

THE FASCINATING LAZARUS FEAST OF PATTINAPAKKAM, CHENNAI

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Most have been forgotten. Most deserve to be forgotten. The heroes will always be remembered, the best, the best and the worst. And a few who were a bit of both.

George R.R. Martin

Folklore is an expression of vivid culture represented by a specific group of people to others. It mostly reflects on the traditions that are common to a particular culture. Folklore includes oral traditions like tales, proverbs and jokes. They might as well include material culture, like traditional building styles and making of handmade toys. Folklore is an as essential form or tradition. However, Folklore mostly deals with customary lore, the forms and rituals of celebrations and the combination of one or more of these is considered as a folklore artefact. The transmission of these artefacts from one region to another or from one generation to the next is the significant feature of folklore. Infact, folklore can be considered as an informal form of fine arts.

The Fascinating Lazarus Feast of Pattinapakkam, Chennai aims to throw light on one such folklore that is the base for a grand feast that is celebrated at Our Lady of Guidance Church popularly known as Lazarus Church at Pattinapakkam in Chennai. This feast is a thanksgiving feast organised by the native Vanniyar community from past three centuries on the last Sunday of January every year. This paper also emphasizes how the people have developed faith in the patron Saint Lazarus based on the folklore who is not even a Cannonised (approved) Saint by the Catholic Church. Though there are no evidences for the authenticity of the legend/folklore, it is the faith of the people and the tradition of the folk lore that has been keeping the folklore and the festivity alive through the centuries.

THE CAR FESTIVAL OF LAZARUS

Culture is a social aspect and not an individual heritage of man. Culture is idealistic. Culture is an acquired quality because is acquired by man as a member of the society and it is important for every individual to form a part of culture. Festivals are a set of celebrations in honour of God or a realm of divine personalities. **These festivals and feasts are historically linked either with mythology, legend or folk lore traditions.** The fairs that are a part of the festivities are a gathering of people to display or trade their products or often to enjoy associated carnival or funfair entertainment.

The subject at hand deals with the Fascinating Lazarus Feast at Pattinapakkam, Chennai, which is celebrated with grandeur at the Church of Our Lady of Guidance, in Raja Annamalaipuram, Chennai every year as a religious festival for the Catholics and a fair for non-Catholic people. It began in **1582 as a**

feast of gratitude and slowly developed into a magnificent car festival connecting the people irrespective of religion, caste creed or nationality. An ancient and historical Catholic Christian monument developing out of the Lazarus' chapel and the miraculous statue of Lazarus designed and created by the Portuguese almost 400 years ago are still attracting many devotees since the old times. The Church is renowned for this annual car festival of Lazarus which is conducted with pomp and show every year. The church is also a legendary church which has the credit of curing skin ailments, when novenas (nine days prayer) are offered to its patron Lazarus.

In order to describe the history of a particular person, or a monument or a place, it is very essential and obligatory to describe the geographical location of that particular subject matter which is brought to light. The church which celebrates this car festival is located in a significant spot in Chennai or Madras as it was earlier called. The location of the Church is a major factor that has played a significant role in this cultural extravaganza that takes place annually.

LOCATION OF THE HISTORICAL CHURCH:

Madras was basically called Chennapatnam. The name Chennapatnam is due to the fact that Damarla Ayyappa Nayak when writing to Francis Day at Armagon in 1639 expressed a desire to found a town in the name of his father Chennappa Nayaka and offered the English liberal privileges if they would come and settle in it. The origin of the name came about this way ((Srinivasachari 1939, 39). While the places surrounding the fort were called as Madras, the North of Madras was called Black town, the South of Madras were having 2 small towns of Santhome and Mylapore (Muthiah 1987, 1). The location of the church of Nossa Senhora De Guia (The Portuguese name), Our Lady of Guidance or the Church of Lazarus is located in between Santhome and Mylapore in Raja Annamalaipuram or Pattinapakkam.

Madras was founded purely as a trading settlement and as such it grew to be by the end of the 17th century to become the chief port of India. When the English first came to Madras there were numerous Roman Catholic Churches in Santhome (Madras Tercentenary Publishing Committee 1988, 210). The present location of the Lazarus Church or the Church of Nossa Senhora De Guia is in Pattinapakkam, Raja Annamalaipuram amidst Santhome, Mylapore, Adyar and the Bay of Bengal on the other side.

