

Temple of Colours

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Narayan Pillay built a wood and thatched hut 178 years ago. A clerk of the East India Company who had sailed to Singapore with Sir Stamford Raffles, Pillay did not realise the significance of this humble structure. It was Singapore's first Hindu temple. The present day structure was formed in 1863, rebuilt when the original could no longer cater to all its patrons. Generations and many renovations later, the Mariamman temple now nestles amidst the towering skyline of an ultra modern city. Ironically, it is situated in what is now Chinatown. Mariamman is a manifestation of the Hindu Great Goddess, who is worshipped for health and prosperity. South Indians, making up the majority of the small number of Indians in Singapore, call their goddesses Amman, meaning 'mother.'

The temple confronts. A blind man would wish he could see. A tall, tapering structure stands above the large, carved doors. This *gopuram* is characteristic of a South Indian temple. Completely adorned with sculptures, it celebrates various manifestations of the Goddess, along with other important deities, animal mounts, musicians, and angels. Each hoof, wrist, and flower is painted like it is the only entity in the world.

In her trademark white sari sits Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning and Music; her fingers lovingly caress the *veena*, a long stringed instrument. One can also spot Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity, a favourite among businessmen. There is also the Mother-Goddess who cares for the well-being of her children. But the most awesome manifestation is that of Kali – with her three-pronged spear, the *trishul*, she annihilates demons who threaten the cosmos. Her blood-smearred attire and garland of skulls sometimes invoke nightmares among the young.

I pause and stare. One look tells me what I have to do. Watching the devotees of temple, I remove my shoes, and wash my feet. The sounds of feminine anklets precede the ringing of the tiny bells on the massive carved doors as devotees enter the temple compound. Most devotees touch the floor and bring their hand to their chest or forehead respectfully. Everyone has cultivated a different habit since their childhood years. Footwear litters the area beside the entrance; designer shoes are

generally not worn because theft is feared, unfortunate as that is in such an institution. Newly washed feet darken the granite floor at the entrance; musky scents of incense and jasmine flowers fill the nostrils, and soon also permeate the pores and the hair. Parents chide their children for playing with the little bells on the door: “Do not disturb others! Behave and come inside!” harsh whispers hiss, as tiny hands are slapped and yanked away.

I look around to ask someone about the pronunciation of the temple’s name. An older man enters the temple with his entourage of family members. I ask, and he obliges beautifully: “Maa-ri-aman.” He has a few golden teeth. He says this with a grin, and the same amount of affection I would normally apply to chocolate. I repeat after him shyly, and his smile widens. We chat for a while.

For generations, his forefathers had crossed this very doorstep. In his childhood, he would chase the pigeons around the temple, much like the way his grandchildren are doing now. He, too, couldn’t pronounce Mariamman when he was young. “For me, it was the temple with the big Durga and tiger.”

Really? I look around for the tiger sculpture... Ah, there it is. There are two of them actually. Their sharp teeth and claws would make any child uneasy...But wait! Do I see toddlers amble gaily to the fearsome creatures to pat them?

“Children nowadays are not afraid of anything,” my old friend muses.

Dusk brings the sound of the *thavil* and the *nadaswaram* announcing the start of the evening prayers. Peace and quiet that prevailed in the late afternoon give way to a deafening tune. That is, if one could call it any kind of tune. The notes make no sense to me and the instruments are played so loudly, I am tempted to seek refuge at the other end of the temple. Devotees rise to greet these sounds. Priests march in authoritatively. They are all topless, and have loincloths wound around their waists, sarong-style. Some have their long hair in a bun.

Before each deity, the priests begin chanting mantras for the thousandth time, with well-practiced intonations, their eyes blank. They anoint the sculptures with vermilion powder and fragrant sandalwood paste, and move a lamp in circles in front the deity. It is a ritual performed several times every morning and evening.

Everywhere devotees fixate on their deities, some squint in concentration, their minds seemingly entwined with matters of consequence...dreams, worries, desires. Wants are dressed to resemble needs. These make the air weighty. Always starting with the God of Beginnings and the Remover of Obstacles, Lord Ganesh, devotees clasp their palms before each deity, and end by circling the sanctums

thrice. With his rotund frame, potbelly, and thick, short, elephant's trunk, it is little wonder that he is the favourite of children.

The priests bring the sacred flame around, and devotees put their hands to their heads after feeling its warmth. The priests smile at children, giving them extra raisins, nuts, and sweets. Prayer tickets, called *archana* sheets, can be bought at a tiny counter for a minimal sum. These entitle the devotee to a special prayer to the selected deity, performed by a priest. At the end of the prayer, the devotees are given bananas and betel leaves.

Some prostrate on the floor, others remain standing with bowed heads. Many prefer to enjoy the peace of the temple long after circling the sanctums. Hindus believe that quiet and solitary meditation in temples brings positive energy to the soul. All foreheads are marked with vermilion powder and sacred ash. Pigeons lumber right up to those seated for sweet *prasadam*, the food of offering. These birds are far from requesting: it seems their right to be fed here.

Tourists position themselves for good pictures. In this domain, colour is always striking; red, saffron, leaf green, and electric blue abound. I reach out to touch the carvings on the walls, half-expecting someone to slap my hands away, the way the children are chided. How long and how much does it take to build a temple like this? The artistry and sheer hard work is marvellous; voluptuous maidens and stocky cows are poised to leap out of the walls. Other visitors come in different skin colours and shapes, but we all peer at the English letterings in the same way, letting the words tumble around our tongues, but softly, as we're sure we could not possibly have the pronunciation right.

It is time, and yet I am reluctant to leave. Sitting down on the concrete ground, I want to enjoy these special smells and sounds. The temple invokes a queer sensation of peace and mild turmoil. It is both noisy and quiet. I notice that people speak little in the main area of the temple. Of what use are words in a place of silent footsteps, closed eyelids, smiles, nods, clasped palms?

A young woman smilingly offers me two spoonfuls of tamarind rice, which I gratefully accept with cupped hands. All devotees and visitors alike are given the food of offering. The rice is spicy and tangy.

Occasional winds nudge the flames of the large oil-lamps, and they throw a dancing glow onto the murals of the ceiling. These give me a neck ache, but are equally as fascinating as the dozens of sculptures adorning the temple walls. Lord Shiva is housing Goddess Ganga in his hair, while Parvati holds a sandalwood

sculpture affectionately... Children look upwards and spin round and round. The large coloured lotuses form kaleidoscopes in their eyes. Do Ganesha's eyes indeed follow us everywhere? When is our mother going to be done sitting and chatting in the temple? What did the moon taste like when Hanuman swallowed it? Will the pigeons eat from our fingers, and does Goddess Kali really eat naughty children?

I cannot help but turn around for a last look, as I step over the threshold to leave.