

## SABARIMALAI YATRA



*... experience of a life-time ...*

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## Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa

### Travelogue

This is an account of my experience from the recent first visit to Sabarimalai and not a travel guide or an instruction manual for the pilgrimage to Sabarimalai (I am certainly not qualified to do so). When viewed through the perspective of Vedanta, the penance and the pilgrimage to Sabarimalai is indeed a supreme means for spiritual progress; this conviction is the undercurrent of this travelogue; its objective is to share the inexplicable joy of the pilgrimage and the benign grace of Lord Ayyappan.

### 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017

I was at London Heathrow Airport to board the flight to Mumbai for my first trip to Sabarimalai. Strangely, all these years, I had not thought of such a pilgrimage. Although ‘Ayyappan’ is one of my names, and having taken trips to Mount Kailash, Amaranth and other beautiful places for pilgrimage and peace, somehow the call to Sabarimalai did not arrive, at least until recently.

Perhaps I must be harbouring a nudging itch somewhere within me for Ayyappan, because when the call eventually came, everything else followed flawlessly.

I guess the enchanting Ayyappan *puja* in London, organized by MitraSeva in January 2017, must have sown the seed, encasing a desire for Sabarimalai. What had flared up the fire was one subsequent casual call, a day before *Maha Shivratri*, to Prakash, my relative in Mumbai; he has been to Sabarimalai few times and when he inquired my interest to join him this year, I grabbed it with my heart; to me it was a divine call. Uma, as ever, was all keen to support.

The next day, February 24<sup>th</sup>, was the *Maha Shivratri*. After attending the midnight *bhajan* at Siddashram, I decided to extend the customary *Shivratri-vratam* into a 41-day*mandala-vratam* usually prescribed for the Sabarimalai-yatra. The choice of the day was also a happy coincidence as my departure for Sabarimalai on 6<sup>th</sup> April was exactly 41 days after the *Maha Shivratri*.

Since then, I have gathered mostly from the Internet on what is required to qualify for the pilgrimage; this has made me bit nervous too, as some of the stern austerities prescribed for the *mandala-vratam* could prove to be difficult to comply. By tradition, the prescribed requirements of *mandala-vratam* might have evolved over time; but without strict discipline, an uncompromising stand and a conducive life-style, total compliance is hard to achieve.

From the start, I was aware of my limitations; for some requirements, there was no effort on my part, for example, avoidance of drinking, smoking and meat-eating etc. ; these are habitually absent in my case; others such as regular fasting, eating *satvic* food, performing daily *puja* etc. were also easier to adopt as part of the routine. However, requirements such as walking on bare-foot, avoidance of shaving / personal grooming, sleeping on the floor, use of specific colour attire etc. were not practical, given my work-life essentials.

So, my penance was hardly complete to the required standard and nowhere closer to that of ardent devotees! Yet I consoled myself.

From the scriptures, we learn that the purpose of pilgrimage, penance and associated rituals is only for the cleansing of the mind, the subtlest of our faculty; the mind is *the means* to attain emancipation

(*moksha*) or to sustain the cycle of embodied life (*samsara*). In other words, mind is the gateway for freedom and its purification is the means for lasting fulfilment.

Vedanta shows that the mind is naturally inert and its subtlety provides the capacity to reflect the lustre of the Self, the effulgent *atma* or the Witness-Consciousness indwelling in all. As a reflecting mirror, when the *mind* reflects the effulgence of *atma*, it also appears to be ‘sentient’. The ‘sentient mind’ animates all other embodiments and gives rise to the ‘individuality’ or the ‘*Jeevatvam*’. Therefore, understanding the role of the mind and employing it as the instrument for perfection is essential.

A pure mind (*citta-suddi*) is void of likes and dislikes (*raga-dvesha*). Likes-dislikes lead to desirous-actions and therefore to the consequential bondage of the laws-of-*karma*; so, the removal of likes-dislikes should lead to *citta-suddi*. Only for this, *karma-yoga* or self-less actions and sacrifices are prescribed.

A pure mind should also have the capacity to focus, as only a focused mind (*citta-ehakraham*) can sustain the intensity of purpose. It is an ability to orient towards the goal, unassailably.

The ability to extend the mind (*citta-vishalam*) is also important to pursue higher ideals, particularly for the spiritual progress. Only for this, various *upasana* to contemplate on both the microcosm and macrocosm are given in the scripture.

Finally, a relaxed mind is one that can remain as a witness without undergoing changes. Listening to enchanting music, observing the beauty of the nature etc. are some examples of attaining mental relaxation.

Therefore, achieving an unblemished mind and reorienting it towards the Self must be the sole purpose of any pilgrimage. All rituals, *upasana* and so, the *mandala-vratam* for the Sabarimalai-pilgrimage, are only the *means* for preparing the mind. The physical, vocal and mental actions (*kayika, vacika, manasa karma*) performed for the *Sabarimalai-yatra* to be done only in the name of God, with no selfish motives. As all devotees are treated equal, with no discrimination, there is no room for *raga-dvesha*. The *bhajan, nama-sankeertanam* and *sarana-ghosham* etc. help in relaxing and focusing the mind.

Of course, this understanding alone does not give the right for anyone to bypass the requirements for the *mandala-vratam*! I was only consoling myself that my inadequacy in some aspects of the rigorous *mandala-vratam* may be excused, provided the goal is forever contemplated in the mind. To remind me of this 41day-*vratam*, I composed and contemplated a short prayer, seeking 41 boons towards the spiritual progress.

I must also mention another lesson in life: *Unless we seek, we don't see even things that are in sight!*

As if to prove this statement, I took notice of the beautiful temple of Lord Ayyappan in Harrow-Weald, not far from my place of residence only recently. The point is, although it is in existence for quite a few years, my good fortune to visit the temple had come only just. Having found this beautiful temple of enchanting deities and divine ambience, I visited as often as I could. The priest had gladly offered some advice about the pilgrimage and performed the initiation by placing the ‘*mala*’, a beaded necklace on me, as a *mudra* or a symbol for taking up the pilgrimage.

During the flight, I was only thinking about legends of Lord Ayyappan which I have learnt from various sources and the underlying truth from the perspective of Vedanta.

## Dharma Shasta Ayyappan

There are many legends about Dharma-Shasta and the special mention is in the Skanda-Purana, where Dharma-Shasta is shown as the *bhutapati*, the Lord of all elements of embodiments. He is also the teacher or *Shasta*. There are also other legends that portray Dharma-Shasta as *Harihara-putran*, the son of both Hari (*visnu*) and Hara (*shiva*). There are many views about this among different schools of thought.

Lord Ayyappan is the avatar of Dharma-Shasta. Descending on the earth as a child and adopted by the Pandala Raja as ‘Manikantan’, Lord Ayyappan grew into a prince of supreme qualities, a Seer and a Warrior of great calibre . By performing various miracles, Lord Ayyappan merged with the Dharma-Shasta, enshrined in the temple of Sabarimalai. While Dharma-Shasta is hailed in many forms including as the Lord with two wives, ‘Purana’ and ‘Pushkala’, Lord Ayyappan is deemed as the *ekanda tatvam*, in other words as the non-dual *Brahman* only.

The history of Manikantan as Lord Ayyappan and the tales from the *purana* on Dharma Shasta are often mixed, leading to various legends, interpretations and debates. Without a true understanding of the purpose of *Purana*, the seemingly contradictory legends and concepts could not be resolved.

