

MEDIA FEATURE

THAIPUSAM - A DIVINE HINDU FESTIVAL

Thaipusam is celebrated on the full moon in the Tamil month of Thai (Jan/Feb). *Pusam* refers to a star that is at its highest point during the festival. The Thaipusam festival commemorates the birthday of Lord Murugan (also known as Lord Subramaniam), the occasion when his mother Devi Parvathy gave Lord Murugan a *vel* (lance) so he could vanquish the evil demon Soorapadman, and when he taught his father (Lord Shiva) the meaning of the word Aum.

Aum is a highly potent terminology in Hinduism that signifies the primeval sound of creation. The significance here is based on the moment when a son turned teacher to his father.

The Celebration

Customarily, Thaipusam is celebrated during the month of Thai when the moon waxes to its zenith (full moon). Apparently, there are several places in Malaysia where this celebration takes place, but if you are visiting Malaysia for the first time, the celebration can best be viewed at Batu Caves (in Kuala Lumpur) and in Penang.

On the eve of the celebration, devotees would gather at the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in Tun H S Lee Road, (High Street) Kuala Lumpur to witness the ceremonial "bath" of Lord Murugan. The deity is then dressed with elaborate offerings, gold ornaments and colourful flowers before being placed on a silver chariot drawn by two oxen. The chariot is then taken on a pilgrimage from the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple to the Sri Subramaniam shrine at Batu Caves.

By 12.30 am, the chariot begins to move out of the temple grounds and thus begins its slow, eight-hour journey to Batu Caves. At the same time, thousands of devotees will accompany the silver chariot on its long journey, some carrying the *kavadi* as a vehicle of self-inflicted penance.

The *kavadi* is a concept originated from India and is actually something like a mobile altar carried on both shoulders as a sign of accomplishment of their vow to the Lord for the purpose of tiding over or averting a great calamity. It can be made of either wood or steel and is decorated with peacock feathers, coloured papers, tinsels, flowers and lime. Word has it that in the olden days, normally Lord Murugan temples were set atop high ridges and mountains.

Whilst undertaking the long and hard journey uphill, the devotees would inflict a heavy burden onto themselves. Some would hang pitchers of milk and pots of honey as a token of their love to the deity. These venerable burdens would normally be wrapped in saffron cloth, indicating "total submission to God".

In a similar manner, the devotees in Kuala Lumpur would make an effort to ascend the 272 steps at Batu Caves whilst carrying a heavy burden on their back and shoulders. The significance of this represents the divine understanding that some people describe to. They believe that it is not easy to attain the feet of God without first putting some effort and labour as a sacrifice. Only those who pass this test will be pleased with lots of bounties and glad tidings.

Mind Over Matter

Devotees conform to a certain ritual in their preparation before they can participate in fulfilling their vows during Thaipusam. The preparation takes about a month prior to the celebration. Devotees rise very early in the morning and take a customary bath to cleanse themselves. They then observe a strict vegetarian fast and complete chastity for about a month. According to orthodox doctrine, rigid fasting and abstinence have to be observed over a 48-day period prior to the offering of the *kavadi* on Thaipusam Day. The main meal comprises only of milk and fruits. This is to fortify the senses and suppress passions - it helps in achieving a profound control of the mind over matter. Such incredible feats of mind over matter are commonly demonstrated during the celebration. Some devotees would add burden to the *kavadi* with heavy pitchers of milk, while others prefer to pierce their cheeks with spears and hooks.

Kavadi bearers or the devotees who have been pierced are believed to attain spiritual strength to enable him to do incredible feats. He dances with the *Kavadi* on their shoulders and metal skewers pierced through his cheeks. Accompanying family members and devotees would chant "*Vel, Vel Muruga*" (Glory unto Muruga). "*Vel*" is a

word that represents a lance or spear wielded by Lord Murugan which he uses to fend off evil and symbolizes wisdom.

Another spectacle that you will witness during the Thaipusam celebration is the breaking of coconuts during the chariot procession and at the temple grounds. This signifies humility and the suppression of one's ego upon attaining wisdom. Even, non-Hindu devotees are sometimes seen breaking coconuts to fulfil their vows.

Thaipusam Celebration in Malaysia

Hindu devotees in Malaysia will be celebrating Thaipusam on 8 February 2009. Visitors get to witness one of the largest religious gatherings during Thaipusam where Hindu devotees from all over the world will come and celebrate the festival in Malaysia. Apart from Batu Caves in Kuala Lumpur, Thaipusam is also celebrated in Penang and in Ipoh, Perak.

Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur

In Kuala Lumpur, the festival is celebrated on a mammoth scale at the Batu Caves temple on the outskirts of the city. On the eve of Thaipusam, a five-ton silver chariot bearing Lord Murugan's image and followed by a procession of several thousand people leaves the Sri Mahamariamman temple in downtown Kuala Lumpur, on a 15 kilometers track to Batu Caves. Spectacular edifices or *kavadis* are often carried or pulled by the devotees with chains and ropes anchored in the skin of their backs or chests.

Getting there

Batu Caves is located about 13km north of Kuala Lumpur city centre. Take special bus from KL Sentral Station to get to Batu Caves during this festive season. Taxis are also available anywhere around the city.

The easiest way to get to Batu Caves is to take the KTM commuter train from KL Sentral Station to Sentul Station. From the station, you can take another train that goes directly to Batu Caves. However, this direct train service is only available during Thaipusam. Taxis are also available at the Sentul Station.

For more information, please contact:-

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Penang

Over the years, Penang Island has also become a popular destination for Thaipusam revellers. On Thaipusam day, various types of colourful *kavadis* would be carried by Hindus, up 248 flights of steps to reach the Arulmigu Balathandayuthabani Temple or the Penang Waterfall Hilltop Temple which is located on a hill at Jalan Kebun Bunga in fulfilment of their vows and to ask for blessings. The main road that leads to the hilltop will be decorated with cultural paintings called *Kolam*.

Along the road there will be decorated stands and booths offering free drinks to quench devotees thirst and also serve free meals. Stalls selling souvenirs, decorative and cultural religious items are aplenty.

For more information, please contact:-

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