

# SASTA WORSHIP

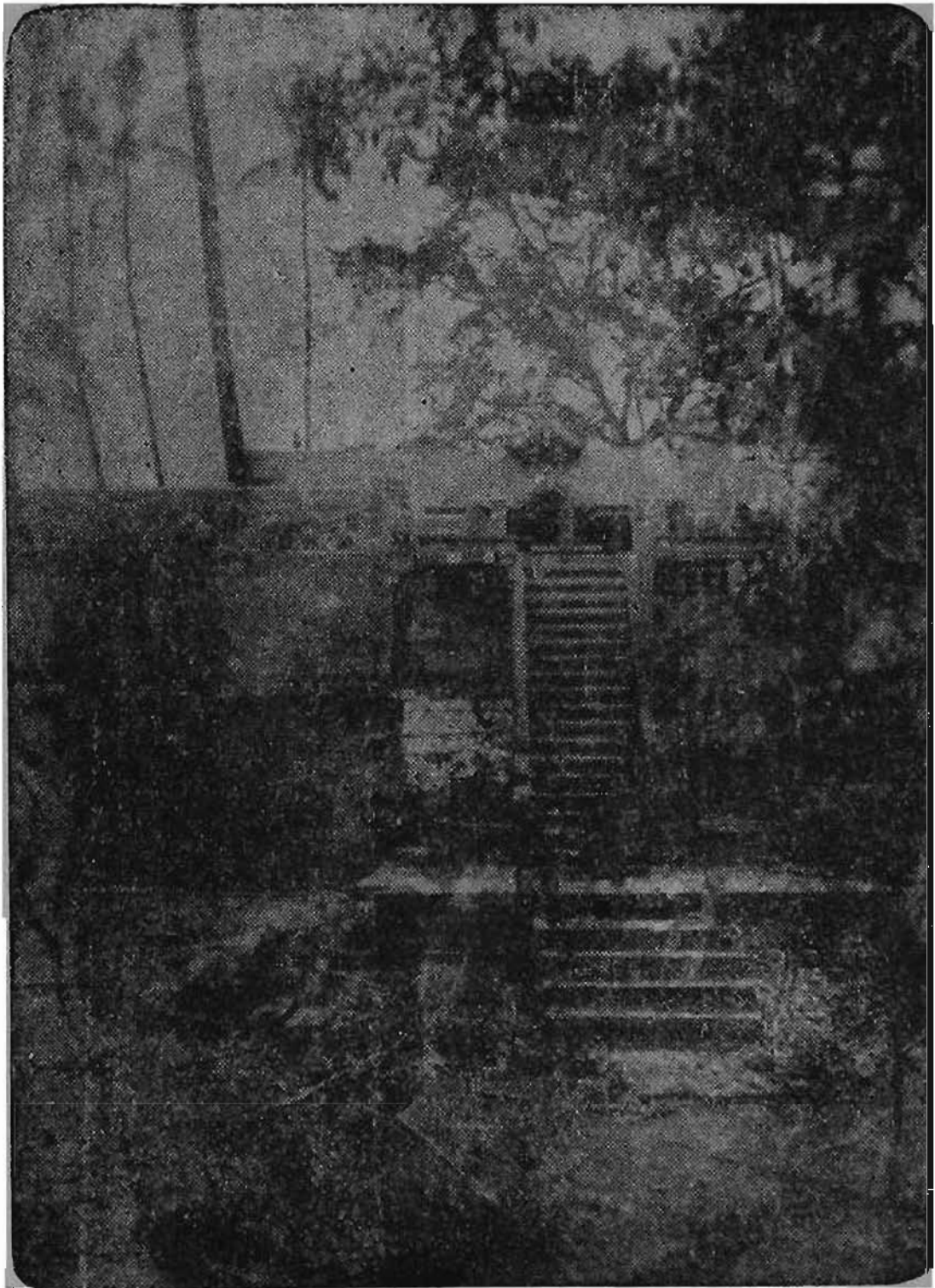
IN

## SOUTH INDIA

*By*  
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*With a Foreword*  
by  
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THE SABARIMALA PAGODA

# Sasta Worship in South India

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY.

