

Design Resource

Margazhi Festival - Tamilnadu

Events and Artefacts

by

Neha Balasundaram and Prof. Ravi Poovaiah
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/margazhi-festival-tamilnadu>



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Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/margazhi-festival-tamilnadu/about-margazhi>

About Margazhi

“Margazhi” is the name of a month in the Tamil calendar. To be more specific, it is the ninth month of the Tamil calendar and is considered to be the most auspicious month of the entire year. This month is known by other names, such as “Agrahayana” or “Margasirsha”, the ninth month in the Hindu calendar, the Panchaanga. The calendars are regularly updated by astrologers who use Vedic calculations and astronomical events, but if we take the Gregorian calendar as a reference, the month lies approximately in the period of mid-December to mid-January.

Many cultures around the country consider this time period to be more auspicious than usual, and each of them has different reasons. People of these regions find their own way to celebrate this spiritual month with colourful kolams in the thresholds of homes, melodious music and dance concerts and whatnot. Margazhi is more than just a festival, it is in fact a month throughout which people celebrate their traditions, an effort by the people to reconnect with their spiritual side.

In the following sections, we shall explore more about Margazhi, and how it is celebrated in other regions and we will then narrow down on the various Tamil literature and artefacts that are associated with this festival. We will also understand, in more detail, the events that take place during this month in the city of Chennai, which is widely regarded as the cultural capital of the country.

Climatic, Astronomic and Astrological conditions

This is the coldest month of the year for many Indian regions, and this is very refreshing, especially for the southern parts of the country that spend most of their time in the heat. Hindu texts define a traditional human year as the sun's northern (Uttarayana) and southern (Dakshinayana) movements in the sky and the next year begins when the sun returns to the same starting point. The Margazhi month marks the beginning of the Uttarayana. After this month, the northward movement of the Sun begins (Yaajnaseni, 2019). An [animated visualization](#) by Kishore S Kumar shows how the sun moves during Uttarayana and Dakshinayana. (Kumar, 2013)

It is said that during Margazhi, Sadhanapada, the period of putting efforts ends, so it is an opportunity to work towards one's goals (Yaajnaseni, 2019). This time period is hence dedicated only to spirituality, and no other growth, conception or beginnings of things are encouraged.

Timescale - A Day in Deva Loka

The Deva Loka is considered to be the abode of the Gods, Goddesses and other celestial beings of the Hindu culture. Hinduism is known for its detailed explorations and explanations of the cosmic time scales. It is commonly believed that a year on earth equates to a day in Deva Loka. The month of Margazhi is considered to be the “Brahma Muhur-tam” or early morning time in the Deva Loka, which is all the more auspicious. (Burgess, 1860)

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The Month of Margazhi

“I manifest more in Margashirsha Maas among the different months in a year.” [1]

~Sri Krishna in Bhagavad Gita, 10.35, मासानां मागशीष हम्.



Krishna enlightening Arjuna with the Bhagwad Gita. (Image source)

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Regions and Celebrations

Tamilnadu

Margazhi is celebrated extensively in many regions of the southern state of Tamilnadu. The following is a description of the common practices followed in Tamilnadu during the month of Margazhi. Although every person may have slightly different ways of worshipping and celebrating during this month, a general commonly accepted routine is described in the following paragraphs, based on a couple of casual interviews conducted with people belonging to this region.

From the first day of the Margazhi month, one wakes up before sunrise, cleans the home and bathes. Some even opt for cold water baths in temple tanks. They then decorate their homes, draw kolams on the thresholds of their homes, offer prayers to the deities in the altars of their homes and chant the verses of the “Thiruppavai” and “Thiruvempavai”. Visiting temples, going to classical music and dance concerts, attending dramas and listening to “Hari-katha” - stories with a traditional theme- narrated by storytellers are just some of the activities one could do during the days of Margazhi.

Of course, there are contemporary additions to the festival, with fests and fairs in Mylapore - the cultural hub of Chennai, music concerts of all genres, street musicians and so much more, adding to the festive spirit of Margazhi. These various events and practices are discussed in more detail in the upcoming sections.



