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People, Planets and the Sun: Surya Puja in Tamil Nadu, South India

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes architectural alignments and reports the results of interviews with priests and lay persons at those temples in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in which sunlight of the rising or setting sun enters the sanctum, primarily near equinox. The event, known as *Surya puja*, occurs most frequently in Shaivite temples and is most often understood to be a case of the sun worshipping Lord Shiva. At some temples it is believed the sun suffers from leprosy, which may be associated with an outbreak of sunspots in the late 11th century. Many of today's *Surya puja* rituals have strong astrological dimensions, which have probably grown in intensity since the temples were built.

1. The Sun and the Sanctuary

With its cardinal orientation, carefully established symmetries, and mathematical regularities the Hindu temple is a miniature universe compressed in space and time.¹ The interior space of the temple, consecrated to a particular deity, is generally protected from the chaos of the exterior world and the ordinary human activities by high walls, cardinal gateways, and strict rules of behavior. In the center of the temple, known as the womb chamber, the *garbhagriha*, lies the deity from whom all creation has flowed. The *garbhagriha* is a small, unadorned, cave-like chamber with thick walls into which natural light can not enter except in the most unusual of circumstances. Among its many meanings, the *garbhagriha* is the undifferentiated state of wholeness that existed before creation, the 'darkness covered by darkness' of Vedic cosmogony, and the womb of earth from which life emerged. The *garbhagriha* is also a symbolic cave set into the side of the cosmic mountain, which is the *axis mundi*.

Construction of the Hindu temple is initiated by the laying out and alignment of the *vastupurushamandala*, which, in its symmetries and mathematical proportions, is an image of the cosmos and a model of its expansion outward from the point source of creation.¹ Precise alignment, usually to the east, is vitally important in order to achieve a unification of the microcosm and macrocosm (Figure 1).

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We have located more than 60 temples of the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu in which the light of the rising or setting sun enters the sanctuary and illuminates the presiding deity during a few days around equinox, an event known as *Surya puja*.² The dramatic entry of sunlight into the normally dark center of the temple has the characteristics of a hierophany as defined by Eliade.³ The sacred breaks into the ordinary world as the sun, remover of darkness, nourisher of life, and destroyer of pollution enters the primordial darkness of the sanctuary. In some of these temples, the event is the basis of an elaborate ceremony, which may be viewed with reverence and wonderment by priests and lay persons.

The dates of 56 *Surya puja* events at 52 temples in the Tanjore district are given in Table 1. In addition to those temples that are included in the table, there are nine others for which *Surya pujas* have been reported, but we do not know the exact date of the events. Among the other 162 Shaivite temples in the Tanjore District, we suspect there are a number of additional *Surya puja* temples that we have yet to identify.

The distribution of solar declinations of these events is shown in Figure 2. The mean solar declination of these 56 events is very close to that of equinox, differing from the celestial equator by only 0.13° or 7 minutes of arc. Such accuracy could have been achieved by the Indian technique of shadow casting using a gnomon.⁴

However, the standard deviation of the solar declinations of the 56 events is large, amounting to 6.8° , seemingly inconsistent with the precision that was possible with the gnomon. The closeness of the mean solar declination to that of equinox suggests that the position of the real sun in the sky was actually measured as part of the ceremonial laying out of the temple's geometrical design. It is unlikely, for example, that sunrise on *Mesa samkranti* was used as the equinoctial marker as its date drifts due to precession (in a manner similar to that of *Makara samkranti*) and now occurs on April 14.

Since the declination of the sun changes by approximately 5.5° during the 14 days before or after equinox, the large spread of orientations may have resulted from direct measurements based upon a combined solar-lunar calendar, such as alignment to sunrise on the full or new moon closest to equinox. Averaged over the various temples in our sample, there should be a roughly uniform distribution of solar azimuths covering the 27.3 day lunar period centered on equinox. Since the exact day of new or full moon may be difficult to establish, the distribution may include as many as 30 days around equinox.

