

## *The Tradition of Hindu Firewalking in Natal*

Every Good Friday in Pietermaritzburg thousands of members of the Hindu community, and other interested onlookers, gather to watch a strange ceremony that has been practised for centuries in India, and faithfully followed in this South African city since the beginning of this century. This is the firewalking festival, in which over one hundred devotees of the Goddess Draupadi walk barefoot across a 7–8 metre pit of red-hot embers. As this takes place in a so-called Indian area, most other people who live in the city are largely unaware of the yearly occurrence of this ancient and colourful festival.

Annual firewalking ceremonies are held at four traditional Hindu temples in Natal: the 'Marriamen' Temple next to the Stri Siva Soobramoniar Temple in lower Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg; two temples in Durban, the Umbilo Shree Draupadiamman Alayam in the grounds of the Umbilo 'Second River' Temple in Bellair Road, Cato Manor, and the Mariamman Temple in the grounds of the Shree Murugar Alayam in Jacobs Road, Clairwood; and the Glencoe Hindu Temple in northern Natal. (I have recently been informed that in the last three or four years three new temples in Chatsworth, Durban, have started practising firewalking.)

At the three southern Natal temples the festival is held between the end of March and the end of May, while at Glencoe it is held during July/August, which is the Tamil month of Adi especially dedicated to the goddess. This corresponds with the custom in India of holding firewalking festivals between the months of March and August.

Firewalking was brought to Natal last century (from 1860 onwards) by Tamil-speaking Hindus from the Madras area of South India, whose ancestors had practised this as part of their village goddess tradition. An article in *The Natal Witness* of 14 April 1927, not long after the Pietermaritzburg 'Marriamen' temple was officially opened in 1925, reported that 'as usual' the annual firewalking ceremony would take place on Good Friday, and claimed that this ceremony had been observed for the last thirty years in Pietermaritzburg. (However, some people recall that for a number of years the holding of the festival was not observed in Pietermaritzburg, and that it was revived again at Easter 1926, since which time it has been held every year.)

This firewalking festival appears to be confined to Natal, as I am informed that no other Hindu communities in South Africa practise it. Today the ceremony is no longer confined to Tamil circles, but has a wider appeal.

The firewalking ceremony as practised in Natal is held in honour of the

Goddess Draupadi, one of the many goddesses worshipped by Hindus, who believe that both female and male deities are necessary to sustain the universe. The goddess is the great Earth Mother who is the active power of existence, animating the entire natural world, and can thus be worshipped as the Supreme Power of the universe. Although it is believed that she is basically One, she manifests herself in a great variety of forms: as Uma, Parvati, Lakshmi and others, she is gentle and benign, whereas in forms such as Kali, Durga, Mariamman and Draupadi she is fierce and at times malevolent. Thus the various goddesses represent the life-giving, preserving forces of nature as well as the destructive forces of disease, famine, decay and death, all of which are recognized as essential for continuity and new life. Worshipers can approach the goddess with loving devotion, but there is also a need to propitiate her. Thus, various propitiatory rituals such as firewalking are practised in order to maintain or restore the health and wellbeing of individuals and the community.

Draupadi is usually one of the goddesses housed in Mariamman temples, which are numerous and very popular in Natal (the word 'amma/amman' means 'mother' — Mariamman and Draupadi are village goddesses of South India, who have become identified with the goddesses of the Shiva tradition). The tradition about the Goddess Draupadi, recorded in the great epic, the Mahabharata, is that she was born from the sacrificial fire prepared by her father, King Drupada, and was an incarnation of the Goddess Sri, or Lakshmi. As the heroine of the epic, she was the faithful wife of the five Pandava brothers, and many Hindus regard her as the model of duty, love and devotion, who bore various severe trials and defilements with fortitude and patience, thus helping to deliver her family. Although there is no episode in the Sanskrit Mahabharata in which Draupadi walks through fire, through a complicated process of intermingling various mythologies, South Indians have come to accept several stories which tell of Draupadi walking on fire, either to confirm her chastity or to purify herself from a number of attempts to defile her. These stories also emphasize many incidents associating Draupadi with fire, which have earned her the title Goddess, or Mother, of Fire. (6: 436)

It is interesting that in the other great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, the heroine Sita, wife of Rama, who is also regarded as an incarnation of Lakshmi, appealed to the fire god, Agni, to bear witness to her wifely fidelity by protecting her as she threw herself onto the fire. She emerged unscathed, protected by her purity.

