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## ARTICLES

# The Mythological Origins of Pazhani Murugan Temple: The Legend of Idumban and the Sacred Hills

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### ABSTRACT

The Pazhani Murugan Temple, one of the six sacred abodes (Arupadai Veedu) of Lord Murugan, occupies a prominent place in Tamil religious and cultural traditions. Its origin is deeply rooted in Hindu mythology, particularly the legend of Sage Agastya, his disciple Idumban, and Lord Murugan. This paper examines the mythological narrative associated with the establishment of the sacred hills of Pazhani and highlights its religious significance in contemporary pilgrimage practices.

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## 1. Introduction and Sacred Regional Context

The Arulmigu Dhandayuthapani Swamy Temple, situated atop the elevation of Shivagiri in the town of Pazhani (Palani), Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, represents one of the most prominent pilgrimage centers in South Asia. Dedicated to Lord Murugan—worshipped variously across the subcontinent as Subrahmanya, Skanda, Kumara, and Karthikeya—the site attracts millions of pilgrims annually, serving as a focal point for regional devotion, Tamil linguistic identity, and trans-Indian Hindu orthopraxy. In the taxonomy of Tamil sacred geography, Pazhani holds a preeminent position as the third *Padaiveedu* (sacred encampment or abode) among the *Arupadai Veedu* (Six Abodes of Murugan) celebrated in classical Tamil literature.

The antiquarian roots of Pazhani are deeply embedded in Sangam literature. The classic text *Tirumurukarrupattai* explicitly identifies the location as *Thiruaavinankudi*, situating the primary early settlement at the base of the sacred hillock. Historical and epigraphic records indicate that during the Sangam era, the surrounding territory was designated as *Vaikavarnadu*, an integral part of *Vaiyapuri Nadu* ruled by the chieftain *Vel-Avi-k-ko-p-perumpekan*. Geographically positioned at the southern terminus of *Kongu Nadu*, the region historically served

as an overland crossroads between the Western Ghats and the eastern plains, turning it into a contested buffer zone among the Chera, Chola, and Pandya dynasties.

| Historical Name / Designation        | Literary / Epigraphic Source               | Geographical & Administrative Context                |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Thiruaavinankudi</b>              | <i>Tirumurukarruppaṭai</i> (Sangam Corpus) | Base of the Pazhani hill; 3rd <i>Arupadai Veedu</i>  |
| <b>Podhini</b>                       | Early Sangam Texts / Local Inscriptions    | Ancient indigenous name for the hill settlement      |
| <b>Vaikavurnadu / Vaiyapuri Nadu</b> | <i>Purananuru</i> / Medieval Inscriptions  | Territorial chieftaincy ruled by King Kopperum Pekan |
| <b>Kongu Nadu (Southern Border)</b>  | Regional Copper Plates & Stone Edicts      | Western Tamil Nadu historical sub-region             |

Devotion to Murugan at Pazhani reflects a complex synthesis of indigenous Dravidian traditions, Puranic mythologies, and Agamic rituals. The deity is celebrated in Sangam works as an embodiment of youth, supreme wisdom, martial courage, and victory over demonic forces. Over centuries, the integration of local hill-worship with pan-Indian Puranic narratives transformed Pazhani into a multi-layered sacred landscape where mythology, ethical philosophy, alchemical science, and sacred geography intersect.

## 2. Mythological Foundations and Cosmic Cartography

### *Sage Agastya and Cosmic Equilibrium*

The mythological genesis of Pazhani is tied to the cosmic equilibrium of the earth. According to Puranic traditions, when all the major divine beings, celestial sages, and deities assembled at Mount Kailasha in the far north to witness the sacred wedding of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, the mass concentration of spiritual energy caused a severe physical imbalance. The northern hemisphere tilted downward under the immense weight, while the southern hemisphere was dangerously elevated.

