



FAITH & PENANCE OF THE TAMIL FOLK

A Photo Exploration: A book named Faith Enduring

Devotees and the pledges made during one of the most extravagant functions of TamilNadu. A function held for the Goddess Amman. It witnesses more than two to three lakh people every year. Held at temples across the state, the worship pattern is distinct and captivating.

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Description about the function

- A spiritually rich and enchanting function is an integral part of the lifestyle of a Tamil folk community.
- The devotees whole understanding of faith and staunch belief lies in this yearly function that takes place in various regions of TamilNadu. For a new person entering these premises, there is an initial blast of shock that hits you, over the course of the rituals as one begins to get acquainted with the proceedings, at this moment we are yet again made to confront something new and shocking.
- No particular name assigned to this festival.
- Specific to the Goddess Mariamman and takes place at her various places of worship.

Thevar & Nadar communities

- Major communities are the Thevar and Nadar communities.
- They belong to the southern districts of TamilNadu, Ramanathapuram, Virudhunagar and Madurai, termed as the Thevar belt.
- Community predominantly existed in the rural areas of TamilNadu.
- Part of the lower class of Dalit society of TamilNadu.
- Occupy positions of artisans and workers such as electricians, masons etc.

Goddess of Southern India

- Goddess Mariamman (Mother)
- A Goddess with two contrasting ends to her.
- A symbol of power for the deprived and subjugated members of society.
- Has been described as bloodthirsty and wild by the early missionaries and Brahmanas.
- Devotees take it upon themselves to pacify the angry Goddess & in return pray for her blessings.

"She is the one who will take care of us poor, deprived and the exploited."

Process followed during the project

- My initial few visits to the ceremonies was merely to orient and experience the environment.
- During the course of the project, I visited around eight Mariamman temples located in Chennai and the outskirts of the city.
- The Thiruvizah (festival) at Samayapuram in the Trichy district. This festival which was held on the 16th & 17th of April had a month long of preparations. A crowd of more than two to three lakh people were at the district during the festival.
- Every year in the month of March and April, this group of the Tamil folk make a vow to the mighty Goddess in bargain for happiness and fulfillment.

Project description

- A photo exploration that captures certain moments during the pledge making ceremony.
- The photographs are then compiled into a book. It is a journey through a religious ceremony and its significance to the devotees.
- The photographs are meant to read into the mindset of the devotees. The book tries to reach a very personal level with the vow makers.
- The project not only involves being witness to the ceremonies, but is also about understanding the personal reasoning for the people to make such a vow and the manner in which they fulfill them.

A journey: Faith & Penance of the Tamil Folk

Written in words, painted in photographs, the intensity and the depth of the moment can little be expressed through these media. Despite seeing these occasions many times, the extent and tolerance of the people till this day continues to amaze me.

Engrossed in her own thoughts, she stood there.
Little did I know that she would be attracted by my gaze
and look straight at me.



On my way to temple, I saw this boy standing in front of this image of Goddess Amman. He had the same aggressiveness and stature as the Goddess herself. But yet he was completely indifferent to her anger.





Sitting at the footsteps of the temple, smeared in kumkum & Turmeric, she looked like she was taking the form of the mighty Goddess.

சுவாமிவாடித்தலும் சுவாமிவாடிப் பார்.
SEE GOD IN EVERY FACE.
SWAMI SIVANANDA.



This is a moment I could never forget. Standing in the temple premise, I could literally feel her gaze follow me. A moment that I knew I had to capture. The play of light and the words of Swami Sivananda compliment each other.



Goddess of Worship & Penance.

Considered to be a part of the village and an entity amongst the people. She is the village guardian and looks after the poor and deprived people. A representation of ravishing beauty and extreme violence. The devotees take their respective pledges every year and pacify the mighty Goddess.







Glimpses of the city on the day of the function

Having travelled for days, the pilgrims set up their meagre belongings on the road sides. At the break of dawn, the procession begins as each and every person gets ready to fulfill their vow.





The morning bath at the outlets of Kaveri. A preparation for the long day ahead.



Penance: The Goddess of fertility, The walk of hanging cradles

The procession though crowded takes place in an organized manner. Devotees from different regions come in groups and fulfill their VOWS.



Little Selvi: Blessings of the Goddess

They had prayed to the Goddess for bear them with a child,
On the birth of the child, they came to the Goddess to
fulfill what they had promised her.







She looked at her mother with questioning and hopeful look. An irresistible moment.



Surya: The young patron to the Goddess
Piercing of the mighty trident

The shy and small built Surya, belongs to a family of four. Since the age of 5 he has been fulfilling the vow made by his mother to the mighty goddess. He has been undergoing the penance for the past 2 years and this year was his third time to pacify the goddess.



It almost seemed like he was being prepared for the ordeal.
Not only physically but psychologically too.





One amongst the line of children yet to fulfill their promise.







Mr. Rajamani: Complete & Unbroken faith



He has repeatedly been undergoing the pledge for many years, but he still feels uneasy just before the ordeal. All he says is, "Amma will take care of us."



Inflicting 315 piercings, he walked forth and circled the temple complex. Almost in a state of trance, it was impossible to have any conversation with him.

Mr. Raja Mani, after the death of his father moved from his village Kundrathur at the age of 18 to earn a living in Chennai. He eventually set up his masonry shop. Supporting a family of 5 sisters and a brother, he is the pillar of his family.



Carrying a 30 kg mould, he slowly went into a noticeable trance and began to sway with the weight of the Goddess. The beautiful yet violent mould depicted the ravishing beauty and the contrasting aggressiveness of the Goddess.



With his family encouraging him, he moved forth dragging the weight of God. Blind faith & belief led him to complete the pledge made by him to the Goddess.







Entering the temple premises



Rolling around the shrine. Considered one of the most difficult pledges.



Lying prostrate in front of the Goddess, he fulfilled what he had promised her.



When I entered the temple premise, I saw a line of people lying on the ground with rice lamps lit on their eyes.





The last ordeal: Stride across the burning pier



Mrs. Suguna Devi
Her walk through the pier

She is the only lady from her locality who walks on fire.
People in the locality say that she becomes violent and
cannot be stopped from stepping onto the burning coal.





Every week she has people who come to her, she advises them. She visibly transforms, her voice changes and she becomes a completely different entity.





Taking the form of the Goddess, she becomes violent and aggressive. Her tone becomes different and almost incomprehensible.





Slowly sinking into a state of trance. The crowd literally hypnotises the people and once they are in a trance they perform the pledges.



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Every year, the devotees relentlessly carry out their pledges. For all its complexity & anomaly, this festival is actually about the simplicity of faith. It's about how every person is able to make a connection with his belief while being part of such a large number.

FAiTH ENDURING...

This is an unceasing walk. An abiding belief that holds these people together. A journey that began a long time back, is still existing and will continue to exist.

Design Characteristics of the book

- Book dimension: 11 inches/11 inches
- The photographs are flush cut to either the top, left or right of the pages.
- The functions of the day are categorized based on the pledge undertaken by one devotee each.
- The font that has been used is Caslon.

Design Challenges

- The aim of the book is not to merely make it seem like a reflection of the festival, but the photographs are meant to portray the mood of the devotees and the pledge makers

Time constraint

One of the aspects to be kept in mind is the state of the devotees during the pledge making ceremony.

Difficulty of conversation

Need for later meetings with the devotees.

Initial apprehension & reluctance.

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