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TEMPLES

Meeting Lord Murugan

How my young son found religion in India

Vatsala Sperling Rochester, Vermont, USA

On a 137-kilometer road trip from Madurai to Palani Hills in South India, we saw many people walking. Ramakrishna, our young driver, explained to our six-year-old son Mahar, "These pilgrims have resolved to walk from their homes to Palani Temple. It will take them many days and nights. They carry their offerings on their heads and go barefoot. When Lord Murugan calls, you simply go."

The atheist in Mahar must have winked with disbelief, thinking, "Ha ha. How can Murugan call? Statues don't speak." Ever since he turned two, Mahar had offered consistent protest to my daily puja worship at our home shrine. My husband Ehud and I had spoken to him softly as well as sternly about his opposition, but nothing had come of these conversations. Mahar's resistance saddened me but Ehud, ever the optimist, always said, "Don't worry. India will work on him."

So here we were, in India, heading to Palani Temple, the most revered of all temples to Lord Murugan. When Mahar was born, we had made a resolution that we would visit Palani Temple and offer his birth hair to Lord Murugan. From our clean, roomy, air-conditioned car, Mahar watched hundreds of barefoot pilgrims passing by. Unmindful of the dismal, disorderly and often times filthy external conditions, the pilgrims set one foot in front of the other and marched on to visit Lord Murugan.

Normally, just like a seasoned lawyer, Mahar would have cross-examined

Ramakrishna on his theory about "When Lord Murugan calls." Instead, he watched the endless stream of pilgrims and asked him, "Do they eat, get water to drink, use rest stops? Do ghosts and goblins bother them at night?" Hmmm. Curiosity instead of world-weary skepticism--a good sign, I thought.

Due to the special celebration of Krittika in commemoration of the six Krittika women who raised Lord Murugan, the temple was flooded with pilgrims. Thousands of men in black dhotis were on the premises, too--pilgrims who were, in fact, on their way to Lord Ayyappa's abode, Sabari Malai, and had resolved to visit every temple along the way. A sea of humanity, dripping with devotion, milled about with a single aim, to have a darshan (sacred sight) of Lord Murugan. They stood in serpentine queue extending to eternity. "We might have to camp overnight, " Ehud said. But on a whim, we entered the Temple Administration Office to see if someone could help us.

Mr. E. Meikandar was in the office, as if by carefully plotted appointment, and asked, "How may I help you?" We loved this question and spoke with him about our desire to offer Mahar's hair to Lord Murugan. Soon he was leafing through the articles that I have published in Hinduism Today and he recognized the picture of its founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. "Hawaii Swami has visited this temple. He is real, you know, " Meikandar offered. He was enchanted by the books that I have authored, How Ganesh Got His Elephant Head and How Parvati Won the Heart of Shiva. And when he saw our wedding pictures in our book A Marriage Made in Heaven, he was overcome with joy. "You are more devoted than many Hindus, " he said to Ehud. "You must get in to see Lord Murugan. Come with me." He literally pulled Ehud out of the administration office and we followed.

He gave us a grand tour of the temple while explaining the beauty, myth, truth and legend. Mahar stayed very close to Mr. E. Meikandar, listening carefully. Soon we found ourselves seated on the floor a few feet away from the Deity. The priests offered a special archana worship for the three of us, smeared vibuthi, holy ash, on our foreheads, adorned Ehud with a rose garland from the feet of the God and said, "Be well." Overwhelmed with emotion, I found myself crying. Mahar sat saucer-eyed, stunned and quiet. Ehud was ecstatic. Ramakrishna, overjoyed, said, "Murugan, the child's hair, our prayers and ourselves are at your temple. Bless us with your grace."

Behind us thousands of pilgrims murmured, chanted, sang and prayed. Smoke

bellowed from burning camphor; incense and lamps hung low. Amidst the ringing of bells, priests continued doing archana after archana, ritual bathing after ritual bathing, smearing vibhuti on every forehead.

Coming out into the sunlit courtyard, we felt as though we had been ejected from the hot and dark womb of Mother Earth. Mahar did not wipe off the vibhuti, as he would certainly have done at home!

We began looking at a statue of Sage Bhogar and Meikandar told us about the sage, who is believed to be a contemporary of Sage Agastya, a rishi mentioned in the epic Ramayana. "Many thousands of years ago, Sage Bhogar lived on this hill, " began Meikandar. "He was very sick and had traveled all over the world looking for a cure. Disheartened and unsuccessful, he returned to this hill. One night Lord Siva appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Ask Murugan to heal you.' " Meikandar recounted how, according to the Siva Purana, the six-year-old Lord Murugan renounced the world upon losing a contest with his brother, Lord Ganesha, and took refuge on this hill. It is now one of the six power places, shakti sthala, of Lord Murugan.

