Malaysia's Festive Jewel
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SPECIAL FEATURE

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One million devotees celebrate Thai Pusam Murugan festival

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Watch the video

More than half the population of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital, turn out to honor the day when Lord Murugan received the holy vel, or spear of wisdom and power, from His Mother, Goddess Parvati. The festival is observed with deep reverence by Tamil Hindus around the world, but in Malaysia, North Indians, Sikhs and Chinese Buddhists join in. Our story covers the celebrations at Batu Caves Murugan Temple outside Kuala Lumpur which was attended this year by an estimated 1.3 million people.

Our correspondent, Rajiv Malik of Delhi, arrived in Malaysia on January 26, a week before the official beginning of Thai Pusam on February 1 and stayed on for one week afterward. He attended the festival and interviewed organizers, participants and prominent Hindus. An key resource for this story was the unpublished thesis on the festival by Dr. Carl Vadivel Belle of Australia, who participates each year by carrying a large kavadi. See URL at end of story to access a short video documentary produced by Hinduism Today to accompany this article.

Batu caves was already swarming with devotees four days before Thai Pusam officially began. As we approached the area, I was awestruck by the majestic 142-foot golden statue of Lord Murugan [see inside cover of this issue]. Dedicated at last year's Thai Pusam, it has already gained international fame. The intricately detailed concrete statue with a 40-foot deep foundation, stands dominantly at the base of a limestone cliff. Behind it is the long, wide and steep staircase leading to a huge natural cave that houses a small temple to this beloved God. At the base are additional temples, permanent exhibit halls and--during the festival--a mini-city of religious shops, stalls for various organizations, music stores, free feeding venues and even an amusement fair, complete with Ferris wheels and other entertainment. Many devotees have come early to avoid the crush on Thai Pusam day, when over a million people will assemble in this compound. Devotees of all ages climb the 272 steps chanting "Vel, Vel " and "Vetri Vel Murugan." The Deity here is famous for granting devotees' prayers for success in exams and business, healing and the conception of a long-desired baby.

The Festival and Its Devotees

Thai Pusam falls on the full moon day in the Tamil month of Thai (January/February) each year, when the moon moves through the zodiac period of Capricorn in the Indian calendar. It is on this day, according to some Hindu scriptures, that Goddess Parvati presented the holy vel, or spear, to Her Son, Lord Murugan (in other scriptures, the event took place at Skanda Shashti). Also known as Karttikeya and Subramaniam, Lord Murugan is greatly adored by Tamil Hindus around the world. In Malaysia, Fiji, South Africa and other countries with large Tamil communities, Thai Pusam is the festival of choice and is celebrated on a larger scale than in South India itself. Here in Malaysia, in addition to the million-plus who celebrate the festival at Batu Caves, hundreds of thousands more celebrate it across Malaysia, including crowds of 200,000 in Penang.

Prayers Answered

As I was taking in the sights and sounds, a man named Balbir Singh, recognizing my Punjabi dialect, greeted me as a brother. Our ancestors had came from the same area, which is now part of Pakistan. His grand-father had immigrated here from Punjab as part of the British Army. He said there are 100,000 Punjabis in Malaysia. "Thai Pusam is a great festival, " he exclaimed. "Hindus, Christians and Sikhs, people of all communities, participate. My whole family came last year and offered

milk to Lord Murugan for good academic results for my children. And they fared well as a result. Two years ago I had a bad dengue fever attack. I feared I was on my deathbed. My wife and daughter came here at 3 am on Thai Pusam, walked up the stairs and prayed for me. Lying in bed at the hospital, I also prayed to Lord Murugan for help. Suddenly, I realized that God was there. I quickly improved and was moved out of the critical care ward." Stories such as his I would hear time and again.

Kavadi Worship

Some devotees carry pal kudam or kavadi up to the temple and offer it to Murugan--as penance, in fulfillment of a particular vow they have taken, or in petition for something they want to happen. One devotee carries kavadi to offset the bad things he has done during the year; another for success in exams; yet another for the trouble-free birth of his sister's baby. Most devotees, however, just come to Batu Caves to worship and do not perform these special observances.

Pal kudam, more common than kavadi, is a pot of milk carried on the head. Kavadis range from the simple pal kavadi--two pots of milk on a wooden pole surmounted by an arch--to extremely big, alagu (beautiful; ornate) kavadis. The latter is a sort of portable temple in which the Deity is supported over the devotee's head by an aluminum framework secured to a metal belt around his waist. Shoulder pads help ease the burden of the weight, which is sometimes considerable. The structure is decorated with ribbons, flowers and peacock feathers. Such kavadis tower above the crowds as carriers make their way from the nearby riverbank up the steps to the temple. Of this year's 1.3 million worshipers, about 22,000 carried kavadi and pal kudam.

As a North Indian, I was not familiar with kavadi or pal kudam. In North India, kavadis are taken for Lord Siva to Neel Kanth Temple in Rishikesh, but those are simple compared to the works of art I saw here.

