Glossary

aaru padai veedu  
the six camps or sacred sites of Lord Murugan

abishekam  
ritual bathing of the murthi during a puja

Adi Dravida  
literally “first” or “original” Dravidians; Dalits or depressed castes

advidya  
spiritual ignorance

Agamas  
literally “that which has come down”; a body of texts regarded as revealed, and consisting of mythology, ritual and philosophy

aluga  
beautiful

Alvars  
the twelve Vaishnavite Saints, contemporaneous with the Saivite Nayanars

Amman  
a generic name for a mother goddess

anava  
egotism; the principal impurity which enmeshes the soul

annathanam  
a mass feeding

arati  
showing a camphor flame before the image of a deity, normally in the context of a puja

archanai  
a form of worship devoted to a specific murthi, and by extension to the deity

arul  
divine grace

asrama  
an ashram, a spiritual retreat

asuras  
demons

bhajan  
singing of devotional hymns

bhakti  
the cultivation of devotion; devotional Hinduism

bhuta  
spirits which possess specific powers

brahmadeyas  
Brahman settlements, specifically sites of Sanskrit learning, culture and philosophical speculation

cakras  
centres of spiritual energy, symbolically located along the spine

darsan  
auspicious sight of the murthi during a puja
devas               gods

dharma            a specific code of conduct intrinsic to a given entity

garbhagriha       literally “womb chamber”, the sanctum sanctorum of a Hindu temple

gramadevata       a lesser “village” deity, often a village goddess

gunas             the three qualities of Nature, namely sattva, rajas and tamas

jalraha           hand cymbals

jati              a particular lineage which sits within the overall caste structure

Kaliyuga          the current age, considered to be degenerate (yuga: epoch; kaliyuga is thus literally the age of Kali)

karma             the consequences of actions, both good and bad; the outcomes of all actions can occur within this or subsequent lives

kolattam          a complex dance performed with sticks; in South India traditionally danced by girls

kovil (koyil)     a Hindu temple

ksatriyas         the second highest caste of the varna system, representing the warrior caste

kumbabishekam     a ceremony conducted to dedicate deities during temple consecration

kundalini         the spiritual power, typically depicted as a serpent, which symbolically uncoils to travel up the spinal column to successively activate the cakras

kurrukals         Brahman priests in the Saivite tradition

lilas             the play of the Divine

lingam            the aniconic form representing the formless Siva

Mahadeva          the supreme deity, Siva, or more generically one of the other high gods/goddesses

malas             the impurities which bind the soul

mantras           “sacred chant”; formulaic words constituting an inner truth

marga             a pathway; a stage of spiritual development

matha (Tamil: madam)   a monastery

mauna             silence, often in the form of a vow

maya              illusion (in the broadest sense of the term)

meelam            a kind of drum

moksha            liberation from the cycle of samsara

mukti             release from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth

murthi            the image of the deity
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nadaswaram a woodwind instrument, shaped like a clarinet
Nayanars The sixty-three Tamil Saivite saints who composed the hymns which make up the sacred work, the Tirumurai
nirguna God beyond form and time
paul kudam a milk pot
paca matter, the fetters or bondages of ignorance
pacu the individual soul
pada yatra a foot pilgrimage
Palaiyakkarars "little kings", the monarchs of the series of states which succeeded the Vijayanagara dynasty
pantaram a non-Brahman trained priest
Pati The Supreme Lord, the Godhead
pattars Brahman priests in the Vaishnavite tradition
pey a malevolent spirit, a ghost of the dead
prasadam food offered to the deity, sanctified and then returned to devotees
preta spirits of the departed
puja a ritual of formal worship
pujari a non-Brahman priest
Purana compendia of myths and religious philosophy
rajas the intermediate of three qualities (gunas) or strands of Nature; embracing the characteristics of passion, energy, desire
rishi a sage possessing great spiritual power
sadhaka a spiritual seeker, an aspirant
sadhu a wandering holy man
Sakti Vel the Vel given by Parvati to Murugan
sakti divine power envisaged as feminine (as Sakti, the term refers to the Goddess, often as the consort of Siva)
samsara the ceaseless cycle of birth, death and rebirth
Sangam (Cankam) traditionally the colloquium of poets who established Tamil literature; more recently a term used to denote a Hindu peak body
sanguna God worshipped in a specific form and with specified qualities
sannyasin an ascetic renunciant
sattva the first quality (guna) of Nature: the higher characteristics of translucence, harmony, balance
sishya the disciple of a guru
sudras the fourth caste of the varna system; those who, in theory, form the caste of labourers and other menials
svayambhu  holy images or places that have appeared spontaneously
Tai  the Tamil month (January–February) in which Thaipusam is held
tamas  the third of the qualities (gunas) of Nature: the dense characteristics of darkness, ignorance, sloth
tapas  performance of spiritually directed austerities
tattvas  the thirty-six primal states of existence from which the universe is composed
thaneer panthal  stalls which provide food, drink and other forms of service
timiti  ritual fire-walking
tinai  a traditional eco-zone of the Tamil country	tirtha yatra  pilgrimage
utsava murthi  the festival image of the deity
vahana  the animal that serves as a god’s mount
vaisyas  the caste that in theory comprises the land-holding and merchant castes
varna  the theoretical system of caste; one of four categories of caste
vastu  the Hindu science of building and construction
vel  spear, lance
vellalars  the highest non-Brahman Tamil caste
Vetrivel  the cosmic spear
vibhuti  the sacred ash used in ritual worship
vidya  spiritual knowledge
vira  a deified hero
yantra  a mystical diagram