### Context of Purana

There are essentially three methods to impart knowledge.

First is by direct ‘**instruction**’, like a king ordering the common. This method is used in the *shastra* as the *shastra* instructs ‘to do’ and ‘not to do’. Generally, it is not easy to take instructions without questioning or obeying with total confidence, unless one has the *viveka* (discriminating intellect) and *vinaya* (obedience). With *viveka*, the validity of scriptures is understood; with *vinaya*, the authority of scriptures is accepted. As *viveka* and *vinaya* are rare qualities, only a few can gain the knowledge directly from the scriptures.

The second is by ‘informing’ or ‘mentoring’. This method is used in *smriti*, like Sri Bhagavad-Gita. For this approach, mutual trust is necessary; even though *vinaya* may be absent, one can assimilate what is being told and draw right conclusions about the imparted knowledge with *viveka*.

While knowledge is imparted directly in the above two methods, it is done only indirectly, in the third method, which is by ‘indulgence’; fanciful stories are used to indirectly impart the knowledge. This is essential if the recipient is not endowed with adequate *viveka* and *vinaya*. This method is used in the *Purana*. Like a mother feeding the child through all sorts of stories and acts, *purana* imparts the knowledge through web of fanciful stories. Like a child, we are also unaware of being nourished by the *Purana*, through the exaggerated tales of interest.

The very word ‘*Purana*’ stands for ‘*Pura nava abi*’ meaning that ‘ancient yet current and relevant’. A concept can remain ‘current and relevant’ only if it is the eternal truth. Therefore, the import of *Purana* should be the essence of Vedanta only. The seeming contradictions in the *Purana* are irrelevant as long as the right knowledge imparted is gained.

As an aspiring student of Vedanta, I see the concept of Lord Ayyappan only as the true essence of Vedanta.

## **Essence of Vedanta**

From the perspective of Vedanta, *Brahman*, the immutable, eternal existence is the only, non-dual truth; only the power of *Brahman* is the cause of all manifestations; therefore, all embodiments are only divine.

As the non-dual, immutable existence, the *Brahman* is referred to as the *nirguna Brahman*. Being totally free of all limitations (such as space, time, attributes and causation), *Brahman* is also not knowable through human perceptions and intellect. By the phrase ‘to know’, there is an inference of a ‘knower’ (the subject) and ‘to be known’ (the objects). But the *nirguna Brahman*, the non-dual existence can never be known.

However, if one persists along the teachings of Vedanta diligently, the non-knowable *nirguna Brahman* will reveal within, as the very knower himself/herself. That is the state of Self-realization (*anubuti*); in that state, there is no difference between the knower and the known; there exists only the knowledge (*cit*). The learned have called this state of self-realization as *advaita-anubuti*.

For all others, therefore, there is a need of a concept to progress the realization of the *Brahman*, through various names and forms and the understanding of infinite manifestations. That is why, the concept of *saguna Brahman*, as a complementary perspective of *nirguna Brahman*, is given in the scriptures; names, forms and attributes can be used to develop a step-wise understanding to know the unknowable.

The great Seers, therefore presented the *saguna Brahman*, as a notional combination of the *Ishvara*, an immutable substratum, which is the cause of all causes, yet the causeless reality and the *Maya*, the expressive power of *Ishvara* that creates, sustains, dissolves all manifestations out of, and into, the underlying substratum. In other words, *Brahman* with *Maya* (*Maya-sahita-Brahman*) is the *Ishvara*; *Ishvara* without *Maya* (*Maya-rahita-Ishvara*) is the *Brahman*.

This concept is also viewed as ‘Shiva and Shakti’ in the Saiva school and ‘Vishnu and Lakshmi’ in Vaishnava school etc. Such varied approaches are all necessary to suit different levels of understanding and stages of spiritual developments.

If such a scalable and varied approach to the realization of the *Brahman* is permissible, then why not revere the various expressions of the power of *Brahman* under various names and forms?

This is what has happened, resulting in innumerable manifestations of divinity and associated legends and the approach to their understanding. This diversity is important as it accommodates the feeble human mind to take several baby-steps towards the *advaita-anubuti*.

Only in support of this pragmatic use-case, our *sanatana-dharma* is beaming with many gods and many means of god-realization. True followers, who pursue these necessary baby-steps, will surely be awakened; when there is true yearning for truth, this quest will become the legitimate inquiry (*vicara*); among all inquiries, *vicara* of the *Brahman* is the most adorable *vicara* (*mimamsa*)

The Harihara-putran Ayyappan is the supremely divine concept for triggering such adorable *vicara*.

The term ‘*Hara*’ represents the substratum and ‘*Hari*’ the expressive powers of the substratum. There cannot be any difference in these two except the perspectives are purposely distinct. *Hara* is *Shiva* and *Hari* is *Shakti*. In the Vedic days, the phrase ‘*agne-visnu*’ is the prominent use for

addressing the *Saguna Brahman*. The term ‘*agni*’ represents the indwelling power, symbolised by fire and ‘*visnu*’ represents the expressive power, symbolised by the pervasive nature of the *Brahman*. In the text *Lalita Sahasranamam*, for example, *Shakti* is called ‘*vimarsana rupini*’, the expressive power of the *Brahman*. Similar references are also found in *Visnu Sahasranamam* and many *Purana*.

The point is, there is no one-way of approaching the eternal truth. This founding principle is what makes the *sanatana-dharma* ‘forever refreshed’ and immutable.

Lord Ayyappan is therefore the essence of Vedanta. Lord Ayyappan, as the *bhutapati* reigns over all elements of embodiments and therefore His benign grace is essential to employ our embodiments well, both for prosperity and ultimate liberation.

### **Legend of Manikantan**

Besides the perspective of Vedanta, brief historic background of Manikantan is also important to know before the pilgrimage. This is because, the devotee, upon wearing the ‘*mala*’, is deemed as Manikantan Himself and during the entire pilgrimage, will enact only the legends of Manikantan.

King Rajashekhar, a pious ruler of Pandala Kingdom was distressed for not having a son. Once Lord Ayyappan appeared as a child on the banks of the river Pamba to bestow grace on the King. The King was overwhelmed with joy; seeing the child wearing a precious necklace, he named the child as ‘Manikantan’ or one who wears the necklace of precious pendant.

Young Manikantan grew into a great prince, demonstrating his mastery over all scriptures and in various arts, in particular martial arts. His divinity was seen and revered by all, as he performed various acts out of kindness that were all deemed beyond ordinary human perceptions or actions. For protecting the kingdom, Manikantan conquered a great Muslim warrior by name ‘Vavar’ and took him as a trusted friend, in the fight against the dacoit Udayanan, who was looting the kingdom and the shrines of Dharma-Shasta.

In due course, King Rajashekhar also got his own biological son Rajarajan. Manikantan as an elder brother fondly led and nurtured his younger sibling. When it was time to name the heir to the throne, although the king wanted to give the honour to Manikantan, the queen, under the bad influence of the minister, created hurdles. Feigning illness, she collaborated with the physician to ask for an impossible remedy - lactating tigress's milk. As no one could procure it, the queen anticipated that the dutiful Manikantan would volunteer to go and by that act, meet his peril. Manikantan took up the challenge and despite the King's plea, ventured to the forest. En route, Manikantan conquers and annihilates the demon Mahishi on the banks of the river Azhutha. Then Manikantan gets the tigress' milk and brings it to the queen, seated majestically on the wild tigress. The queen realizes her folly and seeks forgiveness to Manikantan. The King and the entourage see the Lord Ayyappan, *Harihara-putran* in the Manikantan.