The probable error in the alignment of the axis of a temple to the sunrise position may be represented by a normal distribution (gaussian distribution), $\exp(-0^2/a^2)$. The combination of atmospheric refraction

and variable horizon altitude introduces errors of approximately 0.4° . There also may have been an ambiguity introduced by the angular width of the sun; would the architect align the structure to the first gleam of sunrise or to the center of the fully risen sun? Altogether there may have been a cumulative error of 1° in the observational procedure and such a distribution is shown in Figure 3. The summation of gaussian distributions over 28 and 30 days using $\sigma = 1^\circ$ is shown in Figure 4. The $1/e$ half widths of these distributions are respectively 6.5° and 6.9° , which are sufficiently close to the observed standard deviation of 6.8° to suggest that direct sighting on the rising sun was used rather than shadow casting by a gnomon.

2. The Entrance

During *Surya puja* sunlight moves through temple gateways, which possess multiple levels of meaning associated with the sun and Hindu cosmogony. The three sides of the gateway are viewed as analogous to the arching pathway of the sun as it moves from horizon to horizon. The arch of the doorway generally contains two dominant figures, both of which have astronomical symbolism. At the base of each arch there may be symmetrically placed *makaras*, cosmogonic creatures that synthesize water, earth, and sky, with bodies of crocodile, noses of elephant, and wings of bird. The arch may also contain nymphs, river goddesses, and intertwined stalks of water plants which emerge from the mouth of one *makara* to be reabsorbed by the other, reminiscent of the great cycles of creation and destruction of the universe.⁵ The water imagery is associated with the water cosmogony of Hindu tradition in which the world emerged from darkness, water, and chaos.

A second cosmic symbol of the doorway is that of the gargoyle-like face of Kirtimukha at the top of the arch, glaring downward at all who pass through. With no lower jaw, bulging eyes, protruding fangs, and pendant tongue, Kirtimukha serves as a guardian of Shiva's doorway. Some identify Kirtimukha with Rahu, the demon consumed by hatred of the sun and moon, who chases them in the sky and occasionally causes eclipses. Surrounded by flames that periodically destroy the world, Kirtimukha is also the sun, destroyer of worlds as well as Mahakala and Yama, time and death. Kirtimukha is also known as Simhamukha, the face of the solar lioness, the Splendor of Radiance. The sun is imagined to lie behind the mask of Simhamukha whose eyes 'blaze like lightning'. Others see Kirtimukha's mouth as the source of creation, which will continue to flow until the mouth closes, which is impossible without his lower jaw.⁶

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Not all Hindu temples permit entry of the sun into the sanctum. Although the major axis may be oriented along the east-west line certain features of temple design may block the sun. For example, the view of the horizon may be blocked by a the *vahana*, the vehicle of the deity of the temple, who is often large and may be enclosed in a pavilion. In the Shaivite temple Nandi, the bull may sit directly on the east-west axis facing the god. For example, a monumental statue of Nandi blocks the view of the eastern horizon at the temple of Brihadeshvara in Tanjore. In addition, the flag staff of Shiva, which is symbolic of the fire *linga* and of the endless capacity of Shiva for expansion, may be placed precisely on the east-west axis. Other examples of blockage of light are found in the Kailasanatha temple of Ellora where a wall of exactly the necessary size has been constructed to prevent light of the setting equinox sun from reaching the sanctum. At the Sun Temple of Konarak entry of light to the sanctum was hindered by the extensive Natamandir and also perhaps by a column bearing Surya's charioteer.⁷ In the Surya *puja* temples either these obstacles do not exist or symmetries have been broken by displacements from the axis.

3. The Experience

The head priest of Semponarkoil, near Mayaram, organizes an elaborate twelve-day festival on the occasion of the Surya *puja* at his temple between April 20-May 1. He described his experience while standing in the darkened *garbhagriha* with the horizontal rays of sunlight sweeping past him as so dramatic that he found it hard to believe it was purely a natural phenomenon.

In the temple of Vaitheeswarankoil the priests describe the event with a similar sense of wonderment. Their impression is that the moving light of the evening sun makes a circuit inside the temple, coming up one side of the flag staff of Shiva and returning to the sun on its other side.

