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SACRED NARRATIVES: EXPLORING GURUVAYUR TEMPLE IN POETRY AND PROSE

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Abstract

This paper discusses mainly the role of Guruvayur Temple in Literatures. Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple is also called “Boologa Vaikuntha” and is one of the five popular Krishna temples in India. It is rich in heritage, culture and values. People around the world throng here every day and one of the most visited religious places in Kerala. Guruvayur has earned the cognomen as, “Dwarka of South India”. The main god of the temple is Lord Krishna an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The idol was carved out of a sacred material called Pathala Anjana Sila. The fame of Guruvayur spread across the world after composing the Narayaneeyam by Melppathur Narayana Bhattatiri. It was mainly due to the five devotees who disseminated the glory of Lord Guruvayurappan. They are Poonthanam, Melpattur Narayana Bhattathiri, Vilvamangalam, Kururamma, and the Zamorin Prince Manadevan.

Keywords: Dwarka, Incarnation, Jnana Pana, Narada Purana

Introduction

From ancient times temples are considered as the most important place for the Hindus. They are seen as a sacred place where they worship and bind themselves with their gods. There are old sayings “don’t reside in a place where there is no temple” and it proves how temples play a significant role in one’s life and the place of hope. For many Hindus, a temple is a place of solace during their difficult situation. Going to the temple is not a ritual but it is a way of life given to us by our ancestors. The benefits we get by going to the temple are as follows: 1) as we walk around the temple it is a physical exercise for our body, 2) while we indulge ourselves to the divine sculpture we get peace of mind, 3) as we mingle with other devotees’ fraternity is developed, 4) listening to the chants of the holy mantras our soul gets refreshed, 5) as temple is surrounded by the positive vibes our soul and body is recharged. The most important thing to be followed while visiting a temple is to be respectful. This means removing your shoes, washing the feet, keeping our clothing modest, and not touching any of the statues or paintings unnecessarily.

In history, there have been many famous temples that have been constructed by the kings to show their due respect to their god. All over India, there are many temples that people can visit irrespective of their religion. Each temple is special, different in style and has its own unique history and South India is a homeland to number of majestic temples. One such famous and ancient temple is Guruvayur temple situated in the state of Kerala. This article deals with the history of Guruvayur temple and its role in literature.

Guruvayur is located in Trissur District and it is one of the most visited places by the tourists and pilgrims in Kerala. The main god of the temple is Lord Krishna an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Here, Lord Krishna is called Sri Guruvayurappan and the temple is also called Guruvayur Sri Krishna Temple. Guruvayur has earned the cognomen as, “Dwaraka of South India” and “Heaven on Earth” (Boologa Vaikuntha). It is believed that Dwarka is the ancient city located in North India where Krishna had born. To mention the abode of Lord Krishna in the south i.e., in Guruvayur, the idol of Lord Vishnu has four arms with one carrying the conch (Shanku), another carrying the discus (Chakra), the third one carrying the mace (Gadha) and the last one holding a lotus. A strict dress code is followed for entering the temple. Men can only wear Dhoti and shorts for the boys. Male devotees are prohibited from wearing anything on the upper body other than a small towel. Women are only allowed to wear saris and salwar kameez.



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History of Guruvayur

The origin of Guruvayur temple will make one to mesmerize move themselves to a theist. By the year 1638 A.D., the central shrine is believed to have been reconstructed and after that it had become the most famous pilgrimage center in Kerala. It was mainly due to the five devotees who disseminated the glory of Lord Guruvayurappan. They are Poonthanam, Melpattur Narayana Bhattathiri, Vilvamangalam, Kururamma and the Zamorin Prince Manadevan.

In 1716 A.D., the Dutch plundered and set fire to the temple and was rebuilt in 1747 A.D. Haider Ali captured Calicut and Guruvayur in 1766 A.D., but spared the temple on the request of Srinivas Rao, the Governor of Malabar, granted a free gift - Devadaya and handed the temple back to the Hindus for a ransom which was paid by Vatakkepat Variyar. In 1789, Tipu Sultan, Haider Ali's son and successor of the throne defeat the Zamorin and made the Hindus to convert them to Islam.¹ Fearing destruction, the priests hide the deity, the Moola Vighraha (Main deity) underground, and the Urchsava vighraha (processional deity) was taken to Ambalapuzha. Tipu Sultan destroyed the smaller shrines, plundered, and set fire to the temple but a timely rain and an incorporeal voice forestalled the major destruction. After the English troops drove out Tipu Sultan's army, both the vighrahas (deities) were reinstated. Later on, the temple was revived by the contributions given by the people like Chempakassery Namboodiri, Deshavarma Namboodiri, and the Ullanad Pannikars. They offered everything that they possessed to the service of the lord. In 1928, the Zamorin of Calicut was reinstated as the administrator of Guruvayur temple. In 1931-32, a Sathyagraha was launched under the leadership of Kelappan (Kerala Gandhi), to permit the untouchables to enter in to the temple. This resulted in the Travancore Temple Entry proclamation in 1936 and since then every Hindus is allowed to have darshan of the lord.

