Thai Pusam - Malaysia!
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Over one million people, more than six percent of Malaysia's entire population (and 70% of its Hindus), pilgrimaged to Batu Cave Murugan Temple on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur to celebrate the annual festival of Thai Pusam. The three days from February 2nd to 4th were highlighted by 4,500 devotees who carried kavadi up the 272 steps to the cave shrine. Kavadi is a penance offered to Lord Murugan requiring the carrying of a decorated arch and milk offerings, supplemented with spears and hooks through the cheeks, chest, arms or back. It is a serious affair in Malaysia--in the last few years restrictions had to be imposed on the height of the decorated arches (17 feet) and the length of spears piercing the cheeks (less than three feet). Dancing on swords was forbidden altogether. Austerities such as these are performed to burn away bad karma which might otherwise come to the devotee in the future. Tens of thousands of other devotees, mostly women and students who passed their exams, carried the pal kudamor milk pot offering up to the powerful shrine.

The cave is high on a hillside overlooking a park area below. The kavadi bearers begin their trek about a kilometer away. Hundreds of thousands of devotees line the procession route as the kavadi bearers approach the temple and ascend the center of the triple staircase. Devotees not carrying kavadi take the side stairs--left side up, right side down. The

atmosphere below the cave is a mixture of carnival and frenzied devotion. Once inside the enormous cave, an all-encompassing shantior peace envelopes the pilgrim. The cool air of the cave is also a welcome relief after the long climb which can take several hours. Worship inside is very loosely organized. Kavadi bearers are given priority to have their offerings presented to Lord Murugan by the priests. Others crowd the rails and shout or wave to get a priest's attention. The shrine itself is a mere nitch in the wall a few feet wide and several feet deep with a small statue of the God Murugan installed. Batu Cave is the premier pilgrimage destination in Malaysia and one of the foremost Murugan temples in the world.

The festival attracts many non-Hindus also, most notably Chinese who participate with sincere enthusiasm and devotion. Foreign tourists abound, awestruck by the spectacle. Below the cave entrance the grounds are set up with 650 booths with hawkers selling everything from food and drinks to books and tapes and, of course, the latest issues of Hinduism Today.

Sidebar: Caring for the Pilgrims - The Red Crescent Society

Stationed at regular intervals up the 272 steps to Batu Cave, white uniformed medical personnel, volunteers of Malaysia's Red Crescent Society stand in readiness. Each year some devotees suffer a variety of malaise, most commonly exhaustion. But each year several more serious cases such as diabetic coma and heart attack also happen. During our 1996 visit to the festival, we witnessed a well-drilled stretcher corps hustling up the steps to retrieve an elderly lady who had collapsed. We also noticed Chinese and Malays among the volunteers.

Impressed, we stopped by their "base camp" near the bottom of the steps. There Dr. S.K. Siva, local vice chairperson of the Red Crescent, Dr. Selva Jothi, Dr. N. Genga Tharan Nair, Dr. N. Jeyabalan and Dr. Ponnudurm Chelliah spoke with us during a lull in emergencies. All had been serving on what was now the third day of the festival; none had had more than a few hours sleep. The doctors and 200 volunteers had set up base on Friday and stayed until Sunday night. They had treated about 200 people so far, 20 of whom were sent to the hospital. A serious illness actually related to the festival is diabetic coma. It occurs when fasting devotees continue to take their diabetic pills. With no food in their stomach, the body is sent into shock. Surprisingly, they have never had to treat a kavadi carrier. The biggest mishap to occur was in 1992 when a stage collapsed seriously injuring 34. They complained about a lack of support from the organizers, especially in providing transport and meals for the volunteers, most of whom are poor. The doctors serve without pay and provide much of their own medicine. Volunteers S. Yuvarani, 21, and K. Suguna, 22, are very enthusiastic about their work, despite the hardships. Suguna considers the Red Crescent an excellent example of "how Indians, Chinese and Malay can together give good service to people."

The Red Crescent is the name for the Red Cross in 28 Muslim countries. It has a major presence in Malaysia with 220,000 members and provides critical assistance in times of disaster.