



Meet women who



Singapore Hindu scouted the local temple scene and came across a group who have made it their life's mission to be of service to the community. These "can do" people are caring grandmothers, loving mothers, supportive wives, busy career women, responsible home makers – the roles are endless. What these women have in common is that they are all active and inspired volunteers with the Sri Mariamman Temple (SMT) Lady Volunteers group. Historically, volunteerism has been a key mode through which women have made significant impact on and influenced our cultures and societies. This tradition continues with the SMT Lady Volunteers. Though women volunteers are a common sight at all our Hindu temples, what sets these women at SMT apart is that they are also actively involved in various other social causes outside the temple as well as in inter-faith activities.

Women and Hindu Temples

Though men are predominant in the management of our Hindu temples, it is undoubtedly the women working behind the scenes who give a softer touch to the temple environment. Not surprisingly, women outnumber men in most temple congregations. Women generally build a stronger attachment with the temples they frequent. They make friends with other women, organize social gatherings around temple festivities, bring their immediate and extended families to the temple and generally participate enthusiastically in temple rituals and ceremonies. It is often the woman, whatever her role maybe, who would take vows, observe fasts and perform prayers to ensure her family is blessed with good health, wealth and happiness!



make a difference

It may not be glamorous work but these women have plenty of determination to make a positive change.



SMT Lady Volunteers



Durga Pooja

Step into a temple and you will not fail to notice women engaged in various tasks – from cleaning and sweeping to serving food, packing vibuthi (holy ash) packets and coordinating temple activities. Traditionally, women are not accorded special privileges or rights in temple worship - a practice that can be traced to the old days in rural India. This has not, however, dampened the spirit of women devotees and they continue to be actively involved in various tasks that ensure smooth functioning of the temple.

Durga Poojas

Since the early 1980s, Hindu women in Singapore have been performing special prayers for Goddess Durgai, the Divine Mother who is believed to protect one and all from evil and misery. Worship of this Goddess was so popular that several temples with the deity of Goddess Durga opened their doors on Tuesday and Sunday afternoons to hold the Durga poojas (prayers). The women who regularly attended the poojas soon built a very strong bond which resulted in their coming together for other temple activities. Sri Mariamman Temple has been especially popular with the Durga poojas since the 1980s and it was this group of women devotees who got together to form a lady volunteers group. Though they were not formally organized then, the group has since evolved into a shining example of community service at its best.



Meeting the ladies

Singapore Hindu was privileged to meet two such volunteers from SMT Lady Volunteers group. Mrs Thevaini Veerappan or "Devi" as she is fondly called leads the temple's dynamic team of women volunteers. Devi, a higher clerical officer with three grown-up sons, was all smiles when asked how she juggled a family, career and hours of service to the community. "We think of ourselves as a family and when we come together for a service project, we crack jokes and have a good laugh to keep our spirits up", says Devi. It is this positive mindset that has brought together sixty other like-minded women - from students, housewives, professionals and retirees.



SMT volunteers Punitha and Devi

Mdm Punithadevi Sivalingam, a newly wed who has been a volunteer since the 1990s, was happy to add, "I was fortunate to have met my husband in a temple setting. This has allowed the two of us to be involved in volunteer work together. My mother in law who is a dialysis patient has been coming with me to do her part. She helps with simple chores like cutting vegetables during temple festivities." Like Devi, Punitha too holds a full time job and has a long commute from her home in Pasir Ris to the Sri Mariamman Temple. She credits her passion for temple service to her mentor, the late Mrs Sarojanee Menon who was a devotee and passionate volunteer who pioneered the women's volunteer group at the Sri Mariamman Temple.



Work done by SMT Lady Volunteers

Being a part of SMT Lady Volunteers is not one of glamour and recognition but entails hours of hard work and plenty of sacrifices. The range and scale of programmes this group has been involved in are countless. In addition to the popular Durga Poojas, the group has organized and involved other women in Pournami prayers, Aadi Perukku, Thai Sevai, Koolu Poojas, and the list goes on. Single handedly, these women have ensured that temple ceremonies are both meaningful and engaging. Events organized by this volunteer force are popular with the local Indians and help generate revenue for the temple.

In 1999, with the assistance of self help group Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), the women organized a community referral and information service. They worked in tandem with the self help group to identify and refer less fortunate Singaporeans for social assistance. In 2002, some of the volunteers from SMT Lady Volunteers got together to form Helping Hands, a group dedicated to run food drives for disadvantaged Singaporeans of all races and religions. The women sourced for donors, printed their own flyers and organized food drives annually at the temple. At each one of the food drives, more than 50 families were given free food rations. To ensure that families who come to the food drives feel at ease, the sessions take the form of a tea reception for all to enjoy.

Over the last decade, SMT Lady Volunteers has also been engaged in inter-faith and inter-racial activities. The women volunteer with the Singapore Buddhist Lodge and help out at events like Vesak Day and Chinese New Year. Everything from counting New Year hong baos, to helping out at blood donation drives and serving free food at the Vesak celebrations are undertaken by the volunteers with a smile. These women have also volunteered their services at the consecration ceremonies of other Hindu temples.

“SMT’s Management Committees over the years have been very supportive of our efforts. The Committees make good suggestions to help with our work and motivate us,” says Devi. It is this confidence and support that have driven the women to give more and do more. As for future plans, they hope to be involved in more programmes organized by other Hindu temples and ethnic groups. For women who may be inspired to join the SMT Lady Volunteers, Devi has this to say “We are looking for women who are truly committed and ready to work without any expectations.”

For more information on SMT Lady Volunteers please contact Ms Devi at 9455261.





A Publication of
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ISSN 0218-1215 Volume 17