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A wonderland in homes

Navarathiri



Though the theme and fervour have changed over the decades, it is the same celebration providing the much awaited fanfare to one and all



THE festival season is in full swing and as each festival comes to an end, its successor is ushered in, to command its share of attention and festivity on people. The list of festivals is maintained assiduously by the elders to plan their budget accordingly, while the children eagerly await the dawn of each festival for its uniqueness.

Navarathiri, the festival of nine nights happens to be one of the major festivals among all. According to mythological sources, it is a victory for the female divinity over the evil — the *asura*, as Ambal vanquishes Mahisha by overpowering him. The victorious Ambal presents herself in all majesty and graces her devotees for nine nights.

This event was celebrated in homes in our state and images of Ambal along with other divine figures were set up in a format so as to honour the victory of the vibrant Ambal. She is said to be adorning the *kolu mandapam* in temples, seated amidst all paraphernalia. Thus started the practice of organising the kolu in homes, making use of dolls of all

forms and frames to adorn the steps — *kolu-padi*.

Decades back, it was a hereditary practice but with changing times, faiths and beliefs have also undergone transformation. Heredity is no longer the criterion and anyone, willing to set up a *kolu*, visits the market for a bagful of dolls initially and starts expanding it gradually.

The theme of the *kolu* usually revolves around divine figures which are made of clay and painted suitably. But later, decades have witnessed much advancement with papier mache, china clay and wood used as raw materials. The persons who create them are mostly descendents of great artisans who had so deftly preserved the profession.

Dolls are sold in almost all towns and cities in the state and watching the items on display is itself a delight. Once the dolls are arranged in the *kolu* format, it makes the children dance in delight. The enthusiasm reflects itself in the number of steps that are set up.

There is plenty of room for innovation and novelty, with family members both male and

female vying with one another in utilising their creative talents. The evenings are delightful as illumination and the rainbow coloured attires of women and children mingle, with laughter and mirth pervading the homes, in addition to the rendition of divine lyrics.

There is feast for the tummy too, with *sundal* varieties and other sweets making the rounds among the visitors. It was customary in the past to invite neighbours and friends personally, with little girls offering *kumkum*. But these are 'tech' days and messages are conveyed over phone or by e-mail. The traditional mode of offering *thamboolam* on a plate has also changed and bags of items with gifts et al are offered to the guests.

But the transformation is for the better as new arrivals at dolls outlets get sold off like hot cakes, says a leading business magnate. So also the gift items displayed for the occasion. Though the theme and fervour might have shifted, Navarathiri is the same, providing the much-awaited fanfare to one and all.

—Lakshmi Rajamani



The melodious songs lisped by farm women were balm to people at work, recalls Shantha Padmanaban

A LEGENDARY VILLAGE

I was born and brought up in a lush green and warm village called Kabisthalam, which means an abode of monkeys in Tamil. Situated next to Papanasam in Thanjavur district, between the Cauvery in the south and the Kollidam in the north, Kabisthalam is one of the 108 Vaishnavaita Divyadesams.

Legend has it that it was here that elephant king Gajendra attained *moksha*. When the elephant was drinking water from the river, a crocodile took it in its grip and Lord Mahavishnu rescued the pachyderm by hurling the *chakra* at the crocodile. Even to this day, this scriptural episode is being reenacted in the month of Margazhi and witnessed by hundreds of people from nearby villages. This village finds a mention in the Valmiki Ramayana as this is the place where the simian chief Hanuman rested on his way to Lanka in search of Sita.

I was born in 1939 and in those days, Kabisthalam was called *Mubbogam vilaiyumbhoomi* (Land of triple harvest). The village was full of poovarasu, vanni, vilvam and margosa trees and a thick layer of herbal air filled the place. *Mukkani* — mango, banana and jack — were also found in abundance.

It was only after independence that electricity lighted up my village. Until then the streets were lined with *theevatti* and lanterns.

I was enrolled in a primary school at Umayalpuram, two kilometres from Kabisthalam. I, along with my sister, rode in a bullock cart on unmetalled roads. The carts had shutter windows somewhat like the one in trains these days. I very much enjoyed the ride as the way to my school was lined with tamarind and peepal trees. The line of trees formed a dense emerald canopy and one felt that one was passing through a tunnel.

I grew up reading books like *Gangayathrigam* and preface to *Garudapuram*, written by one of my forebears, Duraiswamy

Mooppanar, a Court Poet of Raja Serfoji. I also used to help at the Venkatchalapathy annachattam, a choultry instituted by my ancestors where around 300 people were and are still fed every day.

