THAIPUSAM IN MALAYSIA

A HINDU FESTIVAL MISUNDERSTOOD?

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INTRODUCTION

1. IN THE BEGINNING: THESIS ORIGINS

At 5 a.m. on 24 January 1978, accompanied by my wife, Wendy, four visitors from Australia, and a young Tamil man, a relative of our amah's (1), who had agreed to act as our interpretive guide, I made my way to the main stairway leading to the Temple Cave of the Batu Caves complex, about 13 kilometres north of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. After threading a path through the crowd, already vast, despite the early hour, we stationed ourselves at the very foot of the steps. We had come to view the Hindu festival of Thaipusam, devoted to the deity Murugan, a South Indian god so seemingly obscure that he earned a mere paragraph in one of the putatively authoritative texts which had provided my background reading into Hinduism, and no entries at all in the remainder.

We had heard highly seasoned stories of the festival of Thaipusam, principally of its more dramatic elements; the hundreds of kavadi (ritual burden) bearers pierced with skewers and hooks, carrying their burdens up the steep flights of stairs leading to the Murugan shrine within the caves; the immense crowd; the constant noise – a product of shouting devotees, blaring loud speakers and incessant drumming; the visiting political dignatories. But most of what we had heard was second hand – the impressions of the few expatriates who visited the festival, and who generally tended to view it as a form of local colour, an incidental divertissement which formed a suitably exotic backdrop to their stay in “oriental” Malaysia, rather than as a meaningful religious observance, worthy of consideration in its own right. We had been informed that if we chose to negotiate the crowds and view the festival we would witness a series of amazing exhibitions – people who performed remarkable and bizarre acts in the name of religious belief. We were also told that we would require strong stomachs and reserves of tolerance.

However, these rather cursory descriptions had give me no insights into what Thaipusam as a festival actually signified, nor indeed did it provide any deeper impressions of what I might experience as a visitor to the festival. But then the fifteen months I had spent in
Malaysia had been a constant exposure to the unexpected. Posted as an Attaché to the Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, I had been furnished with a pre-departure schedule of briefings which had adumbrated only in vague outline some of the political and social realities of the country in which I now found myself. As a consequence I was manifestly under prepared to deal with the complexities of Malaysian life, in particular the array of ethnic, religious, socio-economic, educational and linguistic issues which dominated Malaysian political discourses, and to which my work daily exposed me. In particular, I lacked all but the most rudimentary understanding of the religious traditions which informed and underscored the sensibilities and worldviews of the component ethnicities of Malaysia. I had attempted to overcome my ignorance by a program of concentrated reading, and wherever possible by investigation of local cultures, or at least those aspects which were accessible and available to expatriates. Encouraged by my Malaysian friends, I visited mosques, churches, temples, attended weddings, initiations, firewalkings, and cultural performances. I was a willing participant in the Malaysian open houses which attended the major festivals of the community – Hari Raya Puasa, which marked the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, Chinese New Year, the Hindu festival of Deepavali, and Eurasian celebrations at Christmas. As I gradually gained the confidence of my Malaysian colleagues I began to receive invitations to selected events which were normally closed to expatriate “Europeans” – a kampung silat training session, family religious functions, temple and mosque related activities. These explorations greatly extended my knowledge of Malaysian life, and allowed me to gradually piece together diverse segments of the complex three-dimensional jigsaw which constitutes Malaysian culture and society.

And therein lay a supplementary reason for my visit to Batu Caves that January morning. Hindu associates, aware of my growing interest in religious expression in Malaysia, had suggested that Thaipusam, and in particular the disciplined austerities surrounding the kavadi ritual, might provide a general introduction to some of the traditions of South Indian Hinduism, in particular to the Tamil deity Murugan, and the principles of bhakti worship which permeated Hinduism within Malaysia.
Our arrival at Batu Caves coincided with a temporary lull in proceedings. We stood in the preternatural darkness of the pre-dawn cool, orienting ourselves to our surroundings, and commenting upon the curiously charged atmosphere we had all detected; a singular amalgam of muted exaltation and anticipatory enthusiasm. To our right the looming bulk of Batu Caves was etched against the still night sky. The steps leading to the Temple Cave were softly illuminated by strings of coloured globes. To our left, hundreds of onlookers, nearly all ethnic Indians, waited patiently on either side of the roped lane reserved for kavadi bearers and their followers. Malay soldiers and police, all armed, were stationed at regular intervals along the lane, practising Muslims, detailed to guard a Hindu festival.

Our reveries were interrupted by a sudden commotion. Several drummers preceded a group of chanting and dancing devotees who made their way toward our vantage point, their progress marked with a palpable wave of excitement. In their midst was a young man, somehow anchored below a sort of tower, a decorated platform containing an image of the deity whom I had learned to recognize as Murugan, son of Siva. The votary's torso was laced with hooks, each attached to a fine silver chain which hung from the platform. A “skewer” protruded from his tongue, another had been pushed through his cheeks. The entire group radiated a compelling, urgent and ecstatic energy, a form of intense exhilaration which fell well beyond my own abbreviated experiences of religious expression.

For the next eight hours we remained at Batu Caves, and as my personal diary recalls “...witnessed some of the the most amazing sights one could hope to see.” Throughout the morning hundreds of kavadi bearers made their way to the stairs, all accompanied by retinues of drummers and surrounded by a group of supporters chanting and singing. Some took kavadis similar to that of the first kavadi devotee, others carried long spears which transfixed their cheeks, other devotees restricted themselves to small decorated wooden arches, young men danced on huge knives born by their friends, couples conveyed small children in slings suspended from sugar cane, both men and women carried vessels of milk. Most devotees exuded the same mysterious and unfathomable
rapture, almost overpowering in its intensity, which had so astonished me earlier that morning. I was neither shocked by the spectacle, nor as some observers had predicted, did my stomach churn. Instead, I was increasingly fascinated, and deeply moved to the point where I was all but overwhelmed. At one juncture, a couple of hours into the morning, overcome by the cumulative emotional impact of dozens of kavadi worshippers, I had to sit down, lest I faint.

Throughout the course of the morning we shifted from place to place within the Batu Caves complex. We visited the river where most devotees began their journey, and watched the aspirants bathing, achieving trance, undergoing the piercing of cheeks and tongues, and having their kavadis fitted. We shuffled up the congested steps to the shrine in Temple Cave where the kavadi worshippers terminated their pilgrimages.

Like so many “foreign” observers of Thaipusam, I was curious about what I had seen and experienced during the festival. I had never imagined being part of a crowd on the scale of that which had gathered at Batu Caves (estimated by the local press at 500,000 people), nor had I reckoned upon the large number of active participants. Nor had I begun to foresee the ecstatic devotion of those who had elected to bear kavadis. Like many “Westerners” I was astonished at the absence of pain and blood, at the unaccountable exaltation of the pilgrims, at the esoteric ritual privations they had endured.

In February 1979, a mere six weeks prior to the culmination of my posting and thus my permanent return to Australia, a close Hindu friend, Ramasamy,(3) informed me that several of his relatives intended to take kavadis under the direction of his uncle, and invited me to observe the group as it went through the rituals associated with kavadi worship. Arriving at our destination slightly after nightfall on 9 February, we ascended the steps to the Temple Cave. The interior of the Cave was suffused with the liquid light thrown by dozens of candles and lamps, and the air was heavily laden with the commingled odours of incense and burning camphor. Ramasamy and his cousins made their obeisances, firstly to Lord Ganesha, the elephant headed deity whom they
described as the Remover of Obstacles, and then to Lord Murugan. We left the Cave and made our way to the riverbank where the large group of devotees known to Ramasamy had assembled. The group leader welcomed me, and although he was kept frantically busy in overseeing the purificatory rituals, supervising trance states and fitting kavadis, found time to provide me with abridged explanatory comments about his own actions and those of each kavadi bearer. The devotees consisted of working class Indians, mainly drawn from the rubber and oil palm estates adjacent to Kuala Lumpur, two Chinese university students, and a Eurasian Catholic lawyer who informed me that he divided his worship between Jesus and Murugan. The group contained a wide spread of ages. Although predominantly male, the group included several younger women, and one much older woman, a widow who had dedicated herself to Murugan. At about 12.30 a.m on 10 February, the party set off for the Caves. I watched the ascent, the build up to the final paroxysm of dancing before the shrine, the termination of the trance state, the dismantling of the kavadis. Later that morning I breakfasted with the devotees at a nearby enclosure set aside for this purpose.

My sojourn in Malaysia and the festival of Thaipusam had affected me in ways I had not foreseen. From the very outset of my posting, I had found Malaysia vital and compelling, a country still grappling with the residual problems bequeathed by colonialism, and struggling to come to terms with the legacy of its immediate history, and to reconcile the diversity of cultures, traditions and worldviews within the overarching rubric of nationhood. Moreover, throughout my years in Malaysia, I had made a number of deep and enduring friendships; my family and I had been welcomed into many homes where we had been received with warmth and generosity. My return to Australia was accompanied by an unanticipated and quite profound culture shock, and sustained “homesickness” for the society I had left behind. I believed that my departure had been premature; that there were still lessons to learn and mysteries, both intellectual and personal, that I needed to penetrate. Within six months of my return I had shocked myself, (but neither my wife, nor my Malaysian friends), by announcing my “conversion”(4) to Saivite Hinduism, and by my concomitant vow to bear a succession of kavadis at Thaipusam.
My first kavadi was taken at Batu Caves at Thaipusam on 20 January 1981, and was followed by irregular pilgrimages throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Each of these pilgrimages exposed me to new and often profound experiences, and both widened and deepened my knowledge of Thaipusam, Murugan worship, and Hinduism in Malaysia. In 1989 I was invited to address the 5th Malaysian National Hindu Conference held in Petaling Jaya, Selangor. Senior Hindus suggested that I write a book about my religious experiences. The resultant volume, a highly personalized account of the “confessional” genre, and entitled *Toward Truth: An Australian Spiritual Journey*,(5) was published in February 1992 in Kuala Lumpur.

My interest in Thaipusam has thus been shaped by two major influences – firstly, my role as a privileged “insider”, albeit that of a “Western” pilgrim, and secondly, the spirit of scholarly inquiry. The former has been largely moulded by the philosophies and ritual of the “great tradition” school of Saiva Siddhanta, especially the more esoteric conventions of Murugan worship as they relate to and enmesh with that tradition. While this background was sufficient to provide an interpretive paradigm for my own participation in Thaipusam, it proved too narrow to sustain any detailed analysis of the collocation of behaviours and belief structures which collectively comprise this complex and multifaceted festival. In particular the terms of my personal engagement with Thaipusam neither provided me with the breadth of perspective necessary to discern the intricate and often fluid web of relationships which permeate the supposedly inviolable intra-religious boundaries of *Agamic* and village Hinduism, nor allowed me to appreciate how these relationships catalyze the negotiation, reformulation and transmission of concepts within the broader context of Hindu society. Scholarly inquiry thus insisted that I move beyond the conventions of “great tradition” learning and plunge into the agglomeration of castes, sub-ethnic and religious discourses, which cumulatively make up the body of beliefs generically classified under the rubric of Malaysian Hinduism.

2. THESIS STATEMENT

Thaipusam is a Saivite Hindu festival dedicated to the worship of the deity Murugan,
who is considered to be the son of the supreme deity, Siva, and held to be the Mahadeva (god) of spiritual disciplines, austerities and yogic powers, and thus capable of bestowing mukti (final liberation) upon those who engage in concentrated worship of him. While the deity has absorbed a complex amalgam of Sanskrit and Tamil influences, in pre-modern and modern India he has been increasingly identified as a Dravidian and specifically Tamil deity, who through a prolonged process of syncretization has accumulated a wide variety of motifs, attributes and belief structures which render him acceptable and accessible to all segments of Tamil Hindu society. Murugan worship in Malaysia is widespread among Tamils of both Indian and Sri Lankan descent.

In essence, Thaipusam celebrates the bestowal of the Sakti Vel (electric spear or Vetrivel) upon Murugan, by Parvati, consort of Siva, at the outset of Murugan's campaign to defeat Surapadman, head of the asuras (demonic force or lower astral beings). A substantial corpus of puranic mythology informs the Murugan cultus. At the cosmological level the Murugan mythology may be interpreted to embrace themes of phenomenological atrophy and dissolution, as well as subsequent reconstitution and renewal. At the human level, Murugan's battle with Surapadman is internalized and the Vel becomes a key to spiritual liberation. My field researches suggest that many devotees view Thaipusam – the commemoration of Murugan's acquisition of the Vel – as a highly propitious occasion in which to resolve personal karmic difficulties, or to “repay” the deity for major adjustments or transformations in family and social life. Thaipusam is thus marked by individual acts of devotion involving austerity and sacrifice, often taking the form of bodily mortification, accompanied by trance states, and the bearing of kavadis.

While Thaipusam in Malaysia is consciously formulated upon the mythology, tradition and modes of worship celebrated at the great Murugan pilgrimage centre of Palani, Tamil Nadu, the processes of relocation and adaptation within Malaysia have in certain respects endowed the festival with a uniquely Malaysian orientation. In the years since I first witnessed Thaipusam (1978-79), both the social context in which Thaipusam is
celebrated, and the overall conduct of the festival have altered considerably. The crowds attending the festival have continued to annually increase (press estimates indicate that in 2000 approximately one million people attended Thaipusam at Batu Caves, while 300,000 gathered at the Penang festival), the number of kavadi pilgrims has more than doubled, the publicity surrounding the festival has gained greater prominence, and Thaipusam has been declared a public holiday in several states. Thaipusam has now clearly emerged as the most popular and prominent Hindu festival in Malaysia, and has become the most visible and powerful assertion of Hindu identity. Indians constitute only 7.7 per cent of Peninsula Malaysia's population of approximately 20 million people, and Hindus comprise about 86 per cent of this figure. Yet Thaipusam at Batu Caves has become the largest single religious festival in Malaysia, and is popularly believed to represent the most significant Hindu festival outside India. Moreover the festival attracts devotees from almost the entire spectrum of the Hindu community, as well as Sikh, Sinhalese and Chinese participants. While Thaipusam is dedicated to Murugan, kavadis are borne for nearly all Hindu deities worshipped in Malaysia, including those belonging to non-Agamic and Vaishnavite traditions.

The thesis will explore the festival of Thaipusam in terms of its own inner dynamics – the traditions and belief structures which ensure the festival's continuing relevance to Malaysian Hindus. It will argue that Thaipusam in Malaysia reflects a growing sense of Hindu identity in Malaysia, and an as yet inchoate unity. It will contend that while kavadi worship provides profound meaning at the individual and group level, Thaipusam furnishes a public arena for and gives expression to a powerful Hindu resurgence, largely though not exclusively fuelled by Dravidian assertiveness. It will further argue that the festival both incorporates competing discourses – based on ethnicity, caste, the multiplicity of sects and traditions ranging from village to Agamic – within the generic rituals and received frameworks associated with Murugan worship. The thesis will therefore investigate Murugan as a powerful symbol of Dravidian renaissance, together with the catalytic impulses which are reformulating Malaysian Hinduism. This will necessarily involve a study of the metropolitan culture from which Malaysian Hinduism has arisen, and the continuing applicability of its major tenets and impulses among
Malaysian Hindus. In situating the festival within the context of a Malaysia dominated by Malay and Islamic power brokers, a society in which both the Indian community and Hinduism are relegated to the margins, the thesis will explore Thaipusam as a vehicle for the mobilization of religious symbols and values which not only simultaneously articulate ethnicity and thus resist the forces which threaten cultural and religious integrity, but which also ultimately signal wider allegiances to the broader politico-cultural world of an imagined, immeasurably rich and enduring Indo-Hindu civilization.

Chapter One provides a phenomenological overview of Thaipusam at Batu Caves. This outlines the justificatory mythology which underscores the festival, the founding and development of Batu Caves as a pilgrimage centre, the kingship rituals which establish the overall parameters of the festival, and the formal acts of vow fulfillment which constitute kavadi worship. Chapter Two examines the Indian presence in Malaya/Malaysia against the evolving backdrop of colonial and Japanese rule, as well as a constituent feature of the politics of ethnicity which have dominated post-Merdeka Malaysia. This chapter also discusses the rise of Islam upon the Malaysian polity. Chapter Three consists of a comparative study of Thaipusam and kavadi worship within metropolitan India as well as a number of diaspora locations. This demonstrates that both the festival and the mode of worship are practiced in many societies, and among many castes and classes. In Chapter Four I explore the history and development of Tamil institutions and belief structures including bhakti Hinduism and Saiva Siddhanta. This chapter includes a section which traces the origins of contemporary Hindu reform movements. Finally the chapter examines the origins, motifs and continuing influence of the Murugan cultus and its appeal to a society characterized by enormous and enduring diversity. Chapter Five provides an overview of the relocation and development of Hinduism in Malaya/Malaysia, including the modification of caste, construction and management of temples, and the continuing renegotiation of Hindu identity within modern Malaysia. In Chapter Six I examine kavadi worship within the context of the Tamil Hindu pilgrimage ritual, that is as a tirtha yatra (or “divine crossing”) in which the devotee moves from the periphery to the centre (or axis mundi), usually within the context of vow fulfillment. This chapter will show that Thaipusam is saturated with
themes and dominated by a logic drawn both from the Murugan cosmology and also from wider Tamil belief structures, and that the experience of kavadi worship bestows profound meanings upon votaries. This chapter also touches upon the significance of Murugan as king-deity to the overall conduct of the festival. Finally in the Conclusions I look at the continuing and expanding significance of Thaipusam, its role in providing a forum for the redefinition of Malaysian Hinduism, and its multivocality in terms of the message it sends to a variety of audiences.

A note on diacritics
Throughout this thesis I have employed the most common Malaysian Romanized spelling of Tamil terms, nouns and proper nouns, and have omitted diacritical marks. This has been largely prompted by the varied spellings of Tamil words which appear in different contexts in Malaysia, almost invariably offered without diacritics. (Thus, for example, the term kovil for temple, is often spelled koyil or even koil, aluga (beautiful) kavadis are often rendered as aluka or aluha, while Murugan may be offered as Murukan or Muruhan. Sometimes multiple spellings of the same word appear within the one work.) Within Malaysia, both spelling and meaning are complicated by the fact that many Tamil and Sanskrit words have found their way into the Bahasa Malaysia vocabulary, where they often assume meanings which are marginally or markedly different from their original currency in India. Thus in Malay a guru is a teacher or instructor (with or without religious overtones), whereas the Sanskrit swami becomes the Malay suami (husband). Over time some of these Bahasa Malaysia meanings have been transplanted or returned to the Malaysian Tamil lexicon. In addition, several words relevant to this study, such as “Thaipusam” and “kavadi” have passed into the common Malaysian English vocabulary, and their English spellings are the most widely circulated among Malaysians generally. My aim has been to achieve consistency, as well as clarity. I have italicized Tamil and Sanskrit terms throughout this thesis (with the exception of proper nouns and the two terms just listed, that is “Thaipusam” and “kavadi”).
3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE
For the purpose of this study three basic types of literature were reviewed. The first was that related to the large scale migration of Indians to Malaysia in the wake of British colonial exploitation of the Peninsula – the historical, political, and societal factors which influenced and attended these migratory flows, and the subsequent processes of adaptation and accommodation to the changing society in which they found themselves. This involved examination of primary source material including colonial documentation held by the Indian and Oriental Office Library, London, contemporary and “native” accounts of indentured and kangany migration, as well as descriptions of the processes leading to Merdeka, and the subsequent history of post colonial Malaysia. In order to contextualize the Indian presence in Malaya/Malaysia, I have also consulted the extensive and growing body of work, in particular the fraught history of inter-ethnic relations and the development of political, social and cultural structures designed to accommodate and broker the “legitimate” demands of all communities, and to promote national unity.

There is a reasonable corpus of material devoted to studies of the Indian experience in Malaya/Malaysia, ranging from accounts of the establishment and later abolition of indenture, through to the rise of Indian political, social and cultural organizations. Sandhu's groundbreaking analysis of Indian migration to Malaya, now somewhat dated,(8) has been supplemented by several works which examine the Indian experiences in Malaya/Malaysia from a diversity of specialized perspectives – historical, political, sociological and anthropological.(9) More recent studies have focussed on the development and concomitant oppression of a substantial Indian underclass, comprising as much as 80 per cent of Indian Malaysian society.(10) There are many comprehensive works which explore the various aspects of Malayan/Malaysian history from the studies of pre-colonial Malaya to post-Merdeka Malaysia, and incorporating the modern phenomena of Malay assertiveness and control of the Malaysia polity, as well as the growing impact of Islamization.(11)

The second review related to an examination of Hinduism in Malaysia, and specifically
Dravidian Hinduism, both from the perspective of its metropolitan origins, as well as the circumstances attending its relocation and reformulation within Malaya/Malaysia. My reading into metropolitan traditions drew upon the ever expanding body of research into Dravidian history, culture and society, including recent penetrating studies of the development of Tamil belief structures and religious institutions. The availability of literature covering Hinduism in Malaysia proved more problematic. As Ramanathan Kalimuthu has pointed out in his recent comprehensive study, *Hindu Religion in an Islamic State: The Case of Malaysia*, many of the studies of Indian society in Malaysia which have focussed upon the phenomena of Indian ethnicity, have provided detailed political, economic, societal, and linguistic summaries, while all but neglecting religion and religious issues. Although several recent articles examine selected aspects of the shifting body of discourses which collectively comprise Malaysian Hinduism, there have been few attempts to provide any detailed descriptions or examinations of the sectional and functional components which make up this overall body of beliefs. While I was able to uncover a series of academic and generalist articles, much of my information was thus garnered from fieldwork and interviews.

The third review related to the available literature relating to Thaipusam in Malaysia. The body of material completed around this subject is rather sparse, and few studies have attempted to view Thaipusam in its own terms, rather than as an object of orientalist speculation and theorizing. Lawrence Babb's 1976 work on Thaipusam in Singapore continues to yield valuable insights, while Raymond Lee's more recent study (1989) furnishes an instructive phenomenological overview of Thaipusam at Batu Caves.

It is my contention that Thaipusam, a major, highly colourful and extremely complex Hindu festival, has been seriously misunderstood by most Western observers. In essence, Western interpretations of Thaipusam fall into three major, albeit overlapping, schools, which I have listed as follows:

(i) *The Exotic Malaysia/Mysterious East School.* This consists of the frankly
sensationalist descriptions which exploit both the festival and its participants as objects of curiosity, a diversion or source of potential entertainment, most typically for other Westerners. These accounts are invariably written from a generalist perspective, undisguisedly orientalist, and while sometimes ostensibly sympathetic, their underlying leitmotif remains the cultural distance of the writer from “the other”. The most objectionable accounts of Thaipusam comprise those which might be termed the “benighted native” approach, cast in terms of implied cultural superiority, openly condescending or contemptuous, or simply unconscionable.

(ii) The Lost Village Tradition/Social Deprivation School. This is perhaps the most common interpretation, and strongly encouraged by certain Hindu reformist groups who are supposedly arguing from the privileged and sanctioned perspective of Agamic “great tradition” Hinduism, and who are interested in recasting Malaysian Hinduism in terms of a modernist agenda. This viewpoint contends that Thaipusam constitutes the debased remnants of a decayed and perhaps lost village tradition, somehow transplanted to Malaya/Malaysia, (invariably by Hindus of the lowest castes), and asserts that these rituals find no justification within Agamic or classical Hindu belief structures. The festival is thus sustained by illiterate and ignorant members of a chronically deprived working class/lower caste Hindu population, (Chinese participation is rarely mentioned let alone explained), who use Thaipusam as a cathartic outlet to relive the unmitigated harshness which characterizes their oppression. These accounts also usually reiterate the common fallacy that Thaipusam as practiced in Malaysia is banned in India.

(iii) The Psychoanalytic School. The genre, largely conducted within the framework of neo-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, tends to view the raw material of Thaipusam in terms of the abreacted impulses and dispositions of repressed sexuality combined with social protest. Thus the spectacle of young men, (these accounts invariably marginalize and downplay the participation of women and older devotees), piercing their flesh with skewers and steel rods, transported by the rapture of orgiastic trance, and penetrating into the dark interiors of temples and caves, are fulfilling a ritual whose inner meanings and significance – the “real” motives which impel their public performances – somehow
elude the participants themselves, but may be carefully decoded by privileged (usually Western) scholars accoutred with the appropriate armory of psychoanalytic techniques.(23)

Each of the interpretations grouped under categories (ii) and (iii), written by scholars and observers who in the main have experienced Thaipusam as a largely sociological phenomenon, suggests its own rationale for the construction and inner dynamics of the festival, and argued on the basis of readily observable and purely Malaysian evidence may achieve a deceptive plausibility. It is relatively simple to trace the origins of such interpretations. A large percentage of Malaysia's ethnic Tamil population does consist of an oppressed and marginalized underclass, and it seems axiomatic to many Western scholars to link the esoteric rituals of Thaipusam to the traumas of subjugation, and the intense need for recognition in a society which neither cares to remember the historic achievements of Indian labour, nor values or respects their current contributions. Similarly it would be easy to accept the views of a numerically insignificant but disproportionately vocal group of self proclaimed Hindu “reformers” as authoritative. Many of those who fall within this category are Western educated, of professional standing, fluent in English, modernist in outlook, and immediately accessible to any field worker conducting research into Hinduism in Malaysia. This group is more than prepared to diminish the experiences and practices of those whose perspectives do not accord with their own, especially Hindus who are working class and poorly educated.

I would suggest, however, that these interpretations are based upon incomplete ethnographies, which fail to locate Thaipusam, kavadi worship and Malaysian Hinduism within a sufficiently broad or comprehensive framework. The limitations of these approaches are revealed by analyses of metropolitan Tamil Hindu traditions,(24) studies of Thaipusam and kavadi worship within the wider Tamil diaspora, close readings of the modern Indian migration to and history within Malaya/Malaysia,(25) and the intense fieldwork which must be undertaken if one is to disentangle the layers of meaning embedded in a festival as involved and multifaceted as Thaipusam.(26)
My own fieldwork and research suggest that many of the previous interpretations have reached conclusions which will not withstand the scrutiny of close inquiry. My studies indicate that Thaipusam has its roots in continuing traditions and theologies readily located in both popular and Agamic Hinduism, and that many of those aspects thought most objectionable by Hindu reformers and exotic or bizarre by Western observers have precedents, and nearly always equivalents, within Tamil Hindu culture. My fieldwork demonstrates that kavadi worship is not restricted to lower caste Hindus or younger working class males; nearly all sectors of Malaysian Hindu society and considerable numbers of women participate in the rituals. Nor have I uncovered any evidence that the dynamics of Thaipusam are influenced by inter-caste rivalry; this is not to suggest that caste distrust or friction is non-existent, but rather that it is not a major causative factor in the construction of the festival. Neither have I found any evidence that the trance state at Thaipusam axiomatically produces amnesia; the majority of devotees whom I interviewed were able to provide compelling and often vivid descriptions of their trance experiences. Moreover comparative studies dispel the “social deprivation” theory of Thaipusam; they reveal that kavadi worship is a common diaspora phenomenon, and that this occurs within societies where Tamil practitioners are neither necessarily politically or socially disadvantaged. Indeed these studies clearly reveal that Thaipusam, Murugan worship and kavadi rituals have typical normative elements which manifest at the festivals commemorated in both Batu Caves and Penang.

The thesis, therefore, will argue, inter alia, that Thaipusam at Batu Caves, while in some senses uniquely Malaysian, is “orthodox” in the sense that it reproduces worship rituals and behavioural patterns which owe their origins to Tamil Murugan traditions which continue to be practiced in India.

4. METHODOLOGY
Data for this thesis were collected over a period of nearly nine years. The study commenced at the outset of the 1994 academic year, and was initially envisaged as a Master of Arts program. Much of my initial reading was tightly structured and highly
theoretical and did little to advance my program, or indeed to illumine my overall understanding of my subject. Apart from the fact that this material did not speak in anyway to my own experiences or knowledge of Thaipusam, it also bore negligible relevance to the conditions or beliefs of the Hindu community within Malaysia. My 1995 fieldwork in Malaysia clarified thesis parameters and generated a broader and more immediately relevant reading list. In 1999, the program was upgraded to Doctorate level, and the scope of my research was both broadened and intensified to accommodate the extended and detailed analysis the topic now required.

Because of the need to maintain both vocational and other commitments, this program has been undertaken as a part time and off-campus exercise. The majority of this program was completed while I was resident on a farming property about one hundred kilometres north of Adelaide, South Australia. The overdue upgrading of the telecommunications infrastructure north of Adelaide in the late 1990s finally permitted me to fully employ computer technologies to remain in immediate touch with scholars, contacts and devotees within Australia, Malaysia, and India, as well as other parts of the world. Toward the end of 2000 the sale of a much cherished rural property, and the extensive disorganization which accompanied the move to Adelaide, followed by a lengthy period of adjustment to the radical discontinuity of urban life, proved extremely unsettling and delayed the completion of this thesis. Throughout the entire duration of this thesis, I have received the strong support of Deakin University. The outstanding services offered to distance students by Deakin University Library, together with the unflagging cooperation and encouragement I received from my supervisory staff, allowed me to avoid the stasis and attenuation of commitment which sometimes accompanies physical isolation and the concomitant lack of immediate involvement with the host institution.

The starting point for this thesis revolved around my own experiences of Thaipusam, which were later reinforced and augmented by research undertaken in connection with the preparation and publication of my 1992 book *Towards Truth: An Australian*
Spiritual Journey, and also by my work as Australian Correspondent for the Hawaiian based journal Hinduism Today (1991-1995). While my posting to Malaysia (1976-1979) exposed me to various incidents and cultural tableaux which had permitted me to glean a number of compelling insights into the traditions and concepts which inform “village/popular” Hinduism, they did not enable me to develop any coherent understanding of related belief structures. Thus, when I commenced this study, my views were largely received and refracted through the prism of the “great tradition” set of beliefs known as Saiva Siddhanta. The extraordinary complexity and diversity of belief structures, represented under the rubric of the “Malaysian Hinduism”, and their manifestation in the context of a festival dedicated to the deity Murugan, together with the unreliability and reductiveness of much of the small body of material published on Thaipusam, dictated a wide ranging program of reading, which at times encompassed subject matter which at first sight might have almost appeared tangential to the thesis in preparation. Often, however, this secondary reading has elicited perspectives and insights which have illuminated more puzzling and arcane aspects of the primary field of research. The program of wide and divergent consultation has also allowed me to more readily situate Thaipusam within the general context of Malaysian Hinduism, and to interrogate the subject from a range of historical, political, sociological and anthropological perspectives.

My reading included one month's research into colonial documents, reports and related materials held within the official collection of the India and Oriental Office Library, London. These papers yielded much valuable information and occasionally rare and illustrative vignettes on the Indian experience in British Malaya. I was also afforded the opportunity of researching papers, articles and theses held at the Universiti Malaya, which cast light on specific aspects of the Indian history in Malaya/Malaysia.

Integral to my research were several periods of fieldwork, including four visits to Malaysia, one extended over three months (1995), and three supplementary trips, each of six week's duration, (1997, 2000 and 2004), punctuated by a ten week visit to South India in 1998 funded by a research grant award by Deakin University. My 1995 travel
incorporated a five week stay in London, which allowed specialist library research and consultations with academics.

**Malaysia** The focal points of the Malaysian visits were the close observation of the festival of Thaipusam as conducted at Batu Caves (1995, 2000 and 2004) and Penang (1997). My presence at these festivals provided openings which enabled me to arrange extensive interviews with kavadi bearers and their attendants. Ultimately I met with over three hundred such devotees, as well as members of their families and supporting retinues. The process of organizing interviews was undoubtedly advanced by respondents’ awareness of my own history of kavadi pilgrimage, and my standing as a devotee who had written a “confessional” book about these experiences. My interviewees covered the entire gamut of kavadi worshippers in terms of ethnicity, sex, age, and vocational status, and included participants who had borne kavadis for non-\textit{Agamic} deities.

In organizing interviews with Malaysian Hindus, I was careful to contextualize the views of self-proclaimed “reformers”. As I have indicated, many who fall within this category are Western educated, of professional standing, modernist in outlook and fluent in English. One could thus be easily led to form the impression that the views of the “reformers” represent an authoritative perspective on what constitutes “correct” Hindu philosophies and rituals. In fact, it has been my experience that most reformers subscribe to a textual Hinduism which is both rarefied and “rational”, and thus largely stripped of its \textit{puranic} traditions, its emotional content and the ritual forms of expression which infuse most forms of the South Indian \textit{bhakti} tradition. Many reformers who propound Vedantic philosophies based on the “scientific” teachings of Swami Vivekananda, or who pursue an idealized “philosophical” Hinduism largely isolated from its ritualized expressions, are often but sparsely informed, and hold grossly simplified and stereotypical views about such subjects as \textit{Agamic} beliefs, the scope of Murugan worship and its relationship to didactic philosophy, or the belief structures undergirding village/popular Hinduism. Most reformers are acutely – and to the “Western” observer exaggeratedly – sensitive to imagined Western perceptions of Hinduism. This may be
exemplified by the concern several Indian Malaysian academics expressed about my own enquiries into village/popular Hinduism. It was vehemently suggested by one such academic that it would be beneficial to forget the views and beliefs of the majority of the Hindu population in order to provide a more “acceptable” (even if bowdlerized) portrayal of Malaysian Hinduism. While I have noted the views of the “reformers” as belonging to a small, albeit highly visible minority of Malaysian Hindus, I have not permitted them to unduly bias my overall findings.

My knowledge of local conditions and the assistance of friends and erstwhile colleagues opened many doors to me which otherwise may have remained closed. This enabled me to interview a range of people who hold or have held prominent positions within the Indian and Hindu communities. These included temple officials, politicians (both from the Malaysian Indian Congress and opposition parties), union officials, former INA personnel, several ex-kanganies, and a large number of individuals whose impressions and recollections of specific incidents and events did much to deepen and embellish my own perspectives. Similarly, Malay and Chinese friends and contacts provided me with introductions to politicians, religious scholars and officiants, and individuals who had been involved in movements and moments which had subsequently proved formative in helping to influence the currents and directions of Malayan/Malaysian history, and thus in shaping its emerging political and social structures. Nearly all made their availability conditional upon their guaranteed anonymity. Accordingly, where I have made reference to the views or recollections of an individual, I have footnoted these with the initials of the interviewee.

In the main, interviews were conducted without the agency of my cassette recorder. I quickly discovered that its introduction invariably resulted in hesitancy, confusion and in some cases total silence, even among otherwise fluent respondents. In place, I recorded interviews in reporters' notebooks, which I transcribed to foolscap writing pads at the first available opportunity. In a number of instances the evanescent nature of my contact with certain interviewees, (for example, outstation devotees) made follow-up all but impossible. Where in the few circumstances I was unable to verify specific information,
I (reluctantly) deleted this material from my own research.

I also undertook a series of trips to major temples and noted pilgrimage sites throughout Peninsular Malaysia, especially those related to Murugan worship, and kavadi ritual. This necessarily involved visits to the entire spectrum of Hindu places of worship, ranging from orthodox Agamic temples (exemplified by the well managed Jaffna Tamil and Chettiar temples), to small village structures fashioned of plank and zinc. I observed the conduct of many different rituals, including several examples of mediumship, and met a number of religious figures, many self educated, others possessing the dubious imprimatur of self anointment. (28) Requests to research temple records within Malaysian were invariably declined, generally with the polite rebuttal that these were off limits to any person other than properly elected officials and trustees. However, in many, if not most instances, the need to view temple records was circumvented by prolonged interviews with older devotees.

During my 1995 visit, I was invited to spend time on a coconut/rubber estate in northern Perak which gave a number of opportunities to visit several adjoining coconut, rubber and oil palm estates. This period provided me with insights into the types of environment instrumental in forging the “plantation” culture which continues to strongly influence Indian society within Malaysia. This visit also brought the unexpected bonus of interaction with nearby Telegu communities, and the opportunity to inspect several estate based Vaishnavite temples.

Throughout these visits to Malaysia, I have actively sought opportunities to discuss work in progress with Malaysian academics, and to seek advice on matters ranging from literature to methodology. Most of these illuminating exchanges were with scholars based at the Universiti Malaya (Kuala Lumpur) and the Universiti Sains Malaysia (Penang). The 1995 discussions in particular helped me to explore and reformulate the parameters of my topic, and gave fresh impetus to my literature review. I was also provided with forums in which I could present informal papers to selected groups of postgraduate students. This allowed me to articulate, defend and sometimes revise the
approaches I had adopted. My 1995 fieldwork also involved several worthwhile discussions with several London based academics.

Fieldwork in India: My fieldwork in India in 1998 furnished me with an invaluable opportunity to examine the Murugan cultus within its metropolitan setting, to visit many of the regions from which Tamil immigrants to Malaysia had been drawn, and to observe as much as possible in a ten week trip of village Hinduism in South India.

Undoubtedly the focal point of my visit was a weeklong 120 kilometres pada yatra (foot pilgrimage) which commenced in Palakkad (Kerala), and culminated in the festival of Thaipusam at the major pilgrimage centre of Palani, Tamil Nadu. The pilgrimage group was predominantly composed of Smartha Brahmans. The pilgrimage enabled me to participate in a pada yatra, to note daily rituals, to record the behaviour patterns of pilgrims, to hold a series of in depth discussions with members of the party, and finally to observe pilgrimage traditions and kavadi worship at Palani.

My visits to major temples and pilgrimage sites connected with the Murugan cultus not only provided me with an introduction to centres pivotal to the traditions of Murugan worship, but also finally enabled me to explore a number of destinations I had previously only read about in books, heard in discourses, conversations or songs within Malaysia, or viewed as the idealized offerings of temple artists. Conversations with temple priests, pilgrims and devotees often supplied me with incisive and valuable insights. A prolonged discussion over lunch with the head priest of the major seashore temple and pilgrimage centre of Tiruchendur dispelled in one succinct session several of the more spurious claims made by Hindu reformers and other observers in connection with kavadi rituals and behaviour at Thaipusam in Malaysia.

In addition my trip to India included stays at several ashrama, mainly, but not exclusively linked to the Murugan cultus. These visits supplied an introduction to institutions of spiritual teaching and thought, and some case the traditions of the guru/sishya (master/disciple) relationship. These institutions and traditions are largely
unavailable in Malaysia. In each centre I was treated with extraordinary kindness and generosity, and I was encouraged to question swamis, itinerant *sadhus*, officials and pilgrims, both Indian and international.

During my first and final weeks I was accommodated within the Institute of Asian Studies, Chennai. I was able to hold discussions with academics based at the Institute, and had several key conversations with visiting scholars. While at the Institute, I presented a paper at the Institute's Research Club, and responded to questions and criticisms.

While many have provided assistance in many fields, the opinions contained in this thesis, are, of course, my own.

**NOTES**

(1) Under the terms of my posting to Malaysia, I was obligated to employ domestic staff. An *amah* is regarded as a general domestic help.

(2) I had been advised by relevant briefing officers in Canberra that religion was not a pressing issue in Malaysia. This advice was reiterated by a senior diplomat following my arrival in Kuala Lumpur.

(3) Ramasamy is not his real name.


(5) ibid


(7) Advice provided by a senior Malaysian Indian Congress official. (DSK)


(14) Ramanathan's study is of course a notable exception.

(15) The term “orientalist” is used throughout this thesis in the sense developed by Edward Said. In basic terms, orientalism consists of Western portrayals of a given “third world” subject which both represent it and fix it as inherently “oriental”. The portrayal is hegemonic in that it appropriates and speaks for the “other”, and in various ways, often subtle, seeks to dominate the other by *inter alia* emphasizing the irrefragible differences and distance – social, racial and cultural – between the observer and the observed. (Said,


(18) Examples of this school include: Hullett, Arthur. “Thaipusam and the Cult of Subramaniam”, *Geo*, Volume 3, Number 4, 1981, pp.71-81 (Hullet's article actually displays a photograph of a statuary of the *avatars* of Vishnu which he claims as “Kartikkeya, a manifestation of Subramaniam or Murugan” (72-73) and has worshippers chanting “Wai, Wai Wai” instead of “Vel, Vel Vel”)(77));

www.LonelyPlanet.com.destinations/south_east_asia/Singapore/printable.htm (this website, showing a complete misunderstanding of the festival, describes Thaipusam as “masochistic” and perpetrates the myth that Thaipusam is banned in India (accessed 25 November 2003)

(19) An example of this genre is Blanche D'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* (Penguin, Ringwood, 1981) The pejorative comments about the Malaysia's component ethnic groups which litter this book are apparently justified by the heroine's admission of inherent racism (p.53). Thaipusam becomes an “orgy”, an “abomination” with the priests chanting “mumbo-jumbo” (p.147), complete with the usual claim that the festival is banned in India.(p.144) It is difficult to dispute D'Cruz and Steele's assertion that *Turtle Beach* is at best, implicitly racist. (D'Cruz, J.V. and Steele, William. *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia*, Monash University Press, Clayton, 2003:26: for a close discussion of the racism conveyed by *Turtle Beach* see pages 199-287 of this work.)

(20) The most rancid example of this genre I have seen to date is that by Gail Saari whose fanciful description of Thaipusam proclaims it “...like Halloween in Greenwich Village with more S&M”. Later she states “It is more disturbing to see women in trances than to see men similarly affected. The women in the throes of religious ecstasy – with their hair unbound and uncombed, tongues artificially reddened with saffron powder (sic) and lewdly flitting in and out of their mouths, crazy sensual smiles, eyes rolling and breasts and hips undulating – violate even my notions of propriety (my emphasis) on a

(21) Personal field research

(22) The erroneous notion that some of the “more dramatic aspects” of the festival, that is the piercing of flesh with rods and hooks was banned by law within India, appears to have its genesis in Paul W. Wiebe and S. Mariappan's 1978 study, Indian Malaysians: The View from the Plantation (Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1978:148). This myth is repeated by Hullett who states that the government of India had outlawed the use of “spikes and other implements” (Hullett, op cit:81); Colleen Ward also claims that the festival is banned in India (Ward, Colleen. “Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession and Self-Mortification Practices”, Ethos, Volume 14, 1984:324). Finally Marian Aveling makes the remarkably inaccurate claim that the kavadi ritual forms “no part of Murugan festivals in India”. (Aveling, Marian.“Ritual Changes in the Hindu Temples of Penang”, Contributions to Indian Sociology, Volume 12, Number 2, 1978:192)

(23) A psychoanalytic approach is adopted by Elizabeth Fuller Collins in her book Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual Power and Moral Redemption Among Malaysian Hindus. (Northern Illinois University Press, Dekalb, 1997). My review of this work, which I found reductive and incomplete, is contained in Sophia, Volume 40, Number 2, December 2001: 83-86. (Collins' response is found in the same issue: pp. 87-89)

(24) Thus Evers and Jayarani state that “The worship of Murugan being only (my emphasis) the son of Siva is less demanding (than the worship of Siva)”. They maintain that this was the result of the lack of specialist religious knowledge among the immigrant Hindus. (Evers, Hans Deiter and Jayarani Pavadarayan, “Religious Fervour and Economic Success”, in Sandhu, K.S. and Mani, A., op cit:864.) This shows a comprehensive lack of understanding of Tamil Hinduism, and is akin to suggesting that Christians are unsophisticated because they only worship Jesus, the son of God, or that the Pentecost was a mere seance. (Evers and Jayarani also assert that kavadi bearing Hindus “mutilate” themselves (ibid:848), a claim that is manifestly untrue.) Hullett also
contends that Murugan is not considered a major god in the Hindu pantheon and ponders why such a minor figure has gained provenance in Singapore and Malaysia. (Hullett, op cit:71)

(25) Thus, for example, in her response to my review of her work, Collins asserts that “the majority of devotees who fulfil vows to Murugan are working class descendants of the indentured laborers who were brought to work in the British colony. These low caste and untouchable laborers...”(Collins (2001), op cit:87). This contains a serious and very basic historical error. While it is true that the majority of indentured labourers were indeed Adi Dravidars or of low caste, Collins seems unaware that indentured labour, terminated in 1910, provided less than 6 per cent of total Indian migration to Malaya. As I will show in Chapter Two, the far more influential kangany system of recruitment produced a workforce variegated by caste of whom only about 1/3 were drawn from Adi Dravidar castes.

(26) Two examples, selected at random from Collins' book, both of which might have been rectified by more careful fieldwork, are as follows:

(i) She claims that “Prints of the infant Krishna are frequently used in the decoration of kavadis. Most people seem unaware that the deity represented is Krishna because both Murugan and Krishna are associated with peacock feathers”. (Collins, (1997), op cit: 150) This is simply untenable; any field worker who has spent ten minutes discussing puranic Hinduism with worshippers at Thaipusam will be aware that devotees have an almost encyclopedic knowledge of members of the pantheon and their relations with each other. Malaysian Hindus are vitally aware of both Murugan and Krishna and the easily identified and clearly recognized motifs distinctive to each deity – especially at the infant level.

(ii) On the same page Collins continues “The committee that oversees the Penang Murugan Hill Temple have encouraged the emphasis on the worship of the infant deity by constructing a pond in which the six infant forms of Murugan float on lotus petals.” In fact, the committee have made no such deliberate encouragement; the pond and the representation of the infant Murugan form part of a well structured set of iconic symbols which lead the pilgrim from the periphery (Murugan's unstablized form) to the centre (Murugan triumphant).
(27) One example of the Malaysian orientation of Thaipusam is the involvement of non-Dravidian Indians and ethnic Chinese as kavadi worshippers.

(28) Several of this latter group were obvious frauds. One such “swami” surrounded by strong arm thugs, complete with minatory body language, proudly showed me photos of his visit to Australia. I have since wondered whether he was aware that one of these shots disclosed that he had visited a prominent Sydney massage parlour, one which gained nationwide notoriety in the late 1980s during a well publicized Australian political crisis.
CHAPTER ONE. THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THAIPUSAM
AT BATU CAVES

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I have described the festival of Thaipusam as it is practiced at Batu Caves, outside Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. While Batu Caves is the major Malaysian centre in which Thaipusam is commemorated, there are other significant pilgrimage sites both in Peninsular and East Malaysia where the festival is observed. (1)

In the first section I have examined the mythology which undergirds Thaipusam, in particular, the creation and integration of the deity Murugan, and the implications of Parvati's bestowal of the Sakti Vel in terms of phenomenological dissolution, reconstitution and renewal. I have suggested that the constantly shifting relationship between Siva and Sakti, as embodied in the deity Murugan, is understood by Tamil Saivites, as well as adherents of popular Tamil religious traditions, to operate at all levels of cosmic awareness. The deity, Murugan, is thus of profound significance to the individual devotee and his worship offers an array of possibilities ranging from the simple mitigation of karma to the ultimate possibility of moksha (release).

The following section provides an overview of the festival of Thaipusam at Batu Caves. The development of Batu Caves as a pilgrimage centre is described, and the overall structure of the festival is detailed. I have emphasised the centrality of the Chariot procession, and its general linkages to the rituals associated with South Indian kingship.

In the final section I have focussed upon the process of kavadi (ritualized burden) worship as one of the defining features of Thaipusam at Batu Caves. I have outlined the basic mythology which not only underscores the transformative power of asceticism and yogic disciplines, but also provides a legitimising model for the kavadi ritual. I have also described some of the many forms this worship may take. While I acknowledge that kavadis may be borne for deities other than Murugan, I have suggested that the
associated ritual nearly always falls within the received Murugan paradigm. I have traced the involvement of the individual devotee through the processes of taking a vow, preparatory fasting, the catalytic function of trance (arul), the bearing of the kavadi, and the post-Thaipusam return to society.

2. THAIPUSAM: PURANIC MYTHOLOGY

In essence the festival of Thaipusam commemorates the granting of the Sakti Vel (electric spear/lance or Vetrivel) to Murugan, son of the supreme deity, Siva, by Parvati, Siva's consort, at the outset of Murugan's campaign to defeat the army of Surapadman, head of the asuras (demons). In this section I have provided a synopsis of the corpus of puranic mythology(2) which describes the creation of Murugan, delineates his essential identity, and records the nature of his victory over the asuras, as this mythology is generally understood in Malaysia.(3) Most of the account provided below has been taken from field notes, gathered during extensive conversations with senior Hindus and Murugan bhaktas (devotees). While the deity is known by many names, (Muruga/Murugan/Murukan, Skanda, Shanmugan, Ceyon, Palani, Subramaniam, Swaminathan, etc.) each of which conveys a specific aspect of the deity's multifaceted divinity, unless otherwise indicated I have used the generic term Murugan throughout this section. The evolution of the Murugan cultus, including its nomenclature and specific applications of more common terminology, will be discussed in Chapter Four.

The mythology opens with the separation of Siva, the most powerful of the Gods (Mahadevas), from his consort, Uma. This parting has its origin in an incident which had occurred during Siva's wedding to Uma. Siva had agreed to marry Uma, who had been incarnated as the daughter of Daksha, (Tamil: Takkan), but had unexpectedly vanished during the nuptials. He subsequently carried Uma away as his bride. Incensed, Daksha convened a great sacrifice to which he invited all the gods, with the exception of Siva, about whom he spoke disparagingly. Taking the form of Virabhadra (Siva as Divine Anger)(4), Siva appeared during the ritual, destroyed the sacrifice, humiliated all the gods present, and slew Daksha. Uma advised Siva that she hated her current incarnation, for as long as she inhabited her present body she would be known as the daughter of
Daksha, he who had cursed Siva, the supreme god. Siva told her to become reincarnated as the daughter of Himalaya, the Mountain Lord. She accordingly departed from Siva, and as Parvati performed great austerities (tapas) to purify herself and to make herself attractive to Siva as her groom.

Left without Uma, his Sakti (Divine Energy, personified as female), Siva secluded himself from daily life to devote himself to austerities and meditation. Before his withdrawal, however, he granted substantial boons to three asuras (demons, or lower astral beings)(5), namely Surapadman, Singamukhan and Tarakasuran, including the extraordinary boon to Surapadman that “...he should live forever without being killed by anyone and ...(that he should)...rule the thousand and eight andams (most of the worlds) for hundred and eight (sic) Ugas (several millions of years)”.(6)

The granting of these boons to Surapadman and his brothers formed an integral part of a long-term asuric strategy to gain control of and dominate the universe. This plan had its origins in the birth of a daughter, Surasai, to Atisuran (also known as Akhiresa), the king of the asuras. From her early childhood Surasai was trained in the arts of maya (illusion) by Sukracharya, the chief asuric preceptor. She became thoroughly proficient in all these arts, and thus became known as Mayai. The intention of these teachings was to equip Mayai to help avenge the defeat the asuras had earlier suffered at the hand of the devas (angelic beings).(7)

To further this quest, Mayai was told to transform herself into a beautiful and seductive woman who would beguile Kashyapar, a well-known and powerful rishi (sage). She was to conceive children with Kashyapar, as it was well known that any offspring of a sage, especially an ascetic who had undergone many penances and austerities, would command powers greater than those wielded by the devas. In due course their marriage produced three sons, Surapadaman, Singamukhan, and Tarakasuran, and a daughter, Ajamukhi. Kashyapar, as a rishi, admonished them to lead a virtuous life in accordance with the dictates of righteousness. He attempted to teach his children the basic tenets of
Saivite *bhakti* devotionalism, namely that the aim of the wise is to study the essential deity (*Pati*), the individual being or soul (*pacu*) and the forms of bondage (*paca*) which prevent the soul from attaining knowledge of its true nature and that of God. Those who eschew this path are subject to impurities (*mala*), such as illusion, luxury and pride, and are thus fated to live and die in the world of *samsara* (essentially understood as the cycle of birth, death and rebirth in the mundane phenomenal world). Only righteousness can lead to true knowledge, awareness and bliss. However, Mayai openly scorned Kashyapar's teachings and instructed her children that the material world was the sole reality, and that power and wealth were of paramount importance. She denied the authenticity of concepts such as *karma*, universal *dharma* or the distinctions between truth and illusory perception (*ahamkara*). After sometime Kashyapar realized that his children were firmly ensnared within the web of trickery spun by their mother, and that his advice was proving unavailing. Defeated and disillusioned, he returned to the forest to resume his penance.

Mayai now instructed the children to perform *tapas* (austerities/purificatory sacrifices) to Siva, so that they might acquire the powers which would enable them to subjugate the world and heavens. The three brothers successfully performed *tapas* of increasing severity, and were granted innumerable boons, including that of immortality. Once this process was complete they returned to Mayai, and received further tuition from Sukracharya, who taught them to live a brutal and sensual life in accordance with the following credo:

*Live to eat, live to enjoy,*
*Live to destroy, live to deny,*
*Live to kill, and kill to live,*
*Pleasure is the goal of life,*
*Gratify all your desires,*
*Man is the Supreme God,*
*There is none higher than he,*
*Everything here is meant Only for his enjoyment.*
Armed with the boons bestowed by Siva, the brothers set out to conquer the world. Having vanquished and enslaved their opposition, they began their protracted period of overlordship. Their rule involved a complete inversion of cosmic order and was characterized by injustice, torture, persecution, and a total disregard for the rules of dharma. The moon was prohibited from waxing and waning, the sun was forced to shine throughout the night and was barred from radiating any warmth, and death was abolished. The asuras created terror among the celestials and subjected them to countless indignities. Vayu, the god of wind was made to sweep the streets of the asuric city, and Varuna, the god of rain was forced to wash them. Other gods were compelled to fulfill menial and degrading tasks, including taking up the role of fishermen thus staining their celestial purity with the repeated and adharmic destruction of life.

The devas, weary of the intense suffering they had experienced under the misrule of the asuras, entreated Kama, the embodiment of desire, to rouse Siva from his meditations so that he would marry Parvati, and produce a son who would destroy the asuras. Kama, fearful of the response, dutifully shot his arrows of lust into Siva, who opening his third eye, the symbol of asceticism (an “anti-erotic force”)(10), burned Kama to ash. While Siva did marry Parvati, as foreseen by the celestials, the union was barren. The gods sent Vayu in the form of a breeze to discover why the marriage had produced no issue, but he was denied entry. Led by Brahma, Vishnu and Indra, the gods approached Siva to ask him for his aid to overturn the asuric regime. They found him seated with Parvati. The celestials recounted the many wicked deeds perpetrated by the asuras, and told of the perverted and cruel rule of the asura Surapadman. Upon hearing of the atrocities of the asuras, Siva promised the gods that he would provide his assistance. He also agreed to restore Kama to life, but only as an invisible being. Siva now sprouted five additional heads, and from each of his (now) six heads emitted a divine spark. The seed of Siva, fiery after the long years of austerities,(11) was borne in agony by Vayu and Agni (god of fire), and deposited in the Ganges, which unable to withstand the extreme heat, transported it to Lake Saravana, a mystic body of water located in the Himalayas. Each of the sparks subsequently developed into a baby boy, and each was individually
guarded and nurtured by one of the six Pleiades maidens (Krttikas). Parvati, excluded from the role of mother, cursed the maidens to eternal barrenness. At this point, Parvati's anklet broke, and each of the nine jewels in the anklet reflected her image on the surface of the lake. Siva commanded these images to come to life, and nine saktis emerged from the lake. As Siva's glance fell upon these saktis, each was impregnated. The infuriated Parvati cursed the saktis to an unnaturally elongated pregnancy. Despairing, the saktis sought Siva's intervention, and he insisted that Parvati lift her curse. Each sakti produced a fully-grown son, who collectively were to provide the nine generals of Murugan's devonic army. The chief of these was Veerabahu (individual wisdom and discriminative intelligence). The six babies, born of Siva's spark, rushed to Parvati, and were embraced so that they fused into one being, with six heads and twelve arms, the form of Murugan known as Shanmugan or Arumugan. The baby was nursed by Parvati and fed milk from her breasts.

Throughout his brief infancy Shanmugan displayed extraordinary talents, sometimes engaging in childish acts which reflected his lack of awareness of his own strength and intrinsic qualities. Thus, “...his games and playthings became terrible ones. He piled mountains on top of one another and upended others. Mt. Meru he dumped into the sea. He dammed the waters of the Ganges, changed the orbits of the planets...”.(13) He also tamed a wild ram. But his most celebrated childhood act was the imprisonment of Brahma. Brahma had refused to acknowledge his (Murugan's) status as the son of Siva. Murugan, annoyed, had asked Brahma a series of questions regarding the inner meaning of the mystical symbol the Pravana Aum. (14) When Brahma could not answer, Murugan had him beaten and thrown into jail. Siva, alerted to this development, approached Shanmugan and playfully requested him to explain the significance of this sacred symbol. Dutifully, Murugan instructed his father in the mysteries of the Pravana Aum. (15)

After his boyhood, Murugan was presented with the Vel by Parvati.(16) Accompanied by Veerabahu, Veerabahu's eight brothers, and the devonic army, Murugan left Mt. Kailas in the north of India to head southwards to combat the asuras. En route, Murugan
encountered Krownchan, one of the lieutenants of Tarakasuran, attempting in the form of a mountain to block the passage of the devonic forces. Murugan destroyed Krownchan with a single blow of his Vel. The battle with the asuric forces raged for six days and nights with both Surapadman and Murugan taking a limited role in the early conflicts. Ascendancy alternated between the devas and asuras during the course of this great struggle and neither was able to vanquish the other. Although large numbers of members of both armies were killed, through the use of certain powers, each side was able to bring their slain comrades back to life. However, whenever the devas appeared to be near defeat the intervention of Murugan assured that they regained the upper hand. Once the devonic forces began to control the course of the war, the asura Agnimukhan prayed to the goddess Bhadrakali(17) to intervene on the side of the asuras, but upon encountering Veerabahu, Bhadrakali merely smiled and withdrew from the battlefield.

With the arrival of Murugan and Surapadman, the final phase of the conflict commenced. Realizing the immense power of Murugan, and that defeat in a straight fight was inevitable, Surapadman employed all the illusory powers he had been taught by Mayai, assuming the forms of objects, birds and animals. However, Murugan was beyond any delusion and quickly flushed Surapadman from each of his disguises. Toward the conclusion of the battle, Murugan appeared before Surapadman in all his glory, “...his own true and eternal form: the cosmos and all of its constituent elements organized hierarchically from the highest (at the head) to the lowest (at the feet) and encompassed in the figuration of a male with one head, and two arms, the transcendent male principle that is identified with Purusa, Cosmic Man.”(18)

Surapadman was temporarily overcome with Divine Love, but when Murugan resumed the form of Shanmugan (that is, with six faces, twelve arms and twelve eyes), Surapadman converted himself into a massive cannibalistic monster with a thousand arms and a thousand legs, and launched a frenzied attack. Murugan split Surapadman in two with his Vel, whereupon the latter escaped into the ocean and became a gigantic mango tree which threatened to smother the world. Murugan cleft this tree with his Vel and Surapadaman then took shape as a peacock and a cock both of which charged at
Murugan. However, Murugan tamed both with a single loving glance. To commemorate the defeat of the asuras, Murugan ordered that the peacock and the cock should respectively become his vahana (mount) and emblem of his standard. Thus Surapadaman, who could not be annihilated, having been granted the gift of immortality by Siva as a result of the austerities he had performed, became in the form of two birds, the transformed and submissive symbols of Murugan's dominance.(19)

The struggle is commemorated in the six-day festival of Skanda Shasti (also known as Kanthashasti) in the month of Aippaci (October-November). The main centre in India for this festival is the Murugan temple of Tiruchendur in southern Tamil Nadu, mythical scene of Murugan's final battle with Surapadman.

Kamil Zvelebil(20) has pointed out that all Tamil mythology is multivalent, and thus interpretable on several planes, namely as a story, metaphorically, and as a cosmological expression of metaphysical principles and divine truths. Other scholars have adopted broader schemata for explicating puranic mythology(21). In the following sections I have outlined the major cosmological and metaphysical implications of the mythology, the latter in terms of what it might imply for the evolution and destiny of the individual soul in relation to the Divine.

At the cosmological level, this myth represents nothing less than the process of phenomenal entropy and dissolution and subsequent reconstitution and renewal. The Divine has two essential states. Being, the passive, is known as Siva, and Becoming, the dynamic, is known as Sakti. These two states are envisaged as masculine and feminine respectively. Without the feminine aspect Siva is remote and unknowable, and without the masculine aspect Sakti has no existence. The entire universe with all its beings is a manifestation of the dynamic Sakti. Siva, the supreme effulgence, animates the entire universe of beings and abides within as Spirit. (In man, Sakti comprises body (Deha), life-force (Prana), senses (Indrayas), mind (Manas), intelligence (Buddhi), and ego (Ankara). Siva infuses all these layers with life and spirit.) The constantly shifting relationship between Siva/Sakti (that is, between Absolute and Generative power),
pervades all Tamil Saivite theology, both popular and Agamic(22), especially that school known as Saiva Siddhanta.

Thus, the bestowal by Sakti (Parvati) of the *Vel*, the weapon used to re-establish cosmic harmony, upon the (Siva-created) Murugan, represents a manifest fusion of the Divine's absolute and generative powers. Murugan and his *Vel* in conjunction implies “...the integrating of dualities in a manner with Saiva thought...Murugan and his lance are Siva-Sakti, the cosmic pair”.(23)

As we have seen, this myth opens with the separation of Siva and Uma, and the withdrawal of Siva into austerities and meditation. Moreover, as daughter of Himalaya, Parvati also enters into purificatory *tapas* to make herself worthy of Siva. Divided from one another, Siva and Uma/Parvati accumulate the unrelieved and ascetic “heat” which is produced by the practice of *tapas*. (24)

The splitting of Siva/Sakti creates a dangerously and inherently unstable cosmos, one tending to entropy. “Together they are fertile, generative and equilibrating, but apart they are essentially destructive.”(25) The *tapas* of the *asuras*, and their acquisition of untrammelled power within the phenomenal universe heralds an inversion of the established cosmic order, the withdrawal of the animating spirit, and the cessation of adherence to *rita dharma* (rule by divine cosmic law). The mastery of the *asuras* and the systematic wrecking of the established order indicate the destructive nature of unchecked Sakti. This is further stressed by:

(i) Siva's incineration of Kama, thus repudiating both erotic desire and fertility, and

(ii) the barrenness of Siva's marriage to Parvati.

The story of the *asuras* emphasizes the triumph of absolute materialist desire, of lust without corresponding fertility, of wild and powerful but ultimately unproductive imagination. Mayai represents the very embodiment of unmitigated Sakti, with her employment of illusion to create both cause and effect, and thus to circumvent and deny
reality. The army of the *asuras* represents the thousands of forms of the original impurities, namely *avidya* (spiritual ignorance), *kama* and *karma*. The *asuric* inversion of the cosmic order is perhaps most emphatically exemplified in the form of Surapadman's sister, Ajamukhi, whose savage sexuality causes her to rape all the men she meets, who is cannibalistic and who rejects and destroys all categories.(26)

The imploring of the celestials for the restoration of order marks the genesis of cosmic renewal. But the initial phases of this process are attended by fragmentation and implied violence. Reflecting the barrenness of the marriage between Siva and Parvati, Siva sprouts five additional heads, and emits six divine sparks from the ascetic eye of each. The emission of the seed, its carriage by Vayu (wind), Agni (fire), and its deposition within the Ganges (water) which finally bears it to Lake Saravana, involves the combination of ether, air, fire, water and earth, the constituent elements of the phenomenal universe. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty points out that while in human terms asceticism is opposed to sexuality and fertility, within the mythological context *tapas* becomes a most powerful force which generates extreme heat. The seed of an ascetic, especially when placed in water, is a commencing point of many cosmogonic myths.(27) Moreover the seed produced by an ascetic is inherently dangerous and can beget great heroes, or more likely uncontrolled monsters. It must therefore be properly disposed of. For this reason the gods are never born from Parvati or in any natural manner. The image of fire placed in water is used throughout Hindu mythology to express control of indestructible mass energy.(28) The placing of Siva's seed within Lake Saravana, and the impregnation of the constituent elements with energy and effulgence, the divine essence of Siva, anticipates at microcosmic level the ultimate union and reunification of the dynamic principle of Siva/Sakti. But the tensions which continue to divide Siva/Sakti are evident in Parvati's recalcitrance, her fury at being denied maternal responsibility for the bearing of the six babies, and her cursing of the Pleiades. The breaking of the anklet (a common metaphor for the vagina in South Indian mythology)(29), and the creation of the nine *saktis*, each an activating quality of Parvati, and thus a modification of uncontrolled Sakti, signals an emerging resolution of this phase. The nine gems of the broken anklet collectively comprise *navaratna*, regarded as an auspicious
configuration.(30). Each gem and thus each of the saktis is associated with one of the nine planets (navagraha). The generals thus born of the saktis assume the qualities of the sakti from whom they are delivered, and collectively constitute the beneficent force required to attend and protect the young deity.

Parvati's embrace of the six babies to create a single identity, the six-faced Shanmugan, unifies unmanifested and manifested elements in a single being. But Shanmugan is unstable and undirected, as demonstrated by the willful, chaotic and instinctive actions of his childhood, including the beating and imprisonment of Brahma. Murugan's instruction of Siva in the intrinsic meaning of the Pravana Aum indicates a growing awareness of his divine powers, nature and identity. His further spiritual evolution is illustrated by his taming of a wild ram (in some versions a buck goat), both symbols of lust within Hindu mythology.(31) This foreshadows his future role in subduing (taming) the asuras, the embodiment of rampant materialism exemplified by unrestrained lust. This phase of the deity's unfoldment culminates with Parvati's bestowal of the Sakti Vel.

The stabilization of Murugan, his progression to mature spiritual power, proceeds as the divine campaign against the asuras unfolds. D. Handelman comments “...the evolution of divinity in this myth is the movement from the lower-order reflective to the higher-order reflexive, a metamorphosis to self realization that is integral to a deity who encompasses the cosmos in his being.”(32) This transformation is complete when Murugan reveals himself as Purusa to Surapadman. “The true (i.e. Highest) being of Shanmugan is not his furious multiform of six heads and twelve arms but that of Cosmic Man with one head and two arms...But the true being of Surapadman is indeed a multiform of one thousand heads that depends upon illusion for its existence.”(33)

On the metaphysical level, the purana may be seen as an extended metaphor for spiritual evolution; the destiny of the soul and its ultimate relationship with the Divine. Once an individual reaches a certain stage of spiritual awakening there is a desire to renounce superfluities, and to realize Truth. But in the struggle to achieve moksha (liberation), the devotee often remains unaware of the power of the negative forces of the world, and
the magnetism which deluding joy can exercise. Kashyapar symbolizes this level of unfoldment: although he is a sage and wishes to experience enlightenment, he is attracted by and marries Mayai (lower nature). The union of the soul with Avidya (ignorance of the essential Divine character of the soul), leads to the birth of:

**Asmita:** ego consciousness (Surapadman),

**Kama:** ego motivated desire (Singamukhan),

**Karma:** ego motivated selfish actions (Tarakasuran), and

**Ajamukhi:** veiling power; that which beguiles the soul and leads him/her to fall prey to transient and sensual desires.

The advice given by the father Kashyapar to his children was to live a righteous life. However the credo of Mayai, subsequently reinforced by Sukracharya, the asura guru, was to exploit the illusionary material world. As has been shown, Surapadman and his siblings ignored the instructions of their father and followed the pathway advocated by their mother. The description of the radically divergent directions available to the offspring represents the inner conflicts, choices, and “pulls” experienced by the soul.

The improper use of intelligence to acquire power seems to bestow upon the individual a certain strength, and even omniscience, and he/she becomes corrupt, self centred, forgets the Divine, and exploits his/her knowledge for selfish pursuits. Having been created by Siva in the image of the Divine (*Sura*), the soul falls into the grip of the lower nature (*Asura*). The description of how Surapadman and his brothers petitioned Siva for certain boons, and their subsequent employment of God given powers for evil and unworthy ends, illustrates this process.

The “birth” of Murugan is thus recognition of the Yogic Grace extended by Siva. Shanmugan is created by the third eye of Siva, the eye of wisdom which is able to penetrate all illusion. I have observed that the triumph of the *asuras* is ultimately predicated upon Mayai's use of illusion, both as cause and effect, which is fundamental to her success. The *Vel* represents the highest power of Sakti, (*Para-Sakti*) which when employed by Murugan, dispels all phenomenal illusion and allows the *sadhaka*
(aspirant) to see beyond the world created by Mayai (maya). Murugan's acquisition of the Vel represents the fusing of Jnana-Sakti of Siva (that is, his absolute power of wisdom) and the Para-Sakti of Parvati, to form Yoga-Sakti (contemplative knowledge). Murugan with his Vel is thus identified as the pursuit of the pure spiritual knowledge which destroys the asuras within man. In sum, therefore, it may be stated that Murugan denotes a synthesis of the ultimate powers of Siva-Sakti; a deity created by the Absolute to destroy the bondages of ignorance imposed by the individual ego, but furnished with the means to accomplish this by Parvati. In essence, Murugan may be thus perceived as the principle of Siva-Sakti's action within the substance of the mind.

This is further illustrated by the actual sequence of events surrounding the “birth” of Murugan. I have noted that the divine sparks emanating from Siva's third eye are borne by Vayu (wind) and Agni (fire) to the Ganga which carries them to a lake (Saravana Poihai, or the pond of Saravana). Saravana is encircled by reeds. The depositing of the energy (teja) of effulgence in the world involves a combination of the five principles of creation – ether, air, fire, water and earth. Parvati's embrace of the six babies creates a Being with a single body and six faces. Sakti as the dynamic force of the universe thus integrates the Spirit which was six into one, Skanda (the United One), conjoining the Divine Light (Siva) and Life (Sakti), superficially diverse but ultimately experienced by the Yogi in its essential Oneness. The consignment of sparks within the divine lake may be homologized to the creation of the human soul and the provision of the conditions for its spiritual evolution. The lake itself is thus the human complex, whereas the reeds within the Saravana Poihai – impregnated with the Divine Effulgence of Siva which animates all six portions of this complex, namely Body (Deha) Life-Force, (Prana), Senses (Indrayas), Mind (Manas), Intelligence (Buddhi), and Ego (Ahankara) – represents the web of nerves in the human physical body, the network of life currents known as nadi in the vital body, and the thought flows in the astral body. Psychically, the nadi become the battleground within the human complex in which the inner war between the devas and asuras is fought. In this sense, the Vel and Murugan constitute the essential paradigm for spiritual evolution and the attainment of moksha. For in contemplating the animating life energies with which he/she is composed (Sakti-
Becoming), the *sadhaka* (aspirant) is led to the discovery of his/her true divine nature (Siva-Absolute) and thus into recognition of the intrinsic unity of all existence. Thus the individual (microcosm) is linked to the universal (macrocosm) and is possessed of the full knowledge of the cosmic union of Siva-Sakti, the duality of oneness in perfect dynamic balance.

The petitioning of Siva by the *devas* not only signifies the need to enlist the Yogic forces of God to control the lower nature, but also reveals the longing of the aspirant for liberation, for bestowal of God's Divine Grace. But when the *sadhaka* reaches the stage of asking for Murugan's guidance, he/she is also compelled to acknowledge:

(i) the impulsive power of the lower nature, and the ease with which an individual can succumb to these urges,

(ii) the need to develop willpower, and to discipline the mind so that the individual may gain knowledge, and

(iii) the necessity for Divine Grace (*Arul*) to remove him/her from the pull of lower urges, and to develop willpower and cognition. Divine Grace will often be bestowed in the form of a Guru.

Murugan, approached in this form, as the personification of *Yoga Sakti*, who will direct the *sadhaka* to attain perfect victory over the lower forces, is known as *Guru-Guhan* the Divine Preceptor, who dwells within and guides from the Cave of the heart (*Guhan*: the One who stays concealed within).(35)

In the initial stages of spiritual unfoldment the *sadhaka* is sustained by powerful emotional forces, which generate a seemingly invincible supply of willpower. This gathering resolution is symbolized by the destruction of Krownchan, an *asura* who takes the form of a mountain lying in the path of the *devonic* forces, and who represents inertness, laziness, sloth and a crude effort to fulfill instinctive urges, namely hunger, thirst and sex. At this juncture it appears only a matter of time before the lower forces
are routed, and the untroubled mind is permanently installed in the higher cakras or spheres of spiritual energy. But the fervour engendered by the emotions is not durable, and in time the mind will deviate to the urging of the lower cakras. The aspirant is able to call upon two forces in his fight to banish ego-dominated ignorance: Discriminative Intelligence (Veerabahu), and Universal Wisdom (Murugan). The early stages of the battle are fought by Discriminative Intelligence, but at all times the devotee is subject to counter attack by asuric forces. The devonic and asuric forces occupy and operate from the same ground, (human consciousness), and employ the same vehicles (human intellect and senses), in mounting their “campaigns”. Whenever the asuras threaten to overwhelm the sadhaka the Divine intervenes, ultimately weakening the ego. Among the asuras who challenge the Devas are Surapadman's sons: (i) Banugopan, (seemingly sophisticated but actually distorted knowledge which denies the existence of Reality; Banugopan also symbolizes the inadequacy of the human intellect as a vehicle to discern the Divine), (ii) Agnimukhan (the abusive and loud mouthed crudity which displaces methodical knowledge), and (iii) Hiranyan (the argumentative force, carping and querulous, but lacking knowledge and withdrawing timorously when directly confronted).

A major enemy of the devotee is the limiting sense of Time, and the belief that despite his/her efforts he/she is not making headway towards his/her final destination. The realization that Time is a product of humanity's circumscribed linear conceptions is symbolized by the arrival on the battlefield of Bhadrakali, embodiment of Time, who upon meeting Veerabahu, the pure form of analytical wisdom, merely smiles and withdraws. Bhadrakali can only be terrifying to those enfeebled by ignorance, but she relinquishes all power over those who have acquired the ageless knowledge which has liberated them from the grasp of Time's narrow constraints.

But the major enemy remains the ego. As long as this continues to exist, the devotee may be overwhelmed by ignorant and selfish desires. The final battle between Surapadman (ego) and Murugan (Universal Wisdom) represents the ultimate struggle to
shatter the ego. Throughout this conflict Surapadman appears in many forms each of which demonstrates the delusions bestowed upon awareness by the sense of ego. Each of these camouflages is uncovered by Universal Wisdom. The diversity of forms assumed by Surapadman has an esoteric explanation. In the course of its evolution the soul has passed through many categories, such as inanimate matter, as well as vegetable, plant, tree, bird and animal life, before taking human form. The ego possesses residues of all the past lower existences. Thus as Murugan repeatedly flushes Surapadman from each of his many disguises, visible and invisible, so the soul is liberated from the remaining pull of the avidya (ignorance) of each of these former categories.

As the ego is isolated and its power is gradually blunted, the aspirant gains a brief and fleeting vision of Lord Murugan, representing the Universal Wisdom he/she has been seeking. The ego makes one final attempt to reimpose its dominance, but has met Divine Grace, the powerful Sakti Force of the Absolute, and is destroyed.

The destruction of the ego is explicitly symbolized in the form of Surapadman's final incarnations. Towards the conclusion of the battle the asura becomes a tree or maram. However it is instructive that this is a mango tree, and that Surapadman seeks refuge in the ocean. Both trees and mangos may symbolize the power of sakti; trees represent procreation and fertility, while mangos may symbolize desire and lust. Water is the element of sakti, and the oceans are the ultimate earthly expression of water's power. Therefore Surapadman's attempt to take the shape of a mango tree with the ocean, a tree which seeks to smother the world, may be seen as the final dramatic efflorescence of uncontrolled sakti. The splitting of the tree produces the two birds – the cock and the peacock which attack Murugan. In classical Tamil the term maram also signifies an individual full of anava or ego. The two properties which in combination form anava are yaam (or the “I” of individual assertion), and ennathu (denoting the possessive self). Yaam is symbolized in the form of the cockerel as it struts around with its chest puffed out, while ennathu is seen to be exhibited by the peacock as it vaingloriously spreads its tail feathers. Just as Murugan tames both birds with a single loving glance, and incorporates one as his standard and employs the other as his mount, so he first subdues
anava and transforms the lower forces of yaam and ennathu into awareness, so that the soul is forever bound close to him in grace and love. (37)

By homologizing the human body to the cosmos, the purana also resolves the seeming incompatibility between the transcendent Skanda-Murugan, the great Saivite deity, distant and powerful regulator of immense cosmic forces and divine dharma, and immanent Murugan, the compassionate and loving deity, intimately concerned with the affairs of his devotees. Thus Murugan sets off on his campaign from Mt. Kailas, divine home of Siva in the north of India, and passes through six sacred cities (Tirukedaram, Kashi, Tirukalasti, Tiruvengadam, Chidambaram and Tirupparamkunram) before finally vanquishing Surapadman at Tiruchendur in the extreme south. Esoterically, North is held to symbolize Siva (Being/Absolute), while the South symbolizes Sakti (Becoming/Generative), and the locations in-between are various combinations. Within the human body as universe, the farthest north is the crown of the head, the far south the soles of the feet, the centre at the base of the coccygeal plexus (the base of the spine). The region from head to foot is divided into fourteen sections, representing the fourteen worlds. (38) Human spirituality emerges at the base of the spine, and ascends though six psychic centres (the sacred cities), the higher cakras. The descent of Murugan from the north in response to the entreaties of his devotee, and the gradual unfoldment of spirituality, overcoming the counterpull of the seven worlds below the coccygeal plexus, resolves the seeming incongruity of the transcendent/immanent principles on a microcosmic level. (Chapter Four will further discuss the resolution of Murugan's transcendence/immanence, this time in connection with his marriages to the celestial Teyvayanai and the “earthly” Valli.)

The concept of a universe in dynamic tension, the perennial and constantly shifting relationship between Siva/Sakti, ties all elements and polarities within a unifying framework, indissolubly fuses both macro and micro cosmology (that is, the individual/universal), and creates a divine symmetry. This is central not only to Saiva Siddhanta theology but also to popular Tamil religious beliefs,(39) and finds full expression in the festival of Thaipusam.
Chronometry

Thaipusam is celebrated on the day in which the asterism *Pucam* falls on the ascendent in the month of *Tai* (January-February). The presiding star is the planet *Brihaspati* (Jupiter) which is considered beneficent. (40) Of especial significance is that *Pucam* falls on or near the full moon day (*paurnami*). In the Murugan tradition, the full moon implies completion, fulfillment and total maturity in powers. (41) Moreover this asterism is reputed to be that of *Tantapani*, which either represents a staff, suggesting either the role of an ascetic, or a military leader, thus implicitly linking the two (“The latter subdues the enemy with an army; the former subdues the passions with a staff”). (42) Murugan is known as *Tantayutapani* at Palani, (the most common Malaysian spelling is *Thandayuthapani*), and is represented as an ascetic. (The implications of Hindu chronometry, and more specifically the Tamil festival calendar, in which every ritual observance is ascribed a specific, weighted significance, will be discussed in Chapter Four.)

3. BATU CAVES: AN OVERVIEW

The first official recorded celebration of Thaipusam in Malaysia was that held at Batu Caves, outside Kuala Lumpur, in 1892. (43) Batu Caves, a massif approximately thirteen kilometres north of the city centre, was accidentally discovered in 1878 by William Hornsby, an American naturalist, while on a hunting expedition. (44) The site gained popularity with British residents of Kuala Lumpur who conducted candlelight explorations of the Caves. (45) In the late 1880s, K. Thambusamy, a prominent and wealthy contractor in Kuala Lumpur, and leader of the Indian community (46) had a dream in which Maha Mariamman directed him to establish a temple within the Batu Caves dedicated to her son Murugan. (47) Accordingly he visited the Caves in 1891 with some associates and members of his workforce and cleared the largest Cave. A *Vel*, the symbol of Murugan, was implanted in the Cave. (48)

A steady stream of Hindu devotees was now attracted to the shrine. In response, Thambusamy together with friends and workers, made the Cave more accessible by constructing simple steps, and by clearing the area near the base of the shrine. An
attempt by the British District Officer of Kuala Lumpur to bar public access to the shrine and to remove the *Vel*, was referred to the Courts which decided in favour of the devotees. The first Thaipusam followed in 1892. In 1920 the *Vel* which marked the site of the shrine was replaced by a *murthi* (image) of Murugan.

From the outset the festival was associated with Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil Devastanam, located on Jalan H.S. Lee in the centre of Kuala Lumpur. This link developed as follows. The temple, now the richest in Malaysia, was first constructed in the 1870s as a rudimentary non-*Agamic* shrine dedicated to the tutelary deity Mariamman and was frequented by Kuala Lumpur's growing Indian workforce. The temple was enlarged in the 1880s under the leadership of Kayarohanam Pillai, who was accorded the status of village headman. In 1887 his son, K. Thambusamy, transformed the temple from a shed and attap edifice into a brick and mortar building. In the process the non-*Agamic* Mariamman, a meat eating village deity, was replaced with the *Agamic* or celestial goddess, Maha Mariamman, Mother Sakti, identified as a form of Parvati. In 1889 the temple held its first *Kumba Abishekam* (the ritual sanctification and purification of the entire temple, often involving renovation and renewal as well as the formal installation of the deities).

K. Thambusamy's leadership of the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil Devastanam and his active sponsorship of the Murugan shrine at Batu Caves made it virtually inevitable that the Batu Caves Sri Subramanaya Swami Kovil would fall under Devastanam control. Within several years Thaipusam became a significant festival at Batu Caves. The connection with the Devastanam established by the founder was consolidated, and the Devastanam assumed responsibility for the management of Batu Caves and the organization of Thaipusam. In 1898 the Devastanam acquired control of the popular Court Hill Sree Ganesha Temple. The Devastanam remained under the direction of the Pillai sub-caste until 1924 when the broader Hindu community attempted to establish public management over the temple. These measures were not successful until 1930 when a court hearing ruled in favour of public control. This ensured, *inter alia*, that the festival of Thaipusam as commemorated at Batu Caves would be coordinated by
representatives of the entire Kuala Lumpur Hindu community rather than being left under the organizational direction of a specific caste. Over the years the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil has become one of the wealthiest and most influential temples in Malaysia. (58)

From the very beginning the festival of Thaipusam at Batu Caves was modelled upon modes of ritualistic worship observed in South India, especially those associated with the great temple complex in Palani, one of the main Murugan pilgrimage centres in South India. (59) Batu Caves as a site combined a number of motifs closely associated with the Murugan cultus, including caves, mountaintop retreats, and wilderness (as Batu Caves was then regarded; the site was comparatively remote from Kuala Lumpur, and surrounded by dense jungle; the complex has now been enveloped in encroaching suburbia).

Since World War II, the Batu Caves complex has been extensively redeveloped. By the late 1940s the Caves had become the pre-eminent pilgrimage site in Malaysia, and the Devastanam aimed at fostering a social, cultural and religious environment which would accommodate the needs of the gathering Hindu revival in Malaya, most particularly the renewed focus upon the worship of the (Tamil) Murugan. The Devastanam set out to create a centre which would incorporate all the major symbols and themes of worship found within the Murugan cultus in the Tamil country. In recent years the Devastanam has made efforts to provide for North Indian Hindus, especially those who subscribe to Vaishnavite traditions.

The entire Batu Caves complex covers several hectares incorporating the limestone outcrop which rises dramatically from the riverine plains north of Kuala Lumpur, together with the immediate surrounds. The complex contains the Caves, a couple of hectares of lawns, spiritual and commercial buildings, statues, and a Tamil medium primary school managed by the Devastanam. (60) The gateway to the complex opens out on a nearby road, Jalan Batu Caves, which links the eponymous Jalan Ipoh and Jalan Kuantan (Ipoh and Kuantan Roads). About 500 metres west of the gateway lies the
Sungai Batu, a river which was once used for ceremonial bathing throughout Thaipusam. In the past decade, due to the increasingly polluted state of the river, special baths have been constructed along the banks for the use of devotees. A railway station, now mainly servicing tourist and festival traffic, lies to the immediate west of the complex.

In describing the temples, complexes and surrounds at Batu Caves, it should be emphasized that Tamil Hindu shrines are regarded as symmetrical representations of the divine hierarchy, as well as constituting an axis mundi. The shrine as a whole is thus considered ordered and patterned, and contrasts to the disorder and chaos that reigns beyond its borders. The gates of the shrine represent a boundary for the worshipper. Thus any approach to the shrine will guide the supplicant from the confusion and disarray of the mundane world to the divine order which prevails at the heart of the shrine. (61) The approaches to Batu Caves reflect this ordered transition.

Within the complex a thoroughfare runs approximately 300 metres from the gateway to the base of the stairway which leads to the master cave (known as the Temple Cave). Until 2002 the formal entrance to the Batu Caves complex comprised a pair of large gates, decorated with the figures of peacocks, the mount of Murugan. In 2002 these were replaced with an elaborate stone architrave, which contains as its centrepiece statuary depicting Murugan with his consorts, Teyvayanai and Valli. Other figures include Ganesha and Maha Mariamman, with Idumban as gatekeeper at each end of the architrave. (62) The final stretch of the thoroughfare which links the entrance to the steps leading to the Cave is barred to vehicular traffic. To the west of the thoroughfare lie lawns, the primary school, and closer to the foot of the steps the Mandapam (ceremonial hall) in which the utsavar murthis (festival images) of Murugan and his consorts, together with the chariot, will be housed throughout the festival. The double storey Batu Caves office of the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil Devastanam is sited immediately adjacent to the roadway. During Thaipusam, temple officials and invited dignitaries will sit on the upper story balcony of this building, both to view the kavadi bearers, and to make speeches.
On the east side of the roadway several asrama (spiritual centres/retreats) have been constructed (including the Malaysian Headquarters of the Divine Life Society), and a row of commercial enterprises, most dealing in religious artifacts, souvenirs and light refreshments. (The sale of beer and non-vegetarian foods in at least two of the food stores has been the subject of sustained criticism by many Hindus.) A large parking bay located behind the shops caters for visitors and tourist coaches. (63)

The limestone outcrop contains a myriad of caves, including two large (upstairs) caves, and several much smaller (downstairs) caves. (In addition there are literally hundreds of minor caves and passageways, but these are not open or even accessible to the public, and can only be reached by specialist climbers.) The Temple Cave in which the Murugan shrine is situated is an enormous elevated limestone configuration, (the roof of the Cave rises over 100 metres above the floor), with a yawning southern entrance, and a substantial hollow at the extreme north. The cave is accessed via the main stairway. Just over halfway up the steps, and lying slightly to the west of the stairway, a pathway leads off to the other large cave, the Dark Cave. For many years this Cave, which extends deep into the outcrop, and celebrated for its stalactites and stalagmites, and rare fauna, including certain varieties of bats and non-venomous albino snakes, was declared off limits to the public after blasting operations linked with quarrying was considered to have made the Cave dangerously unstable. Under qualified guidance this Cave may now be toured by members of the public. Until the early 1980s, the entrance to the Dark Cave could be reached by means of a haulage winch (cable railway) which ran alongside the main steps. (The hilltop temple at Palani also features a cable railway which transports devotees to the top of the hill.) The cable railway was shut after inspections revealed it to be unsafe. The station and all operating apparatus were subsequently dismantled. In recent years plans have been mooted to reconstruct the cable railway when sufficient funds are available.

The Temple Cave is reached by a steep stairway consisting of 272 steps. These are divided into sixteen flights, each separated by a landing. The stairway, which inclines slightly to the right for the final three flights before the entrance, is split into three
passageways, each bounded by a stone wall of approximately one metre in height. (On Thaipusam day the outer passageways are meant for the use of ascending and descending traffic, while the central section is theoretically reserved for kavadi bearers and their retinues.) Each year these dividing walls are painted immediately prior to Thaipusam.

Immediately to the left of the base of the stairway is a small temple dedicated to Ganesha. Until the 1980s this was a minor shrine at the foot of a tree. Although the deity had rudimentary protection from the elements, devotees were required to stand in the open. The temple formed part of the major upgrade of the Caves complex undertaken throughout the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The revamped downstairs complex also includes a small temple to Amman (in her Agamic manifestation). This lies behind and at right angles to the Ganesha Temple. Opposite the Ganesha Temple, and across the main pathway, is a recently constructed Temple dedicated to the Navagraha planets. Adjacent to the steps, on the right hand side, is a partially constructed and towering statue of Murugan, which at over 40 metres in height, will comprise the largest representation of the deity in the world, and will completely dominate the entrance to the Batu Caves.

A concrete architrave spans the base of the stairway. The obverse aspect of the architrave, the side facing devotees about to ascend the steps, has as its central motif a statue of Shanmugan, the six-faced youth, seated on his vahana (mount), the peacock, and accompanied by his consorts Valli and Teyvayanai, though it also contains images depicting Valli's fright at being confronted by the "wild" elephant, Ganesha, Murugan's older brother, in disguise. (64) The reverse aspect features Murugan's marriage to Valli. Another architrave with further statuary stretches across the top of the stairway and shows Murugan's marriage to Teyvayanai in the presence of the celestials (thus one symbolically climbs from Murugan's marriage to the earthy Valli at the foot of the stairs to the world of the celestials at the top). Immediately outside the Temple Cave, to the left of the ascending devotee, is a statue of Surapadman in the process of being split in two by the Vel, the peacock and cockerel at his feet. To the right, as one proceeds from the top of the stairway, and against the eastern wall of the Temple Cave, there is a small
shrine to *Idumban*, gatekeeper of Murugan's shrine (who thus fulfills his function as guardian of the Sri Subramanaya Swami Kovil which lies within).

The stairway ends some little distance above the absolute floor of the Temple Cave. Two flights of steps, located on either side of the Cave, link the upper level of the Cave with this floor. These steps are divided into down and up traffic ways. The central portion of the Cave adjacent to these steps is railed off from the general public. At the central junction, facing devotees approaching the main shrine, stands a large figure of Murugan and his *Vel*.

The main shrine, dedicated to Murugan, is located in a minor recess, a mini cave as it were, at the northern end of the western wall. Outside this aperture a small *murthi* of Ganapati enclosed by a miniature demarcation wall stands upon a bed of mosaic tiles. The *sanctum sanctorum* is reached via several tiled steps, so that the officiating *pantaram* must climb to perform all obeisances. The *murthi* is a small image of Murugan in the form of Palani, and is backed by a large *Vel*.

The Cave opens into a huge hollow at the northern end. This is reached by several steep flights of roughly hewn concrete steps, which rise from the Cave floor and are divided into lengthwise sections by rudimentary hand rails. These steps are often wet with seepage and are potentially hazardous for the aged and infirm. The hollow is roughly circular in shape, and is enclosed by a series of sheer rock walls which rise all but vertically to the skylight above. Groups of monkeys cavort on the walls. Although the hollow opens to the sky, it admits very little direct sunlight. A further temple, devoted to Murugan and his consorts Teyvayanai and Valli (that is, Murugan in his fully stabilized form), has been constructed on the floor of the hollow. This represents an attempt to re-create within this single complex the sense of Murugan as a totality; Murugan in all his forms. A *murthi* of Siva as *Nataraja*, the Divine Dancer, has been built against the northern wall.

In recent years, and in particular in the period since 2000, a number of additional statues
depicting mythological episodes within the cosmology of the Murugan cultus have been installed within the Temple Cave. These additions consist of the following:

**Along the Western Wall of the Temple Cave:**
(i) An image of Murugan, having received the *Vel* from Parvati, being blessed by both Siva and Parvati,

(ii) Depictions of (a) the sage Agastya praying to Siva and Parvati, prior to the removal of two hills, Sivagiri and Saktigiri to South India, and (b) Murugan as Palani the renunciate, following his loss of the race with Ganesha around the world. The conjoining of these representations explicitly link these mythological episodes, namely the Agastya/Idumban/kavadi mythology and the mango/Palani mythology. These myths and their significance will be explored later in this chapter.

**Within the Hollow**
A portrayal of the incident in which the young Murugan imprisons Brahma after his failure to explain the meaning of the *Pravana Aum*, and subsequently becomes the teacher of his father, Siva, by instructing him in the mysteries of this mantra.

**Along the Eastern Wall of the Temple Cave**
(i) At the very foot of the stairs leading to the hollow, statuary showing Murugan blessing the erstwhile *asura*, Idumban.

(ii) Statuary of Murugan in his final stabilised form with his wives, Teyvayanai and Valli,

(iii) A depiction of the events which accompany the race between Ganesha and Murugan for which the prize is a mango, and which precedes the latter's ill tempered departure for Palani. (Points (i)-(iii) will be discussed in Section Five of this chapter)

(iv) Murugan as Thandayuthapani within the Cave at the top of the stairs, with
representations of various forms of kavadi worship.

In Chapter Six I will suggest that these additions have been positioned with little regard for the concept, held by the original trustees, of a Hindu pilgrimage as a sequential symbolic re-creation of a carefully structured and layered journey from mundane time and space – that of the *kaliyuga* – to the metaphysical/cosmological centre (or *axis mundi*).

The downstairs caves are reached by a narrow concrete pedestrian causeway which zigzags across a small, rather polluted, and sometimes noisome, ornamental lake. Over the years several attempts have been made to restore the lake to its idealized state, but these are inevitably defeated, usually within weeks, by the huge volume of rubbish casually deposited by visitors. The degraded condition of this lake has been a sore point with senior Hindus for many years.

There are three downstairs caves. The most prominent is Art Gallery Cave, roughly S-shaped. Over the entrance of the Cave are figures of three wise monkeys who hear, see and speak no evil. At the base of the entrance is a *murthi* of Ganesha attended by the two saints Sundarar and Sereman Perimul as envisaged in the praise poem *Vinayakar Akaval* (Call to Vinayakar) written by Saint Avvaiyar (70), the celebrated circa 6th-8th Century Tamil bhakti saint. The interior of the cave, gently illuminated with coloured lights, contains representations of mythology drawn from both Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions. These are portrayed by dioramas consisting of both statuary and paintings. The Saivite mythology features well known scenes taken from the *Skanda Purana* and includes Parvati praying to the *lingam* (i.e. Sakti longing for union with the Absolute, thus symbolizing the conjoining of the Manifest and the Unmanifest); the *Saravana Poihai*, that is, the six babies resting on lotuses on the Divine Lake and watched over by the celestial maidens; the divine youth Murugan interrogating Brahma (who, significantly, is prominently daubed with Vaishnavite *tilak*);(72) Murugan instructing Siva in the mysteries of the *Pravana Aum*; the story of the mango(73); Murugan setting out to destroy Surapadman and the asuras (all portrayed as deformed
and terrifying monstrosities). Other Murugan imagery includes Murugan's marriage to his consort Teyvayanai; the deity's wooing of Valli, aided by his brother Ganesha; (74) Murugan's marriage to Valli, and Murugan (in the guise of a young cowherd) conversing from a naval tree with the Saint Avvaiyar after throwing fruit to her. (75) The totality of the Murugan cultus, that is, Murugan in all his forms, is clearly integrated within these dioramas with the sacred geography of Murugan's mythological history in the Tamil country, and final diorama, Murugan “the shining one”, shown at the top of the Batu Caves steps receiving homage from kavadi bearing devotees, explicitly links all of these sites and mythological episodes to Murugan's presence at the Caves, thus clearly designating the Caves as a Malaysian pilgrimage centre where Murugan may be encountered. In another diorama Siva is depicted in the form of Nataraja. Vaishnavite imagery focuses upon the dasavataraas of Vishnu (that is, the ten main embodiments of Vishnu); Vishnu as Naraya resting on his great serpent bed, Sesa; and Krishna instructing Arjuna the charioteer, a duologue which is central to the Bhagavad Gita.

The second cave houses the Muzium, formerly known as the Art Gallery, and officially opened on 7 January 1973 by Tan Sri Manickavasagam, a former Minister of Labour and Manpower, and President of the Malaysian Indian Congress. (76) The Muzium contains statuary representations of precepts taken from the Tirukkural, St. Tiruvalluvar's great ethical work consisting of a body of aphorisms delivered in rhyming couplets, (77) as well as statues of the main Saiva Bhakti saints, (Appar, Sundarar, Manikkavachar, and Sambandar – these will be discussed in Chapter Four); (78) and depictions of formative mythological episodes in Tamil Hinduism. (79)

Outside the Muzium/Art Gallery is a large enclosure containing chickens and roosters, peacocks and peahens, the male birds symbolic of the final, submissive forms of the defeated asura Surapadman. (80)

The third and final cave, known as the Ramanaya Art Gallery, was officially opened on 15 January 1995 by Dato Seri Dr Samy Vellu, President of the Malaysian Indian Congress. (81) This is devoted to large scale murals and statuary depicting noteworthy
episodes from the Epic. The opening of this Gallery marked an attempt to make the Batu Caves complex relevant to Malaysia's Vaishnavite Hindus, especially those of Northern Indian origin, and to emphasize the overarching and thus inclusive religious allegiance and rich heritage which supposedly forms a unifying leitmotif among Malaysian Hindus. In recent years a small temple surmounted with a massive statue of the deity Hanuman has been constructed at the entrance of the pathway leading to the Gallery.

4. THAIPUSAM: BASIC STRUCTURE
Thaipusam officially commences with the early morning departure of the utsavar murthi (82) of Lord Murugan from the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil to travel to his home in the mountains. Formerly the departure was at 6.30 a.m., but due to the increasingly chaotic traffic conditions in central Kuala Lumpur the time of departure has been successively rescheduled. The chariot bearing Murugan now leaves at 4 a.m.

It should be noted at this juncture that the procession of the deity is grounded in South Indian kingship rituals. In the traditional Hindu worldview, kingship is seen as integral to the orderly functioning of society. A polity which lacks a king possesses no appropriately constituted hierarchy, is no longer viable, and will quickly descend into chaos.(83) Lawrence Babb points out that “In traditional South Indian ritual the processional idiom often serves as a means for the expression of socio-spatial relationships. The procession is an occasion on which the deity, or rather a portable extension of it, emerges from the temple to journey through the community with which the temple is associated. The imagery is royal; the god or goddess becomes a king or a queen, carried forth to survey his or her dominions and to receive offerings or homage from loyal subjects.”(84) The paradigms of kingship and their permeation of the structures of South Indian Hinduism as well as the entire Thaipusam festival will be explored in Chapter Six.

The departure is preceded by an early morning puja (visakha puja)(85) and a special abishekam (bathing) in which the utsavar murthi is successively bathed with water, milk, tender coconut water, ghee, honey, sugar, cane juice, vibhuti (sacred ash)(86),
sandalwood paste, rosewater and *panccamirtam* (a sweet dish made of five fruits, ideally mango, jackfruit, bananas, grapes and oranges, plus brown sugar water). The *Kurukkal* (Brahman temple priest) then recites 108 verses of *mantras* (in Tamil). A curtain is then drawn while the *utsavar murthi* is dressed, adorned with silk, gold and diamonds, and garlanded.

Immediately prior to this ritual, the throng of devotees who have remained overnight at the temple is augmented by a steady stream of arrivals. To a visitor the atmosphere feels tense, electric, expectant. As the *Kurukkal* sings the final invocation prior to revealing the clothed *murthi*, the crowds press forward. The curtain is drawn back, revealing the adorned Murugan, ready to commence his regal journey. Hundreds of women prostrate on the floor, while all the men press their palms, their arms extended above their heads.

Occasionally the drawing back of the curtains may be the signal for cases of spontaneous trance. During my visit for Thaipusam in 1981, a woman standing next to me was thus “possessed”. This state was heralded with a deep sigh, a gentle rocking, which gave way to a slow, dreamlike and controlled dance. Arms outstretched horizontally, hair unbound, and largely ignored by the crowd around her, the woman remained in trance for about ten minutes until a temple *Kurukkal* applied *vibhuti* to her forehead. In most years there are invariably several such cases, mostly women, within the temple.

Once the curtain is opened the *utsavar murthi* is offered *Alankaram Deepam* (the showing of the light of a special lamp to one who is garlanded, that is a god, king or extremely auspicious guest). The *Kurukkal* then presents a succession of silver instruments to the deity, all symbols of his kingship. These normally include the *kudai* (umbrella), *visiri* (fan), *alavadham* (leaf), *venjamaram* (another form of fan), *kodi* (flag), and *kannadi* (mirror). As these items are offered the *Kurukkal* recites the 108 names of Murugan. An *otuvar* (hymn singer), then performs some verses from the *Tevaram*, a corpus of sacred hymns compiled by Saivite saints. Following this the *Kurukkal* offers a tray of flowers to the *utsavar murthi* while reciting the 108 names. He then performs an
arati (display of camphor flames to the deity) and offers the flames to the devotees together with prasadam (sanctified substances, often food, but also involving other substances and offered to devotees at the end of worship. (89) On this occasion the prasadam consists of vibhuti, tirttam (blessed water), kumkum (a red powder, made of turmeric and lime), sandalwood paste and flowers. However generally by this time the temple has become so crowded that only a small section of the crowd receive the flames and prasadam.

The utsavar murthi of Murugan, together with his consorts, Teyyayanai and Valli, plus the Vel, are mounted on a mayil (peacock) shrine, before being lifted on wooden poles and carried clockwise within the temple precincts for three circuits. This circumambulation is accompanied by temple musicians playing the nadaswaran, (90) and drums. James Kirkup describes the scene in the following terms: “...amid great musical agitation, the glittering, shivery shrine with its three tiny golden figures degged and tagged with jewels, dappled with charms and swathed in flowers, a miracle of gold and silver, and crystal dangling dewdrops and ribbons of embroidered cloth with a large panel of flowered lemon silk bellowing behind, is lifted on to two stout long poles and borne on a dozen young men's naked shoulders. There is man holding a fringed, salmon pink umbrella on a six-foot handle high over the sacred image. He walks immediately behind it.” (91) The utsavar murthi are now installed in the temple's magnificent ornate silver chariot which awaits outside the temple on the roadway. Almost unnoticed the Kurukkals retire to the temple. Henceforth Murugan and his consorts will be accompanied by pantarams (non-Brahman priests). A further arati is performed, water sprinkled, and a coconut smashed(92) before the chariot begins its journey. The elevation of Murugan into the chariot is the signal for sustained jostling among the assembled devotees for favourable vantage points to gain darshan of the deity, (that is, the sight or vision of the God. However, darshan as a concept connotes a mystical or “inner vision” and implies reciprocity in that the deity perceives the devotee). Normally at this point a handful of devotees are overcome by emotion and weep openly.

The chariot (ratham), an elaborate construction, twenty-five feet in height, was
intricately carved from teak and plated with silver at a cost of 350,000 Malaysian ringgit. (93) The silver chariot, which was officially inaugurated in a special ceremony held at Batu Caves on 21 January 1983, replaced an older wooden carved ratham which had been used for many years and which remains stored at the temple. The silver ratham is decorated with jewelry and is adorned with flags, tinsel and bunting. Figurines include ceremonial horses, and minor deities facing in the four main directions. (94) The interior, dome and spire are brightly illuminated. Power is supplied by a mobile generator which follows behind the chariot as it makes its way to the Cave. Religious music is played through a public address system.

Until 2000 the chariot was symbolically drawn by relays of yoked oxen. The oxen were freshly scrubbed and decorated for the occasion. Their horns were painted, and they were then garlanded and caparisoned with richly coloured ceremonial cloth. In point of fact the oxen's role was largely emblematic; the bulk of the load was borne by volunteers who scrambled enthusiastically to secure a portion of one of two lead ropes by which the chariot was drawn. The jostling for favoured positions was occasionally vigorous, and sometimes lead to minor affrays, as those too late or too tardy were elbowed aside. Pulling the chariot is regarded as an honoured form of ritual service to the deity and many of those who attached themselves to the lead ropes remained with the chariot throughout its journey to Batu Caves (a passage which might take seven to eight hours).

In 2000 the management of the Devastanam replaced the oxen and the lead ropes with a small tractor. This decision, which was unannounced and apparently taken only hours before the festival, caught devotees by surprise. Many would-be volunteers had waited immediately outside the temple for lengthy periods – some overnight – to gain initial access to the lead ropes. The Devastanam issued a press release stating that the use of oxen to pull the chariot had been discontinued in response to allegations of abuse levelled by animal welfare groups, but that in future years the oxen would symbolically accompany the chariot to preserve the traditions associated with the festival. (95)

Despite the pre-dawn start, a large crowd (police estimates range up to 50,000, but
unofficial sources place the figure at up to 150,000),(96) turns out to accompany the crowd on the processional route. The crowd following the chariot normally stretches over several city blocks, (or at least half a kilometre). All segments of Hindu society are represented, and prominent political figures can be seen walking with those of more modest background. Family groups predominate, crocodiles of young women with their hands clasped or upon each other's shoulders in order to maintain contact within the dense crowd, small babies and young children carried by their parents, older women dressed in richly coloured saris, with younger women and female adolescents increasingly likely to be clad in so-called Punjabi suits, many men formally attired in dupa (silk cream-coloured prayer shirts), but more likely to be wearing western style trousers than the vesthis that are all but de rigeur in major temples in South India.

