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A DESCRIPTION

OF

THE GREAT SEXENNIAL

Murajapam ceremony in the Hindu Principality OF TRAVANCORE

BY

A TRAVANCOREAN,

(i.e Prince Rāma Varma, 1st Prince of Travancore). Son Rājā 1850.

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THE MURAJAPAM FESTIVAL IN TRAVANCORE.

(By a Travancorean.)

The great *Murajapam* is drawing nigh. It will begin on the 18th November and end on the 12th January, extending over 56 days. The ceremony is unique in its nature; and a description of it will not be uninteresting. Let us first consider its origin and its history.

The Travancore almanac gives a list of the bygone rulers of the country. The twenty-seventh name in that list is that of Vaṉchi Mártáṇḍavarmá who began to reign in 1729-30. It was this Rajah that conquered the petty chieftains who had been a source of perpetual strife and anarchy; and extended Travancore to its present limits. He consolidated the sovereign power and established a Government. He may, not unfittingly, be called the Egbert of Travancore. The career of a conqueror is always chequered with bloodshed; and the good sword of Rajah Mártáṇḍavarmá himself had no small share in the work of carnage. Policy and religious scruples alike dictated to him the necessity of purchasing popularity in this world and absolution in the next by unstinted liberality in charitable and devotional expenses. The *Ootperahs* and innumerable other charities of a permanent nature attached to the State owe their origin to this remarkable ruler. Wishing to found an exceptionally grand and solemn religious ceremony, he struck upon the *Bhadradípam*, a religious feast described in the *Brahmáṇḍa Puráṇa*, and supposed to have been performed by the great *Kártavírya Arjuna* of yore. This ceremony is performed at the two *Ayanas* or Solstices in the year. The sun has been the chief object of worship in the early stages of civilisation in all parts of the world. The Incas of Mexico and the Áryan Bráhmins of the Vedic ages have alike regarded the glorious orb of light as a fitting representation of the power, wisdom, beneficence and universality of God. The *Bhadradípam* ceremony chiefly consists in the head priest's transferring by means of *Mantras* the

spirit of the suno five sacred lamps which are allowed to burn a full day. The ai of the ceremony is the increase of plenty and prosperity in th land, the removal of evils, the destruction of enemies, and so fcth. A general feasting of brahmins for five days and special donaions accompany this ceremony. Every twelfth *Bhadradípam* is peceded by the great *Murajapam*, and hence this great ceremony is performed once in six years. The first *Bhadradípam* was performed in 919. *Kollam* (1743-4), and the first *Murajapam* in 925. *K.* (1749-50). Thus, the coming *Murajapam* is the twenty-first of its kind. Rajah Martánḍavarmá performed two *Murajapams*. His great successor Rámavarma Rajah, or as more popularly styled, Rámah Rájáh, who reigned 40 years, performed seven. His successor, the Treaty Rajah performed two. Ráṇí Lakshmí Bhye performed none. Her sister Pṛáṇvatí Bhye, during her regency performed three. Maharajah Rámavarmá performed three. His successor, Maharajah Mártaṇḍavarma performed two. The reigning Maharajah has performed one, and the coming one will be the second of his reign.

Apart from purely religious considerations, the founder of the *Murajapam* had another object. Most of the Malayaḷee brahmins of the highest order were, in those days, residents of the Tamorin's and Cochin Rajah's territories and had little or no inducement to frequent or settle in Travancore. To secure their permanent or temporary residence in the land was the Rajah's eager aim. To effect this he had recourse to grants of *Jenmam* lands, houses, religious privileges, lucrative managements and prelacies of pagodas, &c., to many of the leading Nampúries. While such permanent gifts of the class were drawn to the land by means of religious ceremonies attended with feasting and pecuniary donations, small and large. Of these ceremonies the *Murajapam* has been the grandest.

