

THE MALABAR AND QUILON ERAS

BY MR. T. K. JOSEPH

THERE are more than a dozen and a half different eras used in their Sanskrit, Tamil, Malayalam, Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, and other records by the various cultured communities of Kerala. Of these the Kali and Parasuramic eras are reckoned from very ancient astronomical events assigned by *post factum* calculations to two years in the remote past. To Mr. K. Subramonia Aiyar goes the credit of having ascertained that the Parasuramic era which was in vogue in the British portion of Kerala, began to be reckoned from the total solar eclipse of 6176 B. C., "when the sun and the moon were in the first quarter of Citra Nakshatra, the actual solstice itself occurring on the third day of the month 'of Asvina.'" (*Vide Travancore Information and Listener* for September 1945, p. 35.)

No Mention in Records

This star Spica in Virgo (Kanya) was, we know, regarded in ancient times as the "*mukham*" (face or front) of the year, although it is the middle one (14th) among the 27 asterisms of modern times, and the Hindu ceremonial year begins conventionally with the asterism Aswini in utter disregard of the precession of the equinoxes. "*Citra nakshatram bhavati mukham va etat samvatsarasya*", says an ancient text (a Brahmana?). So a total solar eclipse occurring at that first point (*mukham*) was indeed a fitting *terminus a quo* for an era. But there is no known instance of the use, or mention, of the Parasuramic era in ancient works, inscriptions and other records of Kerala. Most probably it was not actually inaugurated

and used by the people (were they Aryans?) living in 6176 B. C., or in its first six millennia ending with 176 B. C.

Loco-Relevant Eras

Of the other eras which were used in Kerala three or four are loco-relevant, *i. e.*, they began to be reckoned from the foundation of certain localities. For instance the Pudu-Vaippu Era of Cochin began from the sudden appearance or formation of the island of Vaippu. There was the Tali era (Temple era) in Travancore counted from the building of a temple. There was the Calicut era too. "Scaliger gives 907 A. D. for the beginning of the Calicut era," while Du Perron, wrongly, of course, "gives 825 for the foundation of Calicut." Du Perron evidently thought that (Korakkeni)—Quilon in Travancore was (Pantalayini)—Quilon near Calicut. It is the former Quilon that was founded, or re-founded in 825 A. D. Again tradition says that Makotai (Sanskrit Mahodayam, old Malayalam Makotevar Pattanam), a town in Cranganore, was founded in 345 A. D. But Assemani and Raulin assign 800 A. D. to that event, while Zaleski gives 745, 825, 855, and 907 as "wrong dates" for it. One cannot, however, be positive about 345 on the strength of tradition alone, there being no known era counted from the foundation of Makotai, the Makotaiyar—Pattinam (= city of the king of Makotai) mentioned in the Vira Raghava copper-plate of 1320 A. D.

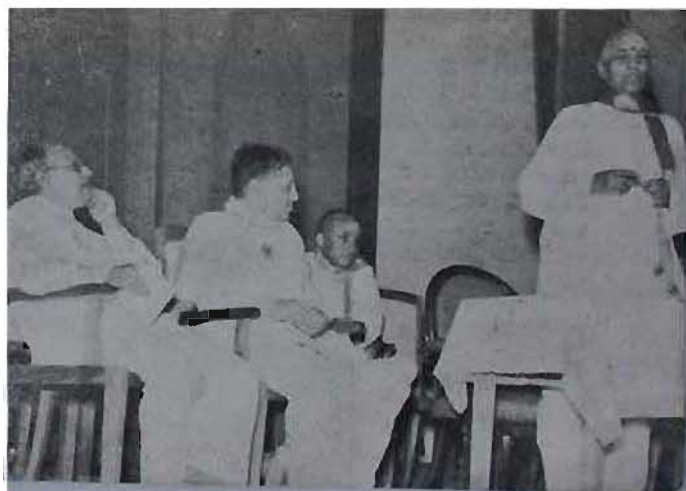
Two Travancore City Eras

There are two other eras also originating from the founding of cities, or as certain Travancore inscriptions say *totidem verbis*

