



EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

Journey to Murugan

A sacred pilgrimage to the *arupadaiveedu*, Lord Karttikeya's six renowned temples in the land of Tamil Saivism

THE DEVOTEE WHO SEEKS THE DARSHAN OF LORD MURUGAN, the Tamils' most beloved God, no doubt finds Him at all of His temples. But those who really want to get Murugan's attention set out on an unforgettable journey, one both within and without. For those who seek His blessings for the upward climb of kundalini, the *arupadaiveedu*, meaning "six encampments," is the pilgrimage of choice. The destinations of this journey are first Tirupparankundram, then Tiruchendur, followed by Palani, Swamimalai, Tiruttani and finally Palamuthirsolai. The fact that this sequence is far from geographically convenient is part of the austerity that comes with any true pilgrimage.

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of HINDUISM TODAY, sent a number of his monks on this sacred pilgrimage in the 1970s,

80s and 90s. In December, 2006, his successor, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, continued the tradition, sending three monks from his Hawaii monastery, including one of the magazine's editors, to South India for the pilgrimage. This Educational Insight has been developed from their collective experience. It contains spiritual and practical information on the pilgrimage to serve as inspiration for devotees of Lord Murugan to set out upon it and tips for a successful journey.

Skanda, as Murugan is called in the *Vedas*, was born of a red spark from Supreme God Siva's third eye. This Deity of the spiritual path is held in highest regard by the Tamil people, who call Him *Murugan*, meaning "beautiful." Thousands of His temples dot the landscape of South India and Sri Lanka—and in modern times, ev-



Perspective: Viewing Tamil Nadu as if hovering above Sri Lanka, devotees of Lord Murugan follow the mystically circuitous route of His six-temple pilgrimage, the spiritual power of each bringing them deeper within themselves and closer to Him. Murugan looks on, blessing devotees as He flies through the ether on His peacock. (inset) A map of South India showing the temple towns.

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erywhere the Tamil people have migrated, including England, Germany, Fiji, Australia, America, Canada, Malaysia and France. Of all the Murugan temples in Tamil Nadu, the six in this pilgrimage are most revered. They were collectively immortalized by Saint Nakkirar in his second-century song *Tirumurugarrupadai*, hailed as one of the most important works of Tamil Sangam literature. And they were given special renown in the songs of saints Arunagirinathar, Kumaraguruparar and other luminaries.

A lyrical narrative, both philosophical and theological, *Tirumurugarrupadai* was instrumental in propagating Murugan worship in its time. Well known today, it is often sung by devotees as a hymn of protection. Saint Nakkirar enunciates a concept central to the Saiva Siddhanta theology of South India, that in the act of spiritual liberation, God's initiative is as intense and indispensable as that of the devotee. Nakkirar invokes the grace of Murugan to take the initiative and shower grace upon the seeker who visits His six abodes.

The significance goes beyond Saint Nakkirar's having woven the temples into his enchanting poem in specified order. There is metaphysical meaning, too. Yogis of yore determined that each temple stimulates a specific chakra in the subtle body of man: Tirupparankundram lights a fire in the *muladhara* chakra governing memory at the base of the spine. Tiruchendur moves the next chakra, *svalbhishthana*, below the navel, governing reason. Palani animates the *manipura* chakra of willpower at the solar plexus. Swamimalai spins the heart chakra, *anahata*, the center of direct cognition. Tiruttani opens the *vishuddha* chakra of divine love at the throat, and Palamuthirsolai electrifies the third eye of divine sight, *ajna chakra*.



Tirupparankundram

Mount of Beauty



THE DEVOTEE IN SEARCH OF LORD MURUGAN'S GRACE BEGINS the fortnight-long six-temple pilgrimage at Madurai, the famous temple city, an ancient capital of the Pandya kings and hub of South Indian art, literature, architecture and sculpture for millennia. This "Athens of the Orient" was the seat of the Tamil Sangams, producing some of the finest philosophical treatises and exquisite, heart-melting devotional poetry during a golden age of Tamil civilization.

We arrive in Madurai via a short flight from Chennai, though it is more common to travel the 460 kilometers by overnight train or bus. Driving north into the city from Madurai's modest airport, the pilgrim is blessed with the sight of Tirupparankundram to the West. This hill, easily seen perched 550 feet above the otherwise flat landscape, is a massive granite rock at which Lord Murugan's first encampment is situated.

Madurai is given life by the famous Meenakshi-Sundareshvara temple, which lies at its center. This vast citadel, rebuilt by the Nayak kings between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, thrives with the constant bustle of hundreds of thousands of worshippers every day. Lodgings of all grades are abundant in the city, most of



ALL PHOTOS: M. AMIRTHAM/DINODIA

Holy hill: (above) Tirupparankundram hillock with the temple at its base; the entrance tower can be seen at right. (top) The temple entrance bustles with devotees.

them located conveniently near the temple.

Traditionally, the devotee visits a Ganesha shrine at the inception of the *arupadaiveedu* pilgrimage. Our Gurudeva advised going to the massive, obstacle-removing Ganesha, called Mukkuruni Vinayagar, inside the Meenakshi-Sundareshvara temple itself. So, after getting settled, we depart for the east entrance of Madurai's massive temple complex.

Resolving to follow the strictest protocol on our *yatra*, we go only to the temple's Ganesha shrine, respectfully resisting the powerful pull to have darshan at the main Siva and Shakti shrines. From this moment on, until the pilgrimage is complete, we will visit no temples or shrines other than the six prescribed Murugan temples. Proceeding to the *kodimaram* (flagpole) and turning right before the main shrine, we wend our way through the labyrinthine complex and soon stand before the ten-foot-tall *murti* of Mukkuruni Vinayagar. The priest attending the shrine performs a short *arati* on our behalf. This is a quiet area, and devotees nearby are meditating on the Lord of Obstacles. Sitting with eyes closed, we beseech His inner assistance with the sacred trek we are about to undertake to His brother's abodes. Sounds of all kinds overwhelm our ears: priests

If with piety and merit of former birth thou doth aspire to the goal of liberation, strive for the wisdom that radiates from virtuous deeds, and may yearning sweet for His roseate feet animate thy mind and lead thee to attainment divine. TIRUMURUGARRUPADAI, LINES 62-67



chanting, bells ringing, votaries singing, children playing and the shuffling feet of countless devotees streaming by as they move from shrine to shrine for darshan.

The first day of our pilgrimage now complete, Lord Murugan's first abode is on our minds' horizon. Arising early the next morning, we drive just seven kilometers southwest to Tirupparankundram, a large hill and favorite resort of Murugan, extolled as a mount of beauty in Saint Nakkirar's poem. In fact, this is where the poet wrote his famous hymn. Ratna Navaratnam tells us in *Karttikeya, The Divine Child*, "The beautiful setting of this hill with its lotus ponds, trailing carpets of flowers and swarms of bees and water fronts are described in *Tirumurugarrupadai*," which in Tamil means "Holy Guide to Lord Murugan."