The Buckingham Canal transverses the city in its entire length, north to south and it flows along the line of the old north river and then continues on, through the southern part of the city, till it reaches the Adyar from across which it again proceeds South (Madras Tercentenary Publishing Committee 1988, 12).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHURCH

Usually a Catholic church is dedicated to only patron (benefactor) saint, the speciality of this church lies in the fact that there are two patron Saints to this church, one Mother Mary and the other, Lazarus. Mother Mary of this church is called Lady of Guidance for the guidance she provided to travelers and passersby. This church has been dedicated to two saints because it grew from the chapel of Lazar and the parishioners (people who belong to the Parish – jurisdiction) honoured Mother Mary of Guidance who was transferred from the Church of Madre – De – Deus near Mandavelipakkam to the present location.

HISTORICAL BACK GROUND:

The Vanniya Kula Kshatriya community of the locality that lived in and around the Church believed in the powers of Lazarus the patron saint of the church and this belief was handed down the centuries through whose intercession, they obtained spiritual health and material wealth. The church/chapel was mainly for and of the people of the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya community. This community has four main popular sub-communities which included the

1. Naickers of Madras,
2. Goundars of Coimbatore and Salem,
3. Seruvai of Madurai and Dindugal and
4. Padayachi of Tanjavur, Trichy, Kadalur, etc.

Hence, the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya community sect that was predominant in the area of the church was Naickers. The people of the other parts of Madras also called them the Palli community. This is evident from the names of the two streets in the area, the Periya Palli street and the Pudhu Palli street which were wholly occupied by that community and hence named thus (Interview with Mr.A.Arulanandham, family member of the hereditary trustees of the feast of Lazarus (Mr. A. Arulanandham, pers. int. on 24th February). The people of the Naicker community believed that Lazarus did exist and he does intercede on their behalf to God to shower on them health, wealth and peace. This belief was given expression in their patron Saint as he is till date venerated and honoured and the car festival is conducted as a festival of gratitude to him.



St. Lazarus Church

FOLK CUM HISTORIC TRADITION OF THE FEAST

Appaswamy Naicker who was the headman of the largely prevalent Naicker Community in the area, (which was a sub-community of the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya community), originally began the feast. He began this feast as an expression of gratitude to Saint Lazar who was their patron saint for having saved his lost son. The headman had a son after several years of childlessness. One day the son was lost. This upset the headman. He was so upset that he alleged Lazarus in the chapel for his

missing son and challenged that if he doesn't get back his son by evening he would tie the image of Lazarus around his hip and jump into the well in the premises of the chapel. It was almost evening and the headman had tied Lazarus around his hip and was nearing the well when he heard his son call him. He saw that his son had come along with someone who resembled a beggar. He hugged and caressed the son. When he turned around to thank the beggar, he had left. Then it was understood that the Patron Saint Lazarus had himself come in the form of beggar with the secured son and saved the father. From thence, as a symbol of expressing their gratitude, this headman and his family members have been taking up the responsibility of conducting the feast of Lazarus every year. The headman of the Naicker community was a rich landlord, whose major source of income was from the collections of the rent for the lands and the two ponds, which were let out on lease to the commoners, which earned a reasonable amount. Mostly the rental proceeds of the pond were used to meet the expenditure of the feast. Now the entire expenses are borne by a trust formed for this purpose called the Lazarus Trust.

RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

In the days of Christ, there were two Lazarus; the first was the brother of Martha and Mary, a Biblical personality, who was raised from the grave by Jesus Christ after four days. Later, he became Bishop and died as a Martyr. The second was Lazarus the beggar, who was mentioned earlier in the parable narrated by Jesus which takes place in the Bible in the Gospel book of Luke Chapter 16 verses 19 to 31. The official Catholic Church has not canonized him as a Saint because he is the Lazar, a character of the parable (moral story) and not the Lazar (a real person) who became a Bishop after the formation of the church. Here we are concerned about this poor Lazarus who is supposed to have appeared in 1568 as a beggar in the South-West corner of Mylapore in a thicket and talked to the people and frequented to the nearby chapel. A Venetian, a merchant of gems and other merchandise, in the year 1582, hands down this description. The devotees down the centuries have venerated this poor man Lazarus. Everywhere his wonderful work became so famous that his fame even reached as far as the shores of England (Silvester D'Rosario 1978. 26).

