

# *The Tamil heritage in Pietermaritzburg*

*by Alleyn Diesel*

**D**URING the Easter period, while Christians all over Pietermaritzburg gather in churches to hear once again the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, with the devout attempting to identify with his suffering, so members of the local Tamil Hindu community observe their own "holy week" preparing for the Draupadi Firewalking Festival by listening again to the sacred story of the Goddess Draupadi, her faithfulness, courage, and victory over indignity and suffering.

This very popular 10-day festival, held in the grounds of the Mariamman Temple at the lower end of Langalibalele Street, recapitulates, through story, song and ritual, aspects of the rich and complex mythology, relating Draupadi's odyssey towards spiritual perfection where, after numerous severe tribulations, she finally demonstrated her virtue by walking

unscathed through fire. Faithful devotees spend the week fasting and attending the daily ceremonies at the temple which highlight features of Draupadi's life. The dramatic climax of the festival is the firewalking where crowds of devotees demonstrate their faith and purity, emulating Draupadi by walking across a pit of burning coals.

Draupadi is the Mother of Fire, one of the south Indian Amman (meaning "mother") Goddesses, brought to South Africa by the early Tamil settlers, and still very popular today. Mariamman, another much venerated Goddess, has many local temples dedicated to her. These vibrant female deities have since very ancient times been regarded as responsible for the wellbeing of humans, animals and nature, revered as the great Mother Earth who gave birth to all life, and to whom all will eventually return.

The story of Draupadi, contained in the great Indian epic the Mahabharata (c.200 BCE-200 CE), is a dramatic tale of fortunes lost and won, of treachery and faithfulness, of defeat and final victory and vindication. A strong, spirited and outspoken woman, she was the faithful wife of the five Pandava brothers. When, through the treachery of their relatives, the Kauravas, her family lost their inheritance, and went into lengthy exile in the forest, she courageously cared for them. She survived numerous attempts by men to seduce and humiliate her, her religious faith and purity bringing her safely through these ordeals. Eventually vindicated, she demonstrated her faithfulness and purity by her safe passage through fire, an event recorded in the Tamil version of the Mahabharata.

Draupadi's odyssey reflects a quest for spiritual perfection where, after enduring and overcoming various trials and hardships, she finally achieves purification and sanctification. Her ultimate ordeal of walking through fire is an apotheosis, transforming her into a Goddess worthy of the worship of her devotees, who must imitate her exemplary life. Draupadi is a much revered name in Hindu households.

The richly symbolic Draupadi firewalking festival involves devotees participating in various rituals and dramas recounting aspects of Draupadi's story, preparing themselves for the climactic fire walk, where the Goddess is believed to spread her sari over the fire, cooling the coals to protect the faithful.

The majority of the Hindu indentured labourers who came to Natal from 1860 onwards were Tamils from the area around the great south Indian city of Madras (now Chennai) in the

state of Tamil Nadu, where they were familiar with the mythology and ritual of Draupadi worship which can be traced back at least seven centuries. Soon after they settled in Pietermaritzburg, they instituted an annual firewalking festival during the 1890s, one which has been observed to the present.

Tamils trace their descent back to the ancient indigenous Dravidian people of south India and Sri Lanka who have lived in the east and south of the sub-continent for millennia, pre-dating the arrival of the Aryans by more than a thousand years. The main Dravidian languages are Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. Their religion as practised today retains many features of some of the oldest manifestations of religion still in existence, giving it a unique quality, much of it worthy of preservation.