In the past few years, Indian youth gangs, adherents of a youth “style”(97) derogatorily dismissed as as “gangsta” sub-culture, a hybrid Weltanschauung largely inspired by an imagined Western popular culture and the heroes (and anti-heroes) of violent Tamil films, have begun to assemble near the chariot's departure point, and reassemble at selected meeting places along the route. These groups, as yet low in number – at most totalling 200 young men (my observations reveal no female membership) – tend to limit their activities to catcalls, whistling, insulting passersby, and directing offensive comments to young women. The presence of these groups has proved an annoyance and a source of chagrin to many Hindus who wish to preserve the integrity and solemnity of Thaipusam.(98)

The chariot makes rapid progress through the neon lit inner city streets, past blocks of modern offices, brilliantly illuminated shopping emporia, all showcasing an extensive range of the latest consumer goods, and recently constructed tourist hotels. Often tourists, alerted by management and staff, spill out from the hotels onto the footpaths to take the obligatory photographs, an authentic splash of local colour for their personal albums. Occasionally the press of the crowd sets off car alarms, their signals fading into the general backdrop as the procession passes.
The chariot is preceded by a plethora of youth and other religious groups, representing a spectrum of Hindu society, (and including in recent years such non-Saivite groups as ISKCON and Brahma Kumaris), many singing bhajans or chanting, by musicians, including temple nadawar players and drummers, dance groups, and several kavadi bearing devotees.

A feature of the procession is the performance of the kolattam dance by numerous youth groups. Elizabeth Collins describes the kolattam as follows: “The dancers form two circles, one inside the other, so that each dancer faces a partner. The dancers in the inner and outer circles move in opposite directions. They mark the rhythms of the dance with the stamp of their feet emphasized by the jangle of bells worn around their ankles, and the clack of their sticks which are hit together or on those of a partner in patterns signaled by the troop leader. The dancers may also jump over and between the sticks of other dancers, which are hit on the ground and against each other in complex rhythms executed at a very fast tempo. The dance requires that each dancer precisely regulate his or her movements in accord with the whole group in an ever changing pattern.”(99) In South India kolattam is traditionally danced by young girls, but in Malaysia it is performed by both boys and girls and occasionally men and women.

The crowd is guided by torch bearing marshals selected by the Devastanam, who work in conjunction with the police, (who in turn direct traffic and minimize likely bottlenecks), and the Federal Reserve Unit. The strong security presence is ostensibly to prevent disorders among the crowd, but also acts as an (unspoken) deterrent against the potentially disruptive activities of religious extremists of other communities.(100) The deployment of largely Malay (and hence) Muslim security forces is well publicized by Malaysian politicians and the Malaysian media, and is often cited as an example of inter-communal cooperation.

The logistics of the procession are complex, and require considerable organization. This involves the Devastanam in planning and negotiations for months in advance of Thaipusam. Authorities with which the Devastanam must liaise include the Malaysian
Indian Congress, the civic administration (especially the Municipal agencies), the police and the Federal Reserve, Tenaga Nasional, (the national electricity company), the Red Crescent, and a host of volunteers and voluntary organizations which will assist with a diversity of tasks including preparing and polishing the chariot, the provision of food, medical aid, and the care of lost children. Tenaga Nasional assigns workers who will cut and disconnect low slung wires which may impede the progress of the chariot, and auxiliary teams who will repair the wires and reconnect supply immediately after the procession has passed.(101) Indian devotees point with pride to an adjustable overhead pedestrian bridge crossing at the fourth mile of Jalan Ipoh, which was specifically designed to allow passage of the chariot. The adjustability was built into the bridge following a directive issued by MIC leader, Dato Seri Dr Samy Vellu, in his former capacity as Minister of Transport.(102) In addition the Devastanam upayams (or endowments) will furnish a variety of services to devotees, including subsidizing the cost of rail travel between Kuala Lumpur and Batu Caves, and the supply of items of worship especially camphor, coconuts, sandalwood paste, vibhuti, etc.(103)

Along the route individual devotees and religious organizations distribute packets of food as well as drinks to the crowd. These may include curried chick peas, noodles, sweet foods, packaged fruit juices, tender coconut juice, and fresh water.

From its departure until its arrival at Batu Caves there are usually several cases of spontaneous trance, mainly among women. Some dance wildly, hair unbound, knocking into or stamping on other people, oblivious to their general surrounds. Others sink into gentle trances, adopting stylized gestures often seen on temple murthis. All are subdued by applications of vibhuti to the forehead.

Once it is clear of the inner city, the chariot makes frequent stops to allow devotees, normally family groups, to receive the darshan of the deity, and to present trays of offerings – generally fruit, coconuts, incense, garlands, cloth and betel leaves and nuts - which are passed to the pantarams seated in the chariot, formally offered to the deity and returned to devotees as prasadam. Infants are also passed up to the chariot to
receive Murugan's blessings, and are returned, often with the wide eyed wonder of the very young, or in floods of tears, to their parents. While the chariot is stationary, devotees fulfill vows by smashing coconuts before it. As the chariot makes its way through the streets, Chinese storeowners, office workers, and factory hands emerge to offer obeisance. Many morning motorists supplicate as they pass by.

In addition to these ad hoc stops, the chariot halts at two prominent temples along the route, both situated on Jalan Ipoh – the Sri Thandayuthapani Kovil, owned and managed by Kuala Lumpur's Chettiar community, and the Sri Paranjothy Vinayagar temple, founded by the “Jaffna” Tamil community.(104) At both locations simultaneous arati are performed to the enthroned utsavar murthi and to the presiding deity within the temple. Large numbers of devotees attempt to place themselves in a convenient position to obtain darshan of this event, which is considered extremely propitious. Significantly the chariot does not stop at the several temples dedicated to village deities which lie en route, nor do senior Hindus acknowledge these temples.

The chariot's frequent halts, especially after daybreak, and as the warmth, then heat of the gathering tropical sun becomes obvious, creates tensions between some of those hauling the chariot, many without any means of deflecting the harsh sunlight, and the marshals, themselves obeying the directives of the pantarams ensconced within the chariot, whose first duty is to ensure the dignity of the procession, and to allow as many people as possible to obtain darshan of the deity. The shouts of the crowd are mainly of good humoured exasperation (“What are we? Beasts of burden?”; “You sit in the shade and enjoy yourselves while we do the work”; “We should not be ignored in this way”; etc.) but occasionally one detects a note of desperation or real rebuke, especially if a member of the crowd falls victim to the heat. This is generally directed against the pantarams who sit sheltered within the confines of the chariot, privileged by virtue of their status to be in constant contact with the murthi, and who are popularly held to be both dismissive of and unfeeling toward those who do the “real work” associated with transporting Murugan and his consorts to their mountain abode.
When the chariot arrives at Batu Caves, Murugan and his consorts are transferred to a special platform within a downstairs shrine, the New Swami Mandapam, and puja and archana (in this instance, a more elaborate puja involving the chanting of the deity's names) are performed. Later the Golden Vel from the chariot is ceremonially presented to the head pantaram of the Sri Subramanaya Swami Kovil, who carries the Vel to the top of the hill, and places it in the Murugan shrine within the Temple Cave. Toward evening, usually at about 4 p.m., the Chairman of the Sri Maha Mariamman Koyil Devastanam will raise the ceremonial flag and declare the festival officially open.

On Day Two of the festival the utsavar murthi of Murugan is borne to the nearby river for abishekam (ritual bathing). However the bulk of the day is devoted to formal acts of worship and service. While the attention of the vast crowd is focused upon the vibrant spectacle of the several thousand devotees who bear kavadi (described in the following section), there are others who meet their spiritual obligations in less obvious ways. These may include annathanam (serving free meals), distributing free cool drinks (especially moor, diluted milk curd), constructing, manning, or making a substantial contribution to a thaneer panthal (a stall devoted to the supply of food and drink), serving in religious organizations (which may include the circulation of tracts, answering questions on religious issues, or providing spiritual counselling), or the provision of religious entertainment at stipulated times (e.g. Bharatanatyam performances or dramatic representations of selected puranas). In addition personnel from the St. John's Ambulance Service and the Red Crescent are on hand to treat the inevitable casualties, mainly cases of fainting, heat stroke and fatigue, as well as the handful of more serious injuries including heart attacks or strokes which are reported each year.

Many parents choose Thaipusam as an auspicious day upon which to shave the hair of young children. Chaulam (head shaving) is regarded as one of the essential rituals associated with infancy. Although ideally head shaving is conducted by the child's father, in practice this is usually entrusted to any one of a number of specialist barbers who are present for the occasion. Other devotees may elect to have their heads shaved as
a form of penance. Hair is believed to easily accumulate pollution and its removal thus rids the child/devotee of an unwanted form of contamination; in the case of infants chaulam assists in cleansing the child of the pollution garnered during and since birth. The shaven head of both young children and adult devotees is anointed with sandalwood paste which is viewed as purifying as well as cooling. (The shaving of hair is closely associated with practices observed at the South Indian Murugan shrines especially those at Tiruchendur and Palani.)

The second day of Thaipusam is easily the most crowded. Thaipusam is now a public holiday in five states (Selangor, Penang, Negri Sembilan, Perak and Johor)(108), which has undoubtedly made it easier for some outstation devotees to travel to Batu Caves. Prior to the Festival hundreds of pilgrims and their families – mainly hailing from outlying areas – arrive at Batu Caves in chartered buses. Most of these camp on the compound lawns. Thousands of others arrive via the subsidized special train services which run between Kuala Lumpur and suburban areas to Batu Caves,(109) while others take advantage of dedicated bus services and outstation taxis. The number of people present at Batu Caves on Thaipusam day is estimated by the local media as in excess of one million people. While the overwhelming majority are Hindus, usually in family groups, there are also many sightseers, especially Malaysians of other ethnic groups (including increasing numbers of Malays).

There are also large numbers of foreign tourists, brought to the Caves by tourism operators to imbibe a slab of authentic “Oriental” culture. While there have been complaints about those tourists who treat the entire festival as a sort of extended sideshow, a mere divertissement staged expressly for their entertainment,(110) the majority are well behaved. Indeed, many younger Western tourists appear overwhelmed and often deeply moved. Some approach devotees who have fulfilled their vows to ask questions and to seek further information.(111) Attempts by tourism companies to promote Thaipusam as a “gape and wonder” spectacle have been discouraged by the Malaysian authorities.(112)
The festival is also an occasion for political opportunism. Political patronage has always been a prominent aspect of Thaipusam at Batu Caves. Prior to Merdeka (independence) a high colonial official would visit the Caves on this day, and be received by executive members of the Devastanam. This tradition is now continued by the Malaysian government which is normally represented by a prominent Cabinet Minister (occasionally by the head or deputy head of Government). This visit recognizes Hinduism as a component religion of Malaysian society, but also implicitly acknowledges the Devastanam as the organizing authority of Thaipusam in Kuala Lumpur, and by extension, the leading role taken by the Kovil in the religious life of Malaysian Hindus. The prominence accorded to Devastanam officials is also displayed in another very public way. This involves the bestowal of the garlands (malais) worn by the utsavar murthi throughout the ritual period, together with the vestments which adorn the deity, upon the leading patrons. They are also given priority in receiving prasadam and receiving the water (tirttam) spiritualized by contact with the deity.

Kalaiyarasi(113) has pointed out that the temple management committee of the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil Devastanam has traditionally used Thaipusam as a forum for aspiring politicians, especially those seeking a springboard to careers within the Malaysian Indian Congress, a component of the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition. The president of the Devastanam is thus in a strong position to dispense patronage on Thaipusam day and carefully selects those whom he invites to speak to the largest assembled Indian audience in Malaysia, and those who are dubbed sufficiently important to sit with him on the front row of the upper storey balcony of the Devastanam headquarters. The intrusion of politics into Thaipusam, in particular the alleged snubbing or suppression of influential Hindus whose views do not accord with MIC policies and priorities, has lead to much criticism within the broader Hindu community. The 1989 decision to display signs promoting a lottery conducted by the MIC, including several over the route taken by kavadi bearers, elicited considerable protest, and has never been repeated.

The festival is also a magnet for wandering religious hucksters, many with bogus
spiritual pedigrees, who appear on Thaipusam day to sell magical cures, miracle potions, charms, and the dubious quality of their psychic insights.

At night, as the last kavadis are borne, elements of the crowd turn their attention to entertainment, in particular a sideshow alley which includes merry-go-rounds, mini-Ferris wheels, and fun palaces. They also frequent the rows of stalls which are set up in selected areas within the compound. The stalls, in 1999 numbering 656, are allocated by Devastanam officials in accordance with the results of a lottery draw which also determines the actual physical location of each stall. Many of these stalls have little connection with religious observance. Commercial operators seize the opportunity to retail a huge variety of (non-religious) items, including trinkets, gifts, popular records and tapes, as well as paraphernalia associated with the cult figures of Tamil cinema. Stall holders who intend to supply free medical services, free food and drinks, and devotional services (including religious counselling), are usually provided with sites free of charge.

The fun fair and retail stalls have been the subject of increasing criticism within the broader Hindu community which views the intrusion of market place money making and the crass frivolity of a side shadow alley as debasing and detracting from the solemnity of the festival. Senior Hindus have long argued that stalls should be restricted to the provision of essential or welfare services or the retailing of religious items.

The night also sees the re-emergence of Tamil youth gangs. However, given the strong and continuous security presence, the gangs are rarely given the opportunity to create any real or sustained disruption. Their activities – shouting at devotees, insulting passersby and general exhibitionism – irritate and embarrass many Hindus.

Day Three of Thaipusam is devoted to the return journey of Murugan and his consorts to the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil. Between 8 and 9 a.m. the Golden Vel is removed from the hill shrine and carried down the stairs and restored to the utsavar murthi within the Mandapam. After a brief puja, Murugan and his consorts are reinstalled within the silver
chariot. The chariot then leaves Batu Caves. Attendance at this ceremony and the crowd which accompanies the chariot on the initial segment of its return journey is comparatively small, numbering no more than several thousands.

Because of traffic restrictions, the procession halts for the day in the Sentul area, about five kilometres from the centre of Kuala Lumpur. This was once the most concentrated Indian suburb in Kuala Lumpur, with a large working class Tamil population historically associated with the nearby railway workshops and processing factories. In recent years Sentul has been extensively redeveloped and the Indian nexus has largely disappeared. The utsav murthi is removed from the chariot, and placed in a temporarily consecrated area on a nearby padang (field) where it is guarded throughout the day by temple authorities and selected youth groups. Occasional visitors pay homage and perform extemporized pujas.

At 4.30 p.m. there are further pujas and archanas to Murugan, and at 6.30 the utsav murthi is reinstalled within the chariot. The procession then recommences its journey to the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil. Normally the crowd is greater than that of the early morning outward departure on Day One. This may be because the time is more convenient for most workers and their families who will have completed their vocational and school related obligations for the day.

As with the outward journey, the chariot is required to stop frequently to meet the needs of devotees. Many of the stops echo the earlier journey. There are numbers of coconuts smashed, as well as family groups offering trays and babies for blessing by the deity. Released from the pressures imposed by peak hour traffic, the civic authorities allow the chariot a more leisurely return, and stops are frequent. The atmosphere at night, with the illuminated chariot and the large crowd escorted by torch bearing marshals, seems even more intense than that of the Day One departure. The chariot is preceded by religious groups performing bhajans, dancers, kolattam groups, temple musicians, and silumban (the Tamil art of stick fighting) exhibitions. As the chariot makes its way back to Kuala Lumpur, there are usually several more cases of trance. Once again, security is tight and
is provided by police and the Federal Reserve Unit.

The chariot varies its route to proceed down Leboh Ampang, a street in central Kuala Lumpur traditionally associated with the city's Chettiar community, and still housing Chettiar managed shops, moneychangers and retailing concerns. The chariot stops in several locations to allow families to pay homage and make offerings to the deity.

The chariot reaches the Kovil at about 1 a.m. The utsavar murthi of Murugan and his consorts are taken from the chariot and carried into the temple upon long poles, an arrangement which reminds the observer of a palanquin. As the young men bearing the utsavar murthi reach the inner temple, they stop, and for a few minutes walk on the spot with a peculiar swaying motion. The general explanation is that when a god goes abroad he must be entertained with a dance, but in India informants advised me that this action is undoubtedly a ritual associated with kingship, the bearers imitating the movements of an elephant, the traditional mount of royalty.

Murugan and his consorts are reinstalled within the temple with a series of welcoming rituals and pujas. The atmosphere within the temple is one of highly charged emotion, and there are several more cases of spontaneous trance. With the deity's return, the formal aspects of Thaipusam are now at an end.

5. THE KAVADI RITUAL

Undoubtedly one of the dominant motifs of Thaipusam in Malaysia, and that which invariably receives the greatest publicity, is the bearing of kavadis. In recent years there has been a huge increase in the number of devotees who undertake worship in this way. In 1978, when I first witnessed Thaipusam, press estimates placed the number of kavadi bearers at between 500-600,(118) but by 1997 the total exceeded 10,000 at Batu Caves while over 50,000 devotees carried paal kudam (ritualized milk pots) to the shrine in the Cave.(119) These numbers have been sustained over subsequent years.

Kavadi worship, and the asceticism which is a necessary concomitant of the ritual, are
both justified and given shape by two closely related *puranas*, the first describing the circumstances surrounding Murugan's retreat to Palani, the second the mythology associated with the *asura*-turned devotee Idumban. These are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Murugan's period of renunciation followed the loss of a competition with his elder brother, the elephant headed deity Ganesha. The *purana*, ever popular among Malaysian Hindus, and often recited in temples and reiterated with variations in public story telling, is as follows. One day the sage *Narada*, regarded as the source of many disputes, visited the Siva family. He left a large and especially succulent mango with Siva and Parvati, who proposed to offer it as a reward to which of their sons could travel around the world more quickly. Murugan immediately mounted his peacock and vanished over the horizon. Ganesha, on the other hand, realizing that he was no match for Murugan in a straightforward race, reflected, then bathed, prostrated before his seated parents, circumambulated them, and demanded the mango. When questioned by his parents as to why he would claim the prize when he had yet to even begin his journey, Ganesha explained that in performing this action he had not only encircled the world, but the entire cosmos, for did not his parents contain the all encompassing Siva-Sakti duality, together with all Truth, Will and Action? Siva and Parvati, pleased with his answer, gave him the fruit. When Murugan returned he was deeply upset to discover Ganesha devouring the mango. Told the reason, he vowed to renounce the world. Angrily, he accused his parents of deception, and of violating the hallowed tenets of *varna dharma* (family dharma). He removed his sacred thread, shaved his head, and wearing only a loincloth and holding a *sannyasin's* staff, farewelled his parents.

Although Parvati pleaded with him, and Siva forbade him to leave, saying, “Why do you renounce the world? You are *Palam ni”*(the fruit), meaning that he was already the truth he intended to seek, Murugan refused to listen. He retired firstly to the Krownchan Mountain, then to the district now known as Palani, where he pursued yogic disciplines and realized the Truth within (the inner fruits of his *tapas* – austerities and meditations.) Thus according to puranic lore, Ganesha is supplicated by those who wish to partake of the proper enjoyments or fruits of the world, whereas Murugan is
worshipped by those who eschew material benefits in favour of ascetic spirituality and the fruits of liberation.

It was while Murugan was at Palani that he encountered and vanquished the asura, Idumban. This purana is summarized in the following paragraphs.

Agastya, a Vedic rishi (sage) journeyed to Mt. Kailas in the Himalayas, the earthly abode of Siva, to offer worship both to Siva and Sakti. His devotion was rewarded when they appeared upon the hills known respectively as Sivagiri and Saktigiri. Siva subsequently asked Agastya to arrange the transport of these two hills to Potikai in South India, which Siva planned to make his southern abode, and thus seat of worship.(124)

Agastya approached an asura, Idumban, to undertake this task. Idumban had served as an archer in the army of Surapadman, but had survived the widespread destruction of the asuric forces. In the period which had elapsed since Surapadman's defeat, Idumban had spent most of his time performing sraddha (funerary) rites for his departed companions. Despite Idumban's background, Agastya believed that the demon was sufficiently trustworthy to execute this commission.

Idumban was initially at a loss as to know how he might carry the hills, but he discovered the danda(125) or staff of Brahman standing above the hills. Using the Divine Serpents of the earth in place of ropes, Idumban tied each hill to an end of the danda which thus became a shoulder pole, with the weight evenly distributed.(126) This was the prototypical kavadi. Near the forest at a site now known as Palani, Idumban tired and set down the hills while he rested. When he attempted to resume his journey, he found that the hills were stuck to the ground. Upon ascending the slopes, he discovered a youth clad only in a loin cloth, holding a staff, and “shining like a thousand suns”.(127) This youth claimed the hills as his own. In the subsequent fight, Idumban was killed, but both Agastya and Idumbi (Idumban's wife) interceded on Idumban's behalf, and Murugan restored Idumban to life. Idumban requested that he remain
forever at the portal of Murugan's shrine as a Divarapala or guardian. Murugan instructed him, “You will stand watch at the foot of the hill. But since you brought Sivagiri and Saktigiri on a shoulder pole, all who henceforth worship me with kavati will first worship you.”(128)

The myth incorporates a number of recurring motifs common to Saivism, but the major implications may be summarized as follows:

(i) The two hills were a gift from Siva, and were delivered to South India through the agency of Agastya, mythical civilizer and bringer of culture to Tamil Nadu from the north,(129)

(ii) The two hills symbolize Siva/Sakti, the cosmic duality, and thus the entirety of creation, from which Murugan was both born and provided with the means to fulfill his role as the vanquisher of the asuras, and,

(iii) The hill on which the Palani temple now stands is that claimed by Murugan from the faithful asura, Idumban. (130)

This combined mythology suggests a number of themes in the evolution of the deity Murugan, and thus by extension of the spiritual unfoldment of the individual devotee. On its most obvious level, the Idumban myth provides a paradigmatic model for a specific form of ritual worship. Idumban, who conveys a kavadi, is subdued, and following his encounter with the deity is transformed into an exemplar of devotion. Idumban's experience may thus be emulated by the individual aspirant. Fred Clothey remarks that “All devotees who bring the kavati or submit to the god on the hilltop are thought to be re-enacting the example of that primordial devotee, all of whose malevolence and simple-mindedness was taken from him in that act of worship.’’(131) Kavadi worshippers, like Idumban, are psychically transmuted, and are relieved of the burden of ignorance through the burden of the divine. In sum, the kavadi ritual is explained and justified in terms of the Idumban myth, which has become a popular mode of worship in localities where Murugan is considered a major deity.(132) It is this
concept which underlies the principle of worship at Thaipusam. By carrying or placing his/her psychic burden at the feet of Murugan, the aspirant publicly demonstrates the wish to be freed from the yoke of those burdens.

But at a more esoteric level, the mythology implicitly recognizes the transformative powers of asceticism, spiritual retreat and yogic disciplines. Tricked on the most fundamental level by Ganesha, who has the insight to recognize the inner truth of a literal direction and to apply this to his ultimate benefit, Murugan determines to renounce the world and family life, disobeys his father and mother, and retires to a self imposed exile in Palani where he pursues the quest of realizing the truth within. Some commentators have suggested to me that Idumban is not a literal figure, but a metaphor for recognition of the burdens which lie between Murugan and total spiritual enlightenment. Idumban must be destroyed; he represents the remnants of uncontrolled Sakti, which must somehow be transformed before Murugan can stabilize into full self reflexivity. Thus the new depths of knowledge garnered through the period of intense yogic asceticism enables the deity to dispose of the Idumban within, and to symbolically convert this burden into a spiritual asset – a guard who stands ready to defend him from external forces. For the individual devotee, the mythology suggests a model for ritual worship – temporary renunciation, the asceticism of pilgrimage, the catalytic experiences of trance and kavadi worship as means for the relief of a psychic burden and the fruits of fresh self-discoveries resulting from an encounter with the deity, which can then be taken forward into the post-Thaipusam mundane life.

To most Malaysian Hindus, the word “kavadi” connotes “burden”, (P.V. Jagadisa Ayyar suggests the word is a combination of kavu and adi meaning “...the vow made to walk the distance to the place of pilgrimage on foot”.(133)) At Batu Caves there is no single uniform style of kavadi which range in complexity from the basic and functional to those which are elaborate and highly ornate. However, there are several unifying motifs falling within the gamut of kavadi worship. Firstly, in bearing a kavadi, the devotee, in emulating Idumban, is submitting to the will of a specified deity (as will be discussed, not all kavadis in Malaysia are borne for Murugan.) Secondly, the kavadi is perceived
as a “...shrine in miniature”(134), containing the god himself, so that the devotee may apprehend himself/herself in the manner of a vahana (mount) whom the deity actually “mounts” during the period of trance, and whom the votary will thus bear to the shrine in the Caves. Thirdly, devotees will carry a gift of milk to be presented to Murugan, in his shrine within the caves. The most commonly accepted explanation for this latter requirement is that milk, a sacred product of Mother Cow (Ma) symbolizes fertility, purity and prosperity.(135) Other explanations will be considered in Chapter Six.

The simplest kavadi is undoubtedly the paal (milk) kavadi. This consists of a small wooded pole surmounted by an arch. Devotional pictures of a murthi/murthis may be fixed under the arch. The kavadi may be decorated with peacock feathers, margosa leaves, flowers and other materials. This style of kavadi is the norm among members of the Penang Chettiar community, and is often recommended as the “approved model” by senior Malaysian Hindus. This was also the type of kavadi carried by the Brahman group with whom I undertook a pada yatra (foot pilgrimage) in India in 1998 (see Chapter Three).

The most luxuriant kavadis are the aluga (beautiful) kavadis. The central feature of the aluga kavadi is a platform in which the murthi of the deity is placed. A series of arches are connected to the platform, all of which may be decorated with ribbons, flowers, and peacock feathers. The deity may be shaded by an umbrella. The shrine is fixed above the devotee's body by means of an aluminium framework which is secured to a metal belt which extends around the waist. Shoulder pads cushion the (sometimes considerable) weight of the kavadi, and foam padding is placed under the belt. The kavadi is further adorned by a series of light chains or fine rods, numbering up to 108(136) which are attached to the torso by small hooks (shaped like fish hooks, but without the barb).(137)

Among the other forms of kavadi commonly found at Batu Caves are the pushpa kavadi, made of flowers, and the karumba kavadi, a simple burden of sugar cane, carried by couples who have recently been granted a child, usually after a long period of barrenness, and in response to prayers and supplications. The baby is carefully secured
in a sling of yellow cloth which is hung from the sugar cane. The husband bears the front of the cane, the wife the back. A frequently encountered kavadi is the vel kavadi, lengthy spears with a lancehead at one end, a lime at the other. These are pushed through the cheeks. During the 1970s and early 1980s there was a tendency for vel kavadis to become longer by the year, until many exceeded five metres. Temple authorities considered these elongated spears dangerous to devotees, their supporters and onlookers, and the product of vanity and braggadocio rather than genuine spirituality. Restrictions on the size of vel kavadis were imposed in the mid 1980s.

Some devotees shoot paper arrows. There are several explanations for this. The first is that in so doing votaries identify themselves with Idumban, who prior to his resuscitation and transformation was well versed in archery and served in this capacity in the army of Surapadman. A second explanation suggests that worshippers are shooting vels, but this interpretation was not supported by devotees whom I interviewed. One pointed out that this would be dangerous as it would seem to presume upon a power which was exclusively Murugan's domain. The most consistent response was that the firing of arrows represented the role of Murugan as warrior-king, and the victory of the deity and his devonic army over the asuras. A handful of generally older devotees walk on stilts. Others abase themselves by rolling the distance to the foot of the stairs leading to the Main Cave. All of these latter forms of worship have become increasingly rare at Batu Caves over the past twenty years.

There is a range of other, barely tolerated kavadis. The most frowned upon kavadis are those of devotees who engage in modes of worship aimed at the supplication of “village” or “little” deities. Overwhelmingly these devotees are young, male, and of working class or estate background. Devotees who are possessed by the village deity Madurai Viran are generally borne standing upon sharp parangs (large bladed knives often shaped like oversized cutlasses). Supporters hold the parangs at each end, and the devotee who engaged in bouts of ritual “marching” on the upturned blades, balances himself by placing his outstretched arms on their shoulders. Very occasionally these devotees “wear” daggers which have been passed through their upper arms. Munisvaran
and Muniandy possessed devotees may pull small wooden chariots by means of ropes attached to large hooks which are pressed into their backs (often these are “symbolic” chariots which are “anchored” by a friend who walks behind and exerts sufficient pressure to keep the ropes taut so that the devotee is still conveying an actual “burden”).(141) Because of logistical difficulties in ascending the Cave steps, this group of devotees will terminate their pilgrimage at the downstairs Swami Mandapam. Usually Munisvaran/Muniandy devotees wear brightly coloured turbans, and will smoke cheroots, and some will drink “bulldog” (Guinness Stout)(142), and twirl ropes with which they occasionally whip themselves. Devotees who bear kavadis for Kali or Durga (in their destructive “village” manifestations)(143) will often cut their tongues to produce the obligatory mouthful of blood consistent with popular iconic representations. In the 1980s, under considerable pressure from reformist Hindus, temple authorities introduced restrictions on all these forms of worship within the Temple Cave, though these devotees were permitted to proceed to the foot of the stairs. In practice, for several years little was done to stop these pilgrims from making their way to the main shrine. In 1999 however, the Chairman of the Devastanam banned whips, parangs, spears of greater than one metre length, and the placing of kumkum (red powder) on the tongue (to produce the symbolic bloodiness of a meat eating goddess) claiming that these were antithetical to the true spirit of Thaipusam.(144)

Most kavadi bearers also take two miniature vels, about skewer length, one of which is pushed through the tongue, the other through the cheeks. This indicates, firstly, that the pilgrim has temporarily renounced the gift of speech taking the vow of silence (mauna)(145) for the duration of bearing of the kavadi (the vow of silence in a common feature of pan-Hindu asceticism and will be discussed more fully in Chapter Six) so that he/she may concentrate more fully upon Murugan (or another selected deity), and secondly that the devotee has passed wholly under the protection of the deity (or Idumban as gatekeeper to Murugan) who will not allow him/her to shed blood or suffer pain. By permitting the vel to pierce the flesh the aspirant is also signifying the transience of the physical body as opposed to the enduring power of truth.
As mentioned, not all kavadis are borne for Murugan. Indeed, a whole collocation of deities are informally acknowledged at Thaipusam. Kavadis are carried in honour of other Saivite deities (Ganapati, Parvati, Siva), Vaishnavite deities (principally Krishna, Rama and Hanuman), village and guardian deities (these terms will be fully explored in later chapters), such as Munisvaran, Muniandy, Madurai Viran, Kali amman, and Durga, and even lesser spirits known as bhuta and pey. One deity who is gaining prominence among Malaysian Hindus is Aiyannar/Ayyappan. The honouring of “little” deities and spirits has elicited much criticism from Hindus who observe or claim to observe Agamic traditions, but in general these idiosyncrasies are tolerated, albeit under sufferance.

This spiritual eclecticism reflects important processes underway in the formulation of a distinctive Malaysian Hindu tradition. These include syncretization and “Sanskritization” and will be discussed in Chapter Five. In the meantime, it is worth noting that homage to “foreign” or “lesser” deities is nearly always permeated with the rituals and falls within the received framework of the established paradigms of Murugan kavadi worship.

The individual decision to bear a kavadi may be prompted by a number of considerations including penance, spiritual unfoldment, overcoming unfavourable karma, or all of these, but in most cases is undertaken to honour a vow. Stereotypically, those fulfilling a vow have entered a reciprocal contract with Murugan, a sort of “cosmic bargaining” as it were, in which they have agreed to bear a kavadi if a certain request is fulfilled (for example, recovery from illness, the conception and successful delivery of a child, reconciliation within a family). Vows may be taken for periods of one, three, five years, or for life, though a three-year vow appears to be the most common. The factors which influence an individual to take a vow are highly varied, and may spring from personal circumstances, or those of a member of the immediate family, (for example, it is not uncommon for a votary to bear a kavadi for a sick or otherwise distressed relative). Often those who take kavadis are inspired by spirit mediums who advise them of psychic or physical misfortunes, contracted in this or past lives, which
have cast a blight upon them personally, or upon their families.

At Batu Caves, kavadi bearers are drawn from the entire spectrum of Malaysian Hindu society. Indeed my own fieldwork corroborates the observation made by Ervin et al., who indicated that the subjects of their study “...ranged in age from 12 to over 50 and were equally divided as to sex. They came from all socio-economic levels, and educational backgrounds, and included unemployed youths, college students, labourers and businessmen.”(150) Thaipusam, ostensibly a Tamil festival, now draws Hindus from every regional Indian background, as well as Sikhs, members of Malaysia's miniscule Sinhalese community and Chinese devotees.(151)

Those who would bear a kavadi must enter what is in effect a period of renunciation and asceticism, several weeks of ritual purification which will prepare them for their encounter with the deity. This involves cessation of many daily activities as well as adherence to certain disciplines. Collectively these observances place the devotee outside the normative boundaries of life as a grihastya (householder), and temporarily into the category of sannyasin. We should note in passing that these restrictions and disciplines in effect signify removal from mundane time and space, and are preparatory for the tirtha yatra (literally “ford” or “crossing place”(152); more esoterically, a journey to a metaphysical “center”) and are consistent with the broader pattern of pan-Hindu pilgrimage paradigms. This issue will be more fully explored in Chapter Six.

Purificatory observations include fasting (a vegetarian diet, excluding eggs, and preferably restricted to one meal each day), eating and drinking from utensils reserved for their specific use (and excluding cups and plates), refraining from tobacco, liquor and stimulating drinks (some devotees extend this to include cola and caffeine based beverages), abjuring sexual relations and contact with menstruating women (153), sleeping upon the floor in a ritually clean environment on a cloth of yellow or white, ceasing cutting of hair or shaving, maintaining calm and equanimity in everyday dealings, in particular eschewing lying, cheating, using foul or abusive language, or quarrelling, especially in the face of provocation. At the commencement of their fasts,
most devotees will also place a string of sacred beads around their necks. These beads will be used in devotions involving chanting or recitation (japa). Generally the beads are rudraksha seeds, taken from the Blue Marble Trees (Eleo Carpus Ganitrus), which is regarded as sacred by Saivites, but beads made of other substances – tulasi (basil) or sandalwood seeds, or crystal – are also permitted. The devotee should not be tarnished with the pollution of recent birth or death within the family (in the case of death pollution is held to last for a period of twelve months). In theory the devotee should wake each morning at five, break his/her fast with a drink of water or milk containing tulasi leaves, a plant considered sacred, and frequently used in ritual offerings,(154) and having bathed in cold water, should pray, recite mantras, and meditate. He/she should also pray three times a day. However the exigencies of modern life militate against strict observance of this latter requirement, and most devotees perform their private meditations as and when they can. Ideally, these purificatory rites should extend over 48 days, but many devotees observe lesser periods, and experienced participants may fast for as little as seven days. Most aspirants will follow the guidance of a spiritual director, usually an older male.

Prior to Thaipusam some devotees may move into a temple or another acknowledged holy place for the final few days of their fast. Many intending kavadi bearers attend what is known as a trial trance. Trial trance, sometimes known as trance training, is usually conducted in a single session, but sometimes over a number of sessions, within the small suburban or village and estate temples. These sessions are usually directed by the resident pujari (a lower caste temple priest), with the assistance of other recognized local spiritual leaders. Trial trance has several intertwined aims. Firstly, it allows the pujari to assess the progress of individual devotees, and to encourage those who have made little or minimal headway, secondly, to identify and if possible modify idiosyncratic trance behaviour (if necessary to decide upon strategies to contain devotees whose trance states are likely to create problems at Thaipusam), (155) and thirdly, to teach devotees the art of achieving and sustaining trance, especially in the face of distractions they will experience on Thaipusam day when the trance state and bodily piercing which follow must be undertaken in the full – and for some, perhaps
intimidating – glare of public scrutiny.

The pujari/spiritual leader assembles the group for which he (or occasionally she) will be responsible up to a week prior to Thaipusam when it may be expected that most devotees will have been fasting for at least two to three weeks. The group, which may number as many as thirty people, will include experienced kavadi bearers as well as several complete beginners. The pujari will commence the session with the obligatory invocation to Ganesha (considered the Ruler of Obstacles, without whose permission and blessing no undertaking, whether minor or major, can hope to succeed), followed by brief supplications to Murugan and/or other deities. The pujari/leader (hereafter referred to generically as the leader), may speak to the group, emphasizing the special bonds that exist between them, the sanctity of their vow, and the need for cooperation and mutual support at all times. He will then signal to the musicians, generally drummers, singers and individuals playing hand cymbals (jalrah). These will perform a selection of kavadi songs, alternating the pace and rhythm according to the instructions of the leader. Devotees generally stand with eyes closed, concentrating in an attitude of reverential prayer. The leader will gesture an experienced member of the group to the front, gently rock him/her back and forth, hand held firmly on the devotee's head, until trance is achieved (sometimes within as little as five to ten seconds). He will then summon other members of the group, one by one. Each member will supplicate to the leader by touching his/her hands on the leader's feet. Sometimes group members achieve spontaneous trances and have no need of the ministrations of the leader. Others, especially novices, may experience real difficulty in attaining trance, and may require the special and sometimes prolonged attention of the leader and his assistants. This may include concentrated chanting at the devotee, increasing the volume, tempo and proximity of the drumming, touching the head with a vel, cutting a lime above the devotee's head (the latter measures are designed to remove impurities and/or negate the influence of malign spirits), or placing the novice alongside an experienced and already entranced devotee (generally one of mature years and of serene or at least equable disposition). Very occasionally a novice is unable to achieve any trance at all, despite the vigorous efforts of the leader and his assistants. Failure to reach trance may elicit
social disapproval by implying that the devotee is unworthy to participate in this form of worship, but this assumption is by no means axiomatic. Often, it is attributed to lack of readiness for this level of spiritual commitment, or is taken as an indication that he/she is meant to pursue other avenues of spiritual unfoldment. Very rarely the leader will comprehensively rebuke a person whom he regards as “bluffing” or “playing the fool”, and will accuse him/her of failing to observe all the requirements of fasting, or behaving as a fraud or a “time waster” (i.e. someone who had no real intention of fulfilling a vow).(156)

The leader identifies individual quirks and peculiarities or trance and may work to modify his/her behaviour prior to Thaipusam. Simons et al. document one such example: “On three different occasions, adolescent girls used the trance dance and the time out from ordinary social expectations to play out a kind of family psychodrama: they behaved like obstreperous adolescents vis-a-vis their guru 'father'. One was a 20 year old who, during the first training session, swept into the centre of the room, wearing a defiant expression, posturing, demanding the guru's attention, pulling at the hair and shoulders of other devotees who were having difficulty in entering trance and generally making a nuisance of herself. A number of times the guru entered the shrine and returned with a vel which he offered to push into her tongue. Each time she indicated, “not ready”. Once he brought out a long steel pole of the type to be used to pierce the cheeks and once a whip. He appeared to be threatening to bring her into line. As the nights of trance training proceeded, this girl became less and less obstreperous, until by Thaipusam day her trance was calm, controlled and orderly.”(157)

The range of trance states varies considerably. Some devotees are gripped by possession(158) trances, usually involving wild and sometimes aggressive dancing. Other possession states present in stylized iconic movements, while others dance gently, arms outstretched, smiling serenely. The leader moves though the group, quiet, dignified, impressive, in control (though not always, occasionally he or one of his assistants is overtaken by spontaneous trance). When he judges that an individual devotee has been in trance for a sufficient period (generally anywhere between 2-15
minutes), he terminates the state with a firm application of vibhuti to the forehead above the pineal gland (site of the “third” or inner eye). With more intractable cases he may accompany this by blowing on the devotee's head. This measure is also taken to control the inevitable outbreaks of spontaneous trance among some of the onlookers. (Unauthorized trance states may denote investment by lesser deities or even spirits, and are usually suppressed as soon as they arise.) Generally the devotee brought out of trance will slump, his/her knees will buckle, and he/she may be assisted to sit down for a period of recuperation. Often he/she will be offered drinks (usually water or the water of tender coconut), and his/her legs will be massaged to prevent cramping. Sometimes after a few minutes the devotee will re-enter trance, and the leader or one of his assistants will once again be required to apply vibhuti. Some individuals may enter trance four or five times, and the exasperated leader may banish him/her to the corner of the temple, where he/she is theoretically out of harm's way.

This training prepares the devotee for managing, sustaining and varying trance behaviour over extended periods. These skills will be necessary on Thaipusam day when significant demands will be made on the votary, including the necessity of attaining trance in a crowded public environment and in the presence of curious onlookers, subsequently remaining still for the time required for insertion of vels and the fitting of the kavadi, as well as exercising control during the inevitable delays on route to the Caves. Trance training also promotes devotee awareness of external cues such as signals and directions from his/her supporting retinue.(159)

On Thaipusam eve aspirants gather at prearranged sites, either at one of the temples within the nearby Indian Settlement(160), or at designated meeting places on the lawns within the Batu Caves compound, or along the riverbank adjacent to the Caves complex. Devotees will generally be dressed in yellow clothes with red edgings (both colours traditionally associated with Murugan)(161), shorts or vesthis for men, saris or “Punjabi suits” (consisting of a loose baju (shirt) and slacks) for women. In recent years shorts have largely replaced the more formal vesthis among Malaysian Hindu men, and Punjabi suits have become widely accepted as official apparel among Tamil women.(162) On
Thaipusam day devotees will also wear anklets which jingle rhythmically as they dance, and some will attach small bells to their kavadis and belts.

Over the next few hours, in an atmosphere increasingly charged with anticipation and exhilaration (perhaps tempered in the case of novices with an all too tangible foreboding), devotees will complete a final set of purificatory rites. These will include some or all of the following. Firstly a propitiatory puja to Ganesha is offered (this itself may incorporate a cluster of elaborate observances, but usually consists of an invocation followed by a call for blessing.) Next there is a prolonged arati (showing of camphor flame) to all deities present. The flame is subsequently offered to all devotees and then to onlookers. Then each devotee is asked to stand next to a coconut upon which a block of camphor is placed. When this is lit, the devotee carries the coconut and burning camphor to the pujari/leader who smashes it violently upon a strategically located rock. This action is held to symbolize the fiery cleansing of impurities (burning camphor) and fracturing of the hard shell of the ego (anava) to reveal the sweetness of inner truth. Success is indicated when the coconut breaks into three or more pieces. A series of bhajans (devotional hymns, generally with a call and response refrain) are then sung, and if the group boasts the services of an accomplished singer, he/she may be called upon to render several songs drawn from the highly specialized and musically intricate Murugan repertoire. Later there may be a final trial trance. After this the devotees are summoned one by one to the group leader. He/she is then asked if he/she realizes the full significance of the vow he/she has taken, that a yellow thread is about to be tied around his/her right wrist, and that from that time onwards he/she will not be permitted to leave the temple or designated sacred area until he/she is fitted with the kavadi. (This period may be a matter of minutes or hours depending upon the circumstances.) The thread is then tied. The devotee may be subsequently fed a handful of chickpeas and saffron rice cooked in the temple, offered to the deities, and thus distributed as prasadam.

In many of these groups some of these preliminary rites may fulfilled either at the home shrine or in the local temple prior to the journey to Batu Caves. Other groups bypass most of these rites and observe only the propitiatory puja and the thread tying.
In the meantime there are occasional disturbances among the onlookers, mainly in the form of spontaneous trance states, sometimes of a superficially alarming nature. These are often heralded with screams, shouts or wild and extravagant dancing. Tamil Hindus recognize and categorize a wide array of trance states, but only one – arul, betokening the grace of the deity – is sought and desired throughout Thaipusam. Spontaneous trance states which grip individuals who have neither fasted nor undertaken the elaborate purificatory rituals or the requisite trance training may represent the unwanted intrusion of disruptive lower deities, or even malign spirits and are therefore usually quelled at the earliest opportunity. (163)

Immediately prior to the final set of pre-kavadi rituals, the aspirant takes a ceremonial purificatory bath. This is done while fully clothed. The devotee takes at least three full buckets/dippers of running water and tips these over the crown of the head. (Those participants who have gathered along the riverbank will use the specially constructed bathing facilities.) Devotees universally report that the water seems abnormally cold, and most manifest this with bouts of shivering, gasping and spluttering. The participant is then daubed with the standard Saivite markings of vibhuti.

In the meantime kavadis are set up in an altar like arrangement on the ground. Banana leaves are placed in front of the kavadis, and fruits including lime, coconut, betel leaves and nuts, as well as incense and camphor, are carefully arrayed along the leaves. A sacred fire consisting of selected woods and camphor is lit, and the pungent, yet fragrant smoke is used to purify the milkpots which are to be fixed to the kavadis. This is accomplished by passing the milkpots inverted over the fire, after which they are filled with milk (with painstaking attention paid to purity). The pots are then sealed with yellow cloth which is passed over the mouth of the vessel and secured around the rim. The final puja follows. The incense is lit, the limes cut, and the religious leader lights the camphor on a tray and performs an arati to the kavadi. This is now fully sanctified as a shrine. At this point, and this point only, are both devotee and kavadi considered fully prepared for the journey to the shrine within the Cave.
The devotee is then put into a trance. He/she concentrates on the deity, while those gathered around chant “Vel! Vel!” (“Spear! Spear!”), “Vetrivel” (“The Electric/Victorious Spear”), or “Haro Hara” (“Praise to the Lord”) all chants pertinent to the worship of Murugan. Further stimulation may be provided through music, especially drumming, and incense may be waved in the devotee's face. The onset of the trance state, (arul), is obvious to all bystanders, and is marked with a host of visible bodily signals, which may included trembling, exaggerated facial contortions, flickering eyes, buckling at the knees, etc. It is at this point that the kavadi is fitted and the vels inserted, often accompanied by shouted invocations to Idumban, servant to Murugan, to remove the pain that the aspirant might otherwise be expected to withstand.

The pujari/leader works quickly, inserting the first vel through the cheeks, initially pinching the skin at the point of entry (normally about an inch back from the corner of the lips), then pushing the vel though the flesh, guiding it with his fingers to the opposite cheek, pinching the inner skin before pushing it through to the outer cheek. The pinching is believed to make the skin more malleable. Normally 2-3 inches of the vel extrudes from each side of the face. (A similar process is followed with the large vel kavadis, except that a banana is used to lubricate the spears, and up to a metre of the rod extrudes from each side.) The leader then asks the devotee to show his/her tongue. He guides the second vel carefully and deliberately through the fleshy part of the tongue about 1-1/2 inches from its tip. He then applies vibhuti to the tongue. As the insertions are performed the leader's assistants and the aspirant's supporters gather round him/her and chant loudly and close to the devotee's ears. This entire operation is usually accomplished within ninety seconds. If the devotee is to bear an aluga kavadi, he/she will now be invited to step inside the framework. The metal belt is secured over the foam or other padding worn as a protective girdle by the devotee, the kavadi, weighing between 30-80 pounds, is checked and adjusted to ensure the even distribution of weight upon the devotee's shoulders, (small foam pads will be placed under points of contact on the shoulders to prevent the rubbing of the metal frame on exposed skin), and the hooks, numbering up to 108, are inserted into the torso. More inventive pujaris and their assistants will organize the hooks to form a pattern upon the torso, but this is not
considered essential. Once again the process is undertaken quickly and efficiently. The
leader dusts the torso with vibhuti. The devotee will then be requested to stand up and
move the kavadi about. This is to allow the leader to check that all hooks are firmly in
place, and that there can thus be no danger to the devotee's retinue or members of the
public from flying or unsecured hooks.(166) It will be seen from this account that the
trance state is not so intense or all encompassing as to preclude communication, in
particular the ability to respond to instructions and requests for basic information.

The achievement of an appropriate trance (arul) is the fulcrum upon which the entire
pilgrimage revolves. The entire period of fasting and the associated tapas and other
disciplines have been designed to prepare the devotee psychically and spiritually for this
“moment of truth” where he/she is able to prove himself/herself worthy of receiving
Divine Grace (arul) which will allow him/her to bear the kavadi in a sanctified state.

Inevitably one or two devotees fail to achieve trance. These aspirants are usually spared
any insertions, and are presented with paal kavadis and instructed to proceed to the
Temple Cave. Occasionally the moment of presentation provokes the hitherto
unattainable trance state.

As with trial trance/trance training, disassociation states among participants vary
extensively, ranging from mild trance states to full blown possession. Simons et al.
claim that the trance is typically followed by amnesia.(167) This is not the experience of
the overwhelming majority of kavadi bearers with whom I have been associated and
others whom I have interviewed. In most cases the violence of the initial trance state
recedes and is replaced by a condition the devotee reports as a form of “supercharged”
awareness; “operating at a higher level” is a frequent comment. In this state the devotee
is cognizant of all that is happening around him/her and is able to respond positively to
practical directions given by the retinue escorting him/her but feels him/herself to be
functioning at a level of awareness infinitely superior to mundane consciousness. This
has also been my own experience. The issue of trance will be discussed more fully in
Chapter Six.
The kavadi having been fitted, devotees set off to their destination surrounded by an escorting group who urge the devotee on with chanting, and ideally either the renditions of a recognized corpus of kavadi songs known as *kavadi-c-cindu* (168) or from the book of hymns known as *Tiruppukal*. (However many groups chant devotional lyrics, often extemporized, to secular music, often popular songs taken from Tamil cinema.) This group also forms a protective ring around the kavadi worshipper. Members of this accompanying group will carry drinking water and a stool upon which the devotee is seated at regular intervals while his/her legs are massaged to prevent cramping. Frequently the organized groups of kavadi bearers will set off together. Along the route the devotee will engage in a ritualized dance known colloquially as the “kavadi” dance, and based upon the *asura* Idumban's swaying movements as he bore the hills, which were to become the future abode of Murugan, slung on a pole. (169) Lakshmanan claims that the kavadi dance “...when performed with vigour and quick movements produces in spectators a feeling of exultation and a temptation to keep in step with the rhythm and the dance.” (170) The kavadi dance also reflects the long history of dance as an integral form of Murugan worship, and his role of Lord of the Dance. (171) Many devotees twirl their kavadis in athletic and awe inspiring displays. As Babb comments, “The springy arches of the aluminium kavadis make a splendid sight as they leap up and down in time with the bearer's movements.” (172)

In recent years senior Hindus have expressed anxiety about the intrusion of non-*Agamic* music and dancing at *Thaipusam*. One of their particular targets has been the use of so-called “bongo” drums, played mainly by working class/estate youth. These are long tapered metal drums, capped with goatskins. The drums are beaten with sticks both on the skin and along the side, sometimes by as many as three youths acting in concert, who often produce rhythms of extraordinary complexity. These drums are held to be not of Indian origin, and thus alien to Hindu worship. However, my fieldwork indicates that this is incorrect. These drums are known in Tamil Nadu, where they are used by members of the *Pairayar* caste (an *Adi Dravidar* caste) (173) and are associated with exorcism and certain types of funerary rites. Other unwelcome innovations have included the use of whistles to regulate dancing, the singing of film and popular songs,
and the performance of disco, rap or break dancing. Measures have been taken to restrict or ban these adjuncts, which are viewed as unseemly and detrimental to the integrity of the festival.

While devotees may commence bearing kavadis from midnight onwards, the vast majority of are borne between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. Raymond Lee contends that the period between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. is regarded as especially auspicious because the sun is at its highest and the penitent not only gains additional merit from enduring the increased heat of the sun, but also enjoys the opportunity to perform sun worship. I have not encountered this explanation. Rather most informants have advised that the gathering day symbolically parallels the growth to maturity of Murugan's powers and thus represents the most propitious time to complete vows to this deity during Thaipusam.

The devotees make their way, often through considerable congestion, from the riverbank along Jalan Batu Caves to the gateway which marks the entrance to the Batu Caves complex. Occasionally all kavadi traffic is halted by the arrival or departure of passenger trains, special services which run throughout the festival period. Once the devotees enter the Cave precincts, they are guided into a roped off lane which is theoretically reserved for the exclusive use of kavadi bearers and their supporters, and allows free access to the Cave steps. Until 2000 each devotee paid M$5 to the temple authorities for the right to employ this lane and to ascend the Cave steps. In 2000 this fee was increased without prior notice and amid considerable public indignation to M$10. The laneway is often clogged with kavadis and progress may be slow. Stimulation for the spectator at this point may be intense to the point of overwhelming; an auditory overload consisting of hundreds of drums, nadaswarans, chanting, the blare of commercially recorded kavadi songs pumped out at full volume through several public address systems, the incomprehensible drone of official speakers (seated on an official dais above the approach to the Cave steps), the press of the crowd, the colour and movement of many kavadis, the gathering heat, and the swirling dust stirred by thousands of feet. Near the base of the steps, a large receptacle, continually replenished by full packets of camphor thrown in by devotees, burns fiercely.
Some supporting retinues may carry limes which at certain points along the route are cut into four and thrown in different directions. This action is performed to propitiate malevolent beings which may be encountered at certain localities and which may hinder the kavadi bearer's progress.

Nearly all interviewees report that once they reach the foot of the 272 steps leading to the Temple Cave they feel a sense of “urgency”, a “pull” towards the shrine which invigorates their dancing. This “pull” escalates as they ascend the steps, enter the Cave, and progress toward the main shrine.

Conditions within the Cave, large as it is, are usually even more chaotic than those prevailing immediately downstairs. The Cave is densely thronged with visitors, and the steps leading from the Cave to the hollow are packed with onlookers who have taken the best vantage points for viewing the arrival of the kavadi bearers. The flights of stairs leading the shrine are often wet and slippery, and the kavadi worshippers and their entourages must exercise considerable care in descending. Along the west wall of the Cave, a line of beggars, gathered from all corners of Peninsular Malaysia, ply their trade. Many Indians walk the length of this assemblage, placing cent pieces in every bowl. The natural half light of the Cave is further dimmed with the combined impact of camphor smoke(177), incense and dust. At night coloured lights throw a patchy illumination. The Cave resonates with the echoes of chanting and stamping feet. The floor of the Cave adjacent to the shrine is awash with souring milk, a product of the Cave's inadequate drainage.(178)

As the devotee reaches the area immediately outside the railing of the main shrine, he/she supplicates to the murthi within. Many, overcome by emotion, weep openly. The milk, borne in the pot slung from the kavadi, is passed to one of the pantarams working within the shrine(179), and poured over the golden Vel. The spiritual leader of the group, or one of his delegated assistants, who has accompanied the party of kavadi bearers to the Cave, sits the devotee on a stool, removes the hooks from his/her body, dusts his/her torso with vibhuti, and assists him/her from the kavadi. This is then entrusted to a
volunteer (recruited by the bearer), who will convey the kavadi either back to the point of origin, or to a designated storage area. Having extricated the devotee from the kavadi, the leader or assistant then removes the miniature vels from the tongue and cheeks (some devotees report a minor “burning” sensation, not amounting to pain or even discomfort, as the vel is taken from the tongue), and applied vibhuti to the points of penetration within the mouth. The devotee is then brought out of the trance state. Occasionally stubborn cases are offered limes to chew; this is thought to assist in terminating any residual vestiges of trance.

The reaction of devotees to the cessation of trance is mixed. Some stagger, near to collapse, exhausted by the enormous expenditure of physical and psychic energy, and need the immediate support of members of their retinue. A few seem dazed and disoriented, and may require additional applications of vibhuti to discontinue persistent symptoms of disassociation. Others seem overcome by their experience, and walk away from the shrine (or shuffle, as the pressing crowd allows little free movement), in a state which they later describe in terms of retrospective amazement or awe.(180) Nearly all devotees return to the point of origin or an agreed meeting place for a vegetarian meal.

On the third day after bearing a kavadi, the devotee attends an Idumban puja, known colloquially (in English) as the “breaking of fast” ceremony.(181) The ritual formally concludes the period of temporary renunciation/asceticism entered into by the devotee. A special offering is made to Idumban which normally includes a number of food items – cooked chicken (sometimes sacrificed in a temple or home based ritual by male devotees, very rarely is this done by females; the sacrifice of animals by women is generally frowned upon)(182), fruits, rice, eggs, and sweets, as well as liquor and cheroots. These are laid on a banana leaf, on a makeshift altar generally placed at the corner of the home, and often located outdoors. A camphor flame is passed over the offering, acknowledging for some Idumban's protection throughout the ordeal of bearing a kavadi, for others the symbolic role of Idumban as gatekeeper to Murugan. Another banana leaf of “pure” food is placed at the other end of the altar. This is subsequently blessed, and the devotee and others perform consecutive aratis, commencing with the
most senior member and concluding with the most junior. The flames are passed by each
devotee before the deities within the home shrine, and are subsequently offered to all
present. The bearers then serve food and drinks to all who have assisted in the
fulfillment of his/her vow,(183) and present gifts which may include a cash donation,
clothes, fruits or sweets to the religious dignitary who offered guidance and direction
throughout the period of fasting, and later presided over or performed the purificatory
and kavadi rituals. The devotee is now formally released from the period of
renunciation, is “returned” to society, and may resume his/her normal lifestyle. Later the
foodstuffs left over from this puja may be bundled up in banana leaves together with
decorations from the kavadis, and thrown in a river the following morning.

The atmosphere at the Idumban puja may best be described as a blend of reverence,
good humour, and subdued triumph. Devotees swap anecdotes about fasting, the
experience of trance, and kavadis, while those who have taken a kavadi for the first time
may now freely admit to the difficulties of fasting and the apprehension and perhaps fear
they felt upon being confronted with the actuality of trance and bodily mortification.
Photographs and videos shot on Thaipusam day may be shown, to the accompaniment of
cries of recognition, banter and pithy witticisms. The occasion is underscored by an
almost palpable undercurrent of group satisfaction and accomplishment, an understated
appreciation of the united achievement of goals which not only benefit the individual,
but also the wider community of friends, relatives, supporters, and to a lesser extent all
fellow believers.

Because this ritual is held to honour a former asura and involves both animal sacrifice
and liquor, it is considered non-Agamic, and thus somewhat disreputable by some
reformist Hindus.

6. CONCLUSIONS
This chapter has traced the multivalent significance of the puranic mythology
surrounding Murugan's receipt of the Sakti Vel. I have suggested that the acquisition of
the Vel symbolizes the unification of the principles and powers of Siva-Sakti within the
form of Murugan. Cosmologically the myth embraces themes of phenomenological dissolution and entropy and subsequent reconstitution and renewal; that is, the collapse and restoration of cosmic order. In metaphysical terms the mythology may be viewed as an extended metaphor for the spiritual evolution of the individual and his/her ever-changing perception of the Divine. Overall the mythology underlines the perennial and constantly shifting relationship between Siva-Sakti, and thus emphasizes the concept of a universal order in profound and dynamic tension which may oscillate between chaos and control – the violence and disorder of cosmic inversion, and the hierarchical reconstitution and penetrating illumination which accompanies restoration. The mythology assembles all cosmological constituents and polarities within a unified framework, one which indissolubly fuses both macro and micro cosmology (that is, the individual-universal), thus creating a divine symmetry which is central not only to Saiva Siddhanta theology, but also to popular Tamil belief structures. Finally the homologizing of body to cosmos resolves the seeming incompatibility of the transcendent Skanda and the immanent Murugan, thus condensing the cosmic drama into an internal and individual struggle, while simultaneously offering the prospect of knowledge of and unity with the Transcendent.

This chapter outlined the structure of the festival of Thaipusam. This commences with the chariot procession to Batu Caves, the kingship ritual which re-establishes and renews the monarch's overlordship throughout his dominions. Following his arrival at the Caves, Murugan is installed in the New Swami Mandapam, and the Golden Vel, the symbol of his regal authority and the weapon provided by Parvati to defeat the asuras, is transferred to the shrine within the Caves. Only at this point may the festival commence. Over the next 36 hours while in residence at his mountaintop retreat, Murugan receives the homage of his devotees. At the conclusion of this period, the Vel is restored to the utsavar murthi, and the deity commences his royal return to the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil in Kuala Lumpur.

This chapter also traces the development of Batu Caves from its modest origins as a Hindu shrine into Malaysia's foremost Hindu pilgrimage centre embodying the major
elements and symbols of the Murugan cultus. Although attempts have also been made to incorporate Vaishnavite symbology, including a recently dedicated Ramanaya Cave, the complex remains a site overwhelmingly dedicated to the culture and worship of Murugan. As a pilgrimage centre, Batu Caves also observes the major conventions of its South Indian counterparts, with a clearly ordered layout which symbolically guides the devotee from the outside world of the kaliyuga to the power which lies at the heart of the shrine.

The final section describes the ritual of kavadi worship. It outlines the justificatory mythology which underscores this ritual, namely Murugan's retreat to Palani to practice the tapas (austerities) necessary to the discovery of the truths (or fruits) within, and his subsequent defeat and transformation of the asura Idumban. I also show that kavadi worship is practiced by devotees drawn from all segments of the Malaysian Hindu community. Although certain groups may venerate non-Agamic deities at Thaipusam, they almost invariably observe the received generic paradigms associated with the Murugan inspired kavadi ritual. Stereotypically the kavadi ritual involves the votary in a fixed sequence of ritual worship, which involves the initial vow, a period of renunciation and asceticism, entry to a specific form of trance, the bearing of the kavadi, and finally a special puja to Idumban in which the devotee is returned to normal routines.

NOTES
(1) Thaipusam is also observed in many other centres including Penang, Ipoh, Johor Bharu, Sungai Patani, Muar and Maran, and increasingly among the small Indian communities stationed in the major East Malaysian cities. The Chettiar managed festival in Penang is described in Chapter Three. At the Ipoh festival large numbers of the minority Telegu community – traditionally Vaishnavites – bear kavadis in accordance with the Murugan tradition.
(2) Puranas “...long mythological works in verse extolling one or other of the great gods”. (Zaehner, R.C. Hinduism, Oxford University Press, London, 1962:10) However, these narratives usually explain aspects of the deity's character, and his/her relationship to other gods, and thus to cosmology.
(3) There are many puranic variations on the mythology surrounding the Skanda-Murugan cultus. These will be outlined in greater detail in Chapter 6. However, most Malaysian Hindu authorities would concur with the essential points as contained in this section. A simplified account of this purana appears in my earlier work. (Belle, Carl Vadivella. *Towards Truth: An Australian Spiritual Journey*, Pacific Press, Sdn. Bhd., Kuala Lumpur, 1992:222-227).


(5) It is popularly held that Siva is obligated to reward all devotees who worship him with *tapas* (austerities), including demons.


(7) Hindu conceptions of creation and destruction revolve about extensive periods or ages of the universe known as *yugas*. Saiva Siddhanta and popular Tamil theology sees the universe in constant flux, with a continual dynamic tension between *asuras* and *devas*. The creation of Murugan corresponds with the inauguration of the current age, the *Kaliyuga*. (Clothey, Fred. *Rhythm and Intent: Ritual Studies from South India*, Blackie and Son Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Bombay, 1983:48.)


(9) ibid:150


(11) ibid:265

(12) While *Sakti* usually refers to Parvati as Siva's consort, a *sakti* is also a divine power personified as female. (Fuller, C.J. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992:44)

(13) Handelman, D. op cit:140.

(14) Saivite Hinduism emphasizes that all creation ultimately emanates from sound. *Aum* (sometimes spelled “*Om*”) is regarded as the basic or primal sound (*Pravana Aum*). *Aum* is chanted as a preparatory or purificatory mantra.

(16) Among Malaysian Hindus, Murugan is nearly always understood to have received the *Vel* from Parvati, and is depicted doing so at Batu Caves. However, other *puranas* portray Siva arming Murugan with the *Vel*. (see, for example, Handelman, op cit.)


(18) Handelman:op cit:143

(19) Clothey,(1978), op cit:117


(21) Coutright, following O'Flaherty, (1973, op cit) distinguishes four interpretable levels within Hindu mythology, namely (i) narrative; that is, the story itself and all its versions; (ii) metaphoric: in which the themes in the narrative level link one particular myth to others in the same or different cycles; (iii) metaphysical: in which elements of the myth tie it to cosmic law and metaphysics; (iv) social and psychological: that is, that dimension which implies meanings for human life and action. Coutright adds a fifth level, namely, aetiological: the assignment of cause and reasons linking the narrative with ritual practice. (See, Coutright, Paul B. *Ganesha: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985)

(22) *Agamas*: Explained to me as literally “that which has come down”. A body of scriptures which are viewed as *sruti* or revealed scripture; and thus form the authoritative basis for *inter alia* Hindu ritual and spiritual disciplines.

(23) Clothey (1978), op cit:193

(24) Handelman, op cit:137

(25) ibid

(26) ibid:149

(27) O'Flaherty, (1973), op cit: 41

(28) ibid: 267-270; 286
According to Saiva Siddhanta philosophy there are four consecutive paths which progressively lead to realization of the Absolute. These are chariya (external acts of devotion, in which the devotee views him or herself as a servant); kriya (the Path of Service; of loving the Absolute as Father); yoga (a path of Self training which culminates in meditation and contemplation of God; of loving the Absolute as a friend); and jnana (knowledge of and realization of union with God.) Chariya and kriya are held to be preparatory to yoga. (Devapoopathy, Nadarajah. The Strength of Saivism, Second International Seminar on Saiva Siddhanta, Kuala Lumpur, 1986:64-66) The relationship between Siva as Absolute and Murugan as God of Yoga leading to union with the Absolute is as follows:

*This, Arumukan is My Power.*

*He and I are no different.*

*Like Me, He is indivisible, Omnipresent.*

*He is like an innocent child, yet Omniscient,*

*Capable of granting greatness, true knowledge and*

*Eternal salvation to those who worship Him.*

(*Kantapuram. Tiruvilaiyatrapatatalam 17.* Devapoopathy: op cit:74)


(36) *Cakras are “vortices of psychic energy...they do not 'exist' as such in the 'physical' matter but may be considered as vital centres, regulators of higher psychic and spiritual forces, which condition all physical responses.” (Zvelibil, Kamil. The Poets of the Powers, Rider and Company, London, 1973: 41) Thes cakras, or higher spiritual centres, are believed to be located along the spine.*
(37) O'Flaherty points out the peacock is often seen to be a motif of eroticism in India. (O'Flaherty: (1973,) op cit:167) In this way Murugan may also be viewed as subduing and controlling the forces of lust and desire and greed, all products of untrammelled sakti.

(38) These centres are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENTRE</th>
<th>PSYCHIC LOCATION</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patala</td>
<td>soles of feet</td>
<td>murder and malice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahatala</td>
<td>feet</td>
<td>absence of conscience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasatala</td>
<td>ankles</td>
<td>selfishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talatala</td>
<td>calves</td>
<td>prolonged mental confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutala</td>
<td>knees</td>
<td>retaliatory jealousy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitala</td>
<td>thighs</td>
<td>raging anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atala</td>
<td>hips</td>
<td>fear and lust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CAKRAS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENTRE</th>
<th>PSYCHIC LOCATION</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muladharma</td>
<td>base of spinal column</td>
<td>opening of spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svadishthana</td>
<td>genitals</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipura</td>
<td>navel</td>
<td>willpower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anahata</td>
<td>cardiac plexus</td>
<td>direct cognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visudhha</td>
<td>throat</td>
<td>divine love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajna</td>
<td>third eye (pineal gland)</td>
<td>divine sight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sahasrara</td>
<td>crown</td>
<td>realization/illumination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(39) Handelman, op cit:151


(41) Clothey (1978) op cit:135
(42) ibid:138
(44) ibid:217
(46) ibid:105
(47) Neelvani, op cit.
(48) Ramanathan, op cit:143-144
(49) ibid:144
(50) Neelvani, op cit.
(51) Ramanathan, op cit:140-142
(52) ibid:142
(55) Information provided through interviews with older devotees.
(56) Gullick, op cit:106
(57) Kalaiyarasi, op cit.
(58) Ramanathan, op cit:140
(59) Clothey (1978) points out that there are six major pilgrimage centres associated with the Murugan cultus in Tamil Nadu. (Clothey, op cit:117) This will be further discussed in Chapter Four.
(60) Kalaiyarasi, op cit.
(62) This architrave was officially opened on 27 December 2002
(63) A constant stream of tourist buses arrives daily. The intrusions of mass tourism have been a matter of deep concern to many Hindus. For while Hindus regard Batu Caves as a sacred site, and are thus sensitive to issues involving ritual purity and
pollution, tourism operators are often remarkably thoughtless, and generally promote the Caves as a natural wonder, a destination which all sightseers must visit, and only incidentally as a Hindu pilgrimage site. This approach results in what many Hindus regarded as offensive behaviour including shouting and laughter in the vicinity of the shrines, inappropriate dress, smoking and the occasional consumption of alcohol in the Caves, and unauthorized photography of devotees, especially those in meditation. While many Hindus grumble about the incursions of foreign tourists, nearly all are aware that had it not been for the intervention of the Malaysian tourist authorities, Batu Caves would have undoubtedly been destroyed by uncontrolled quarrying. The quarrying, conducted by a Chinese owned and managed company, had been located on the far side of the outcrop. The company showed no signs of yielding to the pleading of Hindu authorities or Government spokesmen, including the former Prime Minister, Datuk Hussein Onn, who during his speech to Hindus gathered at Thaipusam in 1978, urged Hindu leaders to explore every legal avenue possible to halt the quarrying. Operations were finally brought to an end after action taken by the Malaysian tourism authorities. Indian politicians explained to me that this avoided the spectacle of Muslim Government Ministers intervening to protect the interests of a minority religion – an action which might have been exploited by the opposition Parti Islam – but which nonetheless assured the integrity of Batu Caves both as a tourist site and as a Hindu pilgrimage centre.

(64) This will be explored in Chapter Four.

(65) Pantaram: a caste of non-Brahman priests. It should be noted that the service of the deity by non-Brahman priests is consistent with the practice at the main temple in Palani.

(66) It is held that the devotee must always ascend to worship Murugan. Clothey (1978) points out that Murugan shrines other than the main pilgrimage centres are generically known as Kunratal (or “every hill on which the god (i.e. Murugan) – dances”). (Clothey, op cit:117) However as with many Tamil myths and practices there is at least one exception. At Vallimalai (literally “Valli's Hill”) in northern Tamil Nadu, I visited a Murugan temple which lies at the base of the hill, whereas the shrine to Valli, Murugan's consort, is located at the summit.

(67) In fact, monkeys abound throughout the compound. In some years they have reached near plague proportions, stealing the offerings brought by pilgrims, and in one
case attacking a temple pantaram as he made his way up the shrine for the early morning puja.

(68) Nataraja is regarded as the dynamic symbol of the universe in constant cosmic flux; Siva as Creator, Preserver/Protector, Destroyer, Siva who conceals and reveals his Grace (the properties of rest and release). (Devapoopathy, op cit: 80-81)

(69) The Art Gallery Cave was previously known as the Muzium (Museum) Cave, whereas what is now the Muzium Caves was formerly referred to as the Art Gallery. The switch in nomenclature was made sometime after January 2000.

(70) St. Avvaiyar encapsulates both the power and unconventionality of bhakti devotionalism. A woman of Panar (lower caste) birth, she eschewed beauty and the security of good marriage in favour of premature age, plainness and a life of devotion and service (especially to those of lower birth). Her “dream” is regarded as a profound meditation and realization of Ganesha who promised that he would personally transport her to eternally remain with Siva upon Mt. Kailas, and is one of the most frequently quoted praise poems to Ganesha.

(71) The linga has its origins in phallic worship among the inhabitants of the Indus Valley civilization (Devapoopathy, op cit:66) However, this association is often denied, especially by those Hindus who are sensitive to Western perceptions of their religion, in particular the concept of a cosmic universe symbolized by the union of the linga with the yoni (vagina, a symbol of Parvati). The linga is more commonly worshipped as Siva as unmanifest reality, i.e. Siva beyond time, form and space, his “formless form” which is both immanent and transcendent. (ibid:67)

(72) The dubbing of Brahma with Vaishnavite markings “subtly” indicates the superiority of the Saivite path, i.e. that a Vaishnavite needs to be instructed by a Saivite. Moreover Murugan is wrongly portrayed as holding the Vel, which in point of fact at this stage of his cosmological history he is yet to receive.

(73) The mango story will be outlined in the following section.

(74) The role of Valli in the Murugan cultus will be discussed in Chapter Four.

(75) This myth celebrates a battle of wits between Murugan and the fabled saint, which ended with Murugan promising to grant her the “fruit” of a long life without hunger, pain and disease. (Zvelebil, (1991), op cit: 27)
(76) Tan Sri Manickavasagam – now deceased – was a former President of the Malaysian Indian Congress, and preceded Dato Seri Samy Vellu, the current incumbent.
(77) The *Tirukkural*, composed by St. Turuvalluvar, a weaver (and thus of humble birth), is regarded as the ethical centrepiece of Saiva Siddhanta theology. (See Pope, Dr G.U., Drew, W.H., Lazurus, John and Ellis, F.W. (Translators), *Tirukkural*, the South India Saiva Siddanta Works Publishing Society, Madras, 1958)
(78) These saints will be discussed in Chapter Four.
(79) When I inspected the Cave in 1997 many of the exhibits appeared neglected and in need of painting. Nearly all of the statues were defaced with graffiti, and some appeared to have been damaged by blows from heavy, blunt instruments. Temple custodians informed me that they believed the vandalism to have been the work of evangelical Christian extremists. Since that time the Cave and exhibits had been refurbished and renovations and extensions incorporating mythological themes are continuing.
(80) It is not uncommon for peacocks and roosters to be kept in the compounds of temples dedicated to Murugan.
(81) Attended personally
(82) *utsavar muthis*: these are special *murthis* which are used throughout festivals. The installed and consecrated *murthi* is regarded as permanent, and is not removed from the temple.
(83) Fuller (1992), op cit:106
(85) Neelvani, op cit.
(86) *Vibhuti* is the ash recovered from burnt cow dung, and is used extensively in Hindu worship, especially for sacred markings upon human devotees. The ash is believed to possess healing, cleansing and purifying properties.
(87) The *vibhuti* is applied on the forehead above the pineal gland which is regarded as the site of the mystical third eye. The third (inner) eye is believed to open at the onset of yogic insight, this lifting the aspirant to a new stage of spiritual unfoldment. The application of *vibhuti* to the forehead immediately above the “third eye” may be thus
seen as a means of control, and in cases of unauthorized or premature trance, of restraint.

(88) *Alankaram Deepam*. This is showing the light to one who is garlanded, that is, worthy of being treated as a king. Tamils will often garland honoured guests or those whom they regard as exalted, (for example, gurus or ascetics).

(89) The sharing of the flame transmits the power and benevolence of the deity which is absorbed by the devotee though the fingertips and eyes. It also signifies the mutual vision of deity and devotee. (Fuller (1992, op cit:73)

(90) The *nadaswaran* is an instrument resembling a clarinet. In public processions it is usually played in relays, with one *nadaswaran* player succeeding another. Often a skilled *nadaswaran* player will revisit the themes of former players and then embellish them with elaborate variations. Most temples employ resident *nadaswaran* players and drummers who not only perform for the temple deity, but will be engaged for weddings, house dedications, etc.


(92) The smashing of coconuts has many meanings in the Tamil worldview. However, in Saivite worship it often symbolizes individual transition, the fracturing of the hard shell of ego (*anava*) to reveal the sweetness of truth within. Coconuts are often smashed prior to a religious pilgrimage. The coconut should smash into three or more pieces. This will be further detailed in Chapter Three.

(93) Every major temple has its own chariot which is used during festivals or on ceremonial occasions to convey the deity in procession. The cost of the *ratham* was announced during the inauguration, at which I was present.

(94) Minor or guardian deities often face in four directions to protect a temple or chariot from malign influences which may pollute. The role of guardian or “lesser” deities and spirits will be considered in later chapters.

(95) Taken from local press accounts. In 2004 an attempt was made to introduce two horses and riders to escort the chariot to the Caves. However these plans were hastily abandoned after one horse, badly frightened, consistently misbehaved, refusing to settle and rearing and threatening to bolt. Given the huge crowd tightly crammed within the confined environs outside the temple entrance, and the consequent inability of people to take evasive action, it seems remarkable that no-one was seriously injured in this
incident. Shortly afterwards both horses were removed from the procession.

(96) Police “estimates” are those authorized for use by the press. Unofficial estimates are actual police estimates. The fact that such huge crowds turn out for Hindu festivals – far greater than those which assemble for the procession held to honour the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed – is a sensitive issue in Malaysia, and could be used to (a) embarrass Muslims and by implication the ruling Barisan Nasional, or (b) be seen as a vehicle to promote racial instability (based on interviews with UMNO politicians during my tenure with the Australian High Commission 1976-79). The unofficial estimate for 2000 was over 220,000 people.

(97) Dick Hebdige comments that “styles” find expression in mundane objects which take on a double meaning; both as a warning to normative values, and as icons of veneration, usually associated with a forbidden identity. (see: Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Methuen & Co Ltd., London, 1979:2-3)

(98) In the past two-three years, responding to the concerns of senior Hindus, the Devastanam authorities have liaised with police to identify and remove potential troublemakers. The intervention of the temple authorities was regarded as essential; the police were reluctant to act unless they had the full backing of the Hindu community. The presence of plain clothed police has all but eliminated the disruption created by the gangs. The precedent for this action was provided by crowd control measures adopted in 1999 at the popular Hindu pilgrimage site of Maran, Pahang, where manifestations of “gangsta” culture were suppressed after only one year of marshall/police coordination.

(99) Collins, Elizabeth Fuller. *Pierced by Murugan's Lance: Ritual, Power and Moral Redemption Among Malaysian Hindus*, Northern Illinois University Press, Dekalb, 1997: 68. Collins claims that *kolattam* represents “stylized combat” while in her doctorate thesis she asserts that the dance is based upon or resembles “ritualized combat”. (Collins, Elizabeth Marie. *Murugan's Lance, Power and Ritual: The Hindu Tamil Festival of Thaipusam in Penang, Malaysia*, University of California, 1991, UMI Dissertation Information Service, Michigan, 1992) This claim is unsourced, and I have been unable to locate any evidence which would substantiate her assertion. Hindu dance masters and teachers have informed me that *kolattam* has its origins in a traditional game played by young Tamil girls. This view is supported by Lakshmanan Chettiar.
The ease with which trouble can arise in Malaysia and how quickly it can become ethnically charged was demonstrated to me by an incident I witnessed at Thaipusam in 1979. At about 3 a.m. on Thaipusam day, the progress of kavadi bearers was blocked by a police truck which became wedged in the crowd on the bridge over the Sungai Batu. Elements of the crowd became very angry, and accused the (Malay) police of deliberately setting out to ruin a Hindu festival. A group of young men began shouting “Babi! Anjing!” (“Pig! Dog!”) to the police who cowered in the back of the van. The impasse was broken by a Tamil member of the Federal Reserve Unit, who leapt on to the tailgate of the van and launched into an impassioned speech. According to my friends he said that (a) the van had become wedged by accident and not design, (b) the crowd was impeding Malay police who had come to protect Tamils in the conduct of their religious ceremonies, and that (c) the people who had insulted his colleagues were a disgrace to the Indian community. This harangue seemed to have an immediate impact, and the situation was defused.

The electricity workers carry long bamboo canes with a triangular shaped crossbar on the top. This is used to lift low-slung wires. Where wires cannot be raised sufficiently to accommodate the passage of the chariot, the workers ascend and cut the wires, (to general applause from the crowd). Occasionally whole blocks of streetlights are blackened, only to be reilluminated within a few minutes of the procession passing. Many of the electricity workers are Malays. It is this sort of arrangement which exemplifies the deeper currents of religious tolerance within Malaysia. With the continual upgrading of services in Kuala Lumpur, the need for this type of intervention is declining year by year.

Information furnished by a branch official, Malaysian Indian Congress. The bridge is only a few blocks from the residence of Datuk Samy Vellu, MIC leader.


The role of the Sri Lankan/Ceylonese “Jaffña” community in the development of Malaysian Hinduism will be outlined in Chapter Five.
Milk curd is considered an advisable element of any vegetarian Hindu's diet. It is also considered “cooling” as opposed to the “heat” of asceticism. The issue of “heating” and “cooling” will be discussed in Chapter Six.

In recent years there have been many complaints about the nature of “counseling” provided by ISKCON, who have used their presence at Thaipusam to openly proselytize. This is considered both intrusive and insensitive in the extreme. I have seen ISKCON representatives attempt to hand tracts to (Saivite) kavadi bearers as they emerge from trance immediately upon completion of their vows. These tracts are often very critical of Saivism and Siva and Murugan who are both labelled as “demi-gods”.

Jagadisa Ayya, P.V. *South Indian Customs*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1989 (1925): 51-52

Thaipusuam has not been proclaimed a public holiday in the Federal Territory.

Some tourists impede the progress of kavadi bearers in their attempts to take pictures. I have seen tourists thrust their cameras into the midst of kavadis to try to photograph the devotees' faces. They often seem genuinely affronted when members of the devotee's supporting group remonstrate with them.

My personal impression has been that most of those who do the approaching are young and generally well educated “Westerners”, mainly of European background.

A senior Malaysian Minister to whom I was introduced in 1982 told me that the Malaysian authorities strongly opposed the “human zoo” approach to tourism, and made every attempt to ensure that the cultural integrity of religions and belief systems were respected. However, this has not always been the case in Singapore. A series of advertisements released by the Singapore Tourist authorities in 1984-85 promoted Thaipusam as an “extraordinary spectacle” (Saturday Travel Section, *The Age*, Melbourne, late 1984-early 1985)

Kalaiyarasi, op cit.

*The Star*, 29 January 1999

Lee, op cit:321

Lee, ibid
However, this form of opportunistic retailing seems to be a feature of pilgrimage sites throughout India (and indeed, perhaps in all religions). Thus, for example, Lawrence Babb, reporting on the Rajim Mela (in India) states that “The atmosphere...in some respects resembles a country fair in the United States. Near the main encampment is situated a large bazaar where merchandise in great variety is available for purchase; food of all kinds, household goods, cheap toys for children, fountain pens, pictures of deities, amulets, etc. There is entertainment as well: mendicants who mortify their flesh; sideshows, hand operated ferris wheels, and singing in the evenings.” (Babb, Lawrence, “The Food of the Gods in Chattisgargh - Some Structural Features of Hindu Ritual”, South Western Journal of Anthropology, Volume 26, 1970:302)

Figure taken from personal diary and derived from local press coverage.

The Star, 24 January 1997

In some variations the prize is marriage, and not the fruit. In these versions Murugan returns to find Ganesha married to Siddhi (power and accomplishment, or perfection; that is realization of the Self); and Buddhi (intellect of the disciplined mind. (See: Zvelebil (1991), op cit: 30). These brides, together representing spiritual illumination and control, emphasize the significance of the mango as a metaphor for the fruits of spiritual knowledge.

Used in this sense to refer to family dharma as opposed to rita dharma (universal dharma). Many accounts also indicate that Murugan was annoyed with his own lack of insight which prevented him from discerning the truth which was so obvious to his brother.

Clothey (1978), op cit:118


Agastya is typically associated with Siva. According to legend the many Southerners who journeyed to Mt. Kailas to witness Siva's marriage to Parvati had requested that Siva provide them with a sage. Siva chose the dwarf Agastya.

(Klostermaier, Klaus L. A Survey of Hinduism, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994:294) Danielou states that Agastya means Mover-of-Mountains, or Mover-of-Unmoving, and that he “...conquered southern India, and taught Vedic rites to its
inhabitants”. (Danielou, Alain (1964), op cit: 322-323)

(125) Jagadisa Ayyar, P.V. *South Indian Shrines*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1982:476

(126) Jagadisa Ayyar states that “…when he (i.e. Idumban) was at a loss to know how to lift them, the Danda or stick of Brahman stood over the hillocks while the snakes of the earth served in place or ropes to enable him to carry them....” (Jayadisa Ayyar P.V. *South Indian Customs*, Asian Educational Services, Madras, 1989 (1925):138)

(127) Zvelebil (1991), op cit: 32

(128) ibid

(129) This claim is not universally accepted, and is indeed firmly rejected by some Dravidian nationalists. (*Vide*: Ramaswamy, Sumathi, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1998) However, many Malaysian Hindus accept the role of Agastya. Some leading Hindus claim that the sage visited the Malay Peninsula and is buried in an undisclosed site on Mt. Kedah. This claim was also made by a Tamil Minister whom I heard speak in Chennai in 1998.

(130) Clothey (1978), op cit:119-120

(131) ibid:120

(132) Zvelebil (1991), op cit: 32

(133) Jagadisa Ayyar (1989), op cit:136

(134) Babb (1976), op cit:8-9

(135) Neelvani, op cit.

(136) The number 108 is considered very significant in Saivite thought. Both Murugan and Ganesha are considered to have 108 attributive names, and many religious treatises are presented in 108 parts.

(137) The making of kavadis is often an expensive undertaking, and *aluga* kavadis in particular may require considerable outlays for timber, hooks, chains, peacock feathers, (which are imported from India), and other materials. However, once constructed, a kavadi may be used for several years, requiring but minor refurbishment before each Thaipusam. Specialist kavadi makers (usually *pujaris* or members of small temples), often rent kavadis to devotees, frequently letting the same kavadi to up to three
individuals over the course of a festival, depending upon the time each person plans to take the kavadi. These kavadis will often be transported to the Caves by the manufacturer, thus sparing the devotee the logistical ordeal of ferrying such a bulky and unwieldy item to and from the crowded environs of Batu Caves. *Paal* kavadis are significantly less expensive than *aluga* kavadis, more easily transported, and many are donated to the Devastanam after the pilgrimage for the use of other and often more needy devotees.

(138) Babb (1976, op cit:9) claims that *vel* kavadis are not regarded by Singaporean devotees as “traditional” and postulates that they may have been introduced to the Hindu community via the agency of Chinese mediumship. (Indeed, during my visit to Singapore in 2000, I was advised that *vel* kavadis had been banned in Singapore, on the basis that they do not comprise part of the recognized Murugan tradition.) Senior Malaysian Hindus have made similar comments to me during the course of my fieldwork. However, this form of kavadi is well known in Tamil Nadu, and photographs within lesser Murugan temples, especially those near Nagercoil in the extreme south, show devotees bearing these kavadis.

(139) Lee, op cit:325

(140) Personal field research


(142) So-called because of the illustration of a bulldog on the label. In Malaysia, Guinness promotes stout as a medicinal drink under the slogan *Guinness baik untuk anda* (“Guinness is good for you”). This does not disguise the fact that in the eyes of most Hindus that Guinness Stout is an alcoholic product, but it has achieved a certain reputation as a healthful tonic among some estate workers and urban labourers.
Many *Agamic* gods are also worshipped in “village” forms. Among Malaysian Hindus both Durga and Kali are worshipped in *Agamic* and village manifestations.

Neelvani lists several other types of kavadis other than those described in the text. Most are not common in Malaysia, or are found in a highly modified form, while some are now very rare even in India. The supplementary list is as follows:

(a) *Maccha Kavadi*: a fisherman will put in fish in a pot and carry it to the shrine (Neelvani claims that this is found only at Palani, but I have seen this motif decorating *aluga* kavadis in Penang.)

(b) *Mayil Kavadi*: Made entirely of peacock feathers. (This form of kavadi is borne at Batu Caves by members of an *Amman* worshipping group based in a spiritual centre on the southern outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.) However, often the term *mayil* (peacock) and *aluga* are used interchangeably in reference to kavadis, perhaps reflecting the extensive use of peacock feathers as decoration on most *aluga* kavadis.

(c) *Pannir Kavadi*: A kavadi featuring scented water

(d) *Agni Kavadi*: Kavadi as a pot containing burning charcoal or wood and covered with *veppillai* leaves. Neelvani notes that this is recommended for those recovering from illness.

(e) *Sandhana Kavadi*: Wet sandalwood paste is moulded into the shape of a *Goparum* (temple tower), and carried on the head.

(f) *Kalasha Kavadi*: A kavadi consisting of a milkpot decorated with flowers, leaves and sometimes limes. (At Batu Caves flowers are usually red and yellow – colours associated with Murugan – normally the blossoms of *kantal, venkai, katampu* or lotus.)

(g) *Pallava Kavadi*: Made of beads such as *rudraksha* (this type of kavadi is very rarely seen at Batu Caves). Neelvani, *op cit.*

*Mauna* is a common discipline among Hindu ascetics. Indeed there are devotees, (usually elderly men and women, and generally occupying positions of spiritual leadership) who take a vow of total silence for the entire period of the Thaipusam festival. This is regarded as the spiritual equivalent of bearing a kavadi.

*Pey*: “anonymous malevolent spirit and ghost of the dead in Tamil Nadu”. (Fuller, C.J. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992:269). However, according to my informants, most *pey* are far
from anonymous, and consist of the spirits of known or divined suicides, those who have died premature death, and women who have died in childbirth. Pey are generally regarded as unquiet beings who require placating, and may hold exceptional (and sometimes transferrable powers). Pey are often the object of mediumship rituals.

(147) The cult of Aiyanar/Ayyappan has taken root among sections of the Malaysian Hindu population over the past 15-20 years. Initially, within Malaysia, this appeared largely as a lower caste phenomenon, and indeed Ayyappan was most typically encountered as a village deity within the context of spiritual mediumship. However, in recent years the worship of Ayyappan has become more widespread, and a number of Malaysian Hindus have participated in the annual pilgrimage to the deity's abode in the Western Ghats, Kerala. An extended account of this pilgrimage is described and analyzed by E. Valentine Daniel, who journeyed with a party that included members of all castes. (Daniel, E. Valentine. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984.) The cult of Aiyanar is explored in Louis Dumont's “A Structural Definition of a Folk Deity of Tamil Nad: Aiyanar the Lord.” (*Contributions to Indian Sociology, Old Series*, No. 3)

(148) For example, Dato S. Govindaraj makes the melodramatic claim that kavadi worship in Malaysia has “...become a horrible spectacle of wild display, competition, and an exhibition of demonic acts and carried to excesses (sic)...” (Dato S. Govindaraj. *Country Report, Malaysia*, First Asia Pacific Hindu Conference, Singapore, 1988). This extraordinary statement manages, *inter alia*, to overlook or ignore the fact that the vast majority of devotees bear orthodox kavadis in honour of Murugan and in accordance with established patterns of Murugan worship. (Dato Govindaraj's comments will be discussed in Chapter Five)

(149) It should be noted, in passing, that many of the heterogeneous collection of deities worshipped at Thaipusam are in some way connected to Murugan, (or are claimed to be so). Thus certain *Agamic* deities, such as Vishnu and Krishna are popularly represented as related to Murugan through his marriage to the celestial Teyvayanai, whereas some non-*Agamic* traditions explicitly identify specific village deities as local manifestations of Murugan.

(150) Ervin, Frank R., Palmour, Roberta M., Murphy, Beverly E. Pearson, Prince,

(151) The group with which I have been associated throughout my own pilgrimages has included the following vocation/social groupings: a Malaysian Government Senator, his sons and daughters, the son of a leading Cabinet Minister, merchants, university lecturers, the Registrar of an Australian University (a Malaysian born Tamil), family members of one of Malaysia's largest trading houses, nurses, taxi drivers, rubber tappers, labourers, housewives, elderly widows, university students, office workers, female secondary students, and an aged female renunciate (now deceased). While in ethnic terms this group is predominantly Tamil (including Jaffa Tamils), there are also members of the Chinese, Telegu, Malayalee, Sikh, Gujarati, Marathi and Sinhalese communities. The group, comprising a total of about 50 devotees, has been equally divided by sex.

(152) Fuller (1992), op cit:205

(153) This stipulation is rigidly observed. During my 1983 pilgrimage, a group of mature males, who had completed the penultimate set of pre-kavadi purificatory rites, to the point of being invested with the yellow thread, were invited to sleep overnight in a neighbouring residence. The following morning senior temple officials insisted that all repeat these rituals. It was explained that their purity may have been compromised by accidental exposure to polluting householder activities, in particular, contact with menstruating women.

(154) Lee, op cit:328

(155) At a trial trance I attended, one young devotee manifested a vehement Hanuman trance. This became obvious when he literally ran up a nearby coconut tree in the temple compound, bit through coconut husks with his teeth, and shook the crown and trunk of the tree with a powerful violence that one would never have imagined from a person of such slight stature. When he threatened to rain coconuts onto the roof of the temple, the *pujari* coaxed him down from the tree with the offer of a tray of bananas and jackfruit. Once the devotee had descended the *pujari* quickly terminated the trance. The *pujari* informed me later that he had marked this young man as potentially disruptive and had advised his assistants to keep him under strict control on Thaipusam day.
(156). For example, in 1983 I witnessed a pujari, a gentle, mild, but extremely devout man, publicly scold a young man whom he accused of attending the temple under the guise of pilgrimage solely for the purpose of flirting with young women. The scolding, as harsh as it was unexpected, had an almost immediate impact, and the young man successfully bore his kavadi on Thaipusam Day.


(158) For the purposes of convenience, I am here using a simplified version of Gilbert Rouget's classification of trance, thus (a) “possession” trance: a form of trance which leads the devotee to acquire a different personality, either of a god or a spirit who has taken complete control of the subject, and (b) “inspiration trance”: where the votary is invested by the deity which then exercizes a form of controlling co-existence over the devotee. (Rouget, Gilbert. *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985:26)


(160) The Indian Settlement has been earmarked for redevelopment into modern suburbia.

(161) Clothey (1978), op cit:177-180. However, as I will observe in Chapter Three, the colours associated with kavadi worship may vary.

(162) However, Ayyappan worshippers will often be dressed in black. Some village deity worshippers will wear turbans traditionally associated with kingship.

(163) Saivite Hindus have many categories to describe the state of trance, ranging from divine grace (*arul*) down to categories embracing demonic possession. Hysteria is usually described in terms of psychic disorder. Collins (op. cit:112-114 ) claims that the trances achieved by women and lower castes are often dismissed by members of higher castes as possession by lower spirits. I have rarely encountered this view either in Malaysia or India. Indeed, the entire tradition of *bhakti* devotionalism would militate against such an approach. It has been my general experience that trance states of women
and lower caste devotees have been accorded equal status with those attained by higher caste males. The issue of trance will be discussed more fully in Chapter Six. However, as an example of an unwanted and intrusive trance I cite the following. In 1985, several male devotees, including this writer, were confronted by an entranced teenage girl performing a corybantic and blatantly seductive dance. She was rapidly brought out of trance and removed from the scene by embarrassed relatives. I was later informed that this girl had been possessed by an *apsara* (celestial nymph, often employed by higher deities to divert ascetics or holy figures from their meditations and *tapas*), and that had any of us responded in any way it would have meant the end of our pilgrimage. I met this young woman – a demure, studious and extremely proper schoolgirl – two weeks later. Although she had been informed of her sensual display, she had no recollection either of the events leading to the trance, nor her actual experience of the trance state.

(164) Neelvani, op cit.


(166) Unless firmly secured, hooks are a source of potential injury both to devotees and onlookers. I have witnessed only two injuries caused by unsecured hooks, one a superficial flesh wound, the other a more serious affair where a flying hook impaled an onlooker's nostril.

(167) Ervin, Palmour, Murphy, Prince and Simons, op cit:267

(168) Lakshmanan, op cit:162-163

(169) ibid:162  In both her doctorate thesis and her book, Collins claims that the kavadi dance is based upon the mating dance of the male peacock. (Collins, op cit:74) This claim is unsourced. I have been unable to locate any reference, either oral or textual, which would substantiate this claim, and senior Hindus and temple authorities, both in Malaysia and India, to whom I put this claim reacted with bemusement, scorn and occasionally outrage.

(170) Lakshmanan, op cit:162-163


(172) Babb (1976), op cit:10

(173) Rajakrishnan Ramasamy. *Caste Consciousness Among Indian Tamils in Malaysia,*
Although it is denied by Devastanam authorities, many of whom themselves claim lower caste allegiance, the forbidding of Paraiyar drumming seems a measure which is specifically directed at banning the practices of an Adi Dravidar caste.

Lee, op cit:326

In 2003, many of the stalls were relocated to widen this laneway.

This fee remains bitterly resented by many Hindus, and is seen as both unnecessary and as a grossly unfair impost upon poorer devotees. Moreover Devastanam assurances that the charge would be waived in the case of children and the less well off do not appear to have been implemented consistently. (See: RM10 is not compulsory at least for some people (Dennis Chua), No option but to pay up for our reporter! (Sushma Veera), and When words and actions don't match – all in the Malay Mail, 4 February 2004.)

The burning of camphor by persons other than pantarams was banned in the Temple Cave in 2002.

In 1999 the Devastanam commissioned a major upgrade of the drainage at Batu Caves. This project was completed only days before Thaipusam 2000, and has partially resolved the problem.

The Devastanam recruits pantarams from all over Malaysia to serve at the Caves throughout Thaipusam. (Lee, op cit:321)

“I walked with God,” a young martial arts instructor informed me in 1995. “I felt all the divine powers I'd ever imagined, and then some more. What am I to do now?” This aspect of Thaipusam will be further explored in Chapter Six.

Opinion is divided as to whether vegetarians are required to attend the Idumban Puja. Some sources aver that because vegetarians are not returning to a diet which includes meat, they have no need to formally break fast at an Idumban puja. However, a large majority of authorities insist that Idumban must be honoured. My own observations suggest that nearly all vegetarians attend.

However, this does not mean that it does not occur. In 1978, I was invited to attend a breaking of fast ceremony in a small village temple near the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Damansara, conducted by a female medium on behalf of the large number of
kavadi bearers, both men and women, whom she had guided throughout Thaipusam. During the course of the Idumban *puja* her daughter slaughtered several chickens which were cooked and offered to both Idumban and devotees.

(183) Neelvani, op cit.
CHAPTER TWO. MALAYSIA: THE SOCIAL AND ETHNIC CONTEXT

1. INTRODUCTION
The chapter situates the contemporary Indian presence within the modern Malaysian polity – a state dominated by the imperatives of ethnicity and increasingly responsive to a hegemonic political, cultural and religious framework shaped and driven by Malay-Muslim powerbrokers. The chapter will trace the arrival and adaptation of the Indian population against the backdrop of British colonial authority, and throughout the transformative period of the Japanese occupation, and will explore the Indian experience within the context of post-War instability and the inter-ethnic re-positioning during the period leading to the attainment of Merdeka. It will also examine the policies of post-Merdeka Malaya/Malaysia, with special reference to the introduction of the New Economic Policy of 1971, the impact of Mahathirism, and the redefinition of Malay-Muslim identity.

2. BRITISH COLONIALISM
The imposition of British control over the Malay Peninsula was both piecemeal and gradual and extended from 1786, when the East India Company acquired the island of Penang (1), to 1914, nearly 130 years later, when the Sultan of Johore agreed to the appointment of a British Resident.(2) The Malayan States were structured into three discrete administrative groups. Authority for the three Straits Settlements territories (Penang and Province Wellesley, Singapore and Malacca) was vested in the Colonial Office(3), while four Malay Sultanates (Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan) were linked together as the Federated Malay States (FMS), with the capital Kuala Lumpur, (in Selangor), and under the direction of a Resident General.(4) The remaining five states, (the former Siamese Protectorates of Perlis, Kedah, Trengganu and Kelantan, and the Johore Sultanate) all of which accepted the appointment of British Residents, were collectively known as the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS). (5)

The establishment of British authority over the Malay Peninsula was followed by the rapid development of a full colonial economy structured upon plantation agriculture and
extraction industries, and supported by a series of major infrastructure projects designed to maximise exploitation of resources and to develop commerce and trade. The British colonial economy in Malaya was extraordinarily successful, and by 1941, on the eve of the Japanese invasion, Malaya was one of the richest possessions within the British Empire. The development and management of this economy was largely driven by British and European companies, and to a lesser extent by an emerging and flourishing Chinese business class.

The establishment of a viable and buoyant colonial economy required a reliable supply of cheap and easily managed labour. The British made an early decision not to incorporate the Malay masses into the colonial workforce, but rather to build a labour corps largely composed of indentured and contractual immigrant labour. This was mainly drawn from China and India, but included a substantial Javanese minority. The British encouraged and regulated immigration in accordance with the demand for labour within Malaya. By 1940 the Chinese and Indian communities comprised about 60 per cent of the population of Malaya, thus significantly outnumbering the indigenous Malays.

2.1 British Theories of Rule

In governing Malaya, British colonial authorities deployed ideologies of colonial rule which had been shaped by experiences of Empire in India, namely:

(i) Indirect rule: This rested upon the Sultans as the traditional loci of Malay political power. Under the agreements concluded with the British, the territorial integrity of each Sultanate was respected, and the Sultans were left in control of matters relating to the interpretation of Islam and Malay custom (adat).

(ii) Co-option of local elites. Members of the Malay aristocracy were absorbed into the fundamental structures of the colonial government and administration. Co-option was to be perpetuated through the establishment of a select school, the Malay College, (“the Eton of the East”), which opened in 1905 in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, and was charged with training the sons of Malay royalty who were imbued with the values and ethos of
Empire,(13) and subsequently appointed to middle range positions within the colonial bureaucracy, (14)

(iii) British racial theory. This was constructed around the supposedly “scientific” principles of Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism not only assumed British and European racial superiority, but also permitted colonial “knowledge” of subject “races” in terms of a complicated racial taxonomy in which any given group could be located in relation to their perceived inferiority to a British template.(15) The application of British racial theory not only reduced the myriad of social groups under colonial control into three primordial and bounded “races” whose standing as a people could be firmly fixed within a determined racial hierarchy, but also ascribed socio-biological characteristics to each of the component races, which *inter alia*, stipulated the vocational function each was to occupy within colonial economic structures. (16)

This racial ideology could also be manipulated to emphasise the absolute necessity for British rule over the Malay Peninsula. British observers were quick to assert that Malay backwardness required the guidance and security provided by a benevolent power, one which would guarantee their welfare, indeed survival, against the predations of unscrupulous outsiders.(17) The British could therefore claim the mantle of protectors of the Malay masses, a role which provided the ultimate *raison d'être* for colonial control. To underscore their self anointed function, the British encouraged the belief that irrespective of their length of stay, the Chinese and Indians would never belong in Malaya, and that their status as “visitors” would render them perpetually ineligible to claim even the most rudimentary political and social privileges within *Tanah Melayu* (the land of the Malays).(18)

By the 1930s British colonial policy had produced an ethnically plural population, split and compartmentalised according to divisions of labour and occupational functions. (19) Although in the years leading to World War II there were signs of growing restiveness, as yet the various ethnic communities remained fragmented and lacked the self reflexivity and wider communal allegiances necessary to mount unified action.
3. INDIAN IMMIGRATION AND SOCIETY TO WORLD WAR II

3.1 Indian Labour: Indentured and Kangany

I have noted that the British colonial economy relied upon imported “coolie” labour, largely recruited from China, India and Java. Indian workers were hired under two basic labour schemes, indenture (1840-1910), and the kangany system, which commenced prior to the official termination of indenture, and was curtailed by the Indian Government in 1938.

The legislative framework providing for Indian indentured labour, enacted by the British Parliament as Ordinance 6 of 1838, was modelled upon and contained the residual elements of the laws which had hitherto governed slavery. Indenture, in theory a mutual contractual agreement between employer and labourer, in practice rested upon a punitive system of legally sanctioned compulsion, which worked almost exclusively to the benefit of the planter. The contract, signed before the labourer left India, placed the employee under a series of legally enforceable obligations, and simultaneously denied him/her of almost all personal freedoms for a stipulated period of time, often of several years duration. The contract was totally binding, and the labourer was powerless to terminate it, or even modify the conditions under which he/she worked. Breaches were subject to prosecution under criminal law, and were ruthlessly pursued through the judicial apparatus of the colonial administration, which invariably sided with planters.