According to Carl Belle's thesis, the practice of kavadi is based on the story of Idumban. In the story, Lord Siva gave Sage Agasthya two Himalayan hills, Sivagiri and Saktigiri, requesting him to take them to South India. Agasthya enlisted the help of Idumban, a reformed asura (demon), for the task. Idumban made a shoulder sling from the staff of Lord Brahma and tied each hill to it with a divine serpent.

This, Belle states, was the prototypical kavadi.

Idumban carried the hills to South India. When he reached the area of Palani Hills, he set the hills down to rest; but when he attempted to resume his journey, he could not lift the hills. A youth clad only in a loincloth, holding a staff and "shining like a thousand suns "--Lord Murugan, had claimed the hills for His own. Attempting to fight the youth, Idumban was killed, but was restored to life to serve as a guardian of Murugan's Palani Hills shrine. Today's devotees carry kavadi to place their psychic burdens at the feet of Murugan and obtain the kind of spiritual transformation that was bestowed upon Idumban.

Penance and Austerity

Those carrying the big kavadi prepare for a full month, observing purification disciplines including eating only one meal a day. Those taking pal kavadi or pal kudam fast for a few days prior to the festival, as do many other worshipers. As added penance, carriers of pal kudam, pal kavadi or big kavadi may have a priest pierce their bodies with small spears, replicas of Lord Murugan's vel, for their climb from the river to the cave.

Body piercing--a distinctive feature of this festival--naturally attracts a lot of attention from the foreign press. Of the Thai Pusam photos taken by big news agencies, three-quarters are generally of devotees pierced with vels or hooks, and accounts rarely include any knowledgeable explanation of the practice. The rigorous preparation, devotion and serious intent of these kavadi carriers is all ignored, as is sincerity of the conclave of one million worshipers.

I am reminded of the Kumbha Mela, where foreign journalists obsess over the naga babas, naked sadhus--as if they were a carnival sideshow, oblivious to the discipline and asceticism they follow, enduring even the coldest season of North India unclad. And, like here, the press at the Mela is equally oblivious to the tens of millions of fully clad devotees who travel long distances to attend and worship with intense devotion.

Meeting the Temple President

I was able to interview Sri R. Nataraja, president of the Maha Mariamman Temple, which manages Batu Caves Temple. Now 60, he has been associated with the temple--the largest in the country--since becoming secretary at age 22 and has served as president for 17 years. It was his idea to build the colossal Murugan statue, and he was instrumental in getting it funded. "Managing this festival is quite a challenge, " he observed. "We are trying to improve the crowd control, but every year there are more and more people. We have had to expedite the worship at the Cave Temple. You have seen at Tirupati, because of the huge number of devotees, they allow you to have darshan of the main Deity only while you are on the move. In past years we had trouble controlling those who wanted to bring big kavadis and pierce themselves with long vels. Once we became strict in enforcement, the devotees adjusted."

"This is basically a religious festival, " he explained, "but we have to see that it has a commercial angle as well. All who attend also love to go to the marketplace to shop and to avail themselves of the free food distribution."

Nataraja gave a brief summary of the festival's financial situation: "Out of the 1.3 million people who participated in Thai Pusam this year, 22,000 carried kavadi or pal kudam and 50,000 people had archana done in the main shrine. Only these 72,000 people paid money directly to the temple, for a total of about us$235,000. The revenue from the temporary marketplace is far greater than that. The festival largely funds all our activities for the rest of the year."

Preparing for Kavadi

In Kuala Lumpur, we visited the Shri Krishna Temple in Brickfields, where a group of youth attached to the temple were putting the final touches on their big kavadis. They belong to a kavadi-carrying group formed some 25 years ago. We spoke with Sri Guna Selan, 28, a marketing executive in a private firm who has been carrying a big kavadi for eight years. "I find this group to be very loving, a brotherly kind of relation. We enjoy decorating the kavadis and bringing them up to Batu Caves, " he related. "I like to show mine to Murugan. Through this, I release whatever my tension, sadness or happiness is at His feet. My guru says that we should carry

kavadi, because we make many mistakes in our daily lives, such as being insulting toward others. We feel these mistakes can be rectified by piercing and suffering pain. Three years ago, when I was 25, I was in a car accident that destroyed my car, but I was unharmed. I believe that Lord Murugan saved me. I saw Him in a vision just before the crash."

We visited a home where devotees were working on 25 big kavadis. Dashman, 19, the youngest of the group, was preparing a kavadi that he would carry weighing 60 kilos, slightly more than his own weight of 55 kilos. His prayer this year was for the safe delivery of his sister's baby. "The preparation is the tough part, " he confided. "I remain vegetarian for 48 days, sleep on the floor and go to the temple as often as possible. Three years of carrying kavadi have made me realize that God is certainly there. It has made me go deep into Hinduism. To get the best from kavadis, one has to fast and keep a very clean heart. And we have to see that we do not make a show or a mockery out of carrying kavadis. Some people do kavadi to show off and don't undertake the fasting properly. It has to be just between you and the Lord Murugan to be effective. We are very gifted that we have such a unique kind of festival. You cannot find something like this anywhere else in the world. We must ensure that it is kept on the right track and does not get lost in trivialities."