An important aspect of religious ritual is that known popularly as worship. Ideally and metaphorically, worship signifies adoration and admiration to a high degree. It implies a relation between two individuals or beings wherein one is treated as the superior to the other, who takes the initiative in making any approaches. The essential element of superiority recognised, therefore, in the object of worship is the power which it possesses of affecting the fortunes of the worshipper. It may be credited in ordinary description with omniscience and omnipotence.

Man, being a religious animal, cannot be happy with a godless creed. He cannot do without religion. It is verily a universal feature of human culture and really there is something in the nature of man which induces him to recognise and worship a superior being. As Sir

Monier Williams says, "Religion is ever present to a Hindu's mind. It colours all his ideas. It runs through every fibre of his being. It is the very Alpha and Omega of his whole earthly career. He is born religious and dies religious .....Nay religion attends him in ante-natal ceremonies long before his birth, and follows him in endless offerings for the good of his soul long after death."\*

In fact, the power which unites man to man is religion. By religion I do not mean creedalism, which is only a maker of cliques similar to the parties made by political views, or to clubs and smart sets which come into existence in society. The power of religion resides in the heart of man and is the chief expression of the soul itself. "Religion, *per se*", wrote H. P. Blavatsky, "in its widest meaning is that which binds not only all *Men* but also all *Beings* and all *things* in the entire Universe into one grand whole" †.

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\* Sir Monier Williams—"Religious Life & Thought in India".

† *The Aryan Path* (Bombay)—Vol. XIII. 1942.

Religion, says another group of modern thinkers, of whom Mr. Edward Clodd is perhaps the best exponent, *grew out of fear*. According to Westermarck, it is "a belief in, and a respectful attitude towards, a supernatural being on whom man feels dependant, and to whose will he makes an appeal in his worship"\* . "It is born of man's terror of the great and mysterious natural agencies by which he is surrounded".†

God, as I understand the word, and as the vast mass of mankind understands it, is a supernatural being *to be revered and worshipped*. God Sasta of Sabarimalai in Travancore, stands to his votaries, on the whole, as Dr. Robertson Smith has well pointed out, in a kindly and protecting relation. He may be angry with them at times, to be sure ; but this anger is only temporary and paternal. His permanent attitude towards his people is one of friendly concern ; He is worshipped as a beneficent and

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\* Edward Westermarck—"The Origin & Development of Moral Ideas" Vol. II.

† Grant Allen—The Evolution of the Idea of God—p. 15.

generous Father. As Dr. Patra has rightly remarked, "Belief in God is ingrained in man ; it is only perverseness that makes him to deny the existence of his Creator. Man must worship God in some form or another. The History of Religion has brought this fact to light. No people even in the lowest scale of civilization has yet been found in whom there is not some sort of belief, or amongst whom there is no respect mixed with a feeling of awe towards a supreme Being"\*.

The hearts of men should bow in worship before the great gods who rule over mankind.

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\* Dr. B. Patra—The Path of Gold—pp. 44-45,

