

*Malabar
and its
Folk*

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Introduction
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CHAPTER VIII.

THE THIRUVATHIRA FESTIVAL.

Thiruvathira is one of the three great national occasions of Malabar. It generally comes off in the Malayalam month of Dhanu (December or January) on the day called the Thiruvathira day. It is essentially a festival in which females are almost exclusively concerned and lasts for but a single day. It has got behind it a traditional antiquity stretching back to times almost out of mind. The popular conception of it is that it is in commemoration of the death of Kamadevan, the Cupid of our national mythology. As recorded in the old Puranas, Kamadevan was destroyed in the burning fire of the third eye of Siva, one of the chief members of our Divine Trinity. Hence he is now supposed as having only an ideal or rather spiritual existence, and thus he exerts a powerful influence upon the lower passions of human nature. The memory of this unhappy tragedy is still kept alive amongst us, particularly the female section, by means of the annual celebration of this important festival. About a week before the day, the festival practically opens. At about 4 in the morning every young female member of Nair families with pretensions to decency, gets out of her bed and takes her bath in a tank. Usually, a fairly large number of these young ladies collect themselves in the tank for the purpose.

Then all or almost all of these plunge in the water and begin to take part in the singing that is presently to follow. One of these then leads off by means of a peculiar rhythmic song chiefly pertaining to Cupid. This singing is simultaneously accompanied by a curious sound produced with her hand on the water. The palm of the left hand is closed and kept immediately underneath the surface of the water. Then the palm of the other is forcibly brought down in a slanting direction and struck against its surface. So that the water is completely ruffled and is splashed in all directions producing a loud deep noise. This process is continuously prolonged together with the singing. One stanza is now over along with the sound and then the leader stops awhile for the others to follow her in her wake. This being likewise over, she caps her first stanza, with another at the same time beating on the water and so on until the conclusion of the song. Then all of them make a long pause and then begin another. The process goes on until the peep of dawn when they rub themselves dry and come home to dress themselves in the neatest and grandest possible attire. They also darken the fringes of their eyelids with a sticky preparation of soot mixed up with a little oil or ghee; and sometimes with a superficial coating of antimony powder. They also wear white, black, or red marks lower down the middle of their foreheads close to the part where the two eyebrows near one another. They also chew betel and thus redden their mouths and lips. Then they

proceed to the enjoyment of another prominent item of pleasure *vis.*, swinging to and fro, on what is usually known as an l'zhinjal. A long bamboo piece is taken and rent asunder from the root end of it leaving the other end whole and untouched. Then two holes are bored, one on the cut end of each one of the two parts into which the bamboo is split. Now another but a small piece of the same material about a yard in length is divided along the grain into two equal parts. One of these is taken and its both ends are cut into points which are thrust into the two holes of the long bamboo pieces spoken of before. This is securely nailed and strongly attached to the long bamboo; which is then hung by means of a very tight strong rope to a strong horizontal branch of a neighbouring tree. Then the player seats herself on the small piece attached between the split portions which are firmly held by her two hands; and then the whole thing is propelled amain by some one from behind. These ladies especially derive immense pleasure from this process of swinging backwards and forwards, sometimes very wide apart so as to reach the other and higher branches of the tree. Nevertheless, accidents are few and far between. This as well as the songs and early bath all close on the festival day when still greater care and scrupulousness are bestowed upon the various elements of enjoyments.

On the festival day after the morning bath is over, they take a light chota and in the noon the family-dinner is

voraciously attacked; the essential and almost universal ingredients of which being ordinary ripe plantain fruits and a delicious preparation of arrow-root powder purified and mixed with jaggery or sugar and also cocoanut. Then till evening dancing and merry-making are ceaselessly indulged in.

The husband population are inexcusably required to be present in the wives' houses before evening as they are bound to do on the Onam and Vishu occasions; failure to do which is looked upon as a step or rather the first step on the part of the defaulting husband towards a final separation or divorce from the wife. Despite the rigour of the bleak December season during which commonly the festival falls, heightened inevitably by the constant blowing of the cold east wind upon their moistened frames, these lusty maidens derive considerable pleasure from their early baths and their frolics in water. The biting cold of the season which makes their persons shiver and quiver like aspen-leaves before the breeze, becomes to them in the midst of all their ecstatic frolics an additional source of pleasure. In short, all these merely tend to brace them up to an extent the like of which they can scarcely find anywhere else. Thus at this stated season of the year the morning hours are invariably filled with the melodious warblings of certain indigenous birds diversified by the sweet cheering songs of our country maidens and constantly disturbed by the rough crowing of the domestic cock; all of which drag their pleasing length along until the morning dawns upon them

and bathes them in the crimson effulgence of the orb of day, driving off the country's face the mist of night which enveloped them in its hazy cover; thus forming the signal for the party to retire to their accustomed abodes for the day's festivities.

The two items described above *viz.*, the swinging process and the beating on the water, have each its own distinctive significance. The former typifies the attempt which these maidens make in order to hang themselves on these instruments and destroy their lives in consequence of the lamented demise of their sexual deity, Kamadevan. It is but natural that depth of sorrow will lead men to extreme courses of action. The beating on the water symbolizes their beating their chests in expression of their deep-felt sorrow caused by their Cupid's death. Such in brief is the description of a Nair festival which plays a conspicuous part in the social history of Malabar. Naturally enough, while within the Christian fold the festive pleasantries and mirth of the Christmas season are going their jolly round, within the limited circle of the Nair society a mournful occasion which time has completely altered into one of mirth, constitutes one of the best enjoyments of our national life.
