

## COASTAL VILLAGE SCENES

Farther to the west, the village boasted many *Sastha* Temples alongside creeks and rivulets. The presiding deity - *Ayyappan* - was also ensconced smack in the middle of orchards, pastures and grasslands. The conventional name *Sastha* got garbled as *Sattan* - not to be confused with the Biblical *Satan*. *Sastha* is antithesis to *Satan*. I confess my ignorance about the language in which the name *Sastha* originated. Obviously, along the way, someone mangled the words: *veshti* became *vetti*, *gotti* became *ghosti*. It might have been the other way around too: hasn't *halal* become *appam*?

The *Sastha/Ayyappan* temples of the Kanyakumari district in the southern tip of Tamil Nadu and the Travancore district of the neighboring State of Kerala have been always very popular. Equally well known were the smaller shrines: *Elimeri*, *Panthalam*, *Kulattuppuzai*, *Ariankavu* and *Acchankovil*

We are talking here about *Sastha* reigning in temples in rural communities with a maximum of a thousand houses. There are others where the god shunned the towns and settled down in backwoods. Among those we have names like *Engodikandan*, *Erukkalai Udaiyar*, *Manikandan*, *Seravadil*, *Niirniraikaavukondan*, *Thenkarai Maharajan* and *Parakkodiankandan*. Then, we also have artifacts scattered all around the forest - remnants of carved figures in *yoga* postures and stone images of *Siva Lingam* warped and eroded over time. There is a suggestion that these relics were objects of worship for the thousands of Jains who sought refuge in this forest following the brutal persecution and impalement of their brethren by the *Saivites*. Whatever might be the truth in such accusations, the fact remains that today *Saivism* is atoning for its past sins. If it is true that *Saivism* implies the universal phenomena - the creation, preservation and destruction - we can see the same process reenacted in the present times. Gone are the days when *Sastha* was the prime object of reverence and veneration. Now, the priests attending on *Sastha* are the caste-members from the *Vellaalar* community who sport the sacred thread or members of the potter community. Now and then, you will notice a Nambiar performing the rituals. When we hear the word Nambiar, we might be mistaken thinking of the other Nambiar - the screen villain of the Tamil movies. The Nambiar I am referring to was also called *Bhattar* - a term describing the ancient worshippers, the *Adi Saivaites*. Some call them a sect of Brahmin community. It is not known if Brahmins had ever considered the Nambiar as a sub-sect of their own. They have

nothing to do with the other sects - the *Vadamars*, *Vaattimars*, *Bragacharanam* and *Choziyars*. Forget intermarriage between the two groups; we can't even be sure being if the two would accept *samapanthi bhojanam* - sitting next to one another and partake food. But they also serve as priests

The locals called the *agraharam* - the enclave of the Brahmins community - the village, or the *Brahmin colony*. Two Nambiars lived there and routinely performed religious services - both in the mornings and evenings - in various temples dedicated to *Siva*, *Sastha*, and *Ganesh*. In some temples *Shasta* also went by the name *Poovathan* with the idols looking like *mysorepalks* set upside down beside the huge altar used for animal sacrifice.

Our village had only one school that, by and large, served the three neighboring communities - *Vellangudi*, *Vairavikkudi*, and *Sambavarkkudi*. Classes were held only up to the fifth standard - a policy that continues to this day. Those were the days of wide-spread family planning schemes and, with the well-to-do families sending their offspring off to the suburban schools, the student population in our school had steadily declined and today the school has only one teacher. Even after a lapse of some 50 years, I still cherish the memories of my school days: I learned my basic math and ABCs there, played in the *verandahs* with friends and hit my head against a pillar. Toward the west, I walked two miles to the high school where I studied from the sixth to the eighth standard.

Our class included three Brahmin girls and other boys and girls from the neighboring rural communities of *Vellangudi*, *Nattangudi* and *Sambavarkkudi* - a total of forty-eight. Only one girl who lived less than a mile away came to the school in a dandy-cart. For lunch, the local boys went home; I always ate the same food packed in a small, metallic tiffin box - usually the leftovers or the hard-boiled rice with a pickle. The lunch break was only an hour - but for us that was mere conjecture. Only the teacher sported a *Fabre leuba* watch.

