CHAPTER V

FAIRS AND FESTIVALS IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

There are festivals and fairs connected to each temple and society in the district of Tirunelveli. These festivals are more common in the temples in the rural areas, mostly connected with the rural temples.

One such festival is Kulasai Mutharamman koil festival known as *dussehra festival*. This temple, Mutharammam koil is, on the way to Kanyakumari 15 k.ms. from Thiruchendoor. There is a connection between Mutharammam temple and the Kulasehara sea shore. During the *dussehra festival, Mahishasura Samharam* takes place in this seashore. The festival starts on the day after the full moon in the Tamil month of *purattasi*. This festival is considered to be famous only next to *Mysore dussehra festival*. Prior to the festival men and women fast for 41 days and fulfill their vows to the goddess. The festival is for a period of 10 days. On the 10th day *Mahishasura Samharam* (destruction of the demon Mahishasura) takes place. The most important part of the festival, the gala function held on the 10th day attracts the tourists. Devotees participate with masks on their face, masks of gods and animals. They come with musical instruments providing the accompanying music for their hilarious dances. They
bless the devotees who seek their blessings, considering it to be equal to the blessings of the goddess. The other functions related to this festival are, prepare lights using rice powder and jiggery. Oil is put in the hole prepared in the middle and with cotton twig light is lighted and offered in front of the goddess. Most of the devotees wear red dress and dance eccentrically. The temple flag is carried in procession, on the back of the elephant. They put fire in the mud pot and carry it in the hands to offer their prayers to the goddess. The first function is hoisting the temple flag in the special mast inside the temple. The metal mast is covered with read cloth, and over it special variety of straw known as *koraipull* is found. The deity is adorned with green silk cloth. The devotees come to the temple on the first day of the festival and wear a special beads garland (*Rudraksha malai*). Various forms of vows are fulfilled. They light the camphor and put it on the top of their head, some people throw the infants in the air and catch them, which is believed to cure diseases in the children. People smear sandal paste on their faces, light camphor put on their tongue. Various offerings are made to the goddess. The goddess is decorated, many kinds of *abishehams* are carried on. Devotees offer anklets, couch, garlands of oranges, flowers and lime. Many folk dances such as *puliattam* (tiger dance), *karagattam* (dance with metal pots on the head) and other folk dances, are performed with folk drums.
accompanying them. These folk dances are followed by modern dances with cinema songs. Young boys and girls dance adorned with colourful dresses. People dance in various fancy dresses. The spread of the dance increases with the increase in the speed of the drum beat. Men folk dressed as women dance *kali nandanam*. These are artistic, colourful performances by the rural folks, which are attracting the onlookers, both devotees and the tourists. This is a time of great relaxation for the rural folk to find a vent for their piled up tensions and of course a time of relaxation for the onlookers. If this festival is organised and published, more tourists interested in cultural heritage will throng to this area.\(^1\)

**Sri Chorimuthu Ayyanar Temple - Singampatti (Karaiyar)\(^2\)**

This temple and the festival connected to it are of interest mainly to the rural people, the domestic tourists. The usual offerings as in any other rural temple, people shave their hair as offering to the God. The main God in this temple is Sorimuthu Ayyanar. Along with him there are other rural deities present such as Sri Mahalingam, Sangili Bhoothathar, Kathavarayar, Melavasal Bhootham, Vinayaga, Dhashinamoorthy, Kumbamamuni Periyasamy, Paathala Bhootham, Otrahakali, Karadimadan, Brahmarakshi, Pechi, Sudalaimadan, 

\(^1\) Personal experience of the researcher.  
karuppan, Karupee, Thalvaimadan, Thoondilmadan and Pattavarayar etc. Each and everyone finds a god or goddess who is his/her family deity. The devotees offer their pujas to their family deity here even if they do not know who is their deity.

Devotees have bath in the Thamiraparani river and come into the temple. They prepare sweet rice, inside the temple itself. A specialty of this temple is that, a pair of leather chappal is offered, by tying them with thread and hanging them in front of the deity. The devotees believe that, if they come in the next day morning, the sole of the chappal will be covered with mud and thorn. Then they believe that god has accepted their offering and worn it in the night while going into the forest and their wishes will be fulfilled.