The Temple Priests

Shri Shakti Vel, just 27 years old, is one of 20 full-time priests attached to Batu Caves. For Thai Pusam the temple management brings in an additional 50 priests from India and 130 from elsewhere in Malaysia, for a total of 200. Five of the Malaysian priests, and all of the Indian priests, are brahmins; the others, including Shakti Vel, are pandarams, an ancient non-brahmin priesthood who do not wear the sacred thread. Pandaram priests are often involved in the worship of Lord Murugan, such as at the Palani Hills temple in India. Pandarams range from simple village priests who know a few mantras to highly trained professionals, like Shakti Vel, whose father and grandfather were pandarams. At Batu caves, the pandarams are responsible for the pujas at the Cave Temple, though some of the brahmin priests help also, out of devotion to Lord Murugan.

Shakti Vel said that the puja pace during festival days is intensely hectic. "With the installation of the huge statue of Lord Murugan at Batu Caves the attendance at Thai Pusam has gone up tremendously." Each puja takes 30 minutes, with at least a hundred devotees attending. One hundred priests at a time manage the pujas in

two twelve-hour shifts each day. Each priest is paid about us$147 for the ten days of worship surrounding Thai Pusam. "We are happy with it; " he said, "there are no complaints. Besides, the priests also receive dakshina, personal offerings which are theirs to keep, and they also do pujas outside of the temple. I am very happy with the privilege of being close to Lord Murugan and serving Him. Multimillionaires come and go but do not get the chance to serve the Lord the way I do. I am grateful to the Lord because He is giving me this opportunity to serve Him due to the punya, good karma, I have accumulated from many past lives."

Sungai Batu

On Sunday the Batu Caves area was again swarming with devotees. We walked to the Sungai Batu, or Batu River, where kavadi and pal kudam carriers were beginning their journey. Along the way, we encountered a large number of temporary barbershops on both sides of the road. One of the proprietors, Pari Devar, employs 30 experienced barbers who shave 2,000 heads in the course of the festival, charging $4.41 for an adult and $2.94 for a child. Many parents choose Thai Pusam as an auspicious day to shave the hair of young children, an essential rite of infancy performed to purify the child. Devar's father started the business years ago, when they charged just 30 cents for an adult and 15 cents for a child. Nearby, dozens of shops sell puja provisions--fresh milk, sweet-smelling flowers and multicolored garlands--which devotees purchase on their way to the river.

The riverside is crowed, bustling place just 100 feet long and 80 feet wide, through which all 22,000 kavadi and pal kudam carriers must be processed. Originally they took their preparatory bath in the river; but uncontrolled development has left it polluted, so open banks of showers have been set up for bathing. A dozen priests are busy performing pujas for the penitents, and--for those who request it--piercing vels through the tongue and cheeks, and placing hooks in the body. It is controlled chaos as devotees shower and are rushed through the pujas and hurried out. Many kavadi carriers complete their riverside blessing a day in advance so they can proceed straight to the Cave Temple and avoid the crush. But no amount of crowding and commotion can dampen the vibrant spiritual atmosphere here, which rivals the fervor along the huge riverside bathing ghats of the Ganga during Kumbha Mela.

Riverside Priests

Jayagobi, age 37, is one of the pandarams who prepare the kavadi and pal kudam carriers at the river's edge. He serves here with four helpers twelve hours a day. By the time it is over, he will have performed puja for 7,000 people. His is one of 18 groups of priests working at the river's edge, ten from Malaysia and eight from India. He explained that devotees come to him to have their kavadi or pal kudam blessed in puja invoking Ganesha and Murugan--and Muniswaram, who is a protector. "We pray to these Gods so that the person taking the kavadi is able to fulfill his or her vow, " he said. As I watched, he deftly pierced the tongues of three sisters with six-inch silver vels. It dawned on me that this form of penance naturally prevents talking on the way up to the Cave.

"I learned the art of piercing when I was just nine years old, " Jayagobi recalled. "I have been doing it for the past ten years here at Thai Pusam, independently and with a lot of confidence. All this comes from the heart. If you do not put your heart and soul in this job, you will not succeed. People come to me for advice on how to carry kavadi and do their prayers."

"The state of trance is attained through very deep devotion, " he went on, "though it is not essential that a person be in trance for the piercing. Sometimes the demigods come into the body of the person. They are positive spirits, such as Muniandi, Munisveeran or Maduraveeran. They are like servants of the God. If the puja is performed in the correct manner and the devotee has done his fasting and prayers well, the good spirits usually come and help the person. "

"You just observed the puja I did for the three sisters. The bhakti, or devotion, of the first two was one hundred percent. In case of the third girl, the bhakti was fifty percent. I can discern this, but it is not something I tell the person."

