



Two Esoteric Temples of Kerala

Sometimes you gain rare insights from
inexplicable coincidences

When you are deeply engrossed in the teachings of our ancient masters, sometimes the words or messages keep ringing in your memory, and they produce unexpected results. This is

because the words of seers, sages or God-realised souls have immense potency of their own.

Quite recently, this was brought home to me in an unobtrusive, yet profound, way.

I had recently been working on two articles. One was titled 'Sri Muthuswami Dikshitar and *Saundaryalahari*.' It dealt with the influence of Adi Sankara's *Saundaryalahari* upon the 18th century music composer, Sri Muthuswami Dikshitar, one of the Music Trinity.

I was focussing specifically on the *kritis* on Sarasvati. And so, I happened to do an unconscious *parayanam* of sorts of these *kritis* and the relevant *slokas* in *Saundaryalahari*, and my mind kept ruminating over these. The other article titled 'Sri Sankara and *Sahasranama*' pertained to Sankara's commentary on *Vishnu Sahasranama* with special focus on the prelude.

I had just finished both when, suddenly and unexpectedly, an opportunity arose to visit Kerala for personal reasons. Our first stop was Kottayam. As an offshoot, things clicked smoothly into place and I was fortunate to have *darsan* of Goddess Sarasvati at Panachikad, near Kottayam. It is considered one of the rare *pratisthas* of the Goddess of Learning.

The Umbrella Goddess

There is an interesting story behind her manifestation. A Namboodri from a reputed family had no issues. He undertook pilgrimage to the north for *Gangasnan*. On the way, he stayed at the famous Mookambika temple.

One day, while in meditation, he heard the Devi's voice saying that he was not destined to have issues. Hence, he should return. The Goddess also revealed that a woman from another reputed family in the Namboodhiri's place would deliver twins, one of which he could adopt.

Accordingly, he started his return journey. When he reached Panachikad, he kept down his palm-leaf umbrella. (It is a custom for Namboothiris of Kerala to use this). He finished his ablutions and tried to lift the umbrella to re-commence his journey. It did not budge, however much he tried. A holy man suddenly appeared and said that the power of Devi Mookambika had descended on that umbrella and that it was imbued with her presence. He advised the Namboothiri to

transfer the power to a suitable icon. A search in the nearby forest revealed an icon guarded by a *Yakshi*. The Namboothiri appeased the *Yakshi* and transferred the power of the Goddess to that icon and consecrated it.

The original icon is now covered by plants and is not visible. These leaves are called Sarasvata leaves and are said to possess medicinal properties. Worship is now done to another icon placed opposite. Devi permanently resides in water as a perennial stream always surrounds her. She is also called Dakshina Mookambika. She is considered very powerful and numerous devotees flock to her, especially for successful studies of their children.

Navaratri is celebrated in a grand manner with music and dance. It is considered auspicious to begin *Vidyarambham* in this place on *Vijayadasami* day. The shrine has many unique features. From the entrance one has to descend a steep flight of stairs [Yes, when one seeks knowledge, the first requisite is humility!]. One first

has *darsan* of Lord Vishnu. The shrine of the Goddess is located to the south of Vishnu. It has no roof, situated as it is in a pond-like enclosure.

A special ghee sanctified with *mantras* is given here as *prasad*. It is said to bestow intellectual advancement. The Goddess is much sought after by artists and those seeking literary accomplishments. The whole place exudes serenity and sanctity which cannot but overpower the devotee. Needless to say, I was convinced that it was only the power of the *Saundaryalahari slokas* and the *kritis* of Dikshitar that had given me this unexpected *darsan*.

Temple for Dhanvantari

More surprises were in store for me. We next visited the famous Sri Krishna temple at Guruvayur. Though I had visited this temple quite a few times, this time, my entire perception was tinged with the words of Adi Sankara in his *Vishnu Sahasranama bhashya* – especially the lines 'Lord Vishnu roots out sins when meditated upon, seen, sung, praised, worshipped, remembered and

prostrated to'. Words of wisdom from our timeless scriptures change your perception, open up new vistas of experience and steer you to seek further, to try and experience what you may already know theoretically.

The temple as usual was heavily crowded, allowing only a fleeting *darsan*. As if to compensate for this, the Lord granted a leisurely *darsan* in yet another special form, that of Dhanvantari, at a temple in Nelluvai, a few km from Guruvayur. This is the presiding deity of Ayurveda and many people seek the deity's blessings. (This deity is special for Ayurvedic physicians, too. Many worship here for bestowing success in their prescribed cures).

The icon is said to have been given by the Ashvini *devatas* – the twin gods of medicine. It holds a pot of nectar in one hand and conforms to the *dhyana sloka* of Dhanvantari. People flock here seeking good health. A special oil and a special *prasad* called *mukkudi* are given here for eradication of all ailments. As I had been plagued

by health problems for quite some time, this unexpected *darsan* by the grace of Acharya Sankara overwhelmed me.

What else can we do but prostrate before the Acharya who always has the welfare of all at heart? *Namami Bhagavatpada Sankaram, loka sankaram* – Truly the words of great men have power. It is only a matter of time before they bestow results 🙏

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