

THE VEDIC FIRE

A 3,000-year-old ritual may have an impact on modern science

Panjaal, a sleepy village near Thrissur, Kerala, will host Athirathram, which its organisers say is the oldest surviving ritual and the greatest Vedic ceremony. Athirathram (Agnicayana), a 12-day Vedic ritual to please Agni, the god of fire, will begin on April 4 after 35 years in Panjaal, traditionally the epicentre of Vedic rituals in the state. It will be attended by hundreds of Vedic scholars from India and abroad.

Athirathram is the ultimate invocation of Vedic scriptures and forms a 3,000-year-long tradition among a few Nampoothiri Brahmin families in Kerala. The last Athirathram was held in Panjaal in 1975 with support from Harvard and Berkeley universities of the US and Finland's Helsinki University. Athirathram's objective is universal peace, prosperity, environmental harmony and love.

"The Athirathram is marked by larger participation of people cutting through gender, class, caste or religion. It is a source for theory of ritual," says K. Krishna Kumar, managing trustee of the Varthathe Trust, the

Rs 2-crore ritual's organiser. Political parties, including the CPI(M), have pledged full support.

Among the visitors will be Frits Stall (81), the celebrated Vedic scholar and Indologist from Holland. Stall, a professor of philosophy and South Asian languages at the University of California, Berkeley, was the first non-Nampoothiri who was allowed to witness, document and film the rite in 1975. Scientists led by Dr VPN Nampoothiri, former director of the International School of Photonics, Cochin University, will study the ritual's scientific dimensions and impact in "areas of atmospheric changes in temperature, humidity and pressure during Athirathram". The ritual's

WOODEN UTENSILS FOR THE RITUAL



impact on micro-organisms in soil, variations in plant animal yield and physiological and psychological effects on humans—especially those who meditate and who are under medication—will also be studied.

Everything for the ritual is made of wood from specially ordained and designated trees and plants. The fire will be created by rubbing sticks of Arani wood. Unlike in the past, the Athirathram will be conducted by young members of the Nampoothiri community. The master of ceremonies is Puthillath Ramanujan Somayajippad, who is only 52 years old; the last Athirathram was conducted by an 80-year-old in 1975. Somayajippad's wife Dhanya will be present for the entire ritual in the pivotal role of *Yajamana Patni* to depict that women were treated with honour during Vedic times contrary to popular notion.

In the past, younger generations of Nampoothiris were attracted to modernity, science and materialistic ideologies. Today, there is a growing interest in traditional knowledges and practices.

by M.G. Radhakrishnan