The Traveler’s Sanctuary Murugkandi Kovil

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In appearance it’s unpretentious. If you didn’t know it existed, you might easily drive by, thus missing a small gem. But for those who often travel this way it’s a destination that cannot be missed. Tucked away along the A9 road in the Kilinochchi District, for years Murukandi Kovil has attracted visitors who travel along the road to the North.

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Murukandi is a quiet and gentle place. For tired travellers who stop here on the journey north, it offers the chance to rest and find strength for the remaining journey. The charm of Murukandi lies in its location and the way the Kovil has been built to blend in with its surroundings.

The moment we enter the Kovil premises, the most striking feature to be seen is the large tree which rises up inside the Kovil. Its branches spread out over the premises, dominating the grounds, and providing welcome shade for the pilgrims who come there. An open area lies in front of the kovil where travellers disembark from their vehicles and worship. In front, is a graceful bell tower, which is used to signal the daily prayer times.

The Kovil itself is a simple structure, a small building thatched with coconut leaves. Like all kovils though, it’s a place of colour. The bright red and white painted walls mark it out as a place of religious worship. From the sunlit grounds, worshippers enter the cool interior of the kovil. Once inside the quiet darkness of the interior, its most distinctive feature becomes apparent. It has literally been built around a tree. The tree trunk seems to fill and dominate the hall. The base of the tree is a kaleidoscope of colours. Red and yellow flowers lie strewn around the floor. Strips of shiny red cloth decorate the statues. Brass lamps are placed in the corners. A portrait of Lord Ganesh is hung on the tree. It looks down protectively over the worshippers who stream through. It has the air of a wayside shrine, a place where travellers turn to for protection.

A place of protection is what Murukandi symbolises. For almost everyone travelling the A9, Murukandi is a place to stop and say a prayer for the rest of the journey. It’s believed that stopping here will bring good luck, and protect the traveller from misfortune.

Murukandi Kovil is dedicated to God Pillaiyar or Lord Ganesh. Venerated as the remover of obstacles and lord of beginnings and wisdom, this god is known by different names; Lord Ganesh to Tamils and Gana Deviyo to Sinhalese. His image can be found in Buddhist temples as well as Hindu kovils, a reflection of the intermingling of cultures that is always present in Sri Lanka.

As a stopping place Murukandi is always busy. In the grounds in front of a kovil a constant stream of visitors can be seen. We stop a moment to watch the people going in and out. Some pilgrims grind sandalwood paste and apply it to their forehead in veneration. A man drops a coin into the till in front of the prayer hall,

perhaps in hope of good luck for his journey. Having worshipped, many walk in a circle around the kovil building. A woman holds a coconut in front of her and dashes it firmly on the ground – it shatters; she moves away, satisfied. Unbothered by the noise another woman lights a camphor fire in front of the image of the god. The smoke drifts upwards obscuring her face. We do not know where she is going or for what purpose. But perhaps somewhere the god will hear. And perhaps in this ancient and much revered place, he will grant her what she desires, what all humans desire regardless of race and religion, the assurance of a safe journey ending in the peace of a homecoming.

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