

The Hill-top Temple

When Shankara-Naarayanan got into the jeep there was a wild breeze billowing and echoing. It was not yet dawn in Simhapura, a few birds were pleasantly in song seeing the sun yet unborn for man. The driver Murugan got in: the jeep started and gently moved into the dark valley.

It was cold and Shankara-Naarayanan rubbed his hands. He unconsciously recited silently, “*Aapadaam apaharthaaram dhaataaram sarvasampadaam ~~~*”, prayer to Lord Shri Rama for a safe journey. His mother had advised him as a child and it had become an instinctive habit. Mother had learnt the habit from grandmother and the ritual went back into the distant family roots.

“Muruga, how long will it take to reach Ambaaloor?”

“About two hours sir. You can have tea at Pudallur after a while.”

aapadam apaharthaaram ~ (mantram) ~ Please Keep me away from accidents and all mishappenings, the bestower of All Good for all worlds Oh! Lord Rama.

Curves after curves the jeep traversed with yellow fog lights too on.

It reached a straight road and suddenly a mist covered all.

On the east across the valley little light of dawn could be discerned ~

The green valley just about turned visible and the river looked like a band of silver.

From the mountain forests a few birds cackled and flew into the mist.

“There are many deer here sir: you may see some of them.”

They turned a corner and a herd of deer was crossing the road.

Sunlight fell on them through the mist.

Murugan stopped the vehicle and they watched.

“Even many peacocks and swans fly around here. Many other birds too. Even foreigners come to watch these birds and take their photographs!”

They crossed a rickety wooden bridge and turned a corner.

Scent of flowers and temple camphor fumes filled the air and a solitary bell echoed in the mountain.

Murugan stopped the jeep, alighted and said,

“Sir, this is a small Ganapathy *koil*. He is called *Malayappan Ganeshan*. Please buy a coconut and crack it here sir. He is standing as a guard for *Ambaaloor Devi*.”

Shankara-Naarayanan bought the coconut from an old woman and cracked it on the stone in front of the temple.

The *poojari* came out with *pooja* flowers and sandal paste and the black ganapathi-homa *prasadaam* and gave it to Shankara-Naarayanan.

“Where is sir from Muruga?” the young priest asked ~

“He is electric engineer going to take charge of Ambaaloor office. ShankaraNaarayanan sir.”

Shankara-Naarayanan was about to take two rupees and put it on the brass plate.

koil ~ Temple

Malayappan Ganeshan ~ Ganapathy who is the Lord of the mountains.

Ambaaloor Devi ~ The Goddess of the land of Ambaal.

poojari ~ One who performs *pooja*: a priest.

prasaadam ~ The food or flowers offered to the deity: a divine gift.

Not necessary Sri Shankara-Naarayanan. Please visit *Malayappan Ganeshan* again.

“Please don’t forget *vinayaka chaturthi*! We have a festival & feast. Have a nice journey sir.”

Then the jeep ascended a few curves and reached a plane area and reached Pudallur. There were a few small shops and a tea stall. Only the tea stall was open. The green mountains loomed high.

Murugan stopped the jeep in front of the tea stall and they got down.

There were few old men covered with woolen shawls drinking tea.

Mist came covered them and later revealed them.

Malayappan Ganeshan ~ Ganapathy who is the Lord of the mountains.
vinayaka chaturthi ~ ganesha chaturthi, Ganesha Festival is a day on which Lord Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvati, is believed to bestow his presence on earth for all his devotees. It is also known as *vinayaka chaturthi* or *vinayaka chavithi* in Sanskrit, Kannada, Tamil and Telugu, Chavath in Konkani and as Chathaa in Nepali Bhasa. It is celebrated as it is the birthday of Lord Ganesha.

“Sir *elam tea*, or mixed *masala* tea or plain tea.” The *chaa-waala* asked.

“Sir, here mixed *masala* tea is special: please try that.” Murugan suggested to Shankara-Naarayanan.

“Okay two *masala* tea-s please: Please wash the glasses well.” ShankaraNaarayanan requested.

“Of course sir! No need to tell! I wash with boiling water also! I want you to come here again sir.” the *chaa-waala* responded.

The tea was very special! Shankara-Naarayanan said, “ One more special *masala* tea for me please! Muruga what about you?”

“Yes sir, I will also have another! Thank you sir.”

“What is this *masala* you put into the tea?”

“I don’t know sir. I think ginger, cinnamon, *thulasi*, cloves and other herbs. It is made in the factory sir. You can buy the ‘*masala*-tea mix’ in Ambaaloor shops. What is sir, Muruga?”

elam tea ~ Tea mixed with Cardomam (‘elaichi’ in Hindi; ‘elam’ in Tamizh).

masala ~ A mixture of spices./ A vegetable mixture especially with potatoes used with poori and as masala inside masala dosha.

chaa-wala ~ Tea maker.

thulasi ~ A sacred leaf used for Worship of Devi and Vishnu.

“He is the new electric engineer for Ambaaloor, Aarumukham!”

Shankara-Naarayanan paid for the tea and said, “Okay Aarumukham! We must be going. I am Shankara-Naarayanan. We will meet again.”

“Shankara-Naarayanan Sir, when will ‘current’ come to ‘Kalaipadi’ on that hill?” He pointed into the valley.

“I can’t really say Aarumukham. The government decides: we execute. Have you given a petition?”

“Yes sir, we have.”

“I will try to follow it up.”