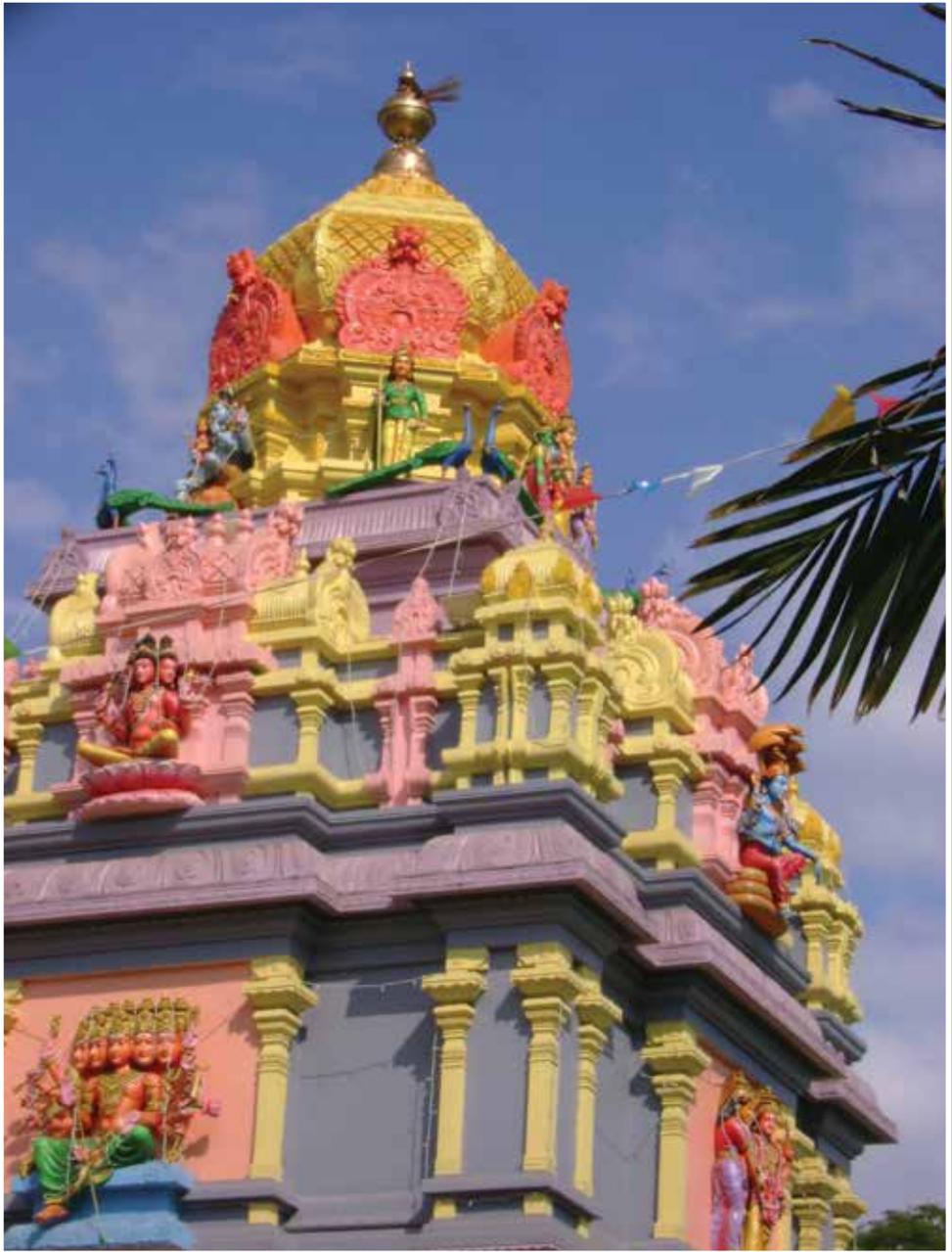
Early Hindu settlers arrived in Pietermaritzburg from about 1865, establishing two temples at the lower end of Longmarket Street, the Sri Siva Soobramoniar and Marriamen (sic) temples. These temples are the two oldest in the city, officially opened in 1925, although the Soobramoniar temple had been constructed between 1908 and 1915, replacing an earlier wood-and-iron structure. It is here, as well as in Tamil homes all round the city, that important Tamil religious observances and festivals are celebrated, preserving their ancient and rich culture and worship.

The deity Soobramoniar (also known as Muruga) is one of the sons of the supreme God Shiva, believed to possess great healing power, celebrated twice annually at the Kavadi festival, attracting very large crowds.

The second temple on this site is dedicated to the indigenous south In-



*The dome of the Mariamman temple*



*The dome of the Soobramoniar temple*

dian Goddess Mariamman, and other powerful Amman (Mother) goddesses, guardians of the earth in all its manifestations. The front pediment shows Mariamman seated on her lion vehicle, symbol of her fearsome, protective power.

Kistappa Reddy, a young indentured labourer who arrived in South Africa from the Madras area of south India in 1898, was a bricklayer who soon turned his very considerable talent to temple designing and building. Over the years, until his death in 1941, he stamped his distinctive style on many highly regarded south Indian, Tamil-oriented temples, on the Natal north and south coasts, at Mount Edgecombe, Canelands, Newlands, Esperanza, and the First Umbilo Temple in Durban. Because of his competence and artistic flair he was increasingly employed on temple projects, and in 1909 came to Pietermaritzburg to make his contribution of the exuberant, uniquely “folk-sy” domes on the two temples. Durban architects Mikula, Kearney and Harber claim, “In the history of ‘classical’ South African Temples, Reddy must retain the position as master.”

In the last 10 years or so I have observed a number of developments which I believe could be indicators of a nascent Tamil renaissance in this city and around the province.

The Tamil language (*Thamizh*), spoken by these early settlers, was gradually replaced by English as the mother tongue of the Indian community. Although this loss of the language of their grandparents is an indication of how successfully South African Indians adapted to life in this country, recently this decline in the use of the vernacular has been regretted, with concerted efforts made to re-introduce

knowledge of the various Indian languages. Many Hindus believe attempts to recover knowledge of their original languages will contribute significantly towards the revival and maintenance of both cultural and religious knowledge.

