

On the deification of Guruvayur Kesavan: The making of an animal religious subject through cultural productions

Tresa Abraham [IIT Bombay]

Guruvayur Kesavan (1905?-76) was an elephant that served in the famous Srikrishna temple at Guruvayur. He was offered by the Valiya Raja of Nilambur to Guruvayurappan (Lord Krishna), the deity at Guruvayur Srikrishna Temple, in 1922. Fifty years later, in 1973, for the first time in history, an elephant's service to the temple was celebrated. On this occasion, he was honoured with the title of Gajarajan (King of Elephants). Following his death, a 12-foot high statue was erected in his honour. Every year the anniversary of his death is commemorated by the temple authorities. In this paper I seek to show how Kesavan, now a famous elephant of Kerala, is deified through narratives. Deification is the process through which an object, animal or human being is made god-like in character. For this purpose, I analyse Unnikrishnan Puthoor's book titled *Gajarajan Guruvayur Kesavan*, and the film *Guruvayur Kesavan* (1977) directed by Bharathan. Most religions across the world depend on narratives about their gods for their existence. They generally have an underlying structure that includes an unusual birth, often following visions; an exemplary life; miracles; and a foreseen death. I argue that the narratives dealt with in this paper are fashioned in the same mould and aid the deification of the elephant.

In her book *The Hindus: An Alternate History* Wendy Doniger observes that animals appear both as objects and as subjects in Hindu religious texts. In her view, nature provides images through which people may think of god. These images also furnish "the ideas that people have about the nature of the gods, and of the world, and of themselves". This leads them "to project onto animals certain anthropomorphic features".¹ Unnikrishnan Puthoor, through his book *Gajarajan Guruvayur Kesavan*, attempts to narrate the life story of Kesavan. This act of writing the biography of an animal invariably involves anthropomorphising the animal, insofar as it is attributed human traits and emotions and is judged by human understanding of its reactions. Puthoor, in an attempt to give more authenticity to his work, refuses to call it a biography. He prefers to call it a life story that was written with reference to records and his own experiences.

The script of Bharathan's feature film *Guruvayur Kesavan* was based on the story written by Unnikrishnan Puthoor. However, Puthoor was not satisfied with the film screenplay, which he believed was embellished to serve the needs of a feature film. In stating that he is not writing a biography but a life story, he projects his work as more authentic than a biography which might be tinted with the biographer's point of view and bias; and also as more true than the narrative of the film, which may be embellished. By attempting to distinguish his work from biography and calling it a life story, he appears to be placing his work on a pedestal of truth. However, if Bharathan's film was embellished with romance and problems of the decline of the feudal lords then Puthoor's work is born of a strong religious bias. Puthoor in his own narrative is a devout admirer of Kesavan and a strong devotee of Guruvayurappan.

The life story of Kesavan is interpolated with temple lore. The choice and placement of these interpolations are interesting. The most popular among them is the lore around Kesavan's entry into Guruvayur temple. Unnikrishnan Puthoor tells that Kesavan was found as a baby elephant in the forests of Nilambur. The entry on "Kesavan" in the Guruvayur Devaswom Board's official website begins with Valiya Raja of Nilambur offering Kesavan to the temple because Guruvayurappan, the Srikrishna deity at Guruvayur, had saved his family and property during the Malabar Mutiny.² This lack of official narrative on the circumstances regarding his birth and early life is compensated by Puthoor. He describes in detail the incidents relating to this offering in his work. During the Malabar Mutiny, the mutineers, having ransacked the Nilambur palace, untied the

young Kesavan and took him along with them. The Muthamma *thamburatti* (matriarch) was heartbroken. Being a devout worshipper of Guruvayurappan, she cried in agony to the Lord. It is believed that she heard a voice consoling her "... Nothing will happen to him. Kesavan is a character in my divine scheme. In this drama of life I have many more roles set aside for Kesavan". The inhabitants of Nilambur palace sought asylum in the palace of the Raja of Cochin. On seeing the Muthamma *thamburatti*'s pain, he sent out strong men to find the elephant in the forests of Nilambur. There was no sign of Kesavan. According to Puthoor, Muthamma *thamburatti* promised to offer Kesavan to Guruvayurappan, if he were to be found. Drawing on popular temple lore, he says that Guruvayurappan took the form of a mahout and searched for Kesavan. He found him tied near the entrance of a cave in the Nilambur forests. He threw a bag of gold coins to placate the mutineers and returned the elephant to the palace. The mahout was never seen again. As the *thamburatti*'s wish was fulfilled, Kesavan was offered to the temple. In the absence of an unusual or blessed birth that is customarily necessary at the birth of a great soul, the incorporation of this lore into the biography can be seen as an attempt to mysticise the beginning of Kesavan's life. The narrative then moves on to anthropomorphise the elephant into an ideal devotee and servant of Guruvayurappan.

