

# REMEMBERING HINDU TRADITIONS



**Sivanandini Duraiswamy**



Sivanandini Duraiswamy was born into a traditional Hindu family and the Hindu up-bringing is reflected in her way of life, and in her writings. She has a Bachelor of Arts Degree. She has obtained a Diploma in Carnatic Music specialising in Veena and in Western Music did her Associate of the Trinity College of Music, London. She also studied Bharata Natyam.

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# Remembering Hindu Traditions

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SIVANANDINI DURAI SWAMY B. A.



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**Dedicated with love and gratitude  
to  
Yogendra and Naresha Duraiswamy**

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*Words fail adequately to express my gratefulness to my husband Yogendra for the unfailing support and assistance he has given me in compiling "Remembering Hindu Traditions." His careful study of the various chapters and the care and attention bestowed in editing the script have been invaluable. His suggestions enabled me to give the necessary finishing touches to it.*

*Authorities and sources are cited at appropriate places. Talks with my learned father, the late Dr. T. Nallainathan on religious subjects were inspiring. He was a medical man, who together with mother, brought religion into the lives of their children making these fasts and festivals meaningful. These talks with him and later with learned professors both at home and abroad and with temple priests had been jotted down at various times and stored away as notes. These now are valuable references which have been incorporated accordingly. Acknowledgments are due to my revered father, who would certainly be very happy at this publication, to the professors and temple priests for their valuable information. I am grateful to my dear friends Lalitha Witanachchi and Thangam Jegathala Prathapan for the care and trouble they had taken to go through the manuscript and making corrections where necessary.*

*Some parts of this book have featured previously in various magazines and in the Sri Lankan press, as talks at religious gatherings and over the air both in Sri Lanka and abroad.*

*It is my duty to express my indebtedness to my Minister, Hon. Lakshman Jayakody, Minister for Cultural and Religious Affairs and Buddha Sasana, for writing the Foreword. My appointment as his Coordinating Secretary, (Hindu Affairs), encouraged me to work on the sheaf of articles, lectures and notes and compile them into a whole.*

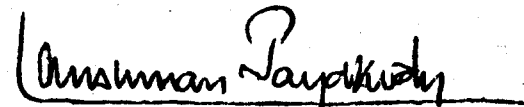
*I am grateful to M. D. Gunasenas, my Publishers for sponsoring this work and for the care they have bestowed in printing the book in elegant form.*

*And finally a gracious thank you to Dr. Stefan Dryer, Director of the German Cultural Institute for launching my maiden effort - Remembering Hindu Traditions.*

## FOREWORD

*Sivanandini Duraiswamy, my Co-ordinating Secretary (Hindu Affairs) and President of one of the oldest Hindu Societies in Sri Lanka, the Saiva Mangaiyar Kalagam (Hindu Women's Society), is presenting her study on the Hindu fasts and festivals as "Remembering Hindu Traditions." With her knowledge of the religion she has drawn upon various religious texts both in Tamil and Sanskrit as well as legends and tradition to give an account of the age old observances of the Hindus. A reference to some of the themes included in the book give us an idea of her approach. She has interestingly linked the Indus Valley Zodiac to the present times. She refers to Ravana, the King of Lanka in Ramanavami and the story of Rama, speaking of him not disparagingly but as 'a human personage.' In the Vaikasi Visakam she speaks of the advent of the Buddha as being imperative. To the Hindus, Lord Buddha is an Avatar and as Swami Vivekananda said, "he was the greatest Soul power that has ever manifested," "the greatest and boldest preacher that the world ever saw." No observances would be complete without an account of the more important social events - the Wedding Scene and the Last Journey which are interesting concluding chapters to the book.*

*She has given a vivid account of the traditional observances along with the legends which characterise them. These studies add to our knowledge of Hinduism and Hindu observances. It is appropriate and useful that she has compiled her knowledge and understanding of the observances for the generations to come.*



**Hon. Lakshman Jayakody**

*Minister of Cultural and Religious Affairs and Buddha Sasana.*

## PREFACE

*Man, in this material world needs some scaffolding of worship on which to stand while over several births he builds up in him the Temple of the Spirit that brings him eternal happiness. It is only when the temple is completed that this scaffolding can be removed. Rituals, namely fasts, festivals and observances help to form this all important scaffolding which is like the husk preserving the seed and helping to make it germinate. These are closely linked with religious faith, creating an atmosphere where the devotee invokes God and feels His mysterious presence.*

*Having travelled widely and having lived abroad on our various diplomatic assignments, I realised that the Hindu rituals have played a significant part in our community life, bringing a sense of peace and harmony to the individual. This idea has grown and taken shape in my mind in the course of several years and the result of my search for the reasons behind our fasts, festivals and observances led to the compilation of "Remembering Hindu Traditions." In order to understand some of the more important observances, the inner significance of the stories that go with the respective observances must be understood. The observances have not been merely a source of discipline, inspiration and joy but have deepened the religious fervour of the Hindus.*

*Man, according to Hinduism is essentially Divine. The Vedantists say that the soul is, "None other than God," while the Saiva Siddhantists say, "It is Infinite, All-pervading and Eternal." He is the Soul in an embodied form and this Soul in the words of the English poet, Shelley is not,*

*" more polluted than the beams of heaven's pure orb and far from being tainted with sin, it is from the hour of its birth a portion of the being of God, a spark of the Divine which will flow back to the burning fountain whence it came, a portion of the Eternal, which must glow through time and remain unquenchably the same."*



*Thus the Soul in man is eternal but bound to the empirical life with body and mind complexes and ignorant of its true nature. The embodied Soul may be weak, wicked, good, strong, big or small - the difference not being in the Soul but in the embodied manifestation which needs the scaffolding of the rituals of fasts, festivals and observances as stepping stones to Moksha.*

*The scope of this book is more than a mere narration of the fasts and festivals; it is rather a compilation of the traditional observances using the various legends and inextricably weaving them into stories of immense human interests bringing them into the present day life of the Hindu. As these pages unfold, my fervent wish is that the general reader may understand the significance of the rituals observed by the Hindus.*

Deepavali 1997

"Kathiramalai,"

9, Castle Lane, Colombo 4,

Sri Lanka.

**In one salutation to thee, my God, let  
all my senses spread out and touch this  
world at thy feet.**

**Like a rain-cloud of July hung low  
with its burden of unshed showers let  
all my mind bend down at thy door in  
one salutation to thee.**

**Let all my songs gather together  
their diverse strains into a single current  
and flow to a sea of silence in one  
salutation to thee.**

**Like a flock of homesick cranes flying  
night and day back to their mountain  
nests let all my life take its voyage  
to its eternal home in one salutation to thee.**

**Rabindranath Tagore**

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Panguni பங்குனி  
Chittirai சித்திரை  
Vaikaasi வைகாசி  
Aani ஆனி  
Aadi ஆடி  
Aavani ஆவணி  
Purattaadhi புரட்டாதி  
Aippasi ஐப்பசி  
Kaartigai கார்த்திகை  
Maargali மாரகழி

### **Gregorian Month**

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February - March  
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April - May  
May - June  
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## INTRODUCTION

In the troubled world of today, man is torn between his material pursuits and his spiritual progress and he forgets that he is the heir to Perfection. Hinduism teaches that man is part of the Supreme Being, Brahman. "The One God hidden in all things, pervading all, the inner spirit of all beings, the overseer of all actions, who dwells in all creatures, the witness, sentient, all alone, and devoid of attributes," says the Svetasvataara Upanishad (VI - II). Despite his inability to grasp this fundamental idea of Divinity, it has given him a worshipful attitude, to that One Spirit, the Almighty God.

The traditional observances, customs and ceremonies of the Hindus reflect the profound yearnings of the community for peace and harmony. The repeated observances down the corridors of time give a vision of the glorious ancient culture; the past becomes a moment of the living present and guides one into the future. The Hindu calendar abounds in a number of fasts and festivals and most of them are of a religious significance. But at the same time these observances have an educative value taking in all the intellectual, aesthetic, psychological, ethical and moral implications and thereby providing for the full expression and development of the Hindu personality. A look into the value of the observances opens vistas of religious treasures which are a treasure trove of the ancient thought and wisdom.

The wise ancients, in order to guide humanity to achieve the goal in life, devised many beautiful and inspiring legends weaving an embroidery of stories around auspicious moments and periods of time by association with events or divine personages. These legends are the Puranas and generally the Hindu fasts and festivals are associated with some Puranic story or other. The fasts and festivals instil discipline, provide recreation and enjoyment and at the same time create an inner change for the better in the life of the people who participate in these observances. The observances

carry with them the wonderful message of peace, harmony, caring, love and goodwill.

Those who do not understand the rich traditions of the fasts and festivals and their importance feel that the observances are antiquated and have no value in the changing world of today. This is not so for these religious observances strengthen the individual, the family unit and the community and help in their spiritual upliftment. These in turn make the ancient religion of Hinduism relevant to modern times. It is an essential part of the fabric of our lives.

The Hindus often channelled scientific knowledge to religious uses especially for observances.<sup>1</sup> The Hindu concept of time is based on the movement of the Sun, Moon and Jupiter. The Sun's movement through the twelve signs of the Zodiac delineates an year. The ancient Hindus divided the heavens into twenty seven asterisms namely nakshastras. The Moon journeys through the different asterisms in a period of one month, waxing and waning. The planet Jupiter conversely traverses the Zodiac in a period of twelve years. A unit of five such cycles leads to a sixty year cycle, the Brihaspati chakra, which is the Hindu counterpart of a century. Each individual year within the cycle has a name such as Shukla, Angirasa, Sri mukha, Bhava, Yuva etc.<sup>2</sup>

A calendar year of three hundred and sixty five days is divided into four parts - each section starts with either a solstice or an equinox, based on the position of the Sun in the celestial sphere. April 14th marks the vernal equinox in the old Hindu calendar while Makara Sankranti marks the winter solstice.

With the Sun entering the first raashi in the Zodiac, the Makara raashi, its northwards journey in heaven commences. As the earth, while revolving on its axis rotates round the Sun, the mortals have a twenty four hour day - twelve hours each, of day and night. A complete year of the mortals becomes a day of the devas - six months each, of day and night. The day of the devas dawns on Makara Sankranti and goes on till mid - July and these six months are referred to as Uttaraayanam and the next, as Dakshinayanam.

The ancient Hindus adored the Sun and called It by various names - Surya, Vishnu Narayana, Savitur etc. The Sun is symbolised as the visible manifestation of the Brahman. Brahman is Light Eternal, but is not discernible to the naked eye of ordinary mortals. The Sun is perceptible and one speaks of the rising sun and the setting sun and so on. In reality it neither rises nor sets. It is there permanently bestowing light, energy, warmth and vitality but remains inexhaustible and unaffected. It is self-luminous throwing light on its satellites like the earth, moon etc. The Sun is thus revered as the physical manifestation of Brahman, whose spiritual rays of knowledge and intelligence were adored by the Vedic seers in the morning of the world and handed down to generations after them and man worships the Sun suffusing it with deep significance and meaning in a spirit of thankfulness.<sup>3</sup>

The rationale of allocating special days for fasts and observances is based on the moon and its influence on the mind. The Sun represents the Paramaatman and the atmic spiritual force is transmitted to the moon and through the moon to the human mind. The ancient Hindu sages believed that during certain phases of the moon, nature assists the worshipper by awakening him from the tamasic stupor. These are allegorically illustrated in the Puranas as incidents that took place between the devas and the asuras, based on the basic truth that goodness triumphs over evil. These allegories are related to the mind of man which is the real battle field between good and evil, knowledge and ignorance and immortality and death.

To the Hindus the lunar cycle is thus significant in determining the dates for various observances. The concept of "thithi", or stage of the lunar cycle is important.<sup>4</sup> The thithi is literally a segment of the Sun's reflection on the orbiting moon. There are thirty thithis in all - fifteen belong to the bright half of the moon and the other fifteen to the dark half of the moon. Of these thithis, the Amavasya (new moon) Chaturthi (fourth), Sashti (sixth), Ekadasi (eleventh), Prathosham (thirteenth) and Purnima (full moon) are important.

In formulating the observances, whether they be fasts, festivals or social events in the daily life of the Hindus, the ancients had studied carefully the mental and psychological make up of the human being and programmed the devotional exercises to create a spiritual atmosphere. The exercises also remind one of his duties in life, namely to feed and care for the elders, the sick and the poor, serve humanity, remember the departed ancestors and create peace all around.

In fasting, the abstinence of food is to help the mind to concentrate on the Supreme. The gross body has to be gradually prepared through fast and prayer for the blossoming of the Divine within. A fast is partial or total abstinence from the intake of food coupled with prayer and meditation. Fasting is referred to as upavasam, that is residing close to God namely, upa-near and vasa - residing. Sri la Sri Arumuga Navalar, the Hindu revivalist of the last century, speaks about fasting as a form of prayer and worship and says, "In order to prevent the mind from being controlled by the senses, one should abstain from food and lessen the intake of food and worship God in thought, word and deed."<sup>15</sup>

Fasting not only tones up one's health but also contributes to the development of the sattvic temperament. It does give the power of will over hunger which is a basic urge in man and this marks the beginning of discipline for a spiritual life. The intake of food satisfies the senses which keep asking for more. If they are starved even for a short period of time, the senses could be disciplined and uplifted. The food that is taken into the body determines the mental condition; for example the food that activates the senses develop the rajasic tendencies which are bad for spiritual progress, while those that purify the senses create sattvic tendencies making the body sensitive to prayer.

Festivals are associated with a wealth of tradition and customs and are meant to train man to share with others whatever good he has received from Nature which is a living example of self-sacrifice. The festivals help him to acquire this spirit of sacrifice and service.

Socially the preparations of fasts and festivals is the bringing together of the people in a common endeavour of unity, brotherhood and co-operation - all providing the total development of the personality.

The social observances of the Hindus are essentially based on the householder's life beginning with his birth and ending with his death. Some of these observances have been watered down because modern scientific knowledge has improved the environmental conditions for man. For example when a child was born in olden days, certain cleansing and purificatory rites had to be performed in the home on the sixteenth day or thirty first day followed by the naming ceremony. Similarly during the funeral observances, purificatory rites had to be included in the ceremonies. These are still observed symbolically.