In the temple of Kali in Chidambaram, Surya *puja* occurs at sunset, and crowds of 100-200 people gather each year to watch the light of the sun illuminate the image of westward-facing pacified Kali, Brahmamacundeswari. On each of three days the sun's rays illuminate one-third of the image and finally touch her head and brilliant gold crown. In the smoke-filled temple the horizontal rays of the sun become visible and eager devotees strain, some standing on their toes, to see her illuminated by the sun. To enhance the effect, the priests may extinguish the electric lights of the temple. The most powerful image in the temple is the fierce form Kali, and she faces eastward with no opening to the outside. R. N. Natarajarathina Deekshithar, priest of the temple, suggests

that too much power may be associated with the fierce form of Kali to allow sunlight to fall on her image.

At Innambur, a small village 4 km from Kumbakonam, a remarkable Surya *puja* occurs in which light enters the sanctuary twice during each of three mornings. First the direct rays of the rising sun touch the lingam and then fifteen minutes later light reflected from the temple tank, which lies some 75 feet to the east, returns to the sanctuary. At this temple the image of Nandi has been displaced off the east-west axis thereby allowing sunlight into the *garbhagriha*.

4. The Meaning

Based upon our interviews, the meaning of Surya *puja* can be divided into the following two major categories:

a. Darshan:

An important aspect of the Surya *puja* experience is that of *darshan*, which may be translated as ‘auspicious sight’.⁸ Vision has the power to transmit blessings and energy from the gods and to transform the beholder. An interactive experience of seeing and being seen, darshan is ‘given’ by the god and ‘taken’ by the person. Viewing the sun streaming through the temple and falling upon the image of the deity is a special opportunity. To view the freshly washed *lingam* brightly reflecting the light of the dawn sun is to be present when the world is starting anew. The symbolism of the event includes the ritual awakening of the god by sunlight and the cyclic emergence of the universe from darkness of chaos. At the time of Surya *puja* the sun is in a direct line-of-sight with the god, Surya and Shiva are viewing each other, and something powerful and mysterious is occurring at an entirely different level from that of human experience. A living geometry is established wherein sight-lines connect multiple realms of the universe: individual, temple, sun, and god.

b. Horoscopic:

Suryanarkoil is one of the few living temples in which Surya is the primary deity. The temple was constructed in approximately A. D. 1070 at a time when sun (Saura) worship was more extensive than today.⁹ Saura devotees formed one of six major schools of Hinduism established by Shankara in the 9th century, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktam (Shakti), Kaumaram (Skanda), Garnapatyam (Ganesh) and Saura. At that time, Saura worship was the least common of the schools, and largely disappeared in the 13th century with the destruction of the sun temples in north India.

Surya resides in the main sanctuary, while the other planets are present in eight smaller shrines surrounding the main temple. Within the temple there is an additional idol of Brihaspati (Jupiter) standing and facing Surya. Of all the planets Jupiter has been so chosen because he alone can absorb the heat generated by the sun, who is 'fire-incarnate', thereby making Surya accessible to human devotees.

Today Surnarkoil appears to be dominated by horoscopic rituals associated with the nine planets, the *navagrahas* (the sun, moon, Rahu, Ketu, and the five naked eye planets). Typically, worshippers will visit the main shrine first, and then perform one or more *pradakshinas*, proceeding in a clockwise direction to the shrines of the other *navagrahas*.

According to the *sthalampurana*, the official history of the temple, the *navagrahas*, including the sun, became afflicted with leprosy due to the curse of a *rishi*, who had been performing penances in the forest to relieve himself from that disease. He requested the aid of the planets, asking them to cure him based upon his belief that his problem of leprosy was the result of karmic processes initiated some time in the past. To his disappointment, the planets replied that they were unable to cure him, saying that the power to remove negative effects of past karma was not vested in them. Their only role, as they understood it, was to serve as 'karmic technicians' and bestow upon human beings both the positive and negative consequences of astrological processes. Compassion for human suffering was not an appropriate planetary attribute.