## CHAPTER II

### SASTA TEMPLES IN SOUTHERN INDIA

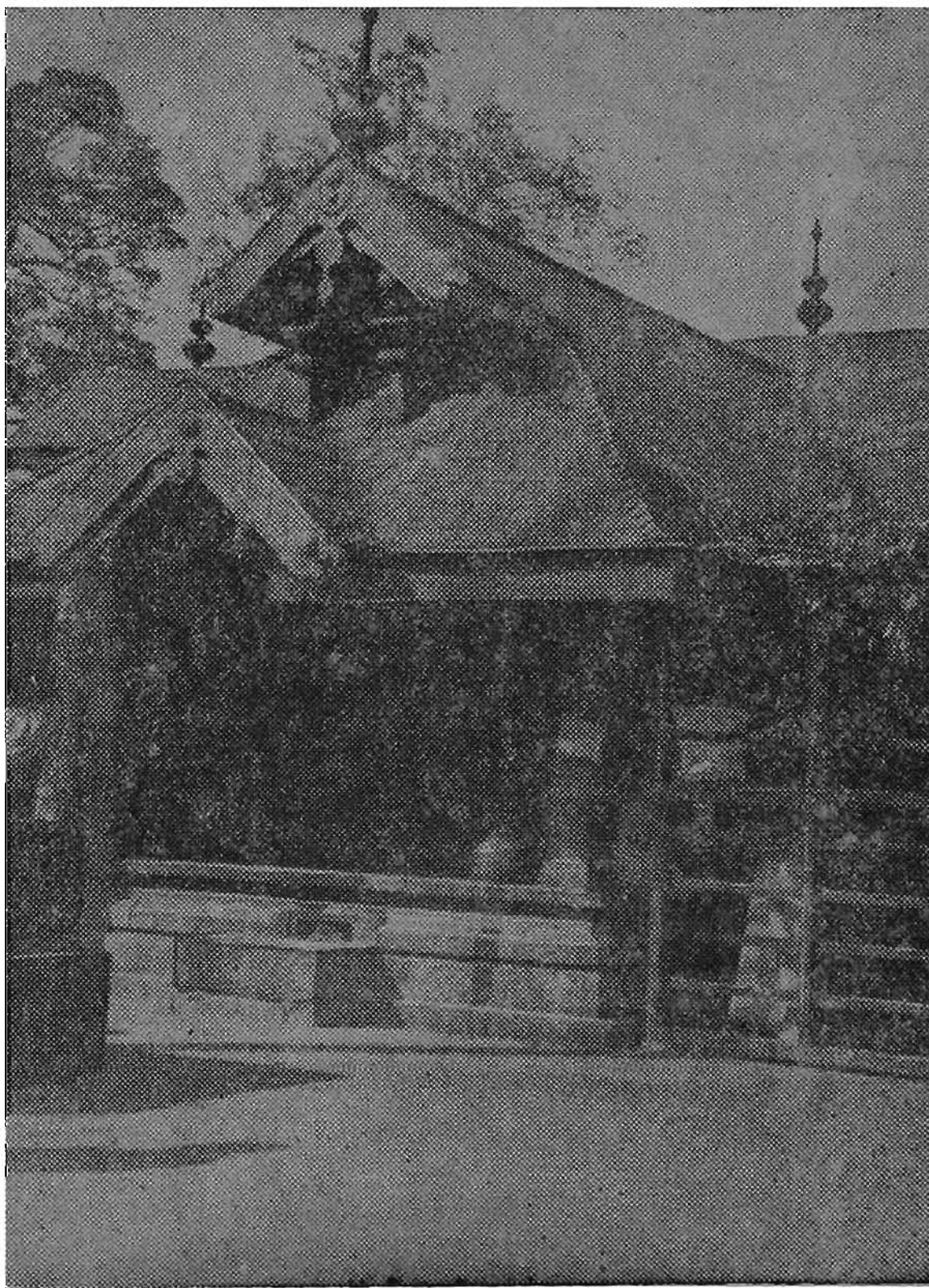
The State of Travancore is well-known for its marked devotion to the worship of the Gods, and its profuse liberality in the support of the popular faith.

The annual worship of Sasta forms a vital part of the conglomerate of religious beliefs, customs and ceremonies. It is confined to the extreme South of India—Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. *Keralolpathi*, a work of comparatively recent date and of more than doubtful authority, mentions that the great Brahmin sage and warrior, Parasurama, established many temples dedicated to Sasta along the ghats to guard the newly created country from the incursions of foreigners. The prominent ones amongst them are those at Sabarimala, Achencoil, Kulathupuzha and Arienkavu. All these are situated on the hills, while the one at Thagazhi is situated about four miles from the sea.

