Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil Where The God Of Beauty Resides

Posted on
Images of Murugan, Valli and Devayani near the second gopuram

There is not much in the world of worship as astonishing as a Hindu kovil and its rituals. And if the kovil is predominant, witnessing its dramatic Dravidian-style architecture—such as the monumental, richly ornate tower or *gopuram*—and the annual festival, an inevitable feast of strange sight and frenzied sound, then the encounter can be significant, whatever your faith.

Words Richard Boyle **Photographs** Varnan Sivanesan

Nallur, 2km from Jaffna, was the capital city of the ancient Jaffna kingdom. The royal palace, minister's residence and other important buildings were located there; some remnants, including the palace façade, can still be seen. In general, the city was laid out like the traditional kovil town according to Hindu traditions. Nallur, which means "good city" in Tamil, was a focal point where writers, artists and poets came to entertain the king in his court. Moreover it was a sacred area where yogis meditated.

The saga of the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, which is dedicated to Lord Murugan, is inextricably entwined with the history of the Kingdom of Jaffna. The original kovil was founded in 948 on land called Kurukkal Valavu, soon after the proclamation of Nallur as the capital city. Surprisingly, it also functioned as a defensive fort with high walls. However, in 1450 Jaffna was captured by Prince Sapumal (Sapumal *Kumaraya*), the adopted son of Parakramabahu VI, ruler of the Kingdom of Kotte. During the invasion the kovil was destroyed, although in 1457 the new king ordered reconstruction to begin at Sankili Thopu, a few kilometres eastwards of the original site.

The Portuguese captured Jaffna in 1560 but, considering their inclination to sack important Hindu places of worship, only demolished the kovil in 1621. The less zealous Dutch wrested Jaffna from the Portuguese in 1658, but it was not until 1734 that permission was obtained for the temple to be built at its original site, Kurukkal

Valavu. Because of its periodic destruction a more modest style was adopted with the use of brick and stone, and cadjan for the roof.

By 1749 this version of the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, an enhanced version of which exists today, was completed. It was a simple affair, just two main halls and no *gopuram* or surrounding wall. It was not until 1899 that the first clock tower was erected and in 1902 that the main hall was refurbished. Much has happened in the past century. From being a simple affair the kovil has now become an elaborate and imposing example of Dravidian-influenced architecture.

> There Is Plenty To Discover Inside The Huge Sand-Lined Compound… Expansive Murals And Decorative Brass

As you approach the kovil you encounter a striking red-and-white striped boundary wall, but your gaze will inevitably be drawn to the five-storey “god-encrusted, golden-ochre *gopuram*” as this strange tower has been described in a guidebook. On entering an impressive double-colonnaded passageway towards the East-facing entrance it becomes apparent that your destination passes through the base of the *gopuram.*

Before entering the kovil you should remove your shoes; women should be conservatively dressed and every man must remove his shirt. There is plenty to discover inside the huge sand-lined compound, such as expansive murals and decorative brass. In the southern part there is a colonnaded, stepped, holy pool and a second *gopuram*, built in 2011, and on the northern side there is a large garden.

Try to time your visit so that you can observe a *pooja* (offering), held at 5am, 10am, noon, 4.15pm (a small *pooja*), 4.30pm (a special *pooja*), 5pm and 6.45pm. On Tuesdays and Fridays especially there are large numbers of devotees. Offerings are made to the image of Murugan and other Hindu deities such as Ganesh, in shrines surrounding the inner sanctum.

The sacred name Murugan is derived from Tamil for “beauty”, which is considered a perfection that leads to divinity. Like most Hindu deities, Murugan, son of Shiva and Parvati and commander of the army of the *devas* (gods), has many other names, such as Skanda, “that which is spilled” (Kandaswamy in the kovil’s name is a variation) and Kartikeya, which corresponds to the star cluster Pleiades.

Representations of Murugan reveal that he has six faces, which symbolise the five senses and the mind. He holds a divine spear or *Vel*, used to defeat evil forces and an object of worship for Hindus, and sits astride his 'vehicle' (*vahana*), a peacock that subjugates a cobra with its claws, representing the overpowering of impurity. Murugan is usually flanked by his two entrancing consorts, Valli and Devayani.

Hindus believe that Murugan incarnated himself to enlighten human beings, to liberate them from ignorance, and to reveal the truth. More practically, he is worshipped by a constant flow of devotees from Sri Lanka and elsewhere to save them from personal disaster and natural catastrophe during this supposed final stage of the world, the *Kaliyuga*, "age of vice". The divine utterance of Murugan rings in the devotees' ears, "Why fear when I am here at Nallur?"

The fully comprehensive 25-day annual festival to honour Murugan, which is held during the month of *Adi,* August-September, is an extraordinary spiritual event. It commences with a flag-hoisting ceremony followed by days of parades, round the precincts at noon and the outer precincts in the evening, of images of Murugan—he is often represented by the Vel, which is installed in the kovil's sanctum sanctorum and 2m long—and of Valli and Devayani. They are reverently transported in *vahanas* such as a silver peacock and green peacock, silver swan, and cobra.

> An Increasing Fervour Is Aroused As Chanting Devotees Strain To Catch A Glimpse Of Their Deity, And The Nagasurams Start To Play In A Loud, Frenzied Fashion, With A Distant Likeness To Improvised Jazz

The festival climaxes with the astounding *ther thiruvilu* or chariot festival, in which thousands of devotees participate.Against a wall of sound—a tolling portable bell, the wailing of the clarinet-like *nagasurams,* the beating of drums and the chanting of *"Haro-hara, Haro-hara!"* ("Oh God Almighty, please remove our sufferings and grant us happiness")—the image of Muruganappears at the kovil's entrance. It is then carried to a tall enclosure where the bulbous, ornate, tiered-roof chariot is parked.

Attended by Brahmin priests, Murugan is reverently placed in the centre of the lavishly decorated chariot, which is then pulled on its wheels by hundreds of devotees around the congested outer courtyard by means of thick ropes. An increasing fervour is aroused as chanting devotees strain to catch a glimpse of their

deity, and the *nagadhaswarams* start to play in a loud, frenzied fashion, with a distant likeness to improvised jazz. The bell, which had fallen silent, starts to toll again.

On the periphery coconuts are hurled to the ground. Some devotees dance with the *kavadi* across their shoulders—a heavy (up to 30kg) wooden or steel arch-shaped object that is studded with peacock feathers and carries two pots of milk to be offered in worship. The *kavadi* is a physical burden, relief from which the devotees implore Murugan for help.

After Murugan’s image returns in the chariot to the vehicle’s enclosure, many devotees roll their bodies synchronously in the hot sand in one direction. It’s the end of the *ther thiruvilu,* the most renowned and popular ritual of the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, a place of worship for a millennium that still has a major spiritual impact on the Hindus of the Jaffna peninsula.