As the baby grows and the first tooth appears, the 'tooth cutting' ceremony is observed. A special sweetmeat known as the 'kolukattai' is made of rice flour dough in a semi-circular shape with a filling of sweetened green gram and on each are inserted a few thick coconut scrapings to represent the teeth. Next, as the child turns two or three, he is initiated into learning and on Vijayadasami day or any other auspicious day, the child seated on the lap of the temple priest or the father, begins his first lesson to read and write the letters 'Aa' 'Aaa' in Tamil on a bed of rice grains. As the girl grows up, the puberty or 'the coming of age' ceremony takes place, where the young girl is dressed up elaborately and the mother's brother officiates at the ceremony. This is purely a ceremony to ward off any evils. Again at the wedding ceremony, religious observances and rituals are followed. When the bride becomes pregnant, there are observances mainly of a protective nature and the mother-to-be is gifted with bangles at the 'valai-kappu' ceremony where special worship is also performed for the safe delivery of the child. Unfortunately this custom is gradually fading away.

The rites at the funeral ceremony are significant and are observed on the day the body is removed for cremation. The

ceremony that is observed a month after the death is known as 'andhieshti' and a similar ceremony after a lapse of an year is known as 'aataththivasham.' In connection with the dead there are important fasts that are observed in memory of the departed parents, namely in the month of Chittirai known as 'Chittraa Paruvam' for the mother and in the month of Aadi known as 'Aadi Amaavaasai' for the father.

Another ritual that women religiously follow is the sacred puja offered to the lamp, the 'Kuththu vilakku.' This is performed in the home shrine or at a religious gathering to promote feelings of harmony and love for God. A married woman performs this puja in order to live married to the end of her life; a young girl, to get married soon.<sup>6</sup>

Fasts, festivals and observances are designed as a discipline to enrich the inner life of man and the religious life of the society he lives in. Swami Vivekananda considered these fasts and rituals in the life of a householder as essential but were primarily external aids, for the transformation of character which is the true function of religion. His advice was, "Let us be at peace, perfect peace with ourselves, and give up our whole body and mind and everything as an eternal sacrifice unto the Lord. Instead of the sacrifice of pouring oblations into the fire, perform this one great sacrifice of your little self."<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

1. Dr. Naresha Duraiswamy - The Hindu New Year - A season of Felicity and Re-newal.

Shastras like the Surya Siddhanta and the Brihat Samhita were based on astronomy and mathematics. Ancient India discovered a method to measure the length of day and to forecast eclipses. It like wise developed the decimal system of numerals, positional arithmetic and the knowledge of zero. The year according to such calculations began with the entry of the sun

into sign of Aries. This event marked the vernal equinox. Classical astronomers however did not take into account the precision of the equinoxes, leading to a present discrepancy of three weeks.

2. *ibid.*
3. The Sun is conceived to be seated in a chariot drawn by seven prancing horses. The concept corresponds to the prismatic analysis of Light and Time. The seven horses represent the seven days of the week and are also the allegorical representation of the seven colours into which the sunbeam breaks up. In philosophical parlance, the property of Light to divide itself into seven colours is the symbol of Pure consciousness descending into the seven planes of consciousness. This is the deep spiritual significance in the worship of the sun.
4. Dr. Vimala Krishnapillai - Viratham, the Hindu Fasts.
5. விரதமாவது, "மனம், பொறி வழி போகாது நிறுத்தற் பொருட்டு. உணவை விடுததேனும் சுருக்கியேனும் மனம், வாக்கு, காயம் என்னும் முன்றினாலும் கடவுளை விதிப்படி மெய்யன்போடு வழிபடுதலாகும்.
6. It is said that the four principle elements of the lamp, namely the lamp itself, the oil, the cotton wick and the light are analagous to dharma, artha, kama and moksha, the four basic objects of Hindu life. The lamp filled with oil absorbed by the wick produces the light just as wealth obtained and used with virtue brings true happiness.  
  
Thaali, Kumkum and Poo - the nuptial symbol, the vermilion pottu and flowers indicate a married person.
7. Swami Vivekananda wanted the revival of the pure spirit of Hinduism as enshrined in the Upanishads and this is gradually becoming dynamic in the lives of the Hindus.

## TEMPLES AND SACRED WORSHIP

"Our whole world is a temple domed by a vast celestial heaven. Billions of stars follow the moon and pour themselves into the golden brilliance of sun-rise. The sun, rises like a luminous lingam filling the solar system with its radiant light," says Suddhananda Bharati. The beauty of the luminous lingam tingling the clouds with pink hues and bathing the sleeping world in that strange ethereal rosy glow, creates in man a sense of peace and harmony. The calmness that radiates from around and the extraordinary sense of stillness at that sacred hour creeps upon him. This magnificent beauty stretching across the sky moved the ancient rishis to prayer and meditation at the very dawn of civilisation itself. How amazing was the thought and devotion of these sages who seeing the glorious rising Sun from their woodland hermitages on the banks of the holy Ganga, first conceived the Gayatri prayer-

" Om Bhū bhuvah swah  
Tatsavitur varenyam  
Bhargo devasya dheemahi  
Dheeyo yo nah prachodayat,"

'Let me contemplate the adorable splendour of Him who created the earth, the air and the starry Spheres and sends the power of comprehension within our minds,' translates Rabindranath Tagore. This has been the transcendental guiding light to humanity down



the ages. It is an earnest prayer requesting for enlightenment, linking the present to the Vedic past. The past lives alongside the present giving the whole a gentle continuity and man even today is constantly seeking peace and happiness, despite all the tensions around him.

Places of worship provide man the rhythmic anthem of love and peace. These places are the temples referred reverentially by the Tamils as the *koyil* or *aalayam*. The *koyil* is the home of the Divine King, the Lord of the Universe and is a sanctum of peace and bliss. Saint Appar sings in one instance, "If you long for steady peace, sincerely adore, sing, pray and worship God in the temple." Dame Avvai, the grand old lady of the Sangam Age says "aalayam tholuvadu saalavum nanru", 'it is good to worship at temple,' and adds, 'never live in a village where there is no temple.'

The Hindu enshrines and worships the Almighty God in three places: firstly in his heart as the *Antar-atman*; secondly in his home as the revered household guest and lastly in the Royal Residence, the consecrated temple, as the Ruler of the Universe. The Hindu temple is thus one of the holy sanctuaries where man shares the precious moments of prayer with God. He attunes his own emotional self to noble and pure thoughts. The purpose of the temple is therefore to be near God, seek His love and to awaken greater love for him. Initially God is worshipped in His Personal form and as man's love deepens he begins to understand Him as pure Consciousness, Light and Love.

God is the power and the light that guides a person to Him. He is Omnipresent, here, there and every where. "The Kingdom of God is deep within, you," say the saints and sages. "The Divine flashes in the psychic heart like lightning in the nimbus" says the Maha Naaraayineeyam. "My heart is the grand temple and God is always present there", says Saint Tirumular while the Vedas say "Deho devaalaya prokto; jivo devasanaatana" - 'Jiva is Siva, God is enshrined in the body.' Krishna says in the Bhagaved Gita, 'out of compassion for human beings, God abiding in the Atman, destroys

the darkness born of ignorance by the Light of the lamp of wisdom.'(10-11)<sup>1</sup> These are some examples that convey this truth.

In the olden days, man was full of unquestioning faith and devotion and he built beautiful temples. The very stones speak of his reverence as he laid each, one on top of the other or chiselled them into beautiful designs. The towering gopurams or temple towers with their exquisite motifs and carvings point upwards with an amazing intensity of his aspirations, as if offering a prayer in stone to the Divine.

Shivaya Subramunya Swami says that temples, the Hindu scriptures and Sat Gurus are the three pillars of Saivism.<sup>2</sup> Each of these contain and support the great truths of the religion. "The temple is the consecrated home of Truth on the earth," in other words, temples are sacred sanctuaries where communion with God could be had. The temple is the symbol of ultimate enlightenment and the principles of its construction, the form of its architecture and detail decorations as well as the various day to day rituals that take place within its walls are aimed at achieving enlightenment or Moksha.

The religion and culture of the Hindus are centred around the temples. Being serene settings for music, song and dance, for weddings and spiritual discourses, temples mirror the life of the people. Down the ages these have also been regarded as centres of excellence for the study of fine arts, sacred architecture, engineering, medicine and sociology.

The temple is likened to the body of man and the various sanctified acts within the temple have their significant parallel in our inner world of body and mind, "ullam perun koyil oonudambu aalayam,"<sup>3</sup> says Tirumular. In another verse he stresses the importance of temple worship saying,

" Naadu nagaramum natruk koyilum  
Thedith thirindhu Sivaperumaan endru  
Paadumin, paadippanimin panintha pin  
Koodiya nenjaththu koyiolaaik kolvane,"<sup>1445</sup>



'Wander through towns, seek Him through shrines, singing Siva, Siva my Lord, and humbly offer worship and He will make your heart His temple.'<sup>4</sup>

Modern research shows us that temples act as bridges linking both religion and science. Hinduism is viewed as a religion which could be explained scientifically. As a philosophy it quenches the thirst for the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality and as a religion it is a link between God and man founded on faith and devotion and manifested through the various rites.

### TEMPLE PLAN - the principles of construction

The belief in God is basic to the Hindu Religion and man needs the temple and the images to guide his prayer and establish contact with Him. Within the temple, God is worshipped physically and through the senses but in man's inner temple deep within, He is realised through the mind. Saint Manikkavasagar explains in a psalm beginning with the words, "Mari nindre ennai mayakkidum..."<sup>5</sup> that one must see God both within and without, for He is not only the Soul of his soul - "ennul eluparam sothi," but also the Dweller in the holy shrine of Tripperunturai - "Tirupperunturai urai Sivane." These words guide one to seek God first in the temple and then with more prayer and meditation, within. The several births one takes, are the stages in the progression towards Moksha and the temple functions as a source of enlightenment helping man towards this end.

Temple architecture is an ancient art. The Vatsushastras have clearly defined the principles of temple building and to this day, these rules are closely followed. In spite of the various outward styles namely, the Dravida (South Indian), Nagara (North Indian) and Vesara (a combination of both), the basic structure is the same.

The temple is so constructed that it resembles the shape of the human body perhaps to remind man that the body is the temple of God! The various sections in the temple correspond to parts of the

body and also to the Yoga centres of consciousness in the human body.<sup>6</sup>

Human Body	Temple	Yoga Centres
1. Head	Sanctum Sanctorum,	Sahasrara, Ajna
2. Neck	Artha Mandapam	Visuddha
3. Chest	Maha Mandapam	Anaahata
4. Stomach	Stapana Mandapam	Manipura
5. Section Below	Stampa Mandapam	Svadishtaana
6. Thighs	Sabha Mandapam	Mulaadhara
7. Knees	First Entrance	
8. Lower Legs	Vasanta Mandapam	
9. Feet	Main Entrance	

The plan of the temple proper, resembles a man lying on his back with the head on the west and the feet pointing east. The main parts in a temple are the -

Moolasthaanam (sanctum sanctorum) or the Garba Graha where the moola murti is installed.

Artha Manadapam where the priests stand while performing the puja.

Maha Mandapam where the utsava murtis are placed. (utsava murtis are the images that are taken out in procession during special ceremonies).

Staapana Mandapam where the sacrificial or homa kundam is placed.

Stampa Mandapam where the Vahanam (Vehicle of the moola murti), Balipeedam (sacrificial altar) and the Kodi Stamban (flag staff) are placed.

Sabha Mandapam or Vasanta Mandapam are found in the bigger temples where religious and musical programmes are held.

Rajagopuram is the tower at the gate representing the feet and this leads into the court yards - the prakarams along which the devotee enters the mandapams.

Going to the temple is itself a ritual, in that one should cleanse oneself both inwardly and outwardly. As a first step to cleanse the mind, the devotee seeks to cleanse himself outwardly - having a bath, wearing washed garments, fasting and then walking to the temple.

One enters the temple carrying a tray of fruits, flowers, incense, coconut, camphor and silk, through the Rajagopuram which is the kingly tower, the symbol of the Cosmos. It is built tall so that one could see it from afar - a constant reminder of God. The devotee breaks the coconut here, a sacred act signifying the shattering of the ego, 'I' and 'Mine.' Since the ego acts as an obstruction in the realization of god, he is (expected) to leave behind his ego and all his worldly problems.<sup>7</sup> He circumambulates along the pathway known as the prakaras or veethys. Each temple has generally three pathways and these represent the three bodies, namely, the gross, subtle and causal. Some temples have five pathways representing the five sheaths of the body namely, anna, prana, mana, vijnaana and ananda maya koshas.

Circumambulating the temple is another ritual. While going round, the worldly thoughts are discarded one by one, concentrating on God, singing His sacred Name or singing the hymns of the Tirumurai. This physical trip from the entrance along the pathways to the hall adjoining the sanctum sanctorum, has its parallel in the psyche, namely the drawing in of the senses away from the material world.

Having gone round, generally twice before the puja and once after it, the devotee comes to the mandapam where the Kodistambam (flag staff),<sup>8</sup> the Balipeedam (sacrificial altar) and the Vahanam (vehicle) are placed. The Kodistambam consists of a flag staff and a flag made of wood and a cloth entwined from the base to the top. The flag points towards the sanctum sanctorum and the

whole represents the philosophy of Pati (God), Pasu (Soul) Paasam (Bondage). At the flag staff, the devotee prostrates surrendering mentally his ego and lower instincts at the sacrificial altar. The idea of surrendering is symbolically shown by the priest during the puja when he places a ball of cooked rice on the sacrificial altar then pushes it out, washes it, places flowers and finally waves the lighted camphor. This represents the ego in man being pushed aside, washed out and in its place, flowers offered. The devotee looks at the entwining rope of the flag which symbolises Paasam (bondage) - aanavam, kanmam and maayai - and prays that he be released from the influence of these three bondages. Next to the sacrificial altar is the vehicle of the moola murti.<sup>9</sup> The Nandi in a Sivan Temple for example represents the Soul (Pasu) that had sought union with God. The devotee wishes and prays that he be gifted like the Nandi so that his ultimate goal is realised.

It is here behind the Kodistambam that the devotee does the final namaskaaram before he leaves. The concept of Pati, Pasu, Paasam is beautifully depicted in this entire set up.

The Moolasthaanam is the sanctum sanctorum of garba graha and the moola murti is the vigraha (the image) of the presiding Deity of the temple. This image is concealed in the darkness of the room. Scientists speak of the specific relationship between the size of the image and the capacity of the sanctum sanctorum. This relationship is important because the air column inside resonates to the sound of the Pranava mantram "OM" as the priests chant. Scientific research shows that if the sanctum sanctorum is correctly built the air molecules vibrate to the maximum producing intense sound. The sanctum sanctorum thus acts as a volume resonator, the image on the pedestal as an energy reservoir, the worshippers as receivers and the air inside as a medium for the transfer of energy.