Lord Ayyappan's incarnation on the earth had come to an end.

His embodied life is the supreme lesson for the human-beings. The slaying of demon *Mahishi* should be taken as the removal of ‘*ahamkara*’ or the egoity. The vacillating mind is the tigress, with its unpredictable aggression and ceaseless vacillations. By calming the mind, the very mind becomes the platform for progress. The tamed tigress is the cleansed mind and its milk is the Atma, the Witness-Consciousness that shines upon the mind. Upon the Self-realization, our ignorance is cut

asunder as in the case of the Queen who gave up her fallacious stand at the very moment of witnessing the Lord.

The Lord, after instructing the King to serve at the Sabarimalai, merges with the Dharma-Shasta at the shrine. The King and his descendants to-date have been duly serving and worshiping in Sabarimalai, where millions of devotees go every year. I was counting the seconds for my opportunity.

## 7<sup>th</sup> April 2017

Prakash received me at the Mumbai Airport. As a senior executive, Prakash is a busy young man yet he spends his time generously for the community-services; as an ardent devotee of Lord Ayyappan and a star performer of *bhajan*, Prakash, ably supported by his wife, my niece Akila and their teenage daughter Shweta, is leading a joyous life in Mumbai; the couple, as I have observed, is a darling-pair of the Dombivili community and their Mandala Pooja Samiti Trust, which is organizing their 22<sup>nd</sup> trip to Sabarimalai this year.

Prakash briefed me of the plan. After taking couple of hours of rest, we went to the community hall. That evening was mainly to appraise the scheduled tasks and to prepare for the next day function, comprising of *Ganapathy homam* and *Shasta-prithi*, followed by the *irumudi-kattu*, all to be completed by 10:00 AM. This meant, as much of preparatory work had to be done by the night.

A major task was to trim hundreds of coconuts; removing the fibres and smoothening the exterior surface of the coconuts are important. Young and old were sitting around two huge drums of water, in which 100s of coconuts were floating. I got injected into the team quickly and the work continued with lots of laughter, interesting conversations and of course *bhajan*. Using sharp knives and scrubbers, we all sat around to tackle the task, which was fun in such joyous atmosphere.

In parallel, there were others preparing the hall for the *puja*. Ladies were decorating the floors with *kolams*; some were setting up the implements - fruits, flowers, garlands, *vibuti*, *aval*, *pori*, ghee, camphor, incense sticks, sandal paste, turmeric- all things were being checked and organized.

The pilgrimage would be led by the ‘gurusami’.

Sri Murthy, a veteran, is our gurusami; he is a simple and kind gentleman. Everyone talks to him so fondly. His wife also joins the Pilgrimage. The elder brother of gurusami, Sri Sankaranarayan and his wife were also part of the entourage to Sabarimalai. Everyone calls them as Anna and Manni. Sankaranarayan is also addressed as ‘periya gurusami’; he is friendly, cheerful and with good sense of humour.

I also met Mr Sivarama Krishnan, popularly known as a ‘Krishnan ji’. I had the pleasure of his company in the following days and came to know more of him; his modesty despite his deep knowledge and execution skills is quite revealing. Based on the adoration and respects that he draws from everyone, I have decided to call him ‘all-in-all Krishnan’.

That also helps to differentiate another Krishnan, who is an astrologer, *prohit*, *devi-upasakar* etc. He has been to Sabarimalai for innumerable times and this time, is accompanied by his child, Sabarish, barely 10 years old.

Then there is Venkatesh, a key member of the samiti; he is completing the 18<sup>th</sup> year of pilgrimage to Sabarimalai. During the week, he was beside me sharing interesting insights about Sabarimalai.

Prakash introduced to Mr Balakrishnan who is the secretary of the samiti; although wearing the burden of responsibility on his forehead, he does have a ‘can-do’ approach, perhaps due to the strong team around him. Mrs. Balakrishnan was also joining the pilgrimage.

There were other veterans with loads of experience in Sabarimalai Yatra such as Venkatesan mama, Pichai mama and Ganesan mama. And there is Ganesan, whose towering personality and captivating pitch while singing Sarana-gohsam is unmissable. Ganesan was accompanied by his elder brother; Prakash had told me that they hail from a family well known for ‘annadhanam’. Then there was Natarajan, known as Pollachi Vadhyar, Kumar, Rajesh with his elder brother, Narayanan and his two young sons Kartik, Kaushik. There were others too. Although I have not managed to know everyone individually, the whole entourage was well balanced, bringing varied experiences, knowledge, zeal and a sense of purpose. In short, the entourage has about 41 devotees, of which 11 are *kanni* (the first-time visitor).

We left for the night with the view to assemble in the hall by 5:30AM the next day.

## 8<sup>th</sup> April 2017

As we entered the community hall at 5:30 AM, the puja has already started. Gurusami and others were preparing the coconut, by piercing one of the eyes, emptying the water and then sealing it with a piece of cork. These coconuts are to be turned into ‘neithengai’ or coconut-filled with ghee. This is an important element of *irumudi-kattu* and central to the perspective of Vedanta in the Ayyappan Puja.

The plan was to perform all the puja, garlanding the *mala* and the *irumudi-kattu* by 10:00 am; by 10:30am we must leave for the Panvel train station, giving generous 2 hours to compensate Mumbai-traffic for our train to Ernakulam at 1PM.

In the hall, slowly, the crowd had swelled. The Vadhyars performed the Ganapathy homam. This was followed by *Shasta-priti*. Some were reciting *sahasranama*.



Then the *mudra-mala* function started. The devotees were asked by the gurusami to recite the *mudra-mantra*, a vow to complete the pilgrimage, and then one-by-one, blessed by the gurusami with the *mudra* (the beaded necklace) on the neck. The *mala* will be removed by the gurusami only upon the completion of the *yatra*. Once the *mala* is worn, each devotee is deemed as Lord Ayyappan Himself, and reverentially addressed as ‘swami’.

I have already taken up the *mandala-vratam* and

the *mala* in the UK. However, gurusami had placed another *mala* on my neck, not noticing the *mala* that I already had. With two *mala*, I was doubly happy!

Then the process of irumdui-kattu began. Under the instruction of the gurusami, four parallel sessions were set-up to speed-up the process, each section managed by gurusami and his delegation.

In the term ‘*irumudi-kattu*’, ‘*iru*’ means two, ‘*mudi*’ means head or top and ‘*kattu*’ means the knot.

Simply it refers to two bundles knotted together and placed on the top of the head.



For this, a two-pouched bag, specially made in blue colour is used. On one pouch, which will be placed in front of the *irumudi-kattu*, eighteen items of offering to the Lord are placed. Starting with *neithengai*, these eighteen items include rice, turmeric powder, vibuti, kumkum, sandal power, rose water, incense stick, camphor etc. This pouch will be tied securely. In the other pouch, which will be placed on the rear of the head when carried, essential items for use by the devotee during the pilgrimage are placed. These days, the items included in the second pouch are mainly the containers to fill-up *maha-prasadam* etc.

