The Nallur Kandaswamy Temple Festival: A Timeless Expression of Faith

Posted on

The annual celebration of Lord Murugan at the Nallur Kandaswamy Temple in Jaffna is more than a religious event — it is a living cultural epic, a month-long spectacle of devotion, tradition, and sensory richness. Held this year from July 28 to August 24, 2025 the festival transforms the temple grounds and surrounding streets into a vibrant tapestry of faith and fervor.

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This is not a festival of moderation. It is an overabundance — of color, sound, scent, and spirit. Towering chariots, intricately adorned, are pulled through the streets by throngs of bare-bodied men. Pilgrims flood the precincts in a tidal wave of saffron, gold, and white. The air pulses with the chant of “Haro Hara,” drums echo, and rituals unfold with piety and spirit.

Daily celebrations mark a new spiritual theme in honor of Murugan, also known as Shanmuga, Karthikeya, Skanda, and Kataragama Deviyo in the island’s south. The deity’s power is so profound that this northern celebration parallels the famed Kataragama festival in the south, connecting two geographically distant traditions through a shared divine thread.

The Nallur festival is Sri Lanka’s longest religious celebration, drawing thousands of devotees from across the island, India, and the Tamil diaspora around the globe. It is a spiritual homecoming, a reunion of families, and a rediscovery of identity.

It is a festival of profound devotion — evident in its most striking acts: bodies pierced with skewers, devotees rolling along the temple floor, and countless coconuts shattered in prayer.

Equally captivating is the celebratory atmosphere that blooms around the sacred. Streets overflow with Jaffna cuisine, laughter, and community spirit. It is a festival of extravagance. Every gesture and display is a tribute to a god who is a warrior and protector.

The grand Mahotsavam — the great festival in honor of Lord Murugan — begins with the Kodietram, the ceremonial flag hoisting. This ritual, rich in symbolism and continuity, is made even more meaningful by the centuries-old tradition upheld by the Sengunthar Mudaliyar weaver lineage. To this day, the sacred cloth is handwoven by descendants of this family and brought to the temple in a ceremonial procession on a chariot from the weavers' home.

The flag is lifted into the sky, accompanied by "Haro Hara" chants and a cascade of fresh flowers from the gathered devotees. Murugan's divine spear — the Vel — is ceremoniously placed upon a peacock chariot, followed by representations of his two consorts, Valli and Theivanai. At the same time, his brother Ganesha is carried on a silver rat chariot. The vibrant hue of auspicious red adorns every detail — from priestly robes to temple garlands — heralding the beginning of a sacred season.

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As Lord Murugan emerges from the inner sanctum, a vibrant shower of flower confetti from the devotees greets him in celebration.



Devotees break coconuts in a powerful ritual of devotion.

This flag-hoisting marks the official start of a nearly month-long spiritual journey. The following ten days are filled with intense religious observances — sacred rituals, daily Abhishekam (the ritual bathing of the deity with water or milk for purification), Yagam (fire offerings), and special Poojas, each deepening the people's connection to the divine.

Each day brings a fresh outpouring of devotion, first within the temple's inner sanctum and then in exuberant processions that spill into the surrounding streets. The deity, flanked by his consorts, is paraded through the crowds on an ever-changing series of sacred mounts, or Vahana — the peacock, bull, horse, swan, and cobra — each mount reflecting a unique facet of Murugan's divine nature.

One of the key highlights of the festival is Manjam, held on the tenth evening. During this sacred procession, Murugan, in his Muththukumaraswamy form, is taken out of the temple in a majestic, brightly lit chariot, accompanied by his consorts Valli and Theivanai. The term Manjam means bed in Tamil, and true to its name, the chariot moves slowly and gracefully around the temple. Men walk to the left,

women to the right, as devotees join in silent reverence. Unlike other processions, this grand chariot— depicting vivid scenes from the Puranam stories—is too heavy to be carried and is instead pulled with devotion by worshippers.



