

Visual Communication Project 3

Photo Exploration: Faith & Penance of the Tamil folk.
A book on the belief and worship patterns

By:
Prarthana Hariharan

VC- 05625810

Guide;
Prof. Raja Mohanty

Industrial Design centre
Indian Institute of Technology
Powai, Mumbai

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Approval Sheet

The visual Communication Project titled:

PHOTO EXPLORATION: FAITH & PENANCE OF THE TAMIL FOLK

Submitted by Prarthana Hariharan

Guide: Prof. Raja Mohanty

Roll no: 05625810

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Masters in Design degree in Visual Communication.

Guide

Chair person

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Acknowledgements

Prof. Raja Mohanty, for his continuous support and encouragement. For giving accurate and timely feedback on my work. He also gave me links to some essential material that aided me in doing this project. For pushing me ahead at every step and at the same time giving me room to work within my own space and creative abilities.

For the numerous people whom I met during my several visits to the various locations of the functions. For their warm and loving attitude towards me. For having recognized the scope of my project and letting me take every step in developing a good piece of work. I am glad to have been able to establish a wonderful and long lasting relationship with these people. Without their willingness and aid this book would have been impossible.

Mrs, Suguna Devi, the first person to explain the various aspects of her community's religious belief and faiths. For giving me directions to go about the work and contacts with the essential and important people.

My family for their continuous support and for providing me with all the help and encouragement throughout the project.

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A spiritually rich and enchanting function is an integral part of the lifestyle of the Thevar and Nadar communities of TamilNadu.

Their 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. This is the very essence of the proceedings.

There is no particular name assigned to this festival. It is categorized based on the Tamil calendar period in which it takes place. It is specific to the Goddess Mariamman and takes place at her various places of worship.

Introduction

My project started off with my interest in the subject of Tamil faith and superstitions. At this point I started to visit some of the temple places in TamilNadu. Over the course of my visits and interactions with the people, I realized that my area of interest lies in the faith and penance patterns of one of the major sects of TamilNadu. This major community are the Thevar and Nadar communities. These people belong to the southern districts of TamilNadu, Ramanathapuram, Virudhunagar and Madurai, termed as the Thevar belt. Having arrived at my area of focus, I started speaking to people from the community and started attending the religious ceremonies that took place on specific days.

My initial few visits to the ceremonies was merely to orient and experience the environment. The ice had to be broken and a certain level of informality had to be developed with the people. In the later stages, I went and met some of the people at their residence and spoke to them. Slowly they began to open up to me. I could sense their initial reluctance, but they were also willing to try to have a conversation with me.

During the course of the project, I visited around eight Mariamman temples located in Chennai and the outskirts of the city.

After speaking to the people, I was told about the Thiruvizah (festival) at Samayapuram in the Trichy district. This festival which was held on the 16th & 17 of April had a month long of preparations. People were flocking to this region, setting up their temporary road side dwellings and waiting for the day to fulfill their penance towards the Goddess. A crowd of more than two to three lakh people were at the district during the festival.

During the course of these visits, I started capturing some of the moments that these people go through. It involves not only being a spectator in these functions, but also interacting with these strong willed people and capturing an essence of their life. My photographs are merely a documentation of my interaction with the people and provide a feel of the place of worship.

Why did I select this subject?

Being from TamilNadu, I have more than once witnessed the various ceremonies and pledge making of these communities. I have always been a keen observer and have been fascinated by the extent of belief of these people, but never once have I moved a step further and tried to understand the reasoning and manner of their worship.

By undertaking this project, I have not only been able to be amidst these people and document their worship patterns, but have also gained a more personal and intimate understanding of the reason for this way of penance.

Thevar & Nadar communities

This community which predominantly existed in the rural areas of TamilNadu has now migrated to the cities and bring along with them their worship patterns. They mostly occupy the position of artisans and workers who are electricians, plumbers, carpenters and masons. The majority of the people form the lower class of the Tamilian Dalit society. Though over time they have also grown, a comparatively smaller number of them hold high positions in the society. Nevertheless, they are the poor, subjugated and deprived people of the Tamil community.

Worship patterns

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. What makes this unique is the manner of penance that the people undertake. The sense of social identity found amongst the worshippers, the expectations they bring to the goddess and the structure of meaning manifest in the trances which characterize the worship. Some of the penances done for the goddess are Azhagi vel (piercing of the trident), Kawadi (carrying the weight of God), Piercing of 315 spears and the firewalking.

Some of these shocking forms of penance are done by these folk. All this traces back to the one Goddess towards whom this pattern of worship is targeted, Goddess Mariamman (Mother).

Goddess behind these worship patterns.

Goddess Mariamman (Mother)

There has been little success in tracing back the origins of this form of worship. Every year the people patiently go through the ordeal. This goddess of Southern India has often been named as “bloodthirsty” by the early missionaries and is still described as “wild” by many Brahmanas. Every year, during the months of March and April, the devotees replicate the identity of the goddess and set out to quench her thirst. The devotees take it upon themselves to satisfy the goddess and in return pray for her blessings.

The goddess is usually listed among the *grama devatas* or village deities. She is considered to be a part of the village and very much an entity amongst the people. An unusual aspect is that the Goddess is often referred to as AMMA and with a tone of informality. To the people, Amman belongs to them and one can sense a tone of possessiveness when they speak about her. She has gained her stature as the beholder of the aspect of Fertility of the womb (in the broader sense- fertility of their land).

Oral story on Goddess Mariamman

During one of my prior visits, the story was told to me. The story as narrated to me; Once there was a dalit and his pregnant wife living on the banks of the Kaveri River. People of the village ridiculed and refused to accept them. As her time of delivery grew near, her husband pleaded every women in the village to help in the delivery, but to no vain. He then crossed the river in the hope of finding help. After he'd crossed over, however, heavy rains came and the river got flooded. The woman was in great distress. She began praying desperately to Lord Shiva. Filled with compassion for the woman's plight, the Lord disguised himself in the form of the woman's mother and delivered the child. When the flood subsided and the husband was able to cross, he was shocked to find that the woman had already successfully delivered their child.

The belief is that Lord Shiva had disguised himself as a woman and delivered the child. That is when Mariamman was born. Later the temple Tayumanavar (meaning “He also became a mother”), was erected.

Project specifications

To develop a photo book that captures certain moments during the pledge making ceremony and compile it into a book. 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.

