

Thaipusam Festival: Bonding across Countries

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Abstract

Thaipusam is an important festival of the Hindus during the full moon in the Tamil month of Thai (thai meaning “10th” and pusam meaning “moon is at its brightest”).

In India and abroad, it is celebrated mainly by the Tamil-speaking community settled in Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Myanmar.

It is dedicated to the Hindu God Murugan, the son of Shiva and Parvathi according to the Hindu mythological book, “Skanda Purana.” Murugan is also known as Kartikeya, Subramaniam, Sanmukha, Shadanana, Skanda and Guha.

Thaipusam was the day when Lord Subramaniam appeared before his devotees, riding on a peacock which has come to be known as his “vahana” or vehicle. It also recognizes Lord Subramaniam’s triumph over the evil forces. According to the legend, devas or celestial beings at one time were so plagued by asura, or demons, that they pleaded with Lord Shiva, to help them. Moved by their pleas Lord Shiva granted their request by creating the mighty warrior, Skanda, out of his own power or Achintya Shakti. Goddess Parvathi presented a spear to Lord Murugan to defeat the demon army and fight their evil deeds. Lord Shiva then sent his son to conquer the asuras. After accomplishing this task, the victorious Subramaniam was believed to have appeared before his devotees. In the vision, he was bedecked with brilliant jewels, armed with a golden spear and seated on a chariot. Murugan is thus the embodiment of Shiva's light and wisdom.

Keywords

Murugan,Thaipusam, Kavadi, Pal-kudam

Thaipusam in India

Devotees take part in the ceremonial sacrifice and offering of the 'Kavadi Attam'. The Kavadi Attam ("kavadi dance") is a ceremonial act of devotional sacrifice through dance, food offerings, and rarely bodily self-mortification.

Kavadi is a semi-circular canopy with a wooden rod that a pilgrim carries on their shoulders to Murugan temples. To honor the God of war, the canopy is covered with feathers of peacock which is the vehicle of Lord Murugan. This journey of penance (the nadai payanam) is made barefoot and can take more than a week depending on the location of the temple.



Image 1: Kavadi Attam



Image 2: Self-mortification on Thaipusam Day

The temple of Murugan in Palani is a popular destination, as it is one among the arupadai veedu ("six houses" - the sites sacred to Murugan).

Devotees prepare for the celebration by keeping their body clean, doing regular prayers, following a vegetarian diet, and fasting before the Thaipusam. Kavadi-bearers have to perform elaborate ceremonies at the time of assuming the kavadi and at the time of offering it to Murugan. The kavadi-bearer observes celibacy and consumes only certain types of foods known as satvik food, once a day, while continuously thinking of God. On the day of the festival, devotees shave their heads and undertake a pilgrimage along a set route, while engaging in various acts of devotion, notably carrying the various types of kavadi. The devotees believe that worshipping Lord Murugan, in this way makes them physically and mentally healthy every year, and helps clear them of karmic debts they may have incurred. At its simplest, the pilgrimage may entail walking the route carrying a pot of milk, but mortification of the flesh by piercing the skin, tongue or cheeks with vel skewers is also common. In addition, some pierce their tongues or cheeks, all the way through, with a small spear.

In Palani Arulmigu Dhandayuthapani temple, a 10-day Festival (Brahmotsavam) is held during Thaipusam. Thirukalyanam (Celestial Wedding) is held on the day before Thaipusam. On Thaipusam, Therottam (chariot procession) is held.

Malaysia

Thaipusam celebrations in Batu Caves, Malaysia is one of the largest of its kind in the world, attracting over a million devotees and thousands of visitors each year.