In his study of Indian migration to Malaya, K.S. Sandhu estimates that a total of 250,000 indentured labourers were recruited to work in Malaya between 1840-1910. Apart from a few hundred labourers from Bengal, the vast majority of the workforce was of South Indian origin. The colonial preference for South Indian labour was informed by an official perspective which viewed the “Madrassi” as docile and easily managed. Indeed, the “cringingly servile” Tamil was portrayed both as an alternative and as a counterweight to the potentially ambitious and assertive Chinese worker.

In the main, Indian indentured labourers consisted of adult males aged between 15 and
45. (29) The overwhelming majority were drawn from the ranks of those agricultural workers and rural wage earners who had been adversely affected by structural economic changes, especially land reforms, introduced by the British authorities. (30) The fear or actual experience of famine and prolonged privation provoked the greatest flows of indentured labourers. (31) Women and children comprised only a small percentage of this migratory flow, rarely constituting more than 20 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of the annual intake, and frequently totalling significantly less. (32)

Because of the extreme poverty of their backgrounds, the “coolies” often commenced their period of indenture under the severe handicap of heavy personal debt. (33) Throughout their working lives they were poorly fed, (34) housed in substandard accommodation, (35) medically neglected, (36) and subject to relentless and brutal discipline. (37) Not surprisingly, many indentured labourers succumbed to premature death; as late as 1905 the annual average death rates on all estates registered at 11.6 per cent. (38) The stringent regime endured by the indentured workforce helped spawn a plethora of social problems which included alcoholism, drug abuse, and uncontrolled gambling. (39)

The treatment of Indian indentured labourers throughout the British Empire, (and other European Empires), became a major political issue among Indian nationalists. (40) Despite these political pressures, indenture was ultimately superseded by the huge demand for labour created by the rubber boom of the opening decades of the twentieth century. Quite simply, indenture was unable to respond to the new labour market, and was increasingly replaced with kangany recruitment which was more flexible and better equipped to meet the immediate requirements of the plantation industry. (41) In 1910 the Colonial Office announced the termination of the recruitment of indentured labour to Malaya. (42)

The recruitment of labour under kangany auspices had commenced well before the cessation of indenture. Basically a kangany was a field foreman, a “coolie of standing”, a man who enjoyed a good reputation and was drawn from a “clean” caste, who was not
only charged with the task of recruiting labour to work on estates, but was required to supervise those whom he had engaged. The kangany recruited within his own district (taluk) of origin in India, thus selecting a workforce of people whose customs and traditions he understood. The colonial authorities regulated the kangany system with the Tamil Immigration Fund Ordinance of 1907, which dealt with the exigencies of the hire and repatriation of Indian labour.

Kangany recruitment stimulated far greater flow and more consistent supply of labour than that achieved under indenture. On the basis of available official data, Sandhu estimates that between 1865 and 1938, 1,186,717 Indian migrants arrived in Malaya under kangany auspices. The figure represents 62 per cent of the total Indian assisted labour migration, and almost 28 per cent of total Indian immigration to Malaya until Merdeka in 1957. Unlike indentured migration, recruitment of kangany labour proved responsive to actual labour demand in Malaya, and appears to have functioned far more independently of social and economic conditions within India.

Throughout the years leading to World War II, the flow of kangany labour was augmented by two additional migratory streams, namely independent assisted and non-assisted workers. The former comprised that group of labourers who had volunteered, independent of the kangany system, to enter contractual employment in Malaya, or to whom the Malayan colonial authorities extended financial and other forms of support. The number of independent assisted workers rose substantially throughout the 1920s and by 1925 accounted for 28 per cent of the total number of Malayan funded labourers. Non-assisted migrants were those who funded their own travel, and who sought work following their arrival in Malaya. These workers were not encouraged by the Malayan authorities, who were reluctant to endorse any form of migration which might threaten the primacy of kangany recruitment. Despite the lack of official support, there was a steady flow of non-assisted migrants from the 1890s onwards.

While approximately one-third of kangany labourers were drawn from Adi Dravidar (or Tamil “untouchable” castes), the remainder represented the general spread of Tamil
caste groups below Brahman level, including members of higher castes. The kangany system thus generated a far more socially diverse workforce than that produced under indenture and resulted in a more variegated Indian community within Malayan estates and towns, and a greater range of social behaviour and belief structures than those which had prevailed throughout the period of indenture. However, the most notable outcome of the kangany system was the development of estates which were discrete and self-enclosed sub-cultural units constructed around the remembered mores of ancestral villages. This resulted in the fragmentation of the plantation workforce into socially as well as geographically isolated component units, fissured by primal loyalties of caste, village, and regional and linguistic origin.

Although, in theory, the welfare of the Indian worker was regulated by the colonial government, in practice, the relationship was one of planter domination and exploitation of a subordinate and largely acquiescent labour force. The plantation economy was wholly structured on the demands of capital, and in particular the maximisation of returns for owners and shareholders. As an instrument - one of several – utilised toward achieving that objective, the Indian worker was accorded secondary consideration, and his/her needs and general welfare were thus of nugatory consequence.

The Indian workforce continued to suffer from an array of seemingly intractable social and health problems, the result of low pay, a harsh working environment and substandard accommodation. Morbidity and mortality rates remained excessive, and were often exacerbated by constant malnourishment, unhealthy housing, the close proximity of estates to known malarial regions, and a high rate of alcoholism, frequently linked to the ready availability of toddy on estates and government controlled worksites. Suicide was a common phenomenon, especially among male labourers.

Kangany recruitment finally ceased in 1938, when the Government of India, alarmed at reports of a threat to reduce the wages of the Indian workforce, placed a ban on the emigration of assisted labour to Malaya. Although the Malayan Government made
several attempts to have the ban rescinded, especially after the outbreak of war in 1939, negotiations continually foundered on the central issue of wages to be paid to plantation labour. (59)

3.2 Other Indian Immigration
Throughout the period other streams of Indian migration arrived in Malaya. Both government and commercial sectors required the support of a trained English speaking workforce which possessed a range of specialist skills not immediately available in Malaya, either among the indigenous Malays or the immigrant labouring communities, and thus had to be procured from abroad. (60) The expansion of the Malayan economy attracted other groups – merchants, financiers, technicians, skilled labour – who saw personal and professional advantages in working in colonial Malaya. These groups included Ceylonese Tamils, (known in Malaya as “Jaffna” Tamils because of their district of origin), who were recruited to serve as clerical personnel within the government services and on the estates, (61) educated Malayalees and young professional Tamils, Nattukottai Chettiars (a caste of businessmen and financiers), Sikh and Punjabi Muslim police and security personnel, and various traders of both North and South Indian background, and including Parsis, Hindus and Muslims. (62)

3.3 Indian Political Development to 1941
By 1939 there were approximately 700,000 Indians resident in Malaya. Of these only 28,000 (or 4 per cent) were occupied in trade, business or professions, while roughly 70,000 (or 10 per cent) were employed in skilled or semi skilled jobs. The remainder, “illiterate coolies” (63) were absorbed in unskilled or menial work. About three-fifths of Indian workers were employed on plantations, while the remainder were mainly engaged in low-skilled occupations, either in government utilities or municipalities. (64) The political and social isolation of the Indian labouring classes was the most striking feature of Indian “society” in pre-war Malaya. This was the result of several factors. The most obvious was the determination of the Indian middle classes to comprehensively distance themselves from the despised “cooie” workforce. In general, Indian middle classes were more than willing to echo the vituperative European condemnation of the putative
The social impotence of the Indian working class was further compounded by a series of deep and self perpetuating schisms based upon the tendency of labourers to identify themselves primarily in terms of the narrow allegiances of the village of origin, caste and sub-ethnicity. The fundamental disunity of the Indian population worked against the formation of wider political allegiances, and impeded the development of any conception of a pan-Indian communal identity.

The first Indian political organisation was the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) founded in 1936. The ideological disposition of the CIAM was largely shaped by the politics of metropolitan Indian nationalism as exemplified by Congress. Consistent with the inclusive ideology espoused by Indian nationalism, the CIAM made determined efforts to represent the entire community, in particular to forge links with Tamil and Telegu estate workers. Although membership was available to all Indians irrespective of ethnic origin, language or religious affiliation, the leadership was firmly captured by middle class English educated North Indians and Malayalees. Most Tamil educated Indians tended to be distrustful if not actively hostile to the CIAM. The Association claimed as its greatest triumph its intervention in 1938 to “persuade” the Government of India to ban the assisted migration of Indian labour to Malaya.

A potent political influence among plantation Tamils was the so-called “Dravidian” ideology propounded by the Self Respect Movement (Dravida Munnetra Kalagam or DMK) headed by E.V. Ramasami Naicker. The ideology combined Tamil exclusivity, a fervent enthusiasm for an imagined historic primordial Tamil culture and the autochthonous polity which had supposedly existed prior to the “invasion” of Northern “Aryan” Brahmanism, with a program of broad social reform. Self Respect gained momentum in both Singapore and Malaya following Ramasami's visit in 1929. Within Malaya, Self Respect's relentless and visceral anti-Brahmanism, its profound hostility toward North Indian and “Sanskrit” influences, and its strict adherence to notions of a pristine and “purified” Tamil identity, tended to drive the politics of the Indian labouring classes into the narrow and introverted channels of sub-
The third strand of an emerging Indian political consciousness consisted of the stirrings of industrial activism among the Indian working classes. The seeds of discontent had been sown among Tamil workers by the traumatic experiences of the Depression years when large numbers of labourers had been summarily retrenched, and others had suffered substantial wage cuts. (74) The tentative growth of worker assertiveness was supported in the late 1930s by the CIAM which had resolved to improve the living and working conditions of Indian labour, and which now made strenuous efforts to identify workers who could be assisted to form and administer trade unions. (75) The late 1930s witnessed a sharp upsurge in industrial disputation involving Indian labour. (76)

Gathering labour discontent, the product of worsening hardship on estates, led to a series of strikes in the Klang district of Selangor in 1941. While workers' grievances had initially focused on wages levels, the strikers drew up a comprehensive charter of claims demanding immediate and sweeping reforms in working and living conditions on estates.(77) In response, the British authorities sanctioned the use of force against the putative “subversive elements”.(78) The strikes, which spread to other estates, were crushed by armed forces including Indian troops. During these confrontations five labourers were killed, and sixty received severe injuries. A wave of arrests and deportations followed.(79)

4. THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The Japanese invasion of Malaya in December 1941 and the humiliating capitulation of the British and Allied forces culminating in their surrender in Singapore on 15 February 1942, shattered the myth of the intrinsic socio-biological superiority of the white “races” and demolished forever the ethos of invincibility and prestige which had suffused British colonialism. (80) Moreover the ignominious rout of the Allied forces irrevocably destroyed British claims to be the protectors of the Malays, thus removing a key pillar which had undergirded the moral and ideological authority of colonial rule in Malaya.(81)
A major impact of the Japanese occupation (1942-1945) was the crystallisation of previously inchoate ethnic identities into three recognisable and mutually antagonistic “racial” blocs, thus fundamentally altering the socio-political landscape of Malaya.(82) In general, the Japanese attempted to reach accommodation with the Malays, oppressed, often murderously, the Chinese,(83) and encouraged the growth of nationalism among the Indians. Japanese promotion of Sino-Malay rivalry and distrust precipitated the future pattern of ethnic relations within Malaya.

Throughout the occupation, Chinese support consolidated behind the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) sponsored (and Chinese dominated) Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which was viewed as the only group capable of offering armed resistance to the Japanese.(84) MPAJA reprisals against alleged informers and collaborators, frequently arbitrary, appeared to fall disproportionately upon Malays. For many Malays the MPAJA actions represented a policy of inter-ethnic score settling.(85) The Japanese Military exploited the nascent Malay fears of Chinese domination by highlighting the potential dangers posed by MCP guerillas. Japanese encouragement of Malay enlistment in the military and police forces set the scene for repeated racial clashes, especially with the MPAJA.(86)

Serious ethnic conflict followed the Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945. MPAJA excesses were interpreted by Malays as the first stage of a concerted Chinese push to establish control over Peninsular Malaya.(87) Malay para-military organisations, including several millenarian cults, began to exact a grisly revenge.(88) The subsequent riots left many dead, and opened a deep and abiding wound in Sino-Malay relations. On the Malay side, there was inscribed an indelible suspicion not only of the MCP and MPAJA, but in more general terms of the thrust and scope of Chinese ambitions in Malaya. Malay misgivings inculcated a sustained resolve to prevent the Chinese from ever gaining political ascendancy in Malaya.(89) In turn, the Chinese had now been warned that if pushed, the Malays would fight, and that henceforth demands for Chinese rights would always be accompanied with the threat of Malay retaliation.(90)
4.1 The Japanese Occupation: The Indian Experience

The most far reaching impact of the Japanese occupation on the mass of the Indian workforce was widespread economic dislocation and appalling hardship. The colonial network of waged labour collapsed under Japanese administration and was not replaced with any alternative form of regular or guaranteed income. Workers and their families were thus denied any obvious means of subsistence, and most experienced an acute struggle for survival. (91) Disease, more easily contracted and spread as a result of chronic malnutrition and the breakdown of sanitation and health services, starvation, especially of the very young and vulnerable within the community, and Japanese labour schemes, took a very heavy toll of Indian life. Throughout these years the Indian population fell by over 100,000, or approximately 14 per cent (from 700,000 in 1939, to 599,000 in 1947), (92) and the Indian component of the overall Malayan population declined from 14 per cent in 1940 to 10 per cent in 1947. (93)

The Japanese invasion was followed by the establishment in Malaya of the Indian Independence League (IIL), a political body devoted to the liberation of India from British colonial control, and the Indian Nationalist Army (INA), the League's military wing. (94) Large numbers of captured British Indian Army personnel were persuaded to join the INA. (95) Early organisational and political divisions in the IIL and INA were overcome by the appointment of prominent Indian nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose, as President of the League. (96) Bose rejuvenated the IIL, undertook a series of far reaching reforms, and in October 1943 announced the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India (FIPG), (97) complete with its own administrative apparatus. (98) By July 1944, IIL membership stood at 350,000, while the INA had achieved a total strength of 50,000 of whom 20,000 had been drawn from the Indians resident in Malaya. (99) However, the rapid expansion in both IIL and INA ranks disguised the fact that many who joined did so reluctantly, and often out of fear or perceived compulsion. (100)

Participation in the IIL and INA had profound ramifications for the Indian population of Malaya. Under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose, Malayan and Singaporean Indians believed that they had been propelled from the periphery of metropolitan affairs
to the very forefront of those struggling against the might of the British Empire for the liberation of the Motherland. The idea that the community had a significant role to play in the establishment of a free India captured the imagination of Indians of all classes and backgrounds. Indian nationalist ideology emphasised pan-Indian identification and the unity of struggle regardless of caste, ethnicity, language or religious background. The nationalist propaganda which stated unequivocally that all Indians were descended from and enjoyed membership of one of the world's greatest and most enduring civilisations was repeated in countless speeches, and was absorbed by all sectors of the community. The experiences of the war years were to engender a renewed and persistent interest among Malayan Indians in their cultural heritage and their links to metropolitan India which was to inform all aspects of Indian political and social life in the post-war era. Moreover, the collective accord fostered throughout the war was to serve as a model for the subsequent conduct of Malayan Indian politics.

The IIL/INA experiences also impressed upon Malayan Indians the value of political organisation and activism as vehicles for mobilisation of community resources and as agencies for inducing and negotiating change. This increasingly involved working class Indians whose interest in politics had been aroused by their engagement with Indian nationalism. Given the fact that the labouring classes comprised an overwhelming majority of Malaya's Indian population, it was only a matter of time before this newly politicised group spoke with a dominant voice in the conduct of post War Malayan Indian affairs.

5. MALAYAN POLITICS TO MERDEKA 1945-1957
5.1 The Malayan Union and the Federation of Malaya Agreement
Following the re-establishment of colonial control, the British authorities attempted to replace the cumbersome administrative apparatus of pre-war Malaya (excluding Singapore), with a unitary system of government. The proposed Malayan Union plan allowed for generous citizenship rights for non-Malays. Malay opposition was immediate and vehement. Prior to the war, the British had always regarded Malaya as Tanah Melayu, the land of the Malays, and indeed the British had been careful to
assure the Sultans that the influx of transient immigrants would not be permitted to undermine the standing of Malays as the sole indigenous people of Malaya.(109) The Malayan Union proposals marked a complete reversal of this approach. Malays were no longer to be regarded as the core “nation” of Malaya, but were to be relegated to the lesser status of a mere community, one of several.(110) Moreover, in Malay eyes, the removal of the traditional rulers and the abolition of the nine territories previously recognised as states/Sultanates by the British not only marked a revocation of the formal agreements under which authority had been ceded to the British Government, but more fundamentally would extirpate a key cultural and social principle around which Malay identity was constructed.(111) Finally, Malays were convinced that the citizenship provisions would transform them into a permanent minority, and thus leave them at the mercy of “immigrant” communities. These fears were aggravated by the general belief that the Malays had already survived a determined Chinese attempt, via the MPAJA, to impose non-Malay rule upon the community.(112) Vigorous and sweeping Malay opposition to the Malayan Union proposals promoted pan-Malay awareness of a common ethnic identity, and crystallised in the formation of the powerful political party, Pertubohan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu, better known by its English title, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).(113) Malay defiance, coupled with Chinese and Indian indifference,(114) led to the British decision to abandon the Malayan Union proposals. These were formally withdrawn in June 1947.(115)

The revised Federation of Malaya Agreement, which came into force on 1 February 1948, clearly established the Malay people and the Malay Sultanates as the normative basis for social, cultural and political organisation within Malaya. It recognised the special standing of the Malays as the indigenous people and thus the core nation of Malaya, restored the Sultans as traditional and spiritual rulers, (116) and severely limited citizenship provisions for non-Malays.(117) The Agreement also clearly stipulated who could be regarded as a Malay. A Malay was now defined as a person who (i) habitually spoke the Malay language, (ii) professed the Muslim religion, and, (iii) conformed to Malay culture.(118) In addition, the definition of a Malay recognisable by cultural rather than "racial" identifiers allowed for the easy incorporation of resident Indonesians within
the “Malay” community, (thus significantly boosting Malay numerical strength), while continuing to exclude immigrant communities. However, the Agreement did recognise that non-Malays had legitimate interests in Malaya, and established the principle of non-Malay representation in Malayan political processes.

The Federation Agreement also integrated the basic terms set forth by UMNO under which Malays would agree to share power with other communities. The Party leadership were insistent that any lasting political settlement would be contingent upon the unequivocal recognition of Malaya as *Tanah Melayu*; that is, first and foremost a Malay polity, and that any final agreement would therefore need to enshrine a suite of Malay special rights and privileges. These claims were based upon the putative standing of Malays as the Peninsula's sole indigenous people, and thus the paradigmatic cultural and political community within Malaya. UMNO contended that British authority had derived from the treaties within the Sultans, which had identified the Rulers as the locus of sovereignty within each territory, and had thus demonstrated British recognition of Malaya as a Malay country. While accepting that members of other races had made Malaya their home, Malays would acknowledge their status as legitimate political participants in Malayan affairs only if special provisions were made to provide Malays with a just share of the wealth of the “Motherland”.

5.2 The Emergency
Following their return to Malaya, the British made it clear that they had no intention of cooperating with their erstwhile political allies, the MCP. In June 1948, frustrated by the failure of their program of moderation and gradualism, the MCP launched the guerilla insurgency which was to become known as the Emergency. The declaration of the state of Emergency provided the colonial authorities with the opportunity to not only ban the MCP, but to suppress all sites of left wing activism, including a number of moderate political organisations and trade unions.

In essence, the Emergency consisted of a Chinese dominated insurrection which was largely resisted by Malay security forces. It thus further emphasised the extent of the
racial cleavage in Malaya, and provided additional grounds for Malay distrust of the Chinese community. (127) However, the Emergency also highlighted the need for close and formal lines of inter-ethnic cooperation if Malaya was to become an independent nation. Negotiations between the government and community leaders produced more liberal citizenship laws, introduced in 1952, (128) and were accompanied by the forging of inter-communal links between Malaya's three major ethnic parties. (129)

5.3 The Attainment of Merdeka

The years leading to Merdeka were marked by the maturation and subsequent institutionalisation of inter-ethnic political cooperation. In January 1952, UMNO and the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) negotiated an ad hoc Alliance to contest local government elections. The success of this arrangement led to the agreement in 1953 to formalise an Alliance structure at the national level. In December 1954 the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) joined the Alliance, thus linking all three major communities within a broad multi-racial coalition. The commanding majorities accrued by the Alliance underscored its claim to speak for the overwhelming majority of Malayans in its dealings with the colonial authorities. (130)

Malaya attained Merdeka on 31 August 1957 under the Prime Ministership of the UMNO leader, Tunku Abdul Rahman. (131) The Malayan Constitution incorporated the dominant Alliance perspectives, reflecting UMNO's views on national policy, state religion and state education, and addressing MCA concerns on the codification of citizenship rights (including the principle of jus soli for non-Malays.) (131) The Malayan Constitution established Islam as the official religion while guaranteeing the rights of non-Malays to practice and propagate their religions and languages; inscribed Malay as the sole and official national language; granted the Yang de-Pertuan (King) and Malay Rulers powers which extended beyond the ceremonial, including discussion of Malay rights and culture and the interpretation of Islam; and enmeshed Malay special rights and privileges in perpetuity. (133)

The Malayan constitutional settlement was brokered by an Alliance which claimed to
fully represent the major communities of Malaysia. The political elites who had fashioned the Alliance compact considered the constitutional outcome a “bargain”, the price to be paid by non-Malays for admission to full participation in the activities of the Federation. Sino-Malay claims would be resolved within the framework established by the bargain; Chinese economic power would be balanced by the undisputed acknowledgement of Malay political ascendancy in a state structured around Malay symbols and Malay notions of statecraft. The Alliance leadership considered that the compromises embodied in the constitutional settlement would prove sufficient to mould a new political community. Close ethnic cooperation, coupled with the promotion of national policies on language, education and culture would result in the formulation of a recognisable and widely accepted Malayan identity.

However the Alliance formula was based on assumptions which could not long survive the political and social pressures of an independent Malaya. It did not recognise the true nature of Malayan pluralism; that is, that Malayan communities did not consist of neat vertical divisions into discrete and homogeneous entities whose legitimate aspirations could be fully articulated within the confines of the Alliance structure. Moreover the Alliance formula ignored a fundamental schism between Malay and non-Malay political ambitions. In essence, while the Malays regarded their own community as the 'natural' political society within the Malayan state, embodying the cultural organisational principles to which the immigrant communities should incline, the non-Malays aimed for a truly inclusive nation state based upon social equality and democracy. Many non-Malays were chary of the permanent constitutional establishment of Malay special rights as the normative basis for Malayan political and cultural life, which they believed militated from the very outset against a genuine multiracial partnership built upon the principles of equal citizenship and equal opportunity.

5.4 Malayan Indian Politics and Society: 1945-1957
The re-establishment of colonial rule was accompanied by sustained British hostility towards those who had participated in the Indian nationalist movement. This provoked sharp political responses within the Indian community, and more particularly among the
younger generation of Tamil workers. Indian activism took expression in four
generic and overlapping movements; namely the short lived Thondar Padai campaign,
the politics of trade unionism, the creation of the Malayan Indian Congress, and Tamil
revivalism. These organisations often drew their most vigorous adherents from the
previously marginalised plantation sector.

(i) **Thondar Padai**
The Thondar Padai, (or Volunteer Corps) initially established on the Harvard
Estate in Kedah, was a militant reform movement, which aimed at the “socio-economic,
cultural and moral uplift of estate labourers.” The movement drew inspiration from
three main sources, namely the intensifying independence movement in metropolitan
India, Gandhian principles of social reform, especially as these related to issues of caste
and personal discipline, as well as the politics of Tamil radicalism. British alarm
increased as Thondar Padai evolved into a quasi-military organisation, resorted to
occasional violence in support of its objectives, and successfully enrolled members on
adjoining estates. Between February-April 1947, a series of confrontations with the
colonial authorities spiralled into demonstrations, strikes and riots. The police reaction
was swift, brutal and uncompromising, and resulted in loss of life, injury and a wave of
arrests and deportations. Thondar Padai was subsequently banned in 1948.

(ii) **Trade Unions**
The immediate and post war years were characterised by widespread and sustained
industrial unrest. Indians were active in the formation of trade unions, and by 1947
comprised an overwhelming majority of the members of the Pan-Malayan Federation of
Trade Unions. In the month following the outbreak of the Emergency in June 1948,
the colonial authorities detained approximately 800 Indians; the majority of whom were
members of a range of left wing organisations with no known MCP associations.
The government also introduced measures to severely curb the power of trade unions.
Henceforth the colonial authorities would register only those unions it deemed to be both
“responsible” and “moderate”. Most of these officially vetted unions were under
Indian leadership. Indians continued to play a pivotal role in Malayan unionism well into
the early years of independence.(154)

(iii) The Malayan Indian Congress
The Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) was formed in August 1946.(155) In its early years the MIC consciously modelled itself on the Indian National Congress, and as far as possible strove to reproduce Congressional philosophies, policies and organisational structures within the Malayan context. Thus the MIC attempted to articulate discourses which spoke for an imagined aggregated Malayan nationalism, and which aimed at constructing inter-communal and nationalist fronts which would demand concessions from the British.(156) For nearly a decade after its foundation, the MIC remained encumbered with the full ideological freight of Indian nationalism, which rendered the party increasingly incongruous in a Malaya more and more dominated by the politics of communalism.(157) During this period crucial opportunities to engage with either the colonial authorities or the representatives of other communal parties were irretrievably lost. Moreover the party's rigid adherence to a Congressional platform limited its effectiveness within its own community. The middle class, English educated and Westernised membership, especially the leadership, failed to address the political and economic imperatives which shaped the attitudes of the Tamil working class who comprised the majority of the Indian population of Malaya.(158)

Continued electoral failure finally impelled a comprehensive reassessment of MIC strategies.(159) The leadership now realised that the party faced extinction unless it sought patronage through partnership – albeit junior partnership – within the Alliance.(160) In December 1954 the MIC became a full member of the Alliance, which now comprised a coalition of UMNO-MCA-MIC representing the three major communities of Malaya.(161) The party also set out to recruit the Tamil educated into MIC ranks, and to ensure their elevation to responsible positions at regional and district levels.(162) Participation within the Alliance structure dictated MIC compliance with the conservative agenda set by the two larger and more powerful parties. The ideological repositioning of the MIC estranged many English educated Indian intellectuals who subsequently transferred their allegiance to non-communal parties.(163)
As a member of the Alliance, the MIC broached a number of concerns in the negotiations leading to Merdeka. These included the potential impact of Malay special rights, in particular their likely impact upon Indian recruitment to government services (which had been a traditional source of employment for the Indian middle classes, as well as a large scale hirer of Indian labour); the constitutional enshrinement of Islam as Malaya's official religion; and UMNO insistence that Malay would become the sole official language. The party gained few concessions. Apart from the fact that the MIC was the smallest and most junior party in the Alliance, it was additionally handicapped by UMNO-MCA awareness that it did not command the full support of the Indian community.(164)

(iv) Tamil Revivalism
The MIC was constantly challenged by the politics of Tamil revivalism. During the approach to Indian independence in 1947, movements emphasising the distinct cultural, linguistic and religious traditions of Tamil society gained wide currency within the Madras Presidency. The ideas and concepts which animated these movements were widely reported in the Malayan Indian press, and began to circulate among the local Tamil population.(165) The Tamil movement spawned a number of organisations concerned with the identification, exploration and propagation of Tamil culture, and the revival of Malayan Tamil society. However, the movement was greatly handicapped by the comparatively small size of the educated Tamil elite, (vis-a-vis those of other communities), which meant that it lacked both the intellectual firepower and organisational resources needed to promote and sustain the intense campaigns that fulfilment of many of its political and economic objectives would have required.(166)

6. POST MERDEKA MALAYSIA
6.1 From Malaya to Malaysia
Many of the inter-ethnic tensions, buried beneath the euphoria of the constitutional “bargain” and the attainment of Merdeka, were exposed throughout the early years of the Federation of Malaysia. The new nation, which conjoined Malaya with Singapore, and the former British colonies of Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah) was formally
proclaimed on 16 February 1963. The UMNO leadership had two major objectives in establishing the Federation. The first was to contain and limit the influence of Chinese dominated Singapore. The second was by redefining indigenous ethnicity to incorporate the “native” peoples of Sarawak and Sabah, to replace the delicate racial balance of Peninsula Malaya with a nation in which the indigenes of the region decisively outnumbered the “immigrant” races.

From the outset, the Peoples Action Party (PAP) of Singapore, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, eschewed the Alliance formula, and rejected UMNO attempts to assert Malay political and cultural hegemony within the new Federation. The resultant tensions worsened with the PAP decision, in conjunction with like minded forces in Malaysia, to field candidates within Peninsular Malaysia with the avowed aim of promoting a “genuine multiracial partnership”. The PAP also called for a “Malaysian Malaysia” that would jettison the communalism of Malayan politics in favour of a modern political democracy in which all citizens would be be treated equally regardless of race. The PAP agenda implied the abandonment of the concept of Tanah Melayu, the core component of UMNO's formative ideology. The PAP conduct could not be tolerated by UMNO and Singapore was expelled from the Federation on 9 August 1965. However, during their period of participation in Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew and his PAP had dramatically widened the boundaries of political debate in the Federation to include a number of sensitive issues that the Alliance had attempted to permanently resolve in the discussions leading to Merdeka. This new and emboldened discourse was to set the stage for the 1969 non-Malay political challenge to the Alliance formula, and more specifically to the concepts embraced in the ideal of Tanah Melayu.

6.2 1969 and the New Economic Policy
Throughout the 1960s relations between the component parties of the Alliance remained close. However at the grassroots level there was an ever expanding ethnic polarisation, a development which went largely unnoticed by the Alliance leadership. In the years leading to the 1969 election, the public arena was increasingly commandeered by ethnic
extremists of all communities. (178) The elections held on 10 May 1969 resulted in significant Alliance losses. (179) Provocative “victory” parades, staged in Kuala Lumpur by opposition parties were countered on 13 May by an UMNO sponsored demonstration, which rapidly degenerated into racial violence. According to official estimates the subsequent riots claimed 177 lives and injured over 340 people. (180) On 15 May the government proclaimed a state of emergency and devolved total political power to a special eight man National Operations Council (NOC) under the direction of Tun Abdul Razak, Deputy Prime Minister and Tunku Abdul Rahman's designated successor. (181)

The 1969 racial riots impelled a comprehensive re-evaluation of Alliance policies, especially the UMNO-MCA compact which had so patently failed to deliver electoral and social stability. The UMNO leadership decided to implement policies which would not only remove the ideology of Tanah Melayu and the concomitant assurance of Malay political primacy from the realm of public debate, (182) but would permanently quell the open Sino-Malay rivalry that had dominated the politics of Peninsular Malaysia since World War II. Interdictions were placed on the public discussion of controversial ethnic issues, especially those connected to the “entrenched” provisions of the Constitution, including the position of Malay as the national language, the role and constitutional functions of the Sultans, the place of Islam as the official religion, Malay special rights, and non-Malay citizenship. (183) Malay indigence (184) was to be addressed by reconfiguring public policy to guarantee that Malays received adequate opportunities for educational and economic advancement. The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971, to be supported by a vigorous and where necessary interventionist program of affirmative action, would ensure a significant expansion of Malay participation within the economy. (185) Finally, a cultural policy, enunciated in 1971, adumbrated a national culture based on the indigenous culture of the region, with Islam regarded as an integral component, but incorporating suitable elements of other cultural traditions. (186) However while the Malay powerbrokers made it clear they would not tolerate any challenge to Malay hegemony, they were prepared to offer palliatives to other communities including the assurance that their basic political, social and economic rights would be respected. (187)
The ruling coalition was also augmented by the addition of several “responsible” former opposition parties, including the Gerakan Raa'yat, the Peoples' Progressive Party and the Malay based Parti Islam (PAS).(188) This broadened coalition, known as the Barisan Nasional (BN), reflected the UMNO belief that the Alliance structure was outmoded, and that both the MCA and MIC were “moribund parties” which could not be relied upon to deliver the support of their respective communities.(189) The enlargement of the political domain in which public policy was negotiated led to renewed government claims that it now enclosed the entire spectrum of legitimate political opinion. The BN made it increasingly clear that it doubted the motives, aspirations and loyalty of the opposition, and that dissent, however “genuine”, axiomatically fell outside the boundaries of valid and responsible public discourse.(190)

7. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY AND THE “PLANTATION CULTURE”

7.1 Indians: Post Merdeka

The Indian population entered Merdeka as a minor community, sandwiched between Malay political dominance and Chinese economic strength. Since Merdeka its trajectory had been one of increasing political, economic and social marginalization. The Indian community lacked the economic foundation necessary to develop capital enterprises or provide the level of entrepreneurial opportunities which would assist in alleviating widespread Indian poverty.(191) Government support for measures involving Indian social and economic uplift has been restricted, and has had little impact upon the ever widening cycle of indigence and underachievement. Politically the community has remained profoundly divided, its support fragmented between the increasingly ineffectual MIC, a series of opposition parties, and an emasculated trade union movement.

In the years since the attainment of Merdeka, from 1957 to 1969 as a member party of the Alliance, and since 1969 as a component member of the BN, the MIC, as a small and junior party within a ruling coalition composed of various ethnic parties, has demonstrated limited influence in determining policies likely to deliver favourable outcomes to Indian voters.(192) Moreover the Party has been largely shunned by non-
Tamils, intellectuals and trade unionists. MIC impotence was starkly revealed by two major crises – the fragmentation of the estates in the 1950s and 1960s, and the post NEP citizenship issue – both of which impacted harshly upon its core constituency.

The introduction of the NEP has resulted in further social and economic marginalization of the Indian community. From 1969 onwards, Indians have recorded, in relative terms, higher unemployment rates, lower levels of educational attainment, and significantly less participation in the corporate sector than either the Malays or the Chinese. However, throughout this period Malays have been able to rely upon intense government patronage, while many Chinese have been able to draw upon a wealthy and influential business sector. Although one of the Malaysian Government's avowed primary aims in implementing the NEP was the elimination of poverty among all communities, few resources have been targeted at the Indian indigent.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the MIC launched a series of self-help projects modelled upon the successful National Land Finance Corporation established by MIC leader Tun Sambanthan in the 1960s. However, all of these cooperative ventures struggled to survive. Firstly, NEP imperatives barred Indian participation in large sections of the economy. Secondly, the cooperatives were poorly led, and investment strategies were ill directed. The cooperatives' indifferent performance never delivered the promised gains to the wider Indian community, and conversely left many investors worse off.

7.2 The “Plantation Culture”: An Indian Dilemma?

The large scale migrations of Indians to Malaya throughout the Nineteenth Century and the first four decades of the Twentieth Century led to the creation of a distinctively Malaysian Indian society. This community remains divided horizontally between the minority upper classes – the middle, professional and business classes – and a large working class which constitutes about 80 per cent of the population. The schism between the classes – upper and lower – within the community can be generally traced
to the differing circumstances of migration to Malaysia. Thus the descendants of “labour” recruitment – those who were contracted under indenture, kangany or assisted labour schemes to work in the plantations and in unskilled positions within government utilities – now make up an underclass which continues to fill labouring and unskilled occupations in modern Malaysia. The middle and upper classes have their origins in “non-labour” migratory schemes; that is, their forbears were those Indians who were appointed to clerical or technical positions in colonial Malaya, or who established themselves in professions and businesses. (201) The social gulf between the classes remains as deep and fixed now as it has throughout the entire history of the modern Indian presence in Malaya/Malaysia. Many “non-labour” Indians endeavour to maintain their social distance from “labour” Indians, and in extreme cases may even deny all bonds of common ethnicity. (202)

S. Arasaratnam has argued that the shared experiences of working class Indians from the time of indenture and kangany recruitment have crystallised into a “plantation oriented culture” which in the context of Malaysian Indian society became “…one of the most significant evolutions of the twentieth century”. (203) This “plantation culture”, characterised by stasis and underachievement, represents the worldview of an oppressed and marginalized underclass. According to D. Jeyakumar it is a “culture of poverty…characterized by apathy, poor parental responsibility, drinking, low self respect, female subordination and poor community cooperation….These problems collectively form an interconnecting and mutually reinforcing network that tends to make the community even more demoralized and apathetic.” (204) It is a culture also marked by meagre educational achievement, a high crime rate, low income, and an absence of inter-generational mobility. (205) Moreover this culture has developed its own paradigmatic impulses, which threaten to lock Indian labouring families into permanent underclass status. As Jeyakumar remarks “…the values and attitudes which had been etched upon the consciousness of a people by generations of dehumanizing experiences do not fade easily. Values and attitudes once inculcated have a momentum of their own.” (206)
The plantation culture has its genesis in the early conditions of Indian labour immigration. Workers recruited under both indenture and kangany auspices were subject to extreme regulation and exploitation. Both systems bore a striking resemblance to slavery in that they established complete legal domination over the labourers and treated him/her as nothing more than a component of production. The rigidity of contractual obligations and the willingness of employers to enforce them, stripped the worker of all but the bare minimum of personal rights, denied him/her even basic occupational mobility, and firmly placed him/her under the control of those who paid his/her wages. (207) The Indian labourer was enclosed in a self contained and isolated world, and subject to a regime of permanent impoverishment, and physical and psychological brutalisation; a regime which discouraged initiative, independence of thought, or any sense of personal integrity. (208) The Annual Reports of the Agent of the Government of India make constant reference to the poverty of Indian labour, to the substandard working and living conditions on estates and in government “lines”, the lack of proper medical care and the poor health of the workforce, deficiencies in nutrition, the inadequacies of education, the indebtedness of labourers, and the growing problems of alcoholism, gambling, violence and suicide. (209)

Since the end of the Pacific War, there has been a continuous migration of labour from the estate sector to urban areas, a movement which accelerated in the 1960s, especially among younger Tamils. (210) There were several factors which expedited their mass rural-urban migration. Firstly, structural changes in the economy, in particular the development of export oriented industrialisation, provided openings for Tamil labour. (211) Secondly changes in the agricultural sector, including a major decline in the importance of the rubber industry, reduced the overall levels of employment within the estate sector. Finally labour shortages within manufacturing and service sectors, and concomitant increases in 'real' wages, attracted many younger Tamils from the estate sectors into urban occupations. (212) The rural-urban migration of Tamil labour occurred against the backdrop of the NEP which closed many traditional avenues of employment to urban based Tamils. (213)
The rural/urban migration did not result in any improvements in the economic standing of the Indian working class, nor did it promote inter-generational social mobility. Indeed, some observers believe that over the past 30 years, the conditions of the Indian indigent have actually worsened. The migration created a large pool of Tamil labour, minimally educated and low skilled, who were compelled to occupy positions that were basic, repetitive and poorly paid, and offered little or nothing in the way of vocational advancement. Indian workers generally found their wages were inadequate to maintain a family, and in most instances did not keep pace with inflation. Financial pressures forced most to rent shoddy housing, often slum and squatter dwellings.

Nor have those trapped within the “plantation culture” been able to look to their more affluent compatriots for leadership and support. The social gulf between middle and upper class Indians and those of the underclass remains as deep and fixed now as it has throughout the entire history of the modern Indian presence in Malaya/Malaysia. Indeed many better off Indians continue to feel shame and disgust at the wretched state of the Indian underclass, and “often feel impatient and angry with the Indian poor caught within this sub-culture of poverty.”

I have noted that the history of the Indian poor in Malaya/Malaysia, now extending well over a century, and thus enclosing up to six generations of Indian working class families, has been one of marginalization and oppression. The few impulses toward reform and self-organisation, which may have ultimately resulted in the uplift of the entire Indian community, have been met with swift and comprehensive official retaliation. Thus the CIAM's efforts to promote genuine Indian unity, and to introduce measures to improve the lot of the labouring classes was countered with the hostility of the colonial administration. The subsequent Klang Valley strikes of 1941 met not with offers of negotiation but with the brute force of military suppression resulting in death, injury, arrests and deportations. While the extraordinary and fleeting unity achieved under the IIL/INA auspices did not long survive the end of the Pacific War, the veterans of both organisations were treated to the full vengeful animosity of the returning British. Post war movements such as Thondar Padai were labelled “subversive” and crushed, while
Indian attempts to create a vibrant and effective trade union movement were defeated by official determination to root out and stifle the slightest traces of radicalism. (218) In order to gain a representative voice for the Indian community, the MIC, the largest Indian political party, was compelled to discard its policies of inclusive reformism to accord with the ideologies promulgated by the communally structured and conservative Alliance. The policies of communalism ensured that the problems of the Indian poor would remain submerged and thus ignored. (219) The implementation of the NEP in 1971, and the concomitant decrease of social, vocational, economic and educational opportunities for non-bumiputras closed many avenues to Indian workers. (220) Perceived official indifference to the plight of the Indian poor was imprinted upon the collective Indian consciousness by the processes which accompanied estate fragmentation, the post-NEP citizenship crisis, and in more recent times has been reinforced by a wave of summary evictions from estates. (221)

Thus the essential problems confronting the Indian labouring classes remain unchanged and unresolved. The plantation culture of chronic underachievement and social stasis, forged over generations of subjugation, of subordination to rigid and unyielding controls, of physical and psychological oppression and demoralisation which robbed the Indian worker of the qualities of initiative and independence, has been transferred to and reproduced within an urban setting. (222) Indian labourers, possessing limited financial and social resources, have accomplished next to nothing in the way of inter-generational vocational and economic mobility. (223) Many of the Indian poor, reduced to irrelevance by Malaysian political and social structures, and neglected by the better off in their own community, regard themselves as “forgotten people”; second class citizens within the country of their birth. (224)

8. CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA, ISLAM AND ETHNICITY

8.1 Mahathir's Malaysia

Dr Mahathir Mohammed succeeded to the Prime Ministership in July 1981, and remained in office for more than 22 years. Mahathir was not only the longest serving Malaysian Prime Minister, but undoubtedly the most provocative and controversial.
Persistent, determined, often dogmatic and combative, he inspired both adulation and scepticism. His rule was studded with substantial achievements, but also with recurring crises. Mahathir's biographer, Khoo Boo Teik, contends that despite the sudden shifts and even reversals of policy which punctuated his years in office, Mahathir was consistently guided by an underlying ideology, an amalgam of five component strands, namely nationalism, capitalism, Islam, populism and authoritarianism, which shaped his views on politics, economics, power and leadership.(225)

As both a Malay and Malaysian nationalist, Mahathir's strategies were directed toward crafting a “carefully managed revolution”, (226) which would totally transform the Malay Weltanschauung, resulting in the production of the Melayu Baru (new Malay), confident, vigorous and assertive, and capable of competing and indeed thriving in the modern world. The arrival of the Melayu Baru would herald a harmonious and innovative Malaysia which had outgrown memories of its colonial origins and the racial tensions and divided loyalties which had blighted its history. (227) All Mahathir's policies – the “Look East” policy launched in 1981, the program of rapid industrialisation and privatisation (both initiated in 1983), and the Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) policy enunciated in 1991, represented far reaching attempts to construct the foundations of a unified Malaysian nation, one in which Malay achievement and inter ethnic cooperation would be accepted facts of life. (228) Mahathir also embarked upon a series of mega projects designed to create a sense of national consciousness and pride in Malaysian achievement. (229)

While Mahathir oversaw years of extensive structural and social change, and initiated sweeping proposals for reform and nation building, in many respects the net effect of his rule was the entrenchment of trends and tendencies which had their origins in colonial Malaya, and which were greatly accelerated following the adoption of the NEP. These trends included increased authoritarianism, justified by a discourse emphasising the very survival of the Malaysian nation; the growth of officially tolerated corruption, especially money politics, patronage and cronyism; and stasis, even deterioration in ethnic relations. In the following paragraphs I will touch upon each of these topics.
(i) Authoritarianism
Sheila Nair has demonstrated that since independence the official nationalist project of the Malaysian ruling elite has been accompanied by elaboration of a thesis of an inherently dangerous internal other; the enemy within who seeks to threaten and overturn domestic cohesion, political stability, social order and national security.(230) The ruling elites' claims are currently grounded in the declared mission of constructing inter-ethnic harmony which can only be assured if civil society fully accedes to the officially posited synchrony of state and nation.(231) Since 1969 power within Malaysia has been centralised within a hegemonic UMNO and from 1981 increasingly in the person of Mahathir as Prime Minister, in the process moving the nation from what observer Harold Crouch has termed a “modified democratic system” to a more restrictive “modified authoritarian system”.(232) Aided by a complaisant media, which is largely affiliated to the ruling coalition,(233) an expanded state regulatory apparatus created to enforce the implementation of the NEP, (234) and an armoury of repressive legislation including inter alia the ISA, the Sedition Act and the Official Secrets Act, Mahathir moved to silence his critics and simultaneously to concentrate power within the Executive. In the process he confronted and curbed alternative sites of authority – the bureaucracy, legislature, judiciary and monarchy.(235) He also revealed his capacity to ruthlessly crush dissent within his own party, including the purging and arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.(236)

(ii) Money Politics
Since independence, political office in Malaysia has been regarded as a sinecure which inter alia allows for the creation of personal wealth, together with the formation of networks of patronage which can be mobilised when required.(237) The introduction of the NEP and the concomitant expansion of the public sector, and the later privatisation program (inaugurated by Mahathir in 1983), placed considerable power within the grasp of ruling UMNO politicians and the bureaucracy, and provided many possibilities for the allocation of economic resources. This resulted in the emergence of “cronyism”, namely the distribution of rentier opportunities to individuals and companies linked to UMNO politicians.(238) Involvement in UMNO politics came to be viewed by many influential
As a quick and assured way of procuring extremely profitable business investments. While the government direction of the economy and the creation of a number of public sector agencies in the form of social enterprises (239) furnished Malays with a range of employment, vocational, educational and entrepreneurial openings and proved effective in creating a substantial and variegated Malay middle class, as well as an influential Malay capitalist class,(240) it may be equally asserted that the NEP, launched on behalf of the mass of impoverished *bumiputras*, has been largely appropriated by the politically dominant and well connected within *bumiputra* ruling circles,(241) (often in conjunction with prominent Chinese business figures, whose expertise was seen as indispensable to economic growth.)(242)

(iii) Ethnic Relations

The 1969 riots and the aftermath clearly demonstrated to non-Malays the hazards of attempting to wrest political power from the Malays.(243) The subsequent constitutional amendments, initiated by the UMNO leadership, and the adumbration and implementation of the post 1969 suite of affirmative action policies, ensured that henceforth political and ethnic accommodation would be on Malay terms, and clearly signalled that Malay power brokers would not tolerate any challenge to their authority. (244) Although, in theory, the NEP aimed to eradicate poverty among all Malaysians, little provision was made for indigent Chinese or Indians.(245)

In the processes of inculcating the objectives of *Tanah Melayu* as the pivotal ideology of modern Malaysia, and in establishing Malay hegemony, the ruling elite has successfully marginalized all competing currents of political thought. Indeed, this elite has firmly identified all alternative ideologies with an inadmissible other, which if allowed, would threaten the very survival of the nation.(246) However, the state has not been able to replicate this outcome either in creating or imposing a widely accepted national culture.

As has been noted, the national culture policy unveiled in 1971 stipulated that Malaysian culture would be built around an indigenous core, and that Islam would be integral to this culture. While this project has been firmly resisted by the non-Malay communities,
attempts to define an accepted normative indigenous culture upon which a national culture might be based have been contested among the Malays themselves. The disjunctive pressures of the NEP and related structural changes within the Malay community, the rapid emergence of a large and variegated middle class, and the forces unleashed by burgeoning economic growth and modernity, have meant that cultural constructions of “Malayness” have become increasingly fragmented and subject to change. (247) Since 1971 Malay culture has been reworked through emphasis on selected cultural symbols, many of which are based on an imagined *kampung* and feudal traditionalism, and which seek historical justification by appeal to the legendary traditions of the Melaka Sultanate. (248) However, visions of “Malayness” may find alternative and distinctive loci including Islam (itself, as we shall see, the subject of competing interpretations), traditions of Malay fraternalism and cooperation, and loyalty to a leader/patriach. (249) Many of these emerging cultural artefacts, the product of the disjunctive forces of modernity, are both inchoate and contingent, and remain subject to political and social modification. (250)

The politicisation of the cultural arena, and privileging of selected aspects of a neo-traditionalism and disputed Malay culture have produced both widespread alienation (251) and multiple sites of particularistic resistance. (252) This has been compounded by the deep and seemingly irreconcilable ambiguities within the main body of Malaysian official nationalist ideology. Thus the promotion of a nationalist cultural project structured upon Malay symbols and sustained by Malay political dominance has co-existed with an exclusionary state project based upon “race” and ethnicity. (253) The resultant incompleteness and contradictions inherent within the construction of the nationalist project have exposed continuing uncertainties surrounding the articulation of self and other, thus providing opportunities for alternative applications and ideological discourses. (254)

While this ideological “space” has been exploited by a number of overtly political organisations, generically known as New Social Movements (NSMs), and generally formed to resist specific aspects of public policy, (255) on the cultural level the
nationalist project has been countered by a myriad of particularistic ethnic and religious sites collectively representing the “fragmented vision” of the complex heterogeneous society which exists below the level of official nationalist ideology. Kahn and Loh define fragmented vision as “...a number of related phenomena, which taken together, have resulted in the proliferation of discourses and/or cultural practices which are either implicitly or explicitly particularistic and which tend to replace or resist the imposition of universalistic value systems generally assumed to accompany modernization.”(256)

One of the cultural spheres in which this “fragmented vision” is most visible is in the matter of religious adherence. Within Malaysia the practice of religion is often inextricably intertwined with the construction of ethnic and sub-ethnic identity.(257) Religious convictions and modes of expression may signal a wide range of identities which are at once both universalistic and particularistic in their application. A Hindu, for example, may use his/her religious beliefs and practices as a vehicle which simultaneously resists Malay religio-ethnic dominance, signals membership of a broader Indic-Hindu civilisation, but also express fealty to sub-ethnic, caste or localised mores and belief structures, (and thus, in passing, adumbrates opposition to the imposition of reformist or “modernising” discourses enunciated by dominant or influential groups within the broader Hindu community). Similarly, a Malay might deploy his/her Islamic faith to symbolise membership of a global Muslim brotherhood, as an ethnic marker integral to his/her identification as a Malay, as a mechanism to convey either solidarity with or opposition to the ruling elite, or as an agency through which programs of social, economic or political change may be negotiated, promoted or imposed.

Given this backdrop, the achievement of national unity, especially when defined in terms of inter-ethnic harmony and social cohesion has proven highly problematic. Indeed, it has been suggested that in the 30 years since the introduction of the NEP, communal relations have become increasingly fraught.(258) Gordon Means has argued that in defining an increasingly wide range of issues in purely ethnic terms, the NEP has reinforced ethnicity in Malaysia.(259) Moreover, the NEP's perceived emphatic benevolence to Malays, and the concomitant and sometimes stringent restriction of
educational, training and public sector employment places allocated to other communities left many non-Bumiputras with the impression that their needs were considered of little moment and that they had been relegated to the status of second class citizenry.(260) Continued racial polarization has manifested in the spiralling 1987 Sino-Malay tensions which were finally quelled by the police action known as “Operation Lallang”; (261) the unambiguous Chinese and Indian voter rejection of the perceived Malay-Islamic chauvinism of the Reformasi platform offered by the opposition Barisan Alternatif in the 1999 elections; (262) and in 2001 the outbreak of Indian-Malay racial violence in the impoverished suburb of Kampong Medan, Kuala Lumpur, which left 6 Indians dead and many others wounded. (263)

8.2 Islam and Ethnicity
In the years since the 1969 racial riots and the introduction of the NEP, Malaysia has witnessed a powerful Islamic resurgence which has lead to exhaustive and sometimes vitriolic debate about the role that Islam should play within the Malaysian state as well as a comprehensive re-evaluation of religious structures and practices. Far from proving a unifying force, the redefinition of Islam has revealed deep and often bitter fissures within the Malay community. The Islamic revival has been accompanied by parallel renascences in all other religious communities, often attended by vigorous and sometimes contentious movements promoting renewal and reform. In this section I will provide an overview of the Islamic resurgence and briefly consider its ramifications upon ethno-religious construction as well as inter-ethnic relations.

Islam was firmly established on the Malay Peninsula throughout the period of the Melaka Sultanate. (264) Conversion was largely peaceful and gradual, producing a Malay-Muslim outlook which was “cosmopolitan, open-minded, tolerant and amenable to cultural diversity”. (265) While Islam altered the pre-existing Indic culture of the Malays, it never displaced it, and both Islam and the Pre-Islamic culture (known under the general rubric of adat – custom) became integral components of Malay ethnicity. (266) However the two strands – Islam and adat – never properly harmonised thus “...creating a permanent tension that lies at the heart of both past and current
developments in Malaysian politics and society. Part of the tension consists of the opposing pulls of ethnic particularism and religious universalism which lie at the root of the problem of Malay ‘identity’”.(267)

Accordingly Malay nationalist responses to British colonialism fell into two generic categories; firstly, those which, while acknowledging the importance of Islam, advocated a generally secular program of reform and modernisation which would uplift the Malays, and secondly, the alternative approach which looked to the reinterpretation of Islam and an application of its principles to rejuvenate Malay society.(268) Similarly, following World War II, Malay nationalist opposition to Malayan Union proposals broke into royalist and religious strains.(269) While the royalist stream, based upon a vision of Malayness constructed around the Sultanates and *adat*, crystallised into the political form of UMNO, in 1951 Malay religious nationalism consolidated in a new political party *Persatuan Islam Se-Tanah Melayu* (PMIP), (later renamed *Partai Islam Se-Malaysia* – PAS – in 1973) which promoted a vision of Malay communalism based on enforced Islamization of the Malayan/Malaysian polity. (270)

The Malayan constitutional settlement of 1957 incorporated both Islam and *adat* into the definition of Malay ethnicity and enshrined Islam as the official religion of Malaya.(271) However, the Alliance stressed that while no person would be permitted to proselytise “among persons professing the Muslim religion”, the Malayan state would be secular and would guarantee freedom of religious belief.(272) The commitment to religious tolerance has been strongly supported by every Malaysian Prime Minister.(273)

However, the Alliance assurance that Islam would not unduly impinge on public and political life was essentially compromised from the time of the declaration of *Merdeka*. The constitutional definition of a Malay as both a person who professed the Islamic faith and as one, who because of his/her “race”, enjoyed a suite of special rights in perpetuity, conflated ethnicity and religion, thus creating from the outset a fundamental split in the Malayan population between Malay/Muslim and non-Malay/non-Muslim.(274) The various measures taken by Islamic authorities to protect the religion from the
“incursions” of other traditions, and to prevent its own adherents from lapsing into secularism, ensured that this division would become a permanent and essentially impermeable barrier. (275)

Most scholars date the genesis of the contemporary Islamic revival from the period immediately following the 1969 racial riots. (276) While Islamization has lead to a heightening of religious consciousness among the Malay middle class, (277) and among many of the thousands of young Malays who have migrated from rural areas to work in the newly established trade zones, (278) in the main the activists have been young, tertiary educated, and often influenced by Pan-Islamic ideologies. (279) Islamic revivalism has fragmented into a wide array of groups encompassing a diversity of stances ranging from moderate to radical, pro-UMNO to anti-UMNO. (280) Indeed the generic label *dakwah* (roughly translated as “missionary”) used to describe all Islamising groups, remains “a loose term, which for locals concisely sums up an aggregate of trends, activities, ideas and associations, each of which, in its own way, promotes or nurtures the cause of Islam.” (281) Given this backdrop, specific groups find it largely impossible to develop claims or speak on behalf of, the wider Muslim community. (282) Indeed the spread of Islamic movements has been accompanied by deepening divisions within the Malay community, especially between the radical *dakwah* groups which advocate the imposition of a theocratic state, and more moderate “secular” Malays. (283)

The immediate post 1969 revival reflected much of the disillusionment felt by younger Malays. Religion was viewed as a means of finding solutions to the seemingly intractable problems experienced by the broader Malay community. (284) The thousands of young Malays who were the immediate beneficiaries of the NEP provided a potential pool of recruits for these movements. Zainah Anwar has pointed out that government policies designed to stimulate Malay advancement drew many young Malays from the formal and highly structured conventionalities of *kampung* and small town society into the often baffling and even threatening complexities of urban life. (285) A high percentage of these were below average achievers who but for affirmative action policies would have been hard pressed to gain university entry, and who often perceived
themselves as “...inferior to the urban and largely better qualified non-Malay students who spoke fluent English, and (who) suffered high levels of anxiety, disenchantment, and failed and dropped out in large numbers.”(286) These pressures were greatly magnified upon students sent abroad who were required to make a dual adjustment; not only to the strangeness of an urban environment, but also to an alien (and to many an intimidating and decadent) culture based upon liberal social and moral values.(287) For large numbers of such students, Islam proved a refuge, a highly structured world view with a distinctive language and vocabulary, as well as an inventory of readily recognisable shared images and ideas.(288) Moreover, retreat into the narrow and familiar confines of a “reductive” Islam, allowed, indeed insisted upon, immediate disengagement with the uncertain and minatory world of ideas, which could retrospectively be condemned as “contaminating”, “sinful” and as “contrary to the spirit of Islam.”(289) Once drawn into the highly polemical and simplistic belief structures of the more radical *dakwah* movements, characterised by their anti-intellectualism and reluctance to enter into debate on more complex philosophical and theological issues,(290) many students abreacted their anxieties, resentments and frustrations into an aggressive superiority toward all – whether Muslim or non-Muslim – who did not share their views.(291)

Islamic movements also gained impetus among students with the 1975 amendment of the Universities and Colleges Act which effectively prohibited all student political activism upon campus. The Government measures followed widespread demonstrations against rural poverty in late 1974, which were supported by students drawn from all universities and colleges throughout Peninsular Malaysia. (292) With the banning of all political organisations within university/college precincts, Islam became the only immediate legally authorised alternative avenue through which Malay students could voice their grievances.(293) Moreover Islam had the additional advantages of furnishing transcendental and sanctified models against which official ideologies and discourses could be evaluated, as well as providing a forum for the articulation and propagation of alternative socio-political ideologies.(294)
Islamic revivalism in Malaysia was significantly influenced by developments elsewhere in the Muslim world, especially the re-assertion of Islamic identity among Middle East nations in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and later by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Throughout the 1970s Pakistani and Indian religious teachers circulated among young Malays, disseminating revolutionary variants of Islam, and some of the graduates of Arab and Islamic universities returned home espousing radical interpretations of Islam. Students sent to study in the United Kingdom were often exposed to the fundamentalist Islam propounded by student organisations, in particular the Egyptian Ikhwan Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood), and the Pakistani Jamaati-i-Islamic. Among Islamic revivalists much was made of the Haddith prophecy that the first 700 years of expanding Islamic faith would be followed by a 700 year “dark age” when the influence of Islam would decline, only to be succeeded by the onset of a new and triumphant era. The date for the commencement of this period of renewal was set Muslim Year 1400 (or 27 November 1979). Given this context, the contemporary success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran was viewed as especially portentous and stimulated particular excitement within PAS and among some Muslim youth circles.

However one of the most potent impulses which has underscored Islamic resurgence in Malaysia has been that of religion as a signifier of Malay identity. While Malays have generally regarded Islam as coterminous with “Malayness,” until 1969 religion was merely one of several obvious components of Malay ethnic identity. The constitutional amendments of the 1971 and the cultural policies of the same year clearly established aspects of Malay ethnicity other than religion – language, the Sultanates, Malay culture – as the fundamental organisational principles around which the modern Malaysian nation was to be constructed. In an ethnically charged environment in which notions of Malayness and Malay statecraft were to be regarded as normative, Islam could be viewed as the final bulwark of Malay exclusiveness and thus as a potential or actual basis for political mobilisation. Within Malaysia the universalism of Islam has thus assumed a particularistic form, which integrates Islam under the rubric of Malay ethnicity and may be employed as a means to both define and insulate Malayness. This
particularism may also be called upon to demarcate Malay Islam from that of other communities, for example Indian Muslims, and the smaller community of Chinese Muslims and recent converts. In relation to non-Muslims, Islam is a potent ethnic marker, and Islamic symbols, rituals and practices become means of emphasising and reinforcing Malay distinctiveness. In more extreme instances Islam may be erected as a barrier to interaction and as an expression of superiority to other communities.

I have noted that Islamic revivalist groups represent the entire spectrum of Muslim opinion from moderate to radical. Outside the sphere of party politics the most influential of these organisations have been Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Malaysian Muslim Youth, more generally known as ABIM), Darul Arqam, the Tabligh groups, and the radical dakwah bodies.

**ABIM** was formally established in 1973, and adopted a range of policies which advocated the reform of the Malaysian polity and society based on the application of Islamic ideals. ABIM regarded itself as “...an Islamic movement which will continue to struggle to uphold Islam, guided by genuine Islamic principles pursued through da'wah (the act of inviting a person into the faith) and tarbiyah (education).” More controversially ABIM argued for the abandonment of the “bumiputram” of the NEP. Outlining ABIM's stance, President Anwar Ibrahim stated that “Islam regards discrimination as a criminal act because it is contradictory to the (Islamic) call to unite different communities, and to encourage tolerance, friendship and mutual respect among all human beings.” Under the Presidency of Anwar Ibrahim (1974-1982), ABIM became a powerful force, and an influential forum for the articulation and moulding of Islamic ideals and policies. However, Anwar's departure in 1982 to join UMNO, together with the prior resignation of several prominent members of the ABIM Executive to join PAS (and in 1982 to capture control of the PAS leadership), left ABIM bereft of direction or momentum.

**Darul Arqam** was established in 1973 under the leadership of Ustaz Ashaari Muhammad, and attempted to promulgate a broad awareness of the teachings of Islam.
and to develop embryonic institutions and alternative economic structures which would anticipate the evolution of a future Islamic state.(311) The movement was banned in 1994 for alleged deviationist teachings by the National Fatwa Council.(312) The *Tabligh* groups were initially formed in the 1950s, but gained membership with the Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1980s. The groups have been wholly concerned with propagating the Islamic faith, and instilling in devotees the ideals of Islamic character. They have thus shunned the wider political arena.(313)

However the most immediate and potentially damaging impact upon Malaysian public opinion and the conduct of Malaysian political life was delivered by the radical student *dakwah* groups of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Upon campus these groups espoused and attempted to enforce their particularistic interpretations of Islam.(314) The radicals were especially concerned with restricting artistic expression and campaigned vigorously to quell art forms considered contrary to Islam.(315)

A spate of violent incidents since the mid 1970s heightened public unease, and led to the introduction of measures to curb the activities of radical Islamic groups. These episodes included the following:

(i) Between December 1977 and August 1978, a band of young men, university lecturers and students – clad in Arab attire and calling themselves “The Army of Allah” conducted a series of nocturnal assaults on Hindu temples in various parts of the country, resulting in the destruction of statuary including dedicated *murthis*. (316) A total of 28 temples, most adjacent to the main road between Malacca and Perak states, were desecrated. (317) These raids ceased following an armed clash with Hindu temple guards in the Subramaniar Temple at the Southern Perak town of Kerling on 19 August 1978. Four young Malays were killed in this exchange. (318)

(ii) In October 1980, a group of entranced Muslim radicals, believing themselves invulnerable to bullets, and acting under the tutelage of a Cambodian visionary – himself a recent convert and claiming to be the Mahdi – launched a frenzied attack on a police station in Batu Pahat, Johore. 8 people were killed, including a pregnant
Muslim woman who was slashed to death by the attackers, and 23 people were injured.(319)

(iii) In 1985, police attempts to arrest an Islamic leader, Ibrahim Mahmud, known as Ibrahim Libya, who had established a commune in Kampong Memali in the Baling area of Kedah, resulted in an armed confrontation in which 18 people were killed. The police subsequently arrested 159 villagers, including women and children.(320)

(iv) In 2001, the government took measures to destroy Al Ma'unah, an alleged Islamic terrorist organisation, whose leader had reportedly led an armed body in a raid aimed at stealing weaponry and ammunition from an army camp in Perak; an action which was seen as a prelude to a coup.(321)

The government is thus aware that if left unchecked, Islamic radicalism has the potential to foment political instability and to ignite both inter-ethnic and intra-Malay violence.(322)

8.3 Islamization: The Government's Response
The struggle to define and control Malay Islamic identity has been fiercely and occasionally violently contested between the two Malay based political parties, the ruling UMNO and the opposition party, PAS, both of which view Malay-Muslims as their natural constituency.(323) This ideological conflict between the two parties has often been couched in misleadingly reductive terminology; namely Mathathir-UMNO "modernism", as opposed to the "traditionalism" of PAS. In fact, the debate largely reflects Malay ambivalence to the impact of "modernisation" and the massive social pressures unleashed by rapid economic growth and sweeping structural changes.(324) Thus the ideology enunciated by each party represents a critique of contemporary Malaysian society, "...a political vision grounded in modern realities."(325) In general, while UMNO has propounded the benefits of a fully developed state, informed by a moderate, revitalised and pragmatic Islam, PAS has cultivated a program rooted in the history of an imagined classicist ummat, and defined in terms of the enduring framework
of fiqh (or Islamic jurisprudence.) PAS thus ostensibly transcends issues relating to Malay ethnic specificity in search of a perceived Islamic universalism; that is, the establishment of an Islamic rather than a Malay state.

Apart from a brief period between 1974-1978 when PAS was a member of the ruling BN coalition, relations between UMNO and PAS have been characterised by hostility and suspicion, and have often been punctuated with bitter accusations. The displacement of the PAS “old guard” leadership in 1982, and the election of a radical “Young Turk”, Arab educated, and seemingly more politically astute leadership, alarmed UMNO, and deepened enmity between the two parties. PAS's post 1982 ulama leadership have cited the Iranian revolution as an inspiration for a Malaysian Islamic state. The shifting political rhetoric of the party reflects PAS's divestment of its historic ethno-religious nationalist agenda in favour of Islamization.

The stamp of the future Islamic state envisioned by PAS was foreshadowed by the party's actions following the 1990 electoral victory in Kelantan. Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the state's Chief Minister, has been stringent in his denunciations of non-believers, and has not shied from disparaging Chinese and Hindus. In 1993 the PAS government introduced the Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code (II), a Code supposedly based on Revelation and thus providing for state enforcement of an individual's obligations to God. The Code, perceived by UMNO as “fanatical”, represented an attempt to broaden the jurisdiction of Malaysia's Syariah Courts, and in so doing to redefine the context in which Malaysian constitutional law is enunciated.

Apart from the attempt to portray PAS as an extreme and dangerous force, the government has responded with what has been basically a three pronged policy; namely (i) reassurance of non-Muslim communities, including a series of speeches by high profile political leaders and the Sultans in which it has been repeatedly emphasised that it is an Islamic duty to display tolerance towards those of other religious persuasions; (ii) the pursuit of legal and extra-judicial measures to curb the growth of Muslim radicalism.
and to check the activities and organisation of student *dakwah* movements; and (iii) the adoption of a policy of Islamization of the Malaysian polity. The latter measure was viewed as a strategy which would both counter and ultimately outflank the growing pressures exerted by Islamic reform groups, as well as nullifying accusations that UMNO was doing little to advance the cause of Islam. However UMNO is aware that this policy must be carefully calibrated to avoid alienating the powerful Chinese business sector or deterring foreign investment.

In 1982, UMNO proclaimed itself the largest Islamic party in the world, and adumbrated a policy of official Islamization. The defection of Anwar Ibrahim from ABIM to UMNO in 1982 was almost wholly in response to Mahathir's promise of the opportunity to participate in the framing and implementation of reforms. The Malaysian Government's program has resulted in the establishment of an International Islamic University (*Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia* or UIAM), the founding of an Islamic banking system, the setting up of an Institute for Islamic Research, and the introduction of measures to assist poorer Muslims to undertake the Haj. At the same time the program of Islamization has been both measured and cautious, and Mahathir, as Prime Minister assured both coalition partners and foreign investors that Malaysia would remain a moderate and stable regime, and that Islamization would complement rather than retard modernisation.

The central component of the Government's Islamization program has been the implementation of an expanded system of *Syariah* (Islamic law), which is viewed by many Muslims as crucial to the process of Islamic reform. The Federal Government has adopted a series of measures to standardise and raise the status of the *Syariah* jurisdiction. However, UMNO was determined to ensure that the nation would not be confined by the “...literalism and legalism of mainstream jurisprudence... (which)...effectively portrays Islam as a static religion which has lost its relevance.” In 1998 the government removed the administration of the *Syariah* from the states and vested it in the Department of Syariah Judiciary (Jabatan Kahikiman Syariah) located within the Prime Minister's Department. This removed *Syariah* from...
the purview of the largely Middle East trained officials who had long dominated Malaysia's Syariah courts. These were replaced with UIAM experts who were expected to interpret Islamic law in the context of Malaysia's local cultures and traditions. (344) The institutionalisation of the Syariah system brought the entire judicial apparatus under the control of the Federal Government, thus rendering officials wholly dependent upon the patronage and career opportunities which could only be offered by the ruling party. (345) However while Malaysia has pursued reform in the administration and interpretation of Syariah, this has not been permitted to impinge upon or challenge the supremacy of the nation's civil legal system. (346)

The 1999 Federal elections thrust the role of Islam in the state to the very centre of political debate. (347) The polls were held in the wake of the economic crisis of 1997 attended by the well publicised fall of prominent business magnates, a series of corporate collapses, and widely circulated rumours of corruption in ruling circles, as well as the controversy surrounding the dismissal and imprisonment of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar. (348) A majority of the Malay electorate voted for PAS and the newly formed Keadilan Party. (349) In April 2001, 6 members of Keadilan were detained on suspicion of plotting the downfall of the Mahathir Government. This was followed in September 2001 with the arrests of 10 Malays, including several PAS members, for alleged membership of a revolutionary Islamic organisation. (350) Mahathir also cited the 11 September 2001 attacks on the New York Trade Center, even to the extent of associating PAS with the Taliban regime of Afghanistan, as an example of what would befall Malaysia if “extremists” were allowed to gain power. (351)

8.4 Islamic Revivalism and Inter Ethnic Relations
In general the rise of Islam and the process of Islamization have been viewed with alarm, occasionally approaching panic, by non-Muslims. Most non-Muslims believe that the process of Islamization poses a severe threat to both ethnic and religious integrity, and perceive the official emphasis upon Islam as further confirmation of their second class status. (352) Many feel intimidated by the intolerance and incipient authoritarianism of radical dakwah groups, and by the continual calls issued by PAS and
other Islamic bodies for the development of an Islamic state and the full implementation of Islamic law for all citizens whether Muslim or non-Muslim. The passage of the Islamic Administration Bill of 1989 which *inter alia* allows non-Muslim minors to convert to Islam upon reaching the age of puberty (*balign*) according to the *Syariah*, was seen by many non-Muslims as a prelude to an Islamic campaign of mass conversion of the children of non-Muslims thus denying other religions of future generations of adherents. There has been growing non-Muslim suspicion that UMNO's attempts to counter PAS radicalism through a process of Islamization represent a continual and incremental form of appeasement rather than a clear rejection of fanaticism, and will ultimately result in the adoption of extreme measures which will gravely diminish the rights of non-Muslims.

The Malaysian Government has attempted to send a succession of reassuring signals to non-Muslims, including encouraging the formation, in August 1983, of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism, to convey the views of minority religious traditions to the government, as well as visible government patronage of non-Islamic cultural and religious festivals. However the increasing emphasis upon Islam as the “Malaysian” way of life, and extraordinary measures such as the preferential admission throughout the 1980s and 1990s of guest workers from Muslim countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nigeria on the grounds that these migrants were the natural “Muslim brothers” to the Malays, while simultaneously restricting access from other neighbouring (non-Muslim) nations, have contributed to the growing unease of many non-Muslims. At the same time the perceived demonization of Islam by Western commentators and agencies, especially the putative portrayal of Muslims as backward, repressive and murderous, and the (well publicised) vehemence of US Christian fundamentalist groups toward all “Asian” religions, including Islam, coupled with the continuing encroachments of a supposedly Western, secularist, materialist culture, viewed as nihilist, decadent, corrosive, and devoid of any inner referential meaning, have strengthened the determination of many Muslims, especially ulamas, to implement whatever steps are necessary to buttress Islam as a fundamental pillar of Malay culture. This concept, of a religion under siege,
and threatened by an array of hostile global forces, may be, as Joel Kahn suggests, a Malay reactive “self exoticizing discourse” in response to the pressures of modernisation, an obsession “with their own uniqueness with respect to a godless cultureless "West””, (361) but it remains virtually incomprehensible to many non-Muslims. They tend to view the policy of Islamization not as an assertion of religio-cultural identity in an unsympathetic and increasingly Western oriented and controlled world, but rather as a mechanism to emphasise, reinforce, and perpetuate non-Malay “otherness” as “immigrants”, and thus to devalue their own civilizational heritages and accomplishments. The resulting contretemps is a melange of misunderstanding, confusion, suspicion and deeply bruised feelings in many quarters.(362)

Non-Muslim fear and rejection of perceived Islamic extremism was emphasised by Chinese and Indian voter behaviour during the 1999 Federal elections. In that year the predominantly Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) banded with Keadilan and PAS in a loosely structured oppositional alliance known as Barisan Alternatif. (363) Although rallies in support of the dismissed Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim had been attended by younger Malaysians of all ethnic groups,(364) these demonstrations did not translate into non-Malay support for what was perceived as the Islamic dominated Alternatif. (365)

Islamic assertion among Malays has been paralleled by a vigorous and sustained renewal of all other religions.(366) This can be at least partially explained in terms of ethnicity. The 1969 racial riots and the subsequent consolidation of the official ideologues and symbols of Tanah Melayu curbed the open expression of non-Malay political ambitions and underlined the dangers attendant in attempting to challenge Malay hegemony.(367) Despite obvious anomalies (for example Malaysia's Indian Muslim and Christian communities), the fault lines of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia are largely coterminous, thus creating a clear dichotomy between Malay/Muslim and non-Malay/non-Muslim.(368) Thwarted in the political sphere, many non-Malays have turned to religion as an expression of ethnic authentication, as a means of ethnic experimentation, and as an alternative to the known hazards of overtly asserting political
ambitions or demands. At one level, then the “ethnicization” of religion has transformed religious observation and its symbols and rituals into vehicles for ethnic mobilisation. On this plane religious adherence may be viewed as a continuing public declaration of communal identity; one which avoids the more obvious danger of political confrontation or overt ethnic rivalry, but nevertheless signals ethnic particularism and resistance to dominant Malay/Muslim cultural and ideological paradigms. Interpreted in this light, the gathering pace of religious observance among all communities throughout the past thirty years may reflect the perpetuation of underlying ethnic debates and even increasing communal polarisation.

However, at another, and perhaps more profound level, the discourses surrounding Malay/Muslim identity have had a more comprehensive and far-reaching impact upon all religious traditions. We have noted, in passing, that the exploration of Islamic and Malay identity has responded to the intense pressures of modernisation and nation building, including the manner in which non-Malays/non-Muslims should be incorporated within the fabric of a Malay/Muslim nation. In fashioning narrative structures which clearly locate Malays within mainstream Islam, Malay Muslims have turned to the intellectual currents of the international Islamic ummat, in particular those which emphasise the histories and traditions of classical Islamic triumphalism, focusing especially on the glories of the Seventh Century Caliphate. However, competing ideologies interpret this history and extrapolate central themes in radically different ways. PAS emphasises reform and renewal in terms of imposing the legal framework of an idealised Islamic state. Thus, for example, Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, PAS Chief Minister of Kelantan, has in public discourse underscored the relevance of Hudud and other legalistic measures by situating the state as the pivot of a cosmic battle in which God Himself is a participant. In contrast UMNO stresses Islam's adaptability, its progressiveness and wide ranging scholarship, its willingness to pursue and apply knowledge. This narrative foregrounds the decline of Islam under Western colonial regimes, and the need for economic and scientific development to regain its rightful position in the modern world. It is important to note, however, that all narratives posit Islam as a religion able to negotiate and accommodate the processes of
modernisation according to its own history and traditions and in terms of its own belief structures.

While these debates within the Muslim population have been echoed among non-Muslim communities, in the case of the latter these have been rendered more urgent by the intense and aggressive proselytisation mounted by evangelical Christians, mainly associated with US Pentecostal traditions. While these groups are prohibited from campaigning among Muslims,(375) they have directed fierce and often offensive polemics against Hinduism, Buddhism and Catholicism. Pentecostalism appears to develop no systematic theology, nor is it rooted in any complex of ecclesiastical traditions, but rather advances its claims through a selective, repetitive and frequently disjointed series of Biblical quotes and bromides which often serve as “simplistic solutions to non-religious problems” (these are seldom complicated by contextualization or scholarly exegesis), together with the doctrine of imminent eschatology.(376) A central tenet is the stress upon the immediate and spontaneous experiential reality of divine revelation, defined wholly in terms of self redemption.(377) However much of the Pentecostalist program consists of the emphatic denial of the validity or even the possibility of integrity or sincerity of any other alternative belief structure. This essentially negative discourse is conducted through the presentation of a series of shrill, vitriolic, and often meretricious caricatures, which traduce foundation mythologies and rituals, and which equate all “non-believers” with Satan and “devil worship”.(378) Pentecostalism has attempted to portray itself as a modern Western tradition (as opposed to supposedly moribund Asian traditionalism), one which is grounded in the Christian theological mainstream. As such it strongly endorses the ethos of consumerism and private enterprise capitalism as the fundamental and most dynamic organisational principle of modern society.(379) The conversion campaign has had moderate successes within the Chinese and Indian communities, mainly among English speaking middle classes, who aspire to be identified as “modern” and Westernized.(380)

Both Islamization and the challenge posed by Protestant evangelicals have produced strong and sustained responses within the Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Sikh and Catholic
communities. All have advanced or developed outreach and youth programs which underscore the proud and extensive heritages, the profound theologies and spiritual accomplishments of their respective religious traditions, and which highlight their immediate relevance to the modern world. Chinese adherents of Buddhism and Taoism have been encouraged to explore the links between the metropolitan centres of China and Taiwan and the Nanyang communities as part of a wider religious and civilizational network. (381) Malaysia's Hindus have embarked upon a campaign of renewal which has included educational programs, temple renovation and construction, and scholarship. Hindu communities and commentators have propounded narratives which aim to establish and affirm Hindu identity, to simultaneously enmesh and locate themselves within the wider world of the Tamil/Hindu diaspora, (thus activating pan-Hindu and pan-Indian allegiances, and signalling common membership of one of the world's great, enduring and vital traditions), (382) and to define themselves within the context of global religious and civilizational structures.

9. CONCLUSIONS
This chapter has shown that the origins of the ethnic politics of contemporary Malaysia were laid throughout the early period of British colonialism. The British administration imposed a policy of racial compartmentalization which ruled through the Sultans, sidelined the bulk of the Malay population, and justified itself in terms of its “protection” of the indigenes against the putative predatory ambitions of the immigrant Chinese and Indians who had been imported to develop the colonial economy. The colonial order was irrevocably shattered by the impact of the Japanese invasion which destroyed forever notions of European invincibility and military superiority. However, the “racial” policies adopted by the Japanese cohered previously inchoate concepts of ethnicity, thus producing a Malaya vertically segmented into three discrete “races” animated by fierce Sino-Malay rivalry. This distrust continued into the post-war period. The Alliance formula and the UMNO-MCA Merdeka “bargain” appeared to provide a workable resolution of the ethnic dilemma, by providing a recognized political forum in which legitimate ethnic claims could be articulated and brokered. However, as we have seen, the “bargain” was challenged throughout the early years of Malaysia, and was
finally rendered unworkable by the racial riots of 13 May 1969. The May 13 incident proved a watershed in Malaysian politics, culture and society. It was followed by measures which removed the concept of *Tanah Melayu* from the sphere of political debate, and which restructured society and in particular the economy with the aim of relieving Malay indigence and ensuring that *bumiputras* shared in full the benefits of economic growth. The subsequent Mahathir era was accompanied by the implementation of sweeping nation-building policies, but also resulted in increased authoritarianism and corruption without necessarily defusing ethnic tensions. Indeed, as I have shown, Malaysia remained a “fragmented society”, containing a multiplicity of particularistic sites resistant to official nationalistic and modernistic ideologies.

The chapter has also traced the circumstances attending the arrival of the segmented Indian population, and has examined its attempts to adjust to the changing political and social structures of colonial Malaya, and independent Malaya/Malaysia. I have noted that the major systems of labour recruitment – indenture and kangany – produced a variegated but firmly subjugated workforce. I have suggested that Indian labour has developed its own paradigmatic impulses, which following Arasaratnam, I have termed a “plantation culture”; a culture which is characterised by chronic underachievement, lack of social mobility, poverty, apathy and hopelessness. However, as I have observed, there were also other streams of Indian immigration, consisting of professional, business and trading groups, which formed a minority of the Indian community, and which remains as socially remote from the majority Indian labouring classes now as it did throughout the colonial era. I have noted that the social divisions and fissures within the Indian population were bridged throughout the brief and catalytic interregnum of the Japanese occupation when the politics of Indian nationalism temporarily unified the community, and emphasized common membership of a great, powerful and enduring civilisation.

The final section of this chapter has charted the rise of Islam in Malaysia, and has examined how competing discourses have created deep divisions within the Muslim community. The struggle to define and direct the course of Islamic expression within
Malaysia has produced hostile and occasionally violent contestation between UMNO and PAS, and has resulted in the introduction of a series of Islamic reforms designed to neutralize and isolate PAS. As I have observed, the continued emphasis upon Islamic identity, and the conjunction of the religion with Malay ethnicity, have left many non-Malays feeling alarmed, threatened and displaced. The religious uncertainty has been compounded by the direct challenge mounted by a series of virulent and aggressive evangelical Christian movements, perceived by many Malays as part of a Western conspiracy designed to curtail and undermine Islam, and by adherents of minority religions as a deliberate and sustained campaign to both traduce and destroy their religious heritages. The cumulative result of these developments has been a powerful resurgence in all religious traditions and a reworking of identities in terms of wider civilizational allegiances.

In locating the Indian population as that of an ineffectual minority in a polity increasingly charged with religio-ethnic tensions, a community irrelevant in the overall political process, economically powerless, and generally existing on the margins of a society dominated politically and culturally by Malay Muslims, in competition with a powerful Chinese commercial class, it would be easy to construct a plausible case that the highly visible festival of Thaipusam represented the product of Indian social and economic deprivation. Such a theory would argue that Thaipusam played a cathartic role to a seriously underprivileged, oppressed and alienated community, which sought refuge and release in sets of extreme and self destructive behaviours which while highlighting group identity, in actual terms merely emphasized the community's powerlessness. In the following chapter I will explore the celebration of Thaipusam and Murugan worship in a variety of settings, both in metropolitan India and within the Tamil diaspora, with the aim of determining whether the theory of “social deprivation” provides a convincing explanation of the forms of ritual worship exhibited at Thaipusam Batu Caves.

NOTES
(5) Kennedy, op cit:251
(9) Parmer (1960), op cit:16
(10) Kennedy, op cit:235
(14) Butcher, op cit:9,108.
(18) Allan, Richard, op cit:276-277
(20) Lydia Potts claims that the word "coolie" originated in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Thus, she states that Sartorius von Walterhausen claims that the term "coolie" labour was "...soon being used widely throughout Eastern Asia and Australia to described emigrants who had committed themselves by contract to work in the distant parts for one season or for several years. Accordingly it covers India, Malaysian, Chinese, Polynesian and Japanese coolies, most of whom worked in countries situated in the tropics, but governed by Europeans. For the most part they are employed in the plantations, but also work in the mines as navvies, on various kinds of project such as railway or canal construction." (Potts, Lydia. The World Labour Market: A History of Migration, Zed Books, London, 1990:64) However, Hugh Tinker asserts that the term originated in the late eighteenth century, and was a pejorative designation which "...ceased to have any connection with any group or race: it was used to describe those at the lowest level of the industrial labour market." (Tinker, Hugh. A New System of Slavery:The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920, Oxford University Press, London, 1974: 42-43) These days within Malaysia the term is regarded as highly insulting, and has not been widely used since Merdeka.(Personal field research)
(21) Tinker (1974), op cit:17
(22) Potts, op cit:64
(26) ibid:82
(27) ibid:56
(28) ibid:57-58
(29) ibid:82
(32) Sandhu (1969), op cit:82
(33) Jain (1984), op cit:164
(34) Jain (1984), op cit:166-167
(35) Tinker (1974), op cit:208
(36) ibid:199
(38) Tinker (1974), op cit:199
(39) ibid: 208-209
(41) Parmer (1960), op cit:50
(42) Tinker (1974), op cit:315
(44) Parmer (1960), op cit:38
(45) Sandhu (1969), op cit:96 This compares with 13 per cent of all assisted labour
recruited under indentured labour schemes, which constituted a mere 6 per cent of all Indian immigration to Malaya to 1957. (Jain (1984), op cit:162) In total about 4 million Indians entered Malaya, with 2.8 million subsequently departing. The 1957 Federation of Malaya Census Report states “...much of the 1.2 million net immigration appears to have been wiped out by disease, snake-bite, exhaustion and malnutrition, for the Indian population of Malaya in 1957 numbered only 858,615, of which 62.1 per cent was locally born.” (Ramachandran, C.P. Key Note Address: The Malaysian Indian in the New Millenium, Kuala Lumpur, June 2002). The blandness of the bureaucratic language cannot disguise the tragedy and horror which lurk behind these figures.

(46) Jain (1984), op cit:172
(47) Sandhu (1969), op cit:115; Parmer (1960), op cit:55
(48) Parmer (1960), op cit:55
(49) ibid; see also Sandhu (1969), op cit:115
(50) Arasaratnam (1970) op cit:24-26
(51) Stenson, Michael R. Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1980:24-25
(52) ibid:26
(53) Selvakumaran, op cit:99,107
(54) Thus for example Jain (1984) remarks that South Indian labour was “both cheap and replaceable”. (op cit:174-175)
(56) 1930 Report of the Agent of the Government of India (IOOR/V/24/1184-85)
(57) Parmer (1960), op cit:213
(58) Selvakumaran, op cit:68; Sandhu (1969), op cit:108
(59) Parmer (1960), op cit:213-215
(60) Sandhu (1969) op cit:67,122
(61) Arasaratnam; (1970), op cit:33
(64) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:37-39
(65) ibid:88
(67) Stenson (1980), op cit:47-51
(68) Selvakumaran, op cit:227, Parmer (1960), op cit:258-259
(69) Selvakumaran, op cit:227
(70) Stenson (1980) op cit:44, Parmer (1960), op cit:200
(71) Parmer (1960), op cit:213
(72) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:127
(73) Stenson (1980), op cit:79
(76) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:80
(77) Selvakumaran, op cit:230-231; Stenson (1980), op cit:64-65
(78) In response to representations made by Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of Singapore, the Undersecretary of State for the Colonial Office on 14 May 1941 approved “firm handling of subversive elements”. (IOOR/L/P & J/8/264: Indians Overseas: Strikes by Indian Labourers)
(79) IOOR/108/21/C:Indians Overseas: Malaya: Negotiations Between Indian and Malayan Governments 1939-1942; Selvakumaran, op cit:232-233


(84) Cheah (1987), op cit:54; Khong, op cit: 32

(85) Cheah (1987), op cit:55


(90) Cheah (1987), op cit:298

Memory in Malaysia”, in Lim and Wong, op cit:93

(92) Stenson (1980), op cit: 90 (Note: Stenson claims that the reduction in the Indian population was 7 per cent; however a quick mathematical check will place the figure at 14 per cent.)


(96) Ramachandra, op cit.


(99) Ramachandra, op cit:215


(102) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:109

(103) ibid; Arasaratnam (1993), op cit:210

(104) Ramachandra, op cit:262-263; Sandhu (1993), op cit:183-184

(105) Arasaratnam (1993), op cit:210

(106) ibid:190-191

(108) Vasil (1980), op cit:207
(109) Ratnam, K.J. Communalism and the Political Process in Malaya, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, 1965:103
(110) Wan Hashim, op cit:46-48
(111) ibid
(113) Wan Hashim, op cit:46
(114) Khong, op cit:94:
(115) Shaw, op cit:63
(116) Ratnam, op cit:118
(118) Ratnam, op cit:116
(119) ibid:79
(120) ibid:104-105
(121) Heng, op cit:151
(122) Kessler, Clive. “Archaism and Modernity: Contemporary Malay Political Culture”, in Kahn and Loh, op cit:139
(123) Heng, op cit:151
(124) Khong, op cit:51-52
(127) Rehman, op cit:57
(128) Khong, op cit:166-167
The population at Merdeka was 6,278,763 people, constituted as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>Just under 50 per cent</td>
<td>3,126,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>37 per cent</td>
<td>2,332,936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>12 per cent</td>
<td>695,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>approximately 2 per cent</td>
<td>123,136 (including Pakistanis, Ceylonese)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Ratnam, op cit:1)

(130) Heng, op cit:201
(131) Milne and Mauzy, op cit:42
(132) Heng, op cit:230
(133) ibid:231
(135) Milne and Mauzy, op cit:38-39
(137) Nair, op cit: 92
(138) Kahn Joel S. and Loh Kok Wah, Francis, “Introduction”, in Kahn and Loh, op cit:9

(139) Kahn and Loh, op cit:10
(140) Ratnam, op cit: 29; Kessler, op cit:136-138
(141) Muhammad Ikmal Said, op cit:275
(142) ibid:265, 275; Milne and Mauzy, op cit:38-42; Ratnam, op cit:132
(143) Selvakumaran, op cit:142
(145) ibid:95
(146) Selvakumaran, op cit:242
(147) Nadaraja, op cit:97
(148) ibid: 97-102  
(149) Selvakumaran, op cit: 242-244  
(150) ibid:244  
(151) ibid:238-240; Ramachandra, op cit.  
(152) Mahajani, op cit:203  
(154) Arasaratnam (1970) op cit:153  
(157) Arasaratnam (1971/72), op cit:4  
(159) Arasaratnam (1971/72), op cit:5  
(160) ibid  
(161) ibid; Amplavanar, op cit:191-192  
(163) Arasaratnam (1971/72) op cit:5; Amplavanar, op cit:172-175,212; Muzaffar (1993), op cit:219; Mahajani, op cit:214-215  
(164) Amplavanar, op cit:199  
(166) Interviews with founding MIC officials: (KPS; RSV)  
(167) Cheah (2003), op cit:93  
(168) Rehman, op cit:59, Milne and Mauzy, op cit:65  
(169) Rehman, op cit:59,  
(170) Vasil (1980), op cit:208  
(171) ibid:156  
(172) Cheah (2003), op cit:101; Milne and Mauzy, op cit:71-72

(174) ibid:122-127; see also Milne and Mauzy, op cit:75

(175) Vasil (1980), op cit:210-212

(176) ibid


(179) Gagliano, op cit:12

(180) Goh records that “Realizing that the UMNO Branch in Selangor was in a precarious situation, bands of youthful sympathizers from the DAP and GERAKAN headed toward Dato Harun's house (that is, the house of the Chief Minister of Selangor) in Jalan Raja Muda, and rudely invited him to quit his State residence since he was allegedly no longer Mentri Besar. At processions held to celebrate individual Opposition successes, youthful Chinese and Indian supporters booed and jeered at Malays they encountered or at Malay houses they passed. The slogans which they shouted ...showed that they interpreted the political stalemate in Selangor as directly, a defeat for UMNO, the leading Malay political party, and indirectly, a defeat for the Malay people. Some of these were 'kapal layar bochor' (The sailing boat is leaking!); 'Melayu sudah jatoh' (Malays have fallen!); 'Melayu sekarang ta'ada kuasa lagi' (Malays no longer have power!); 'Kuala Lumpur sekarang China punya' (Kuala Lumpur now belongs to the Chinese!); 'Melayu boleh balek kampong!' (Malays may return to their villages!).” (Goh, op cit:20-21)

(181) Gagliano, op cit:19

(182) Heng, op cit: 261-262; Shaw, op cit:219; Vasil (1980), op cit:189

In 1970 foreign interests owned 60.7 per cent of Malaysia's share capital. Chinese owned 22.5 per cent, Malays 1.9 per cent, and Indians 1 per cent. (source: Cheah (2003), op cit:86)

Rehman, op cit:96-97
Kahn and Loh, op cit:13
Cheah (2003), op cit:127
Gagliano, op cit:29; Shaw, op cit:239-240
Cheah (2003), op cit:147
Vasil, (1987), op cit:167
Muzaffar (1993), op cit:212
Selvakumaran, op cit:322-323
Amplavanar-Brown, Rajeswary, “The Contemporary Indian Political Elite in Malaysia”, in Sandhu and Mani, op cit:238

The fragmentation of estates began during the 1950s when some sterling companies, alarmed by the uncertain prospects and possible instability of an independent Malaya, decided to sell their properties and repatriate their capital. The process of divestment triggered a chain of speculation, and between 1950 and 1967 18 per cent of the total land area was subdivided. The MIC and the Indian managed National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) repeatedly urged the government to halt fragmentation or at least to regulate the process. However, despite a 1963 government report which recommended the prohibition of further subdivision, UMNO refused to intervene, erroneously contending that fragmentation encouraged the emergence of small scale (Malay) peasant production. An estimated 50,000 Tamil workers were affected by the subdivision of estates. The hereditary occupations of many were lost, and those who managed to secure employment on the fragmented properties endured 'dismal' living and working conditions. (See: Selvakumaran, op cit:260-261,305; Wiebe, Paul W. and Mariappan, S. Indian Malaysians: The View from the Plantation, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1978:38; Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:154-156; Muzaffar (1993):222. The destitution and personal misery that this process created was recounted in interviews with several of those who had been victims of this process.) The citizenship crisis which developed in the wake of the 1969 racial riots reflected a manifest failure of both
political and industrial leadership. Following the imposition of emergency rule, the NOC announced that all employment, whether in public or private sectors, would be restricted to Malaysian citizens. Many Indians, including approximately 20 per cent of the plantation workforce, most of whom met all the pre-conditions necessary for citizenship, were affected by this measure. Up to 10,000 Indians made application to the Indian Labour Fund which had been directed by the government to offer cash inducements and a free passage for those prepared to accept "repatriation" to India. The MIC’s representations on this issue were rejected by the UMNO leadership. The mass exodus of Indian workers was forestalled only by a spectre of several labour shortfalls within the plantation sector, combined with extreme employer pressure which finally resulted in government agreement to granting temporary employment permits. Selvakumaran argues that MIC/NUPW action may have averted this crisis. Since the attainment of Merdeka the MIC had neglected to conduct grassroots campaigns to persuade eligible Indian workers to acquire citizenship, and had failed to make the necessary representations which might have overhauled the complex administrative procedures that were associated with obtaining citizenship. Similarly the NUPW had not stressed the importance of pursuing citizenship among its members, nor had union officials bothered to assist individual members to pursue citizenship claims. (Selvakumaran, op cit:274, 304-305).

(196) Selvakumaran, op cit:307
(197) ibid:306
(198) ibid:310-314
(199) ibid:312-314
(200) Ramachandra, op cit.
(201) ibid
(202) ibid
(203) Arasaratnam (1993), op cit:193
(204) Jeyakumar, D. “The Indian Poor in Malaysia: Problems and Solutions”, in Sandhu, K.S. and Mani, A., (Editors), Indian Communities in Southeast Asia, op cit:418-419
(205) Ramachandran, op cit; Oorjitham, K.S. Susan. “Urban Indian Working Class Households”, Jurnal Pengajian Indian, Department of Indian Studies, Universiti
Thus, for example, the 1926 Report of the Agent of the Government of India states "The evil of toddy drinking is rampant and goes on unchecked." The same Report covers the subject of the low standard of schools and the poor rates of attendance, and the substandard quality of staff. (IOOR:V/24/1184-85) Gamba points out that until the Pacific War the minimum age of employment had been seven years; this was raised to eight years by the enactment of the Children and Young Persons Ordinance No. 33 of 1947. This also specified that children aged between eight and twelve could now only be employed in light agricultural or horticultural work. (Gamba: op cit:259-260) Perhaps the necessity for children to work to contribute to family incomes may at least partially explain poor educational outcomes. The 1935 Agent's Report states that "If a labourer has a family, the wife and children have to work for their bare living...It is generally remarked that the Tamil labourer is of poor physique. It cannot be otherwise when, as had been put on record by a European doctor in charge of an estate group hospital, the South Indian labourer's diet is not much above the malnutrition level."

(IOOR:V/24/1184-85) However, public health measures were poor. Malaria killed about 200,000 persons in the Federated Malay States alone in the dozen years leading to World War I, and a similar number throughout the 1920s. The incidence of anklyostosromiasis (hookworm) infected 75 per cent to 80 per cent of all persons after a year of residence on the estates. Venereal disease, linked to prostitution, affected about 80 per cent of people. Tuberculosis was the fourth largest killer. In the period 1910-1920, infant mortality averaged 195.62/1000. Estate hospitals were poorly equipped and staffed. Many of those employed in hospitals were underqualified, and at least half of all medical personnel were totally unqualified. (Parmer (1990), op cit:181-185). Leonore Manderson points out that colonial authorities tended to dismiss Tamils as physically degenerate and having limited powers of endurance, of poor genetic inheritance, of low intelligence and constricted expectations of life. (Manderson, Lenore. “Colonial Mentality and Public
Health in the Early Twentieth Century Malaya”, in Rimmer and Allen, op cit:198-200
(211) ibid:102; Rajoo, R. “Indian Squatter Settlers: Rural-Urban Migration in West Malaysia”, in Sandhu and Mani, op cit:484-485
(213) Amplavanar-Brown, op cit:250; Puthucheary, Mavis. “Indians in the Public Sector”, in Sandhu and Mani, op cit:348-357
(214) Muzaffar (1993), op cit:227-228
(216) Thus Dato Professor Ramachandran, speaking of the divisions which characterised professional Indians in the pre-World War II colonial era claims: "Herein lay the roots of the mindset of the middle class Malaysian Indian of today. A mindset steeped in sublime ignorance and blind arrogance, even to the point of denying the very roots of our common genetic and ethnic heritage. A mindset that readily identified with the ruling class to subjugate and lord-over our downtrodden brethren. This same mindset persists today in the way we view ourselves." (Ramachandran, op cit)
(217) Jeyakumar, op cit:419
(218) Muzaffar (1993), op cit:219
(219) ibid
(220) Amplavanar-Brown, op cit:250
(221) Personal field research: These evictions have continued unabated, and are a major source of anxiety among many plantation workers living in close proximity to urban centres.
(222) Jeyakumar, op cit:419-245; Oorjitham, “Economic Profile of the Tamil Working Class in Peninsular Malaysia”, op cit:105
(223) Ooijitham, “Urban Working-Class Indians in Malaysia”, op cit:506. Edmund Gomez and Jomo K.S. comment that “...despite its achievements, the extent to which the
NEP's overriding goal of achieving 'national unity' – usually interpreted as improved inter-ethnic relations – had been attained – is highly questionable; in fact, inter-ethnic relations were arguably worse in 1990 than in 1970. S. Samy Vellu, President of the Malaysian Indian Congress, acknowledged in the 1990s that Indians were more marginalized and alienated than ever before.” (Gomez, Edmund Terrence, and Jomo K.S. *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics Patronage and Profits*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997:168). See also: Daniel, Rabindra J. “Poverty Among the Malaysian Indian Plantation Community”, *Jurnal Pengajian India*, Department of Indian Studies, Universiti Malaya, Volume I, 1983, pp.125-142)

(224) Muzaffar (1993), op cit:228; personal field research


(227) Khoo Boo Teik, op cit:74, 327-336

(228) ibid:65-74; Gomez and Jomo, op cit:169

(229) Cheah (2003), op cit:193

(230) Nair, op cit:92

(231) ibid:93

(232) Crouch, Harold. “Authoritarian Trends, the UMNO Split and the Limits to State Power”, in Kahn and Loh, op cit: 21-22

(233) ibid:25

(234) Nair, op cit:92

(235) Crouch, op cit: 23-27; Cheah (2003), op cit:216-222


(237) Rehman, op cit:212-213; Hwang, op cit:133

(239) Khoo Boo Teik, op cit:130
(241) Cheah (2003), op cit:190,234
(243) Lee, Raymond L.M. “Symbols of Separatism: Ethnicity and Status Politics in Contemporary Malaysia”, in Lee, Raymond, L.M. (Editor), Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Malaysia, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1986:34
(244) Gomez and Jomo, op cit:22-23
(245) ibid:39-40; Khoo Boo Teik, op cit:105
(246) Nair, op cit:92. Karim Raslan outlines this viewpoint in the following terms: "The Malaysian political structure is based on the presumption that man cannot be trusted. The argument runs as follows: men and women, will, especially if they're divided by race, religion, language or culture, do their utmost to exacerbate their differences. Violence, as a result, is never far from the surface." Thus "Malaysia...(is)...a country of nearly 20 million people – a polity in name but not much else...If we allowed everybody free rein, the centrifugal forces might destroy the precious security and stability we now enjoy." (Karim Raslan, op cit:164-165)
(247) Kahn and Loh, op cit:6
(248) Kessler, op cit:136
(249) ibid:136-138,146-148
(250) Kahn and Loh, op cit:6
(251) Cheah (2003), op cit:144; Nair, op cit:93; personal field research
(252) Kahn and Loh, op cit:3-4
(253) Nair, op cit:92-94
(254) ibid:94
(255) ibid:95-96
(256) Kahn and Loh, op cit:3-4
(258) Gomez and Jomo, op cit: 168, Crouch, op cit:40-41
(259) Cheah (2003), op cit:144
(260) Gomez and Jomo, op cit:39-40; Cheah, op cit (2003), op cit:144; personal field research 
(261) Hwang, op cit:149-154; Rehman, op cit:229-230
(262) Cheah (2003), op cit:67
(263) ibid:266
(264) Reid, op cit:16-20; Ackermann and Lee, op cit:19-23
(269) Nagata (1984), op cit:15
(273) Field notes: interviews with BN officials; all Malaysian Prime Ministers have been
conspicuous in attending selected non-Muslim religious functions.

(274) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:40

(275) Obvious examples include the strict insistence upon fasting among Muslims throughout the period of Ramadan (and the highly publicized arrests of those who breach this requirement), and the arrests and prosecutions of those persons engaged in khalwat (close proximity).


(277) Sharifah, op cit:76


(279) Zainah, op cit:24, Nagata (1984), op cit:77

(280) Zainah, op cit:2; Sharifah, op cit:79

(281) Nagata (1984), op cit:81

(282) Jomo K.S. and Ahmad Shabery Cheek, “Malaysia's Islamic Movements”, in Kahn and Loh, op cit:79-80

(283) Zainah, op cit:88-89

(284) Nagata (1984), op cit:55, Zainah, op cit:10

(285) Zainah, op cit:4-5, 21-22

(286) ibid:21-22

(287) ibid:25; Rehman, op cit:115-117

(288) Zainah, op cit:26

(289) Personal field research

(290). Nagata (1984), op cit:86-87

(291) Zainah, op cit:78-79, personal field research

(292) Nagata (1984), op cit:60; Milne and Mauzy, op cit:227

(293) Zainah, op cit:22

(294) ibid:77


(296) Personal field research
Conversation with high ranking government officials, during the course of my duties with the Australian High Commission, 1976-1979.

