

as far as the vast majority who worship there are concerned, all that really matters is the divine presence installed within its sacred precincts and from this viewpoint Guruvayur's standing is well established and unassailable.

According to popular belief, as the temple grew in fame, the original shrine came to be managed by seventy-two Namboodiri Brahmin families.²⁴ Since the surrounding land was saline and the area scarcely populated, all those who officiated within the temple originally came from elsewhere. No one can place a historical time frame on this period for it is only with the rise to power of one of Kerala's most famous royal families that, from about the late 13th century, Guruvayur began not only appearing in official records but playing its own part in the *documented* history of the region's turbulent times and shifting fortunes. The correct title of the rulers who brought the temple to prominence underwent several changes before settling on Samoothiri or, as the British mispronounced it, Zamorin. They ruled from Kozhikode—a word Europeans twisted to Calicut—holding for almost 5 centuries a kingdom that stretched across most of what is now central and northern Kerala by being in an almost constant state of war.

It was not until the early 19th century, when different social and political ideas took root, that an irreversible process began, a process which, by the mid-20th century, had not only heralded the ending of the feudal system but, ultimately, removed the last vestiges of royal power.

At the end of the 13th century, however, the Zamorins of Calicut were not only established as powerful rulers, but also embroiled in a long and bitter struggle with the Vellatri, the Raja of Valluvanad. Although the fighting centred on the area around Thirunavaya, an ancient temple dedicated to Vishnu on the northern bank of the Bharatapuzha River, the war was not merely about a land-hungry ruler seeking to enlarge his territory. What the Zamorins wanted and the Vellatris struggled so bravely to retain was a different kind of

power: the right to conduct the prestigious Mamamakam, a famous festival held near the temple once every 12 years. By the time the Zamorins had emerged victorious, the war had dragged on for so long that the usual stream of pilgrims coming to worship at Thirunavaya had dwindled to a trickle. Instead, many pilgrims, especially those from southern Kerala, had begun journeying to Guruvayur to seek Guruvayurappan's blessings. This had a marked effect on the temple's fame and income, an effect that increased when the final outcome of the war gave the Zamorins control of the area north of Guruvayur and safe access to the temple. This was also when the Zamorins themselves became staunch devotees of the Lord. As a result, the 16th century saw an extraordinary rise in the temple's fortunes. It became an important pilgrim centre attracting devotees motivated as much by their own deep faith as the powerful praises offered to the Lord by a handful of remarkable devotees. With offerings pouring in, the temple began enhancing its physical appearance: the eastern and western *gopurams* were built, the *kodi maram* encased in gold and later, in 1638, the sanctum was rebuilt. By and large, this was a peaceful period for the temple. The long-term effect that the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498 eventually had over the region, initially failed to affect it, despite pitching the Zamorins into over 2 centuries of struggle. His wars were not only against the Portuguese and then the Dutch but their neighbours, particularly the Kochi Rajas.

In 1639 Visvabali, an elaborate and expensive 5-day ritual was conducted to propitiate all spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, and thereby benefit the whole world. Its scale was such that it required a 100 times more rice than normally used in the temple's annual Utsavabali²⁵ ritual, along with huge numbers of bananas and coconuts and vast amounts of jaggery, *malar* (puffed rice) and *ghee*. At this stage, the temple benefited from the Zamorin having extended his borders, as any shortfall in the rice the temple needed,

²⁴ Namboodiris—and Namboodiripads—are Kerala Brahmins; see Chapter 5: The Priests, p. 48.

²⁵ An elaborate ritual to satisfy all the installed deities within a temple; performed during the annual festival. See Chapter 17: The Lord's Festival, p. 228.