# Palace of the Gods

Posted on

Above the sea of heads, the giant ornate chariot of Lord Shanmuhar is pulled by thousands of devotees

**Dawn on Point Pedro road in the town of Nallur Jaffna, sets a striking scene. The sun had not come out yet and the sky still swims in blue but an impressive structure, one that penetrates the very fabric of Hindu culture towers resplendent like a golden palace taken straight out of mythology.**

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A Kavadi dancer, driven by faith

The Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil meets us with its entrance-facing East protected by a red and white striped wall. As one walks in it becomes evident that the kovil is

surrounded by soft white sand, where eager worshippers can be seen smashing coconuts as they wait for the morning pooja to begin. Once the entrance comes in to view, it is difficult to not become transfixed by the amber and gold Dravidian style architecture that makes up the arresting five-storey *gopuram* directly attached to the main entrance.

Upon passing through the base of the gopuram, you come to the gates of the kovil guarded by cast iron bars and a painting of Lord Murugan otherwise known as Kartikeya mounted on the wall. God of war, reincarnation of Lord Shiva and presiding deity of the temple, Lord Murugan is depicted on the back of his peacock mount with his two consorts Devasena and Valli by his side. From this point on all male worshippers must enter the kovil shirtless.

A bell rings to signify the commencement of the *pooja* and devotees enter the kovil's gold painted interior where beautifully carved pillars surround a marble shrine, painting a scene of devout spiritual worship. Temple priests immediately direct devotees towards the shrine used to house an onyx idol with dozens of brightly coloured garlands strewn over his head. Here worshippers lay plates of fragrant flowers like hibiscus, frangipani and lotus on the shrine altar before kneeling on the ground to pray for blessings.

This much-venerated idol is a representation of Lord Murugan who the kovil is dedicated to and whose image and folklore is continuously referenced throughout the temple grounds. Most notably in the form of idols and figurines but also through the use of vibrant murals. Illustrating such stories as how Lord Murugan received the *Vel* – a spear like weapon that he is often shown carrying as well as how he came to be born with six faces.

Within the kovil you will find the chariots used for the grand Nallur festival. There are many chariots, one for each day of the festival, which takes place for 28 days between the summer months of August and September. It attracts hundreds of thousands of devotees every year because it is the longest running Hindu festival in Sri Lanka.

During this time many stages of celebrations will take place, beginning with the hoisting of the Hindu holy flag the *Kodiyetram* on the first day of the festival before moving on to cover several different types of revelry. These will include but is not limited to the ever popular *Ther* or chariot festival where idols of Lord Shanmuga and his consorts are carried out on a silver throne to a 50 foot tall chariot. From

there the idols are paraded though the temple's courtyard to the jubilation of many worshippers who will often join the procession by chanting or dancing as an act of holy consecration.

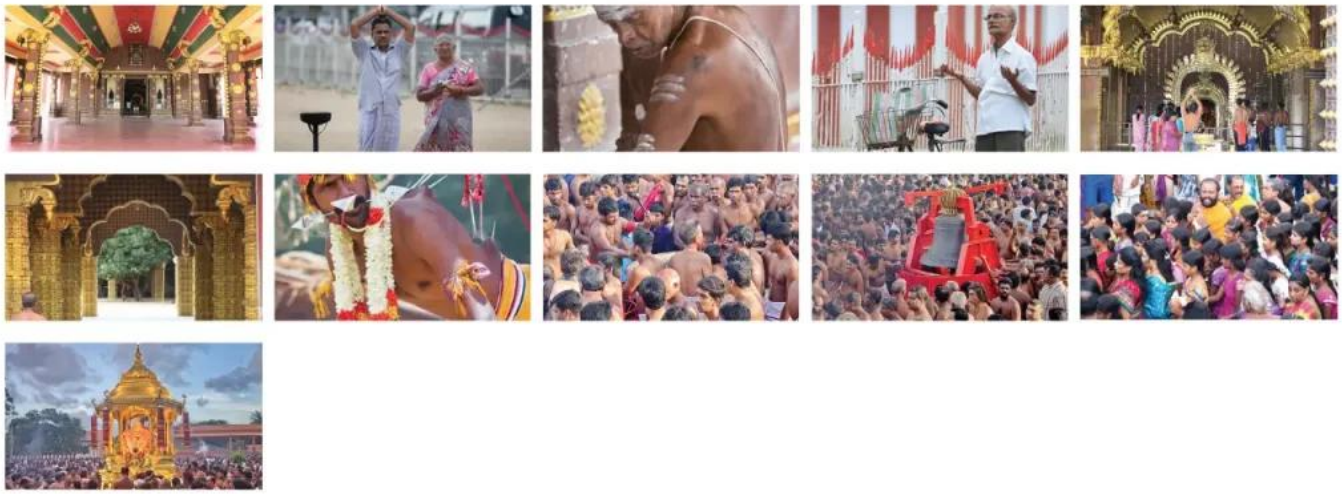
Next comes *Theertham* or the water cutting festival where idols representing Lord Murugan and his consorts are dipped into the kovil's lavishly designed stone carved step pond located on the Southern side of the temple premises.

Crowds of men carry splendid statues of Lord Murugan and his consorts

Finally the *Thirukalyanam* or holy wedding will take place, celebrating the matrimony between Lord Murugan and his two consorts by recreating the wedding through the use of idols. *Thirukalyanam* is performed at the very end of the festival, thus signifying its grand finale.

Leaving Nallur Kovil, it is easy to see the spiritual conviction the temple inspires. In fact it is a place with a history that spans centuries of effort and dedication. The kovil, in Nallur is actually the third of its kind. With the first one being built during the 13$^{th}$ century by Puveneke Vaahu, a minister to the first Aryacakravati King of Jaffna, Kalinga Magha.

The present kovil was resurrected in the 17th century during the Dutch colonial era by Don Juan Ragunatha Maapaana Mudaliyar who would go on to serve as the temple's first custodian. As the years went by this modest compound was continually worked on by the descendants of Maapaana Mudaliyar until 1890 when the kovil would begin it's 'golden period' when Arumuga Maapaana Mudaliyar became it's 7th custodian and made many renovations to the original structure. This era would reach its culmination at the hands of the present and 10th custodian Kumaradas Maapana Mudaliyar, whose vision and administration over the past fifty years has brought the temple to its present scale and glory.

As of today, the kovil consists of four gopurams, six bell towers, a step pond, a garden and a highly fortified wall that surrounds the property. It remains stringent in maintaining punctuality and discipline in both daily rituals and festivals. In addition, the *Archanai Pooja* is still offered at only one rupee to ensure accessibility to all.

Treating all devotees as equals, declining institutional sponsorships and ensuring freedom of worship sans materialistic requirements, the Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil is now considered the largest and only non-commercial Hindu temple complex in Sri Lanka.