The Tirupparankundram Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukkoyil lies at the foot of the hill, on the north side. Entering the temple through the tall, ornately carved and colorful *gopuram*, we ascend steps leading through pillared halls, rich with sculpture and art, a windfall of being near the central hub of Madurai. We chose the Tirupparankundram Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukkoyil lies at the foot of the hill, on the north side. Entering the temple through the tall, ornately carved and colorful *gopuram*, we ascend steps leading through pillared halls, rich with sculpture and art, a windfall of being near the central hub of Madurai. We chose

The entire cave-like shrine, including the *murtis*, is carved right out of the side of the granite hill. The temple precincts grow tighter and tighter as devotees ascend toward the inner sanctum. Squeezing together with hundreds of others, winding their way through a maze of metal railings designed to keep everyone flowing along in an organized fashion, worshipers arrive at the inner sanctum. We experience an odd juxtaposition of nearness and swiftness in this process. Moving single-file past the shrine, we find ourselves a few feet from Lord Murugan—and for a mere mo-

Agamic worship: (left) Priests perform daily abhishekam to the festival Deity of Arumugam, Lord Murugan with six faces; (right) boys learn ancient mantras from the Vedas and Agamas at the priest training school, pathashala, located in the temple precincts

ment, we can almost reach out and touch Him.

Murugan is known as Subrahmanya Swami at Tirupparankundram. Our guide, a boy who attends the temple's *pathashala*, explains that this is the famed site where, according to legend, Murugan married Devayanai after defeating the demon Surapadman. This marriage symbolizes the devotee's uniting with God after transcending his own lower nature. The rock-cut shrine depicts the story of the procession of Gods, seers, men and animals who came to this mount to witness the mystical wedding. Holding His *vel*, or lance, Murugan is enshrined with Devayanai at His side, as well as Sage Narada, who performed the wedding. Above are the Sun and Moon; below are goats, cocks, elephants and peacocks. There are shrines on either side for Karpaga Vinayagar, Durga, Sivalingam, Markali, the holiest month of the Tamil calendar, for our pilgrimage. This is the same time when Ayyappaswami devotees from across South India perform their annual *yatra* to Sabarimalai in Kerala. Many of them follow the strict practice of paying their respects at every temple along the way, so this popular temple is brimming with excited, black- and orange-clad followers of Ayyappaswami.



Enshrined Deity: An artist's rendition of the temple's Murugan sanctum

Perumal (Vishnu), as well as Saint Nakkirar. We are surprised to find that Durga's shrine is the center-most, intimating that it could have been the original sanctum of the temple.

Our guide informs us that in Murugan's shrine *abhishekam* is not performed to the main rock-hewn *murti*, but only to His silver *vel*. In honor of our visit, the head priest takes hold of Murugan's *vel* and performs a brief but powerful *abhishekam* to it with milk and *vibhuti*, or holy ash, and then deftly packages the ash and gives it to us to take away as *prasadam*. Descending the steps as quickly as we came up, we discover a small, pillared hall off to the side that is a perfect place to sit and meditate a while before leaving.

What was initiated here will grow and blossom through the rest of the pilgrimage. The experience burns deeply into our souls, but little prepares us for what we are to experience at Murugan's seaside abode.



Tiruchendur

Abode of Fulfillment

DEEP IN THE SOUTH OF TAMIL NADU LIES THE FAMED SPIRITUAL center called Tiruchendur. Trains and buses ply their way incessantly from Madurai. We take the early morning train to Tirunelveli, and then a 41-km taxi ride to Tiruchendur, winding through the traditional rural landscape, unchanged for centuries. Driving by rice paddies and groves of palmyra and banana, we feel we are journeying back in time.

Pilgrims approach the Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukoyil via a magnificent, covered, open-air walkway that extends 750 meters from the town's center. It is flanked by an overwhelming menagerie of stalls selling garlands, fruits and other offerings, religious music, colorful cloth and objects for the home shrine. Approaching slowly, we soon spot the temple's grand, nine-tiered *mela gopuram*.

This white stone tower displaying an enormous blue *vel* is a striking landmark, visible to sailors from miles away at sea and beckoning devotees from all around. This west entrance, we are told, is only opened during the temple's annual festival.

Catching the smell of sea air, we know we are near. Exiting the corridor, we take in the full view of the seashore, the temple perched on a gentle slope only a few meters to the left. Here the salty waters of the Gulf of Mannar lap against a broad, sandy beach where pilgrims bathe in the sea before entering the temple. The primary entrance to the



Rising high: (above) Tiruchendur's 140-foot-tall gopuram; (top) sunrise at the Shanmuga Vilasam

temple is here, facing south. Called the Shanmuga Vilasa *mandapam*, it is an ornately carved, 124-pillar hall standing as a testament to the craftsmanship that prevailed in the era when this temple was built. We are told the temple was originally built of sandstone, thus the name Tiruchendur, "Holy Red City." When that eroded away, it was rebuilt in granite. Priests are everywhere. We speak with a few in hopes of making arrangements to have darshan of Murugan at tomorrow's early morning *abhishekam*.

In the month of Markali, worship begins at Tiruchendur at 3 am. We arise before dawn and take the short walk to the temple. The dimly lit sanctuary is already crowded with devotees. At 5:30 we are ushered to the ocean-facing main shrine. We are three of fifteen people paying Rs 200 (US\$5) for tickets allowing us to sit right before the sanctum.

The granite statue is Balasubrahmanyaswami, the pious young ascetic. Several paintings in the temple describe the legend: Murugan encamped at Tiruchendur before and after defeating the demon Surapadman and his malevolent band. Kneeling by a small Lingam, He worshiped His Father, Siva, seeking forgiveness for his necessary but regrettable act of killing. Devas arrived in multitudes to thank Murugan for saving them from the demons' wrath, and He quickly stood up to bless them. It is this position in which the *murti* was created,



That those who seek His love be blessed with boons, one face responds in melting love to their behest. That no ills befall the devout who offer oblation ordained in the sacred *Vedas*, one face benign takes care. That the seers be enlightened on the many hidden truths, one face resplendent illumines every quarter like the moon.

