



Thaipusam: A Piercing Experience

Hindu devotees follow a colourful, inspirational ritual

By Susan Hunter

Singapore is one of the few places in the world where Thaipusam, a Hindu ritual in which devotees skewer their cheeks and tongues with steel spears and pierce their chests and backs with hook-like needles, is observed. Devotees may also wear nail-encrusted shoes or carry pots of milk balanced on their heads or hanging off long poles. At first sight these rituals can appear shocking, but a longer look at the participants and the ecstatic reverence with which the procession winds from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Little India to the Sri Thandayuthapani Temple on Tank Road, makes it clear that spiritual forces transport the celebrants beyond pain.

There are many stories about the origin of the celebration, but the best-known version says Thaipusam commemorates the day when Lord Shiva's consort, Parvati, gave a *vel* (spear) to her son Murugan to vanquish the evil demon Soorapadman. Observed on the full moon day during the auspicious 10th Tamil month of Thai, the celebration gets the other half of its name from the star of well-being, Pusam, which rises over the eastern horizon.

Lord Murugan, the Hindu god of war, is also the universal grantor of wishes, beseeched by those hoping for a good turn of events (such as a birth, curing an illness, good exam results) or asking forgiveness for sins. Those who receive boons vow to participate in Thaipusam, often for successive years. But participation in Thaipusam is more than payback – it is a way of reaffirming belief in a public way.

In Singapore, which hosts one of the largest and most dramatic gatherings (the practice originated in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but most Indian states now discourage the piercing part), one can observe at close range devotees carrying large *kavadis* anchored with ropes or chains to the skin of their chests and backs. The *kavadis* were once simple poles borne on the shoulders to carry vessels of milk as an offering to the god. These simple carrying poles have evolved into highly decorated pyramidal metal frames upon which the offering vessels are placed. Some weigh as much as 30 kilogrammes and are two metres tall.

To prepare for Thaipusam participants follow strict purification rituals. These include eating one small vegetarian meal daily, focusing on spiritual concerns and abstaining from physical pleasures.

On the first day of the festival, a silver chariot carries statues of Lord Murugan and his two consorts from Srinivasa

Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road to the Layan Sithi Vinayagar Temple in Keong Saik Road. The following day, the grounds of Srinivasa Perumal Temple teem with friends and supporters smearing each devotee with holy ash before a trusted friend or mentor inserts the spears and skewers. The atmosphere is noisy and celebratory with drumming, the playing of flute-like instruments and the chanting of '*vel, vel*'.

Celebrants appear focused, calm and proud. Many claim they feel no pain as a result of the application of holy ash. Perhaps even more amazing than the ability to endure piercing is that the participants do not bleed, neither while being pierced nor when the *vels* are removed. There is no obvious explanation other than divine intervention or the possibility that the holy ash limits bleeding.

Devotees carrying simple *kavadis* set out in the early morning darkness, but by the time the most heavily burdened and *vel*-pierced participants begin their long walk, daylight has arrived – and with it, hordes of camera-wielding spectators.

When the procession reaches its destination in Tank Road, devotees pour the milk from their *kavadis* onto the statue of Lord Murugan inside the sanctuary. Then they are helped to a quiet place where the *kavadis* and *vels* are removed. Anointed with limewater and more holy ash, given food and drink and treated to a hero's welcome by family and friends, they emerge from their trances.

The sight of so many pierced and speared bodies is unforgettable, but the ecstatic spirit of the observance is even more memorable.

Thaipusam will be held on 20 January 2011.

For more information on the event, see

www.sttemple.com/STT/english/thaipusam.asp

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