Once a factory worker, Jayagobi lost his job and began working during the day as a priest at a Madhuraveeran Temple and driving a taxi in the evening. He is the only priest in his family. During this Thai Pusam his group were paid $1,470 in donations, of which they took $588 as salary and gave the rest to the temple. Donations range, he said, from a few cents to $30. Jayagobi is himself a veteran kavadi carrier: "I started taking pal kudam to Lord Murugan when I was just nine years old. For seven years, I had my head shaved as my offering to the Lord. When I was ten years old, I had a dream in which I was worshiping a Deity in puja. When I poured the milk over the Deity, I could see Lord Murugan, and in His chest was a Siva Lingam. Even today, when I remember this dream and talk about it, my hair stands on end."

Minister Dato Sri Samy Velu

The festival serves as a political platform for the Malaysian Indian Congress Party, whose members give speeches during the opening ceremonies. Dato Sri Samy Velu, 70, the leading Indian political figure in Malaysia, is the chief speaker at the festival. His insights: "Lord Murugan's message is the message of strength. He offers the power of His vel. Strength provides the will and ability for us to be truthful and honest and to coexist harmoniously with others in this multicultural society and country. I feel that wherever I am in this life is due to the blessings of Lord Murugan and the support of the people."

I asked him about the criticism of the piercing of many spears by kavadi carriers and the breaking of hundreds of coconuts. He answered, "Some people say, 'You've got to ban this and stop that.' But if you ask me, I would say that there are different ways in which people want to fulfill their vows. We cannot deny an individual his right of praying in the manner he would like. Thai Pusam is very important. It is a very strong Hindu festival that is respected and well received by the people of other religions. Although they do not pray, they come and see our worship. In my over forty years in politics I have seen that the love for religion is something that keeps on growing. There is nothing that can stop this growth."

Dato Sri Vaithilingam

Dato Sri Vaithilingam, age 72, a highly respected and influential community leader and president of the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, explained that there are over two million Malaysians of Indian origin, of whom 85 percent are Hindus and of those, 85 percent, about 1.5 million, are Saivites. For these Saivites, Murugan is an important Deity. At Batu Caves Thai Pusam this year, he estimates, one million Saivites and 500,000 non-Hindus participated. "Some are Chinese. They buy a joss stick incense, kneel and pray silently. You see many worshiping at the festival in Penang, also."

"The youth participate in a big way, " he said proudly. "They are, in fact, necessary for its success, as a lot of physical work goes into the festival. The youth today understand Thai Pusam better than the youth of twenty years ago, but there definitely remains a need for improving their understanding."

Another group now coming to the festival are Indians from India, Dato said. "They have the six big Lord Murugan temples in South India, and now they regard Batu Caves, with the tallest Murugan statue in the world, as the seventh."

On the issue of big kavadis, he commented, "There got to be this internal competition as to who could carry the largest, so the temples instituted rules that none should be larger than six feet wide. But I saw recently at Batu Caves 500 people arrive from a single village with a ten-foot-wide, highly decorated kavadi to be carried by one of them. They just pushed their way passed the guards. The guards are volunteers, trained only to reason with people and not use force."

"Ten years ago, " he said, "there were a lot of discipline problems. Youngsters would come and create problems, but now things have improved. The discipline is much better. The youth today go singing hymns of Lord Murugan and carry kavadi."

Touching on another sensitive area, he explained that there are big businessmen who vow to break ten thousand coconuts if they get a certain contract. Then, to fulfill the vow, they employ immigrant laborers, who are not even Hindu, to do the breaking, without any prayer or sense of the significance. "Our stand on the matter is that if you have taken a vow, then you yourself should be the person who makes a prayer and breaks the coconuts, and one coconut is enough."

Meeting a Family Group

From the riverside we made our way to the area near the Murugan statue, which was packed with devotees and onlookers gazing at the beautifully made kavadis carried by men dancing with divine intoxication. An unending row of devotees carrying big and small kavadis and pal kudams marched towards the cliff face. I encountered Gurucharan Singh, age 56, and his extended family and friends [see photo p. 31] who had just returned from carrying kavadi to the Cave Temple. Singh is a retired engineer and, like Balbir Singh, a Malaysian-born Sikh. He told me proudly that this was his 30th year of carrying kavadi. "I started taking kavadi due to the 1981 economic setback, during which I lost my job. I came here for Thai Pusam and prayed to Murugan for help. The economy rebounded, I was given my job back and I was able to meet all my financial obligations. I told Murugan that I will carry kavadi until my knees can no longer walk." I asked how a Sikh came to be

worshiping Murugan, and he replied, "We believe that God is one. Therefore we come here and the gurudwara also. My brother-in-law, Shri Balakrishnan Nayar, whose family is from Kerala, carries kavadi. Our whole families join us in this as well. I have the dream one day to carry kavadi in India."

