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The Process of Pilgrimage: The Ayyappa Cultus
and Sabarimalai Yātrā

by

Radhika Sekar

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
October, 1987

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THE PROCESS OF PILGRIMAGE: THE AYYAPPA CULTUS
AND SABARIMALAI YĀTRĀ

submitted by Radhika Sekar, B.A.

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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November 1987

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to construct an ethnographic account of the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimalai (India) and to apply to it the concepts of liminality, communitas and social drama derived from the works of Victor Turner. While our data clearly support the concepts of liminality and social drama, the concept of communitas proves to be of less value. Despite the fact that the ideals of "equality" are firmly incorporated into the norms, symbols and rites of the cultus, disparities do occur at a social level where differences in status and some parochialisms continue to exist. The origins of the deity Ayyappa can be traced to antiquity however the modern Ayyappa movement has gained momentum only since about 1950. The revived popularity of the cultus may be due to the changing political and social structures of Indian society.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this thesis are threefold: The first aim is to give an ethnographic account of the annual pilgrimage to Sabarimalai in Kerala (South India) undertaken by the devotees of the deity Ayyappa. This pilgrimage has three distinctive features. First, it is an almost exclusively male cultus¹ that bars women between the ages of nine and fifty from participating in the pilgrimage rituals. Second, the cultus falls within the Hindu tradition, yet males of all ages may participate on an equal footing, regardless of caste or creed. Muslims and Christians are also known to undertake this pilgrimage, enjoying the same equality. The third important feature of this pilgrimage is that the actual journey to the pilgrimage site is preceded by a forty-two day period of rigorous preparation. During this period, the pilgrims are obliged to wear black clothes and the mālā (rosary beads) with which they are initiated, and they must observe the strictest celibacy and abstinence from meat and intoxicants.

The second objective is to "apply" Victor Turner's concept of pilgrimage as a process and his ideas of "liminality" and "communitas" to a Hindu example. Turner viewed pilgrimage as a liminal phenomenon, similar to tribal initiation rites. First isolated by Arnold van Gennep (1908), this important category of rituals comprises: the

initiation rites that accompany changes in status, place, social position and age in any culture. Examples of these would be: confirmation, wedding vows, the Investiture of the Prince of Wales, etc. They have a basic tripartite processual form consisting of: separation, transition and re-incorporation (van Gennep 1960:191, Turner 1979:149).

The phase of separation consists of symbolic behavior that detaches the ritual subject from a previous position in society. This second transitory phase is characterized by the breakdown of the usual forms of social behavior and the formulation of new norms that apply only to this phase.

Turner called this the "liminal" phase (from Latin limen, which signifies "threshold"). It is during this phase that the transition or transformation occurs. The third phase of re-incorporation comprises symbolic behavior that marks the consummation of the passage and the return of the subject but at a new level in the social environment.

Pilgrimage ritual follows a similar process.

First, the pilgrim sets out from a structured home community with its social norms and restrictions, into a liminal phase on the pilgrimage in which there is a temporary suspension of these norms. From this the pilgrim returns to the structured environment. Ideally, the pilgrim should experience a spiritual transformation during the liminal phase of the pilgrimage.

The characteristics of liminality are necessarily ambiguous. Ritual subjects pass through a cultural realm

that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. The usual patterns of status and authority cease to apply and the initiates are "stripped" as it were of their social positions in the normal social hierarchy. This "stripping" is represented symbolically by the shaving of the head, the imposition of a dress code, and sometimes quite literally by nakedness and serves to achieve a homogeneity and equality between the initiates. Under these conditions, a camaraderie emerges that is otherwise discouraged by social restrictions of caste, class and economic status. Turner defined this comradeship as *communitas*.

Communitas is the generalized social bond that emerges, however fleetingly, in and out of secular structure (Turner 1969:96). Turner distinguishes three types of *communitas*: existential or spontaneous, ~~normative~~, and ideological². Although all three types are closely linked, it is the normative mode of *communitas* that dominates in pilgrimage and other liminal situations. Normative *communitas* is based on unstructured and relatively undifferentiated communities of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of ritual elders (Turner 1969:96, 1974:169). Turner argued that *communitas* is necessary in highly stratified societies such as were found in Medieval Europe, where social relationships were defined by what Pfaffenberger calls "the strait jacket of expectation and obligations" (Pfaffenberger 1969:256). Liminal phenomenon provides a temporary suspension of social

restrictions and differences, emphasizing instead the shared experience. The normative *communitas* that thus emerges (according to Turner) is not permanent, nor does it call for revolution or the abolition of structure. It can be maintained only during the special framework that is formulated during the liminal phase. It offers only a temporary respite from structure, providing merely an "antithesis in compartmentalized time and liminal space" (Ibid).

Turner's ideas of *communitas* (as applied to Hindu rituals) have been widely criticized. Morinis (1984), Pfaffenberger (1979), Pruess (cited in Morinis 1984) and others who tested Turner's framework, did not find a sharp contrast between the structures of the home community and the liminal phase. They also did not find the *communitas* that, according to Turner, should emerge under liminal conditions. This issue will be addressed further in Chapter Four of this thesis, where the applicability of Turner's ideas of liminality and *communitas* will be examined in reference to the Sabarimalai pilgrimage.

Another idea of Turner's that will be examined is his view that social systems are sequences of social dramas, or loosely integrated processes that in retrospect reveal a structure. He defined "social drama" as units of aharmonic or disharmonic process arising in conflict situations (Turner 1979:63). To him, all ritual was a sequence of symbolic acts (1969:64) and constituted "institutionalized

performances" (Schechner 1985:xi). The social drama begins when a crisis arises in the daily flow of social interaction. Thus, if daily life is a kind of theatre, social drama is a "meta-theatre" in which actors play out roles that are deliberate and reflective. Social dramas such as pilgrimage rituals are ordered by rules of procedure, written or unwritten, and consist of explicit scenarios that have a form of their own. Pilgrims prepare, confront others while wearing masks, use the mainstage area for the performance of routines, and so on (Turner 1979:63). Pilgrimage and other liminal phenomena take on a "staged for an audience" quality, revealing a sequence of social dramas involving the pilgrims, their preparations, their journey, their return experiences, and their interaction with the successive socio-cultural environments through which they pass.

For Turner, the optimal conditions for pilgrimage and other such liminal phenomena existed in rural, stratified societies, but he was not unaware of the modern trend that indicates the growing popularity of pilgrimages all over the world (Turner 1974:171). In the context of the modern industrial world, pilgrimages cannot be said to be integrated into the wider socio-cultural system. Turner therefore speculates that in times of transition, when many institutionalized values are under question, there is an increased interest in unstructured, non-institutionalized forms of *communitas*, such as is offered by liminal

phenomena. James Freeman also drew the same conclusion when he studied the effects of modernization on traditional forms of religion in India (1975:124)³. Such an explanation could also be used to explain the sudden popularity of the Ayyappa cultus in the mid-1900's. Though the origins of the shrine and the deity can be traced to antiquity, the temple at Sabarimalai and the god Ayyappa have been relatively unknown beyond the western coastal regions of the Indian peninsula until recently. In order to understand the phenomenal growth of the cultus, this thesis examines the socio-political climate of Southern India and the consequent social changes that occurred after National Independence in 1946.

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to define the term "pilgrimage." A pilgrimage is a journey made by an individual or group of individuals to a sacred place as an act of worship. There are two sides to the word. First, it indicates the physical journey that pilgrims make and secondly, it includes the structured institutions that make the journey a pilgrimage. This defines it as both the individual's behavior and the socio-cultural institution. These are however but the external aspects of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage phenomena also reflect an inner motivation which is deeply rooted in the spiritual psyche of the pilgrims themselves, and while this is difficult to describe, it is essential to understand it.

A second problem that emerges while attempting to define the pilgrimage concept is in the designation of shrines as pilgrimage sites. Why are some shrines considered pilgrimage centres while others are not, and why do some centres become more popular than others? Freeman observed that pilgrimage sites seem to undergo a cycle of decline and revival (1975:125). Bharati offered ease of access as a reason why some sites are more frequented than others (1963:156-158). However, there are several popular sites such as Badrinath in the Himalayas, Sabarimalai in Kerala, and Kataragama in the forests of Northern Sri Lanka, that are difficult to approach and yet they are frequented by thousands of pilgrims every year. In fact, the very remoteness of the site seems to attract the devout and, as Pfaffenberger points out, most pilgrimage sites are situated on the margins of society, in forests or on mountain tops (1979:256).

Turner classified pilgrimage sites into four broad categories. According to him, it is the historical origin of a shrine that determines its popularity, status, future development and form (1963:17-19). These divisions were: (1) prototypical pilgrimages which are established by the founder of an historical religion, by his first disciples or by important evangelists; (2) archaic pilgrimages which bear evident traces of syncretism with older religious beliefs and symbols; (3) medieval pilgrimages which originated between 500-1400 A.D. and which took their tone

from the theological and philosophical issues of the time (this category is relevant only to Christian pilgrimages); and (4) the final category consists of those pilgrimages that have emerged in the modern world in opposition to the changes brought on by modern technology.

In the Hindu tradition, the Brahmapurana (900-1300 A.D.) divides pilgrimage centres into four classes. Based on historical origin, they have a hierarchical order of importance: (1) daiva sites, which are directly associated with one of the three main deities of the Hindu pantheon - Brahma, Viśnu and Śivā; (2) āśura sites that are associated with the destruction of demons; (3) arsa sites that are places associated with saints; and (4) manuśa sites that are sanctified by the patronage of royal rulers (Bhāradwaj 1973:97-98). It is obvious however, that this classification is not to be considered too rigidly. The Sabarimalai site could fit three of the above categories, it being the site where the āśura Mahiśi was destroyed, the site of the shrine to the Muslim saint Vavar, and a centre that has been maintained by the patronage of the Pantalām royal family.

Besides these historical origins, the sanctity of a site depends on one or more of three features: (1) location on a hilltop, a forest or ford or (2) the presence of a tree, such as the holy mango, banyān, kadirā (acacia catechu), etc. The worship of trees is traceable to a pre-Aryan culture even far into the chalcolithic age, and sprang

from a belief that supernatural beings resided in trees. Pliny asserts that the earliest form of temple was a tree (cited in Pillai 1948:4). When the tradition of building temples developed, care was taken not to remove these trees, which were preserved and worshipped with due respect. Famous sacred trees are still to be seen at Courtallam, Mayavaram, Mylapore and Guruvayoor, to name only a few. The temples at these sites are associated with the god Śiva. Every such tree has a legend of its own and is associated with a particular deity (see Pillai 1948 for discussion). The third important feature is proximity to water. The reverence to water can be traced to the early hymns of the Rg Veda (1200 B.C.), in which water is referred to as a Goddess, a Mother and a Sister of priestly ministrants. Waters were also considered to be medicinal, and the "Washers of sin" (Griffiths 1973 ed.:14-15⁴). All pilgrimage sites have some source of water, either a river, stream, tank or well, that is deemed sacred. The Sabarimalai site has all three features. It is on a hilltop, and while a holy tree is not in evidence now, the goddess Malikapuruthamma, whose shrine adjoins that of Ayyappa's, is associated with the kadhira tree which is used in the pilgrimage rituals.

Another important determining factor of a pilgrimage site is what is called the phala-sruti. Derived from Sanskrit, the phala-sruti signifies the merits that a site offers a pilgrim and which the pilgrim can derive by

visiting the site. Some sites offer miracle cures, others promise fertility and success (see Bharati 1963:145 for detailed discussion.)

It has been pointed out by Bharati (1963), Bharadwaj (1973), and Morinis (1984) that the concept of pilgrimage does not occur in the Vedas, but develops only later in the epic and Puranic era (300 B.C. - 300 A.D.). In fact, it can be said that there is an anti-pilgrimage tradition in Hinduism that encourages internal reflection rather than outward ritual. Yet as Bhardwaj adds, though the term pilgrimage is not to be found in the early Vedic texts, the word tirth yātrā, which signifies a journey to a ford or intersection, combines two Vedic ideas: the merits of journeying, and the reverence for waters. The term tirtha has come to indicate the pilgrimage site, and the word yātrā indicates the actual pilgrimage. Both ideas form an integral part of the whole ritual and must be equally emphasized.

This thesis is divided into four sections:

Chapter Two traces the development of the Ayyappa cultus and the myths and legends associated with the deity and the temple.

Chapter Three details the ethnography of the pilgrimage process, using data collected in the field between November 14th, 1986 and January 18th, 1987. While I was unable to participate in the actual pilgrimage ritual, I was able to accompany a group of pilgrims on their

pilgrimage to Sabarimalai, and thereby make first-hand observations of the proceedings. I also interviewed pilgrims at three local Ayyappa Temples situated in Pune, Madras and Coimbatore, and various other informants at Bangalore, Guruvayoor and Ottawa.

The photographs, except for Plates 19, 23 and 24, were taken by me. I used a Ricoh autofocus camera with Kodak 125 black and white film. The other three were taken by one of the Ayyappas in our group with my camera.

Since very little academic research has been done on this topic, my secondary sources were limited to the devotional contributions of K.R. Vaidyanathan (1978), P.T. Thomas (1973), and Pyappan (1963).

Chapter Four seeks to answer the questions raised earlier; namely, the applicability of Turner's ideas of liminality and communitas to this pilgrimage ritual, and his view of looking at pilgrimage as a process or sequence of social dramas.

Chapter Five contains my conclusions and discusses several new questions that cropped up in the course of this study.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM MYTH TO MEANING

The myths and legends of Ayyappa are not contained in any of the major Puranic texts⁵ but are found in the folk songs of Kerala and Coorg. Ayyappa is the son of Śiva and Viśnu, who took the female form of Mohini. There are several versions as to why Viśnu became Mohini⁶. The version narrated in the Sanskrit text Bhutanāthopakyanam (1800 A.D., attributed to a Varma Raja), is considered the primary text of the cultus⁷. According to this, Sage Suta of Naimisaranya, situated on the banks of the river Gomati, narrated the story to his disciples. A version of this story follows.

The demoness Mahishi, having obtained a boon of invincibility through her tapas, went on a rampage of destruction. Overthrowing Indra, the King of Gods, she usurped his throne. In order to end her reign of terror Śiva and Viśnu decided to combine forces and create a son who would eventually destroy her. Viśnu then assumed the form of Mohini - the Enchantress, and bore a son. The child was left on the banks of the river Pampa where he was found by the childless King Rajasekhara of Pantalām. The King took the child back to his palace and adopted him as his heir and called him Manikanthan because of the bell around his neck. Manikanthan grew up to be quite remarkable and was loved by all. Meanwhile the Queen conceived and gave birth to a son. She wished her own son to succeed to the throne and so with the help of the wicked Dewan (minister) plotted Manikanthan's death. Feigning illness, she persuaded the physician to say that she could be cured only by tiger's milk. As a dutiful son Manikanthan volunteered to get the milk for her and set off into the forest. He was only twelve years old. In the forest he confronted and destroyed the evil demoness Mahishi. He then victoriously returned to the city with a flock of tigers, and revealed his divine origin. Forgiving

the Queen and the Dewan, he instructed the King to build a temple on the top of Mount Sabari. He then returned to Devalōka (the abode of the Gods).

from Bhutanāthopakyanam (trans. Vaidyanathan 1978: 23-30).

The myth then goes on to narrate of how Viśnu sent his divine architect, Viśwakarma, to help build the temple and install the mūrti⁸. The dewan, who had been banished by the King contracted smallpox. Overcome with remorse, he prayed to Lord Ayyappa for forgiveness, and after bathing in the River Pampa at the foot of Mount Sabari, he ran up to the shrine crying "Swāmiyee, Śaranam Ayyappa" (I seek refuge in Lord Ayyappa). He was then miraculously cured. Thus, it is believed that the waters of the Pampa are curative and the phala-śruti of the shrine is that of healing and forgiveness of sins.

As is common in Hindu mythology, the narration in the Bhutanāthopakyanam digresses in several places, and we are told that in order to establish dharma (the law) in the world Brahma, Viśnu and Śiva decided to combine their energies and take up human form. They incarnated as the Sage Datta (Dattatreya). Simultaneously, their consorts also incarnated as the beautiful Lila. In due course, Lila married Datta and the two lived as an ordinary couple, raising a family and performing the duties of householders. After finishing these responsibilities, Datta wished to withdraw and lead a spiritual life. Lila's desires however were not satiated and she would not let him withdraw. Angered by her ignorance and "beastly" cravings, Datta

cursed her to be born a mahishi (female buffalo), in the family of āsuras (demons). Consequently, Lila was born as the demoness Mahishi and was eventually destroyed by Ayyappa.

The narration then jumps ahead and tells us that from the ashes of the defeated Mahishi, the beautiful Lila re-emerged. She was completely smitten by the young Ayyappa and wished to marry him. However, he had taken the vow of celibacy and therefore could not oblige her. He promised however to marry her if and when pilgrims stopped journeying to his shrine at Sabarimalai.

Jyoti Sahi, in the chapter "Symbols of Authority and Kingship" in his book The Child and the Serpent (1980), sees a certain basic structure in these myths that reveals a strange pattern of opposition and inversion. First, the myth is concerned with kingship at two levels: the world plane in which the male king rules legitimately, and the cosmic plane where the female Mahishi rules illegitimately by usurping the throne. Running parallel to this theme is the opposition of asceticism and eroticism. Mahishi is in fact Lila, who has been cursed for her eroticism. The king on the other hand is unable to have a child and is therefore barren (comparable to an ascetic). The queen suddenly conceives and Mahishi performs tapas. Thus, the king is erotic and Mahishi is ascetic.

Another pattern of inversions is developed in the conflict between nature and culture. The king leaves his

cultured city to hunt in the (natural) forest, where he finds the divine child. The wild buffalo Mahishi conquers the kingdom of the King of Gods. The child is taken to the city but returns to the forest at the age of twelve - which is traditionally regarded to be on the threshold of puberty - and conquers the erotic Mahishi.

The female in this myth therefore, seems to represent the side of eroticism and world involvement, whereas the male signifies the opposite. Ayyappa is born of two males so he represents the ultra-male child god in whose conception no woman (i.e. no "eroticism") has taken part. Yet, according to the Hindu view of life, for the well-being of the universe and the successful completion of the cosmic cycle of evolution and dissolution⁹ the ascetic Ayyappa must be wedded to the erotic Lila, despite the incompatibility. Thus according to the myth, Ayyappa will marry Lila at the end of time.

Seen on a more personal philosophical level, Mahishi represents the "beast" within us all. Manikānthan is the ātman (soul), who is ultimately identified as the deity Ayyappa Himself. This philosophical interpretation is further illustrated with the ghee and coconut that is used in the pilgrimage ritual itself. According to the myth, when Manikānthan left for the forest, he took with him a coconut filled with ghee (clarified butter). It is believed that the coconut which has three eyes represents the three-eyed god Śiva. The third eye is the eye of jñāna or

knowledge which, when opened by Śiva, consumes the entire phenomenal world. Metaphorically, the third eye of the coconut symbolizes the spiritual eye of the pilgrim. The coconut itself represents his body and the ghee is his ātman (Pyappan 1966:41). This ghee is used in the abhiśekam (anointing) of the murti, indicating the submergence of the Ayyappa's ātman with the deity. After the abhiśekam the coconut is thrown into a pyre thus symbolically indicating the death and the rebirth of the ātman.

It is well known that in the making of ghee, the longer the butter is allowed to simmer on the fire, the purer the ghee will be. This "fire" or "heat form" is linked to tapas, which etymologically means "heat" or "fervor." The Rig Vedic hymn explains that Cosmic Order (ritā) and Universal Truth (satyā) were born out of kindled Heat (tapas) (X.190). Men can create this "heat" in themselves by devotional fervor and spiritual asceticism (for full discussion on "The creative power of heat," see Hopkins 1971:25-26). Thus, the ascetic discipline (tapas) of the pilgrim is the "heat" that purifies the ātman.

Ghee is also regarded as the essence of all food substances and is used to feed the sacrificial fires in all Hindu religious rituals. Just as ghee represents the essence of food, the sexual fluids or semen represents the essence of body substance. It is claimed that the richest blood produces the reproductive ingredients in both sexes, from which is generated an indefinable force or energy which

the yogis call ojas (Mookerji 1982:62). This ojas is stored in the human brain and is believed to be the source of all intelligence and spiritual power. Sexual thought and action if properly checked and controlled can easily be transformed into this ojas. That is why chastity is considered the highest virtue and is so strictly imposed in the more intense spiritual exercises (Vivekananda 1982:64).

