

## THE VILLAGE DEITY

His name was Sangili Boothattaan but people know him as Sangili Poovathan. He has little to do with *Boothathalwar*, the erstwhile *Vaishnava* saint who belonged to a different era, was born in *Kadalmalai* and composed a hundred verses extolling Lord Vishnu. Again, the word *Bhootam* doesn't allude to a ghost, God's emissary or a *Ghandarva*; neither are we here talking about the five elements - earth, water, air, sky and fire. *Bhootam* here refers to the cohorts of Lord Siva who have been cursed and condemned to live as demons on the earth<sup>1</sup>.

We already have a demon on earth who devours the wicked; he is the guardian deity who sits smack at the centre of the village square. There is a literary allusion to such a monster; he is said to be a cousin of Sangili Boothattaan, but I can offer no proof to support that statement.

Maybe in the good old days there has been one demon for every one lakh of the population. The list of the wicked is a long and includes rogues, hypocrites, frauds, thieves, murderers, lechers, and cheats. Maybe there were twenty such specimens for every one lakh and the demon had to depend solely on such persons to satisfy his hunger; has he ever been fully gratified?

Now that number has skyrocketed as twenty for every hundred. We have more towns, more population but there have been no new demons in place; the ones that existed have either retired or even returned to their parental abodes. So, now we have no one to counter the wicked.

The state governments can always issue orders and establish demons in various categories - the stationary ogres, the roving spirits, and highway divinities as well demonesses to curtail the growth of the wicked. But such orders would not be enforceable in *Mount Kailasam*. As a matter of fact, we live in a socialist, secular democracy where such government declarations would not be enforceable even in our neighboring state. And should the deities refuse to accept bribes, the entire state administration would collapse. When I say state administration, I am referring to the ruling party, the party in the opposition, the party waiting in the wings to form the next government, the party with no ambition other than clinging with another, the party with only the leader and no followers, and the party with no leader. Parties come in all shades and forms.

We began with the story of Sangili Boothattaan and slipped into the story of the village deity; let us retrace our footsteps.

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<sup>1</sup> They are worshipped as village deities

There are twenty-seven village deities that constantly change their places; some are permanent members - like those of the UN Security Council. Invariably, these deities are found in the hamlets of every district in every South Indian village. One may question how all of them could manifest everywhere at the same time. That is easily explained: how do you explain the land, air, fire and the sun simultaneously showering their benevolence all over the earth?

Sangili Boothattaan is one of the permanent members of the deities who have their own shrines. Folk tales, folk songs and arts - *villuppaattu* - celebrate him as a regional chief and there are at least six versions of what caused him to come down to earth. But, right now, they do not deserve our most important consideration. My story centers on the boon that was bestowed upon him.

When these minor deities were ordered to appear on earth, either Lord Siva or Parvati granted them many benedictions, including the power to kill, the power to win.

Sangili Boothattaan's boon was his treasure-hoard consisting of several gold nuggets resembling dark jaggery; the honey brown colored raw lumps were in all sizes ranging from the sliver of a coconut to the half-cut copra used in the production of coconut oil.

Lord Siva presented Boothattaan a large urn full of gold nuggets. Lest he should lose it, the Lord provided, on either side of the urn, metal rings that were connected to the anklets through half-an-inch chains. Thus everything about Boothattaan was gold: golden rings, golden anklets, golden chains, and a golden urn full of gold.

I can't quantify that gold in terms of grams, pounds or kilos. I can only say that today the market value of gold is Rs. 890 per gram.

All the twenty-seven deities erected on pedestals stood on a huge tract of farmland where its owner Kannappa Panikkar harvested his crops. It was a sprawling site; on one side stood a shed for the cattle and, on the other, an area to lay down two large haystacks. Across from that location stood a den to store the farming implements like ploughs, yokes, scythes, sickles, bale splitter, livestock trailer, hedge cutter, hedge trimmer, mouse traps, gunny bags, pick axe, hatchet, chopper, cattle chains and straps . . .

At the farthest corner of the farm, under a *neem* tree, stood at waist-high level the twenty seven village deities - their names stretching into a long list . . .

*Sudalai Madan, Sudalai Peichi, Pulai Madan, Pulai Madatti, Kazumaadan, Mundan, Isakkiyamman, Kaliyamman, Muthuppattan, Mutuppeichi, Viyarvai Putran, Madan Tamburan, Boothattan, Sangili Boothattaan, and so on . . .*

As a matter of fact, there is absolutely no connection between Kannappa Panikkar and those who erected the pedestals in the first place. Panikkar bought the land from a family that had traditionally offered worship to the twenty-seven deities. Each deity had its own group of adherents, its ceremonial objects - costumes as well as armaments - tucked away in platforms and boxes in their houses.

Over the years the adherents had to face problems due to changes in the land value, poor compensation and land disposal. The land was the farmer's last resort for cash to meet expenses; the rest was his own house and the field. Many a deity was forcing its adherents into a financial crisis echoing the sentiment "God's property leads to family destruction."