Balakrishnanan told me, "I have been taking kavadi since I was 15 years old. Originally I carried pal kavadi, but for the last ten years I have carried the big kavadis. Thai Pusam is an opportunity to do penance and fulfill vows. I fast for one month, taking just one meal a day, and my wife joins me. Thus, out of each year's twelve months, we sacrifice one for God. I think it is quite fair. You enjoy eleven months and then dedicate one month to God. I feel very, good, clean and nice." Asked how it feels to carry the kavadi and be pierced, he replied, "I get into trance and feel no pain when my tongue is pierced. Only at the Cave Temple, when the vel is removed, do I feel some pain; but the piecing leave no mark."

Preparing the Chariot

At the Maha Mariamman I found a team of six men swarming over the large ornate silver chariot, polishing, cleaning and checking the electrical system of the famous vehicle that carries the Deity and His vel to Batu Caves. Shri Kalaiarasu, age 42, a safety officer at a construction company in America, had come back to Malaysia just for the festival. Two dozen in all work for a month preparing the chariot. They are part of the temple's 1008 Volunteers Youth Organisation. Arasu observed, "I used to see almost all old people in the temple. But today there are more and more youngsters coming. The new generation is definitely getting associated with the festival."

During the festival, the VYO assists with crowd control, monitoring the flow of people up and down the steps so that the caves never become overcrowded. A volunteer is posted at every other step to assist people who are having difficulty with the climb. Normally people go up the left side and down the right, and kavadi carriers go up the middle. But if the caves are full, volunteers at the top walkie-talkie their comrades on the steps to reverse the flow on one side until the caves clear, which usually takes about 30 minutes.

Shri Ravichandran Perumal, 41, chief electrician and part of the crowd control team,

shared, "On a normal day when I walk up the stairs of Batu Caves, I feel pain in my knees and legs. But during Thai Pusam I run up and down the stairs hundreds of times with absolutely no fatigue and no pain. Definitely Lord Murugan gives us very high levels of energy. We are almost without sleep for three days, yet still feel fresh. I think all this is quite a miracle."

Ravi said the chariot weighs 20,000 kilos and is illumined by 500 bulbs drawing 30,000 watts of power. The accompanying vehicles have a sound system for bhajans that can be heard a kilometer away. His job during the long procession to the Caves is to instantly replace any burnt-out lights. He says: "The most beautiful scene during the procession is of the chariot at sunrise. With the chariot decked with yellow colored flowers, the whole thing turns golden when the rays of the morning sun fall on it. It is breathtaking."

Puja at the Cave Temple

In the cool of the evening, I joined the throngs climbing the 272 steps to offer worship at the Cave Temple. It was an experience I will never forget, climbing along with hundreds of others chanting, "Vel, Vel."

Briefly distracted from my destination by an urge to take in the spectacular view from the top of the stairs, I turned around to see the entire festival compound below packed with devotees and the marketplace doing a brisk business. Thousands of families are camped out on the lawns of the large compound, having arrived from outlying areas by chartered buses and special trains.

The temperature drops noticeable as I enter the cave, a spacious awe-inspiring natural limestone chamber at least a hundred feet in height. There were a large number of youth present. Off to one side, a priest is removing the piercing vels of a devotee and bringing him out of trance by applying vibhuti, sacred ash, to his forehead. Devotees who have made their offerings to Lord Murugan are concluding their worship with a prayer to Idumban as they prepared to leave the cave.

For our puja, we purchase milk at the stall right there in the cave and offer it to Lord

Murugan at the small shrine against the wall on the main floor, along with hundreds of other devotees. My fervent prayer is simply that climbing the 272 stairs will not strain my back, since just a year ago I was hospitalized for ten days with back pain. Definitely my prayer was answered, as I twice climbed up to the Cave Temple, plus spent a hectic ten days running about the city reporting on the festival--all with no back pain.

A Kavadi Maker

Back on the ground, at the Batu Caves shopping complex, we visit Amba Store and meet the proprietor, Shrimati Saroja Maniam. Saroja has been making kavadis for 25 years. She attributes the birth of her daughter to the blessings of Lord Murugan. In 1982, a week after going to Batu Caves, she recalls, "I had a magnificent dream in which I saw Lord Murugan coming down the stairs from the caves. I was holding a small Ganesha in my hand. The following month I was expecting and ultimately blessed with a baby daughter."

She sells kavadis for as little as $1, or as much as $60 for an ornate one with peacock feathers. Most are $10. People come here from India and Australia just to buy from her shop. "I don't just design and sell kavadis; I also teach people the art of carrying kavadis A Chinese lady who was always fighting with her husband came to me learn to carry kavadi. Her prayers completely transformed her husband. Now he understands her better and even comes with her to worship."

Festival Officially Begins

Nothing I had seen or heard could have prepared me for the actual beginning of the festival. By midnight on January 31st, the street outside the Maha Mariamman Temple was packed with a crowd of 150,000 devotees. The silver-clad chariot, brightly lit and covered with yellow flowers, was ready for its divine passenger. With a shrill blast from the South Indian nadaswaram horn--the loudest non-brass instrument in the world--and the staccato beat of the tavil drum, the priests emerged from the temple carrying Lord Murugan. The Deity, opulently dressed in gold and jewels, was ceremoniously lifted up into the chariot. For the Thai Pusam festival, He and His vel are brought to Batu Caves, seven miles away, for three days.

