



Bubbling Over

A dispatch from Trivandrum, by Claire van den Heever



Every year, in the seventh month of the Malayalam calendar, India's southernmost city is transformed. Three million women sit beside as many street-side fires, boiling pots of sweet rice pudding: offerings to a Hindu goddess. It is the largest gathering of women in the world.

Transformation

I stumbled along one of Trivandrum's stony roads, dazed, seeking the solace of my bare hotel room. Along the dirt road and on either side of it, bricks were scattered about, burnt objects haphazardly strewn between them. It looked like a city at war. The air was thick, still heavy with the smell of smoke, and crinkled flakes of ash drifted toward the sooty ground. My ears rang from an afternoon of trumpets, shouting and drums. The crowd and I shuffled into an imminent dusk, euphoria mingling with exhaustion, over the stones and past the blackened debris, home.

Every year in [India's southernmost city](#), millions of women build millions of fires in the open street and cook a pot of rice on the flames. They travel to the city on stop trains or rusted buses jammed full to spend days guarding the bricks on which their fire will burn. Then, during a day of sweltering heat, they demonstrate their devotion to both their families and Attukal Devi, the goddess to whom the Attukal Pongala Festival is dedicated. It is the women's belief in Attukal Devi's powers – to bless, to help and to heal – that once a year transforms Trivandrum.

Iain and I had arrived in the city two evenings before the festival after a twenty hour train journey from Mumbai. Trivandrum was overwhelmed, and hotel after hotel had turned us away. "Attukal Pongala," receptionists said with a shrug. "Twenty five lakh ladies are coming to Trivandrum." A *lakh* was 100,000. Twenty five *lakh* was two and a half million. I worried that we wouldn't find a bed at all.

The festival has become hugely popular over the last fifteen years. When 1.5 million women assembled to cook rice for the goddess in 1997, it entered the Guinness Book of World Records as [the largest annual gathering of women in the world](#). This year, up to three million were expected, and Trivandrum's roadsides were stacked with earthen pots in all shapes and sizes. The train station looked like a campsite. Women were arriving in droves from neighbouring states or elsewhere in Kerala, and everywhere they reclined on bedspreads, munching snacks and chatting. Outside the station, rows of bricks were laid out on the ground, watched over by armies of ladies. One middle-aged woman, wrapped liberally in emerald green silk, saw me looking curiously at the bricks and said, "Pongala, Pongala", slowly enunciating the word. I nodded to show I understood. She beamed and began babbling away in Malayalam, leaving me to smile politely through the mutually unintelligible conversation.

In a nearby lane, a shrine of banana leaves and marigold garlands was being assembled, leaf by leaf, outside a hotel. On either side of the shrine, hotel staff members had cordoned off a row of bricks for the female guests – "18 rooms," the owner

proudly told us – which would become hearths for the following day's fires. The bricks all had women's names scrawled onto them in white chalk. At the centre of the shrine was an image of a serene looking Attukal Devi, with jewels around her neck and a trident in her hand. The goddess Kali was pictured below, tongue hanging out and bare conical breasts pointing straight ahead. [The image of the two goddesses](#) was all over the city, on posters, in shrines and stuck onto taxis' windshields: a reminder, perhaps, that good and evil coexist.

By the time the sun set, every open space in the city centre was lined with bricks. Crowds congregated at the enormous music-distorting amplifiers dotted across the city and danced to Hindi and Malayalam pop.

The music was still blaring the next morning when it woke me with a jolt. At 9am, the sun was merciless. A woman sat at every stack of bricks, surrounded by piles of kindling and earthen pots with coconut shell spoons, waiting for the ritual cooking to commence. Each had made an offering to the goddess and placed it in front of her pot. The streets were bright with red and yellow flowers, bananas and incense, laid out on fresh green banana leaves.

I cut through the grounds of a temple and came to the leafy neighbourhood of Chettikulangra, where the offerings and ingredients were even more elaborate. There were tiny earthen *puja* dishes of oil with floating wicks, coconuts, heaps of grain, limes, boxes of incense, sugar coated aniseed and thimbles of red powder to dot a *tilak* between the eyebrows. Even the earthen pots wore garlands of marigolds. The women waited behind their hearths until the sound of temple bells suddenly rang out across the city. All rose to place their palms together in prayer, murmuring mantras. So many were dressed in saris of *kasavu* – traditional Keralan cloth – that, as they stood up one by one, they became a cream coloured wave of cotton, bordered with gold.

Bells soon clanged again and trumpets sounded through street-side amplifiers. We stood beside a neighbourhood shrine, watching a priest light a bundle of branches that he carried along a row of women, lighting their fires. Men took smouldering sticks from the same fire and swiftly transported the flame. Within a minute, smoke was wafting through the street, and only a couple of minutes later, the water in the women's pots had begun to bubble.