TIRUMURUGARRUPADAI, LINES 93-98



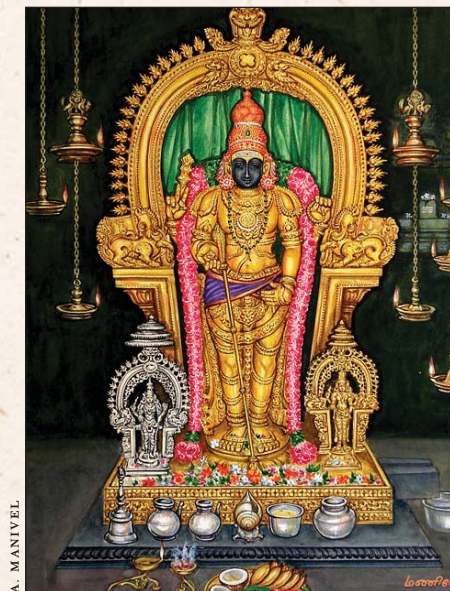
holding flowers in one hand and a *mala* of *rudraksha* beads in the other, utterly absorbed in adoration of God Siva.

We sit humbly before the Deity, a striking image coated from head to toe with sandalwood paste. The priest deftly removes the fragrant covering and proceeds to pour oil, *panchamritam* and later after liter of milk—so much milk, the ablation seems to last an eternity. When milk is poured, this glorious *murti* turns evenly white all over, revealing details in the dark stone and evoking intense devotion among the priests and devotees. The final ablation is with *vibhuti*, holy ash. The priest carves out a beaming smile for Murugan in the white coating. This evokes a spectrum of emotions among the devotees—from energetic bhakti to delicate smiles and quiet laughter. We find that this deeply devotional rite has connected us to Murugan in a new way. A half-hour after the puja began, it is complete, and we are quickly ejected back out into the crush of devotees streaming by the shrine for a glimpse of Murugan in the day's regal attire.

Not far from the main sanctum, we come upon the south-facing shrine of the *utsava murti*. This bronze image, which is paraded

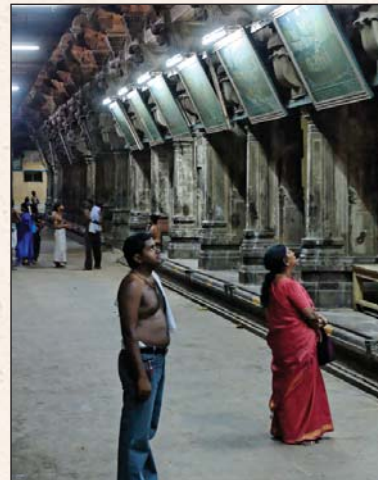
Ubiquitous devotion: (clockwise from top-left) Stalls selling religious items clutter the covered walkway leading to the temple; inside the Shanmuga Vilasa mandapam; families joyously bathe in the ocean prior to entering the temple; a painting of the main murti

around the temple during festivals, is so bright it looks as if its composition could be mostly gold. We learn from a fascinating collection of paintings displayed in the third *prakaram* that Dutch invaders arrived in the 17th century and stole the precious *murti*. Encountering a massive thunderstorm at sea, the plunderers grew fearful, believing their crime had cursed them, and heaved the booty overboard. The Nayak king who patronized the temple at the time instructed his local representative, Vadamalaiappa Pillai, to have a new *murti* made. In the meantime, Lord Subrahmanya appeared to Vadamalaiappa in a dream, indicating the exact spot where the *murti* lay. Men were sent out in ships to recover it. As foretold in the dream, a lime floating in the water and a kite bird flying directly above marked the Deity's location on the sea floor. Retrieving the *murti*, they returned it to the temple. But the tem-





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Holy precincts: (left to right) A peacock settles in for the night atop the south gopuram; devotees enjoy art which tells the story of 17th-century Dutch thieves; this temple, right on the sea, was miraculously spared when the 2004 Asian Tsunami devastated neighboring towns

ple's hereditary priesthood refused the king's order to welcome the desecrated image. The king, adamant that the Deity be restored to its respected position, commissioned a separate family of Adisaiva priests to reinstall it and conduct the daily rites. To this day, that same clan of Adisaivas operates the shrine, completely independent of the other shrines and activities at the temple.

One afternoon we visit Nalikkinaru, the fresh-water well only meters from the shore, where Murugan is said to have cleaned His *vel*. Fed by an underground spring, it never dries up, even in severe drought. The water is believed to heal ailments of all kinds.

On our third day, we rise just before the Sun. Making our way to the temple, we enjoy the morning fragrances as the town awakes and prepares for its day: fresh *dosai*, hot *sambar*, sweet rose milk. The bliss permeating this town is amazing. Every time we stop and stand quietly, all we can feel is this sublimity. All here rings with a happy contentedness, a feeling that everything is all right, right now. Perhaps it's the location at the seaside, the clean air or the presence of the playful child Murugan that lends a sweetness and mellowness to everyone and everything at Tiruchendur.

Hundreds of Ayyappaswami's pilgrims on their way to Kerala are bathing in the ocean in anticipation of the sun's imminent rising. A peacock, perched royally atop the *gopuram* of the Shanmuga Vilasam, calls out. Is he the same one we saw there at dusk last night? Kites circle overhead just offshore, bringing to mind the story of the Dutch and the *utsava murti*. Devotees are gathered out on the rocks, others on the beach, still others in an open-air *mandapam* abutting the temple. Cows saunter through the dispersed crowd; pilgrims like us touch them for blessings. Goats and dogs, young and old, and one cat, meander among pilgrims as the rising Sun marks the new day's beginning.