Zainah, op cit:24


Jomo and Ahmad, op cit:79; Rehman, op cit:115

Mohamed Abu Bakar, op cit:63

Zainah, op cit:80-81; Nagata (1984), op cit:223

Nagata (1984), op cit:187-188

Zainah Anwar comments that "through prayers, fasting, laws of marriage and inheritance, rituals of birth and death, choice of forbidden and permitted food and drinks, Islam seems to project an exclusive identity for the Malays, of which the Chinese have no part." (Zainah, op cit:80-81)

Chandra Muzaffar notes: "Less confident and less secure, both emotionally and intellectually, these students do not want to encounter new ideas and new theories with all the doubts and uncertainties that are inevitable in any such adventure. They would rather derive comfort and solace from the little knowledge they have accumulated, sanctified by tradition and authority." (Muzaffar (1987), op cit:30)

Jomo and Ahmad, op cit:81

Muzaffar(1987), op cit:48

ibid:50-51

ibid:51-52

Zainah, op cit:38-39

Muzaffar (1987), op cit:44-46. Jomo and Ahmad state that Darul Arqam was founded in 1968. (Jomo and Ahmad, op cit:81)

Nair, op cit:97

Muzaffar, op cit:44

Thus Zainah provides the example of a female student who was advised that her brains would be fried and refried in hell because she had once kept her head uncovered. The same student also received an anonymous letter stating that “...it was a sin that she was mixing with Chinese students who were infidels.” (Zainah, op cit:60) Incidents
which were drawn to my attention during my years in Malaysia included threats, especially against young women, harassment of students who refused to conform, whisper and rumour campaigns, intimidation (either real or implied), “stacking” of functions, and occasional physical violence. The main targets were student boarders who were usually living away from home.

(315) This included attempts to ban wayang kulit, traditional Malay ballet, gamelan music, poetry, painting, and all Western art forms. There was also a move to censor books, including set texts. Women's sport was another target, especially multi-ethnic team games (such as women's hockey). Sport was additionally condemned because the sports uniforms worn by women were considered “un-Islamic” and “indecent”.

(316) Nagata (1984), op cit:127


(318) ibid:240-241. The sole survivor was a medical student studying at Flinders University in South Australia, for whom I exercised administrative responsibility. My extended discussions both with this student and with the Malaysian authorities provided me with insights into the world of student Islamic radicalism.

(319) Nagata (1987), op cit:127; Cheah (2003), op cit:167. The fact that the Muslims were in a state of trance shocked many Malays – the trance state was held to be un-Islamic.

(320) Cheah (2003), op cit:212

(321) ibid:215

(322) Personal field research


(324) Kahn, Joel. “Islam, Modernity and the Popular in Malaysia”, in Hooker, Virginia, and Norani Othman, op cit:149-153


(326) ibid:245; Anwar, op cit:116-121
(327) Cheah (2003), op cit:234
(328) Nagata (1984), op cit:51. These continue. During my field work in February-
March 2004 an imam associated with a PAS controlled masjid (mosque) made a public
statement in which he claimed the death of a young daughter of an UMNO functionary
who was murdered during the course of a violent rape was a visitation of divine wrath
upon the parents because of their membership of UMNO. This speech brought
widespread condemnation, and was publicly disowned by PAS leadership.
(329) Zainah, op cit:41
(330) Farish, op cit:198-199
(331). ibid:213
(332) Hooker M.B. “Submission to Allah? The Kelantan Syariah Criminal Code (II)
1993”, in Hooker, Virginia, and Norani Othman, op cit:81. Hooker notes that the
conflation of State and Islam implied by the Code would axiomatically render criticism
of one a criticism of the other.
(333). Kikue, op cit:72
(334) Hooker, M.B., op cit:85
(335) Mahli, op cit:241
(336) Kikue, op cit:67-68
(337) Zainah, op cit 90-91
(338) ibid:38-39
(339) Cheah (2003), op cit:213; personal field research
(340) Hwang, op cit:245-246
(341) Kikue, op cit:64
(342) ibid:61-62
(343) Anwar, op cit:119
(344) Kikue, op cit:61-66
(345) ibid:75
(346) ibid:59
(347) Cheah (2003), op cit:240
Twenty-First Century”, in Hooker, Virginia and Norani Othman, op cit:21. For a
detailed account, see Hwang, op cit:288-324

(349) Cheah (2003), op cit:67
(350) ibid:188
(351) Mahli, op cit:240-242
(352) Jomo and Ahmad, op cit:104
(353) Mohamed Abu Bakar, op cit:70; personal field research
(354) Mohamed Abu Bakar, op cit:69
(355) Personal field research
(356) Kikue, op cit:68; personal field research
(357) Ramanathan, op cit: 249
(358) Personal field research
(359) Personal field research

(360) Many Malays believe that they are the victims of a major US lead Western-Christian conspiracy to infiltrate and destroy their religion. Prior to Operation Lallang in 1987, Jomo K.S. (a non-Malay) wrote, "There has undoubtedly been a strong Christian renewal in Malaysia in recent years, especially among English educated middle class Chinese...strongly encouraged by new right wing Protestant churches, often with Zionist connections and regionally based in Singapore...The Christian evangelists seem to have made it their priority to proselytise among Muslim Malays." (Quoted in an English language pamphlet, "Whither Islam or Wither Islam?", allegedly written by an Indian Muslim, and moderate in tenor, and circulated by the Muslim Students Association, Universiti Sains Malaysia. A copy was given to me in early 1988.) In fact, many Malay contacts believed that American missionaries were using Indonesian Christian immigrants to proselytise, and several incidents involving Indonesian Christians, including the alleged despoiling of a masjid in Pahang, were squelched by the authorities. In 1997 a US Pentecostalist missionary, obviously mistaking me for an Australian Christian, accosted me in Penang Airport, and in a booming voice, seemingly oblivious to the mainly Malay airport staff standing nearby, told me that it was a "strategic priority" to covert all the Chinese and Indian "children" (including Catholics) in preparation for the forthcoming war between Christianity and Islam; according to this interpretation the forces of "righteousness" would thus have ready made "battalions" to
fight in Malaysia. In subsequent conversations with Malaysian colleagues I discovered that these intentions were (and remain) well known among the Malay Muslim leadership.

(362) Personal field research
(363) Hwang, op cit:278
(364) Kahn (2003), op cit:163
(365) Cheah (2003), op cit:188
(366) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:60
(367) ibid
(368) Muzaffar (1987) op cit:1
(369) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:154-155
(370) Nagata(1984), op cit:214
(371) Personal field research
(372) Mahli, op cit:258
(373) Farish, op cit:218-219
(374) Anwar, op cit:116-120
(375) As noted earlier, the Constitution forbids proselytisation among those professing the Muslim faith.
(377) ibid
(378) Propaganda includes comics, cartoons, tapes from alleged “converts”, and very simple pamphlets, all essentially negative, and habitually couched in shrill, combative and denunciatory language. Typically these narratives not only withhold redemption from any person who holds different religious beliefs, but also emphatically deny the possibility of any non-believer being of good character or morally honest. (Catholics are invariably cast as “non-Christians”.) These materials are often circulated surreptitiously, and just “happen” to find their way into public places, especially schools and hospitals.
(379) McGillion, op cit.
(380) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:85
(381) Personal field research
(382) Personal field research
1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the commemoration of Thaipusam (or other Murugan linked festivals), and the related incidence of kavadi worship in a variety of settings, both within metropolitan and diaspora Tamil Hindu society. While each of these sites has its own distinct social, political and economic profile, so that the circumstances in which Tamil Hindus are situated differ sharply from one location to the next, this survey suggests that common elements are found in each of these festivals. These include:

(i) A chariot procession organized by the controlling temple of dominant caste or religious body in which the *utsavar murthi* is paraded and displayed to the community over which the deity exercises authority. (Only in two of the localities studied – the Seychelles, and Kataragama, Sri Lanka – is the chariot ritual absent. However, as will be shown, Hindus within the Seychelles have only in recent years inaugurated the commemoration of Thaipusam as a major festival, and the community is still in the process of developing many of the key symbols of Tamil Hinduism. At Kataragama the chariot ritual is replaced by a procession involving Skanda-Murugan in *yantra* form.)

The chariot ceremonial is structured around the royal symbolism of ritual kingship (in this context it should be noted that the Brahman *pada yatra* described in Section 4, members of the pilgrimage party bore all the insignia of kingship.) While Murugan is typically symbolized by the *Vel*, his kingship at Palani and thus in Thaipusam generally, is characterized by the *danda* or staff.

(ii) Various forms of kavadi worship, typically preceded by a vow requiring a period of asceticism, including *tapas* (austerities), and fasting. The kavadi ritual generally involves an induced trance or state of altered consciousness, and often includes bodily mortification.

(iii) Formal recognition of the *asura*-turned-devotee Idumban. This is not only incorporated in the very act of carrying a kavadi, but also in the related dance, based on
Idumban's gait as he bore the twin hills from the Himalayas to Palani. Moreover there is invariably an additional ritual within the festival which acknowledges Idumban's role as the primordial kavadi worshipper, as well as gatekeeper to Murugan's shrine.

(iv) Other forms of ritualized service to the Hindu community as a whole. This most typically involves mass feedings (*annathanam*), or manning or constructing a *thaneer panthal*, but may include other forms of service.

This chapter will comprehensively demonstrate that the festival of Thaipusam (or related festivals) honouring the deity Skanda-Murugan, and involving kavadi rituals, are not only widely encountered within Tamil Hindu society, but in fact form central components of the religious identity for many members of Tamil communities, both in metropolitan and *diaspora* communities. This is especially demonstrated by the examples of Fiji, where *bhakti* practices clearly demarcate South Indian religiosity against a backdrop of indigenous Fijian and North Indian pressures; of the Seychelles where the recent construction of a Hindu temple and introduction of kavadi worship have fuelled a Tamil cultural and religious revival; and Medan, Indonesia, where the highly irregular banning of the kavadi ritual instilled a deep sense of cultural deprivation among Tamil Hindus.

2. PENANG: THE MALAYSIAN ALTERNATIVE

Thaipusam in Penang follows the same basic format as that of Batu Caves, namely that of a three day festival commemorating the bestowal of the *Sakti Vel* upon the deity, Murugan, beginning and ending with a chariot procession, and involving acts of ritual fulfillment. As with Batu Caves, Thaipusam in Penang attracts large numbers of devotees, with crowds in 1997 estimated at 300,000 and the number of kavadi bearers at 16,000. (1)

However, there are important differences in the conduct and rituals of the two festivals. In this section I have concentrated upon points of departure between Penang and Batu Caves, which include (i) Chettiar management of the festival, (ii) Ritual forms of non-
Chettiar kavadi worship and the demography of worshippers, (iii) the emphasis upon coconut smashing as a form of vow fulfillment, (iv) the importance of *thaneer panthals* (stalls devoted to the supply of food, drink and other services), as a form of *bhakti* devotionalism, and, (v) the influence of “gangsta” culture. These are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

(i) Chettiar Management of Thaipusam
The formal structure of Thaipusam in Penang is organized by the Nattukottai Chettiar community. The history of the Chettiar community in Malaysia, their role in the promotion and maintenance of Saivite Hinduism, their worship of Murugan as their *ishta devata* (personal deity), and their scrupulous adherence to *Agamic* ritual, will be discussed in Chapter Five. The Chettiers view Thaipusam both as a time of vow fulfillment and of service to the entire Hindu community.

The opening ritual within the Chettiar community is a *Pongal*(2) ceremony which is conducted in the *Kovil Veedu*, Georgetown, on the afternoon prior to the departure of the silver chariot. A *homa*(3) fire is prepared using sacred woods, a brass pot is placed on the fire, and milk and rice are added to the pot. At the moment the milk boils over the rim of the pot, conches are blown and bells rung. The *pongal*, dedicated to Ganesha, is considered necessary to remove all barriers to the staging of the festival and to ensure its success.

The entire community gathers in the temple for the purificatory ceremonies held for those votaries, exclusively male, and aged anywhere between 12 to over 70 years of age, who have elected to bear kavadis throughout Thaipusam. The intending kavadi worshippers are dressed in plain *vesthis* and are seated in a designated area within the temple. The kavadis, all of orthodox *paal* design, and richly decorated with clusters of peacock feathers which are tied at both ends of the arch, are set in a semi-circle in front of the altar dedicated to the *ustavar murthi*. Following *bhajans*, the temple priest performs a *puja* to the *ustavar murthi*, after which each kavadi is sanctified. There are sporadic trances among intending kavadi worshippers as this process proceeds. The
community as a body now circumambulates the kavadis which have now been, in effect, transformed into mobile altars dedicated to Murugan. Prasadam and vibhuti are distributed to the kavadi devotees, who in turn redistribute these items to the broader community. A further puja is performed to the utsavar murthi, and the ritual items of kingship are displayed to the deity.

The following morning, the chariot leaves from the Kovil Veedu to make its way to the Nagarathaar Nattukottai Chettiar Thandayudapani Temple on Jalan Waterfall, (a distance of approximately 12 kilometres; the trip may take anything up to 14 hours). The Chettiar kavadi bearers file out of the temple and take their places in front of the community's silver chariot. At about 6 a.m., escorted by the temple patrons and management, and accompanied by musicians – drummers and nadaswaran players – the utsavar murthi is borne outdoors and after oblations conducted in front of a huge crowd, is installed within the bullock drawn chariot.

The kavadi worshippers will precede the chariot for its entire journey. In contrast to nearly all other Malaysian kavadi devotees, the Chettiars do not affix milkpots to their kavadis. Fleshly mortification and the use of vels are both eschewed. The bearers walk the complete distance in silence, but engage in periodic bursts of ritualistic dancing, occasionally involving trance states. Devotees take turns in bearing the kavadis, and when one bearer tires, he merely hands the kavadi to another member of the community. Several of the Chettiar devotees whom I interviewed compared their worship to that of “menial servants to a mighty king”; like courtiers in a royal household they were bound by notions of service, duty and obedience, which were tempered with ideals of reciprocity.

The chariot, which proceeds without illumination on its outward journey from the Kovil Veedu, makes slow progress. There are frequent stops to allow devotees to present trays to the deity, which are returned to their owners as prasadam, to display babies for blessing, and to enable worshippers to gain darshan of the deity. Unlike Kuala Lumpur, where municipal authorities insist on the chariot's quick passage from the central
business district, in Penang there are no such pressures, and the chariot halts whenever sufficient devotees have gathered, and for as long as is required to complete all transactions with worshippers. Various kolattam troupes accompany the chariot, while Indian and Chinese devotees smash enormous quantities of coconuts in the path of the chariot. At a given point along the route a group of Chinese worshippers release a large number of helium inflated balloons tied together in the form of a dragon which writhes spectacularly as it ascends into the late morning skies above the chariot and the attendant crowd.

At about 12.30 p.m. the chariot reaches the Sri Muthumariamman temple on Jalan Dato Keramat. A simultaneous arati is performed to the deity within the temple and to the utsavar murthi within the chariot. Led by musicians, officials emerge from the temple bearing a tray shaded by an umbrella, and containing cloth, fruits and a garland. This is presented to the utsavar murthi through the agency of the priests on the chariot. The Chettiar kavadi bearers now enter the temple where they take a period of rest.

After a substantial break the chariot resumes its journey, finally reaching the Nagarathaar Nattukottai Thandayudapani Temple in Jalan Waterfall at about 8.40 p.m. The exhausted kavadi worshippers now enter the temple. The utsavar murthi is officially greeted and escorted to the temple gateway where all the insignia of kingship are displayed. Murugan then proceeds into the temple, and amidst a conglomeration of welcoming rituals, is formally installed. This ceremony concludes at about 10 p.m. Murugan is now in state and is considered ready to meet kavadi bearing devotees as they pay homage en route to the Arulmigu Bala Thandayudapani Temple (more commonly known as the Hilltop Temple), the entrance of which is located a short distance further along Jalan Waterfall.

The following day – Thaipusam – large numbers of kavadi worshippers will enter the temple, circumambulate the courtyard, and pay allegiance to the the utsavar murthi. For much of the day the temple is crowded with devotees, both Indian and Chinese, and many sightseers, including Western tourists. Following a midday puja, the Chettiar
begin cooking food in large pots. The Chettiar community is initially fed, then other devotees are provided with meals in successive mass sittings throughout the afternoon.

At 6.30 p.m., the (ethnically Chinese) Chief Minister of Penang, his family, and members of the Cabinet and their spouses, are received at the temple by leaders of the Chettiar community. The Chief Minister will be conducted to the sanctum sanctorum where an arati will be performed, and he will be marked with vibhuti and kumkum powder by the head temple priest, presented with vestments taken from the utsavar murthi and garlanded. He and other guests are also presented with fruit taken from the altar. In this way, the Chettiar community offers official hospitality and homage to the political leadership on behalf of the Hindus of Penang, and is reciprocally acknowledged as the sponsoring group within the Hindu community, on the occasion of Thaipusam at least. (4)

As pointed out, the Chettiar temple, and by extension the role of the Chettiars, is also implicitly acknowledged by the majority of kavadi bearers within the general Hindu community, (5) who divert from their pilgrimages to the Arulmigu Bala Thandayudapani Temple to circumambulate the main shrine of the Chettiar temple and receive the darshan of the deity.

However, a challenge to Chettiar orthodoxy and oversight of the temple is mounted in the form of a village ritual conducted on the night prior to the return of the chariot. This is a “folk” celebration of the marriage of Murugan to Valli. The marriage ceremony commences, but is interrupted by a staged sneeze, following which the presiding pujari declares that the marriage is now rendered inauspicious and must be abandoned – Murugan, who already has one wife, must return to his temple in Georgetown. The next attempt at marriage will be set for a year's time. This ensures that Thaipusam will be held the following year. (6) This ritual has no obvious equivalent at Batu Caves.

The reception of the official guests will be followed by mass feedings (annathanam) of all devotees who visit the temple and request a meal. Members of the Chettiar
community will work throughout the day and well into the night to cook and distribute food for up to ten thousand devotees.(7)

At midnight the utsavar murthi will be mounted on a palanquin, and ceremonially paraded around the temple. The deity will then be placed within his “chambers”, ritually farewelled, and the curtains will be drawn. Murugan is then considered to have retired for the night.

At 7.30 a.m. a pongal is conducted within the temple, followed by a puja to the utsavar murthi. The Chettiar kavadi bearers now circumambulate the temple, most in a state of deep trance. Each devotee is presented to the deity and formally relieved of his burden. Breakfast is then served to kavadi worshippers and to members of the Chettiar community.

At 6.30 p.m. farewell pujas are conducted to the utsavar murthi. Accompanied by torch bearers, musicians and temple officials, the utsavar murthi is escorted from the temple, and as dusk becomes night, is reinstalled in the chariot. The chariot is now brilliantly illuminated for the return journey (the general explanation is that Murugan has now received the Vel and burns with the full complement of his powers, whereas on his outward journey he is yet to receive the Vel.) With a large and swelling crowd in attendance, the chariot now begins its return journey. Once again it will make frequent stops for devotees, and more coconuts will be smashed in its path (though not on the same scale which marks the outward journey). The chariot arrives at the Kovil Veedu in Georgetown at about 8 a.m. The utsavar murthi is taken from the chariot, and after a set of welcoming rituals, is borne into the temple. The ceremony is completed by about 8.40 a.m.

The Chettiar organization of Thaipusam has resulted in social tensions within sections of the broader Hindu community, in particular dissatisfaction at what has been perceived as Chettiar arrogance in the management of Thaipusam. Several years ago, general discontent with Chettiar sponsorship led to large numbers of devotees boycotting
Thaipusam and transferring their allegiance to the festival of Panguni Uttiram held in April-May. The boycott led to greater intra-community liaison and concessions to other Hindu groups.

(ii) Non Chettiar Kavadi Worship

While kavadi worship is a central feature of Thaipusam in Penang, the demography of those who bear kavadis and the modes of worship differ in certain respects from those found at Batu Caves. These differences are outlined in the following paragraphs.

In Chapter One, I noted that at Batu Caves it is common to find kavadi bearers originating from all segments of the Hindu population. While in Penang most castes are represented among the ranks of kavadi worshippers, the majority of those who engage in the ritual appear to be younger men falling within the 18-30 year old age group, and of working class background. (This does not axiomatically designate them as belonging to the lower castes; as demonstrated in Chapters Two, many working class and estate Indians are neither lower caste nor of Adi Dravidar background.) The number of women who take vel and bear kavadis both in absolute terms and as a percentage of total kavadi worshippers is significantly lower than at Batu Caves.

As with Batu Caves, kavadi worship takes many forms. However, orthodox paal kavadis and aluga kavadis are encountered less frequently. Most aluga kavadis are of flimsy construction (made of foam plastic and other lightweight materials) and occasionally break before the devotee reaches his/her destination. The classic mayil (peacock) adornment which is such a feature of the decoration of aluga kavadis in Kuala Lumpur is all but absent in Penang. While some aluga kavadis incorporate colours traditionally linked to Murugan worship (red, yellow, green, or red and white in combination – the Tamil “primary colours”(9)), most feature other colours – purple, white, black, orange – not generally associated with the Murugan cultus at Batu Caves. Many kavadis contain shrine motifs which are markedly different from those observed in Kuala Lumpur (e.g a few feature symbols of the Aum, or the Naga (snake) of Siva, while some Chinese devotees bear kavadis dedicated to deities found within Chinese religious traditions).
The most common form of kavadi is a *paal kudam* (milkpot), taken with or without *vels*, and carried on the head or shoulders of the devotee. This appears to be the preferred form of worship for women kavadi bearers. Another common form of kavadi is the hanging of small milkpots (numbering up to 108), which are secured into the torso and arms on small hooks. Sometimes these are sufficiently numerous as to obscure the entire upper body. Other devotees carry numbers of limes in a similar manner. *Vel kavadis* are also common in Penang, but less obtrusive than those found at Batu Caves. Many young men pull “chariot” or *ter kavadis* (that is, hooks which are attached to the backs of devotees and “anchored” with nylon ropes by a friend who walks behind and is responsible for keeping the ropes taut). Still other devotees walk in nailed shoes, or roll for a specified number of times around the concrete courtyard within the Nagarathaar Nattukottai Chettiar Thandayudapani Temple complex (this latter practice involves both male and female votaries). However, the forms of worship associated with lesser or “small” deities, such as Kalamman, Munianty, and Madurai Viran, are found less frequently in Penang, the result of “active discouragement” by festival organizers. Conversely many male kavadi worshippers are clad in the more traditional South Indian *vesthis* rather than the yellow/red shorts which have become common at Batu Caves.

In addition to the standard *vels* taken through the tongue and cheeks, most kavadi bearing devotees also take three tiny *vels* which are inserted into the middle of the forehead above the “third eye”. These *vels* are left on the altar at the hilltop temple. Informants advised me that these *vels* are to remind the devotee of Siva, Parvati and Murugan.(10)

Unlike Batu Caves, kavadi worshippers do not begin their journey from one recognized focal point, but start out from a number of localities across Georgetown, generally specified temples. They bear kavadis along public roadways, thus sharing carriageways with (often heavy) vehicular traffic. Many walk considerable distances (sometimes up to ten kilometres) before they reach the core sacral areas near the Nagarathaar Nattukottai Chettiar Thandayudapani Temple in Jalan Waterfall. Probably because of the distances covered, the devotees do not dance so energetically as those in Kuala Lumpur. Many
aspirants do not wear anklets, and there is little chanting, and an almost complete absence of professional musicians along the route. Kavadi bearers dance in short bursts, mainly to amplified music emanating from *panthals*.

When they reach the Chettiar temple, worshippers leave the road to circumambulate the shrines and to pay homage to the *utsavar murthi*. Upon emerging from the temple, members of the retinue accompanying each kavadi worshipper will smash a coconut upon which a square of burning camphor has been placed. They will then proceed along the roadway to the compound containing the Arulmigu Bala Thandayudapani Temple.

This compound covers several hectares. A Ganesha temple is situated a short distance within the main gateway. Further on, at the foot of the stairs, is located a small shrine to Idumban. From here a stairway snakes its way to the hilltop Murugan temple, and a separate stairway is provided for worshippers descending from the shrine. The compound also contains some well-tended gardens, and a scattering of miscellaneous buildings and pavilions.

Once the devotee enters the Arulmigu Bala Thandayudapani Temple compound, he/she pauses outside the downstairs Ganesha temple, and if the size and manoeuvrability of his/her kavadi permits, will enter and circumambulate the *sanctum sanctorum*. (This is impossible for those bearing *aluga* or other large kavadis.) Devotees then proceed to the Idumban shrine at the foot of the stairway whey they pay obeisance, and formally request his permission and blessings to proceed to the hilltop Murugan shrine. A lime given to the devotee at the outset of his/her journey is offered to Idumban, a coconut is smashed, and the devotee is presented with a fresh lime to surrender to Murugan. The votary then ascends the stairs.

At the hilltop shrine there is no clearly delineated space reserved for kavadi bearers, and kavadi worshippers mingle with the crowd. At the summit, the pilgrim is assisted from his/her kavadi, the milkpot is taken from the kavadi by the temple *Kurukkal* and the milk poured over the deity, the *vels* are removed and the devotee brought out of trance and
encouraged to offer prayers. He/she then proceeds downstairs where he/she distributes small packets of cooked food (usually chick peas) to passersby. As at Batu Caves, the votary will offer a *puja* to Idumban on the third day after bearing a kavadi, during which he/she will be released from his/her vows of asceticism and symbolically “returned” to society.

Elements of “village” Hinduism appear to intrude more openly into non-Chettiar kavadi ritual in Penang. There appears to be significantly less attention to the *Agamic* and purificatory rites which accompany kavadi worship at Batu Caves, and most of the preliminary rituals are either abbreviated or neglected. Many bearers commence their journeys from non-*Agamic* “village” temples. All kavadi worshippers are given a lime to carry (seen as “cooling”, thus countering the “heat” of asceticism(11)), and the supporting group will smash coconuts and cut limes at auspicious points along the route to propitiate or counteract malevolent spirits or harmful “little deities” which may otherwise impede or cause misfortune to devotees.

(iii) **Coconuts as Vow Fulfillment**
Although coconuts are smashed in the path of the chariot in Kuala Lumpur, the numbers are insignificant compared to the volume of those demolished in Penang. In 2000 press estimates indicated that a combined total of 2 million coconuts were supplied to devotees for breaking in the path of the chariot as it made its way to and from the Nagarathaar Nattukottai Chettiar Thandayudapani Temple.

While coconut shattering is a recognized mode of sacrificial worship among both Chinese and Indian devotees, Chinese votaries seem to outnumber Indians both in terms of those who employ coconut smashing to fulfill vows, and in the total number of coconuts broken. Chinese devotees claim that the destruction of coconuts in such huge numbers “cleanses the path for Lord Murugan”.(12) Nearly all devotees who smash coconuts, whether Chinese or Indian, do so to complete a vow.

For Tamil Hindus, the coconut symbolically equates to the human head, and its
fragmentation represents the obliteration of the ego and the realization of the Divine within. According to this thesis, the outer husk of the coconut represents maya (the illusive nature of the world), the inner fibrous matter becomes karma (action and its fruits), the coconut shell is anava (ego), the white matter represents Paramatman (the Divine), the coconut water the ambrosial bliss that union with the god produces, the three “eyes” at the apex of the coconut represent the two physical eyes of man and the inner mystic eye of Siva which must be opened within before unity with the divine may be attained. A devotee who smashes a coconut before a murthi of a deity, is in fact engaging in a recognized devotional ritual which implores the deity to bestow upon that individual the blessings of spiritual unfoldment and liberation.

The logistics and organization associated with the distribution of coconuts in Penang are considerable. Drops are made by local contractors at agreed destination points along the route the chariot will take, with the names of purchasers clearly marked. As the chariot approaches the devotee (or groups of devotees), will step forward and smash the coconuts on the roadway. As piles of coconuts are destroyed, municipal workers and Bobcat operators move in to clear the debris from the road and thus allow the smooth passage of the chariot. Worshippers then offer trays to the deity which are returned to them as prasadam.

In recent years there has been some controversy about the demolition of coconuts on such a huge scale. In 1997 an official of the Hindu Sangam suggested that devotees content themselves with smashing a single coconut, and that they donate the balance of the money they would have spent on coconuts to a recognized charity. This aroused accusations that the official was out of touch with Hindu sentiment, and that he did not understand the nature of Saivite vow fulfillment.(13)

In 1998 the campaign against the smashing of coconuts gathered momentum with the unprecedented, unsought and widely resented intrusion of the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP), which complained about the supposed “pollution” and “waste” linked with the practice. In response, many Hindus claimed, with considerable justification, that
the CAP was meddling in matters which pertained to private religious sentiment, and which was therefore an issue beyond their sphere of expertise and terms of reference, that in criticizing Hinduism they were aligning upon a “soft” target, and that they would be neither sufficiently willing nor adventurous to offer similar animadversions of Muslim or Christian festivals.(14) In 1999, Mr R. Rajendran, Deputy President of the Malaysian Hindu Youth Council warned the CAP against commenting on an issue which was a private matter between individuals and their deity.(15)

(iv) **Thaneer Panthals in Penang**

The construction of *thaneer panthals* is a distinguishing feature of Thaipusam in Penang. Although *panthals* are found at Batu Caves, they are viewed as functional, a place to offer service, rather than as edifices which are designed to reflect the beauty and spirit of *bhakti* devotionalism. There are significantly fewer *panthals* at Batu Caves, and those constructed do not match the range of services of those provided in Penang.

The *panthals* are constructed by groups who band together immediately after Thaipusam to plan for the next festival. These groups represent temple associations, youth or service organizations, or more frequently the Indian (and Chinese) staff of local and multinational firms which donate funds.(16)

The *panthals* are erected along the main route that kavadi bearers follow. They are assembled using lightweight materials, (the substructure is generally an aluminium framework which is bolted together), and are usually put in place in the 48 hours prior to Thaipusam and are removed just as quickly once the festival is complete. Most contain “walls” of palm and banana fronds, reminders of jungle or remote shrines. The *panthals* offer food, drinks and sometimes religious tracts as well as seating to the general public. These services are provided either free of charge or at a nominal sum which will be donated to a particular temple or charity. They also tend to the needs of passing kavadi bearers by providing water for drinking and bathing, and stools upon which the bearer may sit while his/her legs are massaged.
Most of the *panthals* are electrified and feature light shows, sometimes of extraordinary sophistication, and modern sound systems which are used to play religious music. A devotional altar dedicated to a particular deity is incorporated midway along the frontage of the *panthal*. Deities thus honoured include Durga, Mahamariamman, Lakshmi, Siva/Parvati, village deities such as Munisvaran,(17) and occasionally Chinese deities such as Kuan Yin (Goddess of Mercy), but most commonly Ganesha and Murugan. Many of these altars are painstakingly and intricately designed, and feature potted plants, subdued lighting, fountains, mock waterfalls and motifs peculiar to the deity to whom the altar is dedicated (for example, a common theme is Ganesha set against a jungle backdrop, or Murugan against a background of layered peacock feathers.) A *yantra* (a mystical diagram employed to represent aspects of various deities, most commonly *sakti* powers, and closely identified with healing in Tamil traditions (18)), always multi-coloured, and generally of considerable complexity, is painted on the roadway in front of the shrine. Some of these *yantras* remain visible for weeks afterwards.

The *panthals* are staffed by volunteers who have worked throughout the year to plan the design and logistics of the *panthal*, and to raise the funds necessary to support the project. These volunteers are recognized as fulfilling the path of both *bhakti yoga* and *karma yoga*, or the ideal of selfless service. The construction of a shrine, however temporary, also incorporates the concept of the sacred vow of temple building, which is viewed by many Hindus as an act of *bhakti* devotionalism at least equivalent to, or as an accepted alternative to, bearing a kavadi.(19)

(v)“Gangsta” Culture in Penang
Problems with youth gangs, adherent of so-called “gangsta” culture, surfaced in Penang several years ago when there was a violent clash between two groups, involving intermittent fist fighting, and leaving in its wake several injuries, and significant damage to property (including a number of smashed car windscreens).(20) While youth gangs make a point of “parading” themselves at Thaipusam, their behaviour is more likely to prove marginally disruptive than outrageously offensive or dangerous. They are easily
identifiable with their “uniform” of black tee-shirts, generally featuring iconography of supposedly “rebellious” popular western Afro-American and “heavy metal” figures. The gang is normally directed by a self appointed leader. Each group is distinguished from others by putatively identifiable characteristics (dress, hair style, etc.), although the outside observer would be hard pressed to spot any difference. Their rituals are based on a hybrid of Tamil pop and film culture and a medley of selected attributes borrowed from an imagined western heavy rock/Afro-American identity. Whenever the gang deems that a sufficient crowd is present they will launch themselves into frenzied dancing accompanied by shrill ululant screams. Occasionally they will insult Western tourists or make risqué comments to young Indian girls. This type of behaviour is less common at Batu Caves.

Although security is not as obvious as that in Kuala Lumpur, the authorities are more likely to take preventive measures to avoid trouble. I was informed that known “bad hats” and “anti-social” elements are rounded up or formally “warned” a week prior to Thaipusam. Security is generally much stricter at night when the gangs are more visible.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to speculate on the linkage between the prevalence of “gangsta” groups at Thaipusam in Penang, and the suppression of some elements of village forms of worship, several senior Hindu commentators suggested to me that the “gangstas” comprise a sub-group who are denied, (or who in some cases would refuse to accept), any meaningful role in Thaipusam as it is currently constituted in Penang.

(iv) Penang: Some Observations
In general, it may be stated that the devotional current of Thaipusam in Penang is broader and more diffuse than that of Batu Caves, where devotionalism and vow fulfillment is almost exclusively focused upon the ritual of kavadi worship. In Penang bhakti devotionalism may take several publicly recognized forms; for example, coconut smashing, serving in a thaneer panthal, as well as the ascetic path of kavadi worship. While kavadi worship remains a key component of Thaipusam, both within the Chettiar
and wider Hindu communities, rites involving mortification of the flesh are far more likely, *though by no means exclusively*, to be concentrated among younger working class males than is the case at Batu Caves. This may be the result of Chettiar organization and the provision of a “model” and thus socially approved way of bearing kavadis, as well as the ready availability of alternative methods of vow fulfillment. It should also be noted in passing, that criticisms of kavadi worship made by Hindu “reform” movements, which appear to be stronger and better organized in Penang than elsewhere throughout Malaysia, may have an influence on the incidence of kavadi worship and the demographic profile of kavadi devotees. (22) I have tentatively suggested that the suppression of some forms of “village” worship found at Batu Caves may partially explain the virulence of “gangsta” culture in Penang.

I have observed that Thaipusam in Penang is more spatially diffuse than the festival at Batu Caves, although all devotional acts culminate in core sacral areas (that is, along the route taken by the chariot, round the Nattukottai Chettiar Jalan Waterfall Temple, and the Hilltop Murugan Temple). Obvious examples include the lack of restrictions along the route taken by the chariot, the relaxed scheduling of the times of departure and arrival of the chariot, the wide scale smashing of coconuts in public streets, and the siting of *thaneer panthals* along public roadways. The more accommodating atmosphere in which Thaipusam is conducted in Penang may be due to Chinese demographic and political supremacy in that state. (23) This undoubtedly cushions the Muslim/non-Muslim cleavage so immediately evident in other parts of Malaysia. The widespread Chinese participation in all aspects of Thaipusam, including kavadi worship, coconut smashing, the construction and maintenance of *thaneer panthals*, as well as members of *bhajan, tevaram* and *kolattam* groups, (24) and as musicians who accompany the chariot, in short, the societal acceptance of Thaipusam as integral to Penang's cultural fabric, creates a more receptive environment which contrasts with the sense of “foreignness” which seems to underscore Thaipusam at Batu Caves. (25)

However, while Thaipusam in Penang appears to be better organized and superficially more harmonious than the festival at Batu Caves, there is underlying tension and dissent.
Resentment at the key role taken by the Chettiar community in the organization and management of Thaipusam, including the assumption of representational and patronage functions, rejection of Chettiar modes of worship (promoted as a model for other castes and classes), and the prevalence of village and non-\textit{Agamic} rituals point to the persistence of discrete and often agonistic religious traditions, and the perpetuation of social fissures and divisions.

3. INDIA

My research has led me to conclude that the kavadi ritual is a popular form of worship within South India, especially Tamil Nadu and Kerala, that it falls under the rubric of recognized \textit{bhakti} traditions of worship, and that most forms of kavadi worship found in Malaysia have reproduced, almost unchanged, established Indian patterns. Indeed, the official description of a kavadi published in a book prepared under the auspices of the \textit{Arilmugu Dhandayuthapani} Temple, Palani, could have easily referred to many of those borne at Batu Caves, namely “An ornamental piece of semi-circular bent wood decorated with pictures of Muruga, carried by ardent devotees in fulfillment of vows with skewers stuck in the body, cheek or tongue in voluntary mortification of the flesh.”(26) Moreover my research indicates that kavadi worship, is not, as claimed by some observers, exclusive to the socially deprived or lower castes, but is found in all castes.

Most colonial descriptions of \textit{bhakti} religious practices in South India were recorded through the jaundiced, disdainful and uncomprehending perspectives of British Christian missionaries. Thus Henry Whitehead, the Anglican Bishop of Calcutta, dismissed village festivals as “...only gloomy and weird rites for the propitiation of angry deities and the driving away of evil spirits, and it is difficult to detect any traces of a spirit of thankfulness or praise. Even the term worship is hardly correct. The object of all the various rites and ceremonies is not to worship the deity...but simply to propitiate it and avert its wrath.”(27) He also contended that all trance states are accompanied by “devil music” and that associated movement is the “usual devil dancing”.(28) Likewise L.S.S. O'Malley dismissed Subrahmanya as a “minor god”, a mere son of Siva, and wondered
at the attention that was paid to him within the Madras Presidency.(29) Nevertheless, he recognized the crucial role of festivals in making Hinduism a vital religion to the average Hindu. Both Whitehead and O'Malley observed and recorded examples of self mortification; Whitehead refers to a Telegu festival where devotees push “silver pins” through their cheeks,(30) speaks of hook swinging accompanied with the insertion of velu,(31) and a firewalking festival (“a mass of red hot embers”) he witnessed at Bangalore.(32) O’Malley speaks of “strange exhibitions of self mortification” at “Palni” (sic) including the insertion of velu and mouth locks,(33) devotees harnessing themselves by means of hooks to the heavy temple cars, and the practice of hook swinging, the latter banned by the Madras Government in 1935.(34)

In his descriptions of the major sites of pilgrimage associated with the Murugan cultus, Clothey lists two at which forms of kavadi worship similar to those conducted in Malaysia are held. The first of these is at Tirupparankunram, 8 kilometres from Madurai, where Murugan is believed to have married Teyvayanai.(35) The festival of Vaikasi Visakam, held in the Tamil month of Vaikasi (May-June), when the star of Visakam, the natal star of Subramaniam, is in the ascendant(36), draws crowds, predominantly peasants, from the regions adjacent to the temple. These devotees “parade through the streets of Madurai towards Tirupparankumran on the climactic day of the festival, many of them bearing kavadis, pulling carts hooked to their backs, carrying vessels of milk to be used in apiisekam or walking in a pit of coals in the temple grounds.”(37)

The temple at Palani, long associated with the traditions of healing,(38) stages several major and a number of minor festivals, which incorporate “nearly all forms of worship and the entire ritual common to Tamil Nadu”.(39) The major festivals are Panguni Uttiram which attracts half a million people and about 50,000 kavadi bearers, significantly more than the other leading festival, Thaipusam, which is attended by about 100,000 people and 10,000 kavadi bearers.(40) While many kavadi worshippers journey to the hilltop temple, others pilgrimage to the Periyanayaki Amman temple, which is essentially a Murugan temple, though it contains other shrines as well. The Indian tourist
authorities describe kavadi worship in the following, rather breathless, terms, which are singularly reminiscent of the accounts provided by Christian colonial writers: “To the uninitiated Thaipusam is a stunning, totally unexpected assault on the senses. Hair raising sights of human bodies covered in hooks, which anchor huge Kavadis (ritualistic yokes) balanced on heads and cheeks pierced with small spears, wooden tongues and arrows (sic). The most elaborate Kavadis can weigh as much as 80 pounds, a platform ornately decorated with peacock feathers, Christmas (sic) decorations, even plastic dolls...The yellow robed 'Bhaktas' coming from several different places dance their way through the streets to reach the Muruga Sannidhi to the accompaniment of music, both instrumental and vocal. Many strangely (sic) and ghastly traditions, like the lips pierced with mini silver lance, and locking of the mouth with metal ring to maintain perfect silence and drawing of makeshift chariot with its chain hooked into the back of devotees strike the eye of spectator during this festival.”(41)

During an interview with a very senior priest at Tiruchendur, a major Murugan temple, located upon the seashore in the Tirunelvi District in the Bay of Bengal, and the mythical site of Murugan's final battle with Surapadman,(42) I was told of the kavadi worship which occurs at the festival of Chittrai Paruvum which is held at Tiruchendur during the Tamil month of Chitrai (April-May). Although this festival is commemorated as a form of ancestor worship,(43) it also celebrates Murugan's bestowal of the gift of immortality. Chittrai Puruvam incorporates kavadi worship, including the use of aluga kavadis, similar to those borne at Thaipusam in Malaysia. The kavadis are taken by members of all castes, including some Brahmans, though they are mainly carried by devotees drawn from Sudra castes.(44)

While kavadi worship is found at the main pilgrimage centres it is also located within numerous temple communities across South India. Madeleine Biardeau records kavadi bearing at a Kallar festival held to honour Mariamman and Aiyyanar.(45) The Kallars, who described themselves as a Ksatriya caste (46), took kavadis in honour of Kattavaryan who was regarded as Mariamman's son and the first of her bodyguards, and was clearly identified as a form of Murugan.(47) These “human sacrifices” included
“aluka” kavadis, which involved the penetration of needles under the skin of those who were obligated by a vow; the pal kavadi a stick carried on the shoulder with a pot of milk at each end, and the ter kavadi, a chariot drawn by a rope or hook.(48)

On the basis of information provided to me throughout my fieldwork, I suspect Biardeau's observations could be replicated at many sites throughout Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Certainly when I showed my Malaysian kavadi photographs to members of the party with whom I undertook a pada yatra, (or foot pilgrimage – see succeeding section) to swamis and officials in asramas, to temple priests, and to other individuals whom I encountered, I was continually met with descriptions of similar patterns of worship in temples and villages, usually, but not always, associated with Murugan.(49)

At several temples, both in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, I was shown prominently displayed photographs of kavadi worship, often combined with firewalking (timiti). A major temple near Nagercoil in the extreme south of Tamil Nadu included photographs of devotees bearing long spears. Repeated and careful questioning of a wide and varied range of informants drew the consistent response that kavadi worship was a recognized form of bhakti religiosity which reached members of most castes, but rarely Brahmans who tended to avoid body piercing. (However, it was emphasized that there were always exceptions.) Of the total array of behaviours associated with worship at Thaipusam in Malaysia, only knife walking was viewed as outre or as forming a distinctly lower caste tradition. This was seen as a “village” form of worship, largely restricted to Adi Dravidar castes, and normally held in honour of Durga, (in her village form), or Kali Amman, one of the more fierce manifestations of the meat eating goddess (hence the bloodied tongue). This form of worship was regarded as unacceptable among Sudras let alone Brahman castes, and was not permitted at Agamic temples.

4. INDIA: A BRAHMAN THAIPUSAM

The following section provides an overview of a 1998 Thaipusam pada yatra (or foot pilgrimage) undertaken by a party of Smartha Brahmans, and which I was invited to join. The seven day yatra commenced in the Brahmans’ home city of Palakkad, Kerala, and culminated in the kavadi worship of Murugan at Palani on Thaipusam day.
The Palakkad Smartha Brahman community were nearly all of Tamil origin, having migrated to the area from the Tamil country a couple of centuries earlier. Although the majority of the community was professionally educated as lawyers, engineers, teachers etc., a sizable minority were business people, mainly caterers. While all members of the community speak Malayalee, and in fact many of the younger generation lack fluency in Tamil, all were steeped in the traditions of Murugan worship.

Our pilgrimage party consisted of approximately 35 devotees, all male, and aged predominantly between 20 and 55, though several were significantly older, and a couple of younger devotees were in their late teens. The party included a small group who had returned home from various work stations – Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi, Patna – to make the yatra. While the majority of the party consisted of Smartha Brahmans, the minority (20 per cent of the party), were Sudras, of various caste backgrounds.

The pilgrimage required extensive organization. Because the party of Brahmans were unable, for reasons of purity related to their caste, to rely upon securing appropriate food en route to Palani, they were obliged to take their own provisions, including cooking utensils, so that they could prepare their own meals. The party not only packed sufficient food for its own requirements, but also loaded additional supplies which allowed it to cater for mass feedings (annathanam) of other pilgrims, travellers and villagers, irrespective of caste, religion or social status. The provisioning and victualling of the pilgrimage participants required considerable logistical support, and in fact the party was accompanied by a lorry, a mini bus, and a “jeep” (four wheel drive). On the day prior to our departure a body of cooks was kept busy washing and preparing vegetables, scouring utensils, and packing items which were checked off against an exhaustive master list which had been prepared several weeks earlier.

(i) Initial Rituals
The pada yatra formally commenced with a homa ceremony conducted at 4 a.m. on Day 1 of the pilgrimage. The homa, dedicated to Ganapati (Ganesha), had two clear objectives:
(i) To formally request the deity that all obstacles to the conduct of the *pada yatra* be removed, and

(ii) To ritually empower a chosen member of the pilgrimage party to act as Kavadi Master throughout the duration of the *pada yatra*.

The appointment of the position of Kavadi Master bestows both power and a heavy load of responsibilities upon the person who is installed in this office. His status provides him with almost total authority over logistical and organizational matters throughout the pilgrimage. Following his empowerment his word is law until the pilgrimage is complete, and due deference is paid to him and to the sacred office he represents. However, the authority he now wields obligates him to ensure that the physical and basic psychological needs of all members of the pilgrimage party are met. This encumbers him with a significant workload, which does not cease until every member of the party is asleep at night.(52)

A further ceremony, the *Kavadi Muttirai Nirattal*, was held in the temple between 7 and 9.30 am. The ceremony had as its main objectives the dedication and purification of the kavadis, and the formal initiation of the pilgrims who were to bear them. Following this ritual the kavadis are considered sacred instruments, intrinsically pure. In contrast, the pilgrims, who despite their status as temporary renunciates remain in contact with the polluting agents of daily life, must be regularly and ritually re-purified.

Essentially, the *Kavadi Mutturai Nirattal* consists of the following sequence of events. Each *sadhaka* (aspirant) is taken before the Kavadi Master, and prostrates before him and before the *murthi* of Murugan. Under the guidance of the Kavadi Master, small calico bags are filled by the aspirant with various substances; jaggery and sweet mixes, into which coins are inserted. The bags are then tied at the top and affixed to a kavadi, ready to be borne the entire distance to Palani and presented to the deity. Each participant also pays the Kavadi Master a sum (in this instance 150 rupees), which is to assist in defraying any expenses he might incur in fulfilling his duties throughout the
pilgrimage. When the entire group had been presented to the Kavadi Master, and to the deity, there was a session of chanting, *bhajan* and dancing, all accompanied by drums and hand cymbals, employed for rhythmic effect. The music appeared to provoke several cases of trance, both among participants and male and female observers.

Most of the kavadis were of the same basic design as that which in Malaysia is known as the *paal kavadi*; that is, a decorated wooden arch which is carried on the shoulder. Many of the kavadis were of elegant construction, made of carved wood, in many cases, teak. The motifs upon the kavadis included a range of *Agamic* deities (including Murugan and Ganapati), in various phases of their cosmological history, together with their respective *vahanas* (or carrier, the peacock for Murugan, the rat for Ganapati). The kavadis were decorated with the ritual emblems of kingship as well as peacock feathers and bells. Some of the thicker wooden kavadis were very heavy, and the one silver kavadi – which every devotee was expected to bear at some point throughout the *yatra* – exceedingly so. Some of the kavadis had been used over many pilgrimages; indeed, I was informed that several were between 60 to 120 years old. The kavadis thus confer a sense of shared tradition within the community, and one of the more elderly pilgrims recounted to me the distinguished figures among the Palakkad Brahmans who had borne these kavadis. In addition to the kavadis, the party also bears the staff (*Danda*) which is the defining symbol of Murugan at Palani, as well as the various insignia of kingship, plus the paraphernalia associated with Skanda, the warrior. I noted a far more casual relationship between the pilgrim and the carrying of kavadis than is the case in Malaysia; if a devotee tired while bearing the kavadi, he simply passed it on to another member of the party.

(ii) **Ritual Incorporation (Days 1-2)**
Early that evening, and accompanied by lantern bearers and musicians, the pilgrimage party embarked on the ritual parading of the kavadis around the town, that is, to the main temples and the homes of members of the Palakkad Smartha Brahman community. At each home, devotees were acknowledged by householders, music was played and the kavadi dance performed. The ranks of the pilgrimage party were temporarily swollen by the addition of several teenage boys, and by young unmarried women who also bore the
kavadis and participated generally in the dancing. The procession did a full circuit of the outposts of the Brahman quarters. Worshippers returned to the mandapam (ceremonial community hall) at about 9 p.m. The entire procession had taken several hours. The kavadis were then stored in a clean area on mats and stretches of carpet which had been set out specifically for this purpose.

Most of Day 2 was spent in taking the kavadis to the homes of those members of the Smartha Brahman community who resided outside the Palakkad Brahman quarters, but within the general town environs. Throughout the morning and into the evening we were received at a series of devotees' houses. At each stop the kavadis were neatly stored in a ritually cleansed area, and usually upon mats or carpet freshly laid out for this purpose. A brief puja was conducted to the kavadis (and sometimes a bhajan as well) prior to our recommencement. The route we followed in meeting these obligations was very indirect, and we covered an estimated 30 kilometres zigzagging between various houses. By nightfall we had reached the limits of the Palakkad district.

(iii) On the Road: Days 3-5
The next three days were spent in travelling the approximately 120 kilometres between Palakkad and Palani. Each day followed a roughly typical routine which I have sketched in the following paragraphs.

Early in the morning the Brahmans would rise early to conduct certain caste related rituals which the non-Brahman minority were not expected, and indeed, not permitted, to participate in. These rituals were considered intrinsic to the maintenance and obligation of duties imposed at the time of initiation; that is, with the bestowal of the sacred thread.

The cooks would then commence work, either in preparing breakfast or coffee and chai. The remainder of the party would be woken with a shout of “Haro Hara” (“Praise to the Lord”) All meals would be served on a banana leaf laid in front of each individual as we sat cross legged on the concrete floor. The food was ladled by a succession of cooks from stainless steel utensils. We ate using our fingers, right hand only. Generally the
food consisted of rice, **vadai or thosai**, with vegetables and a curry sauce.

Normally the party would set out in the pre-dawn cool (one morning as early as 4 a.m.). We would walk through the dawn into the morning sun, generally reaching our set destination in the late morning. The party was required to walk barefooted the entire distance. For several members of the group the uneven, hot and stony roads were a source of agony, producing blisters, cramps and muscle strain. It was also a stipulation that all pilgrims wear a **vesthi** (generally of white or orange; typically the colours linked with renunciation) and walk bare chested.

When we reached the morning's destination we would perform all ablutions, including bathing, and wash our clothes and lay them out to dry. We would then perform **bhajans** prior to lunch. These were drawn not only from the Murugan repertoire, but were also addressed to other deities including Ganesha, Devi and Krishna. I was informed that “All are within One”, and that while the pilgrimage was devoted to Murugan, and in particular to that phase of the deity's cosmology as embodied in Palani, it was perfectly permissible to make other deities the object of veneration.

Following lunch, most members of the party would take a couple of hour's sleep, thus avoiding the worst of the afternoon heat. At about 4 p.m. the group would be woken with shouts of “**chai**”, and served a light tiffin. Another **bhajan** session would precede the afternoon's journey. About an hour prior to sunset kavadis would be allocated, and we would walk through the twilight and into the brilliant light of the waxing moon. Often we strode along heavily populated streets and over main roads bristling both with long distance and local traffic – trucks, buses, cars, bullock carts, bicycles, and ubiquitous three wheelers. I noted that the appearance of the kavadi procession did not elicit more than a passing interest from the general public.

During the evening we would stop at a pre-arranged locality for dinner, before undertaking further travel. Generally we would cease walking between 11 p.m. and midnight. Overnight accommodation was invariably spartan, and we slept on mats on
concrete floors.

The party generally fitted two other rituals into the daily routine. The first was the kavadi dance, sometimes involving trance states which was usually performed in a temple visited en route, and the second was a mass feeding. At some point, generally in the evening, the cooks would prepare additional food, and travellers or passersby would be invited to eat. The non-Brahmans did not participate either in preparing or serving food for these mass feedings.

On the third day, the Kavadi Master presented all members of the party with a khadi vesthi (of dull orange, a colour considered appropriate for pilgrimages). I was informed that these vesthis are never distributed at the outset of the pilgrimage, but rather after all members of the party have endured the first days of the pada yatra. They are thus received by those who have demonstrated their seriousness and commitment and their determination to see the pilgrimage through to its conclusion.(53)

As the pilgrimage progressed the party appeared to gain considerable cohesion, though it remained clearly understood that this was a yatra organized and managed according to Smartha Brahman mores. However members of the group freely cooperated with one another, and an atmosphere of geniality, often accompanied by quips and humorous exchanges, infused the pada yatra, even when pilgrims were weary, hungry or in acute discomfort. A senior member of the group explained the daily regime of the pilgrimage in these terms: “During the yatra we are spiritual brothers united by a common sense of obligation and devotion. We walk together, we sing and chant together, we eat together seated on the floor – none must be above his brother – we sleep together, we bathe together, we surrender all our blisters and pain in the love of the One, we suspend all privileges of rank and wealth, our common poverty and pursuit of the Divine binds us.”

During the first days of the pilgrimage our route took us through a number of villages situated off the main roads. Invariably the villagers offered us drinks, mainly the juice of tender coconuts. Villagers often placed coins in the kavadis to be borne by devotees to
(iv) In Palani (Days 6-7)

When we arrived at Palani at the end of Day 5 of the pilgrimage, we were lodged in a retreat, owned and maintained by the Smartha Brahman community. Two days were spent in preparatory rites prior to our ascent to the hilltop temple.

Palani contains several prominent temples, of which, the hilltop temple, on the Sivagiri hill, the abode of Lord Dhandayuthapani is the most famous. However, there are also other temples within the town itself including the Kulandi Velayuthaswami Temple, sited at a locality known as Thiru Avinankudi. The temple's presiding deity is Murugan as a child seated on a peacock. Devotees bathe in the enclosures outside the temple, which are considered symbolic of the Saravana Lake in which the seed of Siva was deposited and where the six divine babies were merged into one by Parvati's embrace. The bathing therefore represents the ritualized purification necessary before approaching the sanctum sanctorum. Accordingly, on the morning of Day 6 we visited this temple, bathed and made our way through the crowd to the shrine where a special abishekam and arati was performed for the pilgrimage party.

We then moved to the courtyard of the temple, where the party set up a portable kitchen and continuously cooked food which was served to all who requested it. Every member of the group was required to participate, and I spent about an hour serving food to devotees within the temple. Later when I asked why I was not permitted to assist in the mass feedings, but was required to do so on this occasion, I was informed that the former fell within specific Brahman caste duties (the service of others) and could not be devolved to non-Brahmans, whereas the feedings within the temple were an intrinsic component of pilgrimage rituals, and were regarded as necessary service preparatory to the encounter with the deity.(54)

On the evening of Day 6, the entire pilgrimage group, bearing kavadis, undertook a circuit of the road which runs round the base of the hills containing the
Dhandayuthapani temple, a distance of about 4 kilometres. Our departure was preceded by a ritual purification ceremony, and worship was also offered to the kavadis. An abbreviated *bhajan* session followed, and the Kavadi Master allocated kavadis to those nominated/entitled to bear them.

Our circuit of Palani Hill took nearly three hours. Our group stopped at frequent intervals to sing *bhajans* and kavadi songs, and to perform the kavadi dance. Several members fell into a vigorous twirling dance keeping the kavadi balanced on the back of their neck and shoulders without holding on to it in any way with their hands – a feat which was emulated by some devotees in other pilgrimage groups. Most of our party, however, followed the usual kavadi routine; the swaying dance which replicates the movements of Idumban as he bore the weight of the twin hills to South India. Several devotees attained trance.

On the morning of Day 7, the pilgrimage party assembled for an hour's chanting, designed to repurify our kavadis, followed by a further hour's *bhajan* prior to our kavadi procession to the Kulandi Velayuthaswami Temple. The Kavadi Master again allocated kavadis to members of our group. We were accompanied by several musicians – *nadaswaran* players and drummers. We made our way through the streets of Palani, describing a complete circumambulation of the temple before entering the portals. Several of our group achieved a trance state. The entry hall of the temple contained a party of devotees, who were beating large drums, shaped rather like European timpani, and of similar timbre. The drummers used thick, club like sticks to maintain a series of complex rhythms which were almost overwhelming in their intensity.

The organizers of our pilgrimage party had arranged for a special *abishekam* to be performed to the presiding deity as a prelude to the following day's ascent to the hilltop temple. The temple priest conducting the ritual admitted us into the restricted area close to the *sanctum sanctorum* so that we could obtain a better *darshan* of Murugan; an action which drew protests from a temple security guard. The *abishekam* complete, we bore our kavadis back to the retreat where they were once again stored within the
designated “clean” area.

(v) Thaipusam: Day 8
On the morning of Thaipusam all members of the pilgrimage party were active by 6.30 a.m. About an hour after breakfast there was a preliminary ritual in which the kavadis were allocated to members of the party. The kavadis were then moved to the front of the retreat. A lengthy bhajan session followed, once again accompanied by temple musicians.(57)

Our kavadi group set off at about 9 a.m., initially make our way through the streets of Palani to the “lower” temple. The streets were crowded with other groups of kavadi bearers, representative of many regions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. As with the previous day, our party described a complete circumambulation or the Kulandi Velayuthaswami temple, before undertaking formal worship within. This complete, we made our way to the foot of the stairway leading to the hilltop temple, where amid considerable congestion, we reassembled as a group. At a signal from the Kavadi Master, we began climbing the 697 steps. The ascent to the summit was accomplished very quickly, with many of the devotees literally running up the stairs.

When we reached the area outside the covered walkway (enclosed with wire), which led into the main shrine, the Kavadi Master and a couple of nominated assistants took the bags which had been borne on the kavadis from Palakkad, and piled them on a yellow cloth which they had spread on the ground for this purpose. We were then instructed to make our way to the entrance of the walkway. We were required to purchase tickets to the “expedited” laneway which would enable us to gain direct darshan of the deity.(58) As we entered the walkway the bags taken from the kavadis were passed over the top to us, together with small brass pots of milk (paal kudam). Upon reaching the main shrine, these bags were passed to the non-Brahman priests who serve the deity in the hilltop temple. As the milk was poured over the deity it was re-collected in pots via a small out-pipe at the base of the shrine, and returned, as prasadam, to us. We were allowed about 2 minutes to gain a darshan of the deity for whom we had conducted the entire
During the descent, members of our group paid what seemed almost casual obeisance to Idumban whose shrine is situated halfway down the hill. Although acknowledgment of Idumban is a formal requirement of any kavadi worshipper, in the case of this party this obligation appeared to be lightly observed. This simple action marked the formal termination of the entire pilgrimage. Later that day the majority of the party returned to Palakkad in the back of a lorry.

(vi) Other Observations

During the *pada yatra* I observed other pilgrims making the journey to Palani. Many of these devotees later participated in the festival commemorated at the Periyanayaki Amman temple, described in the previous section.

It was only when our pilgrimage party reached the main road which runs from Coimbatore to Palani that I began to envisage the scale of the mass pilgrimage which occurs each Thaipusam. Thousands of people were on the road, ranging from solitary pilgrims who bore a kavadi in total silence, to near entire villages encompassing a range of populations from young children to elderly men and women (many of the latter obviously arthritic and in considerable pain). The sheer exuberance of these pilgrimage parties was totally unexpected – many passed us singing, others dancing, still others chanting. I was advised that some of these pilgrims would walk over 200 kilometres from their home villages to Palani.

While many of the devotees wore green apparel, others were clad in yellow and red, the same colours which are typically found among kavadi bearers at Batu Caves. I was informed that the colours reflected regional rather than caste variations; green was more likely to be worn by devotees hailing from non-riverine and hills districts, while the yellow-red combination was more generally associated with long established riverine and/or urban communities.
At night most of these parties set up camp alongside the road, groups of men, women and children seemingly oblivious to the constant traffic – both human and motorized – which passed between 10-30 metres from where they slept. I was advised that over the years all *yatras* develop a detailed corporate knowledge of their route, and form relationships with traders, shopkeepers, temple custodians, and householders who assist with food, water and logistics. However, nearly every pilgrimage group will have secured accommodation in Palani well in advance, knowing full well how crowded the city becomes throughout any festival. Much of this accommodation is caste based and maintained and operated by *jati* associations.

In Palani the roads were frequently crowded with kavadi parties representing different locality groups and sometimes specific caste groups. When I asked about Periyanayaki Amman commemorations, I was advised that those who bore *aluga* kavadis could not be distinguished by caste or region alone; many of those who worshipped in this way would also make their way to the hilltop temple. In other words there was no set or “approved” pattern of kavadi worship; the practices adopted were fluid and tended to be shaped more by tradition and inclination than prescribed caste or region based modalities.

Many pilgrims continued to arrive as our group departed Palani; indeed their numbers appeared to have remained constant since the time of our arrival. It was explained that within South India, and particularly at Palani, Thaipusam is regarded as a ten-day festival, whereas in Malaysia, the fulfillment of kavadi worship is generally condensed into a 36-hour period.

(vii) Pilgrimage: A Rationale

The rationale behind the concept of *pada yatra* was outlined to me in the following terms. Smartha Brahmans worship six emanations of Divine; that is, what may be ultimately termed Reality or God. These emanations are Siva, Sakti (Devi), Vishnu, Suraya, Ganapati and Subrahmanya. Put simply, each of these manifestations prefigures a path that the individual will elect to follow, but at base each represents a useful albeit rarefied fabrication, a distillation of Truth which will direct that mind toward certain
ritualistic practices and spiritual disciplines. The fact that the chosen ishta devata is a “fabrication” does not make the manifestation “unreal”; rather it allows the concentration of (latent) Awareness upon a specific aspect of Reality (or form) which will gradually unlock the secrets of Absolute (or formless). Thus the major task or duty of the spiritually advanced individual is the pursuit of yogic practices with the aim of meditation upon, contemplation and realization of, and ultimate absorption in, the Infinite. Those who have elected to worship Subrahmanya (Murugan) will learn to understand all of the emanations of the underlying Reality represented by the deity; that is the truths embodied by Skanda-Murugan in all his forms. This spiritual wisdom destroys the limitations imposed by the human mind in interpreting and determining the many forms of the One. Experiential knowledge leads the sadhaka beyond the constraints of categorization, language and human reason, to contemplation and finally to moksha when the jiva (human soul) becomes Siva (Reality); that is, the worshipper is one with the object or Reality of his/her veneration.

Given this backdrop, pilgrimage may be regarded as a metaphor for the entire process of spiritual discovery; a crossing point (tirtha yatra) from the mundane world to another state of consciousness. Every action within the pilgrimage is a calculated step on the journey toward the axis mundi; it is also a passage which simultaneously reorients the sadhaka from the outer world to the inner. The rituals – for example, the separation from the mundane, the removal from the familiarity of the community, the surmounting of the senses – especially pain – as one travels towards the centre, the final presentation of the physical/psychic burden to the deity – represent a carefully graduated series of steps which open the devotee to a range of cosmic potentialities. In superseding the routines of daily life, the pilgrimage rearranges the senses, and forces the individual to confront truths and thus ultimately Truth itself. Of course moksha will not be attained by every individual on every pilgrimage; the sadhaka's level of spiritual development will influence his relationship to the deity, and hence his patterns of worship. But at the very least the pada yatra will erase the boundaries formally demarcated by mundane consciousness, and involve the devotee in several days of focused bhakti religiosity which will inspire fresh awareness and awaken an array of spiritual possibilities. This
will occur irrespective of whether the sadhaka is at the earliest stages of his/her awakening, (in which case his/her modes of worship are likely to be rudimentary, unsophisticated and even crude), or the most advanced stages of unfoldment (represented by those who have entered advanced meditation or deep yogic contemplation of the deity). These notions of pilgrimage will be further explored in Chapter Six.

5. SINGAPORE

Indians began arriving in Singapore following the British acquisition of the island in 1819. By the 1990s, the Indians numbered 195,000 people, with Tamils constituting about 62 per cent of the total (but 75 per cent of the South Indian population). While 56.5 per cent of ethnic Indians profess Hinduism, Hindus account for a mere 3.6 per cent of Singapore's population. Singaporean Hinduism embraces a diversity similar to that encountered in Malaysia, with the religion fragmented by divisions reflecting region, ethnicity, caste, and lineage. While the overwhelming majority of ethnic Indians were recruited as labourers, and continue to be employed in working class occupations, a minority belong to the technical, commercial and professional classes. In recent years, Tamil has gained importance as a lingua franca of Singapore's Indians, resulting in the decline of the languages of minority Indian communities.

On the basis of fieldwork conducted between July 1973 and July 1974, Lawrence Babb concluded that kavadis were borne on three main occasions in the ritual life of Singapore's Hindus – Thaipusam, Panguni Uttiram, and timiti (the annual firewalking festival at Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road). Thaipusam was the largest kavadi festival, and probably the most important Hindu festival celebrated in Singapore. There is significant evidence that Thaipusam has continued to increase in popularity since Babb completed his fieldwork. Thus while 4,717 kavadis were borne at Thaipusam in Singapore in 1986, by 1995 the number had risen to 7,754, an increase of roughly 40 per cent in less than a decade.

The Thaipusam festival in Singapore essentially covers two days, the first largely
devoted to the formalities of a chariot procession, organized and managed by the
Republic's Nattukottai Chettiar community, and the second Thaipusam day itself, given
over to rituals of vow fulfillment, including kavadi worship. While Thaipusam is
commemorated at most Murugan temples, the focal point is the Chettiars' Thandayuthapani Temple, in Tank Road, constructed in 1869, and generally known as the Chettiar Temple.(68)

At about 6.30 a.m. on Thaipusam Eve, the utsavar murthi of Murugan is taken from the
temple upon the shoulders of devotees, and installed in the temple's silver chariot. The
deity is greeted by a large crowd of devotees who present trays for blessing. The chariot,
which is drawn by a Landrover, then commences its journey.(69) The procession makes
its way to South Bridge Road, and to the Sri Mariamman Temple, the oldest and one of
the most prominent temples in Singapore. Here Murugan ceremonially greets his
mother, Parvati (Mariamman). The chief pantaram of the Mariamman temple smashes a
coconut on the pavement in front of the chariot, and a simultaneous arati is performed to
Mariamman within the temple and to the utsavar murthi of Murugan on the chariot. (70)

The chariot now resumes its journey, this time to the Vinayagar Temple in Keok Siak
Road, where Murugan ritually greets his elder brother, Ganesha. Upon arrival an arati is
performed before the chariot, two coconuts are smashed upon the pavement, and
simultaneous aras are performed before Vinayagar (Ganesha) within the temple and
the utsavar murthi of Murugan. Murugan is taken from the chariot, and now stays at the
temple for the remainder of the day to receive the homage and supplication of his
devotees.(71)

The chariot departs from the Vinayagar Temple at 7 p.m. and commences its return
journey to the Thandayuthapani Temple. On this occasion it is accompanied by a group
of Chettiar kavadi bearers, each of whom carries a paal kavadi. The Chettiar community
have previously conducted a pongal ceremony at 3.30 p.m. and an evening puja at 6.30
p.m.(72) A large crowd gathers to follow the chariot as it moves firstly to Market Street
where many of the homes of the Chettiar community are located. Here a makeshift altar
has been placed in front of each dwelling, consisting of oil lamps and a tray offering. While in past years the chariot would remain at this site for a considerable period, these days police regulations insist that the chariot be moved on within a stipulated time. (73)

The chariot reaches the Thandayuthapani Temple at about 9 p.m. (74) The approach to the temple is the signal for the Chettiar worshippers to perform the kavadi dance, some entering trance. (75) The utsavar murthi is removed from the chariot, and ceremonially borne in a clockwise circuit of the temple. Murugan is finally placed on a swing near the main altar, and receives the offerings of his devotees. (76)

The second day, Thaipusam itself, is mainly given over to the kavadi and other ritual worship. Most kavadi bearers commence their pilgrimage from the Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road, and carry their kavadis to the Thandayuthapani Temple. (77) Devotees take kavadis for a diversity of reasons, but mainly to fulfill a vow, for healing within the family, or as thanks for a petition answered by the deity. (78) While the most simple offering is the paal kudam, many devotees bear paal or aluga kavadis. (79) Most kavadi worshippers also take 3 vels; a small vel which is passed through the skin of the forehead representing the mystical third eye, (80) another through the tongue, and a third through the cheeks. (81) Many devotees are organized within temple or lineage groups and are guided by a recognized leader, often a spirit medium. (82) Worshippers achieve trance prior to the fitting of kavadis, with their retinue of supporters chanting to remove the pain as the vels and hooks are inserted. (83)

Devotees bearing kavadis begin emerging from the Perumal temple at about dawn. Their departure is regulated by the police who insist upon worshippers leaving in groups, a measure designed to reduce disruption to traffic. (84) The votaries follow designated routes which lead to the Thandayuthapani Temple. Their journey, of about 5 kilometres, will take them past two major temples, the Veeramah Kali amman Temple in Serangoon Road and the Shivan Temple in Orchard Road. Devotees will often stop in front of these temples to dance before the presiding deities who are able to gaze through the temple gates to the roadway outside. On each occasion a member of the supporting party will
smash a coconut prior to the resumption of the journey. (85) At specific points limes will be cut and thrown in various directions to propitiate malignant spirits which are reputed to inhabit these areas. (86)

Kavadi votaries complete their journey at the Thanayudapani Temple, where the milk is taken from the kavadis, and poured over the murthi. (87) The kavadi bearer then prays before the image, temple bells are rung, a conch is blown and the devotee’s name is read. The kavadi is then dismantled, and the vels withdrawn. The pilgrim will then often distribute pancha amurtham (a mixture of jackfruit, bananas, honey, milk and brown sugar) to his supporters and members of the public. (88) The aspirant’s obligations will formally conclude with an Idumban puja, conducted on the third day after Thaipusam, in which his/her fast is broken, and he/she is released from the vows of asceticism. (89)

Other devotees view Thaipusam as an auspicious occasion upon which to organize the shaving of children’s heads. This is often undertaken by barbers stationed in the temple courtyard, who upon completion of each shaving ritually anoint the child’s head with sandalwood paste. The festive atmosphere is complemented by the arrival of traders who set up stalls to retail soft drinks, food and religious items. In the afternoon a mass feeding is offered by the Chettiar community. (90) Finally, at night, as the last kavadi bearers arrive, those who have supplicated the deity for the relief of illness will hold a firewalking (timiti) across a pit filled with smouldering coals. (91)

Over the years Thaipusam in Singapore has been subject to two major reformist pressures, firstly that of the Dravidian movement, and more recently that exerted by official bodies entrusted to manage Hindu affairs within the Republic.

The Tamil Reform Association (TRA) established a Kalagam in Singapore in 1932, with the avowed aim of “cleansing” Hinduism. (92) The TRA and related Dravidian organizations continued to exercize a major impact upon Singapore's Tamils until the 1960s, (described in Chapter Five) when a new generation of locally educated Hindus began to articulate concerns that were more specifically Singaporean in content. (93)
After gaining independence in 1965, the Singapore government guaranteed religious freedom. However, in 1972 the government qualified this assurance with the dual stipulations that religions were required to be contemporary in outlook, and that their practices should aim to unify rather than divide the country. This declaration reflected the government's determination that religions should not intrude into the political sphere.(94)

The two quasi-governmental bodies responsible for Hinduism in Singapore – the Hinduism Endowment Board (or HEB; founded in 1969 to administer the affairs of major Hindu Temples and to manage the principal Hindu festivals), and the Hindu Advisory Board (or HAB, initially founded in 1915 by the colonial government to advise on matters relating to Hinduism) – are both entirely staffed by professionals, who have been anxious to remould Hinduism into a “modern” and largely textual religion; one which is allegedly more acceptable to the general public.(95) As Vaneeta Sinha has explained “...the HEB and HAB are perceived by the lay Hindu public to be government bodies and are often seen as conduits through which the government is able to channel the expression of Hinduism in a certain direction.”(96)

Throughout the 1970s there was considerable debate about the need for musical accompaniment of kavadi worship at Thaipusam. Certain youths who were using “non-musical” instruments and alleged to be dancing “garishly” were perceived to be diminishing the sacredness of Thaipusam.(97) In 1979, the HEB, having consulted the Ministry of Social Affairs, announced a raft of conditions which would henceforth apply to the commemoration of Thaipusam. These included a ban on musical instruments, and a prohibition on dancing by those comprising the retinue of any kavadi worshipper. Devotional Indian music was to be permitted only within temple compounds.(98) Despite the objections of many Hindus who argued that it was “traditional to have classical music accompany the kavadi bearers on their annual penance”,(99) the ban on music and dancing was reaffirmed in 1981, and has never been revoked.(100)
6. SRI LANKA

While the kavadi ritual occurs at many of Hindu temples within Sri Lanka(101) the best known instance of kavadi worship takes place at the Asala Festival held annually in July-August at the major pilgrimage centre of Kataragama in southern Sri Lanka. The Asala festival commemorates Skanda's marriage to Valli, which is symbolized by the ritual journey of the deity in his yatra form to the shrine of Valli.(102) Worship is held at various phases of the festival. The Kataragama temple complex is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims, and also attracts some Christian pilgrims.(103)

Kataragama is held to be the location where the deity Murugan wooed and wed the damsel, Valli. The essential mythology attending this event is provided in Chapter Six. However, it should be noted that the marriage is held to embody the very essence of bhakti spirituality, “the immediate spontaneous union of the soul with the divine.”(104)

At Kataragama, Skanda-Murugan “…is regarded by his Tamil devotees as Kantali, God as the Supreme Identity, that is formless. Therefore whatever form or 'face' the god chooses to show is only a guise.”(105) Here Murugan is worshipped as “the reality transcending all categories without attachment, without form, standing alone as the Self”, (106) or in Patrick Harrigan's more explicit description, “Sanmuka (Shanmugan) 'the six-faced' Skanda-Murukan is Lord of Space, the Unmoved Mover abiding as a conscious presence at the source and center of the matrix of infinite possibilities – our world of embodied existence.”(107) It is therefore not surprising that the representation of Murugan claimed to be worshipped at Kataragama (claimed because it is never displayed to the public) is not a conventional murthi or icon, but rather a “sadkona yantra...a six pointed magical diagram etched upon a metal plate.”(108)

At Kataragama kavadi worship is held to symbolize the soul's attempts to find union with the deity. The kavadi represents the human body inhabited by the devotee; the product of all the actions committed in this and other lives. The deity enshrined on the kavadi is illustrative of the god who resides within the devotee, in other words the Supreme Reality sought by the aspirant. Two milk pots are secured to the kavadi, one
represents the bad actions committed by the devotee, the other the good actions. Cumulatively both comprise the metaphorical “burden” which is taken from the kavadi bearer upon reaching his/her destination.(109) The kavadi is also recognized as a mode of invoking the powers of healing, and as a means of fulfilling vows.(110)

As in Malaysia, all devotees are expected to perform tapas before engaging in kavadi worship. These included prescribed fasting, and at Kataragama bathing in the Manik Ganga, adjacent to the complex, immediately prior to bearing the kavadi. The kavadi ritual involves a trance state. Arumugam Rasiah lists several types of kavadi considered acceptable at Kataragama. These include the milk and dancing kavadis (equivalent to the Malaysian paal kavadi), sedil and chariot kavadis, (both classified as ter kavadis in Malaysia), hanging kavadis (where the devotee is borne on a pole to which he is affixed; this practice made its appearance in Sri Lanka in the 1940s) and the carrying of babies in temporary cradles slung from sugar cane.(111) Additional penances including rolling around the temple, a practice known as anga pira thadchanai, and indicating complete submission to the Lord; carrying pots full of burning camphor, or engaging in firewalking. (112) Kavadi worship, which at Kataragama has become popularized among Buddhists to the point of losing much of its religious significance,(113) remains an austere ritual, potent with inner significance among participating Hindus.(114) Among Tamils, all social groups participate in various forms of kavadi worship.(115)

7. SOUTH AFRICA
The Hindu population of South Africa is largely descended from those Indians who were recruited to work as indentured labourers in the British colony of Natal during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This workforce was largely drawn from the Madras Presidency and from North East India.(116)

Hinduism in South Africa finds public expression in ritual life, which includes the annual commemoration of a round of calendrical festivals. Kavadi worship features prominently in the major festivals observed by Tamil speaking Hindus. The principle kavadi festivals are Thaipusam, Chitrai Paruvam, and Panguni Uttiram, celebrated in
the months of Tai (January-February), Chitrai (April-May) and Panguni (March-April) respectively. The July kavadi festival held in about 60 temples throughout Durban attracts large numbers of worshippers, and the mass celebration is believed to promote Hindu solidarity.

Of these, Thaipusam is the most popular kavadi festival. More South African Hindus observe this festival than any other, and participation continues to increase, especially among younger Hindus. As in Malaysia, Thaipusam is commemorated as the occasion upon which Parvati presented Murugan with the Sakti Vel, “the lance like symbol of spiritual knowledge and incisive discrimination.”

The following description of the kavadi worship at the Panguni Uttiram festival at the Shri Civa Cuppiramaniyar Temple at Brake Village, Tongaat, north of Durban in Natal Province, is largely based upon the observations of South African scholar, R.R. Pillai. Panguni Uttiram is commemorated as the day upon which Murugan married the celestial Teyvayanai, daughter of Indra, following his victory over the asuric forces. It is thus a day in which devotees solicit Murugan through performance of austerities and penance. Most votaries fulfill vows aimed at preventing misfortune, rectifying adversity, tapping into Murugan's powers of healing, or simply seeking spiritual unfoldment.

Those who have vowed to take a kavadi begin their formal observances ten days prior to Panguni Uttiram at a special flag hoisting ritual at the kotimaram (flagpole) in the front of the temple. First an abishekam is held which is designed to awaken the spiritual consciousness of the devotees. After the abishekam the murthi and his consorts are clad in “strikingly beautiful” rainment. Aratis are performed by temple priests. In the afternoon a havan or fire offering, designed to maintain the cosmic order, is performed outside the temple. The temple flagpole is now ritually purified. This is done by washing it with water mixed with various “cleansing” agents - turmeric powder, milk, sour milk, sandalwood paste, and rosewater. Once it is purified, the flagpole is adorned with red kumkum dots, and a flag made of white calico, emblazoned with a rooster, the standard
of Murugan, is raised. In addition, a separate piece of calico is used to wrap various items – a coconut, betel leaves, rice and flowers – into a package which is affixed to the flagpole and raised up the pole by hand. While this ritual is being enacted, the devotees chant “Haro Hara” (“Praise to the Lord”). (126)

The items placed within the calico bag represent the Raja Guna (passionate qualities) which devotees must dispense with or subjugate if they are to achieve spiritual enlightenment. While flowers express the devotee's gratitude to the Divine, and their submission to his will, the coconut husk represents the gross body's involvement in the phenomenal world, while the white kernel symbolizes the atman (soul) in its inherent purity, unsullied by any action within the material world. The coconut is therefore emblematic of the pilgrim's anticipated journey; from the gross outer world to the realization of the pure brilliance of the spirit which resides within.(127)

After both the flag and the calico bag have been raised, arati is performed before the flagpole. The votaries with their offerings then proceed to the area within the temple precincts where the utsavar deities are now installed. An arati is performed to these deities, and each of the devotees makes his/her individual offering to the deities. The offering is symbolic of the surrender to Murugan of the karma the aspirant has accumulated throughout his/her life. The entire ceremony culminates with a further arati.(128)

On each day preceding Panguni Uttiram the intending kavadi bearer will attend the temple for obayam (daily prayers). He/she will also undertake a fast, and eat vegetarian meals only, which are provided at the temple. The devotee will also refrain from consuming tobacco and alcohol, as well as eschewing sexual relations. In addition, male devotees will cease shaving.(129)

On the day prior to Panguni Uttiram the devotees will gather at the temple to decorate the kavadis. The Kovil (temple) Kavadi is reserved for the resident temple priest, who is to assume the role of Idumban throughout the kavadi ritual, and thus, as Murugan's
gatekeeper and the original kavadi bearer, will lead the morrow's procession. This kavadi is painstakingly decorated by temple officials, and festooned with marigold garlands. The temple chariot is also decorated, and banana leaves, symbolic of the flow of life, and dates, representing fertility, are tied to the four poles of the chariot. Pictures of various deities of the Hindu pantheon are secured to the chariot (the pictures are incorporated into the festival to ensure that the needs of devotees who worship *ishta devatas* other than Murugan are met).(130)

On the morning of *Panguni Uttiram* the *utsavar murthis* of Murugan and his consorts are placed on the chariot. Pumpkins are placed under the wheels of the chariot. These gourds are held to represent the ego and their destruction thus symbolizes the complete surrender of self to the deity. In addition some devotees, signifying their desire for total submission to Murugan, place themselves beneath the chariot's centre, which will thus pass above them as it commences its journey.(131)

The chariot now proceeds to the middle of a nearby field. The devotees, with their kavadis placed before them, are arranged in concentric circles around the chariot. Prior to arrival, each aspirant has taken a ritually purifying bath of water and turmeric, after which they will have dressed in a *pantaram* or white *vesthi* (white is regarded as the colour of purity). Women devotees will wear a yellow *sari* (yellow being considered the colour of *sakti*). Many male kavadi bearers will also wear *rudraksha malai* (the *rudraksha* beads symbolizing Siva.)(132)

Because the resident temple priest has assumed the role of Idumban, a visiting priest is engaged to perform the prescribed ritual throughout the festival. The first *puja* – a *havan* ceremony – is now conducted, and a piece of *kankanam* turmeric root, seen as protecting the devotee from untoward elements and forces, is tied to a yellow thread, and secured around the wrist of each aspirant. The devotees are now asked to secure the *vel*, representing Murugan, to their kavadis. The *cempus* (brass vessels) containing the devotees' offerings (generally milk), are now covered with banana leaves and tied to each end of the kavadi.(133)
A small altar is formed upon trays which are now placed in front of each kavadi. The tray contains three different types of fruit, a coconut, betel leaves and betel nuts. An arati is performed before each kavadi, and hymns in honour of Murugan, drawn from the kavadi-c-cindu and Tiruppukal are now sung.(134)

Some devotees attain trance and vels are placed through their tongues and cheeks. As in Malaysia, this action is believed to embody the principle of mauna or enforced silence, so that the devotee may concentrate more fully upon Murugan. Mauna and the penetration of the vels are believed to endow the devotee with greater powers of endurance. The piercing with vels is perceived as a form of tapas or austerity which symbolizes recognition of the evanescence of the gross body, compared to the endurance of the subtle body, the atman or self. As Pillai remarks, “The devotees are pierced to rid the selves of all adverse qualities, viz. pride, ego, aggrandizement, etc.”(135) Some devotees allow ripe limes and coconuts to be hooked to their bodies.(136)

The entranced devotees are now led in the kavadi dance (kavati-attam) by the priest bearing the Idumban kavadi. As in Malaysia, many devotees draw silver chariots which are attached by hooks to their backs. These votaries are often fulfilling vows for Hanuman, who is viewed as an avatar of Siva.(137) Many female devotees will take the paal kudam as their ritual offering.(138)

The kavadis having been fitted, the temple chariot now returns to the temple. The kavadi procession, headed by the Idumban kavadi bearer, follows behind the chariot. The kavadi devotees appear to attain an intense pitch of fervour as they come in sight of the temple. Pillai comments: “The devotees increase the tempo of their pace. In a high state of spiritual excitement they circumambulate the temple three times, approach the image of their adoration, Lord Murukan...”.(139) The temple bell (kanta), held to symbolize Brahmin, the ultimate Reality, is rung constantly. It is believed that on the phenomenal level this will enhance the spiritual absorption of devotees. In addition, conches (sankhas) are blown.(140)
Upon arrival at the temple, the brass pots are removed from the kavadis, and the milk is poured over the deity. The milk, now sanctified as *prasadam*, is collected from an outlet pipe on the side of the altar, and may be consumed by devotees. Other worshippers, still entranced, dance before the *murthi*. The hooks and *vels* are removed, and *vibhuti* is applied to the areas which were pierced. The *kankanam* or turmeric root attached to the devotee's wrist is now removed, although some votaries do not unfasten the root until the termination of the Idumban *puja* the following day. The kavadi worship concludes with a prayer followed by an *arati* to Murugan. Kavadi devotees then participate in a vegetarian meal provided by the temple management committee.(141)

On the day after *Panguni Uttiram* the temple flag and calico bag are lowered from the temple flagpole. Because they are considered still potent with the force of *sakti* (cosmic energy), they are plunged into the river where the cooling power of water will absorb and neutralize the *sakti* heat.(142)

Later the final *puja* of the festival is offered, this time in honour of Idumban. During this *puja* the temple priest who has “become” Idumban enters a trance. Vegetarian curries are prepared and offered. The period of renunciation is now at an end, and devotees are released from observance of their *tapas*.(143)

8. FIJI
The Hindu population of Fiji is mainly descended from the immigrant labourers who were recruited to Fiji between 1879 and 1916 to work in sugar and other plantation industries. Approximately 60,000 adults migrated to Fiji, with about 75 per cent originating from North India (mainly from the United Provinces, present day Uttar Pradesh), and the remaining 25 per cent from the Madras Presidency. Most of the North Indian migrants were drawn from the middle order agricultural castes.(144) Few of these labourers, who were known as *girmityas* (derived from the English word, “agreement”, referring to the workplace contract),(145) returned to India at the expiration of their period of indenture.(146)
As in Malaya, the system of indenture was run under a regime of extraordinary harshness. The hierarchical racial structures imposed by the British colonial overlords which placed the Indians at the absolute base, was imposed with unrelenting rigidity. (147) The conditions of indenture which totally defined Indians in terms of their function as units of labour, produced a brutalizing and demoralizing effect upon the workforce. (148) As a result, Fiji’s plantations became “...sites of extraordinary violence, murders and suicides, directed not against Europeans primarily, but by ‘coolies’ against other coolies, or themselves.”(149)

The violence upon the plantations was fiercely exacerbated by the widespread European exploitation of Indian women under their charge. (150) Indian women were considered of low morality, and were thus supposedly readily available to any European supervisor who demanded their services. (151) Europeans were quick to attribute the violence within the sugar plantations to the debased nature of the coolies who were regarded as “the dregs of their homeland” who by their experiences in Fiji had been “converted into something of the ape class”. (152) Given this backdrop, repression and force were viewed as the only possible methods of maintaining control. (153)

The failure of the widespread labour strikes of the 1920's launched by Indian workers, embittered Indo-European relations, and made the Indian population fully aware of their political weakness, and their continuing subjugation to the social, economic and political domination of the British colonial government and the European business class. (154) The Indian actions were viewed as an active challenge to European political supremacy, and were seen as a prelude to racial struggle, possibly even war. The Indian presence proved increasingly worrying to the British administration, which portrayed India as a land of dark violence and subversion. (155) Indians and Hinduism were regarded especially bleakly by European missionaries. (156)

Under these circumstances religion became a weapon with which to counter British colonial hegemony, of articulating agonistic discourses which asserted the primacy of Indian civilizational values, and clearly demarcating cultural and social identity. (157)
Indeed, the scriptures were interpreted to reverse the status of the Indian labour force in relation to their British overlords. John D. Kelly has shown how this counter discourse enabled Indian Hindus to salvage moral integrity from the degradation of their political and social powerlessness. Indian commentators employed the lessons of the *Ramanaya* as allegories for their own wretched condition. Thus “Ram was an *avatar* of Vishnu come to world existence and to fight evil and restore good order. He allowed himself to lose his social status, to be banished; he endured hardships and fought the evil of this world. When portrayed as Ram and Sita, the *girmityas* could not be blamed for their polluted status. When portrayed as Ram's enemy, Ravana, the British could be shown to be deluded or evil.”(158) The prominence of *bhakti* religion with its stress upon the direct relationship between devotees and deity, and constructed around the intensity and purity of the aspirant's desire to experience God (thus superceding both natural law (*dharma*) and knowledge (*jnana*)), became the central feature of Hinduism within Fiji. (159)

The emphasis upon religion was reinforced by the political platform of Gandhian nationalism. Gandhi's program of *satyagraha* insisted upon action informed wholly by truth. The pure and dignified suffering of the oppressed forced the truth in all its naked brutality upon the oppressor, thus both shattering and vitiating the oppressor's moral authority as well as undermining the physical and legal apparatus constructed as a concomitant of that authority, and rewarding the oppressed with final moral victory. Thus the Indian agitation against indenture forced the Fiji Government to deliberate upon conditions on the plantations and in particular the exploitation of Indian woman, “a dialogue it despised, but was unable to resist.”(160)

While Indians made important economic and vocational advances, especially after World War II, and indeed became integral to the development of the South Pacific economy, their successes aroused the fear of the native Fijians. From the outset the Fijians had viewed the Indians as “invaders”,(161) and by the 1940s were advocating the formal repatriation of all Indians lest Fiji be converted into a “little India”.(162) In 1963, the colonial government neutralized this perceived threat by enshrining Fijian
establishment (163), a manoeuvre designed to protect indigenous institutions and ensure Fijian political control in perpetuity. (164)

Throughout their brief history in Fiji, Indian Hindus have relied upon their religion as a mechanism for generating counter hegemonic discourse, a means of resisting the dominant political and social authority, as well as furnishing a cultural mode which signifies identity, integrity and authenticity. As such, the celebration of religion within the public arena may be regarded as a form of social statement, which not only speaks in the enclosed code of its devotees, but also sends broader and unambiguous messages to indigenous Fijians. (165)

An early description of self-mortification rites is provided by plantation manager Walter Gill who remarks in dismissive terms about the worship patterns of South Indian Muslims. He observed that devotees, having chanted themselves into a “state of dementia” (that is, disassociation), passed skewers through their flesh. This included one man who placed four skewers through his forehead another through the palm of his hand, two through his cheeks, and additional skewers through the lobes of his ears. This performance produced no bleeding or wounds. (166)

The study undertaken by Sahadeo et al. in the early 1970s (167) concentrated on various aspects of intense bhakti worship in Fiji, including another Indian festival held in honour of Durga, which involved walking on knives, and the passing of skewers representing a miniature trident through the tongue. This group also monitored Tamil firewalking (timiti) which also incorporated the insertion of vels. (168) The firewalking was undertaken in honour of Amman, the participants regarding the embers as resembling marigold flowers. (169)

Carolyn Henning Brown's 1975 study of firewalking among North and South Indians also makes reference to practices of self mortification, involving piercing with spears and tridents in honour of Subramani (sic). (170) The Maha Devi Temple in Suva, founded by Tamils originating from the Chingleput district, was the first temple in Fiji at
which firewalking was practiced. Brown does not furnish the name of the festival, nor the phase of the year in which it occurs, but states that the aim of the firewalkers is to achieve union with Devi. The asceticism and sacrifices of the ritual are perceived as steps upon this path.(171) On the tenth day of the festival under examination, firewalkers insert spears and *vels* into their faces, and walk from the nearby ocean to the Maha Devi Temple where they cross the firepit, prepared in honour of Devi, on three occasions.(172)

Brown points out that throughout the earlier periods of the Indian experience in Fiji, the South Indians were an excoriated and spurned minority, which had to struggle to retain their languages and culture against the encroachment of Northern Indians.(173) Firewalking thus became an agonistic demonstration of South Indian culture; an exhibition of the power of Tamil spirituality which comprised a clear declaration to North Indians, and then as firewalking was increasingly taken up by the latter, to ethnic Fijians.(174)

Thaipusam has been celebrated in Fiji since the establishment of the *Periyal Kovil* on the banks of the Nandi River by a devotee, Ramasami Pillai, who hailed from Singaranadpur Village, in the Salem District of the Madras Presidency. The *Kovil*, which has been upgraded over the years and is now known as the Siva-Subramaniya Temple, remains the focal point for Thaipusam in Fiji.(175) The first kavadi was borne in 1920, by a devotee, Ambu Nair, who undertook a *pada yatra* of 90 kilometres to the temple. Thaipusam was initially celebrated as a 10 day festival, attracting Hindus from throughout Fiji, many of whom travelled to Nandi by boat to participate.(176) In recent years Thaipusam has become the largest Hindu festival in Fiji. During Thaipusam daily *pujas*, *abishekams*, and *homa* are conducted within the temple, while kavadis are borne around the temple by hundreds of devotees, usually in family groups.(177) Kavadi worship includes piercing by *vels*, and the pulling of *ter* kavadis which are “...witnessed by devotees with great reverence.”(178) The temple chariot, containing the *utsavar murthis* of Murugan, Teyvayanai and Valli, is paraded each night through adjacent neighbourhoods, stopping at all Hindu homes to allow offerings to be made.(179)
Indeed, some Hindus, ex-Fijian nationals, but now resident in other countries, return to Fiji for the festival.(180) Thaipusam is also celebrated at Murugan temples located in Tagi Tagi, Koronbu and Navua. Kavadi worship is also a feature of the festival of *Panguni Uttiram*, which is the other major Murugan festival observed in Fiji.(181)

9. THE SEYCHELLES

Thaipusam within the Seychelles provides an instance of the recent introduction of kavadi worship to a Hindu community, and its subsequent fostering as a quintessential ingredient, if not a distillation, of Tamil Hindu culture.(182)

The Seychelles is a small, multi-ethnic nation located in the Indian Ocean and approximately one thousand miles from India. The total population is 81,000, overwhelmingly concentrated on the main island of Mahe, which also contains the capital, Victoria. The Tamil speaking population in 2001 was approximately 3,500 people (or roughly 4 per cent of the total population). Tamil traders, especially from the the Kaveri delta, were active in the Seychelles well before the arrival of European colonial powers, and exploited the native timber which was exported to Pondicherry. The first permanent Tamil resident, one Ramalingam, an advisor to the Governor, arrived in the Seychelles (from the nearby island of Reunion) in 1789, and was granted significant tracts of land. The Tamil community became established in the Seychelles from 1864 onwards, and by 1901 numbered 332 families. The community has been largely involved in business enterprises.(183)

The Seychellois Tamil community was slow to develop its own cultural and religious institutions and early attempts to commemorate festivals were both spasmodic and abortive. As a newly established immigrant community, most Tamils focused upon economic establishment and consolidation, and maintained and reinforced their Tamil cultural and religious beliefs by intermittent travel back to the Tamil homeland.(184) However, the opening of an international airport in the Seychelles in 1972 greatly promoted travel between Seychellois Hindus and the Indian subcontinent, especially the Tamil “homeland”, and resulted in a substantial increased in the number of Tamil
women resident in the nation.(185)

Finally in 1984, 120 years after the establishment of a permanent Tamil community in the Seychelles, a group of devotees gathered together to establish the Seychelles Hindu Koyil Sangam. This body, buttressed by substantial donations from the community, purchased land in the centre of Victoria, and subsequently constructed a “traditional” temple, the Arul Mihu Navasakthi Vinayakar Temple, which was dedicated in May 1992. Although the presiding deity was Ganesha, supplementary shrines were established for other deities including Murugan, Nadarajah and Durga. The temple became the focal point for a Tamil cultural and religious resurgence within the Seychelles.(186)

The Thaipusam festival was first commemorated in the Seychelles in 1993. During the inaugural year, the kavadi procession was restricted to the inner courtyard of the temple. A total of 16 devotees took kavadis – 6 male worshippers bore the paal kavadis and 10 female worshippers carried the paal kudams. By 1999 the festival followed a processional route along the public highway and involved 51 kavadi worshippers consisting of 21 paal kudams, 19 paal kavadis, 10 aluga kavadis and one ter kavadi. A troupe was engaged from Tamil Nadu to provide appropriate temple music, believed to assist in the process of promoting trance and easing the ritual of insertions, and a ritual specialist, skilled in the fitting of hooks and vels, was imported from India to officiate throughout the Festival.(187) In 1998 the Seychelles Government declared Thaipusam an official public holiday for Hindus.(188) The festival has attracted wide coverage within the local media. Thaipusam concludes with a common lunch (annathanam) in which the entire community participates.(189)

Thaipusam in the Seychelles commemorates Murugan's marriage to Valli, and is thus regarded as an auspicious day for rejoicing and worship (this replaces the standard explanation of Thaipusam as a commemoration of Parvati's bestowal of the Sakti Vel upon Murugan, preparatory to his battle with the asuric army). The mythology of Idumban and the original kavadi is replaced with the assertion that the kavadi represents
a form of *karmic* axis, with the milk pot balanced on one end representing the good deeds the devotee has performed, whereas the milk pot on the other end represents the individual's evil deeds. In approaching the deity the devotee does not ask to be relieved of the burden of ignorance as is the case elsewhere, but rather appeals for forgiveness for evil deeds as well as blessings for the good actions he/she has performed.(190)

The festival is seen as embodying values and traditions which are integral to Tamil culture and identity. V. Sivasupramaniam claims that Thaipusam is a “powerful assertion of Hindu identity...and solidarity” and that “Murugan represents the bliss and beauty of nature. He is the aesthetic symbol of Tamil culture linked to dance and song. Kavadi songs and dances along with the uproar of 'Vel! Vel!' in chorus from the devotees underlies Tamil identity and the Kavadi festival procession provides cultural feast (sic) in the Seychelles for all communities.”(191)

10. MEDAN, INDONESIA

The history of Tamil immigration to North Sumatra echoes that of Malaya; namely a largely unskilled and mainly Tamil workforce recruited to labour in the plantation economy (in this case, tobacco) and upon public works.(192) In the early 1990s the Tamil population numbered about 18,000, most of whom lived in poverty.(193) Over time the Telegu minority have been acculturated into the majority community, which continues to remain structured according to caste.(194)

Since World War II, various associations have been founded to promote and preserve Tamil culture. Most Tamils maintain their cultural values through a process of active identification with the Tamil populations of adjacent areas. Many listen to Tamil radio programs broadcast from Malaysia and Singapore, watch Tamil cinema, and continue to acquire cassettes and videos from Malaysia and Singapore.(195)

The early plantation labourers constructed temples to the deities known from their homelands. These included Mariamman, Murugan (also known as Subramaniyar or Thandayudapany), Kaliyamman (Kali) and Munisvaran.(196) The most important temple
is the Sri Mariamman Kovil, constructed in 1884, and dedicated to Mariamman. This temple contains shrines to Palaiyar (Ganesha) and Murugan. However, Tamil Hindus continues to support two other major temples; the Kali Amman Temple and the Thandayudapani Temple. The Indonesian Government, through the Religious Affairs Department, Jakarta, officially appointed the membership of the Sri Mariamman Temple as official representatives of the entire Tamil community in North Sumatra. This was despite the fact that none of the remaining 15 temples in Medan was willing to accept this temple's authority on religious matters.

The Hindu community celebrated all major calendrical festivals according to an annual schedule furnished by the Sri Maha Mariamman Kovil of Kuala Lumpur. Over the years *timiti* (firewalking, and dedicated to Draupadi Amman), and Thaipusam emerged as the most prominent festivals, with Thaipusam assuming an ever increasing centrality to the spiritual life of Medan's Tamil Hindus. The festival featured both kavadi worship and a chariot procession. Devotees would bath in the Babura River, the main watercourse of Medan, adjacent to the Kali Amman Temple, and subsequently bear their kavadis to the Sri Mariamman Temple.

In 1973, the Chairman of the Sri Mariamman Temple, one Marimuthu Pillai, a multimillionaire patriarch of an influential family which owned textile mills in Java, proposed a ban on kavadi worship at the temple. Marimuthu contended that Hindus in Medan were now Indonesian Hindus and should accordingly emulate the Balinese Hindus, even though the two groups belong to entirely different traditions. Marimuthu also contended that self mortification practices “degraded” Tamils in the sight of other Indonesians and reinforced their status as “aliens.” In 1974 the ban was extended to all temples and publicly celebrated festivals and was enforced with the assistance of local police.

A. Mani points out that the ban proceeded against an extraordinary sequence of events: (i) The committee which endorsed Marimuthu's proposal had earlier worked enthusiastically to promote traditional festivals, and had even invited Tamil Hindu
priests from Malaysia to visit and advise on how best these might be conducted,

(ii) The officer in charge of Hindu affairs at the Ministry of Religion in Jakarta (a graduate of the Benaras Hindu University, India), had studied Hindu behaviour in North Sumatra. He sought advice from officials at the Indian Embassy, Jakarta, who responded that in their opinion the kavadi ritual might well fall under the rubric of traditional Tamil Hinduism, and

(iii) Certain Hindus did not hesitate to accuse the Chairman of bad faith, that is “‘selling' religion for personal profit”, and the temple administration which had so nimbly shifted position as “having changed their views...(to accord with those of the Chairman)...in order to gain economic rewards.” (Mani points out that more affluent members of the Tamil community who support the ban are fully aware of the economic and other benefits which may flow to members of an officially recognized “indigenous” religion). (203)

Members of Adi Dravidar castes who too openly expressed their opposition to the ban were subsequently detailed by Kopkamtib, the branch of the Indonesian Military which exercised responsibility for the maintenance of internal security. It was strongly believed that many of these arrests followed denunciations (including anonymous letters) circulated by the administration of the Sri Mariamman temple. This coercion effectively silenced a number of prominent members of the Tamil community who might otherwise have been expected to publicly oppose the ban.(204)

The ban deeply divided the community, and especially disturbed the large Adi Dravidar working class which considered that throughout the years since their initial migration from India they had gradually lost the accretions of a great and rich Hindu tradition, and that kavadis and other ritual forms of worship were all that were left to them to commemorate their Tamil Hindu identity.(205) Members of the Tamil community contend that the process of enforced Indonesian acculturation was driven by the restricted views of the officially recognized “reform” group associated with the
management of the Sri Mariamman Temple who had demonstrated their willingness to arbitrarily suppress long established traditional forms of cultural expression and worship.(206) Many hundreds of Medan Hindus now visit Penang each Thaipusam to participate in traditional worship in Malaysia.(207)

11. MAURITIUS

The earliest Tamil migrants to Mauritius arrived in the eighteenth century, during the period of French colonization. Most of these immigrants were artisans and traders.(208) Throughout the nineteenth century, this population was augmented by the arrival of thousands of South Indian indentured labourers, who were imported to work on sugar estates. While earlier groups of settlers constructed temples according to Agamic rites, estate Indians built their own places of worship and commemorated the festivals they had known in their homeland.

By 1960 there were approximately 110 Tamil temples established on Mauritius, of which 30 were dedicated to Murugan. While many of the remaining kovils were consecrated Amman or Siva temples, all contained Murugan shrines. Kavadi worship is conducted at all Tamil temples throughout Mauritius.

Although the full round of calendrical festivals is commemorated in Mauritian temples, the major deity worshipped is Murugan, and festivals dedicated to him are marked with particular fervour. Of these, Thaipusam has emerged as the central Tamil Hindu festival, and its observance has assumed national significance. Rituals of worship are consciously modelled on those of Palani, India. Mauritian Tamils consider the Murukan Kovil de Garde Mountain as the local equivalent of Palani, thus inspiring the hymn “The Mauritius Murukan Pamalai” composed by poet P. Tiroumale Chetty. This contains the following lines:

Oh Lord, I have not seen Tanikai Malai
Neither have I seen Palani Malai,
My sadness knows no bound, so for me
Quatre Bornes Malai is your Patai Vitu (or place of major abode)
For many Mauritian Tamils, Murugan has assumed a central and definitive significance in articulating and asserting Tamil ethnic identity. The kavadi ritual, involving ecstatic and even frenzied trance states is seen as integral to his worship. Indeed, Khevasan Sornum remarks “Frenzy is possible and indulged in unashamedly...(by)...the kavadi carrier. The individual man or woman can enjoy the experience of divine tremors, especially when hearing devotional hymns and concentrating upon the Lord.”

Thaipusam features a chariot procession and the offering of trays to the deity within. Devotees smash coconuts in the path of the chariot. Votaries participating in kavadi worship observe ten days of disciplined fasting, which involves a vegetarian diet of food prepared within the home, abstinence from alcohol and sexual relations, avoidance of weddings and funerals, and sleeping on a mat on the floor. The kavadis borne by Mauritian aspirants are similar to those taken in Malaysia, and include the piercing of tongues and cheeks with vel, the carrying of Vel, aluga and ter kavadis, and paal kudam. Other devotees sleep on beds of nails, and walk upon nail slippers. A lemon is attached to all kavadis and borne to the shrine. Many of those who are afflicted with illness lie on the ground and allow kavadi bearers to pass above them.

