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The god in the bread basket: how a stolen idol nearly sparked a princely war

In 1853, a Brahman smuggled the Bhimmum idol out of a temple in Alleppey in a bread basket. The theft nearly sparked a war between Travancore and Cochin before the Madras Government decided the case in 1859.

On the morning of 28 January 1857, a detachment of Travancore's Nair Brigade stood ready at the Alleppey landing place to receive a fugitive god. A boat hove into sight. Priests stepped forward, cracked a coconut in ritual welcome, and made profound salaams before the chief Brahman entered the cabin to greet the returning deity. Moments later, he stormed back out in fury. The idol inside was an impostor, dressed up in the real jewels.

It was merely the latest twist in the restless career of the Bhimmum, a small metal image whose travels across Kerala had already bankrupted gold reserves and felled a Dutch governor's household. It had also provoked a minor war.

The idol had first arrived in Cochin around 1589 in the luggage of a visiting high priest, the Coombaconum Madum Swamiyar, who used it for his private devotions. When he tried to leave six months later, however, he fell violently ill at every attempt. Soothsayers were summoned. They announced that the little god had taken a liking to Cochin and simply refused to depart. The priest agreed to part with it for as many Venetian gold sequins as would cover the figure in a large salver. This bargain proved unexpectedly ruinous when, by local account, the idol's head seemed to rise as fast as the coins were piled, exhausting every sequin in Cochin before a fresh consultation of soothsayers ended the dispute with an administrative contract instead.

Even then, the Bhimmum refused to stay. Around 1719 it vanished. It washed up on the beach and ended up in the residence of the Dutch Governor of Cochin. Seeing only a misshapen little figure cast from mixed gold, silver, and base metals, the Governor handed it to his children as a toy. Almost immediately his wife was struck by severe colic, which vanished only when the idol was removed to the house of a native doctor, whose own family then endured seven years of tormenting illness before realising what they had on their shelf.

Worse followed in September 1791, when the Raja of Cochin ordered the temple trustees to hand over a large consignment of sugarcane jaggery for a royal feast at Tripunithura. One trustee, Dagwar's Kinni, refused. Days

later, two Eurasian officers and a Ragiadoor (royal official) walked into Kinni's shop asking to inspect some silks. While he served them, they murdered him and cut off his head, which they took to the Raja. They also loosed troops into the Canarese Bazaar.

Amid the panic, the temple priests packed the Bhimmum and its jewels into a box. Sheltering under the guns of the Dutch fort, they spirited the god away by canoe, first to Chellanam and then south to Alleppey in rival Travancore. There, once British rule restored calm, the Travancore Raja built it a pagoda and endowed it with lands yielding Rs. 12,000 a year.

For decades, the god seemed settled. Then in February 1853, a Cochin Brahman pulled off an audacious culinary heist. At the end of a temple feast in Alleppey, it was customary for leftover food to be carried outside in long bread baskets to waiting crowds. Slipping the Bhimmum beneath the scraps in one of those baskets, the Brahman walked straight out of the pagoda and lowered the deity into a waiting boat. He had it paddled back to Cochin.

Alleppey awoke to an empty shrine and a diplomatic crisis. Angry protests escalated until, in 1856, Travancore ordered troops from Quilon to march on Cochin and recover its prize by force. Cochin's Dewan hastily offered to return the idol, setting the stage for the solemn reception of January 1857, and the awkward discovery of the decoy in the boat cabin. A second image, hurriedly dispatched three days later on 31 January, proved just as counterfeit as the first.

In 1859, the Madras Government finally closed the six-year standoff with dry bureaucratic logic. Since the Bhimmum had originally decamped from Cochin and had now gone back there, it declared that in Cochin it would stay. Travancore's officials quietly took back the Rs. 12,000 land endowment they had set aside for the runaway god.