To restore equilibrium across the cosmos, Lord Shiva instructed the revered Vedic sage Agastya to travel south. Agastya's southward journey symbolizes the historical diffusion of sacred knowledge, literary arts, and agricultural practices across the Vindhya range into the Tamil country. Before settling in the southern Podhigai hills, Agastya sought to establish permanent sacred anchors in the south to institutionalize this spiritual balance.

### *Idumban and the Sacred Hills*

To accomplish this spatial transformation, Sage Agastya assigned his principal disciple, the titan Idumban, the arduous task of transporting two sacred hillocks—Shivagiri and Shaktigiri—from the Himalayan realm to South India. Demonstrating unwavering devotion (*guru-bhakti*), determination, and physical fortitude, Idumban attached the two hills to the opposite ends of a heavy wooden pole using divine serpents as ropes, creating the prototypical carrying apparatus known as a *Kavadi*.

Idumban carried this colossal burden across the Indian subcontinent. Upon reaching the present-day town of Pazhani (then known as Thiruaavinankudi), he felt physically exhausted from the journey and placed the two hills on the ground to rest.

### *The Divine Encounter and Theological Transformation*

After resting at Pazhani, when Idumban attempted to lift the hills again, he found that both Shivagiri and Shaktigiri remained firmly rooted to the earth. Upon investigating the summit, he found a young boy wearing a loincloth,

holding a wooden staff (*Dhandam*), and seated atop one of the peaks. The boy declared that the hill belonged to him and refused to relinquish it.

Unable to accept this claim, Idumban challenged the boy, precipitating a fierce battle. Idumban was defeated and slain by the extraordinary power of the youth, who then revealed his divine identity as Lord Murugan. Recognizing Murugan's true nature, Idumban surrendered in absolute devotion and sought forgiveness. Moved by Idumban's repentance, Lord Murugan restored him to life and granted him an exalted status as the eternal guardian deity (*Kaval Deivam*) of the sacred hill. Murugan further ordained that any pilgrim ascending the hill carrying a *Kavadi*—emulating Idumban's burden—would receive divine grace and relief from worldly afflictions.

### ***The Legend of the Fruit of Knowledge***

This geographical anchoring corresponds with another foundational narrative explaining Murugan's ascetic form at Pazhani. Sage Narada once presented Lord Shiva at Kailasha with the *Gnana Pazham* (Fruit of Knowledge), a divine fruit containing the elixir of supreme wisdom. Shiva desired to divide the fruit between his two sons, Ganesha and Murugan, but was advised against cutting it, as its mystical potency would be lost. Shiva instituted a contest: the fruit would be awarded to whichever son circumambulated the entire world three times first.

| Character           | Strategy and Action                                                                       | Theological Outcome                                                                  |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lord Murugan</b> | Mounted his vehicle, the Peacock, and sped across the physical cosmos.                    | Demonstrates kinetic action and physical mastery; returns to find the prize awarded. |
| <b>Lord Ganesha</b> | Circumambulated his parents, Shiva and Parvati, declaring them to be the cosmic totality. | Demonstrates intellectual wisdom; receives the <i>Gnana Pazham</i> .                 |

Upon returning and discovering that Ganesha had secured the fruit, Murugan felt cheated and fell into profound disillusionment. Realizing the necessity of transcending worldly attachment, Murugan renounced his celestial robes, shaved his head, wore a simple loincloth, and departed Kailasha for the southern hills of Pazhani. Taking up residence on the summit of Shivagiri as a solitary hermit, he adopted the name *Dandayudhapani*—"the wielder of the staff"—symbolizing self-realization, absolute renunciation, and divine wisdom. Goddess Parvati attempted to soothe his anger, saying, "*Pazham Nee*" ("You are the fruit of knowledge"), a divine declaration from which the town's name *Pazhani* is derived.