Upon receiving such disappointing news from the sun and his fellow planets, the angry *rishi* cursed them to suffer the same malady. The curse took effect at once, and all nine planets, the sun included, were afflicted with leprosy. In desperation, the planets turned to Shiva and implored him to relieve them of such undeserved affliction. According to local tradition, Shiva cured them all with the provision that they show mercy and compassion for the sufferings of unfortunate human beings. For this act Shiva is known as Prananatheswara, the restorer of *prana*, which is life. The temple of Prananatheswara is situated at Thirumangalakendi, about 1.5 km from Surnarkoil, and all pilgrims are advised to visit that temple first before requesting favors of the planets at Surnarkoil. According to astrological belief, if one is so unfortunate as to be born under the sign of Surya, one will suffer from serious disease, become an exile or prisoner, and lose wife, children, and property. Many visit the temple to soften the blow of their horoscopic fate.

The Nageswarar temple of Kumbakonam has probably the best known Surya *puja* in the Tanjore district. The priests of Nageswarar, an early Chola temple built in the 8th century, speak of the sun cursed by

Visvakarma and afflicted by leprosy. Only after worshipping Shiva at the time of Surya *puja* did the sun regain his original splendor. During the three-day festival approximately 500 spectators stand on either side of the long corridor leading to the sanctum to watch the rays of the sun touch the deity of the temple, Nagaraja, in the form of a *lingam* protected by the hood of a cobra. After witnessing the event, people visit the shrine of Surya, which is in the northeast corner of the temple compound. The flag pole at the eastern entrance to the temple has been moved approximately 1/3 m south of the axis, opening up a 1/2⁰ wide pathway for the sun, thereby enabling the sun to touch the *lingam*.

These stories of the leprous sun may reflect an attitude toward the sun that developed after the time the temples were originally constructed. Sunspots may have played a major role in the connection between leprosy and the sun. In A.D. 1077 the sun entered a period of unusual sunspot activity, in which the largest number ever visible to the unaided was ever reported.¹⁰ The extraordinary sunspot activity has been identified as the Medieval Maximum and continued through the end of the fourteenth century. Elsewhere in India, the sun shrine dedicated to the Khakhola Aditya at Varanasi indicates the awareness of the naked eye sunspots of the Medieval Maximum.¹¹

Other examples of the astrological transformation of temples are encountered at Sri Vallar Koil in Mayuram and Tillikali. At sunset between March 15-21 sunlight falls upon the lingam in the main sanctuary at Sri Vallar Koil. However, according to priests at the temple, Surya *puja* today has no particular association with the sun. During that festival and every week on Thursday the major attraction to the crowds of devotees is neither Surya nor the presiding deity of the temple, Shiva, but Dakshinamurti, the south-facing, silent guru of spirituality, a human form of Shiva. Dakshinamurti has the reputation of removing evil influences generated by Jupiter, and, in this instance, the planet has displaced Shiva.

Astrological transformation is also found at Tillaikallikoil in Chidambaram. On Sundays many worshippers come to the temple to request that Kali remove the evil astrological influences of the two shadow planets, Rahu and Ketu. For example, during the Surya *puja* of Sunday, 26 February 1983, the temple was crowded largely because of astrological concerns, and very few of those who were worshipping the goddess paid attention to the rosy light of the setting sun that illuminated her image.

5. Concluding Remarks

There are many levels of meaning of the Surya *puja*, depending upon local traditions and the perspectives of priests, architects, and participants. For some of today's participants, the experience may be a relatively uncomplicated event in which the sun provides additional light to illumine the deity. For others, the Surya *puja* is an opportunity to watch and join with Surya in worshipping Lord Shiva. The belief in some temples that Surya may be suffering from leprosy may have resulted from the outbreak of naked eye sunspots after A. D. 1077, which has been woven into an elaborate legend. Today, concern with one's horoscope and related personal issues appears to be a major reason for many people who visit some of the temples at the time of Surya *puja*. For still others the event may be experienced as a hierophany, a luminous manifestation of the sacred within the stones of the temple.