The deity Ayyappa has always been popular among the Coorgs and the other castes and tribes of the west coast of India. He is referred to as Sāsthā, or in Kodagi as Śārtavu, which etymologically means "a king," "teacher," or "father." It is also a synonym for the Buddha:

The Kodagi folk song Śārtavuda Patē (Song of Ayyappa) narrates the story of Ayyappa's genesis in more or less the same form as the Sanskrit Bhutanāthopakyanam (see Appendix A). What is interesting however is that there is another folk song in Kodagi about Ayyappa which is very different. Here he is depicted as a hunter with a silver bow who hunts with seven dogs, one of which gets bitten by a cobra (Naga). This second song has no Sanskrit equivalent. The motif of Ayyappa as Hunter is very popular in Coorg where several shrines to this deity are to be found in gardens, on hilltops, and in forests (Srinavas, nd. 239-241). It is interesting to note here that Ayyappa the Hunter also bears a similarity to Bhairava (Śiva), who also inhabits forests and hunts with five dogs. Bhairava is also Rudra, the Archer who has two personalities, one fierce

and the other gentle. Rudra as Śarva (from saru, which signifies arrow) hunts in this world. His arrows have the power of death. He is generally evoked with Bhava (Existence). These epithets represent Fire (Śarva) and Water (Bhava), and when invoked together in Rudra grant happiness, remove sins and lengthen life (see Kramrisch 1981:35). It is interesting to note here that Rudra is described in the classical texts as a "large man from the north" (who like the Ayyappa cult members) is clothed in black" (Ibid:55). He is also Pasupati (the Lord of Beasts) and Bhutanatha (Lord of the Spirits) (and as already mentioned, the primary Sanskrit text relating to the Ayyappa myth is called Bhutanāthopakyanam which means the Wisdom of the Lord of the Spirits).

Shrines to Ayyappa are also common in Kerala, where he is known as Dharma Śāsthā. Even in temples dedicated to other deities, there is generally a shrine dedicated to Ayyappa as well¹⁰. Five temples are however considered more important than the others. They are believed to have been founded by the mythological Paraśurama¹¹ and depict the deity in the different āśramas or stages of life¹². Thus, at Kulathupuzha on the banks of the Kalladi River, he appears as a child (Bālaka). At Aryankava he is depicted as an adolescent (brahmacāri) and dressed like a prince. Achankoil, which is on a hilltop, shows him as a householder (grhastha). Here, he is seated on a horse, bears a sword in his right hand and is flanked

by two consorts, Poorna and Pushkala. This image resembles more the Aiyandar motif found in Tamil Nadu. The next temple is Śābarimalai where Ayyappa is considered to be in the form of a forest dweller (vāna prastha). The fifth temple is yet to be discovered and is believed to be on the mountain top to the northeast of Sabarimalai. Here, Ayyappa is in the form of the highest yogi (see Vaidyanathan 1982:70-71). It is believed by some that this fifth site exists only in the hearts of the pilgrims. It is also on this northeastern horizon that the annual Makara Villaku (the Light of Capricorn) is seen.

Ayyappa is also associated with the horseman god Aiyandar in Tamil Nadu. Although they share a common prototypical source in Aiyān (the god of the Ay chieftains) they take different forms in the two provinces. Aiyandar is basically a village deity worshipped by the lower castes in Tamil Nadu. He is depicted as riding on a horse, bearing a sword in his right hand, and has two wives just like the mūrti at Achankoil (see Dumont in Less & Vogt 1972). Ayyappa on the other hand is worshipped by all, from the lowest to the highest and brahman priests officiate at his shrines. He is considered celibate except in southern Travancore where like Aiyandar he has two wives, a form influenced, perhaps, by the Tamil culture.

The relation between Ayyappa and Śāsthā raises a problem. According to some sources, Ayyappa is the incarnation of Śāsthā, a synonym of the Buddha.

Buddhism in India began to decline about the 5th century A.D. and the Brahmanical revivalist movements started by the Śaiva and Vaiśnava Saints achieved a phenomenal success. But a religion which once had taken root so deeply was bound to leave its influence on the philosophy and culture of the society. The Buddha himself was conceived as an incarnation of Viśnu and worshipped as such. In this way many ideals and philosophical concepts of Buddhism gained entrance into the newly transformed Hinduism (see Banerji 1970:26).

P.T. Thomas, in his book Sabarimalai and its Sastha (1973), quotes E.V. Pillai as saying:

"Buddha had the title of Arya. The word Arya sounds in Pali language as Ayyo. When the Buddhists spread their religion several Pali words became part of the language of Kerala. When masculine "an" was added to it, and when the word "appan" was also added to it, it became "Ayyappan."
(Thomas 1973:21)

According to him, the words Dharmam and Śaranam, connected with the Śāsthā tradition point to this link with Buddhism. The word Dharmam is taken over from Buddhism, as is the word Śaranam. He finds similarities between Buddham Śaranam, Sangham Śaranam, and Ayyappa Śaranam, Śāsthā Śaranam, and Dharmam Śaranam (Ibid:21). Thomas, however, is sceptical about this explanation. He argues that it is very unlikely that a hunter and warrior like Ayyappa and a prophet of non-violence like the Buddha could be one and the same deity.

The term Śāsthā is also used in reference to Viśnu, Brhaspati, and the god Indra. In the Bhagavad-Gita

(200 B.C. to 200 A.D.), Kriṣṇa tells Arjuna quite clearly that he becomes incarnate whenever there is a fall in righteousness in the world in order to re-establish dharma (Chapter 4:7)¹³. He (i.e. Viṣṇu) too therefore can be referred to as Dharma Śāsthā. Murukan is referred to as Brahma-śāsthā (Teacher of Knowledge), making it obvious that Sastha is a suffix that is associated to several deities and not specifically to the Buddha. Therefore one can only speculate on the connection between the Buddha and the deity Ayyappa.

Several scholars are of the view that Ayyappa is a pre-Aryan deity. Moti Chandra (n.d. 246), whose views are now paraphrased, seems to substantiate the pre-Aryan origin of the Ayyappa cult. According to him, the strength of the indigenous folk religions was a problem faced by Buddhism which had to temporise with Yakṣa and Naga cults. These cults were gradually assimilated into Buddhism proper. The appearance of Yakṣa and Naga worship, and the floral and animal motifs in early Indian art shows that a compromise was affected with the deeply-rooted folk beliefs. Although in later literature Yakṣas are represented as blood-thirsty demonic creatures, early Buddhist literature considered them to be benevolent, and even the Buddha was referred to as Yakṣa in poetic diction. They were supposed to possess the superhuman qualities of devas (gods), were "primarily vegetation spirits, guardians of the vegetation sources of life" (Ibid), and were therefore 'closely associated with

"waters" (Ibid:246). The earliest meanings of Yakṣa were "magician," "uncouth being," "unseen spiritual enemy" and "super-natural being of exalted character." Dr. A.B. Keith (cited by Moti Chandra (Ibid)) suggested the derivation of the word Yakṣa from the Sanskrit root yaj (to worship), a link that led Coomarswamy to the belief that Yakṣa cults were the precursors of the later Hindu Bhakti cults (see Coomarswamy n.d.:11-12). Later, Jataka tales degraded the Yakṣas, depicting them as cruel and malevolent. They haunted deserts, forests, trees and water. In Jaina literature, they have a dual personality both malevolent and benevolent like Rudra. They respected and protected celibates and sages, were fertility spirits and removed epidemics such as smallpox. They possessed people and answered questions put to them through mediums. The Ghantika Yakṣa referred to in Buddhist Sanskrit literature was a doorkeeper of Vaisali, who became a Yakṣa after his death. He advised the people of Vaisali to build a Yakṣa temple and to hang a bell around the neck of his image. It was supposed that if an enemy entered the town, the bell would toll, thus warning the townsmen of danger (Coomarswamy nd.:12; Kapadia nd.:248). Similar stories were found in other parts of India, giving support to the theory that such a Yakṣa cult did indeed exist. Traces of a Yakṣa cult can still be seen in the Ayyappa cultus. Not only is his temple on a hilltop, he is also believed to live in the waters of the River Pampa and, like the Ghantika Yakṣa of Buddhist

literature, he wears a bell around his neck and is therefore called Manikanthan (which in Tamil means "he who wears a bell around his neck"). The cultus members maintain the strictest celibacy before they undertake their journey through the forests to the Sabarimalai shrine. This emphasis on celibacy could be in order to gain protection from other forest spirits, for as mentioned earlier, Yakṣas are said to protect "sages and celibates".

Clothey (1978:5-9) traces the development of the god through four stages. According to him, the first stage is evident by at least the eighth or ninth century, when a god known as Aiyen was worshipped in the region of the Western Ghats of Malabar. The region was ruled by the Ay chieftains, and there is a reference in the post-Cankam literature (4th - 8th Century A.D.) to a temple erected by one of these chieftains in 846 A.D. within a complex of temples associated with Viśnu. These Ay's were later associated with the Nayars (Nairs), who played a significant role in the spread of the Ayyappa cultus. It is likely that Ayyappa was a descendant of this Aiyen, who became the horseman god of Tamil villagers.

The second stage is the identification with the god Sastha, who comes to prominence in Kerala by the tenth century. Here Clothey (Ibid) points out that Śāsthā is a generic name used for Murukan and, in northeastern India, for the Buddha. But in Kerala, the shrine of Śāsthā was

most commonly within a Śiva or Viśnu temple. One of the earliest inscriptions of Śāsthā, found in the South on a Śiva temple at Padmanabham, is ascribed to an Aychieftain. By the eleventh century the Śāsthā shrines became increasingly independent and the god was explicitly combined with Ayyappa. Sastha, which means "teacher," was a motif used by both kṣatriya and brāhman caste communities. In northern India, however, the epic kṣatriya kings had claimed the role of "teacher of brāhmans," as well as preservers of the state, thereby legitimizing their authority. Clothey argues that the Ayyappa-Śāsthā fusion represents the reflected claim by Kerala chieftains to the authority and power of the epic kings.

The third stage represents the merging of the Sastha cultus with the Hariharaputra cultus. This is rather difficult to date as there are virtually no dated inscriptions to the mythology in the South and no allusions to the myth in the classical puranic literature. However, Clothey (Ibid) assumes that the combining of the Ayyappa-Śāsthā cultus with that of Harihara was stimulated by political developments in the thirteenth century. Harihara was the patron deity of the Hoysalas of Eastern Karnataka, who were defeated in battle by a Pandian king. This Pandian king also defeated the Cheras of Kerala. Apparently weary of the disputes and bickering amongst the various sectarian factions, he suspended worship in two adjoining Śiva and Visnu temples in Pudukottai and appointed a Hoysala officer

to act as mediator between the two. The officer himself worshipped both Viśnu (Hari) and Śiva (Hara) and therefore encouraged friendly toleration between the two sects.

Another source refers to an incident that took place in the Viśnu temple at Srirangam. To control erosion of the temple grounds by the river and to protect the temple from evil spirits, a deity known as Sudra-devata was consecrated to the north of the city. It is believed that this deity was Ayyappa or Aiyannar, a popular village deity. In this way, the village god Ayyappa became absorbed into the Brahmanical religion.

The fourth stage is the incarnation of Hariharaputra, a fully orthodox god as the son of a South Indian king, Rajasekhara. Clothey (Ibid:9) admits that it is impossible to put this myth into any historical context. The most plausible connection could be to the seventh century Pandian who is said to have set up a shrine to Śāsthā at Aryankava, together with a fort near Vallabhpattnam. However, it must be noted here that Clothey referred only to Tamil texts and did not take into account the various folk legends found in Malayalam and Kodagi.

There is yet another dimension of the stories relating to Ayyappa and the Sabarimalai shrine. Malayalam folk songs like Vavar Mahatmayam, Pandalasevvam and Pulipalasevam extol the virtues of a historical Ayyappa and his Muslim friend Vavar. According to these legends,

Ayyappa was the grandson of a brahman priest who had been murdered by a dacoit called Udayanan, who terrorized the country, looting and desecrating even the temples. Ayyappa, whose father was an ardent devotee of Śāsthā, grew up to be an able warrior. He was soon patronized by the weak Pantālam king, and very soon became the Commander-in-Chief of the king's armies. He then set about restoring order (dharma) to the country. A Muslim pirate, Vavar, was his first adversary. Vavar apparently was so overawed by Ayyappa that he surrendered and became his follower. With Vavar's help, Ayyappa formed a strong army in which men of all castes and creeds served. Vavar was made a division commander and asked to fortify Erumeli. They then set out to subdue Udayanan. After defeating him, Ayyappa began the restoration of the Sabarimalai temple and the reconsecration of the Śāsthā murti.

The songs continue with accounts of how Ayyappa asked his men to leave their weapons at a great peepal tree two kilometres away from the shrine at a spot called Saramkuttal. From there, they marched to the shrine unarmed chanting "Swāmi Śaranam" (I surrender to God). Then, after delivering a sermon on equality and brotherhood, Ayyappa is believed to have transformed himself into a bolt of lightning and disappeared into the murti of Śāsthā. Thus, Śāsthā became identified with Ayyappa, and the temple at Sabarimalai became the most important pilgrimage site of the cultus.

The songs also tell of several other warriors who were defeated by Ayyappa and who subsequently became his followers and allies. Some of them like Vavar, have shrines dedicated to them at Sabarimalai¹⁴. There is also a folk story about a beautiful girl who fell in love with Ayyappa but was spurned by him because of his dedication to his mission. She apparently renounced the world and withdrew to Sabarimalai where she lived as a recluse. There is a small shrine at Sabarimalai to an unknown goddess called 'Mala, which could be a reference to her. However, mālā is also the word used to refer to the rosary beads that the Ayyappa pilgrims use in their initiation ceremony. So such a connection can only be speculative.

Vaidyanathan (1983:36-48) calculates that the historical Ayyappa must have lived around 1105 A.D. His calculations however cannot be validated. According to Daniels, the historical Ayyappa could have lived in the eleventh century. At this time, the Chera Empire began to disintegrate in its wars with the Cholas, and the Pandya Kings extended their rule over many parts of Chera territory east of the Ghats. Taking advantage of a weakened ruler, the Maravar tribes began marauding and plundering with an increased intensity. On one of these pillaging expeditions the Maravar captain abducted a princess from the small kingdom of Pantalam, located in central Kerala. She was later rescued by a brāhman and taken to a refuge near Sabarimalai. They were married and she gave birth to a male

child who it is believed was Ayyappa incarnate (Daniels 1984:251).

7 The data in this Chapter clearly indicate the evolution of the god Ayyappa from a somewhat hazy beginning in the yakṣa cults of pre Buddhism. Through a process of assimilation he was absorbed and transformed over the centuries into the present deity of Sabarimalai. Somewhere along the line Ayyappa became associated with the folk heroes of Kerala and thereby easily incorporated into the vast and flexible mythology of Hinduism. He claims relationship with not one but two of the major gods of the Hindu pantheon; Śiva and Viśnu, a claim that also relates him to the popular deities Gaṇeśa and Murukan. Thus he has managed to rise above all sectarian biases and become firmly entrenched in the religious culture of the region.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

The Ayyappa pilgrimage takes place in four stages. First, there is a formal initiation ceremony that begins a forty-one day vratam (vow). This is followed by another formal ceremony at the end of the vratam period, called the irumuṭi kattāl (which in Tamil means tying of the bundle), after which the pilgrims set off on their yātrā (pilgrimage) to the Ayyappa temple at Sabarimalai. This stage includes the physical travel to the pilgrimage site, bathing in the holy river Pampa at the foot of Mount Sabarī and the climb to the top of Mount Sabarī. It climaxes with the pilgrim's ascending the sacred "eighteen steps" to the shrine for the first darśan or glimpse of the deity. The fourth stage is the return journey and final reincorporation of the pilgrims back into secular life.

1. The initiation or malādharam ceremony.

The pilgrimage process starts with a simple yet formal ceremony in which the would-be pilgrim is initiated into the cultus. The ceremony takes place on the first day of the Tamil and Malayalam month of Kārttikai (Scorpio), which in 1986 fell on November 17.

The Tamil and Malayalam calendars base their calculations on a solar/lunar combination. They use the solar year (based on the movement of the sun along its

ecliptic) with the lunar month (which is based on the synodical revolution of the moon). The New Year begins with the vernal equinox, which in this system falls around April 15 with the zodiacal sign of Aries (Chitrai in Tamil, Meṣam in Malayalam). These zodiacal signs which have been derived from the Greek retain similar symbols which are Indianized.

The month of Kārttikai corresponds to Scorpio. From the Tamil root kart (to cut), it is sometimes depicted by a razor. Erard Mollien, an astronomer of the seventeenth century, suggested that the name might metaphorically signify 'the dividing line' (Gleadow 1968:146). Kārttikai is also the first asterism Pleiades which in Sanskrit was called bahulā (meaning "very many") (Ibid.).

Kartikēya in Hindu mythology is the war god and the son of Śiva. Śiva it seems, cast his sperm which was "caught" by the Fire god Agni, who then dropped it in the Ganges river. Ganga washed it ashore, where it split into six beautiful boys who were suckled by the wives of the six celestial sages. Parvati, the wife of Śiva, embraced them and they became one. Kartikēya is also called Kumara (the youth who keeps his chastity) and Skandā (the War god). In Tamil lore he is called Subramaniam or Murukan.

Kārttikai, the month, is also represented by a scorpion (Vriṣikam in Sanskrit and Malayalam), which symbolizes sexual potency. It is the eighth house and it represents a time just before the sun is farthest south on the ecliptic orbit. It "cuts" the zodiac into two uneven

parts - the first seven signs, which represent the upper parts of the body, and the latter five which represent the lower parts. Scorpio (Vriśikam) represents the genitals, the area where the first two cakra's - the mūlādhāra and the svādiṣṭhāna - are believed to be located.

According to Tantric belief, there are seven¹⁵ chief centres of consciousness located along the human spinal cord. These centres (cakras) are not actual physical parts of the gross body but exist on a subtle astral plane. Psychic energy (kundalinī śakti) is believed to lie dormant at the first centre, which is located at the base of the spine. This energy may lie dormant throughout an individual's life time, or it may be aroused either consciously through spiritual practice or unconsciously and spontaneously by the individual through mechanical means. When aroused, this energy rises upwards and passing through the first six centres reaches the seventh, located in the cerebrum. Certain siddhis (occult powers) are acquired at each centre as the psychic energy works its way upwards. When it finally reaches the seventh (sahasrāra) centre the individual experiences the Absolute Bliss (Sat Chit Ānanda).

Each centre has its own function and experience.

The first centre (mūlādhāra) is at the base of the spine and is the resting place of the dormant psychic energy. The second (svādiṣṭhāna) is at the root of the genitals, the third (manipūra) at the navel, the fourth (anāhata) at the heart, the fifth (visudha) at the throat and the sixth

(ājñā) between the eyebrows. The second centre (svādiṣṭhāna) governs imagination which creates desire, leading to gratification. When the psychic energy is aroused one is aware in the physical body of all kinds of astral influences, vague feelings of hostility and restlessness (Avalon 1976:7-14). An increased sexual desire is also connected with the arousal of psychic energy, especially when it is elevated to the second centre (svādiṣṭhāna) (see Swami Muktananda's autobiographical account 1974:90-91). Since psychic energy can be prematurely elevated through artificial means such as chanting, yoga and penance, monastic orders impose a strict code of celibacy on their novices. The astrological symbols of the Ayyappan cultus and the esoteric experiences of Tantra both indicate sexual potency at its height. Cultus practices include austerity, chanting and dancing, which could lead to psychic awakening and therefore increased sexual drive. The vrata of the cult therefore calls for sexual abstinence. In fact this restraint on sex is the single most important rule of the cultus.