The period from the middle of November to the middle of January is *par excellence* the period of the worship of Sasta. The temple at Sabarimalai is the most famous of the Sasta temples in Southern India and stands somewhat majestically on an eminence of 2,000 feet in the heart of the Ranni Reserve of the Manimala Range in Travancore. It attracts numerous pilgrims early in the month of Makaram (January) during the annual *Mandalapuja* which lasts for 41 days.

The pagoda is not easily accessible being twenty-five miles south-east of the Forest station at Peruthode. Through thick deciduous and evergreen forest, the track takes a circuitous course and crossing about half a dozen mountain streams and the same number of high hills, ends at the small temple of Sasta to the east of Sabarimalai. The journey is so long and arduous that pilgrims, with their unquestioning, reverential faith in God, are about three days on their way to it. Ward and Conner, in their *Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States* (1869), have remarked that the whole way and the site about the Pagoda are





**THE SABARIMALAI SASTA SHRINE**

unwholesome, and Lt. Hosley, much earlier (1839) stated that "among the Pagodas of celebrity, that of Ayapen at Chowrymullay attracts particular attention, vast numbers (and many even from the eastern coast) flocking to it at the period of the festival in January, to present their vows and offerings, notwithstanding it is situated in the wildest country possible".\* The present writer would pay a glowing tribute to the Government of His Highness Sri Chitra Thirunal Maharaja and his talented and farsighted Dewan Sachivothama Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, for inaugurating and seeing through a programme of improvement works, like sinking wells and tanks, and adding to the amenities of the pilgrims on their march to the hills.

Entrance to the gate of the pagoda on the east is by a flight of 18 granite steps, and only votaries pass by it during the annual Makaravilakku festival. Outside the raised ground occupied by the above gods, but within the moat encircled area there are Karuppa-swami (the Black One), Kochukadatha (the Fierce One), Vavar, the Muslim Saint and

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\* Lt. W. H. Hosley—Memoir of Travancore—p. 24.

a Goddess. All of them are worshipped by the pilgrims. The goddess referred to is not the well-known Bhadrakali, but the emanation of the carcass of a she-buffalo monster called Mahishi killed by Sasta. Karuppaswami and Kochukadutha are Dravidian male deities. The former is a fierce demon worshipped in the Tamil country by the lower classes of people and the latter is a God of the same nature as Madan, Ekki, Karuppan and other deities.

The pagoda is situated on a plot of ground about one square mile in area surrounded by a wide and deep moat which prevents elephants and other wild animals from getting into the premises. It is small and covered with copper plate. Besides Sasta there are also Ganesa \* or *Vigneswara*, the elephant-headed,

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\* Ganesa is a homely village God adored by Hindus of every denomination. *Vigneswara* means 'Remover of obstacles' and so prayers are offered to him for overcoming hindrances and difficulties, whether in performing religious acts, writing books, building houses, making journeys or undertaking any new venture. He is therefore the typical embodiment of success in life with its usual accompani-

and Subramania, the six-faced (both sons of Siva) set up near his shrine. Sasta too is Siva's son born of Vishnu who once took the form of a bewitching damsel (See Chapter III). Near Sasta's shrine a deity called *Malai* (Hill) is set up. This God—*Malaidaivam*—may be a Pre-Dravidian deity originally revered by the aborigines.

#### PUJA IN THE TEMPLE

"The temple is the personal dwelling place of the God, who lives there in human fashion, in a statue or symbol. The priest's function is to provide for the needs of the God's life..... He is the indispensable intermediary between the God and his worshipper, the sacred and the profane. The worshipper brings his homage and offerings, and the priest renders them acceptable to the God....."\*

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ments of good living, prosperity and peace. He is believed to be the chief of Siva's host of spirits and he controls malignant spirits, who are ever plotting evil and causing hindrances and difficulties. (L. K. B.)