Floral kolam. (Image source)

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Margazhi concerts. (Image source)

During the month of Margazhi, many other festivals are celebrated in this region, and other neighbouring regions like parts of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala:

- **Vaikunta Ekadasi** marks the end of the Margazhi month. This day is when the door (a physical doorway constructed in temples) to “Vaikuntam” (the heavenly abode of Vishnu) is considered to be wide open for everyone. People observe a fast and pass through the doorway which is thought to lead them to Vaikuntam.
- **Arudhra Dharisanam** is the day when Shiva is said to perform his cosmic dance in the form of Nataraja. This day is when the Arudhra star shines brightest, which is thought to be the golden red flame that shines when Shiva does his cosmic dance. This is said to be the longest night of the year, occurring on a full moon day in the month of Margazhi. (Kannikeswaran)

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- **Pavai Nombu** is a fast taken up by young girls and women who seek the blessings of the Pavai (originally thought to be the goddess Katyayani, a form of Durga) and pray for peace and prosperity in the family and to get a suitable husband in their future. More about this is discussed in the following sections.

- **Thyagaraja Aradhana** is when the famous Carnatic singer and composer Thyagaraja from the late 1700s is celebrated. This involves group renditions of his music. The “Thyagaraja Aaradhana” which is a commemorative music festival dedicated to the prolific composer is held in the latter part of the Margazhi season.

Other Regions

Odisha

In Odisha, this month is called Margashira, and every Thursday in this month is celebrated as a festival known as “Manabasa Gurubara”. It is believed by the people that goddess Lakshmi visits people’s homes during this month and removes all pain and negativity. The harvest of the Kharif season is worshipped as goddess Lakshmi on these Thursdays. People keep their homes very clean and invite the goddess inside. The doorstep and entrances of the home are plastered with cow-dung paste and the rest of the house is decorated with aesthetically designed motifs called “Jhoti” or “Chita” using the ground semi liquid rice paste or “pithau”.



Jhoti being created. (Image source)

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Idol of Maa Lakshmi for Manabasa Gurubara. (Image source)

This festival is closely associated with the harvest, and people consider that a successful harvest is due to the grace of Lakshmi. (Samal, 2020)

Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

The Margazhi month proceedings closely resemble those that take place in Tamilnadu. In addition to the above-mentioned festivals, the end of Margazhi is also celebrated with the Makara Sankranti and Thyagaraja Aradhana. (Telanganatoday, 2021)

Thailand

The Triyampawai -Trippawai is a fifteen-day ceremony celebrated annually in December and January by the Thai royal court Brahmans. This ceremony is of great historical interest because it evinces a mostly forgotten link between the ritual culture of Siam (now Thailand) and Tamil Nadu. Although it may have originated from the South Indian regions, the Thai Brahmans have their own way of celebrating this period now with distinct but relatable practices. (McGovern, 2020)

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Margazhi and Literature

Andal

Andal is a female poet and saint who lived in the 8th century. She was the only female out of the 12 Alvar saints of south India, who devoted themselves to the Hindu god Vishnu. She was found as a little child under a tulsi plant by Periyalvar, another Alvar saint, who adopted her. She undertook a religious vow of fasting (a 'Paavai Nombu') during the month of Margazhi and composed famous Tamil literary works Thiruppavaai and Nachiar Tirumozhi, which are recited avidly during the Margazhi season. Her love and devotion to Vishnu are very evident when one reads the verses of these literary treasures. Andal, her Pavaai Nombu and her literary works are central to the celebration of Margazhi. A temple dedicated to her is located in Srivilliputtur, Tamilnadu.

Thiruppavai and Nachiar Thirumozhi

The Thiruppavai is a set of 30 verses or "Pasurams" in praise of Vishnu, who is known as Perumal, and yearns to be united with him and wants to serve him eternally. In this work, she also talks about the vow she undertakes and says that it can bring happiness and eternal bliss. (Mohanlal, 2011) The Nachiar Thirumozhi, which literally translates to "Sacred sayings of the Goddess", is a set of 142 Pasurams divided into 14 segments, and each is called Tirumozhi. Similar to the Thiruppavai, this work of literature reveals Andal's love and yearning for Perumal (Rajarajan, 2017). One verse of the Thiruppavai is sung every day in the regions that celebrate Margazhi as every verse of the literary work corresponds to one day of Margazhi. Both the Tiruppavai and Nachiar Thirumozhi are recited in front of the shrines kept in homes of people and in temples too, by the devotees.