They crossed an old rock bridge across river Naaraayani and reached Ambaaloor. Birds’ songs merged with the flowing river resonance.

There was a Devi Temple as one entered the small town. Some young women were coming out of the temple giggling and talking.

They reached the Assistant Engineer’s office, on the other side of the town.

There was a little stream nearby and also a giant transformer outside the building. Just as they got down from the jeep a peacock walked around majestically with wings open. A few sparrows were purposefully twittering and pecking around.

They walked behind the office to a small quarters which was meant for the Assistant Engineer. Murgan opened the wicket gate and gave Shankara-Naarayanan the key. “Sir, I made the sweeper woman Mohana clean up the quarters thoroughly. Please see if it is okay!”

Murugan then unloaded Shankara-Naarayanan’s bed and suitcase,

“It is nearly eight thirty sir. By nine thirty, the two clerks, the peon and the stenographer will come and we can open the office.”

“Where will you have your breakfast sir? There is Aruna Bhavan which is the best. You get good *dosha*, *pongal*, *idli*, *vadai*.

I will get what you ask for by parcel, if you don’t want to go

dosha ~ A fried South Indian rice pancake.

pongal ~ Rice mixed with dal, ghee and spices.

idli ~ A baked rice paste cake: usually eaten as breakfast.

vadai ~ A fried snack made of urud dal.

there — There is Ammu *paatti* who supplies good food and we will later arrange for your food on a monthly basis from her. That will be homely food & much cheaper.”

“Thank you Muruga for all that you are doing for me. Please get a *pongal* and *vadai* parcel for me and you have your breakfast there too.” ShankaraNaarayanan opened his purse and gave Murugan a ten rupee note.

“Sir, the *semia-kesari* in Aruna Bhavan is special made in ghee. Shall I get *kesari* too.”

“Yes Muruga! You are tempting me ~ Yes, get me *kesari* too.”

“Yes sir.”

“Can we get any newspaper here Muruga?”

“The Tamizh ‘*maalai murashu*’ I can get for you now. The English ‘Indian Express’ paper will arrive only in the afternoon sir. But the office gets copies of the papers sir, if you wait a little.”

“Okay I will wait Muruga.”

paatti ~ Grandmother.

pongal ~ Rice mixed with dal, ghee and spices.

vadai ~ A fried snack made of urud dal.

semia-kesari ~ Vermicelli-ghee-sugar sweet.

Murugan came back with the breakfast as Shankara-Naarayanan was sitting on the veranda and drinking a cup of coffee that he had himself made and watching a peacock with wings spread.

“Are there many peacocks here Muruga?”

“There are sir. So the snakes are scared too. There are many types of snakes around here, Even the black cobra. In the Ambaal temple near the God Murugan you can see many peacocks. People feed them too, to gain Lord Murugan’s blessings and to get good healthy children.”

Shankara-Naarayanan finished his breakfast and as he was clearing Murugan asked, “Were the *kesari*, *pongal* & *vadai* good sir?”

“Very good Muruga. They have used fresh ghee for the *pongal* and *kesari*.”

“Aruna Bhavan is good and there are many cows around here. So, good ghee is also available cheap sir.”

pongal ~ Rice mixed with dal, ghee and spices.

vadai ~ A fried snack made of urud dal.

“Muruga please arrange for *naazhi* milk in the morning and evening. You know I drink a lot of coffee. I also carry coffee powder with me and a filter.”

“Yes sir: I will make the arrangements with Appaavu.”

The office opened and the two clerks Ramalingam, Muthuswamy and Kumaran the peon came in: a little while later Shyamala the stenographer too arrived. Some sparrows were fluttering in the room too. Mohana had finished her cleaning up of the rooms.

“I am Shankara-Naarayanan: Many sparrows too seem to be working in our office.” They laughed and introduced themselves.

Shankara-Naarayanan went to his small cabin and called for Ramalingam through Kumaran.

“Any pending work or files to be passed Sri Ramalingam?”

“Yes sir, Just a few of them. I will bring them over soon.”

The morning work went on peacefully. Shankara-Naarayanan dictated a few letters to Shyamala and chatted with Ramalingam

naazhi (milk) ~ Old measure roughly half a litre (of milk).

and Muthuswamy checking the geographical map of Ambaloor and adjoining areas ~ Malackal, Poongaavanam, Udayoor, Kalaipaadi, Merchaalai, ~ ~ Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*, and so on. The electric connections were slowly getting established in some places and in others they were waiting for the plans to be approved. He asked Muthuswamy to send reminders and made arrangements with Murugan for inspection of the sites and villages the next day that was a Friday.

“Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*” the powerful name got embedded in Shankara-Naarayanan’s mind and he enquired Ramalingam about the place.

“It is just around the corner down sir: a narrow mountain path leads to The Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil* on the hill top. We can see the whole valley from there. There is a temple there and swami *siddha* Raama Muni is the priest there. He is a great soul. There are many stories about his *siddhi-s*. He occasionally comes down to Ambaloor too. The *paayaasam*

kovil ~ Temple.

siddha ~ An adept : one who has supernatural powers in the mystical sense.

siddhi-s ~ Supernatural metaphysical powers.

paayasam ~ A sweet dish made of milk, rice and sugar; it can also be made with jaggery and ghee; this is used as offerings to the deity in the temples.

and *neyvedayam* from his temple are considered *oushadha* by people here. You must visit there. You have to walk through the forest for about two hours.”

There was a continuous chirping of parrots and sparrows. An invisible *kuil* too joined occasionally leading the fray.