\* Sylvan Levi—Introduction to "Indian Temples" (O. Bruhl) p. vii.

In the Sabarimalai temple a Brahmin from Kakkad officiates as priest. There are special *mantrams* to be used in the worship of this deity and Wednesdays and Saturdays are auspicious for his worship. During the last 10 days of the *Mandalam*, a festival in honour of Him is celebrated. In some parts of the country, when children are afflicted with maladies, parents make to Him offerings of rice boiled in milk and sugar, fruits etc. Their special songs called *Sastapattu* (songs in honour of Sasta) are sung to propitiate Him in order to avert any pestilential disease prevailing in the village, to prevent failure of monsoons, and to keep off evil spirits.

#### DATE OF THE PAGODA

The pagoda is an old one and there are not any inscriptions to give us a clue as to the origin of the temple or of the connected structures. This is always the case with the majority of our South-Indian temples and the reason for omitting such an important piece of information regarding the foundation of the temple, is apparent. Mr. T. K. Joseph dates its

antiquity to 1085 M.E. (1910 A.D.) referring to the only Sanskrit inscription in the temple which records that the metal image of Sasta was set up in that year.

The antiquity of Sabarimala Sasta is evident from the references made by Lt. Hosely, and Ward & Conner, as early as 1839.

We have necessarily to recognise that the Gods enshrined and worshipped in every temple are "ancient." The origin of the Gods, saints and rivers ought not to be gone into, for the enquiry may often lead to undesirable conclusions; Mr. Joseph's reference to Sasta's modernity at Sabarimala is one such. "The temple may happen to be a tomb originally; a saint may be but a miserable man of low birth, and a sacred river at its source may be only a dirty little pool"\*.

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\* P. V. Jagadisa Ayyar—"South Indian Shrines"-p. 14.

### CHAPTER III

## ORIGIN OF SASTA

The origin of Sasta is one of the most delightful and interesting romances of Hindu Mythology. Scientific approach to the question being impracticable, at least Tradition, which in all societies, stands as the natural background of history may be expected to step in to unravel the past. The advent of Sasta to the hills has an interest all its own for the student of South Indian History.

According to the epics, *amrita* (ambrosia) was demanded by the Gods, so as to enable them to overcome the demons. In *Vishnu-purana*, however, a Brahmanic addition to the myth was made so as to exalt a sage and illustrate the power he could exercise over the old Vedic deities. It is related that Durvasas obtained from a merry nymph a sweet-scented inspiring garland the inebriating fragrance of which made him dance. He presented it to Indra who placed it on the head of his elephant. The elephant began to prance about ; it grew so ex-

cited that it cast the garland on the ground. Durvasas was so enraged that he cursed Indra who began to suffer loss of power. Indra, as also other deities, became alarmed, fearing that the demons would conquer them. They appealed to Brahma who referred them to Vishnu. Vishnu commanded that the ocean be churned for *amrita*.

As a result of churning in which both the Devas and demons took part, the sea of milk (*Palazhi*) yielded butter flavoured with gums and juices from the mountain. The nectar was carried away by the demons, and the Devas complained to Mahavishnu who assumed the guise of a bewitching damsel (Mohini). The demons were so much under the spell of Mohini's charm that they requested her to distribute the nectar to them. She asked them to shut their eyes and said she would marry him who opened his eyes last. The demons closed their eyes in a spirit of emulation, when Vishnu made away with the nectar and gave it to the Gods. The demons found they were capped; and they grew militant. When the *amrita* was being served amongst the Devas, a demon



Rahu, assumed divine form and repaired to this spot. He was also served with it. Hardly had it reached his throat, when the sun and the moon discovered the mistake and informed Vishnu, who flung his discus and cut off Rahu's huge head. Meanwhile, the demons fought against the Devas, but they were defeated and slain with the discus of Vishnu.

