

Festivals

Paliya Ulsavam is an annual festival celebrated by the Paliyar community in Kerala during the harvest season, typically in April. Historically, the festival coincided with the community's agricultural cycle, functioning as a ritual of gratitude to their deities for protection against harm and as a prayer for future prosperity. While the festival once took place in open community spaces, centred around a sacred tree with gatherings, feasts, and ritual dances, it has transitioned over time into temple-based worship. This shift reflects both cultural adaptation and the community's effort to preserve collective identity while responding to external social and religious pressures.

The Paliyar community are seen worshipping their clan deities such as Palichiyamma and Karuppswamy. Recently, newer temples have been constructed for different deities within the community. Badrakali temple at Chakupallam, Mariyamma temple at Shivalingakudi and Palichiyamma temple along with other deities at Kumali are examples.

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- [Paliyulsavam at Kumali](#)

Paliyulsavam at Chakkupallam

The Emergence of the Badrakaliyamman Temple

At present, Paliya Ulsavam is closely associated with the Sree Badrakaliyamman Temple in Chakkupallam, constructed 13 years ago through the initiative of the Paliya community. The construction of this temple was a response to an incident in which the community faced discrimination when visiting another temple in the region. Before the establishment of this temple, ritual practices were performed at a site marked only by a trident and an anthill.

The temple's construction marked a significant shift in ritual life. With a permanent space for worship, votive rituals were institutionalised into the festival calendar. Many of these practices, including forms of prayer and offerings, draw inspiration from Tamil Nadu's temple traditions, underscoring the community's strong cultural ties to Tamil heritage. Today, the temple has gained recognition beyond the community itself, attracting devotees from distant locations who participate in offerings during the annual festival.

Festival Structure and Ritual Practices

Preparations

The festival begins with *kodiyettam*, the ritual hoisting of a flag at the temple, which marks the commencement of a week-long period of vows and restrictions. During this time, devotees wear *kaapu*, a turmeric bracelet tied to the hand with ritual care. The unbroken turmeric is believed to symbolise the integrity of the vow.

Alongside, preparation of *mulapayaru* is initiated. Seeds such as millet, corn, and peas are placed in a vessel to sprout and to be used later in the festival ritual. Women play a central role in this phase of the festival through *kummi adi*, a community dance performed every evening alongside devotional songs. This performance is directly tied to the efficacy of *mulapayaru*; mistakes in the dance are believed to negatively affect the growth of the sprouts and the fulfilment of associated vows.

The Main Festival

After the preliminary week of vows, the main festival unfolds over three days. A variety of votive rituals and offerings take place, including *maavilakku*, *amman vilakku*, *mulapayaru*, *theechatti*, and *kavadi*. These rituals culminate in the *ghoshayatra*, a ceremonial procession on the final day, after which a concluding temple ritual is performed.

“ **Mulappayaru & Karakam:** Millet and other seeds are sprouted in a specially arranged supporting structure using clay pots, supported by coir, wood, or steel frames, and decorated in symbolic arrangements. Devotees observe strict vows during the sprouting period, and the health of the sprouts is interpreted as an indicator of divine favour. Sprouts that wither or fail are understood as consequences of lapses in ritual observance, requiring the devotee to renew their vows and offerings in the following year.

“ **Maavilakku:** This offering consists of a lamp placed on a pot, covered with a paste made of flour. Devotees must maintain ritual purity during the vow period; any disruption is believed to manifest during the ritual, such as the lamp failing to remain lit or the pot becoming difficult to carry.

“ **Amman Vilakku:** *Similar to maavilakku, but the pots prepared are kept with a framed image of the goddess and flower decorations in addition.*

“ **Theechatti:** This is a votive ritual performed for protection against illnesses such as smallpox and measles. Special clay pots, often sourced from Tamil Nadu, are filled with ingredients such as camphor, neem leaves, and frankincense, and then ignited. Devotees carry these flaming pots as a demonstration of devotion and faith. Restrictions apply to this offering: families that have experienced a recent bereavement or are under social sanctions within the community are prohibited from participating. If these prohibitions are violated, it is believed that the flames will not ignite properly, requiring further ritual resolution.

Concluding Rituals

The festival concludes with collective worship, *kummi adi*, and prayers at the temple. Following the ritual lowering of the flag (*kodimaram*), the *mulapayaru* sprouts are carried to a nearby pond and immersed there, symbolically returning them to nature and closing the cycle of ritual obligations.