The essential part of the *Murajapam* consists in the oral delivery of the Vedas. It is done in the great pagoda at Trevandrum in the mornings. All the three Vedas, viz., Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, and Sáma Veda, are represented. The last one of these scarcely counts a dozen men, while the two others very nearly equally divide the whole body of the Malayáḷee brahmins. Canarese brahmins *of the coast*, who are familar with the Vedas, are also enlisted. Each man has to go through his particular Veda once in eight days, which make one *mura* or rotation. Thus, in 56 days the Vedas are to be repeated seven times. For the *Murajapam* recitation only such of

the Nampúries and Canarese brahmins are admitted as are formally recognised by either of the *Vádhayans* or heads of the two *Yogams* —*Trissivaperúr* and *Tirunáváy*—as having passed an examination in the Vedas. The *Rig* and *Yajus* brahmins are paid 8 chackrams per diem, and the *Sáma* Veda brahmins 9 chackrams. The numbers of brahmins admitted for the Murajapam *recitation* on the last five occasions stand as follows :

Year.			Number.
1015	K.	(1839-40)	3,163
1021	„	(1845- 6)	3,188
1027	„	(1851- 2)	3,681
1033	„	(1857- 8)	2,918
1039	„	(1863- 4)	2,706

It is curious to observe that the above figures show a falling off latterly in the study of the Vedas. Besides *Murajapam* or the recitation of the Vedas, two other *Japams* are made ; one consisting of the *Sahasranáma* or " Vishṇu's thousand names," being a chapter in the *Anuśásanika Parva* of *Mahábhárata*, and the other called *Jalajapam*, consisting of a hymn from the *Rig Veda*, which is considered to possess particular efficacy in destroying evils and enemies. The first of these is performed in the afternoons in the outer quadrangle of the Pagoda, the reciters squatting on plank, floorbenches, and holding strings of *kuśa* grass knotted together with one another, and emanating from an urn containing *Sáḷagrámas* placed in front of the Eastern gate of the Pagoda. The *Jalajapam* is performed in the evenings on the banks of the *Padmatírtham* tank, the reciters supposed to stand hip-deep in water. But the steps on the banks are screened with plaited cocoanut leaves ; and the greater portion of the men naturally prefer standing *above* water to shivering *in* water. On the occasions of these two *Japams*, the Maharajah and other members of the Royal family, male and female, perform perambulations around the reciters. During the last *Murajapam*, it is well known that a section of the Nampúries mobbed and impeded the Maharajah's progress in his *Jalajapam* perambulations, their object being to get released from prison one of their class who was fettered for an outrage committed on the previous night. The payment for *Jalajapam* is four chackrams, and that for *Sahásranámam* two chackrams per diem per man. *All* Nampúries are admitted for these *Japams* ; and all the Canarese brahmins who have passed the *Murajapam* test are likewise admitted. Also such

of the Canarese brahmins who hold permanent religious employments in the Pagoda and the several palaces are admitted. Those Nampúries who do not obtain *Murajapam*, recite *Súkta Japam* in the mornings, the payment being four chackrams per diem. This also consists of a hymn from the *Rig Veda*. Thus the aggregate payments vary from fifteen chackrams to six chackrams per man.

Having thus described the religious part of the great Murajapam ceremony, it is time now to touch upon its festival features. The Murajapam is the most expensive and the grandest of all the periodical ceremonies. The last Murajapam, according to the Travancore Administration report for the year 1863-64, cost 1,63,611 Rs. The preparations for the ceremony begin so early as a year before its advent. Orders are issued by the Dewan to the district officers for causing the planting of the *ettan* species of plantain, of the fruit of which, both raw and ripe, there is an unusually large consumption during the ceremony. Money is largely advanced to the *erayali* ryots for plantains, plantain leaves, gourds, esculent roots and yams, ghee, curd, bamboo mats and baskets, cocoanut shell spoons, cocoanuts, and various other articles. Tenders of contracts for the delivery of the following articles are invited:

Cocoanut oil, gingely oil, molasses, pulse of several sorts, mustard, cummin seed, dill seed, turmeric, dry ginger, tamarind, chillies, pepper, country cloths, gunny cloths, striped sheeting cloth, grass bed mats, silk cotton for stuffing beds, and perhaps some more articles omitted here by oversight. The discretion of accepting or rejecting individual tenders was, in former days, always turned to private profit by the highest officer of state. The erection of sheds begins about three months before the ceremony. The sheds are erected chiefly in and near the Fort, of several sizes, varying from $199 \times 29\frac{1}{2}$ feet to $14\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{1}{4}$ feet, there are in all 52 sheds excluding huts. Of these, six of the larger sizes are put up within the Pagoda enclosure, and are used for feeding. Of the rest which are outside the Pagoda walls, 19 are for storing provisions, cots and mats, medicinal drugs, &c.; 11 for the general residence of the Nampúries; three for the need of invalid Nampúries; five for oil baths; one a rest house at the landing place; one a dispensary for the preparation and distribution of native medicines; and four miscellaneous. The sheds are neatly and strongly built, the floor beaten down and smoothened with cowdung and charcoal, and the sides screened with cleft bamboos closely arranged. For the occupation of the Nampúri chiefs, there are permanent buildings belonging to

the sirkar which are repaired and whitewashed for the occasion. The streets and the houses flanking them are kept neat, and the former lit up with extra lights at nights. A fountain of rude make, on the syphon principle, is set up outside the Northern gate of the Pagoda. Water is conveyed to the spouting orifice by means of a hollowed trunk of the areca palm planted perpendicularly behind a wall or screen, and a shorter one placed horizontally under ground.

The native doctor, a Nampúri brahmin enjoying rich grants of land, &c., from the sirkar, arrives a few weeks before the ceremony, and begins work in right earnest; boiling, pounding, pulverising, straining, ~~planking~~ pill making, &c. A large and varied collection of indigenous drugs is made; and the opportunity cannot but prove interesting to an examiner of the medical botany of the country. Besides these, the bazaar drugs (dried and imported) also largely enter into the composition of the medicines; and the costly substances like musk, civet, purified camphor, Nágkésar, &c., are a source of no small profit to the doctor. He administers medicines to the sick Nampúries and prepares medicinal scented oil for the bath of the Nampuri chiefs. His ticket of admission is required by those who may wish to take meals in the invalid establishment.

The sheds of residence are arranged with cots. These are made up of rude wooden rectangular frame works, measuring $5 \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ feet, with coir netting, and supported by four plain stands. Of these, there were 3,217 on the last occasion. Of common grass mats, cumblies, and thick sheeting, there were 2,781 pieces of each, and as many pillows. The sheds are composed of the following materials: pillar posts measuring from 30 to $7\frac{1}{2}$ feet in length 1,179; bamboos of various lengths 18,080; coir ropes 44,426 skeins; plaited cocoanut leaves 67,865. There is a very large consumption of firewood; viz, 600,000 sticks. All the pieces are of the *same* length and are as nearly as possible, of the same thickness. They are $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet long. About one-fourth or one third of the whole quantity is received beforehand and beautifully stacked in some six sheds; the rest from time to time replacing these as they are spent. The several storehouses and the large residing sheds receive a visit from His Highness the Maharajah and the State officers a couple of days previous to the ceremony.

The storing of vegetables begins generally about ten or twelve days before the ceremony. They are stored partly in the permanent godowns on the North East of the Pagoda, and partly in the

sheds. It is well known that in Travancore there is a large class of men mostly Nairs, called variously *Viruttikárs*, *Úḷiayakárs*, and *Erayalikárs*, from whom service is exacted by the sirkar in various ways. These men possess small holdings of sirkar land, and in lieu of payment of tax, perform certain services allotted to them. Of these, the collecting and bringing in of provisions for the Murajapam and other ceremonies is a principal one. The purchase money is advanced to the *Viruttikár*; and his service consists in procuring and bringing the things indented. The purchase money, however, is extremely below the market price; and the *Viruttikárs* consequently suffer losses. This rate ought to be raised to the market value of the various articles prevailing at the places whence they are brought. A large staff of permanent and extra native petty clerks is employed to give tickets of receipt to the *Viruttikárs* on the delivery of the articles. These men exercise their discretion in accepting or rejecting the articles on the ground of their *quality*. Some times things are not wholly rejected, but undervalued,—ten indifferent plantains being accepted as five standard plantains. It is no wonder that this discretion is often abused by these petty employes. The *Viruttikárs* generally anticipate the *non-regulation* demands, and are provided with a few chackrams, thrown into the sheepskin sheaths of the indispensible *Pichátti* knives which adorn their hips. The vigilance of superiors may minimise the bad practices of the petty clerks. The several outstation *Ootperahs* send to the capital the apportioned quantities of pickled mangoes and various sorts of fruits salted and dried for frying purposes. Of the latter there are three different species of gourd, two varieties of the *Solanum* tribe and one of the country peas. These and the mangoes are received and stored by the head pickle-keeper in H. H. the Maharajah's palace. This person likewise exercises his discretion of accepting or rejecting, and that not without advantage to himself.