In recent years visiting religious specialists from India have begun advising Mauritian Hindus upon rituals and doctrinal matters, and providing religious education for the young. Public participation in religious festivals has continued to annually increase. Thus in 1983 an astonishing 400,000 Mauritians embarked on a 40 mile pada yatra on the occasion of Maha Sivaratri, with some devotees bearing aluga kavadis the entire distance. (209) Mauritian Hindus migrating to Europe and the USA have shown their determination to maintain kavadi worship as an integral part of the panoply of religious rituals.(210)

12. CONCLUSION
This chapter clearly demonstrates that the interrelated phenomena of Murugan worship, Thaipusam and/or similar festivals, and the kavadi rituals involving trance or dissociative states, often including fleshly mortification, are found widely within the
world of Tamil Hinduism, and indeed constitute powerful, generally accepted and enduring expressions and symbols of Tamil bhakti religiosity and cultural identity.

Both colonial records and contemporary accounts reveals that the kavadi ritual is found at many sites throughout South India and is particularly associated with the bhakti worship of the deity Murugan. This is confirmed by my own field observations, which also suggest that the kavadi ritual is found among many castes in South India (including, members of Brahman castes, and involving, at least on one occasion, rites of fleshly mortification). These rituals and forms of bhakti religiosity are thus firmly grounded in metropolitan traditions and have accompanied Tamil Hindus to various locations within the Tamil diaspora. The geographically scattered communities which commemorate Murugan worship, Thaipusam (or related festivals), show wide variation in terms of their respective social, economic and political standings, and include wealthy merchant communities (e.g. the Seychelles), and societies in which Tamils enjoy considerable political power (e.g. Mauritius).

These conclusions clearly shatter several of the assumptions so commonly advanced by scholars and observers of Thaipusam in Malaysia and Singapore, namely:

(i) that Thaipusam as practiced in Malaysia is banned in India,

(ii) that kavadi worship is restricted to lower caste or Adi Dravidar Hindus, and constitutes a basic village ritual, and

(iii) that the ritual can be explained solely or largely as a form of social protest against economic and political marginalization and oppression.

The description of the Brahman pada yatra firmly locates Thaipusam and the kavadi ritual within the overarching framework of the Hindu pilgrimage tradition, with its inherent formalities of ritual separation from mundane routines as a prelude to the journey, both physical and metaphysical, to the axis mundi for the encounter with the deity. The pilgrimage is conceived as an experiential catalyst which inter alia, disrupts
everyday notions, thus opening the devotee to a range of fresh cosmic potentialities, which redefine the individual's relationship to the deity and move him/her indefinably closer to the reality of moksha. This ritual will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

NOTES
(1) Press estimates. The number of kavadi bearers seems to be extraordinarily high, especially when compared to Batu Caves. However, it is impossible to gauge even a rough calculation. Many devotees bear their kavadis throughout the night, including the early hours of the morning, in order to avoid the heat of the day, and in particular the foot burning bitumen roads.

(2) *Pongal*: boiling of rice and milk. This ritual is quintessentially associated with the Tamil harvest festival, *Tai Pongal* (Lakshmanan Chettiar, S.M.L. *The Folklore of Tamil Nadu*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1973:104-5), but may also represent a ritual conducted to Lord Ganesha as Remover of Obstacles.

(3) *Homa* Fire: This is a fire offering, a ritual in which the deity is supplicated through the medium of fire, which is usually set in a sanctified pit.

(4) The Chief Minister also visits other major (non-Chettiar controlled) temples. However, in dining at the Chettiar temple, he recognizes Chettiar management and direction of the festival.

(5) However, some kavadi bearers resolutely refuse to enter the temple, thus rejecting Chettiar sponsorship and (implied) authority.

(6) This ritual appears to be based on village ceremonies found in certain parts of Tamil Nadu. The *Agamic* festival of *Panguni Uttiram* which commemorates Murugan's marriage to Valli is held on the full moon day of the Tamil month of *Panguni* (March-April). (Thiruvasagam, Gomathi. *Book of Festivals*, Saiva Siddhanta Mandram, Kuala Lumpur, 1992:42)

(7) This emulates the practices of certain Brahman groups who at Palani, India, cook and distribute food to all-comers, irrespective of caste.


(10) Personal field research

(11) The issue of “heating” and “cooling” will be discussed in Chapter Six.

(12) Personal field research

(13) Vow fulfillment at Thaipusam embraces the concept of pilgrimage, of stepping outside the boundaries of the mundane. Pilgrimage involves asceticism, denial, sacrifice, and devotion. Coconut smashing has long been regarded as an accepted form of vow fulfillment. Devotees point out that the smashing of a single coconut is a routine temple ritual, which is also often performed on anniversaries and other basic commemorations, and thus cannot be regarded as vow fulfillment. These issues will be discussed more fully in Chapter Six.

(14) Criticisms of Muslim practices would invoke an immediate domestic response, those of Christian practices an international reaction. Many Hindus have expressed dismay that an organization such as the CAP would seek to intervene in an internal religious dispute which was not a matter for Association adjudication and which clearly fell outside its terms of reference. Other Hindus have spoken darkly of the hidden religious agenda, of the influence of known hostile Christian groups and the covert expression of anti-Hindu propaganda under the seemingly neutral aegis of Non-Government Organizations.


(16) Some of the many companies and organizations which contribute include Bosch, Motorola, Carlsburg Breweries, Penang Turf Racing Club, Golden Sands Hotel, and GEC.

(17) The more recent processes of “Sanskritization” have sought to identify Munisvarar, a former guardian deity, as a manifestation of Siva. Munisvarar's elevation will be discussed in Chapter Five.

(18) Yantra: mystical diagrams used to represent aspects of various deities, most commonly sakti powers. (Klostermaier, Klaus, K. *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994: 286-287) *Yantras* are also associated with healing in Tamil Nadu. (Lakshmanan Chettiar S.M.L., *The Folklore of Tamil Nadu*,...
The notion of service is exemplified in the following hymn:

If you wish to become steadfast, O heart
Come.

Entering daily the temple of our Lord before dawn
Sweep and clean the floor:
Weave garlands of flowers;
Sing his fame and praises;
Worship Him, bowing your head fully
Dance and exclaim,
“Praise be to Victorious Cankara” (Siva)
Our God on whose red matted hair,
Is the running water (of the Ganges)!
Lord of Arur.

(St. Appur, a seminal figure in the Tamil bhakti devotional movement, quoted in Devapooopathy, Nadarajah. The Strength of Saivism, Second International Seminar of Saiva Siddhanta, Kuala Lumpur, 1986:96)

During my fieldwork I was advised by social workers that of an estimated 1000 Tamil youth gangs in Malaysia, approximately 600 are based in Penang.

The most commonly portrayed “luminaries” in 1997 were Bob Marley, Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, and Jimi Hendrix, all of whom, coincidentally, died prematurely.

The membership of most of the movements largely consists of professionals, almost exclusively English medium educated, most of whom are acutely sensitive to perceived Western criticisms of Hindu practices and beliefs. Many are influenced by Vedanta oriented “universalistic” approaches to religion (for example, those inspired by Swami Vivekananda). In interviewing leading figures of these groups, one becomes uncomfortably aware that many are limited in their understanding of Saivism and the Murugan cultus, and know almost nothing about the cosmologies expressed in the rituals and beliefs of their more “simple” compatriots.

Penang is the only Malaysian state with a Chinese Chief Minister.

Over recent years there have been several all-Chinese kolattam troupes.
(25) I have shown in Chapter Two how the refusal of the Malay Muslim political elite to tolerate any challenge to the political course it has charted since 1971 has transformed non-Muslim religious beliefs and rituals into fora for the articulation and expression of ethnic values.


(28) ibid:119


(30) Whitehead, op cit:29

(31) ibid:76

(32) ibid:79

(33) O'Malley, op cit:102

(34) ibid:103-104


(37) Clothey (1978), op cit:126

(38) ibid:119

(39) ibid:120

(40) Somalay, op cit:27-29. (Note: these are 1975 estimates. )


(42) This is also known as Jayathirapuram, (City of Victory) (Indian tourism materials, acquired on site)

(43) Thiruvasagam, Gomathi: op cit:3

(44) Personal field research:Informant MSD.

These were sometimes associated with minor gods, in particular the deity Madurai Viran, whom some commentators claimed was a form of Murugan. One somewhat notorious festival held in central Kerala, staged in honour of Kaliamman, identified as a devotee of Murugan, allegedly involves kavadi worship intertwined with ritual drunkenness and the smoking of ganja. I was unable to personally verify these accounts.

Brahman food is generally regarded as high quality cuisine, and because it is ritually pure it may be consumed by all castes. It is thus in constant demand for weddings, temple festivals and other ritual and social functions.

Throughout the pilgrimage the centrality of Murugan to Tamil traditions of Hindu worship was constantly emphasized. This symbiosis was exemplified by the foundation mythology of a Murugan temple the party visited on Day 2 of the yatra and which was located several kilometres inside the Keralese border. This temple had been constructed by a band of Tamil weavers and their families, who had migrated to Kerala over 200 years previously. The story begins with the planned departure of the weavers. Those who were about to leave their home villages had farewelled their relatives and had gathered at an agreed meeting point to commence their journey. As they were on the verge of setting off all within the party heard a voice cry (in Tamil) “Take me with you! Take me with you!” Members of the group investigated but they failed to find the source of the voice. Once again they prepared to move off. Again the voice cried “Take me with you! Take me with you!” Further and more thorough investigation revealed that the voice originated from a small Murugan image obscured by nearby bushes. This episode demonstrates that Murugan worship is an integral part of Tamil culture, and no matter where Tamils journey they should never neglect to convey and honour their primary deity. (This story has two supplementary and almost paradoxical subtexts, namely (i) that Murugan will also seek out and never abandon his devotees, and (ii) those who search but superficially cannot expect to discover him.) When this group of weavers reached Kerala one of their first actions had been to construct a temple dedicated to
Murugan.

(52) In this case the devotee chosen to fill the role of kavadi master was a Brahman caterer, apparently not particularly well versed in scriptures and ritual, but regarded as an astute and capable organizer.

(53) There was not a single drop-out during this yatra; apparently in 1997 there had been two.

(54) During our stay in Palani, the Brahmans conducted two additional mass feedings, both on a Herculean scale. Each lunch sitting extended over 3 hours. During this period people were provided with lunch over twenty minute intervals – as one group departed another was ushered in. I would estimate that several hundred people were thus catered to on each day.

(55) An element of play and competition pervaded the relationship between the Brahmans and the (low caste) drummers. As the Brahmans performed an increasingly complex set of songs, they would deliberately alter the structures and rhythms in an attempt to confuse the drummers. Each change of tempo or rhythm was met with immediate grins as the drummers effortlessly accommodated the revised structure.

(56) The drumming was so pervasive that when drinking water from a bottle I could feel the vibrations through the plastic, and in holding the bottle by my side, I could see the water in a state of semi-agitation. I was informed that the drummers were members of, or related to, the Chettiar/Mudaliar castes, and that the drumming signifies the mustering of Murugan's army of devas prior to battle with the asuric army of Surapadman. The ritual of impassioned drumming is maintained for hours, (indeed for most of Thaipusam day). The devotees are replaced at regular intervals by fresh “shifts” of drummers, so that there is no break in the continuity.

(57) Many of the bhajans – a specialist collection of Murugan kavadi songs – were intricate constructions which I had never heard in Malaysia, but others were very familiar, and appear to be sung by all groups and castes.

(58) The pettifogging delight of the temple officials in delaying and inconveniencing a party of Brahman pilgrims was all too apparent.

(59) Given the pressure of the crowds present on Thaipusam day, this seemed remarkably generous.
(61) ibid:777
(63) Sandhu (1993), op cit:782-783
(64) Mani, A. “Indians in Singapore”, in Sandhu and Mani, op cit: 802
(65) Babb, Lawrence A. Thaipusam in Singapore: Religious Individualism in a Hierarchical Culture, University of Singapore, Department of Sociology Working Paper No. 49, Chopmen, Singapore, 1976: 8
(66) ibid:5
(67) Hinduism Today, April 1995, Volume 17, No. 4: 4
(69) Babb, (1976) op cit:6-7
(70) ibid:7
(71) ibid
(72) Evers and Jayarani, op cit: 854
(73) Babb, (1976) op cit:7
(74) ibid
(75) Evers and Jayarani, op cit: 858
(76) Babb, (1976) op cit: 8
(79) Babb, (1976) op cit: 8
(80) Roces, op cit:86
(81) Babb (1976), op cit:9
(82) ibid
(83) Roces, op cit: 86
(84) ibid: 88
(85) Babb (1976), op cit: 10
(86) Roces, op cit: 87
(87) Babb (1976), op cit: 11
(88) Roces, op cit: 91
(89) Babb (1976), op cit: 11
(90) ibid
(91) Hullet, op cit: 81
(92) Sinha, Vaneeta, op cit: 829
(93) Mani, A. “Indians in Singapore”, op cit: 796-797
(94) Sinha, Vaneeta, op cit: 826-827
(95) ibid: 831-839
(96) ibid: 834
(97) ibid: 832
(98) ibid
(99) ibid: 833
(100) Personal correspondence.
(106) Swearer, op cit: 301
(107) Harrigan (1998), op cit: 39
(108) ibid
(109) Arumugam, op cit: 38
(110) ibid: 39
(111) ibid: 40-44
(112) ibid: 44,85
(113) Arumugam states "Nowadays this kavady has become a common joke. This is now performed by certain groups of person young and old, males and females, with music which has deteriorated to baila music and dance." (Arumugam, op cit.:40) see also, Obeyesekere, Gananath. “The Firewalkers of Kataragama: The Rise of Bhakti Religiosity in Buddhist Sri Lanka”, Journal of Asian Studies, Volume 37, 1978:475
(114) Swearer, op cit:302
(115) ibid
(117) ibid
(118) Hinduism Today, October 1993, Volume 15, Number 10:28. I have been unable to trace to name of this festival. There are no major Murugan festivals celebrated in India in July. However, the festival of Adipuram, and agricultural festival held when newly planted paddy shoots appears is staged in this month. (Clothey, Fred W. (1978), op cit:143). This festival does not normally feature kavadi worship. Adipuram is also commemorated in Malaysia in Siva temples as a festival in honour of Amman (Parasakti) who is ceremonially bathed. Devotees are presented with sprouted navadanyam or nine cereals as prasadam. (Gomathi Thiruvasagam, op cit:10) However, some Mariamman temples use the occasion to celebrate their annual festivals which incorporate the ceremonial procession of the presiding deity. Alternatively, the festival of the Kaveri, (the so-called Ganges of the Tamil Nadu), is held on the 18th day in the Tamil month of Adi (July-August) at Palani. (Somalay: op cit: 32) Finally, it is worth noting that the festival of Asala, celebrating Murugan's marriage to Valli is celebrated at Kataragama, Sri Lanka, in July-August (see succeeding section).
Panguni Uttiram is the largest festival held in Palani, annually drawing over half a million devotees. (Clothey (1978), op cit:141) The festival extends over ten days. (Somalay, op cit: 27) Panguni Uttiram is also an occasion for kavadi worship at various Malaysian temples. (Gomathi Thiruvasagam, op cit:42-43)

This provides an obvious example of syncretic Saivite/Vaishnavite belief structures.


(146) Ahmad Ali. “Indians in Fiji: An Interpretation”, in Subramani, op cit: 8

(147) ibid: 5


(149) Kelly, op cit: 27

(150) Kelly, op cit: 41-42 Walter Gill states that the cane estate junior in charge of the Indian women's gang was known in local idiom as a “Randiwallah” (Gill, op cit:33) and that the estates wore an atmosphere “...saturated by coolie, cane and ____.” (ibid:26)

(151) Gill comments that “If women moved on their brown feet with the grace of cats it was because they had the uninhibited instincts of animals.” (Gill, op cit:36)

(152) ibid: 38

(153) Thus Gill, an estate manager in Fiji, boasts that he advised the husbands of women engaged on a go-slow to beat their wives for causing trouble. (ibid:35)

(154) Ahmad Ali, op cit: 10-11

(155) Kelly, op cit: 142-144

(156) ibid:207

(157) ibid:245

(158) ibid: 44

(159) ibid: 42-44

(160) ibid:49 Gandhian philosophy also undermined British claims to superiority structured upon modernist precepts, in particular the supposed evolutionary and civilizational genius which had underscored British triumphs in science and technology. Gandhi's political theories, essentially moralist discourses, were enmeshed in a divinely grounded framework, which by resisting such relativist constructs as “modern civilization” and “evolutionary conceptual history” countered the hegemonic thrust of British colonialist discourses. (ibid:245)

(161) Ahmad Ali, op cit:4

(162) Manoa, Pia. “Across the Fence”, in Subramani, op cit:187

(163) Ahmad Ali, op cit:17
Manoa, op cit:205


Gill, op cit: 124-125. The Muslim practice may have been the zikr ceremony, which includes a skewer ordeal, an initiation ritual for novices. The zikr ritual is found in various parts of the Islamic world. (see Rouget, Gilbert. Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985:273-274). Gill also records that Tamils performed similar rituals in worshipping the goddess Kali. Predictably, Gill dismissed the Hindus as “primitive”. (Gill, op cit:127)


ibid

In his summary, Ron Crocombe notes that the devotees participate for motives which are essentially mundane. His lack of understanding of the nature of Tamil vow fulfillment, and its inherent relationship to karmic experience and dharmic adjustment, in particular the desire to overcome, or at least neutralize, misfortune or adverse karma, leads Crocombe to the erroneous conclusion that the basis of the involvement “illustrates the incompleteness of the purely religious explanation of the ordeals.” (Crocombe, Ron. “The Rituals in Wider Perspective”, in Sahadeo et al., Holy Torture in Fiji:64) The issue of vow taking will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Brown, op cit:233

ibid:234-237

ibid:233

ibid:224

ibid:225 Brown's failure to uncover scriptural sanction of a practice which finds justification within the eclectic paradigms of bhakti religiosity leads her to the dubious conclusion that firewalking is of “ancient low-caste non Brahanmanical orgiastic origin”, and provokes the extraordinary assertion that “the annals of Dravidian ritual practice are full of puzzled descriptions of rites...(apparently)...but faintly understood by their practitioners.” (Brown, op cit:226)
(175) Goundar, R. Ponnu S., *Murukan Worship in Fiji*,
(176) ibid
(177) *Hinduism Today*, April 1988, Volume 10, Number 3:1
(178) Goundar, op cit.
(179) *Hinduism Today*, April 1988, Volume 10, Number 3:1
(180) *Hinduism Today*, April 1995, Volume 17, Number 4:22
(181) Gounder, op cit.
(182) This section is compiled on the basis of information kindly supplied by Mr Vijaratnam Sivasupramaniam of The Seychelles.
(183) Sivasupramaniam, V. “Taippoosa Kavadi Festival in Seychelles”, *Second International Skanda-Murukan Conference*, Mauritius 24-28 April 2001. (This paper is also found at www.murugan.org/research/seychelles.htm)
(184) ibid
(186) Sivasupramaniam (2001), op cit; Sivasupramaniam (2003), op cit: 46-47
(188) Sivasupramaniam (2003), op cit:44
(189) Sivasupramaniam (2001), op cit.
(190) ibid
(191) ibid
(192) This section relies upon the scholarship of A. Mani, especially his article, “Indians in North Sumatra”, which appears Sandhu K.S. and Mani A. (Editors), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, op cit.
(193) ibid:60
(194) ibid:61-62
(195) ibid:64
(196) ibid:69
(197) ibid
(198) ibid:77
Presumably in reaching this judgement, Marimuthu was fully aware that Balinese Hindus also engage in rites involving both public trance states and self mortification, see: Epton, Nina. “Kris Dancing in Bali”, in Wavell, Stuart, Butt, Audrey and Epton Nina, *Trances*, Antara Book Company, Kuala Lumpur, 1988

Mani, “Indians in North Sumatra”, op cit: 80-81

Unless otherwise indicated, material used in this section is drawn from Khevesan Soornum’s paper “The Murukan Cult in Mauritius: Essence of Tamil Ethnic Identity”, Second International Conference on Skanda-Murukan 24-28 April 2001. This paper is also found at [www.murugan.org/research/sornum.htm](http://www.murugan.org/research/sornum.htm)

*New Saivite World*, 1 April 1983, Volume 5, Number 2:2

*New Saivite World*, Fall 1983, Volume 5, Number 4:28 reports a kavadi festival among Mauritius migrants held in Strasbourg, France.
CHAPTER FOUR: SOUTH INDIAN HINDUISM

1. INTRODUCTION

We have seen that the “social deprivation” theory as an explanation for the range of behaviours observed at Thaipusam does not withstand the scrutiny of comparative study of Murugan and kavadi worship in various settings; indeed, on the contrary, it reinforces the importance of this tradition to contemporary conceptions of Hindu identity within the Tamil diaspora. In searching for alternative explanations, I will briefly survey the history and structures of the South Indian society from which the overwhelming majority of Malaysian Hindus originated. This survey examines the pre-eminent institutions and societal structures of the Tamil country – kingship, theories of rule, caste and temples – as well as touching upon some of the major forms and permutations of South Indian Hinduism. This chapter will explore some of the formative ideologies of colonial rule and their influences upon the South Indian outlook. Finally, I will examine the Murugan cultus in relation to Tamil society with the aim of delineating its continuing appeal and relevance to Tamil Hindus.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TAMIL SEGMENTARY SOCIETY: AN OVERVIEW

Burton Stein, following W.M. Day, asserts that Common Era India has contained two great and discrete nubs of Indian civilization, namely “Hindu Dravidian India” (South India) and “Hindu Aryan India” (centred on the Gangetic Plains/Chambal Basin), each of which served the needs and reflected on the aspirations of quite distinct peoples. (1) South Indian may be defined as that portion of Peninsular India which falls south of the Karnataka watershed (excluding the modern state of Kerala) in the west, and the Krishna-Godvari delta in the east. Stein contends that the shared social, cultural and political histories of this region are such as to constitute it as a recognizable and sufficiently coherent unit for the purposes of study. (2) The essential acculturating core of this region was the Tamil Plain and immediate hinterland. (3)

Stein has convincingly argued that the great and enduring socio-religious cultural beliefs, philosophies and institutions of the Tamil peoples were shaped, developed, and
reinforced throughout the extended period in which the region was under the tutelage of the three dynasties – Pallava, Chola and Vijayanagara – which ruled sequentially from the circa sixth century C.E. to the early eighteenth century. However, these processes were necessarily incremental and accumulative, and each dynasty made its own distinctive contribution.

The most distinctive feature of the South Indian dynastic polity was its segmentary character; that is, it consisted of bounded social units which might operate in combination with or in opposition to other social groupings. According to theories of state located in both puranic and sastric sources, society predated political formations, so that while the state might encompass social collectivities, it was also obligated to respect and protect them. The basic social aggregations consisted of kinship groups (kula), local coalitions usually consisting of occupational groups of several castes and formed around shared and co-operative interests (sreni), alliances based on religious or political affiliations held in common, and territorial or representational bodies (puga). (4) Each segment regarded itself as a socially, structurally and morally autarkic unit, and staunchly guarded its own autonomy.(5)

The segmentary states of South India were organized pyramidically from the base to the apex, consisting at every level of “balanced and opposed internal groupings which jealously clung to their independent identities and privileges and internal governance.”(6) Together these local and supralocal entities extended upwards towards the kingship which necessarily occupied the very peak of the pyramid. All of these structural segments were ultimately concatenated by a shared recognition of a sacred overlord, the king, whose rule and moral authority was fixed through the ritual of incorporation rather than by the agency of direct force.(7)

However, the dynastic polity was inherently unstable. For a start, it was loosely administered from a relatively weak centre, and was thus overwhelmingly dependent upon the efficacy or symbolic hegemony of the institution of kingship for attaining the fealty and unity of the dispersed and heterogeneous segments which constituted the
state. Moreover, the replication of authority in centres of local and supralocal power produced a fluctuating inner dynamic remoulded by repeated tensions and shifting allegiances. (8) The South Indian state was both contingent and fluid and reliant upon the shared acceptance of moral authority and the sacred persona of the king for its very existence. In the following section I will examine the *modus operandi* adopted by medieval South Indian kings to maintain and consolidate their rule.

The **Pallava** dynasty ruled much of South India from circa 575-900 C.E. Under the Pallava rule there were a number of significant socio-religious cultural and economic developments within the region. These included the construction of a series of monumental temples, the foundation of devotional *bhakti* sects, the vigorous promotion of rural Brahmanic centres as the focal points of Sanskrit education and culture, the gradual rise of urban centres involved in more elaborate forms of agrarian and commercial organization, and the establishment of sophisticated trade networks that extended as far as the Mediterranean.(9) The Pallava state incorporated an array of territorially segmented peoples, many of whom continued to observe pre-Pallavan orthogenetic cultural forms, including folk and religious beliefs, marriage customs and art forms.(10) A key element in shaping the emerging culture of the Pallava era was the forging of close ties between the peasant cultivating classes and the Brahmans. By the ninth century peasant society had attained pre-eminence in Pallava South India, thus blunting the influence of the territorially segmented organizations. The Pallava era was marked by hostility between the lowland plains and the putatively dangerous people of the hills and dryland plains.(11)

The **Cholas** (circa 900-1350 C.E.) were active patrons of the Brahman communities, and the *mathas* and *brahmadeyas* (Brahman settlements) became vital points for the propagation of Sanskritic culture over a wide area.(12) The nexus between Brahmans and peasant cultivators, established through the Pallava era, remained the most potent and dynamic agency in fashioning Tamil culture. From the twelfth century onwards, influenced by Brahmans, but without their involvement, peasant groups began to establish their own centres of culture and learning.(13)
Stein has argued that it was throughout the period of the Chola dynasty, and especially the two centuries between circa 1000 and circa 1200 C.E., that many of the most characteristic forms of agrarian organization were founded, especially in the Tamil plains and Kaveri basin, the heartland of Chola power. During this era, the Vellalas, the highest non-Brahman caste, expanded their influence and attained overall control of the riverine and deltaic regions in the south. The Chola dynasty was a period of expansion and previously external groups such as the Kallars and Maravars integrated hitherto unexploited lands on the peripheries into the agricultural economy of the polity. The essential political unit of the Chola state was the nadu, a macro territorial assembly which met ethnic demands as well as fulfilling an economic function.

Between circa 1350-1500 C.E., a period of transition in South India, bodies of Telegu warriors, the founders of the Vijayanagara regimes (circa 1350-1700 C.E.) gained and consolidated control over much of South India. Most scholars agree that the Vijayanagara regime successfully checked the encroachment of Muslim invaders in the south, restored and nurtured Hindu culture and institutions, and established a new state which was grounded in military power and martial in character. Unlike its predecessors, the Vijayanagara kingdom was not based in the Tamil core regions – the Coromandel coast and the Kaveri Basin – but in the comparatively remote Western Deccan.

The Vijayanagara kings introduced a number of new elements into South Indian politics and culture. Their self-anointed role as defenders of Hindu culture, especially the engagement of the Vijayanagara rulers and their agents as vital dharmic actors in state affairs, provided the South Indian polity with a vigorous and radically fresh ideology of governance. But it was the arrival of large numbers of Telegu warriors (Nayakars) and their installation as supra-local chieftains throughout the region which fundamentally changed the character of the segmentary state. While the Nayakars preserved the pre-existing Brahman-peasant affiliations, and maintained Brahmanic authority, the insertion of a new layer of leadership resulted in the inevitable decline of local institutions, particularly the once influential nadus.
management was in effect devolved to the village level. Ultimately, the Nayakars were to occupy the unwieldy role of direct mediators and brokers between the macro kingship at one extreme, and the “atomist” peasant settlements at the other.(22)

The Vijayanagara Empire thus resulted in the crumbling of long established geographic and ethnic boundaries. The founding of the regime was followed by a considerable influx of Telegu warriors and castes, including cultivators, labourers and merchants.(23) The incorporation of new and marginal areas into the state, as well as the constant flux and dynamism which was a characteristic of the Vijayanagara Empire, generated many new opportunities for internal migration and economic and social advancement.(24) One group which benefited was the Brahman community (especially those of Telegu extraction), which not only continued to exercise religious authority, but also became prominent as military commanders and as members of the royal courts and intermediaries between kings and locality chiefs (Palaiyakkarars). (25)

In extending their own subcaste dominance, the Palaiyakkarars (or “little kings”)(26) steadily displaced the Vellala chieftains whose regnancy within the nadus had been a major feature of the Chola era.(27) The Palaiyakkarar hegemony resulted in the steady, but often sudden elevation of groups and castes who had previously been regarded as outside the main structures and instrumentalities of state. Thus, for example, the Maravars and Kallars were ultimately transformed from peripheral people, on the margins of Tamil society, into “little kings” and from devout worshippers of folkish deities into responsible rulers who both promoted and defended Sanskrit culture.(28)

2.1 South Indian Kingship
I have noted that the king was the ritual apex of a fluid segmentary state, a sacred actor who ruled from a weak centre over a complex system of hierarchical relations structured pyramidically. While within the centre the king was able to directly command men and resources, beyond his core region his writ was largely administrative rather than legislative. His commands and decrees were context specific rather than generic; thus they were addressed to groups and individuals rather than to the population at large and
were subject to modification and revocation according to changed circumstances. (29)

The theoretical framework for the institution of South Indian kingship was set out in the medieval law texts (dharmaśāstra), as well as literary and other works. The rajadharma, based on the ancient canons of Aryan kingship (30) was a body of dharmic law (dharma defined as action in conformity with the universal norm (31)), which enunciated the role and duties of a king. The kingdom was portrayed as a sacred universe in which the raja was the principal and most critical actor. (32) His duty was to rule wisely, to be a worthy representative of the deity, to uphold the moral order, bestow justice and to ensure prosperity. (33) However, while the rajadharma envisioned the king as a sacred personage, his power in many respects was limited to enforcing moral responsibility within his kingdom, not only in terms of his own actions, but encompassing every member of his state. (34) The exercise of compelling moral power (ksāstra) to the very limits of his territory, and the dispensation of divine sanctions and hence dharmic justice (danda) (35) was pivotal to the maintenance of his dynastic realm. As David Shulman remarks, “The center, (that is, the kingdom), essentially pure, linked by the axis mundi (the throne) with the transcendent worlds above and below, integrates the scattered segments into a unified but dissonant whole; the center contains the totality by holding conflicting forces in balanced suspension.” (36)

This model of ritually incorporative kingship was inculcated in South India throughout the Pallava period and further developed and entrenched during the reigns of the early Cholas. (37) The most crucial element in the establishment of this form of kingship was the widespread acceptance of kingship as a ritually sacred realm, which explicitly identified the raja as a descendent of one of the great gods of puranic tradition, that is, Siva or Vishnu. (38) From the period of the later Pallava kings through to the conclusion of the Vijayanagara era, South Indian polities were united under the aegis of a king whose overlordship was largely symbolic and ceremonial. (39) The order was in the first instance primarily dependent on the beneficence of the monarch and the reciprocity of king and subject clearly delineated in the processes of ritual incorporation. (40)
Classical Indian thought emphasized the ineluctable linkage between king and Brahman; the Ksatriya-Brahman nexus was viewed as the basic paradigm of Hindu society, and was thus integral to the orderly and proper functioning of that society. (41) Kingly generosity to Brahmans, formalized in the “law of the gift” (danadharma) was a central precept of kingly dharma (42); indeed, his very legitimacy was inextricably linked to his ability to fulfil this role. (43) But the support of Brahmans was coupled with the duty to furnish “massive endowments” to temples. (44) Indeed, the allocation of resources and gifts to Brahmans and temples constituted the very rationale of the institution of kingship and incapacity to meet these essential obligations represented a breakdown of rajadharma. (45) Failure of kingship implied serious consequences for the king and for the territories over which he exercised his moral authority. For a start, the king would have publicly demonstrated the severing or atrophy of his intimate connections with the protecting deity; in particular, that he was no longer vitally engaged with the deity’s redistributive energies. This in turn would signal the cumulative loss of honour and prestige necessary to sustain a successful monarch, thus signifying his powerlessness to execute his most basic responsibilities to his subjects. (46)

Both the generation and bestowal of gifts and the construction of temples were fundamental and integral components of Pallava, Chola and Vijayanagara sovereignty. The presentation of gifts became a central element of Pallava kingship and coincided with the construction of temples to great puranic deities such as Siva and Vishnu. (47) Generosity to brahmadeyas (settlements of Brahmans) was a marked feature of Chola rule, as was the large scale building of temples. (48) Under the Vijayanagara kings, the royal endowment – the transactions of material sources and temple “honours” – was used as a technique for extending and consolidating royal control in new areas. (49)

However, the bestowal of royal beneficence extended well beyond the support of Brahmans and the endowment of temples. Indeed, the ritual presentation of gifts – honours, emblems and grants – to chieftains, other eminent persons and prominent institutions – became a core modality of medieval South Indian statecraft. (50) The practice commenced with the Pallavas who claimed divine descent. In conferring
honours upon lesser potentates, the Pallavas were in a sense sharing their divinity, thus incorporating these figures into the overall structure of a sacred moral order. Presentation was established as a key rite of Chola kingship, symbolizing both royal munificence and sovereign overlordship.

Ritual incorporation – based on presentations and the gift – worked to buttress the overarching moral authority of the South Indian king while recognizing the diffusion of actual power inherent in a segmentary state. It was accomplished according to the following schema. I have noted that the king was a sacred personage, and that the order over which he ruled was divinely sanctioned. Ideally the king fulfilled all of the duties stipulated by rajadharma; he maintained a magnificent court, surrounded himself with the most brilliant men in the state, supported and encouraged the arts, graced festivals with his presence, and performed appropriate worship to the tutelary deity. In addition, he upheld justice, reigned with purity and generated prosperity throughout the entire kingdom. This latter attribute was demonstrated by his continuing ability to engage in lavish presentations to lesser figures – chieftains and others – within the polity. In his bestowal of the gift, grant or honour, the king signified the transfer of some of the essence of his kingship – power, majesty, moral excellence and authority – to the lesser figure of the chieftain. This established a hierarchical relationship which both incorporated the chieftain within the overall structure of the kingdom, and clearly delineated his role and subordinate status. In accepting the gift or honour, the chieftain (or other nominated recipient) recognized his incorporation, an act which engendered a set of moral obligations to the king. The gift was thus a political transaction; an exchange which simultaneously devolved limited sovereignty to the chieftain but reinforced the overlordship of the king, thus ritually reiterating the generic hierarchical and social structure of the kingdom.

This transactional system formed a crucial element of Vijayanagara rule. These Telegu warrior kings employed presentation to secure firm and enduring links with key Tamil institutions, as well as a mechanism to develop moral and political authority over new regions which were absorbed into the state. The gift also proved effective in
securing the loyalty of the *Nayakars* who were prepared to pledge their services to the king in return for specified grants, emblems and honours, together with the recognition of their right to rule over designated areas.(58) Indeed, this system of the exchange and redistribution of goods and services, known as *janjami* and flowing hierarchically from and to the apex, played an essential and catalytic role in both upholding and maintaining royal authority and in promoting effective lines of communication between the centre and the diverse territories and peoples which comprised the Vijayanagara state.(59)

The South Indian king was expected to constantly demonstrate all of the attributes of kingship. These not only entailed those duties outlined in previous paragraphs, but also involved the enactment of the “repeated and continued celebration of rites” engendered by kingship.(60) These rituals would include royal consecration (*rajasuya*) and installation (*apisekam*), but under the Vijayanagara kings the most elaborate and splendid royal commemoration was the nine day festival of *Mahavani or Navaratri*. (61) In the Tamil country *Navaratri* fused with another festival known as *ayuta puja* or the honouring of one’s arms, instruments of trade, or in the case of the king, his weaponry. (62) A tenth day added to *Navaratri* for this purpose became known as *Vijayadisami* (The Victorious Tenth: the day of victory). (63)

*Navaratri*, permeated by royalty and royal symbology, portrayed the king as the key ritual performer and the catalytic agency upon whom the prosperity and stability of the kingdom rested. *Navaratri* was commemorated in the South Indian pre-winter season in the Tamil month of *Puratacci* (September-October). The festival followed the gathering in and reallocation of the harvest, and in ritual cosmology Rama’s vanquishment of Ravana, and was thus viewed as a propitious time for the renewal of the sovereignty and the reinfusion of the king and his weaponry with cosmic power for the protection and rejuvenation of the capital city of Vijayanagara, and for entreatying the king to ensure prosperity and victory. (64) Throughout the festival the king was depicted as the principal devotee of the deity, with whom he was identified. (65) The king also exchanged ceremonial gifts and honours with all subordinate chieftains and other important figures, all of whom had been brought to the capital for this purpose. (66)
Vijayadisami, the king’s regal procession, his court assemblies, and ritual worship signified the goddess’s regeneration of the cosmos with the king clearly identified as its conspicuous locus. (67) The festival thus incorporated all of the diverse elements of the segmentary state within the framework of a recognized polity, with the capital city as the symbolic universe over which the king ruled. (68)

During the Vijayanagara era, Navaratri was increasingly commemorated by regional royal families throughout the kingdom. It adoption by the “little kings” (Palaiyakkarars) indicated the desire, and perhaps the need to reproduce at regional level the legitimising and empowering rituals of the Vijayanagara sovereigns. (69) The observation of Navaratri in this ritual sense continued in many centres well after the decline of the Vijayanagara state. (70)

3. CASTE IN SOUTH INDIA
Within classical Hinduism, the institution of caste is derived from the Purusa Sakta (literally Purusha’s – or primeval man’s – sacrifice) of the Rig Veda, (71) which divides society into a four tiered hierarchical ranking of varnas (or classes); namely the generic categories of Brahman, Kashatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. (72) In fact, the four fold varna system represents an idealized model which has never been replicated within Indian Hindu life. (73)

Caste and ritual division has been a feature of South Indian society for at least 1500 years. The Cankam grammarian Tolkappiyam (circa 300-600 C.E.) separated the population of the Tamil country into four distinct categories, namely Brahman, Arasar (or king), Vanniyar (or merchant) and Vellalar (or peasant). The Vellalars were further subdivided into two classifications – superior and inferior – the latter comprising farm labourers. (74) Burton Stein contends that for at least 500 years it had been possible to identify a clear tripartite horizontal segmentation within the major Tamil polities; that of Brahmans, respectable castes of ritual rank, and lower castes. Following the bhakti movement of medieval South India, these three categories appear to have been recognized for ritual purposes. (75) The political and social structures of South India
were notable for their almost total absence of any caste which could be clearly identified as Kashatriya. (76) Within contemporary Tamil Nadu, society continues to be ritually organized around three main groups, viz: Brahmans, non-Brahmans (Sudras) and Adi Dravidars (the Harijans or “untouchables”). (77)

Dumont has famously argued that caste hierarchies are ineluctably determined by the rigid application of a purity-pollution paradigm shaped and legitimized by the unyielding religious principles which permeate Hindu society. Thus, the ritually pure Brahman caste is ensconced at the apex of Hindu society, whereas the polluted Adi Dravidars form the base. The remaining castes, falling between these poles, are horizontally ranked in accordance with their relative calibrated levels of purity. (78) However, Dumont’s approach is rejected by most contemporary scholars who argue that the mechanics of caste relations are additionally influenced by a range of factors, most commonly the political and economic power wielded by a dominant caste in combination with the allocation of ritual roles and functions. (79) These dynamics obtain in the formation of local, supralocal, regional and state wide configurations of caste. (80)

Ideally, all castes, Brahman and Sudra alike, were required to furnish support for the king, to ensure his ritual purity, while he in turn provided order, and through the sacrifice, regenerated the cosmic power of the kingdom. (81) However the instability inherent within a dispersed and segmentary society meant than kingship alone was incapable of providing social harmony. It fell to caste to regulate and create the symmetry which otherwise would have been absent in localized political structures. Conversely, while the development of parochial caste formations supplied order, they simultaneously resisted the imposition of centralized and universalized creeds. (82)

As noted, the organization of caste hierarchies in any locality or territory was dependent upon the dominant caste; that is, the major landholders who by virtue of their political and economic leverage enjoyed a high ritual status, even though in terms of the Brahmanic paradigm that caste may have been less “pure”, (in terms of willingness to use violence, and in diet and marital customs), than other castes who were relegated to
subordinate status. As Nicolas Dirks has commented, “the reproduction of caste relations and the role of territory in enabling and circumscribing social relations to the economic, ritual and social dependency of subordinate groups became part of the idealistic social formation. This totalization – the commemoration of religion and politics, and the mutually reinforcing complementarities of brutality and belief – ironically renders any single theory seeking to account for things we call caste problematic at best.”

In sum, while the Brahman theoretically provided a scriptural reference point for the construction of caste hierarchies and a paradigm for the maintenance of an ideal society, in reality the position of all castes and their relations to one another were highly contingent on the nature of their association with the dominant caste. However, ritual considerations continued to modify caste organization, so that while a given caste’s final standing was influenced by its localized economic and political reliance upon the dominant caste, it could not be wholly defined in terms of that dependency. As Quigley has remarked, “…the position of Brahmans and untouchables depend upon their respective relations with the dominant caste; any opposition which is perceived between Brahmans and untouchables is determinative of these relations; it is not primary.” Moreover, caste relationships were further influenced by the demands of a peasant society which engendered complex lines of economic, political and ritual cooperation and interdependence between various communities. Indeed, an ideal agrarian settlement was believed to require a full array of vocational specialists, representatives of “the eighteen castes.”

The dominant caste in the Tamil kingdoms were the Vellalars, “the highest ranking Sudras in a caste system in which there are neither Kastriyas nor Vaisyas.” Most scholars now consider that the Vellalars both embodied and transmitted high Tamil culture as well as adapting Sanskrit structures and philosophies to the Tamil region. Traditionally, they also worked in close cooperation with Brahmans and Brahman institutions.
While Western observers once regarded caste as the basic building block of a timeless Indian society, it is now generally accepted that in practical terms the real operational unit is *jati*. Although *jati* may be translated as a “kind” or “species” the term is multivalent and may obtain in a variety of settings to group together people who because of their primary origins are considered intrinsically alike, in contradistinction to those, who because they do not share those origins, may be considered fundamentally “different”. In her study of caste society in the Konku region of South India, Brenda Beck identified four levels at which *jati* may be held to function, namely:

(i) **Caste**: A broad regional grouping, whose functional nucleus is usually a set of generic vocational and socio-economic criteria,

(ii) **Sub-caste**: social groups whose members are regarded as ritual peers in fulfilling life cycle ceremonies, including food exchange,

(iii) **Descent units of clans (gotra or kula)**: Clan nomenclature connotes a ritual significance. These social groupings are nearly always exogamous, and

(iv) **Lineages**: these are contained within clans, and consist of combinations of families, each of which is headed by the eldest capable male.

While it is common for castes to be split into sub-castes, or even sub-subcastes, each of which may be of vital moment to its membership, in regional terms castes may become linked or amalgamated into a series of broadly structured “supercastes”.

Fundamentally, a caste may be viewed as a discrete and self-encompassing social unit which regulates the conduct of its members according to agreed behavioural norms, disciplining those who breach caste mores, and expelling those who commit serious transgressions. Birth into a particular caste provides an individual with an ascriptive code of social behaviour which theoretically mandates occupation, diet, customs, social interactions, and choice of marriage partner, as well as furnishing guidelines for patterns
of worship.(100) At base, caste is built around patterns of kinship, reinforced by endogamous marriage, in conjunction with societal rules governing purity and impurity. Ultimate caste boundaries are coterminous with kinship limits.(101) As Quigley has pointed out, “In the world of caste, virtually every aspect of behaviour is regulated by kin – not only major decisions such as marriage, occupation and place of residence, but in everyday activities such as what one eats, and with whom, or the forms of address one employs for different categories of people.”(102) Endogamy ensures that each jati functions as an extended kin network, and that each member of a caste or a sub-caste may thus view all other members as potential kinsmen to whom in extreme circumstances he/she may turn to for aid, succour, welfare and other forms of support.(103) In such a world, miscegenation not only signifies the commingling of categories which ought to be kept separate and distinct, but also represents a threat to the “natural order”.(104)

Ideally, each caste has its own attributive occupation, which, when assembled cumulatively, comprise a vocational hierarchy, that echoes, albeit in a more complicated format, the prescriptions of the varna system. As I have noted, this theoretical concatenation is in practice influenced by other factors, most notably the economic and political power wielded by the dominant caste, and locally, by each jati’s relationship with that caste.(105) However, in generalist terms it may be stated that hierarchical grading of jati and caste depends upon the paradigm of ritual purity/pollution. Vocational impurity is essentially a physiological state and is ascribed according to a caste’s relative proximity to death as well as the management and disposal of those substances designated as polluting.(106) In sum, a specified division of labour entails that certain groups take upon themselves the tasks involved in removing impurity so that the ritually pure are left free to perform those functions which are necessary for the health of society as a whole.(107) The Brahmans, who occupy a range of “clean” positions, and employ an extensive array of prohibitions and rituals to retain their freedom from pollution, remains the “purest” and thus the “highest” caste, whereas the Adi Dravidar castes undertake the “unclean” and ritually polluting occupations and are regarded as the “lowest” castes within South Indian society.(108) While the relative
ranking of a caste at either end of the spectrum is undisputed, the placement of other castes within a strict and graduated hierarchy is frequently problematic, and elicits numerous disputes over issues involving precedence and relative status within society.(109)

The untouchable castes, the “Sudra of the Sudra”(110) are defined as such because their toril (“action” or “duty”) closely associates them with the death of humans and cows, and they bear the accumulated and indelible pollution (tittu) of their vocations.(111) Adi Dravidar castes consist of the Paraiyars, (or drum players, often connected with funerary or exorcism rites), Pallars (field labourers) and Chakkiliiyars (leatherworkers), (112) and cumulatively comprise approximately 18 per cent of the Tamil population. (113) Adi Dravidars traditionally live in their own quarters outside the set boundaries of established communities. This reflects the generalized belief that the death and impurity which they accrue in the course of their toril is removed from the community and transferred back “to the uncontrollable forces of nature”.(114) But restrictions on Adi Dravidars do not end with spatial exclusion. Other castes refuse to engage in a range of transactions with Adi Dravidars, including the acceptance of food and water, or the exchange of marriage partners. These interdictions are seen as necessary to provide a barrier to the upward flow of impure substances, and thus to prevent the spread of impurity to “clean” castes.(115) However, while Adi Dravidars may be viewed as agents of social disorder,(116) they also play a key role in many village festivals and other ritualized acts of worship. Thus, for example, Harijans often act as camayatis, the human vessel that is formally possessed by the god or goddess during various festivals.(117) Many of the self protective rights which Adi Dravidars once possessed were truncated as a consequence of the land reforms introduced under British colonialism.(118)

The construction of caste in Tamil Nadu is further complicated by the vertical division of the social order into right hand (valangai) and left hand (idangai) consistent with the Tamil envisionment of a human society homologized into a bifurcated human body possessing a single head (Brahman) and clearly delineated right and left functions.(119)
The concept of *valangai* first manifested in the Tamil country in the tenth century, and was closely followed by the *idangai*. By the eleventh century these divisions were found throughout most of the Tamil regions. (120) The right hand was associated with primary production and related vocations including agricultural trade and elements of processing, whereas the left consisted of occupational groupings of artisans and traders. (121) Throughout the Chola era these right/left segmentations appear to reflect broad ethnic divisions, potential groupings which were never unambiguous nor self contained.(122) Indeed, the fluidity of the *idangai* proved useful in assimilating former peripheral groups and new bodies of people into the Chola order.(123)

In her study of left (124) and right castes in Konku, Beck noted prominent variations in worship patterns. The major distinctions were:

(i) Whereas right-handed castes venerated deities who were territorially based, and whose primary role was the protection of local regions and peoples, left handed devotees worshipped the universal gods of the Hindu pantheon, and placed great emphasis upon scholarship and scriptural knowledge,(125)

(ii) Whereas right-handed worshippers insisted upon observation of caste hierarchies in ritual, left handed devotees practiced equality in worship before the deity,

(iii) While right handed sectarian loyalties were confined to the Konku region, left handed castes promoted and sustained a network of allegiances (including pilgrimage destinations) throughout the entire Tamil country, and

(iv) The ceremonial concerns displayed by right and left castes tended to correlate to the ritual division of the year into dark and bright halves.(126)

Beck contends that the disjunctive patterns of worship which prevail between right and left-handed castes reflect world views engendered by occupational hereditary. Thus, while the agriculturalist’s perspective is fixated by the necessarily local issues of land, crops and production, the livelihoods and hence outlooks of artisans and traders were
more likely to be structured around mobility and independence. She further argues that those traditionally denied ownership of land, the major “real” source of wealth in South India, focused upon ritual purity and learning as social compensation.\(^{(127)}\)

Caste relations are neither fixed, nor static, and may over time, demonstrate considerable fluidity. Castes have shown a capacity to redefine themselves both in terms of functions and hierarchical grading. The process of adjustment may involve splitting, uniting with others of similar ritual status or generic occupational grouping, or changing the caste name and/or nomenclature.\(^{(128)}\) However, given that caste hierarchies are deeply influenced by the power exerted by the dominant caste, it could be reasonably expected that fluctuations in the economic and political circumstances of that caste would impact upon caste relations, and as a corollary, reshape the interplay between castes and the ritual functions ascribed to them.\(^{(129)}\)

4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TAMIL HINDUISM: AN OVERVIEW

In this section I have attempted to sketch a general overview of the development of Tamil Hinduism throughout the period of the dynasties, and to highlight some of its most distinctive enduring institutions and characteristics. This is not an exhaustive historical survey, nor does it attempt to comprehensively document all the detailed inflections of the many Hindu traditions and forms of worship located within the Tamil country. Both tasks fall well beyond the scope of this thesis. This section will demonstrate that the continual reworking of Tamil Hinduism, especially the mutable boundaries of Agamic religion, produced multiple sites of particularistic religious expression, a number of which did not outwardly recognize the putative authority of Brahmanic Hinduism. It will trace the emergence of several pervasive features of Tamil Hinduism, namely the Sanskritization/Agamicization of goddess (Amman/Devi) worship, the paradigmatic sovereignty of the deity within the temple, the rise of bhakti devotionalism, and the development of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. All of these constituents may take an array of forms influenced by factors such as region and caste, and may range from the philosophical and Agamic through to traditions whose cosmologies inhere within the context of ritual, but these aspects, whether philosophical,
textual or popular, continue to influence and shape the parameters of contemporary Tamil Hinduism.

Tamil Hindu society was, over the centuries to be subject to many changes induced by a range of factors including dynastic innovations and shifts of emphases, economic and social pressures, migration and incorporation of new regions, transformations of local political relations, and ritual and philosophical inventiveness and revision. However, Burton Stein has argued that the uniqueness of the Tamil social structure as it developed throughout the era of the great dynasties may be ultimately traced to three persistent and related characteristics. These consist of the following:

(i) The secular authority exerted by Brahmans within South Indian society. The brahmadeyas or Brahman settlements were centres of learning and culture which formed a powerful network within South India, especially throughout the Coromandel Plain. Temples provided a mechanism whereby Brahman ecclesiastical functionaries were able to exercise ritual pre-eminence over other castes, to gain control of religious institutions, and thus to assume a primary role in shaping the allegiances and ritual life of Tamil Hindu society,

(ii) The division of lower social groups, that is, those below Brahman and the higher peasant castes, into bifurcated caste structures. In an earlier section I noted the existence of right handed castes (valangai) associated with agricultural production, and left handed castes (idangai) structured around traders and artisans, essentially those belonging to “mobile” vocations. I also noted the ritual implications of these divisions, especially upon patterns of worship and religious allegiances,

(iii) The territorial segmentation of society and culture in the South Indian macro region. The classical works of early Tamil literature delineated South Indian society into five situational types, categorized in terms of sub-region and ritual and occupational structures. These types were: Murala Makkal, tribes of ploughmen (Mavar) inhabiting well watered tracts (panai) and living in villages known as ur; Kuravar Makkal, hill people who were forest dwellers, who were noted for producing charms and telling
fortunes, and who might well emerge from the forests to work in the panai; Mullai Makkal, pastoralists, who were known as ayar (cowmen), kolavar (shepherd) and idaiyar (cowherds or shepherds); Neytal Makkal, fisherfolk who lived in large coastal villages known as pattinam or smaller settlements called pakkam; and Palai Makkal, residents of the dry plains, known as eiyanar, maravar and vedar who were the hunters of the dry plains and forests.(130)

Throughout most of the Pallava era several religious forms – Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism – coexisted with a range of folk religions, each of which reflected the territorial subculture from which it sprang.(131) But the “high” Hindu culture of the Tamil region was not of pristine indigenous origin. As early as the first century C.E., Tamil Hinduism comprised an integrated amalgam of indigenous and Sanskrit religious, philosophical and cultural forms and symbols. Indeed, this fusion appears in classical Tamil literature where Tamil and Sanskrit influences “are so inextricably interwoven as to defy disaggregation into autochthonous interacting phenomena.”(132)

Toward the conclusion of the Pallava era and throughout the Chola dynasty there were profound changes within the religions of the Tamil country. These included the dissolution of the tolerance which had existed between the three main religions of the Pallava dynasty and the subsequent eclipse and decline of Buddhism and Jainism, a resurgent Hinduism enlivened and reshaped by intense philosophical speculation, the replacement of sacrificial Vedic rites with religious forms centred upon temple worship and bhakti devotionalism, and the incorporation of localized cults, and in particular Tamil Amman (goddess) worship, into the fabric of Agamic Hinduism.

The royal veneration of the deity Siva, which had been practiced under the Pallavas, was continued under the Cholas.(133) Indeed, the Chola era was marked by a burgeoning of Saivism within the Tamil country.(134) Many former Buddhist and Jainist shrines within the Coromandel Plains were now dedicated to Siva, usually represented by a linga, and known as Mahesvara (“Great Lord”; that is, Siva as Primal Soul).(135) The Cholas attempted to consolidate all localized cults and tutelary deities into a religious
order centred upon the worship of Siva. This represented a sweeping political
manoeuvre designed to gather all independent cults, as well as regional and caste deities,
under direct Chola control, and to establish a form of ritual sovereignty in which all
lesser gods as well as local chiefs would owe homage to the god of both the king and the
realm.(136)

The Chola policy of assimilation resulted in the elevation of several ancient Tamil folk
deities to full Vedic stature; these were now assigned an honoured place within the
received “great tradition” pantheon. Thus, for example, the god Seyon or Murugan of the
hills region became identified with Subrahmanya, while Mayon, the “black god” of the
pastoralists was firmly linked with Krishna. In addition, Agamic injunctions and
doctrines were amended or even created to allow the inclusion of Tamil village and
regional elements within Brahmanic Tamil Hinduism.(137)

This era was also marked by the full emergence and incorporation of goddess (Amman
or Devi) worship within Agamic Hinduism. Within Tamil traditions, female deities had
long been central to village clan and locality worship, including fertility and protectoral
functions.(138) However, a number of goddesses whose roles were both ambivalent and
problematic, especially the so-called “fierce” goddesses, were only accepted after their
identification as consorts of one of the puranic deities.(139) From the thirteenth century
onwards separate shrines were constructed in Agamic temples for the recently elevated
female deities.(140)

Burton Stein has argued that the religious changes of the late Pallava and Chola eras
reflected major social changes occurring within the Tamil country throughout this
period, in particular the coalescing of Brahman/peasant interests, that is, between those
who controlled cultivation and those who through their sacral duties and expertise were
able to wield significant ideological power.(141) Thus the incorporation of folk and
tutelary deities, including those whose origins lay in regional or tribal backgrounds,
within Agamic Hinduism, constituted a “necessary compromise” between Brahman
canonists and the economic impetus of non-Brahman peasant castes.(142) Similarly, the
bhakti attacks on Jainism and Buddhism and the development of the broader devotional tradition were largely the creative handiwork of a Brahman/peasant alliance. (143) The evolving emphasis upon temple worship of Agamic deities increased the involvement of influential peasant castes, especially those living near to the brahmadeyas, within the ritual life of high religious culture.(144) After the twelfth century leading peasant groups began to establish their own ritual and educational centres. These were influenced by Brahmanic culture and norms, and were maintained by non-Brahmans steeped in Sanskritic and sastric knowledge. They became important centres of learning and culture within South India.(145) However, although the intercessionary power of Brahmans and their standing as the sole custodians and transmitters of Agamic education were weakened, they attained unprecedented levels of secular power. Indeed, Brahmans, brahmadeyas, and the great temples were key pillars of the Chola ideological system of rajadharma (kingly dharma).(146)

Many of the policies of the Cholas were continued throughout the Vijayanagara era. These included:

(i) The incorporation of localized sects and deities within the fold of received Agamic Hinduism. This was achieved by co-opting the leaders of sects, in particular those who might have otherwise proven refractory or resistant to the Vijayanagara order.(147) Many sects within the kingdom continued to worship a local deity complete with his own territorial (nadu) attributes who was subsequently renamed Siva and Agamicized, (148)

(ii) Further consolidation of goddess worship as a component form of puranic Hindu culture. Their continued linkage to accepted Agamic gods ensured that their worship was consistent with entrenched patterns of Siva worship,(149), and

(iii) The emphasis upon temple worship as providing a moral order which embraced all levels of society, ranging from family, jati, clan, village and region to the kingdom itself. Temples determined boundaries and allocated space which marked off sectarian communities and united them in their allegiance to a particular deity.(150)
Throughout this period the highest Sudra castes appear to have maintained three overlapping levels of sectarian affiliation. At the local level these consisted of clan and parochial/territorial deities, often goddesses or male tutelary deities. But the influential non-Brahman peasant castes also recognized certain pilgrimage temples, each of which contained a puranic deity, and was administered by Brahman priests in accordance with Agamic rites. Finally, related institutions of sectarian learning were sustained by networks of gurus.\(^{(151)}\)

However, while many of the deities of village or popular traditions were now identified as great gods, accoutred with the precepts of philosophical Hinduism and subsequently accepted into the corpus of received Agamic/great tradition pantheon, these changes left untouched the great body of village traditions and associated belief structures to which the overwhelming majority of Tamil Hindus subscribed.\(^{(152)}\) Indeed, Brahman and Agamic authorities refused to consider the incorporation of certain village or “lower” traditions, such as animal sacrifice or “excessively erotic religious customs” within the structures of Agamic Hinduism.\(^{(153)}\) Adherents of “little tradition” Hinduism thus continued to recognize a hierarchy of suprahuman entities consisting of (in descending order) puranic gods, intermediate gods, demons and bhuta/pey (spirits).\(^{(154)}\) While village Hinduism often borrowed from other sources, including Agamic traditions, it retained (and continues to retain) its own autonomy, and did not recognize or defer to other sites of religious authority. As Gunthar Sontheimer observes, “From the point of view of sects and the Brahman’s point of view, the deity may be considered to be just a bhuta or inferior godling…but for actual worshippers he is central to their life and beliefs…”\(^{(155)}\)

4.1 Temples and Kingship in the Tamil Country

While under the Pallavas the construction and endowment of temples became an integral constituent of sovereignty, it was throughout the Chola era that many of the great temples of South India were erected.\(^{(156)}\) The upsurge in temple building reflected changing political and economic circumstances. Politically, the dynasty emphasized temple construction as a public display of sovereignty. Economically, the late Pallava
and Chola eras were marked by increased urbanization and the wealth necessary to construct temples. Moreover, throughout the twelfth century the rising power of influential non-Brahman castes, especially merchants and artisans, and their concomitant determination to disentangle themselves from Brahman/peasant control, was demonstrated in the building of their own temples, many of which were to develop into influential pilgrimage sites. It was during this period that temple builders began to introduce more ornate and grandiose architectural styles including enlarged and elaborate goparums (temple towers) and the provision of separate shrines to accommodate Amman and Devi worship.

The Vijayanagara era witnessed a decline in the status and the influence of the brahmadeyas (though, conversely, a rise in Brahman secular power), but a concurrent expansion in dynastic investment in temples. Royal endowment of temples, and the bestowal of “honours” was a favoured stratagem for extending and consolidating Vijayanagara control over areas recently incorporated within the kingdom. At the local level, the Telegu Nayakars used temples as vehicles to redistribute resources to those groups patronized by the warriors. This served two basic purposes. Firstly, it established constituencies beholden to the warriors, and secondly, it forged links between warriors and indigenous chiefs.

The modern understanding of the Hindu temple evolved throughout the period of the dynasties. Essentially the Tamil temple was seen as a royal palace for the deity enshrined within, a “paradigmatic sovereign” who received respect and gifts from a community of devotees, and returned resources to temple servants, donors and worshippers. Indeed, the sovereignty of the deity is constantly emphasized. This is stressed in several ways. The Tamil word kovil means both “temple” and “palace”. Temple servants are referred to as paricanankal (or courtiers of the king), and most of the ritual paraphernalia displayed to or worn by temple deities, especially when they undertake temple processions, is identical to that of the royal insignia of human kings. Much of the language addressed to the deity is that of bonded servitude (atimai); the deity is constantly referred to by terms (iraivan, svami, perumal) that are indicative of
universal lordship or sovereignty. (163)

The deity is thus sovereign ruler and constitutes the moral and iconographic centre of the South Indian temple. But the temple is more than a sacred place ruled by a deity. At one level it delineates the boundaries of the social groupings and provides a recognized arena in which a community of co-sharers is formed within the sight of a particular god. (164) At another level it provides a set of symbols which give expression to a number of definitive concepts concerning authority, hierarchy, exchange, reciprocity, as well as modes of worship. The temple also furnishes a public forum in which these relations and concepts are articulated, aggregated, and negotiated. (165)

Similarly the sovereignty of the deity obtains at many levels. At base, the murthi of the deity is conceived of as more than a stone image; it is in many respects envisaged as a person and is in both philosophical and popular traditions treated as a fully corporeal, sentient, vital, intelligent, and responsive person. Daily rituals of worship will include a series of very intimate acts including waking, bathing and dressing the deity, offering the deity food and putting it to sleep at night. In addition, gifts are offered to the deity who is mentioned by name. (166) But at a more complex level the temple deity is postulated as the ruler of a domain which is ultimately universal. As Appadurai explains, “In the symbol of temple architecture, the various parts of the temple are considered to be parts of the body, not simply the human body, but the divine body as well. This physiological analogy, given the biophysical theories of Hinduism, is simultaneously a cosmological analogy, so that the temple is a cosmic body, that is, the universe conceived of as a body…” (167) On this plane the theory of iconicity or embodiment present a dynamic conception of the divinity which is inseparable from the deity portrayed, that is, the murthi as an emanation, a sakti of the god, and thus a “point at which the worshipper perceives the contiguity in the identity of the empirical and divine realms.” (168) In this sense throughout temple ritual, the murthi and the god are undifferentiated; the murthi becomes a focal point of ever expanding reality redefining the universe of which it is the grounded cosmic centre. (169)
It is in this context that the full significance of gifts to the deity – whether of worship, food, service, or other offerings must be understood. Any gift to the deity places the donor (*upayakar*) in a personal and redistributational relationship with the god. The devotee expects a response, and the resultant returns, or temple honours (*mariayatai*), are shared with others, namely the temple staff and fellow worshippers. The receipt of temple honours signifies that the devotee has partaken of the paradigmatic royalty of the deity, and thus has in ultimate terms shared in the universal redistributive divinity of the polity ruled by the god. (170)

4.2 The Tamil *Bhakti* Movement

The *bhakti* movement of the Tamil country centred upon the experiences of a large group of saints who lived in the pre- and early Pallava period. (171) Although there were up to 900 of these people, most of whom resided on the plains of the Kaveri Basin, and who referred to themselves as slaves (*adiyar* or *tondar*) of the Lord, (172) the stories of only 75 of this number – 63 Saivites (*Nayanars* or leaders) and 12 Vaishnavites (*Alvars* or “Those who delve deeply”/”Those who are absorbed in the Divine”) are now commemorated. (173) Four Tamil saints – Appar, Sambandar, Sundarar, and Manickavasagar, the “four revered ones” – are regarded as pre-eminent in the Tamil *bhakti* tradition, (174) and are often depicted iconically within *Agamic* temples. In the mid-twelfth century the stories of the Tamil saints were gathered within a compendium known as the *Periya Purana*. (175) The sacred canons of both major South Indian sects - Saivism and Vaishnavism – are wholly composed of the impassioned outpourings of the *Nayanars* and *Alvars*. (176) Within Saivism the entire canon, comprising twelve volumes, is known as the *Tirumai*, while the most popular and often sung portion, consisting of seven volumes, is referred to as the *Teveram*. (177)

The *bhakti* tradition in South India represented an attack on two distinct groups; firstly, the austere joyless faiths that Buddhism and Jainism had become by the Pallava era, and secondly, the rigidly codified caste that characterized *Agamic* Hinduism of that period. (178) Dehejia argues that by the seventh century “Jainism in South India had adopted a totally negative attitude to life, proclaiming that the whole world, and all of
womanhood...was the source of misery and temptation. By contrast, the Saiva Saints sang joyously of their Lord Siva and his gracious Parvati. Buddhism and Jainism were ascetic religions which stressed the eternal renunciation of all that man holds dear. The Saivas proclaimed that there was no need to sacrifice family and loved ones to be able to love Siva, and that a life of worldly happiness was in no way incompatible with a life devoted to Siva.”(179) While many of the Nayanars were Brahmans, others included a cowherd, a fisherman, a laundryman, a potter, a weaver, a hunter, a fomenter of toddy, a highway robber, and two untouchables. Four of the Nayanars were women, of whom two were Brahmans, one a queen, while the fourth hailed from a merchant community. (180)

The bhakti tradition of South India represented a melding of two distinct influences. The first was based on the rituals of ecstatic union with various deities which had long existed within indigenous South Indian folk religions, especially within the dances or frenzies of possession which had linked worshipper to deity.(181) The second was the Bhagavad Gita which had formalized and inculcated the notion of equality before God, and had replaced the path of unyielding asceticism with that of profound devotionalism. The resultant fusion produced a religious form which was impassioned, animated by a highly charged emotionalism and which bypassed the formal structures of ritual and caste to assert the validity of the individual’s direct experience of the deity.(182) Bhakti spirituality appeared to meet the needs of the newly emergent Tamil order; namely a dominant peasant class whose religion reflected the devotional traditions of the agrarian society of the Coromandel Plain. But at the same time it won acceptance from the Brahman leadership which viewed bhakti religion as “…a powerful theological and ideological counter to Jains and Buddhists.”(183)

The Tamil Nayanars were distinguished by their love (anpu) of Siva, whom they transformed from a remote supreme godhead into an accessible deity, a local, almost human figure.(184) Though the duality of Siva as both transcendent and immediate pervades their philosophy, many of their most celebrated songs speak of their love of their deity as a familiar and indeed intimate figure – father, brother, friend, child or even
lover.(185) The Nayanars describe their experiences of anpu and how it infuses them with joy and the ultimate freedom of liberation (moksha). (186) The path of bhakti as enunciated by the Nayanars is that of full and impassioned emotional engagement with Siva, “the…(harnessing)…of eyes and ears and hands and tongue again and again to the contemplation and service of god and hence to a further participation in divine bliss.” (187) Bhakti celebrated the sacredness and fullness of being of the love of a god who pervaded all aspects of his creation, and the lives of his devotees and all around them. Thus for example, the mating of animals and the sexual act were seen to echo the “transcendent unity of Siva and Sakti…sex itself is seen as holy because it reflects an essential polarity in God which is the source of his creativity and joy.” (188) The Nayanars also treated the symbols of Siva – the linga, guru and the assembly (the “slaves” of Siva who wear ashes (vibhuti) and beads (rudraksha)) – as manifestations of the Lord himself. (189)

However, the quality which characterizes their devotion is their obsessive single-mindedness; their divine “drunkenness”. (190) The Nayanars reflected the notion that the nature of divinity was unconfined and transcended all moral categories, that Siva infused the world with a wild love which ranged beyond the normative societal structures of order and control. (191) Thus Siva manifests both “…his terrible and gentle aspect; he dances in sheer joy and creation comes to be, and he dances in maniacal frenzy and all worlds crumble into ruin. Even though he appears as a raving madman, his devotees see in him nothing but love and grace.” (192) Siva’s dharma thus consists of both mild (manta) and fierce (tivira) aspects. In terms of bhakti Siva’s mildness finds expression in temple service (cariya) and ritual service (kriya), whereas his fierceness translates into the fanatical and unwavering anpu of the Nayanars whose actions frequently violate and transgress social norms. (193) According to Tamil scholar M.V. Aruncalam, it is Siva who must be held responsible for the Nayanars crazed devotion; Siva “intoxicates” his devotees to the point where they no longer retain any shred of self control. Thus what is perceived as the deranged and berserk actions of a group of criminals and lunatics must be understood as behaviour inspired by the Divine: an excess of love, a devotional form of inebriation intentionally created by Siva himself. (194)
It must be emphasized that in the context of Tamil bhaktism, the ferocious and single minded bhakti of the Nayanars represented an extreme which was generally not replicated within most devotionalist schools. However, the antinomianism which characterized their outlook remained a marked feature of much South Indian bhaktism. Thus David Shulman has demonstrated how themes which cast the deity as an anti-social exile, a predator, a bandit, a marauder, even as a cattle thief, became conventional motifs within Tamil devotional poetry. Similarly, in his analysis of the cult of the goddess Draupadi, Alf Hiltebeitel has shown how wayward forms of “inferior bhakti” directed towards “criminal” or “lesser godlings” and involving alcohol, narcotics and “polluted” forms of possession may be neutralized and subsequently offered as expressions of “higher” bhakti. Bhakti may also be employed mythologically as a means of elevating a “little” deity or a former demon/asura (a figure who eats meat and accepts blood offerings) into the received pantheon. This generally involves the ritual death of the local deity/asura and the loss of his independent power as he is converted into a servant or a guardian of a recognized Agamic deity.

At the same time, as Shulman has noted, the bhakti world view was often tragic in the sense that at the moment of revelation, the ecstatic experience of the deity produced by bhakti was but partial and transitory; the fullness of the transcendental god could never be completely apprehended by human reality. Moreover, our torments must be recognized as the deity’s lila (or Tamil vilaiyatal), that is, the god’s mode of relating to the diverse parts of his nature and to the world generally.

But the main impact of bhakti was to instill within Tamil Hinduism a religious form which provided a means of affirming the value and indeed the primacy of human devotional experience and the individual relationship to the deity. As Clothey points out, “The immortality thus afforded…was not so much an escape from life as the affirmation of the verve and fullness of life. The moment of relationship with the god was thought to be a moment of rejuvenation, a re-creation serving as a prelude to a return to life. The confrontation with the god seemed to be an affirmation of the worshipper’s humanness, for the god was very present and almost human at that
moment…It was self affirming in the sense that the human spirit found some degree of fulfillment in its relationship to the god.”(200) Bhakti devotionalism was thus a path of emotional and sensual worship which forged an intimate personal connection with the Transcendent (often in his/her local embodiment), the impact of which was to remould the psycho-spiritual constitution of the devotee, and cast him/her into a condition of “self transformative flux” which would ultimately lead to awareness of, surrender to, and identification with the deity.(201) Moreover, the way of bhakti devotionalism was open to all; it was not dependent upon birth, caste or asceticism, and was judged by its practitioners as superior to the path of contemplative knowledge (jnana) and action.(202)

Upon initial examination it seems impossible to connect the practices of bhakti devotionalism with its dual identification with the human and present world, as well as the ultimacy of Divine Reality, with the ascetic traditions of yoga, involving meditation and contemplation and intrinsically suspicious “of all human cognitions and perceptions…of all…that normally constitutes the psycho-physical entity we think of as a human person.”(203) Yet both bhakti and yoga encompass common goals. Both attempt to reorient consciousness inwards, to escape the domination and falseness of the ephemeral forms of the external world, and to achieve experiental knowledge of the permanent inner core of existence, that which is recognized as Transcendence.(204) A willingness to embrace transformation is implicit within all forms of bhakti devotionalism; the sadhaka (aspirant) seeks to sacrifice the self, to sever the bonds of attachment and achieve “a return to the primordial essence” thus attaining unity with the universal.(205) It is in this sense that bhakti may be identified with yoga; it is a discipline which quests for the same outcomes as those sought through meditation and contemplation. But bhakti devotionalism also reflects the Tamil insistence on the validity of the soul. Thus while the soul may be immersed within the Divine, and partakes of the nature of the Universal, so that in a profound sense it is one with the Divine, yet it continues to retain its authenticity and individual distinctiveness.(206) In this state the soul attains “…perpetual bliss. It does not see itself or the universe except as God. As God, it sees God. The seer, the seen and the sight become one with Him who
makes the seer see”.(207)

4.3 *Bhakti* Devotionalism and Transgressive Sacrality

At its more extreme, the *bhakti* movement incorporated violent, cruel and impure elements which would, at initial blush, appear to contravene many of the fundamental precepts of normative *Agamic* and philosophical Hinduism. Some of the histories of the *Nayanars*, for example, depict expressions of Siva’s *anpu* involving the infliction of crude brutalities upon self and others (including close kin).(208) These forms of *bhakti* devotionalism not only outrage societal values, but also seem to violate the most sacred ethical codes and belief systems upon which received *Agamic* Hinduism is constructed. Moreover, the actions of the *Nayanars* challenge the understood conventions of spiritual unfoldment; that is, their extremism appears to circumvent the lifetimes of stringently observed and mentored disciplines which are regarded as necessary to guide the committed *sadhaka* on the clearly graduated and incremental pathway to *moksha*.

Many scholars have commented upon the anti-authoritarianism and even antinomianism which appears to permeate many of the practices and beliefs of popular Tamil Hinduism.(209) Tamil Hinduism contains a veritable rogues’ gallery of “criminal” gods and demon devotees who deliberately ignore or flout the sacred moral order and prescribed maxims by which *Agamic* and high gods and the devout *sadhaka* are guided. (210) The habitual and serious infractions perpetrated by these gods/demons defy established societal, theological and dietary strictures, and threaten to subvert received cosmologies. The exploits of criminal gods and demon devotees are the subject of both oral and written traditions, and are well known among the communities who offer worship to these figures.(211)

In his study of the cult of the regional god *Kattavarayan* (who is often identified by his devotees with Murugan), Shulman lists the quintessential curriculum vitae of the South Indian lower caste hero. This includes a multiple birth (often involving a descent from heaven in ambiguous circumstances); mixed ancestry (often arising from Brahman-untouchable or royal-untouchable liaisons); determination to abduct and/or violate a
virgin (or virgins), usually of high caste origin; well established ties to magic and the societal liminality implied by this association; companionship with a low caste assistant; and the ineluctable tincture of impending tragedy which betokens the inevitability of his violent and sacrificial death. Moreover, the hero usually occupies a role on the boundary of society, typically that of guardian and gatekeeper, a position infused with danger, ambivalence and uncertainty, and his character is often that of “trickster like transformability”.

At a lower level, the spirits of the premature dead, that is, those who have died prior to reaching householder status, may assume a malevolent character and create disruption and misfortune. In his study of virabhadras, (“the children of Siva”, from Virabhadra, a terrible deity born of Siva’s rage,) within Andhra Pradesh, David Knipe demonstrates how the spirits of those who have suffered untimely death, usually in childhood, and who are thus believed to be denied any meaningful place within the Brahmanic controlled universe of *samskara*, “return” to intrude upon and subvert familial and societal structures.

In cases of criminal gods, demon devotees, and potentially malignant spirits, Tamil Hinduism devises measures which circumscribe, control, and give direction to antinomianism and disruption and which neutralize threats to cosmic order. Thus the *virabhadras* are restrained through a system of ritualized remembrance and re-incorporation in which their wishes are divined and respected, and each spirit is allocated an honoured position within continuing family structures and patterns of worship.

Criminal gods and demons are conquered and subjugated by a theology of *bhakti* which transforms them into submissive devotees of *puranic* or *Agamic* deities. This often involves their slaying or sacrificial death and their subsequent incarnation as servants of the great gods. Alternatively, or additionally, the powers of these lesser entities are localized and their passions are assuaged by appropriate supplications and meat offerings. In all cases they are subject to the commands of, and are restrained by, a
higher deity. (216) Indeed, their lowly place in the divine hierarchy may be gauged from their spatial location within the shrine, their lack of precedence in worship, and the nature of offerings made to them. (217) Thus violent carnivores reside at the border of the shrine, serve the deities within, and receive either meat offerings, or the residue of the offerings made to the high (vegetarian) deities. (218) However, these servants also conduct essential functions on behalf of the god of the shrine; they face the dangers of the world beyond the shrine, and undertake all necessary violent and polluting acts to protect the god/goddess from contamination and thus ensure that his/her role as a great and pure deity is not compromised. (219)

The actual subordination of the lesser entity and its retention on the border, its “complete subservience and ontological dependence” upon the higher deity, reflect the principles of encompassment and hierarchy which obtain within Tamil Hinduism. (220) The inner subsumption of gross outer forms, (which also applies between the inner subtle body and the gross outer body which form two of the five sheaths which enclose the soul), provides a logic of directional movement; it is the inner higher and less differentiated which encloses the outer, lower and more differentiated, and having established a hierarchy of forms reverts to the (controlling) centre. It is thus the subjugated gatekeepers who occupy the outer shrines on the border, and the concentrated power of the higher deity which is located at the heart of the shrine. (221) However, it should be noted that the deity’s “residue” or “essence”, as it were, may be located within the gross and lower forms, so that worship of the outer offers the prospect of successive progression to an ultimate encounter with the inner.

To date in this section I have discussed only those “lower” entities that seemingly exist on the margins of Hindu cosmologies – criminal gods, demon devotees, and aggrieved spirits – and which are allotted only a border role within established Hindu hierarchies by a process of encompassment, control and restraint. But what of those violent and unruly elements which are located at the centre of the Tamil bhakti tradition; that is, the Nayanars, whose “Rudraic” (222) actions appear not only to contravene established norms of purity and impurity, but also to question or even strike at some of the most
cherished precepts of Agamic and philosophical Hinduism? Indeed, the “shocking excesses” of some of the Nayanars are often cited as among the most profound and highest manifestations of the Saiva bhakti tradition, and are thus the subject of queasy veneration within Saiva Siddhanta.(223)

To explain, *inter alia*, the glaring anomalies between the outré, often bizarre behaviour of the Nayanars on one hand, and received philosophical doctrines on the other, Sunthar Visuvalingam has posited a theology of “transgressive sacrality”; that is, one which violates the established conventions and hierarchies but somehow seems to retains its location, however unlikely, within the fabric of orthodox Hinduism. He maintains that a study of spiritual praxis reveals sets of “…complex relations between the mutually interfering categories of pure and impure, the sacred and profane, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, sacrifice and bhakti, external ritual and internal yoga, Vedism and Saivism, Brahmanical law and tantric aggression.”(224) Visuvalingam contends that is reductive, simplistic and erroneous to portray Hinduism as starkly divided between two fundamental and discrete strands, that is, Agamic/Brahmanic orthodoxy in opposition to popular/village Hinduism. Rather the tradition must be viewed in holistic terms, as a complex continuum, in which unceasing dialogue between various and often antagonistic segments leads to the re-working of themes, rituals and belief structures which are then reincorporated and offered to audiences at a range of levels within society. Thus elements of the “classical”/orthodox are reinterpreted to provide significance for lower caste devotees, while aspects of “lower” traditions, especially those which belong in the realm of raw bhakti movements are “reformed” (that is, Sanskritized/Agamicized) and adapted to classical philosophy and practice, and are accoutred with symbols appropriate to their now elevated standing.(225)

Visuvalingam argues that transgressive sacrality “…acquires a sacred dimension only when it is subordinated to a suprahuman aim, which explicitly and through its inscription in a symbolic context, which, by paradoxically juxtaposing and especially infusing them with the values of interdictory sacred, charges even the crudest profanities with transcendent significance.”(226) Transgressive bhakti Hinduism thus overcomes
orthodox resistance to its zealous extremism by collapsing the deceptively fluid
dialectical oppositions of pure and impure within the context of an all-encompassing
transcendence which both reveals and pronounces its devotional actions as sacred.

Essentially transgressive sacrality, a form of divine madness, is at once both over-
arching and unfathomable. Its underlying momentum is generated by a love (*anpu*)
controlled by God’s actions upon the soul, and is therefore both beyond and
unanswerable to normal human moral categories. The ferocious *bhakti* of the *Nayanars*
propels devotees from the periphery, the world of a multitude of forms sustained by a
network of binary oppositions, into the undifferentiated centre of the Absolute within
which all polarities dissolve. To quote Visuvalingam, “The paradox of *bhakti*, whose
sociological function is definable as the unceasing yet never wholly successful effort to
sacralize life-in-the-world by infusing it with the transcendence of the absolute, is that it
tolerates the violation of sacralizing interdictions, if at all, through the “remissive”
attitude of a cruelly merciful (*karuna/krpa*) God, who thereby effectively disguises the
disquieting *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of his own sinister essence.”(227)

4.4 Saiva Siddhanta
From about the eighth century onwards Tamil Hindu traditions were the subject of
intense philosophical speculation. Throughout the Chola period the *brahmadeyas*
(Brahman settlements) were responsible for much of this theological inquiry. One major
outcome of this conjecture was that henceforth all the great Vedic/Tamil gods were to be
firmly enmeshed in esoteric philosophical schools, and as a consequence their symbols
were divested of their literal meanings and invested with more profound significance
(thus, for example, Murugan’s lance was no longer regarded as a simple weapon but was
rather viewed as a symbol of wisdom and discrimination.)(228) While this theorizing
resulted in the founding of several distinct schools of religious belief, the most
influential and most enduring within the Tamil country was the comprehensive body of
doctrine known as Saiva Siddhanta. The rise of Saiva Siddhanta accompanied the
upsurge of Saivism which was contemporaneous with Chola rule.(229)
Saiva Siddhanta drew upon an amalgam of formative influences and incorporated certain Sanskrit texts, the *Saiva Agamas* (*Agamas* literally meaning “that which has come down”; that is, the received body of revealed scriptures),(230) but also the Vedic teachings.(231) These diverse materials were blended into a cohesive body of philosophical doctrine by the great sage Tirumalar, averred to be a contemporary of the fabled *rishi* Agastya.(232) Having animated the body of the dead cowherd, Mulan, Tirumalar subsequently recited the *Tirumantiram*, the great and definitive canonical text of 3,000 verses, which remains the lodestar of all *Saiva Siddhantans* (that is, those who practice the philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta). Indeed, Tirumalar’s aphorism, *Anbe Sivam*, (“God is love”), is considered to encapsulate the absolute essence of the entire philosophical structure of Saiva Siddhanta.(233) Describing the relationship between the Saiva *Agamas* and the Vedas, Tirumalar states “The Vedas and the *Agamas* are both true, both being works of the Lord. Consider the first as a general treatise, and the latter as a special one. Both are God’s own words. When examined well, the truly great do not see any difference between them, even when some differences are seen by others.”(234) The Saiva Siddhantans regard the Saiva *Agamas* with their divisions of *Tantra*, *Mantra* and *Upadesha* as the consummate explication of the Vedas, and the school of Saiva Siddhanta as the ultimate efflorescence of the Vedic religion.(235)

The Saiva Siddhanta canon extends well beyond the *Tirumantiram* to include the Siva *Agamas*, the twelve *Tirumurais* (the collection of the *Nayanar bhakti* saints) and the *Tiruttontar Purana*, more commonly known as the *Periya Puranam*. These works incorporate the hymns and devotional experiences of the *bhakti* saints, but also anticipate philosophical issues, such as the nature of the soul, sainthood and human destiny, which was to be the subject of further inquiry.(236) While the *Saiva Agamas* were largely of Brahman origin, other devotional literature was compiled by a wide array of authors drawn from a range of social and caste backgrounds. Most of the philosophical works of the Saiva Siddhanta school were written in Tamil, and many of those who contributed to the development of the major doctrines of Tamil Saivism succeeded in combining Brahmanic and Sanskritic patterns of thought with non-Brahmanic and popular Tamil belief structures. (237) The doctrines of Saiva Siddhanta
were later systematized by Meykander (circa 1250) in his Tamil work *Sivajanabodham*, and subsequently elaborated by his disciple Sivacaraya, (238) regarded by many Tamil commentators as the “true founder of Saiva Siddhanta.”(239)

4.5 Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy: An Overview

Saiva Siddhanta posits three categories of existence, namely *Pati* (or the Godhead), *Pacu* (the soul), and *Paca* (the fetters or bondages of ignorance). All of these entities are considered both real and eternally enduring, and indeed the *Tirumantiram* states “Of the three named, God, Soul and Bondage/Like God, soul and bondage are beginningless”.(240) It may be thus assumed that Saiva Siddhanta comprises a system of pluralistic realism; however, this would be to misunderstand the relationship of *Pati* to the other two quantities. The “realness” of *Pacu* and *Paca* are qualified by their dependence upon *Pati*, the Supreme Reality, which dominates and saturates the other two entities.(241) As Swami Siva Adikalaar *et al.* explain, “*Pati, Pacu, Paca* – roughly God, Self and the world…are logically distinct though distinction is not necessarily difference. It is this inherent resistance to monism that gives the system the appearance of pluralism, though this label is misleading – Saiva Siddhanta admits not factual separateness but only cognizable difference between the things ‘separated’ as connoted by the three terms. God is by definition (an) infinite or unlimited being, just as the other ultimates are by definition again, finites and dependent beings.”(242) Moreover, the cosmology is invested with a Divine purpose, which is the purification and perfection of souls, so that they obtain knowledge of and perpetual bliss within the realization of the Godhead.(243)

(i) *Pati*: As mentioned, *Pati* is the paramount and controlling feature of Saiva Siddhanta cosmology. The term *Pati* may be interpreted as “the Protector”, for like a king who rules and protects his subjects, the Divine protects his souls.(244) *Pati* is within and beyond all categories; he is both transcendent and immanent, formed (*Sarupa*) and without form (*Arupa*), universal in form (*Visvarupa*) and unconfined by the universe (*visvadhika*). (245) *Pati* is neither sentient (*cit*) nor insentient (*acit*).(246) The *Tirumantiriam* states that “The Lord is neither cit nor acit/He is the path Supreme”.(247)
As the Supreme Spirit, *Pati* is the ultimate cause, and is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. He is immersed both in the conditions of infinite life and existence constitutive of the soul’s bondage, though in his latter quality he remains unsullied by the imperfections of matter.(248)

The deity’s forms and actions are manifested through *Sakti* (conscious and eternal energy). Indeed *Sakti* infuses all aspects of the Divine’s nature, and is the intermediary between God’s transcendence and immanence.(249) As V. Paranjoti states “*Sakti*… melts practical difficulties arising from the unchanging God, bringing about changes in the world from *cit* (sentient) acting on *acit* (insentient) and the pure acting on the impure, *Sakti* which preserves the values of the Infinite and carries out various operations on the finite, serves to link to extremes of opposite natures.”(250) Within the soul it is *Sakti* which takes the form of Divine grace (*arul*); the dynamic love and compassion indicative of the *Pati*’s transformative actions upon the soul.(251) The five major attributes of *Sakti*, each of which is usually represented by a divine consort in various forms are *para-sakti* (pure wisdom), *ati-sakti* (the Supreme’s energy directed toward the soul), *iccha-sakti* (the Supreme’s desire to help the soul), *jnana-sakti* (the Supreme’s recognition of the outcome of the soul’s *karma*), and *kriya-sakti* (the Supreme’s will to provide the soul with the means to enjoy the fruits of its *karma*).(252)

Within Saiva Siddhanta, the relationship between *Pati*, *Sakti* and the universe is often explained in the analogy of the potter, his materials, and the completed pot. Thus the first or efficient cause is the potter who fashions the potter’s wheel and staff, which becomes the instrumental cause in the making of the pot, whereas the clay is viewed as the auxiliary cause. In cosmological terms, *Pati* is the efficient cause, Sakti, the eternal energy, is the instrumental cause, and *prakiti* or *maya* (matter) is the auxiliary cause from which all creation is shaped.(253)

*Pati* takes many forms and permeates all of them; as the *Tirmantiram* makes clear, all gods are functions of the immanent Siva:

*Without Him, there be celestials none,*
Without Him, penance is not
Without Him, naught the Three (Trimurti) accomplish
Without Him, I know not how to enter the city’s gate. (254)

The explanation for the multitudinous forms of the deity is that while Truth is ultimately One, the paths to the Truth are many and varied. Each form represents a particular aspect of the Supreme Reality, and is thus devised to meet the variegated needs of the different groups of countless souls. (255) However, each of these forms is perceived as a valid vehicle for worship, as each will ultimately lead the soul to the contemplation of the transcendent Godhead. (256)

Some of the major forms taken by Pati include the Trimurti (Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the protector, Rudra, the destroyer, and their respective consorts, Sarasvati, goddess of learning, knowledge and the arts, Laksmi, the protector of souls, and Parvati/Durga); the Siva Linga worshipped as God’s formless form; Ardhanarisvara, venerated as the androgynous Siva-Sakti; Siva as Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance; Ganapati (or Vinayagar, the elephant headed Ganesha); Skanda-Murugan, and Uma (Sakti). (257) Sakti also takes many forms, some benevolent, other awe inspiring and terrible. (258)

(ii) Pacu: The term pacu refers to the soul in the state of bondage, in its identification with the world. (259) The term pacu may be translated as “cattle”; as early as the Atharva-Veda, Siva is referred to as Pasupati, the Lord of Cattle, (260), and like cattle, the soul in its ignorance is tethered by the rope of avidya, or spiritual ignorance. (261)

While the soul is intelligent, and capable of knowledge, this is restricted and veiled by the impurities, (malas) to which it is subject. (262) As B Natarajan comments, “The soul is all pervading, eternal and a conscious agent capable of enjoyment…He is distinct from the gross and subtle bodies he inhabits. Bound souls suffer because they mistake themselves to be finite, limited in thought, will and action; but when liberated they are restored to their original nature.” (263) Pacu can never stand alone; it is associated either
with *paca* or *Pati*. When the soul identifies with matter, it remains sunken in ignorance and concerned with material objects (*a-sat*) and worldly connections. However when *Pacu* is prompted by Divine Grace, it inclines towards *Pati*, and *Jiva* (the bound soul) ultimately becomes *mukta* (the liberated soul).\(^{(264)}\)

(iii) *Paca*: *Paca* refers to the fetters or the net that binds or enmeshes the soul.\(^{(265)}\) Because *paca* is inanimate it is referred to as *catam* or *asat*. As the ordinary rope which ties is made up of three plaited strands, so *paca* is comprised of three major *malas* (or impurities), namely *anava* (egoism), *karma* (the consequences of deeds and actions), and *maya* (the material purpose).\(^{(266)}\)

a) *Anava*: Ego consciousness is the most persistent of the *malas*; it is a fetter which envelops the soul in ignorance, and leads it to equate with the body, and to regard itself as independent, and its actions as self motivated.\(^{(267)}\) *Anava* is the principle of indivuation which entraps the soul within itself and thus leads it to deny the relationship with *Pati*.\(^{(268)}\) It causes the soul to identify with the senses and passions, to suffer needlessly from suppressed material wants, to be swayed by superficial likes and dislikes and to express false emotions such as pride, self satisfaction etc.\(^{(269)}\) *Anava* manifests itself differently in each soul, and hence its levels of pervasiveness vary markedly from soul to soul.\(^{(270)}\)

b) *Karma*: In this context *karma* encompasses the existential consequences engendered by each one of the *pacu’s* actions – that is, those of mind, body and speech. *Karma* may be divided into two basic categories, namely good deeds (*punya karma, nalvinai*) or evil deeds (*papa karma, tivinai*) which in turn generate pleasure and pain. However, because the impact of all deeds must be fully experienced by the soul, *punya karma* may not be used to offset *papa karma*.\(^{(271)}\) *Karma* leads the soul through complex patterns of action and reaction, birth and death, and may influence the soul to behave in ways that are detrimental to its welfare.\(^{(272)}\)

c) *Maya*: This is the primordial stuff from which all creation is fashioned, and which
clings to the soul in various ways. In relation to pacu it may be viewed as similar to the husk which covers the grain.(273) In its most gross form, maya is known as prakiti.
(274)

Maya falls into two categories, namely cutta maya and acutta maya. From these evolve a total of 36 tattvas or primal elements, states and categories of existence, from which the universe is composed.(275) From cutta maya emerge the five tattvas which are activated by Pati, and which direct the soul. Acutta maya gives rise to seven vidya (knowledge) tattvas which cumulatively produce the experiences of the soul. But prakiti maya also emerges from acutta maya and may be divided into a further 24 tattvas, the “objects of enjoyment” known as the anma tattvas.(276) These consist of the five elements, the sense organs, the sensations, the mental instruments, the three gunas (strands or qualities), namely sattva (truth or reality), rajas (passion or attachment), and tamas (inertia or torpor).(277)

(iv) Pati-Pacu-Paca and the Destiny of the Soul: The heart of Saiva Siddhanta philosophy consists of the dynamic interplay between the triangle of Pati-Pacu-Paca, and the ultimate destiny of pacu in realizing and living within the eternal bliss of Pati which is achieved when the bondages of paca are subjugated and dispelled.(278)

Pati liberates the soul through a process of five activating functions, each of which marks a definitive stage the pacu’s unfoldment. These functions are (a) Creation: (srishti), (b) Preservation/Protection (shiti), (c) Destruction (samahara), (d) Concealing Grace (tirobahava) and (v) Revealing Grace (anugraha:arulal). These successive functions lead the pacu from inertia and the darkness of ignorance through unfolding states of awareness and spiritual illumination to liberation, the ultimate Grace where the pacu rests in blissful contemplation of the Divine.(279) The five-fold functions, symbolized in the form taken by Siva as the dancing Nataraja, is often referred to as Pati’s “sport” or “game” (tiruvilaiyatal, or lila). However, despite the ludic connotations of these terms, the lilas are neither meaningless, nor do they reflect the caprices or ephemeral whims of the deity. The “games” of the Divine have an ultimate purpose; the
transformation and release of the pacu.(280)

Souls may be loosely grouped in categories, each of which reflects the stage of
development in terms of the level of pac a to which the pacu is subject. This
evolutionary process requires that the soul be encased in many different forms ranging
from inanimate to animate as outlined in the words of Manickavasagar:

*As grass, shrub, worm, tree*

*Various beasts, bird, snake*

*Stone, men, ghosts, celestial hosts*

*Mighty demons, sage, gods,*

*Born in all forms or life in this perishing world,*

*I have grown weary, my Lord.(281)*

The soul’s evolution consists of a progression of repeated births and deaths which
culminate in final liberation from bondage. At each birth the soul is furnished with a
fresh form or body to provide the array of experiences commensurate with its level of
unfoldment. These experiences gradually weaken the dominance of anava, and the
mature soul now searches for ways to terminate the cycle of samsara, the endless chain
of birth, death and rebirth which immerse it within the impermanence of the phenomenal
universe. The mind seeks ways to achieve liberation, and will increasingly turn to
spiritual disciplines and worship, including the direction of a guru, who in providing
initiation (*diksha*) and the training required, will guide his disciple (*sishya*) toward
*moksha* (release).(282)

The soul’s maturating cognition of Pati is recognized in a four-fold schema, each one of
which characterizes the soul’s relationship and engagement with the Divine. These states
range from trepidation and hesitancy at the most elementary level, to intimate devotional
love at the other. The four ways or paths (*margas*) represent a pattern of sequential
development, each *marga* providing the full complement of experience, conditioning
and understanding necessary before the pacu may progress to the next.(283) These
stages are:
(i) Chariya: The path of service (Dasa Marga). This consists of external acts of devotion (for example, sweeping the temple, cleaning lamps). The relationship between devotee and Pati is likened to that between a servant and his/her master,

(ii) Kriya: The path of ritualistic worship (Satputra Marga). This path consists of regular acts of worship which cultivate devotion to Pati. The phase of Pacu/Pati relationship is likened to that between a loving child and his/her father,

(iii) Yoga: The path of contemplation (Sakha Marga). Throughout the Marga, the devotee, having sought the guidance of a qualified guru (284) undergoes eight stages of self-training and self-control. At the highest level of this path the aspirant identifies with the Pati and attains the form and the various insignia of the Divine. In the Sakha Marga the Pacu/Pati relationship is likened to that of friend to friend,

(iv) Jnana: The path of illumination (San Marga). This involves the search for the true knowledge and worship of the Divine in his formless state, and culminates in spiritual realization. In this state the devotee knows God as the lover knows his/her beloved. (285)

The transformation of souls is the nature of Pati, and to abide in the illumination and bliss of the Divine is the soul’s destiny. However, the soul’s ability to grasp knowledge is developed only when the power of knowing is extended to it; that is, when it is awakened by Pati.(286) But in the final analysis Saiva Siddhanta insists upon the autonomy of the soul. Thus while the pacu achieves oneness with Pati and is so infused with bliss that it is unaware of the loss of its individuality, it remains a distinct entity, a form which can never fully become Pati. As Zaehner remarks, “…just as Siva and Sakti are eternally one and united in substantial love, yet ultimately distinct in that without distinction love is impossible, so is the liberated soul oned and fused in Siva-Sakti, but still distinct in that it knows and loves what it can never altogether become.”(287)
5. BRITISH COLONIALISM AND INDIAN SOCIETY

To date, I have examined some of the developments within Tamil Hinduism throughout the era of the great South Indian dynasties. As I have noted, the scholar Burton Stein has contended that the dynasties stamped Tamil Hinduism with characteristics which were both formative and enduring. In order to understand the shape of contemporary reformist impulses within South India it is necessary to explore the post-Mutiny ideologies of British colonial rule in India. These ideologies permeated British scholarship on India, and ultimately extended to the subject populations, thus profoundly reshaping Indian perceptions of their own culture, society and history.

One of the most far reaching impacts of the comprehensive re-evaluation of British colonial policy which followed the trauma of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58, and the subsequent Jamaica revolt of 1865,(288) was the development of complex theories about race. While European racial theorists had long since advanced hypotheses which purported to conclusively demonstrate European (that is, “white”) biological superiority,(289) these claims appeared to receive the formidable imprimatur of Victorian science with the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin’s “Origin of Species of Natural Selection”.(290) For the first time, science seemed to cast race in terms of biological inevitability; as an all-encompassing concept which was “…the prime determinant of all important traits of body and soul, character and personality of human beings of nations.”(291) Since, according to this viewpoint, a people’s racial characteristics ineluctably predetermined its culture and capabilities, it was now possible to systematically assess and rank each society within the framework of an exhaustive human taxonomy.(292) Social Darwinism (as this doctrine became known),(293) implied the linear development of Man, an evolutionary advance from primitive and degraded to civilized and cultivated, a sequential process propelled by progress (defined in strictly European terms), as the dynamic agent of human history, and the survival of the fittest, pushed to the limit, as the dominant principle of human organization.(294)

But Social Darwinism not only “explained” European ascendancy, it could also be invoked to catalogue the many backwardnesses of “inferior” races. The reverse of
evolution was racial degeneration, an immense danger to society at any stage of its development, a product of careless or promiscuous breeding, and most particularly the practice of miscegenation. Degeneration accounted for the existence of “stationary” societies and “uncivilized” peoples, as well as for the decay and decline of once great civilizations and empires. (295) In its most extreme form degeneration manifested as a morbid deviation from the racial archetype, “…a brutish survival known as ‘atavism’.” (296)

The British wasted no time in applying the lessons of these new racial theories to their subject populations. Census operations, which began in India in 1872, accumulated vast quantities of data which enumerated the population according to a multiplicity of social criteria. (297) The full cumbersome apparatus of Victorian Social Darwinism transformed these data into a complete Indian bio-racial taxonomy which ordered India both vertically and horizontally into a series of overlapping classificatory systems revolving around caste, religion and notions of primary race. This taxonomy enabled the British to exactly locate the cultural and racial status of any individual within the overall structure of what was perceived as the timeless, unchanging Indian social hierarchy. (298)

(i) Caste: The foremost and most basic categorization was caste, which, according to Social Darwinist discourse, was the basic building block of India’s unyielding and immutable social pyramid. (299) The British deciphered caste in terms of the theoretical classificatory systems described in classical Hindu texts. (300) In interpreting these texts, colonial officials placed great emphasis on the primacy of ritual position and clear subordination of lower caste to those of higher status. (301) For the British, castes were “tight organic communities socially distinct from all others around them”, (302) and census officials ascribed to each a series of unalterable and ineradicable sub-biological cultural characteristics (for example, “criminal”, “martial”, “degenerate”), which firmly situated the status of the caste and caste members within the overall structure of Indian society. (303) David Washbrook has demonstrated that British racial ideologies were so wedded to the conceptual imperatives of implacable inter-caste hostility, that when the
examination of any given social structure revealed no overt discord, colonial officials felt obligated to contrive the dynamics of opposition and confrontation. (304) Inevitably the discipline of evolutionary anthropology was often tempered with the demands of political administration, and many caste categories were in effect largely the creation of the Colonial Office. (305)

The immediate impact of the British caste taxonomy was to freeze Indian social structures, and to arrest the general fluidity which had hitherto prevailed within Indian society. (306) As Washbrook states, the British perspectives “…missed the finely honed status differentials within caste, missed the practical openings for social mobility which gave the system flexibility, and above all, missed the webs of interdependency which linked members of different castes together in an economic and social structure.” (307)

A further consequence of the colonial caste taxonomy was the institutionalization and expansion of Brahman power. The colonial authorities accepted without reservation the classical description of the varna system which firmly installed the Brahmans at the apex and as custodians of caste hierarchies. The Brahmans had always furnished the majority of literate functionaries of most Indian polities, and it thus seemed obvious for the British to employ them as civil servants. (308) However, the power now at their disposal appeared to greatly exceed that which they had exercised in the pre-colonial era. (309) This naturally affected the way in which the Brahmans were viewed by the remainder of the population, and was to ultimately create anti-Brahman social and political sentiment, especially in South India. This will be further explored later in this section.