As the nadaswaram echoes, the Kailasa Vimanam in the background.



During the Manjam festival, Lord Murugan and his consorts are carried in a solemn procession.



Lord Murugan, along with his two consorts, Valli and Theyvanai, is carried atop a five-headed cobra-shaped Vahanam.

The Arunagirinathar Uthsavam, on the seventeenth day, brings to life the story of the Tamil Saiva poet Arunagirinathar, who, according to legend, transformed into a parrot to fulfill his sacred mission of composing hymns to Murugan. On the eighteenth day, the Karththigai Uthsavam features Murugan riding a grand chariot divided into three compartments—the central one for the deity himself, flanked by his two consorts. The following morning, the Soorya Uthsavam honors the Sun God with a chariot drawn by seven horses. On day twenty, the Santhanagopalar Uthsavam celebrates Vishnu’s infant avatar, Baby Krishna, depicted sucking his toes and seated on a chariot shaped like a five-headed cobra. The day concludes with the breathtaking Kailasa Vimanam Festival— an evening procession featuring a magnificent chariot representing Mount Kailasa, the sacred Himalayan home of Shiva and his family.

On the twenty-first day, Kajavalli Mahavalli honors the fierce goddess, Durga, while the Vel Vimanam showcases Murugan riding a radiant golden chariot drawn by

golden horses. The following day's Thandayuthapani Uthsavam, known as the Mango Festival, reenacts the tale of Murugan's famed race with his brother Ganesha. After losing, he retreats to Palani Hill as a sadhu, clad simply in a loincloth and bearing his Vel. That evening, the Orumuga Thiruvila depicts Murugan's hunt, riding a horse-drawn chariot, with priests carrying weapons instead of traditional pooja items, adding a striking intensity to the ritual.

On the twenty-third day, Murugan is paraded around the temple on the towering Sapparam—one of the tallest mobile structures in the country. This temporary, illuminated flat chariot is a festival highlight, its immense size matched only by the devoted throng pulling it.

The twenty-fourth day features the grand Ther Thiruvila, the Chariot Festival, where thousands chant and draw Murugan's colossal six-headed, twelve-armed image through the streets. Drums, Nadaswaram, and temple bells blend into a powerful symphony of devotion. Devotees roll on the ground in acts of physical mortification while Murugan sits resplendent, showered by a cascade of flower confetti.

On the twenty-fifth day, the Theertham—a sacred ritual bath— cleanses Murugan's image in the temple tank. That evening, the head priest ceremoniously lowers the flag (Kodiyerakkam) and returns it to the Sengunthar Mudaliyar family, marking the festival's close.

Yet the celebrations continue on the twenty-sixth day with Poongavanam, the playful and heartwarming re-enactment of Murugan's marriage to Valli. Sung in joyful conversation, the legend depicts Theivanai, Murugan's first spouse, locking the newlyweds out of the sanctum, sparking a divine family drama filled with love and forgiveness.

The festival concludes as Murugan's image returns to the inner sanctum— resting until the following year's emergence.

