A Call Of Devotion

Posted on



Krishna and Radha

Countless statues glowed luminous in the dim light and the deepening silence echoed the glory of the manifold gods present at the Hindu Cultural Temple of Arts. Breaking this silence, from the distance the faint melody of a nadaswaram and thestark beat of the thavil seeped in, calling all to the pooja at the Mayurapathi Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil…

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

Hindu Cultural Temple of Arts

Climbing three flights of stairs we alighted at the Temple of Arts where statues of

numerous Hindu gods portrayed a vibrant setting with a multitude of colours merging together. Initiated in 1997 by T Vallipuram, a former trustee, Temple of Arts presents a place where pilgrims who are unable to make the journey to India can perceive gods of the main shrines, here in Sri Lanka. All the statues have been sculpted by two sculptors from Kalligudi, India and it has taken them nearly nine months to complete the task. Excellent craftsmanship and attention to detail defined each idol and we peered around trying to unfold and understand the intricate tales behind the statues.

Positioned in the midst of the room were the statues of Radha and Krishna surrounded by Gopis, Sanskrit for cow-herd girls. Krishna is an avatar of Lord Vishnu, a name that means the one who attracts all. He is generally dark in complexion and is portrayed with Radha, his consort, to his left. A tale of eternal love and devotion is embodied between Radha and Krishna and it is believed that the worship of Krishna is incomplete without Radha. Next to the entrance of the chamber is a statue of Surya Deviyo or Sun god. He is seated in a chariot drawn by seven horses, believed to represent the seven colours of the rainbow, along with two consorts and a nimbus surrounding his figure. Lined on the sides of the room were statues of Amman and Luxmi, as worshipped in different regions of India, and the host of numerous names depicted are thought to be renditions utilised in different regions. It is understood that there are around 108 avatars of Bathrakali Amman, of which approximately 65 had been reproduced at the Temple of Arts.

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Decking the walls were many more images where the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu – Matsya, Kurma, Varha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna and Kalki – stood out. Towards the back of the room we observed the Shiva Lingam, a form of worship of Lord Shiva, known as the destroyer of evil. More statues illustrating Shiva with Parvathi, his consort, and sons, Lord Ganesh and Murugan graced the area while another depicting Shiva as Nataraja, god of dance occupied a prominent place nearby. Lining the wall next to Nataraja, the coronation of Rama – from Ramayana – was depicted. A sight to behold, the portrayal included Sita seated next to Rama while his brothers, Lakshman, Shatrughna and Bharata and Hanuman, his trusted devotee, remained standing or seated on their sides.

Stepping outside this room, we encountered a statue of Bathrakali Amman flanked by mirrors. Looking into the mirror, we were able to glimpse the statue reflected

many times over rendering a mirror tunnel vision. Another small room located close by presented statues of marble brought from India along with some other figures.

Upstairs in the meditation room were more statues of ascetics, hermits and gods that met our scrutiny. A model of Peruvudaiyar Kovil – a sivan Kovil in Thanjavur, India built by the Cholas – caught our attention as we were enthralled by the fact that the Kovil does not cast a shadow at any given time. Further tales of Meera, a hermit observing penance in the hopes of marrying Krishna and Raja Vindra Samdigar, an ascetic who observed jeeva samadhi and is still believed to be alive after 700 years, had us captivated with much curiosity. Statues of King Ravana, Attanadishvaram – part Shiva and part Parvati, symbolising equality of men and women and Harihara Sudan – born from Lord Shiva and Vishnu – added to the complex jigsaw puzzle that weaved in our minds.

Still trying to unravel our minds from the innumerable statues of gods and the information, our footsteps next carried us to the Mayurapathi Kovil where the chantings and the drifting melodies called us to take part in a pooja of devotion…

Mayurapathi Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil

The beginning of the Kovil dates back to a time when a weaving mill existed in Mayura Place, Wellawatte, many years back. Workers had travelled from India to work in the mill and it is said that for their convenience a place of worship, where the Kovil stands today, came to being. By and by, as many wonders came to pass, a Kovil was erected in a grand scale and came to be a prominent place of worship among all communities alike.

Walking into the Kovil, we found ourselves in the midst of a special pooja. Two people were seated at one corner with a priest who was conducting a homa pooja as a prelude to the main pooja, which starts around six in the evening. Chantings filled the air while various offerings were cast to the fire, the centre piece of the ritual, as a purification rite. A while after the focus shifted to the main shrine where the pooja continued as another priest bathed Kali Amman and the surrounding statues of gods in water, red and yellow powder, fruits, milk, king coconut and many other diverse offerings.

As time went by, people thronged the Kovil and their fervent reverences pulsated through the periphery. Accompanied by the never ceasing sound of the holy bell,

nadaswaram and the thavil, the main pooja began with the priests visiting each shrine to venerate the gods – Ganapathi, Murugan, Navagraha, Shiva-Parvati to name a few. Stalling by the Vasantha Mandapam, where the statues of gods that are taken out during the main festival times in July or August are kept, we listened to a devotional chant by an ardent devotee.

Devotees amassed the space to receive the blessings of Kali Amman…

A sudden commotion and a statue of Kali Amman was hoisted up and was carried around the Kovil and as the procession concluded, devotees amassed the space to receive the blessings of Kali Amman in the hopes of fulfilling their myriad of hopes. With the ending of the pooja, the crowd spilled onto the street outside, minds at peace without a doubt after seeking the comforting warmth of the gods at the Mayurapathi Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil. We, too, joined the sea of people gushing out with a new found sense of faith that did not dim even as we threaded our way towards home.

Mayurapathi Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil and the Hindu Cultural Temple of Arts

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