One of the Indian names for the firewalking ritual is 'Pookulithal' which means 'walking on a bed of flowers', presumably because of the belief that Draupadi cools the coals for her devotees, making them like flowers. (9: 75; 10: 50) Most local Hindus appear to be more familiar with the name 'Theemeri', which they say means 'firewalk'.

The decision to participate in the firewalking ceremony is closely associated with the taking of vows (vrata), which plays an important part in all traditional Hindu worship. Individuals can take vows on their own or another person's behalf, promising that if illness or misfortune is averted or overcome, or success achieved in some enterprise, they or the person for whom the vow was taken, will walk across the fire for a specified number of times. This is usually for one, three, five, seven years, or for life. (Hindus tend to regard uneven numbers as being auspicious.) Dire consequences are believed to follow the breaking of such a vow. (7: 119–220; 12: 99)

Two other characteristics of the firewalking ceremony, which it shares with



Devotee in a trance. His face is adorned with pins and two skewers through his cheeks; his body is smeared with ash and limes and marigold chains dangle from hooks through his flesh.

*(Photograph: Author's collection)*

some other traditional Hindu festivals (such as Kavady), are 'the trance' where certain devotees believe themselves to have become possessed or overshadowed by a particular deity who bestows extraordinary powers on them; and the piercing of the body with skewers and hooks in order to show devotion to the God/ess. When they are in a trance, devotees can often have needles and hooks pierced through their flesh without bleeding, walk or even dance on nailed shoes without any pain, or walk through the fire without being burnt. People in trances are also believed to have the power to act as oracles and healers. However, it is not necessary to be in a trance in order to walk through the fire. (7: 217–227)

The preparation period before the actual firewalking day is traditionally eighteen days, which is a reminder of the length of the great battle narrated in the Mahabharata. At the Cato Manor temple this drama is performed in dance during the final night of preparation. Jacobs Road temple appears to be the only temple which still observes the full eighteen days, with Pietermaritzburg and

Second River keeping only a ten day period. During this preparation, devotees who intend to walk across the fire refrain from eating meat and drinking alcohol, and observe sexual abstinence, thus attaining a state of ritual purity. They will also probably attend all the evening activities at the temple. On the last night of the preparation, many devotees spend the whole night in the temple. The belief is that the virtue and purity (*tapas*) gained through these and other austerities allow them to walk unharmed through the fire.

The first night of preparation involves the flag-hoisting ceremony, when the flag to the Goddess, bearing her vehicle, the lion, is hoisted on the *kodi* pole outside the temple, where it remains until the completion of the festival.

Thousands of people are attracted to all the festivals, with Pietermaritzburg's being the largest. In Pietermaritzburg on Good Friday the proceedings start early. The street outside the temple is closed to traffic, and many Indian organizations set up bazaar stalls, selling food, books and puja (prayer) items, so that a carnival-like atmosphere prevails, with loud music played over a public address system. By about 11.30 a.m. crowds of devotees are circum-ambulating the temple with small trays containing offerings of fruit, milk and camphor. The images of various goddesses are placed outside the temple so that people can present their offerings to them. Later Draupadi is placed at the end of the fire pit, under an umbrella, so that she faces those who walk across the fire.

At about twelve noon the priest and his attendants perform a blessing, in the fire pit, of those who intend participating. After this a small pyre of wood is constructed in the middle of the fire pit and this is lit from the fire on the priest's tray. Wood is then piled on to make a larger and larger pyre, with flames leaping metres into the air.

Traditionally a procession then makes its way to a nearby river where the necessary ritual washing can be performed by the participants. At most temples there are no rivers close enough to allow this, so buckets of water are provided at an open space some distance from the temples. In Pietermaritzburg, however, the *Dorp Spruit* is conveniently situated several blocks from the temple, so this is where the participants with their various support groups go to prepare themselves for their act of worship.

Soon after the completion of the purifications the drums begin to beat and many of the participants begin showing signs of going into trances, often dancing and swaying back and forth, and sometimes painting their faces with turmeric or pink *kum-kum* (vermilion).

Family members and friends then often pin hooks, from which limes, coconuts or flowers are suspended, across men's chests and backs. Some devotees have skewers pierced through their tongues and cheeks. On occasions men dance on sandals with soles of nails. Many people crowd round those in trances, requesting to be blessed, usually by having a dot of ash or *kum-kum* placed on their foreheads.