The dandy-cart would arrive everyday to take the girl out for lunch and then drop her back. Her skin shone like gold and I often wondered if even a slight touch of a flower might bruise it. The other two Brahmin girls - Sivakami and Sita - were like a pair of oxen that moved in opposite directions - if one went left, the other went right. The other girl Balambal was all by herself. Initially we suspected there was some kind of hostility between her and the other two girls and, even during our sixth, seventh and eighth standards, I didn't remember seeing the three girls bantering together or sharing an anecdote or something funny with one another. Even when

they talked with one another, it all sounded very solemn indicating a lack of friendship. Neither were there any signs of hostility between them. That always remained a mystery to us.

Balambal grew fond of me maybe because I was ahead of Sivakami and Sita in the class; I never ceded that rank to anyone. Maybe Balambal was asserting her pride by being close to me. From time to time, the three girls would be swapping their ranks with one another - but always after me. Balambal invariably came last in her group. She was the one who sought my help with her homework. She would borrow my text books and even ask me for ten pints of ink. That I aggressively sought female company was an open secret. My receding rib cage, protruding teeth, disheveled hair and diminutive figure, hardly tempted the opposite sex.

One afternoon, returning home on a school holiday in my eighth standard, I took a shortcut near a riverbank when I heard chimes from the nearby *Poovathan* temple. Eagerly looking forward to tasting the temple *prasadam* - puffed grain-snack - I peered inside and noticed Balambal praying and Nambiar brandishing a bell.

That temple had no separate spaces like a corridor, *sanctum-sanctorum*, or an altar for animal-sacrifice. It had something resembling a wall - chunks of rocks piled one above the other and laid in series on the ground along the three sides of the temple. The frontage consisted of an iron gate. Would any thief think of stealing the idol? The premises offered little protection from rain or hostile weather. There was no roof. One could avoid the gusty wind only by retreating to a corner where worshippers came to light oil lamps in the evenings

Sivarama Nambiar was gathering the paraphernalia for a ritual while I started my conversation with Balambal; the half-yearly exams were soon approaching.

“How are your studies going?”

“I am yet to catch up with social studies - that’s the only one still left.”

“Do you think Sivakami and Sita are done with theirs?”

“Don’t ask me about them . . . They never talk to me.”

“Why? Are you quarreling with each other?”

“No, nothing like that . . . Don’t they belong to a different caste?”

That was one of the biggest shocks of my youth.

“You all live in the same village. Don’t you?”

“Yes, but they never visit our homes . . . We too don’t visit them.”

“I noticed your father has the sacred thread . . . . .”

“Their men too wear it, but they would never sit next to us to have meals.”

I got confused even more.

*Sastha* is a vegetarian. His favorites are - sugar, raw rice, crushed cardamom seeds, dried ginger, and *payasam* made of rice, milk and grated coconut. I wondered if the last item was the only dish Balambal enjoyed three times a day.

I heard people say hiring a priest for the temple was becoming harder and harder. That was certainly no surprise: priesthood was a sign of abject poverty and a laborer in a construction site could earn more in wages and also get some gruel as midday meal. No priest in the village ever lived in a good home, had a decent meal or ridden a dandy-cart. Just a look at their wives told you of the grinding poverty they lived in.

Nambiars were as common as one-hump camels; not many from the potter community visited temples. When Nambiars were not around, the priestly duties were performed by *Saiva Pillaimars* who exhibited a distinct mark of recognition: a small chain of *rudraksha* beads tightly pressing against their Adam's apple; they went by the name *Gurukkal*. There was even a village named 'The Monastery of the *Gurukkal*.' Research reveals that the *Vellaalar* community has a priestly class with titles *Pookkatti Pandaram, Gurukkal, Dikshitar, Saivamudali, Othuvar, and Adi Saivar*.

