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Holy Penance Facing Disruption; Malaysia Youth Council Objects to Exhibitionist Feats, Bongo Drums and Disco Dancing at Sacred Festival

Idumban challenged the child-God Muruga for possession of the Sivagiri and Sakthigiri mountains. Easily conquered by the 6-year-old Diety, Idumban daily carried milk in two pots (representing the two mountains) to worship Muruga upon what is now Palani Hill. Thus began the sacred practice of kavadi-named after the semi-circular yoke used to carry first the mountains and later the pots of milk. To this day devotees worship Lord Muruga in the manner of Idumban during the Thai Pusam festival (January/February) in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Mauritius, South Africa and elsewhere.

But all is not well with the worship at Malaysia's Batu Caves, where a million people gather annually to worship and to observe thousands of kavadi carriers-most of whom simply carry pots of milk, as did Idumban. Seven or eight hundred fulfill vows by piercing their bodies with the Vel, a small spear sacred to Lord Muruga. A hundred or so go to literally greater lengths, piercing their cheeks with five-foot Vels. Others beat themselves with chains or whips, walk on sharp swords and/or carry a pahang-the formidable 3-foot Malaysian knife.

To attract attention to themselves, these participants hire musicians - at the goodly fee of a hundred Malaysia dollars - to accompany them. These are not traditional taval or nagasvaram players, but westernized boys in earrings and dark glasses playing African Congo drums, blowing police whistles, disco dancing, singing cinema songs, and drinking beer. Not only do they provide this "service" for those who pay them, but they disrupt the sacred penance of other kavadi carriers by teasing them. The overall result falls somewhere between Ringling Brothers Circus and Saturday Night Fever.

Traditional Hindus, lead by the Malaysia Hindu Youth Council, are upset by the spectacle. "It is a shame that Hindus continue to tolerate such disgraceful practices

that are tarnishing the image of our religion. Kavadi should not be sensationalized for selfish gains," the HYC journal states.

Mr. V. L. Kodivel, Chairman of the Mahamariamman Temple Devasthanam, supports the critics: "The undesirable practices during Thaipusam are contrary to Hindu culture and tradition." His Holiness, Swami Jivanmuktananada of the Divine Life Society, said, "Any effort by the HYC to educate devotees on the proper way of fulfilling vows through kavadi offering is a most timely move." The Malaysia Hindu Sangam, through Y.B. Dato S. Govinda Raj, has given "its wholehearted cooperation at all levels to systematize Kavadi taking."

The HYO has a four point solution: 1) two months in advance of Thai Pusam, call a formal meeting where the traditional way is explained to all who plan to take kavadi; 2) assemble this group at a proper area for preparation three days before the festival; 3) on Thai Pusam day, have a holy man lead the kavadis with nagasvaram horns; 4) keep non-traditional instruments, drinking and rowdy behavior away from the worshippers. The HYO is now seeking support throughout Malaysia for their reforms.

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