

The Thimithi and Navarathiri Festivals in Singapore

By Dinesh Sathisan

An article by L Elizabeth Lewis entitled 'The Fire-Walking Hindus of Singapore' was published in a 1931 *National Geographic* magazine. Lewis, an Englishwoman, had the opportunity to witness the festival here. She described what she saw as a 'weird religious ceremony' and after watching the ritual sacrifice of a goat, (something no longer practised in Singapore) she became 'desperately ill'.

Thimithi (*thi*-fire, *mithi*-to step) honours the goddess Draupadi (Statues of Draupadi can be seen at the Asian Civilisation Museum's South Asia Gallery, as well as at the Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road.) Draupadi is a character from the epic *Mahabharata* and has been deified by Hindus in South India as Draupadi Amman (Amman means 'Mother Goddess'). In the epic, polyandrist Draupadi is the wife of the five Pandava brothers who lose everything, including Draupadi, in a gambling game to their cousin, Duryodhana. In order to further embarrass the Pandava brothers, Duryodhana orders his brother Dushasana to remove Draupadi's clothes in front of the royal court. She shouts for the god Krishna to save her honour. Krishna appears and blesses her with endless lengths of cloth. Draupadi then pledges to prove her chastity and honour by walking barefoot on hot coals and vows that she will comb her undone hair only after smearing Duryodhana's blood on it. Draupadi walks on fire, emerging unscathed, thus proving her purity.

In Singapore, *Thimithi* has been practised since 1840. It is part of a larger ceremony that stretches over two and a half months, with *Thimithi* marking the zenith of the ceremony.

The event always takes place during the month of *Aipasi* in the Tamil calendar (October-November in the Gregorian calendar). During the *Thimithi* festival, members of the temple and devotees stage scenes from the *Mahabharata* as a way to re-enact the event. The celebrations begin at the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road in the early morning hours; a priest leads a grand procession to the Sri Mariamman Temple (about a four kilometre walk) where the actual firewalking takes place. A pit, about 2.7 metres in length, is dug the night before and kept burning hot with coal until the ritual takes place. At the end of the pit is a smaller pit filled with milk to soothe the feet of devotees who have walked on fire. The firewalking proper begins at 4:00 am, with the chief priest crossing the fire pit first, carrying a *karagam* (a decorated pot filled with sacred water or milk) on his head, followed by other devotees. If devotees are physically and spiritually pure, like Draupadi, they will emerge unharmed after walking on fire.

Devotees largely perform the *Thimithi* as an act of penance or to fulfil a vow. They maintain a pure vegetarian diet for up to a month before the ceremony and abstain from anything considered impure, including conjugal activities. Some devotees spend this time reading the *Mahabharata* or other religious texts to spiritually cleanse themselves.

This year, *Thimithi* takes place on Monday, 5 October, at the Sri Mariamman temple.

Navarathiri is a totally different Hindu festival from the *Thimithi*, although similar in the sense that it honours a goddess. *Navarathiri* (*Nava*-nine, *rathiri*-nights) honours



Devotee walking on coals



Devotee praying to Draupadi Amman



The Mother Goddess receives offerings of sweet food



A depiction of Mahishasuramardhini slaying the evil Mahishasura

the Mother Goddess Rajajajeshwari, who takes the forms of goddesses Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvathi, who respectively personify power, wealth and knowledge. The legend of *Navarathiri* recounts the tales of Mahishasura, an evil demon who can change from man to buffalo at will. Mahishasura obtained many boons from the God of Creation, Brahma. An especially significant boon prevented any man from destroying him. (Mahisha believed that no female human form was powerful enough to kill him.) Mahisha then became violent, wreaking havoc on heaven and earth, and no one could stop him. He even took Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma hostage. It was at this point that Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvathi, in order to save their husbands and redeem humanity, fought Mahisha independently, but failed. The goddesses then combined their powers and strengths to become one. Mahisha, to escape the Goddess, changed his form into a lion, a man, an elephant and finally a buffalo. After nine days and nine nights of fighting, the Goddess finally destroyed Mahisha on the 10th day by piercing his chest with her trident and then beheading him. This day is celebrated as *Vijayadashami* (meaning Day of Victory). The Goddess is therefore given the name Mahishasuramardhini, the one who destroyed Mahishasura.

In Singapore, as in other countries where *Navarathiri* is celebrated, the festival largely attracts female devotees. There is a belief that, like the goddesses who fought to redeem their husbands from the evil Mahisha, married female devotees who maintain austerity and abstinence, meditate, fast and perform prayers to Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvathi during these nine nights will accrue positive merit to benefit their husbands. Hindus also believe that by performing prayers during *Navarathiri*, one awakens subconscious energy and strength, leading to the liberation of the soul. The nine nights of celebration are split into

three segments; the first three days are dedicated to Durga, the next to Lakshmi and the last to Sarasvathi.

One interesting feature of *Navarathiri* is the display of idols of Hindu gods, goddesses, poets and mythological characters on a row of steps called the *Kolu Padi* (*Padi*-steps). Devotees visit temples and sing songs (*bhajans*) in honour of the Mother Goddess. At home, *Sarasvathi pooja* is celebrated on the final day of *Navarathiri*, with prayers made to the goddess of knowledge. Books, pencils, pens and musical instruments used by children are placed before a photo or idol of Sarasvathi, with the hope that she will bless these as well as the children with the gift of learning. The celebration ends in grand fashion on the 10th day, *Vijayadashami*, when a statue of the Mother Goddess is adorned with flowers and jewellery, placed on a chariot and paraded around the temple to mark the victory of the Goddess over Mahisha, representing the victory of good over evil.

Navarathiri festivities in Singapore take place from 19 to 27 September this year and can be experienced at several temples, including the Sri Veeramakaliamman temple on Serangoon Road and the Sri Mariamman Temple. *Vijayadashami* is celebrated on 28 September.

Dinesh Sathisan was the youngest docent to join Museum Volunteers in 2005 after successfully convincing the interview panel that despite being a busy university student, he had time to devote to the museum. He guides at the ACM and at the Peranakan Museum. Dinesh has a special interest in the arts of South and Southeast Asia and loves to research and write on the cultural significance and symbolism behind myths and motifs. He currently resides in Singapore.

Ian Selbie provided the Thimithi photos, the Hindu Endowment Board provided the Navarathiri photos