The staple crops were paddy, sugarcane, banana and betel leaf. The north-east monsoon never failed us and swept the entire region during *Aipasi* and *Karthigai*. Even if the monsoon got delayed, I along with my extended family and village folk, used to worship at the temple of Pidari Amman, the *kaaval deivam*, situated in the midst of green fields.

We experienced *Adai mazhai*. We had never witnessed water stagnation as the storm water drained into ponds and canals very easily. The ponds were filled with water lilies and I, along with siblings, cousins and friends, used to make paper boats and float them. Children would collect sand from the banks of the river and make dolls.

Pongal, celebrated with pomp, brought together different sections of the people. On the Kanupongal day, *kolattam* was played by women and children. We took *kattu sadam* and ate it all together. The people were generally prosperous and each household, used to have a minimum of four cows and some goats.

Once Mettur water was released into the Cauvery for irrigation, sometime in June, there would be a festival called *Aer pootam thiruvizha*, celebrated before the land was tilled. The farmers would pray Lord Rama and start tilling. Farm women sang *kuzhavai* during transplantation. These melodious songs were balm to people at work and passers-by. Sadly, this tradition fell on evil days. Those days people lived in great harmony and were pious and humane. When one dug up earth in the backyard, one could find water at span deep, after water was released from the Mettur dam. *Mannum Eeram; Manamum Eeram*. This was the way of life those days.

(Shantha Padmanaban is a homemaker)

—As told to Sukanya Chellappa

CELEBRITY

A litterateur, author, social worker, expert educator, ardent feminist, happy homemaker and able administrator, all rolled into one and that is Dr K Meena, avers G Krishnamoorthy

A UNIQUE ACHIEVER



THE poet would say, 'my object all sublime, I shall achieve in time'. Yes. The lives of great people remind us that we can make our lives sublime, and departing, can leave behind us footprints on the sands of time. Many have been the achievers amidst us, but every one has been a cut above the rest. Prof Dr K Meena, the first woman Vice-Chancellor of Bharathidasan University, Tiruchy, is one such achiever who is keen on making this august seat of knowledge all the more venerable. 'Expresso' takes pride in presenting here excerpts from a chat with her.

On overall track record

Starting my career with a PG degree in physics, as a teacher in Kamakoti Vidyalaya and part-time lecturer in the Evening College of Seethalakshmi Ramaswami College, Tiruchy, in 1984, I switched to Shrimati Indira Gandhi College as Faculty in Physics in 1985, did my ME and PhD in Computer Science and Engineering in Anna University, Chennai and served as HoD of Computer Science, Director of Computer Applications, Vice-Principal and Principal. I was appointed Vice-Chancellor this July 16.

On Bharathidasan University

I have initiated the establishment of a training centre for inclusive education for the differently-abled. The university has allotted Rs.10 lakhs for the Anna Chair. The Centre for Bharathidasan Studies will continue to publish the works of Bharathidasan. The university will encourage preparation of Tamil software tools. The CYDS

will set up a coaching centre for UPSC examinations. The Centre for Knowledge Repository has created a DSpace, a repository of research articles. The university will soon sign an MoU with INFLIBNET to access ETDS.

On education and society

We should cultivate an aptitude for study and research and a tendency to utilise our knowledge for social uplift. It is essential to bridge the gap between the industry and the academia. Self-education is good. But it needs to be backed up by some academic degree or diploma. I am for Tamil as the medium of education for its regional currency, of course, with emphasis on English for its international value.

On areas of interest

Prime among my areas of interest is Artificial Neural Networks and Image Processing. I organise computer training programmes, prepare software for physically challenged, mentally retarded and autistic children. I have authored five books in Tamil and two in computer science in English.

On awards and laurels

The awards I have received include State Award for Best Teacher, Young Women Scientists Award, State Award for Best Social Worker, National Award for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Women Achiever's Award and Best Imaginative Writer Award.

On mentors

The credit for what I am goes to my inspirational father-in-law, the late K Santhanam, Secretary of the National College Council, my supportive husband S Kunjithapatham, Advocate, my understanding parents the late R Kodhandaraman and Rajamaraman of Thirugokarnam, Pudukkottai, my dear brother K Ravi, GM, BPCL, Mumbai and my teachers.

On mission in life

Education for all, enrichment of skills with social conscience, promotion of research with emphasis on applied research, gender parity and empowerment of rural women are among my lifetime ambitions.

When people are put into position slightly above what they would expect, they are apt to excel. Well said.