Originally the temple at Sabarimalai would open only on the initiation day which is also called mandalam puja, mandalam being the astrological terms for forty-one days and then closed, to reopen on the completion of the mandalam on the twelfth day of Sagittarius (Markali in Tamil, Dhanus in Malayalam). It would then stay open until the fifth day of Capricorn (Thai in Tamil, Makaram in

Malayalam). The most important day of the pilgrimage season is the first day of Capricorn, which falls around the fifteenth of January. It is on the night of this day that the Makara Vilakku (the "Capricorn Light") is said to appear and hover on the northeastern horizon for fifteen minutes. The appearance of this light has still not been scientifically explained (see Appendix C). The millions of devotees who flock to Sabarimalai every year insist that it is Lord Ayyappa himself, who comes to give darśan (glimpse) to his devotees. Some skeptics however believe that tribals who live on the hill above which this light hovers send up a rocket on this day as part of their own tribal ritual. The flame of this rocket is mistaken for a star and revered as the holy Makara Vilakku.

The initiation ceremony may take place either at an Ayyappa temple or at the home of the guruswāmi (teacher). If there is no Ayyappa temple in the vicinity, then it can take place at any temple. In Kerala, there is generally a Śāsthā shrine in most Śiva and Viśnu temples. The famous Viśnu temple at Guruvayoor (Kerala) has a shrine to Ayyappa within the greater courtyard.

In the last two decades, the Ayyappa cultus has spread so widely that several new temples have sprung up in cities all over South India. Areas outside South India where the cultus is prominent are cities like Calcutta and Bombay, which have large Tamil and Malayalam populations. The atmosphere around the temples in these cities resembles

that of any temple in the South. I gathered most of my data from observing the procedure at the Ayyappa temple in Mahalingapuram at Madras (see Plate 1).

The ceremony may also be performed at the home of the guruswāmi. Guruswāmies should not be confused with the traditional gurus, who are spiritual teachers. The guruswāmies are not full-time teachers. They are laymen who are themselves devotees of Ayyappa and who undertake the pilgrimage every year. They initiate the devotee during the season, guide him through the forty-one day vratam, providing the leadership on the actual physical journey to the shrine. They continue with their regular jobs throughout the period. Technically, one can become a guruswāmi after undertaking the pilgrimage to Sabarimalai five times (though some of my sources thought it was three). The status of guruswāmi is not automatic. I met several devotees who had been to Sabarimalai more than five times but who had not become guruswāmies. Obviously, the personality and experience of the devotee plays an important role in whether or not he will be accepted as a guruswāmi. They are generally men of charisma, possessing leadership qualities.

There are some very famous and revered guruswāmies, such as Sri Nilakāntaiyar of Madras. This gentleman is in his eighties and has developed quite a personal following over the years. He has been taking

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Plate 1: Ayyappa Temple, Mahalingapuram, Madras..

groups of devotees to Sabarimalai each year during the season for the last thirty years.

Other guruswāmies do not have such a personal following. The guruswāmi at the Ayyappa temple (Malalingapuram) was a gentleman in his sixties. He had retired from his job at the Transport Ministry and was quote: "cast off" unquote, for some reason by his family. His situation was described as "pathetic" until the temple authorities granted him a small honorarium. He now devotes his time to the temple and during the season officiates as the temple guruswāmi.

The relationship between the initiate and his guruswāmi is similar to that between the traditional guru and śiṣya (disciple). Once one accepts a guru, tradition demands obedience and respect. Again, some guruswāmies command more respect than others. Some guruswāmies are more egalitarian in their attitude towards their śiṣyas, while others are more authoritarian. The choice of whether the initiation ceremony would take place in the temple or at the guruswāmi's house depends on the relationship between the two. A guruswāmi with a personal following, such as Nilakantaiyar, would perform the ceremony at his home. Those devotees who do not have a personal guruswāmi go to the temple.

Whether at the temple or at the guruswāmi's home, the initiation ceremony follows the same simple format. The initiate bathes, dons a black veṣṭi (or dhoti, which is a

piece of cotton 45 inches wide and three yards long wrapped around the waist), and goes to the temple or guruswāmi's house at the specified time. If performed on the first of Karttikai, then any time is auspicious. Otherwise, one has to choose an auspicious day and time. According to the Hindu system, the day is divided into nine zones, each of which is governed by one of the nine grahas or planets. The period of day governed by the two grahas Rahu and Ketu are considered inauspicious and are avoided. These positions are not fixed, so the astrological almanac (panchāṅgam) has to be consulted when choosing the appropriate time.

Both the guruswami and the initiate wear black. Although colours such as blue, saffron and yellow are also worn by some Ayyappa initiates, the predominant colour is black. Several initiates explained the choice of black on the basis of its practicality. Being a dark colour, it is easy to maintain during the forty-two day vratam and subsequent journey. It is the colour of the forest and being a dark colour gives warmth.

Edmund Leach* argued that colours make "convenient markers" of role reversal in religious ritual (Leach 1976:58). They are employed to indicate the differences between religious roles and secular ones. According to Hindu scriptures, a brāhman should wear kaśaya (reddish), a ksatriya should wear manjiṣṭha (yellow red) and a vaiśya should wear hāridrā (yellow) (Pandey 1982:130). The colour black is associated with sūdras (Hutton 1983:66). In the

practice of ritual, the auspicious colours are saffron, red, green and yellow. Pure white indicates renunciation. Worn at funerals, it signifies the liberation of the ātman or soul from the body. The Ayyappa cultus members wear either black or blue - never a mixture of colours - or the colours associated with festivities and rejoicing. The solid colour provides a uniform that indicates their purpose and sets them "apart" from the other members of society and black with its association with the "low" śūdras would imply humility and castelessness.

The following is a description of the ceremony that was held at the Ayyappa temple in Malalingapuram, Madras, in 1986 (see Plate 1).

Ayyappa temples imitate the architectural style of the typical Kerala temple. The entrance to the temple in Malalingapuram opens into a courtyard. The śrikovil (main sanctum), which houses the main deity (in this case Ayyappa), occupies the centre, in direct line of the gateway. On the right (of the deity) are smaller shrines to Gaṇeśa and Murukan, and on the left is the shrine to the goddess Malikapuruthamma.

A shrine dedicated to the "elephant-headed" Ganesa is a must in all Hindu temples. Gaṇeśa is the god of Wisdom, the son of Śiva and Parvati and brother of Murukan (or Skanda). He is also the elder brother of Ayyappa. According to myth, Gaṇeśa was created by his mother Parvati from a lump of tumeric (or the scud from her body) and

posted as a doorkeeper to prevent anyone from entering while she bathed. In obedience to her, Gaṇeśa even prevented Siva's entrance. Angered by this, Siva sent his armies (ganas) to remove him. The boy vanquished them all, thus earning the names Ganesa (First among ganas), Ganapati (commander of the ganas) and Vigneshwara (the Remover of Obstacles). He is thus a "portal" deity, posted at the "entrance" of all ritual or secular endeavor. He must be propitiated before anything is begun, if success has to be ensured.

All Hindu gods have a consort or female counterpart. This is the śakti or active aspect of the god at the phenomenal material level of existence. Even a bachelor deity like Gaṇeśa has two śaktis - Buddhi and Siddhi (Knowledge and Success), who are said to accompany him everywhere. The celibate Ayyappa too, therefore, must have a śakti, even if she is dormant. According to the legends and myths, when Ayyappa vanquished the āsurā (demoness) Mahishi, the beautiful Lila emerged from the body. She fell in love with Ayyappa and wished to marry him. However being a celibate, he could not satisfy her and therefore asked her to wait for him. She is represented as the goddess Malikapuruthamma and her shrine is to the left of the śrikovil¹⁶.

New Ayyappa temples in South India always have a shrine to the popular South Indian god Murukan. Besides being an important deity in South India, Murukan is the son

of Siva and the elder brother of Ayyappa. Murukan is also Subramaniam and is known as Kartikeya or Skanda in Sanskrit literature (c.f. myth already discussed in Chapter Two). Murukan's consort is Valli. The Murukan shrine is next to the Gaṇeśa shrine, to the right of the śrikovil. This floor plan is not typical and describes only this particular temple. The Ayyappa temple at Adyar is in fact much larger and is an exact replica of the temple at Sabarimalai. The Ayyappa temple in Poona did not have shrines to Murukan or Malikapuruthamma. These two deities are popular only in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

The rituals and pūjās of the temple are performed by Nambudri priests, a brahman sect from Kerala. The deities have to be worshipped three times a day: dawn, noon and dusk. Starting with Gaṇeśa, they are bathed (abhiśekam), adorned (alankāram) and offered food (naivedhyam). These rituals continue throughout the year quite independently of the pilgrimage season and regardless of other activities that go on in the temple. The guruswāmi has no part in these rituals except as a devotee; they can be performed only by a brāhman priest. The initiate first prays for success at the shrine of Gaṇeśa. He does this either by standing before the mūrti for a few minutes with hands folded and head bowed, or by chanting a Gaṇeśa mantra. The initiation ceremony then begins. The guruswāmi also wears a black veṣṭi. Around his neck is a mālā (rosary). His forehead and arms are smeared with ash to indicate his

withdrawal from secular activity. The initiate, too, may smear ash on his forehead. They are both barechested in front of the deity, as is the custom in South India¹⁷.

After prostrating to the guruswāmi, the initiate stands before him with his hands folded as in prayer. His posture is one of humility and gratitude (see Plates 2 - 3). The guruswāmi then begins to chant the initiation mantra:

Jnana mudra, Sastha Mudram,
Guru Mudram, Namamyaham.
Vara Mudram, Shuddha Mudram,
Rudra Mudram, Namamaham.
Santa Mudram, Sathya Mudram,
Vratha Mudram, Namamyaham.
Sabaryashram Sathyena Mudram,
Pathu Sadapime.
Guru Dakshinayaa Poorvam,
Thasyanugraha Kaarine,
Sharanagatha Mudrakhyam,
Thanmudram Dhaaraayamyaham.
Chinmudram, Khechareemudram,
Bhadra Mudram Namamyaham.
Sabaryachala Mudraya,
Namasthubhyam Namō Namaha.

(B. Rao 1986:41)

(Rao has used colloquial pronunciations here rather than the transliteration rules of Sanskrit. The mantra has been reproduced as it appears in the Ayyappa Bhakti Maala.)

I bow to knowledge, Śāsthā and the Guru. I bow to the Good, Purity and Rudra. I bow to Peace, Truth and the Vow. May the Sabariashram, which is the embodiment of Truth, protect me always. Through the offering to the Guru, his blessings may be obtained. I perform the mudra called śaranāgatha (total surrender of one's ego). I bow to the Sabari mountain.

He then places a mālā around the initiate's neck and the two chant the mantrā again together. The initiate then prostrates before his guruswāmi again (see Plate 4) and makes his gurudakṣiṇā (offering to a guru) which in this case is usually a few rupees.

Plate 2: Mālā
Ceremony: The
initiate waits to
receive his mālā
from the guruswāmi.

Plate 3: Guruswāmi
places the mala
around initiate's
neck

Plate 4: Initiate seeking the guruswāmi's blessings.

The mālā, like the traditional japmālā (mantra rosarys), consists of one hundred and eight or fifty-four¹⁸ beads, and has a pendant of Ayyappa attached to it to differentiate from other rosaries. The mālā may be made of tulsi beads (basil family) or rudrākṣa beads. Some initiates wore several such beads around their neck, mālās that may have been used on previous years. Some wore silver mālās. The bead sizes also varied from very tiny to quite large. The cheaper mālās can be bought at the temple office or from one of the many stalls outside the temple. They range in price from between Rupees three to Rupees ten¹⁹, depending on size and quality. The pendants are generally plastic, but I did see some silver ones. These more precious mālās and pendants have to be ordered from a jeweler.

Once the mālā has been placed around his neck, the initiate must not remove it until he returns from his pilgrimage. It is the symbol of his vrataṁ, the sign of his new status as a member of the cultus. He is now considered the incarnation of the Lord Ayyappa himself and from now on the suffix Swāmi (god) will be added to his name when he is addressed. For example, if his name is Raju, he will be called Rajuswāmi. If his name is not known but only his job, say as a driver, then he will be called Driverswāmi. If nothing is known about him, then he is simply addressed as Swāmi. When Ayyappas meet, they greet each other with Śaranam (I seek refuge). Swāmiye Śaranam Ayyappa (I seek

refuge in the Lord Ayyappa) is the general chant of this cult.

Though there is no formal declaration, it is understood that the Ayyappa (as he is now called) will follow the strictest celibacy, abstain from intoxicants and meat, and participate only in religious activities. He may continue to work at his profession, but he may not indulge in social enterprises. Ayyappas are also required to eat only once a day (at noon) and to avoid garlic, onion and stale food²⁰. In the evening, they may eat fruit or something very light. As far as the dress code is concerned, a degree of flexibility is allowed during the vratam period. The nature of one's profession does not always permit this drastic change in dress code. For example, Ayyappas in the army or police force wear their regular uniforms and change into black only when off duty. Black or blue vestis and barefootedness are, however, insisted upon during the actual pilgrimage.

The rule of celibacy is taken very seriously and includes celibacy in thought and action. Ayyappas are advised to look upon all women older than them as mothers and those younger as daughters or sisters. Menstrual taboos are now strictly imposed. In orthodox Hindu homes, a woman is considered ritually impure during her menstrual period and must withdraw from the kitchen and prayer room. Sexual cohabitation is also forbidden. During the vratam, Ayyappas not only insist on these taboos being rigidly followed but

they go a step further and insist on physical separation. It is not uncommon for a wife, daughter or sister to be sent away during her menses if a male member of the household has taken the vrataṁ.

Though the vrataṁ period is forty-one days, nowadays shorter periods are being permitted. It is compulsory for the kanniswāṁies (first time initiates) to do the whole forty-one days. Others shorten the term to two weeks or even six days. One elderly guruswāmi said that he insisted on at least fifteen days. This relaxation of rules has a varied response (See Appendix D). Some Ayyappas are very unhappy about this new trend and feel that it is inauspicious. Others argue that practicality is the price one pays for modernization.

Though women are barred from participating, those over fifty-two years and under the age of nine may be initiated. People were not sure whether younger women who, for some medical reasons, no longer menstruate could be allowed or not. There were several explanations offered as to why women are restricted. Several Ayyappas explained that in the days before the roads were built, pilgrims had to trek through forests inhabited by wild animals. It would sometimes take several days to reach the shrine and they would have to camp outdoors. It was therefore both difficult and dangerous to allow women on the yātrā. However, when it was argued that women over fifty-two years were permitted despite the inconvenience, I was told that it

was to safeguard the other pilgrims that women in their menstruating years were banned. Apparently, animals have a keen sense of smell and are attracted by menstrual blood therefore menstruating women would be a threat to the safety of the whole pilgrim party.

The women are initiated in the same way as the men and by the same guruswāmies. I did not see any female guruswāmies nor had anyone heard of any. However, Hindu tradition accepts female gurus on par with males, so there would be no problems if a woman did become a guruswāmi. After being initiated, the women are called Malikapuruthammas. The suffix amma is added to their names.

During the forty-one day vratham period, several pūjās and bhajans are conducted. Pūjā is the term used for worship and worship rituals. Bhajans are hymns or songs glorifying the deity. These are arranged either collectively in community halls or temples, or privately in the homes of the Ayyappas. The community pūjās are open to the general public and are attended by Ayyappas, their families and friends. The private pūjās are by invitation, though they are not as rigid as one would suppose. An invitee is always welcome to take a friend or a relative to such events.

At the Ayyappa temple in Malalingapuram (Madras), the temple administration had arranged a Kotiārcana (Koti means core, and ārcana is a synonym for pūjā). This

Plate 5: Koṭiārcana ceremony at Mahalingapuram.

consisted of chanting the names of Ayyappa a million and eight times by devotees over a period of three weeks. A Nambudri priest from Sabarimalai came down specially for this function and other local brāhmans joined him in the chanting (see Plate 5). (I am not sure whether any non-brāhman devotees participated in the chanting but the group included only men). Other devotees would offer flowers and ghee (clarified butter) for pūjā. The ghee was used in the ritual abhiśekam (bathing and anointing of the deity in the main sanctum by the temple priest). It was then collected in a silver pot (Khalasam) and, during the evening pūjā, taken around the temple in procession. It was then divided and returned to the donors as prasādam. The inauguration of this Kotiarcana pūjā was presided over by their Holinesses the Sankaracaryas, who are pontiffs of the Sringeri Matt. A procession of the utsav mūrtis (festival statues) was organized at the end of the puja. Elephants were hired to carry the utsav mūrtis of Ayyappa, Vavar and Malikapuruthamma through the streets of Madras.

A similar festival is held in Kerala called Ayyappa Pattu (Songs of Ayyappa). I witnessed one in Guruvayoor (Kerala) on the eve of our departure to Sabarimalai. The festival began with a procession, led by temple musicians playing their nāḍhaswarams (long clarinets) and kettle drums (see Plate 6). They were followed by about thirty-five girls between the ages of nine and fifteen, carrying small oil lamps. Every now and then, the

Plate 6: Clarinet player leading the procession from the Guruvayoor Temple to the Ayyappa Temple during the Ayyappa Pattu function.

procession would stop and the girls would form a semicircle. They were followed by two men dressed in black vestis and wearing the Ayyappa mālā. One carried a hunter's knife and the other a sickle. They had ash and sandal paste smeared on their foreheads and forearms. When the procession stopped, they would dance within the semicircle formed by the girls. Following them closely was a wooden cart in which several branches of the pāla²¹ (kadhira) tree were held erect. These branches were shaken by men who sat in the cart. The cart was pulled along by other men (see Plate 7). They were followed by a priest who held a camphor flame on a brass plate. ~~Three~~ elephants formed the rear of the procession (see Plate 8). They carried icons of Ayyappa, Vavar and Malikapuruthamma. Five men sat on the back of each elephant behind the icons. They held the red umbrellas and fly whisks, which are symbols of regality and status.

The procession would stop every fifty feet or so. The musicians would stop playing and the priest would perform the ārati. This involves showing a camphor flame to the deity and then rotating it three times in a clockwise direction. The flame is then extended to the people gathered, who pass their palms over it and then touch their eyes. The flame represents the deity and, by reaching for it in this manner, one is receiving the darsan of the deity.

The two men who bear the sickle and knife represent Ayyappa and Vavar. The hunting knife and sickle are symbolic of the forest and vegetation. The dancing is a

Plate 7: Branches of pālā tree being taken in procession. This tree is associated with the goddess Malikapuruthamma.

re-enactment of the fight between Ayyappa and Vavar and their subsequent friendship and adventures. The pāla tree, which is indigenous to Kerala, is considered to be Malikapuruthamma herself in her sakti form. The shaking of the branches during the dancing indicates her presence. In Hindu mythology, the goddess is always represented as being a Kanyā (virgin prepubescent), despite her role as Mother of the Universe. Her handmaids, therefore, should ideally be Kanyās. However, all the unmarried maidens in the procession took part in this ritual.

The dancing goes on for about fifteen minutes at each stop. When the priest gives the signal to move on, the music starts up and the procession moves on. The procession began at 6:00 p.m. in front of the great Visnu temple (the central focal point of all religious ritual in Guruvayoor) and slowly wound its way to the newly-acquired Ayyappa temple grounds a few miles away. Here, small shrines, freshly made from coconut palm leaves, are kept in readiness to receive the icons (see Plate 9). Ayyappa is placed in the centre shrine, with Vavar to the right and Malikapuruthamma on the left. They are offered the traditional coconut, molasses and beaten rice, symbols of the harvest which are then later distributed to the gathering as prasādam. A group of singers begin singing legends of Ayyappa. These legends are mainly in Malayalam or Kodagi (see Appendix A), as Ayyappa is a folk hero of

Plate 8: Elephants carrying icons of deities.

Plate 9: Making of the shrines from palm leaves and banana stalks.

these parts. Several new bhajans have now been composed in Tamil which are also sung,

Women do not actively participate in this function. They come as mere spectators and retire early. The men however stay on until quite late. I left early, but was given an account of the proceedings by my male informants the next morning. Apparently, two men, who are specialists in this form of dance, begin to dance in rhythm, re-enacting the fight between Ayyappa and Vavar. As the evening wears on, they depict other legends from the events of Ayyappa's life, while the other devotees sit around enjoying the entertainment. They are welcome to join in the singing, chanting and dancing, and many do until the early hours of the morning.

2. The Tying of the bundle, or Irumuṭi, ceremony.

The next stage is the preparation for the yātrā, after the vratham period is completed. Again, it may be performed at the temple or at the guruswami's house.