## **3. Siddha Alchemy and the Navapashanam Iconography**

### ***Siddhar Bogar and the Siddha Science***

Beyond its Puranic framework, Pazhani is a vital center for the Tamil Siddha tradition (*Siddha Vaidya* and *Rasa Vada*). Central to this legacy is Siddhar Bogar (also spelled Bhogar or Boganathar), one of the revered Eighteen Siddhars (*Ettupathi Siddhargal*) of Tamil Nadu. Trained under master Kalangi Nathar and Sage Agastya, Bogar was a master of chemistry, medicine, yoga, and esoteric philosophy. His primary treatise, the *Bogar Saptha Kaandam* (*Bogar 7000*), serves as an encyclopedia detailing herbal formulations, mineral purifications, and alchemical transformations.

Legend and textual traditions record that Bogar foresaw the arrival of the *Kali Yuga*, an era characterized by widespread physical suffering, chronic diseases, and spiritual degeneration. To provide a permanent therapeutic sanctuary for humanity, Bogar conceived the creation of a divine icon imbued with self-sustaining medicinal properties. Assisted by 81 *Upa Siddhars*, Bogar systematically processed thousands of rare botanical ingredients and mineral compounds into a permanent composite medium.

### ***Chemical Composition of Navapashanam***

The central idol enshrined within the sanctum of the Pazhani temple is carved from a unique compound known as *Navapashanam*. The term is derived from the Sanskrit and Tamil words *Nava* (nine) and *Pashanam* (poisonous or toxic mineral substances). In their raw states, each of these nine primary ingredients poses extreme biological toxicity. However, through complex Siddha purification techniques (*Sodhana*), heating, herbal neutralization, and alchemical binding, Bogar transformed these lethal elements into a non-toxic matrix possessing divine healing energy.

| <b>Tamil Siddha Name</b>           | <b>Chemical / Mineral Identity</b>           | <b>Traditional Siddha Function &amp; Purification</b>                     |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rasam</b>                       | Elemental Mercury (\$Hg\$)                   | Primary alchemical catalyst; ground with plant extracts and brick powder. |
| <b>Vellai Pashanam / Visha</b>     | Arsenic Trioxide (\$As_2O_3\$)               | Neutralized via scrubbing with betel leaf juice and lemon extracts.       |
| <b>Gauri Pashanam</b>              | Arsenic Pentasulfide (\$As_2S_5\$)           | Purified through repeated boiling in clarified butter (ghee).             |
| <b>Jathilingam</b>                 | Cinnabar / Mercuric Sulfide (\$HgS\$)        | Processed using lime juice, cow milk, and <i>Acalypha indica</i> .        |
| <b>Pooram</b>                      | Mercury Subchloride / Calomel (\$Hg_2Cl_2\$) | Boiled in a specialized pepper and betel-leaf infusion.                   |
| <b>Veeram</b>                      | Mercuric Chloride (\$HgCl_2\$)               | Soaked in cow milk and dried under controlled sunlight.                   |
| <b>Kandhagam</b>                   | Elemental Sulphur (\$S\$)                    | Sun-dried and scrubbed repeatedly using pure milk.                        |
| <b>Mridharsinghi</b>               | Lead Monoxide (\$PbO\$)                      | Detoxified by boiling in herbal extractions or goat urine.                |
| <b>Thurusu / Vajram / Shilajit</b> | Copper Sulfate / Mica / Mineral Pitch        | Acts as a binding matrix to solidify the composite material.              |

### ***Therapeutic Mechanisms of Abhishekam and Panchamirtham***

The *Navapashanam* idol exhibits unique material properties during liquid contact. Unlike stone or metal deities, the Pazhani idol interacts chemically with the substances poured over it during *Abhishekam* (ritual ablutions). When liquids such as cow milk, sandalwood paste, and water pass over the surface of the icon, trace amounts of the detoxified mineral compounds are extracted into the fluid. Devotees consume these runoff liquids as *Prasadam*, believing them to act as a therapeutic panacea capable of curing chronic physiological diseases and metabolic disorders.