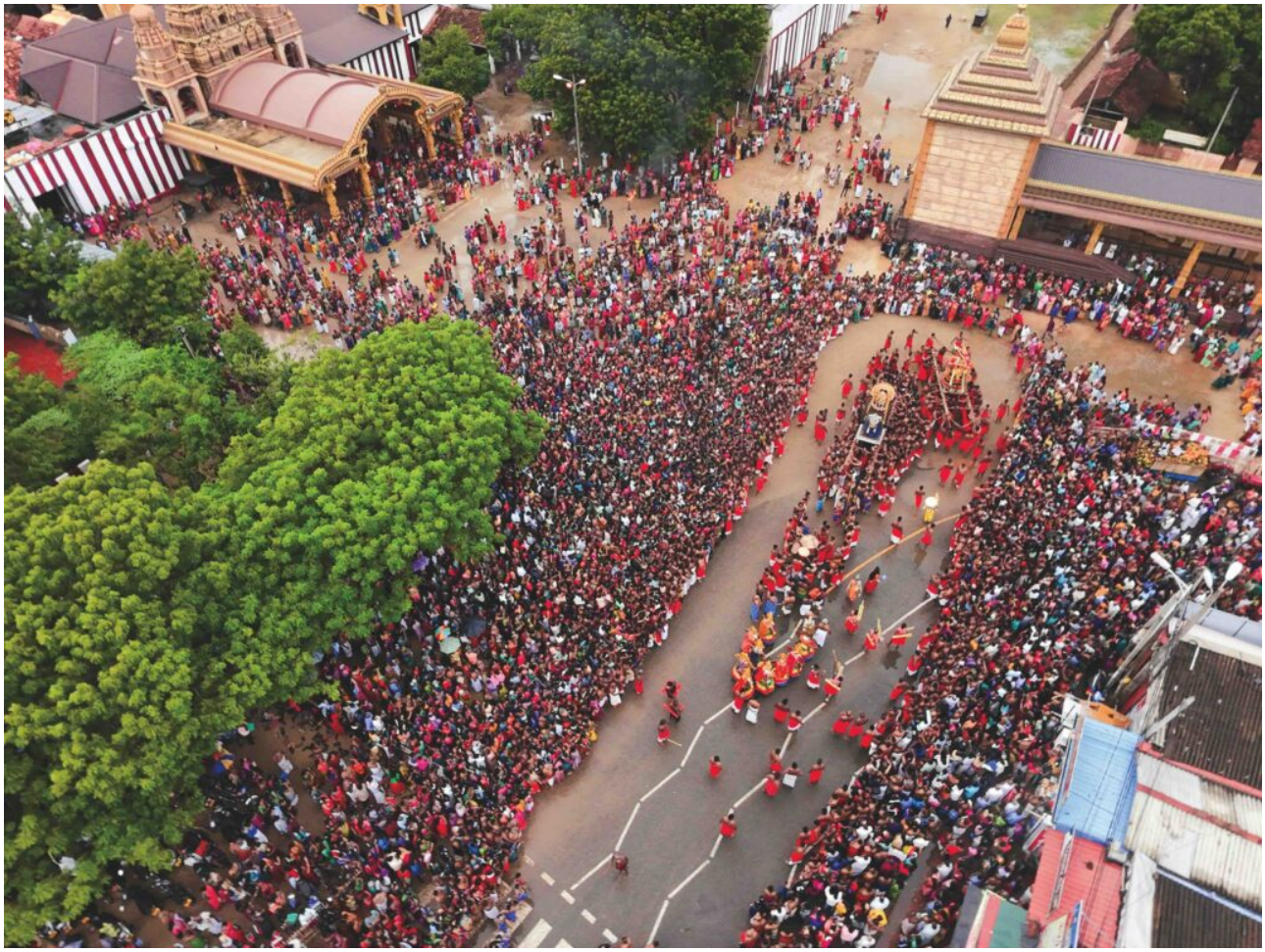
The Nallur Kandaswamy Festival is a vessel of continuity—it carries forward centuries-old customs, preserves oral histories and affirms a collective cultural memory. It reminds us that in devotion, there is both beauty and belonging—a shared reverence that transcends time, geography, and generations.



The tall and impressive sapparam is beautifully adorned with decorations.



Lord Murugan, the six-faced, twelve-armed warrior, symbolizes strength and is celebrated during the Ther Thiruvila, or Chariot Festival.



The Nallur Kandaswamy Temple is an iconic destination for the celebration of Kanda Sashti. The event reaches its peak on the final day with Soorasamharam, a moment that draws countless devotees. This photo was taken in December 2024.



Devotees united in devotion surround the Vel Vimanam, featuring lord Murugan on a radiant golden chariot pulled by golden horses.