The enrolment of *Dehaṇḍakárs*, or brahmin workmen, is in itself a ceremony. The Dewan and other State officers assemble in solemn conclave, and the muster roll of the previous *Murajapam*, *Dehaṇḍakárs* is read over. The *Dehaṇḍakárs* are all Tamil brahmins. When each name is read he presents himself to the official Synod, and is enlisted. Vacancies by death, absence or other causes, are filled up at the spot, sometimes by the appointment of sons or other relatives of the vacators, but oftener by the exercise of patronage proceeding from various quarters. The following is the list of *Dehaṇḍakárs*.

Designation of work.	Number of men.
For boiling rice...	25
For washing rice...	25
For drawing and conveying water...	55
For preparing curries...	26
For " sweet broths...	19
For sweetening beaten rice with molasses... ...	8
For serving leaves and arranging lamps, &c... ...	13
For serving rice (extra)...	13
For frying pan cakes...	31
For driving crows (!)...	14
For serving ghee...	12
For " ripe plantain fruits...	12
For " sugar...	8
For " curd...	8
For " boiled whey...	8
For " Salt...	5
For " various pickles...	12
For distributing sandal paste...	4
For recording the number of men feasted... ...	1
For arranging cocoanut leaf dishes to serve *kanji* gruel.	3
For serving *kanjé* gruel...	27
For serving sliced cocoanuts...	3
For grinding cocoanuts...	26
For expressing cocoanut milk...	16
For serving drinking water, arranging sitting planks and other miscellaneous purposes...	112
For drying the friable salt fruits...	1
For keeping the vessels...	1
For guarding the cooking place...	3
For " the inner gates...	17
For " the outer gates...	14
For " the baths around the tanks...	8
For works in the invalid cooking establishment... ...	61
Total...	591

There are thirty-eight controllers of various works, besides the above. The pay of the controllers ranges from 5 chackrams to 2 chackrams *per diem*, and that of the *Dehaṇḍakárs* from 5 chackrams to 2 chackrams. About 26 men are appointed to keep order generally, and for miscellaneous executive work.

Letters bearing royal signature are taken to the Nampúri Chiefs by special messengers, inviting them to attend the great ceremony. Their number fluctuates, but the average may be taken at somewhere between 20 and 30. The highest among these are the *Vadhyáns* or spiritual heads of the two *Yogams*, *Triśśivaperúr* and *Tirunávay*. Next to them come the six *Vaidikans* or expositors of *Vedic* and *Smárta* rules of life. Their *Taravád* names are *Taykát*, *Cherumukku*, *Kaplingát*, *Perumpaṭappu*, *Pattal*, *Kaimukku*. Besides these, the great *Áḷáncheri Tamprákaḷ*, whose purity of caste is accepted to tower as a monolyth above the level of the rest of the Nampúries, is invited ; so also several *Áḍhyans* (Lords) of wealth and caste excellence. As most of these live in foreign territories or very near the Northern limits of Travancore, all arrangements are made to render their journey comfortable. Cabin boats, palanquins, music, &c, await them at every stage. The most sumptuous meals are provided. The táluq and *provirty* servants pay every attention. Yet, in days of not distant past, some of the Nampúri chiefs, or more often, their head servants were known to collect black mail from petty sirkar officers. The practice seems to have died out. *Triśśivaperúr*, Vádhyán is always the largest train of Nampúri followers.

The *Murajapam* commences. Its religious part has already been described. The streets are strewn with new faces ; some full of piety and religious thoughts, some heavy with sober gravity, some lit up with intelligent curiosity, some glistening with merry carelessness, some meditating apish mischief, some glancing libidinousness, some watering at the thought of the plantain *prathaman* and the inspissated curd curry, and some staring in idiotic vacuity. The percentage of boys and old men is large ; the latter propelled by Epicurean propensities, and the former attracted by the opportunities for merry-making and mischief-making. With the middle-aged, money-making is generally the object.

