

Unique shrines

One will certainly be surprised when it is discovered that temples are built for animals. Cat was worshipped in ancient Egypt and as a religious symbol it roused people's respect and reverence. There is a temple in Rajasthan, Karni Mata's Mandir, in Bikaner district where "a large number of rats, locally known as Karniji's Kabas, are seen moving about freely on the floor of the temple, as the Kabas are fed and not molested there.

Strangest of all, there is a temple in Kerala devoted to the spider! There are, according to zoologists, over three thousand species of spider, distributed around the world. It is not clear which one is glorified to be the deity in this temple at Kodumannil, near Pathanamthitta, Kerala.

If tradition can be accepted, the shrine should be over a thousand years old. The Kalarikkal family of the locality regularly carry out the temple festivals. A legend narrates in detail, the story of a Namboodiri virgin, her transformation into a spider, finally becoming the deity of the temple.

Snakeworship is not limited to any one country or people. It was a common practice in China, Sri Lanka, Japan, Java, Cambodia, Mexico, Egypt and several other regions. In India itself, there is hardly any place without wide and strong tradition of this cult.

Kerala is described in most of the classics, as *nagabhumi*. Almost all caste and communities had something or other to do with snakeworship. Innumerable are the temples and 'tharavads' that had serious connections with this worship. The Nagercoil temple, Trippara temple, Peralasserri temple are the most famous. Some reputed *tharavadas* are: Mannarasala illem, Pampinmekkattu illem, Meppalli illem, Pathirikkunnathumana, etc. According to popular legend Parasurama installed the main snake-idol at Mannarasala. Once in 41 years *Sarppappattu* and *Sarppathullel* (snakedance) are performed here. In *Sarppathullel* (snakedance) the *Valiyamma* (senior Namboodiri lady) and *Cheriyamma*, enact the roles of Nagaraja and Sarpayakshi. The other roles are rendered by Nair ladies.

Sarppakavu used to be the status symbol of

all aristocratic Nair and Namboodiri *tharavads* till very recently. William Logan, in his "Malabar," published as early as 1887, noted that — "a clump of wild jungle trees luxuriantly festooned with graceful creepers, is usually to be found in the South Western corner of the gardens of all respectable Malayali Hindus. The spot is left free to nature to deal with as she likes." These groves (*Kavus*) in reality, served as biosphere reserves, to use a modern turn, giving innumerable living things a much needed refuge.

Strange rituals and commemorative ceremonies relating to snake worship in temples and *Kavus* of Kerala are far too many to be noticed here. In North Kerala, even the ritual dances such as *theyyam* and *thira* have provided appropriate forms called *nagatheyyam* and *nagathottam* as offerings. *Nagathottam* is sung by Theyyampadis and is in a form of rhythmic prose, that tells the story of Nagaraja and Nageswari. *Nagappattu* performances in some temples and *Kavus* last for about seven days. Elaborate ritualistic-colour-floor decoration (*Kalamazhuthu*) is an integral part of this offering.

Elephants are needed for a number of festivals in almost all temples in Kerala. The most imposing male, is preferred to carry the deity around in procession. In temples, as at Guruvayur, there is a large herd of elephants specially maintained for use in ceremonial occasions. But in Kumaranellur Devi temple there is a total ban on male elephants for all festivals and functions! According to tradition and custom, only female elephants (*pidiyana*) can be utilised. Last time, when the lady elephant became too old and infirm to carry out its tasks, she was disposed off only after another *pidiyana* was taken in and kept in position. Another interesting tradition followed in this Devi temple, enjoins that the priest (*poojari*) should be a *brahmachari* a person of assured celibacy.

The Travancore Devaswom Board constituted in August 1949 with the late Mannathu Padmanabhan as the founder president has now more than 1675 temples of



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different categories, under its management. Among these, there is only one temple dedicated to Saraswathi.

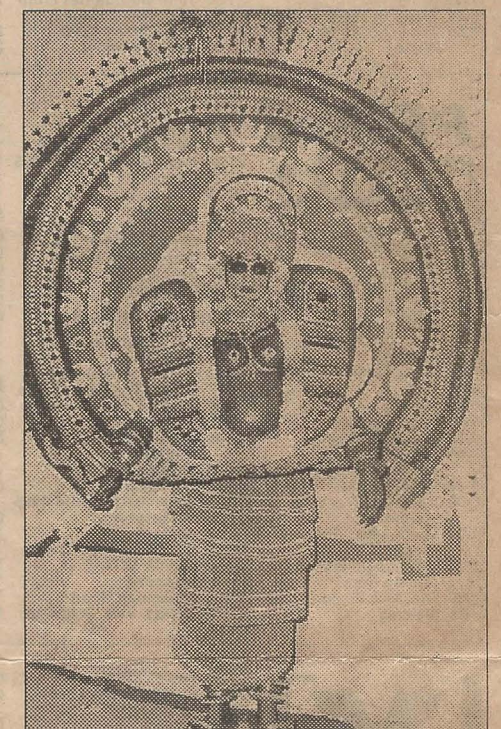
This lone shrine for the Goddess of learning and the arts is known as Mookambi temple and is located at Paravoor near Kollam (Quilon). There is yet another one, in the erstwhile Travancore, but that is under a private management. This shrine is at Panachikkattu (Kottayam) in central Travancore.

The garbhagriha of Mookambi temple is

planned in the form of a lotus. It is built in granite and is located in a lake-like pool, surrounded by a wall in hard rock, to contain the water. Devotees use the top are of this stone wall for circumambulation during worship.

The pool about six feet in depth, named *padmathirtham* has a bridge of about five feet in length across it to Srikoil, from the *mukhamandapam*. Only the *poojari* use it to go inside the sanctum sanctorum.

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Strange rituals and commemorative ceremonies are seen in temples here.