A depiction of Andal. (Image source)

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Thiruvempavai

Thiruvempavai is another important literary work in Tamil, and it is a part of Thiruvagasam, which is a compilation of hymns and was composed by the Nayanmar (Shaivite Bhakti poet) called Manickavasagar. This was composed in the temple town of Thiruvannamalai during the month of Margazhi, as the town folk celebrated the “Pavai Nombu” (a sacred vow), which was also undertaken by Andal. This was (and continues to be) observed by unmarried girls (called “Pavai”) who wished to unite with God as their husband.

Young girls and women still undertake this Nombu or sacred vow during the entire month of Margazhi and recite the 20 verses of the Thiruvempavai, one on every day of the month.

Other Literary Works

There is mention of the spiritual month Margazhi in many literary works of different languages and regions. Some of the most prominent ones are as follows:

- In the Bhagwat Gita, Krishna says “I manifest more in Margashirsha Maas among the different months in a year” to Arjuna.
- In the Skanda Purana, which is the largest of the eighteen Mahapuranas in Hinduism (Wisdom Library, 2020), the first chapter mentions the “greatness of the month of Margashirsha”.
- The legend of Katyayani Vratham, the vow taken up by Andal to attain Perumal, is described in the Bhagavata Purana. The “Gopis” who were young daughters of cowherd folk who lived in Gokula of Braja, prayed to Katyayani and took up the vow for the entire duration of Margashirsha to get Lord Krishna as their husband. They bathed in the Yamuna river at sunrise, observed fasts, made earthen idols of the goddess and offered her flowers and incense. (Sri Katyayani Vrata, 2010)

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Artefacts

Margazhi means many things to many people. In this section, we shall focus on some important symbols and artefacts that come to one's mind when one thinks of Margazhi. This information is based on casual interviews conducted with people belonging to Chennai, Tamilnadu.

Kolam

Kolam is a well-known form of decoration practised by many south Indian households. It is a decorative pattern drawn on the thresholds of homes, made with rice flour or in recent times, chalk powder.



Women drawing kolam in front of the temple. (Image source)

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Although Kolam is drawn every day, it is emphasized more during Margazhi, and waking up before sunrise, bathing, cleaning out the area on the threshold and laying out the kolam is a part of the daily routine in the month of Margazhi. The women of the house, who mostly draw the kolam, try many different new patterns and sometimes even work together on bigger kolams. Kolams are not only limited to homes but are also drawn in temples and entrances of other buildings. Some kolams may even have colours and flowers as part of them. The “Margazhi Kolam” as people call it, has a small ball of cow dung in the middle with a pumpkin flower inserted in it.



Margazhi kolam with pumpkin flower. (Image source)

Andal Attire

Andal was discussed in brief in the previous section. In this section, some of the elements of her attire in which she is commonly depicted will be discussed. These artefacts and symbols appear more commonly during the month of Margazhi in Tamilnadu and surrounding regions.

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Her Hairstyle

Andal has a distinctive hairdo in all of her depictions, which is a small bun, called “Kondai”, to the side of the braid. It is a recurring symbol representing Andal and is adorned by many south Indian brides, during their wedding ceremonies. The small bun is decorated with jewels, a couple of pearls hanging from the end and jasmine flowers. The idols worshipped in the temples are decorated with a headpiece, but some of the visual depictions of the goddess have a small bun of hair.



Andal idol in Srivilliputtur temple. (Image source)