The New Moon day known as Amavasai in the month of Adi (July-August) is a day of celebrations in this temple. The rural people gather in this place, in thousands, have their usual holy dip in the Thamiraparani river after their vows. Many dress in different costumes, many enchanted devotees dance iron chains in both their hands, wear iron bangles and standing in front of the Sudalai Amman beat themselves with the iron chains. They dance in trance. When the deity is taken in procession, with the accompaniment of drums, the trance dance (samiaduthal) is performed with increased spread. The devotees following the deity in procession, wear garlands made of
lime. The ladies wear yellow saris. Men wear various kinds of head
gears (Thalaipakai). The flag masts are taken but in the procession, by
the older devotees.

Dried branches of wood are piled, the flag mast carriers go
round the piled wood, and then lit the woods. Devotees too offer
camphor to burn the stick. As the fire leaps in the air, the voices rise
with the rise of the fire. People go into trance and dance. Then they
walk on the fire and then go into the temple. Once the people assemble
in the open space, the women begin to talk to each other in an un-
understandable language, known as God's language (Theivamozhi).
Outsides cannot understand what they are talking. The devotees talk
very fluently. Then the main incident of the festival is opened. The
zamindar, who is the custodian of the temple, appears in green
costume, an emperor's costume. People waiting for him, rejoice seeing
him. He sits on a special seat resembling a throne. He gets ready to
witness the performance of people walking on the ignited coal.
Another pyre is lit in honour of him, which is bigger than the earlier
one. The devotees go round the fire pit three times and then walk
through the pit, the heat seems not to hurt them. After the zamindar
gives the audience, he leaves the place. All those who had come with
him leave with him. After that the people around there cook, eat and
rejoice, before they leave. This temple festival may not be of great
importance from the point of view of foreign tourists. But it is of
great value for the rural people, domestic tourists.

Hindu festivals and fairs have several ramifications in the
society, economic, cultural and artistic spheres. Society as a whole
gains a lot by celebrating these fairs and festivals around the year.
Festivals have an enormous impact on our society. During a local
festival celebrated in a particular city, town or village, natives of that
place living at distant locations avail of the opportunity to return home
and take part in the celebration. Their sojourn at their native place
adds to the joy of the occasion from a cultural heritage perspective,
celebrations like *ratha yathras*, professional singers, dancers,
drummers and pipe players form an indispensable cultural part of
festivals.\(^3\) Whether prayers are offered in groups or in solitude, as in
one's home, certain basic features are common. Fasting (*upavas*) or
partaking of limited food, is also observed.\(^4\) Celebrations form an
integral and immeasurably important fabric of India's culture. The
amazing array of festivals celebrated across the length and breadth of
the incredible land of India is simple and said to be spell-binding.\(^5\) Be
it the festival of light-Diwali or the festival of colours. *Holi*, there is
gaiety all around. India, festivals are feasts of sights, smells, sounds

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\(^3\) *Fairs and Festivals of India*, Pusthak Mahal, Delhi, 2006, pp.8-9.
and tastes. Bazaars, folk troupes, folk dance and music merry go round. People clad in colourful and new attires, are some of the common features of the festivals.

**Pongal Festival**

Tamil Nadu is a land of many festivals. January marks the festival season, in the state. Tirunelveli District which is a very traditional part of India, is also giving importance to the celebrations of *pongal*, the main harvest festival. *Bogi pongal* and *Mattupongal* are celebrated with vigour and colourfully, usually on the 13th, 14th and 15th of January. A part of spring cleaning for *Pongal*, is carried on *Bogi day*. The first day of the Tamil month of Thai is celebrated as *Pongal*. On the *mattu pongal* day the bulls are overpowered. The man who overpowers the bull is considered to be the honour and hence honoured and gifts are given.

