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INTRODUCTION

During the middle of the 10th century A.D., there lived in the small South Indian town of Shrivilliputtur (shri - villi - poot-toor) a celibate temple priest named Vishnuchittan. He worshipped the god Rangamannar (rung - a - men - naar) (a local form of the Hindu god, Vishnu) and had devoted his life to providing fresh daily flowers as offerings to the god in his temple. He also wrote religious poetry to the deity, and in time came to be known as Periyalvar (peery - all - vaar) "The Great Poet-saint".

One day while Periyalvar was tending his garden, he found abandoned there a baby girl. Although he had renounced a family life, he took her as his foster-daughter and raised her in the contemplative atmosphere of temple life. She was called Godai "flower garland".

As Godai grew, she developed a love of the deity equal to that of her foster-father, and began to consider herself as the "bride of god". She began to deck herself with the strings of flowers meant for the deity. Her father caught her at this one day, and scolded her severely for defiling the holy flower offerings. But that night, the god Rangamannar supposedly appeared to Periyalvar in a dream, saying that he accepted Godai as his wife, and that he would receive no garlands as offerings that had not been worn by her first.

Godai then devoted her life to worship of the god, not only in her town of Shrivilliputtur, but also at the huge Vaisnava temple at Arangam (a - rung - am). Like her father, she wrote beautiful poetry in honor of her god, and now is remembered as Andal (on-doll), "she who is the servant of God".

Over the centuries, the fame of Andal and Periyalvar has grown. In Srivilliputtur, a small temple to honor Periyalvar has been built near the ancient site of his garden where the holy flowers are still grown. A golden image of Andal has been installed in the main temple right at the side of the processional image of the god, Rangamannar. There the foundling child, Godai, is now worshipped as a goddess. It is in her honor the devotees, coming from all over South India join together once a year to take her image in procession, pulling on years and yards of huge ropes her cart, which like a temple itself, looms over the buildings it passes.

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- Slide 1 This small model of a temple cart in the Madurai Meenakshi Temple Museum gives a clear and complete view of the structure of the common temple cart, as they are used in many festivals throughout South India.
- Slide 2 In this next slide, we find ourselves in the small town of Shrivilliputtur (shri - villi - poot - toor) where they are honoring the goddess Andal (on - doll) by taking her for her annual ride around her temple. Crowds of people, mostly women and children, gather to watch the men pull this monstrous wooden cart on huge ropes, each nearly a city block long.
- Slide 3 When the temple priest, who rides with the goddess on top, yells, "Go!", the hundreds of men who pull the six huge ropes all tug together and the cart rolls down the first block of its journey.
- Slide 4 Now we have run ahead of the cart and wait for it to turn the corner. We can just see it peeking out from behind the buildings; it looks like the last house in the row.
- Slide 5 We have not taken refuge on some kind person's porch where we can get a clear view of the cart. The people on top of the two-storied house across the street can almost reach out and touch the lower banners.
- Slide 6 In order to turn the enormous cart around the corner, four of the six ropes must now be passed down the cross street to the men waiting there. This gives us a chance to see how really huge and thick the ropes are.
- Slide 7 As the cart comes nearer, we can see the papier-mache charioteer who holds the reins of his papier-mache horses. The priests stand by to give him directions.
- Slide 8 Someone has seen how hot and tired the men are as they work in the hot sun, and has sent a servant out with a barrel of cool water and a tin cup to give everyone a drink.
- Slide 9 As the cart rolls, with stops and starts, down the street right in front of us, we realize how huge the red wheels are. The horses are so colorful and brightly decorated.
- Slide 10 We can look straight up at the canopy over the cart which is made of bamboo supports and layers of embroidered and appliqued red cloth.

- Slide 11 The long cylindrical banners, very traditional in South Indian celebrations, are called tumbas (tomb - a) and are decorated with religious designs and symbols.
- Slide 12 As the cart gets stuck, some of the boys climb on, each giving their own advise as to the best way to get it started again. I think they really just want a ride.
- Slide 13 With the cart stopped so near us, we can see the sculptures, intricately carved on the sides of the cart. These show pictures of all the gods and some of their divine deeds. The actual wooden cart is so ancient that some sections need to be propped up with wood. The red wheels appear new and strong; the old ones fell off the previous year.
- Slide 14 Now the police, in their brown uniforms and berets, are sent for their advise. It seems that some electrical wires are in the way of the cart. But the goddess must finish her ride, so the wires are cut and the cart can begin again.
- Slide 15 It is pulled just a few feet and now we can see behind it one of the four huge gates to the Andal temple. Here the cart gets stuck in a pot hole and cannot be budged, no matter how hard the ropes are pulled.
- Slide 16 This has happened before and the temple congregation is ready with the solution: huge levers, as big as tree trunks, are brought to help get the wheel out of the hole.
- Slide 17 Here we see the men lifting the levers to place them at the right angle under the wheels. The ropes are strung around the levers to pull the levers down and lift the wheel up.
- Slide 18 Several men wait at the end of each lever rope, ready to pull all together when the temple priest gives the work. And all at once, the huge cart ropes in the front are pulled at the same time as the lever ropes; as the lever is pulled down, the cart wheels are given a budge out of the hole just enough for the men in front pulling the ropes to get the cart going again.
- Slide 19 With the way now clear and easy, the car goes rolling down the street, having just completed only one-quarter of its journey.