After darshan of Lord Murugan in



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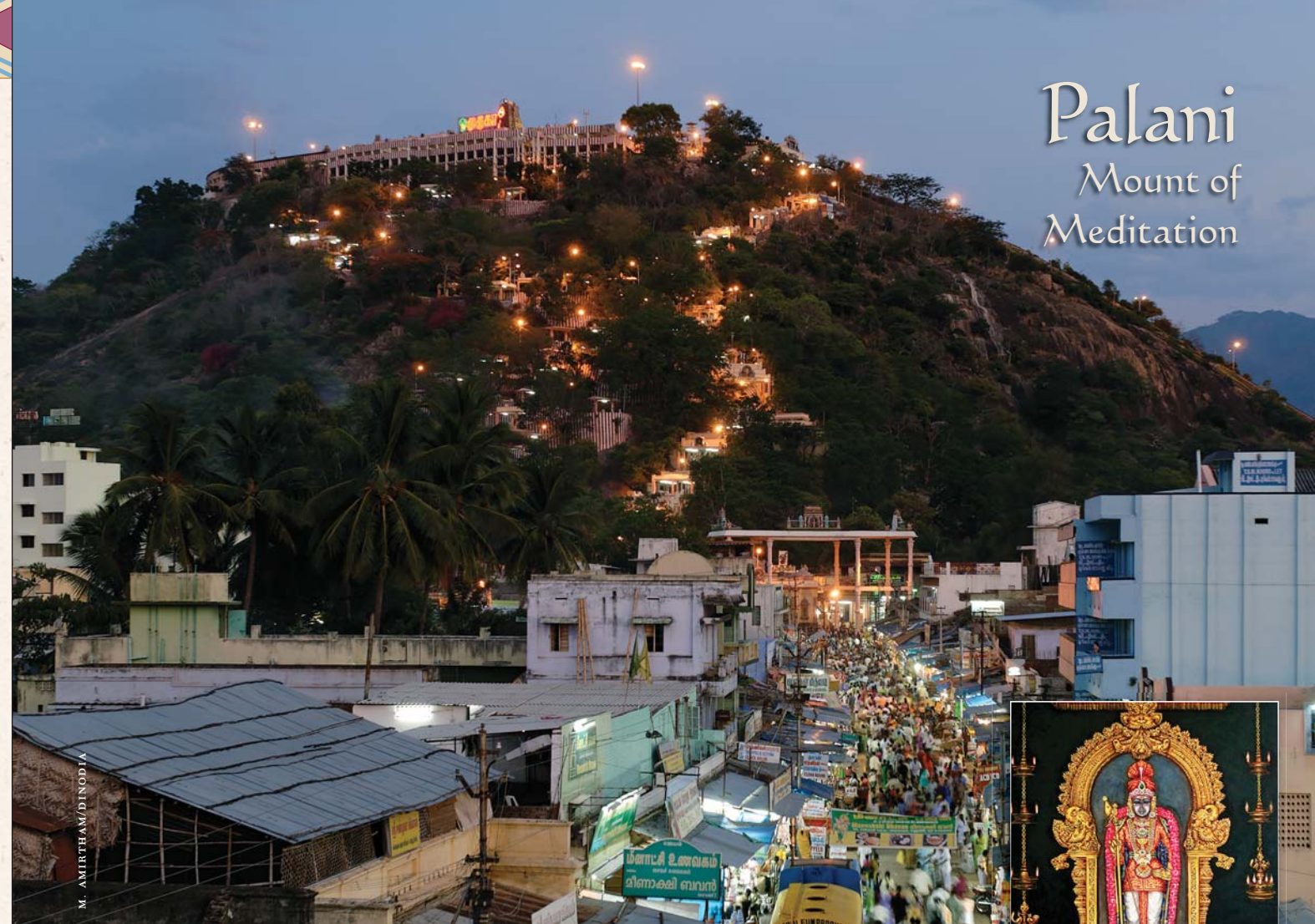
the sanctum, we continue our exploration of this cavernous edifice. Vast halls and corridors have been added over centuries. One of the delights is to roam these passageways as the sea breeze blows through. This is a grand temple, a true work of art and devotion in granite. It gets quieter and quieter as one goes 'round the second *prakaram* and further out into the third. There are solitary hideaways for private meditation. On the north side of the third *prakaram* we encounter a shrine for Vishnu carved out of the rock itself, with a monolithic, larger-than-life, reclining *murti*.

Continuing our *pradakshina*, we notice two men working quietly inside a small, granite-walled chamber. They are laboriously grinding sandalwood on a big, wet, granite slab, slightly funnel-shaped toward one end to collect the paste.

The use of sandalwood is famous here at Tiruchendur. According to Sivakamasundari Shanmugasundaram, reporting for HINDUISM TODAY in 2002, the temple spends about \$150,000 per year for this aromatic, yellowish heartwood. While sandalwood is a primary sacrament used abundantly in Hindu worship, doubtless no other temple in India buys as much of it. Huge amounts are ground fresh daily right here as has been done for millennia. Applied to the Deity during puja, the cooling, fragrant paste is then given as *prasadam* to devotees who lavishly smear it on their face, arms and body, to soothe, to bless, to heal.

For the 30,000 devotees who visit every day, this ocean-side temple of magic radiates the peace that remains after all desires have been fulfilled. The serenity makes a durable mark in the mind, concealing any hint of the intensity that awaits us at Murugan's next encampment.

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Traditional resource: Ever-useful *palmyra trees* dominate the seaside landscape around Tiruchendur



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THE MOST REVERED OF ALL TEMPLES TO LORD MURUGAN is the Arulmigu Sri Dandayuthapani Swami Tirukkoyil at Palani. This third abode is 137 km northwest from Madurai, and reached via Madurai by train, bus or car. The countryside here has a pre-historic feel to it—lone, worn hills that rise abruptly from the ground like rough-hewn tortoises. At any time of year, devotees are seen walking alongside the roads leading to Palani. Carrying only a small yellow bundle of necessities, they undertake this difficult trek, coming from all over South India. As we near Palani, the temple comes into focus at the top of the rounded hill, a verdant mountain range in its background. Accommodations are simple here, even austere. The temple *devasthanam* runs a huge hostelry near the temple steps, and there are private hotels and lodges in town.

We are excited to arrive at Palani. While Murugan in any form is dear to Saivite monks, here He appears as the loincloth-clad renunciate, called Dandayuthapani-swami. *Palani* means "You are the fruit," an allusion to a tale in which Murugan learned that He is the fruit of wisdom of the sages.

After settling in, we meet our guide, Mr. M. Muthumanickam, a member of the government endowment board that administers the temple. He takes us by auto-rickshaw to the bottom of the hill, where a road circuits the hill. Muthumanickam informs

us that circumambulation of the hill is best done in the early morning or at twilight. It is now late in the afternoon, and we are eager to get to the temple. So, we worship briefly at the Vinayagar shrine and ardently climb the 697 steep, stone steps that zig-zag their way to the top. On subsequent visits, we explore the other ways provided to ascend the hill—rope car, winch trolley and an alternate, less steep pathway built for the temple elephant which is also used by children and the elderly.

At the top, the steps give way to a wide, paved walkway surrounding the temple. Muthumanickam tells us, "It is traditional to go around three times." This *pradakshina* gives pilgrims an opportunity to leave their journey behind and attune their minds to Lord Murugan before entering the temple. Wending our way through endless lines of devotees, passing through stainless steel gates and countless barriers, we arrive just outside the inner sanctum. We pay for special tickets to gain direct access to the shrine. Minutes later we are ushered in front of Lord Murugan for darshan.