The process of *irumudi-kattu* is an inspiring event to watch; it is very moving experience to many, especially when its meaning is understood.

Each swami is asked to seat near the gurusami. By reciting the *mantra*, the swami is first given the coconut with the cork removed. Upon the instruction of the gurusami, the swami will fill the coconut, by pouring the ghee through the ‘open eye’. When the coconut is filled and the ghee oozes out, gurusami takes the coconut, which is now called the ‘*neithengai*’. The cork is fitted as the stopper. A moist poppadum is placed on top and a small red piece of cloth to completely seal the *neithengai*. Gurusami gives the irumudi pouch to the swami and ask the *neithengai* to be placed inside. Then subsequent items are placed one by one. The gurusami, then invites only the close relatives to come forward and offer *pidi-arisi*, a handful of rice into the pouch. This is done three times. While doing so, money and other offerings are also made.

Gurusami later mentioned to me the purpose of *pidi-arisi*. In those days, it was not certain that a devotee would come back alive after the trip to Sabarimalai. Therefore, close relatives were made to offer *pidi-arisi*, symbolically as the final rite. This tradition continues even today.

Once the items are added, each irumudi is tightly packed. Then a blanket is placed on the head of the swami, upon which the *irumudi-kattu* is seated. The swami stands up, performs *atma-pradashnam* and then walks towards Sabarimalai. The swami is now revered as Lord Ayyappan Himself and everyone prostrates in front of him, even the gurusami.

Symbolically, the walk of each swami with *irumudi-kattu* terminated at the stage in the community hall where it was removed and placed. Each *irumudi-kattu* was also assigned a token number so that the responsible swami could claim during the journey.

My turn did come.

I was delighted for the opportunity to carry the *irumudi-kattu*. When I noticed the token number of my *irumudi-kattu* as 18, the sentiments were overwhelming.

I poured the ghee into the coconut slowly.

The three eyes of the coconut represent the three guna – *tamas*, *rajas* and *satvic*. The symbolic *satvic* eye was opened and through which the ghee was poured. Ghee represents the Self, the effulgent, eternal *atma* within.

Why ghee?

Milk gets spoiled in a day; boiled milk may stay for couple of more days; if the boiled milk is fermented into curd, it may last for a week or so; when extracted into butter, it may last for month or so. But when the butter is turned into ghee, it remains as it is, forever. Only to symbolize the eternal and unchanging nature of the Self, the indwelling *atma*, ghee is used.

Self-realization is possible only when the mind is pure and focused, free of all its vacillations. The emptied coconut represents such purified mind. Therefore ,*neithengai* is the symbol of purified and fulfilled mind, reflecting the ever lustrous *atma*.

With the *neithengai* inside the irumudi-kattu on the head, the swami who carries is reminded that he is the indeed the indwelling *atma*. Although he is limited by all *upadi* (impediments), by the pilgrimage to Sabarimalai, and transcending the 18-steps, he sheds all impediments and becomes free of his limited ‘I-personality’. As he stands in sanctum sanctorum in front of the deity of Lord Ayyappan, he becomes one with the Lord. This is also indicated symbolically as the ghee in the *neithengai* is poured on the Lord.

The *upadesa-mahavakya* ‘*tatvamasi*’ is now turned into the *anubuti-mahavakya* ‘*aham brahma smi*’. This transformation is all that is required, which is the essence of *neithengai*, irumudi-kattu, Sabarimalai-pilgrimage, *patinettam-padi*, *nei-abhishekam* etc.

Thinking thus, I slowly poured the ghee into the *neithengai*.

As planned, irumudi-kattu was completed by 10:15am. *Maha-prasadam* was served. Things were getting packed for travel. Everyone was given two coconuts to carry in the hand-bag for *surathengai*. A large coach and number of cars were arranged to take us to the Panvel railway station. In the congestion of traffic, a mere 40 km drive took more than 2 hours. I learnt that some of the youngsters had to be very creative to take control of traffic on the road, to make ways for our entourage to reach the station on time.

The Sun was blazing hot. All devotees were bare footed. Men were not wearing any shirt. Panvel station is not really traveller friendly. The terrace does not cover the entire length of the platform and there is no clear marking until the last minute, to indicate the expected location of the carriage. That meant a bit of tension and some panic, making us run hither and thither for a while. As a result, the feet were burnt and many were dancing on their toes.

Finally, when the train arrived, the breeze from the AC coaches gave a welcoming embrace. Everyone worked as if possessed as things were loaded and people were seated in a buzz. A sigh of relief beamed on the faces. As the train left the station, each of us settled on the allotted seats. Promptly Prakash and Astro Krishnan initiated the Sarana-Ghosham and the chorus echoed for a while. Food, snacks, *bhajan* and *sarana-ghosham* were non-stop until we went into slumber.

## 9<sup>th</sup> April 2017

After a good night sleep, everyone was up as the train was slowly entering Kerala, after passing thorough the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. Enthusiastically, *bhajan* and *sarana-ghosham* continued; spiritual topics discussed; varied experiences of Sabarimalai were shared. Quietly, “All-in-all Krishnan” was making calls and sending messages to ensure our next stay and next food were all intact. Narayanan, Krishnan, Natarajan and Prakash were ably steering the youngsters and together making sure everyone’s needs were attended to.

Finally, around 15:00, the train pulled into Ernakulum Station.

Outside was an A/C coach. In about 30 minutes or so, everything was packed into the coach and we were on board. Sarana-ghosham started. With everyone needing to take a lead in turn, it was my turn once. As I was not aware of traditional Sarana-ghosham, I made up few on my own, causing few raised eye-brows as well as happy faces. Of course, Venkatesh was kind enough to show traditional *sarana-ghosham* for me to pick up in due course.

We reached the Ernakulum *Brahmana-Samoogam*, for our overnight stay. It is a serene place, comprising of large marriage halls, both upstairs and downstairs. The entire top floor hall was allotted to us. Next to the Samoogam are the temples of Lord Subramanyar, Sivan and Hanuman temple.

We were asked to be ready by 5PM to go to Chottanikarai Bhagavati Amman temple. In the meantime, I had a quick shower, and went to the next-door Subramanyar temple. I also noticed the festival of Sri Murguan Valli Kalyanam in the downstairs hall of the Samoogam. The whole atmosphere looked divine and auspicious.

At 5PM, we all left to Chottanikarai Bhagavati Amman Temple. I had been here once before. Venkatesh and Prakash gave me more insights about the temple.

The Bhagavati Amman, the main deity, is *yogasvarupini*, poised with benign grace and serenity.



There is also Keel Kavu Bhagavati Amman, Who is the Sister of Chottanikarai Bhagavati Amman. Although Keel Kavu Bhagavati Amman is full of rage to destroy the evil, Amman looks so calm and beautiful. At the temple, tantric worship means, there are many rituals, including what is known as ‘guruthi puja’, or offering of ‘blood’ to God. I am told that these practices have now vastly changed. The Keel Kavu Bhagavati is famous for granting mental health and the specialised puja on behalf of those who seek cure.

After spending time at the temple, we returned to the Samoogam by 8PM. Two more yatris have joined us in Ernakulum as planned and the irumudi-kattu for them was performed in the downstairs hall, in front of the beautiful shrine and the enchanting image of Lord Ayyappan.