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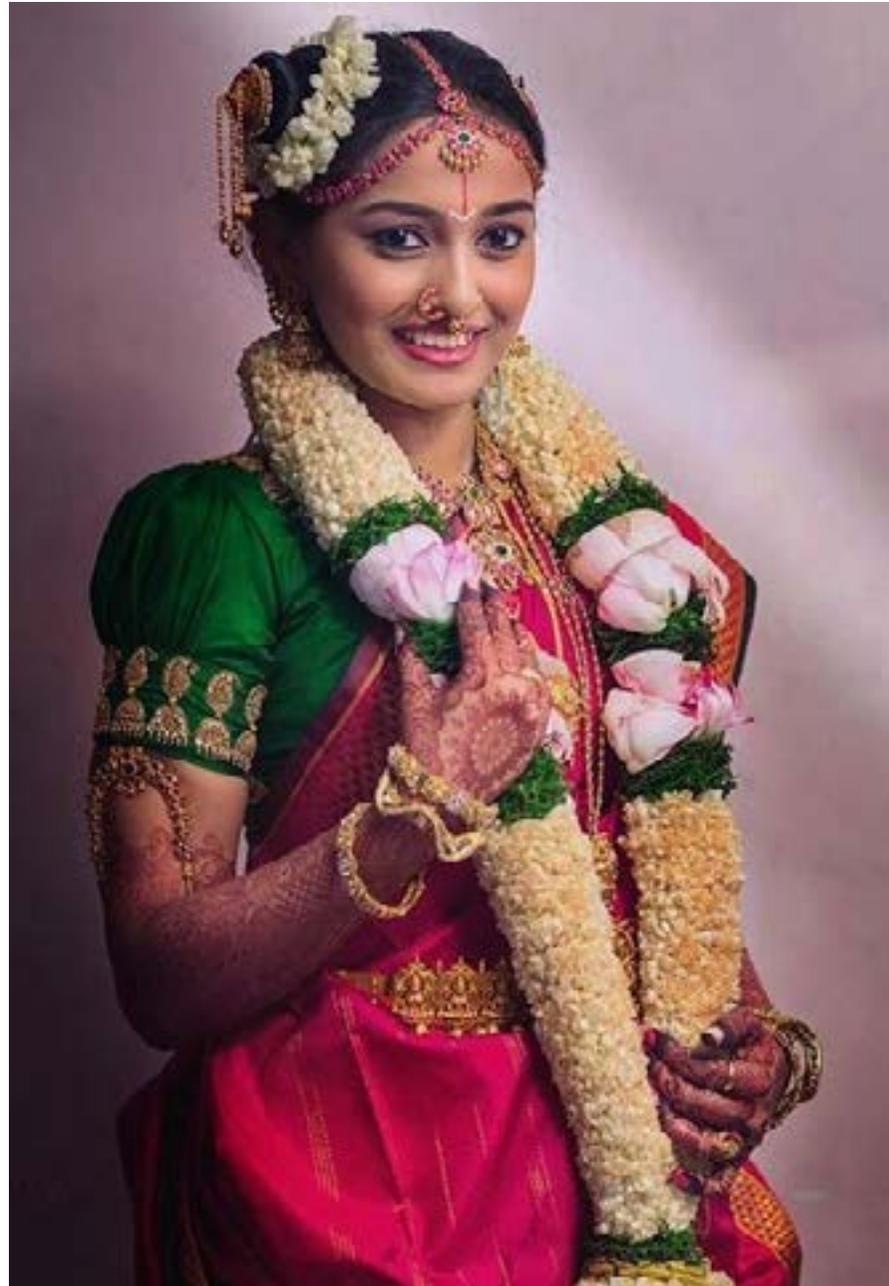
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The Andal hairstyle adorned by brides. (Image source)

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It is said that the marriage of Andal and Perumal was divine and hence, the brides are dressed up similarly indicating that their wedding is divine too.

Her Garland

Andal, who was initially known as “Kodhai”, made it clear that she yearns to be married to the Lord Perumal. She eventually started making garlands as offerings to the Lord, but only after she wore them first. She continued to do this until one day, she was found out by her father Periyalvar, who forbade her from repeating this, and a new garland was immediately made. Later in the night, it is said that Perumal appeared in Periyalvar’s dream, and said that he wanted only Andal’s offerings, and that is how Andal gets her name, which literally means “the one who ruled over the lord”.



Andal’s garland “Andal Maalai”. (Image source)

The tradition is still kept up in the Srivilliputtur temple, where the garland is first offered to the Andal idol, and then taken to the Venkateshwara temple in Tirupati and vice versa during the Brahmotsavam festival. The garland follows a distinct style and is made of tulsi (Holy Basil), Sevanthi (Yellow Chrysanthemum) and Sampangi (Champa) flowers.

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Her Parrot

Andal, In Her 'Nachiar Tirumozhi', talks about her parrot and it is said that her singing about the parrot may refer to her sending parrots as messengers of love to Perumal. Parrots are also said to signify messengers of love, they are considered to be the vehicle of Kamadeva, the Hindu god of human love or desire.



