

[Deteriorating Palani Hills Idol Center of Controversy](#)

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Published by Anonymous on Mar. 01, 1993

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The main image of Lord Muruga (Kartikkeya) at the famed Palani Hills temple in South India has deteriorated so much under the effect of 250,000 abhishekams (anoiting with sacred substances) a year that it is in danger of collapsing. Devotees fear such a collapse would bring untold misfortune upon the community, if not the entire world. Starting in 1984, abhishekam has been allowed only six times a day to the moolavar or main image; the utsava or parade image is used for the rest. Since the temple is under the control of the state government, the issue has become a heated political matter. At the moment, the state has backed down from a premature decision to replace the existing image with a stone one, and is seeking opinions from religious leaders, devotees and experts.

The present image has lasted for hundreds of years. The recent deterioration, first noticed in 1942, is caused by adulterated substances in offerings of milk, vibuthi, honey, rosewater, etc. which are reacting chemically with the murthi. Many parts of the image are cracked or chipped and the entirety of it is worn down to such an extent that it may break off its pedestal.

Sri Ganapathi Sthapathi, former principal of the Tamil Nadu College of Sculpture, told HINDUISM TODAY that, "The icon is not made of any stone. It is made of a peculiar and shastric cement called katusarkara, made out of limestone with certain medical herbs. When prepared according to directions, the resulting form is like artificial stone." He explained that this was applied to a wooden frame. "I was able to see the wooden frame in the composition of the image. There is a vertical wood rod anchored into the floor through the pedestal for stability. Shifting the idol is fraught with danger, even a small vibration is likely to dislodge it."

Sthapathi said that two identical idols are normally prepared when using this method and suggests that the second one might be found hidden in the temple itself. Alternatively, another image could be made of the "nine poisons," - tirumurgal, kaarmukil, indiragopam, kungumam, lavanam, gowri, raktha, anjana

and pavalamuthu - from which Siddhar Bhogar Rishi molded the statue centuries ago. There are specific provisions and instructions in the scriptures for the replacement of worn-out images.

Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, Dr. Selvi Jayalalitha, has taken a personal interest in the issue and directed the government to take action only after "a unanimous consensus is arrived at by the devotees of all sections, the general public and the temple priests."

The Palani Hills temple is one of the most popular of South India and was founded by Bhogar Rishi several thousand years ago. It is located on a hill and reached by climbing 685 stone steps. The present shrine was probably built in the 7th century by Cheraman Perumal, a Chera king. Later, the Nayaks, Pandyas and a number of local rulers added to it.

Hundreds of thousands of devotees visit the hill temple yearly. From the income, the temple operates a training school for priests, another for the traditional temple singers known as oduvars, the temple drummers who play thavil and the musicians who play the nagaswaram (an oboe-like instrument). The temple also operates an orphanage, home for the aged, school for the deaf and feedings for the poor during all major festivals.

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