Hundreds of policemen had been deployed to keep the situation under control, and every business in sight was shut. The city had given itself over to the festival, forgoing commerce for the sake of communal worship and ceremony. Men of all ages worked as volunteers; minutes after the fires were lit, a handful of them ran down the street to help a young woman whose *sari* had caught fire, reaching her before

more than a little hole had been burnt in the cloth. One was a stocky young man in jeans and a black and white checked shirt. “Supporting the women in Pongala” was important to Pradeep, he told me. Radeesh, another volunteer, said he helped out every year “for the worship.”

There were women from every class or caste cooking on the pavement: well-educated women, hard-up farmers’ wives, and everything in between. In a country where people are continuously grouped according to their religious and social differences, the festival is a refreshing exception.

Suja, an attractive woman in a *kasavu sari* with a bright blue *choli* underneath, was sitting on the pavement beside her mother when I struck up a conversation. She had been living in Trivandrum and making an offering of Pongala for the past three years, she told me. Her mother had been making a fire on the street once a year for longer than she could remember.

The two or three hundred fires within sight were progressively clouding the air with thick smoke; the women tending to them sat inside the smoky furnace, stirring pots and dabbing at their streaming eyes. As Suja told me about what the festival meant to her and why she went through this particularly exhausting ritual, the smoke began to make my eyes as red as hers. “It is to have a happy house, a *shanti* house – a peaceful house,” she explained, taking breaths through a rag. Other people might be hoping for riches or good health, I suggested. She gave an affirmative waggle of her head. Her boiled rice, sugar, *ghee* – clarified butter – and coconut would take half an hour to cook, she said. And then, [“Pongala”, meaning “to boil over”](#).

There were various rice-based dishes being cooked around us, sweetened with sugar or *jaggery*, and while Suja’s was simmering away in its earthen pot, I asked her about the image I’d seen of the two goddesses all over the city: Attukal Devi and Kali, the savage, angry goddess. “They are the same,” she replied plainly. “But when Attukal Devi is angry, she is Kali.”

Hinduism is as multilayered as its gods are numerous; there are said to be as many as 330 million deities. While they all represent a single, all-powerful god, each deity has personal attributes and characteristics as diverse as human beings themselves. Like people, they are three dimensional and cannot be categorised easily. The goddess Kali is referred to as both the Protector and the Destroyer. She can be a volatile, bloodthirsty goddess who requires litres of animal blood each week, which her most devout followers willingly provide during weekly animal sacrifices at Kali temples throughout the country, but the concept of her as destructive isn’t categorical. Like humans, she may destroy, but she protects too.

Smoke was pouring into the street, making it difficult to see. Pradeep guided

Iain and I towards a community hall, where women were staggering in to drink cups of a local drink called *sambharam*, made from curd, salt, and a few pungent spices. “It has powerful cooling properties,” Pradeep assured me, “and will give you energy.” Its taste was strong: spicy, bitter, laced with cardamom. “Today, almost everything is free for women,” Pradeep explained. “Their lunch, rickshaws, buses...”

Lunchtime was approaching and women had begun to line up in the street with metal *tiffin* pails and plastic containers. I could see at least a kilometre of women, all waiting to reach a nearby lunch station. Pradeep took me through the back entrance, where worshippers shuffled towards enormous pots, lent by local families, full of south Indian “pure veg” cooking: vegetarian, and egg-free. The male cooks had begun cooking the night before and all the families in the neighbourhood had contributed towards the meal. Some gave bottles of oil, some gave rice, some gave money instead. The women moved past each pot, pausing for an instant to allow the men to dish up rice, thin red *sambal*, a mushy green vegetable called *avial*, green beans in a red sauce and mango *atchar* for extra kick.

Sanctum Sanctorum

Beyond the neighbourhood, women were rushing back to their pots before the ceremonial blessing of the Pongala began. Some were returning from lunch stations further afield; others had used the time to visit the Attukal Bhagavathi Temple, to glimpse the goddess in idol form. We headed in the opposite direction, against the crush of people, to the temple. All through the streets, the festival had taken over: the women striding, purposeful, back to their pots, the men and children hanging around to see the action, the street-side stalls with balloons and trinkets. It was all for Pongala. Even the ambulance parked on the side of the road was strung with tinsel, the word “Pongala” obscuring its windshield. The medics jumped out when they saw me and, shrieking and laughing, posed for a photo in front of the vehicle, all high on festivity.

We reached the temple and, just beyond it, the stage from where the mass blessing would begin. Thousands of women were squeezed into the area, where amplifiers transmitted the activities inside the temple. Following the music, I went in, and came very close to colliding with a procession of men in white *lungis*, drumming wildly. They were followed by a few hundred young boys, also with white *lungis* wrapped around their waists. Each had a plastic token tied to his arm with a number on it, and as they plodded along, circling the central shrine, they looked more like zombies than festival-goers. Two were dragging their feet along, crying, and three of the oldest boys were being propped up by a priest, who urged them along the circuit through the temple.