Some middle-aged woman Kaamaakshi came and brought the lunch from Ammu *paatti*'s house. Shankara-Naarayanan found the food was so fresh and homely and elaborate: rice with *saambar*, *rasam*, cabbage *poduthuval*, tomatoe *kichadi*, *pappad*, *karu vadam-s*, pickles, curds and buttermilk and as if that was not enough a fresh piece of *halwa* soaked in ghee.

neyvedyam ~ An offering of food to the deity which the devotees eat later.

oushada ~ Medicine.

kuil(koel) ~ A famous Indian singing bird.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

saambar ~ The universal south Indian dal curry used with rice, dosha, idly etc. There are various types of Saambaar.

rasam ~ The South Indian lentil soup so to say! A south Indian curry used to eat with rice. There are varieties of Rasam-s.

poduthuval ~ Vegetables fried in oil, used as an accompaniment to eat with rice and saambar.

kichadi ~ A raitha made of curds raw(cooked) vegetables and spices.

pappad ~ A fried side dish used with south Indian rice eating.

karu vadam ~ A deep fried sun dried cereal/ rice paste dish. Used as an accompaniment to eat with rice. Can be eaten also as a snack.

halwa ~ A sweet made of flour generally wheat.

After noon came and there was no work for anybody! The staff came and asked Shankara-Naarayanan if they could play carom board: they confided to him they had pooled in money and got the carom board to spend their bored afternoons. Shankara-Naarayanan found no reason why he should forbid them and he just said, “Do as you please!” They asked him, “Would you like to join us too sir?”

Shankara-Naarayanan said, “No of course not” politely.

He went back to his room and sat on his chair hummed *aananda bhairavi raagam* gently. There was a wild breeze and a fragrance of jasmines! He saw two peacocks at the window both with wings spread.

Shankara-Naarayanan dozed in his chair for a while and Kumaran came in and woke him up by saying, “Sir, Ammu *paatti* wants to see you.”

“Please ask her to come in Kumaran.”

aananda bhairavi raagam ~ A very unique Karnaatik Raagam with a folk tradition too.
paatti ~ Grandmother.

Ammu *paatti* was about seventy years old almost fully grey-haired very serene and dressed in an amber coloured tamizh *podavai*.

Shankara-Naarayanan got up from his seat requested her to sit on the chair in front of him. Although Ammu *paatti* refused at first, later she sat down.

“I am Alamelu Maami, Ambaaloor’s Ammu *paatti*. I came to ask you about your food requirements. I have two monthly schemes: one saada and one special. Saada is Rs.120 and special is Rs.150 per month. I suggest that you go for the special: two times sweet, curds, special curries, *chapathi-s*, *paratha-s*, on special days. Did you like the food today?”

podavai ~ The 9 yard sari used by older brahamin women of those days.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

chapathi ~ is a type of roti. Roti is a traditional bread in Pakistan and India, normally eaten with curries or cooked vegetables, it can be called a carrier for curries or cooked vegetables. It is made most often from wheat flour, cooked on a flat or slightly concave iron griddle called a tawa. It is similar to a tortilla in appearance. Like breads around the world, roti is a staple accompaniment to other foods, maybe spread with ghee (clarified butter).

paratha ~ (or parantha) is a flatbread that originated in the subcontinent (South Asia). It is made with whole-wheat flour, pan fried in ghee or cooking oil, and sometimes stuffed with vegetables, such as boiled potatoes, radishes or cauliflower and/or paneer (South Asian cheese). A paratha (especially a stuffed one) can be eaten simply with a blob of butter spread on top but it is best served with pickles and yoghurt, or thick spicy curries of vegetables.

“It was excellent food. It was so much like at my home. The *rasam* was great! In fact everything was wonderful Ammu *paatti*.”

“Yes! Ammu *paatti* is the mother of Ambaaloor’s children. My husband left one day about fifteen years ago and I heard that he has become a *sanyaasi* in Rishikesh. He was a central Government officer. He was deeply into God related things. He used to tell me, the Himalaya-s is calling him: he even described dreams of encounter with divine beings. He married off our two daughters and son and one day left for his Himalayas.

He has left me his pension and we have our family house here. So I started living here. Then I started cooking and feeding others and found great joy in doing so. It is not for profit I do this son. I have one woman Kaamakshi, the one who brought your lunch today, working with me. My daughter’s daughter also called Alamelu. lives with me. She teaches music in the Saraswathi *Vidyaalaya* and she is learning more too. Have you heard of Ambaaloor Krishna Bhaagavathar?”

rasam ~ The South Indian lentil soup so to say! A south Indian curry used to eat with rice. There are varieties of *rasam*-s.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

sanyaasi ~ A renunciant mendicant of one of the various traditional Hindu orders.

vidyaalaya ~ School (a temple of learning).

“Yes I have heard his singing *Ammu paatti*. He is a great musician and a great teacher.”

“She is learning from him. In fact she came to stay with me to learn from him. ~~~ *Ammu paatti* sighed, “I also sing: I have learnt from great maestros of olden days when you were not born. *Ayyaavoor Narayana Bhagavathar* of *Tyagraja Parampara* and *Sri Rangam Raama Bhaagavathar* of the *Dikshitar parampara*. I play the veena too. Maybe you can come and listen one Sunday. I heard you singing *aananda bhairavi* when I was outside your room. You have good *lakshya jnaanam*. Have you learnt music?”

