

Footsteps of Lord Kartikeya

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It was the month of September. I was at Coimbatore, a beautiful city surrounded by sylvan mountains of western Tamil Nadu. After an eventful week, the weekend plan emerged: exploring interesting places nearby. One day, on way back from work, I saw a signboard in front of a sedate building.

It turned out to be the local chapter of Ramanasramam, a spiritual centre dedicated to Sri Ramana Maharshi. The interiors had pleasant vibes. Sitting down at the shrine for a while, I purchased the publications associated with the silent sage of Tiruvannamalai.

Another hectic week went by. Then, the anticipated weekend arrived. From the central bus terminus at Gandhipuram, I embarked on the journey to Palani. Settling down at a window seat, with wind in the hair, it was a pleasurable ride: enjoying unfolding vistas of wayside towns, green landscapes, forested hills, interspersed with factories, timber yards with giant windmill blades rotating in slow motion, amidst settled rural hamlets.

We reached the picturesque town of Pollachi. The stomach growled, announcing its presence. It was time to try out local offerings. Seeing the parked vehicles and the crowd, I entered the busy restaurant, gorged on tasty pongal-vada with sambar-chutney, washing it down with filter coffee. The staff provided the customers with three types of chutney coloured white, red and green; made of coconut, tomato and coriander

paste. With a full stomach, the mood was set for the day's explorations.

The Aliyar hydroelectric dam encircled by misty mountains and the Anaimalai Tiger Reserve situated closeby were popular destinations. However, on that day, the call of the spirit was stronger. Asking around, I caught a town bus reaching Vethathiri Ashram at Aliyar. Set up at the foothills of an imposing mountain, resplendent in natural surroundings, the ashram had the living presence of a Master, one who transmitted the evolutionary message: 'World Peace through Individual Peace'.¹

After spending time at the Ashram and coming back to Pollachi, I boarded the first bus to Palani. Amidst the cacophony in the crowded bus, the tranquillity of the Aliyar Ashram continued to linger in the heart for a while. At last, the view of Sivagiri hill of Palani appeared on the horizon, crowned by the ancient temple.

Surrounded by lakes and hills of the Western Ghats, Palani temple is the abode of Lord Kartikeya. Known as Sri Murugan in Tamil lands, he is associated with valour-love-beauty-generosity-wisdom. He is also Skanda, Lord of War. He is depicted wielding a spear, used to kill the mythical demon, Surapadman. As thanksgiving, Lord Indra offered his daughter, Devasena's hand in marriage.²

In ancient lore, there is a well-known story associated with the origin of Palani as a pilgrim site. At Mount Kailash, Lord Shiva received the fruit of knowledge from Sage

Nārada. As the fruit of wisdom could not be split up into two, it was decided that it would be handed over to the son who came first after circling around the globe. After the briefing, Kartikeya took off on the long journey, mounted on his peacock. Ganesha chose to stay put, circumbulating his own mother Parvati, who represented the world to him. Having completed the task, Ganesha received the fruit.

After circling the world, Kartikeya came back. He saw that the fruit was already taken. Crestfallen, he moved away from his parental abode, came to these forests, and engrossed himself in meditation. Shiva and Parvati rushed from Mount Kailash to pacify him. They addressed him and said: *Pazham nee*: ‘you yourself are the fruit’. From the word ‘Pazham nee’, the name Pazhani, (Palani in English) came into being.

The journey continued. After multiple stoppages, when the bus reached Palani, it was late evening. Taking up a room at a lodge, I decided to visit the temple in the morning. Waking up and after having a light breakfast, I went out to visit the local salon for a haircut. On the wall, there was a large picture of Lord Kartikeya, with the name Saravanan written on it: ‘Divine one born in clump of reeds.’ The barber, while cutting hair, recounted Puranic details surrounding the immaculate birth of Lord Kartikeya, facilitated by Agni, Lord of Fire.

Coming back to the room, after a refreshing bath, I set off for the temple. At the foot of the hill, I stopped near the entrance and bought a ticket from the counter. I assumed that the ticket was for entering the temple. At the entrance, I showed it to a staff-member in sight. He smiled and said that this was a ticket for ear piercing.

Well, here was a surprise. I wondered if I should really get the ears pierced. Then,

surrendering to the moment, I decided to go for it. From a nearby shop, I bought a pair of ear studs, with sparkling stone set in the centre. Next, I located the goldsmith shop and sat down on the stool, waiting for my turn.

The piercing of the ears was quick. There was a sharp stabbing pain, and it was done. The experienced hand applied *vibhuti*, holy-ash on my ears. Offering thanks, I took some of the holy-ash, mixed it with water, and put three horizontal streaks on my forehead, in traditional format of the Shaivites.

Next came the bazaar, lined with shops overflowing with a variety of wares. There were stacked tiers of *prasadam* jars and *vibhuti* packets placed at the front. There were stalls selling flower garlands of all shapes, sizes and colours. The scents of flowers and natural incense spread across the street, lightly tranquilizing the crowd thronging the stalls.

The pleasantness of the pilgrimage site created the right ambience for unscripted encounters with mendicants relaxing in the shadows. Sitting down on a bench, watching the colourful procession of life go by, I felt blessed to have been born in a land which accepted and celebrated diversity in language and culture, work and worship.