In the temple, a curtain which represents the veil of ignorance in man, is drawn across the door-way of the sanctum sanctorum before the puja. With the ringing of the temple bells, when the devotees are called to prayer, the curtain is drawn aside and with deepaaraadhanai (the showing of lighted camphor), the Deity is

revealed helping them to commune with God. The image in the sanctum sanctorum represents the Atmalingam in the cavern of man's heart reminding him of the Truth that God dwells in the heart, of each individual. It is for this reason that the sanctum sanctorum is kept dark with a lamp burning both day and night. The light represents the lamp of knowledge in the human being, which should be kept burning all the time. This is the light of the Soul, the Atmajyoti in every being. The light of knowledge drives away all the layers of ignorance that have been accumulated over the many births man has had leads him on to the light of Eternal Bliss. 'Tamasoma jyotir gamaya,' through the light of knowledge, lead us from darkness unto light,' was the earnest prayer of the Vedic rishis. The lamps of light are thus invocations for abiding knowledge.

Saint Appar sings a beautiful psalm where in he says that in the home of the body the residing God is not visible because of the veil of ignorance. Using the wick of knowledge, the lamp of the mind is lit and Siva, will be perceived.

" Udambenu manai yakaththu ullame thakaliyaaka

.....  
Kadambamaa kaalai thaathai kalaladi kaanalaame."<sup>10</sup>

The lighting of lamps in the temple and at the home shrine is thus a very significant and sacred act.<sup>11</sup>

All these sacred acts of worship performed with deep faith and devotion in the temples, home shrines or within oneself, lead man from the mundane world to the lotus feet of God. Man is a psychic being who has been seeking to adore, to praise and to worship the Almighty at every step from time immemorial. He performs a sanctified act called a puja. This is performed in the temple where the priest or pujari as he is called, does the puja or in the home shrine, where the family members perform the puja daily.

A puja is a simple offering of adoration and service to God in a spirit of self sacrifice. This is an expression of the human Soul's

ageless desire to be one with God. There are four stages or maargas in the spiritual path namely, chariyai, kiriyai, yoga and jnaana maargas, each leading to the other and finally to Moksha. Saint Tirumular describes the four stages in his Tirumantiram as,

" Kiriya is worship of Siva in Form  
Yoga of the Formless One  
Jnaana is the advanced path in fullness of time  
The adoration of the loving heart is Chariya,  
Exalted indeed it is,"(1448)

The chariyai and kiriyai maargas are purificatory and Tirumular advise one to, 'Gently light the lamp, gather fragrant flowers, humbly clean the floor, sing God's praise, count the rudraksha beads, perform abhishekam and the various other acts of temple service,' (1502) and, 'forget your worldly worries and meditate. Truly you shall attain bliss.' (1008) He adds tat jnaana is to be one with Siva - life within Life and seeking that light within Life is yoga. The external acts of investing the image with vibrant spirituality is kiriyai and to adore Siva with deep devotion is chariyai. Constant worship and adoration of Siva makes Him reside in the temple within.

For the inner development of the embodied Soul these four maargas are important. The saints and sages realised Moksha through these paths and in the process unwound the karmas of the past and learned to live fully in the present.<sup>12</sup>

The puja proper consists of pratishta or consecration, abhisheka or anointing, archanai or the offering of flowers while reciting the Name and mantrams, aarati or waving of lighted camphor, prasaadam or offering of specially prepared food and namaskaaram or obeisance. The first five acts are performed in the temple by the priest to the accompaniment of naadaswara music, drum beats of the thavil and blowing of conch shells while the devotees look on, in a prayerful attitude and finally pay their obeisance and leave. At the home shrine, the family members perform the puja, individually or together in which case one member does the puja while the others look on.

Pratishta is an invocation by which the devotee feel the living presence of God in the image in the sanctum sanctorum. He first invokes the Divine in his heart and then worships the image. In the mornings, Subrabaatham or Tiruppallieluchchi hymns are sung by which the Deity is awakened from His slumber. These songs that are sung for the purpose of waking God, are in reality, the awakening from the slumber of ignorance.

Abhishekam comes next. This is an important ceremony generally performed very early in the morning. It is a sacred act of bathing or anointing the image with panchaamirtham<sup>13</sup> - milk, honey, fruit, curd and ghee while chanting mantrams and the Name of God. The image is first bathed with water and then anointed with each, washed and finally dressed up in silk, flowers, sandal paste for archanai.

The abhisheka material have been tested and found to produce a rich negative ion after abhishekam. These ions are necessary to fix oxygen with haemoglobin in the blood. The electrical conductivity of the image also changes and repeated abhishekams maintain the charge within the sanctum sanctorum. The chanting of the mantrams plus the production of rich negative ions set the air in the sanctum sanctorum in vibration with maximum energy. The whole atmosphere is charged with the chanting of the mantrams and the singing of Tevarams.

Next comes the archanai, the adoration with flowers, kumkum, incense and mantrams with the offering of prasaadam. All this signifies the offering of oneself unto God - "I am thine; Thy will be done." Offering of flowers in reality is the offering of one's love and devotion to God. Then comes the deepaaraadhanai or aarati, the act of waving lighted camphor namely the panchaalaathi, which displaces the air and the worshipers inhale the rich negative ion accumulated in the sanctum sanctorum. Lighted camphor signifies first the burning down of the ego and desires to ashes and the total illumination of the human personality by Divine illumination. When all the desires are consumed in the flame, the Jivaatman becomes one with the Paramaatman.

As the mantrams cascade from the sanctum sanctorum, as the flowers are showered on the image, and, aarati done, the word "Arohara" reverberates through the halls of the temple charged with devotion and piety. And with that comes the namaskaaram, which is an act signifying absolute submission, as he catches a glimpse of God within, with deepaaraadhanai lighting up the sanctum sanctorum for dharshan, and the devotee prostrates by falling symbolically and the feet of the Supreme.

Finally the priest brings down the panchaalaathi with the lighted camphor that was shown in the sanctum sanctorum, to the congregation standing in the Sabha Mandapam. The devotees stretch out their hands towards the flame and quickly touch their eyes in an act of homage and identification. The abhisheka materials namely theertham (the concoction of milk, young coconut, curd etc used in the abhishekam), holy ash, sandal paste, flowers, kumkum and panchaamirtham (the mixture of all the fruits that were used in the abhishekam) are given to the devotees by the priest.

Once the main puja is over, the devotee seeks individual blessing which is a special type of archanai, where the name and the star under which he is born, is individually intoned, flowers and fruits offered and aarati done.

Pujas are broadly classified into three,<sup>14</sup> namely Niththiya puja or daily puja, Naimiththiya puja or puja done on special occasions, and Kaamiya puja or puja done for a specific reason (namely for example a yaagam for peace is a Kaamiya puja). The Niththiya puja<sup>15</sup> consists of six pujas which are performed daily in temples starting with the waking up of God known as the Tiruvanandha puja and ending with the ritual of putting Him to sleep, the Arththasaama puja. The other four are Kaalai sandhi puja, Uchchi kaala puja, saayaratcha puja and Irandaam kaala puja.

The annual festival of each temple is a very colourful ceremony lasting for a number of days culminating in the Ther or chariot festival. The beautifully attired utsava murti, representing



the main image in the sanctum sanctorum, is brought out and taken in procession in a chariot, drawn by the devotees. This signifies God Himself coming out in His full regalia to give His blessings to all. The Kathopanishad says (1.3.3) that the Lord in the chariot is the Atman, the Indweller in the Body. He is indeed the Indweller in all creation and represents the various cosmic forces at work. (See Mahotsavam - 94)

In the Nagapooshani Amman temple in Jaffna and in certain temples in South India, floating festivals are celebrated after the chariot festival. Here the special image of the Deity is taken in a boat beautifully decorated and well lit, in the temple tank or sea signifying the Truth that God is the Helmsman of all beings who set sail in the uncharted sea of life.

Besides the annual festivals, there are special abhishekams and pujas in temples dedicated to Siva, sakti, Vishnu, Ganesha and Murugan. The more important pujas in Sivan temples are Maha Sivaraatri, Panguni Uttaram, Aani Uttaram and Maargali Tiruvaadirai. (See pages - 26, 35, 63, 116). The Navaraatri Puja is a special occasion in Amman temples. (See page - 98). In temples where Ganesha is the presiding deity, Vinayaka Chaturthi puja is important and the Skanda Shasti fast and puja become important in Murugan temples. (See page - 110). Each one of these pujas has its respective rituals and modes of abhishekam.

All the pujas conducted in the temple reflect regality and they are accompanied by the naadaswara music and the blowing of the conch as befits a royal ceremony. Just as the kings hold court for their subjects, the Supreme One in His royal residence the ko-yil, holds daily court' so that the devotees or rather the subjects could come with their offerings and present their petitions. The puja that is performed is the daily court.

A deep significance is woven into the temple and the sacred acts of temple worship and this is symbolic of what should take place within oneself. As one sacrifices the ego, he purifies himself and goes deeper into himself and is able to hear the sweet guiding

voice within. With the blaze of enlightenment, the veil of ignorance is drawn and the Reality enshrined, the Atman, is realised.

***The Temple is indeed an altar raised to the Eternal soul and through worship and prayer, the intuitive Light in the Soul will naturally look for the Eternal Soul in the sacred edifice.***

## NOTES

1. Saint Pusalaar demonstrated this Truth in his life. He was a very sincere devotee of God and his one desire was to build a temple for Him. He accomplished this desire by building the temple in the cavern of his heart laying stone upon stone with deep devotion and prayer. Tradition has it that the Kadava King had built a huge temple in Kaanchipuram and the date for the consecration ceremonies for both the temples coincided. Both were devout devotees but God had appeared in a dream to the King saying that He will be attending the ceremonies at Pusalaar's temple! and asked the king to change his date!! thereby showing the world not only the importance of temples but also that each one could build the sacred shrine within himself. The story goes on to say that the King was intrigued to know that some one else had also built a temple and wished to see this construction. He went to Pusalaar's village but did not see any new temple there. He met Pusalaar and heard from him that the Temple he had built was deep within him! The King realising that here was a true devotee of God, fell at his feet and asked for his blessings.
2. Scriptures are the written record of Truth and the sat Guru is the physical embodiment of Truth. Scriptures may be likened to a divine map, chartered by God or by previous pathfinders and leading mankind to God through the trackless wilderness of earthly experience. The sat Guru is one who has realised God within himself. Having been to the journey' end he can guide our own journey.

3. உள்ளம் பெருங்கோயில் ஊனுடம்பு ஆலயம் வள்ளற் பிரானார்க்கு வாய்கொ புரவாசல் தெள்ளத்தெளிவார்க்குச் சீவன் சிவலிங்கங்கள் புலனைந்தும் காளா மணிவிளக்கே.

இந்த உடல் ஓர் ஆலயம். அவ்வாலயத்தின் முதல் கோபுரத்தின் கீழ் நுழைவாயில் போன்றது நம் வாய்; நம் உள்ளம் தான் மூலஸ்தானம் - கருவறை. அந்த மூலஸ்தானத்தில் வழிபடு தெய்வமாக சிவலிங்கம் - சீவன் என்னும் உயிர். அந்தத் தெய்வச் சிலையருகே ஒளிமயமான ஜந்து திரிகளைக்கொண்ட விளக்கே நம் புலன்கள். “ஆகவே வெளியிலுள்ள கற்கோயிலை மட்டும் சுற்றிக்கொண்டு கும்பிடாமல், உங்கள் உடல் ஆலயத்தினுள்ளே உள்ளகருவறையில் வீற்றிருக்கும் உள்ளொளியைக் காணுக,” என்று இராமலிங்க சுவாமிகள் எடுத்துப்பாடியுள்ளார்.

It is also said that the four components of the vilakku that is the oil lamp, namely the lamp itself, the oil, the wick and the light are analogous to the four fundamental objects of Hindu life - dharma, artha, kaama and moksha. The lamp filled with oil absorbed by the wick produces light just as wealth acquired by right means and used for good purposes brings about true happiness and God's blessings leading one to Moksha.

4. நாடு நகரமும் நற்றிருக் கோயிலுந் தேடித் திரிந்து சிவபெரு மான்என்று பாடுமின் பாடிப் பணிமின் பணிந்தபின் கூடிய நெஞ்சத்துக் கோயிலாய்க் கொள்வனே.
5. உறிநின்று என்னுள் எழுபரஞ் சோதி ; சிவபெரு மானே திருப்பெருந்துறையுறை சிவனே.
6. Courtesy - Sri Senpaga vinayakar Temple - Maha Kumbabishega Malar - 1983.
7. The hard shell of the coconut represents the ego and the kernel represents the Soul - the Atman. The Atman can be realised only when the ego is removed.

