

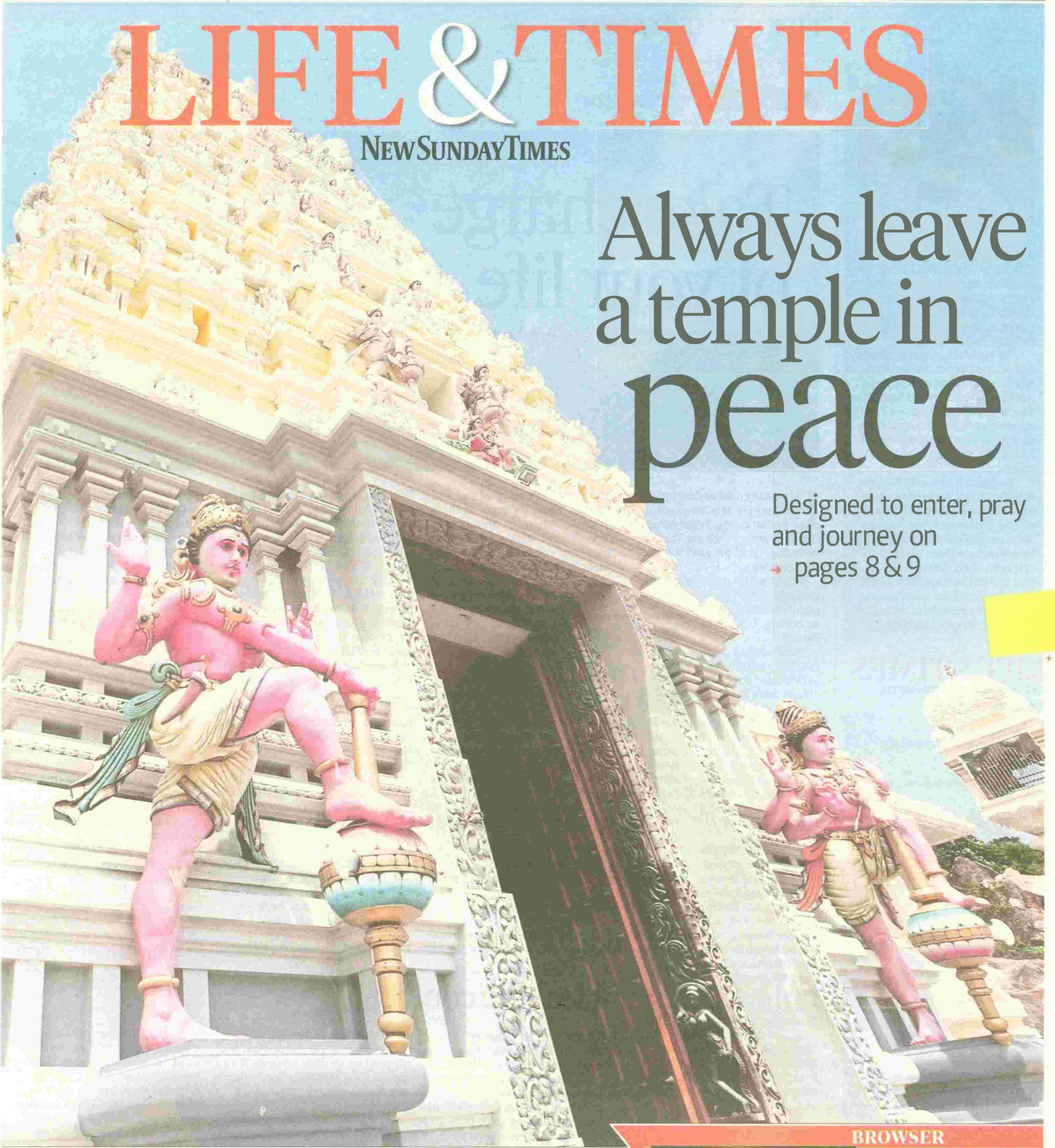
OCTOBER 19, 2014

# LIFE & TIMES

NEW SUNDAY TIMES

## Always leave a temple in peace

Designed to enter, pray  
and journey on  
♦ pages 8 & 9



LIFE'S  
SIMPLE  
PLEASURES

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BROWSER

## LIFE&amp;TIMES HERITAGE

ON Deepavali last year, when I visited the temple, something didn't feel right. Yet, I couldn't put my finger on why I wasn't feeling at peace.

When I discussed this with J.R. Rajaji, a former member of the committee of the Hindu Endowment Board which oversees the Waterfall Temple (Arulmigu Balathandayuthapani Temple) in Penang, he asked me if I had stepped into the temple the right way.

This puzzled me. Nonetheless, I recalled that, because of the crowd, I had entered via a side entrance.

Rajaji, 78, then mentioned "vashtu shastra" and I asked him to explain why that was important in matters of temple construction and worship.