The unique *murti* here was created by Bhogar Rishi, one of the eighteen *siddhars* of Saiva tradition. He formed the image centuries ago from an amalgam of nine



DAVE TROPE

On the hilltop: (above) The gold-covered tower; (top) as night falls, devotees proceed to Palani's steps; (inset) a painting of the Dandayuthapaniswami murti in regal attire

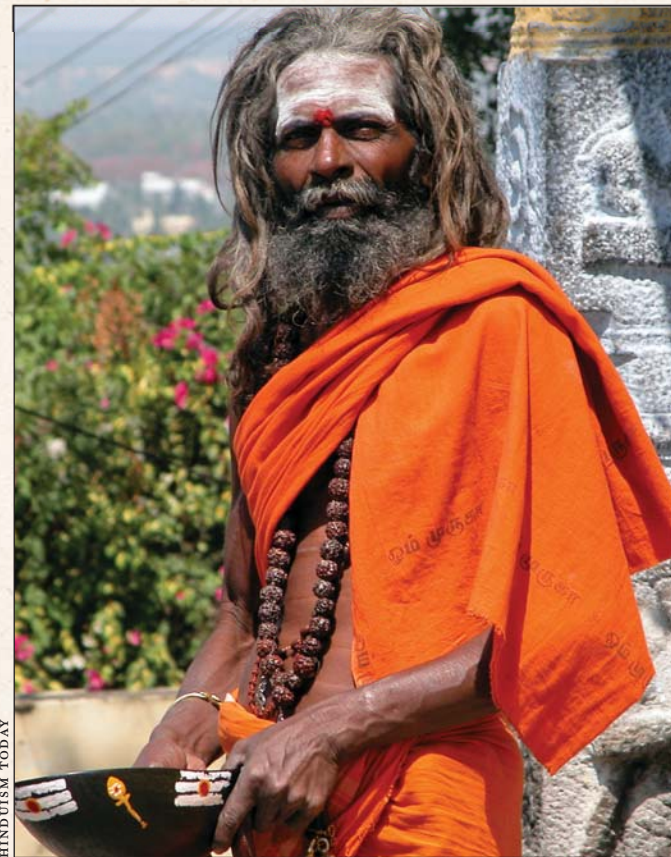


A. MANIVEL

In garments of bark these hoary seers are clad, their braided hair gleaming white like valampuri conch, their body so immaculately clean and fair, their high chest of bony ribs wrapped in deer skin, bodies lean with austere meals after days of fast; their minds unsullied and

free from guile and hate; they are wise beyond the wisdom of the learned; they act as the goal and pivot of the knowers free from anger, greed and sufferings sore; with cheerful hearts and gracious mien they lead the way.

TIRUMURUGARRUPADAI, LINES 126-127



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herbs and minerals. *Abhishekam* is the most important form of worship at Palani—the Deity is bathed six times a day. Muthumanickam relates, “These abundant ablutions over hundreds of years slowly deteriorated the *murti*. Sixty years ago the temple administration stopped all worship to the original *murti* and had a bronze replica installed directly in front of it for bathing.” In 2006, R. Selvanathan, Chief Executive Sthapati of Sri Vaithyanatha Sthapati Associates, Chennai, was commissioned to perform the delicate and complex task of restoring the ancient image. Sthapati explains, “The *murti* was found to be infirm and unstable, presenting a frail appearance. Body parts were in a very dilapidated condition and may have broken up any moment if not attended to.” Selvanathan’s repair work was successful, and ablutions to the original *murti* resumed.

Watching the puja is like watching an intricate dance. While only Adisaiva priests enter the inner sanctum, a clan of *pandararam* priests serves in the preparation of all offerings. Everything passes through their hands before being presented: *abhishekam* ingredients, clothing, garlands, food, incense and all the lamps. Every priest is dressed impeccably, his spotless *veshti* wrapped just right. Traditional Sanskrit Vedic mantras are chanted in the inner sanctum, but we hear a priest chant Murugan’s 108 names in Tamil over a PA system. We later see a sign near the shrine stating that, according to the requirements of the temple endowment board, *archanas* will be performed in Tamil upon request.

While the Deity is being dressed, the crowd’s anticipation grows. Behind us hundreds are chanting, singing, praying. When the curtain finally opens, Murugan is adorned in *raja alankaram*, dressed like a king—so majestic, so magnetic. A cacophony of sounds envelops us as the *arati* swoops past and priests smear *vibhuti* on the forehead of each one present.

Inside the temple, we notice that a significant amount of renovation work has occurred since our 2004 visit. Particularly evident is the polished granite tile on the floors and walls inside and around the temple. The temple’s most recent *kumbhabhishekam* was on April 3, 2005. Former Joint Commissioner of the temple, Mr. D. Sundaram, reports, “The renovation work started on March 9, 2005, and finished on March 29. Amazingly, the task was performed by 1,000 workers per shift, three shifts per day. New *mandapams* in the first *prakaram* and all the granite floor and wall tile work was completed in just twenty days.”

Muthumanickam informs us that Palani has the highest income of any temple in Tamil Nadu and is second in all of India only to Tirupati’s Venkateswara temple. That doesn’t count the enormous sums of money devotees spend in town on supplies—milk, yogurt, honey, ghee, *vibhuti*—which they bring to the temple in huge quantities for the daily *abhishekams*. He amplifies, “There is so much money, more than we can use here. We donate the rest to many of the poorer temples in Tamil Nadu—just enough to each one to keep the basic practices of lighting lamps and simple, daily puja going.” One of the ways in which Palani’s wealth manifests is in its cleaning program. There are workers collecting trash and sweeping and spraying down the walkways all through the day. They set a great example for other temples to follow.

Sunset is nearing. Muthumanickam urges us to stay for the nighttime golden chariot procession. We sit down to talk near the Ganesha shrine as the crowds gather. Nakkirar names the third *padai-vedu*, Avinankudi, and frequently it is said that this temple near the base of the hill is the true abode of Lord Murugan. We ask Muthumanickam about this, and he quickly dismisses the misconception: “The two are really to be considered one temple. They

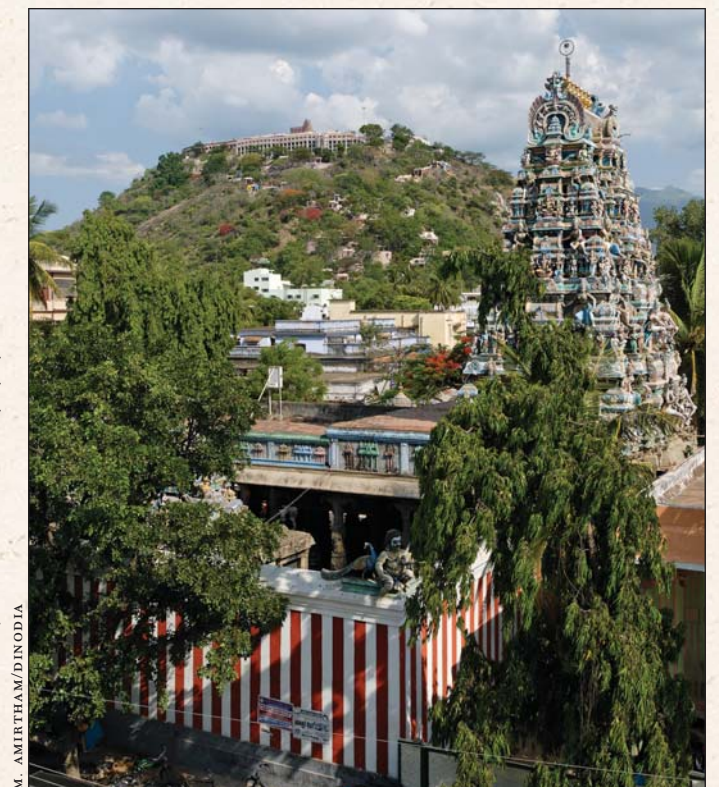
Jai Murugan: (clockwise from left) A resident sadhu begs alms; devotees climb the 697 steps to and from the hilltop; pilgrims make offerings of camphor, coconuts and flower garlands; Tiruvavinankudi, the nearby temple that is mystically connected to Palani

.....
come under the same management and share the same priesthood. It is customary to visit there before coming up the hill to worship here.”