“No! No! *Ammu paatti*, very little: I learnt with my sisters. I was very fond of going for concerts and I have heard many great musicians. I also listen to records and have picked up stray bits. I am sorry to have killed *aananda bhairavi*!”

“No! No! *Shankara-Naarayanan* sir, you sang it with feeling. By learning more you can improve it. Do you want me to introduce you to *Ambaaloor Krishna Bhaagavathar*? I am sure

paatti ~ Grandmother.

parampara ~ Tradition.

aananda bhairavi raagam ~ A very unique *Karnaatik Raagam* with a folk tradition too.

lakshya jnaanam ~ Intrinsic knowledge by direction!

it is a golden opportunity. You can always learn more. I still pick up new *krithi-s* from my grand-daughter Alamelu. She sings very well. She has so much *jnaanam*. Her *thiruppaavai* rendering is excellent.”

“I have bored you with my family history. Please tell me something about yourself. “

“We are from Thiruvananthapuram. *Appa* is a doctor in Medical College. *Amma* is there and I have two younger sisters too. *Amma*’s people are from Madurai. Neelakantan Shivan was *Appa*’s family. They talk proudly of him. *Ammu paatti* please don’t call me sir! Call me Shankara-Naarayana. Thank you.”

“You have not told me Shankara-Naarayana whether you want the saada or special monthly scheme. Do you have any special demands regarding food?”

“Yes! *Ammu paatti* I don’t eat onion and garlic.”

thiruppavai ~ The Tiruppavai is a collection of thirty stanzas (pasuram) in Tamil written by a Brahmin girl, Andal, in praise of the God Tirumal or Vishnu. It is part of Divya Prabandha, a work of the twelve Alvars, and is important in Tamil literature.

appa ~ Father.

amma ~ Mother.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

“No need to worry son. I don’t use onion and garlic in my cooking. Even North Indian *sabji* I make it *saatvik*. Even my grand daughter Alamelu is very much for *saatvik* food. Even in hotels she refuses the onion *saambaar*.”

“I will take the ‘Special’ Ammu *paatti*.”

“Thank you. Okay I must be leaving! Be blessed son!”

Ammu *paatti* beatifically smiled and left the office.

Shankara-Naarayanan looked out of the window: a stag and deer were grazing. A few crows were aimlessly shifting and taking short flights.

sabji ~ A north Indian vegetable curry: There are innumerable *sabji*-s of course!

saatvik ~ That which encourages *sattva* (white luminous and that which is most auspicious) instead of *rajas*(moderate intentions and attitude) and *tamas* (black and ngative intentions).

saambar ~ The universal south Indian dal curry used with rice, dosha, idly etc. There are various types of Saambaar.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

Evening came: coffee, *bajji* and *mysore paak* was brought by Raamu who was a kid living next door to Ammu *paatti*. Raamu liked Shankara-Naarayanan and asked him,

“Do you play cricket sir?”

Shankara-Naarayanan said, “Yes! a little. I played for my school and college teams.”

“Wow! You have played with a real cricket ball. I have not even touched one! We play with tennis balls here.”

“I want to be a pilot when I grow up.”

Shankara-Naarayanan smiled, “Which class are you in Ramu?”

“Seventh class sir.”

Twilight was filled with birds’ music. Shankara-Naarayanan felt he should go to the Ambaaloor Temple. He changed from his trousers bathed and wore *dhothi*, smeared *vibhuthi* appropriately covered himself with *angavastram* and started.

bajji ~ A fried snack with vegetables like potatoes and raw plantains covered with gram flour.

mysore paak ~ A south Indian sweet made in ghee, sugar and gram flour.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

dhothi ~ A white sheet worn around the waist especially in South India as a routine dress.

vibhuthi ~ The sacred ash: worn by shavite-s as a mark of auspiciousness.

angavastram ~ A sheet of white worn to cover the shoulders.

It was breezy and cold.

There were not many people in the temple.

He stood in front of the Devi *vigraham* adorned in jewels and flowers. There was incense fragrance and many floral fragrances merging. Many oil lamps flickered all around. Shankara-Naarayanan closed his eyes and recited

“*Sarva mangala maangalye shive sarvaartha saadhike ~~~~*”

He opened his eyes closed his palms in obeisance and turned around and found a beautiful young woman dressed in a green saree looking at him. She wore a diamond nose-stud and had jasmines on her hair.

She smiled beautifully and Shankara-Naarayanan too smiled rather embarrassed. The *poojaari* brought the *prasaadam* and he received it, put the *chandan* on his forehead, put the *thulasi* leaves behind his ears: although he wanted to look at the green

vigraham ~ The idol.

sarva mangala maangalye ~ (mantram) All auspicious bestowing auspicious mother.

poojaari ~ One who performs pooja: a priest.

prasaadam ~ The food or flowers offered to the deity: a divine gift.

chandan ~ Sandalwood paste given as *prasaadam*.

thulasi ~ A sacred leaf used for Worship of Devi and Vishnu.

clad woman once again, he refrained himself from turning in that direction.

He then did his *pradakshinam* around the temple in an elevated mood. There were many peacocks some with wings spread. There were many birds too of various types twittering in twilight delight. There were also a few temple cows grazing. He wondered who she was? Was it Ammu *paatti*'s grand-daughter Alamelu perhaps? No it must be somebody else mistaking him for somebody else.

He walked home with the twilight sun and as he reached his quarters it was an all ruby sky. Some temple bells echoed into infinity.