A central element of this ritual ecosystem is *Pazhani Panchamirtham*, a sweet concoction offered to the deity. Recognized globally for its culinary and cultural uniqueness, *Pazhani Panchamirtham* has been awarded a Geographical Indication (GI) tag under Indian intellectual property law. Prepared using a strict traditional recipe without artificial preservatives or added water, it consists of five primary ingredients:

1. Crushed Virupachi plantain bananas
2. Kangeyam *Kandasari* (unrefined sugar)

3.  
Dates
4.  
Raisins
5.  
Pure clarified butter (ghee)

This mixture is enhanced with cardamom and *Kalkandu* (sugar candy). When applied to the deity during specific rituals, *Panchamirtham* absorbs the subtle energies of the *Navapashanam* idol, serving as a long-lasting consumable offering distributed to millions of pilgrims worldwide.

Directly beneath the sanctum sanctorum, in a narrow cave-like corridor located southwest of the main shrine, lies the *Samadhi* of Siddhar Bogar. Tradition asserts that after completing the consecration of the idol, Bogar entered a state of irreversible *Nirvigalpa Samadhi*. An underground tunnel is believed to directly connect Bogar's subterranean chamber to the base of the *Navapashanam* idol, physically and spiritually linking the creator with his creation for eternity.

#### 4. Architectural Evolution and Dynastic Patronage

##### *Architectural Topography and Spatial Layout*

The temple complex is situated at an elevation of approximately 1,500 feet above sea level atop Shivagiri hill. The structural layout follows the principles of classical Dravidian temple architecture, adapted to the natural contours of the mountain. The hill is traditionally accessed via steep stone steps cut into the rock face, supplemented in modern times by a winch-operated funicular railway and an aerial rope-car system.

The spatial layout unfolds sequentially from the base to the hill summit. At the foothills lies the *Thiruavinankudi Kulandhai Velappar Temple*, situated adjacent to the *Saravana Poigai*, the sacred temple tank symbolizing Murugan's miraculous birth. The ascent up the hill features several intermediary shrines, most notably the sanctuary dedicated to Idumban, reinforcing his mythological role as the custodian of the hill. At the summit, the path opens into an ambulatory outer precinct (*Prakaram*), leading into the inner precincts housing shrines for Shiva, Parvati, Vinayaka, Bogar's *Samadhi*, and the main sanctum sanctorum.

##### *Dynastic Chronology and Architectural Stratigraphy*

The temple evolved over many centuries through successive phases of royal patronage, institutional endowments, and architectural expansions. While Tamil scriptures trace the founding of the innermost shrine to Sage Bogar and legendary early rulers, tangible epigraphic and structural evidence reveals continuous patronage from major South Indian dynasties.

| Dynastic Period               | Epoch                                     | Key Structural / Architectural Contributions                                   | Epigraphic & Artifactual Evidence                                                |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Early Chera Dynasty</b>    | Classical Era (c. 2nd C. BCE – 3rd C. CE) | Initial shrine construction at the hill core; establishment of path networks.  | Early Sangam references ( <i>Podhini / Thiruaavinankudi</i> ).                   |
| <b>Imperial Chola Dynasty</b> | Medieval Era (c. 10th – 12th C. CE)       | Major expansion of the main sanctum ( <i>Garbhagriha</i> ) and stone mandapas. | Stone inscriptions detailing land grants, gold donations, and ritual endowments. |

| Dynastic Period                            | Epoch                                    | Key Structural / Architectural Contributions                                                     | Epigraphic & Artifactual Evidence                                           |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Pandya Dynasty</b>                      | High Medieval Era (c. 13th – 14th C. CE) | Construction of outer ambulatory walls ( <i>Prakarams</i> ) and defensive structures.            | Twin-fish emblems ( <i>Pandya insignia</i> ) carved onto ambulatory walls.  |
| <b>Vijayanagara &amp; Nayak Rulers</b>     | Early Modern Era (c. 15th – 17th C. CE)  | Monumental <i>Gopurams</i> (gateway towers), pillared halls ( <i>Mandapas</i> ), chariot houses. | Intricate stone sculptures, ceiling paintings, and structural enhancements. |
| <b>Kingdom of Mysore &amp; British Raj</b> | Modern Era (18th C. – mid-20th C. CE)    | Administration by local chieftains; inclusion in Madras Presidency.                              | Colonial land records; integration into regional transit networks.          |