There is no dearth of fairs and festivals in Tamil Nadu and more particularly in Tirunelveli which is known for its tradition. The following are the main festivals in Tamil Nadu, spread over the year.\(^6\)

1. **Pongal** January
2. **Thaipoosam** January
3. **Mahasivarathri** February
4. **Masi Magam** February

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Festival</th>
<th>Month</th>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Sri Rama Navami</em></td>
<td>March</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td><em>Panguni Uthiram</em></td>
<td>March</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td><em>Tamil New Year day</em></td>
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<td>8</td>
<td><em>Chitra Pournami</em></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td><em>Guru Poonam</em></td>
<td>June</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td><em>Adi Pooram</em></td>
<td>June</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td><em>Pathinettam Perukku</em></td>
<td>July</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td><em>Avani Avittam</em></td>
<td>July</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td><em>Gayathri Jampam</em></td>
<td>September</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td><em>Vinayaka Chaturthi</em></td>
<td>September</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td><em>Mahalaya Ammavasai</em></td>
<td>September</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td><em>Gokulashtami</em></td>
<td>September</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td><em>Navarathiri (Dasara)</em></td>
<td>October</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td><em>Karthigai Deepam</em></td>
<td>November</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td><em>Kantha Sasti</em></td>
<td>November</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td><em>Deepavali</em></td>
<td>November</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td><em>Vaikunta Ekadasi</em></td>
<td>December</td>
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Most of the above mentioned festivals are celebrated in the district of Tamil Nadu. Along with these there are certain special festivals celebrated in this district. A brief list is given below which helps to understand the main tradition of this district: (i) *Karadaiyan*
Nonbu; (ii) Siruveethu Pongal; (iii) Owaiyar Viratham (iv) Agasthiyar Festival (v) Chorimuthu Aiyyanar Festival (vi) Margazhi Bazzar; (vii) Valliyur Teppa Thiruvizha; (viii) Mutharamman Koil Thiruvizha; (ix) Sankarankoil Thapaz; (x) Kulasehara Pathinan Dasara Festival; and (xi) Nellaiappar temple car Festival.

Some of these festivals are regular and some seasonal. Some are purely religious solemn observations mingled with austerities like fasting, motivation. All the festivals are celebrated with certain amount of pomp and glory. Some of the common festivals of this district are:

Adi-Puram Festival

Most of the Hindu temples celebrate Adipuram which falls in the month of Adi (July-August). The festival is one intended to propitiate the Goddess Sakthi Devi. If the Adipuram falls on a Friday, it is considered to be very precious. The festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm, since it is expected to get more energy for the devotees.

Avani Avittam

This festival falls in the month of August. This festival is celebrated by a section of the society, including Brahmans who wear holy thread across their chest as a mark of their cast. They renew this thread very solemnly on this day. It is noteworthy that despite the
changes brought about in society by modern ideas, this festival continues to be celebrated as ever with usual enthusiasm and religious fervor.

**Adi Thapas**

This festival is celebrated in Sankarankoil, in the month of *Adi*, (July-August). The fiction says that, in order to reveal the fact that Siva and Vishnu are not entirely separated entities, Siva revealed the form of god, as half side Vishnu and half Siva. Lakhs of pilgrims throng to this temple every year.

**Karthikai Deepam Festival**

It is a festival of lights celebrated in the month of *karthikai* (October-November). This festival is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of *karthikai*. Greater importance is attached to the propitiation of *agni* (fire) and all the houses are grandly lighted using, small mud lamps with cotton twig and oil in it. Lighting such lamps on a large scale is expected to wean away the negative forces in the house. In the evening there is a peculiar custom of bearing heaps of dry leaves, twigs, etc, known as "*chokkapanai*", which are symbolical of the aerial cars, of the *asuras* who were disturbing the sages, which are burnt by the fire emanating from the third eye of Shiva.
Karadaiyan Nonbu

Karadaiyan Nonbu is observed by women. Pleased by the observance of Goddess Parvathi, god Siva decided not to proceed anywhere without his consort. The women on that day fast and at the auspicious time consecrate a brass metal pot, placing a sacred thread on it. Later this thread is tied around the neck of the performing woman. It is also believed that this 'nonbu' will protect the life of the husband. This ritual is purely for ladies only. The foreign tourists, who are interested in the heritage of this district, will be surprised to observe the nonbu, where the wife prays not to be separated from the husband during this nonbu.