The Srivilliputhur handmade parrot. (Image source)

In the town of Srivilliputhur, Andal's parrot is hand-crafted, with fresh green leaves for its body, pomegranate flower for beak and mouth and Bamboo sticks for legs. An article published by The Hindu talks about S Raman, who is 65 years old and is the last man left in the community of parrot makers, which spanned seven generations in that town. He single-handedly collects all the materials required and creates the parrot in four hours every day. (Krishnamachari, 2013)

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S. Raman creating the leaf parrot. (Image source)

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Sweet Pongal Prasadam in Leaf Cups

Margazhi means many things to many people. One thing that everyone commonly enjoys is the “Chakkarai Pongal Prasadam” which is the sweet dish that is offered to the deities first and distributed to temple visitors. Although Prasadam is given on many other occasions, it's given consecutively every day in the early mornings when people visit their local temples. A very common sight is a long queue of people waiting inside the temples for fresh Prasadam in those little lotus leaf cups.

Prasadam is given to every single person who visits the temple and it reflects the philanthropic spirit of temples, which regularly feed those in need of food. These recipes are also passed down generations and are cherished by everyone who has tasted it. The process is also sustainable as the food is never wasted, and it's served in biodegradable leaf cups, which everyone knows and loves.



Prasadham in leaf cups. (Image source)

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Swarga Vasal

Vaikunta Ekadashi, as discussed in the previous section, marks the end of the Margazhi season. This day is when the doors to “Vaikuntam” (the heavenly abode of Vishnu) are considered to be wide open for everyone. The presiding deities (a form of Vishnu) of the temples are brought outside in the early morning, passing through the opened doors.

This is an important event in the Ranganathaswamy temple in Srirangam, Tamilnadu, which has a dedicated “Swarga Vasal” which is opened only once a year. People observe a fast on this day, visit temples and walk through this gate and this is considered as them entering the doors to Vaikuntam. Therefore, these opened doors are a common symbol that marks the end of the Margazhi season.



Swarga vasal at Srirangam temple - door to Vaikuntam. (Image source)

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To some people, it signifies the start of a brand new year, and as they pass through the doorway they hope their sins are forgiven and are allowed to start the year afresh.



Presiding deity of Srirangam temple crossing the doorway. (Image source)

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Events During Margazhi Season

Traditional Events

Madras Music Festival

Every year, Chennai city organises a two-month Music Season, said to be among the largest music festival in the world, with audiences and artists from across India participating in more than 1,500 performances spread all over the city's public spaces. (UNESCO Creative Cities Network, 2017). Many key music organizations called "Sabha"s in the city organize events of their own, but the most notable is the "Margazhi festival" by The Music Academy. The festival was founded in 1928 and the Academy has been hosting it since then, uninterruptedly, even during World War II and the 2004 tsunami (Shekar, 2020).



Singer Bombay Jayashri at the Music Academy during the fest. (Image source)

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The festival eventually came to be known as the “Madras music festival” or “Chennai music festival”. The music festival involves other events too like dance and drama.



Performance at the Music Academy during the festival. (Image source)

As important as the events themselves are the food served at “Sabha canteens” during the concerts. Some of the best caterers in the region are stationed outside these Sabhas and once the concert is over, people rush outside to get their hands on the piping hot delicacies from famous Tamil-Brahmin cuisine. These experiences in Sabha canteens were very commonly mentioned as the “most memorable” parts of the festival by most of the people interviewed. It is also said that the Margazhi festival may have begun not just to celebrate culture but also as political weapons, to revolt against British imperialism. This was an effort to “mobilize irreverence towards the then reigning crown”. (Ramanathan, 2016)

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Canteen at Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha. (Image source)

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Veedhi Bhajana

“Veedhi Bhajana” literally translates into “singing devotional songs on the street”, which is essentially what this tradition is. People wake up in the early morning and in their traditional attire, playing tunes on their classical instruments like the Tambura and Manjira, singing devotional songs and famous Tamil compositions. They walk barefoot around the streets of their local temple even in cold temperatures. This is a regular Margazhi tradition and Veedhi bhajan groups have emerged and regularly perform for the locality.