(ii) Religion: The second, most simplistic, and yet most enduring categorization was that of religion. The 1872 census established an India which consisted of a Hindu “majority” and a sizeable Muslim “minority”. (310) This formed the basis of the British contention that India was divided into two great and implacable antagonistic communities, namely those of Hinduism and Islam. (311) This viewpoint asserted that every Indian, by virtue of his or her religious identity inescapably belonged to a specific religious community,
and was destined to gaze with ingrained distrust and antipathy at the other. Moreover, religious identity supposedly imbued its members with a number of inscribed characteristics which reflected each community’s stage of evolutionary development. Thus “…Muslims were violent, despotic, masculine. Hindus were indolent, passive, effeminate. One fought by the sword; the other by cunning and litigation.”(312) This division of Indian society into clearly demarcated and mutually hostile communities – Hindu versus Muslim – not only ignored the immense cultural pluralism within India, (313) but also overlooked the fact that Indians had never primarily typecast each other in terms of religious adherence.(314)

The British misunderstood the essential nature of all Indian religious traditions, especially those described as “Hindu”. British administrators and scholars reduced the vast, disparate and often conflicting mosaic of cults, deities, sects, ideas and philosophies into a single religion clustered under the unitary fabric of Hinduism.(315) Hinduism, as described by the British, found its original, highest, and most authentic expression in Brahmanism and the sacred texts. This interpretation of Hinduism – of Brahmanism as the finest efflorescence and core of Hindu culture – overlooked the fact that Brahmanism was itself not homogeneous, and that apart from the internal divisions of sub-caste and occupation, there were many localized variations of Brahmanism which had arisen in response to specific social, cultural and historic contingencies.(316)

Moreover, in locating essential Hinduism within a Brahmanic and textual framework, and in relying upon Brahmanic advice on all matters relating to Hindu culture, law and customary belief,(317) the British authorities effectively discounted the validity and significance of popular manifestations of Hinduism. Despite the fact that these traditions claimed the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of Hindus,(318) for British administrators these village/popular expressions remained mere “deviations”, lesser and bastard offshoots of Brahmanism, the originating and vital source of “pure” Hinduism.(319)

(iii) Race: British evolutionary theories further divided the Indians by race. This schema posited two primary racial groups, the Turanians and the Dravidians, essentially generic
terms for North and South Indians. These two “races” were subdivided into a meticulously compiled hierarchy of sub-racial groupings, which incorporated considerations of caste, religion, colour and even district of origin.(320)

The Turanians consisted of the waves of Aryans who were believed to have colonized India in the centuries BC, and who had bestowed upon the sub-continent the multiple benefits of a higher civilization, including the Hindu religion.(321) However, despite their noble origins, the Turanians had irrevocably “degenerated”, the result of local association and irresponsible miscegenation with the indigenous population, the non-Aryan Dravidians. Indeed, racial decay among the Turanians had proceeded to the point where renewal or regeneration was dismissed as an impossibility.(322)

The position of the Dravidians was even more irredeemably hopeless. British racial theory assigned great weight to the colour of a person’s skin in determining their standing in the evolutionary scale. Socio-biological status decreased in proportion to the increasing darkness of hue. This principle was reflected in C.O. Groom Napier’s influential Table of Human Races (1867) which posited the existence of three main racial groupings, namely (in descending order), Semitic-Indo European, Mongolian and Ethiopian.(323) The “Negroid” features and complexions of the Dravidians, coupled with their putative ugliness, marked them out as members of the ignoble Ethiopian grouping, and thus belonging to a decidedly lower stratum than the Indo-European Turanians.(324)

But the Dravidians were not just racially degenerate. British evolutionary theory also charged them with the long-term contamination and debasement of the superior and morally upright religion of the Aryans. The latter could be discerned from careful and discriminating study of the ancient Brahmanic texts which were written in Sanskrit, and which had been validated by a century of European scholarship as “authentic” and “pure” Hinduism.(325) By contrast, the religion of the Dravidians, the “aboriginal” peoples of India, with its perceived lack of scriptural and philosophical underpinnings, was dismissed as no more than barbarism and a collocation of “material demonologies”.
Over time, it was opined, the advanced, refined and textual traditions of the Aryans had meshed with the “wholly degrading” religion of the Dravidians to the severe detriment of the former. Indeed, the Dravidians were held responsible for all the “superstitious abominations” with which modern Hinduism was studded.

Many of the key constructs of the ideologies of Empire, so assiduously promulgated by the British, particularly the definitions of the social and racial composition of colonial societies, were ultimately accepted by the native populations themselves. For example, Thomas Metcalf has demonstrated how the portrayal of an India deeply sundered between two religious communities became an accepted verity within internal Indian political debate. But other critiques of Indian society also gained wide currency, especially among Indian intellectuals. These included colonial perspectives on caste; on the Turanian/Dravidian racial divide; on Brahmanism and ancient Sanskrit texts as the sole repository of authentic Hindu culture (with its corollary the denial of the validity of regional or popular Hindu religions); on the measurement of Hinduism against “Semitic” religions, especially Christianity (and more latterly against the benchmarks established by an imagined modernistic “Western” scientific ethos).

5.1 South Indian Reform Movements

Hindu reform movements, reacting to British ideologies and the incessant propaganda of Christian missionaries, began the task of reconstructing an idealized Hinduism which was largely the fabrication of Orientalist scholarship. This “neo-Hindu” movement which found particular favour among Brahmans, sought to “rescue” India by retrieving an imagined pristine Hinduism which supposedly existed in the era of the original Sanskrit Aryan civilization. This project would necessarily require the suppression of the “dark, feminine and materialistic and sensual religion of the Aboriginal Dravidians” wherever such excrescences appeared. Among the missionaries and their supporters, festivals involving rites of asceticism or ecstatic trance/possession (often mistaken by missionaries and other Europeans for drunkenness), were held to constitute “devil worship” and “demonology” and were thus obvious deviations from the higher Aryan culture of Brahmanic textual Hinduism. Such “crazed” and unrestrained
manifestations were ripe for reform or suppression.(333)

Geoffrey Oddie has demonstrated how in late nineteenth century India, Western educated elites, taking their cue from the diatribes of Christian missionaries, successfully agitated for the enactment of legislation to ban the practice of hookswinging.(334) This ritual, which was common in Bengal, the Deccan, and the southern regions of India,(335) involved various castes,(336) trance states, (337) and vows offered generally to female and “lower” deities.(338) To Westernized elites, the practice was “a symbol of some of the worst excesses they were determined to leave behind, and their attack on the practice, an expression of their solidarity, not only with each other, but also with the new forces they so much admired in cosmopolitan and Western culture.”(339) Although there was evidence that hookswinging served to unite villages and that the ritual was believed to promote general well-being,(340) the reformers, using the terminology of British Social Darwinism, declared it “uncivilized”,(341), and the festival as that of “the mob” and “the lower orders”.(342) In presenting their case against hookswinging, these elites employed the essential arguments most calculated to win the support of missionaries and colonial officials; namely that the practice was not located in Brahmanic culture and was thus unrelated to Aryan/Vedic traditions; was not justified by the Sastras of classical Hinduism; and had never involved Brahman participation.(343)

Profoundly influenced by the intense Puritanism of Victorian sexual morality, reinforced by missionary jeremiads about an imagined dissolute Hindu sexuality, Westernized elites and Neo-Hindus turned their attention to other targets. Their actions included the destruction of erotic statuary within Hindu temples,(344) the suppression of the erotic traditions of Tamil poetry,(345) and the banning of devadasis, following attacks that were launched “…with a puritanical fanaticism which was equaled only by the complete ignorance of (or unwillingness to understand) its history and the motivation behind it.” (346)

Hindu and other reform movements gained particular and enduring strength within
South India. For this was the region where colonial ideologies weighed most heavily; the homeland of the “backward” Dravidians who supposedly bore responsibility both for the degradation of the Turanians and corruption of the original Brahmanic and Aryan Hinduism. In general, South Indian responses coalesced into three main movements; Neo-Hinduism, “Neo-Shaivism” and Dravidian “nationalism”. The latter two movements, in implementing their religious and political schedules, emphasized the primacy of the Tamil language. The major thrust of these reform movements cannot be fully understood without reference to the dynamics of inter-caste politics, animated throughout the period of British rule.

In the previous section I noted that British social evolutionary theories insisted upon the concept of inter-caste conflict as an activating principle of Indian society to the point that in situations where such rivalry was not immediately obvious the colonial authorities felt constrained to assume or even invent it. The declaration by senior members of the Secretariat of the Madras Presidency that they would look favourably on appeals directed against caste “aggression” produced a new dimension in local politics. As Washbrook comments, “Once the language of large scale communal hostility, of broadly defined castes competing against each other had been introduced, there was no end to the number of situations it could be used to describe.”(347)

Within the Madras Presidency, inter-caste conflict took the form of a virulent anti-Brahmanism, which was to form the central plank of Dravidian “nationalism”. This was shaped by the emergence of political formations under British rule. As in much of the remainder of India, the British employed Brahmans as integral agents of colonial administration. By 1920, the Brahmans, who comprised a mere three per cent of the population, dominated the bureaucracy, many professions and the politics of the Madras Presidency.(348) However, the attempts of the so-called Mylapore group to consolidate Brahman political power were opposed in the 1920s by the non-Brahman professionals of the recently formed Justice Party. The political rhetoric of the Justiceites was couched in the florid polemics of anti-Brahman invective, including the claim that Brahmans were not true Dravidians, but represented a wave of “northern invaders”.(349)
The anti-Brahman movement had a powerful religious dimension. Many Brahmans supported the concept of Neo-Hinduism which implicitly dismissed South Indian Hindu discourses, and argued for a “return” to the supposed original traditions of an Aryan, textual religion.(350) This project was resolutely opposed by the emerging non-Brahman elites, the class of educated, almost wholly upper caste professionals and administrators, who sought to establish an identity grounded in the “authentic religion” of the Tamils, and which gloried in the veneration of the Tamil language and the Tamil scriptures. Sumathi Ramaswamy has described this movement as “Neo-Shaivism”.(351)

Neo-Shaivism, the “true” Tamil religion (*tamil matam*), was formulated from Saivite texts and narratives, was centred upon the monotheistic and “rational” worship of Siva, designated the Tamil divinity *par excellence*. This worship was conducted according to “true” Tamil rituals, by “Tamil” (that is, non-Brahman) priests, and using the Tamil language. Neo-Shaivism was structured around several fundamental principles, namely that Saivism was the primordial and “original” religion of all non-Brahman Tamils, and that the tenets of its beliefs and rituals were enshrined in Tamil texts; that it was the most ancient religion of India and pre-dated Sanskritic Aryan Hinduism by many centuries; and that Brahmanism and Aryanism had corrupted this pristine religion.(352) The promoters of Neo-Shaivism were determined to restore the religion to its full (and exclusively) Tamil effulgence. This, they believed, could only be achieved by identifying and extirpating all Aryan-Sanskritic accretions (especially the traditions of “polytheistic” worship) supposedly imported from North India. The framing and codification of Neo-Shaivism proved a difficult and often contentious task. There were disagreements as to what constituted “pure” Saivism, and the disentangling of the complex linkages and fusions between Tamil and Sanskrit Hinduism, established and sustained over an extended period reaching back to the first century C.E.(353)

But while Neo-Shaivism contested the claims advanced both by British evolutionary anthropology and Neo-Hinduism in connection with Dravidian culture, language and religion, its promoters had no hesitation in accepting colonial propositions about village traditions or non-*Agamic* Hinduism which formed the religion of the vast majority of the
Tamil population. As Ramaswamy has observed, the program of Neo-Shaivism was “…puritanical and elitist…in its advocacy of vegetarianism and teetotalism and its calls for the excision of “irrational” customs and actions and rituals (animal sacrifices, the worship of godlings and the like), which were the very stuff of village and popular religion.”

Throughout the early decades following the rise of Neo-Shaivism, its proponents viewed the Tamil religion as merely one variation of the great collocation of discourses which comprised the Hindu tradition, and criticism of Sanskrit, per se, was muted. This changed in the 1920s with the rise of the vehement anti-Brahman rhetoric of the increasingly powerful Justice Party. The moderation of earlier years gave way to allegations of maleficent Sanskrit-Brahmanic conspiracies designed to denigrate the divinity of both Tamil and the Tamil religion. Although, as noted, both Tamil and Sanskrit had been fundamental to institutionalized South Indian Hinduism for many centuries, Neo-Shaivite radicals now demanded that all worship in Tamil temples be conducted in Tamil. The (re)divination of Tamil was embodied in the figure of the rather obscure goddess Tamilttay and the various myths attributed her creation to the quintessentially “Dravidian” god Siva, sometimes through the agency of Earth, at other times by the intervention of Murugan, and in further interpretations by the sage Agastya. As Neo-Shaivite claims for the exclusive divinity of Tamil traditions and the Tamil language as the proper and sole vehicle for the conduct of worship increased, so too did the calumniaion of Sanskrit, and the denial of its very legitimacy as a language of worship. By the late 1940s Neo-Shaivite extremists were insisting that Tamil temples be cleansed of the “filth” of Sanskrit.

The Tamil ideologies and anti-Brahmanism which had found expression in Neo-Shaivism and the political agenda of the Justice Party, took on a far more strident and aggressive tenor in the atheistic Dravidianism of the Self Respect movement headed by E.V. Ramasami Naicker. Ramasami’s social theories posited a separate South Indian racial and hence civilizational identity, and called for the establishment of an autonomous Tamil polity. He identified the enemies of this project as Tamil
Brahmans who represented the northern “Aryan invaders” who had subjugated Tamil society with their caste rules and rituals. But Ramasami had no faith in the ideologies of Neo-Shaivism. His atheism led him and his followers to ridicule Neo-Shaivism with the same contempt he evinced toward Hinduism, which he regarded as nothing more that a Brahmanical, Sanskritic conspiracy designed to destroy Tamil identity and annihilate Dravidian culture. Ramasami also launched fierce attacks on the rituals and practices of popular Hinduism and called for the implementation of a “rational” and essentially modernist political agenda.

Ramasami remained influential throughout the 1930s and 1940s. However, after the formation in 1949 of the Dravida Munnera Kalagam (Dravidian Progress Association or DMK), which embodied the principal constructs of the Dravidian ideologies, the party took steps to distance itself from Ramasami’s iconoclasm. The DMK’s more inclusive Dravidianism allowed for the exploration of Tamil religiosity, which incorporated both popular and established devotional traditions, including the worship of Murugan, within the framework of its cultural policy. In 1967, the DMK won a convincing electoral victory, thus ushering in a period of intense Tamilization (including the re-naming of the Madras state, which became Tamilnadu (Tamil Nadu).

6. MURUGAN: A TAMIL DEITY
6.1 Earliest History
The deity Murugan has been closely identified with Tamil religiosity for at least two millennia. Descriptions of Murugan are contained within the earliest Tamil literature, the substantial corpus of the work known as the Cankam poetry which most scholars accept was composed over a period commencing in the first century C.E. and continuing until the third century C.E. In his landmark study, The Many Faces of Murukan – The History and Meaning of a South Indian God, Fred W. Clothey points out that throughout the Cankam period Tamil culture progressively absorbed elements of the Sanskrit culture of the Aryan North. The later portrayals of Murugan reflect the admixture of these northern influences and thus differ markedly from those found within the earliest poetry.
In the earlier phase of Cankam literature, Murugan is clearly depicted as a rural deity, and is firmly identified with the hills and hills people of the Tamil country. (372) The deity was also regarded as the god of the hunt, and indeed Asim Kumar Chatterjee postulates that Murugan may have been the patron god of the Kuravars or hunting tribes. (373) In this guise, Murugan’s enemy is the cur (soor), a demon who ranges the countryside randomly seeking out and possessing young women. (374) In early literature the cur is viewed as an actual physical manifestation whose very presence produces terror. However, over time, the cur transforms into the cura whom Murugan defeats in battle, initially with a specially shaped leaf, but later with a leaf shaped lance. (375) Murugan is further recognized as a god who generates paroxysms of excitement among girls and young women, and thus becomes established as the patron of premarital love. (376) He is also represented as a deity both adept at creating and dispelling suffering (ananku). (377) The red colour of the god is constantly reiterated, and he is thus known as Ceyon/Seyon (“the Red One”). (378) Murugan is closely associated with the elephant and the peacock, the latter gradually assuming a major role as the deity’s mount. (379)

Throughout the later Cankam era – a period of urbanization and the establishment of kingdoms in the Tamil country – Murugan incorporates additional roles and motifs. Clothey suggests that poetical references link Murugan with the deities Mayon and Tirumal, generally portrayed in pastoral and forest (mullai) settings, and who are later more generally recognized as Vishnu, especially in his avatar as Krishna, the cowherd. (380) Throughout this period Murugan is also associated with the ruling echelons – kings, chiefs, warriors – and indeed, he is established as the exemplar of wise command and the model against which all kingship is to be judged. In this guise, the deity acquires all the regalia and symbols intrinsic to royal authority. (381) Thus, even by the close of the Cankam period, Murugan may be regarded as a composite deity, incorporating various roles and motifs. He is both a bucolic and sylvan god worshipped by diverse rural peoples, as well as an urban deity encompassing the functions of warrior and king. His early and established broad acceptance distinguishes him as a “universal” god within the Tamil country. (382)
A marked feature of early Murugan worship is the frenzied dance of his devotees, including the priests (velan) dedicated to his service, who employed trance states inspired by the god to practice divination and to cure sickness, and later within the urban context among “…women in festive spirit…(who)…wearing kanci blooms, dance in streets and in the temple courts of Madurai, zealously adoring him who wears the katumpu blossoms.”(383) Thus even at this early juncture Murugan is a god who inspires possession, ecstatic dancing, and the healing of illness.

6.2 Sanskritic Skanda: The God’s Northern Presence

In ancient North India mythology tracing and explicating the deeds and attributes of the deity Skanda gained wide currency throughout the epoch of kingship (that is, roughly between the third and sixth centuries C.E.). As in South India, the deity gradually acquires a multiple persona which ascribes to him the vastly diverse roles of warrior, sage, master thief and rogue.(384)

Early references to Skanda are contained within the Great Epic where he is identified as the son of Agni, and depicted as the god of war. The youthful sage, Sanatkumara, later linked to Skanda, appears in the Chandyoga Upanishad.(385) Sanatkumara (“Eternal Son”) is portrayed as a sagacious and benevolent figure who imparts profound knowledge relating to the mysteries of existence. His youthfulness is seen as an attribute which connects him to the origins of time and primordiality, thus endowing him with an inherent awareness of the meanings of creation. Indeed, in his role of sage, he teaches the Brahman, Narada, the inner significance of the concept of atman,(386) (thus anticipating Skanda’s later forceful imprisonment of the god Brahma for his inability to comprehend the Pravana Aum, and his subsequent explanation of the inner meaning of the mantra to his father, Siva.) But while Sanatkumara is clearly identified with learning and knowledge, he also conveys the ideals of penance and austerities.(387)

The deity Skanda-Karttikeya also features in both the Epics and the Puranas. Within the Epics, Karttikeya(388) is repeatedly described as the Sun-God, a role which in earlier Vedic literature was usually assigned to Agni.(399) More commonly, however,
Karttikeya is a warrior, a powerful deity whose astounding handsomeness is often remarked upon, and who adopts as his mount the peacock, “…the most beautiful bird found anywhere in the world.”(390) His most frequent weapon is the sakti or lance.(391) However, within the Puranas, Karttikeya’s role as warrior/war god is extended to portray a deity who embodies penetrating learning and wisdom.(392) Clothey has observed that within the context of Epic and Puranic mythology, the warrior embraces the dual functions of creation and destruction, entailing responsibility for the maintenance of cosmic dharma. Thus in his defeat of his enemies he preserves, renews or restores universal order. His role as a central pillar of cosmic symmetry elevates Skanda-Karttikeya into the position of a major deity, a high god.(393)

A further, and often neglected aspect of Skanda-Karttikeya, is his casting in the role of divine lover. In the Brahma Puruna the deity is shown as a profligate who is constantly found beguiling and seducing the consorts of the celestials. Understandably upset, the gods complain to Parvati who fruitlessly tries to persuade her son to refrain from a life of dissolution and pleasure. When her cajolery fails, Parvati decides to intervene more directly. Subsequently, whenever Skanda sets out on an amorous adventure, he encounters his mother. Stymied and frustrated, he pauses to reflect, ultimately embracing the path of asceticism. This myth is later repeated in the Skanda Purana.(394)

However, as Clothey has pointed out, the most obvious and profound motif of Skanda-Karttikeya mythology within the Vedic tradition is that of divine sonship. The implications of this role are far-reaching and establish the deity’s credentials as a great and universal god. The celestial son is viewed in many respects as the embodiment of the father; the fulfilment of the father’s functions and thus responsible for discharging many of the specific roles ascribed to the father.(395) Moreover, in early Sanskrit literature the son of a creator partakes of the world’s primordiality (that is, of the very essence of creation itself), and thus may be perceived as a generator of cosmic order. (396) Throughout the Gupta era, Skanda becomes firmly identified as Siva’s son, and thus a member of Siva’s family, consisting of Siva himself, Gauri, Laksmi, Sarasvati,
Ganesha and Skanda-Karttikeya.(397)

Many of the additional names acquired by the deity throughout this period remain in common usage. These include *Kumara* (a term first used to describe the god Agni, and meaning “that which is spilled or oozed”, that is, sperm), but also referring to the deity as a bachelor or boy, (398), *Mahasena; Subrahmanya; Guha* (indicating that the god had for a time been a cave dweller);(399) and *Gangeya* (because of his birth in the water of the Ganges).(400)

Throughout the period of Aryan-Vedic teachings, Skanda thus incorporated a variety of celestial motifs and themes. This composite deity gained the allegiance of many sectors of Northern Indian society, including kings, warriors, poets and religious philosophers. At some point in this era the warrior god fused with the Brahmanic Skanda, the slayer of the *asuras*(401) and the sustainer and renewer of cosmic order.(402) Not only does Skanda integrate all of these roles and functions, but as son of Siva he is infused with all of the commanding characteristics of a supreme deity and is thus elevated to the status of a high god in his own right.(403) While he is an auspicious deity who can and does grant boons to his devotees, at the same time he retains the ludic qualities of a rogue deity; as a philanderer, and as *Dhurta*, the patron of thieves.(404) These qualities, as much as those of the great Brahmanic deity, are to remain, sometimes unnoticed, often denied, as authentic voices of the god’s multifarious persona.(405)

6.3 The Northern-Southern Fusion

By the fourth to the fifth century C.E., Skanda of the Epics had become known in South India. By this stage he had made the transition to a pan-Indian god, though his primary northern manifestation as a Sanskritic kingship-warrior god tended to differ from his Tamil orientations. However, the growing influence of Sanskrit and Aryan themes in the South were to be increasingly reflected in the Tamil Murugan. These did not detract from the folkish attributes of the deity; the high Brahmanic god who occupied a prominent position within the established Hindu pantheon continued to coexist with the popular god of the hills, forests and pastoral peoples.(406)
In a great Tamil work of this era, the Paripatal, Sanskrit and Tamil mythology and motifs are conspicuously commingled. Not only is Skanda-Murugan identified as a composite deity, but the god is expressly linked to the other great deities. Thus, for example, his mother Parvati is shown to be the sister of Vishnu, thus making the latter an uncle of Skanda. Another passage provides the deity with two brides, the celestial Devesena, (later more popularly known by her Tamil name of Teyvayanai), and the earthy Valli, a bride of humble origins. The two brides of Murugan suggest a dual role for the deity; a heavenly and thus transcendent god, and one who in his earthly presence is immanent to his devotees. (407) The implications of the relationship between Murugan and Valli are explored later in this chapter.

The Skanda of the northern tradition is largely a mythological figure. He fulfils a prominent role in the cycle of creation, is familiar with and moves easily in the world of the high deities, and is expressly linked to the great celestial motifs – the sun, the stars, and God as creator. His covenant with his devotees is that offered by Brahmanic Hinduism – the promise of release, liberation, and absorption into the heavenly sphere. (408) His Sanskrit manifestations contrast with those of the more immediate and accessible Tamil Murugan, for although by this juncture Murugan has been accepted as a “high” god with all the characteristics that such a role implies, he retains his earthly aspects, as a god of fertility, of forests and rural life, a deity whose worship is exuberant and frequently sensual, a god depicted as “an extension of joyous humanness”. (409)

The spur for the accelerated and general integration of the diverse motifs and roles of Skanda-Murugan appears to have been provided by the warrior chieftains of the Pandya, Pallava and early Chola dynasties, (410) in particular the latter who were both powerful patrons of Brahmanic culture and worshippers of Murugan as Subrahmanya. (411)

But while Skanda-Murugan was becoming deeply entrenched within the Tamil country, Skanda was fading from the prominence he had enjoyed in Northern India. Indeed, in the period following the Gupta era, the worship of Skanda, except for that of Karttikeya, who was regarded as a rather minor deity, (412) had all but disappeared in the Aryan
regions. Thus Skanda-Murugan was to become almost exclusively a South Indian and especially Tamil god, and his cultus was to increasingly reflect the religious, philosophical and political permutations of Tamil history and society.

6.4 Skanda-Murugan in the Tamil Country
Toward the end of the Cankam period, and up until the tenth century, Murugan faded into relative obscurity. Much of this period was marked by the temporary eclipse of Hinduism within the Tamil country, and momentary ascendancy of the more austere religions of Jainism and Buddhism. The seventh century resurgence of Hinduism and the veneration of Siva and Vishnu inspired by the bhakti poets and their philosophy of devotionalism failed to re-establish Skanda as a major deity. While throughout this era he continued to be identified as the son of Siva, he was relegated to the status of a minor god, and his public and ceremonial worship languished.

However, as this era progressed, Skanda began to regather his former prominence. Following the post Jain/Buddhist re-emergence of Siva and Vishnu as the undisputed leading gods of the South Indian Hindu firmament, the profound implications of Skanda’s divine sonship were more widely recognized, while his brother Ganesha also gained extensive acceptance. Firmly positioned within the Saivite tradition, Skanda’s militaristic role gradually receded, and temple iconography increasingly depicted him as a philosopher and guru.

The reinstatement of Skanda-Murugan coincided with the inauguration of the Chola dynasty. Murugan’s “rehabilitation” as a great god was accompanied by a flowering of iconography which celebrated the deity’s multifaceted persona and which incorporated most of the elements of his prior background. Several persistent Murugan motifs and symbols were firmly established throughout this period. The depiction of the peacock as Murugan’s mount became standard, forever displacing the elephant. In addition, portrayals of Murugan as San Mukha (Shanmugan), a six-faced god astride a peacock, became accepted iconography in the early Chola era. Of great significance was the Chola fondness for Skanda in his role as the Skanda gurumurti, Subrahmanya.
The positioning of Skanda-Murugan as a great Saivite god spawned an accompanying devotional literature in both Sanskrit and Tamil, and an extensive mythology (as exemplified by the *Skanda Purana*). (417) This period was also marked by intense philosophical speculation in the Tamil country, much of it conducted within the *brahmadeyas* or Brahman settlements, which received substantial patronage.(418) The deity Subrahmanya played a considerable role in this process as *gurumurti*, as did Murugan as the font of the Tamil language, the moulder and teacher of Tamil grammar, and the creative inspiration of Tamil literature and poetry.(419)

However, although Skanda-Murugan’s single composite identity had been established, throughout much of the medieval period, the inconsistencies between the Sanskrit Skanda and the Tamil Murugan remained obvious. As Clothey has remarked, “Murukan is as fully Tamil in the medieval period as Subrahmanya is Sanskrit.”(420) Thus, while at one extreme, the high Brahmanic god Skanda-Subrahmanya embodied the ideals of asceticism, renunciation and released, at the other, Murugan, the folk deity, affirmed the fullness and exhilaration of life.(421) It was not until the Vijayanagara era that awareness grew of the intrinsic correspondence between the high Tamil and Sanskrit attributes of Murugan and the Brahmanic Skanda-Subrahmanya, and there was a concomitant more general, though never complete, acceptance of the deity in all his diversity.

Since the late nineteenth century, Murugan has been an integral component of the great cultural regeneration which has swept the Tamil country and the Tamil *diaspora*. Throughout the period leading to the independence of India, the deity has been associated with the revitalization, and indeed the entire spectrum, of the Tamil arts, and as patron of the Tamil languages, the publishing and promotion of neglected of forgotten works of Tamil literature and philosophy.(422) The renewed pride in the Tamil heritage took the form of popular movements which emphasized Tamil arts and traditions, and resulted, *inter alia*, in the renovation of the great temples of the Tamil country.(423)
In the period which has followed the attainment of Indian independence, Murugan temples have been opened to Adi Dravidars, and the overall improvement of transport in Tamil Nadu has made all Murugan pilgrimage sectors much more accessible to all sectors of the population. While the deity continues to reflect the full array of Sanskritic and Tamil components of his multifaceted persona, he has become indelibly identified with concepts of Tamil culture and ethnicity and his mythology has firmly tied the sacred geography of Tamil Nadu to the powerful Murugan shrine of Kataragama in southern Sri Lanka. (424) The 1967 election which brought the anti-Brahman “nationalist” party (Dravida Munnera Kalagam), to office in the state of Tamil Nadu was followed by a suite of measures which, inter alia, further entrenched Murugan’s already powerful presence within Tamil consciousness. Subsequent to the Chief Minister’s declaration at Palani that the deity was the “God of the DMK”, the Government moved to appoint non-Brahman executive officers to all major Murugan temples, attempted to enforce the reciting of accanais and the singing of hymns in Tamil, and adopted a series of policies aimed at sweeping away imagined Brahmanic practices and influences. (425) In the five years between 1967 and 1972, annual attendances at all Murugan shrines rose dramatically, (426) and have continued to steadily increase over the intervening years. (427) Indeed, Murugan appears to remain the Tamil deity par excellence, a god who reflects the heritage, history, traditions and social backgrounds of all Tamilians, and who, in one form of another, is regarded as accessible to every segment of Tamil Hindu society.

6.5 Murugan: Sacred Geography

The sacred geography of the Murugan cultus essentially comprises the six camps or sites (jointly known as the arul patai vitu), each of which is linked to particular episodes in his divine career, and which cumulatively embrace the major corpus of mythology which encompass the deity. (428) These centres firmly identify Murugan with the ethno-linguistic state of Tamil Nadu, thus simultaneously emphasizing the deity’s “Dravidian” associations, and sacralizing the region in which the temples are located. (429) Clothey has pointed out that the temple at Tiruttani, near the northern border of Tamil Nadu, together with Palani, near the western edge of the state, and Tiruchendur, on the south
east coast, collectively form a triangle which roughly encloses the Tamil country.(430)

While the location of five of Murugan’s centres are undisputed, many Tamils hold that the sixth site is every other shrine dedicated to Murugan. (Clothey points out that the Tamil expression is \textit{kunratal} translating as “every hill upon which the god dances.”) (431) However, Patrick Harrigan argues that there are only five \textit{patai vitu}, and that the sixth sacred site must be understood in metaphysical terms. He contends that the number six relates to Skanda-Murugan’s origins as the six divine sparks which emanated from Siva’s forehead and which later coalesced into \textit{Sanatkumara} (or Perpetual Youth). In his role as \textit{Sanmukha}(Shanmugan), the six-faced Skanda-Murugan represents the Lord of Space incorporating the six cardinal directions, that is, East, West, North, South, up and down; “the Unmoved Mover abiding as a conscious presence of the source and matrix of infinite possibilities.”(432) The six sites thus constitute the fullness of Skanda-Murugan, each site comprising one facet of the deity and thus one essential cosmological function. As Clothey has demonstrated, the six sites collectively serve to cosmicize and sacralize the Tamil country. Thus “Tamil Nadu becomes a microcosm with six \textit{cakras} even as the human frame is a microcosm in the symbol-system of yoga, and the temple is a microcosm in the symbol system associated with temple ritual.”(433)

Each of the five major pilgrimage centres embodies a mythological event within the Murugan cultus, and thus prescribes a range of ritual behaviours germane to the particular chapters of his cosmology. The five centres are:

(a) \textbf{Swamimalai}: approximately 8 kilometres from Kumbakonam, is the location where the youthful Murugan punished Brahma and subsequently at Siva’s request revealed to him the meaning of the \textit{Pravana Aum}.

(b) \textbf{Palani}: about 60 kilometres from the city of Madurai, is the locality where Murugan retired to realize the Truth (or fruits) within, following his “race” with Ganesha, and where subsequently defeated and transformed the \textit{asura} Idumban.

(c) \textbf{Tiruchendur}: located in the Tirunelvi District on the Bay of Bengal, marks the site of Murugan’s final battle with the \textit{asura} Surapadman when the latter entered the ocean as a giant mango tree and threatened to smother the world.
(d) Tiruppanrankunram: about eight kilometres from the city of Madurai, is held to be the site where Murugan married Teyvayanai, daughter of Indra, king of the gods.
(e) Tiruttani: situated on the northern border of Tamil Nadu, approximately 110 kilometres north of Chennai, is regarded as the location from where Murugan conducted his courtship of his second wife, Valli, and later wed her. Tiruttani also marks the spot where Murugan instructed the sage Agastya in Tamil, thus recognizing Murugan’s role as patron and mentor of Tamil literature and founder and teacher of Saiva Siddhanta.

6.6 Ritual Chronometry and the Murugan Cultus
Sacred chronometry, the measurement of time against cosmic rhythm, enables devotees to synchronize beliefs and ritual behaviours to the movement of bodies which are both extra-terrestrial and supramundane. The calibration of time not only makes the cosmic rhythm more immediately understandable, but also allows the determination of important units of time into significant periods when certain ritual observances are regarded as appropriate and access to the deities more negotiable. Clough describes these moments as “tempocosms”, units of time which represent “points of access to a larger dimension of existence.”(435) Thus festivals with their enclosed and prescribed ritual behaviours are fixed to coincide with important tempocosms. Taken collectively, these tempocosms provide the devotee with a cyclical cosmology, a vision of the world which imposes calendrical order, but while simultaneously presenting the possibility of both ritual and thus actual transcendence of the tyranny of linear time.(436)

Put simplistically, Tamil chronometry can be explained in terms of the daily cycle in relation to two much larger and concentrically arranged measurements of time, namely the lunar month and the solar year. The daily cycle is divided into a schedule of sacred hours (tirukkalam) which are homologized to the deity’s existential life. Thus the dawn is associated with the commencement of the deity’s life and the creation of the cosmos. The growth of cosmic dynamism (and of the deity’s powers) reaches its peak at midday (mattyanam) which also marks the finalization of the daylight ritual observances. The afternoon-evening round concludes with the “ritual of the bedchamber” in which the
The deity retires for the evening. The lunar cycle is divided into 27 units (asterisms or nakshastras) marked by conspicuous stars or star groups. The fortnights within the lunar month – the “bright” cycle when the moon is waxing, and the “dark” cycle when the moon is waning – are each calibrated into 15 tirthis or stages. The full moon (paurnami) is regarded as especially momentous and is commemorated in all Saivite temples. The solar cycle is divided into 12 monthly segments, which are calculated, in the main, against the moon’s movements in relation to the nakshastras. Tamil months commence with the day in which the sun “enters” the new sign of the zodiac. The entire year represents a day in the life of the gods, and the deity’s cosmic cycle is carefully calculated against a complex and graduated chronometry. Only when the cycles of months, nakshastras, tirthis and ritual hours have been assigned a weighted significance can tempocosms or points of cosmological access be regarded as established.

The Murugan cultus has intricate associations with the notion of cosmic time. Thus with the Epic, the Mahabharata, Skanda is born on the amavasya (new moon day) when the sun and the moon are conjoined. Indra, king of the gods, declares Skanda to be lord of time, and his birth to inaugurate a fresh chronometric era. In popular belief, Murugan is associated with the regularity of the seasons, and is not only responsible for ushering in the rains, but is also linked to the blossoming of certain trees.

Clothey has demonstrated how ritual worship of Skanda-Murugan is comprehensively embedded in notions of cosmic time. The majority of Murugan festivals fall in the six months of the year between the winter and summer solstices, thus homologizing to the “pre-dawn” and “morning” of the deity’s “cosmic day”. Thaipusam is fixed by the nakshastra pucam which falls on or near the full moon day in the month of Tai and is homologized to the post-dawn of the deity’s “cosmic day”, a time when the deity is moving toward the very height of his power and vigour. Within Tamil traditions, and in particular, those of the Murugan cultus, the full moon implies the attainment of complete maturity and authority, the total control of faculties and capabilities. The asterism on Thaipusam is that of tantapani, which consists both of the staff of asceticism and that of danda, that is, royal and military leadership.
unambiguously echoes events in the deity’s cosmology. Murugan has angrily departed southwards from the family home at Mt. Kailas to seek the inner fruits of knowledge and wisdom at Palani, and in living as a renunciate, he has conquered the inner passions. He has destroyed the demon Idumban, relieved him of his burden, and has converted him to both disciple and perpetual gatekeeper. Parvati’s presentation of the Sakti Vel represents the final stage of this transformative period, and heralds his readiness to meet the asuric forces in battle.

6.7 Murugan’s Marriage to Valli
Within the Sanskrit tradition, Skanda is viewed as a celibate ascetic, (the eternal brahmacarin), married to a single wife, the fair and celestial Devesena (the Army of the Gods). However, within the Tamil traditions, the earliest reference to Murugan’s bride is to the earthy Valli.(443) Valli, dark complexioned, a native of the Tamil country, is regarded as more fun loving, even “frivolous”, than the seemingly austere Devesena. (444) Among Tamils, Valli is undoubtedly the more popular of Murugan’s consorts, and her marriage conveys more profound and immediate philosophical implications to many devotees.(445) This was emphasized by the obvious reverence felt for Valli among the Malaysian devotees whom I interviewed in the course of my fieldwork, and in their determination to explain the significance of the divine marriage. In the following paragraphs I have outline the essential mythology surrounding the courtship and marriage of Murugan and Valli, and have delineated the major inferences of this mythology for Murugan devotees. This summary is largely, but not wholly, compiled from the accounts provided by Malaysian devotees.

Contemporaneous with Siva’s creation of Skanda, Mahavishnu, the deity representing the illusive cosmic mind and clearly identified as the bother of Parvati,(446) ejected fierce light through both of his eyes, in the process creating two daughters, called Amirthavalli and Sundaravalli. The two virgins, having met Murugan at the home of his father, Siva, in Mt. Kailas, both fell in love with the deity and declared their determination to be married to him. Both performed severe tapas in order to be united with him. Finally, Murugan appeared to both of them and advised that he would marry
them after he had defeated Surapadman the chief of the asuras. But the marriages would not take place until both had been reborn. He decreed that each was to have an animal as a mother; Amirthavalli’s was to be a heavenly white elephant and Sundaravalli’s a Doe.

Amirthavalli was duly born from a white elephant, and was known as Devesena, or more popularly by her Tamil name, Teyvayana. Teyvayana was adopted by Indra, the king of the heavenly gods, and raised as his daughter. Following the battle with Surapadman at Tiruchendur, Indra respectfully reminded the victorious Skanda that he had promised to marry Teyvayana, now a beautiful young woman. Skanda travelled to Tiruppanrankunram near Madurai for the wedding. The marriage was conducted according to established Brahmanic rites. Skanda’s parents, Siva and Parvati, were in attendance, as was Skanda’s elder brother, Ganesha. The parents solemnly blessed their Divine Son and their celestial daughter-in-law.

Sundaravalli’s birth was less propitious. She was conceived after the sage Shivamuni was distracted from his tapas in the forest by the sight of a beautiful Doe which he impregnated with a “lustful” glance. The Doe gave birth to a baby girl in a pit underneath the creepers, (by tradition, these are sweet yam creepers), and among the tubers. The deer immediately abandoned the child who was discovered by a Kuravar hunter chieftain, Nambirajan, reputedly at a location known as Vallimalai, near Chittoor in the Tamil country. (In Sri Lankan recensions, the mythology specifies that Valli was born at Kathirkaman and Nambirajan is identified as king of the tribal Veddas, a hunting people. Nambirajan adopted the girl as his own and named her “Valli” (creeper). When she reached the age of twelve years she was sent out to guard the millet fields from the beasts and birds. She kept the beasts at bay with a slingshot and deterred the birds by crying out as they attempted to alight on the crops. During this period she was informed by a wandering fortuneteller than she was destined to marry Murugan. She yearned for Murugan’s presence, and firmly resolved that she would accept no other suitor.

The sweet cries of Valli’s voice as she watched over the millet fields reached the ears of
the Rishi Narada, who hasted to Mt. Kailas to advise Murugan of her beauty. Leaving Teyvayanai in the celestial abode of his parents, Murugan set off for the millet fields. Upon his arrival, he assumed the form of a hunter prince and engaged Valli in conversation. However, when his remarks ventured into the realm of flirtation, Valli raised a cry of alarm, and her father returned with his band of hunters. Murugan immediately transformed himself into a venkai tree. The hunters asked Valli how a fully grown tree had so suddenly appeared. Valli responded, “I do not know how it came; it appeared I think, like magic (mayam). I have been trembling at the thought that something that was not here before has sprung up so suddenly.”(451) Some informants assert that at this point the hunters attempted to fell the tree, but when their best efforts made no impression, they gave up and departed.

After the hunters had withdrawn, Murugan resumed his original form and proposed marriage to Valli. Valli responded that she was a girl of very modest origins; was it not wrong for one so exalted as he to trifle with her in such a flippant manner? Murugan as a hunter prince then disappeared only to return as an itinerant bangle seller, a function which gave him the licence to massage Valli’s hands as he fitted his wares on her wrists. Valli was very quick to see through his disguise, and to send the “bangle seller” on his way.

Once again, Murugan appeared as a hunter prince. However, with the return of Nambirajan and his retinue, he transformed himself into a decrepit aged ascetic, complete with holy robes, but toothless, grey-bearded and hunched of back. The old sage offered Nambirajan due felicitations and advised him that he wished to bathe in the spring of the mountain which fell under Nambirajan’s control. The chief gave the ascetic his permission, and ordered Valli to be companion to the sage. Valli subsequently escorted the saint to the other side of the mountain where the spring was located.(452) When the ascetic complained of hunger, Valli provided him with honey and nuts, though because of his infirmity she was obliged to feed him by hand. The saint then desired to quench his thirst. Valli led him to the spring with the aid of a stick; she held one end and he held the other. When they reached the spring, the saint pretended to fall into the
water, and grasping Valli, pulled her in after him. Valli was unable to swim, and the aged sage was obliged to rescue her. The frail ascetic was unexpectedly transformed into a handsome young man who bore Valli to the Cave where she was accustomed to churning buttermilk. Here he applied “artificial respiration”.(453) Valli was seized with a powerful vision of her marriage to Murugan, and the wonder of his embrace, or in Arumugam’s words, “…she was seeing Lord Murugan…and nothing else. In short, she was in a trance.”(454)

At this point Valli became aware that she was being observed by her best friend who was standing outside the cave, and the trance disappeared. In place she found herself in the arms of an aged saint who now asked Valli to marry her. Laughing, Valli refused, stating that he was both old and infirm, and that an elderly ascetic should not be lusting after young women. In return, the old sage responded that he had merely been joking with her.

Murugan pondered over the failure of his wooing, and suddenly realized that he had neglected to enlist the aid of his brother, Ganesha,(Maha Ganapati, Remover of Obstacles). Almost instantly Ganesha appeared in the form of a “huge, black tusker”(455) and resoundingly trumpeted the Pravana Aum. Terrified, Valli rushed back into the arms of the aged ascetic, and implored his protection. The sage replied that he would ensure her safety on the condition that she agreed to wed him. Distraught, Valli agreed, whereupon the sage approached the elephant, held up his palm, and asked the elephant to leave. The “tusker” immediately departed. Turning to Valli, the saint reminded her of her promise to marry him. By now completely distressed, Valli put her hands to her ears to block out the old man’s voice. As she did so she heard the sound of the Pravana Aum within. Confused, and suspecting trickery, Valli censured the old man for joking with her. The sage merely laughed, and replied, “Oh, ho, Valli, you have already learnt how to joke with the real joker himself, and as such you are now fit and matured enough for the yoke of Divine Union.”(456)

According to most Malaysian informants, the courtship ends with Valli’s ultimate
recognition of the wild elephant as Ganesha. The deity then reappears as a divine white elephant, whom Valli worships and supplicates for his aid to marry Murugan. In response, the white elephant picks Valli up in his trunk, and places her in the arms of the aged ascetic who now reveals himself as Murugan. Ganapati appears before Murugan and Valli, and agrees to conduct their marriage. He blesses them both, and promises to be with them forever.

However, other versions have Valli returning to the millet fields after her encounter with the deity. Her companion notices her change in manner. Murugan subsequently enlists the aid of her companion by threatening the extreme measure of mounting the matal hobbyhorse and parading through the streets of the village if he is denied access to Valli; the companion agrees to assist and thus acquiesces in the secret trysts between the sage/deity and Valli.(457)

Following the harvest, Valli returns to the village where she frets for Murugan. Fearing that she is unwell, her foster parents lock Valli in their hut. They subsequently consult a woman medium, but she is possessed by the cur, the demon of the mountain slopes. The Kuravar then hold a ritualistic dance (veriyattal) for Murugan. The deity descends, and through visions and other signs makes it clear that he took possession of Valli while she was tending the millet, but that her malady will be cured if he is worshipped. Valli instantly recovers, and praises are offered to Murugan.

Murugan searches for Valli in the fields, but failing to find her, the lovelorn deity wanders the mountain, finally pausing outside Nambirajan’s hut. Observing him, Valli’s companion urges him to elope with Valli. The two lovers flee from the village.(458) Murugan now marries Valli in secret. The following morning the Kuravar, finding Valli gone, send out an armed search party. Happening upon the couple the Karavar fire volleys of arrows at Murugan, but at a single crow of the cock on his banner, they all fall down slain. Valli is distressed, and at Narada’s urging, Murugan restores them all to life. (459) Nambirajan now insists that the couple be married according to orthodox rites. The wedding is duly held, and Siva, Parvati and all the gods are present to extend their
blessings to the couple. (460) Murugan ties the *tali*, the Tamil wedding necklace that binds the bride to her husband. Murugan then bears Valli to Tiruttani in modern day northern Tamil Nadu, and then to his celestial dwelling in the *Kanta Mantaram* (the sacred mountain of Skanda), where with Valli seated on his right side and Devesena (sic) on his left, he works to protect the universe. (461)

6.8 Murugan and his Consorts: The Implications
The mythology surrounding Teyvayanai and Valli conveys a comprehensive array of symbolic messages and motifs, as well as a substantial corpus of metaphysical and ontological conclusions integral to the Murugan cultus. Indeed, so vast is that topic that a full and detailed interpretation and explanation of the mythology’s significance lies beyond the scope of this thesis. In the following paragraphs I have highlighted some of the major themes and philosophical implications of the divine marriages.

*Firstly,* the marriages fuse Saiva and Vaishnava motifs. By his marriage to the daughters of Vishnu, Murugan may be identified as more than Siva’s son and nephew to Vishnu; he is now the deity’s son-in-law. (462) Indeed, in some versions, accepted among sections of the Malaysian Hindu population, Murugan’s bride Valli is a daughter of Krishna, himself an incarnation (*avatar*) of her recognized father Vishnu-Tirumal. (463)

*Secondly,* the marriage to Valli further confirms Murugan’s identity as a Tamil deity. While the celestial Teyvayanai is imported from the “Aryan” north, the Sanskritic universe of Indra and the gods, Valli is indigenous, a product of the southern soil, and integrated into the agricultural pursuits of the region. (464) Moreover, she hails from an exceedingly modest background; she is born among the Kuravar hill people, raised by a hunter chieftain and his wife, and is sent to work in the fields. (465) However, her origins prove no barrier to her union with the Divine, and indeed her significance is underscored by her placement at the “prestigious” right-hand side of Murugan. (466)

*Thirdly,* Murugan’s two brides reflect his constant movements through an array of cosmic possibilities and potentialities. The deity is now viewed on one hand as the
transcendent Skanda, restorer of cosmic *dharma*, and re-creator and ruler of the cosmos. On the other, he is perceived as Murugan, immanent deity who is close to and vitally concerned with the affairs of his devotees. In the following paragraphs I will argue that the divine marriages resolve this dilemma, and indeed provide a cosmic schema which explains both his roles. In so doing, I will draw upon the work of D. Handelman, (467) as well as adding observations of my own.

Saiva Siddhanta philosophy and popular Tamil belief structures posit a cosmos which is in constant flux and transformation. This flux, resulting from the dynamic tension and constantly shifting relationship between Siva and Sakti, produces a never-ending succession of symmetrical and asymmetrical states. (468) Indeed, as observed in Chapter One, the attainment of an absolute balance between these two principles would result in cosmological stasis and universal disintegration and entropy.

Saivism posits three major ontological principles or categories within the phenomenal cosmos, namely, in order of hierarchical descent, Siva, Sakti and *asura* (or “demonic”). (469) Siva is the foundation of all creation and permeates all levels of the hierarchy. While any given category can reconstitute itself at still lower levels in the hierarchy, it cannot move to higher levels without upsetting the cosmic balance. Thus Sakti can and does create *asuras*, and manifests on a lower planes as *maya*, but Sakti cannot become Siva (although Siva can absorb Sakti back into his own being). The *asuras*, at the base of the hierarchy, cannot encompass higher categories without causing destruction and chaos. (470)

It follows, then, that the deity can “descend” into a deflection of himself, or into multiple or lesser forms (*saktis*). Thus, the great Siva, who manifests in such “pure” forms as Parasivam (Absolute Reality), or the sublime Nataraja (Lord of the Cosmic Dance), may at lower levels appear in such terrifying guises as *Bhairava* (the Terrible), who delights in destruction, or *Bhutesvara* (Lord of the Elements), who “haunts graveyards and places of cremation, wearing serpents round his neck and skulls for a necklace, attended by troops of imps and trampling on rebellious demons.” (471) But Siva can reconstitute
himself in totality by ascending hierarchically through these manifestations. (We should note, in passing, that the devotee who consistently worships the substratum, as it were, which constitutes the very essence of the devolved Siva in any manifestation, is similarly able to progressively achieve knowledge of Siva in his fullness.) In a like manner Sakti can move through a succession of aspects – such as *jnana sakti* (knowledge), *kriya sakti* (action) and *iccha sakti* (desire, volition) – which can reassemble themselves as Sakti, consort of Siva. But no principle or category can surmount its natural place in the hierarchy, that is, at the level at which it was ordered or at which it entered existence, without disconnecting or fragmenting the agglomeration of elements that form the higher realms of encompassment.(472)

To summarize thus far. The cosmos depends upon constant movement. At one extreme absolute control by Siva results in the total subsumption of all creation within him, the cessation of all existence, and the cosmic stasis of *mahapralaya*; at the other total dissolution of inclusion leads to cosmic decomposition, disintegration and chaos. Handelman has suggested that the genius of South Indian cosmogony is the role of triads which both encourage and explain shifts and permutations as the various elements interact with one another.(473) Murugan and his consorts Valli and Teyvayanai represent such a triad. The deity mediates between his two wives, while the latter relate to Murugan and to each other. As the relationship between the three constantly shifts, so do the circumstances of the deity. This dynamism produces a broad and complex array of points of intersection, each of which represents a cosmic possibility.(474) The marriages of Murugan enable us to resolve the seeming dilemma posed by the deity’s polarity as both a transcendent and immanent deity.

Skanda weds the celestial Teyvayanai following the defeat of the *asuras*. The marriage observes the paradigmatic conventions of phenomenal Tamil society. Teyvayanai is the ideal wife for a transcendent god. She embraces the quality of *karpu*; that is, she is chaste and pure. However, this marriage and Skanda-Murugan’s withdrawal to the celestial spheres leaves him remotes and isolated from the affairs of his devotees. His seclusion in the heavens results in a slowing of cosmic activities, which if left
unchecked, would create stagnation and ultimately degradation. (475)

Conversely, Valli is associated with vigour and the quickening of cosmic movements. As Murugan pursues Valli, he assumes a number of exceptional attributes; he becomes a trickster, a prankster, a master of evanescent guise. Moreover, most informants state that he resumes his multiform of Shanmugan. However, should Murugan remain continually with Valli in the phenomenal world, his continued immanence would result in the loss of transcendence, which invests in him the properties required for cosmic rulership. (476) The collapse of transcendence would lead to cosmic decay and disintegration.

In sum, the triad of Skanda-Murugan, Teyvayanai and Valli provides a schema for cosmic organization apposite for a deity who is constituted from and combines within himself the inherently dynamic tension of the principles of Siva-Sakti. The reciprocal mediation between each point of the triad, and the other two members, implies the incessant movement of the deity along a finely graduated continuum of cosmic potentialities ranging between the polarities of transcendence and immanence.

Finally, the mythology has profound implications for the modalities of worship within the Murugan cultus. For while, at base, both consorts symbolize the conventionalities of Saiva Siddhanta and popular Tamil belief structures, that is, the soul, (pacu) liberated from the bondages of ignorance (paca) and united with God (Pati), (477) the routes by which this objective is attained are vastly different. Indeed, the marriage mythology suggests, _inter alia_, the limits of orthodoxy in achieving knowledge of the Divine.

Teyvayanai’s marriage to Murugan follows the conventions of Tamil society. Her wedding is solemnized according to accepted formalities, and precedes a proper conjugal life. (478) She thus symbolizes _kriya sakti_, the path of action and motivation, (479) and thus of established modes of devotional worship conducted within the framework of received _Agamic_ rites.

In contrast, the deity’s relationship with Valli is imbued with the Tamil concept known
as kaluvu, which Brenda Beck has described as pre-marital love undertaken without regard for the niceties and formal obligations of society mores.(480) Valli thus symbolizes iccha sakti (desire/volition) in terms that equate to the human understanding and experience of this quality, that is, the worship of the Divine through “ecstasy and self abandonment…. (however)...Self abandonment in Hinduism is associated with lack of control, and consequently with danger and defilement in general.”(481)

While Valli is resolute in her determination to marry Murugan, it must be underscored that it is the deity who pursues Valli, just as the pure-hearted and committed devotee is rewarded by the god’s engagement and union with the soul. In this regard the episode involving the matal hobbyhorse assumes a special significance. The matal hobbyhorse was a device employed by lovesick young men to shame their adored. However, in the writings and songs of the bhakti poets, the matal hobbyhorse becomes a metaphoric convention to portray the longing of the soul for union with the deity which is thus made to appear as a hard-hearted or indifferent woman. In the myth of Valli, the bhakti perspective is inverted: the god is male, and the threat to mount the matal hobbyhorse, an act of abasement and humiliation, is to drive the devotee to union with the deity. (482) But even without this incident, Murugan’s behaviour is revealed as deceptive and feckless, and heedless of accepted societal standards and norms of respectability.(483)

The marriage of Murugan and Valli exemplifies the very essence and final goal of bhakti spirituality, “the immediate spontaneous union of the soul with the divine”.(484) However, the pathway to the marriage is convoluted. Skanda-Murugan does not reveal his divinity at the outset, but rather approaches Valli in a series of disguises. In so doing, he tests the strength of her vow that she intends to marry Murugan, and no other. Although the deity ultimately weds Valli, his true identity is revealed only at the moment of immediate union. His advances to Valli and the different forms he adopts are indicative of his divine play (lilas), and reveal Murugan as a trickster, the honourable “rogue” who leads the aspirant through the experiential world until he/she is relieved of all illusions and is fully prepared for the encounter with Divine Reality.(485) The meaning is made explicit in Murugan’s comments to Valli, when, in his guise as the old
sage, having tricked Valli into marriage, he commends her on having learned to deal with the “real joker” and that she is now ready for the “yoke of Divine Union”. (486)

The pre-marital trysts and ultimate union with Valli symbolize the disorder which attends apprehension of the Divine, and the overwhelming power which accompanies this process. Moreover, Valli’s lowly status suggests that the modest, the self effacing and the subservient are capable of responding to and discerning the divine. (487) though in ways that might not necessarily fall within the prescribed corpus of recognized ritual Agamic worship. At this point, it is worth remarking that the mythology of Valli infers that the transcendent Skanda appears to devotees in whatever forms he chooses to manifest himself, and even though this may be a guise or illusion, the aspirant who truly reveres the divine who inheres in that form, however unconventional that may be, and however removed from accepted Agamic depictions, will through the love and mercy of the deity, attain ultimate knowledge of and union with the Reality and Truth that is Skanda-Murugan.

CONCLUSIONS
This chapter has looked at Tamil history and society and in very general terms some of the key aspects of the evolution of Tamil Hinduism. It has also examined the Murugan cultus and the attributes which underscore its continuing relevance, and indeed centrality to Tamil Hindu culture.

We have seen that the essential contours of modern Tamil Hinduism were shaped throughout the period of the great Tamil dynasties, each of which made their own distinctive contributions to South Indian institutions and societies. These dynasties embraced societies which were characterized by astounding diversity; a heterogeneous population segmented both horizontally and vertically by a medley of ethnicities, regions, occupations, castes and modes of worship, and further complicated by internal movement and migration. These societies were ruled by a ritually incorporative sovereignty, a kingship which reached and controlled the various segments through the establishment of complex reciprocal obligations and supplemented by annual and
splendid rituals of cosmic renewal and redistribution.

The Hindu religion which evolved within the dynastic era reflected the profound segmentation of the societies themselves. At the upper level the Ksatriya-Brahman nexus produced great temples and centres of learning. These were replicated by Vellalar and merchant castes, especially as economic changes enhanced the political power of these groups. The history of Tamil Hinduism reads as a continual process of dialogue and redefinition, and in particular the constant incorporation of “popular” practices and gods, many of whom retained their site-specific characteristics while simultaneously acquiring the title and overarching attributes of one of another of the great Agamic deities.

The triumph of Hinduism over the rival religions Jainism and Buddhism created new forms of religious expression including bhaktism and Saiva Siddhanta, both of which absorbed significant elements of indigenous folk religions and popular belief structures. Bhakti religions became a vehicle for direct cognition of the god, a highly charged and emotional devotionalism which stressed the validity of individual experience of the divine, and which by-passed the formal ritualism, ceremonialism and disciplines of the orthodox approaches to liberation. At its most extreme bhaktism countenanced seemingly solipsistic and outwardly bizarre forms, which transgressed societal norms, and which claimed justification in direct experience of a Transcendence in which all polarities were dissolved. Saiva Siddhanta posited a dynamic relationship between the categories of Pati-pacu-paca (God, soul and matter) in which the soul is ultimately freed through divine grace from the bondages of paca into a relationship of profound contemplation and union with Pati. However, these closely inter-related and overlapping religious forms insist upon the validity and ultimate autonomy of the individual soul, and both posit a logic of inner movement in which the individual who genuinely and devoutly worships the deity in whatever form he/she perceives him/her, including the outer forms or devolutions of Pati/God, will be progressively drawn toward a full realization of Divine Reality.
We have noted that the period of British colonialism and in particular British post-Mutiny racial ideologies, based upon orientalist readings of Indian history, culture and institutions, produced reactive Hindu reform movements, which in South India attempted to locate and disinter imagined pasts. These consisted of Neo-Hinduism which looked to a putative Aryan-Sanskritic civilization, and two Tamil oriented movements, Neo-Shaivism and Dravidian “nationalism”, both of which sought in radically different ways to re-create a supposed autochthonous Tamil culture free of its Sanskritic-Brahmanic accretions. Both condemned, in vituperative terms, indigenous “little” or popular traditions.

We have also examined the Murugan cultus, from its dual origins in Tamil folk traditions and northern Sanskritic religion. This section identified some of the huge diversity of roles accorded to Skanda-Murugan, ranging from the possessive deity to high Brahmanic deity, and has noted how the fusion of northern-southern motifs produced a composite god whose complex persona enabled him to reach every segment of South Indian society, and with the rise of Dravidian “nationalism” located him as the quintessential Tamil deity. The examination of sacred geography and chronometry of the Murugan cultus established both cosmic and sequential links with the Tamil lands, and provided a range of propitious ritual moments and concomitant behaviours favourable for communication with the deity. Finally, the divine marriages to Teyvayanai and Valli suggested other possibilities in the Murugan cultus ranging from the conventionalities of formal worship and an orthodox layered approach to the divine, to the more idiosyncratic and even transgressive bhaktism exemplified by Murugan’s wooing of Valli. This mythology implied movement from the ultimate world of forms and phenomenal illusion to the inner world of perception, contemplation, truth and transcendence.

In sum, this chapter has furnished an overview of the breathtaking diversity encompassed by Tamil Hinduism, and the extensive array of particularistic forms which co-exist, often uneasily, within the Tamil worldview. But I would suggest that this multitude of forms has several broad and consistent features. Firstly, they envisage a
cosmos in perpetual flux, both at the macro and micro level, a never-ending tension between the principles of Siva and Sakti, alternation between stasis and chaos, a cosmos embodying the dynamics of movement, exchange and transformation. Secondly, they imply a flexible relativity between the ideals of transcendence and immanence, a negotiable contiguity linking the peripheral world of forms and differentiation and the inner world where all binary oppositions and differentiations collapse into the oneness of transcendence, a progression from the border to the centre accomplished through the agency of divine encompassment and control. While this may be expressed in different ways (for example, Valli’s union with Murugan, or the Pacific’s divine deliverance from the bondages of Paca), the underlying principle of inner movement to the stillness and Oneness of the Absolute remains the same. Finally, Tamil theology and popular belief structures advocate an essential anti-authoritarianism which insist upon the ultimate veracity of the soul; a “democratic” ethos which recognizes that the inner movement embraces an infinite range of possibilities and a multitude of forms, and thus that countless paths, often convoluted, even contrary, all in the last analysis lead to a common destination. Murugan’s ubiquitous persona bestrides Tamil Hinduism like a colossus, meeting all potentialities and offering every devotee from the highest to the lowest, from the soul deep in yoga, to the most simple and unsophisticated bhakta, the promise of illumination, knowledge and release.

NOTES
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(3) ibid:33
(4) ibid:22
(5) ibid:23
(6) ibid:275
(7) ibid:23
(9) Stein(1980), op cit:64-65,100
(10) ibid:65
(11) ibid:74-75
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(13) ibid:177
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(16) ibid
(17) Stein(1980), op cit:90,104
(19) Dirks (1993), op cit:35
(20) Stein (1980), op cit:383
(21) ibid:50-51
(22) ibid:440
(23) Dirks (1993), op cit:34; Stein (1980), op cit:418
(24) Dirks (1993), op cit:154
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(26) Dirks (1993), op cit:19
(27) ibid:52
(28) ibid:71
(30) Stein (1980), op cit:275
(31) ibid:268
(32) Shulman (1985), op cit:366
(34) Stein (1980), op cit:268
(35) ibid:267-268
(36) Shulman (1985), op cit:366
(37) Stein (1980), op cit:40
(38) Dirks (1993), op cit:28
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(41) Shulman (1985), op cit:95
(42) Appadurai (1978), op cit:47
(43) Shulman (1985), op cit:31
(44) ibid
(45) Dirks (1993), op cit:28-29
(46) Appadurai (1981), op cit:71
(47) ibid:62-63; Appadurai (1978), op cit:48
(48) Appadurai (1978), op cit:48
(49) ibid:49
(50) Dirks (1993), op cit:128
(51) ibid:29
(52) ibid:37
(53) ibid:128
(54) ibid:134
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(56) ibid:134
(57) Appadurai (1978), op cit:47-49
(58) Dirks (1993), op cit:47
(59) ibid:31
(60) Breckenbridge, Carol A. “From Protector to Litigant: Changing Relations Between Hindu Temples and the Raja of Ramnad”, in Stein, Burton (1978), op cit:78
(61) Dirks (1993), op cit:38-39
(62) Breckenbridge (1978), op cit:82
(63) Dirks (1993), op cit:40; Breckenbridge (1978), op cit:88
(64) Stein (1980), op cit:384; Dirks (1993), op cit:40 Breckenbridge (1978), op cit:88
(65) Dirks (1993), op cit:41
(66) Breckenbridge (1978), op cit:92; Stein (1980), op cit:391
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(68) Stein (1980), op cit:391
(69) Breckenbridge (1978), op cit:88
(72) Fuller (1992), op cit:15
(73) ibid:12-15
(75) Stein (1980), op cit:54-55
(76) ibid:47
(78) Quigley, op cit:24
(80) Dirks (1993), op cit:284
(81) Quigley, op cit:139
(82) ibid:166
(83) ibid:11
(84) Dirks (1993), op cit:284
(86) Stein (198), op cit:9
(87) Quigley, op cit:160-161
(88) Stein (1980), op cit:10-11
(89) Dirks (1993), ibid:247
(90) ibid
(92) Quigley, op cit:7
(93) Fuller (1992), op cit:13
(94) Quigley, op cit:4-5
(95) Beck (1972), op cit.
(96) Rajakrishnan (1984), *Caste Consciousness..., op cit:47*
(97) Beck (1972), op cit:2-3
(98) Fuller (1992), op cit:13
(99) Hutton claims that the word caste has its origins in the Portugues word *casta*, signifying “breed”, “race” or “kind”. (Hutton, op cit:47)
(100) Rajakrishnan (1984), *Caste Consciousness..., op cit:5-7*
(101) Quigley, op cit:106,161
(102) ibid:87
(103) ibid:106
(104) ibid:141
(107) Beck (1972), op cit:7
(108) Rajakrishnan (1984), *Caste Consciousness..., op cit:4-5*
(109) Fuller (1992), op cit:15
(110) Quigley, op cit:140
(111) Moffatt, op cit:111
(112) ibid:59
(113) ibid:40
(114) Quigley, op cit:156
(115) Moffatt, op cit:87-88
Moffat points out that prior to the imposition of British rule, lower castes had certain rights. In cultural terms, the high castes were restrained by fear of the power of sorcery of the very low in society. Economically, the non-cultivating high castes were exceedingly dependent on the low caste agricultural labourers, giving the low castes a degree of bargaining power. Politically, the high castes needed the support of low caste retainers in factional disputes, and low castes could appeal to extra-village royal authority. In addition, low castes had a right to boycott a high caste person who mistreated one of their number. The creation of the new British agricultural economy converted ranked economic rights into monetarized rights, thus effectively removing the rights of self-protection from the lowest castes. (Moffat, op cit:44)

The designation of left hand has been attached to corrupt or perverse forms of worship called *vamis* (from *vama* – "left side" or "reverse") which are secret forms of tantric worship. These do not apply in this discussion. (Stein (1980), op cit:201)

Stein suggests that these subcultures, each comprising a distinct identity composed of an amalgam of religious, vocational and residential criteria, imply a form of system ranking which strongly echoes the *varna* classification found elsewhere within the Indian cultural sphere. (ibid)
(133) ibid: 323
(136) Stein (1980), op cit:331
(137) ibid:84-85
(138) ibid:237-238
(139) ibid:324
(140) ibid:237
(141) ibid:239-240
(142) ibid:330
(143) ibid:331
(144) ibid:84
(145) ibid:172
(146) ibid:352
(147) Appadurai (1981), op cit:52
(149) ibid:26-27
(150) Stein(1980), op cit:454
(152) Fuller (1992), op cit:xi
(153) Stein (1980), op cit:85
(154) Moffatt, op cit:219
(156) Appadurai (1978), op cit:48
(157) ibid; Stein (1980), op cit:244
(158) Stein (1980), op cit:252
(159) ibid:244-245
(160) Appadurai (1978), op cit:49
(161) ibid:57-59
(163) Appadurai (1981), op cit:21
(164) Stein (1980), op cit:454
(165) Appadurai (1981), op cit:18
(166) ibid:20-21
(167) ibid:22
(169) Coutright, Paul B. “On this Holy Day in My Humble Way”, in Waghorne and Cutler, op cit:46
(172) Dehejia, op cit:1
(173) ibid:8
(174) ibid:8-9
(175) ibid:19
(176) ibid:7
(177) ibid:69
(179) Dehejia, op cit:28-29
(180) ibid:15-17
(181) Clothey (1978), op cit:100-101
(182) Siva, Loganathan and Thinnappan, op cit:18-21; Hudson, Dennis. “Violent and
Fanatical Devotion Among the Nayanars: A Study in the Periya Puranam of Cekkilar”, in Hiltebeitel, Alf (Editor), op cit:375
(183) Stein (1980), op city:81
(184) Dehejia, op cit:4
(185) For example St. Tirumalar, spiritual preceptor of the Nayanar states:

With senses

Stilled and indrawn

Surrender

To the Beloved –

Like a man who lies with woman

In embrace and loving caress –

When That becomes This

Peace and bliss

Will indeed be yours. (Quoted in Dehejia, op cit:14-15)

(186) Hudson, “Violent and Fanatical Devotion…”, op cit:373
(187) Dehejia, op cit:13
(188) Thus St. Manickavasagar states:

Once I went to Aiyyaru, with light and reverend tread,

I saw come two young elephants, male by loved female led,

And in that sight I saw God’s foot, saw sacred things unsaid, (Quoted in Siva, Loganathan and Thinnappan, op cit:19)

(189) Hudson, “Violent and Fanatical Devotion…”, op cit:376
(190) ibid; Dehejia, op cit:65. For example, St. Manickavasagar speaks of divine intoxication in the following terms:

Here we shall dance deranged

We shall dance drunk,

like mad, like mad,

We shall roll and dance

There are no voyeurs here (also Brahmans)

None to ask questions here,

Drowning in Siva’s love,
We shall become one. (Quoted in Daniel, E. Valentine. Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984:253)

(191) Shulman (1985), op cit:354
(192) Siva, Loganathan, and Thinnappan, op cit:19
(193) Hudson, “Violent and Fanatical Devotion…”, op cit:380
(194) ibid:385-391
(195) Shulman (1985), op cit:351-353
(197) The example most pertinent to our discussion is of course Murugan’s conversion of Idumban from asura to temple gatekeeper. See also, Waghorne, Joanne Punzo. “From Royal Baron to Servant of God? Gaining a Divine Body in South India,” in Hiltebeitel, Alf, op cit:405-406
(198) Shulman (1985), op cit:351-353
(199) Fuller (1992), op cit:157
(200) Clothey (1978), op cit:102
(202) Fuller (1992), op cit:157
(204) Shulman (1991), op cit:52. Thus St. Tirumalar states:

Those who know not
say that love and Siva
are two

Few do know
that love itself
is Siva,
When you know
That love and Siva
are one,
All is harmony,

*Peace.* (quoted in Dehejia, op cit:14-15)

(205) Clothey (1978), op cit:102

(206) ibid


(208) Some examples: Iyarppahai Nayanar who, when requested, offered his wife to a visiting Brahman devotee, and killed his relatives when they attempted to intervene; Kannappar Nayanar, who placed pork on the *lingam*, thus defiling it, and plucked his eye out to stop the *lingam* bleeding; Murthi Nayanar, who ground his own elbow to provide sandalwood powder for ritual worship; and Chandesvara Nayanar, who cut off his father’s feet when he interfered with his devotions. (Sivananda, Swami. *SixtyThree Nayanar Saints*, Divine Life Society, Sivanandashram, Batu Caves, 1980:43-45,65-69,80-81,88-90


(210) Madeleine Biardeau points out that demons and minor gods are integral to the inherent dynamics that sustain Hinduism socially, theologically and historically; that is, they must be viewed within the context of the whole of Hinduism, especially in terms of myth and ritual. (Biardeau, Madeleine. “Brahmans and Meat Eating Gods”, in Hiltebeitel, op cit:30-31)

(211) Hiltebeitel, Alf. “Introduction”, in Hiltebeitel, op cit:1. This has been confirmed by my own field research.


(214) ibid:144
(215) Hiltebeitel, “Introduction”, op cit:1


(217) Hiltebeitel, “Draupadi’s Two Guardians…”, op cit:361-362

(218) Shulman (1989), op cit:58

(219) Hiltebeitel, “Draupadi’s Two Guardians…”, op cit:364; Shulman (1989), op cit:59

(220) Shulman (1989), op cit:9

(221) ibid:58

(222) “Rudraic”: This adjective is used by Sunthar Visuvalingam, who is referring to Siva’s destructive mode, which within most schools of Saivism, including Saiva Siddhanta, as well as popular Tamil culture, is located within the specific form of Rudra. Visuvalingam, Sunthar. “The Transgressive Sacrality of the Diksita: Sacrifice, Criminality and Bhakti in the Hindu Tradition”, in Hiltebeitel, op cit:449

(223) ibid:449-450

(224) ibid:428

(225) This forms a central plank in Visuvalingam’s approach

(226) ibid:431

(227) ibid:450-451

(228) Clothey (1978), op cit:28-29


(231) Dehejia, op cit:79


(233) Dehejia, op cit:75; Natarajan, op cit:viii

(234) Devapoopathy, op cit:34

(235) Clothey (1978), op cit:90

(236) Devapoopathy, op cit:15-32

(237) Clothey (1978), op cit:91-92

(238) Siva, Loganathan and Thinnappan, op cit:4
Thus the Tirumantiram states:

The Lord is neither cit not acit; he is the path Supreme,
If we meditate on Him He will bestow on us grace,
This is the only path, Supreme Path, says Vedanta.

(Verse 54, Tirumantiram)

(248) Siva, Loganathan, and Thinnappan, op cit:30; Devapoopathy, op cit:52

In whatsoever form
whosever
in his innermost mind
continuously visualizes him,
In that form
He will give them
grace. (quoted in Dehejia, op cit:72)

(254) Tirumantiram, verse 7
(255) Devapoopathy, op cit:66
(256) St. Cheraman states:

In whatsoever form
whosesoever
in his innermost mind
continuously visualizes him,
In that form
He will give them
grace. (quoted in Dehejia, op cit:72)
(257) Devapoopathy, op cit:66-69; Siva, Loganathan and Thinnappan, op cit:3
(258) Devapoopathy, op cit:68
(259) ibid:54
(261) Natarajan, op cit:viii
(262) Devapoopathy, op cit:54
(263) Natarajan, op cit:viii
(264) Devapoopathy, op cit:54-55, 60-63; Zaehner, op cit:88-89
(265) Zaehner, op cit:88
(266) Clothey (1978), op cit:94. Devapoopathy points out that while there are only three major *malas*, the impurities actually take a multitude of sub-forms. (Devapoopathy, op cit:55)
(267) Devapoopathy, op cit:55
(268) Zaehner, op cit:88
(269) Clothey (1978), op cit:94
(270) Devapoopathy, op cit:55
(271) ibid:56
(272) Clothey (1978), op cit:94
(273) ibid
(274) Devapoopathy, op cit:56
(275) Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, op cit:836
(276) Devapoopathy, op cit:55-57
(277) Clothey (1978), op cit:94
(278) Siva, Loganathan and Thinnappan, op cit:30
(279) Shivapadasundaram, op cit:60-62; Devapoopathy, op cit:53-54; Paranjoti, op cit:169
(280) Zaehner, op cit:89; Devapoopathy, op cit:53
(281) Devapoopathy, op cit:59. The four categories of soul are:
(i) *Kevala*: In this, the lowest state, *pacu* is wholly identified with *anava*. It is a condition of total isolation from *Pati* and its defining characteristics are non-intelligence, inaction and formlessness; (ii) *Sakala*: In this state, the soul is endowed with a body, a
mind and sense organs and is sent into the world with the express purpose of experiencing *karma*, that is, the pain and pleasure which are contingent upon its actions, (iii) *Pralayakala*: In this state the soul has become disentangled from the *maya malar*, but remains subject to the processes of *karma* and the pull of *anava*, and (iv) *Vijnakala*: This constitutes the final state in which the *pacu* is subject to the *anava malar* only, and may obtein freedom and released by total surrender to *Pati*. (Natarajan, op cit:viii; Zaehner, op cit:88-90)

(282) Devapoopathy, op cit:59
(283) ibid:65
(284) However, the *guru* must be a true and properly initiated spiritual preceptor, and not a false teacher. The *Tirumantiram* warns:

*They seek not the Guru that blindness cures*
*They seek the Guru who cures not blindness;*
*The blind and the blind in a blind dance shuffled*
*And the blind and the blind in a deep pit together fell.*

(*Tirumantiram*, Verse 1680)

(285) Devapoopathy, op cit:64-65; Natarajan, op cit:viii
(286) Paranjoti describes the soul’s subsequent journey as follows: “Placed in a world, the working of which is conducive to its interest, awaiting itself of the grace of God, which is given to it in full measure, and utilizing to the maximum degree its emotive, cognitive and connotive powers, the soul achieves a great transformation in its status. In place of ignorance there is knowledge; in place of bondage there is freedom; in place of misery there is bliss; in place of degradation there is exultation. With transmigration terminated the soul abides forever in the haven of peace and bliss at the feet of Siva.”
(Paranjoti,op cit:170)

(287) Zaehner, op cit:89


(291) Bolt, op cit:9


(293) Bolt, op cit:24-26

(294) ibid: 11; Hirschmann (1987), op cit:568


(297) Van der Veer, op cit:19

(298) ibid


(300) Van der Veer, op cit:19


(302) Van der Veer, op cit:19

(303) Metcalf, op cit:127


(305) Baker, Christopher. “Facts and Figures:Madras Government Statistics 1880-1940”, in Baker and Washbrook, op cit:222-224. As Washbrook comments, “It may well seem remarkable that any government can carry on administration through social categories which are more or less bogus.” (Washbrook, “The Development of Caste Organization…”, op cit:186)
Biblical genealogies indicated that the sons of Ham populated areas which were known as North Africa and the Horn. These were described as the land of Cush (Cush meaning black). (Blackburn, Robin. *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*, Verso, London and New York, 1997:65-73, 310)

Thus the 1891 Census Report of the Government of India could speak of the Dravidians in the following terms: “This was a race black in skin, low in stature, and with matted locks, in war treacherous and cunning; in choice of food, disgusting, and in ceremonial, absolutely deficient. The superior civilisation of the foreigner (the Aryan) soon asserted itself, and the lower race had to give way…The newcomers had to deal with opponents far inferior to themselves in civilisation, and with only a very
rudimentary political organization, so that the opposition to be overcome before the Aryan could take possession of the soil was of the feeblest.” (quoted in Ramaswamy, Sumathi. Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1998:41)

(325) Ramaswamy, op cit:26
(326) ibid
(327) ibid
(328) Thus, for example, in 1901, Charles Johnstone, a missionary could write of the Tamils: “To this black race, passionate, magnetic of wild imaginings, we must trace every lurid and demoniac element in the beliefs of India. This is their contribution to the common sum: a combination fitting in the hue of the African voodoo, the Australian cannibal, and Papuan headhunter.”(Quoted in Bolt, op cit:168-169) When conducting my fieldwork, I was astonished at the racist sentiments expressed by some US and UK missionaries, and their seeming contempt for “black” Indians. (One UK missionary, based in Singapore, told me, in all seriousness, “The blacker the skin, the blacker the heart, and the the blacker the sins.”)

(329) Metcalf observes that “By the end of the nineteenth century, this insistence that India was divided into two opposed religious communities shaped the way not only the British, but increasingly numbers of Indians, viewed their society. Nor did even those liberal dissenters who refused to abandon the ideals of an India remade ever question the country’s division into Hindu or Muslim, or challenge the stereotypes defining these communities…The characters of Dr Aziz and Godbole in A Passage to India represented conventions of descriptive writing about the two communities…” (Metcalf, op cit:148)


(331) Ramaswamy, op cit:26-27
(332) ibid:26
(333) Inglis, Stephen. “Possession and Pottery: Serving the Divine in a South Indian Community”, in Waghoorne and Cutler, op cit:89; Oddie, op cit:53-54
(334) Oddie, op cit.
(335) ibid:23-24
(336) ibid:29-31
(337) ibid:36
(338) ibid:47-48
(339) ibid:119
(340) ibid:75
(341) ibid:109-111
(342) ibid:126
(343) ibid:77-78
(345) Ramaswamy, op cit:120
(346) Friedhelm Hardy comments, “They succeeded only too well in their task; the abolition by law of the devadasis was regarded as a necessary reform of South Indian temple culture, but it also resulted in a total destruction of one of the major segments of that culture, through which for one and a half millennia deep rooted Southern religious sentiments had expressed themselves. The whole range of art that had surrounded the temple was eliminated, and the whole issue of temple eroticism was prejudiced.”
(347) Stein, (1980), op cit:51
(349) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(350) Ramaswamy, op cit:26-27
(351) ibid:25
(352) ibid:29-30
(353) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(355) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(356) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(357) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(358) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(359) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(360) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(361) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(362) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(363) Stein (1980), op cit:51
(364) Stein (1980), op cit:51

(365) Ramaswamy, op cit:69

(366) Baker (1976), op cit:83-85; Ramaswamy, op cit:69

(367) Ramaswamy, op cit:64-70

(368) ibid:70

(369) ibid:73-74

(370) Clothey (1978), op cit:15

(371) ibid:23-24

(372) ibid:26


(374) Clothey (1978), op cit:26

(375) ibid:130

(376) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:63

(377) Clothey (1978), op cit:126

(378) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:63


(380) Clothey (1978), op cit:34

(381) ibid:34-35

(382) ibid
(383) ibid:34
(384) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:2-6
(385) ibid:4-6
(386) Clothey (1978), op cit:49-50
(387) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:6
(388) So named because he was attended by the Krittikas or Pleaides. (Clothey (1978), op cit:54)
(389) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:24
(390) ibid
(391) ibid:101
(392) ibid:24
(393) Clothey (1978), op cit:47-48
(394) ibid:107
(395) ibid:146-147
(396) ibid
(397) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:48
(398) ibid:103
(399) ibid:89-93
(400) Clothey (1978), op cit:54
(401) ibid
(402) ibid:59-60
(403) ibid:61
(404) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:4
(407) ibid:64-65
(408) ibid:70-71
(409) ibid
(410) ibid:71; Chatterjee (1970), op cit:70
(411) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:70
(412) Clothey (1978), op cit:73
(413) Chatterjee (1970), op cit:42
(414) Clothey (1978), op cit:73-75
(415) ibid:76-77
(416) ibid: 77-79
(417) ibid:81
(418) Stein (1980), op cit:142
(419) Clothey (1978), op cit: 85
(420) ibid:110
(421) ibid:109
(422) ibid:114
(423) ibid:114-115
(424) ibid:116
(425) ibid
(426) ibid
(427) Personal field research
(429) Clothey (1978), op cit:117
(430) ibid:123
(431) ibid:117
(434) Clothey (1978), op cit:116-129
(435) Clothey (1983), op cit:47
(436) ibid
(437) ibid:49-51
(438) ibid:60-61
(439) ibid:76-79
(440) ibid:48
ibid

ibid:64; personal field research


Clothey (1978), op cit:138

Shulman (1980), op cit:275


Shulman (1980), op cit:275

Clothey (1978), op cit:83

Arumugam, op cit:10


Shulman (1980), op cit:276

In the Sri Lankan recension the spring is replaced by the *Menik* (River) *Ganga* at Kataragama.

Arumugam, op cit:21 Arumugam is here being rather coy. In fact, the eroticism of the Murugan-Valli courtship is emphasized within many variations of the story. (Personal field research.)

My emphasis. Arumugam, op cit:22

ibid:24

ibid:25

Shulman (1980), op cit:277. The *matal* hobbyhorse was made of the jagged leaves of the palmyra tree, and was a public device used by young men to shame their beloved into marriage, but it resulted in the rider being regarded as a general fool and a laughing stock.

ibid:278

ibid

Handelman, op cit:155

Clothey (1978), op cit:84

ibid
(463) Shulman (1980), op cit:283; personal field research
(464) ibid:281-282
(465) Clothey (1978), op cit:84
(466) Shulman (1980), op cit:282
(467) Handelman, op cit.
(468) ibid:151
(469) ibid:167
(470) ibid:168
(472) Handelman, op cit:168
(473) ibid:168-169
(474) ibid
(475) ibid:160
(476) ibid:161
(477) Clothey (1978), op cit:85
(478) Handelman, op cit:154
(479) Shulman (1980), op cit:282
(480) Handelman, op cit:154
(481) ibid:155
(482) Shulman (1980), op cit:280-281
(483) Handelman, op cit:155
(484) Shulman (1980), op cit:282
(485) Harrigan (1998), op cit:47
(486) Arumugam, op cit:25
(487) Shulman (1980), op cit:280-281
CHAPTER FIVE. HINDUISM IN MALAYSIA: AN OVERVIEW

1 INTRODUCTION

Hinduism has been re-created (1) as a significant minority religion in Malaya as an outcome of the waves of Indian migration which followed the British colonisation of Malaya, and which continued up until the very eve of the Pacific War. The transplantation and historical evolution of Malaya/Malaysian Hinduism has occurred in the absence of those traditional sources of authority – firstly the religious centres of learning or monastic orders (math) which have provided a system of scriptural hermeneutics and exegesis, and secondly an influential Brahman or dominant orthodox castes – which had such a marked impact upon Hindu structures, belief systems, mythology and patterns of worship in South India. (2) Thus the new arrivals in the estates and workplaces of Malaya had no recognised authoritative points of reference and initially tended to automatically reproduce remembered practices and mores of the Hinduism of their home regions. (3) Since the majority of Indian immigrants were indentured and later kangany recruited labourers, the deities worshipped and the rituals associated with that worship revolved around the sub-communal norms of behaviour and caste variations of the village of origin. (4) Over time these practices were in some cases reinforced, in other modified, in many more supplemented, by other regional and caste influences introduced to the estates, workplaces and cities of Malaya. (5)

In the following paragraphs I have provided a general overview of Hinduism as it has been reconstructed in Malaysia. My survey commences with a brief examination of caste. I have then traced the contours of Malaysian Hinduism in terms of a theoretical functional model, that is, structured in hierarchical layers, with Agamic/Sanskritic or “great tradition” Hinduism at the apex, with supposedly “little traditions” – variously known as folk, village or popular traditions – comprising subordinate layers, with the seemingly lowest manifestation, spirit worship – the furthest removed from the Agamic/Sanskritic ideal – forming the lowest rung. According to this interpretation, an hierarchical survey of Hinduism from highest to lowest would consist of a four tiered order, namely:
(a) *Agamic* Hinduism/Scriptural Hinduism: involving the worship of “universal” gods – Siva, Ganesha, Subrahmanya (Murugan), Vishnu, Krishna, and Sakti (often as Parvati, Laksmi, and Saraswati) – in temples constructed and sanctified according to prescribed rites, built by specialist temple architects (*sthapatis*) and served by ritual specialists (usually Brahman *Kurukkals* or *Pattars*, or in many cases, non-Brahman *pantarams*).

(b) Popular Hinduism: Village Deities (*Kariya Deevam*): Non scriptural Hinduism, involving worship of mainly non-*Agamic* and often regional or village specific deities – for example, Mariamman (in her village form), Ambal, Uramman, Kali – in non-*Agamic* temples, and oversighted by *pantarams* or *pujaris* (ritual non-specialist temple priests).

(c) Popular Hinduism: Guardian (Tutelary Deities) (*Gramadevata*): These are lesser and minor deities who originally guarded the boundaries of specific villages and are now sometimes held to protect *Adi Dravidar* castes. Their worship often involves animal sacrifice. Examples include Muniandy, Aiyana, Sangilkurappan and Vairavar. These deities are always served by *pujaris*.

(d) Popular Hinduism: Spirit Worship (*Siru Deivam* or *avī*): Spirits include *preta* (spirits of the departed), and *bhuta* (powerful spirits), both of whom may be propitiated or used to invoke blessings, as well as *pey*, generally unknown spirits who commit malicious acts. Worship of *preta* and *bhuta*, often consisting of “bargaining”, is usually conducted through individuals who possess (or claim to possess) a recognized gift for mediumship. *Pey* are usually worshipped by practitioners of sorcery or black magic.

However, while the overview provided below follows this basic configuration, it must be pointed out that the model itself is a gross simplification of the structures and dynamics of Malaysian Hinduism. Hindu practices and beliefs found in Malaysia are astonishingly heterogeneous, and aside from the small but vocal groups of Hindu reformers who, as will we see in later sections, are intent on imposing their own imagined “purified” model of Hinduism upon the remainder of the Hindu population, and who sweepingly dismiss all popular manifestations as lesser or degenerate variants...
of the religion, most Malaysian devotees practice a form of worship, which, while it may generally incline to one of other of the belief structures outlined above, contains elements of different, or in some cases, all four layers of Hindu belief.

The overview which follows also looks at, *inter alia*, Hindu temples within Malaysia, popular festivals, and finally Hindu reform movements, especially the impact of syncretization and the consequent reshaping of the contours of Malaysian Hinduism.

While in this chapter I have accessed a variety of written source materials, much of the chapter is based upon my own field research. This included extensive interviews with temple and religious officials, political functionaries, and, of course, devotees.

2. CASTE IN MALAYA/MALAYSIA

In Chapter Two I noted that the indentured workforce in Malaya was drawn from landless labourers and those dispossessed by agricultural reforms within the Madras Presidency, and consisted overwhelmingly of members of the *Adi Dravidar* castes. Kangany recruitment resulted in major changes in the overall composition of the Indian workforce. The reputation of the kangany, as a member of a “clean” caste and a man who promised to guarantee the welfare of those he recruited, led to a significant increase in the number of labourers who were prepared to relocate to the estates and workplaces of Malaya.(6) While approximately one-third of kangany migrants originated from among the *Adi Dravidar* castes of *Paraiyar, Chakkiliyar* and *Palliar*, others were drawn from the entire range of non-Brahman castes. Major caste groupings included *Vellalar, Goundar, Ambalakkar, Kallar* and *Vanniyar*. (7) Several of these groups, especially the *Vellalar, Goundar* and *Vanniyar*, included members of land owning and cultivating *jatis* and were regarded among the higher Tamil caste groups. (8) Kangany recruitment produced a more variegated Indian community within Malayan estates and towns, and thus a greater spread of social behaviour and belief structures. (9)

The absence of a strong Brahmanical model on the estates and more generally within the social and cultural fabric of the Malayan Hindu community,(10) has had a profound
impact upon the evolution and organisation of inter-caste dynamics in Malaysia/Malaysia.(11) The re-creation of known hierarchical ranking was complicated by the ambiguities of regional caste variations within Tamil Nadu, which were now introduced into Malayan estates and workplaces. Thus the full reconstruction of the traditional village communities with their stipulated and demarcated frameworks of occupation, order and precedence was clearly impossible within the Malayan setting.(12)

While there was no real possibility of reproducing the totality of caste organisation in Malaya and the complete array of distinctive behaviours, diets and ideals of ritual purity as they existed in traditional India, major elements of ritual caste observations were introduced into the social life of Indians in Malaya. Certain caste prohibitions and taboos were adhered to, especially the provision of separate housing and supplies of drinking water for upper castes and Adi Dravidars.(13) Adi Dravidars accepted the allocation of discrete housing lines and water supplies without protest. (14) Most marriages remained within caste, though some minority jatis did not have sufficient numbers in Malaya to sustain the practice of endogamy, and there was a tendency for small jatis to be absorbed within the nearest hierarchically ranked generic caste grouping. (15) There was evidence of caste clashes on estates, and caste associations were later formed, including the establishment of Adi Dravidar Sangams among depressed castes. (16)

Caste distinctions among Indians in Malaya gradually became more muted as the Indian workforce became more settled within Malaya. The slow easing of caste relations was undoubtedly assisted by the fact that within the plantation and workplace contexts jati had no operational significance either as a term or a concept. (17) Arasaratnam has suggested that the change in caste relations began in the 1920s when upper caste leaders, inspired by Gandhian ideologies, offered assistance to Adi Dravidar Sangams. (18) By the early 1930s officials were noting the softening of caste hierarchies within Malayan social, vocational and religious life. Commenting on the admission of Adi Dravidars to the newly opened Agamic Mariamman temple in Penang in 1935, J.M. Barron, the Acting Controller of Labour described it as “a remarkable instance of the growth of the
new spirit of (inter caste) tolerance.” However, in an indication that this new lenience was not shared by all Tamil workers, he also noted that on one estate in Province Wellesley upper caste labourers complained that Adi Dravidars did not evince “…the same respectful inferiority as in India.” (19) In the same year, K.A. Mukundan, Agent of the Government of India, noted an increase in inter-caste marriages, though he did not elaborate upon which castes these involved.(20) In 1936, C. Wilson, Controller of Labour, opined optimistically that “Caste distinctions are not so strong in Malaya as in India and the spirit of tolerance is growing...In time, no doubt, caste distinctions will die in Malaya. A piped water system spells death to caste.” (21) However, he also noted “…on estates it is necessary to provide caste men with separate accommodation from the Adi Dravidars; though quarrels between the two bodies are not common.” (22)

The opening of the Penang Mariamman temples to Adi Dravidars in 1935 represented a triumph of Gandhian principles in Malaya (23) and was followed by an open door policy in several other temples in Malaya. After World War II, in the wake of the unifying experiences of the IIL/INA and inspired by the anti caste rhetoric of Subhas Chandra Bose, all temples were opened to Adi Dravidar devotees. While this measure elicited sustained resistance in India, within Malaya the open door policy aroused little opposition.(24)

The traditional model of social organisation, structured into a carefully graduated ranking and revolving about the fundamental division of Brahman, non-Brahman and Adi Dravidar castes was replaced in Malaya with two broader, and essentially generic groupings. While “clean” castes identified themselves as “Tamilar” (uyarntajati or higher castes), Adi Dravidar jatis were known as “Paraiyar” (talntajati or lower castes). This basic division, which emerged within the late kangany era, continues to remain valid within Malaysia. (25)

The continuing moderation of caste boundaries and inter-caste perceptions has been a prolonged and gradual process among Malayan/Malaysian Indians. I have noted that the lack of a dominant Brahman caste left Malayan Hindus without a key stabilising
principle of social organisation, and that estate and workplace arrangements within Malaya removed vocational calling as an ascriptive criterion of caste. Since World War II a range of economic and educational influences, especially social and occupational mobility, have continued to temper traditional notions of caste and caste hierarchy. Moreover the post war politics of communalism, and the stress upon Indian identity vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, have served to cut across prescribed inter-caste modes of communication and to introduce more cooperative concepts of social organisation. (26) It is generally agreed that younger Indians tend to be less interested in formal caste relations and notions of putative hierarchy. (27)

However, while caste boundaries have continued to blur, and the perceptions that castes hold of each other have been extensively re-negotiated and some aspects of caste behaviour have been relaxed, caste remains a significant social phenomenon within Malaysian Indian Hindu life. Enduring caste signifiers centre upon the maintenance of endogamous marriage and the observation of ritual purity and pollution in social interaction. Higher castes continue to regard wedlock with lower castes as socially degrading and deleterious for the entire clan affected by the liaison. (28) Taboos relating to food, and diet, and from whom one will accept cooked food, continue to reinforce caste identity; for example during wedding ceremonies or other occasions requiring mass feedings, the host group will normally employ a higher caste cook. (29) Among upper castes, especially older members, it is common to discern certain pejorative attitudes held regarding the characteristics of lower castes as a group – for example, that they are aggressive, unclean, generally bad mannered, loud and uncouth in behaviour, loose tongued and foul mouthed, and that they eat messily and noisily etc. (30)

Moreover, caste remains a persistent and resilient source of social identification for many Hindus. Thus, for example, throughout the late 1970s and into the mid 1980s the irruption of caste politics destabilised the MIC, with the formation of rival interest groups coalesced around higher and lower castes. (31) Moreover, as we will see, Hindu reformers and educators offer a model of Hinduism structured around the imagined higher caste and Brahmanical ideals, and completely stripped of its putative
village/lower caste and thus less socially acceptable accretions. It can perhaps be argued that these groups of reformers represent a new approach to maintenance and indeed reinforcement of upper class control of the social and ritual parameters of Malaysian Indian Hindu society.

Caste associations have a limited influence in contemporary Malaysia. Upon their formation in the 1920s, Adi Dravidar caste sangams developed mass followings. Most of these were reform oriented, concerned with welfare, education and uplift.(32) Some however, became politically aligned with the “Dravidian” ideologies of Ramasami Naicker's Self Respect Movement, and served to disseminate the vehement anti-Brahman propaganda associated with pan-Dravidian organisations.(33) In more recent times the membership of such caste associations has become increasingly restricted to poorly educated and lower caste Tamils. These associations are generally shunned by younger and urban educated Tamils, and continue to decline in significance.(34)

3. **AGAMIC HINDUISM**

Agamic or “great tradition” Hinduism, (35) was imported to Malaysia by middle and upper class Hindus, in particular the Chettiar and Jaffna Tamil communities. The specific contributions of each of these communities to the development of Malayan/Malaysian Hinduism will be outlined later in this section. Agamic Hinduism is based upon scriptural and textual sources, and culminates in personal revelation derived from the prolonged pursuit of strict yogic disciplines. Public worship is conducted in temples dedicated to the great or universal deities of traditional Saivism or Vaishnavism. These temples are constructed according to detailed instructions contained within the Agamas, are built by specialist temple architects (sthapatis) engaged from Tamil Nadu, are dedicated consistent with a conglomery of elaborate and precise rituals (pranaprathista) including the installation of the images of the deities, consecration of the sacred vessel placed above the main shrine (kumbabishekam), and followed by the full consecration of the temple through special rites (Mandalabishekam) conducted over forty days.(36) The temples are subsequently maintained in conformity with rituals stipulated in the Agamas, and are conducted by specialists usually of Brahman caste, known as kurukkals in
Saivite temples, and *pattars* in Vaishnavite temples. Both *kurrukals* and *pattars* hail from a caste of hereditary temple priests. (37) Recognised temple rituals include a series of daily *pujas*, accompanied by the chanting of *mantras*, the singing of devotional hymns, and the playing of traditional instruments known as *nadaswaran* and *meelam*. (38) All offerings to deities within the temple are vegetarian. (39) Brahmans and “clean” castes within Malaysia regard these temples as embodying the absolute ideals of Hindu religious belief and therefore superior in concept and instrumentality to non-*Agamic* or popular temples. (40) A large percentage of *Agamic* temples in Malaysia are dedicated to either Murugan (Subrahmanya) or to Mariamman (Sakti). (41)

4. POPULAR HINDUISM

C.J. Fuller describes popular Hinduism as “the beliefs and practices that constitute the living 'practical' religion of ordinary Hindus.” (42) In Malaysia, village or popular Hinduism is “...a religion of pragmatism...based on non-Sanskritic village Hinduism with an admixture of Sanskritic/higher Hinduism.” (43) Thus while popular Hinduism worships village and tutelary gods, and may involve the propitiation or manipulation of spirits, it also incorporates elements of *Agamic* scriptural traditions and *puranic* mythology, as well as the worship of universal *Agamic*/Sanskritic deities such as Murugan, Ganesha, Lakshmi, Parvati (Sakti), Vishnu and Krishna. (44) The observances and rituals of popular Hinduism are primarily geared toward control of the forces of the mundane world, such as obtaining material blessings and warding off misfortune. (45) However, while some observers posit an inner logic of popular Hinduism which is both self reflexive and wholly existential, my own field work would suggest that popular Hinduism also develops its own doctrines of final ends which incorporate detailed concepts built around eschatology, transcendence and salvation.

(i) Village deities

These were “brought” in a manner of speaking to Malaya, mostly by low caste Hindus, and re-established in shrines and temples on estates and near labour lines in urban areas. The deities worshipped inevitably reflected the village or region of origin. (46) Many were female and were known as the Mother Goddess (*Uramma*, *Amman* or *Ambal*).
These goddesses were habitually parochial and were responsible for the general welfare of the village which was regarded as her domain, her sphere of control. The inhabitants of the village were thus her subjects, her devotees who received her protection from the vagaries of temporal life – illness, drought, misfortune – as well as the blessings she saw fit to bestow – prosperity, good health and so on. Village goddesses are invariably agrarian and associated with the elements which cumulatively constitute productivity, namely earth, plants and fertility. Among the most common forms of Mother Goddess is Mariamman, the goddess of health and rain, who is not only a provider of plenty, but also a protector against contagion including smallpox.

Rituals of worship of popular deities were constructed around remembered mores of the home village. The temples to such deities were non-Agamic in character, and were not built according to Agamic rites and injunctions. The murthis within the temples are generally made of cement and clay (as opposed to black granite in the Agamic temples), and are worshipped according to rites which are not necessarily attuned to Agamic precepts. The deities are served by pantarams (non-Brahman priests) and pujaris (shaman-diviners).

In many instances the latter lack formal instruction in the finer details of temple worship, and often relax or ignore customary purity rituals. Worship of village deities may be basic and without the complex elaboration of Agamic ritual, (for example frequently excluding both mantras and devotional hymns which are integral to Agamic ritual). Indeed, in many of the smaller shrines the relevant worship rituals are performed only occasionally, sometimes only daily, in some cases only weekly. Animal sacrifice may comprise part of festival celebrations or prescribed rituals; this differs from Agamic Hinduism which permits only vegetarian offerings to deities.

Often the constituency of a given village temple will revolve around an extended family and kinship network, or a particular sub-caste/ caste alliance, and in many cases the village goddess is regarded as a clan deity.

It is important to note that while these deities are generally worshipped by lower caste devotees, they are often supplicated by higher caste and well educated Hindus. Over the years most of the village deities have become closely associated with, and in some
instances have fused identity with, the major Sanskritic deities. Thus Mariamman, while maintaining her village persona in many temples, has in others achieved congruence with Sakti, especially Parvati, wife of Siva. Indeed, many temples dedicated to Mariamman in this latter capacity, contain an image of Murugan, the son of Siva/Sakti.

(ii) Guardian or Tutelary Deities

These deities are normally regarded as under the control of the village goddess, and are often located in the compounds outside her shrine. Where separate temples have been established for these “little gods”, they are usually situated away from the main temples. The function of the guardian deities is to protect their devotees from attack by malignant forces. Although these deities may be benevolent in outlook, especially when propitiated, they are likely to create mischief and wreak vengeance upon those who ignore them. The guardian deities are almost exclusively masculine, and within traditional India were generally local in character. In Malaysia, they are worshipped in non-Agamic temples, which are often small, usually constructed of plank and mud walls with zinc roofs. The images are made of cement or clay. Their worship often involves animal sacrifice, and they are usually served by part-time pujaris. Some of the guardian deities, especially Muniandy, Aiyanar (in his “lesser” role) and Munisvaran are regarded as protectors of the Adi Dravidar castes, and are fully identified with lower caste patterns of worship.

(iii) Spirit Worship

Theoretically the gramadevata stands above the realm of spirit worship, but in practice the veneration of village and guardian deities and spirits is frequently inter-linked, and often overlaps. Moreover the fluidity of popular Hinduism, and the ambiguities and porosity of boundaries between the different categories means that a presence identified by a particular group or generation as a spirit may over time be invested with the qualities of a tutelary or village deity, or even ultimately associated with the great Agamic deities. Spirits may be divided into three basic categories, namely:

(a) Bhuta or potent spirits who have obtained powers which may either assist or frustrate
the living,

(b) *Pretā* or spirits of the departed, and

(c) *Pey*, the widely encountered and malevolent ghosts who may create misfortune, illness and distress. (62)

All categories of spirit must be carefully distinguished from *asuras*, the demonic beings found in *puranic* mythology. (63)

As we have noted in the case of the *virabhadaras*, according to popular Hindu belief, the spirit of any human who meets a premature death – whether by murder, suicide, accident, epidemic disease, infant mortality, or childbirth – or otherwise dies unfulfilled (for example, a childless woman), will remain close to and attached to the world of humans, rather than passing into the astral world or the world of the manes. (64) Many Hindu families who have lost a member to untimely death make provision for the “departed” individual by strategically mounting and periodically honouring a framed photograph of the deceased person. This ensures that he/she is constantly remembered, and by being continually reincorporated within familial structures is appropriately placated to compensate for his/her physical absence, and is thus not tempted by neglect to create disturbances within the family as a whole. (65) One of the most simple and ubiquitous methods of accommodating a spirit who can create endless mischief and cause great harm is to deify the spirit so its malevolence can be controlled and turned to the advantage of the living. The *bhuta* – spirits who have thus been elevated – are also able to minimise the damage that *pey* might inflict, and are generally considered benevolent. On the other hand *preta* are naturally vengeful, and may be invoked by practitioners of black magic to visit misfortune upon enemies. (66)

However, the deification of a spirit is often an arbitrary process. Dumont comments that “often a spirit is malevolent only as long as it lacks a cult; once the cult is provided, it becomes tutelary.” (67) This is exemplified by the Tamil tutelary deities *Karuppan* and
Madan whose elevation rescued them from their original standing as pey and assured them of a regional and caste based status as guardian deities. (68) Despite deification, both preta and bhuta may remain volatile and unpredictable and unless handled carefully may create problems for family, clans and friends. (69)

However, spirits may be deified in other ways. Often these are viras, heroes who have achieved reputations as great warriors and who have died on the battle field. Thus the little deity, Madurai Viran, who was a general of the Madurai Pandyan king, achieved posthumous regional deification, and was worshipped in Malaya/Malaysia as the patron deity of the Vannar (laundrymen) caste. In recent years, his worship has become more widespread extending beyond his original regional/ caste basis. (70) In addition, Sati Matas, heroines who voluntarily elected to die on their husband's funeral pyres, may be deified, but this practice is uncommon in Tamil Nadu, and unknown in Malaysia. (71) Both viras and sati matas are employed as clan deities, but many of them ultimately gain a wider circle of devotees and are transformed into tutelary deities. (72)

Many of the shrines dedicated to bhutas and pretas are located on private or government land, and are often positioned next to trees regarded as possessing inherent spiritual significance. (73) Among Malaysian Hindus, spirit worship is conducted by mediums, some of whom by dint of their reputation – a reputation built on actual or imagined outcomes as gauged by devotees – gain a broad following including members of higher castes. (74) The majority of mediums “divine” messages from bhutas/ pretas, or with the aid of spirits perform rituals which provide a stipulated behavioural charter for their devotees, in, for example, such matters as alleviating misfortune or pursuing prosperity. In extreme cases mediums will invoke spirits to settle scores with enemies (or perceived enemies), though the placing of curses or plotting misfortune for others is generally considered unethical and the requisite rituals are fraught with danger. (75) Because spirits are former humans they are believed by some devotees to have a greater understanding of the needs and motivations of ordinary people. However, neither bhutas nor pretas nor pey have other than limited and quite specific powers, and as their influence is confined to a fixed domain, (76) they can be “overridden”, as it were, by
appeal to higher deities, that is, village or Agamic gods, especially Ganesha and Murugan. Some of the shrines dedicated to bhutas and pretas may grow into temples as the spirits evolve into tutelary deities, or (more rarely) become associated with the Agamic deities of the Hindu pantheon.

