

Impact of Sabarimala Temple and Lord Ayyappa Cult in the Culture of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Sabarimala Temple and the Lord Ayyappa cult is associated with the culture and traditions of the land of Kerala or the South West strip of the nation, along the western ghats, from time dating back to CE 6th Century to the current times. The temple and the deity are integrated with the land of Kerala irrespective of the religion, caste, creed and the different localities of living. The Lord Ayyappa cult is directly influencing the psychology and physiology of the people across the land at different levels of engagement which will be enumerated in the study below with distinct variables. The aim of the study is to discuss this in detail while is actively forming the thought process of the society which is passively affecting the socio-economic scenario having more influence in the spiritual pursuits of a large mass. This is specifically aiming at the pilgrims who are also called as Ayyappans, Manikantans (Boy Pilgrim), Malikkapuram (Female Pilgrim) and the Guruswami (The pilgrim who as climbed the 18 holysteps, Pathinettam Padi, and has visited the Sabarimala with full 41 days of vrutham (penance), with a minimum of 18 times. There are mentions of many Guruswamis like Kulathinal Ganghadharan Pillai, Aloor Parameshwaran Nair and many more regionally. The study is detailed with the support of review of literature, personal interviews and direct visit to locations of importance. The Ayyappa cult and the annual pilgrimage to the temple is an undisputed cultural trait of the people of the region.

INTRODUCTION

Sabarimala temple is an integral part of the history of the south from time undocumented. The written history specifically mentions the existence of the temple from CE 1100+, where a clear-cut mention about the rituals of Sabarimala is specified connecting to the Kunnakkattu Family of Ranni ('Temples of Pathanamthitta'), The family still follows the tradition as the custodians of the Guruti Pooja of the Sabarimala Mallikkapuram Temple and are the Chief Priests for the Manimandapam in the temple premises which is the sanctum where Lord Ayyappa attained mahasamadhi. The current chieftain of the manimandapam, Shri. Ratheesh Ayyappa Kurup reckons this that genealogical priesthood is having a history of a millennium. He says; "I follow that which is showed by my forefathers and many of the tradition is transferred between the generation by words and practice than written records".

The temple is closely connected with other religious beliefs showcasing an example of the religious unity as it is linked to Islam via Vavar, a close aid of Lord Ayyappa and to the Christianity through famous Artungal Besalica via the Priest of the church who was also known be a mentor or aid of the Lord Ayyappa. The temple is synchronising the various sects of the society from tribal communities like Malaryans, Ulladans, Malapandarams etc; to different warrior tribes like Nairs; Ezhava Kurups; further to the Brahmins or Priest of different ritual patterns. The temple is located in the Periyar Tiger Reserve of the Western Ghats in the Pathanamthitta District of Kerala. The temple is having a structure with specially consecrated structures like;

Sannidhanam (Main Shrine) - The main shrine is the sanctum sanctorum where Lord Ayyappa is enshrined in a yogic posture. The deity is worshipped as a Naishtika Brahmacari or Nithyabrahmacari (eternal celibate).

The shrine follows traditional Kerala temple architecture, using stone, wood, and copper-plated roofing. Pathinettam Padi (18 Sacred Steps) - The 18 sacred steps lead to the main shrine and are among the most important features of Sabarimala. Pilgrims traditionally carry the Irumudi Kettu (Holy twin bundle) while climbing these steps. Each step symbolizes spiritual concepts defined connecting to various attributes of puranas (ancient stories), panchabhutas (five elements), panchakoshas (five sheaths) and various symbolization of dravidian spiritual steps. Malikappuram Kshethram (Temple) Located near the main shrine, the Malikappuram Temple is dedicated to Malikappurathamma (Mother Goddess). It is smaller and simpler in structure and represents devotion and patience. The temple is situated on a hilltop amidst dense forests of the Western Ghats. The natural environment is an integral part of the temple's structure, emphasizing renunciation and harmony with nature. Sabarimala Temple avoids elaborate decorations and towering gopurams. Its simple structure highlights equality, discipline, and spiritual focus.