Another feature of this festival is the constructing of 'goron gons' (also spelt 'karagam'). A 'goron gon' is believed to be a manifestation of the goddess, and is made up of a clay or brass pot filled with sanctified water, with a conical bamboo frame constructed over this, covered with marigolds, and vines, with a lime placed on the top. Sometimes it also has a clay face just above the vase. These are carefully put together by groups of worshippers during the preparation period, and some devotees carry these, often very heavy, tall structures, on their heads.

Finally, a large, colourful procession is formed which makes its way along



The head of the procession on its way to the temple. Some people hold rope whips above their heads while others carry 'goron gons'.

*(Photograph: Author's collection)*

the route to the temple, accompanied by crowds of supporters and onlookers, with considerable noise from drums, cymbals, and loud chanting. At various points along the road the procession is halted by people, mostly women, placing burning camphor across its path, and requesting blessings from the participants. The atmosphere is highly charged with excitement and intense religious fervour.

The procession often only arrives at the gates of the 'Marriamen' Temple at dusk. By this time the grounds are packed to capacity with thousands of people who have waited patiently for many hours in order to get as close a view as possible of the fire pit.

In recent years, upwards of 130 people have walked across the fire in Pietermaritzburg. (For some years the Maritzburg temple committee has not allowed any women to walk.) At the Durban temples the numbers are about half this, and include some adolescent boys and a number of women. A few men carry young children in their arms. Once the first person has run across the fire, the others follow in quick succession, so that it takes only about twenty minutes for such a large number of people to walk.

In general, it takes about seven to eight steps to run across the fire-pit. At each end of the pit there is a trough, filled with water, with milk and turmeric powder added, through which the participants walk as they enter and leave the pit. Different devotees react differently. Most run across as quickly as possible, with their feet sinking into the intensely hot ash. But others walk slowly, palms of hands pressed together in an attitude of meditation. For many it appears to be a considerable ordeal, not easily accomplished, and some on arriving at the other side appear on the verge of collapse, as they prostrate themselves before



A woman devotee walks across the fire.

*(Photograph: Author's collection)*

the Goddess. They get tremendous verbal and physical support and encouragement from the crowd.

After it is all over, numbers of devotees use empty milk cartons to scoop up some of the still hot ash to take home, as ash is believed to be very holy and powerfully curative. (14: 175)

I have spoken to a number of participants, and I include summaries of what three of them have told me about their involvement in firewalking:

#### ***Interview A***

A man and his wife were spoken to at the river not long before the actual firewalking began. This was his tenth time of walking the fire, although he had not done so the previous year, because his wife's mother died shortly before

the ceremony. He started walking years ago when he went to visit his future wife, and saw her niece, who was an infant with a disability which prevented her from walking and talking. She had been taken to many doctors who were apparently unable to help. He felt so sad for her that he said, 'I'm going to take this child across the fire with me'. Within days of this resolve, the child appeared to improve, and he believed this was a message that God had heard him. So, since then, he has walked across the fire; on the first two occasions holding the child, and she continued to improve, although he said she still cannot talk. He still walks for her every year that he can. He said that he does not get a trance at all. He has never had one, and said if he did he would accept it, but he does not especially want a trance. He claimed that too many people are jealous of those who do get trances, and they try to 'bind them'. Sometimes when this happens, the people who are 'bound' start ailing, and finally get very sick, and even die. He said that he only becomes aware of the heat of the fire when he gets about halfway across the pit, and then he knows that it is very hot, but he has never been burnt.

### ***Interview B***

This man, in his thirties, has not taken a lifetime vow, but has decided to walk every year that he is able. However, he has not walked for the last two years, as he has not felt himself to be sufficiently prepared. He claims that he gets a 'Perumal trance' (another name for the God Vishnu). He says that he goes in and out of trances all day on the day of the firewalking. He is in a trance before and during the time of the inserting of skewers and hooks, but he claims that people usually come out of the trance before walking through the fire. 'You have to be in your "normal mind" when you walk; you must know what you are doing; but you go back into the trance as soon as you have crossed the pit.' He admits that he is frightened just before he walks. Many people back off, and need lots of encouragement. He says he is aware of the heat on his feet, but says that most people do not burn or get blisters. However, later that same night his feet feel very hot. 'If you have faith, the Mother protects you.' Some years ago, he claims, the first nine people who walked got burnt, and he, too, got badly burnt one year. This was because something had 'gone wrong' during their preparation period and 'Mother teaches you a lesson'. He suggested that they had eaten the wrong food, or done something wrong.

