

# Sabarimalai

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Sabarimalai is an ancient hill of Kerala. About forty years ago this hill was surrounded by dense forest haunted by wild animals. Today Hindus have a temple on the top of the hill. The deity of this temple is known as Ayyappan—God Father. Travel on foot was unsafe and hazardous for many centuries. But vehicular roads have been opened providing transportation facilities to reach the hill.

The antiquity of Sabarimalai dates back between 2000 and 2500 years before Christ. Today this hill temple of Ayyappan has become the most renowned centre of pilgrimage to Hindus from all parts of India. Jains, Christians, foreigners and even Muslims visit the hill especially during the Makara Vilakku, the festival of Lights. More than three million pilgrims throng the hill to participate in the Makara Vilakku festival, an annual event of great religious importance in Kerala.

During the Makara Vilakku night a celestial phenomenon would appear on the sky. This phenomenon is in the shape of a lustrous star with a tiny tail. This radiating star could be visible to all for a few minutes and it would disappear in the sky. This phenomenon is called Makara Jyothi, the flame of supernatural light emanating from the heavenly world. According to legends, this flame had been appearing every year from time immemorial.

Sabarimalai has undergone three stages of religious transformation from Jainism to Buddhism and then to Hinduism. Ayyappan worshipped by the Hindus is not the personal name of any Vedic-Hindu God but a symbol of unification of all gods. The name of Ayyappan is untraceable in the Hindu religious scriptures. The word is classical Tamil spoken by the people of Kerala and Tamilnad several centuries ago. Ayyappan etymologically meant Mahadeva or Adideva, the first God Father and Protector.

The ancient inhabitants of Sabarimalai and its surrounding areas were hill tribes—Panchamos or Anaryas of Vedic India. They were an organised community and led an independent existence outside the pale of Vedic society. There is evidence to prove that even in those remote ages Arhant Dharma or Jainism prevailed in Kerala including Sabarimalai. Those hoary days were early centuries of Aryan penetration in South India.

About 4000 years or even much earlier, a tribal woman called Sabari arose to eminence and renown for her wisdom, learning and extreme penance. She lived on the hill and practised austerities in her hermitage. Jain monks might have preached Jainism and guided the people to live the right way of life in the remotest conners of Kerala. Sabari might have come into contact with some of the Jain monks, studied Jain Dharma under them, renounced worldly life in her younger days and was initiated as a nun in the Jain Monastic Order. The present hill on which she practised extreme penance and attained the highest state of spiritual wisdom came to be known as Sabarimalai for perpetuating her sacred memory. Today the hill has become a celebrated symbol of universal worship and the unity of Human Spirit in the religious annals of India.

Sage Valmiki in his *Rāmāyaṇa* has described Sabari in terms of a Mahasramani, which meant a great Jain Nun. Ascetic Bhagavan Mahavira was called Sramana Bhagavan in the Jain scriptures. Acarya Kundakunda has described ascetics of his order as sramanas. An Asokan inscription of 3rd century B.C. has described sramanas as Jain ascetics distinct from Brahmanas. Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar, the noted Indologist has opined that sramanas applied exclusively to the Jain ascetics or monks and not to any other mendicants. On the basis of all these scriptural and epigraphical evidences, we can say that Sabari was a great Jain nun substantiating the statement of the sage Valmiki.

We have trustworthy evidence to prove that in the days of Sabari, there existed on Sabarimalai some places of worship or even *stūpas* containing the body relics of the great Gurus or may be some footprints of Tirthankaras, hermitages and *ārāmas*—garden dwellings for Jain monks and *vidyālayas* or educational institutions conducted by them which are known as Pallis in Jain scriptures including Tamil scriptures. The relics have vanished in the course of several centuries either by vandalism or ravages of time.

In the *Mahāpurāṇam*, a Digambar Tamil scripture translated from Sanskrit, it is stated that Emperor Bharata, son of Rsabhadeva, founder of Jainism, Neminatha or Aristanemi of the *Vedas*, a cousin of Sri Kṛṣṇa and Samprati, a grand son of Asoka, a Jaina by faith were pioneers in propagating Jainism not only in India but throughout the world. Neminatha lived between 2000 and 2500 years before Christ. According to the *Mahāpurāṇam*, he came to South India and preached Jainism at Canjeevaram in Tamilnad. Some of the Neminatha's disciples might have visited Sabarimalai and stayed on this hill for propagating Jainism.