The central sanctum sanctorum (*Garbhagriha*) houses the ascetic idol of Dandayudhapani. Surmounting the sanctum is a pyramid-shaped Vimanam covered in gold plating. The stone walls of the inner sanctum feature ancient Tamil inscriptions recording royal decrees, land grants, and ritual schedules. In the ambulatory precincts surrounding the central sanctuary, structural elements from the Pandya period—specifically carved reliefs depicting the twin-fish insignia—remain visible alongside Vijayanagara-style pillared halls.

## 5. Ritual Orthopraxy, Festivals, and Phenomenological Vows

### *The Kavadi Attam: Somatic Devotion and Penance*

The defining devotional practice associated with Pazhani is the carrying of the *Kavadi*. Originating directly from the legend of Idumban transporting Shivagiri and Shaktigiri, the *Kavadi* is a wooden or bamboo arch decorated with peacock feathers, flowers, and religious symbols. The performance of the ritual dance—*Kavadi Attam*—is an embodiment of faith, discipline, penance, and thanksgiving.

Pilgrims prepare for carrying the *Kavadi* by undertaking a strict *Vratham* (period of vow and purification) lasting up to 48 days. During this period, devotees observe complete celibacy, consume pure vegetarian food, sleep on unpadded floors, walk barefoot, and maintain continuous mental concentration through devotional chanting.

| Kavadi Typology        | Physical Form & Contents                                                                | Symbolic & Ritual Purpose                                                                |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Paal Kavadi</b>     | Arch structure carrying brass pots of fresh cow milk.                                   | Milk used for the deity's <i>Abhishekam</i> ; symbolizes purity and nourishment.         |
| <b>Theertha Kavadi</b> | Arch structure carrying vessels filled with holy water.                                 | Sacred water used to cleanse the sanctum; symbolizes spiritual purification.             |
| <b>Mayil Kavadi</b>    | Frame adorned entirely with peacock feathers.                                           | Emulates the aesthetic form of Murugan's vehicle ( <i>Vahana</i> ).                      |
| <b>Vel Kavadi</b>      | Heavy frame combined with bodily piercings ( <i>Vel</i> skewers through cheeks/tongue). | Extreme penance ( <i>Prayaschitta</i> ); conquest of physical pain and surrender of ego. |

The phenomenon of ritual trance (*Arul* or *Sami Adudhal*) frequently accompanies the *Kavadi* procession. Under the influence of rhythmic percussion (*Thavil*), double-reed wind instruments (*Nadaswaram*), collective chanting,

and deep religious focus, bearers enter an altered state of consciousness. This trance state enables pilgrims to endure physical penance and carry heavy structures up the steep ascent without displaying signs of exhaustion.

### ***Major Festival Cycles and Ritual Practices***

The liturgical calendar at Pazhani is structured around annual festivals that attract immense gatherings from across India and the global Tamil diaspora.

| <b>Festival Name</b>   | <b>Tamil Month / Gregorian Calendar</b> | <b>Core Mythological Theme &amp; Primary Rituals</b>                                                                              |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Thaipusam</b>       | <i>Thai</i> (January – February)        | Commemorates Parvati bestowing the divine spear ( <i>Vel</i> ) to Murugan; peak <i>Kavadi</i> pilgrimages and <i>Pada Yatra</i> . |
| <b>Panguni Uthiram</b> | <i>Panguni</i> (March – April)          | Celebrates celestial divine marriages; 10-day festival featuring chariot processions and sacred tank ablutions.                   |
| <b>Skanda Sashti</b>   | <i>Aippasi</i> (October – November)     | Celebrates Murugan's victory over demonic forces; features a 6-day fast and <i>Soorasamharam</i> reenactment.                     |
| <b>Vaikasi Visakam</b> | <i>Vaikasi</i> (May – June)             | Celebrates the divine birth of Lord Murugan from Shiva's third eye; marked by special <i>Abhishekams</i> .                        |