On 1970, after the 6th day of the annual Ekadasi festival, a massive fire broke out in the temple the people irrespective of caste and creed fought the fire shoulder to shoulder. Despite five hours of the furious fire, the Sree Kovil, the moola vighraha Guruvayurappan, and the sub-shrines of Ganesha, Ayyappa and Devi, and the flag staff remained unblemished.²

Origin of the Idol

The famous literature Narayaneeyam says that the main deity in Guruvayur has an age of more than 5000 years. The idol was carved out of a sacred material called Pathala Anjana Sila (a sacred stone). It was once worshipped by the great God Maha Vishnu. Later, he handed it over to the Lord Brahma. After many centuries, the same idol was worshipped by Sri Krishna's parents Vasudeva and Devaki and later, it was installed in Dwaraka and worshipped by Krishna himself during his incarnation. Before leaving this mortal world Krishna handed over this Idol to his premier disciple Uddhava and instructed him to hand it over to Brihaspati, who is known as Guru of the Devas so that it may be placed in an appropriate place and worshipped during Kaliyuga.³

Dwarka was submerged because of inundation but Brihaspati with his foremost disciple Vayu (the lord of the wind) managed to retrieve the idol. At the time of searching for an appropriate place to install the idol they met Parasuram who was searching for an idol and he led them to a lush green venue behind a beautiful lake. It is the place where the Yogi God Shiva and his spouse Parvati would spend time in contemplation. They permitted Guru Brihaspati and Vayu to install and consecrate the idol there. From then on, the place came to be known as Guruvayur.⁴

Guruvayur as Gleaned from Literature

Around the 16th century after composing the Narayaneeyam by Melppathur Narayana Bhattatiri, the fame of Guruvayur spread all over the world. The Narayaneeyam is a devotional poem in Sanskrit work comprised of 1036 verses and narrates the summary of the great Bhagvatha Purana.⁵ The story begins as his Guru Achuta Pisharodi suffered from painful arthritis. Unable to bear his guru's suffering by his yogic power Bhattathiri transferred the disease to himself and relieved his Guru. He soon discovered that the pain was agonizing and to sort it out, he planned to make a pilgrimage to Guruvayur believing that Guruvayurappan would recover him from the disease. On the way to the temple, he is said to have met Thunjat Ezhuthacchan the author of Adhyatma Ramayana and he shocked Bhattathiri by saying "Mean Thottu



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Kottuka” (start with the fish). Later, he realized that Ezhuthachan was not asking him to eat fish but to start writing the Bhagavad by beginning the story of the Matsya Avatara which was an incarnation of Maha Vishnu in the form of fish. Subsequently, Bhattathiri started writing the poem by sitting in front of the lord Sri Guruvayurappan.⁶ He had completed Narayaneeyam in a hundred days by writing one Dasaka (ten stanzas) in one day. It is stated that on his last day of composing, he was blessed with the vision of lord Guruvayurappan and was cured of his agony.

Poonthanam was a contemporary of Bhattathiri, celebrated not for scholarly pursuits but for his profound devotion to Sri Guruvayurappan, a form of Lord Krishna worshipped in Guruvayur, Kerala. His most renowned work, “Jnanappana,” means “The Song of Wisdom,” and serves as a testament to his deep spiritual insights and experiences.⁷ Poonthanam married at the age of twenty, but for many years, his wife could not conceive. Desperate for a blessing, he prayed earnestly, pouring his heart into his devotion, and finally, his prayers were answered with the birth of a son. This joyous occasion prompted him to invite friends and family for a grand celebration, a moment of pure happiness that he had been waiting for a long time. Tragically, just an hour before the festivities were set to begin, disaster struck. The child suddenly passed away, leaving Poonthanam devastated and heartbroken. This profound loss shattered his world, prompting him to renounce all earthly pleasures and turn his life completely toward devotion. In his sorrow, he found solace in the belief that Krishna, his beloved deity, was not only a divine figure but also embodied the spirit of his lost child.⁸

Poonthanam famously expressed this sentiment in his poetry, stating, “Whilst little Krishna is dancing in our hearts, do we need little ones of our own?” This poignant reflection encapsulates his transformation - where grief evolved into a profound spiritual connection. He realized that the love he felt for his son could be redirected toward the divine, and through this, he found a deeper, more fulfilling relationship with Krishna. His life and works illustrate the themes of loss, devotion, and spiritual rebirth. Poonthanam's poetry resonates with anyone who has experienced sorrow, offering comfort through the idea that divine love can fill the emptiness left by worldly loss. His journey serves as a reminder of the power of faith and how devotion can transform our understanding of love and existence.⁹

