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Ettumanur in Kerala is an oasis of relief for sufferers from all faiths

Vrindavanam S. Gopalakrishnan, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

When one hears the name of Ettumanur, a small town in southeastern Kerala, the beloved Ettumanar Mahadevar and His ancient temple always come to mind. Now under government administration, this traditional Kerala-style temple, situated 61 km southeast of the port city of Cochin, is believed to be one of the oldest temples in the state, with legends connecting it with the Vedic era of 5,000 years ago.

Even with today's relentless onslaught of materialism and the resultant atheism, the greatness and glory of this temple has not dwindled in the slightest. The fact that thousands of devotees rush to the temple every day to fulfill their numberless desires and to get cured of so many incurable diseases proves that the power of this sacred place has not faded, but has only increased with the passage of time, says Mr. V.K. Somasekharan Nair, a retired college professor. "The number of devotees who have been blessed by the Aghoramurti (the temple's main icon, a Sivalinga representing God Siva's fiery, life-transforming aspect) is legendary. Owing to the all-pervading power of the Aghoramurti, the temple stands first among places of worship and pilgrimage in the South. That is why it attracts devotees not only from India but from abroad," he adds. Devotees hold that any incurable disease will be cured and any desire will be fulfilled by pilgrimaging to this temple.

Hinduism Today spoke with some of the beneficiaries of Ettumanur Mahadevar's renowned power, who have been cured of such serious ailments as epilepsy and peptic ulcers. When asked about the mercy of the Lord, tears of joy rolled down the cheeks of 53-year-old Sukumariamamma of Ernakulam. She was suffering from pain in

the stomach and had been on medication for a long time, but the medications provided no permanent solution to her agony. Eventually, an old woman suggested that she take a vow to offer thulabharam, her weight in rice, before the God. Sukumariamamma took the suggestion, and also began reciting the mantra "Aum Namah Sivaya " while taking her medications. To her astonishment, after about a fortnight she started to feel relief. She said, "I offered the thulabharam, and ever since I have made a point to visit the Mahadevar temple at least once a month to offer my prayers."

Mr. S. Mani of Thiruvalla, a town 50 km south of Ettumanur, narrated his experience. He started having epileptic seizures when he was 26 years old. He was given sedatives and other medications, but they didn't help. On the advice of a friend, he went to Ettumanur Mahadevar and surrendered before the Lord, remaining there for several days while chanting "Aum Namah Sivaya." The head priest gave him blessed, medicated ghee to take in the early morning for 41 days while observing a penance. Thereafter, his seizures ceased. Mani exclaimed, "Ettumanur Mahadevar is a very powerful Lord!" The devotees of this temple have numberless miraculous experiences to relate, including the curing of skin diseases and chronic asthma.

Believers of other faiths come and offer prayers here, too. During the annual festival in February/March, several thousand people congregate, but there are never any untoward incidents. Once a person enters the walls of the compound, he is self-disciplined and controlled, said a senior police official.

According to Mr. Mathur V.P. Panicker, a retired executive engineer from the State Public Works Department and currently the head of the temple management committee, many notable names from the scriptures are associated with this great temple. It is believed that the Pandavas and Sage Vyasa (both ca 3100 bce) worshiped here. The great philosopher-monk and Hindu reformer Sri Adi Shankaracharya (788-820) showed his devotion to God Siva here, and composed his poem "Saundarya Lahari " during his visit to the temple.

The Ettumanur Mahadevar temple shines in the annals of ancient India, Panicker says. The great saint Khara Prakasha worshiped God Siva here to alleviate his sins and prayed for blessings to consecrate a Sivalinga for the benefit of all humanity. God Siva appeared and presented his own icon to the saint, who then installed the Sivalinga in the sanctum sanctorum facing the unusual direction of West. This

two-foot-high Sivalinga is the primary object of worship in the temple today.

Several more legends link the temple's origins to the Vedic era. One belief is that the Maniman Tirtham mentioned in the Vamana Purana and the Padma Purana is Ettumanur. Another story, in which Saint Khara Maharshi disguised himself as a deer and persuaded Siva to carry him around, gives Ettumanur its name, which in Malayalam means "the place where the deer was carried."

The Pandyan King Chanda Bhaskara was exorcised of demonic spirits with the blessings of the Lord at Ettumanur and constructed the present temple in gratitude in 1540. The gifted architects of that time exhibited great skill in their art here. Both the functional, architectural wood carvings and those of a purely decorative nature are distinguished as some of the most expertly executed examples of Kerala's long-standing and famous wood-carving tradition. The paintings on the walls are the oldest (early 16th century) and most celebrated example of Kerala murals. In one painting, God Siva as Pradosha Nataraja is depicted in a blissfully radiant, gloriously energetic dance. This particular painting is considered a landmark in the history of traditional Kerala temple painting.

The unusual, circular sanctum sanctorum of the presiding Deity is constructed on an elevated sloping deck of black granite. Admission into the sanctum is strictly reserved for the chief priest and his assistants. As the space directly facing the sanctum is limited, only a handful of devotees can have darshan of the Deity at a time. Also within the sanctum, facing South, is enshrined an image of Siva as Dakshinamurti, the silent, primordial guru. Nearby is an icon of Lord Ganesha, and opposite the main Deity, in a large hall, is a pillar dedicated to Goddess Bhagavati. A small shrine in the north wing of the temple is dedicated to Lord Dharma Sastha, more popularly known as Ayyappan.

Several offerings made by kings and other devotees of yore are unique to Ettumanur Mahadevar Temple. King Marthanda Varma of the erstwhile Travancore state offered seven large, solid gold elephants, each weighing 210 lb, as well as an eighth gold baby elephant and a pile of gold areca nuts. These were offered in 1753 as atonement for the destruction of temple property caused in his campaign to annex neighboring territories.

Chempakassery King Devanarayanan of the mid-17th century visited the temple to offer prayers and gifted a huge, 500-lb bronze ox filled with chennullu, a variety of paddy grain --in gratitude for the Lord's curing the king of his stomach ailments. It is believed by many that eating a few blessed rice grains taken from the belly of the giant bronze ox will provide immediate relief for any stomach disease. The presence of so much gold and the power of the temple to cure so many devotees explains why this is one of the wealthiest temples in the state, attracting an income of US\$200,000 annually.

One of the most impressive features of Ettumanur is the valia vilakku, a giant oil lamp at the entrance to the temple. "The soot that accumulates on the underside of the shade of the lamp has been found to cure many eye diseases, " says Mr. Panicker. The focus of offerings is typically in the direction of this legendary lamp. Devotees pour sesame oil into the lamp by the jug, and over 4,000 liters of overflowing oil is collected each month. "The oil is collected in a tank underground and is pumped into a tank in the temple store, " said Mr. Jagmohan Das, an administrative officer of the temple. Some of the surplus oil is distributed to other temples, and the balance is auctioned. Panicker says, "This lamp has remained lit for over 450 years, giving spiritual light to the millions of devotees who grope about in the dark seeking divine illumination."