He sat on a chair on the veranda and watched the sky. Before he turned aware it was a starry ciborium all around him. The stars looked much closer in Ambaaloor. It was a full moon on the sky. A cold breeze fluttered the trees around now swirling in the subtle colour of the fullmoon night.

Shankara-Naarayanan was woken up from his reverie by somebody walking in.

pradakshinam ~ Sacred circumambulation of a temple: literally to go round.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

“I am Narayana moorthy bringing your dinner. I am slightly mad but not fully so. My wife died few years ago and I could not bear it: I think that caused my semilunacy. Today is full moon: I am very happy. Good Night! The tiffin carrier will be collected tomorrow morning by Kaamaakshi.”

“Thank you sir.”

“You calling me sir: it is funny: crazy Narayana-moorthy wishes you good night. Yes! You must visit Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*. Swami *siddha* Raama Muni is a kind friend.”

Narayana moorthy went and Shankara-Naarayanan felt sad. He stared at the milkyway listened to the humming winds.

The night food was exotic too *paratha-s*, *paneer mutter*,

siddha ~ An adept : one who has supernatural powers in the mystical sense.
paratha ~ (or *parantha*) is a flatbread that originated in the subcontinent (South Asia). It is made with whole-wheat flour, pan fried in ghee or cooking oil, and sometimes stuffed with vegetables, such as boiled potatoes, radishes or cauliflower and/or paneer (South Asian cheese). A *paratha* (especially a stuffed one) can be eaten simply with a blob of butter spread on top but it is best served with pickles and yoghurt, or thick spicy curries of vegetables.

paneer mutter ~ A special curry that uses Indian home cheese (*paneer*) and *mutter* (a type of gram).

boondi raitha, and a *gulab jamun*. *Ammu paatti* seemd to really care and her north Indian dishes were great too.

Next morning after breakfast of *idli-s* and *vada* Shankara-Naarayanan left in the jeep with Murugan to inspect the site and village of Malackal.

It was an arduous route. The path ended: the jeep could go no further. They had to walk to reach the remote village in the valley. He went around made some estimates and noted them.

Shankara-Naarayanan reached home by late after-noon: the food was kept in the office: He again savoured *Ammu paatti's* excellent food though turned cold. Rice, *maampazha pulisshery*, *chenai-vazhakkai-chakkakuru mezhukkuvaratti*, *olan*,

boondi raitha ~ A mixture of curds and fried gram flour as little globules.
gulab jamun ~ A soft north Indian sweet made with cooked milk: served in sugar syrup.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

idli ~ A baked rice paste cake: usually eaten as breakfast.

vada ~ A fried snack made of urud dal.

maampazha pulisshery ~ a curry with ripe mangoes and buttermilk: the sour curry with ripe-mangoes.

chenai vazhakai, chakkakuru mezhukkuvaratti ~ Amaranthus (*chena*), raw plantain (*vazhakai*) and jackfruit seeds (*chakkakuru*) cooked & fried as an accompanying dish.

olan ~ A side dish made with melons or pumpkins and coconut milk.

pappad avakkai oorhaai, curds, buttermilk and *idichu pizinja paayasam*. Shankara-Naarayanan felt his mother would be pleased to know about the high quality food Ammu *paatty* served him every day.

After office Murugan came and sat on the veranda floor and started chatting with Shankara-Naarayanan.

“Sir, I have a sister nearly blind. She is nearly thirty years old! Will anybody marry her? I am very worried.”

“Somebody will come Muruga! There is ‘*daiva nischayam*’! Don’t brood Muruga.”

“Sir, You must visit Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*. Swami *siddha* Raama Muni is a great person. People say he has actually seen Lord Shiva!”

“I will Muruga! It is in my mind too!”

pappad ~ A fried side dish used with south Indian rice eating.

avakkai oorhai ~ A famous Andhra mango pickle.

idichu pizinga paayasam ~ The jabbed squeezed paayasam [!!] uses coconut milk to make a great paayasam specially popular in Keralam. Paayasam is a kind of kheer we may say a sweet dish.

daiva nischayam ~ Divine will (ordinance).

kovil ~ Temple

siddha ~ An adept : one who has supernatural powers in the mystical sense.

It was twilight golden light all over. The deer were resting: the birds fluttered towards the sky.

Narayana Moorthy announced “Here I am Narayanan Moorthy half mad with your night’s food.”

“Good night sir! Tiffin carrier will be taken back tomorrow morning by Kaamakshi! Hence I depart Narayana Moorthy.”

Shankara-Naarayanan asked Murugan to stay on and share his food . “Ammu *paatti* sends so much I gave it to the birds and deer. We will have enough for two I think.”

They shared the the three varieties of *sevai* with *appalam-s* and *chutney*: Murugan cleaned the vessels.

Shankara-Naarayanan again thought of the green saree-d woman and the temple. He stared at the sky and a shooting star fell into extinction.

Murugan left and Shankara-Naarayanan put on his transistor radio and tuned. There was some music from Madras. He

paatti ~ Grandmother.

sevai ~ A special dish made of rice paste steamed and made into strands like noodles: It can be variously spiced.

appalaam ~ A fried side dish used in Tamil naadu with rice.

chutney ~ A spiced side dish often mixed with grated coconut.

heard *kaambodhi aalaapana* by Semmangudi and Dikshitar's "Shree Subrahmanyaya" after that. TN Krishnan was playing the violin and Palghat TS Mani Iyer was on the *mridangam*. Then a *surutti raagam krithi* by Swathi Thirunaal. He wondered how wonderfully the *kaambodhi* was rendered.

