

MEDIA INFO

THAIPUSAM – A DIVINE HINDU CELEBRATION

Ancient mythology has it that, in the month of Thai in the Hindu calendar (January 15 – February 15) at an astronomically significant point of time, namely Pusam, Lord Murugan (also known as Lord Subramaniam) 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 the Batu Caves in Selangor and The Sri Maha Mariamman Temples both in Penang and Kuala Lumpur.

On the eve of the celebration, devotees would gather at the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in Bandar Road, Kuala Lumpur as early as 1 am to witness the ceremonial “bath” of Lord Muruga. The deity is then dressed with elaborate offerings 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 shrine at the Batu Caves Hindu temple.

By 4 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, hundreds 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. It can be made of either wood or steel and is decorated with coloured papers, tinsels, flowers and lime. Word has it that in the olden days, most Hindu temples were set atop high ridges and mountains. Access to the temples was only possible after one had gone through the “tests”.

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 belief that it is not easy to reach 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 41-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.

Having been pierced, the devotee attains spiritual strength to enable him to do incredible feats. He dances with metal skewers pierced through his cheeks chanting “*Vel, Vel Muruga*” (Glory unto Muruga). “Vel” is a word that represents a lance or spear wielded by Lord Muruga which he uses to fend off evil in mankind.

Another spectacle that you will witness during the Thaipusam celebration is the breaking of coconuts on the street. This signifies humility and the release on one’s ego. Non-Hindu devotees are sometimes seen breaking coconuts to fulfil their vows. Sometimes, Caucasians especially from Australia join in the celebration as well.

Thaipusam Celebration in Malaysia

Hindu devotees in Malaysia will be celebrating Thaipusam on 23 January 2008. 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 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 kilometres trek 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 Metro bus No 11 from the Central Market annexe or the Cityliner bus No 69 at Jalan Pudu to get to Batu Caves. Taxis are also available anywhere around city.

The easiest way to get to Batu Caves is to take the KTM commuter train from KL Sentral station to the 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:-

Batu Caves Hindu Association

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Penang

Over the last six years, Penang Island has 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.

For more information, please contact:-

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