Irumuṭi in Tamil quite literally means "two portions." It is a specially designed cotton bag with two compartments. One section is designated as the min muṭi or "front knot" and the other becomes the pin muṭi or "back knot." The min muṭi is packed with the articles that the Ayyappa will take to offer at the shrine. The pin muṭi will contain articles for his personal use. Symbolically the min muṭi represents the ego consciousness of the Ayyappa, which

he will be offering to the deity and the pin muṭi represents his past karma and saṃskārs, which he hopes will be left behind.

The ceremony that I witnessed was held in the large pandal (tent) of the Ayyappa Samaj in Coimbatore. Two groups were performing their ceremonies in the pandal that same evening almost simultaneously. They occupied spots side by side but carried on without getting in each other's way. Each group consisted of about thirty-five males of all ages, the youngest being six years old.

A picture of Ayyappa was decorated and placed in a convenient spot propped against a pot (the pot had no special significance, it was merely handy). The gathering, which consisted of the family members of the Ayyappas, the Ayyappas themselves and a large number of children (who always seem to appear from nowhere at the drop of a pin) seated themselves around the picture of the deity. Incense was burned and a lamp was lit. A short Ganesa mantra was recited by the guruswāmi, followed by ārati before the ceremony began.

The Ayyappa was asked to sit facing the picture of the deity. The picture is arranged so that the Ayyappa will face east, which is the most auspicious direction. After prostrating to the guruswāmi, he sits down on a wooden plank that is set on the floor. The guruswāmi sits on a mat but others sit on the floor. The guruswāmi begins the chant: Swāmiyee Saranam Ayyappa ("I seek refuge in the Lord

Ayyappa"), which is then continued by the congregation for a few minutes.

The most important offering that the Ayyappa takes to the shrine is a coconut filled with ghee (see Plate 10). This has important symbolic value (which has been explained in Chapter Two). A hole is made in one of the eyes and the water is drained out. The Ayyappa fills this coconut with ghee, then plugs the coconut with a plastic stopper. The eyes of the coconut are then dotted with tumeric and kumkum (red powder). This is then placed in the min muti. The guruswāmi then fills a smaller cotton bag with three scoops of rice grain, to which Ayyappa and his family members also add three scoops each (see Plate 11). This custom is a re-enactment of a funeral ritual in which family members feed three scoops of rice to the corpse before it is taken away for cremation. It signifies that the Ayyappa is now temporarily dead to his family and friends. The bag is then secured and placed with the coconut in the min muti. Another coconut is also placed in the min muti. This one is to be broken before the Ayyappa ascends the sacred "eighteen steps" at the shrine. Other pūjā items are also packed, such as camphor, incense, tumeric, areca nuts and beaten rice for Malikapuruthamma, black pepper for Vavar²², and a small pouch containing money collected from the congregation for the temple donation box (hundi). The min muti is then secured. It will be opened only at the shrine.

The pin muti is then packed with ~~some~~ of the smaller personal requirements of the Ayyappa, such as his comb, soap, etc. The guruswāmi and the Ayyappa then rise. The Ayyappa once again prostrates before the guruswami who then places the irumuṭi on his head. This is a very emotional moment for the Ayyappa, for it marks the beginning of his journey to the shrine. Soon he will be standing in the very presence of Lord Ayyappa himself. The irumuṭi is placed so that the min muti sits on the crown of the Ayyappa's head and the pin muti hangs behind. The Ayyappa is then turned around three times in a clockwise direction²³. This is another re-enactment of a funeral ritual in which the corpse is turned around three times before being taken to the cremation ground (see Plates 12, 13).

The first part of the irumuṭi ceremony is now over. Each Ayyappa has to perform the ceremony individually and, since there is always a group setting off together, they have to wait until all the irumuṭis are completed. The Ayyappa, therefore, places his irumuṭi on a woollen blanket²⁴ very reverentially and prostrates to it (see Plate 14. This bundle represents his sādhana (that is, the practice of his vrata that he has performed over the last forty-two days). It is his tapas and therefore very sacred.

While he waits for the others, the Ayyappa may mingle with his family. When the ceremonies are completed,

Plate 10: Irumuṭi
kattal ceremony:
Pouring ghee into
coconut that is to
be offered to the
deity at Sabarimala
His Guruswāmi
watches.
Coimbatore, T. Nadu.

Plate 11: Relatives
offering three
scoops of rice
grain. The Ayyappa's
sister offers three
scoops of rice
grain. Other friends
and relatives also
make the same
offering.
Coimbatore, T. Nadu.

Plate 12: The
Ayyappa stands to
receive the
irumuti. After the
irumuti is filled,
it is placed on the
Ayyappa's head by
his guruswāmi.
Coimbatore, T. Nadu.

Plate 13: The
Ayyappa being
turned thrice - a
re-enactment of a
funeral rite.
Coimbatore, T. Nadu.

Plate 14: Irumutis placed reverentially on a woolen blanket while the group are at supper. Coimbatore, T. Nadu.

the Ayyappas sit together and partake of a simple meal consisting of rice, lentils, vegetables and yoghurt. After this evening meal, the group falls in line again and receives the blessings of the elders present. They prostrate once again to the guruswāmi who then places their bundles on their heads. Placing his own bundle on his head, he then leads them out chanting "Swāmiyee Śaranam Ayyappa." At the threshold, each Ayyappa breaks a coconut, and then walks backwards a few paces (just as a corpse is carried out head first). Turning around again, he walks away and begins his yātrā to Sabarimalai, without once looking back. At this stage no one is to call out to him or wish him goodbye. He has crossed the threshold of the secular world into that of the sacred realm. When there is no definite threshold, as in the case of a hall or tent, the threshold is symbolically marked by a strategically-placed stone. The Ayyappas break their coconuts on the stone before departing.

I witnessed other irumuṭi kattal ceremonies at the Viṣṇu temple in Guruvayoor. Several were held simultaneously within the courtyard of this famous temple. They all followed the same format. The group with which I travelled performed their ceremonies at the main entrance of the Guruvayoor temple.

Besides the irumuṭi kattal, the Ayyappa carries only a shoulder bag of personal belongings, a blanket and perhaps some small cooking utensils. Some groups hire a cook to accompany them on their yātrā and his equipment is

transported up the hill by asses or coolies (porters) that may be hired at the foot of Mount Sabari. Our group took a team of three cooks, who were also cultus members. They cooked the midday meal, which consisted of rice, a watery lentil soup (rasam) and buttermilk. For our return journey, they packed us some upamā, which is a semolina preparation.

Usually, Ayyappas visit several other temples and pilgrimage spots enroute to Sabarimalai. The group I travelled with visited six such major sites. They were: (1) Tripayer, a beautiful temple on the backwaters of the Arabian Sea dedicated to Lord Rāmā (an incarnation of Viśnu); (2) Thriuvangikudum, dedicated to Śiva; (3) Thiruparithāra, where Viśnu is seen in his Visvarupa (Cosmic form); (4) Chottānicara, the temple to Durga and Kali where the mentally ill and "possessed" are brought to be cured; (5) Udyanapuram, dedicated to Murukan; and finally (6) the Vaikom temple to Śiva. These temples were chosen by the guruswāmies in consultation with group leaders. It is not mandatory to visit these particular shrines. The selection depends on the route one takes to Pampa and the time one has. Some groups visit temples on the way back, after completing the yātrā (pilgrimage). All these temples are packed with bus loads of Ayyappas on their way to or from Sabarimalai. All clad in black, they greet each other with deep-throated Śaranams as they stop to exchange notes and discuss the temples they have visited. It is a grand sight

and I felt a thrill to be a part of it, no matter how marginally I was involved.

3. The journey, or yātrā.

There are two ways of getting to Sabarimalai: the longer route that passes through the hilly terrains and forests of the Western Ghats, or the shorter route in which one drives right up to the River Pampa at the foot of Mount Sabari (see Maps 1 and 2).

The longer route begins at a village called Erumeli (southeast of Kottayam). It derives its name from the buffalo-headed Mahishi of the myth (erume is buffalo in both Tamil and Malayalam). It is believed that this was where the tusk of the demoness fell during her battle with Ayyappa. There is a small temple to Ayyappa here in this village where he is depicted as a hunter. Erumeli also has a sizable Muslim population. There is a darghā (shrine to a Muslim saint) to the Saint Vavar, who is believed to have been a close friend and ally of the legendary Ayyappa. Both Hindus and Muslims worship at the shrine before setting off on the yātrā. A colourful custom called the petta thullal (dance of the hunters) is performed here. The Ayyappas paint their faces and torsos in dots and zig-zag designs of different colours²⁵. They carry a stick over their shoulders. This stick is decorated with leaves and vegetables. They then dance and sing in ecstasy "Swāmi thinthakathom, Ayyappa thinthakathom (thinthakathom is just

Map 1: Kerala (Government of India Road Map of India .
Sixth Edition - 1:2500000. Govt. of India
1977)

Map 2: Sabarimalai Route Map (Tactical Pilotage Chart 1:500000. Defense Mapping Agency, Aerospace Centre. St. Louis Airforce Station, Missouri T.P.C.K. 8D Edition 1, 1983)

a beat and has no meaning). They dance around the Vavar and Ayyappa shrines in the darghā and then dance on to the main Ayyappa temple. Here, they circumambulate the shrine three times before proceeding to the river to bathe. After freshening up, they return to the temple and make offerings to the deities for their safe journey through the forest. This ritual is compulsory for the kanniswāmies (initiates) who take this route.

Pyappan describes the petta thullal ceremony as an "acid test" of one's ego, which is bound to receive a severe blow when one's naked body is smeared with colours by strangers (Pyappan 1966:46). Valentine Daniel went on the Sabarimalai pilgrimage while collecting data for his book Fluid Signs (1984) and found that the ceremony helped dissolve the last traces of social reserve that his fellow Ayyappas felt towards him as a foreigner and guest. As they began painting each other's faces and bodies, the last residue of social differences of rank and status began to disappear (Daniel 1984:250).

The traditional route to Sabarimalai begins at Erumeli and winds through the forest and hilly terrain to the foot of Mount Sabari and the banks of the River Pampa. There are several important spots along this route where specific rituals are performed. For example, I was told that at a place called Kallidumkannu, the Ayyappas are directed to throw stones into a ravine. There are many explanations for this practice. Some believe that the

mortal remains of Mahishī were dumped here and have to be kept covered up. Others believe that the stones represent past sins that are to be thrown away. One informant linked the ritual to the Muslim custom of "throwing stones at Shaitan." The more skeptical Ayyappas explained that the purpose of these stones was to fill up the large ravine and level the land.

In 1960, an access road was constructed for vehicles, so that one can now drive right up to the foot of Sabarimalai. From here, the sannidhānam (the holy summit) is only eight kilometers away. The Kerala State Transport Corporation runs special buses during the pilgrimage season that connect Pampa directly with almost all the major cities of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Those who can afford private transportation rent taxis or come in their own cars. Our group, which assembled in Guruvayoor, consisted of two hundred or so pilgrims. Most of them travelled to Pampa by a hired bus. There was a small advance party of twelve (of which I was a member), who went on in advance by a van.

The River Pampa is believed to be the conflux of all the holy rivers of India. It has its physical source near Mount Sabari and flows northwest into the Vembanad Lakes near Allepy (see Map 1), which is a backwater of the Arabian Sea. The holiest spot on the banks of this river is at the foot of Sabarimalai. The area is hilly, with an elevation between fifty and two thousand feet above the sea level.

The region is associated with legends from the Hindu epic Ramayana. Rama, the god/king of Ayodhya, was exiled to the forest with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. Sita was abducted by the rākṣasa (demon) Ravanna and carried away to his capital in Lanka. Their search for her led Rama and Lakshmana to the southern-most regions of Bharatvarsha (India), where they met with help from several local kings. The capital of King Sugreeva, the monkey king who became an ally, is believed to have been five kilometers southwest of Pampa. It is believed that one of the rocks here bears the foot imprint of Lord Rama.

The many caves in the hills are said to have housed several sages over the centuries. The Mount Sabari itself derives its name from the Riśi (sage) who lived there. According to legends, Sabari was a tribal woman who became the disciple of Riśi Matangi. When he died, she too wished to give up her mortal body but was directed by her guru to stay and await the arrival of Lord Rama. Sabari thus stayed on and when the Lord Rama and his brother arrived, extended to them her hospitality. Having thus fulfilled her mission, she built a pyre and immolated herself.

All vehicles are parked on the left bank of the Pampa. There are rows and rows of cars, buses, vans and motorcycles, and even some auto rickshaws (three wheelers), which are peculiar to India. There are many extremely

courteous and efficient policemen on duty, directing traffic and lending assistance to the pilgrims.

One crosses to the other side of the Pampa by a narrow bridge. The Ayyappas must bathe in this river before they begin the climb up Sabarimalai. It is believed that Ayyappa dwells in this river. They are to stand in the river, facing south and propitiate their ancestors by chanting three times the names of those departed, while scooping up and pouring handfuls of water back into the river. After bathing and donning fresh clothes, they prepare to ascend the holy mountain (see Plates 15 - 16).

All along the route to the hill are stalls selling refreshments, souvenirs and other paraphernalia. The scene resembled the fiesta of the three kings or Canterbury Fair as described by Victor Turner (1974:194) (see Plate 17). There is a small Gaṇeśa shrine at the gateway. After worshipping here, the group fell into a single file and, carrying their irumuṭis on their heads, began chanting in chorus, "Swāmiyee Śaranam Ayyappa," as they set off to ascend the mountain.

The road is a mere dirt path, full of pebbles, stones and thorns, and the Tamil chant "Kalum mulum Kāliki methai" (we walk over stones and thorns) is very appropriate. It has to be walked barefooted, for Sabarimalai is a holy mountain. It is only the merchants around Pampa and the police on duty who wear sandals; coolies, who carry heavy articles up and down the hills, also go barefooted.

Plates 15 - 16: Bathing in the Pampa

Plate 17: Carnival atmosphere at Pampa

Most Ayyappas begin the ascent either before nine o'clock in the morning, when it is cool, or wait until after sunset. The rush at these times, therefore, is quite phenomenal. As they climb this holy mountain towards the climax, they chant in chorus (see Appendix B). The chanting helps to keep the mind focused on the deity so that the difficult climb seems easier. Some groups are able to climb quite fast and as they almost run up the hill, they shout "wari wari" (which in Tamil and Malayalam means "give way, give way"), and push past the slower groups. The stronger members of a group help the slower members by encouraging them on. Dolis (litters) are available to carry the older or disabled pilgrims but most walk and I saw only old ladies being carried up in this way. Dolis can be hired for anything from fifty to a hundred and twenty rupees.

The first point of rest is at a spot called Apachimedu. The pilgrims rest here and buy soda and limes from a stall to quench their thirst. From here, the climb becomes less steep and therefore easier.

The next stop is a kilometer away at a spot called Saramkuttal. There is a peepal tree here that has hundreds of arrows stuck in it. There are three explanations for this custom. Some believe that they are commemorating the spot where Ayyappa's arrow fell as he was marking the spot for the temple. Another version relates to the myth of Malikapuruthamma, who rises from the ashes of Mahishi to fall in love with Ayyappa. He promised to marry her when

Plate 18: A view of the Summit (sarnidhānam). The smoke indicates the location of the temple. It is the smoke from the pyre where the pilgrims cast their coconuts. Sabarimalai, Kerala.

kanniswāmis (initiates) stopped coming to Sabarimalai.

Thus, kanniswāmis are to indicate their presence by bringing an arrow to this spot. The third version refers to the folk legends that indicate that Ayyappa instructed his men to place their weapons here before proceeding to the shrine.

From Saramkuttal, the summit is not far off. Excitement mounts as the pilgrims get closer to the top. They will soon be in the presence of their deity. This excitement is transferred to the chanting, which gets louder and more intense. The Ayyappas almost run the rest of the way (see Plate 18).

The temple is built on a small plateau in the traditional architectural style of Kerala. The present structure was rebuilt in 1952 after it was destroyed by vandalism that spared only the stone steps that lead up to the main entrance of the shrine. In fact, these steps are believed to be part of the original temple that was constructed here by the mythical Viśvakarma. The steps therefore are very sacred and some consider them to be more holy than the temple or mūrti of Ayyappa himself. They are narrow and made of granite, about eight inches deep and five feet long. Two years ago, they were plated in gold leaf by a rich devotee, and so they now glisten in the sunshine (see Plate 19).

There are several possible explanations as to why there are eighteen steps. The number "eighteen" can be considered auspicious for various reasons. There are

Plate 19: The holy "Eighteen Steps" at the summit. The Srikovil that houses the deity can be seen in the background. The two smaller shrines on either side of the steps are dedicated to the Guardian Deities.

eighteen chapters in the Bhagavad Gita. If one adds the five indriyas (senses), eight ragas (notes), three gunas (constituents of nature), vidyā (knowledge) and avidyā (ignorance), one gets the magical number of eighteen. There are also eighteen Puranas, and the Mahabharata War lasted eighteen days. Folk legends say that each step is dedicated to eighteen weapons that were used in the battle between Ayyappa and the dacoit (brigand) Udayanam. A skeptical informant, however, suggested that the number eighteen is an architectural practicality and has no spiritual value at all. The height of the plaza, according to him, only allows for eighteen steps.

Religious ideas, according to Durkheim, result from the interpretation of pre-existing sentiments and in order to study religion, we must penetrate these sentiments, avoiding the ideas which are only the symbol and surface expression of these (Durkheim 1985:219). Whatever the significance of the number eighteen, it is enough that the steps are held in great reverence.

Police are posted on either side of the steps to help devotees as they ascend. The new gold plating has made the steps very slippery and so one has to tread very carefully. Formerly, before the steps were gold plated, the pilgrims broke their coconuts on the step that corresponded with the number of times they had made the yātrā. On completion of eighteen yātrās, they were allowed to plant a coconut sapling in the courtyard of the temple. Now

however, one is not allowed to break coconuts on the steps for fear of damaging the gold. They are broken instead at the foot of the steps before climbing up. This change in custom has created some disgruntled feelings amongst the pilgrims, who resent what they perceive as an arbitrary change of tradition by a few rich devotees.

After breaking the coconut at the base of the steps, the Ayyappa now finally ascends the sacred Eighteen Steps. This is the climax of the vratham. He will now come face to face with the presence that has dominated his existence for the last two months. The deity is apparently visible from the eighteenth step, and it is from here that the Ayyappa receives his first darsan (glimpse of the deity). This is, I was told, a moment of magic, when time stands still and everything recedes into the background. As one informant put it: "One stands there speechless, aware only of the Divine Presence, as the rest of existence recedes into the background, into a timelessness and infinity."

• One is not allowed to linger on this last step, as there is usually a long line of Ayyappas waiting and equally anxious for their first darsan. The ghee-filled coconut is now carefully broken at the designated spot to the left of the steps and handed over at one of the counters (vazhivadu) that line the south wall of the sanctum. In return, a written receipt is given. One then goes back to the main sanctum for a closer darsan. At the sanctum, the receipt is

handed to the officiating priest, who will then perform the abhiśekam by chanting the appropriate mantras. The abhiśekam signifies the submergence of the pilgrim's ego with that of the deity. It is a moment of symbolic death. But then, the death of the body is the liberation of the ātman and its mergence with the Absolute Brahman. The coconut that was filled with the ghee now represents the discarded body of the Ayyappa. He cremates it by throwing it into a pyre outside the temple. This completes the cycle, for "cremation," to quote Robert Hertz, "far from destroying the body of the deceased, recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life" (Hertz 196:43). The Ayyappa is thus reborn. The ghee is returned to the Ayyappa as prasādam (food distributed to devotees after it has been offered to the deity as an oblation) and is taken home to distribute to family and friends.

At one time, the kunda (pyre) that is used to burn the coconuts was in the courtyard of the main sanctum. However, the increased numbers of Ayyappas made it practical to move it down to a spot near the foot of the Eighteen Steps. Barbed wire surrounds the kunda, so that one cannot get too close to it. A few years ago, apparently, a devotee was so overcome with emotion that, instead of merely symbolically tossing the coconut shell into the fire, he leaped into the flames himself. The barbed wire is to prevent a repeat of this performance.

PLAN OF TEMPLE SITE (Measurements approximate, no scale)

A.	Steps leading up to temple plaza	H.	Vavarswamys shrine	L.	M., N. Ganēśa, Murukan Malā.
B.	Pyre for coconuts	I.	Steps leading up to shrine	O.	Srikovil
C.	Admin. offices	J.	Flagstaff	P.	Malikapurathamma's Shrine
		K.	Camphor flame	Q.	Police H.Q. and Admin. bldgs.