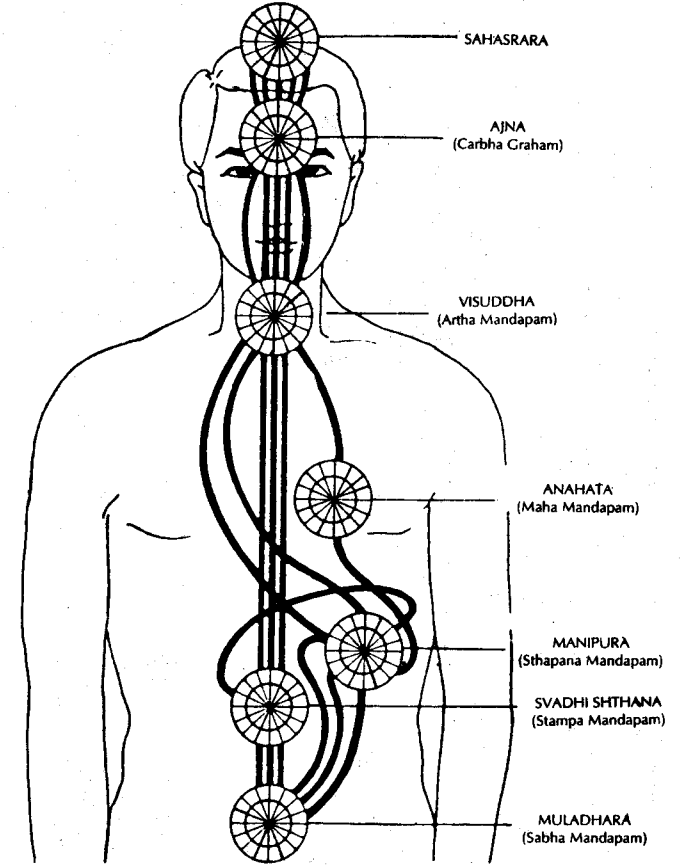
8. The flag staff is made of wood and consists of the bottom which is square called the Brahma paakam; next is the Vishnu paakam followed by the Rudra paakam which is octagonal. Then comes the stem or Thuvaja sthambam, the pedestal and finally the flag. The philosophy behind this is that knowledge and ego are together but when jnaana becomes predominant, the ego is subdued. At the sacrificial altar one is expected to surrender all beastly qualities in order that the Soul is purified.
9. Each deity has a vehicle namely the Nandi or Bull is Siva's vehicle, the Simha or Lion is Parvati's, the Garuda is Vishnu's; the Mouse is Ganesha's, the Peacock is Murugan's etc.
10. உடம்பெனு மணையகத்து உள்ளமே தகளியாக
11. Naminandhi Adigal was a devotee who knew the importance of lighting the temple lamps. On one occasion he wished to light the lamps in the temple at Tiruvaroor and he did so with God's grace using water for ghee, to the consternation of the Jains. The story reads that he had asked his neighbours who were Jains for ghee but they scoffed at him by saying, 'To Siva, who has fire in His hand, lamps are superficial; if you wish to light the lamps use water.' He did so and the lamps burnt brilliantly. Naminandhi's life was a striking demonstration of profound faith in God and complete resignation to His will - he accomplished the impossible.
12. Saint Appar in one instance emphasises the importance of service and says -  
if you want to get rid of agitation and enjoy peace, visit temples before dawn, clear the precincts, gather flowers, string them into garlands and adorn the Deity, feast your eyes on It and derive peace.

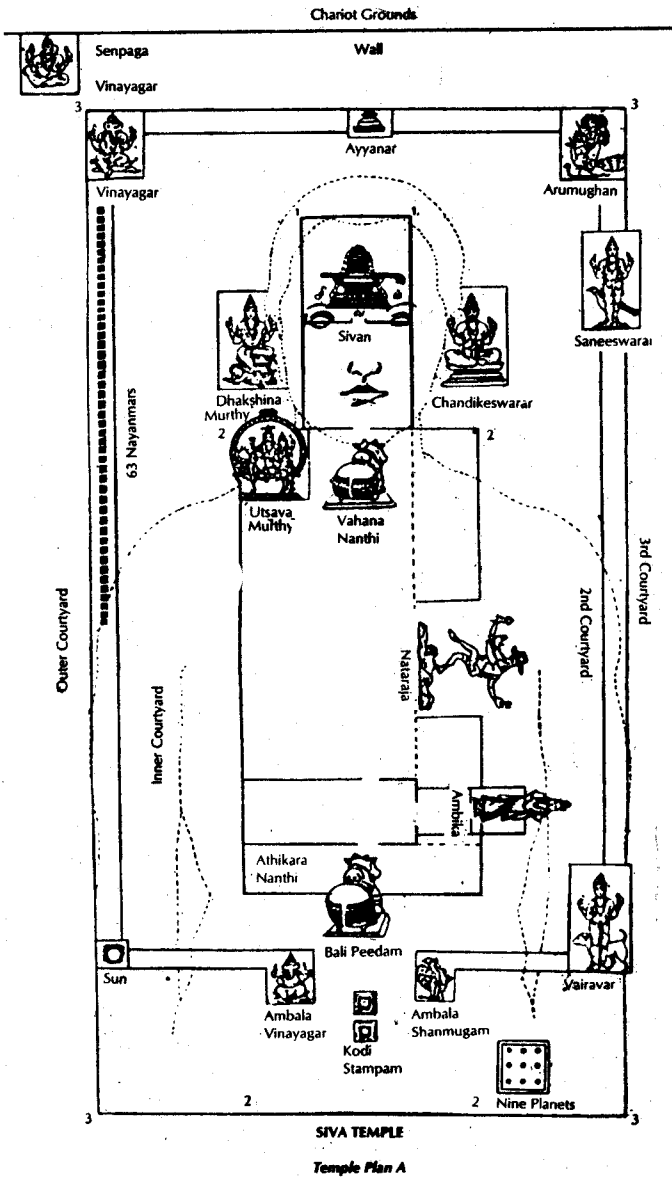
நிலைபெறுமா நெண்ணுதியே நெஞ்சே நீவா  
நித்தலும் எம்பிரானுடைய கோயில் புக்குப்

புலர்வதன் முன்னலகிட்டு மெழுக்குமிட்டுப்  
பூமாலை புனைந்தேத்திப் புகழ்ந்து பாடித்  
தலையினாற் கும்பிட்டு கூத்துமாடிச்  
சங்கரா சய போற்றி போற்றி என்றும்  
அலைபுனல் சேர் செஞ்சடை எம்மாதி என்றும்  
ஆரூரா வென்றென் றேயலறா நில்வே.

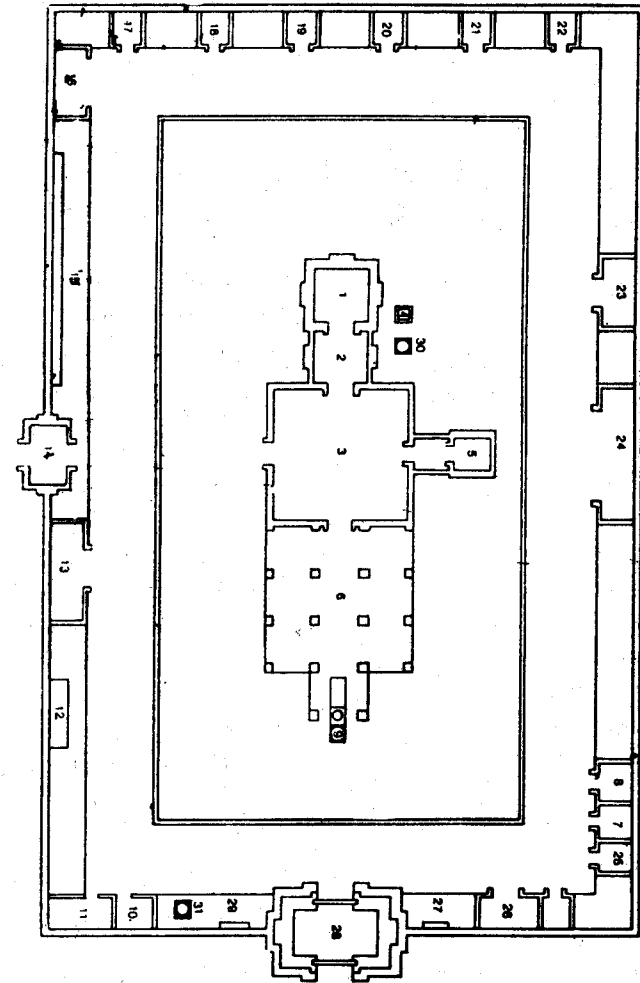
13. The panchaamirtham is symbolic of five internal faculties in man, namely manas (mind), budhi, (intelligence), chitta (sub conscious mind), ahankaara (ego) and hridaya (emotion). While performing the ritual we should also mentally perform them and discipline the mind.
14. நித்திய, நைமித்திய, காமிய பூசைகள்.
15. திருவனந்த பூசை, காலை சந்திப் பூசை, உச்சிக் காலப் பூசை, சாயரட்சப் பூசை, இரண்டாங் காலப் பூசை, அர்த்த சாமப் பூசை).

YOGA CENTRES OF CONSCIOUSNESS





### கோவில் அமைப்பு Temple Complex



Courtesy - Sri Senpaga Vinayakar Temple Malar 1983



- |                           |                       |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. கர்ப்பக்கிரகம்         | 1. Garba Graham       |
| 2. அர்த்த மண்டபம்         | 2. Artha Mandapam     |
| 3. மஹா மண்டபம்            | 3. Maha Mandapam      |
| 4. சண்டேசுவரர் கோவில்     | 4. Sandeswarar Temple |
| 5. அம்பாள் கர்ப்பக்கிரகம் | 5. Ambal Garba Graham |
| 6. நிருத்த மண்டபம்        | 6. Nritha Mandapam    |
| 7. பள்ளியறை               | 7. Palliarai          |
| 8. நடராஜர் ஆலயம்          | 8. Nataraja Temple    |
| 9. ஸ்தம்ப மண்டபம்         | 9. Stampa Mandapam    |
| 10. பாக சாலை              | 10. Pagasalai         |
| 11. களஞ்சியம்             | 11. Kalanchiyam       |
| 12. நால்வர்               | 12. Four Achariyas    |
| 13. பக்தாலயம்             | 13. Baktalayam        |
| 14. அம்பாள் கோபுரம்       | 14. Ambal Gopuram     |
| 15. சந்தான குரவர்         | 15. santhana Kuravar  |
| 16. வாகன சாலை             | 16. Vahanasalai       |
| 17. பிள்ளையார்            | 17. Pillaiyar         |
| 18. சோமாஸ்கந்தர்          | 18. Somaskandar       |
| 19. சந்திரசேகரர்          | 19. Chanthrasekar     |
| 20. பிட்சாடனர்            | 20. Pichadanar        |
| 21. மகாவிஷ்ணு             | 21. Maha Vishnu       |
| 22. சுப்பிரமணியர்         | 22. Subramaniam       |
| 23. ஆகம நூல் நிலையம்      | 23. Agama Library     |
| 24. வசந்த மண்டபம்         | 24. Vasantha Mandapam |
| 25. பைரவர் ஆலயம்          | 25. Vairavar Temple   |
| 26. யாகசாலை               | 26. Yagasalai         |
| 27. சந்திரன்              | 27. Chanthiran (Moon) |
| 28. கோபுரவாசல்            | 28. Gopura Entrance   |
| 29. சூரியன்               | 29. Suriyan (Sun)     |
| 30. கிணறு                 | 30. Well              |
| 31. கிணறு                 | 31. Well              |

## RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THAI PONGAL

As the sun makes its overtures in the East, dispelling the nestling darkness of night, Thai Pongal or Makara Sankaraanti dawns exerting an indescribable sense of hope and wonder in mankind. At that hour of dawn, man feels an infusion of delight at the beauty of the pale rose streaks of sunrise with its mystical veil-like fine powder which seems to sift down from the heavens, as though the firmament is being sprinkled with some divine elixir.

Man is imbued with a sense of eager expectancy as Thai Pongal draws near. ' "Thai piranthaal vali pirakkum," when the month of Thai dawns, times will be propitious,' is a saying that has the power to thrill human kind with its hidden possibilities and who hopefully believe that these possibilities will translate themselves into reality. Man lives in the hope of achieving something more and Pongal not only connotes this but also conveys to humanity the message of peace, unity and brotherhood, for a better tomorrow.

There is no other festival as important as Thai Pongal to the farmer who shares his happiness with nature. On this day when the Sun enters the house of Makaram or Capricorn, taking a northerly course in heaven called the Uttaraayana, the farmer offers the first fruits of his harvest as thanks-giving to Him who, in the form of rain and sunshine, land and manure, animals and implements, gave him a bountiful harvest. Hence this day is also referred to as "Ulavar

Naal,"<sup>1</sup> the sacred day for the Farmer. It is believed that from Vedic times, celebrations and religious observances have been associated with the advent of the seasons marked by the apparent movement of the Sun. After a period of dark and gloomy weather generally accompanied by hardship during the months of November and December, the earth begins to smile and a poet describes:

" Thai magalin pudhukkolam pankajam pol malarkaiyile  
Aadhavanai namaskariththu kaikooopi pongiduvom,"<sup>2</sup>

'When the month of Thai dawns and blooms out like the lotus, we raise our hands in worship to the Sun and prepare the Pongal.' The cycle of life and renewal is determined by the Sun and is distinctly implanted in nature, influencing even man's thoughts. There comes the change of seasons - the season of sowing and another of harvesting. And Thai Pongal marks the beginning of the harvest season with the onset of bright and sunny weather.

In ancient times this day marked the New Year, says a poet:

" ..... pallaayirathu aandai  
Tamilar vaalvil puththaandu thai mudal naal  
Pongal nannaal,"<sup>3</sup>

'for thousand years the New Year in the lives of the Tamils was on the first of the month of Thai.'

Prior to Pongal is the month of Maargali which is of great importance to the Hindus. Throughout the period of Maargali, special rituals are performed daily in all Hindu homes. Every morning at the main entrance to the house, the threshold is specially prepared for Ganesha, who is invoked to protect the inmates of the home throughout this month and He is referred to as Maargali Pillaiyar. In the villages, before sunrise, a layer of fresh cowdung is applied in thick swirls on this spot and the mistress of the home draws the traditional kolam.<sup>4</sup> In the centre of the kolam is placed a tiny symbol of Pillaiyar made out of fresh cowdung or turmeric in a conical shape decorated with a strand of grass. These are collected and on Thai Pongal day or the day after that, a

special pongal, the Pillaiyar Pongal<sup>5</sup> is done, offerings made and then they are immersed in the river or sea.

The holy day of Thai Pongal or Thaith Thirunaal or Thaith Thingal, as it is variously called, marks the end of the month of Maargali and the beginning of the harvest season. The farmers in ancient agricultural communities offered newly harvested grains to the Sun to invoke its blessings and to this day these rituals are followed religiously. The farmers work hard in the fields from dawn to sundown for several months taking care of their crop and after the long season of rain, during which the grain grows, the sun shines to ripen the heads of grain. The farmers' hearts leap with joy on seeing the abundance of the harvest and following this, the ritual of cooking the first sheaf of grain and the offering of that cooked rice in a spirit of gratitude, marks Thai Pongal. In those communities, the harvesting of the farmer's food grain was an important event, for it ensured survival of his tribe. Pongal occurs at a time when the barns and granaries of the farmers are brimful after a bountiful harvest. At this time of the year, Nature in all its verdant glory mirrors the happiness and joy of the people. Harvest time is also a time to consider past successes and plan future triumphs, an occasion for evaluation and preparation. The end of a season's toil which has involved the entire farming community makes an ideal break before beginning again, a time of thanks-giving and festivity. Thanks is offered to the Sun, to one's fellow beings and to the draught animals for having helped to make the harvest bountiful. Mother Earth is also cleaned after the harvest and made new in the agricultural cycle, for the time of harvest is also the time when the earth wakes up to a new life after the cold months of November and December.