5. MALAYSIAN HINDU TEMPLES

In his study on Hinduism in Malaysia, Ramanathan Kalimuthu estimates that there is an approximate total of 17,000 Hindu temples in Malaysia. These range across the entire gamut of the South Indian tradition from modest shrines and small temples, often little more than sheds, used for mediumship and worship of guardian/tutelary deities, to the most elaborate and properly maintained Agamic temples. Ramanathan points out that the large number and sheer multiplicity of temples encountered in Malaysia “...is clearly a reflection of the diverse practices within the Hindu religion itself. It also reflects the various sub-ethnic divisions based on caste, religion and the orientation of the Malaysian Hindu community.”

The Hindus who migrated to Malaya were inspired by two deeply held cultural convictions regarding the construction of temples. The first is that no settlement, village or town is complete for a Hindu unless it has a temple, and that if the locality does not have a temple it is the duty of individuals or the community to construct one. Secondly, it is believed that those who participate in the construction or maintenance of temples will acquire great merit.

Malaysia's earliest temples were built around regional, caste or sub-caste belief structures imported from the home localities of India. However, as will be discussed, in many instances the deities worshipped and the ritual performed have undergone profound alterations over the years, and the initial specific caste, lineage or regional focus has either been expunged or obscured.

5.1 Agamic Temples

The major Agamic temples in Malaya were established by the upper castes. The initial
burden of temple construction fell disproportionately upon the Chettiar caste, and more latterly upon the Jaffna Tamil community, although contributions towards the establishment of temples were also received from the professional and commercial classes. (83) Both the Chettiar and Jaffna Tamils established exemplary models of *Agamic* temple construction, maintenance and worship which adhered to the scriptural injunctions, rituals, festivals and other prescribed observances learnt in their respective countries of origin. Brahman *kurukkals* were imported to officiate in these temples. (84) At this point it is important to note that many members of the South Indian middle class who might have been expected to promote *Agamic* worship and to provide leadership in the construction of temples, initially distanced themselves from open allegiance to Hindu belief and worship structures, especially in the period leading to World War II. Much of this class, from whom the reform movements were to ultimately spring, were acutely conscious of the perceived standing of the Indian community in the eyes of the British and other ethnic communities, and were anxious to establish themselves as a “modern” and “Westernised” community. This necessitated maintaining social distance from other Hindus, especially from the bulk of the labouring classes and their “debased” and socially embarrassing traditions. (85)

(i) Chettiar

The Nattukottai Chettiar, generally referred to as the Chettiar (but also known as the *Vanikars, Nagarathars* or *Chettyars*, (86) are by tradition a Tamil money lending caste. The Chettiar base in India is centred in the generic territory known as Chettinad (“The land of the Chettiar”) located in the districts of Ramnad and Puddukkottai. (87) The social organisation of the Chettiars is based in nine ancestral temples, each of which is owned by one of the nine clan groups. (88) The Chettiars are endogamous, and cross cousin marriage is common. Although the Chettiars were originally a Sudra caste, in more recent times they have made claim to be considered as Vaisyas. (89)

British colonialism provided the Chettiars with an expanded range of trading possibilities both within India and in other colonies, particularly Ceylon, the Straits Settlements and Burma. (90) By the 1790s the first Chettiar business houses known as
Kittingi(91) were opened in Penang, and others followed in Melaka in 1808 and Singapore in the 1820s. (92) Throughout the 1820s as their numbers increased, the Chettiar diaspora established formal temples in the style of their homelands in their places of operation. By the end of the nineteenth century the Chettiar diaspora had established a chain of kittingi and temples in all major economic centres down the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. As they became more firmly established in Malaya and Singapore, they brought their wives and children to join them.(93)

Murugan is the caste deity of the Chettiar diaspora and his worship permeates all social and business life of the community.(94) As patron deity Murugan is held to be honorary chairman of all temple social and financial meetings as well as witness in business dealings between Chettiar diaspora.(95) The first dealing of the day is always done in Murugan's name, and a nominal sum is registered in the ledger book as expenditure sustained by the deity. An agreed percentage of income, (usually about ten per cent), is levied on all Chettiar commercial undertakings and retained as a tithe (Mahamai) within an account held in the name of “Chetti Murugan”. The funds thus generated are later used for charitable purposes and for temples, festivals and other religious expenses.(96)

Chettiar temples in Malaysia were constructed according to strict Agamic precepts, and continue to be maintained in conformity with these ideals. These temples are generally regarded as extremely well organised and appear largely free of the vexatious factionalism which is often found among the management committees of many other Hindu temples throughout Malaysia.(97) The general supervision of temple affairs is entrusted to a five member management committee (or panchyat) which is usually elected for a five year term. Because each temple is regarded as the final arbiter on all religious and social matters affecting the Chettiar community, the panchyat also fulfils important mediatory and adjudicatory functions.(98)

Festivals in Chettiar temples are primarily organised around the worship of Murugan. These are invariably well planned and executed. Since Murugan has a number of festival days, particular festivals are allocated to specific temples in different locations, and
throughout the calendar year all Chettiar temples will organise at least one major festival. Thus, for example, Thaipusam is associated with Singapore and Penang, while *Chitra Paruvam* has become linked to the temple in Telok Intan, in Perak.(99) In the earlier days the commemoration of the festival round provided Chettiar stationed in different localities with regular opportunities to visit each other.(100) However, it should also be noted that the spatial distribution of Murugan festivals may be also seen as an attempt to replicate the sacral geography of Murugan worship as it is found in India. There, as we have observed in Chapter Four, specific temples are fused with strategic episodes in the overall chronology of the Murugan mythology, and the festival associated with each of these temples derives its meaning from these developments.(101)

The Chettiars have never experienced the problem of recruiting and retaining temple priests which has become an issue of perennial concern to many Malaysian temples. This is largely because since the 1850s, they have maintained meticulous documentation of temple affairs, and are thus able to justify to immigration authorities the need to import approved temple priests, musicians and temple craftsmen. (102) Moreover, the Chettiar community in India have established an institution in Pallaiyarpatti in Chettinad for the education and training of both Brahman and non-Brahman priests. Moreover Chettiars have also provided lavish donations to *math* which train Brahman *kurrakals*. Since the 1980s the Malaysian Chettiars have sponsored several local trainees (including at least two ethnic Chinese), but mainly Tamils of *Vellala* caste,(103) to train as temple priests. The Chettiars are known as good employers, and provide all temple officiants with accommodation and fair remuneration.(104) In return, priests are required to acknowledge members of the Chettiar community, and to offer them precedence throughout all ritualistic and ceremonial occasions.(105)

The perceived exclusivity of the Chettiars and the priority that they accord their own caste both within their temples and within the overall structures of the festivals which they sponsor, have created resentment among some Malaysian Tamils. Moreover the economic success of the Chettiars has promoted charges of arrogance, lack of
compassion, parsimoniousness, and indifference to the sufferings of the broader Tamil community. In recent years, the Chettiar community, stung by these criticisms, have made efforts to reach out to other sectors of the Indian Hindu population. Many of the censorious judgements passed on the Chettiar community seem exaggerated and without real foundation. The Chettiars make substantial donations to charities, and are equally generous in their contributions to religious and cultural organisations, scholars and artists. Moreover, as Ramanathan remarks “...no-one can compare to them in terms of the financial resources lavished on the maintenance of the temples, since all are financially secure and seem well able to face any challenge in the future.”

(ii) Ceylonese (“Jaffna”) Tamils

The culture of the Ceylonese “Jaffna” Tamils contains marked variations from the Tamil culture of mainland India. Distinctive elements include linguistic differences in the use of spoken Tamil, the structure of inter-caste relations, observance of life cycle ceremonies, and some modes of worship. The overwhelming majority of Jaffna Tamils who migrated to Malaya were members of the authoritative Vellala caste, who were principally agriculturalists and landowners, and who dominated the middle and upper classes of Ceylonese Tamil society. The Vellalas saw themselves as patrons in chief who were expected to fulfil a kingly role and to conform to the dharma specified for those who occupied the highest echelons of society. They ran the temples according to Agamic precepts and demanded the compliance of the supporting clean castes. The small Brahman caste in Jaffna, numerically insignificant and politically irrelevant, was dependent upon the Vellalas for employment within the temples.

Within Malaya the Jaffna Tamils developed an exemplary record for temple building, and wherever a community established itself, the construction of a temple invariably followed. Given the fact that the Ceylonese Vellalas are overwhelmingly Saivite and are steeped in the practices and traditions of Agamic Hinduism, these temples were axiomatically dedicated to the major deities – Siva, Ganesha and Skanda-Murugan. Temples were built along the length and breadth of the Malay Peninsula, including many isolated locations in which Jaffna Tamils were employed (for example, the railway
settlement of Kuala Lipis, and the former royal town of Pekan, both in the state of Pahang).(113) The Jaffna Tamil construction of temples has continued unabated, and the most recent temple, the Sri Vinayagar Temple in Petaling Jaya, was built in the mid 1990s at a cost of one million Malaysian ringgit.(114)

The Jaffna Tamil temples are regarded as well managed and maintained. The community has been careful to establish legally protected temple endowments for the maintenance of these temples, and to devise safeguards which stipulate the conditions under which these funds may be drawn upon.(115) Wherever possible, Jaffna Tamils have attempted to restrict membership of the temple management committees to their own community, though in recent years there had been some relaxation surrounding this issue, especially as the abilities of the educated Indian Tamils have become more apparent. However Jaffna Tamils have been greatly alarmed by reports of mismanagement of some Malaysian Hindu temples, and are determined to ensure that this does not occur within the temples they have established.(116)

Among some sectors of the broader Hindu community, the Jaffna Tamils have a reputation for exclusivity, which manifests as a perceived condescension toward Indian Tamil Hindus.(117) It is generally acknowledged that Jaffna managed temples distribute honours to their own community, and that in matters of ritual and worship the kurukkals are expected to accord precedence to Jaffna Tamils. The key to this putative clannishness must be explained in relation to their history and the desire to foster and protect their cultural and religious heritage. Throughout the colonial era, Sri Lankan Hindus were subject to the intense zealotry and persecution of Portuguese Catholicism, which was followed by the sustained attacks mounted by Protestant missionaries.(118) Jaffna Tamils normally inculcate religious values among their children at a very early age, and thoroughly verse their adolescents and young people in the beliefs, traditions and rituals of Saiva Siddhanta. This has produced a depth of expertise within the community which is well placed not only to manage temples, but also to hand on to the succeeding generation the traditions of scholarship and cultural accomplishment for which the Jaffna Tamils are renowned.(119) Within Malaya the tight cultural bonds have
been reinforced by intermarriage, though this is now being gradually relaxed among some younger Tamils.(120)

5.2 Non Agamic Temples
While shrines and minor temples had been constructed on estates and adjacent to urban labour lines throughout the period of indentured labour, the introduction of kangany recruitment was followed by the gradual but inexorable establishment and development of Hindu religious institutions within Malaya.(121) Temples were built either on or near most workplaces and invariably reflected the beliefs prevailing within the village of origin of the labourers who constructed it.(122) As well as providing a symbol of shared Hindu identity, temples became a focal point for community life, allowing the commemoration of all life cycle markers as well as the staging of festivals in accordance with the Hindu calendar.(123)

(i) Plantation Temples
The initial costs associated with the construction of estate temples was usually funded by a management grant supplemented by workers' donations.(124) The management was keen to establish and preserve a settled workforce, and the provision of a temple was often seen as a small price to pay as a means of helping workers to adjust to the plantation environment, (125) as well as convincing them that their employers were interested in the welfare of the labour force and their families.(126) Estate temples relied upon two sources of income for their financial upkeep; firstly a small impost levied upon labourers, and secondly, a management grant furnished from the profits of employer run toddy shops.(127)

As noted, most of the temples constructed reflected the popular beliefs of the villages of origin. However the entire range of sub-cultural norms patterns of worship – whether regional, linguistic, caste or lineage – were woven within the totality of the religious life of the estate. It was thus not uncommon for the medium and higher castes of any given estate – *Goundar, Kallar, Vellalar, Vanniyar*, etc. – to establish a temple dedicated to “universal” deities such as Siva, Ganesha, Murugan or Vishnu, or Mariamman in her
capacity as Sakti. Invariably Mariamman temples contained a shrine to Murugan. (128)

Whereas *Agamic* deities were worshipped in non-*Agamic* temples, temples dedicated to village or tutelary deities and patronised by lower castes were generally built away from the main plantation lines. These temples often practiced animal sacrifice, usually of goats, buffaloes and chickens, which was not permitted in temples dedicated to universal deities. (129) Nearly all the plantation temples, whether dedicated to universal, village or tutelary deities, were served by *pujaris*, (lower caste temple priests) who often had little knowledge of the inner significance of the rituals they performed, or of the more detailed requirements of temple etiquette. (130)

Plantation temples were administered by a committee known as a *panchyat*. Whereas in India the *panchyat* (literally, Council of Five) consisted of the elders of a village and was charged with maintaining general order within the community, this was not the case upon Malayan estates. (131) In general, *panchyats* were used as a tool of the plantation management. The estate manager appointed the *panchyat* membership, generally the clerical staff and the work supervisors, (that is the *kanganies* and *tindals*), and set the general directions the *panchyat* was expected to follow. The estate manager (*Dorai*) - throughout the colonial era generally British, and in more recent years Asian – was regarded as the honorary chairman of the temple, and during festivals was awarded the honours and respect which in India had been reserved for kings and noted dignatories. (132)

(ii) Urban Temples

Most urban non-*Agamic* temples commenced their existence as very basic structures established near labour lines. Many of these began as simple shrines, dedicated to tutelary deities, especially Muniandy and Munisvaran, but others were more elaborate edifices containing a shrine to Mariamman, usually in her role as a village deity. (133) Often these places of worship were marked by a single religious symbol betokening the presence of a deity. These included the trident (signifying Siva-Sakti) or the *Vel* (the most potent symbol of Murugan). (134) In many cases more than one shrine was established near a particular worksite. Some of these were shrines set up to supplicate
the village deity of a specific family, or sub-caste. (135) Over time, many of these shrines and structures developed into temples with established worship patterns, which celebrated an anniversary festival and the round of festivals pertinent to the deity/deities associated with the temple. The priests who officiated within the temples were either lower caste pujaaris and often mediums or shaman/diviners. (136) The management of the temple sometimes remained under the control of an individual or family who founded the temple, but often it was devolved to a panchyat which was usually dominated, in the initial years at least, by a lineage group, or a particular caste. (137) The constitution and development of a temple bestowed both status and honour upon the temple founder(s), the management and the priest, and elevated the standing of those involved in these capacities within the context of their immediate social circle and the wider neighbourhood. (138)

(iii) Wayside Shrines/Temples
Apart from the non-Agamic temples already described, there are a large number of rudimentary shrines within Peninsula Malaysia, especially along the West Coast, which appear to have no obvious ownership. These are often constructed adjacent to roads and railway lines, and usually under or next to trees. These shrines, occasionally little more than a box like structure on the ground, or a tiny shed containing devotional pictures or symbols, have a wide range of origins and purposes. They may be set up to propitiate bhuta/preta, to worship a deity considered too dangerous to supplicate within the home shrine and/or unacceptable within the local temple, (139) or as a result of mediumship or personal inspiration (often in the latter case arising from individual good fortune attributed to the intervention of a particular deity.) Occasionally they are established upon a site where there has been a fatal accident or particular misfortune, and where the spirits of the departed may be thought to be lingering. (140) Worship at all of these shrines is normally conducted by an individual or a medium/shaman and is usually observed by a small coterie of devotees, occasionally only by a single family. (141)

A second group of shrines have been established because of their correlation with certain natural phenomena considered to have divine associations. Thus some types of trees are
said to contain spirits while particular rocks and stones are held to embody representational attributes of a given deity. Other natural phenomena which may inspire shrines include caves, snakes (especially the larger varieties, for example, cobras and pythons), anthills, hills and mountains, and streams and rivers, (especially the confluence of watercourses). While many of these shrines may exist for no more than a few years, others may survive indefinitely, while still others may attract a regular circle of devotees and gradually make the transition to an established temple (sometimes Agamicized), and very occasionally to a recognized pilgrimage centre.(142) While worship linked with natural phenomena has its genesis in animistic belief, (143) and is primarily pursued by lower caste or lesser educated Hindus, this is by no means invariably the case, and the reputed powers generated by worship at a specific shrine may draw higher caste and/or better educated Hindus.(144) Where a shrine which has its origins in the divine power manifested at a particular locality becomes a pilgrimage centre, the patterns of worship will range across the entire spectrum of Hindu belief structures, sometimes evolving into idiosyncratic and syncretic forms of worship which may fuse elements of village and Agamic Hinduism.(145)

5.3 Ritual Specialists
There are very few Brahman priests in Malaysia, and most are employed within the Agamic temples managed by the Chettiar and Jaffna Tamil communities, as well as in a number of recently “Agamicized/Sanskritized” temples.(146) The Malaysian immigration authorities have proven generally unsympathetic to requests to issue work permits for Brahman kurrakals brought from India or Sri Lanka, claiming that the Malaysian Hindus should be training their own temple specialists.(147) The employment of kurrakals and the justification for their immigration are issues which have been the subject of repeated MIC representations.(148)

Many temples in Malaysia are served by a sub-caste of non-Brahman priests known as pantarams, most of whom undertake a temple apprenticeship which equips them with the rudimentary training required to deal with the ritual contingencies they will encounter in the normal course of their duties. The majority of the non-Agamic temples
are served by *pujaris*, many of whom are part-time priests. The training of *pujaris* varies from comprehensive (in a small minority of cases), to elementary, through to a substantial group who possess a minimum of ritual skills and limited understanding of temple etiquette and management and whose observation of the need for ritual purity in the discharge of temple rites is all but non-existent. Some *pujaris* are mediums or shaman-diviners who are recognised to have skills in worshipping tutelary deities, in controlling *bhuta/preta*, or in divining forecasts and issuing prognostications for individual and familial welfare. For many of this latter group, the rituals associated with formal temple worship are incidental to their mediumship function.

6. MAJOR FESTIVALS

While colonial accounts contain a number of descriptions of Hindu festivals, especially more graphic descriptions of firewalking and rituals involving “self torture”, they rarely provide details of the name of the festival or document the deities worshipped. Thaipusam appears to have emerged early in the colonial era as the most widely observed “popular” festival with both Penang and Batu Caves clearly identified as prominent pilgrimage centres. Murugan/Subramaniam was widely worshipped on the estates, and centres commemorating Thaipusam attracted thousands of devotees from many miles around. By the 1930s Thaipusam was clearly established as the most important Hindu festival and its pre-eminence has continued into the modern era. Other Murugan festivals were also also prominent in the Hindu calendar, especially *Panguni Uttiram*. 

*Deepavali* was also established as a major festival in the Hindu calendar during the colonial period. However, unlike other parts of India where *Deepavali* often commemorates Lord Krishna's victory over Naragasuran, *Deepavali* in Malaya/Malaysia has been observed more of a generalist triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness. While *Deepavali* is a proclaimed national holiday, the only Hindu festival to have achieved this status, its religious dimension has been diluted to the point where it is often regarded as little more than a day of feasting, open house celebrations.
and merry making.(159)

A further major festival widely commemorated throughout Malaya was the Tamil harvest festival of **Thaipongal**, which is traditionally held over the first two days of the Tamil month of **Tai** (which commences in mid-January).(160) On the first morning worship is performed and rice is ceremonially cooked with sugar and milk in a pot, timed to boil over the rim of the pot at sunrise. The ground outside the house is carefully decorated with intricate patterns of slaked lime and/or coloured rice (an art form known as **kolam**), and indoors with fresh produce.(161) The second day is given over to the decoration and honouring of animals.(162) Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise of Dravidianism, Thaipongal was increasingly celebrated as the secular **Tamizhar Tirural** (Festival of the Tamils).(163) In recent years the secular observation of Thaipongal has become rather muted.

In addition to these observances, the annual festival held in the workplace temple was also regarded as of crucial importance in the ritual life of the community.(164) The festival was arranged by the temple committee and was seen as an opportunity for united community cooperation and celebration, thus perhaps echoing important integrative village festivals held in India.(165) Devotees often used this festival as a day of penance or vow fulfilment to the temple deity, either through **timiti** or **kavadi** worship.(166)

The festivals listed above are merely the most prominent of those observed in Malaysia. There are many others, including the important **Agamic** festivals of Mahasivaratri and Navaratri, both promoted by Hindu reform movements,(167) Tamil New Year, festivals honouring Mariamman and Sakti worship (including “women's” festivals emphasising the most dramatic aspects of uncontrolled **sakti**, which feature ritualistic abuse and denigration of absent menfolk),(168) and a heterogeneity of other festivals peculiar to the medley of ethnic, caste or sub-caste, and regional groupings which make up the Hindu population of Malaysia.(169)
7. MALAYSIAN HINDU REFORM MOVEMENTS

All of the Hindu reform movements described in Chapter Four – Neo-Hinduism, Neo-Shaivism, the secular Dravidianism inspired by E.V. Ramasami Naicker, and the more inclusive ideologies of the DMK – have taken root in Malaya/Malaysia and continue to shape contemporary reformist impulses. However, these ideologies have been localised in the light of Malaysian conditions and experiences, sometimes producing idiosyncratic and often paradoxical outcomes. Membership and agendas of reformist bodies often overlap in various ways and it is not uncommon to find reformers or religious commentators who combine elements of Neo-Hinduism, Neo-Shaivism and Dravidian ideologies in their discourses. However, it is possible to discern two generic thrusts of reform within Malayan/ Malaysian Hinduism; firstly, that of an imagined Agamic or Sanskritic Hinduism, consisting of a mainly middle class membership, which has sought to impose reform from above, and secondly, a more diffuse Dravidianism which has sought to inspire egalitarian change within the sphere of religion and religious observance.(170) However, while over the past century the diverse Hindu traditions which have been transplanted to Malaysia have been exposed to the impulses of reform, unification and modernism, Hinduism in Malaysia remains weakly integrated, and subject to competing and potentially fissaparous influences.(171)

Much of the reformist program has been geared toward creating a “modern” Hinduism which will improve the public image of the religion in the eyes of the ruling authorities and other ethnic communities. In the process of seeking change, reformers have often shown limited understanding of the ritualistic and customary bases of many practices found within Malaysia, and have repeatedly displayed great insensitivity towards the feelings and beliefs of those whose traditions they wish to refashion.(172) It is not an infrequent experience to encounter Hindu reformers, often profoundly lacking even the most rudimentary understanding of the fundamental tenets of popular traditions, who denounce the beliefs, practices and experiences of their non-Agamic co-religionists in terms strikingly reminiscent of those once used by British administrators and Christian missionaries to describe Hinduism as a whole.(173)
7.1 Early Hindu Administration and Reform

In 1906, reacting to the multiplicity of religious forms and mounting evidence of irregularity, disputation and factionalism within the management committees, the Government of the Straits Settlements passed the Hindu Endowments Board Ordinance which empowered the governor to appoint a Board (the Penang Hindu Endowments Board, or PHEB), to manage, where necessary, the affairs of a specified group of Penang temples. For the next fifty years the PHEB continued its work in Penang, and following Merdeka in 1957, was absorbed within the bureaucracy of independent Malaya. (174) Within Singapore, the creation of a similar board in the 1920s created deep concern among the Hindu population that Europeans (and thus presumably Christians), were being invited by the colonial administration to arbitrate on matters affecting Hindu worship. (175) No such regulatory bodies were established in the Malay states. (176)

Throughout the 1920s, Hindu groups established sabhas and sangams in all major centres of Indian population throughout the country. Many of these bodies suffered from weak leadership, unstable management and internecine conflict. The multiplicity of organisations meant that there was no central coordinating agency representing Hinduism with which the colonial authorities could deal in arbitrating upon the administration of religious issues. From the mid 1930s onwards many of these bodies amalgamated to form more durable and representative institutions. (177)

An early reform movement, which emerged in the 1920s, and comprising a largely upper class membership, aimed at creating an acceptable public image for Hinduism. The reformers sought the banning of animal sacrifice, and later the prohibiting of firewalking (timiti) and kavadi worship. (178)

7.2 Dravidianism

The major impetus to Hindu reformism prior to World War II was the cult of radical Dravidianism launched by the Tamil cultural and political separatist movement, the Self Respect organisation, headed by E.V. Ramasami Naicker. Self Respect aimed at
restoring and refurbishing an imagined autochthonous Tamil culture which it contended had long been subjugated and adulterated by Northern Brahman and Sanskritic influences. Within the religious sphere the Dravidian movement aimed at eliminating “superstition” and practices which it determined were inconsistent with the “modern” age; of disentangling all Brahmanic and Sanskritic accretions from Tamil belief structures; and of uniting all castes to overthrow the putative Northern Aryan Brahmanic “oppression” of Tamil society. (179) A Tamil Reform Association (TRA) was formed in 1931. The TRA was not only concerned with “modernising” Hinduism, but planned to uplift Malayan Hindus “onto a level with other communities in Malaya, so that they would not be looked down upon as backward and archaic.” (180) The TRA produced a journal entitled “Reform”, the first issue of which was published in 1936. (181)

A concurrent reform movement, which overlapped with the Self Respect movement was the Adi Dravidar caste association which set up branches across Malaya and developed substantial followings throughout the pre-war years. This movement strove to eradicate blood sacrifices in Hindu worship, to curtail the worship of guardian/tutelary deities and bhuta/preta, to cease pariayah tappu beating as part of Tamil funerary rights (182), and to push for open door admission policies at all temples. Adi Dravidar associations also provided basic tuition classes for members.(183)

The TRA, having suspended operations throughout the Japanese Occupation, resumed its activities following the war. The refusal of estate labourers – particularly younger workers – to unquestioningly accept the reimposition of British authority, created a plantation environment more receptive to the dissemination of the extreme ideologies of the TRA. (184) Many younger workers were now prepared to accept the view that the Hindu temple was a “Brahmanic” institution designed to hoodwink and exploit all other castes, and was thus integral to the system of social control which the “invading” northern Brahmans had imposed upon South India. (185)

The TRA campaign aimed at ensuring that Malayan temples were kept abreast with the
program of “modernisation” which was occurring within the Tamil homeland. Initially the Association targeted the practice of animal sacrifice within the context of temple and ritual worship. The suppression of animal sacrifice had been largely successful in Madras, and the TRA conducted a vigorous educational program within Malaya which was supplemented by the application of selective pressure on temple managements which refused to ban the practice. This objective met with considerable success; animal sacrifice became far less common, and was restricted to a handful of minor non-\textit{Agamic} temples.\textsuperscript{(186)}

The post war religious revival among the bulk of the Hindu population was deeply influenced and ultimately shaped by Dravidian ideologies.\textsuperscript{(187)} The preponderance of Tamils within the Hindu population inexorably led to the “Tamilization” of Malayan Hinduism.\textsuperscript{(188)} This resulted in the greater use of Tamil ritual in temple worship, the publication of a plethora of devotional material in Tamil, and the establishment of Tamil classes throughout Malaya.\textsuperscript{(189)} The Hindu renascence also resulted in the rediscovery and exploration of all the Tamil arts – literature, Carnatic classical music, the \textit{Bharatanatyam} dance form, and drama, as well as the inauguration of a range of societies dedicated to nourishing these arts, and promoting concerts and performances.\textsuperscript{(190)}

\subsection*{7.3 Middle Class Reform}

In Chapter Two it was noted that the period of Japanese occupation resulted in the cohering of Malaya's many ethnic groups into generic racial blocs, and the development of sharply delineated inclusive-exclusive boundaries. In the Indian case, the community's war time involvement in the politics of the INA/IIL, and the concomitant absorption of the leitmotif underpinning the ideology of Indian nationalism, that of India as a great, enduring and incomparably rich civilisation, promoted a renewed interest among Malayan Indians in the examination and re-evaluation of their cultural and religious heritage. The latter phenomenon was especially pronounced among middle and upper class Indians, many of whom prior to the war had eschewed open adherence to all forms of Hinduism, and had attempted to assume a veneer of "Westernisation" which
would publically distance them from working class Indians.(191)

Many educated Hindus expressed interest in studying the philosophical basis of Hinduism, especially the teachings of Saiva Siddhanta, a southern school of Hinduism strongly interlinked with Tamil Agamic “great tradition” Hinduism, but, as we have seen, also absorbing or reworking elements of popular Hinduism.(192) Their enthusiasm was reinforced by the visits of a steady stream of swamis and spiritual teachers from Tamil Nadu and Ceylon.(193) These educated strata took a special interest in non-ritualised devotional worship, especially the performance of bhajan, (the singing of devotional hymns), but tended to eschew, and ultimately lose contact with, the more robust traditions of bhakti worship, such as foot pilgrimage (pada yatra) or the kavadi ritual.(194)

In the early 1950s, the Hindu revival led to an influx of fresh talent and expertise into the management and administration of temples, as well as the establishment of a number of educational organisations which provided classes in Saiva Siddhanta and Agamic ritual worship. These new societies included a number of Hindu Youth organisations.(195) Many of these bodies provided outreach services within the broader Indian community.(196) In 1954 major Hindu groups across the country convened an all-Malaya Hindu Conference, which resulted in the inauguration of the Malayan Hindu Sangam.(197) This body has sought to exercise a central role in the affairs of Malaysian Hinduism.(198)

Other philosophical Hindu traditions have had a profound influence on educated Hindus. Both the Ramakrishna Mission(199) and the Vivekananda Society(200) have promulgated Vedantic theology, and their associated “universalistic” philosophies. More recently, Caucasian American, Guru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001) established a small but dynamic following in Malaysia, though he has been criticised for his use of Christian ecclesiastical terminology, and the rather selective scholarship of his order which emphatically rejects both the Bhagavad Gita and of the extensive corpus of
puranic mythology, allegedly because of their putative “militarism” and “excessive” violence. (201) The Indian guru, Sai Baba, has also developed a substantial following in Malaysia. Groups devoted to his teachings have been established throughout the Indian community, and have also attracted the involvement of significant numbers of Chinese participants. (202)

In general middle and professional class Hindu reformers have attempted to project an image of Hinduism as a tolerant, progressive and dignified religion. However, many of these reformers are often beset with acute, and in some instances chronic, anxieties regarding the perceptions of Hinduism held by Malays, Chinese and Westerners. (203) Proponents of “great tradition” Hinduism have repeatedly promoted an imagined “pan-Hinduism” and have sought to discourage what they often portray as localised beliefs, and practices, that is, those allegedly based on caste, lineage, region and sect. (204) Indeed, a minority of middle-upper class reform movements have taken extraordinary steps to distance themselves from the more ascetic, stark or ebullient traditions of bhakti worship and puranic Hinduism, even to the extent of denying that these rituals and beliefs have any basis in Hinduism at all. (205)

The uninformed views of many “modernising” Hindus about the authenticity of their own traditions can be explained as follows. I have previously noted that many middle class Hindus had eschewed any acknowledgement of their religion throughout the period extending to the Pacific War. (206) It may therefore be postulated that this generation experienced something of a cultural lacuna, and that the broad knowledge of the traditions of bhakti worship, puranic mythology, the essential cosmologies of Agamic deities, and the inter-relationship of Agamic and popular Hinduism, all of which would have existed in their home environment in India, were irretrievably lost. Among a small, select group of reformers, the emphasis upon philosophical and scriptural Hinduism, without a countervailing knowledge of the full gamut of Hindu devotionalist traditions, often produces a rarified aloofness and a tendency to a rather dogmatic omniscience, which sometimes expresses itself in a vigorous denunciation of those who subscribe to what are resolutely condemned as “lower forms” of belief and worship. (207)
7.4 Thaipusam and Reform

Over the years the “popular” commemoration of Thaipusam has been criticised by various reformers. There have been two major attempts to ban kavadi worship in Malaysia/Singapore. The first of these was launched by the TRA, the second was a somewhat more generalist campaign initiated by the Hindu Sangam of Malaysia.

(i) TRA In 1938-39, the TRA tried to persuade the colonial government to outlaw both timiti and kavadi worship in Malaya. This action formed part of E.V. Ramasami’s program of expunging Dravidian culture of practices not considered “rational”. The colonial government, aware of Ramasami's communist affiliations, were not disposed to respond.

Following the War, the TRA actually appealed to the Singapore government to legislate against kavadi worship and timiti. The Singapore Hindu Association sought Indian direction on the matter and was “allegedly” advised in July 1949 in a letter signed by a high government (Congress) official, that the proscription of kavadi worship might “lead to the disappearance of piety and religion” in Malaya and Singapore. The existence of this letter was confirmed by a conversation between this scholar and a senior kurukkal in Seremban in 1995. He stated that, “These rascals (that is, the TRA) actually went running off to the British to try to ban a Hindu custom which brought joy and meaning to thousands of devotees. Is such a thing possible? These meddlers were prepared to soil their hands hobnobbing with the colonialists. They were stupid and ignorant men.”

Several other senior Hindus to whom I spoke in the course of this research were aware of this letter and the quite explicit advice it contained.

Having failed in their efforts to persuade the colonial authorities to prohibit kavadi worship and timiti, the TRA now endeavoured to coerce major temples to comply with their demands. In 1950 the Mariamman and Tank Road temples, responding to TRA insistence, imposed a temporary ban on aluga kavadis. This was revoked after the temples were overwhelmed by pressures exerted by wealthy patrons and by the many
requests of devotees wishing to bear kavadis.(215)

(ii) Malaysian Hindu Sangam In 1988 the Malaysian Hindu Sangam issued an extraordinary statement condemning kavadi worship as “an affront to the Hindu religion”, a practice which was devoid of scriptural injunction, and which constituted an offence to the human body (which should be regarded as a temple). The statement also claimed that many who undertook the kavadi ritual did so “to show off”. (216) In addressing the 1988 Asia Pacific Hindu Conference in Singapore, Sangam President Datuk S. Govindaraj asserted that Thaipusam worship in Malaysia was not only “markedly different” to that found in India, but had “become a horrible spectacle of wild display, competition and exhibition of demonic acts carried to excess that finds no sanction in our Saistra (sic)”(217) He spoke further of the “ignorance” of devotees, and the “terrifying techniques” of kavadi worship.(218)

Datuk Govindaraj's attack was received angrily by many Hindus who regarded it as high handed, unconscionable, and, for a high official of an institution supposedly steeped in the traditions of Hindu culture, almost unbelievable in its nescience.(219) Govindaraj's strictures, typical of those found among a self professed reformist elite (220) had no observable impact upon the commemoration of Thaipusam in Malaysia.

7.5 Sanskritization/Agamicization in Malaysia
Over the past thirty years the process of Sanskritization and/or Agamicization has had a major impact on the overall structures of Malaysia Hinduism. Within the metropolitan Indian context, Sanskritization implies the disposal of lesser deities and localised customs, beliefs and patterns of worship, and their subsequent replacement with recognised practices and deities drawn from “higher tradition” Agamic Hinduism.(221) However, within Malaysia, it is more common for gods and goddesses to be redefined in terms of their putative relationship to recognised Agamic deities, an undertaking which involves their celestial uplift (as it were), and the subsequent reincorporation within the Hindu pantheon.(222) Thus a large number of shrines and temples dedicated to village or tutelary deities have been elevated, with the deities being assigned attributes which
enable them to be firmly identified with one of the great Agamic gods; Siva, Ganesha, Murugan, Sakti (especially Parvati and Sarasvati), Vishnu, or (more rarely) Krishna. (223) The rituals and modes of worship associated with the deities also undergo a corresponding revision as to befit the status of deities who are now regarded as Agamic. (224) Simultaneously temples are refurbished and remodelled to accord with Agamic precepts. (225)

In the following paragraphs, I will provide an example of the phenomenon of Sanskritization/Agamicization as it has affected the Raja Rajesvariyanman Temple in Kuala Lumpur, as well as examining the calculated and ritualistic upgrading of the tutelary deity Munisvaran.

Until 1977, the site of the Raja Rajesvariyanman Temple located in Ulu Kelang, Kuala Lumpur, was occupied by a small temple dedicated to Mariamman in her capacity as a village deity. The temple was frequented by Hindu utility and other workers, and the deity was served by a pujari. However, throughout the early 1970s the Ulu Kelang region, which had been a combination of jungle, rubber estates and squatter settlements, was comprehensively redeveloped into largely middle class suburb. Hindu residents moving into the suburb believed that the temple should be reconstructed to serve the needs of the newly arrived community. The management therefore employed sthapatis to refashion the temple so that it observed all Agamic requirements. The temple was provided with a name – Raja Rajesvariyanman – which followed the traditions of a similarly named great Agamic temple of South India. Two kurukkals were engaged from Tamil Nadu to ensure that temple worship and ritual were performed in accordance with Agamic precepts. In time, the temple became a noted centre for the teaching and performance of Carnatic classical music as well as Bharatanatyam dance, both of which are seen as intrinsic to the culture associated with “great tradition” Hinduism. (226) In the process of Agamicization, the identity of the former village temple has not been so much obscured as completely obliterated, in effect being replaced with a new temple which fully embodies the ideals of Agamic Hinduism.
The temples dedicated to the tutelary deity Munisvaran have undergone a similar process of partial Agamicization. Munisvaran is a localised deity imported from South India, where he often guards village boundaries. Within Malaysia he is usually found in small temples constructed of plank and zinc, and the images are usually made of clay. Along with another tutelary deity, Muniandy, he is often found standing guard in the temple compounds of village goddesses. Munisvaran accepts blood sacrifices, and is said to control both bhuta and preta. He is thus a typical tutelary deity who is benevolent when propitiated, but capable of acts of anger and destruction when ignored.(227) From the early 1970s, the pujaris serving Munisvaran temples began to insist that the deity was not a lesser “little” god, but rather should be identified with Siva, and that the animal sacrifice being conducted in his temples was actually being offered to Muniandy, whose role was specified as that of doorkeeper/custodian to the temple. In 1974, a conference was called by the managements of Munisvaran and Kaliyamman temples. This Conference was attended by representatives of 37 (mainly Munisvaran) temples, who determined, inter alia, that Munisvaran was a manifestation of the Agamic god, Siva, and a consequence a number of non-Agamic practices, including animal sacrifices, should be discontinued within Munisvaran temples.(228) Many of these temples have begun to observe the major Siva festival Maha Sivaratri, as well as other festivals dedicated to Siva, and have introduced other elements of Agamic worship into their corpus of temple ritual.(229)

As I have already noted, Agamicization/Sanskritization in Malaysia differs from the process as found in India. There it is a phenomenon of caste, an attempt to relocate a particular jati as a higher social group within the overall caste hierarchy. It is essentially a process of cultural mobilization whereby a specific caste consciously adopts the religious and social practices of higher castes, thus, over time achieving acknowledgement of a more elevated societal status than it was previously accorded. In the course of achieving this revised standing, the social process may involve the clustering and subsequent welding of hitherto fragmented social groups into a new and recognizably integrated social unit.(230) However, this is not how Sanskritization/Agamicization operates in Malaysia. While the process also involves
projected upward social mobility and a redefinition of a specific group's cultural status, it is only incidentally a caste related phenomenon. Rather with the general weakening of the institution of caste and the emergence of class as the primary agency for the social organization of Malaysian Hindu society, Sanskritization/Agamicization may be interpreted as a form of social striving by which lower class Indians attempt, by emulating the religious practices observed in the major Agamic temples, to identify themselves with middle and upper class Hindus.

Viewed in this context, Agamicization/Sanskritization may be seen as a lower class initiated movement dedicated to reshaping the form and boundaries of Hinduism as an overall ethnic marker. By imposing “higher” and uniform traditions of worship, Agamicization/Sanskritization re-images and repositions Hinduism (and by extension, all devotees), in the eyes of other ethnic communities, and presents it as a respectable, dignified and cultivated religion.

But while Sanskritization/Agamicization leads to the introduction of recognized and more reputable patterns of worship, the process does not result in the loss of cherished village and tutelary deities. They are retained, redefined, and accoutred with new and higher attributes which fuse their identities with that of selected Agamic deities, and are subsequently offered an honoured position within the received Hindu pantheon. The process of Sanskritization/Agamicization had also resulted in the widespread veneration of former village gods and goddesses within the context of the great Agamic festivals, as well as other calendrical rituals normally restricted to Agamic deities. Thus, for example, throughout Thaipusam, certain devotees will acknowledge Munisvaran, the former tutelary deity, as none other than Siva, the “father” of Murugan, and in the great Agamic festival of Navaratri, celebrating the "feminine" functional energies of the Trimurti, various village goddesses may be identified and worshipped as manifestations of the Agamic deity, Sakti.(231)

In an earlier section I noted that Agamic and popular Hinduism could not be considered totally discrete traditions, and that most devotees observed belief rituals and patterns of
worship which incorporated elements from both. The continuing creative dialogue between these traditions provided opportunities for the emergence of “hybrid” syncretized belief structures. Within Malaysia, Agamicization/ Sanskritization represents a form of this process, in effect the grafting of selected elements of “great tradition” Hinduism upon a reconstituted popular religion.

One of the most pronounced syncretic impulses within Malaysia, however, has been the “Tamilization” of Hinduism, and the concomitant absorption of other forms of Hinduism, especially the minority Vaishnavite tradition, within the overarching fabric of the majority popular Saivite traditions. Thus one finds Vaishnavite deities, especially Krishna and Hanuman, and to a lesser extent Vishnu, represented within the great Saivite festivals, and the incorporation of some Vaishnavite motifs and scriptures – in particular the Bhagavad Gita – into Malaysian Saivism.(232) Similarly, many of those who adhere to Vaishnavite beliefs, will often incorporate Saivite deities, especially Murugan, into their worship. (233)

8. THE KERLING INCIDENT AND HINDU RENEWAL

The general response to Islamization has been one of renewal. This has been manifest in activities such as temple construction, increased participation in festivals and exploration of religious traditions. However, the specific “Islamic” incident which acted as a catalyst for these processes was the spate of temple violations which culminated in the so-called Kerling Incident of 19 August 1978 (outlined in Chapter Two) Many Hindus had believed that police attempts to apprehend the desecrators were both laggardly and half hearted, and that the protection of Hindu temples was viewed officially as a low priority. Others commented privately that they felt that Hinduism had been viewed by the extremists as a “soft” target which could be attacked with relative impunity.(234) These perceptions moulded a wider view that the Malaysian Government could not be relied upon to guarantee the security and preservation of the Hindu heritage. The Kerling Incident thus served as a warning to Hindus that the future of their community was wholly dependent upon their own efforts.(235)
The Malay Islamic upsurge has been paralleled with a renewed Hindu involvement and exploration of their heritage and traditions. Much of this occurred within the arena of temple worship which has always been viewed as a central facet of Hinduism in Malaysia. Throughout the 1980s there was a sharp rise in the number of temples built. In addition many shrines and non-\textit{Agamic} temples were reconstructed and dedicated as \textit{Agamic} temples. A further development was an increase in the multi-shrine temples in Malaysia; many temples which were formerly dedicated to a single deity were refashioned to provide shrines for additional \textit{Agamic} gods, even to the extent of some Saivite temples incorporating shrines for Vaishnavite deities.\cite{236} In addition there has been considerable interest in exploring the philosophical foundations of Hinduism, and in reinterpreting Hindu practices in the light of \textit{Agamic} traditions. This has led to the discouragement of some obscure or irrelevant practices, and the discreet jettisoning of those seen as antiquated.\cite{237} And as I observed in Chapter Two, the intensification of the Hindu revival has produced a more active engagement with the wider world of Hinduism, in particular, the attempt to situate Malaysian Hinduism in terms of its relationship both with metropolitan India and the Tamil/Indian \textit{diaspora}.

\textbf{9. CONCLUSIONS}

This chapter has examined the reproduction and adaptation of Hinduism – its practices, belief structures, philosophies – with Malaya/Malaysia. It has noted that this has occurred in the absence of two key forces which have played major roles in shaping metropolitan Tamil Hinduism; firstly, the centres of religious learning (\textit{math}), and secondly an influential Brahman or dominant orthodox caste.

The formative period of kangany recruitment produced a variegated caste structure in Malaysia, with about one-third of the population drawn from \textit{Adi Dravidar} castes and the remainder from a range of \textit{Sudra} castes. Although caste as an institution has been re-negotiated in Malaysia, it retains its potency in certain facets of Hindu life, for example in choice of marriage partners, food exchange, and in observation of ritual purity and pollution.
Malaysian Hinduism is remarkably diverse and is marked by a proliferation of religious forms. While Agamic Hinduism was imported by middle and upper class groups, especially the Chettiar and Jaffna Tamil communities, popular or village Hinduism consisted of practices built around remembered mores. The diversity of temples ranging from Agamic to wayside shrines, reflects the many divisions within the community – those of caste, sub-ethnicity and locality of origin. However, a common feature has been the worship of Murugan which is practiced within nearly all Agamic temples as well as a high percentage of plantation and workplace temples. This phenomenon perhaps accounts for the rapid emergence of Thaipusam as the most widely celebrated Hindu festival in Malaya/Malaysia.

As in Tamil Nadu, Hindu reformist movements have sought to reconfigure the structures and practices of Hinduism. While reformism has assumed a multiplicity of forms, two major influences can be identified; namely (i) middle class groups concerned with the imposition of an imagined Agamic/Sanskritic Hinduism, and (ii) Tamil bodies, representing a diffuse Dravidianism. Middle class reformism, which largely emerged after World War II, and among a strata of society which had hitherto largely eschewed Hinduism, has proven most selective in its depiction of what can be considered to constitute Hindu belief and ritual, preferring to appeal to wholly textual and scriptural sources. Dravidianism has ranged from emphasis upon the introduction and observations putative Tamil forms of worship through to the more iconoclastic and intolerant radicalism initially championed by Ramasami Naicker's Self Respect movement. As I have noted, both groups have in their own ways, challenged the validity of Thaipusam.

However the most influential impulses in reformulating Malaysian Hinduism have been those which have produced syncretic outcomes – those which have aligned or fused one form of Hinduism with another. These movements have reworked belief and ritual structures to “Tamilize” Hinduism, to Agamicize/Sanskritize village Hinduism, and to incorporate symbols and motifs drawn from Agamic Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions into popular forms of worship. The reconstitution of boundaries has resulted in a diversity of “hybrid” Hindu structures.
In recent years it has been possible to discern an incipient, and thus inchoate sense of unity among Malaysian Hindus. Thus while Hinduism in Malaysia remains a concatenation of fluid and potentially kinetic structures, still fissiparous and but loosely integrated, its membership has become increasingly aware of its overriding commonality and shared interests. This has been reinforced by the pressures exerted by a resurgent Islam, and in particular the shock of the Kerling Incident, which indicated to Hindus their own vulnerability. The result has been a renewed exploration of the Hindu heritage and its traditions, in particular the location of Malaysian Hinduism within the context of a wider civilizational arena, embracing both metropolitan India as well as the Tamil Hindu diaspora.

NOTES
(1) Raghavan argues that the Hinduism has been “re-created” in Malaya/Malaysia. He points out that Hinduism existed in Malaya well before the arrival of Islam. See: Raghavan, Nedyam. India and Malaya: A Study, Indian Council of World Affairs/Orient Longmans Ltd., Bombay, 1954
(2) Ackerman, Susan E. and Lee, Raymond M. Heaven in Transition: Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1988:91,95
(4) ibid: 84
(7) ibid:25-26
(8) ibid:24-26
Lucia, 1980:24-26
(10) Jain (1970), op cit:346
(11) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:95
(15) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit: 66
(16) ibid: 65-66
(22) ibid
(23) Arasaratnam (1993), op cit:206
(24) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:168
(25) Rajakrishnan, *Caste Consciousness...*, op cit:15-16; personal field research
(26) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:95
(27) Rajakrishnan; *Caste Consciousness.....*, op cit:30-31; personal field research.
(28) Rajakrishnan notes that this is particularly pronounced among Goundar and Chettiar castes. Rajakrishnan *Caste Consciousness..., op cit:59
(29) ibid:34. The hiring of a high caste cook for weddings and other functions seems to be a very common practice in India.
(30) Rajakrishnan, *Caste Consciousness...*; op cit:54; personal field research
(32) ibid:73
(33) Jain (1970), op cit: 346
(34) Personal field research; Rajakrishnan, Caste Consciousness..., op cit:73-76
(35) Agamic Hinduism is regarded as sruti or “revealed religion” and thus offers scriptural or sastric instructions on the conduct of religious rituals, the construction of temples, ethical living, etc. (Klostermaier, Klaus. *A Survey of Hinduism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994:69-70)
(36) Rajoo R. “Sanskritization in the Hindu Temples of West Malaysia”, *Jurnal Pengajian India*, Department of Indian Studies, Department of Indian Studies, Universiti Malaya, Volume II, 1984:161
(37) Ramanathan, op cit:77; Rajoo (1984), op cit:160
(38) Rajoo (1984), op cit:160
(39) One of the first actions taken by temple committees seeking to “reform” village temples is the banning of all meat offerings and the substitution of vegetarian offerings.
(40) Personal field research
(41) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:167-168
(43) Rajoo, R. “Hindu Religious Values and Economic Retardation Among the Indian Plantation Workers in Peninsular Malaysia – a Myth or Reality?”, *Jurnal Pengajian India*, Department of Indian Studies, Universiti Malaya, Volume IV, 1986: 44
(44) ibid
(45) ibid
(46) Ramanathan, op cit:82
(47) ibid:79
(48) Rajoo (1984), op cit:160
(49) Ramanathan, op cit:70
(50) ibid
(51) ibid: 82
(52) Rajoo (1984) op cit:160-161; Ramanathan, op cit: 79-80; personal field research
(53) Ramanathan, op cit:82
(54) ibid
(55) Rajoo (1984), op cit:160; personal field research
(56) Ramanathan, op cit: 81; personal field research
(57) Jain (1970), op cit:134
(58) Fuller (1992), op cit:48-50
(59) Ramanathan, op cit:85
(60) Rajoo (1984), op cit:161
(61) Ramanathan, op cit: 85
(62) Ramanathan, ibid:80-81; Fuller(1992), op cit:50
(63) Fuller (1992), op cit: 50
(64) ibid:49
(65) Personal field research
(66) Ramanathan, op cit:80-81
(67) Fuller (1992), op cit:49
(68) ibid
(69) Personal field research
(70) Ramanathan, op cit: 202-203; personal field research
(71) Fuller(1992), op cit:49
(72) ibid
(73) Ramanathan, op cit: 95
(74) Personal field research; Ramanathan, op cit: 95
(75) Personal field research
(76) Fuller (1992), op cit:51
(77) Personal field research
(78) Ramanathan, op cit:95
(79) ibid
(80) ibid
(81) ibid:283-284; Personal field research
(82) Ramanathan, op cit:3; Personal field research
(83) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit: 163
(84) Ramanathan, op cit: 299
(85) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit: 173
(88) Nadarajan, op cit: 253
(89) Ramanathan, op cit: 97
(90) ibid: 101
(91) Evers and Jayarani, op cit: 853
(92) Ramanathan, op cit: 101; Nadarajan, op cit: 256
(93) Evers and Jayarani, op cit: 853; personal field research
(94) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit: 167-168
(95) Evers and Jayarani, op cit: 856
(96) Ramanathan, op cit: 100
(97) Personal field research
(98) Ramanathan, op cit: 96
(99) Personal field research
(100) Ramanathan, op cit: 103
(102) Interviews with officials of Chettiar managed temples in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Telok Intan.
(103) Nadarajan, op cit: 253
(104) Ramanathan, op cit: 105
(105) Personal field research
(106) Personal field research
(107) Personal field research
(108) Ramanathan, op cit: 108
(109) ibid:118
(110) Rajakrishnan Ramasamy. “Indo-Ceylonese Relations in Malaysia”, Jurnal Pengajian India, Department of Indian Studies, Universiti Malaya, Volume IV, 1986:98
(111) ibid:103
(112) Ramanathan, op cit: 116
(113) ibid:122
(114) Information provided in personal correspondence.
(115) Ramanathan, op cit:124
(116) ibid:128
(117) Rajakrishnan (1986), op cit:103
(118) The following account of the Portuguese desecration of the Vishnu temple at the southern tip of Sri Lanka, and recorded by the military official de Couta, provides an example of Portuguese attitudes and behaviour towards non-Christian religions: “The temple was vast in size all the roofs being domed and richly carved; round it were several handsome chapels and over the principal gateway was a tall tower roofed with copper, gilt in various parts. Within was a large square with verandahs and terraces with a handsome gate on each side, while all around were planted sweet-smelling flowers which were used during the processions. We burst in the gates and proceeded to destroy the idols of which there were more than a thousand of different figures of clay and wood and copper, mostly gilded. We destroyed the domes and colonnades and sacked the stores where we found a vast accumulation of ivory, fine clothes, coffee, pepper, sandalwood, jewels, precious stones and all the fittings of the temple, which we plundered as we desired and set the rest on fire. As the greatest affront that could be offered to the place we slaughtered within some cows, this being a stain which could not be purified without the most elaborate ceremonies. We also burnt a magnificent wooden car built like a tower of seven stories, and beautifully painted and gilt – a magnificent vehicle in which they were accustomed to convey the chief idol around the city.” (Obeyesekere, Gananath. The Cult of the Goddess Pattini, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984:23). The Protestant attitudes towards Sri Lankan religions, buttressed by British colonialism, may be revealed by the fact that in 1880 when Major Olcott and Madam Blavatsky of the Theosophy Society visited Ceylon, they discovered that only
Christian marriages were regarded as legal by the colonial authorities. Education was dominated by Christian missionaries: there were 805 Christian schools opposed to a mere 4 Buddhist schools. Grants for schools were dependent upon a commitment to teach the Bible. (Washington, Peter. *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1993:66-67)

(119) Personal field research
(120) Ramanathan, op cit:127
(121) Arasaratnam(1970), op cit:65
(122) Ramanathan, op cit:82
(123) ibid:90-91
(125) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:65
(126) Gamba, op cit:307
(129) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:171
(130) Personal field research
(131) Gamba, op cit:309
(132) Ramanathan, op cit:84
(133) ibid:89; personal field research.
(134) Personal field research
(135) Ramanathan, op cit:90
(136) Personal field research
(137) Arasaratnam(1970), op cit:164
(138) Ramanathan, op cit:91
(139) Personal field research
(140) Personal field research
(141) Personal field research
(142) Personal field research
(143) Ramanathan, op cit:79
This was one of the most frequent complaints raised by temple authorities within the major Agamic temples.

One small “village” temple dedicated to Kaliamman I visited near Ipoh was officiated by a pujari who was notorious for his drunkenness, and who, when conducting the evening puja at which I was present, was obviously under the influence of alcohol.
(168) Personal field research
(169) Personal field research. For a major, albeit now dated, survey of the major Hindu festivals in Malaysia, see Arasaratnam, Sinnappah. *Indian Festivals in Malaya*, Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1966
(170) Arasaratnam (1993), op cit:207
(171) Personal field research. See also Ackerman and Lee, op cit112-113; Rajoo. R. “Ethnicity and Religion Among Urban Hindus in Peninsular Malaysia”, *Jurnal Pengajian India*, Department of Indian Studies, Universiti Malaya, Volume I, 1983:99-103
(172) Personal field research
(173) Personal field research
(174) Ramanathan, op cit:177-181
(175) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:164
(176) Information garnered from personal interviews with temple officials, Kuala Lumpur.
(177) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:195
(178) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:96
(179) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:126-127
(180) ibid:172-173
(181) ibid
(182) Rajakrishnan, *Caste Consciousness*..., op cit:73
(183) ibid:74
(184) Gamba, op cit:308
(185) ibid:307
(186) Personal field research
(187) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:165
(188) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:97
(189) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:166-167
(190) ibid:128
(191) ibid:165-166
(192) Ackerman and Lee, op cit:97
(193) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:167
(194) Personal field research
(195) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:166
(196) Personal field research
(197) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:166
(198) Personal field research
(199) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:174
(200) ibid:175
(201) Hinduism Today, April/May/June 2002; Personal field research – indeed, several leading Malaysian Hindus were mystified that Sivaya Subramuniyaswami would reject the Gita, and also the huge corpus of puranic mythology.
(202) Personal field research
(203) Rajoo (1984), op cit:168
(204) Personal field research
(205) Personal field research
(206) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:165
(207) Personal field research
(208) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:172-173
(211) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:174
(212) Informant: VPI
(213) I also discussed the letter with a Government appointed senior temple official in Palani. He responded, “I have no idea why these fellows (that is, Hindu reformers), get themselves so heated (about kavadi worship). They are not very knowledgeable people.” He went on to explain that the kavadi ritual had long been an integral devotional tradition within the Murugan cultus, and was well established not only in South India, but elsewhere throughout the Tamil diaspora (interview, February 1998). The advice contained in the letter also echoes that conveyed by Indian officials to
Indonesian authorities in the early 1990s in connection with attempts to ban kavadi worship in Medan (see Chapter Three).

(214) Arasaratnam (1970), op cit:174
(215) Sinha, Vaneeta, op cit:844-845
(216) *Hinduism Today*, April 1988, Volume 10, Number 3:8
(218) ibid
(219) Personal correspondence
(220) Personal field research
(221) Rajoo (1984), op cit:167
(222) ibid:158-159
(223) Ramanathan, op cit:81
(224) Rajoo (1984), op cit:158-159
(225) ibid:164
(226) ibid:163-164
(227) Personal field research
(228) Rajoo (1984), op cit:164-165
(229) Personal field research
(230) Rajoo (1984), op cit:167
(232) Personal field research
(233) Personal field research
(234) Comments made to me by MIC politicians in 1978 at the time of the temple desecrations leading to the Kerling Incident.
(235) Ramanathan, op cit:243
(236) Personal field research
(237) Personal field research
CHAPTER SIX. THAIPUSAM CONSIDERED: THE DIVINE CROSSING

1. INTRODUCTION
In this chapter, I will explore kavadi worship at Thaipusam through the structures of the Tamil Hindu pilgrimage ritual. This will examine theoretical notions of pilgrimage and the implications for the individual participant. The chapter will also explore how Hindu ritual performs its work, and how it enables the devotee to effect a paradigm shift in the circumstances of his/her mundane existence through an appeal to and interaction with the Divine. This process involves substantial modification and transformation, which must be undertaken at a ritually designated propitious moment. At Thaipusam this involves the installation of the king-deity Murugan in his mountaintop palace, and his consequent readiness to grant audience to his devotees. The chapter looks at asceticism and change, the liminality of trance and its application as an agent of transformation at Thaipusam, and the multivalent symbology of the journey to the Caves. Finally this chapter makes reference to the Idumban puja in which the devotee is restored to society, as well as Thaipusam and the heat-colour paradigm.

2. PILGRIMAGE: THE TIRTHA YATRA
Within the Hindu tradition pilgrimage is known as a tirtha yatra, that is a round journey or yatra to a “ford” or crossing place (tirtha).(1) While some tirthas may actually consist of river crossings, the term may be more literally interpreted to incorporate any pilgrimage centre, any one of a broad range of liminal median locations in which the boundary between human and divine worlds is both permeable and negotiable.(2) In the most general sense, then, a pilgrimage may be viewed as a return journey to a destination (or “crossing place”) where deities normally transcendent are both immanent and accessible.(3)

Pilgrimage has always been a vital ritual and an integral component of Hinduism.(4) The efficacy of pilgrimage is emphasized in Sanskrit law books, puranas and the Epic Mahabharata, and is regarded as especially creditable when undertaken by poor or lower caste devotees or women.(5)
It should be noted that pilgrimages should be distinguished from visits to village or district temples or shrines. While these places fulfill a particular purpose, in particular in providing a recognized local focus of worship, they function in ways that are both more diffuse and generalized than that of the great pilgrimage centres. Often these shrines and temples are dedicated to the celebration of village or district specific gods and spirits, frequently of human origin, “whose worship ...(is)... susceptible to manipulation rather than adoration.” However, even when the presiding deity of a village or district temple or shrine is a member of the recognized Agamic pantheon, it will be regarded as a secondary dwelling for a god (or goddess) whose sacred geography locates his/her "essential abode" elsewhere. Local temples and shrines are regarded as appropriate venues for routine worship, general transactions between devotee and deity, and the resolution of standard problems of life, especially well-being and happiness, but they are not considered to offer the efficacy or power of the great pilgrimage centres. Nor does a visit to the local or district shrine require either the effort of the disruption to societal routines involved in undertaking a tirtha yatra, nor deliver the merit (punya) that the pilgrimage earns the devotee.

A pilgrimage centre may be conceptualized as an axis mundi, a central and crucial pivot of the universe which is considered outside mundane space and time, even though it is a visible site on earth as well. The shrine is idealized as a ritually ordered universe, and the gatekeeper marks the point of transition from the outside world; a place marked by the chaos, sorrow and flux of the Kaliyuga (current age) to the other-worldly shrine. The ritual ordering of this universe within the shrine thus creates a structured ideal which is in diametric opposition to the disorderly world which exists beyond the shrine's boundaries. The heart of the shrine is suffused with sacred power which is a dense and patterned representation of ritual symbolism. The shrine is viewed as a microcosm of creation in its entirety, the centre of the universe, the one location that is linked to other worlds.

Hindu pilgrimage sites have their genesis in scenes of mythological action often involving a particular formative phase of a deity's cosmology, or settings for
demonstrations of that deity's power or benevolence. This event will be incorporated in what Alan Moronis has described as a “foundation narrative”; that is an account which simultaneously fixes certain deeds of the deity at a given geographical location at a specific point in time, but also situates these deeds within the context of the philosophical tradition – eternal and thus outside the constraints of linear time – with which the deity is associated. The essential elements of this myth which firmly establish the nexus between deity and site, now proclaim the locale a place where the devotee may anticipate an encounter with the god or goddess.(13) The mythology will furnish appropriate symbology and prescribe the ritual forms of worship to be observed at the site. Over the years the veracity of the locale as a place of pilgrimage will be continuously reinforced by the occurrence and recounting of “miracles” which will substantiate both the deity's presence and his/her willingness to implicate himself/herself in the affairs of his/her devotees.(14)

Hindu pilgrimage centres are often associated with noteworthy geographical features. Dolf Hartsuiker has commented that “The Hindus inhabit an enchanted land where the Divine makes its presence known in a multitude of forms: mountains, rocks, boulders, stones, oceans, rivers, lakes, wells, trees and human beings. As if that is not enough the Divine manifests itself in 'self-created' and man made sculptures and images in hymns and songs.”(15) Pilgrimage sites are especially linked with water; (16) in the case of Tamil pilgrimage centres, water is often connected with mountains. Indeed, a Tamil precept suggests that a yatra invariably commences in a river and ends in a mountain. (17).

Pilgrimage centres are often important focal points for a given sect, cult or tradition, drawing votaries from a wide area, in the case of very important pilgrimage sites (for example Benares), from all over India.(18) Frequently they are institutional systems in their own right, containing temples, priests and sometimes math and/or asrama, and delineating the conventions of symbolic behaviour considered proper for the worship of a particular manifestation of the deity. As such they are often central points for the propagation and dissemination of the orthodox forms of a specific cult.(19) The
authoritative ritual symbolism situated within the sacred zones of the pilgrimage sites is constantly animated by the presence and actions of the continual crowds of devotees together with sacramental specialists, normally priests and related officiants. (20)

Tamil mythology is characterized by persistent localization, and is thus intertwined within networks of shrines and temple worship and the particular rite of pilgrimage. (21) One of the most distinguishing features of Tamil puranas is the constant localization of mythic action, so that pilgrimage sites are firmly linked to a specific phase of the deity's history. Deities are thus often rooted in particular territory which is rightfully owned by them, and thus considered to be their province. (22) Territoriality is their characteristic trait, and linkage to a particular event within the overall mythology means that a god of a given location will have a distinctive manifestation even though he may bear the same name as the same god at another pilgrimage site. (23) Just as localization establishes a nexus between place and mythic action, so it determines and prescribes the forms of ritual worship considered appropriate to a given venue. (24)

Despite the multiplicity of pilgrimage sites in South India, each shrine is viewed as the centre of the universe, an axis mundi, the one ordered situation that is directly linked to the world of the deities. Cumulatively these localities provide a “sacred geography” which not only chronicles the actions and manifestations of a particular deity, but spatially relates to the others in an integrating system of religious topography. Thus each pilgrimage site comprises a node of a wider and unified symbolic domain which embraces the totality of a given deity, and allows the devotees to retrace the narrative and cosmology of his/her object of veneration. (25) As Moronis remarks “Pilgrimage places as sites where the divine has manifested itself are therefore acknowledged as points on earth especially suited for approach to the deity, for here the immanent deity has 'proven' to be accessible”. (26)

While pilgrimage sites may be linked to geographic features and as a sacred destination draw people from a wide area, in esoteric terms pilgrimage sites may be homologized as inner tirthas within the human body, so that a yatra is recognized as a journey to the
Thus theoretically the enlightened Hindu may participate in a pilgrimage without actually leaving home, just as the worshipper may revere a deity within his/her body conceived as a temple. And just as each shrine is identified with the centre of the universe, so the hidden centre of each human – the heart, concealed source of life which sustains each body – is viewed as the internal shrine which like the pilgrimage centre, is linked to the infinite shrine. Indeed, while Sanskrit texts may praise the outer pilgrimage, they simultaneously recognize that the primary basis for truth, purity and moksha lie within the votary.

As we have noted, the yatra entails a ritualized visit to a location where the deity is recognized as immanent and thus approachable. This will involve a period of intense preparation for the forthcoming encounter with the deity in which the votary is detached from the societal routines of the mundane world, and focusses upon cultivating the selfless devotion which ideally should permeate the entire pilgrimage. This detachment will require the temporary adoption of an ascetic code of behaviour more typically associated with the sannyasin or renunciate. The chief behavioural characteristics of a renunciate are indifference to both family and caste origins, the rejection of personal propriety, and the ceaseless and single minded determination to seek and unite with the deity. This goal may be achieved through the exhaustive practice of tapas (austerities), yogic discipline, or ecstatic bhakti. However, while the pilgrim may for the duration of the yatra conform to the cultural ideal of renunciation, the path of asceticism is regarded as a passing phase to be measured in weeks or months rather than in terms of the lifetime vows which are taken by the sannyasin. Ascetic practices will ideally involve a minimum regime of sexual continence, a vegetarian diet (and generally no more than one meal a day) sleeping on the floor/ground, and going barefoot, and may require additional observations depending upon the ritual behaviour associated with the pilgrimage centre and the deity ensconced within. Moreover, in furthering compliance with the ascetic ideal, the pilgrim upon leaving home should dispense with his/her birth given identity (that is, ties of caste, status, familial associations) in order to devote wholehearted attention to the aims, processes and outcomes of the yatra. Collectively these tapas comprise the “fire” necessary for
ritual and psychic purification, the cleansing of mundane pollution, which ensures that the pilgrim is in the requisite state of purity necessary for the contemplation of the deity. (35)

While *moksha* (enlightenment and release) is the central premise of the Hindu life,(36) most pilgrims undertake the *tirtha yatra* with more practical goals in mind. (37) However, while the devotee knows that a *yatra* may not result in the attainment of *moksha*, the pilgrimage is regarded as a step on the road of dharma (*dharmarasata*) which will at least bring the votary closer to this goal. As Anne Grodzins Gold comments “Everyone accepts as given that a supreme deity resides not only beyond beings, but within each. If a person can divest himself of excess belongings, both goods and mental attachments – he may come nearer to uncovering or realizing the deity within himself.”(38)

At one level the pilgrimage may be seen as a form of cosmic bargaining, a studied reciprocity in which a devotee makes a sacrifice which constitutes an appeal to the deity's benevolence and is acknowledged and rewarded by him/her. Put succinctly, the pilgrim employs or trades his/her devotion to seek the deity's intervention in his/her mundane worldly affairs.(39) Oral traditions emphasize that devotion, correct disciplines, and ritual actions dedicated to the deity must bear fruit.(40) The two complimentary elements on the pilgrimage are the vow made by the devotee, and the subsequent proof delivered by the deity. As Gold comments, “Schematically a pilgrim promises to make a certain offering if he receives a certain boon; the deity won't fulfill the prayer without the vow; the pilgrim is not accountable for anything if he does not get his proof.”(41) While open grasping after the fruits of a vow may draw societal censure, their careful pursuit through the studied discipline of a vow contingent upon pilgrimage, an accepted and proven means of attaining the blessings of the deities, (42) is both righteous and justified.(43) It will be seen that the fulfillment of a vow, in particular the suspension of societal routines in favour of the temporary adoption of an ascetic mode of behaviour, that involving some of the *tapas* of the renunciate, also embodies the concept of penance. Indeed, the fulfillment of *dharma*, the attaining of merit (*punya*), and divine
assistance in managing or mitigating the vast karmic forces of life, often lie at the very heart of the pilgrim's yatra. (44) In sum, while the pilgrimage is a form of bhakti which will aid the votary's spiritual evolution and bring him/her closer to release (mukti), the devotee's motive is for assistance in the mundane world, a material benefit which will soften and rearrange the frequently overwhelming karmic forces which buffet humanity, and manifest as sickness, creation, destruction, etc. (45) But while for most devotees the aim of the pilgrimage may consist of the attainment of tangible material benefits, it must be emphasized that at heart, every yatra constitutes a personal search for a relationship with the deity, and that great stress is placed upon the qualities of humility, faith, submission and devotion. (46) As Moronis notes: “Pilgrimage, being a compound of rituals is an especially effective performance for attaining the boons of deities because of its merit producing and purificatory effects”. (47)

But the journey is a mere prelude to a deeper sense of self sacrifice. (48) The climacteric act of the pilgrimage is the presentation of the aspirant to the deity. As the pilgrim passes the gatekeeper of the shrine he/she enters an idealized zone, increasingly laden with structured symbolism and dense with esoteric meaning. Indeed, these images and symbols, situated as they are within the essential abode of the deity, the axis mundi, are endowed with concentrated power and exceptional significance, being far more “pure”, condensed, and charged with both meaning and energy, than those variants located elsewhere. (49) Within the sacred centre, the aspirant, unimpeded by the distractions of mundane life, is free to communicate with the immanent deity. But the perception is not one sided. While the devotee gains the darshan of the deity, in the deepest sense, ideally “...the scalding sight of God which disrupts the senses and rearranges them on a higher level” (50) – the deity also observes the aspirant.

Indeed the encounter with the deity is one of free flowing and transformative symbiosis. It is a convention of pilgrimage that the devotee should not arrive empty handed, that he/she should have brought with him/her an offering considered suitable for surrender to their deity installed within the axis mundi. This may be a physical offering – fruit, milk, selected foodstuffs, flowers, sacralized water etc. - or it may consist of a psychic
offering, for instance, ritualized worship consonant with the deity's cosmology (for example, firewalking for Draupadi, kavadi worship or hair shaving for Murugan).(51) At the initial presentation before the deity, both parties release what they can offer in unqualified volume; the pilgrim his/her devotion, and the deity his/her darshan.(52) The devotee thus establishes a reciprocal relationship with the deity which involves a mutual transfer of energies, the extension of the deity's benevolence and blessing upon the devotee, the augmentation of the spiritual energy of the deity. The murthis within pilgrimage centres, the embodiments of divinity, thus act as Hartsuiker so aptly remarks as both “accumulators” and “conductors” of spiritual energy.(53) And in general, the mutual transfer of energies between deity and devotee will be intensified in the case of greater, more powerful and more popular pilgrimage centres, with their constant crowds of votaries and concomitant flow of devotions and other offerings.(54)

The encounter complete, the devotee begins the journey home. The homecoming and the redistribution among others of the power, the “imbued leavings” acquired through the act of pilgrimage is an essential part of the yatra. (55) For the impact of the encounter with the deity upon the devotee and the special qualities imparted by gaining darshan of the deity in the central and defining fulcrum around which the entire pilgrimage is structured, and the proof may be read by others in the qualities the returning pilgrim can both display and offer others.(56) Thus in the Rajastani village where she undertook her fieldwork, Gold observed that returning pilgrims were traditionally received as deities. (57)

Upon return the pilgrim is released from his/her temporary vows of asceticism, and is free to resume his/her daily societal routines. This release may be authorized by a special ceremony which marks the conclusion of the pilgrim's yatra, and symbolically returns him/her to the folds of conventional society. But the processes of pilgrimage, the combined impress of the powerful and catalytic disciplines of austerities, sacrifice and worship have left the pilgrim transformed. He/she has stepped outside the mundane world to enter the structured sacred sphere of the Divine, and has experienced at first hand the power imparted by the Divine within the shrine. As Shulman remarks,
“Through his contact with the power of the shrine, the pilgrim brings to the sphere of his usual activity a new sense of order and control.”(58)

In sum, then, pilgrimage may be viewed as a journey from the periphery, from the mundane world of the kaliyuga to the centre, the axis mundi, where direct communication can be made with the immanent deity. Pilgrimage deals with a wide variety of motives and furnishes a structure which accommodates them all. While the pilgrimage provides the votary with both material reward (bhukti), and release (mukti), the goals of most South Indian pilgrims are essentially practical in that the worshipper seeks the deity's intervention and assistance to help him/her in everyday life. Pilgrimage is an act of devotion which stresses the qualities of humility, faith, and submission and highlights the aspirant's willingness to undergo rigorous austerities and sacrifice in the service of the deity. In turn, the pilgrim knows that the deity will acknowledge and respond to that devotion.

3. BATU CAVES: A MALAYSIAN PILGRIMAGE SITE

I have noted that the Hindu pilgrimage sites contain a number of explicit distinguishing features. These include:

(a) A foundation mythology which clearly establishes a nexus between deity and locality, and

(b) An expectation that the normally transcendent deity will prove immanent and accessible to his devotees, at least during certain ritually prescribed festive periods, and that the deity will repeatedly demonstrate his/her willingness to involve himself/herself in the affairs of his/her devotees, even to the extent of deploying his/her “miraculous” powers.

The foundation mythology which located Batu Caves as a site of Murugan worship was outlined in Chapter One. I noted that in 1891, K. Thambasamy, a prominent member of the Kuala Lumpur Hindu community had a vision of the deity Maha Mariamman in which he was instructed to establish a shrine to her son, Murugan, within the Main Cave.
He duly placed a *vel*, the symbol of Siva-Sakti within the Cave, a cue for other Hindus to visit the site and offer worship. Orders issued by the British District Officer, Kuala Lumpur, directing that the *vel* be removed and prohibiting public admission to the Cave, were successfully contested in court. The ruling, a clear victory for Hindus over the seemingly illimitable power of the colonial authorities, was for many devotees clear proof of Murugan's presence in the Cave. As I have noted, the first Thaipusam was celebrated at the Caves in 1892.

As outlined in Chapter One, the Batu Caves locale contained a number of motifs which were integral to the Murugan cultus in South India, including caves, mountaintop retreats, and wilderness. Moreover the general grandeur of the Batu Caves, especially the imposing physical dimensions of the Main (now Temple) Cave, made it a fitting Malayan domain for the great and regal *Agamic* deity, Murugan. Over the years the site was developed into a major pilgrimage centre incorporating all of the dominant symbols and themes of worship associated with Murugan in the Tamil country. Batu Caves has been transformed from a simple shrine consisting of a single *vel* into the paramount Murugan complex in Malaysia, complete with temples, administrative and commercial premises, an interpretative *Muzium* and Art Gallery, and a central stairway leading into the Temple Cave. In recent years the opening of the Ramanaya Cave and the unveiling of a large free standing statue of Hanuman has represented an attempt to increase the complex's relevance to the minority Vaishnavite community. Nevertheless Batu Caves remains a site comprehensively dedicated to the cultus of Murugan and the Saivite tradition in which the deity is enmeshed. The latest addition to the complex, the gigantic statue of Murugan, proudly proclaimed by the Sri Maha Mariamman Devastanam as the largest in the world, merely underscores this fact.

While the religious life of Batu Caves is continuous, with a daily schedule of *pujas*, as well as prayers and life cycle ceremonies conducted on behalf of the constant stream of devotees and visitors, there is no doubt that the festival of Thaipusam is the dominant festival in the ritual year, and overwhelmingly so. I have noted that this festival now annually draws over one million people to Batu Caves, and that thousands of entranced
devotees bear the kavadi to the main shrine in the Temple Caves. Throughout Thaipusam, the power and presence of Murugan is conspicuously and continuously displayed. Each of the kavadi carrying votaries has been overtaken by the divine trance state known as arul, representing an investment or possession by the deity. These adepts seem charged with a superhuman power which enables them to demonstrate extraordinary feats of strength and endurance, and to pierce the flesh with hooks, spears and vels without evincing the slightest trace of pain or without shedding any blood. They subsequently recount to family and friends details of their encounters with the deity and the divine force which they experienced while bearing the kavadi. And each year there are reports, often well publicized, of the deity's benevolence; of the power of Murugan to heal chronic and even terminal illnesses,(60) or the sudden and necessary adjustments in quotidian life, explicable only in terms of Murugan's direct intervention.(61) For many Malaysian Saivite Hindus, Murugan's presence at Batu Caves is a fact of life, one which is proven beyond any shred of reasonable doubt, and his blessings are clearly and unmistakably bestowed each Thaipusam upon the thousands of devotees who flock to worship him.

3.1 Ritual Worship
In Chapter One I noted how the conjoined myths of Palani the renunciate, and the death and transformation of Idumban, provide the lietmotifs of kavadi worship at Thaipusam. To recapitulate briefly, this sequence of events commences when at the urging of the sage Narada, Murugan and Ganesha embark upon a race around the world for the prize of a mango. The more literally minded Murugan is outwitted by the knowledgeable Ganesha who adopts the simple expedient of circumambulating his parents, thereby not only encompassing the world, but also the entire cosmos, the Siva-Sakti duality and all the truths contained within. Ganesha is awarded the mango, the fruits of pure knowledge. Furious at this outcome, Murugan renounces the world, and repairs first to Krownchan, and thence to Palani, where he conquers the inner passions and realizes the Truth within. While at Palani, Murugan meets and vanquishes the asura Idumban, who is proceeding southwards on a sacred commission to deliver two hills to South India. Idumban is slain, but is restored to life after both the sage Agastya, and the asura's wife,
Idumbi, appeal to Murugan. Murugan directs that the resurrected and now aware Idumban stand guard as perpetual gatekeeper at the boundary of his shrine, and proclaims that all who worship Murugan in the modality exemplified by Idumban will henceforth acknowledge the asura-turned-devotee. Following these developments – the realization and the defeat of Idumban – Murugan returns to Mt. Kailas where Parvati presents him with the Sakti Vel preparatory to his campaign to defeat the Asuric army and to restore cosmic order.

This mythology merges several motifs common to the Murugan cultus and to Hinduism generally; namely the dispelling of illusion, the fruits (pala) of Truth (quite clearly represented by the mango), renunciation, asceticism, and the power of tapas (spiritual disciplines), the death of ignorance and a re-birth in awareness following an appeal to the Lord. These are all symbolically united within the principal murthi at Palani, one of the main Murugan shrines in India, where the deity is portrayed as holding a danda or staff, representing asceticism, military leadership and the royal justice of kingship. There are other cosmic possibilities as well, some of which I will pursue later in this chapter. For the moment I merely wish to note that the mythology combines the themes of renunciation, asceticism and knowledge, within a prescribed form of devotional worship, the kavadi ritual. All these are commemorated in ritual worship at Thaipusam in Palani, and are reproduced at Batu Caves.

4. KINGSHIP AND THAIPUSAM
In Chapter Four I noted that kingship provided the ritual and unifying centre of a sacred realm, which in the case of the South Indian polities consisted of societies segmented by the pronounced diversity of ethnicity, region and caste. The king ruled this society in accordance with the precepts of dharmic law, or danda (to recount Dumont's description, “...a kind of immanent power of justice more or less identical with dharma.”(62)) I also showed that the king was required to perform public rites which clearly and continually re-established his association with the Divine and which unequivocally affirmed his sovereignty, and in particular situated him as the pivotal locus and dynamic agency upon whom the prosperity and well-being of the kingdom
depended. The kingship rituals thus symbolized cosmic renewal and regeneration, and the monarch was explicitly identified as the principal moral and sacral performer in this process. I would suggest that Murugan's kingship is unmistakably demonstrated in these terms throughout the entire festival of Thaipusam.

As we have noted, the festival opens with the royal procession of the king-deity Murugan, who leaves his temple-palace (kōvil) the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in central Kuala Lumpur, for his mountaintop abode in Batu Caves. As observed in Chapter One, prior to his departure he is offered a series of propitiatory and supplicatory rites; he is bathed and dressed in rich robes, he receives the Alankaram Deepam or showing of the light to one who is garlanded, in this instance the king-deity, all the symbols of kingship are displayed to him, and he and his consorts are borne around the temple-palace on a mayil (peacock) palanquin before being installed in the kōvil's silver chariot, a vehicle betokening his power, dignity, and majesty.

The chariot procession signifies Murugan's sovereignty over his ritual domain, the diverse segments of the Hindu population of Malaysia. Throughout the journey to the Caves, he sits in regal splendour in the silver chariot, drawn (even if now, symbolically) by a selected retinue of subjects, constantly attended by his pantarams (or temple servants), and escorted by officials, musicians, torchbearers, dance troupes, and representatives of all major Hindu organizations, as well as a vast concourse of devotees drawn from the entire spectrum of Malaysian Hindu society, all of whom have turned out to pledge their allegiance. En route, the chariot makes repeated stops to allow the king-deity to receive the homage and supplications of groups of devotees.

Upon arrival at his mountain abode, Murugan and his consorts are enthroned in the downstairs shrine, the New Swami Mandapam, where devotees may offer worship. However, his Golden Vel, the instrumental symbol of his regal-divine authority, is borne to the shrine upstairs, an action which exemplifies Clifford Geertz's observation that "the progress of Indic-Hindu kings affirms the association with transcendence by the bestowal of ritual signs upon their territory, thus making their kingdom almost
physically part of them.’ (63) The transfer of the Golden *Vel*, the regenerative symbol of cosmic power to the shrine within the Temple Cave, and the subsequent raising of the temple flag, the royal standard, signals that the king is now in state in his mountain palace, and that he will received those votaries who wish to submit personal appeals for his Divine jurisdiction. For a full 36 hours devotees may now approach the deity-king for a personal audience in the knowledge that their entreaties and pleas, properly framed within the context of prescribed ritual supplication, will be fully received and acknowledged by a responsive and compassionate monarch.

At the conclusion of this period, the Golden *Vel*, the symbol of regal authority will be removed from the Batu Caves temple-palace, and restored to the deity, the *utsavar murthi*, in the New Swami Mandapam. He will then depart for his permanent *kovil*-palace in central Kuala Lumpur. Once again he will be accompanied by officials, musicians and various ritual servants; once again he will be greeted and enthroned with a congeries of welcoming and installation rituals appropriate to his kingship.

In Chapter Four, I demonstrated that South Indian kingship was sustained by a form of ritual incorporation known as *janjami*, a system of exchange of gifts and services which flowed hierarchically from the apex to all groups within the pyramidal and segmentary society. I would suggest that the redistributive principle embodied in *janjami* applies in the transactions which occur throughout Thaipusam, and is clearly discernible at a number of levels. At its most straightforward, it may be seen in an uncomplicated exchange between those who offer simple devotion or service in return for *darshan* of the deity. At another level this exchange functions between those who tender offerings to the deity which are returned charged with his energy. But I would submit that it is the kavadi worshippers who participate in the most intimate form of *janjami* with the king-deity. For in offering themselves and their very bodies as objects of devotion, they are publicly pledging their most profound loyalty and submission in return for the king-deity's protection, beneficence, and direct intervention in their lives. In this way the votary forges a personal relationship with the deity, one which recognizes the divine justice of his sovereignty – his *danda* – which is in the most special sense unique to each
individual.

In Chapter Four I observed that the Navaratri festival, the main ceremonial of the Vijayanagara kingship, ritually renewed the monarchy, re-established its divine character, and revived incorporative ties with all elements of the segmentary society within the overall structures of a clearly demarcated kingdom. Within Navaratri, the capital city became a symbolic universe over which the monarch claimed dominion. I would argue that Thaipusam fulfills a similar function among Malaysian Hindus. Murugan's annual visit to Batu Caves reestablishes his sovereignty over his domain, and reinfuses with cosmic energy his mountaintop palace. Throughout his stay he clearly displays his majesty, redistributive power and his kingly dispensations. He commands the avowed allegiance of all of the leading figures of his realm. Murugan is indubitably clearly identified as king-deity whose overlordship is ritually acknowledged in a myriad of ways, ranging from simple worship, to acts of ritual service, and finally to those which betoken explicit servitude. The festival commemorating the bestowal of the Sakti Vel, the instrument which enables Murugan to display his full array of cosmic powers, is the largest Hindu festival in Malaysia and clearly, albeit temporarily, unites the various (and sometimes antagonistic) segments of a richly diverse community under the overarching power of his ritual sovereignty.

5. RITES OF SEPARATION
In order to understand the transformative changes which occur throughout the processes of pilgrimage, it is first necessary to provide a basic description of the notions of substance and intersubstantial relationships which lie at the very heart of Tamil culture, and which govern the Tamil devotee's dealings with his/her deity.

In his study of the Tamil cultural worldview, E. Valentine Daniel describes a creation myth which is based upon the distribution of substance and substances. According to this mythology, all differentiated manifest forms within the universe have evolved from a single primordial source, an “...unmanifested and equilibrated substance”. While
the causal factors which produced the “first” movement or action (karman) remain unexplained, what is known is that all substances which can be located within the universe posses their own intrinsic properties, each of which contains inscribed codes of action. Each entity is made of substances which in combination assign certain dispositions which cumulatively constitute the “headwriting” (talaieruttu) or intrinsic qualities allocated to that entity at the time of its creation, and which constrain it to behave consistently with its innate properties. At the end of its life the entity will be evaluated against the karma, both good and bad, generated by its actions, and will subsequently reincarnate with a new set of dispositions (or headwriting) precipitated by its prior history.(66)

Each entity within the universe is unique in terms of its substantial composition, and is subject to its own peculiar array of intersubstantial stresses. The proper proportioning of substances within the body is integral to vitality and apposite functioning.(67) But the constant exchange of bodily substances with other entities is an ever present threat to the entity's well being.(68) All manifest forms, including humans and even gods, must strive to conserve or restore equilibrium to their body substances. Daniel contends that all everyday actions, including the most mundane, are geared towards maintenance and restitution of equilibrium. This is a necessarily complex process, involving both care and caution. (69) An excess of any form of action, whether good or bad, threatens the stability of the entity, and may also affect that of other entities. If this excess is sufficiently severe, it may even disrupt the cosmic order.(70)

It is the constant interplay between forces, the unremitting flow of exchanges which produces incessant universal flux, and the transformation attending these exchanges are its concomitant. (71) But because the universe is, as it were, a closed system, this flux is dependent upon a perpetual cycle which orders the creation, decay, destruction and recreation of all entities, and the new must therefore be fashioned from the substantial remnants of the old.(72)

The uniqueness of all categories and entities extends to human beings; humankind is
ineluctably variegated, and each person is in the most profound sense an individual. While human behaviour and conduct may be guided on the broadest level by universal cultural premises, on the individual level there can be no single moral schema or set of psychological or physical applications which obtain across the entire spectrum of humankind. (73) The headwriting of any particular person consists of a coded substance which is welded to the body substance at the time of birth (some commentators suggest at the time of conception). (74) The headwriting allocated to a created human being will be moulded by his/her past actions, and will be influenced by the deeds of relatives, and those of other agents including friends and chance acquaintances. (75) (Conversely, the actions of the individual will have consequences for families, friends and even entire communities.) (76) This headwriting will exercise a controlling leverage over the individual until such time as the soul casts off the gross and subtle bodies of the particular incarnation. (77) The substance of a person is a coherent amalgam: the qualities (kunams) pervade the entity wholistically and cannot be split into psychological or physiological components. The kunams are highly resistant to change. (78)

The fact that every human being is endowed with a unique composite substance produces a Hindu worldview which is highly idiosyncratic. (79) Each individual has a singular complement both of substances and the framework which govern its combinations. The resultant quest for personal equilibrium is necessarily determined by the search for those substances which prove compatible with his/her own bodily substance. (80) Because each individual remains vulnerable to the circumstances of place, time and space, as well all the substances with which he/she comes into contact, the Hindu outlook is especially sensitive to the body's intimate relationship and interaction with both the immediate and wider environment. (81)

Integral to personal equilibrium is the regulation and maintenance of the proper balance between hot and cold. Within Tamil culture the designation of hot and cold is both relative and situational and varies among individuals, groups of individuals, (for example, castes), localities and cultures. (82) This includes foodstuffs; thus what might
be regarded as “heating” by one individual or caste, might be deemed neutral or even “cooling” among others. However, as Brenda Beck points out, citrus and products of the cow are generally regarded as cooling; it has been my observation that alcohol is widely regarded as heating.

The health of an individual is regulated by three bodily humours, namely phlegm (\textit{kapam}), bile (\textit{pittam}) and wind (\textit{vayu}). Of these phlegm is cold, and dominant throughout youth, bile is hot, and linked to middle age, and wind is neutral and associated with old age. While every human contains a number of hot and cold attributes, the appropriate individual level will depend upon his/her \textit{kunam} (coded substance or headwriting). An individual's wellbeing is related to maintaining the hot and cold balance appropriate to his/her \textit{kunam}, and illness is attributed to excessive heat or unnatural cold. (It should be noted that there are specific bodily states beyond considerations of health with are invariably associated with heat. These are often connected with sexuality. Thus both puberty and pregnancy are regarded as times of heat, and sexual intercourse is regarded as heating.)

The heat/cold polarity implies a nexus between any given substance and its inherent energy. Thus while coldness connotes inertness and inanimation, heat suggests dynamism and movement. And indeed, within Hindu schemata, heat is ineluctably associated with the transformation of substances, including processes involving the mixing or transmutation of substances. (These processes include rites of passage and life crisis cycles.) Both hot and cold are connected with particular colours; thus black and red are viewed as “hot”, while green and white are seen as “cold”.

Two qualities inhere within the \textit{kunam} (headwriting) which pervade the created human. These are \textit{yokam} (translated variously as luck, fortune, and destiny) and \textit{viti} (or fate) both of which influence the final form that the \textit{kunam} takes. Although the \textit{kunam} complex (\textit{kunam-yokam-viti}) is regarded as permanent and thus immutable, in reality all substances are in incessant flux, and under certain conditions the \textit{kunam} is subject to modification. Indeed, the \textit{kunam} complex may prove malleable and
ultimately controllable by the combined application of *mati* (discrimination, judgement and intelligence), *muyateci* (right effort) and *karman* (proper effort supported by right actions. These qualities (*karman-mati-muyateci*) are collectively known as the *karman* complex. (94) The *karman* is an integral component of the body substance. Valentine Daniel points out that several Hindu traditions, including Saiva Siddhanta, use the analogy of *karma* as fruit (*pala*). Thus when a given *karman* or karmic residue is realized, it is said to have ripened (*palikkum* or *parukkum*). Saiva Siddhanta, following the *Upanisads* situates karmic residue in the second most innermost body (*kanjuga sariram*) of the five bodies, thus clearly identifying it as a fundamental body substance. (95)

In order to instigate the desired changes to the *kunam* complex, the *karman* complex must be set in motion; it must be released from its potentiality and converted to kinetic form. This may be achieved in a number of ways, including sacrifices, pilgrimages, vows, offerings, *pujas*, prayers or individual *sadhana* or disciplines. (96) Brenda Beck points that in both pan-Indian epics and localized stories, it is emphasized that destiny may be softened and reshaped by personal heroic action, comprising disciplines and inner strength, which cumulatively overcomes the perceived fixity of fate and character. (97) This is exemplified by the testimony of one of Valentine Daniel's informants: “My younger daughter was fated to die before she was five. It was in her *jatakam* (“horoscope”) that she was to die of snakebite. For five years I made vows, visited Kadirgamam...and I prayed to Civan and his son, Murugan, and they saved her. He never fails. God never fails. After that her *viti* changed. Her *yokam* changed, and her *kunam* changed.” (98)

While on one level the *karman* complex (the actor's actions) is distinguished from the *kunam* complex (his/her bodily state, fortune and fate) the very moment of differentiation weds action to actor thus modifying the *kunam* complex. As Valentine Daniel notes, this seeming paradox emphasizes the action-actor identity principle so pronounced in Hindu culture. (99)
However the application of karman to kunam is affected by the age we live in, the kaliyuga, where degenerative forces are in the ascendent, and at the personal level turpitude, wrong doing and decadence may be regarded as normative.(100) Among Tamils all creative actions are fraught with pain, vulnerability and danger, and expose the actor to the grave risk of deterioration and the perils of chaos.(101) The individual thus striving to change his/her kunam complex must therefore not falter, and must demonstrate great resolution merely to sustain his/her equilibrium against the forces of dissolution and entropy which prevail in the phenomenal universe. Indeed, the energy expended in attempting to rectify or “turn around” a deficient kunam complex must in practical terms be double that of the momentum generated by that kunam complex before any perceptible progress can be registered.(102)

In sum, the Tamils efforts to attain substantial compatibility and arrest personal instability are thwarted by the seemingly irresistible forces of cosmic flux, the ceaseless interplay of substances. The decision to embark upon a pilgrimage is to select a ritual, one which is regarded as extremely powerful, which will generate a new form of knowledge and thus control.(103) The exact nature of this knowledge will be discussed later in this chapter. For the moment I wish to examine agencies by which the potential pilgrims divine the need to undertake a pilgrimage.

5.1 Divination

While some Hindus may decide of their own volition, based on internal experiences (for example meditation), to undertake a given propitiatory ritual, often to ameliorate or neutralize problems or conditions which may seem to the outside observer as trivial or inconsequential, mere vagaries of life,(104) many will seek the advice of a person whose experience and reputation has designated him/her as qualified to divine a person's karma and dharma, and to chart an appropriate array of responsive choices. This is accomplished through a process of identification and assessment of an individual's kunam and karnam complexes, and fusing the two to form a new kunam complex.(105)

One way of locating the causes of problems and situating them within a definitive
pattern is through consultation with an astrologer. Among Tamils astrology, “...an interpretative art...firmly shaded in its nuances” is regarded as a blueprint for life, and astrological advice is often sought before making any decision of importance, especially those involving significant life choices.(106) As Judy Pugh comments “...the world reflected in astrology is a unitary field in which reciprocal relations of all entities is a fundamental axiom, and the ceaselessly patterned timing of the heaven's images a determination of events and conditions in the realm of human action.”(107) The heavenly bodies, including the planets (graha) constellations (rasi) and the asterisms, (naksastras), all have a major impact upon the individual and their configuration at the time of birth is inscribed within the created human as headwriting, that is, as the karmic residue accumulated through prior existences.(108) Birth is the key point at which karma is made visible, and at which the kunam or dispositions of the person may be assessed.(109)

Many Hindus, including some well educated in Agamic beliefs, (110) will consult a medium, “...a person who acts as an agency of communication between the people of this world and the denizens of another. More specifically, the Hindu mediums...provide in their own persons the means by which ordinary people may converse with the deities of the Hindu pantheon.”(111) Usually mediums are men (though in Malaysia, there are several well known female mediums), of modest and unprepossessing circumstances, who initially received their powers during a formative and sometimes traumatic encounter with their deity, normally at a tender age. Often the medium is “claimed” by a particular god or goddess with whom he/she communicates exclusively.(112) During consultation, which be on a one-to-one basis, or sometimes within a crowded temple setting, the medium will be possessed, and while in trance will issue a diagnosis of the individual's condition, a prognosis for the future, and prescribe appropriate corrective measures. (113)

Lawrence Babb has argued that mediumship is best viewed as a constituent element within the broader framework of speculative Hinduism, that is one which contemplates the perennial and overarching issues of dharma, karma and samsara. In order to
locate the source of a particular problem, the actor is progressively led from the circumstances of the particular toward an exploration of the general, to situate misfortunes within a wider canvas, one which is “...less the consequences of specific, discoverable and thus correctable omissions and errors, and more the symptoms of the general moral conditions of the experiencing self. And this general condition in time is referred to a past which is normally hidden, and implies a future that while obscure, is within the long term control of the individual.” (114) In effect, then, the medium assists the individual to identify a karmic pattern which relates his/her personal situation to a higher concept or responsibility and authority, thus wedding individual behaviour to conceptions of personal dharma. (115)

While a wide range of divinatory rituals exists within popular Hinduism, including the ritual of flowers, (116) clairvoyance and personal fortune telling, it has been my experience, at least within Malaysia, that most serious problems are divined through the agencies of astrology and mediumship. (117) Both are geared to explaining an individual's situations in terms of the legacy of his/her past, (that is, the actor's karma), a past which can be modified by appropriate actions taken in the present, this resulting in a higher degree of understanding and control of the future.

The process of divination, whether undertaken personally or via the agency will always result in recommended measures of corrective action to be taken by the actor. In cases involving the malign influences of persons, ghosts, angry demons or little gods, the appropriate responses will usually consist of propitiation, including pujas and placatory rituals. (118) However, more serious or intractable diagnoses, especially those involving major karmic adjustment, will require more drastic measures. The individual will be directed to perform one of an array of votive activities which may range from mild austerities to rituals of penance including pilgrimage, firewalking or kavadi worship. (119)

A vow (vrata or nertikkatan (Tamil)), is a form of contract with the deity, and consists of a personal resolution made by the individual to the god to perform a designated
action, either to repay the deity for prayers and supplications answered, or in anticipation of their fulfillment. (120) Vows fall within the received bhakti tradition, and are firmly predicated on the assumption that the deity is obligated to recognize a particular penitential action, and to reward the devotion of the aspirant. (121) The vow, especially involving the rites of penance, are viewed as especially efficacious in resolving or softening karma, and in transforming one's life path; that is, discerning and living in accordance with the principles of individual dharma. (122) The merit or reward accrued by this devotion, while the result of a compact between aspirant and deity, may produce karmic outcomes for others with whom the devotee is associated, including spouse, children and kin. 

The general sequence of events outlined in this section is common to most devotees who make a vow to take a kavadi during Thaipusam at Batu Caves:

(i) The aspirant identifies a major problem which adversely affects him/her or a member of his/her wider family. This problem many involve failings of health, childlessness, family disputes or other deep seated complications,

(ii) Divination of the source of the problem follows, whether personally (through means such as meditation, intuition or revelation), or via consultation (astrology, mediumship), and will lead to an acknowledgement that the matter can only be resolved through some form of appeal to or propitiation of a greater force,

(iii) The devotee will then take a vow to Murugan (or to another god) indicating that he/she will bear a kavadi or perform some other penitential act at Thaipusam, which will either follow the deity's answering of his/her entreaties, or in anticipation of their fulfillment,

(iv) The vow demonstrates that the devotee, in seeking resolution, is responding to a higher authority, and thus attempting to situate the problem within a wider cosmology, one ultimately involving the principles of karma, dharma and knowledge of the Divine.
At an agreed period prior to undertaking his/her Thaipusam vow, generally 28 days, but in some cases as little as seven days and other up to 42 days, depending on the relative experience of the intending votary, the aspirant commences a process of disengagement with quotidian society known colloquially among Malaysian Hindus as “fasting”. In fact, despite the appellation, fasting involves more than a series of dietary restrictions. As I have shown in Chapter One, fasting entails the withdrawal from a large number of mundane activities, and compliance with an abstemious regime consisting of a strictly vegetarian diet, abstention from alcohol and nicotine, cessation of all sexual activity, sleeping on the floor, avoidance of contact with menstruating women, as well as stringent round of spiritual observations. The initiation of fasting may be marked by a special inauguration ritual, usually a puja conducted within the temple, sometimes in the home shrine. Within India, this interval is generally more intense that the fasting observed in Malaysia, and may include restrictions on the apparel worn by votaries, and the homes and functions they may frequent.(124)

The period of fasting is regarded as necessary to cleanse the devotee of impurities preparatory to the encounter with the deity. Within the Hindu worldview, impurity (or pollution), is an inescapable condition of mundane existence and invariably accrues from the fundamental daily routines including eating, elimination, sex, body effluvia, and within the broader family, the processes of birth and death. The act of fasting aims to remove the devotee from the sphere of quotidian household life to a more rarefied plane. The spiritual disciplines which are a concomitant of fasting – the prayers, sleeping on the floor, refraining from losing one's temper etc - are also viewed as a form of purification in that they concentrate the devotee's mind on the forthcoming pilgrimage, and reorient consciousness away from the commonplace, the work-a-day routines, to contemplation of the Divine. Moreover the disciplines imposed during the period of the vow are believed to produce beneficent results including nullification of at least some of the karma which created the necessity to make the vow in the first place. (125) Purity is regarded as an essential pre-requisite for any consequential communication with the deity, and this condition is more pronounced for devotees intending to perform rituals to any of the Sanskritic/Agamic deities.(126)
E. Valentine Daniel argues that all restrictions endured throughout the preparatory interval of asceticism are subordinate to, and in the final analysis complementary to, the ban on sexual activity. He states that the principle aim of the pilgrim is to progressively overcome the five senses (*intriyas*) – namely sight, hearing, smell, taste and ultimately touch/feeling in the blissful awareness of the Divine. However, as is well known that sexual intercourse is the prime example of sensations, produced by the *mei* (the organ that reacts to the sense of touch and feeling). It is also known that within Indian thought, semen is regarded as the essence of all bodily substances, just as ghee is identified as the essence of all foodstuffs. The retention of sexual fluids, (or *intiriams*; the term also refers in a generic sense to the five senses), is considered essential to attaining the state of ascetic purity and generating and sustaining *tapas*.(127)

The period of fasting temporarily removes the devotee from his/her status as a householder and places him/her in the ranks of renouncers or *sannyasins*. While Lawrence Babb contents that the renunciation prior to Thaipusam is not the "...sannyasin's break with the world, but rather a ceremonial attitude adopted as a temporary expedient,"(128) this is not supported by my own fieldwork. Most respondents interviewed insisted that they regarded themselves as *sannyasins* throughout the pre-Thaipusam interval, even if during this time they maintained the broader ties of quotidian life such as family, friends and vocation. The claim that pilgrims transfer, however fleetingly, to a *sannyasin's* status, is supported by Daniel's observation that his initiation, and that of his fellow pilgrims, prefatory to a *pada yatra* (foot pilgrimage) to the shrine of the deity Ayyappan in central Kerala, included a death sub-ritual, a procedure explicitly linked to the self conducted funerary rites performed by the renunciate.(129) This sub-ritual is also undertaken by at least some of the votaries in their preparations to take a kavadi at Batu Caves.(130)

The importance of this issue cannot be overstated. The *sannyasin* is regarded as a pivotal figure in the overall Hindu worldview. By renouncing the world, symbolically shedding his/her links with family, friends, property and residence by officiating at his own
funerary rites, the *sannyasin* plies the lonely ascetic path which aims at the acquisition of transcendental knowledge and the permanent release from the transmigratory cycle (*samsara*).(131) But while it may well be that the pathways of the *sannyasin* and the householder constitute “…an existential choice between the life of the spirit and the life of the body”,(132) and that householders accord renunciates (including pilgrims) deep respect(133) the principle embodied in renunciation clashes in practical terms with the entrenched Hindu belief in the importance of family and descendants. (134) Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty asserts that the ideal in Hinduism is that of a complete and integrated life in which human nature in its totality is explored and valued.(135) She shows that the conflict between asceticism and householder life is simultaneously stressed and resolved within the context of Saivite mythology, thus, “The …opposition on the mortal level is between two goals; it is best to be a holy man, to give up sexual pleasures, and it is best to beget sons, to fulfill one's duty to society...in Hinduism it is exaggerated, because passionless sages are so deeply venerated, and the ties of family and children, strengthened by caste structures and the importance of rituals for the dead are so very compelling. Man himself must be both procreative and ascetic; God must be the most ascetic of ascetics, the most virile of lovers. Siva resolves the paradox in his own character by embodying a philosophy found throughout Hinduism: that chastity and sexuality are not opposed but symbiotic, that the chaste man is procreative by virtue of his chastity, and that man who lives happily with his wife is performing a sacrament in his very life if he but realize it.”(136)

This paradox is also found within the mythology of Murugan. Thus Murugan, the ever chaste, the subduer of lust, is also the ardent and even reckless wooer of Valli, whom, despite the binding strictures of conventional morality, he persuades to elope with him. (137)

I would suggest that the resolution outlined by O'Flaherty is also expressed within the ritual of pilgrimage, in which for a short while the devotee ceases to be a householder (*grihastya*), and is placed among the ranks of the *sannyasins*. The votary thus becomes, even for a brief period, a revered cultural archetype, the renunciate, and is exposed
during this interval to the path of asceticism, and to at least some of the specialist knowledge which is a concomitant of this state.

