

## LIFE&amp;TIMES HERITAGE

# A Waterfall of blessings

Thousands will throng the Waterfall Temple today for Thaipusam. **Aneeta Sundararaj** finds out more about its origins

**T**HIS year, during Thaipusam, throngs of worshippers in Penang will carry kavadi and climb the steps of the new Arulmigu Balathandayuthapani Temple on top of a hill.

"It is also known as the Hilltop Temple in Jalan Air Terjun or Hilltop Temple in Jalan Waterfall," says J.R. Rajaji, a former member of the committee of the Hindu Endowment Board which oversees the Waterfall Temple, the site of the Thaipusam festival every year in Penang. Consecrated last June in a grand ceremony, this temple is said to be the largest one dedicated to Lord Murugan outside India.

Previously, worshippers visited a modest temple which the locals referred to as Waterfall Temple. So, where's the waterfall? Rajaji smiles and tells a story that began more than two centuries ago when Tamil labourers erected a shrine to Lord Murugan at the base of the waterfall in the Botanical Gardens.

"There is a reason this site was chosen," says Rajaji, 77, a retired civil servant. "Thaipusam, as you know, celebrates Lord Murugan's acquisition of the spear, sakti vel, from his mother, which he used to vanquish Surapadman. But there is another lesser-known story, one that tells why we carry a kavadi," he adds.

According to Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva was pleased with Sage Agastya's worship and allowed him to shift two hills, Sivagiri and Saktigiri, to South India and make them seats of worship. The sage commissioned his disciple, Idumban, to carry the hills. Idumban

slung the Danda of Brahma (Rod of Brahma) across his shoulders and used snakes to tie the hills — one on each side — to this rod. In Tamil, to suspend something on two ends of a pole carried across one's shoulders is referred to as kavadi.

"Idumban created the prototype of the kavadi," says Rajaji.

After carrying the kavadi for a while, Idumban became tired and put it down to rest. Once refreshed, Idumban found that he could no longer lift his kavadi, unaware of what had transpired while he rested.

Apparently, Lord Murugan was smarting after being outwitted by his brother, Lord Ganesh, in a race

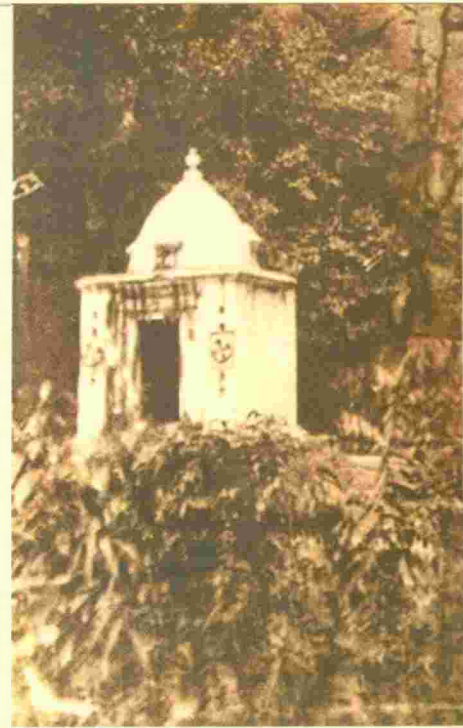
to go around the Earth three times. Lord Murugan completed the race to find that Lord Ganesh never attempted it in a similar manner. Instead, Lord Ganesh was declared the winner because he considered their parents to be his world and went around them three times. Lord Murugan left his family. Dressed in a *kaupeenam* (loincloth) and carrying a staff, he became a recluse and lived on the Sivagiri Hill.

Unable to lift his kavadi, Idumban climbed the hill, saw a youth and demanded that he vacate the hill. A fierce battle ensued during which Idumban was slain. Sage Agastya interceded and Idumban was restored to life. When Idum-

ban recognised the youth as Lord Murugan, he prayed and asked that, henceforth, whoever undertook a vow, carried the kavadi and visited Lord Murugan's temple, would be blessed. Furthermore, Idumban wanted the privilege of standing guard at the foot of the hill where Lord Murugan's temple was built.

"Now you know why Lord Murugan's temple is always near a hill," says Rajaji. He adds that the act of carrying a kavadi is a way for worshippers to follow in the footsteps of Idumban and experience a transformation that relieves them of the burden of ignorance.