The saints, yogis and siddhas who had walked these forested hills down the ages had lived a complete life. Their life and work integrated faith and reason, devotion and knowledge. Saint Arunagirinathar in the classic, *Kandar Anubhuti* elaborates on communion in silence. The spear of divine grace pierces the veil of ignorance. Reality is realized in a lightning-flash of awareness, revealing subject and object, observer and observed.

Unlike other temples where the main idol faces east, here in Palani, it faces

west.³ Bypassing depiction of deity in mode of power, Sri Murugan is installed here in saintly mode: a boyish figure, head shorn of hair, wearing a loin cloth and holding a staff, referred to as *Dandayudhapani*. As the paragon of ever-youthfulness, he is addressed as Kumaraswamy.

Meanwhile, on the pilgrim trail, with hope in their hearts and prayer on their lips, a group of women pilgrims were tying red-yellow threads to the branches of the sacred tree. On one side, there was a large tray. It was filled with earthen lamps, their u-shaped wicks burning bright. With flames dancing in the wind, the lamps sat pretty on the blackened surface, complemented by burning pieces of white camphor melting into nothingness.

The smell of burning oil, camphor and smoke created a dream sequence, a time warp of sorts in which the assembled pilgrims forgot the pressing realities of their lives. They became still as they closed their eyes, lowered their heads, folding their hands in gentle supplication. This was the long pause in awareness, finding rest and repose, before moving on.

The way up the hill was not difficult. The climb had less than seven hundred steps. Waves of devotees thronged the steps to the hilltop, many of them with tonsured heads lapped with sandalwood paste. A group of porter-mules, with load on their backs, stood silently. Meanwhile, the troop of monkeys kept up their antics, stealing the offerings from the pilgrims' side bags by closing in from behind, making strange faces and letting out screeching calls, scaring kids and adults alike.

I reached the top, stepping on to the hot paved courtyard in front of the main

shrine. In the open arena, devotees wearing *rudraksha-sphatika malas* were engaged in ecstatic dancing with the *kavadi*, arch-shaped contraption, balanced on the shoulder. Their hands and feet moved in rhythm with drumbeats and devotional hymns. Dressed in yellow, some of them had silver spears going through their cheeks horizontally and tongues vertically. This was the celebration of the Divine by ardent devotees who had taken up self-mortification, gaining victory of mind over matter.⁴

Then, it was a patient wait as the snaking queue inched its way into the innards of the ancient temple. After entering the cool interiors and having *darshanam* of the Beloved Lord in hushed silence, coming out to the sunlit courtyard was a rebirth of sorts. Then, walking to the edge of the parapet and looking down at the plains, lakes, hillocks and habitats below, it was a spectacular sight. On one side of the hill, the winding trail had a row of expectant pilgrims, young and old, clambering up the weathered steps with eager joy. Indeed, the peacock-riding Lord had stolen their hearts, once and for all.

Coming out of the temple, there arose subtle joy with recharge of energy. Back to Coimbatore, I deliberated whether I should keep the ear studs on, before going to work the next day. I stuck to the plan and wore the ear studs to work. The local associates, looking at the ear studs, exchanged glances, and shared their lunchbox in the afternoon. It felt good.

However, the dash of vanity lasted a week. By this time, the friction of ear studs with soft skin membrane had caused a lingering wound. Heeding advice from well-wishers, the studs were taken off. The wound healed quickly. While the trip had

been short, the memories remained long, by grace.

Over the years, I would look at the ear studs in its tiny red box and remember the Divine play during the first visit to the holy

shrine. Last but not least, the unique taste of *prasadam* received in form of *panchamritam* that had delighted body-mind-spirit remained etched in the depth of being.⁵ ■

NOTES

- 1 Vethathiri Ashram was founded by Yogiraj Vethathiri Maharishi (1911-2006) in the year 1958. The Maharishi was an exponent of simplified *Kundalini Yoga* and simplified *Kaya-kalpa Yoga* in the tradition of the *siddhas* of Southern India.
- 2 While the Lord is represented as *jnāna*-personified, *Devasena (Devayani)*, daughter of Indra, representing *kriyā-shakti*, is the companion.
- 3 Ancient lore states that one of the eighteen *Maha-siddhas*, Bogar, adept-alchemist-herbalist amalgamated nine potent substances, *nava-pashanam* to create the immaculate idol of Palani. Bogar is known as Boganathar in Tamil lands. He was the disciple of Kalangi Nathar of Benaras, belonging to Nath-yogi sampradaya. Bogar was known as *Bo-yang* in China. Across millennia, the chain of spiritual transmission spread across continents.
- 4 Groups of devotees from the provinces arrive in *padayatra* accompanied by fellow-musicians with wind-percussion instruments such as *nadaswaram*, *melam*, *parai*, *thappu*, *kombu* and *mattalam*. Some devotees wear green clothes, while others wear saffron; aspiring for material abundance and spiritual transcendence. After camping at the foot of the hill, they visit sub-shrines dedicated to *Ganapati*, *Idumban*, *Amman*, *Shiva-Parvati*, *Dakshinamurti*, *Vasuki* and culminate at the main shrine.
- 5 The *panchamritam*, prepared with banana, country-sugar, honey, ghee and cardamom, is used in daily *abhishekam* of the deity and distributed to the devotees.

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you perform there will multiply itself tenfold. Moreover, the dormant power of a *mantra* awakens very soon in this sacred place. In

Varanasi, the land of eternal freedom, Lord Vishwanath grants liberation unasked to all, great or small, rich or poor. ■

WORKS CITED

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