Aim & Challenges

Aim of the project:

It was not only a learning experience for me, a one that I completely enjoyed, but also a way of being able to interact with these people in the smallest possible manner. The book is targeted towards those who have an interest in this area and those who are willing and want to be exposed to this area of TamilNadu's religious practices.

The book is a very personal outlook at these group of Tamilians and their thinking pattern. The religious functions and the ceremonies are just a part of the book.

Design Challenge:

One of the challenges was the time constraint that came with the theme of the project. The festivals or ceremonies are time specific and particular to specific religious locations. One of the other main challenges was the intermingling with the people of this community. But this aspect was completely broken down and the interaction became joyful and memorable.

One of the main tasks was to be able to prompt them to have a free and willing conversation with me. They were also reluctant in many cases to let me document the preparations for the ceremony. They said that it is not considered good or auspicious to do so. But in some cases there were people who were genuinely willing to let a student get an exposure to this ordeal. They were willing to push aside their apprehensions and openly accepted me in their premises.

Contents and structure of the book

The book has been written from my point of view. My conversations and interactions with four people and their respective stories is being portrayed through the photographs. The book is entirely a compilation of photographs that visually narrate the stories of faith of these people and their communities.

Some of the functions and pledges that they make to the Goddess are

- Azhagi Vel, which is the piercing of the mighty trident.
- Kawadi, which is carrying the weight of God. This is done in various ways. One of the most extremes pledges made is the piercing of the 315 spears.
- Lighting of the rice lamps: this is specific to just one temple of Goddess Mariamman. Devotees light the lamp and place it on their eyes and forehead as a pledge to her.
- Firewalking festival: this is generally the last and the most important of the pledges. Women, men and children walk on the burning pier and pay respect to the goddess.

At each of the locations of my visit, I not only witnessed the event but also got to speak to the people who were fulfilling the pledge. So what one would see in this compilation are not only photographs of the people during the ceremony, but also the prior instances to the function.

Design considerations for the book

Throughout the book, the photographs have been given maximum emphasis. The book is aimed to be a visual narrative. The text is there to merely explain the experience and compliment the photographs. A square format was decided for the book to aid in the placement of landscape as well as portrait images. A simple 3 column grid has been followed throughout the book. The typeface used for the accompanying text is Caslon.

Photograph considerations

The photographs are aimed at capturing moments from the ceremonies and the over all set up and mind set of the location while approaching the festival season.

The photos show a more individual point of view of the people who undertake the vows. The photographs capture the situation and the time experienced by the devotees.

In some instances, I also planned later visits to the residence of the devotees to get acquainted with their lifestyle and speak to them at ease. One of the major aspects to be taken into consideration is the inability to have a dialogue with these people during the ceremony. Many of the worshippers are in a state of trance and any form of direct conversation with them is near to impossible.

The colors in the photographs are bold and vibrant just like the festival and the people themselves. The jarring and vibrant nature of the people have been attempted to be portrayed.

Typeface Considerations

Faith expressed through Penance
Worship patterns among Tamil folk

Georgia (Regular)

Faith expressed through Penance
Worship patterns among Tamil folk

Bembo (Regular)

**Faith expressed through Penance
Worship patterns among Tamil folk**

Caslon (Roman)

*Faith expressed through Penance
Worship patterns among Tamil folk*

ITC Stone Informal (Italics)

Faith expressed through Penance
Worship patterns among Tamil folk

Frutiger (Roman)

Typeface consideration (Body text)

Georgia (Regular) 12 point

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.

Bembo (Regular) 12 point

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.

Caslon (Roman) 12 point

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.

ITC Stone Informal (Italics) 12 point

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Frutiger (Roman) 12 point

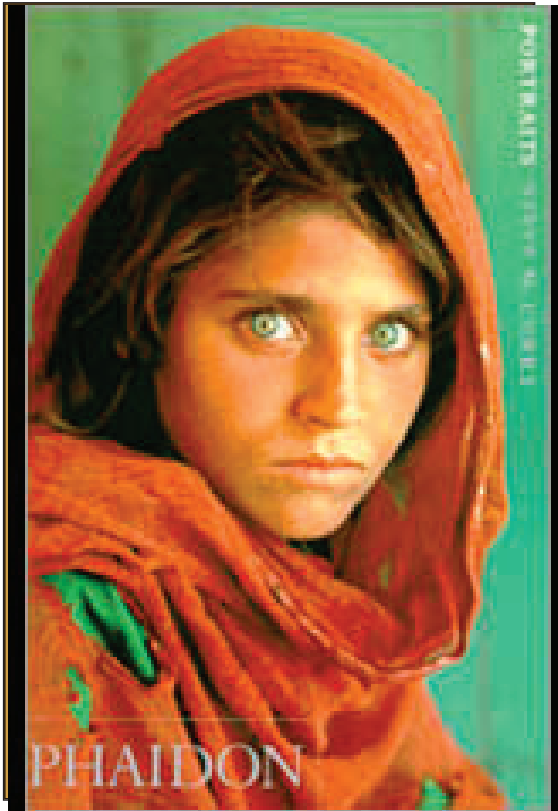
Written in words, painted in photographs, the intensity and the depth of the moment can little be expressed through these media. Despite seeing these occasions many times, the extent and tolerance of the people till this day continues to amaze me.

Considerations for the book layout and size

While looking into book design, I looked at specifically those books which lay maximum emphasis on the images and have minimal amount of text. This is a constraint that I set for myself.

For this purpose, I selected some books and looked at the manner in which they have laid the text and imagery.