Toward the west to the village there was a ridge next to which sat a *Sattan* Temple. It was not known how the presiding deity was named officially in the archives of the state government. In its appearance the sculpted image had little resemblance to conventional *Sastha* figure; its form was like a *Siva Lingam*, and the deity “who wore skies as clothes.” stood two feet tall, broad-hipped. The temple had no roof or a rampart. The deity stood on a platform, six feet by four feet, reaching to a height of three feet. The orchard was lush with a wide variety of flowers - oleander, bachelor button, crape jasmine, and dahlias, all in red, white, and pink colors. The flora included four palm trees, one mango tree, and ten coconut trees. Facing the ridge was a well with steps down to the water. The locals called it the ‘spring-water well.’

The orchard, the well and *Sattan* were held in a trusteeship of the eldest member of *Vengaikkadu* family reaching back to three generations. Their ancestors had mandated two full grainy bins from the barn to carry on the daily worship. Balambal's father Sivarama Nambiar was required to perform *puja* in the three temples every day. His monthly wages came to fifty-six liters of grains, an ample supply of sesame oil to light the lamps and rice to prepare the

offering to the devotees. As for the other necessities - flowers, fruits, coconuts, betel leaves, areca nuts, sandalwood, sacred ash, and firewood - these were routinely provided from time to time. As an emergency measure, an extra eight liters of grains might be available to the priest, but nothing else. For the rest, Nambiar and *Sattan* had to sort out things between themselves.

When it came to the temple attendance, this was no *Tirupati*, *Guruvayur*, *Kollura*, *Melmarunthuvar*, *Sabarimalai* or *Tiruvarangam*. Any plate-donations, even in small denominations like *half-annas* or *quarter-annas*, were out of question. Still, if a devotee showed up and asked for god's grace, he would be given a little sacred ash which he would generously smear on his forehead, chest and shoulder

The main event at the temple was during the harvest season when the landlord would visit the temple for worship and return to his farm with sacred ash on his forehead. Otherwise, *Sattan* enjoyed none of the customary privileges - public donations, tributes or festival celebrations.

According to the scriptures, the officiating priest had to bathe before performing the *puja* in the three temples. He would have a dip in a river or the spring-water well and, wearing only a wet *veshti*, offer a bath to the idol. Had some devotees offered oil for worship, it would all be used the same day: the priest would use half that amount for *abhisekam* and stone-lamps and the rest when he fried the raw rice to prepare *prasadam*. It would appear he used snuff only after he started catching cold following the customary baths three times a day.

The deity would be decked with white *erukkalai* flowers from the plants close to the temple. Didn't Lord Siva adore them and even donned them on his hair?

Has not *Tirumantiram* say as much?

*Easy for all to offer in worship a green leaf to the Lord,*

*Easy for all to give a mouthful to the cow,*

*Easy for all to give a handful of food to others before sitting down to eat,*

*Easy for all, good, kind words on others to bestow.<sup>1</sup>*

Without compromising his official duties, the priest would offer his services to the locals when they sought his presence at their homes on special occasions to sprinkle holy water as a sacramental protection - the birth of a baby, a girl coming of age, or a death in the family. The priest would go with *dharba*, the sacrificial grass, and oblation items. He would receive four

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<sup>1</sup> From *Tirumantiram* - A Tamil Scriptural Classic - published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai

*annas* as a fee for his services and sundry items that could be contained in half a gunny bag: raw rice, coconuts, sugar, dal, a bunch of ripe bananas, a good measure ghee and sesame oil, a stem of plantain tree, a small pumpkin, two raw bananas, four eggplants, tuberous crops like potato, colocasia, and yam, cucumbers, and a sari. At the end of the ritual, he would carry the gunny bag on his head, walk away from the sacramental site and go down the steps without ever turning his back and facing no one on his way out. Once in a while, he might hear a voice admonishing him: 'You better not turn back!'

A few noticing him on their path would mildly tease him: "Are you going to stuff yourself with everything or sell some of it?"

