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A REVIEW OF THE IDOLS OF BUDDHA THE ENLIGHTENED PROFOUNDER

SHASTA THE GUARDIAN DEITY AND SABARIMALA AYYAPPA THE
TRIBAL ANCESTRAL DEITY FROM ICONOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Speaker

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Chair

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A REVIEW OF THE IDOLS OF BUDDHA THE ENLIGHTENED PROFOUNDER

Shasta the guardian deity and Sabarimala Ayyappa the tribal ancestral deity from Iconographical perspectives

Buddha, Shasta and Ayyappa idols have been found from various parts of Kerala. Buddha and Shasta idols in Kerala have an antiquity of roughly over 1200 years. Though there are no temples dedicated to Buddha, there are many temples dedicated to Shasta and Ayyappa today. Icons of Buddha, Shasta and Ayyappa divulge distinct iconographic characters. However, people out of ignorance or vested interest, swap the identity of these deities and propagate them according to their whims and fancies. Though this is immaterial to the believer, muddled factors have created a host of controversies associated with these deities in recent times. Deliberations and litigations concerning Ayyappa are today forefront newsmakers.

Ayyappa is essentially a tribal ancestral deity and has an antiquity of no more than 200 years. Ayyappa's tribal antecedents were masked by legends citing him as an incarnation of Shasta or Hariharaputra and thus resulting in his assimilation to the Brahmanical fold. The first

Ayyappa idol in Sabarimala temple, replacing the tribal idol, was installed in 1910, when the temple started to get popular and was rebuilt. The temple was burnt down and, breaking open the sanctum, the idol was broken by vandals in the first half of 1950. The temple was subsequently renovated and a new idol was enshrined. Consequent to this, the tribal identity of Ayyappa was wrapped in layers of myths and legends from Puranas and Epics and he became synonymous with Bhutanatha, Hariharaputra, Dharma Shasta etc. New rituals were introduced to cover his tribal antecedents. Over the past 70 years or so many new rituals have emerged. Despite all these, the arrow, the rice, beaten rice, coconut etc. taken to the shrine and the black clothes worn by the pilgrims are lingering tribal elements.

This presentation will deal with reviewing and defining the iconographic and stylistic character of Buddha, Shasta and Ayyappa and will try to trace the growth and development of the Ayyappa cult.



PROFESSOR AJIT KUMAR

Professor Ajit Kumar, started his career with the Archaeological Survey of India and served the organization from 1984 to 1997. He retired in 2020 as the Head of the Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala of which he was the founder head. He was the Director of the School of Social Sciences, and Chairman of the Department Council, Doctoral Committee in Archaeology, and Board of Studies of the University of Kerala. He was the Subject Expert for Archaeology at the National Testing Agency, Delhi, and was nominated to the panel of Eminent Archaeologists in India. He has been the Executive Committee member of ISPQS, Pune; the Indian Art History Congress, Guwahati and the Indian Archaeological Society, New Delhi. Professor Ajit Kumar has extensive experience in field archaeology and has published widely in areas including Archaeology of Kerala, Rock Art Studies and Harappan Archaeology. *Art Rupestre: Petroglyphs and Pictographs in Kerala (Rock-art in Kerala)* (2018) *Sculptural Art in Early Buddhist (Hinayana) Cave of Western Maharashtra (A Stylo-Chrono Study)* (2013) and *Forts of Kerala (Historical and Architectural account)* (2017) are among his notable works.

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