

The Mother Priestess of Mannarasala

A Cult that Defies Tradition

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Priesthood of women is a very rare phenomenon among the Malayali Brahmins who are the priestly class of Kerala—that long and narrow strip of greenish land towards the south-west of India. But the head priestess of Mannarasala is an exception.

Mannarasala is a famous centre of pilgrimage where *Nagaradhana* (serpent-worship) is popular. The Amma (mother) of Mannarasala is the most important cult figure of the area. Thousands of devotees seek solace from her.

The Malayali Brahmin community has developed a tradition of keeping its women folk within the inner rooms of their homes, calling them *antherjanams* (people confined to inner rooms). It is not clear how far this tradition goes back in history. But in recent history, women of this community were not allowed to go out, nor could they mingle with outsiders. *Antherjanams* had to lead a life of austerity, devoting themselves to prayers and family chores. And yet, a priestess from this community reigns supreme in a temple group.

The story goes that Mannarasala is where Parasurama did his *tapa*s (penance) before he left Kerala. He had raised the land from the sea by throwing into it an axe, which covered the region from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari; Varuna, the god of the seas, had given his blessings for the task. Parasurama performed severe *tapas* to please

Lord Shiva who blessed him with land. The warrior gave this piece of earth to the Brahmins as penance for the sin of killing his mother, Renuka. But the land was found to be unfit for human habitation. Varuna then took away the extreme salinity of soil and water. The infesting snakes were restricted to mini-forests, known as *kavu*, for the upkeep of the environment. The snake-god, Vasuki, was worshipped, and *poojas* and rituals evolved through the ages. Mannarasala was one of the chief sites of *Nagaradhana*. Mannarasala, originally called Mandarasala, got its name from the profusion of *mandaram*—a kind of flowering tree that grew there. A family of Brahmins settled in the area, as directed by Parasurama, for the worship and upkeep of the *Naga*

temple.

Legend has it that this mini-forest once caught fire and the resident serpents were severely burnt. All the men of the Brahmin family were away and only the women were at home. They tried their best to put out the fire with water, and nursed the injured snakes with medicines and love. When these creatures were cured, they were restored to their original homes. The *nagas* were very pleased.

The elder Brahmin of the family, Vasudeva, and his wife, Sreedevi, were in deep sorrow as they had no children. The *naga* god blessed them and soon twins were born to them—one was in the form of a *naga* (the reincarnation of Anantha), the other an ordinary human child. As years went by, the human child grew up, got married and had children and grandchildren. The elder *naga* son lived with them for many years. Even today, members of the family refer to him as their *muthassan* (grandfather). At last the *naga* son said that it was time for him to retire and retreated to the cellar or the *nilavara* of the house. Nobody was to enter there and his mother would offer him *pooja*—a custom that would continue forever. The senior-most woman of the house should be the chief *poojarin* (priestess). This ritual is performed even today.

Many believers still flock to this *naga* shrine at Mannarasala, seeking solace for their woes. I have seen the Amma of Mannarasala: a simple-minded *antherjanam*, with very little



so-called “modern” education. She is always clad in white and has been practicing *bramhacharya* from the day she assumed her duties. The devotees who flock to the temple are eager to be blessed by her and line up in front of her tiny prayer room, adjacent to the *nilavara* to where the serpent son had retired. They tell her of their miseries and seek comfort. The Amma listens to them carefully and suggests that they should pray



The Mother of Mannarsala in her tiny prayer chamber

to the *naga* god and offer him what they can.

I have seen people leaving her with a peaceful mind. I wonder whether modern psychological counselling is doing any better!

The temple is surrounded by an area of untouched forest—the typical tropical growth of Kerala. If you want to spend a few hours far from the madding crowd in the company of Mother Nature, come to this holy place, where a woman is the central figure. □

M.D. Umadevi Antherjanam, is a retired school teacher and headmistress currently undertaking a study on the *Nagaradhana* (snake worship) of Kerala.

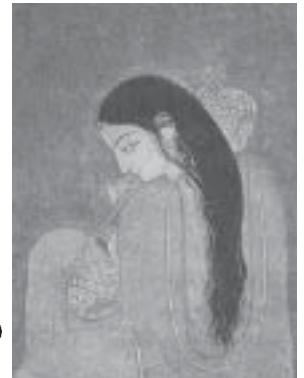
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The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
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