FIGURE 1

When there are large groups together, then the ghee is collected and joint abhiśekam is performed. The ghee is then divided up and distributed amongst the group.

The temple itself sits on a small elevated plaza (see Figure 1). Eighteen granite steps lead up to the main entrance. The area around the foot of the "Eighteen Steps" are two small shrines to Kaduthaswami and Karuppaswami, the two dwārapalakas (door guardians). They are stationed there to protect the steps from being defiled by those who mount them without performing the vratham. They also protect the Ayyappas from malevolent "forest spirits," who may try to prevent them from fulfilling this last lap of their journey.

To the southwest of the "Eighteen Steps" and opposite the northern entrance to the temple is the shrine to Vavar, the Muslim friend of Ayyappa. It is very simple and consists of a wall covered with green satin cloth. There are no idols in this shrine, just a sword propped up against the wall²⁶. The pūjā here is conducted by a Muslim priest (mullah), who reads out passages from the Koran and distributes pepper and ash as prasādam (see Plate 20).

To the left of the Vavar shrine is the shrine to the Navagrahas (nine planets). Hindu astronomy identifies seven planets: Surya (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Budha (Mercury), Sukra (Venus), Mangala (Mars), Brhaspati (Jupiter) and Śani (Saturn). To these grahas, two more were added, Rahu and Ketu, which represent the ascending and descending nodes of the moon (Basham 1959:491). Hindus

Plate 20: Vavarswami's shrine. Shrine to Vavar, the Muslim saint and friend of Ayyappa, within the temple courtyard at Sabarimalai. The Muslim priest (mullāh) who is sitting, offers pilgrims pepper and ash after chanting a few lines from the Koran. He too is wearing the black vesti of an Ayyappa devotee. The man standing is a P. Narayana Nair who assists the priest. Pilgrims drop their monetary offerings into the brass pot in the foreground. Sabarimalai, Kerala.

believe that these planets affect the daily fortunes of individuals and therefore must be propitiated. There are nine mūrtis in this shrine, each one representing one of the nine planets.

The Ayyappas are allowed to use the "Eighteen Steps" only twice. Once when ascending with the irumuṭi, and then again after completing the vrātam and other pūjās. At other times, the steps at the northern entrance are used.

At the top of the "Eighteen Steps" is the gold-plated divājasthamba (flagstaff). This is a tall flagstaff, about fifty feet high and four feet in diameter, divided into thirty-three divisions (see Plate 21).

According to Viraswami Pathar in his book Temple and its Significance (cited in Sahi 1980:79), the flagstaff

represents the ascent of the psychic energy lodged latent at the base of the spine in the mūlādhāra cakra. It therefore has thirty-three divisions like the vertebrae of the human spine (quoted Sahi 1980:79). The symbol of the cosmic pillar relates to a myth about a magical lake that lies in the depths of the Himalayas in mythical Mount Meru. When the sun rises above this lake a pillar rises from the centre of the lake and grows until it reaches its greatest height at midday, becoming a platform on which the sun and moon rest while at their zenith before once again taking their path downwards - a movement which is followed by the pillar itself. From this myth, we see the relation of the pillar to the sun and the axis of the universe arising out of a

The sacred 18 steps at the Sabarimala shrine

Plate 21: The Flagstaff at the base of the "eighteenth step."
(Picture from: Illustrated Weekly of India, Feb. 1987)

cosmic sea. The flagstaff represents the centre of the universe, which is always where the deity resides. Thus, every temple must have a flagstaff. The deity also resides within the heart of his devotees. The flagstaff, therefore, can also be considered a symbolic representation of the devotee himself. The staff is his spinal column, and the base represents the first cakra (mulādhāra) that lodges the psychic energy (kundalinī Śakti). The path of the sun, therefore re-enacts the spiritual ascent of the devotee that leads to union with the deity and ultimate bliss.

The Śrikovil (the main sanctum) is in line with the flagstaff. The Śrikovil at Sabari is built in the typical style of Kerala temples. It has a copper-plated roof, with four golden finials on top. Around the sanctum is a large courtyard which houses the shrines of Ganesa and Murukan.

The sanctum itself is very small. There is an altar at one end of the room, facing the entrance. This altar, however, is more of a chamber, for it has three sides and the fourth side has a door that is opened to display the mūrti. The chamber is about four feet by four feet, is raised and has four steps leading up into it. At the centre of the chamber, directly facing the door and in line with the main outer entrance, sits the mūrti at eye level. Only Nambudri priests are allowed to enter this chamber, to attend on the deity. Temple lamps and bells hang from the ceilings.

To the south of the śrikovil are small shrines to Ganesa and Murukan. The kunda (pyre) where the Ayyappas used to throw their coconuts was located here before it was shifted. There is also a small shrine to the goddess Mala.

At the top of the "Eighteen Steps" and to the left is another smaller kunda. The camphor that is brought by the Ayyappas is kept burning there continuously. The temple courtyard is extended in the north to accommodate administration offices and the large donation box (hundi), in which monetary offerings of the devotees are deposited.

The northwestern part of the temple site slopes down into a tank. This is the temple tank that is used for bathing. Beyond this, on a little hillock, is the shrine to Malikapurathamma. To the left of this shrine are the mūrtis of the snake deities Nagaraja and Nagayakshi, which the tribals of the area worship.

The Ayyappa Motif (see Plate 22)

The mūrti of Lord Ayyappa that is within the main sanctum is resplendent. It is a small statue, only two and one-half feet high. This particular mūrti was installed after renovations in 1960. Made of pancaloha (an alloy of five metals: iron, copper, silver, bronze and aluminum); it was cast by smiths from the Chengannur district of Kerala.

Ayyappa sits in the utakāsana position, with a yogic band (pattabandhā) around his knees. His right elbow rests on his right knee with the fingers of the hand poised

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Plate 22: The deity - Lord Ayappa. This is a photograph of the mūrti at the Rastapet temple in Pune, which is an exact stone replica of the mūrti at Sabarimalai..

in the chinmudra (forefinger touching the tip of the thumb). The left hand is extended gracefully, with the elbow resting on the kneecaps. Around his neck he wears, besides the usual ornaments, a little bell. The Vaisnava mark is on his forehead.

The mūrti is a pratiṣṭa, which means "a living presence." It has been formally consecrated and is therefore treated as a living being. There are many tales about how "alive" this mūrti is. Apparently, his moods are clearly visible to his devotees by his changing facial expressions. They say that on some days "he" looks angry, on other days sad or joyous. Since all the devotees see a similar expression at the same time, they do not think this is their imagination or a projection of their own state of mind. The day we had darśan, "he" was in a joyous mood which made all the devotees quite ecstatic.

The utakatāsana pose, according to the Yogāsena Vijñāna - a treatise on the Science of Yoga - by Dharendra Brahmachari (n.d.), when performed helps in the maintenance of uninterrupted celibacy (Brahmachari n.d.:63). The position, according to yogis, induces the semen to course upwards. This is what yogis aim for when they perform Kundalini yoga, a yoga that guides the psychic energy that is believed to be stored in the cakra (centre) at the base of the spine. Through certain spiritual practices this latent energy at the first cakra is gently coaxed up to the final centre in the crown of the head.

The pattabandha, or band around the knees and hips of the mūrti, can be explained in various ways. It could refer to the band worn by yogis to provide support during their yogic exercises. It may also serve to prevent erections. As one devotee assured Daniel: "If he were ever struck by an unvanquishable ithyphallic condition, this posture would help relieve it" (Daniel 1984:2460). In the Lalitāsahasrānāma (a Sanskrit text describing the thousand and eight forms of Devi), Sri Lalitā is described as wearing a pattabandha around her waist to support her breasts, which are heavy (v. 36, Krisnaswamy 1971:13). The pattabandha therefore could have both a symbolic and a practical meaning. Several Ayyappas wear a wide belt below the hips in imitation of the deity.

Mudras are gestures used in yoga and dance to indicate expression and meaning. The chinmudra has several symbolic meanings. When placed over the left wrist, it indicates a swan (hamsa). It is also used to show time (kāla) and, on a more philosophical level, indicates the union of the ātman and Brahman. It is used to indicate the highest yogi and incidentally hamsa (swan) is also a symbol of such a person (e.g. Sri Ramakrishna Parmahansa).

Many Ayyappas also wear a little bell around their necks in imitation of the deity. According to the myth, Siva tied a bell around the neck of the baby when he was left in the forest. The baby was found by King Rajasekhara,

who named him Manikantha (he who wears a bell around his neck.)

According to Tantric sādhana (practice), the aspect of the mind which cognizes is called Nāma (sound). The object of cognition is called Rūpa (form). The whole of creation, therefore, is sound and form (Woodroffe 1953:88). Thus, the god Siva symbolically carries a drum (Damaru) and Viṣṇu a conch shell. It is believed that the sound that the yogi hears when the psychic energy (kundalīni) rises to the level of the fourth cakra in the heart region is that of a bell ringing (or of flowing water). The fourth cakra in the heart is also believed to be the seat of the deity or one's ātman (soul). Thus the symbol of the bell which Ayyappa wears around his neck could be another symbolic indicator of the deity "within."

After completing the main ritual of climbing the "Eighteen Steps" and performing the ghee abhiṣekam, the Ayyappas are now free to participate in the various activities that are taking place around the shrine. Here, the advantage of coming in a large group becomes evident. The group that I travelled with called themselves the Guruvayoor Bhajana Samaj. They had been coming to Sabarimalai regularly every year for the past ten years and were therefore well known to the temple authorities. They organized three ceremonies every year: a pañchābhiṣekam (five anointings), a karpura āraṭi (camphor flame) to

Malikapuruthamma and a dance recital which is quite customary in South Indian temples.

The panchābhisekam was performed at noon, after the regular pujās at the shrine were completed. The five articles used for the abhisekam were ghee, sandal paste, panchāmritam (a mixture of fruits and cane-sugar), coconut milk and flowers. The panchāmritam required some preparation. It consisted of bananas, raisins, honey and milk. The bananas had to be peeled, cut and mixed well with the other ingredients, so that it became a gooey molasses-like substance. This was prepared by the group at Sabarimalai just before the function.

The five articles were then taken in procession by the group, heralded by the temple musicians on the kettle drums and clarinets (nāḍhaswaram). After the abhisekam, the five offerings were returned to the group and distributed as prasādam.

I could not attend the karpura āratī, which took place at dusk²⁷. However from the accounts I had from informants who participated, it seems to have been similar to the ceremonies I witnessed at Guruvayoor and Madras. An Ayyappa carries a camphor flame in a pot on his head and, accompanied by the musicians and other Ayyappas, goes in procession to the shrine of Malikapuruthamma. Here they go around the shrine three times in homage (pradaksina) amidst dancing and singing. The dancing and singing becomes frenzied and some Ayyappas become ecstatic and possessed

Plate 23: Arati procession. The procession accompanying the karpura-arati to the goddess's shrine at dusk. Musicians play the kettle drums (mridangam), clarinet, and a curved horn (in foreground).

(see Plates 23 - 24). This goes on for about two hours, until they have spent themselves. (Some informants confessed that they felt as if they had had sexual release after great tension.) They returned to the dormitory with the flame which is then passed around to the devotees who pass their palms over it and touch it to their eyes.

The dance that was arranged was a kathakali performance that is typical of Kerala. Although it follows the rules of classical dance (the nāṭyaśāstras), it is an amalgamation of several art forms. Local ritual, socio-religious dances and even the martial arts have influenced the style. The entire body, down to the smallest facial muscle, is used to portray emotion. The dancers use elaborate masks to depict the various characters they are portraying. All the themes are derived from Hindu mythology. The dances are usually held at night in village arenas. The dance performance arranged at Sabarimalai was held in a special auditorium built near the northern entrance of the temple. The very famous artist, Kalamandaram Gopi, belonged to the group. On that particular night, he and his troupe performed excerpts from the Hindu epic Ramayana.

Other rituals like the angapradakṣaṇam are also performed by some devotees. This involves rolling around the stone courtyard of the temple three times. Such a ritual is generally undertaken as a penance, however, the leader of our group did it as an act of faith and devotion.

Plate 24: Dancing with the camphor flame. The karpura-ārati for the goddess Malikapuruthamma. One of the guruswamis bears it on his head and dances around the courtyard of the goddess's shrine. Other Ayyappas join in, dancing and clapping to the beat of the mridangam (drum). Sabarimalai, Kerala.

Guest houses are available to accommodate the Ayyappas. These are nothing more than dormitories with zinc roofing and cement floors. There are no doors or windows, just walls three feet high, with openings on either side of the floor. Coir mats are spread for sitting and sleeping on (see Plate 25). Behind these dorms are latrines and a few taps where people wash themselves. Public showers are available at the cost of three rupees, but these are open and do not afford any privacy. There is a V.I.P. guest house available if booked in advance for one hundred rupees per night (about ten dollars), but these too are apparently very basic, consisting only of a narrow wooden bed without a mattress but they provide the luxury of a private bathroom. Devotees who cannot afford accommodation merely camp out in the open; cooking and sleeping wherever they can find shelter (see Plate 26).

Canteens are attached to the guest houses where one can buy a most delicious brew of ginger, cane sugar and coffee or tea. It was very cozy to see the Ayyappas huddled together for warmth in the cool dawn drinking this hot beverage. Besides the canteens are cafeterias where one can buy tiffin (breakfast or tea time snacks). The food at these cafes was not very palatable and the hygiene was even worse (see Plate 27). Shops next to the cafeterias sold cigarettes and did brisk business, despite the vow of abstinence that is required of the Ayyappas.

Plate 25: Pilgrim accommodation. Kerala State Guest House, where our group stayed. Floor mats are provided for sitting and sleeping. A group of Ayyappas sit around relaxing while some take naps. The researcher is however busy "observing", with her pencil poised ready to make notes. In the background is the coffee stall. The short wall that encloses the dormitory is used as shelf space to place various pūjā articles.

Just in front of the temple steps is a large terminus-like structure that houses several souvenir shops that sell bhajan tapes, calendars, postcards, mālās and other paraphernalia. A loudspeaker system is operated out of the temple administration office that blares out Ayyappa bhajans and chants. These begin at three a.m., along with the dawn pūjās to the deity and carry on intermittently until noon, beginning again at around seven in the evening and carrying on until after eleven. The system is also used as an intercom. If an Ayyappa has to be contacted urgently, messages can be sent to the police station next to the temple and he will then be paged over the microphone.

The most auspicious day to have darśan of the Lord Ayyappa is the first day of Capricorn (Thai, Makaram). This is when the Makara Vilakku (Light of Capricorn) hovers in the northwestern horizon. On this day, the crown jewels of the Pantalām royal family are brought to Sabarimalai and used for adorning the mūrti.

The jewels are apparently brought in a strong box carried by two Ayyappas, who follow the vratham for sixty days. They carry the box between them and walk eighteen kilometers from the Pantalām estate to the shrine. A large bird, believed to be an eagle (most likely a vulture or hawk) is seen to accompany them every year from the start of their route to the finish. This bird apparently appears every year and disappears after escorting the jewels safely to the shrine. It is not trained. It appears from nowhere

Plate 26: Camping out. Ayyappas who cannot afford the various accommodation available on the Summit, camp out. This group made themselves comfortable in the large terminus-like building enroute to the temple. They are seen here preparing a midday meal of vegetables and rice. Public toilets and showers are available close by. In the background to the right, are stalls that sell religious paraphernalia.

and after the box reaches Sabarimalai safely, it flies away again and is not seen until the next year. Two men bear the box of jewels and are escorted by police. They are chosen every year and have to complete sixty days of vratam. Rumour goes that they are so strong because of their tapas, that they literally run the distance and leave the police trailing after them.

The light apparently appears in the sky at the same moment that the doors of the shrine open to reveal an adorned mūrti. Only the faithful see the light. I asked several Ayyappas who had been to Sabarimalai for this auspicious moment if they had seen this light and they all confirmed that they had.

The crowd on the Makara Vilakku day is unbelievable. In 1987, there were an estimated one million people in the area waiting for darśan (see Appendix E). The lineup started at Pampa and extended right up to the shrine itself. When the boxes come into sight, a reverberating chant of Saranam begins which reaches a crescendo when the Makara Vilakku is spotted (see Vaidyanathan 1983:119-126 for a full description.)

4. The Return.

Most Ayyappas choose to begin the trek back to Pampa in the cool of the morning. The group have their final darśan of the deity and leave the temple rather sadly, descending by the "Eighteen Steps." Although the elation of

completing the yātrā is still with them, they are sad to leave the serenity of Sabarimalai where they are far away from the problems of secular life. They must return now and shoulder once again their responsibilities. Reluctantly, they bid farewell to their Lord Ayyappa and promise to return again if "he" so wishes it.

After a final darśan the groups fall into a single file. The leader, or guruswāmi, begins the familiar chant, "Swāmiyee Śaranam Ayyappa" and leads them back down the hill to the River Pampaa. The journey back is much quicker and easier. On the way, one passes Ayyappas on their way up. Whereas on the way up one does not speak unless to chant, the atmosphere on the way down is quite jovial. There is a lot of teasing and discussion that goes on.

The banks of the Pampa are lined with refreshment stalls and shops and is quite commercialized. It has a fair-like atmosphere, where one can buy anything from the sacred to the absurd. Tribal folk also come here to hawk their tribal cures made from peacock bone. I was warned however that their medicines were greatly adulterated and would cause more damage than good.

After a last dip in the Pampa, the group got into the vans and buses and set off for Guruvayoor and home. The atmosphere in the van, which was sober on the way to Sabari, was now more lighthearted, although also a trifle subdued as we were physically tired and emotionally drained. We

Plate 27: Hotel Genesh where pilgrims buy breakfast and tiffin. Cigarettes were also available here. Sabarimalai, Kerala.

stopped once, at a tea stall to taste the delicious kapā, a tapioca snack that is unique to Kerala.

On returning home, the Ayyappa breaks a coconut on the threshold of his home before re-entering. His family greet him with great joy and spirits are high as he tries to narrate everything in one breath. He shaves and bathes and, instead of donning the black veṣṭi, he now wears his normal clothes. In South India, men usually wear white veṣṭis or colourful lungis (a garment similar to a veṣṭi but in bright patterned colours) and a colourful bush shirt or vest on top while relaxing at home. The packets of prasādam are then opened and distributed to all those who have gathered to greet him. The mālā is removed either by the guruswami, or by the Ayyappa himself, at the temple or in his pūjā room in front of a picture of the deity and then hung around the picture. He has now completed his vrātam and is returned to the secular world.

According to Hindu tradition, one must visit those who have returned from a yātrā and listen to their accounts of the journey. This is almost as good as going on the yātrā themselves, as the blessings of the deity are thus transferred to them. As a result of this sentiment, the returned pilgrim has a steady stream of visitors for the next few days, all eager to hear about this yātrā and share the prasadam.

It is also customary amongst the brāhman caste community to hold a pūjā to propitiate the family deities

and give thanks for the safe return of the yātri (pilgrim). Some devotees hold very elaborate feasts after the pūjās, in which they also feed the poor. Once again, bhajans are sung in praise of the Lord Ayyappa but this time the atmosphere is calm and there is no frenzy.

CHAPTER FOUR
 LIMINALITY, COMMUNITAS
 AND
 SOCIAL DRAMA

Although the processual aspect of Turner's argument can be documented in this pilgrimage, there are still some problems with his general approach. The Sabarimalai pilgrimage does indeed display a tripartite structure of separation, liminality and reintegration. The mālādharam ceremony indicates the initiation and separation of the individual and "sets him apart" as it were, from the norm. The pilgrim, or Ayyappa as he is now called, enters into a period of liminality.

According to Turner, liminality is characterized by an ambiguity in which ritual subjects are governed by rules that are typical only to that phase. There are inversions of norms and a general "leveling" process, in which signs of their preliminal state are destroyed (Turner 1979:19). This is evident in the dress, dietary restrictions and other rules by which the Ayyappa must abide after he wears his mālā. He is referred to as swāmi from thereon, thereby losing even his identity and acquiring a shared common one.