The official church is treated by a private revelation. The claim that Lazarus the beggar did appear after Christ and helped in trials and tribulations is legendary. For anyone can claim to have had a revelation from God, and even mislead people. Ultimately the test of whether a person has received a revelation (or message) from God is the quality of his or her life. As Jesus said, *from their fruits you shall know them*. However the Local church with the view of not hurting the sentiments of the Vanniya Community and allows them to continue the devotion to the uncannonised saint (meaning a person who has not been approved to be a saintly person by the Catholic Church)

FEASTS OF LAZARUS:

The fascinating and spectacular feast of Lazarus is celebrated on the last Sunday of January every year. The feast of Lazarus was started as a feast of gratitude. The celebration always started with the flag hoisting 10 days earlier to the Feast Sunday. A flag with the picture of Lazarus at one side and the picture of Mother Mary on the other side that is beautifully painted is hoisted by the main celebrant of the Novena Mass (mostly a Bishop or a priest) and is followed by a solemn (formal) high mass ten days ahead of the feast. When the flag is hoisted the band is played.

Each and every day till the feast day, Novena prayers are said and special masses are celebrated with significant themes for each day. The themes are explained elaborately by the celebrant in his homily (sermon) during the mass.

This feast of Lazarus is being celebrated over the centuries as a car festival with pomp, extravaganza and extreme solemnity. The traditional cars bearing the embellishment of culture and custom are vibrantly decorated and the statues of saints bear eloquent testimony of the antiquity of the feast. Devotees from all over the city irrespective of caste and creed gather in an unending stream during the festival days to thank and pay homage to the major event of the Parish. The present parishioners and devotees of St. Lazarus have placed on record, their deep sense of gratitude to their forefathers who with solid faith, undiminished piety and enthusiasm have undertaken the grand celebrations of the feast through the past centuries (Pushpamary. A, pers. int. on 24th February 2018). member of the Sodality of Mary, Our Lady of Guidance Church, and family member of the hereditary trustees of the feast of Lazarus on 25th February.

THE CELEBRATIONS:

The Car processions are the main attractions of the feast and a cultural embellishment. The statues are taken out on the decorated cars in processions through the car streets. (around the church) These were the property of the headman of the Naicker community. He was also called a *Nattamai* who also dispersed justice by resolving the local civil disputes. Earlier the statues were kept in the residence of the headman and preserved in safe custody. They were used during the feast and brought back for preservation till the next feast. Later the statues were brought under the custody of the Parish Church.

It is said that until the advent of the European missionaries to India, the residents of the locality were all Hindus. The ancestors of Appaswamy Naicker were the Hereditary *Nattamais* to the Kapalishwarar temple and during the Kapalishwarar festival, the *Mudhal Mariyadhai* and *Parivattam* was offered to the Naicker headman and he used to donate the required materials for the special poojas. Later on with the insurgence of missionaries and consequent conversions, the ancestors of Appaswamy Naicker and his descendants converted to Christianity and became staunch and ardent followers of Christ. Most historians say and believe that the conversions were due to material benefits that were gained. Contrary to this, it is necessary to place on record that the Naicker community was basically very rich and there was no necessity for them to convert just for the sake of wheat and milk powder. The headman's family used to feed a minimum of ten to a maximum of hundred people per day. The conversion of the Naicker community from Hinduism to Christianity was due to their thirst for spirituality and nothing else. Due to their ancestral relationship with the Kapalishwarar temple, the vehicles or carts which carry the cars on the streets, were borrowed from the temple by the Trust for the celebration of the Lazarus feast. This habit has been a tradition for nearly 300 years and it continues till date.

CAR PROCESSIONS

Cars are '*ther*' (chariots) that are used to carry representations of Gods. The cars are usually used on annual festival days called '*Ther Thiruvizha*', during which many people gather around. The festival, called Ratha Yatra, is a famous festival mainly observed in Eastern India (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_car).