"Saint Bhogar took the dream about Murugan to heart. He created an amalgam of nine minerals. Mixed with herbs, the amalgam became harder than rock. From it he sculpted a small statue of the child Murugan. Then he began a rigorous practice of collecting water every day from a pond on the plains below the hill. Each day he carried it up the hill and bathed the statue. He lived on the water that poured off the Deity from this sacred bath and was eventually healed from his illness, freed from his miserable disease.

"As legend has it, there is a vast system of tunnels and caves under the hill. No one has ever ventured near them. One day, Sage Bhogar went into a tunnel and never came out. Some believe he still lives on, but no one can see him, " Meikandar said.

Mahar was totally absorbed in the story of a statue not more than two feet high that had healing powers, and the invisible sage living in the subterranean network of tunnels. His fanciful imagination was surely engaged.

"The nava pashana (nine poisons) statue of unknown composition and formula has been bathed every day for thousands of years. Devotees have sipped the water from this bath with faith. Murugan is also bathed with panchamritam, five elixirs of immortality, honey, milk, ghee, yogurt and cow urine mixed with dates, banana, jaggery and edible camphor. Vibuthi is also used for the bath. Then the entire statue of Lord Murugan is covered with a thick coat of rakala chandanam (a special sandalwood paste) that is allowed to dry overnight. All these constitute the prasadam given to the pilgrims as they visit Lord Murugan from all over the world and pray to be healed, " Meikandar said, waving his hands over the milling crowd of devotees.

We were approaching the huge metal offering box where Meikandar advised us we could drop in our offering of birth hair. "Mom, " queried Mahar, "This man keeps saying that the pilgrims are praying to be healed. I don't see any sick or injured people here. Everyone looks healthy and they're so loud, chanting all these prayers. What sickness do they have?"

Finally, Mahar had caught up. His rational, logical brain was working, and he was asking a real question. At six years of age, he does study homeopathy with me at home. I talk to him about personal and social hygiene and tell him anecdotes from the good old days when I ran the clinical microbiology department in a children's hospital. I read to him about healthy eating habits, exercise, preventive medicine, vaccinations and what not. He studies pictures of human anatomy and can clearly distinguish, for example, between cross sections of the larynx and the auditory canal. Very aptly, he had observed that people around him looked apparently healthy. "What's wrong with me, Mom, that I must pray to be healed? What's wrong with you? Is Papa sick, too?" He questioned me, needing a truthful answer.

We held his birth hair together and dropped it into the hundi. Then we sat down to savor the moment, to relish the great and intense darshan we just had and digest the stories and legends that we had heard.

"A sense of ownership, an idea that our body is 'I' is the sickness we all have, Mahar, " I whispered. "By offering our hair, we let go of that sense and idea. The offering is our way of saying to Lord Murugan, 'At your feet, we have let go of our sense of self, we do not claim ownership to our physical being, appearance and circumstances. Heal us from this sickness of identifying ourselves with our body.' "

He had quietly climbed onto my lap. As I held my child in a loving embrace, a message flashed on my mind's screen: "We offer a little child's birth hair at the temple, but think about it, the child is not yet rooted deeply in his sense of self. He is still living in the realm of innocence, instincts, feelings and physiological reflexes that are innate to his biological being. But this rite of passage, samaskara, does send a clear message to the mother; it gives her a chance to begin learning to let go."

After conception and the birth of a child, the very first thing that happens is the snipping of the umbilical cord. Mother and child are two separate beings. The child is born from the mother, and, yet he is distinct and separate from her. The first lesson, therefore, is that a mother must let go of the precious child from her womb. There is no other way. At the namakarana samskara, a child gets his own name, and from now on he will be encouraged to leave it behind as a legacy. Soon enough, the sacred time of breast-feeding comes to an end and, with annaprasana samskara, the child is given solids to eat and the mother hands her child over to the care of Goddess Annapoorna, the universal mother. Though she will continue to cook for the child, the nourishment will come from the Goddess. Then the child goes through mundan samskar--the removal of birth hair. The mother sees that the child no longer wears on himself what he wore in her womb, that is, the birth hair. Mother offers this hair at a temple and prays for the well-being of the child as he grows up and away from her. That is the point of growing up--to grow away! Then comes the aksharabhyasa, introducing the child to reading, writing and math and handing him over to Goddess Saraswati with a prayer, "O Mother,