

both for its rituals and to feed devotees, could be brought from the fertile, paddy-producing area now known as Palakkad District.

Yet this peace was temporary and deceptive for when the Zamorin finally acquired control of Guruvayur, the temple was brought directly into the theatre of war. In 1716, the Dutch, then battling against the Zamorin, raided the temple, desecrated its sacred precincts, looted its wealth, burnt the western *gopuram* and even stripped the *kodi maram* of its gold. Forty years later, in 1756, they returned and, while they spared Guruvayur, they rampaged through the nearby Thikunavayi Temple to which Guruvayur was then subordinate. Since Thikunavayi's officiating priests fled and refused to return, even to perform the necessary purification rituals, Thikunavayi Devaswom had to be dissolved. The Zamorin then became the supervising trustee of Thikunavayi and Guruvayur, as well as their *Mel Koyma* or Sovereign Protector.

Meanwhile, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the effect of Guruvayur being managed by the Zamorin had created more or less permanent acrimony between him and Mallissery Namboothiripad, the temple's traditional owner—the inevitable outcome of a clash between the power of a reigning monarch and the holder of an ancient right.

Although by 1747, rebuilding had removed all traces of Dutch vandalism, the temple was again seriously threatened when, in 1766, the armies of Haider Ali, the ruler of Mysore, swept down through Malabar. These were dark days for the entire region: Calicut fell to Haider Ali and the ruling Zamorin, distressed by his failure to protect his kingdom and his subjects, set fire to his palace and committed suicide.<sup>26</sup> Though Haider Ali's troops reached Guruvayur, the temple was spared when a man known only as the Vatakkepat Warriar paid a ransom of 10,000 *panams*, a coin then in currency.

Inevitably, a sense of uncertainty and insecurity prevailed: pilgrims stopped visiting the temple; tenants ceased paying



their land rents, and the transport of rice became impossible. In 1780, all that saved the temple from complete ruin was Srinivasa Rao, Haider Ali's Governor of Malabar, making a no doubt delicately phrased request for the temple to be spared destruction and granted a *devadaaya*, the gift of financial support from a ruler to a deity.

Eight years later, Haider Ali's son and successor, Tippu Sultan, came to Malabar leading a powerful army intent on defeating the Zamorin and, it was believed, forcibly converting the Hindu population to Islam. Guruvayur feared total destruction, its apprehensions fuelled by the havoc being left in the wake of Tippu Sultan's army.

It is at this point that, almost inevitably, myth, history and oral tradition collide, the story of how the temple was saved being almost *consciously* too good to be left without evidence of divine intervention.

The temple's first concern was not for its physical safety but the preservation of the *moolavighraha*, Guruvayurappan's idol. Though there are different versions of the story, according to the most likely one, it was hidden within the temple, probably buried, whilst the processional image, the *thidambu*, was invested with the Lord's divine energy, His *chaitanya*, and spirited away to the safety of Ambalapuzha's

*The morning seeveli (procession).*

*Facing page: The young Padmanabhan, presently the temple's oldest tusker.*

<sup>26</sup> In this catastrophe, almost all early records of the region were destroyed.