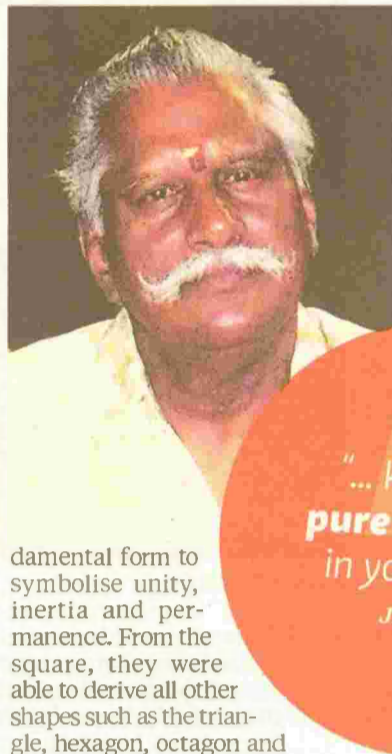
He explained: "You see, the design of a Hindu temple is like the structure of a cosmic man who, in Hindu mythology, is called Purush."

According to the story, Lord Brahma created Purush when he was creating the Universe. In the process, things got a little out of hand and Purush became too large to manage. At the behest of the other Gods, Lord Brahma contained Purush by pinning him down with his head towards north-east and legs to the south-west. Unable to bring Himself to destroy Purush, Lord Brahma decided to make him immortal. Henceforth, he was to be known as Vashtu-Purush and all mortals who built a structure on Earth needed to first worship him.

#### FUNDAMENTAL CHART

With this in place, ancient architects went on to create the basic metaphysical chart for all Hindu temples, which they still call a Vashtu-Purusha-Mandala.

They chose the square as the fun-



"... keep only pure thoughts in your head."

JR Rajaji

damental form to symbolise unity, inertia and permanence. From the square, they were able to derive all other shapes such as the triangle, hexagon, octagon and circle.

"You will notice that this chart is divided into 81 parts (9x9)," said Rajaji. "The number 9 is very important and is derived from the human body. We have nine 'holes' - two eyes, two ears,

# Worship and a way of life

The design of a Hindu temple reflects many things, including the dharma, values and the Hindu way of life, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

two nostrils, one mouth, two orifices for waste."

Like any other art form, there are regional variations in the style and construction of a temple, such as those from Orissa, Gujarat, Kashmir and South India. However, this basic metaphysical chart is still used to create the final form (inclusive of the vertical and horizontal dimensions) of the temple.

Once the plan is drawn up on paper, the next step is to "draw" it at the actual building site.

"There is a sanctification ceremony

called the Bhoomiparipalana puja. A priest from India will conduct all the necessary ceremonies before actual work begins," said Rajaji.

Then, I succeeded in drawing his ire by asking why it was necessary for a priest to come all the way from India to work on a temple plan. Surely, our local architects and engineers are able to create and construct a temple as well.

He paused before replying: "Yes, with modern technology, you can even build a temple in the middle of the ocean. But is it practical? You need a place where God can be powerful enough to bless the world. I mean, if you had a president and gave him a weak chair to sit on, what's the point? This is something that only



**Kailash**, a Shiva temple in India in the Unesco heritage site of Ellora. The entire structure is carved out of a single granite piece and took centuries to complete. The word **kailash** means **Abode Of Shiva**.

PICTURE BY ANEETA SUNDARARAJ



Arulmigu Sri Raja Kaliyamman glass temple, Johor Baru.



those who are well-versed in temple structure, astrology and construction can do."

Having set the record straight, Rajaji continued: "When you look at a temple, imagine you're looking at a man who is lying down with his head in the north-east and his legs in the south-west. The entrance to the temple, the gopuram, is the man's feet."

This means paying obeisance at the entrance of a temple is the first step of Hindu worship. Once inside the temple grounds, devotees remove their shoes and then rinse their feet, mouth and hands in the place provided.

**WORSHIP AT THE FLAGPOLE**

Why a flagpole? "In olden times," said Rajaji, "men used to go around town to pass messages. Some messages were good, some were bad. When they saw a flagpole, such as at a wedding, they would avoid coming in to

**On the cover**

The Penang Waterfall Hill Temple. Picture by Muhammad Mikail Ong

**SYMBOLISMS AND MEANINGS**

It is customary to worship Lord Ganesh before entering the main hall of the temple. By honouring Him first, the dynamic blessings of the temple will be opened to the devotee. The next step is to pay obeisance to the vehicle of the presiding deity of the temple.

Ranjiji said: "In a Shiva temple, there will be a Nandi or sacred bull in front of the temple. For an Amman temple, you'll see a lion, Simmhavanam, because that is her vehicle.

"Step inside the mahamandap (main hall) using your right foot. Don't step on the threshold. Step over it instead.

