east of Jetavana where the Buddha "held a discussion with the (advocates of the) ninety-six schemes of erroneous doctrine." (A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms—by Fa-Hien Translated by James Legge, Page 59-60).

(10) Vide—Cheraman Perumal-Nayanar Puranam.

(11) "வேற்கோட்டம்,  
வச்சிரக் கோட்டம், புறம்பணியான்  
வாழ்கோட்டம்"  
(Chapter 9, ll. 11-14.)

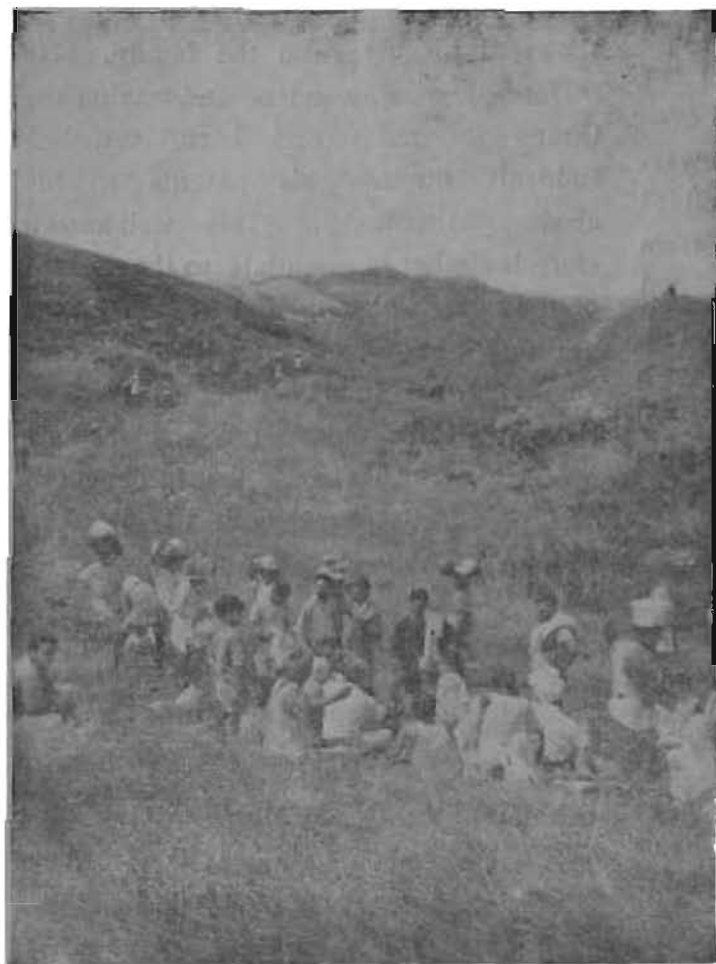
that he is specially called Arya (or Ayyan which is only a variant of the Sanskrit word) would point to the same conclusion. Sasta is mentioned as Purambanaiyan, one who lived outside the limits of the city. We may note that even today, the Ayyanar temples of Tamil Nad are located outside villages and towns. This is probably due to the fact that he is a guardian deity, en-

other than orthodox Brahmins. The temple priests mostly come from among the potters (Kuyavar).<sup>(12)</sup> This may probably be due to the fact that animal sacrifices are offered in this temple—a practice which seems to be of later origin. But in the past, he was the adored god of the Brahmanas as of other castes. The Silappadikaram tells us that Madalan, learned in Vedic lore, paid

his respects to this god. Sasta himself was born in a Brahmana family, and married a maid of that community, according to the account of Ilango-Adigal.<sup>(13)</sup> In the days of the Alvars and the Nayanars, too, offerings to Sasta by high and low for the achievement of certain desired objects was a common feature.<sup>(14)</sup> Most striking of all, is the testimony of epigraphy. In the 1922 collection of the Madras Epigraphical<sup>(15)</sup> Department, several inscriptions of Agaram or Kayilur village in Villupuram taluk say that the Mahasasta of the place was called Paramaswamigal; the deity was worshipped and looked after by Brahmanas leading a pure life of consecrated service.

