

Attukal Pongala

The Attukal Pongala festival is an annual event where Pongala, an offering of boiled rice is made to Attukal Amma, which translates as “mother” (Jennett 2005:35). The festival has grown substantially over the years, depicting the profound meaning the festival has to women. The festival is held in Thiruvanthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, India. It is a festival of unique significance, as the devotees are all women, which within the Hindu tradition is not an abundant occurrence as Hinduism is known as a male-dominated religion and until recently there has been little research into the roles women play. This is of great value as women perform complex and intriguing rituals (Gross 68). The festival is noteworthy as women from various classes, communities and religions band together to worship the goddess (referred to as mother but who has numerous names which are used interchangeably, such as Devi, Bhagavati and Bhadrakali which respectively mean goddess, powerful supreme deity and auspicious Kali) [from this point forward the goddess will be referred to as Bhagavati]. The festival serves to bring women together as a whole, not divide them into castes and classes. This dissolving of caste distinction is noteworthy as “fifty years ago the mothers of the women who today offer Pongala could not have drunk from the same well, eaten in the same room, or even walked down the street at the same time; yet today they sit and cook for the Goddess side by side” (Jennett 2005: 43). Now women from all different walks of life perform the rituals together. The only women that are unable to participate in the ritual are those women who are menstruating. These women, as well as women who are not able to attend for other reasons, may ask a friend or family member to prepare an offering of Pongala for them (Jennett 2005:40).

The offering of Pongala to Attukal Amma is a ritual in the non-Sanskritic tradition; therefore, there are no written texts, and instead the text is song and poetry that is orally

exchanged through rituals, dances, and dramas (Jennett 2005:36). The festival is held in late February to early March, during the month of Kumbham, which means earthen pot (Jennett 2005:40). The festival has grown from women performing the ritual in the fields to small shrines, to gatherings of hundreds of thousands of people (Jennett 2000:5). Pongala day is the ninth day during the ten day festival, which also coincides with a full moon. On the ninth day, the women wake early, and begin the day by pouring water on their head, in preparation for Attukal Pongala. Before the sun has even risen, the women will set three bricks in the formation of a triangle on which to later set their earthen pots (Jennett 2005:6). Women are dressed in their traditional *mundu*, which are two lengths of white cotton wrapped over a skirt and blouse. The cotton is preferable in comparison to the polyester variety for safety reasons, as the close quarters (2 feet separate one fire from the next) create a fire hazard (Jennett 2005:42). By the time the sun begins to rise, the streets are full of music and people. The numerous people spread for miles and miles surrounding the Attukal Temple. Many women have arrived many days earlier to ensure they find the most auspicious spots and throughout the entire festival many devotees have set up shrines for Bhagavati (Jennett 2000:7).

Living near the temple is thought to be auspicious and it is believed that the goddess will bring prosperity to those who live in her land. Many people that live within or close to the Attukal Temple kindly open their courtyards to provide family, friends and even strangers a place to cook their Pongala (Jennett 2005:14).

By midmorning the pots will begin to be filled with the necessary ingredients, such as rice, water and jaggery (unrefined sugar cane) (Jennett 2000:7). The fact that the ingredients are very cheap allows nearly any woman to participate. However, even before the barriers of castes began to fall, the upper castes would supply the women of lower castes with the supplies needed

(Jennett 2005:38). Songs are continually sung and the song that is retold throughout the festival is the story of Kannaki, a woman who is betrayed by her husband and her king. There are numerous versions of the story but the deeper meaning is found through what Kannaki symbolizes, which is the “capacity of divine power in female form to bring retributive justice to those whom the law fails to protect” (Jennett 2005:44). As this song is again being recounted, the priest will begin to light some of the devotees’ fires. While this is occurring a loud speaker dictates the instructions so a mass of women devotees, who are unable to visually follow the priests actions, are able to follow in step. It is important that the women do the cooking together as it provides a sense of unity and also allows the women to band together and leave their many other daily worries behind. It is a unique day as it is one of the few days where they are not responsible for their children or husbands (Jennett 2005:42) Once the fire is lit, they wait for the water to boil. Once that water is brought to a boil the women will slowly add the rice, ensuring they do not spill and add the rice in an *arati* motion (circular motion).

At this point some women differ on whether or not it is auspicious to allow their pot of Pongala to boil over; it is crucial for some to allow their pot of rice to boil over, where other women feel that it is critical that it does not flow over as it seems wasteful (Jennett 2005: 45). This in conjunction with the fact that some women use red-rice in the ritual while others use white polished rice signifies how the ritual has been tailored to the various women and their traditions and what the ritual symbolizes to each individual. The objective of performing the ritual naturally varies across the women who perform the ritual. For example some women “ask the Goddess for something and make a vow and if it is granted they will offer Pongala” (Jennett 2005:46). This signifies the mutual relationship between the women and the Goddess. While others feel that by feeding Bhagavati it will provide additional blessings to the community

(Jennett 2001:15). Once the rice has finished cooking the women wait for a priest to sprinkle rosewater on the rice in order to bless the goddess. After this women will begin to leave and return their trek back to their homes to share their Pongala with their friends and families (Jennett 2001:16).

References

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