### ***Interview C***

A conversation with one of the three white men who had just participated in the walking at the Second River Temple elicited the information that he is a businessman, and that this was his third time of walking. He showed his feet, which were completely unmarked in any way from the fire. He admitted that this year he had not participated fully in the preparation period. He had only prepared formally for the last three days. But he pointed out that the requirements are no alcohol, no meat and no sexual activity, and that as he never drinks alcohol and is a vegetarian, all he had to observe was sexual abstinence. He said he has never taken a vow, but decided to walk because he wanted the spiritual discipline of concentrating on the mother principle in the universe. He explained that the Creator as male represents thought, while the mother is action or energy: the life-force or vitality in all creation (Mother Nature, he said). He sees the discipline of preparing for the firewalk as burning out the impure aspects in his life. He said he is aware of the intense heat of the

fire, but feels no pain. However, immediately afterwards, and for some days, he can feel the heat through his whole body. He would not speculate on whether he would participate again; it would depend on how he feels.

There is most interesting evidence of firewalking in India in the 18th and 19th centuries recorded by J.G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, where his description of a ceremony in the Madras area records details almost exactly the same as those observed in Natal in present times. Referring specifically to firewalking, he writes:

Ceremonies of this sort used to be observed in most districts of the Madras Presidency, sometimes in discharge of vows made in time of sickness or distress, sometimes periodically in honour of a deity. Where the ceremony was observed periodically, it generally occurred in March or June, which are the months of the vernal equinox and the summer solstice respectively . . . In 1854 the Madras Government instituted an enquiry into the custom, but found that it was not attended by any danger or instances of injury sufficient to call for government interference.

The French traveller Sonnerat has described how, in the eighteenth century, the Hindoos celebrated a fire-festival of this sort in honour of the god Darma Rajah [better known as Yudhishtira, one of Draupadi's husbands] and his wife Drobede (Draupadi). The festival lasted eighteen days, during which all who had vowed to take part in it were bound to fast, to practise continence, to sleep on the ground without a mat, and to walk on a furnace. On the eighteenth day the images of Darma Rajah and his spouse were carried in procession to the furnace, and the performers followed dancing, their heads crowned with flowers and their bodies smeared with saffron. The furnace consisted of a trench about forty feet long, filled with hot embers. When the images had been carried thrice round it, the worshippers walked over the embers, faster or slower, according to the degree of their religious fervour, some carrying their children in their arms, others brandishing spears, swords, and standards. This part of the ceremony being over, the bystanders hastened to rub their foreheads with ashes from the furnace, and to beg from the performers the flowers which they had worn in their hair; and such as obtained them preserved the flowers carefully. The rite was performed in honour of the goddess Drobede (Draupadi), the heroine of the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata . . . In some villages the ceremony is performed annually; in others, which cannot afford the expense every year, it is observed at longer intervals . . . or only in special emergencies, such as the outbreak of smallpox, cholera, or plague. Anybody but a pariah . . . may take part in the ceremony in fulfilment of a vow. For example, if a man suffers from some chronic malady, he may vow to Draupadi that, should he be healed of his disease, he will walk over the fire at her festival. As a preparation for the solemnity he sleeps in the temple and observes a fast. The celebration of the rite in any village is believed to protect the cattle and the crops and to guard the inhabitants from dangers of all kinds. When it is over, many people carry home the holy ashes of the fire as a talisman which will drive away devils and demons. (4: 6-8)

There are many records of the practice in present day India and Sri Lanka. (1: 254; 5: 193-98)

My observation is that it would appear from the increasing numbers of

people who attend and participate in the firewalking and other similar festivals that they are growing in popularity rather than diminishing, in spite of various recent predictions that this type of ritualistic Hinduism is on the decline. This is confirmed by G. Buijs in her study of the worship of Mariamman in Natal in 1980:

While in some overseas Indian communities there has been a noticeable trend away from 'folk worship' to more universalistic definitions of Hinduism, which focus on the main Hindu Gods, in Natal an emphasis remains amongst a proportion of South Indians on the worship of the gods of so-called 'village Hinduism'. (2: 1)

Possibly the comparative isolation imposed on the Hindu communities by apartheid policy has helped to preserve such traditional, ritualistic ceremonies, free from any interference by disapproving or missionizing whites. And, in turn, these festivals, with their vows, religious fervour and excitement, the meaning of which is often only understood by the participants, have helped to invigorate and strengthen these minority communities. (7: 215) Certainly the village tradition of ritual folk worship, brought from South India to Natal by the earliest Hindu settlers, has been very carefully preserved from generation to generation, and appears at present to be enjoying something of a revival.

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