The period between the mālādharam ceremony and the return is clearly liminal. Ayyappas do not observe caste or class rules. The cultus emphasizes equality not only across

social boundaries, but also amongst peoples of all creeds. Muslims and Christians also undertake this pilgrimage, the most famous non-Hindu Ayyappa being the well-known singer Yesudas. Besides doing the pilgrimage every year, Yesudas, who is a Christian, has composed and sung several bhajans honouring the deity which are played over the microphone system at Sabarimalai every day. I did not meet any Muslims but several informants assured me that they do come, though their numbers have dwindled in the past few years due (I was told) to the influence of Muslim fundamentalism from the Middle East. I could not help noting that there were very few worshippers at the Vavar shrine at Sabarimalai on the day I was there. In fact, out of our group of twelve, only I stopped and paid homage at the shrine. The others felt it was unnecessary.

Other examples of liminality are displayed in the various ritual symbols themselves. The irumuṭi ceremony incorporates two funeral rites, thus symbolically emphasizing the pilgrim's role as a liminal entity. There is great solemnity at this function. The friends and relatives of the Ayyappa are not to call out to him or bid him farewell. He leaves, after breaking a coconut at the threshold, walking backwards a few paces, just as a corpse is carried out head first and turning around again, leaves without looking back. A lamp is lit and a pot of water is kept in the home of the Ayyappa until he returns after a successful yātrā. Some informants said that in the old days

the lamp would be kept alight for up to six months after the departure of the Ayyappa and if he did not return by then, they would consider him dead. The lamp and waterpot are again reminiscent of a funeral rite. A lamp is lit after the corpse is cremated and kept alight for ten days. This flame represents the ātman of the departed and special pūjās (rites) are performed during the ten days to ensure the safe passage of the ātman to its ultimate destination. Thus, the irumuṭi ceremony marks the entrance into a liminal zone, a period of "betwixt-and-between," when the Ayyappa is in the realm of the sacred. The period during which the pilgrimage takes place is the month of Thai (January), which precedes uttarāyanam (the northern movement of the sun), a period when it is believed that the doors of heaven are open. It is therefore a "dangerous time", a "threshold month" as it were, considered inauspicious to the living but good for the departing souls of the dead.

After the irumuṭi is placed on the head of the Ayyappa, it is quite common for those assembled to prostrate before him, even if he is very young. It is believed that a celibate has great spiritual powers and people are wary of offending him. All through the journey the Ayyappas are treated with courtesy and respect. People will often come up to them and give them money to donate at the shrine on their behalf. It is also considered very meritorious to pay the expenses of their yātrā and in this manner many poor Ayyappas are able to meet the costs of the trip.

The reintegration of the Ayyappa after the pilgrimage is not as elaborate as the other two phases. He bathes, removes his mālā and wears the colourful clothes that he would normally wear. I noticed some Ayyappas make a beeline for their cigarettes as soon as they completed the climb to the shrine. This was, in a sense, their way of symbolically expressing the completion of the ritual. In fact, the several cigarette stalls at Pampa do a flourishing business. The Ayyappa is now free to dress, eat and socialize as he normally would. Preliminal rules of class and hierarchy now re-emerge as the process is completed.

Morinis finds two problems with Turner's comparison between pilgrimage ritual and tribal rituals (1984:258). He points out the two essential characteristics of tribal rites of passage are that they are essentially initiatory and are always accompanied by a change in social status. Admittedly the Sabarimalai pilgrimage is unique in its well-accentuated symbols of liminal process. However, these can be seen in other pilgrimages, albeit less prominently. Most pilgrims take a vrātam (vow) before setting off on their pilgrimage. Vratams are of various kinds and each vrātam has its own peculiarities. Certain features are, however, common to all vrātams. These are both in preparation and performance such as: sexual continence, fasting, bathing and abstaining from meat and alcohol. The mind is concentrated to its purpose and the resolution is taken (Avalon 1972:c). The pilgrimage to the

famous hilltop shrine of Lord Venkateswara in Tirumalai (Andhra), for example, does not impose a dress code or dietary restrictions. However, it is understood that a particular type of behavior is expected of pilgrims in the vicinity of the temple. These are: abstinence from meat, alcohol and sex while on the sacred mountain. Pilgrims are also required to dress modestly and although this temple is not too orthodox in its dress codes, others in South India require men to wear vestis and women to wear saris. It is also understood that one fasts and bathes before approaching the deity for darsan. However whether or not this form of individual vrata can be compared to an initiation rite is debatable. As for the changes in social status (which Morinis argues does not occur in pilgrimage phenomenon), it can be argued that some change does occur. In the Sabarimalai pilgrimage, for example, the successful completion of five yātrās elevates the Ayyappa to the status of guruswāmī thus qualifying him to initiate others into the cultus. Transformation of the individual can also occur at a phenomenal level in the consciousness of the pilgrim. These changes however, are not at the societal level and do not therefore directly influence the position of the pilgrim in the social hierarchy. Hence they are debatable.

The main problem that researchers have with Turner's scheme is with his concept of communitas. There are two aspects to this issue. First, according to Turner, liminal phenomena provide the structural environment in

which *communitas* is generated and second, that optimal conditions for liminality and *communitas* exist in hierarchical societies, or in periods of transition and social change. Morinis (1984), Eickelman (1976) and Preuss (1974), among others, found that the *communitas*-type relationship does not necessarily occur. Preuss applied Turner's framework to his own research in Thailand and found that there was no sharp contrast between structure and anti-structure that results in *communitas*. On the contrary, he found that people tended to bring structural bonds with them and grouped together on the basis of existing social groups (cited in Morinis 1984:258).

In the Ayyappa cultus, homogeneity is introduced in the dress and the suffix swāmi by which all members are addressed. Ayyappas are directed to interact freely without any social inhibitions of caste or status. P. Rama Menon, in his book Ente Sabarimalai Yātrā (cited in Vaidyanathan 1983:50), gives an account of this social tolerance. He writes of his barber, who was a member of the cultus and who respectfully maintained his social distance from the author who was of a higher caste. Whenever he visited the author's house, he would stand outside at the veranda and conduct his business there. When, however, the author took the vrātam and became a fellow Ayyappa, the barber's attitude changed and he began to mix with him more freely, even entering the study on his next visit to the author's house (cited in Vaidyanathan 1983:50-51).

The group that I accompanied to Sabarimalai consisted of about two hundred men and four women, all of different social backgrounds and representing all four Dravidian languages. The dominant linguistic group however was Malayalam, followed by quite a large group of Kannadigas from Karnataka.

Twelve of us formed an advance party that was sent on ahead to oversee the arrangements. The rest came by coach at a more leisurely pace. This advance party formed a subgroup and consisted of: the group leader who was a Nair, in his mid-forties; his elder brother and two nephews, both in their mid-to-late twenties; a brāhman youth also in his twenties who was regarded as a nephew by the group leader since he had had long associations with his family; three other brāhmans; a bank manager from Bangalore; a grandfather and his grandson who belonged to the caste of Palghat brāhmans; a Tamil businessman belonging to the Chetty caste who was a business associate of the group leader; a foreman from the group leader's factory and his driver. I did not determine the castes of these last two. I was the twelfth in this rather incongruous group and, because I was only an observer, at times I felt very much like the Judas of the group. From the time we left Guruvayoor we shared transportation, food and lodgings. Our expenses were to be shared equally and the group leader's brother was appointed treasurer. Although the group leader was in charge at times there would be a conflict of interest between him and some

of the group, especially between him and his brother or the bank manager. In such a case, a consensus was taken and the issue resolved amicably. I was, however, never included in these discussions.

Overtly, we were a group, united and unrestricted by class and caste. However, a certain hierarchy did emerge and even in this small group of eleven Ayyappas there were cliques. The young Nairs and the brāhman youth were always together. They were university educated and spoke fluent English besides their native Malayalam and Tamil. They were close to the group leader and he relied upon them a fair amount and complained to them privately about the rest of us. His brother and the Palghat trio formed another group. They were all slow walkers and lagged behind all the time. This left the businessman and the foreman. The businessman was a bit of a "bumpkin" and came in for a lot of teasing, which he took sportingly. The driver who was young and agile, was given many errands and kept very busy. He never spoke to me but was very helpful (carrying my bag, arranging boiled water, etc.).

Despite these cliques, there was an overall unity to the group. We set out from Guruvayoor as individuals and returned as members of a group. A feeling of community did emerge among us, with each one looking out for the others on the trek up the mountain and otherwise. The only major conflict (which really was not very important at all) was when the Palghat brāhman discovered that he had to pay an

extra eight Rupees (approximately eighty cents) for some fruits that had been bought for me. He argued that since he was diabetic, he never ate fruits and saw no reason therefore to pay for my indulgence. In embarrassment, I offered to pay for the fruits myself but was not allowed to by the group. They insisted that since we had promised to share all expenses he should on principle, pay up.

In the larger group that travelled by bus, language differences became quite obvious. The Kannadigas who did not know Malayalam would huddle together and speak to each other in their own language, while the Malayalis would sit together. Several expressed their disappointment at this parochialism but they did not offer to do anything to change it. There was also a subtle rivalry between our group leader and the group leader of the Kannada group. This Kannada leader was fluent in both Kannada and Malayalam and was very humorous. He kept the group entertained with jokes and anecdotes in both languages all afternoon, much to the irritation of our own group leader who frowned on such levity.

Some informants said that they preferred to come alone and did not get involved in the social aspects of the cultus. They followed the vratham diligently and travelled to the shrine alone. This way, according to them, their minds were fully focused on their deity.

Disparity is also seen in the accommodations that are available to the Ayyappas. There are two types of

accommodation: the dormitory guest house (in which we stayed, see Plate 25) and a V.I.P. guest house that has to be booked beforehand. This is for the use of celebrities and other rich Ayyappas who have enough clout with the Devasthānam (Temple Administration). The facilities of the guest house, I am told, are very modest, consisting of a narrow wooden bed and a single chair, but it does offer the luxury of a private bathroom. Apparently other guest houses have also been built by private individuals which are made available to their friends. Those who cannot afford any accommodation merely camp wherever they can. A popular place is the large terminus-like building that is enroute to the shrine (see Plate 26). Public toilets are available nearby for a fee of rupees one. These are, however, open and offer no privacy. The few older women present at Sabarimalai bathed in the temple tank.

Despite these various discrepancies, a degree of *communitas* does emerge in the Ayyappa cultus. There is still an overall feeling of membership and, at times, even a oneness. Pfaffenberger (1978) and Morinis (1984) have both argued that the pilgrimage ritual represents a personal journey, or ascent to a holy place and therefore *communitas* seldom occurs. Pfaffenberger bases his arguments on his study of the Kataragama pilgrimage of Northern Sri Lanka. Visited by a growing number of Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims, Kataragama, according to Pfaffenberger, actually seems to strengthen the already wide rift between the two communities

(1978:269). It must be pointed out, however, that the Sabarimalai pilgrimage is very structured compared to the Kataragama one and ideals of equality are built into the pilgrimage rituals and structure of the cultus. A further example of this is the Petta Thullal (Dance of the Hunters) ritual that takes place at Erumeli before the Ayyappas set out on their trek through the forest.

The optimal conditions for the emergence of liminal phenomena and therefore the generation of *communitas*, occurs, according to Turner, in rigidly hierarchical societies or in periods of social transition. Indian society has always been rigidly hierarchical and structured. However, it has also offered several outlets for liminal experience built right into its structure. The traditional Hindu society was based on the varṇā-śrama-dharma (law based on caste and stage in life), which based the goals and ideals of an individual on his caste activity and stage in life (see ff.:12). Hopkins (1971:75) explains that in this system two dimensions of time were involved. The āśramas (stage) marked the stages of a persons development within a given life time, while the varṇas (caste) related to his development-throughout many lives in the course of transmigration. It was assumed that a person belonged to the varṇa for which he was qualified by his ability and temperament as a result of his past actions in previous lives. The dharma (duty) of that birth was the proper recompense for past actions and defined the

possibility for future development. The metaphysical aspects of re-incarnation were not however the main concern of the varnā-śrama-dharma system. The emphasis was on the practical situation relating to the duties and responsibilities of the brāhman, kṣatriya and vaiśya castes. (Śūdras were excluded from this system.) These duties were outlined in the Dharma Śāstra tenets (treatises on dharma) as they applied to the various castes and stages of life. Brāhmans were assigned the roles of teachers and priests, kṣatriyas of protecting people and vaiśyas were assigned trade and other economic enterprises. The dharma of the śūdra was to serve the three upper varnas (castes) on whom he was both economically and ritually dependent.

Although studentship (brahmacāri) and the final āśramas of hermit and world renouncer (sannyāsin) were characterized by celibacy and self restraint, it was the householder stage that formed the keystone of the system. Rather than being downgraded, the lay life of the householder was highly respected and even viewed as the most important of the āśramas because it alone leads to the production of offspring and the support of society. The pursuit of mokṣa (liberation) was to be undertaken only after the duties of the stage were completed.

- "When a householder sees his skin wrinkled and growing white and sees the sons of his sons, he may betake himself to the forest."

(Manu IV:2 edited Muller 1982)

He then in effect retired from active household life to live as a hermit, practising celibacy and self

restraint. It was hoped that this life of discipline would aid spiritual development that would bring him a step closer to the final goal of moksa (liberation).

In the modern era, this system is not adhered to in its strictest sense. The varnā-srama dharma system was developed by a highly agrarian society where ritual played a vital role in the social and political lives of the people. From the nineteenth century onwards, Hindu society has been exposed to secularizing influences. Industrialization has introduced a new social order based on the demands of a new industrial force rather than the traditional hereditary ritualistic roles. Nevertheless, the householder still bears the brunt of social duty. He is still obliged to sustain the social system through his economic endeavours and procreative activities. Pilgrimage and other liminal phenomena therefore as always, offers him a temporary respite from his social chores.

Turner argued that:

"In European rurally based feudal economies, life of the masses was localized. Religious life was limited to the local parish. Yet Christianity generated its own mode of liminality for the laity. This mode was represented by pilgrimage to sacred sites or holy shrines located some ways away."

(Turner 1978:4)

In a similar manner, pilgrimage allowed the traditional Hindu householder an opportunity to experience temporary freedom from social obligations and concentrate on the higher spiritual goal of moksa (liberation). The pilgrimage process still fulfills such a function as can be

clearly seen in the Sabarimalai yātrā. The deity at Sabarimalai is himself depicted as a vānaprastha (hermit, forest dweller). Like the vānaprastha the modern Ayyappa withdraws from secular household activities. He does not renounce the world like a sannyāsi but merely withdraws from as much secular involvement as possible, leading a life of restraint, celibacy and abstinence during the period of his vratam (vow). Through such austerity he seeks to achieve a measure of purity that will aid his spiritual development and bring him closer to his final goal of mokṣa (liberation).

In order to understand the increasing popularity of the Ayyappa cult in modern times, one has to look at the political and social changes in Indian society in the last century. India was relatively undisturbed from outside influences for centuries after the Gupta Empire (413 A.D.). During these centuries the entire sub-continent was brought into the Brahmanical synthesis and a cultural integration was achieved. Political integration did not however follow social and cultural integration. The breakup of the Gupta Empire left northern India divided between small regional kingdoms. Southern India, beyond the reach of the Guptas, had always followed an independent course. When India was finally united politically, it was the Muslims in northern India and then the British throughout the sub-continent who did it.

Muslim rule and contact had little direct effect on Hindu religious patterns. Interaction and appropriation did occur but these were at the popular level as reflected in the teachings of the poet saints like Kabir (1380 - 1460) and Nanak (1469 - 1538). British influences, though shorter in duration, were mainly secular and therefore more easily appropriated by the Hindus. English education was introduced in the early half of the nineteenth century and employment preference was given to those who had an English education. Mass education was introduced in the latter half of the century and universities modeled on the British system were established.

These measures affected only a small percentage of the population but those who were affected gained access to the English intellectual tradition which reflected the mood of social criticism amid reform that characterized nineteenth century England. Concern for social reform was also conveyed by liberal British administrators who were disturbed by many of the social abuses found in Hindu society. English educated Indians soon became influenced by Western ideals. Some began to question the validity of the Hindu religion itself while others like Ram Mohan Roy (1774 - 1833) sought to correct such social abuses as child marriages for girls, denial of widow re-marriage and sati (burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband). Though this group represented a minority, this minority had

great influence in British India and became the new Indian intellectual elite.

It was from this concern with social change and the added influences of Western ideas that Indian Nationalism arose. Spear (1970) prefers to call it the Indian transformation for he argues:

"it was by no means a nationalism in the commonly accepted western sense, a common aspiration for self government based on a common language, territory or racial strain. Rather it was a mingling of old ideas with new which produced a political movement against the foreigner and a transformation of traditional society."

(Spear 1970:158)

Indians who had for so long been dominated and undermined by foreign rule and British cultural supremacy were now emerging with a new awareness of their own past heritage. Although this new awareness first served to unite Hindus, it also brought with it all past parochial tendencies and communal conflicts.

India gained Independence from the British in 1946, however communal strife permeated the subcontinent. Much bitterness had been created over the separation of Pakistan and, within Hindu society, regionalism based on language began to assert itself. In 1952, agitation began in the southern Madras State for a separate Andhra Pradesh for the Telegu-speaking peoples of the area. Until then, Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, which represent three Dravidian language groups, came under the governorship of Madras State. The formation of a separate Andhra Pradesh

paved the way for future state divisions based on linguistic affiliations (see Hardgrave 1979; Irschick 1969).

The history of Southern India has always been separate and distinct from the rest of India. The so-called Aryanization of India²⁸ brought the Dravidian peoples of the peninsula within the Hindu fold. The brāhmans, who were the carriers of the Aryan culture, brought with them the Hindu caste hierarchy and a religion based on Brahmanical ritual. As a community, the brahmans managed to retain their exclusivity through the ages. In the modern period, it was they who first accepted English education and therefore were the first to gain economic and political advantages in the colonial system. Without education the non-brāhman communities felt the heavier burden of exploitation and oppression.

It was little wonder therefore that after Independence, there was a tremendous backlash of feeling against the brāhmans. Tamil leaders like E.V. Naicker saw Independence as another form of Aryan imperialism and brāhman domination. They saw the Centre's proposal to make Hindi the official language of India as a further Aryan plot to submerge Dravidian culture. This bitterness extended even towards the religion of the brāhmans, and several Hindu deities, such as Ganesa and Rama, were parodied and Sanskrit literature was ridiculed. The de-Sanskritization of the Tamil language was also begun around this time.

By 1950, the extremism of Naicker and his followers was tempered by the new Dravida Munetra Kharazham (D.M.K.) party. They were interested in reconciling with the Aryan north in the interest of Nationalism. Instead of seeking separatism, they concentrated on a Tamil Nationalism that theoretically included all Tamilians, irrespective of caste or creed.

It was in this atmosphere of regional pride and social awareness that the Ayyappa cultus became popular. Ayyappa represented a non-Aryan deity, brought up and raised by a Dravidian King Rajasekhara on Dravidian soil. The fact that he belonged to the Pantalarn lineage, an offshoot of the Pandian line, and not the Cholas with their sectarian Shivite bias, or the Chera lineage which was associated only with Kerala, made him all the more acceptable. His message is one of brotherhood and the pre-Aryan ideal of a casteless society. P.T. Raju of Madurai, who was actively involved in the political movement, paraded a gold icon of the deity throughout the state in order to popularize him (see Clothey 1978:9). A Tamil drama based on the Ayyappa myth was written by Nawab Raja Mannickam and played to full houses everywhere. It was later made into a film in which the famous Tamil and Malayalam actor Nambiar portrayed the king. He later became an ardent Ayyappa devotee himself and he popularized the cultus amongst the film crowd. Other famous movie stars like Shivaji Ganeshan, Rajanikant and Amrish

also became devotees which further heightened public interest in Ayyappa and Sabarimalai.

In 1950, there was another incident that helped in the spread of the cultus. The temple at Sabarimalai was vandalized and the mūrti was smashed. Rumour had it that a Christian posing as a swāmi was responsible for this vile deed. The story was publicized with an appeal for funds to aid in the reconstruction of the temple. Public sympathy was so great that within a year the temple was rebuilt and the new mūrti consecrated (see Vaidyanathan 1983:15-17 for further details).