According to Doniger, Hindu "gods become incarnate as animals and have animal vehicles in the human world". Later, in the same work, she suggests various ways in which the *vahana* (the animal) functions. Doniger describes the many ways in which the *vahana* may be used "in the sense of 'a material embodiment or manifestation, of something'" or "as a vehicle in the sense that mosquitoes may 'carry' malaria". Wherever the animal is found, the deity is also present. For the purpose of this paper, I employ the sense of the *vahana* as a "material embodiment or manifestation" of the god. Kesavan was deemed to have been Guruvayurappan's favourite *vahana*. This belief was strengthened when the aged Kesavan refused to allow other elephants to carry the idol for the *seeveli* procession³ by standing in front of the temple gate. Lalitha Balasubramanian states that a "*devaprashnam*"⁴ was conducted and it was proclaimed that only Kesavan would carry the Lord in procession till his death". Kesavan's status as a favourite of the reigning deity is seen to be acknowledged by all in both the narratives. Devotees who come to worship Guruvayurappan are often shown as praying and paying homage to him.

The story of Kesavan as told by Puthoor borrows heavily from the stories of Lord Krishna. Stephen Alter discusses the movie *Guruvayur Kesavan* in his *Elephant Maximus: A Portrait of the Indian Elephant* (2004) and says that "the stoic nobility of the elephant" provides a sharp contrast to the "weaknesses, fears and failings of human beings". Human beings are presented as greedy, envious, and cowardly. Kesavan's mischief is projected as an attempt to correct these failings. He is given the position of a father or lord correcting his children. In the film, Kesavan's mahout Mani Nair is offered a bribe to ensure that Kesavan is available for a temple festival by the manager of a timber mill. The timber mill owner and the manager had ill-treated and insulted Kesavan in their greed for money. To the manager's mortification, Kesavan disrobes him before women and children. Mani Nair realising his mistake, returns the money and asks Kesavan to forgive the manager. Mani Nair returns the "*mundu*" to the manager, who begs his forgiveness and flees. The film and the book project Kesavan as an elephant that knows his role as the *vahana*. In the anecdotes narrated in the texts, Kesavan appears to be demanding the respect that is accorded to the *vahana* of Lord Krishna.

Two prominent female characters in the film *Guruvayur Kesavan* are Jayabharathi and Usha Kumari. They are very devoted to him and visit him regularly. While Jayabharathi regularly feeds him jaggery balls, Usha Kumari, like the ideal devotee Manjula,⁵ garlands him every day with a lotus flower. Among the popular narratives on Kesavan is the one on his amorous relationship with the cow elephants in Guruvayur. Stephen Alter says that "the sensual advances" made by Gajarani Lakshmi towards Kesavan "and their hidden love were well known". He says that "their relationship remained unconsummated because of temple injunctions against elephants breeding in captivity". Puthoor in his work discusses the attention that Guruvayur Kesavan attracted from Radha a "demure" cow

elephant. Kesavan's relationship with Radha is written along the lines of Lord Krishna's relationship with Radha. Puthoor narrated the love entanglement of Radha, Kesavan and Lakshmi. Puthoor records his interview with a mahout who testifies to having seen the elephants (Radha and Kesavan) frolicking in the dead of the night following Onam, the harvest festival of Kerala. The witness portrays Lakshmi as a jealous lover who would riot if she were to see Kesavan engaging with another female elephant. From Puthoor's narrative, it is evident that Lakshmi was considered to be his consort, while Radha was considered his secret lover. Attribution of romantic love to animals, projecting ideas such as monogamy, legitimate relationship and illicit relationship is a part of the act of anthropomorphising the elephant. However, these narratives resemble and cohere to already existing narratives of gods, and this leads to the making of Kesavan like God.

Even though he is given a god-like status in the narrative, the injunction against breeding imposed by temple authorities is a clear indication that this status is subject to man's will and intentions. Elephants are known for their temper and the havoc they cause during temple festivals in Kerala. Their temper rises during the *musth*, the breeding season. According to Puthoor, Kesavan stands out from other elephants not only by his imposing physical stature but also his ability to stay in control even when in *musth* and when provoked by others. On the other hand Kesavan was short tempered and had a revengeful nature. Although the narratives mention his infamous temper that earned him the name "Lunatic Kesavan", the stories justify his failure to keep calm and attempt to absolve him of all blame. Puthoor repeatedly notes that he was called "lunatic Kesavan" at a young age. In Puthoor's *Gajarajan Guruvayur Kesavan* the elephant understands the responsibility that comes from his strength and power.