In these days, when Hindu pilgrims visit Sabarimalai they recite devotional hymns paying homage to Ayyappan throughout their journey. Among these hymns, they recite repeatedly *palli kettum ketteettu* which means they are carrying a package or bundle containing *pūjā* materials to worship at the Pallis, shrines or *stūpas*. These words are classical Tamil. Palli meant exclusively Jain temple and not Bauddha Viharas or Hindu temples. We do not find the word Palli in other scriptures except in those of the Jains. Palli is an Ardha-Magadhi Prakrit word, the language spoken by Mahavira and the Buddha while delivering their sermons before the common people of Magadha. It is the spoken dialect or language of the lower strata of society in the days of Mahavira. Jain monks of Magadha who came to Tamilnad and Kerala, may be in the 3rd century B.C. or much earlier, in the course of their discourses used the word Palli and gradually this word was adopted in Tamil language. The Roman traders who were in South India carried the word to Rome and Greece and it was incorporated in the Greek language. When the Christian churches were built in Rome in the 3rd century A.D. Palli became the name of the churches. There is no appropriate word in Greek to denote the church and hence the Roman fathers or missionaries called the churches as Pallis or houses of worship. Many other Tamil words which were used by Roman traders were also incorporated in Greek. To illustrate rice is called Arisi in Tamil, peacock is Mayil and ginger is Inchi. These Tamil words intermingled with the Greek language gradually transformed and adopted as Greek. Even today, these Tamil words are spoken and used by Romans, Greek and many other European nations. In later centuries Palli spread to Arabia and adopted in Arabic to denote mosques. Churches and mosques in Tamilnad, Kerala and many other parts of India are called Pallis even today. The word is a legacy from Magadha inherited by Rome, Greece and many other European countries besides Arabia and India. Further, primary schools run by Jain ascetics in Tamilnad and Kerala are called Pallikootams even today. Jain monks were pioneers in the field of education both in Tamilnad and Kerala. The Jain temples and dwellings of monks attached to the temples were also called Pallis. Many villages in Palghat district, my birth place, are called even today with a prefix of Palli. These villages are Elappalli, Nalleppalli, Polpalli Kallepalli, etc. A village in Travancore is called Karunagappalli ; Madanappalli and Yischinappalli are in Tamilnad. These facts go to prove that all these villages were residential areas of Jain monks and places of Jain worship several centuries ago. In the North and South Arcot districts of Tamilnad, there are many Jain temples and villages called Pallis. The hill temple Yirukoyilur is known as Pallichandal. This temple has become extinct but its relics remain even today. The temple at Karur is called Pazaanagapalli.



At Tindivanam near Madras existed a Jain temple called Palli. The Tricy Jinalaya is known as Perumpalli—the Great Jain Temple. The lands owned by temples are Palli Vayal or agricultural fields. In an inscription of the 1st century B. C. discovered at Mangalam village in Tamilnad two Jain temples which existed there were called Pallis. A Jain Hill temple at Alalhur near Palghat town is called Pallikunnu. It is no more but its relics are preserved in the Trichur Museum. An inscription found at Alalhur shows that the hill temple there was built nine hundred years ago. There were several other temples in Tamilnad and Kerala called Pallis but they have become extinct and their relics remain even today. On the basis of all these scriptural and epigraphical evidences to prove that Pallis also denoted Jain temples, we can safely say that there were Pallis on Sabarimalai about 4000 years ago.