Book 1: Steve McCurry,
Book dimensions 10 inches/ 15 inches



PREFACE

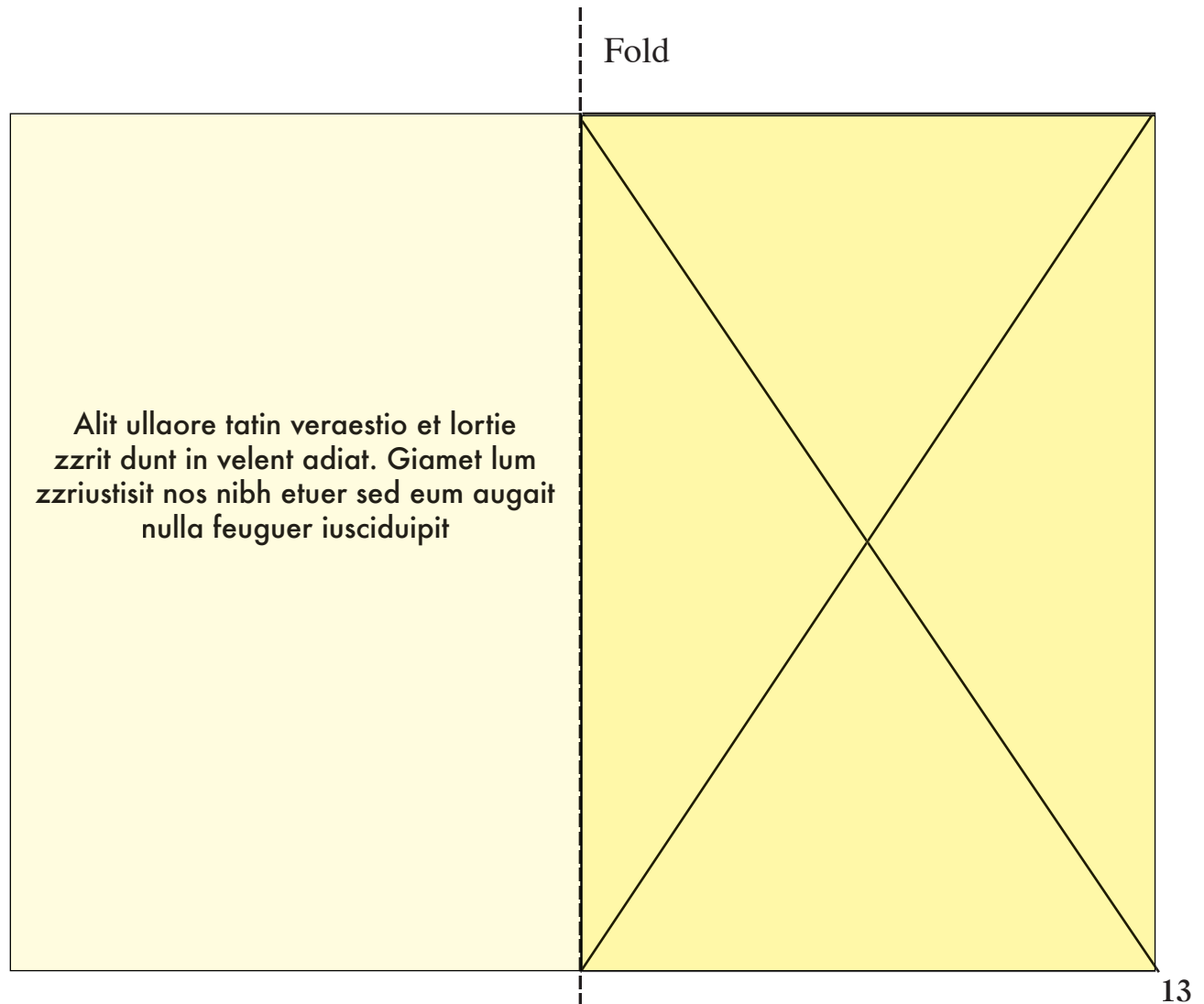
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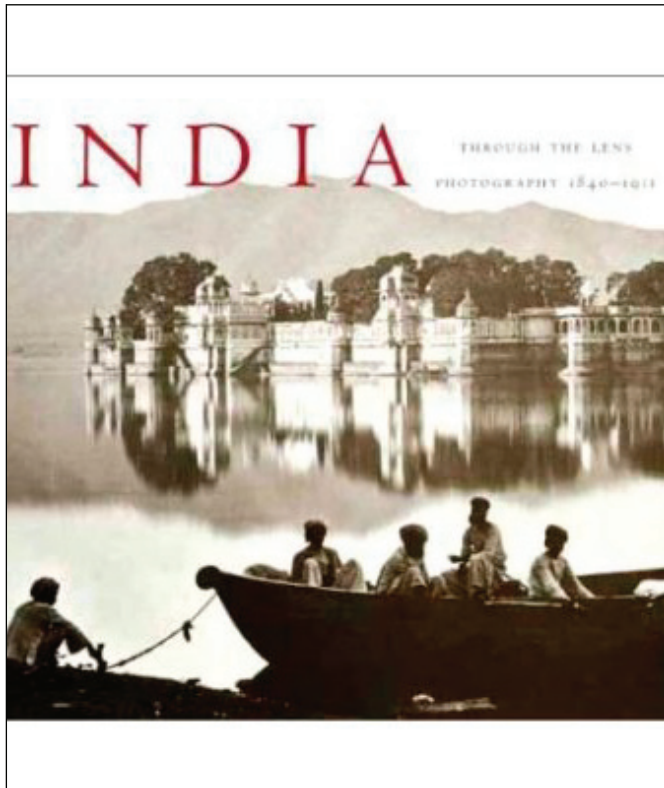
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In this book, the layout has been kept fairly simple. There is three column grid that has been followed for the text pages which are just the introduction and the conclusion. The book has not been divided into sections. The photographs have been placed one after another with short individual descriptions each. The photographs have been flush cut to the pages.



Book 2: Vidya Dehejia, India Through the Lens
Book dimensions 8.63 inches/ 11.47 inches