The sheds are occupied. They become busy as bee hives and merry as marriage bells. Singing ballads and dramatic songs, narrating stories, mimicking and jesting, making practical jokes, gambling with dice or cards, playing chess, chewing betel, and a thousand other things are practiced. The gourmands snore awfully, their paunches pressing down the coir net work of the cots. The morning meals are taken by the Nampúries between 8 and 11 A. M. They sit on planks arranged in long rows, and eat. The curries, sweet broths, pickles, fries, chetnies, &c., are prepared with the

utmost care, and served neatly and without stint. The culinary attainments displayed on the occasion, are worth an Achard's study. Yet a viciously disposed Nampúri here and there would insist upon the lowest pan cake in a whole pile being taken out for him at the risk of smashing the basketful, or a particular piece low down in a cauldron full of boiled plantains still emitting hot steam. The cooks show much patience, and comfort themselves by thinking that the days of the Nampúries are not unnumbered. In the noon, *kanji* gruel and its accompaniments are served out to those who may desire to have it. Between 2 and 3 P. M. the Nampúries perform *Sahasranáma Japam* already described, and are honored with the perambulations of the Maharajah and other members of the royal family. Between $6\frac{1}{2}$ and $7\frac{1}{2}$ P. M., they perform *Jalajapam* around the chief tank, and are likewise honored by royalty. At the end of this, there is an uproarious rush of the Nampúries into the pagoda for their evening meals. Vociferous hurrahing and jesting are indulged in at this time. One of the favorite practices is that accosting the Tamiḷ and foreign brahmins with the epithet, *Úśi*, which, in Malayalam, means '*needle*' or '*pen*.' The drift of this taunt is founded upon the following legend. The immortal *Vibhíshaṇa* brother of the giant king *Rávaṇa*, is supposed even to this day to pay mysterious nocturnal visits to the famous shrine of Vishṇu at *Śríraṅgam* near Trichinopoly. One night, a brahmin employe, out of curiosity, lay concealed in a corner of the Pagoda. *Vibhíshaṇa* came, with his followers bearing flower baskets and other materials for the *Púja*. The sly little brahmin, moved by a wish to visit *Laṅká*, threw himself into one of the emptied flower baskets, unnoticed by the giants, who returned home with the basket without feeling whatever the weight of the man. After reaching *Laṅká* the man came out; and the puny apparition was reported to *Vibhíshaṇa* who called up the man and asked him what he wanted. The brahmin, out of inordinate greed, requested the giant king to give him what was considered the rarest thing in *Laṅká*. *Laṅká* being all of gold and precious stones, iron, was very scarce; and *Vibhíshaṇa*, having some-how procured an iron pen had preserved it with the greatest care, and under the strictest guard. He caused it to be brought, opened out several concentrical caskets of silver, gold, diamonds, rubies, &c., took out the pen and gave it to the avaricious brahmin to the extreme surprise and disappointment of the latter. The joke '*Úśi*,' has reference to this. Some of the cleverer Nampúries prefix adjectives to apply the joke to

particular persons. For instance, on one occasion the late Dewan, Krishna Row, was addressed '*Mála iṭṭa Úśi*,' or '*necklaced pin*,' as he always wore a necklace.

The evening meals are, by far, the most sumptuous and are much coveted by the Nampuries. After this meal, each man receives one leaffold of beaten rice needed with molasses. These folds are generally sold by them. They get also *choots* (not cheroots !) made of dry cocoanut spathes, split and bundled up, and lit at one end; these being intended to give them light on their way to the sheds and other improvised night residences. Holding the rice folds in one hand with the otheir shaking the *choots into* flame, with their waist clothes, in many cases, removed to their heads, raising a yell of '*Úśi*' they proceed in gangs after the night meals. With the *choots* flaming and smouldering at rapid intervals, the Nampuries look like so many *ignis fatui*. The Nampúries get a cot, a sheeting, a cumbly, &c., each man, besides a pair of clothes. Once in eight days, a man gets 6 tolahs of Jaffna tobacco, and every day twenty betel leaves and ten soopari nuts. They are permitted to indulge in oil baths any day and any nnmber of times. The body is smeared over with oil and the head bathed. The substances used for removing the oil are gingely seed cakes, the bark of the thorny wild creeper, *Iucha*, and the dry powdered leaves of the wild shrub *Táḷi*. The meals prepared in the *Díṅapura* or invalid establishment are extremely neat and well served. Many *non-invalids* get admission into it on the strength of tickets from the Nampùri doctor.