"When the original shrine was moved, the temple to Idumban was built to look like the old one near the waterfall," says Rajaji. "The shrine was moved because, in the early part of the 20th Century, the British

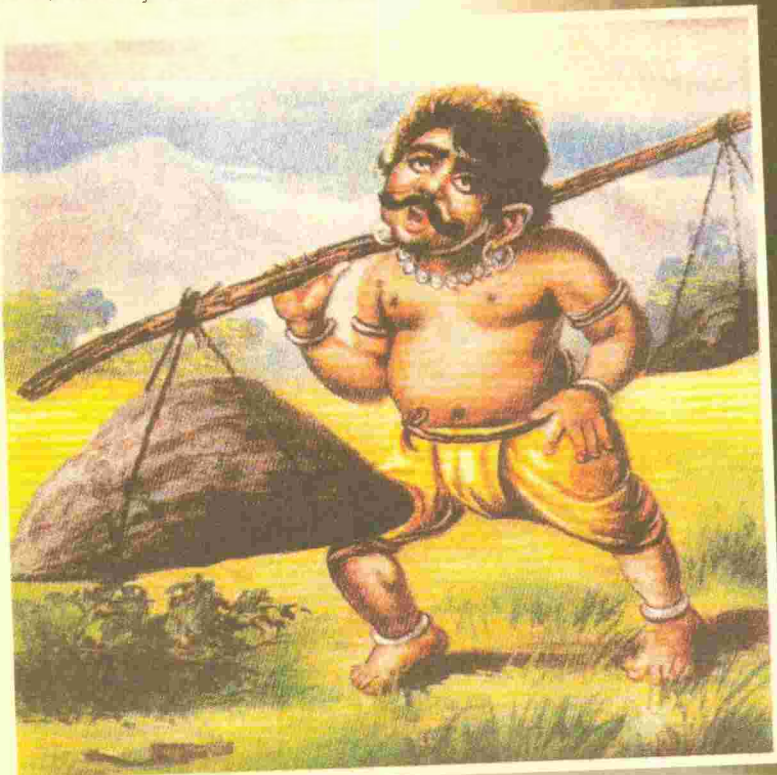


wanted to build a reservoir and they didn't want anyone to contaminate the water."

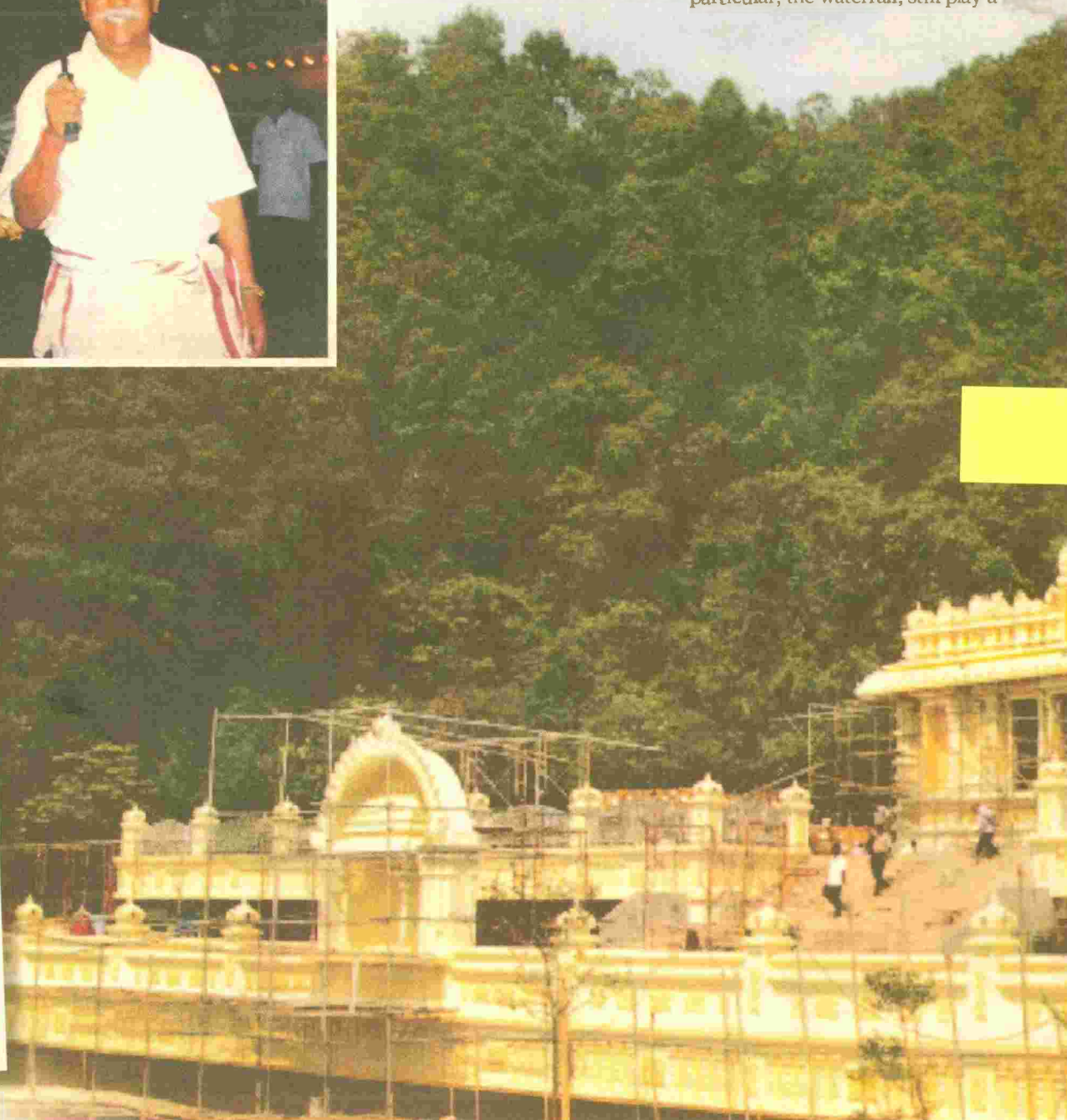
Once the Waterfall Temple was built, no one went to the original temple as it became a restricted area. However, this doesn't mean the original shrine is legend and doesn't exist anymore. Indeed, Rajaji, as part of the temple committee in the past, says the original shrine and, in particular, the waterfall, still play a