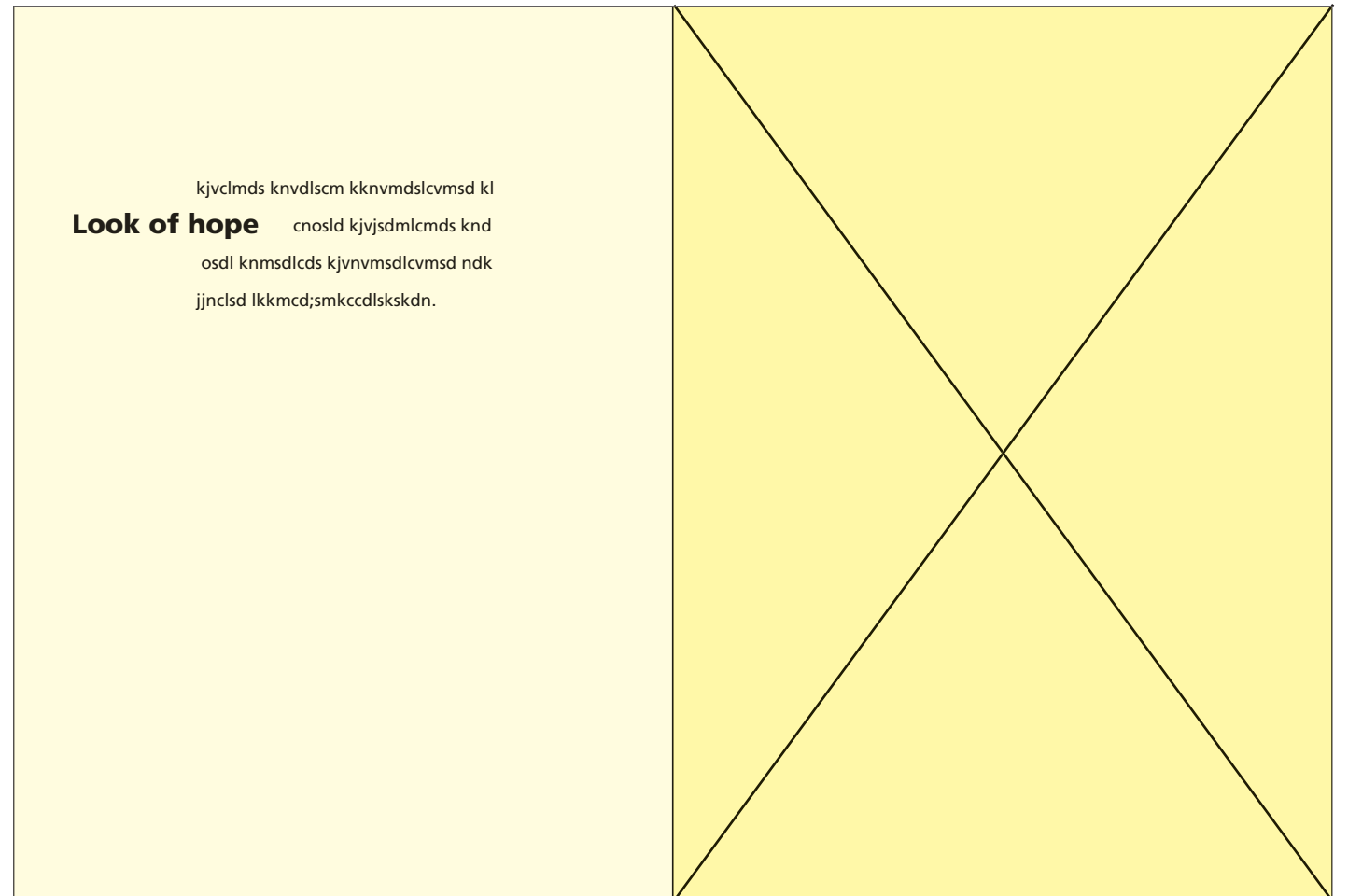
Preface

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In this book, what I found interesting was the manner of placing the text. In each page the description of the photograph was integrated with the title. The subtle manner in which the grid is broken is interesting.



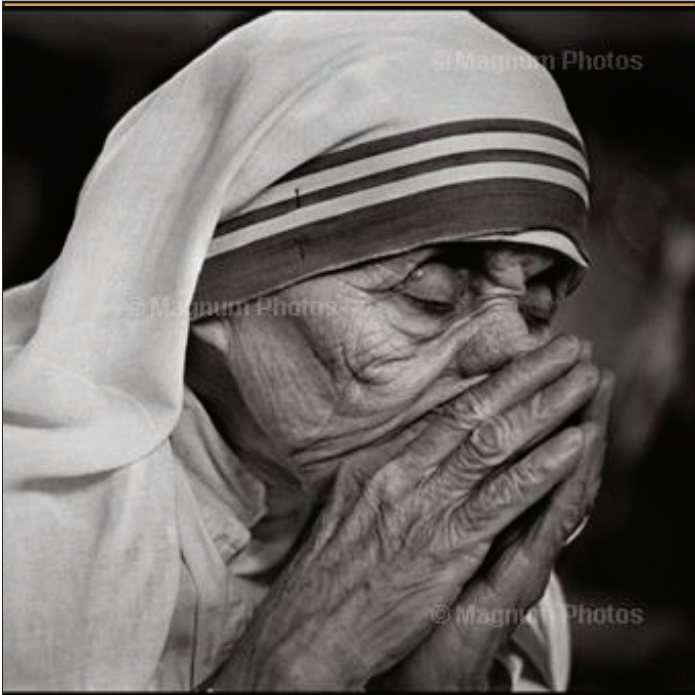
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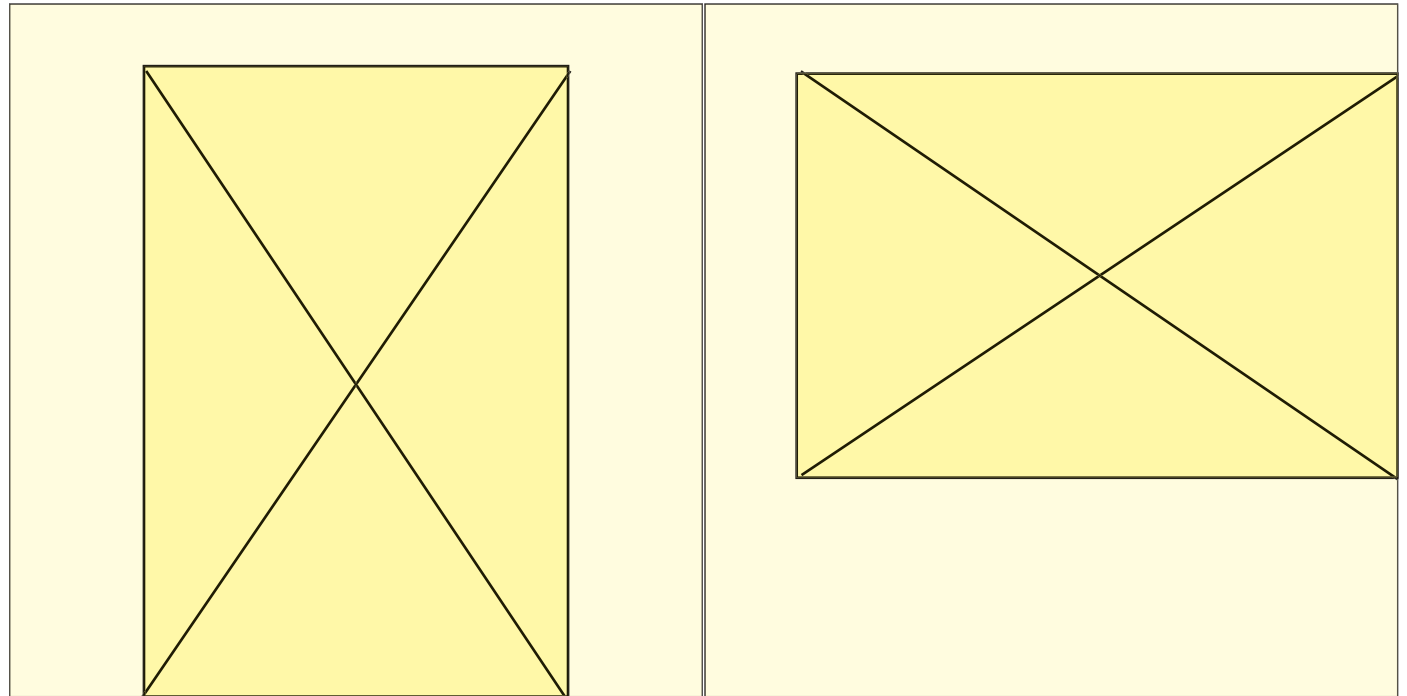
Book 3: Raghu Rai, A Life Dedicated
Book dimensions 12 inches/ 12 inches