Alongside *Kavadi* carrying, ritual tonsure (*Mottai*) represents one of the most widespread practices at the temple. Millions of devotees shave their heads at the base of the hill as an act of humility, offering their hair to symbolize the complete surrender of vanity and individual pride before the divine ascetic.

## **6. Socio-Economic Impact, Heritage Management, and Diasporic Continuity**

### ***Regional Economic Ecosystem and Governance***

The Arulmigu Dhandayuthapani Swamy Temple serves as the central economic engine for the town of Pazhani and the broader Dindigul district. In the absence of large-scale manufacturing industries, the local economy relies heavily on pilgrimage tourism and associated services.

The economic influence of the temple extends across several key sectors:

- **Agricultural Value Chains:** Demand for raw materials needed to prepare *Panchamirtham* drives regional agriculture, specifically the cultivation of Virupachi plantains, production of Kangeyam unrefined sugar, and supply of dairy products for clarified butter.
- **Cottage Industries:** Local artisan communities specialize in crafting wooden *Kavadis*, weaving devotional robes in yellow and saffron shades, shaping brass *Vels*, and preparing sandalwood paste.
- **Hospitality and Transport:** The continuous influx of millions of pilgrims sustains a dense network of lodges, dining halls, commercial transit operations, and retail markets.

The management of the temple complex is overseen by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu. Balancing ancient Agamic practices with mass crowd dynamics, the state administration has implemented modern infrastructure, including queue complexes, digital reservation systems, automated *Panchamirtham* production facilities, and free meal distribution centers (*Annadhanam*). Revenues generated by the temple are reinvested into local infrastructure, health services, and educational institutions.

### ***Transnational Migration and Diasporic Continuity***

During the 19th and 20th centuries, waves of Tamil laborers, merchants, and professionals migrated internationally, establishing communities across Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean rim, and Western nations. These migrant populations brought the devotional practices of Pazhani with them, establishing Murugan worship as a central pillar of Tamil cultural identity, social cohesion, and heritage preservation abroad.

In nations such as Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, Murugan temples serve as vibrant cultural centers. Anthropological research highlights how the physical and symbolic landscape of Pazhani has been replicated in overseas sites. For instance, the Batu Caves complex in Selangor, Malaysia—featuring a limestone hill accessed by a steep 272-step staircase—serves as a direct architectural and topographical parallel to the Pazhani hill shrine.

During global celebrations of Thaipusam, hundreds of thousands of Tamil devotees in the diaspora perform *Kavadi Attam*, observe strict fasting vows, and undergo ritual bodily piercings. In these transnational contexts, the practices originating from the legend of Idumban and Pazhani transcend personal religious devotion. They function as powerful public assertions of cultural continuity, ethnic solidarity, and community identity within multicultural societies.

## **7. Conclusion**

The legend of Idumban serves as the foundational narrative explaining the sanctity and theological foundation of the Pazhani shrine while establishing the origin of the *Kavadi* tradition. Its enduring message illustrates values of obedience, humility, repentance, and divine grace, reinforcing the religious importance of the Pazhani Murugan Temple as a major center of pilgrimage in South India and one of the country's foremost pilgrimage destinations.

Through the synthesis of Puranic mythology, Siddha alchemical science, Dravidian temple architecture, and somatic ritual practice, Pazhani remains a vibrant monument of living heritage. The temple continues to inspire religious tourism, academic scholarship, Tamil cultural identity, and charitable activities across regional and international boundaries, maintaining its timeless role as a sanctuary of spiritual transformation and healing.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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