

The 'goddess' of Kanya

At the sangam of three seas, on the southern tip of India, lives Mayamma with her 20 dogs and 40 pups. The number of those who believe that she is a manifestation of the virgin goddess of Kanyakumari is fast increasing. According to them, she would never die, for she was never born. However, Mayamma has her critics.

WRINKLES of time on her sun-tanned body. The skin is oily, giving her a special shine. In the shade of Kanyakumari temple listening to the roar of the sea sleeps Mayamma. Guarding her are 20 dogs. A few disciples too sit by her side, reverently, silently. As the photographer goes down on his knees to click, one of the dogs jumps at him barking. She wakes up, watches the stranger. Rajendran, her close aide, brings tea and plantains for her. She takes a plantain and offers it to the photographer. Rajendran says: "Accept it with grace, Amma is offering you *prasadam*".

This is Mayamma, whom many believe is the reincarnation of Parasakthi doing *tapas* to please Lord Siva at the meeting place of three seas.

Sitting by her side in a yogic pose is Sugathan. He is a Malayali, an ardent devotee of the 'living goddess'. His long beard and curly hair give him the look of a sanyasi. In fact, Sugathan looks more holy than the goddess he worships.

Who really is Mayamma? Where did she come from and when?

Her devotees believe that she has been on the golden shores of Cape Comorin



Mysterious, Mayamma



PHOTOS: MAXWELL FERNANDEZ

One mother, many pups

kumari

from time immemorial. She knows no death. She was never born, she has been there from the very beginning.

Her devotees have a million stories to tell about the supernatural powers of Mayamma. According to them a mere visit to her is enough to make luck come in search of you. Want to win a lottery, need a husband, anything you need, just ask her and it will be granted.

The devotees have founded an organization in her name—the Mayamma Samajam. To look after the 'living goddess', her 20 dogs and 40 pups, the samajam has engaged the services of Rajendran, one of her devotees. Rajendran came to Cape Comorin 10 years ago to do mosaic work but fate had other designs for him. "My mind was a turbulent sea. Her *darsan* set my soul at rest and I became her slave. One day I asked her, 'Ma, shall I go home?' She said 'no' and I stayed on".

Mayamma's day begins with an early morning dip in the sea. Then she sets fire to all the rubbish she had collected the previous day from the seashore. She dissolves the ash in seawater and then scooping a handful of it sprinkles it all



The dinner. Rajendran feeds Mayamma

over the beach. Devotees view this as the purification of the beach by Mayamma.

Then she goes to sleep in the shade of a structure in memory of Swami Vivekananda built close to the temple. Meanwhile, Rajendran prepares the food for the dogs, cows and crows. By 3 p.m. she wakes up and blesses her devotees. Plantain is given as *prasadam*. Tea too. Dogs also share. Samajam foots the bill.

Before sunset begins the mighty parade through Sannidhi street. The living goddess of Kanyakumari walks holding on to Rajendran. Following her are

20 dogs. Mayamma halts at a few hotels, chappathis, vadas and other eatables are bought and she feeds her dogs.

Hitherto, Mayamma used to sleep in a little hut close to the sea listening to the roar of the waves. Of late, she spends the night at the house of one Siva Sankaran Pillai, a businessman who believes that all his prosperity is due to her blessings. Her dogs sleep outside at the gate till she comes out the next day.

Critics have different tales to tell about Mayamma. One version is that Mayamma is a Maharashtrian (she speaks Marathi) who came here with some pilgrims about 40 years ago. When the pilgrims went back she was left behind. Whether it was intentional or not, no one knows.

Mayamma somehow survived on the beach of Cape Comorin. She caught fish, fried them on the seashore and lived. She used to sell fish too. She was not a beauty but she had a well-structured body.

At night 'wolves' came shadowing her and her pet dogs used to chase them away. Her love for dogs is because of this, both critics and some devotees say. The critics also say that she has no powers, supernatural powers. Some people are imagining things and some others are exploiting her name, they allege.

But Mayamma devotion is spreading fast. Her end will come sooner or later. She is weak and sick. One could see sores on her feet. But death will not remove her from the prayer rooms of hundreds of homes. A good number of people belonging to all walks of life believe that whatever they have achieved in life is because of her—the living goddess of Kanyakumari.

—MAXWELL FERNANDEZ



Free meal for animals. Dogs, cows and even crows are fed