There is no evidence to prove that Buddhism prevailed in Kerala before the 3rd century B.C. But some historians have opined that Mahendra, son of Asoka had visited Kerala on his way to Sri Lanka. An Asokan inscription has stated that Buddhist missionaries have been sent to Kerala in the 3rd century B. C. A legend says that Kerala was ruled by king Jayasimha Perumal in the 3rd century B.C. and he was a Buddhist. It might be that the king and a section of the people embraced the religion of the Buddha after the advent of Buddhist missionaries of Asoka. There is no record to prove that Buddhism prevailed in Kerala between the 2nd century B.C. and the 8th century A.D. But we can take it for granted that during these long centuries also there were a large number of Buddhists in Kerala because the Eaezhuvas came from Ceylon and settled in Kerala before the Christian era professed Buddhism. In the 9th century A.D. the central parts of Travancore were ruled by king Vikramaditya Varagunan. He was not only a devout Buddhist but also an ardent propagator of the faith. Varagunan sent a Buddha image to Qandahar in Afghanistan with his name in Devnagari inscribed on it. Archaeologists have discovered this Buddha image. Varagunan was a generous patron of both Jainism and Hinduism. In some of the *dānapatras* or charity deeds of the 9th century A.D. it is stated that the king had donated lands to Jaina and Buddhist temples. Hiuen T'sang, the Chinese pilgrim monk, from Nalanda has stated in his travel diary, the *Sazyu-chi* or Travels in the Western World or India that he came across many Nirgranthas or Jain ascetics and also Buddhist monks at Kanchipuram in Tamilnad in the 8th century A.D. This evidence would prove that in the days of Varagunan also there were Jainas and Buddhists not only in Tamilnad but also in Kerala situated not far from Kanchi. Varagunan installed a number of Buddha images and also built temples dedicated to Dharma Sastha or the Buddha in Travancore. According to Amarasingha, author

of *Amarakoṣa* Sastha is the Buddha. Amarasingha was a Jain by faith. A number of Buddha images and ruins of Sastha temples have been found in Travancore and the images are worshipped these days by the Hindus. An old book in Sanskrit has narrated some of the activities of Varagunan for promoting Buddhism in Kerala. This king was an eminent scholar noted for his religious toleration. He was a rationalist and a devotee in the Temple of the Universal Spirit. He was an ardent promoter of human brotherhood and peace in Kerala.

During the reign of Varagunan Sabarimalai, which was a noted centre of Jain worship in the previous centuries became a Buddhist centre of worship for the people of Kerala. Thus king is believed to have installed an image of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Buddha on Sabarimalai. It is the present image called Ayyappan worshipped by the Hindus. Similar Buddha images have been found in China, once the citadel of Mahayana Buddhism, in Asia.

After the 12th century A.D. Jainism and Buddhism declined in Kerala because of the revival of Saivism and Vaisnavism. Sabarimalai the centre of Buddhist worship in the previous centuries changed hands and fell under the management of the Pantalam king of Travancore. He continued to keep the Buddha image installed by Varagunan besides maintaining some of the Jain and Buddhist rites, ceremonies and long fasts of the Jains. The name of the Buddha image came to be known as Ayyappan or God Father. One of the trustworthy evidence to prove these facts is that Ayyappa pilgrims visiting Sabarimalai should observe fasts, restrain from eating meat or any other animal food preparations, they should not partake intoxicating beverages and should have no sexual relations with women. Another noteworthy custom is that the pilgrims should be clad in black garments, one of the age-old customs observed by the Buddhists in some of the South-East Asian countries while they were on pilgrimage. These Ayyappa Hindu pilgrims should also repeat devotional hymns like *śaraṇam Ayyappa Svāmiye śasanam*—I take refuge in Ayyappan. The *śaraṇam* is Buddhistic like *Buddham śaraṇam gacchāmi* or I surrender to the Buddha. Lastly, the pilgrims should ascend eighteen steps to reach the *sannidhānam* for *darśan* of the Ayyappa image. These eighteen steps are symbolic among the several rules of conduct prescribed not only in Jainism and Buddhism but also in Hinduism. There are several reasons to maintain the former Buddha image on Sabarimalai. One reason is that the Buddha is the 9th incarnation of Mahaviṣṇu according to *Bhāgavatham*, the most important Hindu scripture. Therefore, there is no reason why the Hindus should refuse to worship the image of the Buddha. Adi Sankara in the 8th century A.D.,

the supreme Master of all religions, who raised a Victory Pillar at Kanchipuram to commemorate his cultural conquest of India, was known as a Pracchanna Baudha or a Buddhist in disguise. Sankara has described the Buddha as the Emperor of the Yogis in this Kali age. Besides, in the days of Varagunan Buddhism was the preponderating religion of the people in Kerala but the Buddha image was also worshipped by the Hindus. There is evidence to prove on the basis of the scriptural references that because the Buddha was an incarnation of Mahavisnu it was justifiable for the Pantalan kings to keep the Buddha image for the worship of the Hindus.

Sabarimalai is a living monument of religious and cultural unification in Ayyappan, a great symbol of human brotherhood indispensable to a Democratic Secular Republic like India for promoting unity and peace among the people.