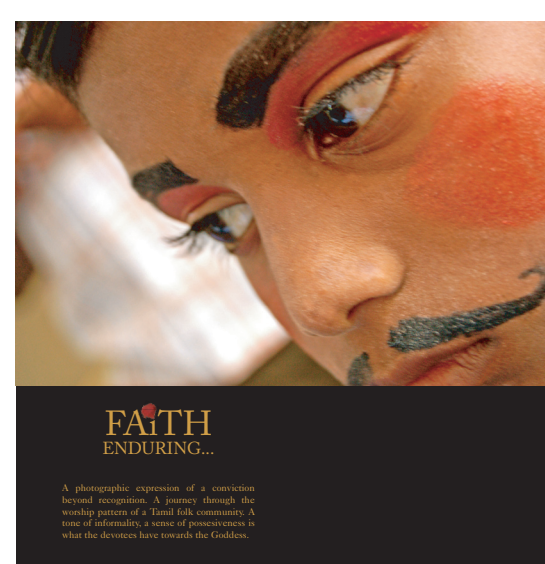
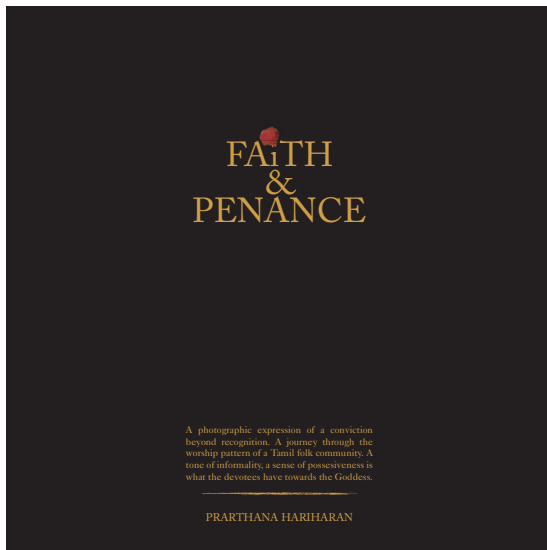
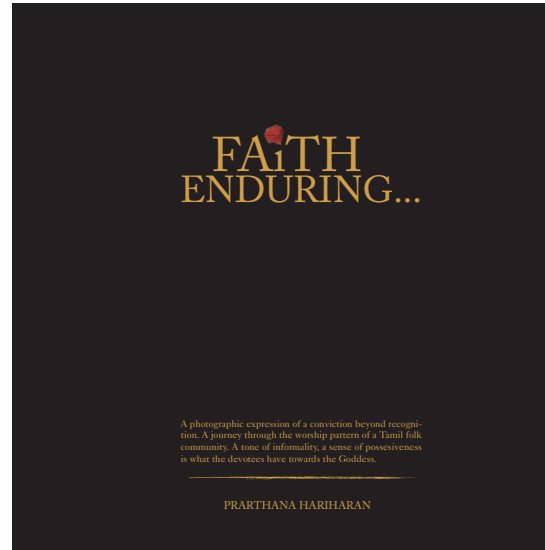
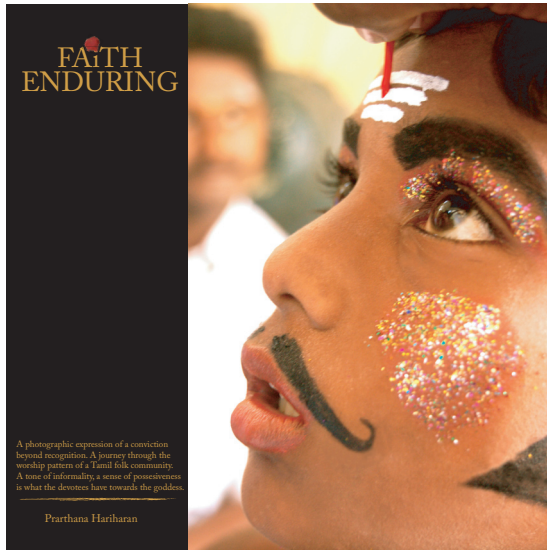
Mother, these Paens are for you.

Num velenim adignit utat la feum eugueril
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nvmds;ve,sdlkk.

In this layout there is no accompanying text to the images. There is a small paragraph of around 100-150 words after every 25 to 30 pictures. Each spread has 2 photographs and they are flush cut to either the right, left or bottom of the book. In certain sections of the book, the photograph is across the whole page spread.



Final page layouts



The book is titled FAITH ENDURING... It is accompanied by a subline.