Paliyulsavam at Kumali

Palichiyamma Temple and Origins

The community's faith centers around Palichiyamma, their clan deity, worshipped alongside Karuppuswamy at Kumily. Dedicated families are entrusted with rituals for each deity. Initially, worship was conducted beneath a large banyan tree. Plans to build a temple for Palichiyamma faced delays due to lack of funds, until an unexpected turn of events reshaped community resolve.

Years ago, the sudden death of the then temple secretary and a following thunderstorm the very next day, the incident was seen as an omen. The community came together, continued the construction, and completed it with public support, this time observing Brahmanical rituals.

“**Aruvi**, chieftain from Kumily settlement, recalls, “The word *Paliyar* itself originates from *Palichiyamayude Makkal*, meaning *children of Goddess Palichiyamma*.”

The Forest Pilgrimage

One of the most unique aspects of the festival is the ritualistic journey to **Kalluvariya**, a forest site about 15 km from Thekkady. A week before the festival, the community embarks on a three-day trek to collect sacred water and soil from the ancestral shrine at Kalluvariya.

According to belief, women carry nine pots of water from Kalluvariya, while men accompany them for protection. This water is used for rituals and sprinkled along the village boundaries as protection against disease and misfortune. A small amount of soil is also brought back, symbolising the presence of Palichiyamma at the festival.

The procession is deeply symbolic: women carrying the sacred water represent Palichiyamma's journey to the settlement, while male family members of Karuppuswamy walk ahead in trance, signifying the deity's role in protecting her path.

Rituals of Preparation

On returning to the village, the deities are prepared with abhishekam using the sacred water. The next day, the **Kodiyettam** (flag hoisting) signals the start of a seven-day observance period, during which the community maintains strict vows. Both men and women follow a vegetarian diet, practice celibacy, and sleep in separate accommodations. Before Kodiyettam, Karuppuswamy is invited to the temple from his abode through a ceremony, and his presence and blessings are sought.

Women also begin preparations for the **Mulapayaru ritual**, sprouting seeds of millet, corn, and lentils in carefully shaded areas of the temple. This sprouting is considered a direct reflection of divine blessings: healthy growth signifies favour, while wilting sprouts are seen as a result of lapses in vows. Each evening, women perform **Kummi-adi**, a devotional dance around the mulapayaru, believed to aid its growth.

The Main Festival

After a week of vows, the main festival unfolds over three days. Devotees perform a variety of votive rituals and offerings, each carrying deep spiritual meaning:

“ Mulapayaru – Millet and other seeds are sprouted in a specially arranged supporting structure using clay pots, supported by coir, wood, or steel frames, and decorated in symbolic arrangements. Devotees observe strict vows during the sprouting period, and the health of the sprouts is interpreted as an indicator of divine favour. Sprouts that wither or fail are understood as consequences of lapses in ritual observance, requiring the devotee to renew their vows and offerings in the following year.

“ Maavilakku & Amman Vilakku – This offering consists of a lamp placed on a pot, covered with a paste made of flour. Devotees must maintain ritual purity during the vow period; any disruption is believed to manifest during the ritual, such as the lamp failing to remain lit or the pot becoming difficult to carry. A similar offering that includes a goddess image and flowers is called Amman Vilakku.

“ Theechatti – This is a votive ritual performed for protection against illnesses such as smallpox and measles. Special clay pots, often sourced from Tamil

Nadu, are filled with ingredients such as camphor, neem leaves, and frankincense, and then ignited. Devotees carry these flaming pots as a demonstration of devotion and faith. Restrictions apply to this offering: families that have experienced a recent bereavement or are under social sanctions within the community are prohibited from participating. If these prohibitions are violated, it is believed that the flames will not ignite properly, requiring further ritual resolution.

“ Kavadi, Swamy Thulluka, Shoolamkuthal, and Pongala – Other votive acts performed by devotees as fulfilment of vows.

Paliya Nritham: The Sacred Dance of the Community

An integral part of the festival is the **Paliya Nritham**, the traditional dance of the Paliyar community. Performed during festive nights, this dance embodies both celebration and devotion. Paliya Nritham is a collective performance by both men and women, often accompanied by rhythmic songs, hand-clapping, and the beating of traditional instruments.

Culmination in Celebration

On the final day, **Pongal** is celebrated, marking both the completion of the festival and the community's renewed bond with their deities. Upon the completion of the festival, Goddess Palichiyamma is taken back to Kalluvariya, with a promise to meet next year.