After the irumudi-kattu and sarana-ghosham, we had a simple and sumptuous dinner. Everyone went to bed, eagerly awaiting the departure to Sabarimalai by 8AM the following morning.

## 10<sup>th</sup> April 2017

I got up quite early and went to the temples nearby. While the Subramanian temple is Tamil, the Siva temple is in the style of Kerala and the Hanuman temple in the style of Karnataka.



After praying at the Subramanian temple, I went to Siva temple. Like in many Siva temples in Kerala, one cannot do full *pradakshanam* around the Siva-linga. Here the linga is reasonably big in size and interestingly, the base is slightly oblong. The *abhishekam* was going on. The priests were bringing lots of water in copper pots; I think they were doing 108 pots of water. I did not count, but the speed and the frequency in which they were doing did suggest so. I found a nice corner to sit for a while and recite Sri Rudram.

Then I visited the Hanuman temple; there was a notable incident. When I want to buy a lotus flower, the vendor immediately took a glass of water, asked me to stretch my hand and poured on it to cleanse it. Then he washed his hands and then washed a lotus flower before giving it to me. I was astounded by the reverence.

When I returned to the Samoogam, everyone was busy loading things on to the Bus. I joined them to help. I have decided to fast for until the *darshan* of Lord in Sabarimalai, later in the evening.

The bus left for Pampa; As usual, the *sarana-ghosham* was filling the coach and seeping through the air to make the sky even more auspicious. En route, we took a brief stop at Etamannur, where there is a famous Siva temple. Gurusami told us that we would visit the temple on our way back.

After about 4 hours we were at Erumeli.

Erumeli is the important point in the pilgrimage. The name Erumeli is derived from the phrase



‘Eruma-Kolli’. In Malayalam, the term ‘Eruma’ refers to buffalo and ‘kolli’ refers to the annihilation. So Erumeli refers to the place where the buffalo is killed. Here buffalo refers to the egoity. When the egoity is annihilated, mind is rendered free of its ‘I-personality’. Only then, the upadesa-mahavakya ‘*tatvamasi*’ can be realized.

In Erumeli, there are three shrines: Kochambalam (small shrine), Valiyambalam (big shrine) and Vavar Masjid. Here the tradition demands that the devotees perform what is known as ‘*pettai-thullal*’, a joyous dancing parade to signify the legends of Manikantan.

‘*Pettai*’ means shops, ‘*thullal*’ means joyous dance. During *pettai-thullal*, the devotees wear masks and crowns, decorate themselves with fanciful colours, and to the rhythmic beat of ‘swami titakkatom’, they joyously dance as they move towards the temple. The parade starts from

Kochambalam temple and then moves to the nearby Vavar Masjid and finally ends at the Valiyambalm temple.

According to *purana*, *pettai-thullal* refers to the celebration after *Mahishi* is annihilated by the Lord. According to history, *pettai-thullal* refers to the celebration of the tribal warriors who were marching behind Manikantan, for defeating the dacoit Udayanan and to rescue the shrine of Sabarimalai, where Dharma Shasta reigns. There are many other stories like this.



The devotees first buy things from the shop headbands, arrows, swords, mace, and crown etc. There are certain conventions too. For example, *kanni* swami will take the symbolic ‘arrow’; those coming for the second year take the ‘sword’ and those in the third year, the ‘mace’. Everyone decorates their faces and the bodies with colours. The parade starts from Kochambalam. There are drummers on the street, who are usually hired to provide the dance beats.

By dancing, the entourage first go to the Vavar Masjid. This is a unique Masjid in the world, as Vibuti is given as the *prasad*. I was told that during the Islamic festivals, the Islamic devotees carry pots filled with sandal paste, (*sandanakudam*) as an offer for Sri Dharma-Shasta at the Valiyambalam temple.

After praying at the mask, the parade marches towards the Valiyambalam.



We all enjoyed the parade and arrived at the Valiyambalam temple. At the entrance, the mahavakya ‘*tatvamasi*’ is written, reminding us the purpose of the pilgrimage. Inside the temple, the dance continued for a while. Devotees normally take path in the stream nearby. Now, the temple authorities have installed showers. After a quick shower, we offered our prayers to the deity, known as ‘Kiratha Shasta’.

The bus left Erumeli towards Pamba. From the bus, we could see the ‘*periya-pathai*’, the traditional long route that starts from Erumeli and takes about 41km of trekking along the dense forest. I have learnt that the devotees who take the *periya-pathai* will pass through fourteen key places before reaching Pamba. These are Erumeli, Perur-todu, Irumbunniyarkara, Arasu-mudikkoddai, Kaalaketti, Azutha-malai, Azhutha-nati, Kallidum-kunru, Inchipparai, Mukkuzi, Kriyilaam-thodu, Karimalai-ucchi, Valiyaanathavalam, Seriyanathavalam.

We were not taking the *periya-pathai*; we will reach Pamba by the bus and from their trek the last 7 km to Sabarimalai.

From the Bus, Venkatesh pointed the Alutha River that was flowing under the bridge. There are legends about the river too. At about 2PM, we have reached Pamba. I learnt that until few years ago, people could go only up to place called ‘Sallakyam’ by car and then had to walk few miles to reach Pamba. Now one can reach Pamba by car.

Pamba river is hailed as the Dakshina-Ganga. It originates in the Western Ghats (Pulachimalai) and flows through various district to merge into the Vembanad Lake. Sabarimalai is on the banks of river

Pamba. According to *Purana*, Pandala Raja found the Lord Ayyappan as a child in the banks of Pamba river only. So Pamba is a significant place for the pilgrims. Traditionally, devotees take bath

in the holy river Pampa, perform *pitru-tarpana* and start the final-leg of trekking to Sabarimalai.



Apparently, the river was dried up until the previous week due to draught and so it was nice to see the vibrantly flowing stream. From the Bus stop to the other side of the river, we had to cross a short bridge. Under the blistering Sun, it was an ordeal to make that 10 minutes' walk. As soon as we cross the bridge, we took shelter under the shade.

There are lots of shops in Pamba. ‘Doli’ are available for hire; each doli is carried by two or four strong men; they walk at incredible speed. We have arranged a few for those who needed the support for the last leg of our pilgrimage.

After about 30 minutes, gurusami had invited one-by-one and placed the respective irumudi-kattu on our heads. From then on, we needed to carry to complete the pilgrimage. Only on critical needs, irumudi-kattu can be taken down, that too by one of the seniors.

As per tradition, after offering *surathengai* at the Ganesh temple, we climbed up the hill. We started to move in batches and the Sun was still blazing.

There are two routes. One has steps and other is plain track, mainly used by the temple authorities to transport things. We all took the track. Although it was hot to start with, in about 15 minutes, to our pleasant surprise, as if a light is switched-off, the Sun was blocked by the thick blanket of clouds. Almost for the entire duration of the trekking, Sun was not at all a problem.

But the climb was not easy for all, especially at few sharp turns and deep ascends. In some places, the inclination is more than 50 or 60 degrees. But nothing seemed impossible for the zealous young and old. I saw one swami, who was coming down, happily fanning the face of Balakrishnan with his towel as if to give him a boost from his momentary rest. I have seen similar gesture among the travellers during my trekking to Mount Kailash also. I only wish such compassion and empathy prevail for all at all occasion.