An owl was making its music from a tree and a moth flew into his room.

Shankara-Naarayanan put off the light and went to sleep.

Next day was a second Saturday and a holiday.

Shankara-Naarayanan bathed elaborately washed his clothes: later had his *idli-s* with *chutney* and *semia kesari* sent by Ammu *paatti*.

He picked up the novel Anna Karenina which he had been slowly reading for nearly a month: published by Signet classics. He read for a while and drank coffee.

aalapana ~ A spontaneous elucidation of a raga in contrast to a planned performance of a composition.

mridangam ~ A great Indian percussion instrument.

surutti raagam ~ A popular karnaatik ragam (melody scale).

idli ~ A baked rice paste cake: usually eaten as breakfast.

chutney ~ A spiced side dish often mixed with grated coconut.

semia-kesari ~ Vermicelli-ghee-sugar sweet.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

The peacock made a wild cry and the sparrows twittered around in sheer ecstasy.

Lunch came and it was *sambaar rasam*, *aviyal* combination. The sweet was *mysore paak*.

He felt he was becoming idle and thought he would walk around Ambaaloor. The sun was high on the horizon, but there were trees on both sides of the road protecting with breezy shadows.

There were a few stray dogs chasing each other and few parrots fluttered all around. Suddenly a deer darted into a small path. Shankara-Naarayanan read, “Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*” carved on an old stone with an arrow towards the path.

He felt drawn to the forest path and decided to go to Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*.

Soon he saw himself engulfed in a fusion of crickets’ cries and many birds’ music. He heard the sound of a waterfall.

rasam ~ The South Indian lentil soup so to say! A south Indian curry used to eat with rice. There are varieties of rasam-s.

avial ~ A special mixed vegetable dish made in Keralam.

mysore paak ~ A south Indian sweet made in ghee, sugar and gram flour.

kovil ~ Temple

A herd of deer crossed his path almost as if asking him, what are you doing in our place. Many monkeys were jumping from tree to tree. A mother monkey had her child on her teats and she walked majestically across the path cackling fallen leaves. A giant lizard suddenly climbed a tree.

He reached a waterfall and there were swans, cranes and ducks moving in and out of the flowing stream. Some flew away, some just rearranged their positions. A woodpecker pecked music into awesome silences.

Shankara-Naarayanan felt a little scared and wondered whether he would climb to reach the Temple or whether he should return. He was dressed in a trousers & *kurtha* and was just wearing chappals. But he washed his face and feet in the stream, started reciting, “*om nama shivaaya*” and continued along the steep path upwards.

Path became steeper and rather narrow ~ sunlight fell on and off his face. There were little silvery streamlets that crossed the path too. Peacocks, deer and wild flowers blue, yellow, red, also myriad forest greens in a strange divine confluence enveloped him. He felt as if he was wading through a ‘forest-oceanbreeze-light’ cage.

kurtha ~ A shirt like loose upper garment used by Indian-s.

Little later he felt fatigued: He must have walked for nearly two hours. He felt he was close to the Hill top Temple. But he sat down on a rock and heard the forest call of crickets, many birds and myriad invisible insects.

He started off again: he turned the corner and came to sudden openness: there was a rainbow in the sky and many butterflies and birds came out of nowhere. A fragrance of lilies, jasmines, tuberose engulfed him!

A few squirrels squealed past and rabbits came out of the forest to see who had come to their abode and hopped away. The sun was behind him.

The temple was closed ~ there was a wild breeze.

He walked around for a while wondering what he should do since there was nobody but for birds, animals, butterflies and dragonflies.

He heard distant foot steps and saw a saffron robed bare-footed Swamiji walking up towards the temple. He guessed it must be Swami *siddha* Raama Muni.

The man reached Shankara-Naarayanan and said, “You must be Sri Shankara-Naarayanan the new Electrical Engineer of siddha ~ An adept : one who has supernatural powers in the mystical sense.

Ambaaloor. Welcome to Naaga Lingeshwarar *kovil*. Only blessed souls reach this beautiful abode of Lord Shiva. I have been a priest here for nearly thirty years.”

He looked about fifty years of age half grey with a long beard and long hair tied behind. His eyes were gleaming light. He carried a bundle and a shoulder cloth bag. There were a few sparrows and butterflies fluttering around him.

Shankara-Naarayanan said, “*Namaste Swamiji! Pranaamyaham*”

“No! No! I am not a Swamiji! I am just a humble *poojaari* of this Hill top Temple.”

“But to people of Ambaaloor you are Swami *siddha* Raama Muni.”

He laughed and said, “Come along ! You must be wanting to drink some coffee. I will make some black coffee for you. Sorry, no milk available here!”

kovil ~ Temple

namaste ~ Worship thou ~ Respectful Greetings.

pranaamyaham ~ I pay obeisance to you.

poojaari ~ One who performs pooja: a priest.

siddha ~ An adept : one who has supernatural powers in the mystical sense.

Shankara-Naarayanan silently followed him to the eight pillored *mandapam* in front of the Temple.

Swami Rama said, “*shambho mahadeva*” and walked to a small rocky room where he kept his bag and bundle.

He made a fire with firewood and in a few minutes had boiled water and made *kattan kaappi* for Shankara-Naarayanan.

He said, “Here is your glass ~ if you want more sugar here it is.”