Another great literary work was Narada Purana. The story goes as Janmejaya, the son of Parikshit and great-grandson of Arjuna conducted a fire sacrifice ceremony to kill all the snakes in the world. This is because Takshak, the king of serpents, killed his father. Thousands of snakes were killed in the sacrificial fire and before Takshaka was killed it was saved by a Brahmin named Astika.¹⁰ As Janmejaya was responsible for the death of innocent snakes he was cursed by the snakes that on his nuptial night he might be afflicted with leprosy. He was greatly sad. One day, he met sage Atreya and he advised him to take refuge under the feet of Lord Krishna at Guruvayur. Janmejaya indulges in prayers for ten months diligently. His prayer was accepted by the lord and he was completely cured.

Manaveda, the Zamorin king had a wish to see the Lord, Krishna. He told it to Vilwamangalam, a sage who stated that he was an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna and that he might appear before him whenever he wanted to see lord Krishna. Vilwamangalam swami replied Manaveda that he needed to get the consent of Lord Krishna. Next days, Swami told him that Lord Krishna have agreed and you could view him on the platform of Elanji tree on the early morning. Like that, Manaveda had a vision of Lord Krishna as a small boy playing near the Elanji tree. After seeing it, he was greatly excited and went near the boy to embrace him. As he approached the Lord, he disappeared stating that vilwamangalam had not mentioned it. A peacock feather from the headgear of lord Krishna has fallen on the floor. He was sad about his discourtesy behavior towards the lord. To show his devotion and innocence, he planned to write Krishnageeti and it will be adorned as the head gear for lord Krishna. Based on Krishnageeti the dance drama Krishnanattam was formulated and till today it was performed on the premises of Guruvayur temple to depict the deeds of Lord Krishna to the devotees.¹¹



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Literary Representations of Guruvayur Temple

Poetry

Several prominent poets have drawn inspiration from Guruvayur Temple, using their verses to convey deep devotion. For instance, G. Sankara Kurup, a noted Malayalam poet, intertwines the beauty of nature with spirituality, reflecting the temple's serene environment. In his poem, the vivid imagery of the temple juxtaposes the divine and natural worlds, encapsulating the essence of bhakti (devotion). Themes of longing and transcendence pervade these poetic expressions, allowing readers to connect with the spiritual experience of worship.¹²

Prose

In prose literature, Guruvayur Temple features prominently in the works of writers like M. T. Vasudevan Nair. His narratives often capture the cultural essence of the temple and its impact on community life.¹³ Through character development and plot progression, these stories illuminate the complexities of faith, tradition, and personal belief. Nair's works often depict the pilgrimage experience, portraying the temple as a sacred space where individual and collective identities converge.¹⁴

Conclusion

In exploring the sacred narratives of Guruvayur Temple, we uncover a rich tapestry woven with threads of devotion, mythology, and cultural heritage. This revered site, dedicated to Lord Krishna, transcends mere architectural grandeur; it serves as a living embodiment of spiritual and artistic expression. Through poetry and prose, the temple's stories come alive, reflecting the deep-seated beliefs and practices of countless devotees over centuries. The narratives surrounding Guruvayur are not just historical accounts; they encapsulate profound themes of love, sacrifice, and the eternal quest for connection with the divine. The temple's rituals, festivals, and daily practices create a rhythm that resonates with the lives of those who visit, fostering a sense of community and belonging. Each story told within its walls adds layers to its significance, intertwining personal experiences with collective memory.

The influence of Guruvayur extends beyond religious boundaries, inspiring artists, poets, and thinkers who seek to capture the essence of its spirituality. This intersection of faith and creativity underscores the universal human yearning for meaning and transcendence. As we delve into the sacred narratives, we also recognize the role of storytelling in shaping our understanding of the divine and the sacredness embedded in our everyday lives.

The temple stands as a beacon of hope and resilience, illustrating how sacred spaces can foster community, inspire creativity, and nurture the human spirit. In conclusion, let us carry forward the essence of Guruvayur - an invitation to experience the divine in our everyday lives, appreciate the power of storytelling, and acknowledge the interconnectedness of all who seek spiritual fulfillment. By engaging with these narratives, we not only honor the past but also contribute to the construction of the history of Guruvayur, ensuring that its legacy endures for generations to come. Whether visited in person or contemplated from afar, the temple serves as a poignant reminder of the sacredness that infuses our lives and the narratives that shape our understanding of the divine.

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