



# Walking with faith

With the Hindu ceremony of Panguni Uthiram just around the corner, **Aneeta Sundararaj** explores the concept of fire-walking

**A**LL the lights in the temple are on. The place is teeming with people and they dance, wild almost, to the drumbeat. A devotee, dressed in yellow, takes his place at one end of a specially-erected pit in the temple grounds. The priest says something and the drumbeats become louder. In a trance, the devotee walks into the pit and over a bed of hot coals. This is the Hindu ceremony called Panguni Uthiram, which is celebrated on April 3.

J. R. Rajaji, 76, a former committee member of the Hindu Endowment Board explains: "Panguni Uthiram is usually celebrated at a temple where the main deity is either Ambal or Mahamariamman. Panguni is the 12th month in the Tamil calendar and it's special because of the coming together of the star, Uthiram, and the full moon (Pournami)."

While Hindu mythology suggests that the day is intended to celebrate the married life of a householder, Rajaji tells another interesting story about why people choose to walk on hot coals for this celebration.

"In the *Ramayana*, Sita was abducted by Ravana and Rama set out to rescue her. One day, while he was walking along the banks of the river, he overheard two men talking. They questioned Sita's chastity now that she had lived in Ravana's court.

After rescuing Sita, Rama insisted that his wife undergo the Agni Pariksha — a test by walking through fire — to prove that she was still chaste. Today, we do it to fulfil avow."



Some of the participants at **Anthony Robbins'** seminar.

Rajaji has experience walking on hot coals. "It was a long time ago," he says. "Some time in 1965 or 1966. I was a technician in the Waterworks Department in Alor Setar. The officer in Langkawi was going to retire and my colleagues kept telling me, 'Raja, you'll probably be transferred there.' I didn't want to go so I made a vow in the Mahamariamman temple in Bakar Bata, Alor Setar that I would walk on fire if Amma fulfilled my wish and brought me closer to my family in Butterworth."

Rajaji's preparations for the fire walk began 10 days before the ceremony. "I was on a strict vegetarian diet and slept on the floor. On the day itself, I immersed my body in manjal thanee (water with turmeric in it) and reported to the temple. When the time came, I stood in front of the pit which was about 4.5 metres long and 1.8 metres wide. The temple committee will appoint a special priest called Karagha pandaram, who decides whether or not I can do this fire walk. If he thinks that a person hasn't observed all the rules and is not pure, he'll put some kum-kum (made from turmeric or saffron) on his forehead and tell the

participant to walk around the pit. Otherwise, he'll pluck some neem leaves and a lime, put it in your mouth, put vibuthi (sacred ash used in Hindu religious worship) on your forehead and tell you to walk on the hot coals."

Rajaji describes the experience, saying: "I suppose you can say I surrendered to Amma. I didn't feel any pain. I could feel the heat on my shins. At the end of the walk, there is another pit filled with cow's milk and we all take a dip in it to signify that we've fulfilled our vow."

As it turned out, Rajaji was transferred to Sungai Petani. "I felt as though Amma had sent me to her son — Murugan — in Sungai Petani," says Rajaji. "The moment I arrived, I became the chairman of a committee (a temple where the main deity is Lord Murugan) overseeing the building of a temple hall. I kept a beard until the building was completed."

#### METAPHOR FOR POSSIBILITIES

What Rajaji describes as a moment of "surrender" is something entirely different for Sarjit Singh, 56, principal consultant trainer at Akal

Learning Solutions PLT.

This professional trainer says that participants undergo a "change in state" and views the entire experience of walking on fire in a secular context. "Fire walking is nothing new. Many people do it. The Japanese have a festival called Hiwatara-matsuri at the start of Spring; the Greeks also have it," says Sarjit. "I attended a seminar by Anthony Robbins when he first came to Asia. Fire walking was an integrated activity in the seminar to help participants do certain things — either build their self-confidence or break limiting barriers."

Quoting Robbins, Sarjit explains that the purpose of walking on fire "is an experience in personal power and a metaphor for possibilities, an opportunity for people to produce results they previously had thought impossible."

"This must have been in the 1990s or just after 2000," elaborates Sarjit. "I went with the mindset of a trainer. I was curious as to how the event — what we call a large group awareness training session — was organised. There were thousands of people in that seminar. Yes, I also walked on fire and that experience was huge. It felt good and you come away saying things like, 'Yes, I can do this; what else can I do?'"

Sarjit, too, had no burn marks on the soles of his feet after he completed the fire walk.

Doing the fire walk is one thing; it is quite another to lead others to do it. Sarjit says: "As leaders, we have to be confident and know what we're doing. I mean would you like to be led by someone who is under-confident?"

#### SCIENCE CHIPS IN

Is there, then, a scientific reason, behind this phenomenon? Robert Novella, in his article *The Physics and Fantasy of Firewalking*, dismisses religion or "mysterious mind powers" as the reason why people don't get burnt during fire walking.

Instead, he says that it's all down to thermodynamics and the principles of convection, conduction and radiation. Burning coal or wood coal means that lesser heat is transferred to the skin and, therefore, no burns occur. If steel is heated, Novella is certain that the results would be different and many would come away burnt.

Nonetheless, for people like Rajaji, fire walking remains a testament to their deep-seated beliefs. Indeed, he says: "Agni, or God of Fire is the one superpower on earth. In that moment before you take that first step onto the coals, you know that Agni witnesses all our deeds. To me, it proved the existence of God. I was comfortable in the knowledge that my wishes would be fulfilled. And they were."



**Rajaji** (with beard) walked on fire to fulfil a vow.