During the land negotiations with Panikkar, the owners stipulated a condition that, on no account the pedestals could ever be demolished and that their families must have unrestrained access to the land.

Each pedestal remains a symbol for a deity that is represented by a stone in some form smeared with turmeric or vermilion. The shrine provides simply a worship area with no enclosure, no roof and no lock for entry. Once in a while, the entry would be clogged by wind-blown earth; otherwise, as far as the pedestals are concerned, Panikkar has nothing to worry about.

Kannappa Panikkar has no objection as to how the adherents chose to worship their respective deities. Recently, when the *Sudalai Madan* grove changed hands, that pedestal was uprooted to make room for an additional coconut tree; then, on the eighth day of the purchase, the new owner felt his tongue sprained and hovered over death. That episode turned Panikkar hysterical and since then he has been fretting with terror.

During the harvest time he would help himself to rest under the shade of the *neem* tree and enjoy the breeze; he would simply spread his towel beside the pedestal, rest his head under a folded arm, and take a nap.

Unlike some other deities *Sudalai Madan, Kazu Madan, Pulai Madan, Sangili Boothattaan* never demanded life as a sacrifice; he was strictly a vegetarian god gratified by the rice pudding made by boiling rice mixed with milk and sugar.

Unlike the other guardian deities Sangili Boothattaan roamed the region at his whim and fancy, usually on the full moon nights in late hours, when all other creatures rested.

He marched dragging the golden urn and chains clanking and scraping the ground along the way. The Tamil tradition had lionized royal processions with names like *Moovarula*, *Tirukkaiyilaya Gnana Ula*, and *Kulottunga Chozan Ula*. But so far no one has chosen to sing celebrating Sangili Boothattaan's pageant.

'When is this going to end?' he would often look back in anguish while making his routines. "Fate has condemned me to live with a single urn," he would moan. "What can one make of all the wealth that *Kubera* carries with him?"

The other twenty-six deities' reaction to his predicament was part sympathy, part irritation and part shame; for the sixteen guardian deities he was an utter embarrassment. The others, *Teradi Madan*, *Soolaikkarai Madan*, *Palattadi Maran*, *Kallukkuzi Madan*, *Cekkadi Madan*, *Maattuthozu Madan*, *Vandippurai Madan*, *Paditturai Madan*, *Panri Madan*, and *Maadaakkuzi Madan* responded with suppressed laughter.

It was the demoness *Vandi Malaichi* who one day made a sympathetic enquiry:

"I can't believe this; you are still not free from that load?"

The other demons carried no urns; still, they too had borne afflictions. *Mundan*, defiant and stubborn, had been suffering for the past seven years. A Malayali magician from *Peipparai* had condemned him to silence, and he would not be free from that curse until the next five years. A few centuries ago another magician tried to torment Sangili Boothattaan, but luckily he was spared - thanks to the meritorious deeds of his previous birth; even today, that memory strikes a terror in Boothattaan.

By and large, demons like Boothattaan did not frighten the general public. There were a few other members who traced their origin to Boothattaan but they raised no terror or trepidation. They were dismissed with a disdain as "the ones who liked the rice pudding with milk and sugar!" The one scared of violence is not likely to admire the noble mind.

Now, it is certainly possible to exchange the urn with another, but the recipient must be the right person. Whether it is a man or a woman, the situation demanded that the person must be in a state of reverie amidst the clank of the urn and chains and, with eyes still closed, must come forward and, using a sharp knife, cut his left, little finger to shed a few drops of blood as sacrifice.

How to figure out the right person? Lord Siva said: 'Seek the divine presence in the far South of a Jain monk who was born a thousand years ago.'

And the Jain monk spoke: "He must be a teetotaler; lives in pure and pious thoughts. His face reveals grace . . ."

The monk had a long list; but they were all impeccably great people who showed no iniquity between wealth and poverty; they sought no money. For some, the clink and chatter of the urn and chains prompted a state of meditation - sleep as well as conscience of the outer world. So, there was some hope, but how can you expect a person, noble in heart and mind, would keep a knife by the bedside? And what happens, while facing Sangili Boothattaan in dark and readiness to cut his finger, he opened his eyes by mistake? How the radiance of a thousand lightnings would burst into a fire ball - shattering and blinding the demon's eyes!

Then there were some lazy bums who dismissed the story of golden urn with a disdain: "What's this cock and bull story . . . The demon, treasure and the urn . . . It all looks nonsense . . . Even if it were true, we know we don't deserve any of it . . ."

If you wake up someone and offer him gold, he would probably test out if it is brass.

And, there was another group of 'right persons.' But they were the filthy rich with all their ill-gotten wealth accumulated over their lives; they were the 'little' *Kuberas*.

Boothattan was dead tired after his quest; he admitted reluctantly that he erred when he asked Lord Siva to grant him the boon. He lacked the intuition: one must possess a sharp intellect to realize that wealth meant knowledge - the fulfillment of one's mind.