I noticed Alamelu mami, who was coming with me, bit tired. Her pace was slow and so I asked if she needed any help. She politely declined and said how wonderful and happy she was.

‘I often used to think, will I ever get a chance to go to Sabarimalai?’ she said.

‘Year after year, after seeing-off my husband to Sabarmalai-yatra, I used to be alone at home and feel why am I not getting a chance. Now I am here, and I am speechless’, Mami said to me, with a tinge of tears at the tip of her eyes.

‘Surely Mami, blessed we are all’, saying thus, I walked ahead with Venkatesh and others.

After about an hour over the hill, known as Nili Malai, and a steep peak known as Apache Medu, we came to a place called ‘**Sabari Peedam**’.

In Ramayana, like the mentioning of Pamba, there is also a story of Sabari, who hosted Rama and Lakshmana while trespassing the forest in search of Seetha. Sabari was a great devotee, saint, who adored and worshipped Rama. She hosted Rama and Lakshmana at her abode and served them with all she could with pure love and devotion. Only by her name, the location of Lord Ayyappan shrine is called as Sabarimalai. Sabari-Peedam is symbolic of saint Sabari and it is a remarkable place for the pilgrims. Usually devotees pay a visit to Sabari-Peedam before proceeding to the shrine.

There is also another tradition.

The symbolic arrow, sword and mace used during the *pettai-thullal* by the devotees coming for the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time respectively are to be deposited in a place called ‘**saram-kutti-aal**’. Literally ‘saram’ refers to weapon, ‘kutti’ means pierced and ‘aal’ is the banyan tree.

According to history, Manikantan and His army, after defeating Udayanan placed all their weapons and belongings at the banyan tree, before going to the Dharma-Shasta shrine in Sabarimalai. In the same spirit, the devotees who performed *pettai-thullal* carry their weapons and deposit at the same place. I guess, this also provide an opportunity to remind the devotees that we should leave behind all our possessions and ego before reaching the shrine at Sabarimalai.

I was told that it is common for using the ‘sabari-peedam’ itself as the place to leave the symbolic weapons because the path to saram-kutti-aal is tedious and often closed for public access. But as we approached the sabari-peedam, a passer-by stopped us and directed to take another route for saram-kutti-aal. So, we pursued the new trek.

After about few minutes, we realized that the path is quite lonely and seemingly not much used. Six of us, led by Astro Krishnan, were simply walking for a while but there was no sign. The track was not easy to walk; sharp stones were piercing the feet. For the first time, I was thinking about the sarana-ghosham, ‘*kallum mullum kalukku methai*’.

A natural question in the mind was why could not the temple authorities clean up the path and make it comfortable for the pilgrims. But it lasted only for a few seconds. This is an opportunity to see suffering as a penance and to appraise our condition.

How often we think about our breathing! Only when we grasp for breath, the value of every breath is known. When did I last think about the role of my feet? Have I ever contemplated on bearing pain? What is pain anyway? Is it not just a physical sensation! So is the pleasure! Who is feeling the pain and the pleasure? Surely, the gross-body cannot feel.

So, all pain and pleasure are mere thoughts. Mind is therefore the performer of all action and the enjoyer of experiences. But why should mind feel the pain? It must be only because of its sense of ownership – the feeling of my, mine etc. , - the *mamakara*.

When there is no *mamakara*, there cannot be any pain.

When the mind is not active, like in deep sleep, there is neither pain nor pleasure. That means, I could disown and transverse all pains and pleasures. I could be above board, unaffected by all, unattached to the whims and fancies of the mind. But first, I must able to bear the pain. Only by

observing the pain, I can bear the pain and eventually unattached from the pain. Only by observing the mind, I can be unattached from the mind and untouched by its vacillations.

Perhaps pilgrimage such as this, are meant for teaching these lessons only! The very purpose of *vratam*, in depriving the body and mind of their needs, is only to achieve endurance and the capacity for liberation. Thinking thus, I was stepping on the stubborn little sharp stones, that clutching my feet. We were inching along the path. Smt. Balakrishnan who was walking with me was quite vocal about her fear, ‘may be this is not the correct route!’

Just about, there was a man coming down. When we asked, he replied in Malayalam, ‘Yes, this is how Ayyappan travelled. But no one seems to go this way. You go... Saram Kutti Aal is here only’.



With those encouraging words, we persisted and after about 30 minutes or so, we found the place, littered with so many symbolic weapons. We deposited our weapons. From thereon, the passage was much better. After about 15 minutes, suddenly we saw the glimpse of Sabari Mala and the Shrine. At once, Astro Krishnan raised the Sarana-Ghosham and we echoed with renewed zeal. Like the arrows that we have left behind at Saram-kutti-aal, we propelled towards the shrine. In about 30 minutes, we were at the entrance of the shrine, Sabarimalai Lord Ayyappan.

## Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa!

Steadily, the members arrived as we have assembled at the entrance of the shrine. All-in-all Krishnan had already made few magic calls so that our luggage etc. can go straight to the lodge nearby where we have booked to stay. Then with gurusami taking the lead, we followed towards the shrine.

As it was the first day of opening the shrine for the season, there was not much crowd. I would say overall about 1000 devotees. It would swell rapidly in the coming days due to Vishu and New Year’s Day. I believe during the *mandala-puja*, devotees touch more than a million counts.

Gurusami was going as if he was possessed. We followed him and come in front of the 18-steps. Only those with irumudi-kattu are allowed to climb the 18-steps. As required, we offered the 2<sup>nd</sup> *surathengai* in the designated place, which is next to the Karuppanna Sami Sannidhi, left of the 18-steps.

My heart was full of inexplicable joy as I was standing in front of the first step. Any moment, I would step on this. What would happen, I wondered.

I have been dreaming about this all these days, rather visioning how this ascend would be. I used to imagine climbing on to each step slowly; I stand up on each step with both my feet firmly established; the lustre of the deepam on both ends of the step would bathe me in warmth, giving me greater energy and zeal. Then I get on to the next step.



There is more energy. For every step climbed, there is more vigour; there is more radiance all around. As I raise, I feel like floating. The drums beat louder as I go up. The bells tingle. The 18-steps grow so tall as if my heads are touching the passing clouds. When I cross the 18<sup>th</sup> step, there and then, I see the *Para Brahman* as Lord Ayyappan, sitting in the posture of Veerasana; He is wearing a mesmerising smile. Suddenly, except the Lord, everything else disappears. The sky is gone; the surrounded mountains disappeared; the space is filled with the radiance of Lord, in front of me, seated, smiling, with His graceful eyes looking deep into me, melting me away, slowly and surely. I see Him as gold, silver and white; suddenly a river of turmeric stream washing the divine feet of Lord flashes all over my body! Should I close the eye, should I keep it open, should I ask for something, what should I do, I dread in inexplicable joy and fear. Knowing my incapability, Lord Ayyappan is simply watching me, sitting there, with the remiss line of smile in His lips.

‘Move, move’ – set the policeman.

I stepped on the first step for real.

Gurusami and Prakash were ahead of me, others behind. I climbed. I was living my dream. I stood on both my feet on each step; I wanted to spread as much of my body on these magnificent steps, but the crowd is pushing. I did not know that I needed some help, a policeman, gently held my hand to see me through to the last few steps.

