

CHARIOTS OF FINESSE

Meet a master craftsman who has been making beautiful, elaborate *kavadi* – an integral part of the Thaipusam festival – for over 50 years.

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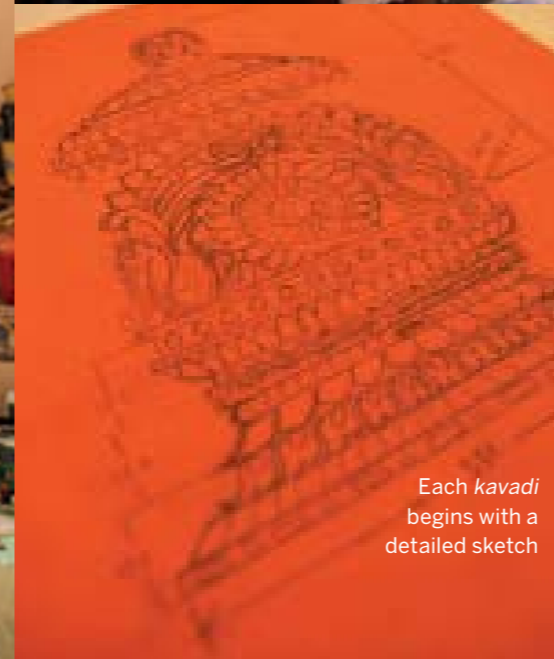
Radhakrishnan is known for his highly intricate, vibrantly-painted *kavadis*, some of which stand several metres tall



Polystyrene allows for better creativity and flexibility



Nearly every part of the massive structures are done by hand



Each *kavadi* begins with a detailed sketch

Radhakrishnan Munniappan is silent, his brows furrowed together in deep concentration as one hand rotates a polystyrene block while the other deftly slices and shaves it to the desired shape. There is no hesitation in his movements and to the casual observer, it's as if the artisan's hands, slightly wrinkled with age, are being divinely guided. Less than five minutes later he stops and examines the finished work before him. It's a smooth lotus bud-shaped dome that will decorate the roof of a chariot, a type of *kavadi* used by Hindu devotees of Lord Murugan during Thaipusam.

At 72, Radhakrishnan is one of the oldest *kavadi* makers in Ipoh, about two hours' drive from KL, and he is said to be the pioneer in making *kavadi* out of polystyrene. He's lost count of the number of *kavadis* he's crafted in the last 54 years. He is particular about his clients ("I won't make *kavadis* for rowdy types") and only makes about three *kavadis* for Thaipusam every year.

Kavadis vary in size and shape—from two semi-circular pieces of wood or steel that are bent and attached to a cross structure that is balanced on the shoulders, to more elaborate chariots embellished with

"It's not like cutting a potato"

Radhakrishnan Munniappan

peacock feathers and decorative lights. Radhakrishnan specialises in the latter, and his creations are highly sought-after, particularly for their intricate designs, colour and sheer 'wow' factor. Inspired by the architecture of Hindu temples, Radhakrishnan believes that the skill he wields is a gift from God. Patience is also a key virtue. "It's not like cutting a potato," he quips.

When he started making *kavadis* at the age of 18, the primary material was plywood, which is still the material of choice in most parts of Malaysia. "When I was working at Telekom Malaysia, I used to see blocks of polystyrene lying about which were used to pack machinery, so I took some home and started experimenting with them," he says. Over the years, with the use of just a boxcutter, he's created very elaborate *kavadis*—some towering as high as 6.7m. Polystyrene, he says, permits him to be more creative with the designs, allowing him to create embossed panels, columns with grooved striations and multi-faceted tiered domes.

Over the years, Radhakrishnan's mastery of *kavadi* making has inspired the young to take up the craft. His 30-year-old nephew Sivabalan Doraisamy is already creating impressive *kavadi* together with fellow artisans Karthigesu Alagarsamy and Sharma Raju. And so in this way, the art of *kavadi* making is passed on to a new generation of craftsmen. ■

Thaipusam (this 27 Jan) is a Hindu festival celebrated mostly by the Tamil community, on the full moon in the Tamil month of Thai (usually Jan or Feb). Thaipusam commemorates the occasion when the Goddess Parvati gave Lord Murugan a spear to vanquish an evil demon. Part of the ceremonial worship of Lord Murugan is the carrying of *kavadi*. Generally, devotees would have taken a vow to carry the *kavadi* to give thanks for prayers answered and to ask the gods for help. In Malaysia, Thaipusam is celebrated on a grand scale at Batu Caves near KL, and in Ipoh and Penang.



Peacock feathers are popularly used to embellish *kavadis*