The celebrations take place on a grand scale at Sri Subramanya-Swamy Temple just outside of Kuala Lumpur. Besides the Batu Caves, devotees also gather at the Balathandayuthapani Temple or Waterfall Hill Temple in Penang, the Sri Subramanya Swamy Temple in Sungai, Petani (Kedah), and the Sri Subramaniam Swamy Temple in Ipoh (Perak) It is a public holiday there on this day.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, the procession is mainly held in the capital of North Sumatra province, Medan. On the eve of Thaipusam, the Hindus gather together at Sree Soepramaniem Nagarattar Temple at Kejaksaan Road to accompany a 125 years old chariot, locally known as Radhoo from the temple to the main temple nearby (about 2–3 kilometers) at Sri Mariamman Temple at Kampung Madras which opens 24-hours for the festival. The kavadi processions also happen during the day.

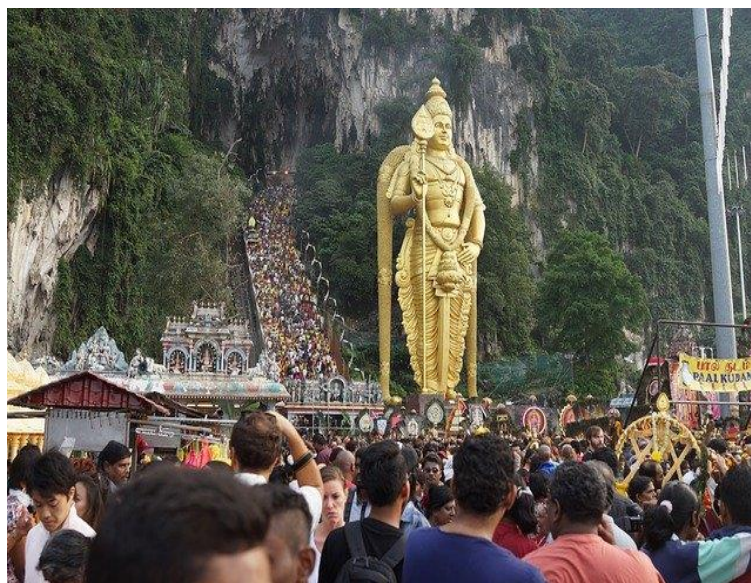


Image 3: Celebrations, Batu caves, Malaysia

Singapore

The symbolism of carrying the kavadi originates from a legend where the kavadi represents a mountain with Lord Subramaniam at its peak. The smaller, semi-circular kavadi is a D-shaped wooden frame with bars for support on the shoulders, normally decorated with flowers and peacock feathers. Other forms of sacrifice include piercing silver pins through the cheek and tongue and pricking the body with hooks and spear-like needles. The piercing of flesh in connection with carrying kavadi is vital to Thaipusam in Singapore. It is closely associated with the Hindu concepts of ritual purity and pollution. The devotees who intend to perform the sacrifice are customarily required to observe strict physical and mental discipline. Throughout the tenth month of Thai, purification of the body is a necessity. This includes taking just one vegetarian meal a day, and sexual abstinence. In addition, a 24-hour fast is observed on the eve of Thaipusam. Most women devotees carry a pot of milk called a palkuddam.



Image 4: Milk Pots as Offerings

The milk is poured over the statue of Lord Subramaniam at the end of the procession. Those who take part are usually individuals who have asked the deity for a favor. In return, they vow to undergo the ritual test of physical and spiritual endurance. Apart from those who go to the temples on Thaipusam day to fulfil their vows and to do penance, there are others who go with their families to offer prayers and to seek spiritual solace.

For years in Singapore, the traditional route for kavadi bearers has been from Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple. Thousands gather and crowd the temple grounds by midnight.

The kavadi procession starts as early as 4 am. leaving at intervals of 15 minutes.

The kavadi carriers, together with their relatives, friends and well-wishers, assemble in the morning to participate in the three- to four-kilometer procession to their final destination at the Sri Thandayuthapani Temple, commonly known as the Murugan Temple or Chettiar's Temple.

The celebrants following the procession chant "Vel, vel, kavadi". The belief is that Lord Murugan was given an unconquerable spear, "Vel", which he used magnificently to overcome the demons.

A mixture of fruits and honey is prepared and distributed among the devotees. Thousands of poor are fed for three days in the temple confines.

Conclusion

Festivals help us to bond across countries while we remain rooted to our culture.

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