Siva was anxious to know how Vishnu recovered the nectar. When Vishnu narrated the incident, Siva had a craving to see him in the guise of a woman. Vishnu reluctantly agreed and appeared in the guise of a damsel. Siva felt enamoured of her and out of their union a child was born (Sasta). He is therefore called Hari-Hara-Suta or Hari-Hara-Putra. "He was born on a Saturday under Uthrom star, Vrischika legnam in the month of Dhanus"\*.

When he asked them what mission he was intended to fulfil, he was told he should remain in the jungle, that the Pandian Raja would take him, and that he should remain

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\* V. Narayana Pillai—Rangaswami Aiyangar Commemoration Volume—p. 539.

with him for twelve years. He was further told he was born for heavenly deeds.

The child was left in the forest. The cries of the infant attracted to the spot a cow which seeing a new-born baby lying helpless on the rough earth, took pity upon it and warmed and fed it on its milk for a week. On the eighth day the Pandyan Raja happened to come that way a-hunting and heard the cry of a baby in the jungle. His attention being drawn to the strange sight of a cow suckling tenderly a human baby, he went near the spot, and seeing what a fine child it was, he took it up in his hands thanking the Gods for having bestowed on his childless self so precious a boon. He consigned it to the care of his wife on his return. The boy grew into a very promising lad, and the King relied on him for advice in affairs of State. This upset the court flunkeys so much that their distemper took the shape of casting foul aspersions on the boy's origin to the Queen. They hit upon the device that the Queen should feign illness and that the boy should be asked to fetch tiger's milk to cure her illness. The King was persuaded to

send him for the purpose and Manikantan was too ready to go. He went to the high hills and raised a huge cry when all the tigers flocked round him. They were really Devas in disguise. He rode over a huge tiger and marched to Madura followed by a retinue of tigers. People grew panicky and the King was astonished. Manikantan got down and paid his respects to the King. He told the King that any quantity of milk can be had for curing the Queen's illness. He was appeased and the tigers dispersed.

Meanwhile the period of twelve years elapsed, and he told the Raja he was going away to fulfil his mission. He marched to the hills and created a Mahisha to divert the attention of Mahishasuri from the path of destruction. The result was that they roamed together as husband and wife. The Mahishi approached to kill Manikantan but she was promptly done away with near Erumeli. On his return, he met Vavar. They became thick friends and went to Ponnambalamedu.

“Agastya\* is said to have asked him to remain at Sabarimala, and there he remains to this day.”§

According to another tradition, there lived a demon, named Bhasmasura, who by his severe penance gained the favour of Siva and got from Him a boon that, whatever he touched with his hand should be turned to ashes. He tried to test its efficacy on Siva himself, who ran away and concealed himself in the flower of a plant growing in a tank. He thence prayed to Vishnu to rescue Him, who thereupon appeared to the demon in the form of a *mohini* (damsel). At the sight of her, his passions overpowered him, and he lost control over his

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\* Agastya was the first Aryan leader, who, according to tradition, crossed the Vindhya mountains. He is credited with having founded the first Tamil Academy besides writing a Tamil Grammar, which, though lost, has been extremely quoted in a treatise written by one of his disciples. Raised to the rank of divinity, he occupies a unique place as the pioneer who introduced Aryan knowledge and culture in Southern India. (L. K. B.).

§ L. A. Krishna Iyer—The Travancore Tribes and Castes.

senses ; the virgin consented to yield to his wishes, if he would rub oil on his head and bathe in the water of the tank close-by. The demon did so and was reduced to ashes, as his hand touched his head. Siva then left his hiding place, and saw Vishnu in the form of a handsome virgin, and Sasta is said to be born of their embrace. The above story was invented by the Brahman priesthood with a view to destroy the old idea of non-Aryan gods which still influences the masses.