Several of my informants confirmed that they had seen the drama Saranam Ayyappa, written by Raja Mannickam, and that it had influenced their conversion. The brāhman youth in my party had seen the film when he was about fifteen years old and was subsequently filled with a desire to go to Sabarimalai. His father, however, discouraged him and it was only on the group leader's intervention that he changed his mind and allowed his son to make the yātrā. Another informant said that after seeing the film, Lord Ayyappa had appeared to him in a dream and beckoned him to Sabarimalai.

Finally, the third aspect of Turner's discussion is his view of social systems as a sequence of social dramas or loosely integrated social processes that, in retrospect, reveal a structure. He defined social dramas as units of aharmonic or disharmonic social processes that arise in

conflict situations (1979:63). He admits that social drama could be viewed as a story in Hayden White's sense of the word, nevertheless, he discerns inaugural, transitional and terminal motifs in social drama that have a beginning, a middle and an end (1982:68). His hypothesis is that social dramas are "dramas of living," and have four phases which he labels breach, crisis, redress and reintegration.

This idea of Turner's has been well illustrated by Richard Schechner who is Professor of Drama at the New York University School of Arts and a close friend of Turner. Commenting on Turner's analysis of "social drama," he agrees that these situations are inherently dramatic.

"Participants not only do things, they try to show others what they have done; actions take on a 'performed-for-an-audience' aspect" (cited in Turner 1979:63).

He elaborates this theme further in his book Between Anthropology and Theatre (1985:151-210), where he analyzes the Ramlila festival held annually at Ramnager (Northern Indian) in terms of such a social drama. He draws the analogy between this festival and the mouth of Lord Krisna, which when opened reveals the whole universe. Similarly the Ramlila is not just a single event but a whole multitude of sequential processes that incorporate several texts, both literary and performative. Thus, epic literature and contemporary politics are situated spatially in an environment that is theatrical.

Schechner sees in this ritual three equal parts that divide the life of the epic hero Rama into "king," "warrior" and "renouncer." Rama goes into the forest (renouncer), vanquishes the demon Ravana (warrior) and returns to Ayodhya to rule (king). His rule is Ramarājya, a golden era that all Hindus yearn for. The ritual condenses the whole subcontinent of India into one spatial area, which is the centre stage.

A similar structure is revealed in the Sabarimalai ritual. The pilgrimage combines classical Sanskritic texts with folkloric legends of the area, revealing two Ayyappas: the one of myth and the one of history. A third Ayyappa, whose origins are in a pre-Aryan tribal cult, lurks in the shadows.

The Ayyappa of myth is the ever-popular child god, who incarnates to save the world from evil. He becomes the son of a king who is both human and a native of the South. Like the epic hero Rama, he is sent to the forest due to the plottings of the wicked stepmother, from whence he returns after vanquishing the evil demoness, thus re-establishing order in the universe. The phases of recluse warrior and king are therefore clearly marked. The legendary Ayyappa, like the myth, is also a great warrior, a celibate (therefore recluse), and triumphantly restores order in a kingdom terrorized by dacoits. Traces of the tribal Ayyappa linger in the cult beliefs and rituals; for example, he cures epidemics and disease, protects communities from evil

and is protective toward celibates and sages. The rejection of sex, which here symbolizes involvement in the material world, is a common theme throughout. Ayyappa the deity rejects Lila, Ayyappa the legend rejects the young woman and Ayyappa the tribal god protects celibates and sages.

Furthermore, the political dimension is satisfied through the message of unity. The Pantalām line is a branch of the Pandian lineage which, unlike the staunchly Shivite Cholas and the Cheras who were limited to Kerala, symbolizes this political unity of the Dravidian areas. Moreover, the rituals of the cult do not require the services of a brahman priest. (The Nambudri brāhman priests are involved in only shrine duties.) They may be performed by any member who has undertaken the pilgrimage five times. There can be no scope therefore for brāhman (i.e. Aryan) domination.

The actual yātrā is a re-enactment of Ayyappa's triumphs on two levels. The traditional route to Sabarimalai begins at Erumeli, where it is believed that the tusk of the demoness Mahishi fell during the battle. It is also believed to be the site where the historical Ayyappa routed the dacoit Udayanan's army. There is a temple at the site to both Ayyappa, depicted as a hunter, and to his friend Vavar and pilgrims perform a victory dance there before setting off to Sabarimalai.

The pilgrim's "progress" too is a model of recluse, warrior and hero. The Ayyappa takes the vrātam and becomes a recluse. At the end of forty-two days, he emerges

triumphant after defeating the mahishi within himself, to stand before his deity as a hero! Thus, symbolically the pilgrims set out to act the roles of recluse, warrior and king. The black garb that cult members wear sets them apart from others. They are actors in a drama that is staged beyond the four walls of their private prayer rooms to an unlimited horizon. There were moments on the trip when I did indeed have the feeling that I was participating in a drama. At one moment, the Ayyappas would be relaxing (talking, joking and snorting snuff) and then suddenly, as if on cue, they would become solemn and fall into line chanting as they marched off to perform. When they returned, they would be in a state of high excitement, which took at least an hour to subside as they discussed the performance that had just taken place. This kind of backstage behavior was particularly noticeable at Sabarimalai before and after they went for darsan.

Besides the actual pilgrimage ritual, there are several interrelated roles that add different dimensions to the pilgrimage. Festivals such as the Ayyappa Pattu, organized before the yātrā, involve whole communities and neighbourhoods. Besides the Ayyappa himself, his family members and friends are also drawn into the activities that take place around the temple during the season. Many of those attending the daily pūjās will not even be going to Sabarimalai. Yet they participate as spectators and enjoy the season's festivities.

In addition to the participants and spectators, the pilgrimage also draws businessmen. Stalls selling religious paraphernalia spring up outside the temples and do brisk business. Beggars from all over the city are also drawn to these centres, hoping to prey on the sentiments of the pilgrims.

I found that not all spectators are willing participants. One informant who lived near the temple at Mahalingapuram (Madras) complained bitterly about the nuisance caused by the increased traffic and noise during the season. According to him, music blared all night, cars were parked everywhere so that local residents had no space to park their own cars, auto-rickshaws were noisy and many of the young Ayyappas loitered around the area ogling at the girls. To his horror some of them even smoked! This gentleman who was in his mid-forties felt that the whole cultus was a sham. He said, and I quote, "These people are drunkards and black marketeers all year long and become holy for forty days. After they return from Sabarimalai they go back to their bad habits. What is the use? "

Others also expressed cynicism and contempt for the cults. One business executive had no time for such people who, according to him, wear their religion on their sleeves. On the whole, however, public response to the cultus is favourable and finds sanction even by the leaders of mainstream Hinduism, such as the pontiffs of the Sringeri Peetam.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The primary issues examined in this thesis have been: (1) the ethnographic details of the Sabarimalai pilgrimage; (2) an assessment of the concepts of liminality, *communitas* and process as they apply to Hindu pilgrimages; and (3) the sudden surge of interest in the Ayyappa pilgrimage within the last three decades.

The ethnographic details were based on fieldwork research undertaken in three main areas - Madras, Coimbatore and the trip to Sabarimalai from a start in Guruvayoor. Though I was on hand for all the important structural elements of the pilgrimage ritual, there were several ceremonies from which I was excluded. For example, I was not allowed to ascend the sacred eighteen steps and therefore I had to enter the shrine from the northern entrance. I was also barred from attending the evening Kalpura āratī to the goddess Malikapuruthamma. These are only two events from which I was excluded which I know of. Besides these limitations, I am also aware of the fact that the group which I did have contact with were mainly urban middle class residents of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka who shared a more or less similar educational and social background. Rituals of a rural group are bound to differ to some extent and these have to be further researched.

It has been clearly shown that the Sabarimalai pilgrimage is a liminal phenomenon in Turner's terms. The symbols of both the ritual and mythology indicate this. However, whether this and pilgrimages in general can be equated with tribal initiation rites is a point debated by Morinis (1984:258). In my view, however, such a debate seems unnecessary, since both pilgrimage and tribal rituals are transitory processes that come under the common genre of liminal phenomena. The comparison is intended to help understand the characteristics of liminality rather than to equate pilgrimage with tribal ritual. Both processes offer the ritual subject a liminal phase during which transformation can be affected structurally, psychologically or spiritually.

The issue of *communitas* raises several problems. some pilgrimages seem to offer conditions that are more conducive to *communitas* than others. The Ayyappa cultus has a normative *communitas* ideology built into its structural hierarchy that demands equality. However, it becomes evident that this normative ideal does not always succeed in creating existential or structural *communitas*. There are moments of intense *communitas*, such as the climactic Makara Vilakku festival. On this day, about one million Ayyappas congregate at the Sabari shrine to catch a glimpse of the light that is said to hover on the northern horizon for a period of fifteen minutes. The atmosphere at this event is (I was told) charged with devotional fervor and common

spirit. At other times, however, the Ayyappas do not feel very equal and cling to their parochial and financial barriers. It would therefore seem that existential *communitas* is not an automatic response to structural stimuli as Turner seems to view it but is a response that occurs at a phenomenal level in the minds of the pilgrim subjects. Furthermore, a Hindu would argue that *communitas* with a group or another individual is insignificant compared to the real aim, which is communion with the deity. When this happens existentially, all boundaries and barriers automatically dissolve.

The next issue is with the concept of "process." Although the Sabarimalai pilgrimage quite clearly displays a sequence of loosely integrated processes, my problem is with the word "process" itself, which implies a natural series of continuous event(s) with a beginning and an end. In actual fact, the pilgrimage process never reaches its final stage of development. It is constantly evolving and adapting to new conditions and perceptions. Changes can already be seen in the ritual behavior of members of the Ayyappa cultus within the last three decades. Several informants who had been undertaking this pilgrimage since the early days of its revival commented that the former magic had disappeared (see Appendix E). They blamed this on the relaxation of rules and on the improved transportation and facilities that are inevitable in a society that is undergoing modernization. The consensus was that at the rate things are changing, the

shrine would soon be too accessible thus loosing its uniqueness and attraction. All this implies that cycles of change exist along with the structural processes and the two are integrated. This sequence of process and cycles is best summed up in the Sanskrit word Lilā. Lilā, which means "play" or "sport", signifies the "divine sport or play" that causes the phenomenal world to exist. It represents the female force (śakti) that sustains material existence in an endless and eternal cycle of birth-death-rebirth. In other words, the linear connotations of "process" do not capture well the Hindu understanding of pilgrimage.

With regard to the emergence of the Ayyappa cultus during a period in which Indian society (and South Indian society specifically) was undergoing transition influenced by global and internal political changes, two issues emerge. First, it has to be pointed out that the Sabarimalai yātrā was not the only one to emerge at this time. Several other pilgrimage sites enjoyed an increased popularity. In Tamil Nadu, there was an increased interest in the Amman (goddess) cults. These are śakti cults and shrines to the different forms of Amman (e.g. Karmamiamman), which had hitherto been falling into ruin and which were, during this period, renovated by the State Government. Again patronage, this time by political leaders and a box office film in Tamil, greatly popularized the cultus. What is confusing here is the contrast between the Ayyappa cultus and the Amman cultus. Both emerged during the same period of transition,

yet their basic merit or phalam is different. While the deity Ayyappa offers liberation, Amman represents "power." What therefore is the selective basis by which deities are chosen at an operational level? A further paradox is presented in the fact that whereas the Keralite form of Ayyappa gained such popularity, his prototype Aiyannar in Tamil Nadu remains a village god worshipped mainly by non-brahmans. Krishna Chaitanya (1972) speculates that the early migrants to Kerala had to make their way through the mountain passes of the Western Ghats. The biggest obstacles facing them were the thick jungles and wild animals. As a consequence, the sentinel deity of the plains (Aiyannar) was transformed into Ayyappa the hunter, whose hunting pack consisted of tigers. This could explain the metamorphosis of the deity however it does not throw light on the selective basis by which deities are "chosen" by devotees.

Clothey (1978) in his "Theogany and Power in South India: Some Clues from the Aiyappan Cult" (ed. Smith 1978:2-7) addresses the same basic question as to why gods arise and persist in history. By way of an answer he proposes three hypotheses: first that the manner in which the god is perceived reflects particular historical circumstances and geographical contexts which are incorporated into the mythology of the god. Turner (1963) made a similar point when he argued that all pilgrimages are influenced by a synchronic connection between economic, political, legal, ecological and religious factors (1963:17-

19). All such factors, according to Clothey, serve as the contents out of which the images for perceiving the deity are derived. Secondly, historical process is a crucial dimension in theogany. The popularity of a deity reflects an ongoing tradition and not just an isolated moment in history. He is ascribed a mythology and lineage that provides authenticity and identity not only to the god but also to his worshippers. Thirdly, this process occurs through an oral tradition, being handed down from father to son, or through the sharing of incidents in which the god has performed miracles either in the past or in one's present time. In this manner the god is easily appropriated and becomes existentially real for the worshippers. Clothey then outlined the evolution of the god Aiyappan (see Chapter Two: where I have already discussed this) from his prototypical roots to his current status as Lord of Sabarimalai.

Although these arguments are quite logical, they deal only with the external socio-political factors that influence a religious phenomenon. They do not fully account for the inner motivation within an individual that urges him to seek communion with a higher Supreme Being. Unless this aspect is considered one cannot have a fully satisfactory answer to the question.

Finally there are several dimensions to this phenomena that need exploring. Further research is required into the extensive folklore, both in Malayalam and Kodagi.

Muslim and Christian members of the cultus need to be identified and interviewed. I was told that they carry different articles for worship in their irumutis. Their form of devotion too would take a different form, as would that of other Hindus from different backgrounds.

The area surrounding Sabarimalai is rich with legend and history. The Pantalams whose estates are eight kilometers away from Sabarimalai have a long and sacred relationship with the deity and shrine. If persuaded, they could provide valuable insights into the cultus history and customs. My final conclusion is therefore that additional research be undertaken towards gathering more comprehensive data on this pilgrimage by a team of anthropologists who are specialists in mythology, folklore, semiotics and other relevant disciplines.

NOTES

1. I prefer to use the term "cultus" rather than "cult" because of the negative connotations associated with the term "cult" in recent years. Cults can also mean movements outside the main stream religion, e.g. the Hare Krishnas, T.M. Moonies, etc. The Ayyappa movement however is very much within the main stream of Hinduism and finds sanction even amongst orthodox Hindus.
2. Turner defines *communitas* as: "A relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arise spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations and circumstances. It is a liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity and comradeship. The distinction between structure and *communitas* is not the same as that between secular and sacred; *communitas* is an essential and generic human bond" (Turner 1979:150). He distinguishes between three types of *communitas*. These types are (1) existential or spontaneous *communitas* found in a society as a "structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less" (Turner 1969:96). (2) "Normative *communitas* which

emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comunitas, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of ritual elders."

(Ibid.): (3) "Ideological comunitas, which is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models or blueprints of societies believed by their authors to exemplify or supply the optimal conditions for existential comunitas" (Turner 1974:169).

3. In "Religious Change in a Hindu Pilgrimage Center," Freeman discusses the impact of scarcity, rapid socio-economic change, and urbanization on a traditional Hindu pilgrimage center at Bhubaneswar in Orissa (Eastern India). The construction of a new town adjacent to the center provided new opportunities for the hard pressed priests. As a consequence, temple services were abandoned as the young priests took new occupations in the town. However the decline of the temple did not signify the disintegration of religion, rather the focus shifted from temple rituals to expressions of popular religion which rose in importance (Freeman 1975:124-132).

4. Rg Veda Hymn XXIII

16. Along their paths the Mothers go, Sisters
of priestly ministrants,
Mingling their sweetness with the milk.
17. May Waters gathered near the Sun, and those
wherewith the Sun is joined,
Speed forth this sacrifice of ours.
18. I call the Waters, Goddesses, wherein our cattle
quench their thirst;
Oblations to the Streams be given.
19. Amrit is in the Waters; in the Waters
there is healing balm:
Be swift ye Gods, to give them praise.
20. Within the Waters - Soma thus hath told me -
dwell all balms that heal,
And Agni, he who blesseth all. The Waters hold
all medicines.
21. O Waters, teem with medicines to keep my body
safe from harm,
-So that I long may see the Sun.
22. Whatever sin is found in me, whatever evil
I have wrought,
If I have lied or falsely sworn, Waters
remove it far from me.

(Translation by R.T.H. Griffith 1973:13-14)

5. Puranas are "old world legends" that combine history with myth. They are connected with the epic literature and law books in form and substance. Eighteen puranas are considered the chief and there are another eighteen styled as upa-puranas of which little is known. The chief puranas contain the history of remote times and describe regions of the universe not visible to the ordinary physical eye (see Sastri 1982:63). They therefore have mystical overtones. The chronology and geography found in them are often confusing and their genealogical tables inaccurate. But they are a

storehouse of genuine and valuable historical tradition. Since they represent an oral tradition it is again difficult to date them. However, it is generally accepted by scholars that they emerged from around 850 A.D.

6. There are several myths relating to Viśnu as the Enchantress Mohini. Viśnu first transforms himself into Mohini in order to take back the Soma from the demons who have stolen it (MBh 1.15-17; O'Flaherty 1975:277). According to a purana myth, Viśnu took the form of Mohini when the god Śiva was threatened by the demon Bhasmāśura. Śiva had granted the demon a boon that gave him the power to burn to ashes anyone by merely touching their heads. Bhasmāśura wished to test his boon on Śiva himself. Viśnu then became Mohini and lured the demon away from Śiva. Fascinated by her, Bhasmāśura began to dance with Mohini and was tricked into placing his hand on his own head, thus burning himself to ashes.

The myth goes on to narrate that Śiva who had been watching, also became infatuated with Mohini and embraced her with lust. Out of this union, Hanuman or Skanda or, in more recent myths, Ayyappa is said to have been born (see O'Flaherty 1982:320-323). (See also Kodgu myth Sarthavadu Pattu Appendix A)

7. This text is similar to the Kodagi version in Appendix A.
8. Murti (Sk) statue or idol of deity.
9. The concept of evolution and dissolution is based on the Sankhya doctrine that has exercised great influence on Vedantic thought through the ages. According to this, the heterogeneous universe is a development out of homogeneous matter (prākṛiti), and to this matter it ultimately returns, for everything that is manifested (evolution) will ultimately be withdrawn (dissolution). Thus, this universe is but one of a series of worlds that have thus been evolved and dissolved. The manifested matter (i.e. prākṛiti) is represented in Tantra as a female aspect of śakti, and the unmanifested formless matter is the male aspect. The union of the two results in the disappearance of the phenomenal world (see Hiriyanna 1973:267-297 and Zimmer 1974:28-281).
10. The Visnu temple at Guruvayoor has an Ayyappa Temple within its courtyard.
11. Parasurama (Rama with the Axe) is considered an incarnation of Visnu who took human form as the son of a brāhman Jamadagni. He destroyed the whole kṣatriya clan for its impiety. Frequently referred to in

literature, Parasurama is not worshipped in the manner that the Krishna and Rama incarnations are. Another legend makes him the founder of Kerala which he created by reclaiming land from the Indian Ocean.

12. (pg 17): aśrama (Sk) "stage of life". The dharma i.e. law) tenets of Hinduism concentrate on the particulars of social duty and the arrangement of life within the social system. The basic principle of this arrangement was summarized in the term varnasrama-dharma, i.e. dharma in accordance with one's varna (caste: brāhman, kṣatriya, vaiśya or sudra) and his stage of life (āśrama) as a student (brahmacarin), householder (grhastha) a hermit (vānaprastha) or world renouncer (sannyasin).

Chapter 4:7

13. (pg 19): Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati, Bhārata, abhyutthānam adharmasya tadā 'tmanam sṛjamy aham.

For whenever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, Then do I generate Myself (on earth). Chapt. 4:7 Bh. Gita. (trans. Zaehner 1979:184)

14. According to Vaidyanathan (1983:113) the shrines to the Guardian deities at the foot of the "Eighteen Steps" represent the warrior and devotee Kadutha.

Kadutha became Ayyappa's devotee and renouncing everything spent the rest of his days in prayer at the shrine.

