Gatekeepers of the graveyard god

Sudalai Madan was banished to earth after it was discovered that he preferred eating human flesh to divine nectar

BY SINDHURI NANDAKUMAR

Outside the entrance to the Ammanathan temple in Cheranmahadevi, a village 12 km from Tirunelveli, songs by villu paattu performers blare from a speaker, the words barely distinguishable through the screechy acoustics.

The temple is holding a festival and Parvathi who was banished behind the microphone. He is accompanied by two men playing the magudam, a drum, and by an assistant singer. As the annavi or lead singer, he will recite the story of Sudalai Madan. It is an entire repertory that can go on for as long as eight hours sometimes, all of which Mariappan has committed to memory from hearing his father’s performances.

With its turmeric, betel leaf and iron ring, the sacred cord will prevent evil spirits from entering their bodies. Mariappan takes centrestage, dancing that he has already received bookings for 2020. The community, which performs seven months a year, often finds itself without work. “During the season – May, June – we can negotiate about ₹40,000 per performance, and this is divided between seven people, but at other times, what we earn is a lot less,” says Mariappan. “Most of the time we fall into debt. Sometimes, we do daily labour.”

Both Mariappan and Perumal have decided that their sons will not continue the profession. Armed with a bachelor’s degree, Mariappan himself had left in pursuit of an office job, but when his father died unexpectedly, he had to return — bookings and advances for the next year had already come in.

“The Sudalai brought me back,” he says, shrugging. “Sometimes when people get possessed, I ask why life is so difficult for us, and the sami (lord) says, ‘I am the one who made it impossible for you to find a job. You are mine.’ But as long as he is protecting us, I know we will be okay.”