Many of the votaries interviewed in the process of preparing this thesis reported enormous difficulty in managing the first few days of fasting; not so much the process of physical withdrawal which accompanied the cessation of normal householder life, but the unexpected changes that were an adjunct of this passage. Many experienced adverse psycho-spiritual symptoms including weariness, blankness, irritability, and mental confusion, especially discontinuous thought processes. However, after a certain period, generally ranging from three to ten days, many devotees were aware of a sudden and unexpected sense of energy, a freshness, buoyancy and clarity of thought which represented a vital, often novel and far more comprehensive way of envisioning the world and existential life. These feelings may be accentuated as the fast continues. For experienced pilgrims this “energy” often sets in within a couple of days after the commencement of fasting.

5.2 Pilgrimage: The Divine Crossing

To summarize thus far. The individual's attempts to achieve and maintain substantial reality and compatibility have been obstructed by the nature of the cosmos; namely the world's unceasing flux and the perpetual movement of substances. He/she has discerned, either through personal effort, (meditation, intuition), or through the agency of divination (for example, astrology, mediumship or related rituals), that he/she (or someone within his/her immediate circle) has a major problem or condition, which may be variously described as *karma*, misfortune, ill-health, an imbalance of humours, an excess of hot or cold, etc, which requires a form of resolution which will effect a permanent life change (or in other words, the *kunam* complex must be modified, thus requiring the activation of the *karman* complex). He/she has made a vow to perform a specialist congeries of ritual actions which collectively constitute a pilgrimage, and has undertaken the requisite period of fasting and asceticism, thus temporarily relinquishing the role of householder to enter the ranks of the renunciates or *sannyasins*. At this point the devotee is now ready to embark upon the prolonged physical and metaphysical
journey to the *axis mundi*, the location where the deity will be immanent and accessible.

In the following paragraphs I wish to examine some of the theoretical notions of pilgrimage and outline the processes which affect change within the votary throughout this ritual. I will postulate that in Malaysia the hardships and austerities which are a concomitant of the physical journey to the pilgrimage shrine, and the knowledge which is acquired throughout this process is condensed within an abbreviated period – that of the trance state known as *arul* – and is evidenced by the fleshly mortification which accompanies the bearing of a kavadi.

The Tamil's intention is to affect a change in his/her personal circumstances which will produce a state of substantial equilibrium and equipoise. This will require the development of a new form of knowledge; one which transcends the inferior analytical knowledge which belongs to the distinctions and categories of the differentiated mundane world. This new knowledge will be experienced rather than logically understood, and will consist of the inculcation of the reality of undifferentiated Oneness, the impartation of the deeper awareness of the fundamental and underlying existential substantial unity, including the nature of the devotee's innermost being, the *Atman*, where movement is replaced by stillness and the quotidien by Transcendence. The pilgrimage is a *karman* which will eventually lead the votary to experience this essential knowledge (*vidya*).(138) (However we should note in passing that the word “eventually” here is a key qualifier; very few Hindus would assert that one pilgrimage on its own would be sufficient to induce such a radical transformation in spiritual consciousness.)

The pilgrims experience a long and uncomfortable journey to the main shrine; a journey which consists of a continuous succession of ascetic experiences which will generate *tapas* (austerities).(139) As I noted in Chapter Three, the Brahmans with whom I undertook the 1998 *pada yatra* to Palani regarded every action within the pilgrimage as a calculated step on the road towards the *axis mundi*. But it was more than a physical journey, it was a metaphor for the entire process of spiritual discovery, a crossing point from the world of the quotidian to another state of consciousness, one which
progressively reoriented the *sadhaka* from the outer world to the inner. In this sense then, the pilgrimage may be regarded as soteriological; it is a constant movement away from ignorance and illusion (*avidya*), towards *moksha*, that totality of knowledge (*vidya*) in which all polarities and differentiations are dissolved. (140)

Ideally the *tirtha yatra* requires the successive subdual of the eight *ragas* or attachments to experience or desire, including attachment itself. (The remaining seven *ragas* are *kaman* (lust or desire), *krodam* (jealousy), *lobam* (greed, avarice), *moham* (presumptuousness, pride, conceit and recklessness), *matsaryan* (arrogance), *tirksa* (translated by Valentine Daniel as “the fixing of one's mind on a single object” or – in a pejorative sense – “persistence”), and *damban* (“flamboyance” or “showiness”). (141) As earlier noted the five senses (or *intriyas*) – hearing, smell, sight, speech, hunger/thirst – all of which merge into tactility or feeling (touch), must also be quelled. The organ which absorbs and responds to touch is known as *mei* in Tamil, and refers to the entire body (known as *sarira* in Sanskrit), the two outermost body sheaths. When the *mei* is acquiescent, the sensations of discomfort and pain which are inevitable components of pilgrimage are checked, and replaced with the awareness of love. Valentine Daniel contends that because the vanquishing of the *ragas* and *intriyas* and the final victory over the *mei* are prolonged processes, this feeling of love occurs only in the last stages of pilgrimage. (142)

But there are other qualities known as the *kunams* (*gunas*) which are called into play throughout the ritual of pilgrimage. These *gunas* are:

(i) *Tamas* (or darkness); consisting on inaction, lethargy, mental torpor, crude thoughts, baseness, density and resistance,

(ii) *Rajas* (passion): the qualities of physical activity, the energy that furnishes strength, movement, emotion and vitality, and

(iii) *Sattva*: consisting of mental activity, enlightenment, translucence, the higher qualities which create patience, compassion, and all other virtues.
All humans are composed of varying combinations of these three qualities, though they exist in all entities in different proportions, and each may dominate in any one human at given periods of time. (143)

Valentine Daniel records that throughout the commencing stages of the pilgrimage in which he undertook field work, most participants were dominated by tamas; they were dull, unresponsive and languorous. However, after an initial period the tamas were replaced by rajas and the same participants reported feelings of freshness, clarity and animation. This transformation was also symbolically recognized in my own 1998 pada yatra, when on the third day ceremonial vesthis were issued to all those who remained in the pilgrimage party; in other words, those who had surmounted the period of tamasik inertia. Rajas in turn is overtaken by sattva, stimulated by the growth of unexpected and often intense perceptions. Sattva strengthens towards its zenith at the moment that pain is replaced by love. (144)

The rise of sattva, the cumulative feelings of love, provide the devotee with an awareness, however evanescent, of vidya or pure knowledge, and thus the unmistakable presence of the deity. As Daniel movingly writes of his own pilgrimage group, “In the formulation of the Hindu great tradition, this (the vanquishment of avidya), as is well known to every beginning student of Indian religions is seen as the merging of the atman with the universal soul or brahman. Such a formulation by humble pilgrims (especially the unschooled ones), though not entirely absent, was certainly not prevalent. Of those pilgrims I walked with and talked with however, none failed to express – even if in the most inarticulate of ways – the experiences of having lost their identity and individuality, even if it had been only for a fleeting moment. This sense of union was often not expressed in words (quite appropriately so) but in states of trance. These moments of loss of self consciousness and even consciousness were later referred to as the purpose and highest point of their entire pilgrimage – if not their entire life.” (145)

In the following sections I will explore the phenomenon of trance and its bearing upon
kavadi worshippers at Thaipusam in Malaysia. However, I would submit in advance that the transformations and processes described in the preceding paragraphs are replicated among those who carry kavadis at Batu Caves. I have already noted how the opening phases of fasting produce an initial “slowness” among devotees characteristic of the *tamasik* state – a mental and spiritual stodginess which follows the votary's separation from normal societal routines. After an indeterminate period, this torpor and confusion is replaced by the rise of a sense of confident energy and dynamism, indicating the displacement of the *tamas* by the *rajas*, a development which may gather pace throughout fasting. I would postulate that the *rajas* is in turn replaced by the *sattva* and that this occurs at the moment that the trance state – the condition known as *arul* – is attained on Thaipusam day, and is categorically demonstrated by the events that follow. Firstly, in allowing a *vel* to penetrate his/her tongue the devotee renounces the gift of speech and embraces the state of *mauna* (silence), a renunciatory vow common to certain sages and *sannyasins*. But in permitting the mortification of the flesh the devotee also displays his/her triumph over pain, and thus simultaneously over the *mei*, the organ of touch which produces the sensations of pain. We have already noted that the cessation of pain is contemporaneous with the rise of love. In sum, then, the *arul* trance state circumvents the lengthy physical journey undertaken by the devotee to the *axis mundi*, and catapults him/her beyond the gradual process of quelling the senses which the orthodox pilgrim must endure as he/she makes his/her way from the periphery to the physical and metaphysical centre. And like Daniel's pilgrims, votaries at Thaipusam express the ineffable in the incandescence of trance. Having made these preliminary observations, I now turn to the subject of trance, and its centrality to the ritual of kavadi worship at Batu Caves.

6. TRANCE AND THAIPUSAM: TRANCE AS *TIRTHA*

Trance states, as a mode of religious experience, while often viewed with deep disdain and suspicion within the post-Enlightenment West, are embraced in a broad array of societies,(146) where they form a widely recognized, if not universally accepted pathway to direct cognition of the nature of divinity and/or the world of the spirits.(147) However, it is worth noting that despite Western scepticism, trance and related
dissociative states of widely varying character have in the past and continue to be practiced in the “West”. For example, Gilbert Rouget has shown that religious inspired trance was known in Ancient Greece where it was termed, *inter alia, theoleptos*, a form of “divine madness” in which it was believed the frenzied subject was seized by the deity.(148) R.A.Knox has demonstrated how recurrent manifestations of the phenomenon of “enthusiasm” have punctuated the history and indeed the development of Western Christianity,(149) while I.M. Lewis has drawn attention to the medieval cult of Tarantism.(150) In more recent times trance and dissociation have been found among groups and movements as dissimilar as charismatic Christian sects, the 1960s Western “counterculture” with its sanctioning of “mind altering” drugs and the cult of psychedelia,(151) the habitués of rock concerts, (152) and the Greek fire walking adepts of the Anastenarides Christian sect.(153)

The literature which researches the subject of trance, dissociative and related states is broad and varied, and often reaches differing conclusions on the nature and outcomes of the phenomenon. While some discrepancies revolve around preferred nomenclature and systems of classification, others constitute fundamental points of disagreement on more basic issues. Many accounts become sidetracked by ill informed speculation on the authenticity of observed trance states. As I.M.Lewis aptly observes “…the majority of anthropological writers on possession have been equally fascinated by richly dramatic elements, enthralled - one might almost say - by the more bizarre and exotic shamanistic exercises, and absorbed in quite pointless debates about the genuineness (or otherwise) of trance states.”(154) Several dissertations on trance and trance behaviours are at variance with my own observations of participant performances at the Thaipusam festival. In the following paragraphs I have provided an overview of several scholarly perspectives of trance and related states, prior to discussion of the centrality of trance to kavadi worship at Thaipusam.

6.1 Trance States: An Overview

William Sargant's 1957 study, *Battle for the Mind*,(155) explains trance and related dissociation states in terms of Pavlovian psychology. He argues that political
brainwashing, “primitive” religions, and revivalist Christianity employ similar techniques to instigate profound changes in personality and outlook. In essence, Sargant contends that the individual's central nervous system is overwhelmed, either by incessant arousal and intense stimulation, or by prolonged sensory deprivation. The collapse of the central nervous system is followed by the destruction or at least the substantial modification of the individual's previous conditioning, as well as his/her more complex learned responses. The participant is subsequently indoctrinated with a new political ideology or set of religious beliefs, depending upon the agency conducting the brainwashing. The ultimate form that the indoctrination takes is fundamentally influenced by the personality subject to reconditioning. This interpretation is highly mechanistic, and Sargant emphasizes the tentative nature of his conclusions.(156)

I.M. Lewis's complex and subtle 1971 study *Ecstatic Religions: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism,*(157) examines a wide range of trance behaviours. Lewis argues that mystical states and hence patterns of trance invariably bear the impress of the total cultural environment to which those affected belong. He notes that trance is often located among disadvantaged groups, especially the poor and women, and thus may be utilized as a role playing stratagem to counter or mitigate the circumstances (or perceived circumstances) of their oppression. Lewis also observes that trance is more likely to occur among less structured religions; tightly controlled religions are far less likely to tolerate trance.(158) However, Lewis emphasizes that his findings are provisional, and that not all trance behaviours fit comfortably within his schemata. Lewis rightly insists that scholars must allow non-Western cultures to speak for themselves, in their own terms, and that they must avoid, (or at least exercise severe caution) in interpreting such trance states according to Western concepts of “truth” or against Western benchmarks.(159) He also warns against the reductive deployment of psychoanalysis as a tool to explain trance states, especially mediumship and shamanism, stressing that this is often “so contrived and at social variance with the facts that it can have little significance or value.”(160)

In her 1972 study *Ceremonial Spirit Possession in Africa and Afro-America,* Sheila
Walker emphasizes the huge range of behavioural states which fall under the generic rubric of Altered States of Consciousness (ASCs), and the diversity of societal functions these states fulfill. (161) Walker argues that trance is merely one of these ASCs, a western scientific concept for a particular psychological and physiological condition in which the devotee “exhibits motor behaviours different from that which is characteristic for him.” (162) She contends that possession is essentially a folk explanation for a specialized form of ASC in which the spirit or deity manifests within the human body and assumes control of the host's executive functions. Walker further distinguishes between ASCs and hysteria which she maintains transpires in instances where the subject enacts his/her own fantasies as reality, and hypnosis, a state which is determined and characterized by the hypnotist's domination of his/her subject. Under Walker's schema, ASCs are moulded by a number of highly influential factors, the most important of which are the character of the spirit/deity invoked, the rituals which induce the trance state, and the cultural framework and the expectations they engender with the entranced devotee.

For Erika Bourguignon, all trance states fall under the generic rubric of “altered states of consciousness”. (163) ASCs may be divided into two very broad categories, namely: (i) Possession Trance (PT): These are states which involves “possession” or seizure by spirits or gods. This form of trance does not involve hallucinations, and may prove radically discontinuous in terms of behavioural patterns, and (ii) Trance (T): Quite simply, these are all states which fall outside the category of PT. This classification relates more generally to trance states induced as a result of mediumship, divination or shamanistic ritual. Bourguignon avers that trance states characteristically produce hallucinations and visions, and typically inspires the receipt of divine or spirit messages by the participant and their relay to a wider audience. (164) However, this rudimentary division disguises the reality of a subtle and graduated continuum of hybrid intermediary forms of ASC, which may consist at their own elementary level of dream like states, and at their most complex of a profound and often
inspired form of PT which Bourguignon designates as a “visionary trance”. (165)

For Ronald Shor (166) trance behaviour must be considered in relation to a behaviour controlling mechanism he labels the generalized reality orientation, a plexus of functions which directs mundane consciousness, and habituates the individuals to the received realities of everyday life. The generalized-reality orientation is defined as “...a structured complex of recollections, an abstractive superstructure of ideas or superordinated gestalt of relationships. From its totality are derived various concepts, some of which are reality, body image, critical self awareness, cognition of self, world, other people, time, space, logic, purpose, various institutions, conscious fears and defences. Just as the number seven has mathematical meaning only when it is embedded within the whole number system so for example, the idea of self has no sensible meaning unless embedded within an adequate orientation to reality.” (167) However, the generalized-reality orientation maintains its principal role as the custodian of awareness only with continual mental effort and may weaken and become non-functional when this effort is not sustained. (168) The trance estate may emerge when the generalized-reality orientation is suspended, (but never entirely suppressed), and the subject is simultaneously induced to direct concentration on a special range of limited stimuli, so that certain behaviours may operate isolated from the controlling domain of mundane awareness. The instigation of the trance state and resultant temporary overthrow of the generalized-reality orientation permits the emergence of a new form of mental awareness, thus resulting in a radical realignment of experiential consciousness. These fresh sources of phenomenal awareness and modes of thought are normally squelched by the logic and knowledge which govern mundane consciousness. (169) Shor clearly distinguishes between trance proper and hypnosis, regarding the latter as a limited form of trance, a behavioural type developed by the West, typically attained through the agency of motivated role playing, and characterized by specialized and pre-determined outcomes; thus “an impure concoction of trance and role playing”. (170)

In advancing his theories of trance, Gilbert Rouget (171) firmly rejects the concept of altered states of consciousness which he regards as too broad and imprecise to capture or
enclose the fundamental essence of the trance state. (172) Rouget views trance as a change in the structure of individual consciousness which makes the subject “… susceptible of being invaded by an emotional event that submerges ... (his/her) ... normal states and leads to hysteriform behaviour.” (173) For Rouget, there are three basic states of mystic trance, though he cautions that the vagueness and subjectivity of received trance experience produces an array of states which are not readily subsumed within these categories. In focussing upon individual mystic trance states which involve complex relationships between devotee and deity, Rouget thus classifies states as follows:

(i) Possession Trance: or a force in which the subject’s personality is overtaken by that of a god, spirit, genius or ancestor,

(ii) Inspiration Trance: in which the subject is imbued with the deity, or a force originating with the deity. However, while the deity does not dominate as in the case of possession trance, but rather establishes a form of co-existence with the devotee, he/she still exercises control over the subject, and

(iii) Communal trance: in which the relationship between the divinity and subject is conceived as an encounter. This may be experienced as a form of communion-revelation and illumination. Communal trance does not involve any form of possession or embodiment by any spirit or deity. (174)

Rouget is insistent that induced trance states no matter how powerful or revelatory, differ in both degree and quality from the state of ecstasy or final mystic union between devotee and deity. Ecstasy for Rouget is the rarefied contemplation of the sublime which marks the culmination of the adept's spiritual journey, and is realized in silence. Conversely trance involves movement, noise, crisis, and is set in motion by selected stimuli, is conducted in company, is transitory, and according to Rouget produces no hallucinations. In place of “ecstasy” Rouget suggests the term “exultation” to describe the psychic rapture produced by trance states. (175) This is consistent with Lewis's use of this term in his definition of possession trance as “…those transports of mystical
exultation in which man's whole being seems to fuse in a glorious communication with
the divinity.”(176) However, although in Rouget's schema, ecstasy and trance form
opposite ends of a continuum of mystical experiences, they are connected by a series of
graduated intermediary states.(177)

Rather different approaches are adopted by Holger Kalweit (178) and Abraham Maslow
(179). For Kalweit, altered states of consciousness represent the opportunity for the
devotee to enter normally unexplored spheres of awareness. In trance the subject is
overtaken by a greater force, and becomes attuned to a power which Kalweit describes
as the “rhythm of life” which provides him/her with insights and experiences of a
mystical order usually denied by the inhibiting constrains of mundane consciousness.
(180) For Maslow trance states form merely one component of an extended range of
mystical transports, which he labels “peak experiences”. These are characterized by the
supercession of normal consciousness and the saturation of the subject by profound
states of awareness. (181) While much of the behaviour Maslow associates with peak
experiences is also found within trance states (in particular, those which Bourguignon
describes as “visionary trances” and those which fall under the rubric of Rouget's
“inspirational trances”), the two are not necessarily synonymous, and Maslow is at pains
to emphasize the mystical intensity of a peak experience.(182) For Maslow, then, trance
when it coincides with a peak experience is merely an incidental factor, and certainly not
a necessary precondition.(183)

Finally both Felicitas Goodman(184) and Arthur Deikman(185) demonstrate that altered
states of consciousness do not always produce mystical exultation, but may result in less
congenial outcomes. Goodman's study of glossolalia (vocalization in trance) among
Apostolics of Yutacan, Mexico, revealed a community torn by violence, reckless
charges of misconduct and Satanic possessions, sightings of the devil, self
impoverishment, predictions of the imminence of the Second Coming, disillusionment
and alienation.(186) Although Goodman would probably eschew and perhaps dispute
the following, her description of events among the Apostolics reads as a form of
collective and uncontrolled hysteria, and bears several basic structural similarities to an
outbreak of mass hysteria I witnessed in 1978 among young female Malay factory workers in Kuala Lumpur. (187) Deikman notes that while trance states are capable of producing mystical experiences which may be exultant or revelatory, they may also be employed to attain dispositions which are “demonic” or psychotic in character; the outcomes are dependent upon the nature and range of stimuli used to induce the ASC/trance and the context in which the relevant rituals are performed. (188)

6.2 Thaipusam and Trance: Some Preliminary Observations
This brief review illustrates the wide range of scholarly discourse and perspectives which seek to explain the phenomenon of trance and altered states of consciousness. In general, it can be argued that several key themes emerge which are advanced by most scholars as integral to trance states:
(i) trance states lead the participant away from normal consciousness into new forms of awareness. These overcome learned behaviour and install fresh conceptions and understanding, sometimes radically discontinuous from the patterns of consciousness which preceded the trance state,

(ii) Trance states vary enormously, and range from possession trance, in which the spirit or deity assumes full control of the subject, to other more complex states which produce mystical exultation,

(iii) These trance states are provoked by exposure to specific stimuli, and are shaped by the total cultural environment to which the subjects belong,

(iv) Trance states, while capable of producing intense mystical experiences, are not necessarily beneficial, and may result in episodes which prove destructive to the subjects, and may even be psychotic in character, and

(v) Neither hypnotic states, nor hysteria may regarded as full trance states. Hypnosis, a Western invention, is a condition subject to direct manipulation and specific instruction, while hysteria is an uncontrolled state in which the subject enacts his/her fantasies.
Throughout this section, and despite noting Rouget's strictures, I intend to use the term “ecstasy” as well as that of “exultation” to describe trance states at Thaipusam. I will use this term in the sense in which it was employed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who believed ecstasy was a form of mystical displacement, of standing outside both time and self. For Emerson ecstasy described “...a wide range of experiences characterized by being joyful, transitory, unexpected, rare, valued and extraordinary, to the point of seeming as if derived from a preternatural source.”(189) Emerson believed that the experience of ecstasy was “...marked by a great intensity of feeling, by a sense of contact – often spoken of as the keynote of religious experience.”(190)

The divergent nature of scholarly analysis of trance is replicated, as it were, in the mélange of trance states observed at Thaipusam at Batu Caves. In Chapter One I noted that votaries and their spiritual mentors aimed at invoking an esoteric trance condition known as arul – literally a state of grace – in which the deity “mounts” the devotee and temporarily infuses the subject with a mystical awareness of his presence. I also observed that while most participants bear kavadis to fulfill vows to Murugan, a substantial minority of kavadi worshippers pay homage to other deities ranging from Agamic gods through to village gods and goddesses, tutelary deities, and even spirits. Given the extraordinary multiplicity of deities worshipped at Thaipusam, and the social and ethnic heterogeneity of the participants, we might reasonably anticipate observing an extensive array of trance states, displaying not only the entire spectrum of described trance behaviour, but also incorporating the characteristics of the medley of deities for whom kavadis are borne. And indeed, this is confirmed by research, which reveals a gamut of trance states ranging from straightforward and uncomplicated possession, in which the aspirant is “seized” by the deity and subsequently manifests his/her dominant or most conspicuous traits, through to more complex behavioural patterns consistent with those states Rouget has categorized as “inspirational” trances, Maslow describes as “peak experiences” and Emerson terms as “ecstatic”. Arul, the “authorized” trance state, is a multifaceted phenomenon, and is expressed in many different forms ranging from tumultuous vigour to comparative calm, often fluctuating between these two extremes.
Indeed, the comprehensive lack of uniformity merely serves to underscore Rouget’s dictum that “…in the field of human behaviour, no law can be verified other than with a fairly wide margin of uncertainty.”(191)

I have earlier noted that Tamil Hinduism recognizes an extensive and variegated range of trance states. At their lowest and most dangerous levels, these involve possession by malevolent spirits or treacherous asuras and must be either suppressed or contained through appropriate propitiation. At the highest level – arul – trance connotes mystical awareness of an infusion by the deity. In general, it is agreed that trance states involving the great Agamic gods – Siva, Parvati, Vishnu, Murugan, Krishna, Sarasvati etc. - are both “higher” and more powerfully illuminating that those attained through the worship of “lesser” deities. However, given the shifting structures of Malaysian Hinduism and the anti authoritarian discourses which inform bhakti devotionalism, this assertion cannot be regarded as axiomatic. In the previous chapter I noted the processes of Agamicization/Sanskritization have identified certain non-Agamic deities – for example, Munisvaran, and Kali, Mariamman and Durga (in their village forms) – as manifestations of the great Agamic gods. Given these circumstances, the devotees who are entranced by those non-Agamic deities might (and indeed, do) emphatically affirm the equivalence of their trance states to those bestowed upon the votaries of Agamic goods. Moreover, bhakti philosophies strenuously assert the intrinsic experiential validity and autonomy of individualistic devotionalism, and thus reject societal assessment on the basis of outer markers, (for example, caste or the sex of the devotees), or of the adoption of arcane or even bizarre forms of worship (such as those which violate prescribed norms). Finally, bhakti clearly recognizes the transformative power of persistent and virtuous ritual devotion, and the eventual rewards which must accrue to those who are zealous in their worship. Thus a devotee who with a pure and open heart completes a ritual for a lesser non-Agamic deity may be viewed as embarking upon his/her own transmogrative path, a journey which over the passage of time will ultimately result in the development of a higher consciousness and ultimately awareness of and union with the great Agamic deities.
I have noted that the “authorized” and actively sought trance – *arul* – is restricted to those devotees who have undergone recognized rites of inner purification and *tapas* prefatory to their encounter with the deity. As a consequence, unsanctioned trance states which occur at Thaipusam, especially those which are regarded as potentially or actually dangerous (for example, those suggesting *asuric* possession) are quickly suppressed, usually with the firm application of *vibhuti* to the forehead, and occasionally in more stubborn cases with additional measures, including the physical isolation of the possessee.

I have argued that aspirants actively seek the state of *arul*. However, at Batu Caves, there is one small (and extremely controversial) “transgressive” group which quite deliberately promotes “demonic” possession prior to the ascent to the Caves. I shall discuss the phenomenon of the demon devotee later in this chapter.

### 6.3 Amnesia and Trance

Many of the commentators who have studied trance have remarked upon the amnesia which supposedly accompanies this state. Thus Rouget claims that trance is characterized by total amnesia,\(^{(192)}\) while Simons *et al.* state that devotees at Thaipusam experience amnesia.\(^{(193)}\) Collins emphatically asserts that “The vast majority of devotees who perform ritual vow fulfillment involving piercing the body relate that they retain no memory of their trance experience.”\(^{(194)}\) However, in contrast, Colleen Ward finds that most devotees are able to recollect and comment upon their dissociative experiences.\(^{(195)}\) My own research supports Ward's conclusions. In conducting interviews among votaries at Batu Caves, Penang, and in Singapore and India, I have found that the overwhelming majority of subjects, most of whom had engaged in acts of bodily mortification, had vivid and compelling recollections of their trance states. Many were able to describe in pellucid detail the sequence of events which had accompanied the onset of trance, and the experiences and insights which followed. \(^{(196)}\) Even among the handful who could remember little of their kavadi *yatras*, most were able to recall at least some of the events between the initial trance state and their arrival at the shrine in the Cave. (Most of the latter group were among those who were
gripped by possession trances involving investment by non-
Agamic or guardian deities.)

6.4 Inducing Trance
The trance state is induced by a series of culture specific stimuli or prompts that the participants recognize as a structured sequence which leads devotees from mundane consciousness to the world of the gods. Often this comprises a pattern which is learned by the aspirants in training sessions or in a specially convened initiation ritual in which the religious officient carefully instructs the adept in the chronology of stimuli/symbology and in the appropriate responses these should elicit. (197) This period of procedural apprenticeship results in an “irreversible modification of the person's relations with himself, with divinity and with society.”(198) The behaviour learned through the training and/or initiation will be subsequently replicated within the context of the religious festival.

Most scholars agree that trance states, as learned experiences, are ineluctably culture specific, and are thus guided and shaped according to the cultural milieu in which they arise.(199) The cultural background not only provides an interpretative framework which infuses the ritual trance states with meaning, but also furnishes the symbols necessary for psychological reinforcement of the experience.(200) Thus even the characteristics of the investing or possessing deity will be expressed in culturally relevant forms. Indeed, Walker contends that the power of culture over devotees is so marked as to affect all aspects of trance behaviour including physiological constituents, thus making it difficult to “distinguish exactly what the (underlying) neurophysical influence is.”(201)

The trance state is induced by a series of sub-rituals, invariably in combination with music and dance. Music in this context is not necessarily the product of a disciplined art form, but rather “...any sonic event that is linked with this state, that cannot be reduced to language...and that displays a certain degree of rhythmic or melodic organization.” (202) This broad definition makes allowance for a wide range of aural phenomena including chant, handclapping and improvised instrumentation.(203) But music on its
own does not induce trance. Its function is to furnish an ambient psychological setting in which ritual may do its work, all the while sending a series of coded signals, sound bearing meaning, to which the devotee responds “physiologically, psychologically, affectively and aesthetically.”(204) Rouget contends that these signals work at three basic levels:
(a) by providing and sustaining an emotionally recognized arena in which the adept may conduct his/her performance,
(b) by stimulating the imagination, directing the devotee towards identification with the deity (or spirit) which is to invest or posses him/her, and
(c) by supplying the devotee, in physiological terms, with the means (that is, music), to exteriorize this trance through the medium of dance.(205)
Of the latter Rouget comments “…it is through the music that the group provides the entranced person with the mirror in which he can read the image of his borrowed identity and it is the music that enables him to reflect this identity back again to the group in the form of a dance.”(206)

The music for trance settings in nearly always supplied by musicians – often professional musicians – who do not enter trance themselves. The music which accompanies the attainment of trance normally possesses two basic characteristics, namely hard breaks or abrupt changes, together with dramatic accelerando crescendos. Indeed the latter is so closely associated with trance over so many cultures that Rouget regards the phenomenon as a near universal leitmotif of possession music.(207) Rouget stresses that while drumming may play a role in providing the musical settings in which trance is induced, it is not a necessary precondition for this state, nor does it possess any intrinsic “triggering mechanism” which produces neurophysiological correspondences within the subject.(208)

Trance states invariably result in dancing. The music performed and the ritual is
inexorably intertwined with the dance; indeed the dance may be regarded as a spatial inscription of the “possession music”.(209) But while the dance may highlight the devotee's symbiosis with the deity, and thus comprise an integral component of the trance experience, it also converts the votary into a performer and the ritual into sacred theatre. In actively responding to the music, the devotee exteriorizes the relationship between deity and subject and transmits to all observers – other adepts, fellow believers, and spectators – messages regarding the power and character of the possessing deity. Moreover the evolving nature of the dance signifies to religious observers and others the progress and depth of that relationship.(210)

The induction of trance at Thaipusam contains all of the ingredients listed in the preceding paragraphs. The devotee approaches the festival after weeks of fasting, during which he/she has endured privations, performed tapas and concentrated his/her mind on the ritual which will result in a direct experience of the Divine. He/she is aware that the attainment of trance is a necessary pre-condition for the successful bearing of the kavadi, and the painless and bloodless insertion of the vels and hooks within the body. As noted in Chapter One, many of the aspirants will have attended sessions of trance training, where their progress was assessed, and their ability to achieve and sustain trance was put to the test. On Thaipusam day the devotee will gather with his/her particular group, either at the river bank outside the Batu Caves complex, or in one of the small temples within the nearby Indian settlement. The votary will be clad in the requisite vesthi, shorts, sari, or Punjabi suit, usually made of yellow cloth and trimmed with red. He/she will be wearing anklets accoutred with small bells. He/she will undergo all the preliminary rituals including a puja to Ganesha, and the purification of the kavadi he/she is to carry. All cultural “prompts” and stimuli now in place, the leader and group's attention will turn to inducing trance. The retinue surrounding the votary will chant, music will be played and perhaps hymns or songs will be performed, percussive instruments hit rhythmically, and incense passed under the devotee's face. As mentioned in Chapter One, the eventuating trance is obvious to all bystanders, and is dramatically demonstrated by a range of bodily signals. This indicates to onlookers that the deity has "mounted" the devotee, who has entered the state of arul. At this point the vels will be
inserted, the kavadi fitted, and the devotee and his/her retinue will depart for the Temple Cave. En route, the aspirant will perform the kavadi dance, emulating the swaying motion of Idumban as he bore the hills to the south of India.

6.5 Trance: The Individual Impact

While the trance state produces immediately observable psycho-physiological changes in behaviour, it may also result in profound and deep-seated psychic-spiritual impacts upon subjects which sometimes prove life altering.

The main apparent changes which follow the induction of trance are physiological and may be readily detected by even casual onlookers. These include pronounced changes in emotional expression and a loss of self control which may produce trembling, shaking, facial distortion and involuntary muscular spasms and twitching. (211) Psychological changes are less noticeable, but their impact upon the individual are even more marked and far reaching. These include disruption of normal thought processes; disturbances to concentration, attention, memory and judgement; disorganization of the subject's sense of time and place; changes to the subject's body image (so, for example, the body is directed to assume the public demeanor and personal characteristic of the possessing deity or spirit), and the impressive, and occasionally breathtaking, augmentation of the subject's ability to perform unusual actions (for example, to resist pain, to withstand fatigue, to undertake feats of Herculean strength). (212) But more importantly the adept enters a stage in which normal perceptions become distorted, and in which he/she may be subject to feelings of rejuvenation or hypersensibility. As Shor has pointed out, the fading of the generalized-reality orientation, and the concomitant eclipse of mundane consciousness, allows normally occluded dimensions of awareness to impinge upon phenomenal awareness. (213) These may allow the ingress and absorption of an array of fresh mental constructs, “…the possibility that new, special orientations may be constructed at profound levels without recourse to the logic, knowledge and critical functions of the usual reality orientation.” (214)

Often these changes in meaning and awareness suggest or invoke perceptions of
powerful spiritual significance, frequently freighted with the impress of the ineffable. (215) At their most esoteric, these perceptions may promote a sense of impending or actual mystical union with the deity; however, because of the transitory nature of the trance state the condition of penetrating awareness is necessarily evanescent.(216) However, as William James has observed, mystical experiences are more convincing, more immediate and real than those processed by logic or the rational intellect.(217) Moreover, such experiences are intrinsically noetic; they are perceived as states of knowledge, and often possess a veracity and vitality which surpasses those learned through the agency of mundane consciousness.(218) At their most intense, these experiences may be so powerful and profound as to be life changing; equivalent in their impact to the forces which impel religious conversion. Those who have had such experiences often express their good fortune, their gratitude, as well as their intense feelings of indebtedness to the deity.(219) Walker remarks that devotees in a ritual involving possession trance undergo an experience which is transforming in both psychological and social terms. Typically, the devotee “emerges from participation... with a strengthened and freshened sense of his rapport with the cosmos, the society and himself...the ritual participant is internally changed by the rituals in which he is participant, and his internal world changes accordingly.”(220)

These physiological and psycho-spiritual changes are evident throughout Thaipusam. I have already mentioned some of the physical symptoms which reveal the onset of trance. However, as I indicated in Chapter One, for many devotees the violent impact of the initial trance is replaced by a calmer plateau state in which the devotee is aware of his/her surroundings, is able to respond to directions, and is able to interact with members of the retinue as they guide him/her toward the Caves. The “superhuman” energies expended by votaries are obvious, and are demonstrated in the ability to bear an unaccustomed weight while encumbered with hooks, chains and velṣ, to engage in vigorous dance, and to climb the steep flights of stairs which lead to the Temple Cave.

My interviews with devotees suggest that while the early emphatic trance indicates the arrival and presence of the deity, it is the phase that follows which imparts fresh
awareness, the array of abstruse experiences which William James has termed “noetic”, and which comprise the very heart of the kavadi yatra. For many devotees these experiences are overwhelming and frequently ineffable. This inability to communicate the intense nature and power of kavadi worship to others has been noted by Malaysian columnist, Sri Delima, who writes:

“After it is all over, curious foreigners and fellow Malaysians waylay him (the devotee) and ask: Tell us, did you feel any pain? Were you conscious of the kavadi's weight? Is it true they put some pain killing powder on you? Or were you in a trance already when they pierced you? How did it all feel – tell us, tell us.

“He tries to, but how does one communicate the feel of something to someone who has never felt anything remotely like it? One might just as well discuss landscapes with the blind-from-birth.

“People born and bred amidst it all may have an inkling of the experience without experiencing it. Never more than an inkling, though.” (221)

The depth of the encounter is indicated by the comments of some of the adepts whom I interviewed:
- “I felt His presence all the way through. I can never be the same person again.” (Tamil housewife, aged 45)
- “Murugan is wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. He (metaphorically) kissed my forehead.” (Tamil rubber tapper, male, aged 20)
- “What can I say? Murugan is real, he exists, he has filled me with love. There is just nothing more I can add.” (Gujarati businesswoman, aged 25)
- “This kavadi has rescued me. I am telling you that my life must have ended in ruin but for the Almighty's presence.” (Sikh student, male, aged 21)
- “I stood and trembled and cried in front of a great torrential Force, a never ceasing stream of arul. I shed tears now, as you can see, as I recollect it.” (Tamil widow, aged 65)
- “My mother was saved by His Grace, this is why I take a kavadi now. But I had no idea, no idea...I am different, overcome. It is today that I really know what my religion has been trying to tell me all these years...but I was blind, you know? The blindness of
intellectual arrogance. No more, I am telling you.” (Jaffna Tamil university lecturer, male, aged 28) (222)

All of those interviewed indicated that the experience had been manifestly positive, that “messages”, some explicit, other subtle and recondite, had been transmitted during the course of bearing the kavadi, and that these messages would change the way they conducted their lives, and the way they viewed the world. Many older Hindus whom I interviewed recounted their own kavadi pilgrimages in terms of awe, and several claimed that the experience had transformed their lives. It may well be, as Timothy Beard suggests that, “In the affective experience, the subject’s own emotions contribute fundamentally to what he sees. It is a different order of experience – the pre-objective. He does not observe, he responds: and his response colours what he seems to see.” (223) However, to the devotees I have interviewed these episodes were real, immediate, urgent and profound; they were authentic mystical experiences of great intensity and power, often the most penetrating transforming interludes in their religious life. In the deepest sense, these equated to the “peak experiences” described by Maslow.

But the successful involvement in a trance related ritual produces other outcomes as well. These include the freedom to act in ways that are not available to devotees within their allocated societal role, and indeed may contradict the norms of quotidian life.(224) Ironically the self sacrifice and behavioural constraints accepted by the devotee as the preconditions for participation in a specified ritual, and the overt surrender of the ego which is preludial to entry to the trance, provides the devotee with the heightened freedom required to enact his/her spiritual actualization within the public arena.(225)

At the same time the involvement of the individual in a public ritual trance state places the devotee under considerable societal pressure. The votary's ability to successfully complete the ritual may result in an elevation of his/her social status. The capacity to attain and sustain trance is an open test of his/her spiritual credibility, a very public confirmation that the deity has chosen the aspirant as a worthy vehicle for possession or investment.(226) On the other hand, failure to fulfill his/her allotted role may
demonstrate or be interpreted as spiritual inadequacy. It may connote lack of preparation for the encounter with the deity, especially inattention to the necessary preliminary procedures, or more tellingly that the devotee has been deemed spiritually unequal to the task demanded by the deity. (227)

All devotees, especially first time aspirants, are under considerable pressure to “perform” at Thaipusam. However, this pressure is often ameliorated throughout the period of fasting by the careful instruction and reassurance provided by religious teachers and influential elders within the temple community, and by the active support extended by friends and family. Trance training may also provide much needed confidence. However, these measures can only go so far, and the final hours leading to the encounter with the deity, the actual “moment of truth” when arul “descends” are often fraught with anxiety. As Babb states the trance state is of great significance to the individual devotee: “More than any other ritual phenomenon, trance fuses public and private truth. It is public in the sense that the devotee's special religious status is visible to all; divine favour can be seen in his demeanor and in his apparently miraculous ability to penetrate his flesh without pain and bleeding. It is private in the sense that the devotee has a truly personal encounter with the God...”(228)

Inability to attain trance on Thaipusam day, which according to my own observations affects only a handful of devotees, will be generally attributed to one of three causes:
(i) The failure to properly observe all the requirements of fasting,

(ii) spiritual unworthiness; that is, for some reason the deity chooses not to possess or invest the subject, or

(iii) the subject is not ready for the level of spiritual commitment demanded of participants at Thaipusam, or is required to pursue other forms of spiritual disciplines.

However, while the inability to realize trance will cause acute discomfort for the intending votary, and may earn social disapproval, this does not necessarily follow,
especially in instances where the devotee is very young. Of more serious moment however, is the undisputed fact that the prospective devotee has been unable to fulfill a vow to the deity, and that an extremely significant transaction remains incomplete. In these cases, the devotee is advise to seek spiritual counselling and to find ways of discharging his debt to the god.

The subject of trance and the signals sent to wider audiences will be summarized in the final Chapter.

6.6 Trance: The Demon Devotee
The demon devotee is especially problematic to all levels of constituted religious authority, often indicative of those who achieve trance according to well-accepted and established rites. The demon devotee typically worships a renegade deity or spirit, one which makes no pretence of respecting the recognized moral order and is openly subversive of all received authority. These peripheral figures seems to be largely attractive to the weak and downtrodden, and their domination of the lowest ranks forms a double protest; first on the part of the gods/spirits against the cosmology which renders them as outcasts, and secondly on the part of the devotees against the secular/religious authorities which regulate them to the base of society. This intertwining of outcast gods and adherents has the impact of publicly elevating the devotees to the heights of exultation, and thus demonstrates the dangerous powers which the deity/spirit invests in this otherwise despised or oppressed segment of society. However, the effectiveness of this protest depends upon the overall societal acknowledgment of the minatory forces symbolized throughout the period of possession. Moreover, the leaders of these groups will almost inevitably be subject to intense public ostracism, and their powers will often be discredited or checked by accusations of black magic or witchcraft.

In discussing the issue of the demon devotee at Thaipusam, it is first necessary to resolve the status of two groups, namely women and lower caste devotees, who are sometimes identified by scholars as “lesser” worshippers; that is, votaries whose
experiences can never be considered to be on the same rarefied level as those of upper caste male devotees.

Gananath Obeyesekere has made the claim that as Murugan became “Brahmanized” his identity was inexorably fused with the higher caste mores of purity and pollution, a process which rendered him beyond possessing women, whom Obeyesekere asserts are regarded as intrinsically impure. According to this viewpoint, the trance states of women must denote possession by lesser gods and spirits. This contention is not supported by my own observations in Malaysia or India, or among the “Jaffna” Tamils whom I interviewed in the course of preparing this dissertation. On the contrary it was repeatedly emphasized that such an attitude would be contrary to the ideals of bhakti worship, as well as the philosophies of Saiva Siddhanta. It was further pointed out that several prominent and well-established female mediums in Malaysia claimed inspiration from Murugan. Finally, the story of Murugan's enthrallment of Valli and the fact that Thaipusam celebrated Parvati's granting of the Sakti Vel, the instrumental means by which Murugan achieved domination over the asuras, were cited as evidence of the elevated status of women within the Murugan cultus.

In the case of Adi Dravidar devotees, some commentators aver that their ambiguous spiritual status is the result of their putative continual contact with lower deities and the world of spirits (especially potentially malevolent spirits such as bhuta and pey, relationships which render them “...supposedly weaker in mental and spiritual terms.” (233)) Certainly my fieldwork reveals that many members of higher castes fear the ability of the Adi Dravidars to manipulate these forces, and that mediums, shamans and exorcists dealing with godlings, and dangerous spirits are usually (though not inevitably) drawn from their ranks. However, while I have encountered pejorative attitudes toward the participation of Adi Dravidars in Thaipusam rituals, (often among Hindu reformers, especially when worship is directed toward village or “little” deities), it is by no means ubiquitous, nor even widespread. Indeed most Adi Dravidars interviewed reported little overt discrimination throughout the course of their involvement at Thaipusam, although several stated that they felt that their experiences were devalued in comparison to those
of upper castes. However, the democratizing influence of bhaktism at Batu Caves is pronounced, especially in the conduct of a ritual such as a tirtha yatra, when in theory all notions of caste are suspended and the equality of pilgrims is emphasized. Thus if a devotee conducts his/her worship in accordance with received norms, his/her participation will generally be considered of commensurate moment to that of other votaries.

At Batu Caves, the greatest public animus is reserved for the small group of “transgressive” devotees, that is, those aspirants who quite deliberately flout the fundamental norms of the purity-impurity dichotomy, and who either worship dangerous spirits or who identify themselves with asuric or demonic forces, and who drink alcohol and engage in other so-called “left-handed” activities. In fact interviews with a number of these devotees, most of whom were young males of Adi Dravidar castes, revealed that none were left handed in the sense of belonging to the school of kulavarna tantra, that is, “spiritual advancement...achieved by means of the very things which are the causes of man's downfall,” (234) nor were any adherents of the sorts of sakta tantra cults described by Sir John Woodroofe.(235)

The rationale which informs their worship is straightforward and is summed up in the following selected collected comments: “We have fasted, we have observed all restrictions”; “Surapadman, Singhamukhan, Tarakasura, and all the other asuras behaved badly, even Idumban was a demon, and yet they were all rescued by Murugan. We can but hope for the same.”; “We hurt no-one. God alone will decide whether our actions are right. God helps those who admit they are ignorant and in need of assistance. It is not for others to decide how we should behave.” A highly respected Malaysian Hindu, a venerated elder with a wide range of social, political and religious contacts, told me, “These people are among the misunderstood Hindus. They are on the whole modest, humble and decent. Their path is a sort of modified, heavily diluted left handedness, a pathway more widely trodden and better understood in India than in Malaysia.” (236) Indeed, as noted in Chapter Four, “inferior bhakti” may be transformed and subsequently offered as “higher bhakti”.(237) These “transgressive” devotees
appear to be a Malaysian example of this phenomenon.

7. BEYOND TRANCE: THE PILGRIMAGE

In this section I trace the devotee's progress to the shrine following the attainment of trance. As we have seen, the votary has now completed his/her period of purificatory fasting; he/she has bathed prior to undertaking the conglery of rituals prior to the induction of the trance state, and subsequent fitting of the kavadi. The aspirant now sets out on a short but intense journey, densely laden with the ritual symbolism drawn from the Murugan cosmology. This journey re-enacts, even if inexactly, the spiritual genesis, stabilization and triumph of the deity Murugan, and foreshadows the progressive enlightenment of the devotee, and thus the final destiny of his/her soul.

(Indeed, this metaphorical journey began the day the votary commenced fasting. In Chapter One, I noted that Murugan's first military manoeuvre following the acquisition of the Vel resulted in the slaying of the asura Krownchan, who had taken the form of a mountain attempting to block the passage of the devonic forces. Krownchan represents the tamas, the forces of inertia, torpor and sloth. We have seen that the sadhaka has already vanquished tamas throughout the period of fasting.)

Bearing the kavadi, a miniature shrine containing the deity himself, and in the state of arul in which he/she has been “mounted” by the god, the entranced devotee now makes his/her way from the riverbank or Indian settlement to the entrance of the Batu Caves complex. En route, the votary, surrounded by his/her retinue, performs the kavadi dance, the swaying movements of the asura Idumban, as under commission from the sage Agastya, he bore the twin hills Sivagiri and Saktigiri to South India.

The devotee reaches the goparum (represented by an ornate architrave) which marks the entrance to the Batu Caves complex, where he/she crosses the boundary which divides the outside world of the kaliyuga, the world of chaos and sorrow, from the demarcated and patterned universe within. It is generally held that only at this juncture does the pilgrim's “real” journey commence, and that he/she begins that stage of the odyssey
which moves backwards in time and into the primordial Self. (238)

The pilgrim now makes his/her way along the roped off lane reserved for kavadi worshippers towards the flights of steps which lead to the Temple Cave. However, before even climbing the first step, the devotee passes a series of sequentially structured symbols, all of which relate to the early phases of Murugan's cosmic history.

- On his/her right, the votary will pass the temple dedicated to the navagraha, the nine planets. This recollects the creation of the nine saktis following the breaking of Parvati's anklet, each of whom is associated with one of the navagraha. The sons subsequently born to the saktis assume the characteristics of the planet with whom he is linked, and collectively protect the young deity and later accompany him as his generals on his campaign against the asuric army.

- On his/her left and immediately prior to reaching the stairway, the pilgrim will pass a small Ganesha temple, emphasizing the deity's relationship to Murugan as older brother, and his role as Maha Ganapati, Ruler of Obstacles, without whose blessings no undertaking can expect to be successful.

- Behind this temple lies a further temple dedicated to Mahamariamman, Murugan's mother, thus recalling firstly the foundation mythology of the Batu Caves shrine (as we have seen it was Mahamariamman who directed that worship be performed to her son in the Cave), and secondly Parvati's presentation of the Sakti Vel at the outset of his campaign to vanquish the asura-king Surapadman, thus restoring cosmic order.

- To the right of the base of the stairway stands the partially completed colossus of Murugan, an unambiguous symbol signifying that Batu Caves is the deity's provenance, his major Malaysian home, and premier pilgrimage site.

- On reaching the stairway, the devotee will pass under an architrave, the centrepiece of which is the deity depicted as Shanmugan, seated on his mayil vahana (peacock mount),
together with his consorts Teyvayanai and Valli. Shanmugan represents the early multiform of Murugan, the unstabilized deity united into One by the embrace of Parvati. He is thus at the earliest stage of his cosmic career, and is yet to reach his destined effulgence as *Purusa* or Cosmic Man. It will also be recollected that during Murugan's wooing of Valli, his descent from the celestial abode of Mt. Kailas to the jungle surrounds of Valli's village is marked by his reversion to the multiform Shanmugan, thus representing his immanence to all sincere devotees.

- This theme is further developed by the motifs contained on the reverse side of the downstairs architrave which depicts Murugan's marriage to the dark and earthy Valli, the adopted daughter of the hunter chief and an indigenous child of the soil. Valli symbolizes the power of *bhakti*, the forces of ecstasy and self abandonment, and thus the unconventional, flexuous pathway the devotee must take in dispelling illusion and attaining realization of the deity's divine identity.

### 7.1 The Stairs: Towards Stabilization

Having passed under the downstairs architrave, the votary now climbs the 272 steps which lead him/her to the entrance of the Temple Cave. The ascent encapsulates twin myths: the first the mythology of the Murugan-Teyvayanai-Valli triad, the second Murugan's campaign against the army of the *asuras*.

(i) Murugan-Teyvayanai-Valli: We have noted that the reverse side of the downstairs architrave (that is, the side facing the steps) depicts the marriage of Murugan and Valli. The architrave which surmounts the top of the steps shows Murugan wedding his other consort, the fair Teyvayanai, the daughter of Indra, king of the gods. This ceremony is conducted according to orthodox Brahmanic rites, and in the presence of the celestials. The marriage symbolizes the unification of God and soul congruent with the established precepts and conventions of spiritual enlightenment, that is, correct observance of appropriate rituals, proper conduct, and spiritual disciplines, all leading to *moksha*. In this context, it will be recollected that Murugan weds Teyvayanai only after he has achieved final victory over the *asuras* and has restored harmony to the cosmos. Teyvayanai thus represents finality, order, stability and transcendence.
The steps which form a pathway between the two architraves suggest that both metaphysical journeys, that of orthodoxy (Teyvayanai) and that of bhakti (Valli) will ultimately reach the same destination. In this sense each one of the 272 steps taken by the devotee as he/she climbs to the summit is illustrative of any one of an infinitude of cosmological potentialities produced by the constantly shifting axis of the Murugan-Teyvayanai-Valli triad, as the deity repeatedly moves between immanence (Valli) and transcendence (Teyvayanai).

(ii) The Battle With the Asuras: But in climbing the stairs, the devotee also symbolically re-enacts the great war between the devas and the asuras. As I outlined in Chapter One, Murugan descended from the celestial abode at Mt. Kailas to conduct his military campaign against Surapadman's forces. I noted that by homologizing the battlefield to the human body, the mythology is internalized and the conflict between Murugan and the asuras becomes a spiritual quest to subdue anava (ego). As we have seen this homology collapses the seeming incompatibility between the deity who is both transcendent and immanent. In this context the mounting of the stairs represents the ascent through the cakras, the series of spiritual centres figuratively located along the spine. Hindus hold that the force of kundalini (or primordial power), depicted as a serpent, “uncoils” as the aspirant progressively moves towards his/her final spiritual goals, travelling up the sushumna nadi (the central psychic current within the spinal column), activating each of the cakras in succession before reaching the crown. (I observe in passing that the two main constituent channels of the sushumna nadi, are the ida nadi, portrayed as feminine, and the pingala, viewed as masculine. The tension and dynamic interplay of Siva-Sakti is thus intimately conjoined within the multitude of processes that collectively comprise spiritual unfoldment.) The rise through the cakras is symbolically and collectively underscored by the location of Ganesha's temple at the foot of the stairs, the lower architrave featuring the unstabilized Shanmugan, contrasting with the celestial Murugan at the summit, a deity who has fulfilled his prescribed cosmic role, and attained his full array of powers. We have already commented on Shanmugan, and his eventual effulgent destiny as Purusa, Cosmic Man, the slayer of Surapadman. With regard to Ganesha, the deity is considered to control entry into the realm of the
seven cakras, and is himself seated upon and permeates the muladhara cakra, symbolically sited at the base of the spine, and controlling memory, space and time. Murugan initiates the individual into yogic powers, which moves the devotee beyond the muladhara cakra, and into the pull of the higher cakras. As the devotee moves progressively towards spiritual enlightenment he/she will successively pass through the following cakras:
svadhisthana (below navel): reason
manipura (solar plexus): willpower
anahata (heart centre): direct cognition
visudanta (throat): divine love
ajna (third eye): divine sight
before reaching the sahasrara cakra at the crown of the head betokening spiritual illumination. Thus the stairway as a whole recollects Murugan's campaign and the final triumph over the asuras, and each step therefore represents movement toward conquering maya (illusion), malas (impurities), anava (ego) and avidya (ignorance), and thereby acquisition of vidya (pure knowledge) and moksha (enlightenment and release).

7.2 The Temple Cave
At the very entrance of the Cave, the votary will encounter two further iconic depictions symbolizing Murugan's triumph over the asuras and the dispelling of anava or ego dominated ignorance. Both reflect the deity's profound and transformative spiritual power.

On the devotee's left, he/she will pass statuary showing Murugan's Vel splitting the asura-king Surapadman into two, prior to his final defeat and conversion into the two avian forms in which he permanently serves Murugan; namely the mayil (peacock) which becomes his vahana, and the rooster which is inscribed upon his standard. The slaying of Surapadman not only concludes the campaign against the asuras, but also clearly demonstrates the subjugation of anava, which is now converted into blissful awareness of the deity.
On the devotee's right, he/she will pass a murthi of Idumban, the defeated and transformed asura who now permanently remains at the border of the Swami Subramanya Kovil as guardian gatekeeper of the shrine. Idumban represents the destruction of ignorance, the sudden awareness of the nature of divinity and the role of perennial service as a form of worship. His defeat at the hands of the renunciate god at Palani also provides a prominent mode of ritual worship, the bearing of a kavadi.

As the devotee enters the Cave, immediately prior to the steps which lead to the Cave floor, he/she will pass a large statue of Murugan with his Vel, that is, Murugan as “the Shining One”, the god triumphant, totally integrated and in possession of his full compliment of cosmic powers. The entry to the Cave marks a critical threshold for all votaries. In Chapter Four I stated that all Tamil Hindu philosophies and belief structures posit a direction of inner movement, a progression from the outer world of forms to the centre where undifferentiated Oneness was be encountered in the perfect stillness and silence of transcendence. Thus the individual atman lies at the metaphorical centre of the five body sheaths, and truth is discovered only by constant probing and penetration of layer after layer of impurity and illusion. In Chapter Four I also noted that the Hindu temple is homologized to the body. Within Tamil temples the central shrine (gharbgriya: literally womb chamber) is considered the “heart”; a small enclosed area which draws the devotee inwards from the outer world “...away from the sun and harsh shadows of the day into a dark and magical world for a purely personal transaction.” (239) Entry to the Cave is thus symbolic of the search for final truths; as Shulman remarks, “Knowledge, or Truth, is in the eyes of Hindus, by nature esoteric; it is buried, lost to be recovered from the depths of the sea or the darkness of the earth.” (240) As I stated in Chapter One, the murthi of Murugan is located within an aperture at the northern wall of the Temple Cave, as it were, a cave within a cave. At Batu Caves this is doubly significant; as I have observed, one of Murugan's attributional names is Guru-Guhan; the Divine Preceptor who dwells within and issues wisdom from the cave of the heart. Thus the entry to the Cave symbolizes the final stage of the sadhaka's search for Truth, the passage from ignorance to enlightenment.
But this is more than outer symbolism. As we have seen, the logic of inner movement also applies to the Hindu pilgrimage; it is a *tirtha yatra* (a divine crossing) which takes the adept from the border to the metaphysical centre. The same logic will direct that just as Murugan, *Guru-Guhan*, sits at the heart of the Cave, so does the heart of Truth lie within the votary, and the heart within the human body becomes the shrine where purity and *moksha* may be realized. At this moment all paradoxes are resolved; Murugan's battle with the *asuras*, indeed his entire cosmology is internalized and all polarities – the dynamic tension of Siva-Sakti, the illusory divisions between differentiated and undifferentiated, the outer and the inner, transcendence and immanence – collapse.

The votary proceeds to the main shrine where he/she will perform a final dance before the deity. The god and the adept exchange energies; the votary pours forth all the emotion of his/her devotion, still encumbered by the kavadi he/she has borne for the Lord, a public admission of his/her ignorance, the votary stands as if psychically naked before the deity. Thus the “burden” has been carried from the periphery through a series of symbolic thresholds to the inner world, where Murugan is encountered in his supreme majesty, and is laid at his feet. In return the deity offers his *darshan*, his blessings, the transformative spiritual energy which emanates from his eyes. The milk is taken from the kavadi, and tipped over the Golden *Vel*, the symbol of Murugan's authority and kingship, which has been transferred from the deity's permanent *kovil* (palace) in Kuala Lumpur to the Caves for the duration of the festival. The subject will then be removed from the kavadi, his/her *vels* will be extracted, and he/she will be brought out of trance. The formal exchange between devotee and deity is now at an end; the contract is fulfilled.

(As I mentioned in Chapter One, a range of additional statuary has been installed within the Temple Cave over the last few years. These have been placed without regard for the sequential unfoldment of the ritual symbolism which is believed to be a necessary concomitant of the pilgrimage experience.)
8. RITES OF REINCORPORATION

In Chapter One we noted that on the third day after Thaipusam the votary attends an Idumban *puja*, which not only honours the former *asura*, but also releases the devotee from the vows of asceticism thus symbolically restoring him/her to society. He/she then ceases his/her adoptive role as *sannyasin*, and resumes the mundane routines of a householder.

But the devotee has changed, and the person who returns to society is not the same individual who commenced fasting between 2-6 weeks previously. As we have seen the pilgrimage is conceived of as an experiential catalyst which, *inter alia*, disrupts everyday notions thus opening the adept to a range of cosmic possibilities which will reshape his/her relationship to the deity, and move him/her indefinably toward *moksha*. By bearing a kavadi at Thaipusam the pilgrim has been exposed to new forms of knowledge, he/she has encountered the deity in all his fullness, has been relieved of *karma*, and his been infused with new energies. He/she thus brings to quotidian life a fresh sense of purpose, control and direction, a renewed appreciation of his/her religion and all that that implies. He/she now stands, in psychical terms, on a more elevated plateau, representing the transformation and equipoise he/she has sought; a temporary resolution which will equip him/her spiritually as well as in the conduct of the subsequent mundane life to which he/she is returning.

Throughout the pilgrimage the devotee has been assisted by a close supporting retinue of relatives and friends as well as his/her spiritual advisor, all of whom were with him/her during the intimate and reactive meeting with the deity. This is now acknowledged by the adept who now serves his supporters with food and drink. The palpable feelings of group satisfaction, of a significant undertaking now complete, not only pervades the entire Idumban *puja* but also confirms a complex of shared interests and emotion that survive into quotidian life. (241)

9. AFTERWORD: COLOUR AND HEAT/COLD IN THAIPUSAM

Earlier this chapter we noted that red and white are the primary Tamil colours. We also
observed that red is a hot colour, and that white is considered cool. Brenda Beck explains that while white represents stability, freedom from pollution and general well-being, it is also associated with purity, and linked to ritual cooling substances, including water and milk. Red on the other hand is a colour of ambiguity and uncertainty. Although it is often used to show health and vitality, it may also be identified with human blood. In this connection it may be used to express pollution, conflict and even death. However, red and white in combination are regarded as auspicious and progenitive. (242)

Beck contends that the majority of South Indian rituals are conducted in units of three consisting of an initial event, a climax and a conclusion. She further asserts that these can be expressed in terms of colour, and that stage one and three will always be white, while stage two is invariably red. (243) If we assume that South Indian rituals are designed to move an individual from a given state to a more desirable condition, we must deduce that the central stage of the ritual, the red state, is that in which the transition is effected. And indeed, red is associated with extraordinary or innovative occurrences, and with the process of transformation. (244) If we link red/white with heating and cooling, we can conclude that any Tamil ritual will be constituted in a three stage structure, comprising white-cool/red-hot/white-cool. While heat is implicated in the transformation of substances and thus forms the central and decisive element with major rituals and ceremonies, if left uncontrolled red-heat can prove dangerous and destructive. Tamil rituals thus seek to surround and contain red-heat with white-cool. (245) I would suggest that the red-hot/white-cool dichotomy is in clear evidence throughout Thaipusam.

The festival opens with the raising of the flag (koti) within the Batu Caves compound. In the South African festival, discussed in Chapter Three, the flagpole was ritually purified with cooling agents and then adorned with red dots of kumkum powder, thus symbolizing both heating and cooling. (246) The flag raised at Batu Caves consists of a red painted rooster, (Murugan's standard) against and enclosed by a white background (thus the red-hot is surrounded by white-cool).
On the individual level, the devotee's fasting, asceticism and generation of *tapas* is a period of prolonged and unrelieved heating. The ascetic is one who quells his earthly desires, especially his sexual passions. These energies are directed inwards and are transmuted, igniting a spiritual “fire” within. All heat is extremely dangerous if not properly controlled. While the renunciate manipulates his/her heat to produce spiritual outcomes, at Thaipusam the adept's red-heat is controlled within the parameters of approved and tested ritual behaviours.

The votary's heat is at its most pronounced, and thus at its most dangerous, during the interval immediately preceding trance, and throughout the period of *arul*. We have noted that devotees usually wear clothes which incorporate Murugan's colours; yellow (a cool colour), with red trimmings. Prior to taking the kavadi, the devotee is cooled by a ritual bath. The state of *arul* is regarded as a red-hot condition, and must be carefully contained and directed. However, some cooling agents are employed – the *vels* and spears are often lubricated with bananas, citrus is often supplied to the votary (or cut above his/her head), and *vibhuti* (holy ash) is applied to the torso of those bearing *aluga* or other large kavadis. All of these measures are regarded as cooling (indeed, as we have seen, *vibhuti* is used by the *pujari* and his assistants to suppress unwanted and potentially intrusive trance states.) However, despite these white-cooling measures, it is generally acknowledged that the “crossing” which follows “moment of truth”, that is, the attainment of *arul*, is accompanied by a steep rise in the red-heat of the aspirant.

When the devotee reaches the shrine in the Cave and is presented to Murugan – a potential exchange of red-heat spiritual energies – the milk the devotee has borne on his kavadi is poured over the Golden Vel to help “cool” the deity. As noted earlier in this chapter, the *murthis* within the shrine are regarded as accumulators and as conductors of energy. Throughout a major festival such as Thaipusam, when countless numbers of worshippers express their adulation, and thousands are engaged in intimate transfers of substantial power with the deity, there is a huge risk that the god will overheat with unpredictable and possibly dire consequences. Milk is regarded as something more than
a mere white-cooling agent; it is *amirtha* (the light of the moon), the symbol of knowledge and immortality. The act of pouring this substance is thus not only a “cooling” act; it restores to the deity some of the spiritual power he expends as he bestows *darshan* upon the devotee.\(^{(248)}\)

Following presentation of his/her psychic burden, which is symbolically laid at the feet of the deity, the devotee is brought out of trance, (a white-cooling action), dusted with *vibhuti* (cooling), and has *vibhuti* (cooling) and *kumkum* (red-heating) applied to his/her forehead. Those who show reluctance or difficulty to emerge from trance are offered limes (cooling) to chew. The subsequent Idumban *puja* is a white-cooling ritual in which the devotee terminates his/her period of red-heating asceticism and is returned to society.

In very basic terms, the schema outlined by Beck, and strongly supported by my own research, as applied to Thaipusam might be displayed as follows:

1. Original state of white: Mundane life
2. Red/heat: Vow/asceticism/fasting/*arul*/pilgrimage
3. New state of white: Idumban *puja*/return to society

In this context Stage (2), that of red-heat-fire represents the period of transformative liminality, which separates the cool-white phases which enclose the ritual.

The above is a very elementary discussion of a complex issue, and does not delve into the many white-cool/red-heat permutations which might be uncovered by a closer examination of the festival as a whole. However, in a very general sense, this section does demonstrate the essential red/white correspondences which obtain throughout Thaipusam.

10. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has examined Thaipusam in terms of the Tamil Hindu ritual of pilgrimage, the *tirtha yatra* (or divine crossing) a journey from the periphery to the *axis mundi* or centre, a location where a given deity is both immanent and accessible. In this sense, the movement from the outer to the inner, pilgrimage is consistent with the logic of inner
direction found in Tamil Hindu philosophies and belief structures. We have noted that pilgrimage is a ritual, which while conducted for reasons which are outwardly mundane, also produces general spiritual outcomes. Batu Caves is a recognized Malaysian pilgrimage centre with a well established foundation mythology, and a prescribed corpus of ritual behaviours. However, as I have noted, these ritual behaviours occur only when the king-deity is in residence at his mountaintop kovil; that is, when he makes his annual regal procession from his Kuala Lumpur palace, and the symbol of his authority, the Golden Vel, is installed within the shrine in the Cave. In a sense the rites of kingship establish the wider boundaries of the Thaipusam festival, and the ritual incorporation of the king-deity's segmentary population also encompasses the period when kavadi worship – the personal approach to the deity – is regarded as its most efficacious.

In examining the Tamil approaches to the rite of pilgrimage, I have explored South Indian approaches to substance movement, and in particular the concept of headwriting and what this internal code implies for the individual. We have noted that the kunam complex may be modified by the appropriate application of the karman complex, resulting in the formation of the new kunam complex. The need to move from one state to another – a personal repositioning towards greater equipoise and control – may be divined internally or through an agency – and may be effected by a number of prescribed rituals one of which is pilgrimage.

The decision to embark upon a pilgrimage (in the case of the devotee at Thaipusam to bear a kavadi), is followed by the votary making a vow, a form of contract in which he/she agrees to undertake a pilgrimage in return for a tangible benefit bestowed by the deity. The period prior to the pilgrimage is marked by a stipulated interval of asceticism in which the aspirant withdraws from mundane societal routines and assumes the role and persona, at least in part, of a sannyasin, a revered Hindu cultural archetype.

In this chapter I have examined trance as a mechanism for totally extricating the devotee from the realm of the quotidian, and thus providing a new form of consciousness which sub-rituals can suggest, induce and promote direct communication with the divine. Arul
is a defining category of trance, which represents the descent of the deity and his “mounting” of the votary. I have postulated that arul forms the core phase of Thaipusam, and plunges the devotee into an ecstatic and noetic liminality, in which he/she is exposed to the deity's power and “messages” and knowledge are transferred.

Beginning with the initiation of fasting, the pilgrim commences a journey which is saturated with the symbology of the Murugan cultus, and which contains within its structures the essential corpus of Murugan mythology. The period of asceticism sees the subdual of the tamas (forces of inertia which impede spirituality), and the rise of rajas (activity, energy), which are in turn displaced by sattva (pure consciousness) which arrives at the moment of arul: a crucial and pivotal point in which pain is quelled and replaced by love. The devotee then begins an intense journey which re-enacts many of the significant and formative events within the Murugan cosmology – the deity's early history, the presentation of the Vel, his triumph over the asuras, his full stabilization, his divine marriages, his ultimate rule as the powerful Skanda-Murugan, enclosing and embracing all cosmic powers and offering the potentiality of transcendence. But the homologization of the body and the cosmic fuses external and internal rituals and symbolism, so that in the most profound sense the aspirant adumbrates and symbolically fulfills his/her own metaphysical journey to the centre, climaxing with the entry to the Cave, where all theoretical oppositions and paradoxes of the outer world collapse and the votary is presented to the deity. The devotee presents Murugan with his/her burden, and the deity extends his blessings and bestows his darshan. The adept is returned to society following the Idumban puja, but is transformed; he/she brings to the mundane societal routines a new and more elevated sense of purpose and control.

Finally, this chapter has touched upon the use of colour and heat in Hindu ritual, and has demonstrated that Thaipusam as practiced in Malaysia conforms to the white-red-white/cool-heat-cool sequences common to Tamil ritual.

NOTES
University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988:4

(2) Moronis, E. Alan. *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984:49

(3) ibid:280


(5) Gold, op cit:5; Moronis, op cit:50

(6) Gold, op cit:36

(7) ibid:136

(8) ibid:195-196

(9) ibid:136-137

(10) Fuller (1992), op cit:208

(11) Moronis, op cit:209-210


(13) Moronis, op cit:204-205

(14) ibid:228-229


(16) Moronis, op cit:42


(18) Fuller (1992), op cit:208

(19) Moronis, op cit:42-45

(20) ibid:213

(21) Shulman (1980), op cit:40

(22) Moronis, op cit:112

(23) Shulman (1980), op cit:55

(24) Moronis, op cit:42-45
(25) Fuller (1992), op cit:209
(26) Moronis, op cit:280
(27) Gold, op cit:295
(28) Fuller (1992), op cit:209
(29) Shulman (1980), op cit:41
(30) Gold, op cit:296
(31) ibid:137
(32) ibid:5-6
(33) ibid:5
(34) ibid
(35) ibid; Shulman (1980), op cit:18
(36) Hartsuiker, op cit:10
(37) Moronis, op cit:60
(38) Gold, op cit:263
(39) Shulman (1980), op cit:18-19
(40) Gold, op cit:6-7
(41) ibid:187
(42) Moronis, op cit:67
(43) Gold, op cit:6-7
(44) Moronis, op cit:225
(45) ibid:221-226; Gold, op cit:262; Fuller (1992), op cit:214; Shulman (1980), op cit:18-21
(46) Moronis, op cit:226
(47) ibid:67
(48) ibid:224; Shulman (1980), op cit:18
(49) Moronis, op cit:209
(52) Gold, op cit:188
(56) I have encountered this phenomenon in connection with my own pilgrimages. For example, in 1992, following Thaipusam, a friend asked me to bless a newly married couple in Kuala Lumpur. He explained that because I had taken a kavadi, I would be newly charged with spiritual energy, and I was thus capable of distributing some of this spiritual power to others.

(57) Gold, op cit:253

(58) Shulman (1980), op cit:26

(59) Interviews with trustees, Batu Caves.

(60) Thus for example, I have met devotees whose relatives were purportedly dying of cancer, and whose recovery was attributed solely to the miraculous intervention of Murugan. In 1995, I interviewed a woman who bore a kavadi every year. She informed me that 10 years previously she had been diagnosed with cancer of the womb, and had been told that she had had less than 25 per cent chance of survival, and that if she did survive she would never bear children. She now had three children. She attributed her good fortune to Murugan, and had promised to bear a kavadi every year for life.(PR)

(61) Other devotees told me of rapid changes in their life circumstances. All believed that this was a result of Murugan's direct intervention.


(64) Daniel, E. Valentine. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984

(65) ibid:5

(67) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:5-6
(68) Moreno (1985), op cit:119-120
(69) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:5-6. Thus, for example, diet must be appropriately regulated, and a balanced meal must contain a total of six qualities – sweet, sour, salty, bitter, astringent and hot. (Eichinger, Ferro-Luzzi, Gabriella. “Ritual as Language: The Case of South Indian Food Offerings”, Current Anthropology, Volume 18, Number 3, 1977:511)
(71) ibid:316
(72) ibid:282-283; Inglis, Stephen. “Possession and Pottery: Serving the Divine in a South Indian Community”, in Wagorne and Cutler, op cit:99
(73) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:70-71
(74) Daniel, Sheryl (1983), op cit:33; personal field research
(75) Daniel, Sheryl (1983), op cit:28
(76) Fuller (1992), op cit:224-225
(77) Daniel, Sheryl (1983), op cit:33
(78) ibid:31-33
(79) Thus Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty comments: “By refusing to modify its component elements in order to force them into a synthesis, Indian mythology celebrates the idea that the universe is boundlessly various, and that everything occurs simultaneously, that all possibilities may exist without excluding each other. The myths rejoice in all their experiences that stretch and fill the human spirit, not merely the moments of pure joy that we want to capture, not the great tragedies and traditions that transform and strengthen us, but all the seemingly insignificant episodes and repetitious encounters of banal reality which the myth...teaches us to sanctify and to value. Untrammelled variety and contradictions are ethically and metaphysically necessary; this constitutes the particular charm and strength of the Hindu world view.” (O'Flaherty (1973), op cit:318)
(80) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:70-72
(81) ibid; Kakar, Sudhir. Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and its Healing Traditions, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982:234
(82) Daniel, E. Valentine (1983), op cit:84
(83) ibid:86; personal field research.
(87) Beck (1969), op cit:561
(88) ibid:562 (Throughout my wife's 1977 pregnancy during our posting to Malaysia, our (Tamil) amah fed my wife a series of meals which she advised would help keep her “cool”. She also warned my wife to abstain from a number of specified items which she claimed would result in dangerous “heating”.)
(91) ibid
(92) ibid:197
(94) Daniel, E. Valentine (1983), op cit:95
(95) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:212
(96) ibid:149
(97) Beck, Brenda E.F. “Fate, Karma and Cursing in a Local Epic Milieu”, in Keyes and Daniel, op cit:79
(99) ibid:210
(101) Inglis, op cit:99
(103) ibid:237; personal field research.
(104) Personal field research.
(105) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:221-222
Harmondsworth, 1996:29

(107) Pugh, Judy F. “Astrology and Fate: The Hindu and Muslim Experiences”, in Keyes and Daniel, op cit: 132

(108) ibid:134; Fuller (1992), op cit:251

(109) Pugh, op cit:135

(110) Personal field research.


(112) ibid:32

(113) Throughout my years in Malaysia, and during my fieldwork I witnessed several mediumship sessions in various locations. During one such session, the medium, who was possessed by Ayyappan, and who had never met me previously, issued a progostication which was startlingly accurate.


(115) ibid:176-179


(117) However, I have also seen mediums use aura forecasting, and rituals involving flames.

(118) Babb, “Destiny and Responsibility...”, op cit:174


(120) Babb (1976), op cit:15; Moreno (1985), op cit:104

(121) Wadley, Susan S. “Vrats: Transformers of Destiny”, in Keyes and Daniel, op cit:156

(122) ibid:147

(123) ibid:158-159


(125) Wadley (1983), op cit:147

(126) Babb (1975), op cit:293-294
(128) Babb (1976), op cit:17
(130) Personal field research
(131) Fuller (1992), op cit:17
(132) O'Flaherty (1973), op cit:73
(133) Fuller (1992), op cit:17; Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:248; personal field research
(134) O'Flaherty (1973), op cit:68
(135) ibid:79
(136) ibid:254
(137) See Chapter Four
(139) Shulman (1980), op cit:18
(140) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:270
(144) Daniel, E. Valentine (1984), op cit:275
(145) ibid:285-286
(149) Knox, R.A. Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion, Clarendon Press,
Oxford, 1950
(150) Lewis, I.M., op cit:57
(151) ibid:39
(152) Rouget, op cit:241; personal observation.
(153) Rouget, op cit:275
(154) Lewis, I.M., op cit:227
(156) ibid:212
(157) Lewis I.M., op cit.
(158) Thus, I was informed that the famous Kuda Kepang, a Malay festival in Johore with animist roots and involving trance states, has been banned due to pressure from Muslim authorities. I have been unable to verify this assertion. (For a description of this festival see: Wavell, Stuart. “The Centaurs of Batu Pahat”, in Wavell, Stuart, Butt, Audrey and Epton, Nina, Trances, Antara Book Company, Kuala Lumpur,1988.)
(159) Lewis I.M., op cit:24
(160) ibid:174. An example of this is provided Elizabeth Fuller Collins’ claim that the piercing of the “phallic” tongue with the vel may represent “symbolic castration”. Collins claims that the action may represent the nullifying of the Oedipal complex, and thus reassures “...the powerful representatives of the father – the god, high-caste leaders and political leaders – that the rebellious sons are not a threat.” (Collins,Elizabeth Fuller. Pierced by Murugan’s Lance: Ritual Power and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus, Northern Illinois University Press, Dekalb, 1997:145-146.) However, this explanation is both self referential and tendentious. Firstly Collins makes no mention of the concept of mauna (or silence), which is the most common explanation offered by devotees themselves. Secondly, the statement does not reflect the reality that penetration of the tongue extends to many high caste men. Finally it conveniently ignores the large number of women who take vels through their tongues, and who seem to have no place in this Oedipal schemata.
(162) ibid:10
(164) Bourguignon, Erika “Introduction”, in Bourguignon (Editor), op cit:12
(165) ibid:15
(167) ibid:239-240
(168) ibid:237-238
(169) ibid:246-247
(170) ibid:248
(171) Rouget, op cit.
(172) ibid:16-17
(173) ibid:322
(174) ibid:26
(175) ibid:7-14
(176) Lewis I.M., op cit:18
(177) Rouget, op cit:11
(180) Kalweit, op cit:227
(181) Maslow, op cit:63
(182) ibid:59-69
(183) ibid:75
(186) Goodman, op cit:210-215
(187) This incident, which occurred in 1977, involved young women, recently recruited
from *kampung* backgrounds, and working long hours assembling electronic components with the use of microscopes. The hysteria commenced when one young woman shouted that she had seen a *hantu* (ghost) floating under her microscope. The response was instantaneous. Within a minute nearly every Malay girl on the factory floor was uncontrollably hysterical. All were presenting with symptoms of extreme fear, weeping, huddling together, and screaming. The handful of Tamil and Chinese girls on the floor remained unaffected. The hysteria was finally ended when the factory management announced that it was curtailing the shift, and a Malay *bomoh* was called to restore calm. *En passant*, it is worth noting that the glossolalia observed by Goodman consisted of a high 'u'u'u'u' or bubububu, identical to that she had witnessed among similar groups elsewhere in Mexico and in the United States. This was mirrored by my own observations of Assemblies of God ceremonies in Kuala Lumpur, and Clare, South Australia, both in the 1990s, and at a 1968 open-air Revivalist meeting conducted in Adelaide, South Australia (which I attended in the course of preparing a University essay). The interchangeability of these states recorded over time and in several different locations seems to cast at least some doubt on I.M. Lewis's hypothesis that ASCs are ineluctably shaped by the culture of the participants. (Lewis, I.M., op cit:16)

(188) Deikman, “Deautomization…”, op cit:43. Deikman's hypothesis is exemplified by the 1980 attack launched on the Batu Pahat police station by a group of entranced followers of a self proclaimed Mahdi, a recent convert to Islam. This incident is described in Chapter Two.


(190) ibid

(191) Rouget, op cit:305

(192) ibid:9-10


(196) Personal field research

(197) Walker, op cit:55-56; Rouget, op cit:46

(198) Rouget, op cit:32

(199) Lewis, I.M., op cit:16

(200) Walker, op cit:55-56,80

(201) ibid:80

(202) Rouget, op cit:63

(203) ibid

(204) ibid:119

(205) ibid:325

(206) ibid

(207) ibid:91

(208) ibid:169

(209) ibid:117

(210) ibid


(212) ibid; Rouget, op cit:14

(213) Shorr, op cit:245-246

(214) ibid:246-247

(215) Ludwig, op cit:13-16


(217) ibid:87

(218) ibid:367

(219) Maslow, op cit:66-75

(220) Walker, op cit:125, see also Maslow, op cit:66

(222) Personal field research
(225) Walker, op cit:84
(227) Simons *et al.*, op cit:250; Ward, op cit:325
(228) Babb (1976), op cit:19
(229) Lewis I.M., op cit:127
(230) ibid:96
(231) ibid:121-122
(233) Fuller (1992), op cit:240 (My emphasis).
(236) Personal field research
(238) Shulman (1980), op cit:18
(239) Wood, op cit:73
(240) Shulman (1980), op cit:19
(241) Personal field research
(242) Beck (1969), op cit:558
(243) ibid:556
(244) ibid:554
(245) Shulman (1980), op cit:94
(247) Beck (1969), op cit:565
(248) Shulman (1980), op cit:101-103; personal field research
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the Introduction to this thesis, I contended that many scholars who had written about Thaipusam had constructed interpretations of the festival and the associated forms of worship (especially the kavadi ritual) which suggested their own rationales for Thaipusam. I argued that, based on selective fieldwork and purely Malaysian evidence, each of these analyses was superficially convincing, but when subject to closer examination relied upon ethnographies that were far from complete. But in treating Thaipusam as a *sui generis*, these scholars had failed to situate either the festival or the ritual of kavadi worship within a sufficiently broad cultural or comparative framework. My intention in this thesis has been to closely examine Thaipusam from the “inside”, as it were, and to trace the layers of meaning and the recondite vocabularies of this multifaceted and complex festival in terms of its continuing relevance to Malaysian Hindus. In the following paragraphs I will conclude that Thaipusam at Batu Caves, far from being a cultural aberration, a product of time, place and the peculiar circumstances of Tamil Malaysians, is constructed from the ingredients of Tamil culture, and can only be fully understood by locating it within Tamil history, theologies and belief structures, and in particular those associated with the cultus of the Tamil deity, Murugan.

The festival of Thaipusam commemorates Parvati’s bestowal of the *Sakti Vel* upon the Siva-created deity Murugan, prior to his battle with the demon-king Surapadman under whose leadership the *asuras* had inverted cosmic order. While this mythology applies on many levels, in essence it may be read as a statement of phenomenological dissolution, entropy and subsequent reconstitution and renewal, and secondly as delineating a charter for individual spiritual unfoldment and liberation. In this context, Murugan and the *Vel* represent the unification of the principles of Siva and Sakti, the Absolute force and its generative energies in perfect synchrony. Batu Caves, the main Malaysian centre at which Thaipusam is commemorated, became a site dedicated to the veneration of Murugan and the Murugan cultus after an influential Hindu had a vision which instructed him to offer worship to the deity in the Cave. The first Thaipusam at Batu Caves, based on the mythology and rituals observed at the major South Indian pilgrimage centre of Palani, was conducted in 1892. Batu Caves was subsequently developed into the largest pilgrimage centre for
Murugan within Malaysia, complete with shrines, asrama, statuary, interpretative centres, offices and commercial premises. The festival of Thaipusam, is enclosed within kingship rituals which commence with the departure of the king-deity, Murugan, from his permanent kovil-palace, the Sri Maha Mariamman temple in Kuala Lumpur, to his mountaintop palace at Batu Caves, where his symbol of authority, the Golden Vel, is installed within the main shrine of the Temple Cave. The major form of ritual worship throughout Thaipusam, the bearing of kavadis, is derived from the esoteric applications of two conjoined myths – the Idumban myth, and the mango/Palani myth – and not only emphasizes themes of asceticism, renunciation, self discipline, the generation of tapas (austerities), and the search for the Truth or inner fruits (pala) within, but also provides an approved, and indeed divinely sanctioned mode of worship. The kavadi ritual, including acts of bodily mortification, cuts across divisions of caste, sect, class, regional background, ethnicity and sex, to reach all segments of the Hindu population, as well as members of some other religious traditions.

The Indian population in Malaysia may be traced to two major streams of migration; those recruited to serve as a labour force within the colonial economy, and a minority of technical, professional and business migrants attracted by the economic opportunities offered in British Malaya. The main forms of labour recruitment consisted of indenture (discontinued after 1910), and the rather more influential kangany system, the latter producing a more variegated labour population consisting of the general spread of castes below the Brahman level. Skilled and professional migrants included an influential Chettiar merchant/money lending class, Jaffna Tamils, as well as Malayalees, North Indians, Sikhs and professional and artisan Tamils. The Indian population was characterized by a clear social and vocational chasm between the middle-upper class and the labour force, the former dedicated to maintaining their distance from the despised “coolies”. While the period of the Japanese occupation inflicted deplorable hardships upon the Indian workforce, the impact of the nationalist politics of Subhas Chandra Bose, the IIL and INA, produced a fleeting sense of Indian unity, a common membership of a great and enduring civilization, and propelled the Indian communities of Malaya and Singapore from the periphery of metropolitan politics to the forefront of the struggle against British colonialism. However this brittle unity did not long survive the Japanese surrender,
and Indian political organizations were compelled to adjust to the realities of a Malaya structured implacably along communal lines. The major Indian party, the Malayan Indian Congress, was required to divest itself of its program of inclusive nationalism in order to accord with the conservative ideologies of its Alliance partners. Since Merdeka, Indian political, social and economic weaknesses have been repeatedly exposed, especially in the period following the implementation of post 1969 economic, educational and cultural policies designed to increase social and economic opportunities for Malays. In recent years the position of the Indian labouring community as a marginalized and oppressed underclass has become entrenched, and the “plantation culture” of poverty, underachievement and social stasis has been transferred and reproduced within Malaysian towns and cities. The social divisions between middle-upper class and working Indians established by the conditions of colonial labour and non-labour migration remains as fixed and potent in contemporary Malaysia as they were in pre-War Malaya.

Since 1969 Malaysia has been dominated by Malay-Muslim powerbrokers which have refused to tolerate any challenge to its hegemony or to the major assumptions which underpin its modernist and nationalist project. This has been accompanied by a process of Islamization which has effectively reinforced ethnic boundaries by emphasizing the essential Malay-Muslim/non-Malay-non-Muslim dichotomy which divides Malaysian society. The rise of a sharply contested Islam, and the challenge of an aggressive evangelical Christianity has resulted in a renewal in all other religious traditions. Malaysia remains a nation fragmented by multiple sites of particularistic resistance that exist below the level of nationalist discourse.

The study of Thaipusam and the kavadi ritual throughout various locations both within metropolitan India and number of Tamil diaspora societies revealed common patterns of worship. These included the following essential elements:

(i) A chariot procession in which the utsavar murthi of the deity is ceremonially paraded before the population which recognizes his regal-divine authority,

(ii) Various forms of kavadi worship, involving vow taking, a period of asceticism, trance states or altered states of consciousness, often including acts of bodily mortification. Kavadi worship was found throughout various castes and jatis, and
included at least one instance in metropolitan India of Brahmanic bodily mortification,

(iii) Formal recognition of the asura/devotee Idumban. This is incorporated into Thaipusam and related festivals in various ways; firstly, through the act of bearing a kavadi, secondly by performing the kavadi dance, thus emulating the laboured movements of the asura as he bore the twin hills to South India; thirdly, in ritual worship acknowledging his role as gatekeeper, and finally (often) in a formal puja releasing devotees from their vow of asceticism and returning them to the folds of quotidian society, and

(iv) Other forms of ritual service, most frequently involving manning a thaneer panthal, or participating in an annathanam (mass feeding).

This comparative study situates Thaipusam at Batu Caves in a broader cultural framework, and clearly demonstrates that the festival as conducted in Malaysia contains typical and normative elements which are readily found within Murugan festivals both in Tamil Nadu and in diaspora locations. Inter alia, this comparative study undermines the social deprivation theory advanced by some scholars in connection with Thaipusam at Batu Caves; that is, that the ritual behaviours of participants are an internalised mimesis of or a cathartic social protest against the conditions of their marginalisation and oppression. The comparative study also lays to rest the canard that Thaipusam as practiced at Batu Caves is banned in India.

The defining characteristics of Tamil society and Hinduism were shaped throughout the period of the great South Indian dynasties, the Pallava, Chola and Vijayanagara kingdoms which cumulatively ruled the Tamil country between circa sixth century C.E. and eighteenth century C.E. These were societies of astonishing diversity and movement embracing heterogeneity of peoples divided by ethnicity, region, language, caste and jati. The kings were obliged to respect and protect the social-political formations which collectively constituted his realm. These segmentary societies were held together by a ritual kingship whose rule took the form of an incorporative moral authority derived from the deity. This authority was both activated and reinforced by a flow of gifts and honours from and to the centre, which
transferred some of the king’s divine authority to the empire’s principal chiefs and leading authorities and bound them and the sovereign in ties of mutual obligation. The Vijayanagara kings also convened annual festivals of great splendour in which the monarchs and their empires were ritually reinfused with cosmic energies and the sovereign’s intimate relationship with the deity was emphasized.

Tamil Hinduism reflected the bewildering diversity which constituted South Indian society, collectively comprising a multitude of forms ranging from Brahmanic/Sanskritic philosophical Hinduism to countless indigenous and localized sects. High Sanskritic/Agamic culture was disseminated through the agency of the brahmadeyas, and later through institutions founded and maintained by members of the Vellala caste. Continual revision of Agamic Hinduism resulted in the incorporation and recognition of many local or indigenous deities who were identified with the high Sanskritic gods (including the folkish Murugan), as well as making provision for goddess (Amman) worship. However, the vast majority of Tamil Hindus continued to worship according to local or popular traditions.

The great Hindu revival towards the conclusion of the Pallava era produced new religious forms. One of these was bhakti Hinduism, which insisted upon the equality of souls before the deity, and which embraced a multitude of possibilities for access to the deity, including simple devotionalism, to forms of transgressive and “inferior” bhakti. Another was the influential philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta which emphasized the triangular relationship of Patti-pacu-paca. Both movements overlapped, not only with each other, but also with popular forms of Tamil Hinduism.

Tamil Hinduism was characterized by its anti-authoritarianism, its powerful assertion of the primacy and validity of the individual’s relationship with the deity, and by a logic of inner movement, which progressively directed the soul from the outer world of forms and oppositions to an inner centre where the primordial and transcendent deity might be realized.

Post-Mutiny British rule in India embraced new ideologies of governance informed by orientalist scholarship, especially of evolutionary anthropology, which propounded theories of the inherent socio-biological qualities bestowed by racial
origin. The British henceforth envisaged an India structured according to the clearly demarcated classifications of caste, religion and primary race. Many of these ideas were to gain currency among Indians themselves, especially the newly Westernised administrative and professional classes. British theories ultimately influenced three major “reform” movements in Tamil India, namely Neo-Hinduism, which sought to re-create an imagined pristine Sanskritic-Aryan Hinduism; Neo-Shaivism which aimed at reformulating an authentic Tamil Hinduism stripped of its supposed Brahmanic-Sanskritic accretions, and Dravidianism which looked to the re-establishment of an autochthonous and “pure” Tamil culture which had putatively existed prior to a supposed Aryan-Brahman “invasion” which had subjugated the Tamil country and imposed “alien” cultural forms. Dravidian ideologies ranged from the nihilistic atheistic radicalism of E.V. Ramasami’s iconoclastic Self-Respect Movement to more moderate Dravidianism of the DMK.

The deity Skanda-Murugan reflects and encompasses Tamil history, culture and religion. Over the centuries the deity absorbed an array of attributes and functions, including those which had their genesis in South Indian folk traditions, puranic mythology, Sanskritic philosophies and scriptural Hinduism. Throughout the Chola period the Sanskritic-Agamic Skanda became fused with the Tamil folk deity Murugan. His extensive range of roles and duties, incorporating high philosophical god, king, warrior, god of possession and healing, patron of Tamil language and literature, rogue deity who is both philanderer and patron of thieves, make him immediately accessible to all sectors of the variegated Tamil society. His marriages to the celestial Teyvayanai and the earthy Valli underscore the extraordinary range of cosmic potentialities which embrace orthodox forms of progressive and incremental spiritual unfoldment as well as the unconventional and convoluted schema of bhakti worship, a path which may rupture societal norms. In the contemporary Tamil milieu, which privileges Dravidian traditions and ideologies, Murugan is the Tamil god par excellence. His mythology emphasizes his intimate and continuing engagement with the Tamil heartland, while his chronometry provides a series of propitious moments for his direct and ritual worship.

The study of Tamil Hinduism reveals no distinctive or categorical demarcation between the boundaries of great tradition/Agamic Hinduism and systems of popular
belief, but rather indicates a continuum of overlapping, interlinked and porous religious forms which have historically informed and influenced each other. Overall, Tamil Saivite traditions posit a universe in constant flux and movement in which gods and humans constantly interact and the underlying organizing principle is based upon the dynamic tension of Siva-Sakti, and the constantly shifting relationship between these polarities. Tamil Hinduism promises a logic of inner direction which insists that whatever god is worshipped, in whatever form that god inheres, and whatever the modality of worship, the sincere devotee will be lead from the outer world – the periphery – to the inner unity with the primordial Transcendent.

Tamil Hinduism was reproduced within Malaya/Malaysia without two of the major features – a Brahman or dominant orthodox caste, or the maths or institutions of learning – which had influenced and shaped religious forms within metropolitan Tamil Nadu. The kangany system of recruitment, which provided a range of castes in Malaysian plantations and workplaces, was indirectly responsible for the introduction of an array of regional, localized and caste based forms of worship into Malaya. While many estate or workplace temples were dedicated to village or locality gods, middle level castes established temples for the worship of Agamic deities such as Mahamariamman/Parvati, Siva, Murugan, Ganesha, Vishnu and Krishna. However the full tradition of Agamic worship was introduced to Malaya by the Chettiar caste and by Jaffna Tamils. Both groups founded temples constructed, dedicated, managed and maintained according to Agamic rites. These temples also commemorated an appropriate round of calendrical rituals and festivals congruent with Agamic prescriptions and injunctions. Many middle-upper class Indians maintained their distance from Hinduism, eschewing open allegiance to a religion which might publicly proclaim their common ethnicity with working class Hindus. This changed throughout the Japanese occupation when the politics of Indian nationalism emphasized inclusive membership of an ancient, great and philosophically rich society. In the years following the war, there was a pronounced Hindu revival, and a renewed middle class interest in Tamil arts and culture as well as philosophical Hinduism, especially Saiva Siddhanta. Although Hindu reform movements in Malaya/Malaysia echoed many of the sentiments of those bodies active in the Tamil heartland, these were overshadowed by processes of far-reaching syncretism, Agamicization/Sanskritization, the fusing of Saivite and Vaishnavite
motifs, and the Tamilization of Hindu forms – which continue to reconfigure the Malaysian Hindu landscape. While the impact of caste and caste organization in Malaysia has generally weakened, many caste specific deities have retained their potency, although syncretism has linked them and sometimes coalesced their identities with one or another of the great Agamic deities.

The current Hindu renewal in Malaysia has probably been immeasurably stimulated by three basic factors. The first is the charged ethnic-religious discourses which shape Malaysian politics and culture, and in particular the pressures exerted by Malay-Islamic dominance. As we have noted, this has resulted in a revitalization of all religious traditions. The second is the aggressive challenge mounted by evangelical movements, and their avowed, scarcely veiled contempt for Hindu culture and traditions. The third is the powerful influence of Dravidian ideologies which emphasize the genius and singularity of Tamil culture, and which not only continue to resonate within the Tamil heartland but which have percolated to all sections of the Tamil diaspora. (1) Religion is an increasingly potent force among Malaysia’s Hindus. This has been evidenced by escalating participation in ritual worship especially in major festivals, and in temple refurbishment and construction. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the worship of the Tamil deity Murugan which finds it most powerful public expression in the festival of Thaipusam.

The kavadi ritual at Thaipusam constitutes a pilgrimage, a tirtha yatra or divine crossing, which in metaphysical terms moves from the periphery, the world of forms, to the axis mundi, the centre, where a normally transcendent deity is both immanent and accessible. The pilgrimage site itself is ordered and patterned, and exists in an oasis of timelessness beyond the confusion and disorder of the kaliyuga. Batu Caves forms such a pilgrimage site within the Malaysian context.

A devotee who undertakes a pilgrimage often does so in response to a discernible condition which requires rectification or alleviation. In esoteric terms this is seen as a modification of his/her uniquely coded body substance, a ritual which will activate the karman complex and thus alter the semi-permanent kunam complex, thus shifting the devotee into a fresh state of awareness offering greater equipoise and control. The process of pilgrimage involves the votary taking a vow to a given deity which is
followed by prescribed rites of asceticism which allows the devotee to attain the requisite state of inner purity necessary for an encounter with the deity. During the period of fasting, the aspirant perceives of himself/herself, temporarily at least, as a sannyasin, a renunciate, a revered archetype in the Hindu worldview. Throughout the pilgrimage the inner qualities or gunas are roused, resulting in the votary progressing from a state of tamas characterized by inertia and resistance, through a rajasik phase (typified by movement and energy), to the phase of sattva, where the sadhaka (aspirant) experiences intense perceptions. Sattva normally replaces rajas when the pain of the pilgrimage is overcome by love. Within the context of Thaipusam tamas is superseded by rajas throughout the period of fasting, while sattva is experienced at onset of the trance state (arul) and the fitting of the kavadis, which clearly and publicly reveals the conquest over pain.

Trance states may take an number of forms, but at Thaipusam only one trance is sought or desired, that of arul, a state of grace in which the devotee is “mounted” by the deity. However, arul may manifest in many ways, ranging from, full-scale possession to inspirational trance states where the deity invests the consciousness of the votary. It is throughout this period of trance that the devotee receives noetic messages, which impart knowledge of the deity. Often these messages permanently alter his/her worldview.

In bearing a kavadi, the votary embarks upon a tirtha yatra, a metaphysical journey that encompasses the entire generic cosmological history of the deity Murugan. This commences with the violence of his creation and the bestowal of the Vel, and continues with the conversion of Idumban, the defeat of the asuras, the isolation and destruction of Surapadman, the deity’s full stabilization, and his marriages to his consorts. The homologization of the body to the cosmos ensures that this divine crossing is replicated within the devotee, representing the unleashing of the kundalini of spiritual force and its rise through the cakras to the human crown, the seat of full illumination. The outer-inner dichotomy collapses when the votary enters the Temple Cave and is presented to the deity, and the world of paradoxes and oppositions is temporarily replaced by awareness of the immanent deity. On the third day after Thaipusam the pilgrim attends an Idumban puja in which he/she is released from his/her vows and returned to quotidian life. But the devotee brings to this mundane
realm a new sense of control and fresh forms of knowledge, the fruits (pala) of the encounter with the deity.

Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has observed that “Myths come alive in the context of history, ritual or philosophy and the social law. Hidden somewhere in the maze is the key to the Hindu worldview, startling, fascinating and complex.”(2) This comment is most certainly applicable to the festival of Thaipusam which operates upon lines of significance which provide layers of meaning to individuals and groups, and which speaks to many different audiences.

We have seen that the festival commemorates the bestowal of the Sakti Vel upon the deity Murugan. The worship of Murugan throughout the festival dramatizes and re-enacts the entire cosmology of the deity which is offered to the devotees on a variety of levels, ranging from the noetic knowledge imparted to entranced individuals, to generalised acknowledgment of Murugan as powerful king-deity.

But the worship of Murugan cannot be neatly extricated from the cultural context in which he is fully implicated. Thaipusam in Malaysia comprises nothing less than a public celebration of Malaysian Hinduism which reproduces condensed codes of Tamil history and culture, as well as displaying an extensive repertoire of philosophies and belief structures. This celebration may be seen in acts as diverse as the kingship ritual which re-establishes the monarch-deity’s sovereignty over his domain, and transforms the mundane into the Divine with the infusion of his cosmic energy,(3) and the period of asceticism/fasting in which devotees are temporarily converted to the socially approved state of sannyasin.

But I would suggest that the most profound cultural statement offered by Thaipusam is the open commitment, admittedly often grudging and conditional, to the diversity of religious traditions evinced within the festival. These range from Sanskritic-Agamic modes through a number of variants influenced to differing extents by Saiva Siddhanta, to village Hinduism and examples of transgressive worship. All, however, are permeated with the ethos of bhakti devotionalism, covering a gamut of forms from classical bhakti to more dramatic expressions of worship. I have shown that Tamil Hinduism insists upon the equality of the soul before the deity, and the
autonomy and validity of devotional worship, even when this is conveyed in idiosyncratic forms. According to this perspective while there may be socially approved models of kavadi worship, there can be no one verifiably “correct” way of performing the ritual, and the devotee who offers worship, however singular, with a pure heart, will be subject to the same inner directional force, and will ultimately reach the same destination as the votary who strictly adheres to Agamic precepts.

The insistence on Thaipusam as a heterogenous and even conflicting medley of ideals, motivations and religious forms, co-existing within the broad paradigms established by the rituals of Murugan worship, constitutes a vigorous assertion of the segmentary traditions set by Tamil history, religious ideals and beliefs, as well as categorically signalling their continuing relevance in contemporary Malaysia. The festival thus sends a number of clear statements not only to devotees and the general Hindu community, but also to a series of external groups.

Firstly, it offers a firm rebuke to Hindu reformers, those who condemn the festival, express scepticism about the motivations and dispositions of its practitioners and deny the validity of their spiritual experiences. By exhibiting the continuing strength and power of Malaysian Hinduism in all its forms, Thaipusam issues a categorical rejection of the demands of those who would “disenchant” Hinduism by disavowing its rich collocations of rituals, gods and cosmologies in favour of a monochromatic world of textual or hermeneutic religion.

Secondly, Thaipusam disseminates agonistic signals to non-Hindus. The huge crowds, the public chariot procession, the elaborate organization, the extensive publicity, the full societal involvement, all speak of the determination of Malaysian Hindus to retain their cultural and religious traditions as a living force, while asceticism, trance states, kavadis and bodily mortification clearly demonstrate the disciplines and inner strength required by the devotees of a powerful and miraculous god who will protect his votaries from pain even while bestowing his blessings.

Finally, Thaipusam speaks to the Tamil/Hindu heartland. It makes a clear statement about a proud, shared and continuing heritage, common membership of the great, rich and enduring civilization which not only includes metropolitan India, but the
wider diaspora. This broad message also incorporates an agonistic sub-text. It states to Malays and Chinese that just as they have sought religious forms and inspiration from external civilizational impulses, and just as they claim allegiance to a wider religious community, so too do Hindus owe their genius to a broader cultural canvas, a religion which has moved from its metropolitan origins to become truly global.

Thaipusam rapidly emerged as the most popular and widely observed Hindu festival in the years following the commencement of Indian migration to Malaya. It has survived several challenges; most notably the attempts of the Tamil Reform Association and the Malaysian Hindu Sangam to either ban the festival or restrict the permitted modes of worship. The continuing relevance of Thaipusam to Malaysian Hindus is beyond question. This is clearly demonstrated by the annually increasing crowds who attend the festival, and the expansion in the number of devotees who bear kavadis. Thaipusam remains the largest and most consistent expression of Hindu identity in Malaysia. While worship coalesces around that quintessentially Tamil deity, Murugan, the festival provides a stable forum for the public articulation of the concatenation of religious forms and belief structures which collectively comprise Malaysian Hinduism, and provides public space for the contributions made by both high and low status groups. Thaipusam has over the years developed its own paradigmatic impulses which have stimulated the evolution, expression, aggregation and negotiation of the Hindu presence and identity in Malaysia. Given the centrality of Thaipusam to Malaysian Hinduism it is not unreasonable to suggest that this process will continue.

NOTES
(1) While compiling this thesis I had several interesting exchanges with Tamils resident on the small island of Reunion. I was informed that the Tamil renewal, centring on Murugan worship, Thaipusam and the Tamil language, arts and literature, was reshaping Tamil society within the island.


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