The parallelism of the microcosm and macrocosm as evidenced by accurate cardinal alignment is an issue of great importance in the Hindu temple. We have proposed that the apparent imprecision of such alignments of the Surya *puja* temples did not result from unintentional errors but rather from a solar-lunar alignment of the *vastupurushamandala*, such that the architect sighted the rising sun on the day of the full (or new) moon closest to equinox. It may be possible to test this proposal of solar-lunar alignments by means of epigraphic records of the dates of construction of some of these temples.

It would appear that there has been an evolution of function and meaning in many of these temples as traditions of Saura worship changed, sunspots appeared and then faded on the face of the sun, and astrology became an increasingly important concern in people's lives. The power of astrology in influencing and in some cases even preempting temple traditions has caused certain alarm. One of the most famous Tamil poets and saints, Thirugnana Sambandar, who lived around A. D. 650, is especially known for his poem, *Kolarupadigam*, 'Verse for eliminating the effects of planets' in which he encouraged people not to be afraid of the planets and to surrender themselves only at the feet of Lord Shiva. For a time, his influence reduced the importance of the planets and astrology and restored Surya to a central position as the symbol of Shiva's light. Temples to Surya were built and images of the other *navagrahas* were organized heliocentricity around the dominant and central planet. Eventually however, the astrological *navagrahas* returned to dominance, and the sun, only one out of nine, lost much of his ancient significance and power.

Regardless of one's reason for attending, the Surya *puja* is an event of undeniable drama. Coming from far beyond the temple, light of the sun

slowly moves through the structure toward its center, and, when it enters the *sanctum*, the dark microcosm is briefly illuminated by the brilliant macrocosm. To some, it may appear that at the blazing moment when light touches the Shiva lingam, space and time have collapsed into the center of both the cosmos and the temple.

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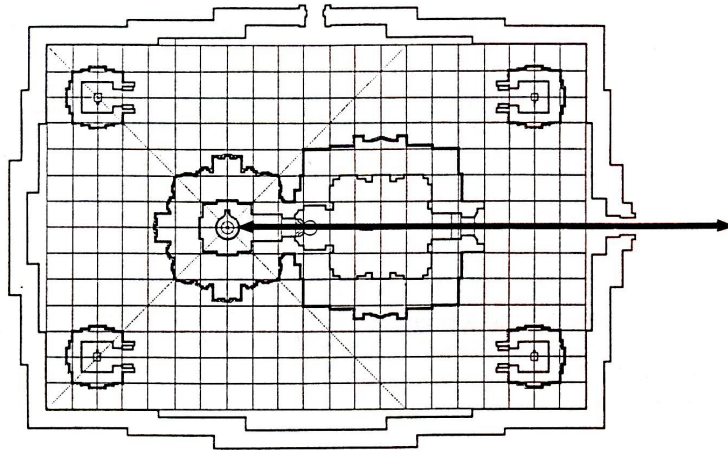
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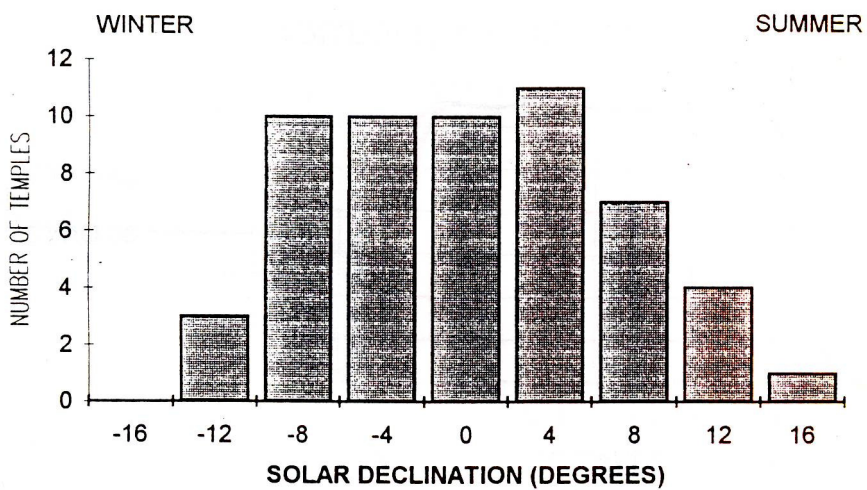
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Below: Figure 1 Schematic ground plan of a Hindu temple.