Pongal or sweetened milk rice is cooked with the newly harvested grain, in a new clay pot placed on the newly prepared hearth in the inner courtyard or garden of the house or in the fields. The hearth is encircled with a kolam which sanctifies it. The pot is decorated with the strands of grass, ginger and saffron leaves all entwined into a string and tied round the neck of the pot with mango leaves hanging from this string. This symbolises auspiciousness and prosperity. The pot is filled with milk and placed on the

hearth by the head of the household assisted by his wife. It is said that when the milk boils and spills over a particular side, that would be a reflection of what the year would be for the family - for example to spill over to the East is said to be lucky! When the milk boils, the householder takes a handful of rice grains, circles the pot three times and drops the grain into the boiling milk amidst the din of fire crackers. The wife then completes the cooking rituals and the family offers the Pongal together with the fruits, flowers, sugar cane, etc, from the fields or garden as prasaadam to the Sun, singing, "Siva Suryaaya Siva Suryaaya Nama OM."

The farmers on the following day celebrate Maattu Pongal, the pongal for the cattle, the draught animals which helped in ploughing the fields, providing the milk and helping to draw the carts through the year. Man shows his gratitude to the animals by cleaning the cowshed, smearing a layer of fresh cowdung on which the kolam is drawn, bathing and adorning the animals with garlands, kumkum, sandal paste etc. Pongal is next prepared followed by worship and thanks-giving. The pongal is then offered to the animals.

There is a deep spiritual significance in the worship of the Sun, the harbinger of life and vitality, light and warmth. The Vedic Rishis, in the morning of the world, sang the Vedic hymns in praise of the various aspects of Nature suffusing them with deep inner meanings and venerating them as God. The Sun is described as the Giver of light and life asking for nothing in return. Mother Nature is continuously giving and making man's life easier. Man too has his part to play and his contributions to make. When he is engaged in these acts of giving and caring he becomes purer, happier and selfless, escaping from the conflicts of selfishness. Hinduism looks upon life as a continuous act of service and sacrifice - the giving back of one's best in return for what has been gained from life. And of the festivals, it is Thai Pongal that reflects man's real gratitude to Mother Nature for the bountiful harvest.

Pongal originated as a harvest festival heralding the new season but today the rituals of lighting the hearth, placing of the pongal-pot on the fire, adding the newly harvested grain and finally

offering the cooked rice, all form the ritualistic aspect of the morning prayer, the Sandhyopaasana<sup>6</sup> on Pongal day. This form of worship is not merely a method of venerating the Sun but also venerating the environment and nature on which man is dependent for his very existence. The ancient Hindus realised that nature and environment needed man's care and through these rituals he was able to take care of his surroundings and at the same time develop his spiritual life and find peace and harmony.

May the festivities of Thai Pongal usher in joy and cheer, hope and prosperity, knowledge and peace dispelling the darkness of ignorance as we cook the pongal and raise our hands in worship to Surya Bhagavan.

#### NOTES

1. உழவர் நாள்
2. தை மகளின் புதுக்கோலம் பங்கஜம் போல் மலர்கையிலே ஆதவனை நமஸ்கரித்து கை கூப்பி பொங்கிடுவோம்.
3. .... பல்லாயிரத்தாண்டாய் தமிழர் வாழ்வல் புத்தாண்டு தை முதல் நாள் பொங்கல் நன்னாள்.
4. The kolam is an ancient Hindu art handed down from mother to daughter. It is a design drawn on the floor which rice flour and the traditional patterns consist of dots, a series of them guiding the artist to form the pattern. On completion it is a beautiful work of art sanctifying the area on which it is drawn.
5. In olden days these effigies are collected in a specially made toy cart and after the Pillaiyar Pongal immersed in the sea, river, pond or temple tank.
6. Sandhyopaasana is derived from the word Sandhi - the meeting point of night and morning, forenoon and twelve noon and dusk and night.

## MAHA SIVARAATRI - Its significance

The great night consecrated to Siva is Maha Sivaratri. This Sivaratri or Sivacaturdasi vrata as it is also known, is the important fast which falls on amavasai, the night of the 14th day of the dark fortnight in Maasi.

It was on this night that Siva revealed Himself as the lingam in a column of light in Tiruvanaamalai to dispel all doubts as to who is the Almighty God. Tradition has it that a dispute arose between Brahma the Creator, and Vishnu the Preserver, of the Universe as to who is the greater of the two - was it the one who created or the one who preserved. This argument was solved by the Almighty Siva, who manifested Himself as a huge column of Light rising from a bottomless base to limitless heights of this universe saying, 'Seek the beginning and the summit; who ever could find the one end would be the greater of the two.' Brahma took the form of a swan and flew upwards to seek the summit, while Vishnu took the form of a boar and burrowed downwards to seek the beginning. They were both seeking with pride and arrogance that great Light which is referred to as having neither a beginning nor an end - 'Aathiyum anthamum illaa arum perum jyothi.'<sup>1</sup> And they failed. Siva appeared through this effulgence as the Sivalingam and granted them Illumination.

Saint Appar refers to this incident where Siva saying, 'I am here,' appeared in the form of the lingam between Vishnu and Brahma as,

" .....  
Ingutren andru lingaththe thondrinaan  
Pongu senchadai punniyamoorthiye,"<sup>2</sup>

and goes on to speak of the Sivalingam as,

" Sokkanaintha suderoli vannan; ulaka moorthy oli nira vannan."<sup>3</sup>

And continues with deep devotion saying,  
'I sought Him whom Vishnu and Brahma sought in vain and I found Him in my very being.'<sup>4</sup>

This merely shows that the pride of learning and possessions as depicted by Brahma and Vishnu respectively, are inimical to the Realisation of the Absolute.

The lingam from which Siva revealed Himself on Maha Sivaratri, is the Sivalingam - the perfect symbol of the formless all pervading Divine spirit which is discernible in all the operations of the phenomenal universe. "The lingam is 'a sign', 'an image' of the rhythmic creation and destruction of the universe which expresses itself in forms and periodically returns to its primal preformal unity before being reborn," describes Eliade.<sup>5</sup> The Sivaagamas give the etymological meaning of lingam as, 'All the existents get absorbed in it at the time of destruction and all the existents evolve from it at the time of creation.'<sup>6</sup>

The concept of the lingam as known to us, came down from the Indus Valley Culture and during the Vedic age this concept was beautifully incorporated as the symbolic expression of transcendentalism, the Infinite being rendered in the formless symbol.<sup>7</sup>

God in reality is formless, but yet all forms are His forms. The Lingotbhava form is symbolic of both His formlessness and form, explaining the transcendental essence of God. It is symbolic of form, because it has the oval shape, and it is formless because it has neither head nor limb. The very conception of a lingam denotes something which has neither a beginning nor an end. The All-pervading formless Siva as seen in the lingam is the ever pure undying Soul, residing in the chamber of the heart. He is the Indweller, the Atmalingam deep within each one. He is Omnipresent and All-pervasive. By the very nature of these qualities, He cannot have any form. Hence He is formless, but takes a form in order to bless us mortals.

Siva is the pure, changeless, attributeless consciousness. He cannot be seen but He can be realised in the heart through devotion, fasts, meditation and naamasmarana. Adi Shankara in the Linga Ashtakam reverentially sings - 'I always bow before that Sadasiva lingam, which is adored by Brahma, Vishnu and the other suras, and which is praised by pure and holy speeches and which destroys the cycle of births and deaths,

" Brahma muraari sura arirchitha lingam  
Nirmala bhaashita shobitha lingam  
Janmaja dhukka vinaashaka lingam  
Thathpranayaami Sadhasiva lingam."

The lingam is the symbol of worship on Sivaraatri and all the observances are connected to it. Legend has linked the story of a hunter with Maha Sivaraatri. The hunter who had lost his way on his return journey home, decided that he would climb a tree and remain there during the night for fear of beasts. He had not eaten the whole day and to keep awake he kept plucking and throwing down leaves from the tree which happened to be a Vilva tree. It is said that these leaves and dew drops fell on a lingam under the tree. Unknowingly the hunter had performed both abhishekam and archana with dew drops and vilva leaves! This incident is said to have taken place on Maha Sivaraatri and the hunter duly blessed, for he had fulfilled the all night vigil and the worship of the Sivalingam.

In the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata, Bhishma resting on his bed of arrows, refers to this incident during the course of his discourse on Dharma, to all his relatives on the Kurukshetra battlefield, as the Sivaraatri fast that King Chitrabaanu was observing. Chitrabaanu is said to have been the hunter who had unconsciously observed the Maha Sivaraatri fast in his previous birth and was now consciously observing it.

The inner spiritual significance of the fast could be gleaned from this simple story. The hunter of this sacred episode, is the Atman or the embodied Soul. The individual goes out hunting, on his ceaseless quest after worldly pleasures. He gets tired and frustrated by failures and hardships to gain eternal happiness through material enjoyments. He falls asleep, withdrawing himself from worldly pursuits; he fasts, giving up materialism and wakes up to find that he is engulfed by the forest of darkness, namely ignorance. Through fear he climbs the tree of Jnaana-sthaana where he diligently keeps vigil all through the night performing perpetual worship of Siva. This vigilance over oneself and one's senses is necessary if one is to be alive to one's inner Reality which is generally clouded by ignorance. The devotee observes the fast that is upavaasa on this day. This is abstaining from food, fasting in the outward sense but turning inward and mentally living near God in the esoteric sense. When one consciously controls the basic urge of hunger and engages in prayer and worship - physically, verbally and mentally, one tends to move up the ladder of spirituality. In the night of ignorance, man does not see the Atman within and the raatri of this great fast reminds him of this veil. He turns towards God through repeated prayers and exhortations to remind himself of the knowledge that God is the only Reality.

The night of the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight is also significant because it is the Amaavaasai night when the Sun and the moon dwell together. In the spiritual sense, the Sun and the moon connote Paramaatman and Jivaatman respectively. Through fast, vigilance, prayer and meditation on this great amavasai night dedicated to Siva, man should free himself from the shackles of the world and thereby attain Oneness with the Almighty.



The Sivaraatri fast is the most austere and rigorous of all the fasts and observances of the Hindus. The devotee fasts the whole day and engages himself in worship of God. The vigil at night is all important in this fast; the night is stressed because it signifies the darkness of the world of senses and through fast and prayer the devotee passes from darkness to Light; from night to day.

The Maha Sivaraatri pujas consists of abhishekams, archana is and naamasmaranam, performed in the four watches or yaamas of the night from dusk to dawn. Siva is considered to be 'Tejo-maya' always 'boiling' with the fire of tapas. Hence 'abhisheka priyah Sivah' is said of Him. He is thus propitiated by abhishekam.

Abhishekam consists of anointing the deity with materials like milk, curd, ghee for the first yaama, five varieties of fruits, the panchaamirtam for the second yaama, honey for the third yaama and perfumed water for the last yaama. Milk, honey, fruit, curd and ghee are symbolic of the five internal faculties which sustain the Jiva, namely, manas (mind), buddhi (intellect), chitta (sub-conscious mind), ahankaara (ego) and hridaya (emotion). Through external abhishekams, the devotee should gradually turn inwards and through the five faculties observe internal abhishekam. It is interesting to note that materials like water, milk, curd, ghee, sandal-paste, honey, fruits, perfumed water used for abhishekam of the lingam or any deity, have been tested and found to produce a rich negative ion concentration after abhishekam. Repeated abhishekams create an electrical charge in the lingam or deity and this energy plus the negative ions are inhaled by the devotees during arati with camphor when the air within the sanctum sanctorum is dispelled into the hall. (See page 14).

Abhishekams are followed by archana is, the floral offerings of lotus, thulasi, vilva and nandiyavatta respectively at each yaama. Of these the sacred vilva is the most important and most effective of the offerings on Maha Sivaraatri. The words, "eka vilvam sivaarpanam," tell us that even a single vilva leaf is sufficient for this Siva puja and if offered with a full heart and a devoted mind is sufficient to ward off "trijanma paapam," the sins of three births.

Of the abhishekams and pujas, the Lingotbhava abhishekam and puja are the most important aspect of the Sivaraatri puja. The Lingotbhava murti which is installed in the niche in the outer wall of the sanctum sanctorum in a Sivan Temple, is the object of veneration at the midnight yaama. The Lingotbhava murti is depicted as emerging out of the lingam with the top half of the head and the bottom half of the legs cut off. The axe and the deer are seen carved while a swan in flight at the top of the lingam and a boar burrowing the earth at the bottom, are also depicted. This depicts the story where Brahma and Vishnu took the forms of swan and boar, to look for the summit and the base of the column of Light. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity in the Lingotbhava murti is the rare combination of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, the conception of the creator, preserver and destroyer all in one; this clearly shows the tatvam that God is one, Full and All-pervading. ' "Ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti," Truth is one but forms are many,' is the Upanishadic saying.

As one watches these ceremonies, the Lingotbhava murti appears to grow upward and downward - a strange experience which could be attributed to the skill of the artist who sculptured this effect through subtle mouldings.<sup>8</sup>

The Lingotbhava puja is followed by the last yaama puja. At this last yaama, the slender streak of the first moon in its last phase disappears from darkness by joining the resplendent rising Sun. This is symbolic of the illumination, the Moksha one achieves - where the Jivaatman the moon, merges with the Paramaatman the Sun, on this Amaavaasai thithi.

We see that Sivaraatri is a perfect fast. Constant vigilance is imposed on the mind; there has to be a puja, consisting of abhishekams and archana is every three hours. These external abhishekams and archana is lead one on to internal abhishekam which is done with pure love and bhakti to the Atma lingam. By the observances of fasts and pujas, man is awakened to the supreme purpose in life. The human being has his life on earth to work out

his karma, fulfil his destiny and through protracted saadhana, he understands the Divinity within him. He is then, truly in tune with God, for his mind melts in the cosmic mind.

Thus when one analyses the arduous fast, one could say that the observance of Sivaraatri is a fore-runner of one's intense and constant saadhana for God realisation. Man's whole life on this earth could be likened to the raatri. By observing vigil during this raatri of the worldly life in which one tends to get enmeshed, man is made to realise the dangers of getting unduly involved and thereby forgets the real purpose of his life in this world. Instead of looking for happiness in external objects, these fasts help to look inward. Repeating God's name, and the Panchaakshara mantram, performing abhishekams and archana with the vision of His beautiful form in the mind, is indeed a mighty purifying effect on any devotee.

May all the aspiring Souls in the world be divinely inspired in order that they may understand the spiritual lesson and the significance of this grand Sivaraatri fast thereby enabling them to reach their ultimate destiny.