The moment the vast sea of people--waiting quietly until now--heard the nadaswaram and saw the Deity, they loudly chanted "Vel, Vel Murugan, " "Murugan Ke Haro Hara, " and "Vetri Vel Murugan, " The roar reached a crescendo when the Deity was placed in the chariot. Devotees choked with emotion and divine love. Tears rolled down the cheeks of many; others fell into trance. Most stood in blissful revery, hands folded and eyes closed. I was amazed that this was taking place not in India, but in a country where Hindus are just eight percent of the population.

The crowd was packed so tightly that I wondered how the chariot could possibly begin its journey. I could not even budge from where I was standing. But when the clock struck 12:20 am, the pilot car started up, the chariot began to move and the crowed swiftly parted and the bhajanas abruptly stopped. Strategically-placed volunteers politely directed people to make way. Trailing behind was a large generator that powered the multitude of lights. Next came the police and ambulance service. Security was strong, I was told, to avoid any interference by trouble-makers. A dozen or more police walked directly behind the chariot to keep devotees back a few feet. Until a few years ago, the chariot was pulled by the devotees with the help of oxen; but this practice was discontinued in favor of a vehicle.

On the Chariot's Route

Preceding the pilot car a large crane truck operated by the electrical supply company lifts overhead wires out of the way of the 21-foot-tall chariot; others are cut outright and reconnected after the chariot has passed--leaving the surrounding area in temporary darkness. Overpasses ("flyovers, " as they are called here) enroute have been built high. One flyover is engineered to be raised when the chariot comes through.

As the chariot presses forward, the crowd swells with people coming in from all directions. In the procession behind, a powerful rhythm is kept by bhajan groups, musicians and kolattam dancers. Kolattam, akin to the North Indian garba dance, is performed with sticks in a circle. Groups of musicians summon devotees to the street and intensify the sense of anticipation by conducting bhajans several blocks ahead of the chariot, then move further ahead when the chariot comes into view. I am reminded of joyous scenes on the streets of Delhi when thousands of marriages take place on certain nights due to the auspicious configuration of planets.

Devotees line the entire route, holding trays of bananas, coconuts, camphor, joss stick incense and clothing they will offer to Lord Murugan. Many break a coconut, then put camphor on one half and hand it up to the priests to wave as light before the Deity. Parents hand up babies to be blessed--at some stops, by the dozen. Those managing the chariot allow time for everyone to worship at each stop. At several locations, groups of people break hundreds of coconuts on the street--something I have never seen in India. With devotees in a long queue for archana and holding their babies to be blessed, suddenly a resounding "crack!" is heard as a dozen people threw coconuts down on the concrete road simultaneously. Piles of broken coconuts come up in a matter of minutes. This is a controversial practice, I learned, that some devotees are quite taken aback by. I was told that at least the coconuts do not go to waste, but are used in oil production.

I took it as a blessing from Lord Murugan Himself that the chariot passed right in front of my hotel at about 3 am, allowing me to unobtrusively leave the procession to seek a few hours' rest, knowing I would be spending the afternoon and evening at Batu Caves. However, thousands of devotees followed the chariot all the way to its destination.

Arriving at Batu Caves

Moving at a snail's pace, the chariot arrived at Batu Caves at 11:30Ãam, covering the seven miles from the temple in twelve hours. With horns and conches blaring, bells ringing, chants resounding and arati lamps raised in fervent puja, the Murugan Deity was ceremoniously installed in the New Swami Mandapam at the foot of the hill. His golden vel was carried to the Cave Temple by the head priest. The festival officially began with the flag raising, which was scheduled for 4 pm, but actually occurred at 5:30. At this auspicious even, I had the honor of briefly meeting Dr. K. Pichai Sivachariyar, Hinduism Today's Hindu of the Year for 2004 (http:/www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/2004/10-12/40_honor.shtml) and one of the foremost priests of South India. He was there with a contingent of Indian brahmins brought in to help with the festival.

During Thai Pusam, the wide concrete path to the cave is divided into two sections, one for those entering and one for those leaving. The flag-hoisting ceremony takes place on the exit side, next to the holy spear of Lord Murugan--which nearly matches the height of the His golden statue.

Every inch of the compound was packed with worshipers. Musicians, drummers and dancing groups accompanied many of the big kavadi carriers, who were blissfully dancing to the beat of the music, as were their accompanying friends and relatives. The noise level in the whole area was quite high. Chanting of "Vel, Vel " was nearly constant. The music seemed to help people enter into trance. I saw some suddenly shrieking and then going into a blissful state, all surrounded by a sea of humanity flowing harmoniously toward Lord Murugan's cave home.

Unending Procession

Thousands of devotees--men, women and children in their best traditional Hindu clothing, as well as foreign tourists--were lined up on both sides of the road along which the unending procession of kavadi and pal kudam carriers. Other devotees were performing different forms of penance, some rolling to the cave steps and others prostrating by "measuring their length." The latter would lay flat face down, rise, walk two steps, prostrate again, and thus reverently make their way toward the shrine. Many parents carry their newborn babies in cradles strapped to sugar cane stalks--another form of kavadi [see sidebar, page 28].

