

## Selling Ayyappan

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The Malayalam teleSerial Swamy Ayyappan, now being telecast on the Asianet channel Monday through Friday, is reportedly proving quite popular. Naturally, for Ayyappan is a genial god whose unpretentious shrine at Sabarimala in the Western Ghats draws millions of pilgrims every year. They have great fascination for the story. Hindus in Kerala believe that Ayyappan is Hariharaputran—son of Hari (Vishnu) and Haran (Shiva). Vishnu took birth as Mohini, so goes the bizarre myth, to lure the asuras into parting with the divine amrit. Mohini enticed Shiva, but abandoned the product of their union, a male child, in the forest. The king of Panthalam, off Sabarimala, found the infant and took him to the palace where he grew up to become Ayyappan. The commercial serial sticks to this myth and thus places Ayyappan in a Hindu milieu. Vishnu, Shiva and their consorts figure prominently in the serial, as does the ubiquitous sage, Narada.

But is Ayyappan a Hindu? It should be noted that this unique god does not find mention in the Hindu holy books. There is a plausible theory that he is a pre-Aryan subaltern deity who fell victim to the Aryan onslaught. The very name 'Ayyappan' has a Dravidian ring about it, like Ayyanar of the Tamils. More important, unlike other devas, Ayyappan has his feet firmly in the fertile Kerala soil. Historically, he was the adopted son of the ruler of Panthalam. Even now the deity's gold ornaments are kept in safe custody in the palace in Panthalam and brought to the hill-top shrine during the Mandala Puja season amid much din and bustle.

The story goes that while living in the palace, the queen who loved her son more than the foster son feigned illness on the advice of a wily minister, and the physician dutifully prescribed tiger's milk. Ayyappan rushed to the forest and came back riding a tiger, with its young ones in toe. The blown-up logo of a tiger-riding Ayyappan can be found in the house of many a devotee. Well-known historian Romila Thapar refers to this and comments : "In many rural areas there is to this day an all-purpose holy man who rides a tiger and is variously called Barekhan Ghazi or Satya-pir, and is worshipped by all, irrespective of formal religious affiliations. This bond, or even the subconscious memory of a bond binding a range of peoples, had no-formal definition. This was the religious articulation of the majority of the people in such areas. When we arbitrarily attach such religious expression to either Islam or Hinduism, we perhaps misrepresent the nature of these beliefs." (The Tyranny of Labels. *Social Scientist*, September-October, 1996)

The adivasis mainly worshipped female deities. Male gods came to the scene in the first centuries of the Christian era. The tribals who cultivated the soil for their daily food worshipped the earth as mother. Under the Aryans, however, mother goddesses morphed into Kali and Durga; Murugan of the Tamils too assumed a Hindu complexion. Dravidian places of worship called *kavus* became Hindu temples. Now, folklore is a vast treasure house of unwritten history of the people, their anxieties, sorrows and dreams, their struggles, victories and defeats. Hindu

fundamentalists have been making a determined bid to delete this unwritten people's history as part of a project to nibble away at the plurality of the social fabric.

The fundamentalists have made its presence felt in Sabarimala. The Sangh Parivar, which operates in Kerala through its temple protection committees, among other outfits, set up a *Santhi Sena* to look after the welfare of the pilgrims, beefing up the force regularly. There have even been paranoiac efforts to clear the place of Muslim traders. Saffron groups provide medical assistance to sick and inform pilgrims, supply drinking water and bring out 'guides' which present Ayyappan as a Hindu god.