Top. Figure 2: Distribution of declinations of the sun of the central axes of the Surya *puja* temples.

Below. Figure 3: Gaussian distribution with $\sigma = 1^\circ$.



NORMAL DISTRIBUTION

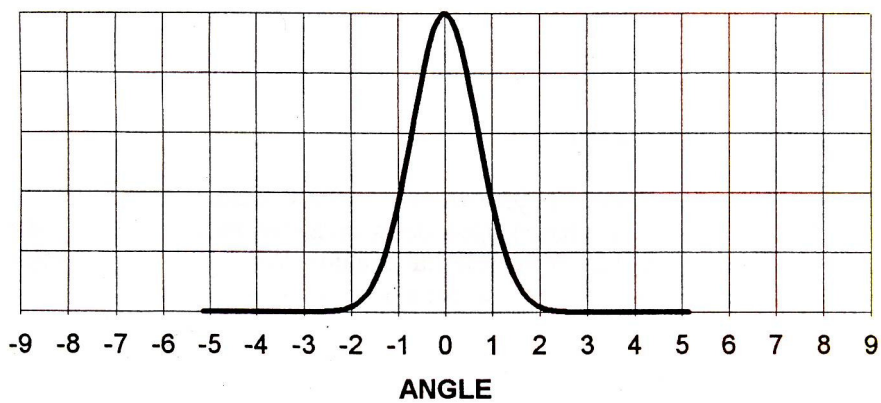
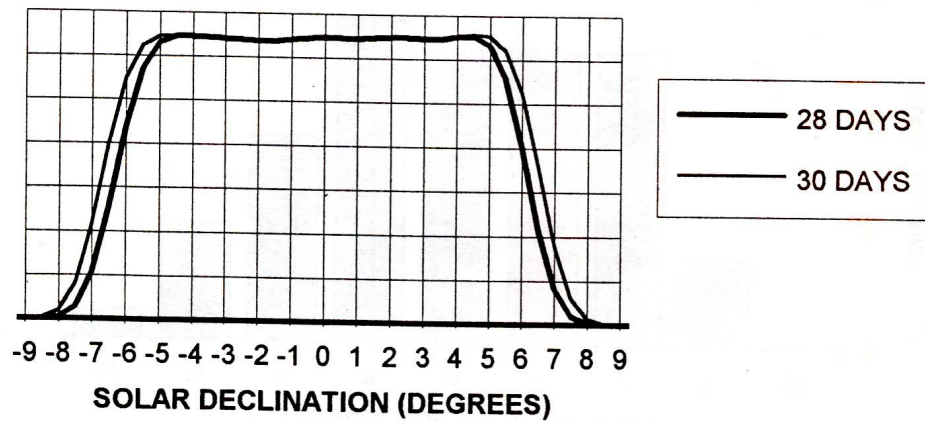


Figure 4: Summation of normal (Gaussian) distributions with $a= 1^\circ$ over 28 and 30 day periods centered on equinox.

SUMMATION OF NORMAL DISTRIBUTIONS



Following Page: Table 1

Surya Puja Temples in Tanjore District, Tamil Nadu.

Declination of the sun, based upon dates of Surya *puja*, is measured in degrees above or below (-) the celestial equator. Westward facing temples in which Surya *puja* occurs in the evening are indicated by 'e'.