By 7 pm nearly 100,000 people have amassed atop the hill. The devotion reaches a crescendo as the doors of the chariot shed are flung open. Accompanied by *nadaswaram* and *tavil*, the chariot begins to roll. This small, ornate carriage and the *utsava murti* that rides in it are solid gold. A company of police officers with guns and a set of wooden barriers surrounds the chariot from the moment the shed doors are opened until they are locked again. Devotees pay Rs 1,000 (US\$25) for the privilege of going inside the barrier to more intimately worship the *murti*.

The shrine to Bhogar Rishi in the southwest corridor provides a serene and quiet sanctuary in this bustling complex. Very much like a cave, it is a great place for quiet meditation. Introspective devotees can be seen here throughout the day, absorbed within themselves.

The temple’s magic is potent, its vibration ever powerful. So many are captured by Palani. By what seems only to be grace they appear in front of the Deity. They watch an *abhishekam* and have an *archana* performed. An *arati* is passed. The priests put a garland from Murugan around pilgrims’ necks and smear *vibhuti* on their foreheads, and they go away transfixed. Even if they go to no other temple, their lives are transformed by the Lord of Palani in that single moment.



M. AMIRTHAM/DINODIA

Swamimalai

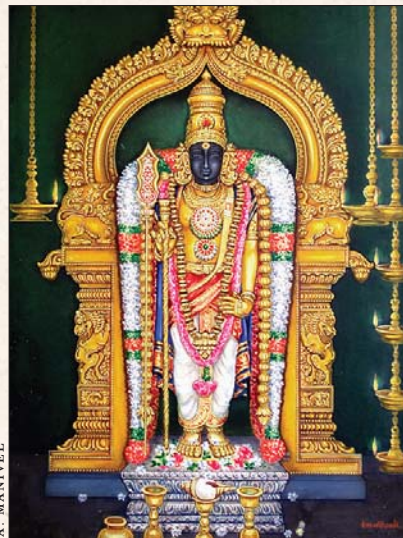
Abode of the Guru



RIDING ON THE INTENSITY OF PALANI, WE PREPARE OURSELVES for the serene rapture of Murugan's fourth abode. Known in ancient days as Tiruveragam, the wooded village of Swamimalai is located five kilometers west of Kumbakonam on the banks of a tributary of the Kaveri River. We drive to Trichy, then take the train to Kumbakonam. Accommodations in Swamimalai are almost nonexistent, so it is best to stay in Kumbakonam or Tanjavur (32 km away) and take a bus or hired car to Swamimalai for the day.

The Arulmigu Sri Swaminatha Swami Tirukkoyil is a small, well-maintained temple rising to 60 feet on an artificial hillock constructed from granite stones. One enters from the south or east side and arrives within the third *prakaram*, at ground level. A thick, high wall protects the complex from the sounds and vibrations of the outside world. Here there are shrines to God Siva as Sundareswarar and Shakti as the Goddess Meenakshi.

After circumambulating in the third *prakaram*, we ascend the steep steps to the second *prakaram*. Other than a family of green parrots who enjoy the temple's outer precincts, this is a quiet, austere place. There is a small *mandapam* on the east side dedicated to Saint Arunagirinathar and the *Tiruppugal* he sang in devotional wonder of Murugan. This small open-air pavilion, situated directly underneath the *kodimaram*, or temple flagpole, is a wonderful place for undisturbed meditation.



The guru: (above) A painting of Swaminatha Swami; (top) viewing Swamimalai's three levels from the Northeast

Another flight of steps leads to the *kodimaram* and Vinayagar shrine. There are sixty steps in all, representing the sixty-year cycle of the Hindu calendar. This cycle is based on the planet Jupiter, symbol of the guru in Hindu astrology. This is especially significant at Swamimalai, as it is here that Murugan is the guru, known as Swaminathan.

The first *prakaram* is enclosed, giving us the feeling of being in a cave. Only small openings vent the abundant camphor and *homa* smoke. Deities line the north wall. A glorious, silver-clad shrine for the *utsava murti* draws almost as much attention as the main sanctum.

Instead of Murugan's usual peacock, we are surprised to find an elephant *vahana* facing the main shrine. The priest who was our guide, Sivasri P. Ganesa Gurukkal, senses our wondering and explains, "Swaminathan rides Indra's elephant." As the story goes, Indra, the King of Gods, left behind His white elephant when He stopped here to worship Murugan.

From here devotees ascend a few steps and pass through a brass-covered doorway onto a raised platform for standing darshan. There is room for many to stand, but those who pay are allowed to sit directly in front of the sanctum on a marble floor during the puja.

With hair in topknot and a large preceptor's *danda* in hand, the black stone *murti* is a full six feet tall. It is dark inside the shrine, but the power of the guru can be felt like an outpour-

These twice-born, tuned to the hour of worship in wet clothes clad, and palms lifted overhead, laud themselves and chant the Vedic lore enshrined in the secret word of letters six, oft repeated and flowers offered at proper time. Thus they glorify Him, and for such worship, our Lord doth dwell in Eragam in joyful bliss.

TIRUMURUGARRUPADAI 184-189



ALL PHOTOS: M. AMIRTHAM/DINDOIA

ing of love and wisdom. An *abhishekam* begins just as we sit down. Oil, a mixture of herbs, spices and water called *kootu*, abundant milk, yogurt and sandalwood paste are poured over the life-size *murti* in rapid succession.

The sandalwood is mixed to such a smooth consistency that it covers the body thickly and remains like a coat of amber paint. The priest then draws eyebrows, eyes and mouth on the face. He performs a prolonged *arati*. Passing the lamp before Murugan with steady deliberation, he lingers now and again to allow us all to see the *murti*'s refined features. Accented by the yellow sandalwood and illumined by the delicate flame, Murugan's form draws us into rapt attention. Time stands still. Swaminathan is then rinsed, and the *panchamritam* and *vibhuti* are poured. The curtain is closed longer than usual while the Deity and shrine are meticulously cleaned and fresh white clothing and a silver crown and *kavacham* (ornate metal covering) for hands and feet are put on. A priest pours oil onto and then speedily lights the huge *alankara dipam*, a multi-tiered lamp with 108 wicks. Suddenly one priest throws the curtain open and a second offers the lamp amidst a flurry of chanting, then quickly passes it back out of the shrine where a helper puts it out with a few deft waves of the hand.