15. The number of cakras vary in different systems. This figure is based on the classical Sat Cakra Nirupana translated from Sanskrit by Arthur Avalon. (1978)
16. Sakti is always represented on the left of the deity while Ganesa is always to the right. This is based on Tantric symbolism where the female is left and male right.
17. In Southern India, men are required to worship barechested as a mark of respect towards the deity who is often draped with a cloth. "Barechestedness" indicates "lowliness" and "humility". In traditional Hindu society one of the eight prohibitions imposed on outcasts and Adi Dravidas was that: males should not wear coats, vests or shirts. (Hutton 1983:205)
18. The number one hundred and eight is of special significance. Mantras are chanted one hundred and eight times, deities are praised with a hundred and eight epithets. I asked several people about the significance of the number one hundred and eight and though they all insisted that it was auspicious none

could explain why. The numbers one and eight are important. They represent the Sanskrit alphabets "y" and "j" which together spell yaj to sacrifice and inverted jay which means victory. The numbers one and eight together represents the victory (18), and with the zero in between (108) it becomes even more so. Thus 1008, 10008 and so on... (This explanation is only guess-work.)

19. Exchange rate: Approximately Rupees 10 to a Can. dollar:

20. This represents a sāttvic or pure diet that is prescribed in Hatha Yoga. Onions, potatoes and garlic are root vegetables that grow "below" the ground and therefore considered "impure". Orthodox Hindus would also include potatoes in this category. Spices are also avoided and stale food.

According to the Bh. Gita, there are three types of food associated with the three types of human beings (sāttvic i.e. pure, rājasic i.e. passionate and tāmasic i.e. indolent). Foods that "are savoury, rich in oil and firm" are agreeable to the sāttvic. Foods that are "pungent, sour, salty, stinging hot, sharp, rough and burning" are what the rājasic love, and "stale, tasteless, rotten and decayed" are eaten by the tāmasic (Zaehner 1979:377).

21. The pāla tree (acacia catechu) called kadhira/khadira in Sanskrit has long been associated with the goddess. It is found mainly in East India, bears a white and yellow flower. Its wood is treated to yield catechu which is used in tanning and dyeing. It is also used to treat diarrhea and throat infections. (Usher 1974:12 also Nandi 1973:120) Kadhira is the more common spelling.
22. Pepper is widely grown in the Coorg and hilly areas of the Western Ghats. It attracted Arab Traders who came to the region to trade. Thus I speculate that pepper in some way has become associated and dear to the Muslim Vavarswamy.
23. Circumbulating (pradikṣā) in a clockwise direction three times is part of ritual worship. It is symbolic of circling the Universe three times a practice that commemorates the myth in which Ganesa went around Siva three times and won victory over his sibling Murukan.
24. Wool is considered a bad conductor of electricity and therefore is used to contain the spiritual energy within the irumuṭi.

25. I have no idea as to why those particular designs are drawn. I am only recounting accounts that were told to me by informants.
26. According to Vaidyanathan (1983:115) there are seven families in the Alleppey district surrounding Sabarimalai that claim to be descendants of Vavar. Their claims go back fifteen generations. The sword that is placed in the shrine at Sabarimalai is believed to have belonged to Vavaraswami himself. It is traditionally kept by the family Musalia. By vocation, these Muslim priests are Vaidyas (doctors) practising the unani system of medicine. Three fourths of the income at the shrine goes to them and the balance is retained by the Devaswom (Temple Administrator). They have free access to the shrine and surrounding areas by a written order of December 3, 1904.
27. Though I was able to have darsan in the morning, I was restricted by temple authorities from attending this evening worship -- both from a point of view of my safety and the sentiments of the Ayyappas. The two photographs (Plates 23 and 24) were taken by one of my group members.

28. Aryanization or Sanskritization as it is more commonly known, is a process by which indigenous groups have been incorporated into Indian civilization by adopting a set of beliefs, practises and values that M. Srinivas (1952) calls "Sanskritic Hinduism" and identifies primarily with the brahman way of life. In his work Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India (1952) he distinguishes variations in Hinduism according to the degree of geographical spread. "All-Indian Hinduism" is Hinduism with an all India spread, "Peninsular Hinduism" spread over the entire peninsula, "Regional Hinduism" is restricted to particular regions and "Local Hinduism" has a spread confined to local areas. The main problem with this concept is that Srinivas modeled his "All India Hinduism" on the Brahmanical tradition.. For further discussion on this see Singer (1972:268-270).

APPENDIX A

In Coorg there are two versions as to the origins of Ayyappa. The first is very similar to the Bhasmāsura myth found in Sanskrit texts (see ff. 11). The other version depicts Ayyappa as a hunter with a silver bow and seven dogs.

The folk songs shown below are from the unpublished manuscripts of N. Chinapaa and belong to the author's granddaughter, Mrs. Nanjamma Chinapaa. They were published in Kannada by the Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore, in 1924.

1. Sarthavuda Patta (Songs of Sarthavu)

Long live and listen O friend,
Let us sing the song,
Of the son of Harihara,
Who famed as Sarthavu,
Lived in the dense forest,
Of gold stringed Kodagi.

Yes, listen, O friend,
In the earth
The greatest is Kodagi,
Equal to this country
Is copper like Tulunad.
Away from it
In the country of Gokarn,
In the hill of Gokarn
In the olden days
The giant Mrugesvara.

Planting the stick of Dombas,
Keeping over it
With a needle stick (/stuck)
Keeping an areca nut
Over it on its top
Keeping a ?
On top of it,

Over on top of all these
 Mrugesvara giant
 Standing on one leg
 ? fire hand
 So in mind thinking
 Of god Shambusiva
 Did severe penance.

When he was doing penance
 Shambusiva god
 Learning about this
 Coming slowly
 To the earth below
 Going near the giant
 And standing there
 What did he say?

"O what is this giant,
 In meditation some
 Years have passed
 I am pleased with your penance,
 And will give desired boon.
 Beg for what you want."

Mrugesvara giant
 Lifting his eyes and seeing
 Our learned one (god)
 Prostrated at his feet.
 "I want a fire hand."
 So he requested.
 Hearing this god
 Granted what he begged for.
 Learning this the giant
 Spoke these words -
 "O my god
 How can I know
 What you have granted
 That you have given
 What I wanted
 How do I know?
 Therefore, O god
 Over your head
 I shall keep my hand and see"

So he said
 The wretched giant
 While he ran near him.
 Shambu Siva god
 In terror and fright
 Ran round and round
 The Chappannar country.

Listen, listen O friend,
 Mrugesvara giant
 Like thread behind the needle
 Like fish after ?

Ran after god.
 Seeing this
 Shambu Siva god
 In the dense forest
 In the hole in the white tree
 He hid himself.
 All that time (when time was thus)
 The wind stopped blowing
 The heat increased
 It was impossible to live on earth
 When time was like this
 The illusive Viśnu
 Becoming aware of this
 Coming to the earth
 While searching for the god
 With an eye on his forehead.

Mrugesvara giant
 Seeing god Nārāyana
 With his own eyes
 While he ran
 Towards the illusive god
 To keep his fire hand
 Over his head.
 The illusive god
 Discarding his shape
 Stood in beauty
 As Mohini in shape.
 Seeing this the giant
 Bewitched by illusion
 Desiring the beauty
 Spoke these words -
 "Listen maiden goddess
 If you marry me
 In all the three worlds
 I shall make you the queen.
 If otherwise, O maiden
 With my fire hand
 I shall burn you to ashes."

When he said this
 The illusive Mohini
 Spoke these words -
 "The king of giants
 Joining you
 I shall live ten years,
 So have I thought.
 But now O giant
 If, all the seven dances

That I shall now dance here
 You should also dance
 I shall marry you
 If not O giant
 You shouldn't touch."

So she said
 And the illusive-eyed Mohini
 Danced the seven kinds
 Seeing this the giant
 Danced in delight
 All the seven dances.
 While he was dancing,
 For dance
 The mystical Mohini
 What did she do?
 Nothing else than this.
 The lotus hand
 She kept over her good head
 While she was dancing.
 Seeing this the giant
 His fire hand
 He placed over his head
 At that time, O friend
 The giant Mrugesvara
 Burnt to ashes.

Seeing this Viśnu
 Taking his shape
 Coming in search
 Of our learned one
 In the dense forest
 The fierce wind was blowing
 Seeing this Viśnu
 Going and looking there
 In the hole in the white tree
 (The donkey had laid his head)
 Inside the hole
 Shambu Śiva Mahadeva
 Was hiding in fright
 Seeing the donkey
 Viśnu pushed it aside
 Even after pushing the donkey
 It did not move aside
 Seeing this Visnu
 (If our purpose has to be achieved
 We may have to touch the feet of a donkey)
 So thinking
 Catching the feet of the donkey
 Pulled it aside.

Aware of this, God
 Got down from the hole
 (when saying me and two

Let us go to heaven)?
 Shambu Siva God
 Asked, "Which way
 Did Mrugesvara giant go?"
 So he asked
 When thus he asked
 Narayana god
 Spoke these words -
 "Listen, listen O god
 When this Mrugesvara giant
 With his fire hand
 Coming in search of you
 Seeing me, the giant
 Ran and jumped at me.
 When I saw it
 I stood in the shape
 Of maiden goddess
 The giant who saw me
 Became bewitched at the beauty
 And said that
 I should marry him.
 When I heard those words
 I spoke thus -
 What dance I now dance
 All the seven sorts
 If you dance per dance
 I shall marry you.
 When I said so
 Mrugesvara giant
 In delight and beautifully
 All the seven dances
 While dancing in competition turn
 I kept my hand
 Over my head.
 Seeing this the giant
 Lifting up his hand
 Placed it on his head
 In accordance with the dance.
 All that time, great Lord
 Mrugesvara going, disappearing,
 Bhasmasvara came."

So he said.
 Listening to this tale,
 Our learned god Siva
 His delight increasing
 Spoke these words.
 "O, then Visnu
 In Mohini's shape
 All that you danced there
 Please dance here and now."
 Agreeing to his request
 God Narayana
 In the shape of maiden goddess

All the seven dances
 Danced beautifully.
 While she danced beautifully
 Shambu Śiva god
 Being bewitched by illusion
 Married the maiden goddess.
 Listen, O my friend
 When time thus passed
 The maiden goddess became pregnant.
 Seeing this
 God Narayana
 "This is shameful
 What ? is there for this?
 So thinking
 When his ten months were over
 Where did he go?
 (Breaking open) his thighs
 (Plucking out)
 The baby in the womb
 Taking by hand
 Finishing the work of the gold cradle,
 The gold ? rope
 Getting all,
 "On this earth,
 Renounced as Śārthavu
 Living in valour"
 So dropped him to earth.

Listen, O friend
 On the earth below
 In the centre of the earth
 Famed as Śārthavu
 Lived nobly, victoriously
 When living heroically
 Conquering seven worlds.
 Going to Brahmas world
 Driving away from there
 The four headed god
 On the throne of Brahma
 Sat in royal style.
 No satisfied with this
 Began the work of creation.
 How? Do you want to know?
 Nothing else but this.
 All the men born
 Should not die, he said
 Learning this gods
 In terror and fright
 Sat in deep thought.
 "O what way is there for this?"
 So thinking
 To tale bearing Narada.
 Narada the great rishi
 Sent letters and servant.

Hearing this news
 Narada the great rishi
 Going to the world of gods
 "Do not be frightened, gods."
 So saying
 Going slowly to the world of Brahma,
 Folding his hands
 Stood in front of Sārthavu
 And saluted him.
 Seeing this Sārthavu
 Gave the order
 To sit in style.
 Enquiring after welfare
 When me and two were said (e)
 The illusive Narada
 Spoke these words -
 "Listen, listen, O god
 In all the fourteen worlds
 Who is there like you
 Who is father but Śiva
 Who is mother but Viśnu
 Who has your valour
 Way you live
 None born will die."
 When this he said
 The son of Harihara
 Was greatly delighted.
 Seeing this Narada
 Spoke these words -
 "But now, O god
 Please let me know
 What relation is
 Goddess Parvathi (to you)
 And Laxmi devi, the great mother?"
 When thus asked
 Searching for relationship,
 The defeated Sārthavu
 "I shall find out
 The relationships."
 So saying leaving
 The throne of Brahma
 In the dense forest
 Trying to find out the relationship
 (Took his stand there).

So let us sing
 If this song is sung
 Listen to its fruit.
 We get what we beg,
 Keeping and taking
 The source of the song
 The original le le le (?)

2. Excerpts from "Songs of seven (children) of gods."
 (From Nanjamma Chinapaa's unpublished manuscript.
 Translation by N. Chinapaa. Originally published
 in Kannada, 1925.)

Across the seven seas
 To this side of seven seas
 To the ocean of milk
 On the white sands of the shore
 On the white stone rock
 Standing on it
 Jumping high up into the sky
 Falling down to the earth
 Opening its gold mouth
 Left its brave life.
 (My friend sitting by me)
 Where its blood fell
 The fungus grew
 In that fungus spread
 Seven horned red anthill
 Spring up mysteriously
 Springing up mysteriously
 Grew up by miracle
 When time passed thus
 The anthill grew large
 From inside it
 seven branched banyan tree
 Was born mysteriously
 And grew up by miracle
 While saying one and two
 Among the branches of the tree
 In wondrous miracle
 Two twin conches
 Silver conch and gold conch
 Both were on it
 Where the conches were grown
 And when a strong wind blew
 The branches of the banyan tree
 Beat each other
 When a branch touched another
 One conch touched another
 Like bronze when it touched
 Like glass it was torn
 Like mud it was separated
 So when the conches broke
 What wonderous story is this?
 Inside the gold conch were seven children of god
 And seven headed cobra
 Inside the silver conch were
 Silver bowed Ayyappa

And seven ferocious dogs
All born mysteriously
And grew up in wondrous miracle.
Silver bowed Ayyappa
And the seven dogs
And the cobra child
Stayed under the ocean
The seven (children of) gods
Were crawling all over
The branches of the banyan
When thus crawling
And living in peace
The six brothers
And one sister
To eat the fruit of the tree
The bird flying round the sky
Came searching for food
When it was eating
the eldest of the seven
Spoke these words -
"Bird you who eat fruits
If you help us
To cross the seven seas
And drop us on earth
We shall give you a boon."

APPENDIX BPāda Yātrā Chants

These lines are examples of the kind chanted by pilgrims. A leader yells out the first part of the line and the second half is chorused by his group.

Swāmy Śaranam	--	Ayyappa Śaranam
Bhagawān Śaranam	--	Bhagawati Śaranam
Devan Śaranam	--	Devi Śaranam
Devan Pādam	--	Devi Pādam
Swāmy Pādam	--	Ayyappa Pādam
Bhagawāne	--	Bhagawatiye
Eśwarane	--	Eśwariye
Saktane	--	Saktiye
Devane	--	Deviye
Swāmiye	--	Ayyappa
Pallik kattu	--	Sabarimalaikke
Irumuṭi kattu	--	Sabarimalaikke
Kattum katti	--	Sabarimalaikke
Kallum mullum	--	Kaliki methai
Gundum Gudiyam	--	Paramānandam
Endhi vidayya	--	Thooki vidayya
Swāmy maare	--	Ayyappa maare
Neyabhiśekam	--	Swāmike
Karpuradeepam	--	Swāmike
Chandanabhiśekam	--	Swāmikke
Bhāsmābhiśekam	--	Swāmikke
Paneer abhiśekam	--	Swāmikke
Pālabhiśekam	--	Swāmikke
Thengai vellam	--	Swāmikke
Swāmiye	--	Śaranam Ayyappa

(C.B. Rao 1986:21)

APPENDIX C

Site of the Makara Jyoti: divine phenomenon?

THE HOLY STAR

Venu Menon profiles the Makara Jyoti.

The Makara Jyoti, the light held divine by lakhs of Sabarimala pilgrims, actually flares from a rocky ledge atop a hill several kilometres away from the main shrine.

On the rock's surface is etched a star-shaped figure with the symbol *Om* inscribed at the centre. Each cone of the star contains an alphabet, which when read together spell *Namasivaya*. A line runs through one corner of the star, ending in a trishul, pointing outward in the direction of Sabarimala. The rock surface in the vicinity of the star is inscribed in Malayalam with the words *Podiyal, Chandral, Swamidasan*.

On January 14, a puja is conducted on the star. A large aluminium vessel is half-filled with mud, which is topped with five to seven kilos of camphor. At 6.35 pm a man sets a lighted match to the camphor.

A long blue-white tongue of flame leaps up, reaching a height of over 5 feet. The man picks the vessel up and lifts it above his head, then lowers it. He does this three times. Then a wet sack is placed over the vessel to smother the flame.

This is the light beheld by a million rapturous pilgrims, some miles away at the temple in Sabarimala.

from Illustrated Weekly of India February 15, 1987

APPENDIX D

A question of beard

Express News Service

KOTTAYAM, Jan. 9.

The beard or the lack of it on policemen guarding the sacred 18 steps at Sabarimala is again causing a crisis of faith among devotees, according to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

Pilgrims ascend the sacred steps after observing 'vrath' and carrying 'irumudi', the prescribed rituals that makes one eligible to climb the steps. But as devotees throng the steps what they see are policemen sans beard.... a flagrant violation of rituals.

Many a devotee has registered his protest against the presence of clean-shaven policemen. But the policemen confess that they are not permitted to grow a beard in spite of the assurance given by the Chief Minister himself at the Sannidhanam. They also said that the Assistant Police Superintendent victimised all policemen who dared to grow beards while on duty.

Meanwhile, the flow of pilgrims to Sabarimala and the lack of sanitary facilities at the shrine and surrounding areas have led to an extremely unhygienic situation, according to Mr. Kummanam Rajasekheran, State Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The absence of an electric incinerator has led to the accumulation of garbage all over the place which attracts flies. This hazard is enhanced by the flow of jaggery water from the place where sweets are prepared as offerings, he added.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has also protested against government apathy to the recent sabotage which led to power failure at the Sannidhanam. It warned that a repeat performance during Makaravilakku which attracts millions of pilgrims to the hill shrine would endanger their lives.

APPENDIX E

Millions offer prayers

SABARIMALA, Jan. 14: An estimated one million pilgrims from all over the country offered prayers to Lord Ayyappa, the presiding diety of the hill shrine, on Makar Sankranthi day today.

Pilgrims, chanting *Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa*, waited for hours in a queue which started from Pampa at the foot of the hills, before their turn came to climb the sacred 18 steps for 'darshan' of the lord.

The *Abhishekham* for the idol, which began in the small hours today, continued for over nine hours.

The sanctum sanctorum was then closed for a brief while for cleansing operations before receiving the *Thiruvabharanam* (sacred vestment) which will be brought from Pandalam this evening. The idol will be adorned with the *Thiruvabharanam* during *Deeparadhana*.

from Indian Express January 14, 1987

GLOSSARY OF COMMONLY USED TERMS

<u>ārati</u>	- waving a lamp in worship before a deity (Sanskrit)
<u>ātman</u>	- the individual soul or self (Sanskrit)
<u>bhajan</u>	- songs sung in adoration of god (Hindu derived from Sanskrit)
<u>cakras</u>	- circles or psychic centres located along the spinal column in the body (Sanskrit)
<u>darśan</u>	- viewing or glimpse of the deity (Sanskrit)
<u>dharma</u>	- duty, rule of righteousness (Sanskrit)
<u>ghee</u>	- clarified butter (Hindi)
<u>guruswāmi</u>	- teacher, in this case the guide who initiates the devotee into the cultus (Tamil derived from Sanskrit)
<u>irumuṭi kattal</u>	- ceremony of packing the bundles (<u>irumuṭi</u>) before setting off for Sabarimalai (Tamil)
<u>mālā</u>	- rosary beads of <u>tulsi</u> or <u>rudrakṣa</u> used to initiate the Ayyappas
<u>mantra</u>	- sacred word or sentence (Sanskrit)
<u>prasādam</u>	- food offered in <u>puja</u> (Tamil derived from Sanskrit)
<u>pūjā</u>	- worship rituals (Sanskrit)
<u>Swāmiyee Saranam</u> <u>Ayyappa</u>	- "(I) take refuge in the Lord Ayyappa." - chant of the Ayyappa cultus. (Swamiyee - Tamil, <u>Saranam</u> derived from Sanskrit)
<u>tapas</u>	- heat or fervor, spiritual austerities (Sanskrit)
<u>veṣṭi</u>	- a lower garment used by men. It is a piece of cloth three yards long and forty-five inches wide that is wrapped around the waist (Tamil)
<u>vratam</u>	- vow (Tamil derived from Sanskrit)
<u>yātrā</u>	- pilgrimage journey (Sanskrit)

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