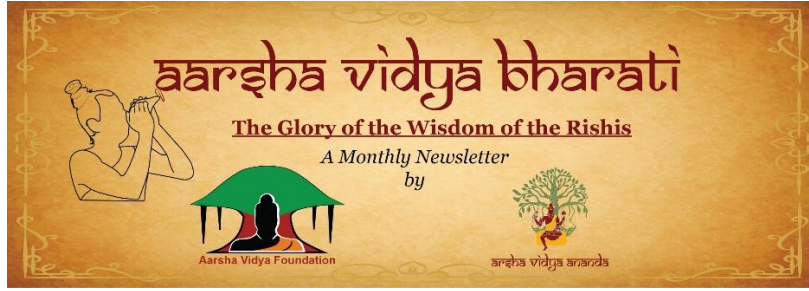

Aarsha Vidya Bharati - Jul 2023

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A monthly newsletter that will bring you more happiness, more wisdom and more freedom



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Living Our Traditions

Sheela Surendran, Mumbai

Sabarimala is situated 190kms from Thiruvananthapuram. It is the sacred abode of lord Ayyappa who reveals the *mahāvākya* – *Tat tvam asi*, and hence it is looked upon as a Vedanta temple too. Situated amidst the dense forest in the rugged terrains of the western ghats and inhabited by various wild life species, plants and herbs, lakhs of people from all over the country assemble here during Vishu, (April 14), Mandala pooja (Nov-Dec) and Makar sankranti (Jan 14).

I also planned a pilgrimage to Sabarimala with my family members. As it was my first time, I needed to learn the do's and don'ts before-hand. I was told that one has to observe a 41-day vrata. One adheres to a minimal living whereby one doesn't overeat or over do anything be it entertainment or any other activity. One abstains from adharma. Eat simple, sleep well and avoid hurting others, follow *brahmacharya*, help others and spending most of the time in *bhagavad smaran*. All these are preparatory steps to have a manageable journey and a mind to recognize that 'I' am Ayyappa swami.

On the first day of the fast I took an early bath and offered my prayers to my ancestors, *kula devatā* and *kula devi* and offered my prayers to all *graha*-s (planets), to my guru and kept my *mālā* also on the feet of Ayyappa. Then I wore the *mālā* and offered *dakṣiṇā* to the pujari. Once the *mālā* is worn, everyone addresses the female as "Malikaapuram" and male member as "Ayyappaswami".



On the day one is leaving for Sabarimala, an elaborate pooja is done by the Guruswamy (A person who has been to Sabarimala 18 to 20 times). He makes the "irumudi" (A black cloth divided into 2 parts - the front pouch and rear pouch). The former contains all pooja items and coconut filled with ghee for *abhiṣekam*. The rear pouch contains a few eatables just in case nothing is available on the *yātrā*. This

irumudi one has to carry on one's head till one reaches the abode. Before leaving, one has to break the coconut and the same is repeated after coming back also and a lamp is lighted and it keeps on burning till we come back.

The significance of the 18 steps to the *sannidhānam* is similar to the preparatory steps to know the *satyam* (I am non different from *Īśvara*).

The first five steps are *pancendriya*-s, the next eight are *aṣṭa-rāga*-s (*krodha* - anger, *kāma* - binding desire, *lobha* - greed, *moha* - confusion, *asūya* - jealousy, *dambha* - pride, *mada* - intoxication, *mātsarya* - miserliness out of envy) followed by the three *triguṇā*-s (*satva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) and finally last two steps of *avidya* and *vidya*.

After the 41 days fast and the trek to the top, even though exhausted, the moment I reached the abode I offered my prayers at the feet of lord Ayyappa. The chants of 'Swami sharanam' were reverberating in the air. It looked like all were consumed by *bhakti* and love. The moment the door of the *Garbha-graha*, inner sanctorum was opened, I caught a glimpse of lord Ayyappa being bathed in ghee. Tears of joy filled my



eyes. I had a list of wishes as 'Sheela' but the moment I offered my *sāṣṭaṅga namaskāram*, I was blank. There was only me. Nothing to ask or wish for. The moment I opened my eyes I was back to being the same person but with a far better understanding that I am on the right track. *Īśvara kṛpā*, *Guru kṛpā* and *Ātma kṛpā* have helped me to be here and my *niṣṭhā* will help me have clarity and recognize my true nature. I am *Satyam*. The journey to the abode of lord Ayyappa was quite a journey to myself!