Shankara-Naarayanan said, “I feel so relieved after seeing you Swamiji Rama. I did not know what I will do to go back to Ambaaloor . I was rather tired.”

“It will be difficult for you to reach Ambaaloor by sunset. I will suggest that you stay on for the night here and start tomorrow morning. It is not very safe to walk through the forest path in the twilight.”

Shankara-Naarayanan was silent ~ He sipped the coffee and watched a deer herd moving in front of the temple. Some

mandapam ~ The pillored hall in front of the temple where people sit and pray!

shambho mahadeva ~ Shambho (the auspicious one) ~ Mahadeva (the great lord).

kattan kaappi ~ Black-coffee.

grazed: some just went into the forest. The sky was turning a little clouded.

A few birds, sparrows, parrots, blue robins, honey sucklers were flying outside the room waiting purposefully! Swami Rama took a clay bowl put rice and *dal* sprinkled some water said, “*shambho mahadeva*” and kept the bowl a little far away on a stone: the birds were chirping ecstatically. One actually sat on his shoulder for awhile.

“They know when to come here.” Swami Rama said, as he came back to the rock cut room.

Sound of birds twittering and time passed on in natural ease. The western horizon was turning red and the sun too. A slight drizzle too waved and dazzled in the breeze.

“So Shri Shankara-Naarayanan Naaga Lingeshwarar wants you to stay on here with him for the evening.”

“Yes! Swamiji! I feel I have been here before and even feel I have known you in some other life. Everything seems to have a divine inevitability here.”

dal ~ Dal or Pappu (also spelled dahl, dhal or daal) is a preparation of pulses (dried beans) which have been stripped of their outer hulls and split.
shambho mahadeva ~ Shambho (the auspicious one) ~ Mahadeva (the great lord).

“Before it is dark we will bathe and collect the water for our night. There is a small pond there in front of the little waterfall.”

“Here please take this *dhothi* and *kurtha* and you can change your clothes if you want to after you bathe. It is as if I had been keeping these for you Sri Shankara-Naarayanan.”

There were swans and even a few deer near the pond. When Shankara-Naarayanan returned from the pond, the Swamiji was lighting the few lamps in front of the temple.

Then he said “ I will make the ‘*prasadam*’ for the night. You may sit on the *mandapam* and recite *om nama shivaaya*. I will be back soon.” ~~~~~

Swami Rama came to the front with the *pongal*, *kothsu* and a jaggery *paayasam* as the offering to Lord Shiva.

dhothi ~ A white sheet worn around the waist especially in South India as a routine dress.

kurtha ~ A shirt like loose upper garment used by Indian-s.

prasaadam ~ The food or flowers offered to the deity: a divine gift.

mandapam ~ The pillored hall in front of the temple where people sit and pray!

pongal ~ Rice mixed with dal, ghee and spices.

kothsu ~ A simple south indian curry made with brinjals and tamarind ~

paayasam ~ A sweet dish made of milk, rice and sugar; it can also be made with jaggery and ghee; this is used as offerings to the deity in the temples.

“Let me do the sandhya *pooja*.”

He went near The Shiva Lingam and sat in *padmasana* and silently did his *archana* with *chethi*, *mandaram*, *thulasi* and *bilvam* to Lord Shiva. He finally offered the *neyvedyam* and showed the *aarti* of camphor flames.

By then the stars were bright on the horizon. The moon was flanked by bright clouds ~ Some birds twittered! There was the mysterious echo of a night forest around.

Swami Rama closed the Temple door and came to the *mandapam* with the *prasadam*.

padmasana ~ The Lotus posture of Classical Yoga and Tantra.

archana ~ Worship with flowers.

chethi ~ A traditionally red flower that grows in clusters and used for *pooja* in temples and at home.

mandaram ~ A white flower used for *pooja* ~ mildly fragrant.

thulasi ~ A sacred leaf used for Worship of Devi and Vishnu.

bilvam ~ The leaves of bilva tree used especially in the worship of Lord Shiva. Three leaves grow on the same stalk and they are used only as three in *pooja*. Bilva tree has many mythological references in ancient Puraanaas. There are mantra-s like *bilvaashtakam* by Sankaraachaarya.

neyvedyam ~ An offering of food to the deity which the devotees eat later.

aarti ~ Camphor flames shown around the *vigraha* (idol) as an offering of good fragrance and divine light.

mandapam ~ The pillored hall in front of the temple where people sit and pray!

prasaadam ~ The food or flowers offered to the deity: a divine gift.

“Let’s eat our *prasadam* Sri Shankara-Naarayanan.
The *ney-paayasam* is specially for you.”

They finished eating on lotus leaves, silently washed and sat on the *mandapam* steps. Moonlight came in the cool breeze!

An apparently long time passed on in Silence.

Swami Rama spoke,

“You know I was a very anti-religious man who was a follower of EV Ramaswamy Naicker, a member of *Dravida Kazhagam* and a very negatively minded person. I drank, heavily abused priests. As was customary I was married and hurt my wife too. In short I was a frustrated young man: I owned a cycle shop those days. I was living near Thirunelveli.”

Moon went into the clouds and few birds twittered.

prasaadam ~ The food or flowers offered to the deity: a divine gift.

paayasam ~ A sweet dish made of milk, rice and sugar; it can also be made with jaggery and ghee; this is used as offerings to the deity in the temples.

mandapam ~ The pillored hall in front of the temple where people sit and pray!

dravida kazhagam ~ The organization of dravida-s. An anti brahmin and anti-religious movement initiated by EVR Naicker in Tamizh-naadu.