Because of this, various local Tamil associations have started numerous afternoon classes to teach the vernacular to children. Some classes are also run for groups of very enthusiastic adults, particularly senior citizens.

Another factor in this recent revival of pride in their heritage is the opening of post-apartheid South Africa to the world community, and with this the increasing number of Tamil films (with English sub-titles) being shown at major movie venues round the country, as well as the availability of many films on DVD, and the renewed interest these have stimulated in Tamil music and dance. SATV 2 has a Sunday morning Indian-themed programme, Mela, at noon, “showcasing the uniquely South African Indian experience”, and a lively Facebook page. A number of Indian channels are featured on DSTV such as ZEE TV and Glow, presenting movies, series, cookery programmes, documentaries, and music, although Tamil interests do not feature prominently. However, The South African Tamil Federation has a Facebook page with ongoing news and comment.

Evidence of a new generation of young people taking pride in their Tamil culture is the growing number of youngsters singing in choirs at religious functions, and the growth in popularity of eisteddfods featuring Tamil music.

In January 2005 the two Tamil temples in Longmarket (now Lang-

alibalele) Street embarked on the important task of renovating these extremely busy temples. Generally considered to be fine examples of south Indian temple architecture with their colourful pediments and domes decorated with images of Hindu deities, they had in recent years fallen into a state of considerable disrepair. This was due mainly to a lack of funds, and because, ideally, the work needed to be done by specialist builders from India. The South African apartheid authorities refused to grant permission for craftsmen to come from India, but this obstacle was finally overcome, allowing for the refurbishment to commence.

For approximately two years, until 2007, temple architects and artisans especially imported from Tamil Nadu in south India worked on replacing the dome and the front pediment of the Soobramoniar Temple, meticulously carving a plethora of lively deities from the Hindu pantheon: Soobramoniar on his peacock vehicle and his two consorts, the monkey God Hanuman, Ganesha the pot-bellied, smiley elephant-headed deity, and many others. Obvious changes are the considerably higher dome which is more in keeping with the dimensions of the whole building, the central front pediment focusing exclusively on Soobramoniar and his two wives, the lavishly decorated shrine to Hanuman on the right hand side of the temple, and new decorations on the pillars at the front, as well as some characterful cats adorning the Mariamman temple.

However, in the light of the praise of Mikula *et al*, and despite rejoicing in the glories of the “new” temple, I can’t help but feel saddened by the total destruction of the original historic

Kistappa Reddy dome of this temple in order to make way for the newly constructed one. An irreplaceable part of the legacy of the original settlers was surely worthy of a better fate than being consigned to the demolisher’s hammer. Perhaps it could have been dismantled and moved to another part of the temple compound where it could have become part of a specially constructed shrine to preserve this charming example of “folk” south Indian Hindu architecture. It seems somewhat ironic that something so valuable, with links to the earliest and finest building of temples in South Africa, had to be lost in order for the “restoration” of the temple to be accomplished.

Although for me tinged with regret, the extensive renovation of these extremely busy temples, at great expense to the local community, and the fact that the committee and devotees of the temples committed themselves to raise the one million or more Rands for the project, are heartening evidence of an increasingly deeply felt sense on the part of the local Tamil people of pride in their heritage, and a desire to honour the legacy left by their ancestors.

Another significant move initiated by the temple committees is a series of talks given in the evenings during important festivals such as the firewalking and Durga Puja (also known as Navarathri). These addresses are planned to promote a fuller understanding of Tamil religion, such as addresses on the Goddess Draupadi and her festival, as well as on other indigenous Dravidian goddesses and deities. This is something of an innovation for a traditional Hindu temple, as “sermons” have not usually

been a feature of worship, and seems to be further indication of a move to revitalise a sense of familiarity with their Tamil heritage.

An additional unfortunate loss of heritage and religious knowledge is that although the local Tamil community appears to have preserved the ritual of the Draupadi festival most meticulously throughout the 150 and more years of their residence in South Africa, there has been considerable loss of knowledge of the mythology upon which the ritual depends. An example of this is that the all-night performance of the Tamil *Terukkuttu* street drama, which was a unique part of the firewalking celebrations at two Durban temples, has been discontinued as too few people understood the language, and there was nobody trained and willing to take

over from the aging performers. These powerful dramas, like the medieval Christian “miracle plays”, conveyed knowledge of religious mythology to largely illiterate devotees, and could still contribute to a familiarity with sacred narratives, and so to a greater appreciation of the richness of the festival.

This recent recognition of the value of their age-old inheritance, as well as the promising signs of attempts to extend knowledge of their religious tradition and the contribution it could make to the wider South African religious scene, appears to indicate that Tamil culture will make its presence increasingly felt among the wealth of diverse traditions of this country, something which ultimately enriches the whole nation.