

Temple of Wisdom

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The 'navagraha' or 'nine planets' to the right of the Maha Mandapam

A temple to Lord Ganesh on the glistening sands of Vakarai has been welcoming worshippers seeking good fortune for generations

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A colourful relief of Lord Ganesh adorns the entrance while the old bell tower stands proudly by

As my friends and I cruised along the A15 highway, relishing the mesmerising vistas of the Vakarai coast, we came across the colourful little Sri Selva Vinayagar Temple gleaming in the sun. The place was deserted. A few of us decided to explore and trudged barefoot across the hot, soft sand towards the *andiyalinda*, a type of deep well devised by Northern and Eastern farmers to gather water from beneath this parched land. Here we washed our feet, a spiritual observance of cleansing before entering holy ground and a refreshing experience in the humidity of the late morning.

The temple's arch is embellished with a colourful relief of Lord Ganesh, also known as Vinayagar or Pillaiyar, and the pillars are decorated with floral designs. Being under this cooling cement and brick structure is a stark contrast to the searing heat outside. Assimilating all the traditional elements of the Hindu Vastu Shastra, or 'science of architecture' in deciding the precise distance between each sacred structure, the temple embodies simplicity.

The Maha Mandapam, the temple's main pavilion, houses the Pali Peedam, with its figure of Lord Ganesh's mount, or *vahana*, Mushika the mouse. At this black altar Hindus must leave their ego and all ill feeling before proceeding towards the Artha Mandapam, the inner room that leads to the most sacred central altar (sanctum sanctorum). Above the entrance to the Artha Mandapam is an ornate sculpture of Lord Shiva; his consort, the goddess Parvati; Lord Ganesh; his brother Lord Murugan; as well as the sages Narada and Agastya lingering in the back.. Lord Shiva is handing Lord Ganesh a bright green mango, the final moment of a popular Hindu fable about a challenge between Ganesh and Murugan.

The Sri Selva Vinayagar Temple, fondly known as the Pillaiyar Temple by its devotees, had a humble beginning

The story goes that Sage Narada set the brothers a challenge: the fastest to get around the world three times would win a mango sweeter than the nectar of the gods. Murugan, the god of war, mounted his peacock *vahana* and started his journey around the world, while Ganesh, the god of wisdom, encircled Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati three times, declaring that his parents were his world. Lord Murugan arrived at the end of his third circumnavigation to find Lord Ganesh being awarded the mango by Lord Shiva, in what has become known as a symbolic triumph of wisdom over might.

The Sri Selva Vinayagar Temple, fondly known as the Pillaiyar Temple by its devotees, had a humble beginning. Luck was on our side as we ventured outside the sacred walls to the nearby shop, which happened to be run by the great-granddaughter of its founder Amirthanbigar Tharmalingam and her husband K Tharmalingam, who told us the story. According to him, in the early 1950s his wife's great-grandfather, T Kanthavanam, a resident of the area, had installed a statue donated by a priest in Trincomalee so that those who had moved to Vakaraï from Batticaloa for work had somewhere to call on the gods. Eventually a small abode was created to house the statue, which was maintained by wealthy patrons until the Temple Maintenance Committee was established in 1975.

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Devastation has struck the little temple twice, yet it has stood strong as a symbol of resilience to its worshippers. During the tropical cyclone that ravaged the east coast in 1978, taking with it a fifth of the Batticaloa District's fishing fleet, the building suffered significant damage. It was later rebuilt, with the *kumbabishekam*, or consecration ceremony, held in 1989.

A decade and a half later, the gushing waters of the Indian Ocean carried away almost the entire temple. Miraculously the Ganesh statue was left behind and the bell tower too stood tall. According to the priest, the statue was replaced with a new one brought from India as it had sustained minor damages last year.

A five-day Annual Chariot procession, or Aani Theertham, takes place from June to July

We eagerly followed the priest towards the back of the temple, where a *kohomba* (neem) tree arched out branches brimming with life. The temple tree was also washed away during the 2004 tsunami and has been replanted. Ten years on it grows strong, a metaphor for how Vakaraï has rebuilt after both war and natural disaster.

The restoration process continues today with funds received from devotees. The

premises are being expanded to include a Vasantha Mandapam, a ritual hall to accommodate the growing crowd that throngs the temple during festivities. The founder's great-grandson-in-law says the committee is hopeful that construction will be completed before the five-day Annual Chariot procession, or Aani Theertham, that takes place from June to July.

Vakarai is in a spirit of grand celebration during festivities, when families take part in traditions that have been passed down the generations. During Aani Uthiram, a festival associated with the Hindu astral system where the star Uthiram coincides with the month of July, the statue of Lord Ganesh is taken to the beach and ritually bathed.

Other celebrations are held year-round to venerate Lord Shiva, Lord Murugan and Goddess Shakti, deities that are central to life here. Approximately 6,000 Hindus live in Vakarai today – the little temple by the road offers guidance, wisdom and providence to so many.

