

Sabarimalai Temple and Pilgrimage

Sabarimalai is a temple located in the mountains of South India, in the state of Kerala. It is dedicated to the deity Ayyappan, who is venerated widely throughout the South. Ayyappan is not mentioned in any of the puranic texts, and appears mostly in the myths and legends of Kerala. The first Sanskrit text to mention Ayyappan is the *Bhutanathopakhyanam*, which was written in the nineteenth century, and is the primary text of the cult (Sekar 15).

There are several differing stories of Sabarimalai's origins, nearly all tied to Ayyappan. One such Ayyappan myth, of which there are many, it involves Ayyappan, although he is not yet revealed to be the deity, undertaking the impossible task of acquiring the milk of a tiger to save the life of the queen (Younger 18). When he succeeds, the king recognizes Ayyappan's divinity and promises to build him a temple. Ayyappan shoots an arrow to indicate where the temple should be built, and it lands in the forest where Sabarimalai now stands. A separate story tells of how Parasurama, an avatara of Visnu, founded five shrines to Ayyappan (Sekar 19). The five shrines contain images of Ayyappan in several stages of life, the fourth of which is at Sabarimalai which depicts the deity in the forest dweller (*vanaprastha*) stage of life. The fifth shrine has not been found, but it is believed by devotees to be on the summit of a nearby mountain, depicting Ayyappan as a *sannyasin*.

As alluded to above, it is possible that the myths involving Ayyappan are of South Indian origin, and it may be the case that Vedic references are built on a standing definition. Some scholars argue that versions of the story which portray Ayyappan as the son of Siva

and Mohini may be a more recent creation, reflecting the southward movement of the The Vedas (Younger 22 and Thomas 20).

Sabarimalai is open to pilgrims only during the festival season, which runs for fifty one days though December and part of January (Younger 17). The pilgrimage is noteworthy for its popularity, drawing approximately ten million pilgrims each year (Younger 23). This popularity is a relatively recent phenomenon, and while scholars are uncertain what caused the rise in pilgrims, having increased in the last fifty years (Younger 22-23).

The pilgrimage is important to the cultural identity of many South Indians, and the austere life lead by pilgrims is seen as similar to ancient forms of religious expression (Younger 18). Between forty five and sixty days prior to departing on the pilgrimage, pilgrims undertake numerous vows of austerity (Daniel 246-247). The list of injunctions is extensive and includes vows to refrain from intoxicating beverages, sexual activity, meat, eggs, and anger.

While Sabarimalai is important to the South Indian identity, it is by no means exclusive to those people. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the pilgrimage is its inclusiveness; the pilgrimage is open to all castes and faiths (Vaidyanathan 50). The tradition has loosely tied itself with both Islam and Buddhism. There is a mosque at Erumeli [the official starting place of the pilgrimage] dedicated to a figure named Vaver, who appears to provide assistance to Ayyappan in some stories (Thomas 14). Pilgrims are expected to circumambulate the mosque three times before visiting the temple to Ayyappan located in the same town. Some scholars have speculated at a possible link to Buddhism

because Ayyappan is called simply 'teacher' by most pilgrims, which is one of the names of the Buddha (Younger 21). This universality of Sabarimalai is brought into question by its stance towards women.

No women of menstrual age are permitted on the pilgrimage (Younger 20). The reason typically given for this exclusion is that the pilgrimage is at essence a male initiation rite, testing the ability of a man to cope with the challenges of forest life. The exclusion of women is justified in the myth surrounding Ayyappan, who promises to wed the goddess Malikappurattamma the year that no pilgrims arrive to worship at Sabarimalai (Younger 20).. Malikappurattamma has a shrine on a nearby mountain, and during the festival her image is symbolically brought near Ayyappan's shrine to witness the throngs of pilgrims standing between them. It is common for Hindu rituals and worship to be closed to menstruating women, but Sabarimalai's exclusion of the entire age group is unusual and worthy of mention.

Despite the casteless nature of the pilgrimage, Ayyappan has historically been much more popular amongst the lower classes; Ayyappan is not worshipped as the chief deity in any Brahmin temples (Thomas 19). Some scholars credited the rise in the ritual's popularity as stemming from anti-Brahmin sentiment; since the tradition is seen as natively South Indian, and the Brahmins are viewed as Northern migrants. This pilgrimage is seen by some as a way of asserting their independence from the caste system (Younger 23). Despite this undertone, the number of upper-caste pilgrims has increased steadily in recent years (Younger 24).

The pilgrimage begins with the vows of austerity mentioned above, which are taken in advance of the pilgrims departure. First time pilgrims are expected to find the participant in his region who has completed the pilgrimage the greatest number of times, and place himself under their care for the duration (Thomas 24-25). This senior pilgrim is to serve as a spiritual guide for the new devotee. This hierarchy is linguistically reinforced through the different modes of address used for pilgrims who have completed the pilgrimage more often. First and second time pilgrims are called *kanni*, those participating for a third time are called *muthalperu*, fourth are *bharippu*, and those on their fifth pilgrimage or more are addressed as 'pazhama' (Thomas 24).

When departing from their hometown, after an appropriate period of austerities, modern pilgrims have two options. The traditional method is to travel by foot to the town of Erumeli, stopping to worship at as many temples as possible along the way, and to begin the pilgrimage proper from there (Younger 19). For pilgrims looking for a less arduous journey, a road now extends to the town of Pampa at the foot of the mountain. Pilgrims are able to park their vehicles in Pampa and undertake a shorter eight kilometre trek up the mountain (Sekar 58). For pilgrims without their own means of transportation, the Kerala State Transport Corporation also runs a bus service to Pampa.

Along the route to the temple from Erumeli, pilgrims stop to hurl stones into a ravine, this is explained in a number of different ways. Some pilgrims understand it as symbolically throwing away a person's sins, others as a reenactment of Ayyappan's victory over the buffalo demoness Mahisi. Some scholars have also remarked on the similarity of this ritual to Muslim pilgrims stoning pillars in Mecca (Sekar 60). Pilgrims undertaking the

last leg of the journey from Pampa first bathe in the river which the town is named for (Sekar 64). This bathing, as in one possible understanding of the ravine ritual, is intended to rid a person of their sins before proceeding to the temple.

After arriving at the temple, pilgrims smash ghee filled coconuts against the steps, before climbing those steps and entering into the temple itself (Younger 20). In the temple they witness priests pour ghee filled coconuts over the image of Ayyappan. Once the final act of the pilgrimage is complete, the pilgrims turn homewards, lingering only briefly once reaching the goal of their last several weeks (Younger 20).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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RELATED TOPICS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Ayyappan
Bhutanathopakhyanam
Caste

Dravidian
Kerala
Liminality
Mahisi
Mohini
Pampa
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Vaver

NOTEWORTHY WEBSITES RELATED TO THE TOPIC

<http://www.ayyappan-ldc.com/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabarimala>

<http://www.sabarimala.org/>

<http://plerinageayappa.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.saranamayyappa.org/index.asp>

<http://www.sabarimala.org.in/>

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