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Ananthan, P. During the Saivite religious festival of Thai Pusam, near the end of January each year, in the modern, cosmopolitan countries of Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa, the Worshipping throngs make a stunning picture. The onlooker may see hundreds of devotees in procession carrying the "Kavadi" - an arch-shaped object, brightly painted and decorated with flowers - over their head and shoulders. Thousands of more devotees walk along in festive procession, singing and chanting, or worshipping in silence as drummers drum and music plays. The melodious bhajans ring out, all in praise of the God Muruga. Tourists snap photographs. During the height of certain portions of the three-day festival one may see devotees with long metal spears, or Vels, passed through their cheeks and tongues. Metal hooks piercing their skin adorn their chests and backs, and their bodies glisten with holy ash. This year in Bellair, South Africa, for example, Narain Chetty pulled a heavy chariot with the ropes attached to hooks in his back. This staunch devotee has taken part in the festival for past 15 years.

Batu Caves Temple outside of Kuala Lumpur holds perhaps the grandest Thai Pusam in the world. This year an estimated 800,000 people were in attendance. Over 2,000 devotees carried the kavadi. A much fewer number performed unusual physical ordeals. More Hindus in the Republic of South Africa turn out for this festival than any other, and it ranks as one of the most popular in Mauritius and Singapore as well. Reports from South Africa and Malaysia state that increasing numbers of young people are participating.

The thousands of devotees combine their energies during these three special days to draw Muruga's attention, His power, and receive His blessings. Additionally, to carry the kavadi is to take an active part in the festival, to perform a special symbolic act of worship which involves one fully and leaves an enduring memory. The Hindu concept of penance is central to Thai Pusam and oftentimes the moving force behind the physical hardships which attract the attention of the onlooker. Penance - to intentionally undergo suffering or austerity to atone for misconduct -

is taking karma in one's own hands. Often with the help and blessings of the God, the Hindu devotee may thus settle a particular karmic debt consciously and deliberately, rather than wait for its karmic effect to come in its due course.

Two thousand devotees carried the kavadi on the second day of Thai Pusam at Batu Caves Temple this year, ranging in age from toddlers to men in their 80's. "It all begins before daybreak near a river situated along the temple grounds," explains P. Ananthan. "Each kavadi bearer would have undergone a period of fasting, refraining from consuming especially meat and alcohol. This is done in order to get rid of all evil deeds and influences and to think of only Lord Muruga at that particular fasting month." A bath in the cool river is taken by each, and those who are to carry hooks or vels through their body are then prepared. With great care and knowledge which constitutes an art in itself, experts insert the metal objects. No pain is felt, for trance has been entered, and no blood is spilled. Soon the procession makes its way slowly and festively across a large flat expanse and climbs the 272 stone steps leading up the side of the mountain to a mammoth limestone cave wherein is found the shrine of Lord Muruga. A festive, worshipful spirit fills the air. After reaching the top, they proceed to the shrine. Experts place holy ash on the forehead of each one and reawaken them from the trance. The whole event, from the river to the shrine, has lasted three hours.

Thai Pusam celebrates the giving of the Shakti Vel, the lance-like symbol of spiritual knowledge and incisive discrimination, to Lord Muruga by Parvati, the female or creative aspect of God Siva. The word "Thai" denotes the Tamil month of January/February.

On the first day of Thai Pusam at Batu Caves, thousands of devotees gather at 4 A.M. to follow the bullock-drawn chariot of Lord Muruga from the Maha Mariamman Temple to Batu Caves, a distance of several miles. The pujaris by then have conducted puja for the Deity, taken the parade image around the temple and now place it in the chariot waiting outside. Effectively, the priests have invoked the presence and power of the God in the parade image. The chariot stands an impressive 25-feet tall, the whole structure carved of teak and covered with silver, donned with colorful and dazzling lights. Illuminating the quiet darkness, the procession slowly moves ahead, stopping at numerous temples along the long route where pujas and archanas are performed for the benefit of the hundreds of people lined up.

On the final day of Thai Pusam at Batu Caves the image of Lord Muruga is carried in His chariot back to the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple. The processions begins in the morning and at sunset, the Deity once again installed in His sanctum inside the temple, the festival comes to an end for one more year. A massive event honoring a god invisible to the physical eyes has taken the cooperation of the government and combined efforts of several religious world, Hindus have once again voice their testimony of faith in Muruga - as if to say that though outer life styles and world circumstances many change, their inner relationship with Him is abiding.