

Ayyappan

One of the most widely worshipped deities in the Hindu world is Ayyappan, although where and when this particular god emerged is still very obscure. Ayyappan has a number of different names he is known by, such as: Sasta, Arya, Hari-Hara-putra, Ayya, among many others. This variety of epithets suggests many different versions of his mythic adventures and origins.

Ayyappan is probably most well known the Kerala state of South India (Smith and Narsimhachary 221) and as far away as Bombay.

It is intriguing that in some versions Aiyappan is not truly a god, but merely a demi-god or magic child. In one such version he is the son of Siva and Mohini (female *avatara* of Vishnu) and after birth he is left on a stream bank to be found by a childless tribal king. Ayyappan (named Ayappa in this version) goes through life healing and slaying demons up until he enters the inner sanctum of Mt. Sabri and disappears.

Another version of Ayyappan's myth is as follows. Siva calls on Vishnu for help, who appears in the form of Mohini (seductress) to lure away *asuras* (demons) from the Elixir of Immortality (*amrta*) when it was extracted from the Ocean of Milk. Siva is then finds himself attracted to Mohini and they mate and produce a child named Ayyappan. Then he is left in the forest and found by a childless king of Madura, who is also part of the royal family of the Pandyas, and named him Manikantha ("mani", jewel or bell and "kantha", neck) because the king either had seen the jewel sparkle or heard the bell sound, which was on a string around his neck. He then grew up noble and honorable becoming the king's Commander in Chief of the army, and doing a great many of other things including healing people and slaying demons. Eventually Ayyappan became the center of jealous attention. A plot was made by the queen and his fellow officers to kill him; they would send Ayyappan on a perilous journey into a jungle

known for the abundance of man-eating tigers and leopards. A traitorous physician approached the king telling him that the only way to heal the queen, who had been pretending to be very ill and fainting, was to bring him leopard's milk within an hour and a half. The king told Ayyappan of the situation he undertook to everyone's surprise with no hesitation, showing him to be truly dharmic and fearless. Ayyappan entered the jungle and returned to the palace riding a tiger leading many she-leopards. The king then realized that Ayyappan was not an ordinary person. Ayyappan when questioned about this by the king replies that his father and whole world is God (Siva). Ayyappan then returns to Kerala and thereupon meets Parasurama (human incarnation of Vishnu) at the summit of Sabarimala. In the days that followed the kings received a dream from Ayyappan to come to Sabarimala to meet him. The king obeys the request to building a temple to Ayyappan on the mountain (Parmeshwaranand, 5 1120).

Ayyappan is portrayed in depictions as varied as his many legends. In most depictions he is in a seated posture called *paryankabanhana* or *utkutikasana* with a band of cloth called *yogapatta* around his knees (Smith and Narsimhachary 221). He is also invariably dressed in bracelets, armllets, necklaces, crowns, gem studded waistband and a cincture on his chest. Ayyappan is always depicted with one head, which according to Brunce suggest that the god could not lie, for he could only show one face to the world. By contrast to the demon Ravana, with his ten or more heads, deceit comes easily to one who has more than one face to show (Brunce 2000:5470). Ayyappan is also shown as being youthful. Yet sometimes his portrayed fierce to represent the boundless energy of youth and the power to succeed in all things. Ayyappan is also depicted as being white in color according Brunce (54). May suggest his purity and honor, exemplifying his dangerous quest to save a woman he thought was in need of his help. Ayyappan's *vahana* is the tiger, although at times he is seated on the lotus flower. The

tiger may represent his triumph on his jungle quest and the lotus flower represents his connection to Siva, with whom the lotus is always associated. The *urdhva-pundra* is depicted upon Ayyappan's forehead, which connects him to Vishnu. The *urdhva-pundra* is called the third eye and represents enlightenment and an all seeing awareness according to Smith and Narismhachary (372). Worshippers of Ayyappan undertake a pilgrimage to Mt. Sabarimala twice a year, once in August and September and again with greater numbers from November to January. The pilgrims dress in blue or black, and carry a special cloth bag called *irumudi* on their head. Within the bag are two compartments, one for items of worship (idols, *dhupa*). While the other compartment is for personal belongings, such as pictures of their family for the pilgrimage can be extensively long. In some cases the pilgrimage can be long and pilgrims pack pictures of family, books, and clothes. Around each worshipper's neck are *tulasi* or *rudraksa*-beads (Smith and Narsimhachary 224) [*Rudraksa*- beads symbolize Siva's tears for Sati, and *Tulasi*-beads both connect Ayyappan to the gods who fathered/mothered him]. Prior to undertaking these pilgrimages the worshippers fast, eat simple meals, and are not allowed sex or alcohol (Parmeshwaranand, 1121). Upon reaching the mountain temple devotees call aloud *Svamiye Saranam Ayyappan!* (Oh! Lord Ayyappan! You are our only refuge!)(1120). After reaching the temple the devotee climbs eighteen steps and give offerings of ghee and *vibhuti* through the priests, the *prasadam* which is the remnants of the offering are believed by some to have amazing curative powers. After the worshipper has completed prayers to Ayyappan they then retreat back down the eighteen steps backwards. The temple is to be the last thing seen on this pilgrimage by the worshipper. An aspect that is unique to Ayyappan is that all castes and classes are welcome to worship Ayyappan. However women between the ages of six and sixty are not allowed entering the inner sanctum of the temple. The belief behind this tradition is that women may tempt Ayyappan away from his dharmic lifestyle.

This is one of the few instances in which all males are free of class restrictions and an attempt to bring unity among Hindu classes and sects in the Keral region, pulling them together under one god who embodies both Siva and Vishnu. However today we note that Ayyappan did not replace Siva or Vishnu. Rather he accents both of those great gods, for the Ayyappan shrines can be found within temples to both Siva and Vishnu (Smith and Narsimhachary 226).