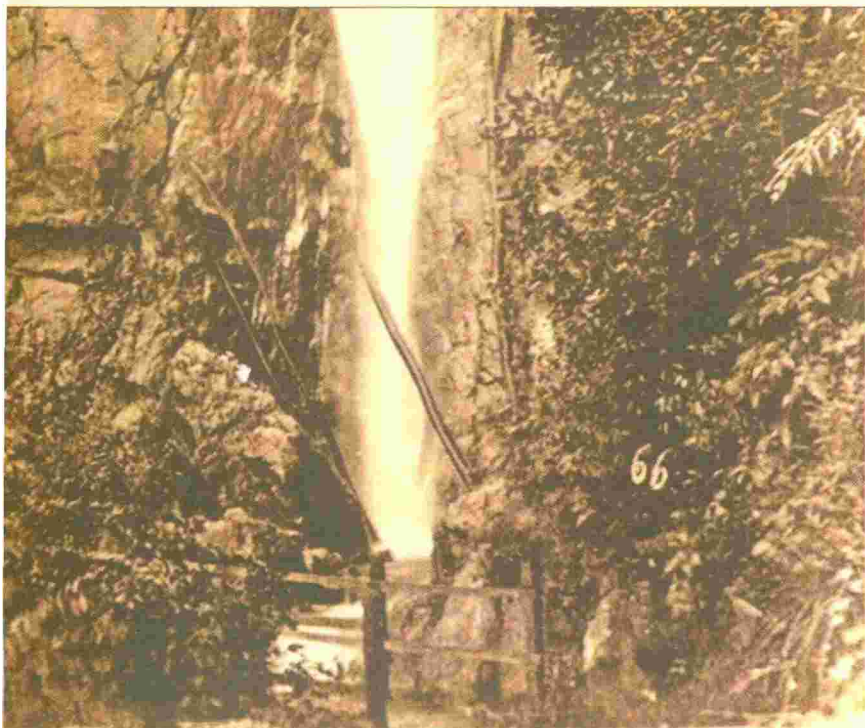
Mr and Mrs Rajaji.



Idumban created the Kavadi prototype.



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Idumban temple and the site of the original Shrine.



The waterfall today.



Water fall Temple.

fundamental role in Thaipusam celebrations in Penang each year.

Rajaji says: "That area is now under the control of Perbadanan Bekalan Air. But, a few days before Thaipusam, we will go on foot to the original shrine. The priest will say a few prayers and we will end with

a cry for victory to Lord Murugan which goes like this: *Vetrivel Muruganukku Arohara*. We will fill five *kudams* (pots) with water from the waterfall and bring this back with us for use in the *abhishegam*. This is the ritual bath given to Lord Ganesh, Lord Murugan, Mailvaganam (Lord Muruga's vehicle, the peacock), Lord Shiva and his consort, Shakti."

He adds that things such as milk,

sandalwood, yoghurt, honey and *vibuthi* will also be used during the *abhishegam* and later distributed to worshippers. "Some people will take it home and keep it in their altars, others will consume it. Each person has his or her own way of doing things."

Rajaji admits that, initially, he did

not support the construction of this new impressive Hilltop Temple. "I didn't see the need for it. Still, when it was built, I went for the prayers. When I was climbing the steps, I slipped and fell backwards but I wasn't hurt. I think that was Lord Murugan reprimanding me for objecting to the temple being built in the first place."

He recalls another story when he accompanied a visitor to the Waterfall Temple. "When I told her the story of Idumban, she told me not to



The Idumban Temple.

PICTURES FROM THE SOUVENIR BOOK PUBLISHED TO COMMEMORATE THE CONSECRATION CEREMONY OF THE HILLTOP TEMPLE, PENANG, JUNE 2012. COURTESY OF J.R. RAJAJI



say anymore as she was petrified of snakes. We then started to climb the steps to the temple. Next thing you know, there was a snake on one of the steps. She fainted." Rajaji believes that since the woman refused to pay obeisance to Idumban, she was not allowed to proceed further. "Idumban is Lord Murugan's security guard, you know," he says.

But the experience that Rajaji treasures most is his trips to the original Lord Murugan shrine next to the waterfall. "I feel so lucky, so blessed. It's beautiful there. The air is clean, the plants are alive, the birds are chirping and even the water flows with a particular rhythm. It's Nature's music," he says with a nostalgic look before adding: "I wish I could go there again".