Mandalavrutham, a 41 day vrutham, penance or vow, observed by the pilgrims before visiting the temple is having the history of centuries. The peculiarity of the vrutham is that this is observed by Men of any age and the women between the age of 10 yrs and 50 yrs rather the women who have the capacity to conceive a new life are denied from the visit to temple as per traditions. The vrutham mentioned is having strict vows of brahmacharyam (celibacy), sattvik food (vegetarian food), regular visits to temple in the early hours of dawn and dusk, having the strict adherence to yama; niyamas; The temple unlike the normal temple is open only during the mandalamasam and the makavillaku festival (typically between November 15 – Jan 20th), also in the first 5 days of malayalam month and during special festive. This is since the Lord Ayyapa cult is in the sanyassi (Monk) form who is not always in interactions with the worldly. The earlier mentioned vrutham of the pilgrim which they repeat year after year makes them psychologically and physiologically stable which is the key focus of the study mentioned here.

Guruswamis, the senior pilgrim who has accomplished the pilgrimage minimum 18 times is having a very critical role in the region especially in the traditional and cultural realms. They are highly respected in the society even by other religious believers and people irrespective of the regions. One of the senior most Guruswami of Kerala is Kulathinal Ganghadharan Pillai (92 Yrs), who has visited Sabarimala 72 times, that too with a special privilege of carrying the Thiruvabharanam (special gold ornaments of Lord Ayyappa) from Pandalam Valiyakoyikkal Palace (custodians of the Thiruvabharanam) to Sabarimala temple.

Guruswami Kulathinal Ganghadharan Pillai says; “After years of regular vruthams and practicing continuous submission to Lord Ayyappa, I feel that the all my life is continuously surrendered to Lord Ayyappa and is able to lift the Thiruvabharanam even now and used to carry it 85-90 kms between the palace and temple till the age of 88 yrs”

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Majority of the history, fables, traditions, folklore related to the temple and cult is passed on and circulated through oral communication through vernacular languages. The efforts were very minimal in documenting it via secondary documentation methods or rather the materials are lost during the historical evolution. Few of the religiously structured hymns where we get the details of the temple and its practices include: Sastha pattu, Chinthu pattu, Nayattu vili and Ayyappan pattu which are assimilated on the society of the region. “Pattu stands for songs in vernacular and villi is loud announcement”. Perinad Punnamottil family is the one of the prominent family who hold the right of the Nayattu villi of the Sabarimala temple (2024, Manimandapam & Thankadhwajam).

The roles of various tribes in the history of the Sabarimala temple is undisputed where in which they hold even the rights of Dravidian pooja hardly before a century (2019, Sabarimala Ayyappan Malarya Daivam). The life practices of the tribals in the current times are highly synchronized with the Ayyappa cult at different levels. Not only that the tradition is restricted to these communities Sasthavu, the primordial devata of Lord Ayyappa is mentioned as the Paradevatha (family deity) of the entire region irrespective of caste, creed and belief systems (2018, Sri Dharmasastha Charitham). The book also mentions the role of Saturn, the planet in the whole tradition of Sasthavu who is the presiding deity of Sabarimala.

Sabarimala as a temple is not standing alone in the spiritual circuit but there are many Sastha/Ayyappa temples which are connected with the Lord Ayyappa traditions as mentioned which include; Achankovil, Aryankavu, Kulathupuzha, Kanthamala (now at 40 acres estate, Moozhiyaar), Erumeli and as spread as 108 temples of Lord Sastha/Lord Ayyappa across the region (2020), Sabarimala Vijnanakosham).

Since the Sabarimala temple is not limited to the tale of Lord Ayyappa but also the Mother Goddess, Malikkapurathuamma, it is practiced by many that there is a tradition of considering the Sabarimala as a joint centre of Sakthya (Feminine Energy) and Dravidian worship. This is widely quoted by leading regional philosophers as Late Dr Vijayamohan V P and is having textual reference, 1995, Sreemad Ayyappa Bhagavatham. There are many elucidations about this approach of connecting the Malikkapurathamma to Kottravi Devi and Karineeli Amma, and Sasthavu of Sabarimala to Karinkutty Chathan, the dravidian GOD which is highly referred by Dr R Ramanand, a Kashmir Saivism expert and who authored the pathbreaking book (2019), Kuttichathan Ayyappan Sasthavu.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Sabarimala and the traditional practices are closely connected with the individual of spiritual pursuit and the family system of the region; The individuals under the directions of Guruswami will follow the penance and vows towards individual growth and realization as per the Lord Ayyappa traditions of Sabarimala. Few of the key vows include;

- Observing celibacy (brahmacharya)
- Maintaining mental purity and self-control
- Following a simple vegetarian diet
- Wearing black/blue clothing
- Avoiding intoxicants, violence, and immoral behaviour
- Practicing daily prayers, meditation, and service
- Living with humility and equality, addressing others as Swami or Ayyappa or Manikanta or Mallikkapuram

Social Equality & Brotherhood: During Mandalavrutham, caste, class, and social status dissolve. Everyone is treated equally as Ayyappa, promoting social harmony and inclusiveness. It reinforces the idea that spiritual discipline transcends social divisions. This strengthens unity, mutual respect, and collective identity.