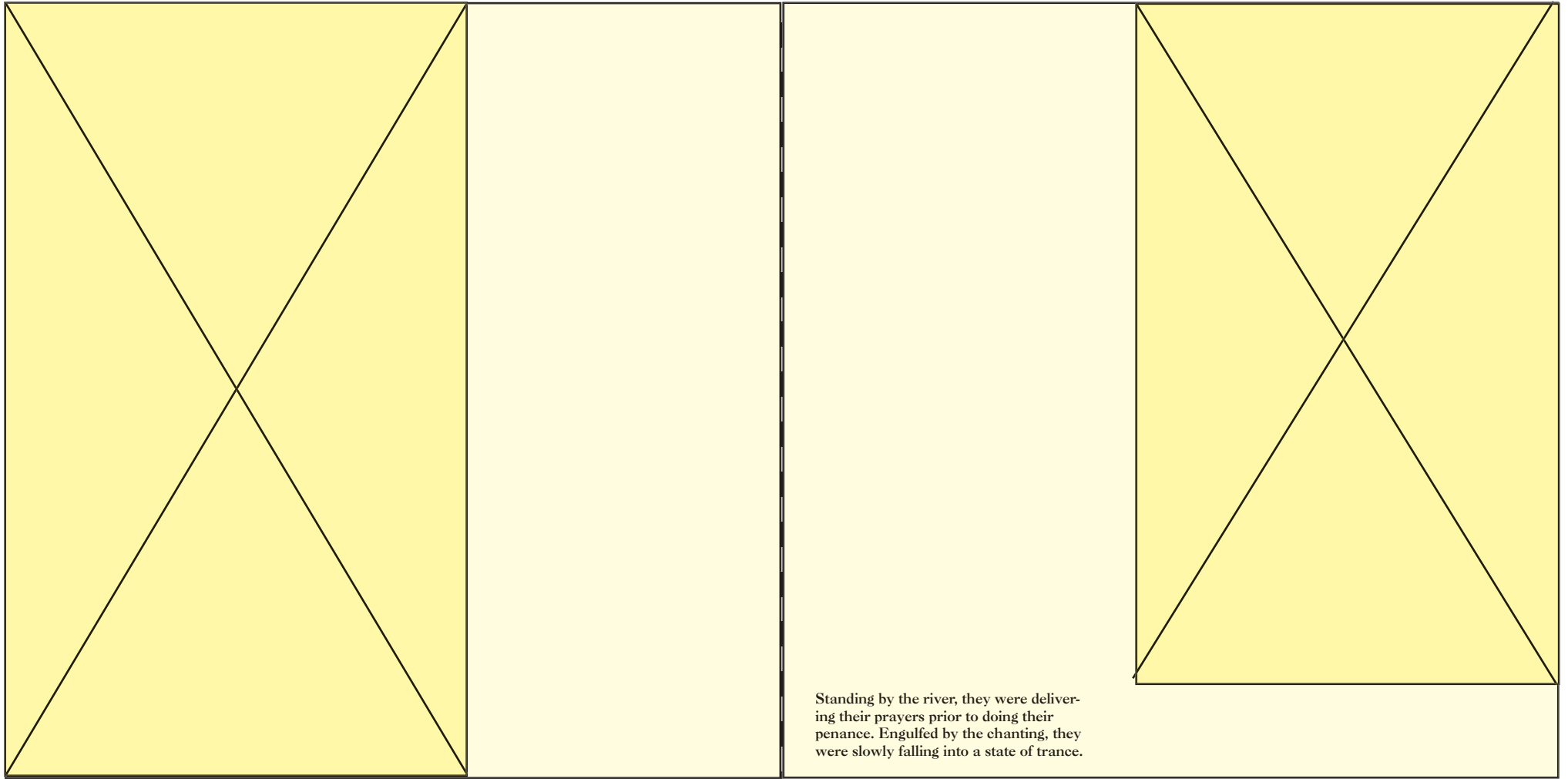
The format follows one photograph per side of the page spread. Most of the photographs are placed in the centre of the page with a 1 cm border. In some cases the photographs are flush cut to the left, right or top of the page to break the monotony. In some sections, the photograph spreads across the whole page spread.

The overall color scheme of the book is yellow on black. The black background not only goes with the theme and shows the dark yet divine elements of worship, but also helps in projecting the photographs better. The richness of the subject and the fact that the Goddess is mainly portrayed through yellows and reds comes across in the book.