Chiruveettu Pongal

This means, pongal in the small house, which is a special feature of the culture of Tirunelveli district. It is celebrated after the regular pongal festival. This is to involve the children, both male and female, in the age group of 7 to 12. The children build a model (lay out) of a house with clay. In the middle of this chiruveedu (small house) they prepare pongal with the guidance of the elders. After offering the pongal prepared by them, to the gods it is offered to the elders, proclaiming their success in pongal preparation. This is a prelude for the future pongal. If the tourists get a chance to be in the district of
Tirunelveli during this time, they will enjoy the hectic activities of the children. It will be remarkable.

With every festival there is celebration, involving worship, merry making and social gathering. In most cases, the people, mainly the rural people get a chance to display their artistic talents such as, *kummi* (dancing with clapping of hands) *kolattam* (dancing with special colourful sticks) etc.

**Kummi**

During the time of *kodai* (Annual festival of village deity), ladies, mostly irrespective of age, assemble in front of the temple. The go in rounds, clapping hands and praising the gods. The rhythm with which it takes place, definitely is a feast for the eyes and ears.

**Mulaipari**

This is a festival which is celebrated throughout Tamilnadu, mainly in the rural areas. Seeds of the grains which sprout easily are sown in pots, after the women physically and mentally purify themselves, as an offering to the goddess. Women complete with each other to see that within the 9 days, whose grains have grown taller and thicker. On the 10th day of the festival the pots are carried on the heads of women. Accompanied with folk band and music, the petromax lights providing the illumination, the procession starts from the temples and go round the streets of the village or towns and reaches
the riverbed and the *mulaipari* is offered to the river. This is expected to bring prosperity in agriculture and families. This is a joyous celebration of women, especially, the young women to bring out their creativity in the way they decorate the pots and the plants grown.

**Unchiviruthi Aiyyar**

This is a specialty of Tirunelveli district. This is again a special feature of the Brahmin community. An orthodox poor profit comes with traditional dress, known as, *panchakatcham*. He will come with a copper pot hanging from his neck, with a small quantity of rice in it. He goes round the streets of the areas in which the Brahmins live. He moves about singing in praise of gods. When he reaches the threshold of the houses, the woman of the house come out with a cup of rice to offer him. He accepts it in his pot, and gives back from the pot, half a cup of rice, as a mark of blessing. The poor Brahmin who comes to receive rice is known as Uchiviruthi Ayyar. This practice is still continued in the Ambasamuthiram area of Tirunelveli district.

**Handicrafts in Tirunelveli District**

The small village of Patthamadai in Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu is famous for the elegantly weaved mats made out of a special kind of grass known as *koraipull*. The artisans here are very skillful in weaving mats with the grass, so dexterously that they do not look like mats. They are soft like cloth. The art work is superb. The artisans
weave the names of the names of people, the images of gods and goddesses, animals, images of leaders. These mats are known as super fine mats. These mats have a wide market in the other states of India and in the foreign countries. The carry the message and glory of our heritage to the other places within the country and abroad. The prices vary from rupees two thousand to four thousands depending on the silky nature of the mats. These can be folded, as we fold the clothes. Many artisans have received award for their skillful weaving of mats. The process is very dexterously carried on. The *koraipull* is carefully chosen, divided into very thin strains. A variety of mats, such as wedding mats with the names of bride and bridegroom woven in it, colourful picturesque mats used to hang on the wall, mats for worship, mats used to seat the guests during the lunch function, some thin mats used to spread over the beds to keep the beds cool, are woven.\(^7\) The mats produced here are a part of the culture of Tamil Nadu. The All India handicrafts Association, awarded a merit shield to the artisans, since they are using only natural colours, it is praiseworthy. Since the artisans do not get enough income, there is the danger that this art may disappear. It is the duty of the governments, the state and central to protect the artisans, by providing them enough market, publishing the

\(^7\) *Dinamalar* Supplement Business Issue, 19.10.2001, Personal visit to Pathamadai district.
glory of the products in the local and in the marks abroad. These mats have full potential to carry the message of the heritage of the country.

If religion is the life-line of people, the fairs and festivals that accompany worship of gods and goddesses, are colourful and attractive. The district remains colourful with gay and happiness and with religious fervor in most of the days, throughout the year. They offer opportunities for artisans living in and around Tirunelveli to show-case their intricately produced articles. Such of those articles are purchased by the tourist traffic who visit the places on occasions of celebrations in this region.