After the head priest offers a multitude of other lamps, *mudras* and mantras, he performs the final *arati*. The priests take off the *murti* gigantic garlands that have been offered throughout the day and give them to devotees. As this evening *abhishekam* finishes, everyone feels copiously blessed.

Escorting the three of us around a pro-

Going in and in: (left) The south entrance is surrounded by vendors offering kumkum, turmeric and sacred threads; devotees line up by Murugan's elephant vahana on their way to the main mandapam

fusion of subsidiary shrines, Ganesa Gurukkal proudly declares, "As Adisaivas, we maintain the tradition of chanting only Sanskrit inside the *sannadhi* (sanctum)." He is referring to the modern-day trend, followed in less strict temples, of performing entire pujas in the Tamil language. He is also emphasizing the special importance of Sanskrit chants at this temple.

According to Ratna Navaratnam, the brahmin priests at Swamimalai traditionally chant Murugan's six-lettered Sanskrit mantra, "Sa-ra-va-na-bha-va," during long periods of meditative *japa*. She observes that Swamimalai is linked to the *anahata* chakra, the heart center, which powers the faculties of direct cognition and comprehension. Here, the aspirant attains a mountaintop consciousness: an objective apprehension of the whole of existence. In a split second, complete knowledge of a subject may be known, directly as a boon and blessing from Murugan. Navaratnam writes of the metaphysics behind the relationship of Murugan's six temples to the chakras, "The chanting of the mystical letters of spiritual potency is the propelling force of an inward spiritual pilgrimage in the form of an introspective meditation. The focal point of meditation is said to undergo a shifting process from the lower centers to the highest center, passing through six stages. These six stages can be taken to symbolically represent the six abodes of Murugan in Tirumurugarrupadai."



Worship with light: Young devotees offer ghee lamps for Shanmuga, Valli and Devayanai



Tiruttani

Abode of Peace

SITUATED 700 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL AMIDST A HILL range with a dramatic panoramic view is the Tiruttani Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukkoyil, Murugan's fifth abode. From Swamimalai, the pilgrim usually goes to Trichy, the hub for traveling north to Chennai by bus, train or plane. Tiruttani is a small town located 84 km west of Chennai, 13 km north of Arakonam on the Chennai-Mumbai route. There are basic pilgrim accommodations in Tiruttani, but many choose to stay at Chennai or Kanchipuram (40 km to the south), making a day trip to Tiruttani.

The hill at Tiruttani is known as Tanigaimalai, meaning "peaceful hill." The name refers to the legend of Lord Murugan's choosing this place for peace of mind and quiet relaxation after defeating Surapadman and marrying Devayanai. But there is much more significance to His presence here.

The ode in *Tirumurugarrupadai* calls this place Kunrutoradal and describes Murugan as Ceyon, the "Red God" who loves to sport in the hills. Ratna Navaratnam writes of the ancient tribals and their worship here: "The worship of Murugan takes the form of a dance known as *veriyadal* in the hilly and forest regions. These highlanders celebrated God Murugan as their guardian Deity and believed that the welfare of their tribe was His concern." The hill folk, in long, night-draped dances fueled by honey wine, sought to bring the whole tribe into Murugan's aura, much as the Vedic priests of the North imbibed *soma* to plunge into a vision-quest of Skanda. Na-



Placid pond: (above) Tiruttani's tank, called Saravana Poigai, at the bottom of the hill; (top) Murugan delights in red flowers, and Royal Poinciana trees like this one can be seen blooming around Tiruttani in the summertime

varatnam explains that they used dance and music to propitiate Murugan for practical assistance, such as to heal disease or alleviate famine or drought. These tribal dance forms are incorporated into today's *kavadi* (milk-pot-carrying penance to Murugan) processions celebrated worldwide.

This abode of Murugan is also the birthplace of India's first vice-president and second president, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. Yet, it holds even more legendary significance. According to Murugan *bhaktar* Patrick Harrigan, a host of Gods, saints and sages are known to have worshiped Lord Subrahmanyam here, including Rama, Arjuna, Vishnu, Sage Agastiyar, Saint Arunagirinathar, Saint Ramalinga Swamigal and Sri Muttuswami Deekshitar.

Arriving at the bottom of the hill, we encounter the enchanting Saravana Poigai. Our priest and guide, Sivasri K.V. Ravi Gurukkal, tells us, "This tank is renowned for its sacred water which is known to have healing effects for both bodily and mental illnesses." After bathing our feet, we turn and ascend the hill via 365 steps, representing the days of the year.

At the top, it is cool and quiet, and one immediately understands why Murugan chose this place for solace. Here it is easy to view the world below from a mountaintop consciousness. A new perspective is gained. In Tiruttani's setting, the *vishuddha* chakra is amplified—the unadulterated energy of cosmic love. When there is an inexpressible love and kinship with mankind and all

As He strides on the peacock with the ram behind, the flawless banner of the cock is raised aloft; adorned with armlets, waist tucked with trailing robes, His stature rises as He roves with bands of singers, their voices sweet as notes of well-tuned lutes.

TIRUMURUGARRUPADAI, LINES 210-214



life forms, our consciousness resides in this chakra at the throat. When deeply immersed in this state, there is no consciousness of a physical body, of being a person with emotions or intellect. One just is the light flowing through all form. Ineffable bliss permeates the subtle nerve system as the truth of the oneness of the universe is fully and powerfully realized.

Ascending the final steps to the east entrance, we again encounter Indra's white elephant where one would expect to see Lord Murugan's peacock mount. In an even more unusual twist, the elephant faces east, away from the shrine. T.G.S. Balaram Iyer, in his book *South Temples*, offers, "Some consider that the Lord is ever ready to start on His carrier and rush to the aid of devotees"—meaning the elephant would not even have to turn around to begin a campaign.

Ravi Gurukkal takes us aside to tell more about the temple and its priesthood. There are 27 Adisaiva families serving the temple. He proudly explained, "We follow a strict discipline here. When it

Worship's way: (clockwise from left) Tiny shops and the occasional beggar line the steps going up the hill; head priest Sivasri K.V. Ravi Gurukkal performs arati for the utsava murti; a bird's eye view of the temple; artist's rendition of the main shrine

is a priest's turn to do the puja, he must fast, bathe in a designated place inside the temple, then meditate in front of the shrine. Only then can he go inside the sanctum and do the puja." This *sadhana* clearly has an effect, as we found them all so humble and content, quiet and composed.