The freaks and follies committed by the Nampúries during the *Murajapam* are indeed numerous. There is scarcely a place not open to their strollings. The several palaces, the several public offices, the public gardens, the museum, the stables &c., daily receive their unimpeded visits. On one occasion, a Nampúri finding access into the drawing room of one of the former Maharajahs, grinned at his own image reflected by a large mirror. A passage of grins and antics entered between the man and his image, till at last, the Nampúri gave a violent blow and shattered the fine and costly mirror. On another occasion, a Nampúri, going to the old-fashion clock tower, inserted his hand into the heavy jaws of the face which open and shut its mouth at every stroke of the bell hammer. Having done this at 1 P. M. he had to stand till 2, yelling all the while in excruciating pain. On a third occasion a Nampúri got himself rudely pawed by a cheetah with whom he attempted over-familiarity. On a fourth, one received a kick in his face from the horse of a late Commander of the Nair

brigade. The Nampúries are greatly amused with a treat with *galvanic* batteries, with horse and elephant riding, with picnics in their own way and so forth.

At or before the beginning of the last *Mura*, most men decamp, as Tamil brahmins, hitherto held in order, are allowed to take meals and other liberties without distinction. No '*úśi*' is heard there-after. All exclusive care and neatness in the feast disappear, everything goes on pell mell.

The last day of the *Murajapam* is called *Lakshadípam* (a lakh of lights). The preparations for the great illumination begin early in the day. The sheds inside the Pagoda are all removed in about six hours. Several hundreds of men and thirty or forty elephants are employed—the latter to pull up the heavy pillar posts and carry them out of the Pagoda. The whole scene is full of bustle. It is indeed a Babel scene. After this, the yards within and without the *Śivalimandapam* are filled with close rows of cleft bamboo stands over which are placed small earthen chatties with oil and wicks. Besides this, the interstices between the granite pillars are covered with lights. Tall brazen posts with tiers of lights are kept ready. Even the tops of the outerwall are lined with large chatties. At about 8 at night the whole pagoda is lit up, and is one effulgent blaze. A very large and miscellaneous crowd of people congregate. Ten thousand will be but an under estimate. Hundreds of flambeaux are borne. The Śivali rounds of the *Swámies* are performed amidst every pomp. The Maharajah, and the several members of the Royal family, and all the Hindu officers, high and low, attend. Even out-station judges and Peshkars and minor officials come to the capital for the grand occasion. On the morning after *Lakshadípam*, His Highness the Maharajah undergoes a series of religious ceremonies, takes his bath in the *Patmatírtham* tank, makes liberal donations, and presents an elephant to the pagoda. A general bonus of 16 chackrams per head to all Malayáḷi brahmins and of 8 chackrams to all Tamiḷ brahmins, including women and children, is distributed. The ceremony thus comes to an end.

The chief Nampúries are presented with cloths, bangles, rings, &c., by the Maharajah, and they return to their homes. The total expense of the last *Murajapam*, as stated in the Administration Report of that year, was Rs. 1,63,611; and with all possible economy, the coming *Murajapam* will cost about as much.

A great deal can be said against the *Nampúries*. They are uncivilised and full of follies and superstitions. But as a class, they are simple, timid and undesigning. The Vedic observances are nowhere in India less degenerated and adulterated than among the *Nampúries*. The *Murajapam* itself is an unique relic of olden days, and is ethnically as interesting as Tirumala Naick's Mahal at Madura is architecturally. Long live the *Nampúries* ! Long live the great *Murajapam* ! Long live the Maharajah of Travancore!