The Car Procession

The Car Processions were the highlight of the Fascinating Feast of Lazarus. The statues of Mother Mary and other Saints are placed in the cars that are extravagantly and beautifully decorated with flowers, festoons, etc. while four of the cars are decorated with fresh flowers of rose, jasmine and marigold, the others are decorated with festoons and light. These decorated cars are in procession once on the eve of the feast and again in the morning and evening of the main feast day through the car streets. The names of the statues of the saints who are honoured during the feast are

1. Mary the Morning Star (Natchathira Madha)
2. Saint Lazarus
3. Saint Anthony
4. Saint Xavier
5. Saint Arokianather
6. Saint Sebastian
7. Saint Santiago
8. Arc Angel Michael and
9. Saint Joseph

Basically when they first started the feast, only the statue of Saint Lazarus was taken on a procession and within a century's time-span, the other saints were also honoured by such processions. Initially there were totally 8 cars with statues. It is a very common superstition that eight is an unlucky number and hence for the past fifteen to twenty years or so the statue of Saint Joseph is being added and is honoured. This car festival is held for two days and it involves people of different religions in the process of the main celebration. This is also the time when the people from

different nationalities along with the Indians especially with the people of that area, who reside aboard come back to witness the pomp and show of this car festival. It not only serves as a cultural reunion but also promotes religious and social tourism.

Before the advent of the lights in the area, dry cow dung was soaked in kerosene and put into large wooden holders and used for lighting purposes. These were called as *Thee Pandhams* and they illuminated the entire area. Men used to carry them alongside with the cars during the processions. Later the cars were decorated with serial bulbs and appeared divine in the nights during the procession. In the initial years the cars were carried on the shoulders of fishermen, who volunteered to bear the divinity and when they wanted to take rest during the procession, they kept it on a base called, “*Ayyah Kal*” which was a huge circular stone with a flat base. Later on seeing the hardship undergone by the fishermen and on humanitarian basis, the conductors of the feast earlier borrowed and later rented the carts from the Kapaleeshwarar temple (Hindu religious institution) and were used to carry the cars and a grand lunch is being provided till date to the organizers of the Church festival.

The car festival which takes place in Pattinappakam is an annual affair which draws the attention of not only the local people, but also tourists from nearby places and even the people from other States and other countries who come here especially during the latter part of December or January. Pattinappakam, being an area in close range to important land marks like the Santhome Church, the Kapalishwarar Temple and the Marina beach serves the purpose of a cultural tourist destination also.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS:

The various shops that are put up on the roads during the 2 days grand feast, attract the children and elders alike. Starting with food items like *bajjis*, *paniyarams*, chips, halwa and coconut candy, there are also shops selling utensils, toys, accessories, plastic items, slippers, pottery, ceramic and glass-ware. Key-Chain art, Mehandi (hand colouring) and nail art stalls are the latest attractions that have been included in the recent years to meet the needs of the young people. There are different types of merry-go rounds for small kids to adults that are lined up on the roads and they are in fact the best of all the attractions.

Peddlers, pavement shop-keepers and other devotees work unpaid during the festival, in order to express their gratitude to the celebrity saint. There are also many devotees who provide food, snacks, cool drinks and other basic amenities to the people in the pavement shops and to all those who come to the church as a symbol of their gratitude to the Saint Lazarus. This car festival of Lazar serves as a cultural representation of the Catholic Church, where importance is given to localizing the religion. It is also a significant tourist attraction and it brings all the natives and relatives of the people of that locality, who have seen the festival for ages and have cherished the grandeur of the feast. This kind of car festival is a unique one and is celebrated extravagantly in a city like Chennai which is a strong cultural hub of India.

Chennai is popular for its inherent or exhibited cultural value and historical significance and this car festival serves not only the religious purpose but also, tourist, cultural as well as commercial purpose. In spite of the passage of so many years, the tradition, faith and the devotion to the Lazar has remained unchanged. Though the

name of the church has been changed from *Lazarus Church* to *Our Lady of Guidance Church*, it is still called as Lazarus church owing credit to the old tradition as the car festival of Lazar is till date carried out as a cultural extravaganza.

CONCLUSION

Anything that begins with a humble beginning has a definite future. The Feast of Lazarus based on Folk tradition and a background story based on faith has sustained itself through the ages, in spite of scientific and technological development. This makes it very evident that religion and faith can never be challenged. The fascinating Feast of Lazarus is being held over the centuries as a feast of gratitude for a person who is not even a Saint. As such, the divine revelation amidst the people and their faith has resulted in this grand feast. As traditions and practices of spirituality are common in India, this Lazarus Feast in Pattinappakam is sustained as a prominent one in Chennai as it remained as the cultural hub from thence till date.

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