Moral and Ethical Discipline: The vrutham enforces truthfulness, non-violence, self-restraint, and compassion. Devotees consciously avoid anger, greed, and harmful speech with a powerful reduction in antisocial behaviour, family conflicts, and substance abuse.

Psychological & Mental Health Benefits: Structured routine, prayer, and abstinence improve: regulation, stress control, patience and resilience. Devotees experience a sense of purpose, belonging, and inner peace. Improves collective mental well-being and emotional maturity.

Strengthening Community Bonds: Group prayers, bhajans, and pilgrim preparation create strong community networks. Guruswami-led groups promote mentorship, leadership, and accountability. Encourages cooperation, social support systems, and leadership values. **Promotion of Simple Living:** Minimalism in food, dress, and lifestyle counters excessive materialism. Teaches contentment, discipline, and sustainability. This encourages environmentally conscious and ethically balanced living.

Cultural Continuity & Identity: These practices preserve traditional values, rituals, and collective memory. It connects generations through shared spiritual practice. This strengthens cultural identity and continuity in a

rapidly modernizing society. This ecosystem is a social training system that cultivates self-discipline, equality, empathy, and moral responsibility.

Key Impact Factors of the Sabarimala spiritual ecosystem affecting in the society:

Equality	Reduces caste rigidity
Ethics	Strengthens moral discipline
Mental Health	Balancing emotional resilience
Community Bond	Improves brotherhood & unity
Culture	Secures the regional identity
Economic factors	Supports the livelihood
Environment factors	Promotes sustainable values

Economic impact of Sabarimala:

SABARIMALA TEMPLE



Large Influx of Pilgrims



Spending on Travel, Food, Offerings & Stay



Employment Generation



Growth of Local Trade & Small Businesses



Transport & Infrastructure Development



Government Revenue



Rural Income Circulation & Regional Development

Key factors of Mandalavrutham affecting the individual or society:

	SOCIAL EQUALITY <ul style="list-style-type: none">• No caste/class	
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SIMPLE LIVING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone as 'Swami' 	MORAL DISCIPLINE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-restraint Minimal lifestyle 	MANDALA VRUTHAM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41-Day Discipline Purity Self-control Devotion 	COMMUNITY & SERVICE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Truthfulness Non-violence Ethics
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brotherhood Annadanam (Food service) Volunteering 	

CONCLUSION

The impact of the Sabarimala temple and Lord Ayyappa cult in the society of Kerala is highly undisputed as the calendar of the state is set in a structure embarrassing the Mandala period from November – January and the first 5 days of the Malayalam month. The whole of the region is spiritually uplifted during the period. The whole of the Kerala region is into the practice of worshipping Lord Ayyappa irrespective of their caste, varied belief systems of Sanatan, the traditions what they follow. The life style of the people is attuned to the strong belief systems routed in the Lord Ayyappa tradition which is well connected with various localities in the state where we have a Lord Ayyappa temple to anchor the local people and the faith.

The regional traditional steps are initiated by the Guruswami of the region amongst the society and is taken a lead in spiritual drive of the families, temples and the rituals specially during the Mandalamasam. There is a tradition that atleast one of the male family members will be visiting Sabarimala temple wherein which the entire family will be following the vow and penance just like the pilgrim who is planning to visit Sabarimala.

The economic and individual level factors are very crucial and specific as far as the ecosystem is concerned since the Sabarimala temple and related pilgrimage is bringing in good revenue system for the society at different levels.

Lord Ayyappa is not distinct from the tradition of believing forefathers as Ayyappa is considered as the foremost teacher by the followers and is having a stature equal to forefather or ancestor in the household. It is stated in relevant religious and spiritual gatherings that Lord Ayyappa is the God owned by Kerala.

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