

[All Night Festival](#)

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All Night Festival For a Goddess Who Saved a Kingdom

Choodie Sivaram, Bangalore

In the heart of Arkalgud, 100 kms from Bangalore, is a small temple of the Goddess Doddamma with a naturally-formed stone deity. Legends say a queen, devoted to "Amma," prayed for protection during the late 18th century Tipu Sultan raids of her kingdom. An epidemic struck the enemy, forcing its retreat. The Goddess appeared in the queen's dreams expressing Her wish to be worshiped. Thus was born the Doddamma festival.

When I arrived at Arkalgud, it was five in the evening. The narrow roads were crowded with overstuffed vehicles--people riding on car rooftops--heading toward town. As I reached my husband's uncle's 200-year-old house, a large group of villagers were noisily bargaining with my uncle-in-law. Mock discontent screwed up their faces. I later learned this was part of the festival warmup--villages vying for more rice for their participation, etc. Eighteen caste communities contribute to this raucous festival--the Amma temples are run by washermen and fishermen priests. So it is a rather egalitarian affair, cutting across many social walls.

The villagers of Aigur carry the Goddess. The devadasis, (ritual temple dancers) of Aigur, draped in yellow saris, carry haldi and kumkum for Amma and sing verses in Her praise, set to folk tunes. The eighteen caste communities arrive one by one in batches, dancing and running along with their own band. As the sun goes down, the festive mood begins to bubble. Drums pound out for men to dance with abandon, carrying branches, sticks and swords.

The night is spent in a continuous tide of rituals, all very important to the villagers. The last of the rites is bringing of the ghate. Clay pots are filled with freshly tapped toddy (distilled liquor from the palmyra palm) and decorated like a temple water pot. Folklore gives prominence to toddy as a symbol of Goddess Lakshmi. Five young girls carry the ghate on their heads for about two kilometers to the temple. The girls fast on fruit and milk. Their procession starts at 4am. At the temple, the pots are worshiped and offered. The mother of seven-year old Sowmya, one of the ghate bearers, told me the next afternoon, "The girls are possessed, unaware of what is happening. The Goddess talks through them expressing satisfaction over the festival." Immediately after the ghate offering, batches of villagers fan out through every street and lane sprinkling rice and shouting "Ho bali, ta bali," to drive out malevolent spirits. The loud screaming helps warn people not to come in their way or watch--it is considered inauspicious.

As dawn breaks, the villagers return home. The temple is quickly cleaned, washed down of all the mush and coconut shells and readied for the morning puja. The puja is performed by my husband's uncle, a brahmin. After this, the temple is open.

Later that day it is the women who come in gay procession, draped in their finest saris and jewelry, carrying trays of fruit, betel leaves and coconut flowers. The temple is very crowded with long lines waiting to get inside. Inside, mountains of flowers and fruit make it hard even to see the Deity. That evening, entertainment is staged and music blares through loudspeakers as 200 security police relax and enjoy the peaceful frolic. In fact, peace is one of Arkalgud's proudest treasures. "There has never been a single Hindu/Muslim fight in this town, regardless of the rest of India," beams Muslim businessman Nissar Ahmed.