As the puja begins, we are once again captured by Lord Subrahmanyam. Unlike most temple protocols, all offerings except the *abhishekam* itself are made from outside the shrine, right in front of us. There is something exceptionally sweet about the ritual here: the priests are unhurried and unusually present. Performing the sacred rites is, for these priests, a delightful dance of divine communion, as it was for the tribals of ancient times.





Palamuthirsolai

Grove of Grace



THE LAST LEG OF OUR PILGRIMAGE RETURNS US TO MADURAI, the nearest town to Palamuthirsolai, “grove of ripe fruit.” Trains, buses and flights go daily from Chennai back to Madurai. Once there, it is best to hire a car to get to the Palamuthirsolai Arulmigu Sri Subrahmanya Swami Tirukkoyil. Located 19 km north of the temple city in the Alagar Hills above the Alagarkoil of Lord Vishnu, it is the most remote and spartan of the *arupadaiveedu*.

As we drive through the entry gate and head up the winding road, we are quickly enveloped in the clean, cool air of the thick forest. Soon we arrive at Lord Murugan’s sixth and final encampment. Says Vellayapettai Radhakrishnan for Murugan.org, “While this temple is not as large or bustling as the other five recognized shrines, it is just as incredible to visit. Even today the place is very fertile with many trees and different flora and fauna, a standing testimony to the vivid description of its natural beauty as found in *Tirumurugarrupadai*.” Though tranquil, the environs here are permeated with an electrical shakti that feels, to us, like an approaching lightning storm.

There is a powerful sacredness here, owing to the three things the temple is famous for: a small stone *vel*; a Java Plum tree where Saint Auvaiyar met Lord Murugan; and a spring hailed in Saint Nakkirar’s poem as the source of Murugan’s

grace on Earth.

Our guide is Sivasri Muthukuma Gurukkal, son of the chief priest. He tells us that, while the importance of this spot has been hailed for centuries, the temple that stands here now was constructed recently. “In ancient times, the *vel* was worshiped as the main Deity,” he explains, as he takes us to a shrine holding a stone *vel* just to the right of the main sanctum. “This *vel* is of great significance. It is the original Deity, and it is still highly venerated.” The lancelike *vel* wielded by Lord Karttikeya embodies discrimination and spiritual insight. Our Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, wrote about the importance of Murugan’s *vel* in the lives of seekers on the spiritual path: “The shakti power of the *vel*, the eminent, intricate power of righteousness over wrongdoing, conquers confusion within the realms below. The holy *vel*, that when thrown always hits its mark and of itself returns to Karttikeya’s mighty hand, rewards us when righteousness prevails and becomes the kundalini serpent’s unleashed power thwarting our every effort with punishing remorse when we transgress dharma’s law. Thus, the holy *vel* is our release from ig-



In the forest: (above) The way to Palamuthirsolai takes one through the fortified wall of Alagarkoil; (top) the temple’s colorful entrance gopuram amid the forested hills; (inset) artist’s rendition of the main shrine



M. AMIRTHAM/DINDOIA HINDUISM TODAY



Worshipping: (above) A monkey frolics near Ganesha at the Java Plum tree; Sivasri Muthukuma Gurukkal shows worshipers the arati

norance into knowledge, our release from vanity into modesty, our release from sinfulness into purity through *tapas*. When we perform penance and beseech His blessing, this merciful God hurls His *vel* into the astral plane, piercing discordant sounds, colors and shapes, removing the mind’s darkness.” Pilgrimage is a penance of sorts, and the power of Murugan’s *vel* is felt throughout the *arupadaiveedu*. It is a force of change that remains with us, feeding and enriching our spiritual life for years to come.

The Java Plum tree (*Syzygium cumini* or jambu) at Palamuthirsolai is the tree where Auvaiyar, a ninth-century saint, encountered Lord Balasubrahmanyam. The classic story relates that the elder woman sat under the shade of this tree to rest on the way to the temple. A boy called out from the branches above and asked her if she would like some hot or cold fruit. Perplexed but curious, she asked for the former. The boy shook the tree, and some of the grape-sized plums fell from its branches onto the sand below. Picking one up, she blew on it to clean off the sand. The boy chortled and asked if she was blowing on the fruit because it was too hot. Only when she entered the temple did she realize that she had just met Lord Murugan Himself, and that she actually didn’t know as much as she thought she did. Through His simple play, Murugan shattered her arrogance. Auvaiyar went on to write some of the sweetest, most celebrated Tamil devotional songs. It is considered a miracle that this tree fruits every year during the six-day Skanda Shashti festival in October-November, completely off season.

To Saint Nakkirar, the spring above Palamuthirsolai is the waterfall of grace that showers the devotee who reaches the final stop on this profound inner odyssey. The water from this spring is said to have healing qualities. Devotees flock there, filling up bottles to take home with them, bringing them first to the temple for blessings.

Today, the central shrine houses a small, standing *murti* of Lord Murugan, with consorts Valli and Devayanai at His sides. As we sit watching the *abhishekam*, the image of Lord Murugan’s grace as the waterfall comes to the mind’s eye. The joy of completion pours over us. Inwardly quiet, blissfully content, we feel we have accomplished something special. It is an inner fulfillment, arrived at after an outer journey.

For centuries, seekers who have performed this noble pilgrimage have testified that at its end awaits a release from the worries and

In this way have I known His graciousness, whether in these abodes or in other haunts. Wherever thou dost confront Him, be in tune to praise Him, your face in utter gladness beaming. Your hands uplifted above your head in worship, do thou prostrate yourself in surrender, full and fit, and in this manner raise thy voice of prayer:

“Divine child with golden jewels bedecked, Thou art the refuge of those in anguish. Vanquisher with emblazoned chest exultant! Luminous Love, savior of the needy meek! Whose hallowed name the enlightened extol. Thou mighty conqueror who confoundeth titans, dauntless victor, Thou Supreme Lord Divine!”

His immaculate form, majestic and mighty, divine in strength, and stature reaching skyward, manifests itself in sublime splendor. His fiery form instantly He conceals to one of genial youth and utters words of love: “Thy coming I know, fear thee not! Thou shalt surely excel in this world, girt by the furious oceans deep and vast, be thou One indeed, without a parallel.” Thus saying, He will grant everlasting worthy boons, rare indeed to attain by mortals weak.

He is the Lord of the Mount from whose dizzy heights many a waterfall doth spin torrential falls—Lord of abundant fruit groves, too, where luscious fruits ripen.

TIRUMURUGARRUPADAI, LINES 249-254, 271-276, 287-295, 315-317

TRANSLATED BY RATNA NAVARATNAM

concerns of their lives. They are relieved of things long burdening their hearts and minds, never to be plagued by them again. This real-life purifying experience is captured in the *Vedas*, which affirm, “To such a one who has his stains wiped away, the venerable Sanatkumara shows the further shore of darkness. Him they call Skanda.”