

THIRUKARTHIKAI

THIRU KARTHIKAI festival is surely one of the most beautiful of South Indian festivals. This festival falls in the Tamil month of Karthigai when the star Krithikai is on the ascendant and usually occurs on a full moon day.

Karthikai Deepam, the festival of lights basically a Tamil festival, is celebrated throughout Tamil Nadu during the Tamil month of Karthikai (November-December). Not many of us are aware that it is one of the oldest festivals celebrated in the State, perhaps even before people began celebrating Deepavali and Navarathri.

One of the earliest references to the festival is found in the Ahananuru, which dates back to the Sangam Age (200 B.C. to 300 A.D.). The Ahananuru clearly states that Karthikai is celebrated on the full moon day (pournami) of the Tamil month of Karthikai. It was one of the most important festivals (peruvizha) of the ancient Tamils. Avaiyyar, the renowned poetess of those times, refers to the festival in her songs.

The Karthikai Deepam day commemorates the appearance of the Lord as a jothi sthambam, an infinite pillar of light at Arunachala. Because of the confluence of Karthikai star and full moon day in this month, this day is favored for worship of Muruga who, born in a spark from Shiva's jnanagni was brought up by Kruthika maidens.

There is also another story which states that there was a demon who had, by severe austerities, obtained the boon that he could be invincible and immortal so long as the three forts in which he had entrenched himself were not demolished at one stroke. Because of these three forts, he had come to be known as Tripurasura. The forts were impregnable, one within the other. If only one or two of them were destroyed by his opponents, they would immediately spring up again as strong as ever and the demon would remain unconquerable for such was the boon. Only when all the three forts were demolished and razed to the ground at one stroke and at one time could the demon be vanquished and destroyed. All the forces of good-the gods-tried to rid the world of the atrocities and tyranny of the demon but could not succeed. They could destroy one fort or at least two and that too one after the other and the forts would spring up again. In despair the defeated gods approached Lord Shiva to come to their rescue and protect the world.

The merciful Lord Shiva agreed and remembering the boon the demon had been blessed with, Lord Shiva took out His Arrow and shot it at the three forts and lo! The impregnable walls came crumbling down and became dust and could not come into being again and the fearful demon deprived of his invincible shelter was slain. The whole Universe heaved a sigh of relief and once again righteousness reigned in the world. People could freely follow their religious duties and live in peace and prosperity. It was this auspicious Kartika Purnima-Full Moon Day-when this great victory of good over evil was achieved and so it is observed as a day of rejoicing and at night a huge bonfire(chokkapan) is lit in honour of the Lord's victory.

All our religious stories or the so-called myths are fraught with deep meaning and this story is no exception. The philosophical teaching is clear. Every individual soul is encased in three bodies-the Karana, Sukshma and the Sthula. The food and breath sheaths make up the gross or physical body, sthula sharira. The breath, emotion and intelligence sheaths make up the subtle or astral body, sukshma sharira. The intelligence and bliss sheaths make up the causal body, karana sharira. The three bodies are the different vehicles of our consciousness. It is only by the Grace of the Almighty, the Lord Shiva - the Paramatman – we can free ourself from all the three bodies and attain eternal Moksha.

Karthikai festival is celebrated with great fervour at Thiruvannamalai, the abode of Lord Karthikeyan and Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva and Lord Karthikeyan or Muruga, are offered special prayers during this festival. With the fall of dusk, large number of lighted oil lamps, set in front of every home on both sides of the street, is a sight enough to evoke a deep sense of awe at the significance and beauty that underlies this festival. Earthen lamps, brass lamps, silver lamps of all shapes and sizes, tall and small, artistically wrought and merely functional, all set up to be lighted by the ladies of the house who appear to be experts at placing them in the most aesthetic combinations possible. A majority of the houses display at least an average of 30 to 50 lamps on large `kolams' drawn before every home.

It is customary in our families that when a girl gets married, her parents give her gifts of many lamps, made of both silver and brass, while her mother-in-law also gifts her a lamp. These lamps are all lit together at our homes during the festival of Thiru Karthikai. Throughout the month of Karthikai, a couple of oil lamps adorn the outside of every home. It is also customary in our

families, for the Girl's parents to present New Dresses to the newly Weds, preferably of Pure Silk material, on their 1st Karthikai festival after the marriage.

Most of our families prepare the following special dishes on this festival day and offer to Gods as "Prasadam/Neivedhyam". (Detailed, step-by-step, Preparation methods (Recipes) of these dishes are given, in "Our Community Favourite Dishes Recipe" section of Thondai-mandala Mudaliars, web site's home page.).

1. PANCHAMIRTHAM.
2. KARTHikai PORI
3. APPAM
4. ADHIRASAM.

The `Neyvedhyam' is placed in front of the Kuthuvizhakku and other lamps and prayers are offered. The Vizhakku Pooja is performed by lady members, in the presence of all family members. Bajans and devotional songs are sung by all the family members together during the Pooja. (Devotional songs by great Tamil poets are available for ready reference and for reciting in our "Thuthi Padaalgal" section of our web-site's Home-Page). After the Pooja, lamps are placed in front of the house and also on compound walls uniformly and prasadam given to all members, guests. Prasadam is also given to our Neighbours, relatives and friends.