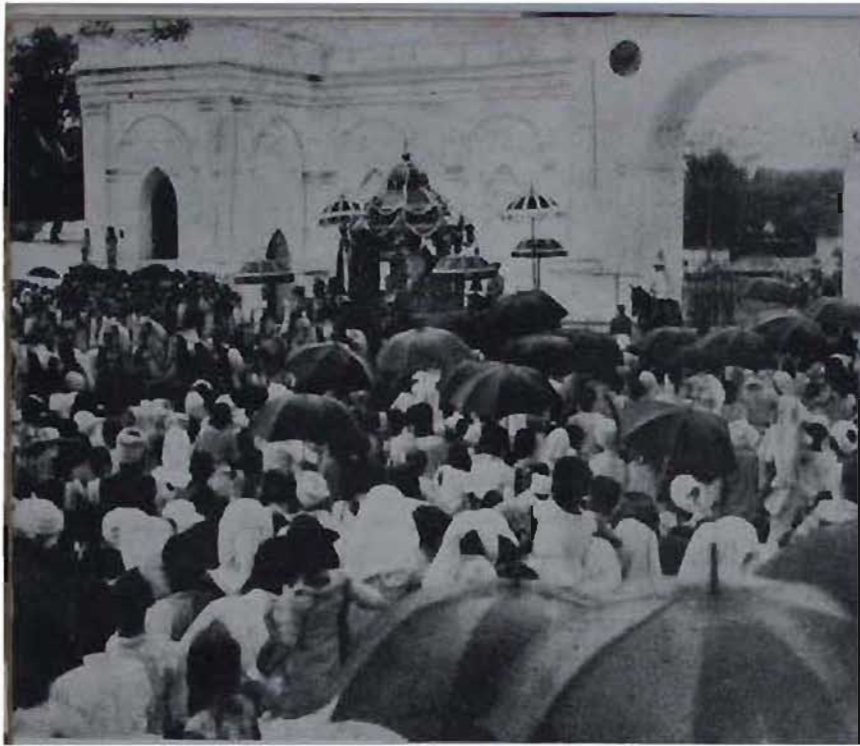
The Scientist, the Statesman and the Philosopher—Sir C. V. Raman, Sachivottama Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar and Sir S. Radhakrishnan photographed on the Dewan's 66th birthday at a breakfast party given by him.



On the 1st of November Sir C. V. Raman opened the Alagappa Hall of the S. M. M. Club.



Asthana Vidwan Rajamanickam Pillai presided over this year's Music Conference at Trivandrum.



In spite of heavy rains the citizens of Trivandrum gathered in their thousands to witness the Poojadeduppu procession, which was celebrated recently. Photograph shows the procession emerging from the Fort.

This photograph was taken at a magnificent party given by Sachivolhama Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Dewan, at Bhakthi Vilas, his official residence in the honour of the 33rd Birthday of H.H. the Maharaja, and shows H.H. the Maharaja, H.H. Maharani Setu Parvati Bai, H.H. the Elaya Raja, the host and other distinguished guests.



from "the appearance of Kollam, and of Iravipuram"—"கொல்லம் தோன்றி, இற விபுரம் தோன்றி." The first is our Quilon Era; the other is the Iravipuram Era found used in an inscription in the old Tekkumkur territory comprising Iravipuram of Kottayam in Travancore. That era has gone out of vogue and Iravipuram too may be regarded as extinct unless the present Iravinallur can be identified with it. It must have been a "*puram*" (city) far less important than Quilon, or Calicut. Yet its "appearance" gave rise to an era.

The appearance (or "*tonrral*") cannot in this case, as well as in that of Quilon, be construed to mean a sudden, natural upheaval as in the case of Vaipin Island mentioned already. Iravipuram, Quilon, and Calicut, like the Tali (temple) which had the Tali Era appertaining to it, must have been actually planned and built by experts, indigenous or foreign, employed by the kings of those three cities, who ordered three eras also to be reckoned from the dates of their completion, or rather from the auspicious days on which they were formally occupied with pomp and ceremony. Temples, synagogues, churches, mosques, streets, and bazaars also must have been constructed in the above three cities, and the consecration ceremony performed on the same day. From the Quilon copper-plates of *circa* 880 A. D. with its Pahlavi, Kufic and Hebrew signatures, we may infer that there were Persians, Arabs, and Jews (if not Chinese also) in Quilon earlier in the ninth century. For them places of worship must have been built in the new city, and a harbour constructed or improved to give a fillip to sea-borne trade eastwards and westwards.