More specifically, Ayyappan was not any subaltern god, but the Buddha. During the pilgrims' arduous trek to Sabarimala, the deep forests resonate with chants like 'Swami Sharanam', 'Ayyappa Sharanam'. Also, prior to the pilgrimage, the devotee is supposed to lead an austere sanyasi's life for 41 days, wearing black clothes and a garland of beads, abstaining from sex, non-vegetarian food and liquor and frequently invoking the lord with loud 'Sharanam' chant. Does not this Sharanam ring a Buddhist bell—*Buddham Sharanam Gachchami*, etc? Again, to the genuine devotees, the trek, shoulder-to-shoulder, to Sabarimala is a journey of self-discovery - they belong to the same family and address one another as Swamy. Indeed, every devotee is considered an Ayyappan himself. Ayyappan is perhaps the only god in Kerala who welcomes all, without distinction of caste or religion, into his presence. Sabarimala will never allow 'purification' ceremonies of the kind conducted recently in the Guruvayur Krishna temple where a central minister, a Hindu with a Christian wife, took his grandson. This absence of rigid caste or religious barriers is evidently a legacy of Buddhism.

Amarasimhan, the Buddhist author of *Amarakosam*, also identified Ayyappan with the Buddha. The deity in Sabarimala has striking similarities with the meditating Buddha. The discovery of a stone idol of the founder of Buddhism at Pallippuram in south Kerala not long ago seems to have clinched the issue. Besides, the pilgrims—Hindu and non-Hindu—worship and accept prasada at the shrine of Vavar who, it is believed, was Ayyappan's Muslim Man Friday. There is general agreement that 'Vavar' is a corruption of the name 'Babar', though some scholars believe that he was a Buddhist acharya named Bavari. The pilgrims also bow before Malikappurathamma, a mother goddess, and Karutha and Karuppa, believed to have been Ayyappan's close tribal comrades. Besides the Sabarimala shrine, numerous places of worship where Ayyappan, also called Dharma Sastha, is the presiding deity, dot Kerala. With this difference that these are Hindu temples now.

It is well known that Buddhism and Jainism flourished in this region in the first centuries after Christ. Preached in simple language and shorn of jargons of mysticism, the Buddhist karma theory, which is different from its Hindu counterpart, taught people to give up strange *yagnas* and other rituals and love their brethren and work hard for salvation in this life itself. These non-theist faiths challenged caste discrimination and Brahmin domination and changed the course of life of the superstitious, ancestor-worshipping people to a certain extent -- till the rise of Brahminism. The Brahmins appropriated Lord Buddha, their

arch enemy, and included him in the Hindu pantheon as yet another avatar of Vishnu.

Meanwhile, the spirituality industry has come as a godsend in a state which is notoriously backward in industrialization and where religious rituals have emerged as a way to escape life's boredom and existential worries. According to the findings of an *India Today* (Malayalam) survey, 10 million pilgrims visit the shrine every year. The impact of this huge human presence on the environment has been catastrophic: during the pilgrimage season there is more stinking waste matter than water in the Pampa river near the shrine. Yet the authorities have been busy boosting pilgrimage tourism, as it puts whopping revenue in the government kitty; to hell with its environmental and cultural fallout. Owners of luxury buses, tour operators, dealers in cassettes, traders selling black mundus and puja items all do lucrative business in the southern states. So those who bankroll and dish out TV soaps which put people to sleep cannot be expected to lag behind.

Such programmes "fill the silence of the people with articulations of the dominant groups," as well-known Malayalam poet K. Satchidanandan puts it. Already, there is too much of religion on the idiot box in Kerala. Even as Asianet is airing this serial, there is another devotional serial on another Malayalam channel, Surya - on a Hindu mother goddess. But then, at least these two channels do not boast of any progressive ideological baggage; Kairali TV, floated by the CPI(M), religiously provides live telecast of important festivals in temples and churches. The Mata Amritanandamayi Mutt and a Christian group also have channels to sell their own brands of spirituality. The Ramayana telecast by Doordarshan in the late eighties helped the Sangh parivar in mobilizing the Hindu masses on a national scale on the issue of the Rama temple in Ayodhya. The Asianet serial may also contribute towards Hindu consolidation in Kerala where Christians and Muslims together constitute over 40 percent of the population.