#### NOTES

1. ஆதியும் அந்தமும் இல்லா அரும் பெருஞ் சோதி - the first line of the Tiruvem paavai hymns sung by Saint Manikkavasagar.
2. செங்க ணானும் பிரமனுந் தம்முளே  
எங்குந் தேடி திரிந்தவர் காண்கிலர்  
இங்குந்நேனென்றி லிங்கத்தே தோன்றினான்  
பொங்கு செஞ்சடைப் புண்ணிய மூர்த்தியே”
3. சொக்கணைந்த சுடரொளி வண்ணன்; உலக மூர்த்தி ஒளிநிற வண்ணன்.
4. திருமாலொடு நான்முகனும் தேடித் தேடொண்ணாத் தேவனை  
என்னுள்ளே தேடிக் கண்டு கொண்டேன்.”

5. This could be compared to the glacial ages, the four periods that is spoken of in Geography corresponding to the yugas when everything lies dormant at the end of a yuga - the primal preformal form which comes back to life and the whole is reborn.
6. Subrahedaagama 33:16-2a
7. To the Vedic rishi, the formless is the lingam and tradition has it that they used the smooth egg shaped stones untouched by human craftsmen as the symbol of worship and placed them under trees supported by the form of a serpent. The stone symbolises the first germ, the egg of the universe, the tree with its branches and leaves is the universe itself and the serpent symbolises re-incarnation, the process by which the embodied Soul evolves. The lingam, tree and serpent represent the birth and evolution of the Universe in the macrocosm and the embodied Soul in the microcosm.
8. Zimmer a German art critique refers to an experience he felt on seeing the Lingotbhava moorthy at Musee Guiment in Paris, and his theory is based on the phenomenon of the growing and expanding form created by the artist.

## MAASI MAGHAM - The Sacred Bath

The ancient Hindu shastras speak of many ways of washing away the sins one may have collected during his sojourn on earth. Washing one's sins inwardly has its outward expression as bathing in holy waters of rivers, temple tanks or sea. In the month of Maasi, under the asterism Magha, the time is considered very auspicious for bathing in sacred waters and worshipping God. Once every twelve years, a rare and auspicious time occurs when Jupiter is in the Vrishaba raashi and at the same time, the Sun occupies the Mesha raashi on a full moon day in the asterism Magha. This marks the Maha Magha festival or the Kumbha Mela in the month of Maasi. This day is observed with great reverence in Kumbhakonam, Haridwar, Sangam (Allahabad) in India and in Sri Lanka, at the Mutthumari Amman Temple in Matale.

Shrines, sacred tanks and rivers are all centres of spiritual energy where a sincere devotee feels the invisible presence of God. This is due to the spiritual vibrations that have been invested in these centres by the spiritual current of millions of devotees flocking there with faith and devotion, year in and year out, day in and day out. On normal days itself these vibrations are felt; more so on certain periods of time when there are rare conjunctions of planets as in the month of Maasi when Maasi Magham occurs.

In India, especially in Kumbhakonam, Maha Magham is celebrated with deep sanctity and is considered unique and unparalleled in merit. Legend has linked an unusual story of Maha Magham to the Shrine of Kumbhakonam. It is said that when the ice of the glacial age melted during the Pralaya, the seeds of the next cycle of creation were preserved in an Amrita Kalasa, the vessel of Ambrosia. This pot was closed and sealed and was said to have floated for a long time on the waters of the Pralaya and finally when the waters subsided, the pot (kumbha) came to rest in a tilted (konam) position at a spot which is now the sacred Shrine of Kumbhakonam. The seal broke off and the nectar flowed out into a pool, the Amritavaapi, the theertham of the temple. And it is to this sacred tank that thousands of devotees flock each year, more so once in twelve years, to bathe in the holy waters, fast, worship and meditate in the temple. At Sangam, the Kubha Mela is celebrated once in twelve years during the period of Maasi Magham with deep piety concluding in the Mela, the festival. It is believed that when one sees millions and millions of devotees in one spot, it is very sacred and auspicious, creating spiritual vibrations.

"The real Maasi Magham is inside you", says a sage, tracing the story of the Amrita Kalasa floating on the waters of the deluge as taking place within each person. "The immortal Soul of man is the Amrita Kalasa and at the time of birth it rests in the sacred kshetra of the heart, the inner hridaya. This is symbolically, the Amritavaapi in the Anaahatha Chakra. The Lord of your being Antaryaamin, rules there. With His Grace the string that binds the Kalasa is broken and one could dip into the pool of water, the pool of immortality," says Swami Sivananda. One should avail oneself of this opportunity and take a dip in the sacred water. In the inner realm, the sanctified bath is through meditation, in the inner holy water. This will help to break the 'cord of the Kalasa,' namely the bonds of samsara and grant immortality.

It is understood that in ancient days on such occasions, when pilgrims flocked with faith and devotion to take a dip in the holy water, these centres were converted into spiritual centres with the



sages presiding over the discourses. The pilgrims were mainly householders and needed these spiritual guidelines which they are said to have received with reverence. Today such spiritual settings are no more and the scene has changed but the bath and fast are still observed with piety and the surging crowds carry with them vibrations of devotion and spirituality. The rare conjunction of planets manifest a Divine sakti and help in the development of spirituality.

A bath cleanses outwardly and the Maasi Magham observances consist of a bath in silence in the sacred waters of the temple ponds or rivers. After the bath and wearing washed garments one sits quietly performing japam, gradually concentrating on Him reflecting on the inner Maasi Magha bath of purification.

In Sri Lanka, in all Sivan Temples special pujas are performed on this day. But in Matale, the Muththumaari Amman Temple is the venue of the final Mahotsavam when Devi rides the chariot in all Her splendour accompanied by four other chariots carrying the temple Deities. This 'pancha-ratha pavani,' is a magnificent scene set amidst the verdant hills of Lanka emphasising not the sacred bath as in the Maasi Magha observances but that of Devi, the presiding Deity of the Plantation people of Sri Lanka.

## PANGUNI UTTARAM

Observances of fasts, temple worship, prayer, meditation, naama japam, service, caring and sharing for others, are some of the more important practices entrusted by tradition to a Hindu. These practices though generally undertaken for material benefits, also lead one to a higher position in life, giving a sense of spiritual achievement. In the month of Panguni under the asterism Uttaram, it is said that Siva manifesting Himself as Kalyana Sundarar wedded Meenakshi, the daughter of the King of Madurai. This gives the Hindus an opportunity to fast and rejoice, inspiring and deepening their religious fervour.

The Puranic story reads that the King of Madurai had no children of his own and prayed for a child. He undertook a great fast and performed a huge yaagam in the month of Adi under the asterism Puram and through the fire, Goddess Parvathy manifested as a baby girl. Since she came into the Pandyan family whose emblem was the fish and since she also had beautiful eyes, she was called Meenakshi. She grew up into a beautiful and erudite valiant princess who conquered many kingdoms and is said to have gone to Mount Kailash to challenge the Lord of Kailash. There when she saw Him she became completely subdued and totally feminine.<sup>1</sup>

She was directed to go back to Madurai by the Lord of Kailash, who came down on Panguni Uttaram to wed her. This event has

been recorded by Sage Paranjothi in his celebrated work, the Tiruvilaadat Puranam as:

" Sutru naan maraikalaarppa thurian changa menga  
Katra naan mukaththon velvich sadangu nool varaindha maatraal  
Muttra mangala naan saaththi muludhula keenral sengai  
Patrinan patrivaarkke veedarul paramayogi."<sup>2</sup>

This verse describes the wedding scene very eloquently - 'In the wedding hall amidst the chanting of the four Vedas, blowing of the conch shells and in the presence of Agni in the homam kindled by Brahma, the Lord in accordance with the shastras tied the nuptial cord round the neck of His Bride the Virgin, yet the Mother of all, and clasped Her hand.'

The poet goes on to describe the Bridegroom Kalyana Sundarar, who as Sundarar Pandyan took residence in Madurai which was resounding with the chanting of Vedic mantrams. His banner with the emblem of the bull became the Pandyan banner with the fish emblem; the snakes round His neck and body became the golden jewellery of a Prince and His tiger-skin loin cloth became the silken garb of the Groom.

The Hindus to this day follow the same marriage ceremonies. Spiritually this ceremony where Siva weds Parvathy symbolises the union of the immobile Absolute Siva and the Mobile creative Energy Sakti. These represent the potential and kinetic states of energy in the Universe. They are inseparable and are the two aspects of the same Reality - the unity of Being and Becoming.

The ceremony is allegorical and conveys a deep philosophical truth where the Absolute unfolds into duality for the sake of the Universe and all its creatures. In the Mundane nuptial ceremonies of the Hindus, the bride and groom represent the Divine Couple. The spiritual traditions emphasise the fact that marriage and family life should be viewed as stages in the growth of the Soul towards Moksha. The bride and groom are spiritual partners proceeding towards a spiritual goal. (See page 123)

On this special day when the Lord wedded Meenakshi, special pujas depicting the wedding scenes are portrayed as the Tirukalyaanam in all Sivan Temples. The devotees fast during the day and spend the evening at the temple watching the colourful pujas where the temple priests officiate at the ceremonies.

Cultivation of the beautiful was a part of the religious life of the Hindu community throughout the Chola, Chera, Pandyan and Pallava periods in the south and the Gupta, Chalukyan, Rashtrakuta and Bundalkand eras in the north. The Hindu forms of worship inspired the people and created the finest art including temple sculpture, bronzes, painting and stone carvings which have been considered as some of the most beautiful pieces of art fashioned by man. These represent and embody the most glorious development of art in the service and devotion of religion and of man's devotion of the Divine. The marriage ceremony of Lord Kalyanasundarar and His Consort is one such portrayal on temple panels and several bronzes, each a masterpiece of art.<sup>3</sup>

The great masterpiece of early Chola workmanship is the image of Kalyanasundarar from Tirvengadu. The Bride is beautifully portrayed, slender and graceful, a coy but radiantly happy Bride with a beaming smile on Her lips. A quality of contentment, quietness and solemnity has been effectively infused into the bridal figure through facial expression and the stance of the figure. Her hand is placed in Her Lord's in the panigrahanam ceremony and the slightly bent pose conveys gently, the acceptance of Her Lord! The bronze craftsman has symbolised Her in marital felicity and happiness. One marvels at Her blissful demureness and earnestness. The Puranic story tells us that She had endured great penance for this moment of fulfillment, which the artist has conveyed perfectly.

The nuptial piece is characterised by its simplicity, grace of form and beauty of detail. The delicate modelling has given the piece an inner beauty and tranquility that is suffused with devotion. The craftsman has fashioned the figure especially that of Parvati with so much of delicacy and devotion that She appears real and lyrical.

The betrothal of Siva and Parvati in the cave temple at Elephanta<sup>4</sup>, though desecrated by the Portuguese, is another awe-inspiring example. In a deep grotto set against a dimmed recess, is a colossal panel depicting the marriage of Siva and Parvati - a timeless scene of bliss, tenderness, tranquility and peace. The artist has effectively portrayed this tender scene by sculpturing Siva as turning gently to His bride and the bride's slim petite figure leaning towards Her Lord. The grotto is reminiscent of the cavern of the heart and as Zimmer observes, "wherein the fire of life, the energy of the creator is quick with the ardour of its eternal source and at the same instant throbbing with the pulse of time."

In Khajuraho we see the very same wedding ceremony sculptured in stone. Strangely in this temple, the annual Sivaraatri ceremony is observed as the wedding of Siva. Parvati in one relief-carving, is seen viewing Herself in a mirror held by the left hand and arranging Her coiffure with the other. In another, we see Vishnu blessing the marriage and placing Parvati's hand in that of Siva's. In still another relief sculpture, the artist places Parvati to the right of Siva. The images of Siva and Parvati, appear in this relief, "throbbing with vitality and bewitching in charm and glamour and yet massive in dignity and completely free from all that is sensual." The latest research on this temple by Dr. Punja, views the temples as wedding chariots used by the gods who attend the Sivaraatri wedding!

#### NOTES

1. அச்சம், நாணம், மடமை, பயிர்ப்பு என்ற பெண்மைக்குரிய நாற்குணங்களும் கொண்டாள்.
2. சுற்று நான் மறைகளார்ப்ப தூரியஞ் சங்க மேங்க கற்ற நான் முகத்தோன் வேள்விச் சடங்கு நூல் வரைந்த மாற்றல் முற்ற மங்கல நாண்சாத்தி முழுதுல கீன்றல் செங்கை பற்றினன் பற்றிவார்க்கே வீடருள் பரமயோகி
3. Examples of the descriptions of the Divine Couple - from the author's 'Grandeur that is Hindu Art.'
4. The Tandava Dance of Siva and the Trimurti are two other beautiful carvings that have been damaged.

## NEW YEAR AS THE HINDUS OBSERVE IT

Goodwill, happiness and a sense of expectancy fills the air and the hearts of the Hindus and Buddhists as they await the dawn of the traditional New Year. It is observed with great reverence, devotion, a sense of duty and loving kindness towards all stimulating society, enlivening the nation and fostering national consciousness. "Pudhu Varudam" or New Year marks the Hindu Solar New Year beginning on the first of the Tamil month of Chittirai. This marks the New Year not only in Sri Lanka but also in Punjab, Haryana, Assam, Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Nepal, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. It is called Sonkran in Thailand from the Sanskrit Sankranti, Baisaaki in the Punjab, Aluth Avurudhu in Sinhala, Pudu Varudam in Tamil and so on. Observances of the New Year differ by some days in certain countries owing to differences in calculations. Pudu Varudam or Chittirai Varudap pirappu is indeed an auspicious occasion for the Hindus.<sup>1</sup>

Modern research has shown that the concept of the solar cycle was not unknown to the Indus valley people.<sup>2</sup> Four or five millennia ago, the people of Mohenjo-Daro have had a calendar stone, based on the solar cycle which indicated the days of the year in the agricultural cycle of the Indus valley. This was prepared by the agricultural community perhaps for the preparation of sowing, irrigating and harvesting of crops. With more light being shed on the Indus valley people and with the decipherment of the inscrip-

tions on the seals, research has revealed inter-alia, historical facts that these Dravidians had made use of the Zodiac long before it reached the Sumerians. The first symbol in the Zodiac is the ram (aadu in Tamil) and the fish (meen in Tamil) is the last zodiacal constellation of the year - both being used as a unit of system reckoning time. An ancient Tamil composition, the Paththuppaattu, speaks of the ram being the first constellation of the year and that the fast moving Sun goes from the horned ram to the other houses.