Typically, a priest was duty bound never to show anger or resentment and always "show positive response to provocative people and occasions." He has been enjoined "to abandon the urges and thoughts that are worldly - tit for tat." In the realm of spirituality, 'tit for tat' never works. Indian mythology includes tales where Lord Siva was hit with a stone or struck by *Gandiva*, Arjuna's bow. The priest was exhorted to train himself thus: "Neither my mind shall be affected by this, nor shall I give vent to evil words, but I will remain full of concern and pity, with a mind of love, and I will not give in to hatred." He was urged to turn the other cheek with joy.

The first time of a significant occurrence in the village - when the plantain tree produced a fruit or the cow gave the milk - a portion of the yield would be donated to the deity. Should there be a celebration - say, for an event like a birthday or a son-in-law's visit to escort his wife back home - the temple would be honored with a little portion and the boys in the neighborhood would share it.

During his walks, now and then, the priest would stop and chat with a farmer who might be collecting and putting away bananas, okra, eggplants, spinach or drum-sticks. The ostensible reason for the stop was to chit chat, but he would invariably end up with gift - a coconut or a handful of vegetables.

Nambiar rarely visited the fields when farmers would be busy appraising the crop yield lest his presence should be mistaken for a plea for their charity. Other than his customary duties, the priest was sought by the locals for advice on all sundry matters: the farmers wanted to know of an imminent rain; what the omens and premonitions portended; information on the new moon and full moon days, and the auspicious times and days for rituals. He was expected to have read

and memorized the entire almanac and to have the answers to their questions on religious matters on the tip of his tongue.

One always saw him in some quest - seeking and forever losing it. During the ritual, three times a day, he would be seen holding a circular, bell-metal vessel in the left hand, its contents covered under a banana leaf, while his right hand held on to the tip of his *veshti*. Could it be a vow or some act of meditation?

The *prasadam* would hardly fill up someone's belly. Often in the mornings the priest managed to have a coconut piece with some sugar bought for a quarter of anna from a vendor. Back at home, he would justify the extra expense to his folks.

Occasionally, he would have just a pair of bananas and be done with it.

Now he was getting ready for the evening worship at the orchard *Sattan* Temple. Hunger haunted him - he had already consumed whatever gruel that was left. There was no way he could borrow even some grain. It would take at least a ten days before the farmers would reap the harvest.

*Sattan* was supposed to take care of the all the creatures in the universe, and now Nambiar found himself responsible for *Sattan* as well. Could he approach someone in the neighborhood for a small loan? They would simply pounce on him with a question: "Have you sold the stuff and squandered the money?"

*Was poverty the price a priest paid for piety?*

*Forget about tomorrow; how to answer Sattan today?*

He finished the rituals, brandished the bell and lit camphor on a plate when he noticed the landlord coming up the steps and entering the temple. Nambiar politely extended the camphor flame and offered him *vibhuti*. The landlord smeared a pinch to his tongue and dabbed the rest to the forehead and his Adam's apple.

"Nambiar . . . Give me a little *prasadam* . . ."

The words jolted the priest - taking his breath away. He felt shamed as if he has suddenly been exposed to the world in his total nakedness . . .

"*Pillaivaal* . . . I have only some raw rice . . . Not even a piece of coconut . . ."

"Let me have a pinch . . . just a pinch . . ."

"Please . . . Excuse me . . ."

"If you don't. I can get it myself . . ."

The landlord held up the bronze vessel and uncovered it.

A slice of a mango stirred, like a blob of phosphorous smack in the middle of the vessel.

Nambiar felt as if bathed in sweat.

“Are you playing games with me? Can you deceive god? What is he going to say if you yourself betray him?”

Instantly Nambiar threw himself down on the floor. His voice choking, he let out a cry in desperation and said, his words breaking up.

“Yes, I am guilty . . . I am sorry . . . It is poverty . . . This will never happen again . . . .”

He had no inclination to get up. It was in that same orchard eight years ago, his eldest son, a twelve-year boy, had succumbed to snakebite. Had he been alive, he would be now performing rituals in the three temples; he could have been a valuable partner to his father.

Nambiar lay on the ground for a long time; he felt the aroma from his son’s body hung in the air.

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