Tradition

Now, Hindu tradition recorded by Prinsep, Gundert, Burnell, and Buchanan in

the 19th century, and by earlier European writers of the Dutch and Portuguese periods, as well as by the various Keralolpattis, and our historians like the two Menons, Sundaram Pillai, Gopinatha Rao, Nagam Aiyah and others, mention a council of expert astronomers from all parts of Kerala, convened at Quilon, in Travancore, by King Udaya Martanda Varma in Kali 3926, a newly built Siva temple of 824-5 A. D., and a "*chira*" (tank, or harbour?) dug in 825, as well as the inauguration of the Quilon Era, which Prinsep, Buchanan, and Gundert call a cycle of Parasurama. Since 6176 B. C. is found by Mr. Subramonia Aiyar to have been the first year of the era of Parasurama, 825 A. D. marked the beginning of the eighth cycle (825 to 1825 A. D.) and not that of the third as Gundert says.

Quilon Astronomical Conference

The Parasuramic Era (which is different from the Saptarshi Era) must have been used originally (though not from 6176 B. C.) in British Malabar and its southern neighbourhood, which were Nambudiri Brahmin regions *par excellence*, and thereafter adopted without alteration in the rest of ancient Kerala proper, and even further south in Venad, of which Quilon was the capital. We may suppose that the Era began to be used in Quilon only about the beginning of the Christian Era, which fell in the seventh cycle (176 B. C. to 825 A. D.) of P. E. The first month of the year in Quilon was then Kanya itself as in North Kerala. But at that time the actual beginning of the year (the summer solstice) was not in Kanya, but in Karkataka by precession (roughly from 1700 B. C to 500 A. D.).

So in 825 A. D. the real commencement of the year was in Mithuna, while it began

conventionally in the old Kanya of 6176 B. C. This discrepancy was, we may suppose, realised by the Quilon King and his Tamil Brahmin astronomers from Venad and the adjoining eastern region, and some months before the beginning of the eighth cycle (825 to 1825 A. D.) he convened a conference of East and West Coast Brahmin astronomers. After continued observation and expert discussion of the Sun's Zodiacal and solstitial positions he must have decided to discard the conventional Kanya of the northerners, and adopted Simha as the beginning of the year in the portions of the East and West Coasts under his sway. The experts from the north perhaps demurred, and held fast to their age-old Kanya.

Leo Displaces Virgo

Simha was chosen not because the summer solstice of about 825 actually occurred in that sign, but for some other reason which tradition has not disclosed to us. Was Simha pitched upon because it was the month of the great Onam festival of Kerala, or perhaps because it was regarded as the Sun's House? There is inscriptional evidence for the celebration of Aavani (Simha) Onam in Kerala in about 1000 A. D., and we may assume that the celebration had been in vogue before 825, or perhaps from the days of the Vaishnavite

Chera Kulasekhara Alwar, or the consecration of the Trkkaalkara Temple of Vamana Murti.

M. E. and Q. E.

Thus in Quilon of Travancore Simha boldly displaced the northerner's antiquated old maid Kanya, and the year 7001 of P. E. came to be reckoned as 1 of the Quilon Era, which therefore is not the same as the Malabar Era (M. E.) of the present British parts of Kerala. The consecration of the new city's temple, and of the new church known in the copper-plates as the "Tarisa Palli" (= Christian Palli as distinguished from any Jewish, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jain or Chinese "Palli" in or outside the city), as well as the opening of the new Quilon harbour and perhaps also the first day of the Onam season of that year, may be supposed to have fallen on the first day of 1 Q. E., when the city was opened for business and commerce. The northern astronomers must have participated in the festivities of that very first Quilonic New Year's Day if they had not already left the city in disgust at the difference of opinion, of which Kanya and Simha months are even now witnesses in spite of later calendar reform in British Malabar. Man verily, is the slave of custom and convention.