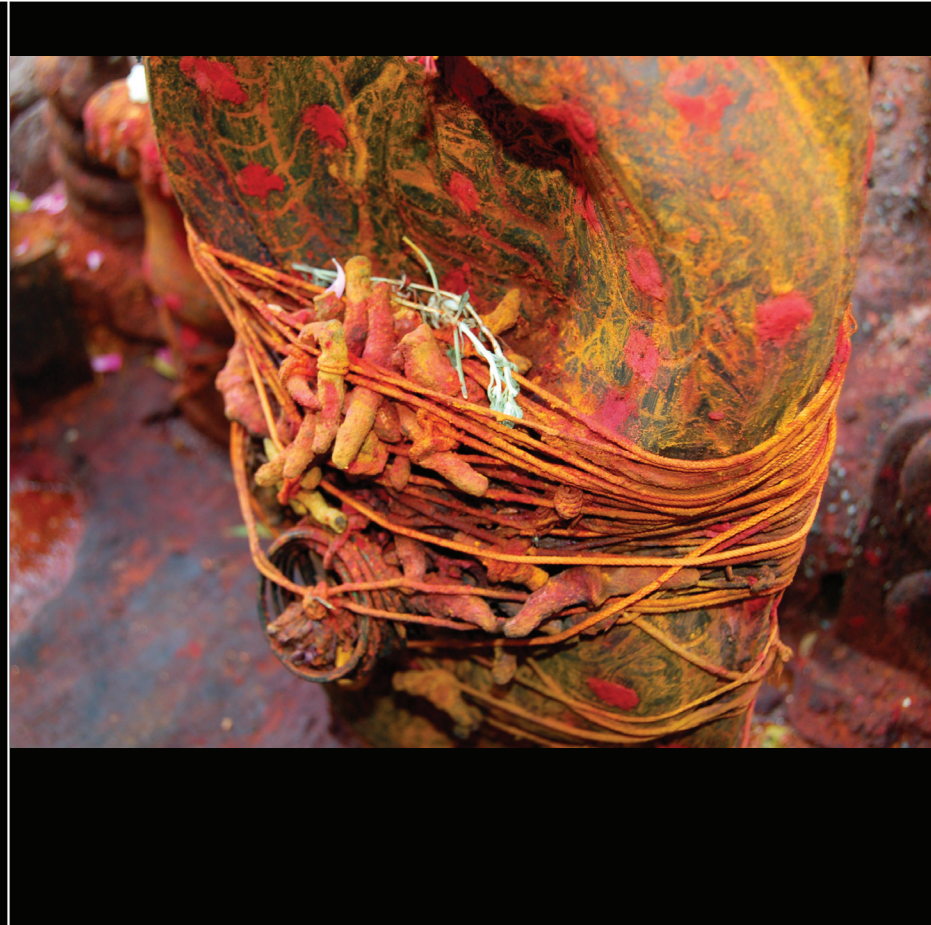
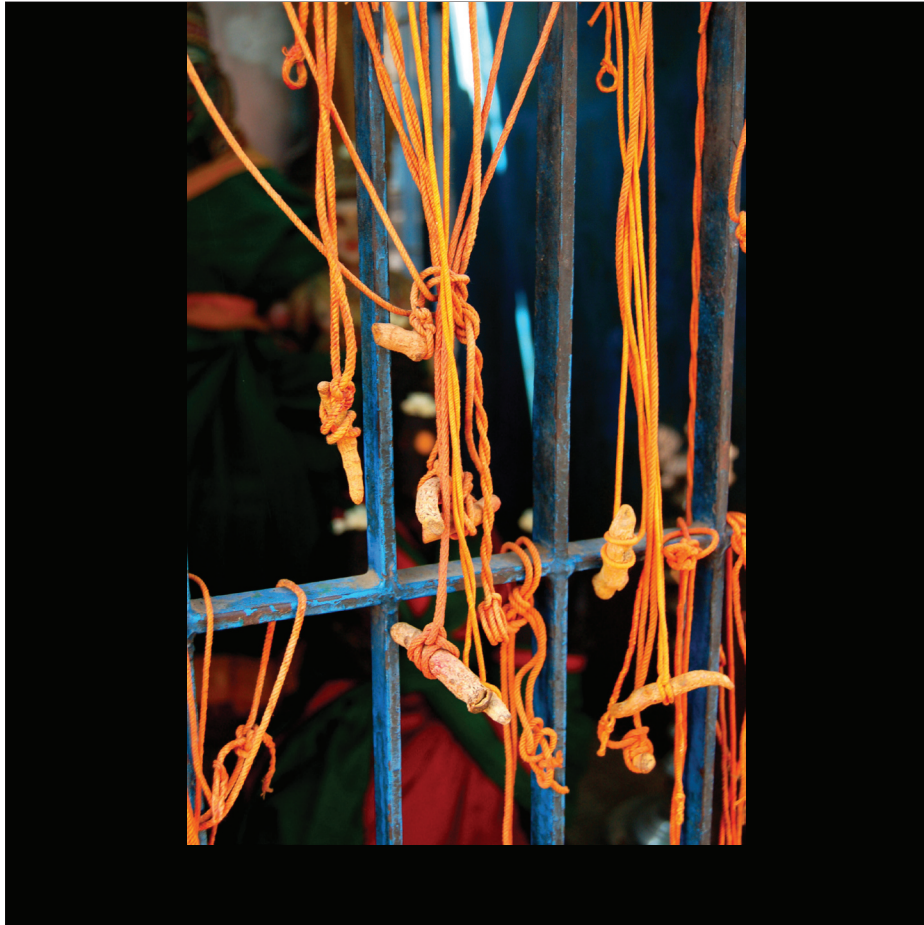
11.5 inches/ 11.5 inches

Page spreads (options for portrait and landscape images)

Fold



Sample pages form the book





Little Selvi: Blessings of the Goddess



LITTLE SELVI: THE BLESSINGS OF THE GODDESS

They carried their child, tied in a rope cradle and offered her to the Goddess. An oath made two years back was now fulfilled on this auspicious day. The knot of devotion held the child in its cradle.