In his interesting paper on *Sasta, the Forest Deity of Travancore*, Mr. Narayana Pillai differs from the above two versions. According to him, when Bhadrakali killed Mahishasura, his sister Mahishi performed great penance and got from Brahma the boon that she should conquer the Devas and that she could be killed only by a son of Hari and Hara, who has spent twelve years as the *dasa* (servant) of a King. Having strengthened herself by godly favour she began to trouble the Devas who at once repaired to Vishnu and Siva for immediate help. It is said that in response to their prayers Sasta was born. He

lived with Siva at Kailas and when he came of age, he was told that he was born to kill Mahishi and to achieve this he should remain for twelve summers as a *dasa* (servant) of the *Pāṇḍālam* King. On the expiry of that period Sasta marched to the Hills and killed Mahishi.\*

Pre-Aryan Southern India was comparatively free from myths and with the advent of the Aryans to the South a vast mass of mythic lore began to make its way into the land. Starting from the sectarian controversies and schisms of the various religious factions in Southern India, the mythic rill seems in a few centuries to have swollen into a formidable torrent and literally submerged the land in the Puranic period which comes very close to our own times.

Different parts of Kerala have different romantic traditional accounts of the advent of Sasta. We find myth opposing myth. But it can be said that a sameness of thought runs through them all.

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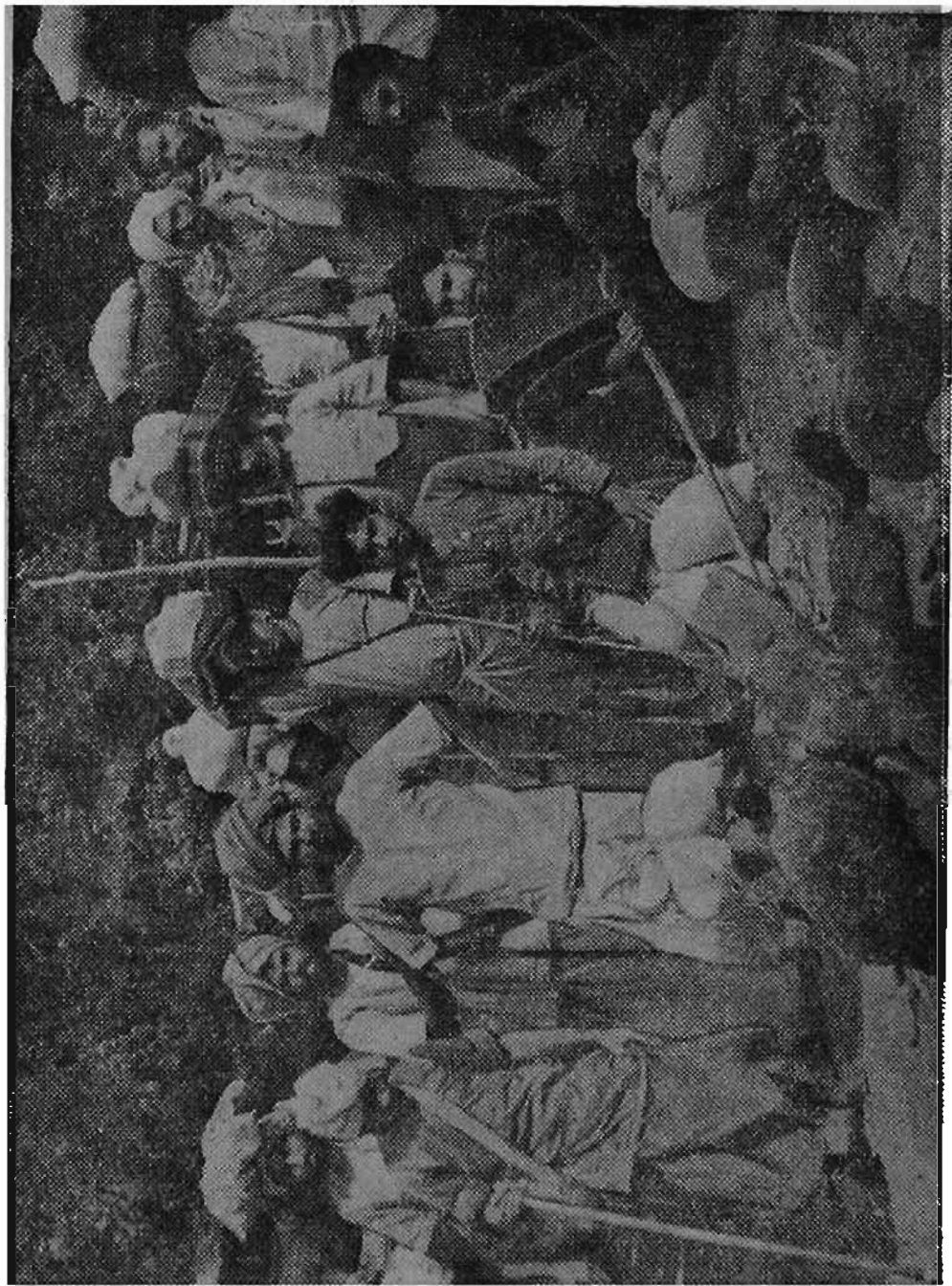
\* V. Narayana Pillai—Rangaswami Aiyangar Commemoration Volume - Pp. 539-540.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MAKARAVILAKKU FESTIVAL :