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Date	Place	Temple	Declination
1 Feb 13-19	Ethappor	Sambamoorthy	-12.37
2 Oct 26-Nov 1	Ethappor	Sambamoorthy	-13.46
3 Feb 25-27	Aduthurai	Suryanarkoil	-8.78
4 Feb 25-27	Thirukkandiyoor, Thanjavur	Kadenswarar	-8.78
5 Feb 25-27	Thirukkadiyur	Virattesar	-8.78
6 Feb 25-28	e Chidambaram	Tillaikalikoil	-8.58
7 March 1-2	Thiruvankadu	Thiruvenkattasar	-7.46
8 March 1-5	Kunrathoor	Sekkizhar	-6.88
9 March 2-8	Thirunelikkaval	Eswarar	-6.11
10 March 3-5	e Vaitheeswarankoil, Mayavaram	Vaidhyantham	-6.50
11 March 3-5	Thirukkadayoor	Amirdhakateswarar	-6.50
12 March 3-5	Thirunageswaram		-6.50
13 Oct 20-22	Thirunageswaram		-10.63
14 March 5-7	e Thiruppariyalur	Varattesar	-5.73
15 March 5-9	Poondhamalli	Vaidhyanatha	-5.33
16 Oct 5-7	e Thirukkadayoor	Amirdhakateswarar	-5.03
17 Oct 5-7	e Mayavaram	Vaitheeswarankoil	-5.03
18 March 7-9	Thiru Azhundhoor	Shiva	-4.94
19 March 7-10	Thiruppariyalur	Veerattesar	-4.75
20 March 8-10	Thirukkarukarvur		-4.56
21 March 10	Thiruengoi	Malai (Maragadhasalar)	-4.17
22 March 12-14	Thirukkadambur	Amirthakadeswarar	-2.99
23 March 14-16	Thirumandurai	Amiravananathar	-2.20
24 March 15-21	e Mayavaram	Vallalar Koil	-1.03
25 March 16-18	Thiruppuramloam	Satchi Nathar	-1.41
26 Sept 25-27	Thirukkadambur	Melai (Amirthakadeswarar)	-1.16
27 Sept 23-25	Thiruppainnali		-0.38
28 March 20-22	Thiruppainnali		0.00
29 Sept 24	Thirupartrurai	Thirumanlanathar	-0.38
30 March 21	Thirupartrurai	Thirumanlanathar	0.77
31 Sept 23-25	Tirppainjili	Nilivaneswarar	-0.38
32 March 21-23	Tirppainjili	Nilivaneswarar	0.56
33 March 20-26	Magandrapalli	Koyiladi Palayam	0.96
34 March 25-27	Thiruvaimoor	Bayamoomathar	2.13
35 March 26-28	Nagalapuram	Nagaliswaram	2.53
36 March 26-28	Thiruvedikkudi	Edapureeswarar	2.53
37 Sept 14-18	Thiruvetkalam	Pasupatheswaran	2.71
38 March 27-29	Innambur	Thankuonreeswarar	2.91
39 March 27-29	Thiruthani	Arwmutraswamy	2.91
40 March 27-29	Vedhikkadu	Shiva	2.91
41 March 27-29	Thiruvampuram	Valmpurinathar	2.91
42 March 27-Apr 9	e Telicherry	Shiva	5.01
43 Apr 1-3	e Thiruppalachchiraman	Thiruvasi	4.85
44 Apr 1-3	Thiruchotrutthurai		4.85
45 Apr 2-11	Thirukadaimudi	Kilaiyur	6.55
46 Apr 4-6	Thiruchirappalli	Thayumanavar	6.00
47 Apr 6-10	Thirunavaloor	Shiva	7.13
48 Apr 7-9	Thiruanniyur	Ponnur	7.13
49 April 8-10	Thiruthankudi	Thittai-Devaguru nathar	7.51
50 Apr 8-12	Ponnoor, Mayaram	Shiva	7.88
51 Apr 14-16	Koodalai Athoor	Shiva	9.69
52 Apr 14-20	Panangalloor	Eswarar and Amman	10.39
53 Apr 18-20	Aduthurai	Shiva	11.10
54 Apr 20-May 1	Semponnar Koil	Shiva	13.23
55 Apr 24-26	Kumbakonam	Nageswarar	13.13
56 May 1-4	Thiruppatteeswaram	Patteeswaranathar	15.46