

A Litter-Free Thaipusam campaign shows that it is possible to effectively manage waste and rubbish, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

THE party at your house is in full swing and everyone is enjoying themselves. When the last guest finally leaves, you look around to see plates, some with leftover food, on every surface. The floor is a little sticky because someone has spilt a drink. The big clean-up begins and it's almost two hours before your place is finally liveable again.

Cheah Chee Chon, 46, vice-president of the Malaysian Plastics Manufacturers Association (MPMA), suggests that you expand the scenario and try to imagine what it's like at one of the largest events in the country, Thaipusam. Just think of how much cleaning up needs to be done in and around the temple area; a harrowing thought especially as there were close to three million visitors to Batu Caves in February this year.

To tackle the possible catastrophe of uncollected and unmanaged rubbish and waste, MPMA approached the management of the Sri Mahamariamman Temple which manages the temple at Batu Caves. The aim was to enter into a "public-private" partnership in a campaign called Litter Free Thaipusam 2015.

The whole process began six months earlier, in August 2014. Angela Foo, the 36-year-old general manager of Logomas Packaging Sdn Bhd, says: "My company and four others approached the MPMA. The association is the official voice for plastic industry here. We wanted to carry out a CSR programme. We wanted to change the people's mindset and ask them to practise proper waste disposal. You see, packaging serves a useful purpose as food can be served in a safe and hygienic manner. But when such packaging is not thrown away in a proper manner, it gives a negative image of such packaging. It's not the product that is bad. It is how we treat it after we've used it that's bad."

"It's a habit," says Cheah, a qualified engineer and father of two sets of twins. "People drink from plastic bottles or eat noodles from polystyrene packets. Then they throw them on the street. They don't bother to take the packaging home for disposal as somebody else will clean it all up later. Worse, when you throw food on the ground, it starts to stink. That is potential for environmental and health problems."

Both have a personal story to share about improper waste disposal which led them to change their ways. Angela's tale is, by far, the most



S. Linkeshwar, 6, who is Sri Umeshwaran Shekar's son, shows the proper way to throw rubbish.



(From left) Cheah, Foo and Umeshwaran are united in their desire to change mindsets.

dramatic. The mother of three young children recalls: "When I was 6, my family was going back to my mother's hometown in Kampar. I was always car-sick and would throw up. One day, my mother made me vomit into a plastic bag. She then tied it,

wound down the window and threw it out. It got stuck on a motorcyclist's helmet."

From that day on, lesson learnt, the family began to adopt proper habits for waste disposal.

To put the problems during

Thaipusam into perspective, Sri Umeshwaran Shekar, 33, an executive at MPMA, says: "The chariot goes through the city to the temple. Along the route, we will find a lot of waste such as organic rubbish, paper, tissue, plastic bottles and lunch boxes. In 2014, about 200 tonnes of waste were collected. This year, it was 280 tonnes because Thaipusam was over a long weekend and there were more visitors."

RT Sundaram, 53, a member of the temple management committee explains: "At the peak of Thaipusam, devotees and tourists have no room to move even a few steps away from where they are. It takes almost six hours to go up and down the steps at Batu Caves. How do you expect them to find a dustbin? As for waste management people, they are unable to move into the crowd to collect the rubbish. We can only do that when the crowd is thinner. This requires more manpower because, by the

CAMPAIGN MECHANICS

How did the campaign work? The five companies agreed to sponsor rubbish bins, poles, vests and an allowance for volunteers who signed up for the campaign.

Umeshwaran says: "We had 250 volunteers, mainly college students, working in three shifts. Bins were placed every 500m along the route that the chariot took. Altogether, there were 30 checkpoints. Inside the temple grounds, we had another 20 checkpoints. The volunteers carried a small bell to catch people's attention; they would then request that waste be thrown in the bins."

Once the bags in bins were filled, volunteers tied the bags and replaced them with new ones. The tied bags were then collected by a waste contractor and taken to landfills.

When the Litter Free Thaipusam 2015 campaign ended, the volunteers told Umeshwaran and his team that they felt really happy because they'd done something good.

Sundaram says: "The waste was better managed and it actually reduced 40 per cent of the work force during the chariot procession and on Thaipusam Day. We actually noticed less rubbish on the streets and temple grounds"

end of the day, rubbish is scattered all around the temple grounds."

Umeshwaran adds: "When people do find a bin, it's probably over-filled. I have been going to Batu Caves for Thaipusam. I see many NGOs offering free food, but no one provides bins. Many people think Alam Flora will clean up after the festival. But Alam Flora only covers Kuala Lumpur and Batu Caves is in Selangor."