When the 18<sup>th</sup> step was crossed, we were all there in front of the Lord. The magnificent idol of Lord Ayyappan, although smaller in size than what I have imagined, is incredibly beautiful. Every aspect of the deity is enchanting. During the *arti*, the glitter of His face, the sharpness of His nose, the smile-encased lips, the flowing long eyes that ooze the benign grace, the wide shoulders, the broad chest, the lean muscles and the ribs, the seated posture of Veerasana, the grace-granting hands – and every aspect of the Lord simply enthrals the devotees.

One can simply fall in love and stay in front of the Lord forever.



We were asked to move and come around for another *darshan* with the *irudmudi-kattu*. The queue was arranged around the temple overlooking the *ponnambalam* or the golden ceiling. As we moved in the queue, we could see the open space, blue sky dotted with mountains and fields. Prakash showed me the Kanta-malai at a distance, on which divine jyoti is often cited according to the legends. Everyone was saying sarana-ghosham.

I recalled my last strip with Prakash to Nasik and Shirdi. Standing behind me in the queue for the *darshan*, Prakash used to sing melodious *bhajan* and *keertana*, as if to make a direct deposit into my ears. It was an immersive experience of *nama sangeerthanam*, preparing the tortured mind for the divine *darshan*. This time also, as Prakash was standing behind me, I made my requests. He at once obliged and proved to be unstoppable. For the next 20 minutes or so, my eyes were filled with the surrounding beauty and my ears were immersed with melodious songs; the only challenge was to keep my beastly mind in focus.

Again, we had another wonderful *darshan* of the Lord. Perhaps the usual crowd was not there, the security-personnel were kind and let us stay for a while, and even comeback for more *darshan*. We were ceaselessly trying to carry the Lord into our hearts.

Gurusami then formally removed the irumudi-kattu from our heads. We could now carry each of our irumudi-kattu in our hands to a place where we needed to unpack and collate all offerings for submission to the temple authorities. It was decided that could be done at the lodge. So, we were leaving the temple.

It was dark by then. As we came down, we saw the tantric priests were starting the *padi-puja* in



which each step is worshipped with the offering of flowers and lighting of lamps. We all watched with great interest as the *padi-puja* is special and spectacular to observe.

Then we all returned to the lodge with happy hearts. Contented and fulfilled, we sat around to unpack the irumudi-kattu. All offerings from the group were to be taken to the temple and submitted for the jointing the *abhishekam* next day. This was done.

By then, it was about 9:45pm. Dinner was served in the room and everyone was happily sharing their experiences so far. I took a walk around the temple to see the buzz. Crowd was pouring in. Many devotees were sleeping on the floor and the passage to the temple. The shops selling photos, pictures, books etc. were busy.

We went to bed with the plan to start by 4am next day as the *ghee-abhishekam* starts at 5am.

## 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017

We were all out to the temple by 5AM. As we have no *irumudi-kattu*, we must go through different route to the *sannidhi*. The plan was to have *darshan* of the Lord and all other deities, then go with Venkatesh and Venkatesan – who needed to plant a coconut sapling to mark their completion of 18 years.

We all dispersed in small groups. First, we visited the Kanni mula Ganapathy and then the Karthikeyan. Then on the south side, is Maligapurathu Amman. There are interesting legends about Maligapurathu Amman. According to *Purana*, when Mahishi is killed by Lord Ayyappan, the liberated Shakti came as a beautiful maid and wanted to marry Lord Ayyappan. However, the Lord told Her to wait until such time there is no more kanni-swami coming to Sabarimalai. As every year, more and more kanni-swami are coming to Sabarimalai, the desire of Maligapurathu Amman remains unfulfilled.



Maligapurathu Amman is also seen as the MahaShakti; by worshipping Her, all prosperities are granted and marriage and such auspicious functions will happen without a hitch; with such faith,

devotees offering a cloth or blouse-piece to the Amman. There is also a tradition of rolling the coconut around the shrine. Pollachi-Natarajan Vadhyar made all the ladies from our entourage to perform the puja and *sahasranama archana*.

Then there is a place where the king Pandala Raja used to stay. Next to that site, there is Kochukaduta-Sami and Karuppa sami. There are idols of snakes that are worshipped using turmeric powder. Also, there is a Navagraha shrine. A Vavar Masjid also exists where an Islamic imam gives Vibuti as the *prasad*.

We then joined the queue for the *darshan* of Lord Ayyappan. There were more people compared to previous day and the queues were longer. Yet, we could witness the *nei-abhishekam* and *pushpanjali*. For senior citizens, the temple administration provides a special pass. With one such pass, 5 people can go through a short queue. We have obtained few passes and kept on finding the opportunities to witness the Lord.

Suddenly there was some noise. We saw the chief tantric coming to the temple. He has the traditional authority for performing the puja. We were so lucky to see him perform the *nei-abhishekam*. In the meantime, All-in-All Krishnan has arranged for us to meet with the MelSanthi. MelSanti is the Priest appointed every year, strictly for one-year term to perform all the rituals at the temple. He is also a tantric, revered by all. Prakash was so keen to see him, saying, how nice of meeting a person who can touch and worship Lord Ayyappan. Perhaps to please him, when Prakash offered his respects to MelSanti, he touched the head of Prakash and offered the garland of Lord Ayyappan.

After collecting the Prasad, with deeply fulfilled hearts, we left the temple.



I went with Venkatesh to witness the planting of coconut tree. At the lodge, *prasad* were prepared for distribution. Gurusami then invited each devotee and handed the blessed *prasad*. After lunch, we left the lodge. We went back to the 18-steps, offered another *surathengai* and left for Pamba.

On the way, back Prakash and Balakrishnan were mentioning their experience while climbing. When they saw some struggle for Alamelu Mami, they have helped

her, by holding her hand and taking frequent rest. That time, they have noticed a woman, who was dark skinned and looked impoverished walking along with them, and stopping where they stopped etc. She had a glorious face with bright eyes. Prakash was not sure why she followed. At one stage, she came and told Alamelu Mami not to hold anyone's hands and go. 'You will be fine, go. Keep going'. Apparently, she said with such vigour all had to oblige. They have progressed but the lady did not come and could not be seen after that. Prakash and Balakrishnan were quite moved by the experience. Then I told about my conversation with Alamelu Mami and her deep desire to see Sabarimalai.

We returned to Pamba and after a while, we were back on the bus travelling back to Ernakulum.

Ettumannur was our next stop where the gurusami performed the ritual for the removal of mudra-mala. I understood that it was the tradition of the group. We arrived at the Ettumannur Shiva

temple. At the Shasta-Sannidhi, gurusami presided the ceremony. When I have removed the *mudra-mala*, I felt both joy and inexplicable lose.

When the *mudra-mala* is worn and everyone calling every other as ‘swami’, there is literally an inference for ‘*advaita-anubutii*’. No other penance and pilgrimage comes as close to Sabarimalai-yatra in giving the perspectives of Vedanta through ritualistic disciplines.

Turmeric power that is used as Ganesha remains as auspicious even after the puja; a stone worshipped as god is deemed pious forever. In the Sabarimalai-yatra, every devotee is deemed as the Swami! What other supreme state that one can dream of! Such highest status is also indicated by Vedanta through the mahavakya ‘*tatvamasi*’.