#### The Story of Sasta in the Silappadikaram

In the epic of the Silappadikaram is found a fascinating account of the life of Sasta as a human being. This story is told at length in chapter 8 and is again summarized in chapter 30, when King Senguttuvan asks the revered Madalan why the God



#### PILGRIMAGE TO SABARIMALA

In the foreground is seen a group of pilgrims resting during their trek to Sabarimala.

trusted with the care of the areas in which his shrine is situated.

#### Sasta worship by Brahmanas

Today, the Ayyanar of Tamil Nad is primarily a deity worshipped by sects

(12) Sangam literature bears testimony to the employment of potters as temple priests (Vide Narrinai, 200-293.)

(13) Chapters 9 & 80 of Silappadikaram.

(14) Vide foot note No. 6.

(15) M. E. R. 368 to 388 of 1922.

chose Devandi as his "medium." The story runs as follows:—

Malathi, a Brahmana woman out of over-flowing love, suckled her co-wife's child during the latter's absence. But, as ill-luck would have it, the child died. Fearing the wrath of the jealous co-wife, Malathi went with the dead child to the deities of all temples, praying to them to resurrect the child and save her. On her way, one mischievous goblin snatched even the corpse in her hands and ate it away. In helpless surrender, the woman fell at the feet of Sasta for rescuing her from blame. Taking pity on her, the god assumed the shape of her co-wife's child. Thus appearing on earth in the Brahmana family of Kappiyakkudi,<sup>16</sup> he mastered all the arts as a Brahmachari, and married Devandi, a Brahmana maid. He led the householder's life with her for eight years. After the death of his parents, he took care to conserve the property of the family and also duly performed the prescribed rites for the departed souls. His task thus over, he showed his true self to his wife one day and vanished into his temple, asking her to come to his shrine. From that time forth, Devandi spent her life in austerities and worship of her lord.

#### Legend of Sasta similar to the story of the Silappadikaram

Tradition and legend in Kerala have woven a beautiful story around the per-

(16) Kappiyakkudi is Kappya-gotra, to which Tholkappiyanaṁ, Kappiyavrukkappiyaṁ, Vel-luṁkappiyaṁ and other famous poets belong.

sonality of the popular Ayyappaṁ. He is believed to have been found in a forest as a baby by the childless King of Pandalam. After growing up to manhood, he fulfilled a son's obligations to his parents. A brother was born to him and a difficulty developed as to his getting the crown. The queen mother became jealous of the foundling; but the divine boy showered his grace on the family. He performed some wonders and leaving the throne for the second born, vanished suddenly inviting his parents to his abode—Sabarimala. This well-known story is similar in essentials to the account of the Silappadikaram and both may have a common source. The two accounts emphasise the fundamental beliefs that, for some avowed object, the god was born on earth, and that, after the fulfilment of this object, he went back to his usual residence of the celestial world.

#### Another reference in Silappadikaram

After his departure from Devandi, Sasta makes his appearance in the form of a Brahmin before Madalan while the latter was in the temple of Mangala Devi. Sasta gave him a small vessel containing sacred water and asked him to keep the water safe. Then he went away.

During the installation of Kannaki Devi, when Madalan, Chenguttuvan and others were present in the temple, Sasta appeared again on Devandi and explained to Madalan about the sacred qualities of

the water, which he had left with him before. If sprinkled on persons, he said, it would enable them to remember their past births. Sasta further asked him to sprinkle the water over the twin girls born to the wife of Arattanchetti and also over the daughter of Sedakkudumbi engaged in the services of God Vishnu in Adakamadam. When Madalan did so, the three children knew their previous births and began to sob. Of the three children, one was the mother of Kannaki, another the mother of Kovalan and the third Madavi, the cowherdess of Madura.

All these instances make it evident that Sasta was revered as a divine benefactor to the people in distress as early as the Sangam period.

#### **A Yogi, and Protector of Dharma**

Sasta, besides being an exponent of the Shastras, is a yogi, as one of his names signifies. At Sabarimalai, too, amidst the loneliness of the hills and forests, he sits in Yogasana pose. As a protector of Dharma, Aramkappan, he is keeping watch over the Dharmarajya (Travancore) at the request of Parasurama. (17)

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(17) There is no evidence either in Tamil literature, inscription or tradition in support of the belief that Sasta had his origin from Buddhistic sources.

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