'Why did I think of wealth? Could it be a slip of tongue - something that intruded and confused me?' he thought.

The moonlight comforted him: like a cloud reaching to the lofty mountain top or an infant leaping to its mother's breast, he longed to embrace it.

Probably the Lord Siva had laughed to himself when he granted the wish. "I even forgot to ask Him any remedy," Boothattan reflected. "The time was not appropriate; how long will I have to endure this suffering?"

He was in no mood to walk away from the moonlight. 'When am I going to walk again moving my hands and feet freely?' he agonized. The aroma of the *punnai* flowers hung in the air; the young women had long ago stopped donning the *punnai* flower on their tresses; still it

blooms every season without fail. He noticed two bandicoots crossing his way and rushing to their hideaway.

A Shivaite monk was resting on a *pial* with the begging bowl under his head. He snored loudly and, for an ascetic, he looked quite robust in health. Who was he? With his spiritual vision, Boothattan determined that the man was married, had three marriageable daughters and belonged to another village. Asceticism appeared to be his vocation just as many see social service as their calling.

‘Forget it! Where can I find a right person - a human being - as described by *Valluvar*? Haven’t we heard of a foreign philosopher who carried a lamp in the daytime looking for an honest man? Let me shield this monk from poverty. . . He does look like an honest man . . . After all, how can one survive in this world short of indulging in some unfair means? How much longer should I hauling the urn?’ He approached the mendicant.

He raised his voice and spoke in a stern voice: “Get up . . . Don’t open your eyes! Do as I say . . . I am Sangili Boothattan . . . I have gold nuggets in my possession . . . Have you got a knife? Take it out and without opening your eyes cut your left little finger and shed some blood . . .”

The ascetic was half asleep as he answered: “I can’t sell the gold. Would anyone buy gold from a monk? They would simply put me in a prison . . . Give me thousand rupees, if you can . . . Don’t disturb my sleep . . .”

Sangili Boothattan paused for a moment. The monk turned away and continued to snore.

Boothattan rested on the *pial*, totally exhausted, *and* mulled over his next move. With excruciating pain in the legs, maneuvering the wide-spread footsteps proved exasperating. Once again the mind reverted to grieving over his naiveté; why didn’t he display some sagacity in the Lord’s presence when he granted him the boon? He could have claimed - like the Demon King *Ravana* - total invincibility. It all had been a big mistake. Well, didn’t they call him and his peers evil and “the ones who liked the rice pudding with milk and sugar!”

Boothattan’s eyes turned redder; it was caused neither by intoxication, nor by lust. It came out of acute pain and he felt as if his Adam’s apple was ripped apart. He broke into loud tears, and the wind shook up the tree branches; birds started chirping at the odd hour; infants cried for milk; young women, aroused from amorous dreams, went back to sleep.

He recalled a past event when, having violated the Lord’s orders, he had been walking on a hot summer day dragging the urn along. Why not exchange the urn with someone - how does it

matter if it were a man or a woman - as long as they are the right ones? He stopped at a house and introduced himself: "My dear lady, I am Sangili Boothattaan." At the time the lady of the house was in rapt attention watching a mega T.V. series, its episode number 10,497.

"I am busy now; come back later," she told him.

When he returned to Kannappa Panikkar's farm, the other deities had all returned to their abodes. Vandi Malaichi, having finished her stint and helping herself with some betel leaves, seemed in a friendly mood when she asked: "Did anything happen today?"

"No auntie, " Boothattan answered her. "Like our Vallalar used to say, I spread out my wares in the bazaar, but nobody would buy anything. I am wasting my time. Where I can possibly go and vent out my grievance? I can't exchange my destiny with someone unqualified and the ones who are competent are not interested. See how *Thillai Natarajan* has forsaken me . . ."

"Can I give you a bit of advice? Why don't you simply return to *Kailasam*? That's the only way you can solve your problem . . . Now it all looks like an unending story . . ."

"How can I do such a thing? It has been a long time ago - thousands of years have since passed; I have even forgotten the path . . ." Boothattan lamented. " I have become an outlaw . . ."

"That's not a big problem . . . There was the trail *Appar* followed and another journey was undertaken by *Karaikkaal Ammayar* . . . You can ask someone to help you. There's also an opening out of Madurai, " she told him. "Why don't you rest for tomorrow and leave late at night?"

The idea was appealing to Boothattan. 'Was not Kailasam the abode of the Lord who devoured the poison from the Milk of Ocean and protected every one? He is the only one who will help unburden my freight. He is the one who carries all our sins and can also lighten them.

Still, a thought troubled him: Would he ever return from Kailasam once he had made his way there? Wouldn't someone occupy his shrine in Kannappa Naikkar farm?

Only six more days remained for the next new moon day. There is still time for a decision," he mused. "Meanwhile, let me have that rice pudding. "

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(Original title: Sangili Boothattan)