#### A PILGRIMAGE WITHOUT CASTE DISTINCTIONS

The annual festival at Sabarimalai in honour of Sasta is known as *Makaravilakku* and affords an impressive sight to the pilgrims. It falls about the middle of January and lasts for five days. Last year the festival was an unexampled one in the intensity of pilgrim traffic. Devotees from all the parts of South India—from the Brahman to the animistic tribes like the Kanikkar, the Malayarayan, the Malapantaram, the Urali etc inhabiting the forests of Travancore—visit the temple, during the festive occasion, to obtain a *darsan* of Sasta. The little courtyard of the temple is almost invariably thronged by a crowd of devoted and eager worshippers. Amidst the distractions of civilized life Sasta worship gives a chastening influence and it is a pleasing feature of the times that the ranks of the votaries or Ayyappans are being reinforced



A PARTY OF PILGRIMS ON THE WAY TO SABRIMALAI



by the influx of cultured and literate men, despite the rigorous discipline enforced on them and the ordeal of the journey.

### DISCIPLINE

Sasta is a stern disciplinarian. He is very frigid in his tastes. By remaining under a vow for forty-one days from the middle of November, a man can qualify himself as a votary of Sasta. During the period he should lead a celibate life; he should be pure in body and mind. He should abstain from meat diet and intoxicants. This is meant to avoid developing undesirable qualities with which a person would otherwise be affected. He must have reverential faith, love and devotion towards God. He should love his friend, nay more, the whole world, which is but an emanation of Divine Love. The result of such a disciplinary life is visible in the increase of strength and grit in them, who are able to stand the tedium of the pilgrimage with greater comfort and ease. Such a restrained and abstemious life also makes them admirably fit to receive the seal of divine approbation. A person who breaks his vow, who acts in a manner

that is not expected of him, incurs the wrath of Sasta and jeopardises the result that is striven for. The story of a votary who went as far as Erumeli but returned mad may be cited as an instance. In fact, health, wealth and life are to be gained only by a rigid observance of the vow.

Among women, girls and old women are not debarred from going on a pilgrimage and so are women in their family way. Women votaries are called *Malikapurams* and they are also bound by the same injunctions in force among the men.

#### KANNI AYYAPPANS

The votaries are called by the name *Ayyappans* or *Swamis*. With the rosary of *tulasi* beads worn round their necks, and an all unshaven body they are really so during the period of the vow. They propitiate god Sasta, Karuppaswami, Kochukadatha, Vavar, Ganesa, and crests of hills with what is known as *Vellamkudi*. This is intended to avoid all mishaps on their march through the hills and attract more votaries. A man going for the first time in his