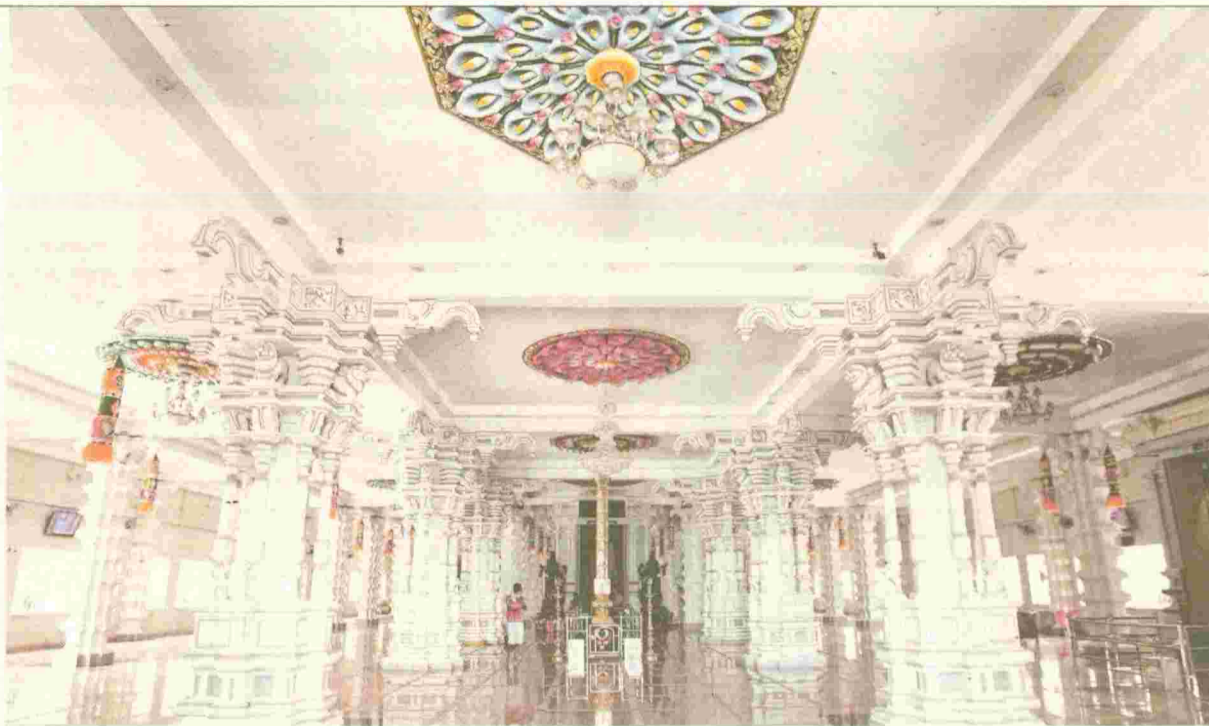
"Once you're inside the temple hall, imagine you're standing on the stomach of Vashtu-Purush."

It is said that in the middle of the temple floor, you will find a black dot.

"This black dot is symbolic of the umbilicus of Vashtu-Purush," explained Rajaji. "It is also the exact centre of the Vashtu-Purusha-Mandala and Brahmasthanam (the station of Lord Brahma). Think of it this way: When you make pickles, you put all the good things into the jar and seal it. This black dot is like the 10th hole and seals all the good things in the temple."

Thereafter, devotees will present their offerings (usually a tray of flowers) to the priest to be placed before the presiding deity of the temple in the place called the karpagraham or moolasthanam. "This is where the head of Vashtu-Purush lies and is always in the north-east. The sun's rays must reach the presiding deity of the temple in this inner sanctum. This is why, even in your own house, you should never sleep with your head in the south-west," said Rajaji.

NSTP/MOHD AZREN JAMALUDIN



*Arulmigu Balathanda yuthapani Kovil, the Penang Waterfall Hill Temple is the highest hilltop Hindu temple in Penang.* NSTP/MUHAMMAD MIKAIL ONG



*Artistic feature at the Penang Waterfall Hill Temple.* NSTP/MUHAMMAD MIKAIL ONG



*Clay lamps.* NSTP/FAIZ ANUAR

**FIRE AND ASH**

After this, the priest recites the necessary mantras and lights the flame (deepum).

"At the moment when he holds the deepum in front of the deity, that's the single moment when you are in communion with the deity," he said.

The priest then brings the deepum in front of you and you are invited to draw the blessings of the presiding deity by passing your hands over the flame and lightly touching your eyes.

Rajaji added: "The vibuthi (ash) given to you after this is to remind you that whatever you do in this lifetime, there will come a time when you will

return to dust. The chandana (sandalwood paste) and kumkum you apply to your forehead represents the third eye of the spiritual seeing. The kumkum also symbolises that all humans are equal for all our blood is red."

Food cooked and blessed may then be distributed to the devotees. It is customary to leave a monetary offering in a donation box. One of the final acts of worship in a Hindu temple is to undertake the pradakshina (walk around the sanctum in clockwise fashion). Having come to the end of his explanations, Rajaji smiled at me and said: "Always leave a temple in peace."