The Vedic rishis of ancient India studied the movements of the Sun, moon, stars and planets in order to unravel the mysteries of nature and realised that there was a rhythm and an order in nature and that the Sun influenced the total life of the Universe.<sup>3</sup> They worshipped the Sun as the Supreme God Brahman, 'Tat Savitur', the centre of the Universe, the regulator and maker of time, the sustainer and nourisher of all.

According to the ancient Dravidians and Aryans, the dawn of New Year ushering in the debut of spring in the month of Chittirai, is marked by the transition of the Sun from the last house of the Zodiac (Pisces), to the first house (Aries), which takes place every year at a precise moment. The Sun, in traversing through the twelve houses of the Zodiac covers a period of one year. Religious observances and celebrations seem to have been associated with the advent of the seasons and the spiring festival of the New Year was perhaps one such observance. And the very same New Year that was established by the ancient Indians is perhaps being celebrated today by the Hindus as the New Year.

From time immemorial the Hindus have considered the transition as an auspicious event, for the Sun is the presiding deity of the planetary system and the entry from Pisces to Aries is significant, marking the beginning of the year. The Hindu almanac known as the Panchaangam, substantiated by astronomical calculations, gives us the exact time of the dawn of the New Year.

The New Year originated as a pastoral festival and did not really form an organic part of urban civilization. It is basically a time

when all the members of a family get back to their ancestral milieu with a sense of nostalgia. And so one should try to understand all the rituals against the back drop of the village. In fact it is only a society living close to nature that could really enjoy and understand a festival like the New Year (nava varsha), which is bound up with nature and the cycle of life.

Unfortunately today, the pastoral milieu which supported the New Year is steadily crumbling and the festivities have been separated from their basic roots. Be that as it may, as the New Year draws near, one is imbued with a sense of eager expectancy which never seems to dim.

The New Year falls around the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> of April at a particular time that is based on the exact movement of the Sun to the first house in the Zodiac. The period just preceding and following this auspicious time is referred to as the Vishu Punnyakalam or the Vishu auspicious time when the rites are observed.

In April, the rains come after a spell of hot dry weather ushering in spring when the plants burst forth into a riot of colour with blossoms of flowers, fruits and grains, portraying the benevolence of nature. The air is resonant with the sweet chirpings of the birds and the singing of the cuckoo. Into this lovely atmosphere the New Year or Chittirai Pudu Varudam dawns with nature's bountiful blessings. It is natural that the farmer looks upon the beneficial effect of the golden rays of the Sun for the luxuriance of his crops, the ripening of the grain and reaping a plentiful harvest. The bounteous gifts of nature call for celebration and is an occasion for the offering of gratitude. Homage is paid in a symbolic sense but it shows man's concern for his environment and nature, the resources and bountifulness, a concern that is all important today for his very survival on planet earth.

The New Year festival is associated with a wealth of traditions, rituals and customs which are enchanting and mystical in character. These are woven into the fabric of astrology, for it is believed that

the New Year dawns with the Sun, Surya Bhagavan, coming down to earth riding His golden chariot drawn by seven horses each representing a day in the week. The Sun is also referred to as Kaala-thevan, the one who determines the various seasons. And the observances on this day are made in conformity with this movement of the Sun and thanksgiving is offered to the Sun God.

Let us gloss through some of the traditional practices that are observed during the punyakaalm of the New Year.

The bath comes first. Each member of the family is anointed with Maruththu Neer before the bath. This Maruththu water, is a decoction of a variety of medicinal herbs, leaves, flowers, saffron etc prepared by the temple priests and is available only in the temples. The herbs and flowers that are used in this decoction are the lotus, pomegranate, tulasi, vilvam, aruham grass, saffron, thitpili, sukku and pepper. After the bath each one wears new clothes following the colours given in the Panchaangam. The ritual bath signifies the outer purity making way to spiritual purity.

The mother then specially prepares the threshold of the house for Ganesha. In the villages before sunrise, a layer of fresh cowdung is applied in thick swirls on this spot and the mistress of the home draws the traditional kolam<sup>4</sup> placing an effigy of Ganesha the guardian deity of the household made out of fresh saffron with a strand of aruham grass in the centre. Ganesha is invoked to protect the inmates of the home.

Seven to nine newly picked mango leaves are tied up across the beam of the main door. She next sets the Poorna-kumbam. This consists of a silver or brass pot of water on which is placed a coconut fringed with five or seven mango leaves. This pot is placed on a bed of rice grains which are strewn on a banana leaf. A pair of kuththu vilakkus the traditional brass lamps, are placed on either side of the kumbam and small brass or silver containers with holyash, kumkum and sandal paste together with rose water in the panneer kumbam are placed. A tray of betel leaves arranged in a circular pattern with the leaves pointing outward with shavings of

arecanut placed on this bed of leaves and a lime in the centre, is also placed by the kumbam. The betel leaf is very significant to the Hindus. The exchange of a sheaf of betel leaf is a vital factor in knitting together the various threads of social fabric; it binds family relationships. A tray of fruits and flowers are also placed next to the kumbam. This entire paraphernalia is indicative of prosperity and protection for the household. The guests are received at the entrance with the offering of kumkum, sandalwood paste, arecanut, betel leaves, and sprinkled with panneer, as they enter the house.

Once the threshold is ready, the hearth is lit, milk boiled and pongal - sweetened milk rice is prepared. This is offered by the family to the Sun God as thanksgiving. The family now gathers for prayers in the home shrine. After prayers the father, with both hands gives each member the kaivishesham. The mother then gives the kaivishesham to the father. Kaivishesham consists of money, a few grains of rice, arecanut, lime, flowers together with holyash, kumkum and sandal paste all wrapped up in a sheaf of betel leaves. As the children receive this they go down on their knees and revere the parents. This reverence by children has been a beautiful aspect of the Hindu culture. Reverence and love are expressed through worship and gifts, strengthening the family unit creating a fund of love and good will.

Kaivishesham marks the first transaction for the New Year. It is considered to be a lucky transaction and with it one looks forward to an year of plenty and prosperity. This exchange emphasises the principle of social obligation. Gifts are presented to all dependents of the household.

The family next, goes to the temple with offerings of flowers, fruits, garlands, incense and silk. Collective worship in the temple is very important because it not only kindles devotion but creates a sense of kinship, for New Year is indeed a season for sharing and caring. Social unity and co-operation have been emphasised since the Vedic age. After the puja one would see many devotees distributing food parcels, money or clothing to the beggars who may have gathered in the temple.



On returning home, the meal is served, first serving the food to any visitor who may have already called; generally the poor come to collect whatever is given. The meal is a festive one with a variety of palakaaram - sweet and savoury. These sweet meats are prepared in advance but also begun at an auspicious time in the old year.

Next an auspicious time is noted to start work or studies in the New Year. Generally one adheres to these auspicious times, strictly. Various games and dances are associated with the New Year especially in the villages. The cracking of coconuts (por thengai), the cart race, gudu, chitpi, kummi, kollattam and many more such games and dances are associated with the festivities.

All these traditional practices of ritual bathing, lighting of the hearth, exchanging of kaivishesham, beginning work for the New Year etc are programmed into a schedule of auspicious times and are observed by one and all with due decorum, in the belief that any ill effects of planetary combinations, will be warded off. This belief lays the foundation for positive behaviour in practising the values and norms of life. Herein lies an important aspect of the Hindu culture where man has developed an intricate measure to manage time based on astrologically measured auspicious times. Furthermore, the structure of all the rituals and customs gives an insight to the anthropological significance of New Year. One looks back to give thanks to the Sun God and then looks forward with the firm resolution to achieve more. These ritualistic observances cleanse the mind and heart of the people, strengthen the family unit creating a feeling of sharing and caring and finally renew the religious fervour facilitating the progress towards the goal of spiritual perfection.

Of the many festivals observed in different parts of the Hindu world, New Year has been one in which all the people in every village or town to whatever class of society they belong, await with great eagerness. Days ahead preparations of cleaning and renewing go on in almost every house with enthusiasm and its arrival fills one with great happiness. As we commit ourselves to the ceremo-

nies of cleaning and renewal, caring and sharing and usher in the New Year, may we work towards building a society where peace, prosperity and harmony prevail in our lovely island home, Sri Lanka.

## NOTES

1. Some speak of this as the Tamil New Year! This is not correct since the Tamil non - Hindus do not observe the day - to them the New Year falls on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January when they observe mid-night mass.

C. Tharmakulasingham is of the opinion that during the early era of Buddhism, many Tamil scholars from India were Buddhist and had come down to Sri Lanka via Madurai. These early connections between the Sinhala and Tamil people through Buddhism and Hinduism that brought about the two communities to celebrate the New Year on the same day. In his article, இலங்கை வரலாற்றில் அர்த்தம் இல்லாத வரலாற்றுத் திறனாய்வுகள், he says, பௌத்தமும் சிங்களமும் ஒன்றல்ல. தமிழும் சைவமும் ஒருமைப்பாடு கொண்டவை அல்ல,

2. In the Proto-Indo Mediterranean Studies, Father Heras speaks of the inscription on a seal which reads - "Kal tirtu min Edu min Adu ten Parava," the translation being - 'the southern Paravas finished the construction of a canal in the period of time from fish and the ram to fish.' This time period clearly indicates an year. The fish - min symbol is the last zodiacal constellation of the year and the ram - adu is the first - both being used as a unit of a system reckoning time - a full year. In this epigraph we see the two symbols of the Zodiac. Another inscription has indicated that the space round the Sun was divided into eight parts which has been interpreted as showing the 'houses of the Sun.' Thus it would appear that the eight houses and the respective constellations were already known as being in the Zodiac and the Sumerians had taken the eight constellations from the early Mohenjo-Daro people and added the four new ones - thereby forming the twelve signs of the Zodiac.

The Indus Valley people spoke a language closely related to Tamil.

3. The Vedic rishis were the first to calculate time based on the Sun's movement in the Zodiac. The elliptical path of the Sun was termed the Zodiac. The Zodiac was divided into twelve parts each having a sign or raashi. The movement from one raashi to the other takes about a month and the day of transit is referred to as Sankaraanti which is held very sacred. The first raashi is the Mesha raashi (Aries) and the last is Meena (Pisces). The transit from the last to the first naturally becomes sacred and marks the new cycle.
4. The kolam is a design drawn with rice flour and the traditional patterns consist of dots - a series of them guiding the artist to form a pattern. On completion the kolam is a beautiful work of art sanctifying the area on which it is drawn. This geometrical design is studded with meaning and has reference to old forgotten metaphors of abundance. Rice is an acknowledged emblem of fertility in oriental traditions. The Rangoli is another form of kolam where the outline is drawn and filled in with coloured powder. The elaborate designs demonstrate the dexterity and highly artistic nature of those who adorn the floor in this exquisite manner. Beautifully blended colours and intricate patterns speak of patience and inherent talent!

## RAMA NAVAMI AND THE STORY OF SRI RAMA

My body is your favourite abode,  
 My steadfast mind is the golden throne for you - asana.  
 My meditation of your blessed feet is the holy Ganga water for you - abhisheka.  
 My loving devotion is the garment for you - vastra.  
 My praise of your great glory is the sweet - smelling sandal paste for you - gandha.  
 My chanting of your sacred names is the full-blown lotus flower for you - pushpa.  
 The effect of the past misdeeds is the burning of the incense before you - dhupa.  
 My devotion to your holy feet is the all-day light burning before you - dipa.  
 The fruit of my devout worship is the offering for you - naivedya.  
 The permanent happiness that I derive is from you - tambula.  
 Your darshana is - deeparaadhana.  
 This is the true worship done by your devotee Tyagaraja.  
 O, Raghunatha, protect me,

sings Saint Tyagaraja<sup>1</sup> in simple Telugu weaving into this wonderful song the highest ideals of devotion, prayer and worship, longing for Sri Rama's darshan and protection.

Rama Navami is Rama's birthday which falls on the ninth day of the bright half of the month of Chittirai bringing with it the wonderful message of peace and harmony, love and devotion, justice and dharma shrouded in the mysterious appearance of God in human form, the avataar, Ramachandra. The story of his birth is strange and fascinating and though his sublime message came to this world several millennia ago, it has endured and prevailed upon many a Hindu to lead a dharmic life. Rama himself has demonstrated how one should lead this life.

The scenes that make up the story of Rama are replete with references to obedience of a son to a father, love for a wife, love for brothers and vice versa, love towards friends and devotees and love of a people - all being poignant values reminding man that these should be practised always. From his life story, one also sees the spirit of facing the realities of existence in a dharmic way without running away from them blending action with devotion.

Rama is himself a personification of love and heroism, of ahimsa and kshatriyadharma. His descent brings down God to man's level for the purpose of elevating man to his original position. Through his love and mercy, he mixed with mortals to draw them towards him. The effectiveness of this incarnation is commensurate with the fact that he even forgets his Divinity, lives and moves with the people and subjects himself to the stress and storm of ordinary life, its successes and failures, its trials and tribulations. One sees a suffering Rama, a man caught in the eddies of his uneven life, permitting himself to be swayed by sentiments and emotions. In his relationship with his father, mother, step mother, teacher, brothers, wife, friends, enemies and subjects, he brought a sense of grace, purity and sweetness for he was intensely human. And man while studying the story, will store away these in his subconscious mind which could gradually be brought out. Exoterically, the story of Rama is the story of the Prince of Ayodhya. Esoterically one discerns the yearning of an exiled Atman for the Paramaatman in the relation of Sita and Rama and the importance of upholding one's dharma and duty. 'You have to uphold your dharma and this

is the only obligation you have in this world,' was Rama's message and he demonstrated it by his noble actions.

Tradition has it that Vishnu incarnated as Rama at the request of the gods to rid the world of adharma in the form of the haughty Ravana. He was born to King Dasaratha and Queen Kaushalya as the eldest son. On the eve of his coronation as Crown Prince of Ayodhya, Kaikeyi, the third Queen, on the advice of her maid Manthara, brought pressure to bear on the King and got Rama banished from the capital to the forest for fourteen years in order to make her son Bharata, the Crown Prince.

Rama left Ayodhya in a spirit of obedience accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana. Bharata on receiving the news of his pending coronation as Crown Prince, defied his mother's wishes and refused to accept the kingdom now since King Dasaratha had also died. But since Rama refused to disobey his father's word and insisted on going away to the forest hermitage, Bharata agreed to rule as Regent with Rama's pair of sandals on the throne after the symbolic crowning of the pair of sandals - padukka pattaabhishekam.