On the morning of February 1, Lord Murugan was taken to the nearby river for ritual bathing, but most of the focus was on the worship by devotees. Everyone is drawn to watch the thousands of beautifully decorated kavadis that tower over the crowd as they approach the Caves. People watch not only to enjoy the colorful display, but to admire the devotion and penance of the bearers.

Tourism

This year the first day, Thursday, February 1, was a holiday in Kuala Lumpur, creating a four-day weekend that brought a much bigger turnout than usual, all the way through Sunday. Increasing the attendance still further was a big promotional program by the government tourism department. Despite the government's laudable efforts to discourage tourism companies from promoting the festival as a "gape and wonder " spectacle, I certainly saw tourists there for that purpose.

UK's Channel Four TV network, noted for sensationalist reporting, was there to record the experience of two brothers from England who were doing an "experiment " with kavadi, in which one had fasted for a month beforehand and the other had not. Dato Vaithilingam and others were aware of the project and refused to cooperate with the journalists.

The Chariot's Return

On the third and final day of the festival, between 8 and 9 am, the golden vel was removed from the hill shrine, carried down the stairs and returned to the Murugan Deity, which was then placed back in the chariot for the return trip to Maha Mariamman Temple.

Before the procession started, an elaborate puja was performed by the priests at the flag pole. The flag was solemnly brought down to mark the end of the festival, though it would be several more days before the crowds would fully disperse.

This journey was as well attended as the midnight trip to the Caves. Coconut breaking began again in a big way. Hundreds of devotees were there to have puja done for themselves and their families. To assist them a man was effortlessly breaking the coconuts in half with a big knife. The passing up of the babies for Lord Murugan's blessings resumed outside the main gates. The chariot's departure did not diminish the stream of kavadi and pal kudam carriers flowing towards the main shrine.

On the way to Kuala Lumpur, the chariot halts for several hours in the Sentul area--partly from tradition, as there was once a large Indian population here, and partly for traffic considerations. Big crowds turn out to greet the chariot as it leaves again in late afternoon. The workday is over, and students are out of school. Stops are made every few hundred yards, with crowds of Hindus, Chinese and others seeking a last chance for blessings. The chariot finally reaches the temple at about 1:00 am, and the Deity and His vel are returned to the sanctum.

In Conclusion

I have covered all four Maha Kumbha Melas as a journalist for Hinduism Today, but this Thai Pusam assignment has been very special. The Kumbha Melas are attended by tens of millions of Hindus of all classes, castes, regions and communities; the Allahabad Mela is the largest religious gathering in the world. Thai Pusam is more specific, revolving around the Saivite Tamils' most beloved Deity, Lord Murugan and His vel. They look to Him not just for spiritual upliftment, peace and blissfulness, but also for worldly things like success in exams, material prosperity and the blessing of much-wanted sons and daughters. The fact that thousands and thousands of people continue to carry kavadis and pal kudams every year is proof that whatever boons are sought are being granted.

Back in Delhi, the golden statue of Murugan at Batu Caves appears in my dreams. My wife and children have heard me murmuring "Vel, Vel " to myself many times while working on this article, and even asleep. As I mentioned earlier, on my arrival at Batu Caves, I prayed to Murugan to take care of my back injury, which had left me laid up for a month earlier in the year. Despite a hectic schedule and two trips up 272 steps to the main shrine, I remained quite fit. This experience has made me a staunch devotee of Lord Murugan

Deep Impressions

Sri A.P. Muthukumaara Sivachariyar, 59, a priest: "I think the youth are carrying forward the tradition very well. Sixty percent of those who carry kavadi are youth. The people who walk with the chariot and who carry pal kudam are mainly young people. Ours is a living heritage. Swami Vivekananda rightly said that if our youth get spiritual guidance and attain spiritual power, Hinduism will always be a winner."

Simon Kooman, a restaurant owner from Netherlands: "I find Thai Pusam something very special. The whole scene is amazing. People are going up with babies hung on sugarcanes. They are going up with milk pots. We have seen other religious events, but nothing like this. My wife is completely obsessed with the festival. In the past fifty years, I have been to Penang six times, but had never seen the festivities here at Batu Caves. It is the first time I have seen this and so find it very special. We have been here for the past four hours after having been in flight all night, but still we are thoroughly enjoying it."

Esther Tina and Kystle Linda, born Christians who converted back to Hinduism under the influence of their Hindu father. Esther, 28, said, "I have carried pal kudam for the past six years, and attribute my success in education and business to Lord Murugan's blessings. Now, I am praying for a suitable husband."

Hema Lata, journalist: "I have carried pal kundam every year for the past many years, but not this year as I am reporting on the event. I feel the coverage given to Thai Pusam by the media is not fair. Sensational things are highlighted and the real meaning is lost. I feel the media should explain what the devotees are doing and how it is all linked to Hinduism."