“Due to some divine grace I can’t say otherwise I visited Ambaaloor then. Those days, it was thirty five years ago, Ambaaloor was not a town, there was no electricity. Just a temple and an *agrahaarom*. All around there were forests and some tribal people too lived there. I had a friend who worked as a supervisor of the forests and I had come here on his invitation.”

“Well, One day I walked up this forest path like you did today and came to this place on the hill-top. It was all misty that day and there were many beautiful birds and butterflies fluttering here. There were rabbits and swans too. I saw a dilapidated temple with wild bushes all inside the temple. I was amused and I loudly remarked to myself ‘What lord Shiva is there nobody coming to worship you? Just birds and animals here.’ ”

I laughed and lit my *beedi*.

It was as if Lord Shiva heard me, and almost instantly I became dumb. I tried to say my name Manickam and no real sound came.

agrahaarom ~ A brahmin dwelling place around a temple where the houses are all arranged in a continuous sequence on opposite sides.
beedi ~ Tobacco rolled in a special leaf: the poor man’s cigarette in India.

I ran down the mountain path in a panic like a mad man and reached outside Ambaaloor Devi temple.

There was a saffron robed *sanyaasi* who was sitting there outside the Devi temple, He gestured to me to come to him.

I went near, fell at his feet and cried:

He said, “You abused Shiva-*perumaal* and the Lord graciously took your voice away. Now you pray to him to restore your voice so that you can praise him. Just have faith in these words and you will recover your voice and say, ‘*om nama shivaaya*’. For now think of Lord Shiva and say *om nama shivaaya* silently in your mind. I will give you a letter and an address of a Yogi Swami Atmaananda in Kaashi who will guide you. This will all become a great blessing.”

Swami Rama sighed: Some birds which had built their nests in the *mandapam* were twittering. The moon rested on the sky listening.

There were a few luminous clouds too.

sanyaasi ~ A renunciant mendicant of one of the various traditional Hindu orders.

perumaal ~ The great one: the Lord.

mandapam ~ The pillared hall in front of the temple where people sit and pray!

“No! I won’t go on for too long! Nobody in Ambaaloor knows this story of my early days. Today somehow Lord Shiva has made me tell you!

Yes! I went to Kaashi met Swami Atmaananda and he assured me that I would recover my voice and study *vaidika* Mantram-s. So it happened. Ah! The Swami had asked me to bring my wife and study under a Brahamin *pundit*, Sanskrit and Mantram-s.”

“But how did you recover your voice?”

“One day in Kaashi I had a dream in which I heard ‘*om nama shivaaya*’ being recited by a thousand people in a strange space of light. I jumped up and said, ‘*om nama shivaaya*’ slowly. For many months I could say only *om nama shivaaya* always!

Well it happened. I learned about the Temple rituals and *pooja* to Shiva especially. I was made a Brahamin and given the *upanayanam* and my Guru Yogi Swami Atmaananda initiated

vaidika ~ One who is adept in mantra-s of veda-s and the rituals of temples: one who lives according to veda-s.

upanayanam ~ sacred thread ceremony of a Brahamin child from when he is initiated into veda-s.

me into *grahastha deeksha*. He felt my destiny was to worship in this temple.

So after nearly ten years in Kaashi, I came here with my wife Chempaham and started the *pooja* here. All this happened nearly thirty years before. I had a son who was left to study the *veda-s* in the *paathashaala* in Kaashi. He is a *pundit* now and married. Chempaham died a few years ago! Here I am still living on this Hill top Temple of Naaga Lingeshwarar.

My son Chandrashekarar visits me every few years.”

A strange silence engulfed them. The astral canopy was just so near their heads. Some crickets cried from the forest.

Swami Rama remarked, “Let us sleep or we will disturb these sleeping birds. *om nama shivaaya.*”

Shankara-Naarayanan woke up to the morning Mantram-s of Swami Rama. It was soon a beautiful dawn with sparrows’ music and mist revealing flowers and the sky. A delicate breeze was a bouquet of fragrances.

grhastha deeksha ~ The initiation into Yoga for a householder. (*grahasta* ~ householder: *deeksha* ~ divine Initiation).

veda-s ~ The primal repository of mantrams revealed in the Hindu tradition ~ derived from *vid* (to know).

paathashaala ~ The house of learning, where *veda-s* are taught.

Shankara-Naarayanan bid good bye to swami Rama after drinking the black coffee.

“Be well! May the Lord Sadaa Shivaa bless you.”

Shankara-Naarayanan tried to touch Swami Rama’s feet in respect but the Swami refrained him.

His forest walk down to Ambaaloor was a beatific experience. He encountered deer, swans and many butterflies. He was talking and singing to himself as he descended the hill very fast.

As Shankara-Naarayanan walked towards his quarters he heard some female voice humming Ragam Bhairavi. He turned the corner and reached the wicket gate. He saw the boy Ramu standing on the veranda with the beautiful woman who smiled at him in the Ambaaloor Devi temple. She was wearing a yellow saree now.

He recognized now it must be Alamelu, Ammu *paatti*’s grand-daughter. A strange joy welled up within Shankara-Naarayanan as he smiled at Alamelu again when she smiled at him.

paatti ~ Grandmother.

Sparrows fluttered and a peacock spread its wings near the stream.

Morning sun glowed in ancient resplendence.
