

DURGA WORSHIP IN KERALA.

(N.V.Krishna Warrior)

Every evening, as part of her daily prayers, my mother recites a metrical composition containing the names of 108 places, both ^{some} obscure and ^{some} well-known, but ^{all} equally hallowed by the presence of temples of Goddess Durga. Mostly on the western sea-board, these temples are distributed between Kanyākumārī in the south and Kollūr in south Canara in the north. At the time when this poem was composed Kerala was divided into several political entities, but the cultural boundaries of Kerala ~~was~~ supposed to have been Gokarna in the north and Kanyakumari in the south. This devotional poem was ^{my} first lesson in regional Geography and at school we used to ^{try to} locate these 108 places ^{on a} map of the then Madras presidency, which also depicted the native States of Cochin and Travancore. Even now I experience a rare thrill, when chancing to pass a dilapidated village temple I stop to enquire the name of the place and discover that here in front of me is one holy seat of Durga mentioned by the ancient hymnist in the list of 108 Durga temples of Kerala.

Topping the list is Valayālaya, now known as ŪRAKAM, a place about 8 miles to the south of Trichur on the Trichur-Cranganore route. The Goddess of this temple has been referred to ~~in Sanskrit and Malayalam~~ in a number of literary works both in Sanskrit and ⁱⁿ Malayalam, and folk-lore credits her to have been the most beautiful of all the 108 Durgas inhabiting Kerala. It is a fact that the image of the Goddess here, either in the original black stone or in ^{its} the burnished gold sheath has a ravishing sweetness of its own. A vast area surrounding the temple was supposed to ^{have been} the SANKETA of the Goddess into which the rough rulers of old did not dare to carry their ^{weapons.} quarrels. Even paupers could not be arrested once they entered this ~~area~~ sacred precinct.

This ^{charming} beautiful Durga is conceived as SRĪVIDYĀ whose body is composed of the 51 syllables of the alphabet and who herself is "the honey dripping from the innumerable flowers blossoming on the tree of the Vedas." Being the beloved sister of Vishnu, she is fond of only SATWIKĀ ^{both of} worship, consisting of offerings of ^{white} flowers, sweet NAIVEDYA like milk pudding and hymns like SRĪSUKTA. Nobody has dared to think of offering animal sacrifice within her SANKETA. During the NAVARĀTHI festival she is especially worshipped as the Goddess of knowledge, even though a collection of palm leaf manuscripts is also worshipped separately as Goddess Saraswati in the same temple. And artists from far and wide come to this temple to offer SEVA or free exhibition of their artistic talents as a mode of worship to the Goddess Durga.

About 15 miles to the south of VALAYĀLAYA is the famous abode of SRIKURUMBĀ, the Kālī of Kodungallur (Cranganore). The object of universal love and fear, this terrible "MOTHER" is the Goddess of small-pox and similar dreaded diseases. Her temple is a famous pilgrim centre, perhaps second ^{in popularity} only to the hill-shrine of the ŚĀSTĀ of SABARIMALA. Every year on the ^{ĀṢVĪNĪ} constellation in the month of MĪNĀ (March-April) devotees ~~gather~~ converge on this sea-shore temple in their thousands- men and women from villages far and near, carrying their offerings consisting of black ~~mix~~ pepper, Turmeric-powder, small coins of silver and copper and live cocks. Till recently it was the custom here to offer the sacrifices of fowl in lakhs. This has now been prohibited, and pilgrims have to gain what solace they can by leaving their fowls within the temple premises.

The pilgrims to this temple carry ~~to~~ short sticks, and beating them to keep the rhythm, they sing all sort of obscene songs along the entire route ^{to} and even in the sacred precinct. These poems were our first lessons in KĀMĀSĀSTRA, and even though prohibited officially, these songs could be heard on the roads ^{even now.} ~~during the season of this festival.~~ Women of decent families avoid ~~these roads~~ as far as possible these roads during the season of this festival. Another feature of this pilgrimage, ^{is} the hosts

of KOMARAMS or oracles, clad in red, with jingling CILAMPUS or anklets of bronze, ^{and} heavy bell-studded waist-bands of the same metal, these oracles carry curved swords in their hand. Whenever they are possessed by the Goddess, which happens quite frequently, they leap and dance, ~~and~~ shout in a characteristic way and parting their flowing hair make a long ^{dent} ~~wound~~ on the crown of the head with their swords and offer ~~this~~ ^{gushing from this wound} blood to their bloodthirsty Goddess. The worship at the Kāli temple in Cranganore is conducted ~~in~~ according to ŚĀKTA or KAULA tenets. The Durga is conceived in her terrible aspect as the killer of the demon Mahisha and is propitiated by the offerings of blood, red flowers, Naivedya sweetened with black jaggery and Tantric hymns.

Thus, within fifteen miles of each other, we have ^{examples of} the two traditions of Durga worship ~~in Kerala~~ - the SĀTWIKA ^{tradition} worship tempered with the ~~the~~ upper-class culture of Advaita Philosophy, Vaishnav ~~literature~~ ^{sophisticated} and artistic achievements, and the TĀMĀSA ^{tradition} worship ~~deeply rooted in the~~ ^{and deeply rooted in} absolute surrender to the dreaded Power above ^{folk literature} and lower-caste ^{culture} ~~traditions~~ ~~with~~ ~~its~~ ~~own~~ ~~origins~~ ~~perhaps~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ dark slimes of prehistory.

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