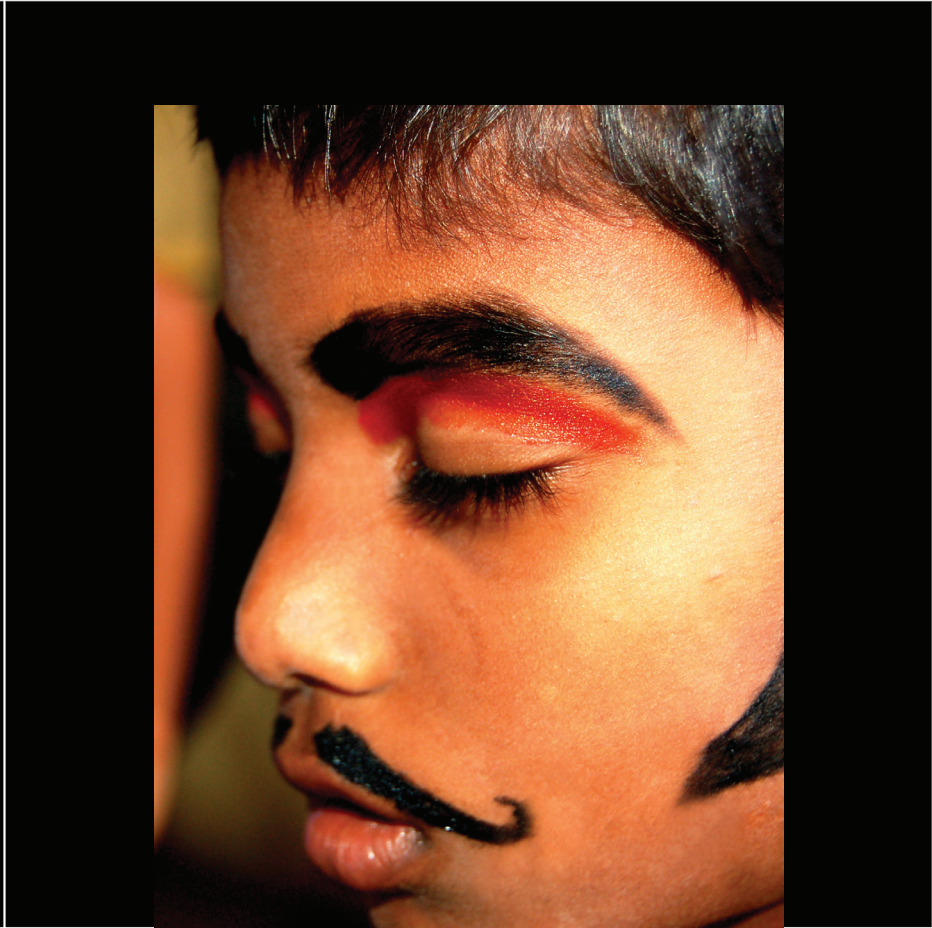
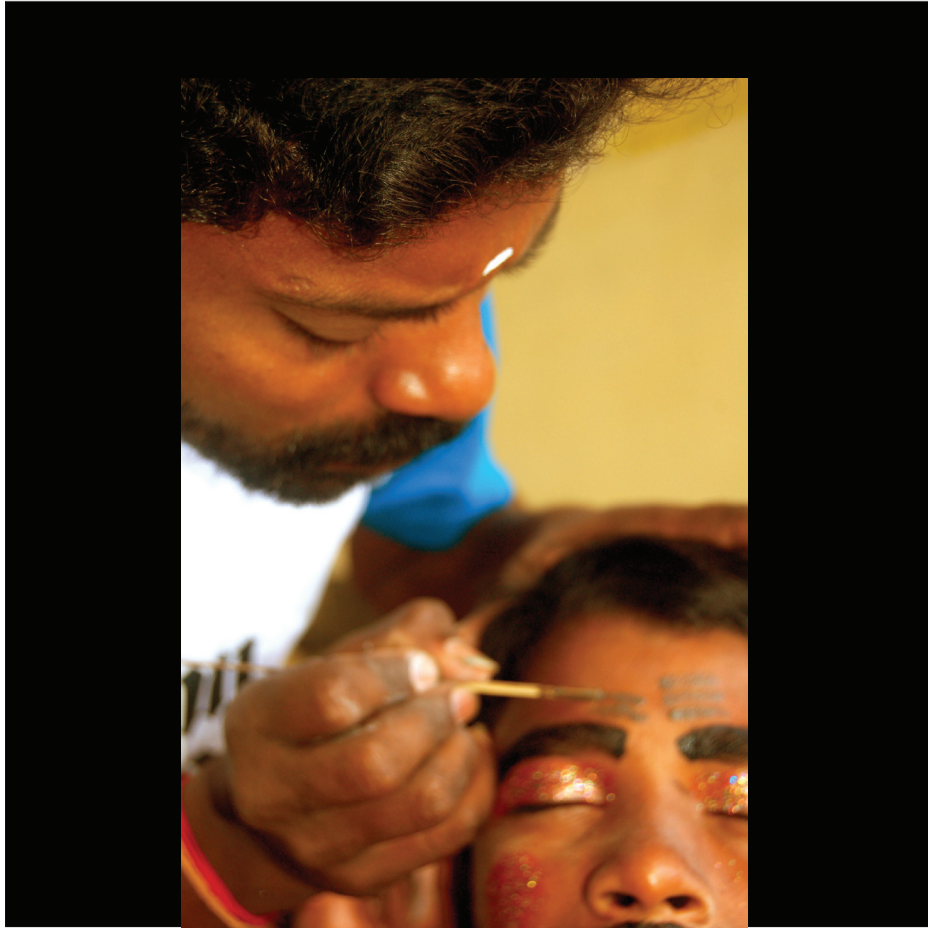
The young patron to Goddess



SURYA- THE YOUNG PATRON TO THE GODDESS

The shy and small built Surya, belongs to a family of four. He has a younger sister. Now he is studying in the 4th standard at the corporation school of his area. Since the age of 5 he has been fulfilling the vow made by his mother to the mighty goddess. When he was 2 years old, he had to go through a life threatening health problem. At that critical time his mother took the oath on behalf of her son. He has been undergoing the penance for the past 2 years and this year was his third time to pacify the goddess.

PIERCING THE MIGHTY TRIDENT



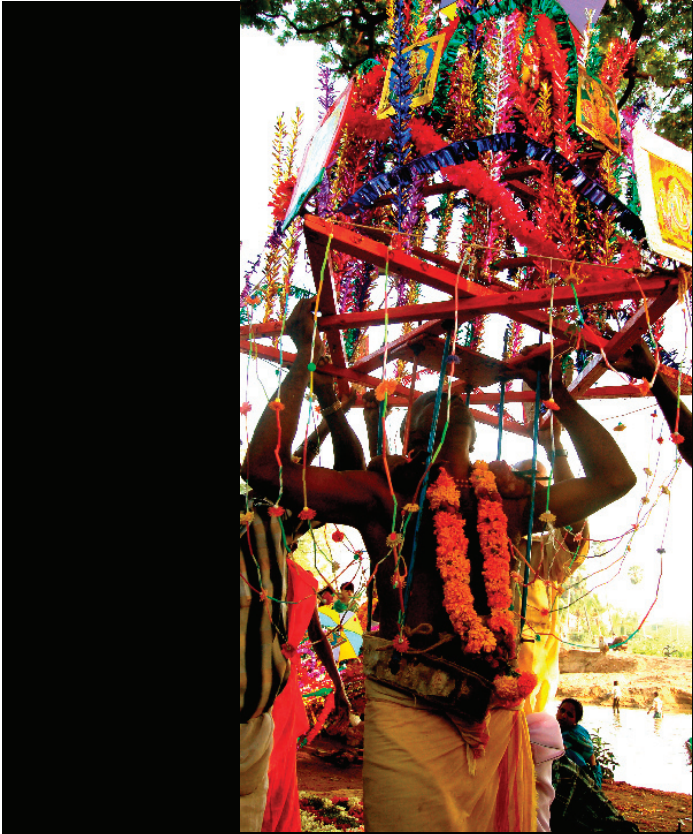
Determined & Decisive steps towards God



Entering into a trance



Carrying the weight of God



Printing specifications

The pages of the book will be printed on 210 gsm Matt Art paper.
Four color printing

The text on the cover will either be screen printed or laminated.

Hard bound book.

Conclusion

The devotees belong to those people who are trying to connect to their past even as the growth of urban India threatens them.

Despite all its complexity and amplitude, the festival is actually about the simplicity of faith and belief.

The people have a conviction beyond one's immediate recognition. Though a little apprehensive in the beginning, towards the end it was a picture of warmth and genuineness.

The experience has created an impact and slowly a transformation has taken place. The interactions have touched me and I am glad to have been able to develop a long lasting and memorable relationship with these people.

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<http://www.dakshinachitra.net/scripts/tn-ayyanar.asp>

Photography work that I referred to;

<http://www.sharadhaksar.com/>

Rai, R; "A Life Dedicated", 2004, Timeless Books.