Early morning Margazhi Veedhi Bhajans. (Image source)

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Neha Balasundaram and Prof. Ravi Poovalah
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://www.dsource.in/resource/margazhi-festival-tamilnadu/events-during-margazhi-season>

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Kathakalakshepam

The art of classical storytelling, “Kathakalakshepam”, means “narrating the stories of ancient text in a comprehensive manner to the common people.” The storyteller is highly competent in ancient stories, Hari Kathas (stories of Vishnu), epics and other forms of classic literature and they narrate, sing and enact these stories to the audience. The storyteller is trained in classical music too and includes music in their stories. They usually perform in troupes with percussionists and other instrumentalists and the storyteller breaks away into song, followed by the instrumentalists who are masters of improvisation. (Swaminathan, 2016). These events are cherished by the older members of the city as this is a place where they can experience the stories they may or may not know in a more engaging manner accompanied by Carnatic music that pleases the soul.



Visaka Hari, a Harikatha exponent. (Image source)

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Contemporary Additions

Mylapore Festival

As one would guess, during this festive season, many stalls, shops, canteens selling South Indian cuisine, and many cinema and concert venues displaying cultural content emerge. It is more than just a cultural event at this point, as this is the flagship event of many Sabhas in the city. One of the other important events is the “Mylapore festival” organized every year by Sundaram Finance, an investment service provider, based in Chennai. It is held in Mylapore, the cultural hub of Chennai city. This is a full-fledged fest involving contests, stalls, concerts held in unexpected venues like parks or on the street and talks. Visiting this festival has almost become part of the Margazhi tradition for many people in the city.



Kolam contest, part of Mylapore festival. (Image source)

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Carnatic concert in Mylapore festival. (Image source)

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A significant event is the Kolam competition, for which an entire street is cordoned off, and over a hundred people design kolams within an hour or two. The kolams are left for others to spectate. Traditional games and Thanjavur painting workshops for kids are also some interesting options for the younger audiences (Surendran, 2020).



Pallankuzhi contest (traditional game), Mylapore festival. (Image source)

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Newest additions to the celebration

People always find new ways to celebrate festivals, and the festival itself, and what it means to the people evolve over time. One thing that remains is how it brings people together and helps them connect to their roots and spiritual side. In recent times there has been a rise in folk music and dance events, which is also an effort to re-vive dying folk art forms. An example is the “Margazhiyil Makkalisai”, a festival that offers a platform for folk and street musicians and is an attempt to make Margazhi more inclusive. Art shows displaying all things “Margazhi”, mobile apps that help its users find concerts that happen around the city and a series of **illustrations** by Biswajit Balasubramaniam depicting people during the Margazhi season are just a few of the new additions to all the Margazhi festivities.



Margazhi Musings - 6 by Biswajit Balasubramanian. (Image source)

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Margazhiyil Makkalisai, folk and street artist festival. (Image source)



Margazhi musings - Art show savouring the art of Margazhi. (Image source)

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A day in Margazhi - An infographic

Based on all the information collected, an infographic summarizing the events and artefacts of Margazhi has been designed. It shows what a day in Margazhi typically looks like, from sunrise to sunset.

- The day would start off with a bath and designing beautiful Kolams in front of homes. Some visit temple tanks and take a cold water bath there. They then dress in traditional attire - a saree, madisar or dhoti and get ready for the day.
- Next on the list would be visiting a temple, and either participating or hearing a Veedhi Bhajanai procession. Having sweet Pongal Prasadam is something one will never miss out on when one goes to temples. Women would also do the required tasks and worship at their altar for their Pavai Nombu.
- Singing Thiruppavai and Thiruvempavai would happen either in the temple itself, or there would definitely be melodious Carnatic music playing on the radio or loudspeaker.
- The fun part of the day is here when the people visit fests and fun events in the city like the fancy-dress competition for kids, kolam contest, playing traditional games or maybe a bit of street shopping.
- Last but not least, the day ends with a soul-stirring Carnatic music concert (they are actually held throughout the day, but the late evening spots are reserved for the best artists), a visually enthralling dance or drama or some folk music performances, and to top it off, having the most delicious food at the Sabha canteen is the best way to finish off the day.

The infographic created was shown to the same people who were interviewed and was verified by them.



A day in Margazhi - an Infographic (pdf [here](#)).

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