FactsDid you know

The Bharani festival at the Bhagavathi Temple of Kodungallur

The annual Bharani festival falls in the Malayalam month of Meenam, around March to April, at the famous Bhagavathi Temple of Kodungallur (Cranganore). A ritual of sanctioned desecration reversed the customary caste barriers. For seven days, only castes strictly classed as polluting, normally barred from the temple grounds, could enter the outer precincts and touch the shrine itself. Thousands of pilgrims marched to the temple crying “nada, nada” (“march, march”), singing lewd, obscene ballads, hurling stones, and shouting ritual abuse at the goddess. By ancient custom, Kulimuttat Arayan, chief of the Mukkuva caste, had the formal privilege of starting this deliberate pollution.

Pilgrims arrived with live cocks. They cut off the cocks’ heads with knives to spill blood over stones standing outside the inner circumambulation path (pradakshina vazhi). People called the gathering the Cock Feast of Cranganore. Amid heavy drinking of toddy and arrack, devotees offered grains of pepper, sesamum, and coins to the goddess in return for consecrated turmeric powder. People believed she presided over dread epidemics like smallpox and cholera.

Once the seven days of ritual license and sacrifice ended, the temple closed and underwent thorough cleansing with ritual to remove pollution.