The boys’ parents had put their sons forward for one of 865 places in a week-long programme, during which they lived at the temple and were, in effect, “given” to Attukal Devi. The parents offered their sons to the goddess as an expression of gratitude, perhaps because the goddess granted a wish or cured a family member’s disease. The boys, between seven and thirteen, endured a week of separation from their parents during which they ate only food cooked at the temple and slept on a stone floor. They spent their time worshipping, bowing to the goddess 1008 times every morning, and again every night.

Just as I began pitying them, another group skipped past and, jumping in front of Iain’s camera, shouted “Hello, Hello, Hello!” – until a policewoman ushered them back into the procession. Among them were a couple of devout little men, carrying urns of holy water which they flicked repeatedly onto their faces, bending to touch stone-carved idols, and then their heads.

I made my way under the temple's brightly painted Gopuram to the stage, where an army of priests carried buckets of the water that had been used to bathe Attukal Devi's idol. Flicking water into each woman's pot of food to bless it was a mammoth task, and half an hour later a handful of priests were still rushing through the crowds, hurriedly flicking drops of water from the end of palm leaves.

Many of the women had clearly done this before. With their cooking utensils and other belongings already packed into bags of canvas or sacking, and the pot of rice on top, they opened the bag as the priest came by, allowing their Pongala dish to catch a few drops of the holy water. In no time, they had covered the pot with a banana leaf and a piece of rope and were hustling with bags balanced on their heads towards the train or bus station to make their way home.

"This is the one day when everybody is the same," Pradeep had told me proudly. "This festival does not discriminate; anyone can participate."

Pradeep estimated that 95 percent of participants are Hindus, but Kerala's Christians and Muslims also take part, as well as people from foreign countries. I wasn't entirely convinced that foreigners would stick it out in the extreme heat and smoke until I met Mariana, a Russian in a pretty orange *salwar kameez*, who had cooked her own pot of rice for the festival.

"The best way to get the essence of a festival is to participate," she told me, noticing my surprise. I told her I agreed – but it was about 35 degrees in the city *before* the fires were lit. She had sat in the heat from morning until the mid-afternoon blessing, and for hours the day before to claim a spot for her fire, managing to get a prized position just in front of the stage, beside the Attukal Bhagavathi Temple. Now she was lining up to see the Attukal Devi idol in the temple shrine.

Exhausted, I decided to call it a day. The streets were still far too crowded for auto rickshaws or buses, and I prepared myself for the hour-long walk back. As I was leaving, a middle-aged woman called Layla approached me on her way to see the idol.

"Where are you from?" she asked, and nodded approvingly when I said South Africa. Then, as though there were a thread connecting the two thoughts: "I have a friend from America."

The friend was, she said, living at Amma's ashram. Amma is Kerala's best-known guru, with devotees around the world. "I was the headmistress of the school near the ashram. Amma gave me these." Layla showed me a string of beads around her neck.

Kerala's favourite guru is a woman – one of only a handful of female gurus – and her philosophy lies in the simple power of hugging. When Amma makes an

appearance in India or abroad, thousands of people – devotees, sceptics and the curious among them – wait in queues for half the night just to be hugged by her.

Layla explained her reasons for making Pongala quite differently to Suja. “I do it to pray to god, for devotion,” she told me. She had been making an offering of Pongala to the goddess for 25 years. If she shows her devotion, she explained, the goddess will give relief from pain and suffering. Good fortune, a happy household – these were things that other people asked of the goddess. “But Devi won’t give all these things,” she warned.

What if she wasn’t suffering, I asked – to what would the goddess bring relief?

“Then,” she said, “my devotion is for pain and suffering in the future.”

“Your future?” I asked, puzzled. “In this lifetime – or in another incarnation?”

She smiled sagely and, despite my peek into these women’s world, I had a feeling I’d never know.

A fresh-faced group of twenty-somethings stood near the temple’s entrance: Brahmins who had just returned from blessing the Pongala pots. The young men were not priests, but because they belonged to the Brahmin caste, they had assumed the role today, to assist with the proceedings. After arriving at the temple at around 11 o’clock that day, they had been given a sash to wear and, with buckets of holy water in hand, had set off through the crowds to “provide a service” – as the 22-year-old Praveen pragmatically put it. The women who wanted their blessing to have extra clout would hand the Brahmin a note. If they were providing a kind of service, did that mean that the money they received was like a tip, I asked Praveen. “No,” he said, frowning at how difficult it was to explain the practice. They accept the money on the goddess’ behalf, he explained, but the money is theirs to keep. “How much did you collect today?” I asked Ramesh, a smiling 18-year-old. He didn’t know, he said; he hadn’t counted it yet. It was in the range of two thousand rupees he guessed – a tidy sum for an hour’s work, by any standards. The seven students who I met had all grown up in the same neighbourhood, where they were now returning, they told me, to play computer games, or football, or to sleep.

I, too, decided to return to my home for the night. I began the hour long walk back; the streets were still far too crowded for auto rickshaws or buses. The day’s events floated before my mind; images, sounds and sensations occasionally surfaced, flickered, and then subsided, as if from a dream. Bed was a very welcoming prospect. Grotty, grey sheets couldn’t have mattered less – given all the colour I’d seen.