Accounts of Kesavan roused to anger clearly mention that no physical harm had come to pass to fellow creatures. The monetary damage that Kesavan caused in those spells is shrugged off as outcomes of the misdeeds of human beings involved. One such incident is narrated by Puthoor. Kesavan was roused to anger by the taunts of the mill owners and the indifference of his mahouts Achuthan Nair and Mani Nair. He wrecked the mill and left for Guruvayur temple disobeying the mahouts. Kesavan's behaviour is justified by the consideration he showed to the officers following him on foot and the care he took not to disturb Radha, the cow and her calf who were sleeping on the road. Puthoor recalls that day fondly. He and his friends were rushing out after school, when they encountered Kesavan on the road. On seeing the children, Kesavan moved to the side and allowed all of them to pass safely and then proceeded to the temple. Like God, Kesavan, in these narratives, is inviolable and above all blame. But this attribute of "god-like" nature depended on the negation of his animal nature.

Kesavan died on Ekadasi⁶ day (2 December 1976). He fasted for the entire day and dropped down facing the direction of the temple, with his trunk raised as a mark of prostration. In the film, when Kesavan falls sick the main mahout Achu Nair asks the other mahouts to tie him in the direction of the temple. Kesavan is seen to be fasting on the day before his death, as if anticipating it. His refusal of food and drink is shown to sadden Achu Nair. Improvising on the idea that he died facing the temple with his trunk raised, the film shows Kesavan having a vision of Lord Krishna in the form of a little boy just before his death. This leads him to prostrate before the Lord.

In this paper, I have attempted to study two texts on the famous Gajaran Guruvayur Kesavan to understand the processes through which the legendary elephant is anthropomorphised and then deified. In these texts, Kesavan, an anthropomorphised elephant serving in the temple, is made into the physical embodiment of a *vahana* and thereby elevated to the level of a deity. However, this entails a negation of his animal nature. Through the paper I have attempted to show that his story is narrated in a manner that coheres to larger narratives of gods, and in particular to Lord Krishna who is the central deity of Guruvayur temple.

NOTES

1. I have used an epub version which has no page numbers and the location is device specific.
2. The Malabar rebellion was an armed uprising in 1921 against British authority and Hindu landlords in the Malabar region of Southern India by Mappila Muslims. The 1921 rebellion began as a reaction against a heavy-handed crackdown on the Khilafat Movement by the British authorities in the Eranad and Valluvanad taluks of Malabar. In the initial stages, a number of minor clashes took place between Khilafat volunteers and the police, but the violence soon spread across the region. The Mappilas attacked and took control of police stations, British government offices, courts and government treasuries. The largely *kudiyaa*n (tenant) Mappilas also attacked and killed *jenmi* (landlords) of the Hindu Nair and Brahmin Nambudiri castes.
3. *Seeveli* is a daily ritual procession carried out in the Guruvayur temple. It is a procession of caparisoned elephants marching, with one of them carrying the idol of Lord Krishna. It is done three times a day – 7.00am, 5.30pm and 8.30pm.. The night *seeveli* is the most majestic one, with three or more elephants marching with the sounds of drums. The entire temple is lit up with around 1 lakh lamps. Incense sticks and special herbal *sambrani* are also lit. It is a mesmerising scene to watch the *seeveli*. On festival days this ritual is much grander, with five elephants joining the procession
4. *Devaprashnam* is an astrological practice to find out the will of God
5. According to the temple lore, Manjula, a devotee, used to offer a garland daily to Lord Krishna. One day, she was delayed and could not offer the garland. On seeing her distress, Poonthanam, another famous devotee of Lord Krishna, advised her to consider the banyan tree near the temple as the Lord and to offer the garland to it. The following day the priest was shocked to see Manjula's garland on Guruvayurappan's neck. The banyan tree is known as "Manjula Aal" ever since (Balasubramanian n.p).
6. *Ekadasi* is the eleventh lunar day (*tithi*) of the *shukla* (bright) or *krishna* (dark) *paksha* (fortnight) of every lunar month in the Hindu calendar (*Panchang*). In Hinduism and Jainism it is considered a spiritually beneficial day and is usually observed by a partial fast. Beans and grains are not eaten during Ekadasi, as on this day these two foods are believed to be contaminated by sin. Only fruits, vegetables and milk products are eaten during Ekadasi. This period of abstention runs from sunrise on the day of Ekadasi to sunrise on the following day.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alter, Stephen. *Elephas Maximus: A Portrait of the Indian Elephant*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004. Print.
- Balasubramanian, Lalitha. *Kerala the Divine Destination*. Mumbai: Wordizen, 2015. Print.
- Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New York: Penguin, 2009. Print.
- "Gajarajan Kesavan." *Welcome to the Abode of Guruvayoorappan*. Guruvayur Devaswom Boards, n.d. Web.
- Guruvayur kesavan*. Dir. Bharathan. Screenplay by N. Govindankutty. Manjilas, 1977. Film.
- Puthoor, Unnikrishnan. *Gajarajan Guruvayur Kesavan*. First CB Ed. Kottayam: CurrentBooks, 1999. Print.