So even after the mudra-mala is removed, the lessons of the pilgrimage and the aspects highlighted in the *vratam* such as love, compassion, non-discrimination, penance, endurance, simple and disciplined life, higher ideals, good company –must persist in our hearts.

I was thinking how these values to be pursued. Just then, the gurusami touched my shoulders. ‘It is the best *darshan* and trip for me in all these years. We should pray that we all meet again for similar experience next year’.

I said, ‘by the will of the Lord’.



## 12<sup>th</sup> April 2017

After another night at Ernakulum, a happy family of devotees were travelling back to Mumbai, arriving on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2017.



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## Swami Saranam - Ayyappa Saranam - Swamiye Saranam

The body being the instrument in the pursuit of life, our foremost goal is good health. *Sastras* refer to our gross embodiment by the five *karma-indriyas*, namely the hands (1) that help us to perform, the legs (2) to move, the mouth (3) to vocalize our thoughts, the organs of excretion (4) and organs of procreation (5). These are made up of the *panca-bhutas*, the five natural elements, namely the space (6), the air (7), the fire (8), the water (8) and the earth or field (9). So we seek the grace of the Lord Ayyappan to grant us the finest composition of *panca-bhutas*.

Our *gnana-indriyas* or the organs of perception, namely, the ears as the power to hear (11), skin as the sense of touch (12), eyes that see (13), tongue that tastes (14) and nose that smells (15) are also based on the *panca-butas*; besides, the *panca-pranas* or five vital forces in the forms of *prana* (16) as the power of respiration and in particular exhalation, *apana* (17) as the power of excretion, *samana* (18) as the power of digestion, *viyana* (19) as the power of blood-circulation and *udana* (20) as the power of deglutition, sleep and the carrier of the *Jiva* upon death equip us. Together with the *panca-pranas* and the *gnana-indriyas*, are the inner most organs or *anta-karanas*, namely the *manas* (21), which forever vacillates yet remains as the subtlest instrument reflecting the consciousness, *chittam* (22) or the memory, *buddi* (23) or the intellect and finally the I-Consciousness or the egoity, the *ahamkara* (24). Let these 24 elements of our embodiment be pure and pristine, thereby, our worlds of experiences, namely in the transactional awakening or *jagrata* (25), dream-state or *svapna* (26) and the deep-sleep state or *sushupti* (27) be enjoyable and peaceful.

Grief is only due to our inherent attitude or *guna*; the *tamasam* (28) or the dull and laziness be overcome; *rajasam* (29) or the passionate approach be subdued and *satvikam* (30) or the balanced outlook be strengthened. With a good mix of *guna*, let all our actions, be it physical or *kayika* (31), vocal or *vacika* (32) and mental or *mansa* (33) *karmas* be pious, leading to lasting happiness, directing our life along righteousness or *dharma* (34), obtaining the means or the *arta* (35) as virtuous and our desire or the *kama* (36) be pious. Life after life, thus we shall be blessed; yet we need the discriminating intellect or *viveka* (37) to differentiate the truth from untruth and the eternal from the ephemeral. By that knowledge, let us wear the armour of dispassion or *vairagya* (38) for a life of austerity, in which self-control and discipline such as *sama*, *dama* etc. (39) are instilled. As the result, there is liberty, emancipation and fulfilment, indicated by 'mukti' (40).

As a liberated person, we shall then be cognizant of the fact that the very truth we were seeking all along in our lives, and *That Which* we worship as Lord Ayyappan in this embodiment, is verily within our hearts, as the Self, the non-dual Brahman. (41)



# Swami Saranam - Ayyappa Saranam - Swamiye Saranam

41 days of penance - (In the tune of "tatpranamami sadasiva lingam")

- (01) nampik **kaikaļil** nalamiļa abhayam  
nalamaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (02) empik **k- lka!** e'umaruļ abhayam  
enaiyāļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (03) vāymai **v- ymo** i va'iyām abhayam  
varamaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (04) tūymaik **kudav- y** tuyaraļu abhayam  
tuņaiyān dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (05) santati **vaļarkaru** vuntuļu abhayam  
sadguru Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (06) muntiya **velivuru** mutalē abhayam  
muņiyuru dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (07) paravum **valiyanu** payaņē abhayam  
parivaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (08) tīravum **oliyanu** tiraļē abhayam  
tiruvē dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (09) vaļarum **nīraru** vaļaņē abhayam  
vakaiyaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (10) nilaņuļ **kalamē** nitiyē abhayam  
niļaivē dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (11) tulliya **cevika!** tuņaivara abhayam  
tuyttaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (12) melliya **tōluņar** mēluļal abhayam  
meyyaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (13) nalliru **nayaņam** nayamuļa tabhayam  
naļattiņuļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (14) palliru **n- viņiř** parcuvai abhayam  
parivaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (15) vāsaņai **n- ciyil** vaciyuļal abhayam  
varamaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (16) vīsiņum **pir- ḥasu** vāsamuļ abhayam  
virivaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (17) kī'iļaņg **abh- ḥak** kiļaiyuļ abhayam  
giritara Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (18) kū'aļai **sam- ḥa** guņamuļ abhayam  
gurupara dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (19) kurutiyuļ **viy- ḥak** kulavaluļ abhayam  
kuļiraruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (20) vikuti **yut- ḥa** vi'uņkaluļ abhayam  
vidaiyaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (21) ātiņum **maņameņum** ādiyuļ abhayam  
aruļmiku Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (22) niņiņum **citta** niņaivukaļ abhayam  
niņaivaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (23) kāneņa **buddiyiļ** kaņippatuļ abhayam  
kaņintaruļ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (24) nāneņa **- ḥavam** nakaivatuļ abhayam  
naņintaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (25) diņamoru **vilippiņait** tiļappatuļ abhayam  
tirumiku Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (26) maņamuru **kaņavuka!** maņaippatuļ abhayam  
maruļaļu dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (27) aṭaņkiņum **- l tuyil** aļubhavam abhayam  
harihara Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (28) muļaņkiņum **t- masam** muřippatuļ abhayam  
muļnava dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (29) vīriya **r- jasa** vilāňkaļu abhayam  
vilāňkiļa Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (30) tūriya **sattuvat** tuynilai abhayam  
tuņaiyaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (31) seytiju **meyttolir** cīruļa tabhayam  
cētaņaņ Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (32) peytiju **v- ymolip** pēccuņa tabhayam  
perunilai dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (33) avviya **maņacceyal** atuvuļa tabhayam  
aruļmiku Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (34) cevviya **aravalic** cīrmaiyuļ abhayam  
cintaiyuļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (35) vēņtiya **poruļum** viļaivumuļ abhayam  
virivē Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (36) tūnțiya **iņbam** tulaňkutal abhayam  
tuņaiyaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (37) pakuttari **vivēkap** payaņuļa tabhayam  
parivuļai Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (38) vakuttuta vātaļa **viļuttaluļ** abhayam  
va'iyaruļ dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (39) akappaļa **samanilai** adaiyavuļ abhayam  
aruļtaru Sabarigi rīsā saraņam
- (40) pukappaļa **viļutalai** pularvatuļ abhayam  
pūraņa dharma Sāstā saraņam (svāmi)
- (41) harihara sudha **nahat tiraļē**  
ayyā Sabarigi rīsā saraņam  
virisaļai sukapporuļ vittē abhayam  
vīrā caņattama rīsā saraņam (svāmi)