Shri Rajendran, 49, university professor who teaches education and psychology: "My own connection to Thai Pusam is very special. I was the third child in my family, and both my siblings elder to me had died. In the 1950s when my mother underwent a womb operation, the doctors said she would not be able to conceive. But after five years of my parents praying every year to Lord Murugan, I was born. They carried me to Lord Murugan in a sugarcane kavadi, just as you see parents doing today. I am sure, because of this, I became a staunch devotee of Lord Murugan, and Thai Pusam a very special religious festival. After this, my three sisters were born."

Ramdas, leader of the musical group Port Klang Urumee Melam Khandan, which accompanies the big kavadis: "I started this group two years ago. There are ten players. Three of us are students, and the rest work at regular jobs. We perform for nine kavadis during the festival, and charge $162 each. More would like us to accompany them, but this is as many as we can manage in the time available. We have a large number of instruments and four different types of dresses which are changed for each kavadi in sequence. In preparation for Thai Pusam, our team fasts for three days. Most of us carry pal kudam, also. During the last three days of the festival, we get only two hours sleep a night. Here at Batu Caves there is a continuous flow of energy through us. Even after performing many times each day and walking up the stairs repeatedly, we do not feel tired.

"There are perhaps 50 groups like ours in Kuala Lumpur, which play not only at Thai Pusam, but also at cultural events and festivals. We have learned everything ourselves, as there are no gurus here to teach us music. We have created our own songs and lyrics, and also modified and modernized some traditional songs with rhythmic additions. Our three singers have all learned on their own. We do these

performances for the sake of the preservation of culture and art, not for money. Our future plans include performing outside Malaysia. We have an offer from someone in Iceland who heard of us. The money we make goes into the bank and is used for buying instruments and other expenses, such as travel. We've produced a CD with songs to Murugan, Ganesha and Amman which has sold a thousand copies and is turning a profit. This income will be used to promote character building among the youth."

Babies in Sugar Cane Cradles

Correspondent Rajiv Malik interviewed Kamala, a teacher, and Ravindran, an insurance agent, as they carried their newborn to the cave shrine (pictures above and right). Hundreds of grateful parents likewise carry their sought-for children to the shrine each year.

Kamala: "After many years, in 2006 I came here for Thai Pusam. I went to Lord Murugan and cried before Him and prayed for Him to bless me with a child. I was longing to have the darshan, the divine sight, of Lord Murugan for a long time. I repeatedly told Him to bestow and shower His grace on me so that I could have a baby I longed for. When I prayed to Him, I said that if I am blessed with a baby I will have the baby's head shaved and carry the baby in the sugar-cane kavadi. This year, Lord blessed me with a baby. It has come with His grace. You ask me whether carrying the kavadi was painful or not. My reply is that when God's grace is there, then you do not experience any pain. We were standing for such a long time, but I did not feel tired at all. I believe this is due to some kind of vibration which makes you feel that the divine is there."

Ravindran: "We have wanted a child for 18 years. My wife Kamala took this vow that if we have a child we will carry a sugar-cane kavadi. I am also very happy. Though it is she who took the vow, I am supporting her fulfilling it. She has also vowed to go to Tirupati and Palani in India. In fact, she vowed that in 1995. We will be going soon to Tirupati and Palani, and I will have my head shaved there.

"Before we came to Batu Caves in 2006, we had done invitro fertilization (IVF) twice for conceiving the child, but it did not work. The third time we got it done in February, shortly after worshiping Lord Murugan at Thai Pusam, and it worked. I would also like to state here that the IVF treatment given to Kamala was sponsored by the Royal Family of Malaysia through the Tunku Aziza Fertility Foundation. We were one of the fifty couples they sponsor every year. They had sponsored us all the three times for this treatment. So it was divine grace and the foundation's support that brought this miracle.

Serving the Devotees

Swami Guhabhaktananda, President, Divine Life Society, Malaysia Main Branch

"The main role of the Divine Life Society during Thai Pusam is feeding the thousands of devotees, which we do free of charge. We also help devotees who want to take kavadi, and teach them to do so in a very orderly way, without inflicting any pain to the body through piercing. We tell them that the aim of taking a kavadi is to carry the items which are to be used for abhishekam, that is poured over the Deity. We do a preliminary puja blessing for 150 devotees carrying kavadi, and all move out together at 6 am on Thai Pusam day.

"The vel represents jnana, knowledge or wisdom. When Parvati Herself gave Murugan the vel, She gave him the wisdom to cross the ocean of samsara, the cycle of birth and rebirth.

"People are breaking the coconuts without understanding the meaning behind it. The coconut represents the head. When the husk is removed, it is like removing the impurities of the mind. The shell represents the ego. It is said that this shell should be crushed at the feet of the Lord, so that the ego goes away and only the purity of the soul is left. So if a man breaks a thousand coconuts, is he breaking a thousand egos in him? If he really understood the significance of breaking the coconut, then he would break only one. But he does not know this."