Rama and Bharata lived a life showing that the evolution of man towards Perfection can be achieved only through detachment from material wealth. During Rama's absence, Bharata's trustee government of Ayodhya with Rama's pair of sandals as the emblem of sovereignty, was flawless but at the same time devoid of pomp. Rama's life in the forest was also devoid of any material amenities and his life together with that of Sita's was to alleviate the sufferings of the people and other inhabitants like Jatayu the bird, Sugriva, Guha and Sabari the old woman.

In the forest, Ravana the Rakshasa King of Lanka, himself a great devotee of Siva and a celebrated musician, but one who had gained demonic strength through severe penance, steals away Sita in the absence of Rama and Lakshmana and brings her to Lanka. Rama went in search of the golden deer which Sita wanted and later Lakshmana was sent by her to look for Rama. The stealing away of



Sita by the worldly minded Ravana reflects the loss of reasoning, deluded by Maya. The golden deer Maricha is itself Maya which deluded all three, Sita, Rama and Lakshmana.

The story next reflects the power of a sincere prayer. This is illustrated by Sita who was a captive in the Asoka vanam in Lanka. She prays fervently for Rama's help and this comes in the form of Hanuman bringing Rama's ring to Sita in return for the Choodamani she places at his feet.

In their search for Sita, the brothers meet Hanuman who became a great devotee of Rama. Hanuman is a personification of truth, purity, steadfastness, selfless service and devoted to duty and devotion, all rolled into one. These qualities of Hanuman ensured him success in all his endeavours.

In their search, they are next supported by the 'monkey' clan, the Vanaras who are led by Sugriva. Sugriva is a fugitive living in the forest after having been banished from the kingdom by his brother Vali. The story reads that when Rama and Lakshmana were pursuing their search and Hanuman kindled a fire, Sugriva circumambulated the fire and vowed with Agni as witness, that his race would share the joys and sorrows of Rama and concluded, 'Let our friendship be eternal,' portraying the cherished human value of maitri.

And finally crossing the bridge to Lanka which was built by all these devotees led by Hanuman with stones on which the sacred name, 'Jai Ram,' was inscribed, the great battle is fought between Rama and Ravana. In Lanka, Rama first meets Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, who failed to persuade Ravana not to confront Rama. Vibhishana surrendered himself fully to Rama, an act of saranaagati which is the axle of the story of Sri Rama. Rama has proclaimed to mankind that who-so-ever seeks grace offering himself fully at his feet shall be protected. This offer was made to Ravana, who had wronged Rama grievously. Rama lived and demonstrated this truth. And in a later era, Krishna tells Arjuna. 'Take refuge in Me alone; have no fears and cast off all doubts, I shall liberate you from all sins.'

Seeing Ravana the great but cruel ten headed warrior in his chariot, Rama realised that he was a great warrior but that he had to go because of his cruelty. He engaged him in battle and wounded him, broke his crown and chariot and deprived him of every weapon. Rama could have easily finished the episode but fighting an unarmed opponent was not a dharmic action and instead said, 'You may go now. You fought bravely today. Rest and come back refreshed and with weapons.' This is the battle etiquette that was maintained in wars during those ages. An angry and shame-faced Ravana retreated and the following day, the great battle began and every astra (missile) was equally matched, one nullifying the other. But finally Rama's Brahma astra was sent and Ravana fell fighting like a hero. Being destroyed by God Himself, he attains Perfection.

After installing Vibhishana as the King of Lanka, Rama and Sita together with Lakshmana and accompanied by some devotees return to Ayodhya in time to prevent Bharata from jumping into the fire he had kindled since Rama had not yet returned. Tradition has it that, that evening when Sita went to the sacred River Ganga, to perform Sandhyopaasana the evening prayer, the Ayodhya women followed her and returned with her with lighted lamps to commemorate Deepavali the festival of lights, which was being celebrated after fourteen long years!

Rama was crowned King and he was duty bound to build a kingdom based on dharma - Rama Rajya. It is this that made him rise above personal considerations and make Sita go through the fire ordeal which proved her absolute fidelity. But again he sends her away to the forest hermitage with a conflict of emotions in the search of a duty as king to respect the wishes of his people.

The brief story of Rama is simple to read but to understand the philosophy behind it, one must necessarily follow the parts played by King Dasaratha, Kaikeyi, her maid Manthara, Ravana, Hanuman, Sugriva, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata and Rama himself. King Dasaratha was an ordinary king with human failings, was persuaded by his favourite queen on the promptings for her maid, Manthara to do

the wrong thing. Here Manthara could be compared to the vicious mind and Kaikeyi the infatuating sense organs, misleading the worldly king. When Lakshmana grew very angry on hearing of Rama's banishment for the first time, Rama calmly says, 'Blame not our father nor her, our mother. 'Tis fate that drives us on, my brother.' It is seen here that Rama not merely forgives Kaikeyi but retains his love for her.

Coming to Ravana, one sees that he was no ordinary person either. Though he was a great Siva bhakta, his demonic qualities often took the better of him and he had to be destroyed. With his ten heads, he could be compared with the five sense organs of knowledge and five of actions and through the loss of reasoning, he listens to the screams of his sister, who was infatuated with Rama and steals away Sita from the forest dwellings. Then again, what ever cruelty there may have been in him, one sees a striking example of social behaviour. In spite of his disregard for human beings, his despotism and lust, he preserves the honour of Sita, treats her with respect and obeys the law for the captive even though he may have cajoled and threatened her. Ravana, though a Rakshasa, figures as a human personage as much as Rama.

On Rama Navami, Vishnu incarnated in Ayodhya. He took with Him His Consort, the embodiment of supreme compassion and sacrifice into the world of men and women and enacted with Her the story of sacrifice, suffering and dharma inculcating the truths which help man on his sojourn to Moksha. The whole story can be looked upon as an allegory symbolising the war between good and evil, right and wrong, self abnegation and covetousness, righteousness and self consideration. It is an apotheosis of eternal friendship, brotherhood and maitri. The human appeal of this story makes the Hindus feel that what happened long long ago appear as events of the present day. Sri Rama is an unfailing companion of each one in his life's voyage helping him to derive moral strength to face all ordeals.

Rama Navami is observed in all Vishnu Temples and centres of Worship not necessarily by Vaishnavites only but even by

Saivites. In certain temples, ten days earlier sometimes even forty five days earlier, the recitation of the Ramayana is commenced and on Rama Navami day it is completed with pomp and pageantry. Devotees generally observe a one day fast on that day completing it with the taking of prasaadam. The temples are specially decorated and in the evening elaborate abhishekams are done and the vigrahams of Rama and Sita are tastefully dressed up for puja. Flowers and prasaadam are offered, Ram bhajans are sung in congregation finally ending with deepaaraadhana. Prasaadam is then served to the devotees. As the Ram mantrams are chanted, as the flowers are showered on the Deity, as aarati is done, 'Sri Rama Jaya Rama Jaya Rama Om,' reverberate through the prayer halls.

As we celebrate Rama Navami year after year in the month of Chittirai, may we re-dedicate ourselves to foster the values of dharma and maitri. It is these values that could establish understanding and harmony at national, regional and international levels.

#### NOTES

1. Saint Tyagaraja belonged to the seventeenth century and was a great Rama bhakta (devotee) whose one aim was to continuously sing the name of Rama. He was a composer par excellence who only sang in praise of Rama.
2. Hindus always worship the feet of God surrendering themselves totally at the Feet. Tradition has it that when He comes down it is His feet that first touches the earth and so man is imbued with a sense of piety and worships His feet.

## VAIKAASI VISAAKAM

The hallowed full moon day in the month of Vaikaasi, under the Visaakam star is the Vaikaasi Pournima also termed Vaisaaki Pournima. The Vaikaasi moonlight floods the world with a glorious effulgence making the over arching sky infinite and vast. In our tropical skies, the moon, 'slowly and silently walks the night in her silver shoon.' The transparent clouds seem to salute her as she moves unhurriedly. This is indeed Nature's magnificence manifesting itself with an overwhelming grandeur. And with this mysteriously beautiful soft light of sanctity, comes a hush, deep and strange reminding the Hindus and Buddhists of the significance of this sacred day.

It is well known that the asterism Visaakam is considered to be the birth star of Murugan who is called Visaakan. The Visaaka asterism is a combination of three stars which shine brightly in the sky and its pattern in the sky resembles the Torana or entrance. It is the fourteenth asterism in the month of Vaikaasi when the sun's vernal equinox falls which accounts for the hot days during this month.

Vaikaasi Visaakam is important to the Saivites, Vaishnavites and the Buddhists. To the Saivites, it is the day of the descent of Murugan; to the Vaishnavites it is Periyalvar's jayanti and to the

Buddhists it is the day of the great miracles of nativity, enlightenment and maha samadhi of Buddha.

The descent of Murugan is referred to as the Shanmuga avataaram. This descent was in answer to a prayer by the devas to rid the world of adharma caused by the three asura brothers, Soorapadman, Singamuhan and Taarakan. These brothers had obtained great powers through intense penance and were harassing the devas. The devas appealed to Siva for help. Tradition has it that Siva added a sixth face to the existing five faces and this incident is spoken of in the celebrated work of Saint Kumaragurupararas,

" Ainthu mukaththodatho mukamum thanthu  
Tirumukangal aaraaki."<sup>1</sup>

Saint Tirumular in his Magnum Opus, the Tirumantiram, over two thousand years ago referred to this Divine incident as,

" Aame piraan mukamainthodu maaruya  
Raame piraanuk kathomukamaarula."<sup>2</sup>

From the forehead, Siva emitted six sparks of fire which enveloped the world with lustre. These sparks were carried by Vaayu and Agni to the Ganges which pushed them into Lake Saravanai filled with lotuses and reeds. Philosophically the lotus represents the pure heart and the reeds represent the network of nerves in man's physical body. Symbolically, the Divine Effulgence in the lake with its lotuses and reeds, are within each one. As Light and Life this Reality abides in the body, breath, senses, mind, intelligence and ego. These six facets of the human complex represents the six faces of Shanmugan.

In the lake the sparks became six Divine children and were nursed by six Kaartika maidens. These children were embraced by the Divine Mother and became One with six faces and twelve hands. And thus descended Shanmugan, the incarnation of pure

consciousness and divine knowledge on the pournima (paruvam) in the month of Vaikaasi.

Saint Kachchiappah Sivachariyar beautifully portrays the descent as, 'With form and formlessness, without a beginning and as one and many, stood the column of Light, the Supreme Brahman, who with six merciful faces and twelve arms took the Divine Incarnation as Murugan for the redemption of the world.'

" Aruvamum uruvumaaki anaathiyai palavaai onraai  
Brahmamaai ninra sothi pilambathor meniyaakak  
Karunaikoor mukangal aarum karangal pannirendu konde  
Oru thirumurugan vandhaangu udhiththan ulakam uyya."<sup>3</sup>

He then goes on to say, 'That ever pure, Omnipresent Siva, who cannot be comprehended by speech or mind or even by the Vedas, assuming the form of six sweet babes, was gracefully seated on six lotus flowers in the Saravana Lake.'

Murugan is worshipped and adored also as Subramanyan, Shanmugan, Kartikeyan, Guhan Saravanapavan, Arumugan etc. As Murugan, He is the ever young and beautiful; as Subramanyan, He is the Commander-in-Chief seated on a peacock with the Vel and is depicted at times with the Divine Consorts, Devayani and Valli. As Shanmugan, He descended to destroy adharma. As Kartikeyan, He was nursed by the Kaartika maidens. As Guhan, He resides in the Cavern of one's heart. As Saravanabavan, He belonged to Lake Saravanai. As Arumugan, He has six faces.

Murugan is blue in colour holding the Vel and sometimes He is depicted with the two consorts, Devayanai and Valli. Besides Him stands the peacock gripping a snake with its claws. This entire picture is in itself a narrative description in which every aspect symbolises a deeper meaning. The blue indicates infinity. To the human perception all infinite expanses for example the sky or ocean, appear blue. Murugan is the Infinite Reality existing in the cavern of the heart - the Guhan. This Reality expresses Itself through

the mind and together with the five sense organs, forms His six faces - Shan(six) mugan.

The peacock is symbolic of vanity and pride. The serpent represents ego, the carnal personality of man which keeps wanting the mundane pleasures. The ego is created by avidya or ignorance and this must be kept in check and channelised to discover the Truth. The peacock holding the serpent within its claws conveys this Truth. And finally the Vel, is symbolic of the removal of the negative and evil tendencies which veil the true Divine Self. The Vel represents wisdom, Jnaana Sakti; His Consort Valli is the power of Will and is the personification of Divine Love, Ichchaa Sakti; and Devayanai is the power of action and is the personification of deathlessness, Kriya Sakti. The three Saktis help in eradicating the demon ego, represented in this episode as Soorapadman, the asura.

Murugan appeared for a special purpose to eradicate the adharma caused by the asuras and the ensuing battle with the asuras is the story of the Skanda shashti fast. The manifestation of Shanmugan is the everlasting testament of victory, of Truth over falsehood, of Dharma over adharma. And those who fight against adharmic forces within or around themselves, are said to be the 'faithful warriors of Murugan' and reflect his splendour - the Muruga amsam.<sup>4</sup>

Thus it is seen that on this special day of Vaikaasi Visaakam, the young and ever beautiful One came down for a specific purpose. But what is important is that this Divine Avataaram is continuously going on within man. Saint Arunagirinathar says that one should bear this in mind, draw strength and knowledge from this by meditating on the His sacred form for at least half a minute in order that he may be blessed with His grace.

" Sarana kamalalayaththe arai nimisha neramettill  
Thavamurai Dyaanam vaikka . . ."<sup>5</sup>

To the Buddhist, Vaikaasi Pournima, is Wesak, the day Gautam Buddha was born, gained enlightenment and finally attained maha samaadhi. His life from birth, through marriage, renunciation, enlightenment to maha samaadhi is fascinating. Even though he had left his mortal coil over two thousand five hundred years ago, the spirituality created by him has not diminished - it is timelessly ancient.

Swami Vivekananda, in the course of some of his lectures referred to the Buddha as, "The greatest Soul power that has ever manifested," "The greatest Soul that ever wore a human form," "The greatest and boldest preacher of morality that the world ever saw," "The preacher of equality," "The greatest Hindu ever born."

The advent of the Buddha was imperative. He appears when misery and materialism of the world calls for Divine intervention to help mankind. The historical conditions of that time needed the guiding hand of an Avataar. After the august age of the Vedas and Upanishads, a dark period set in when the teachings of the shastras retreated into the forests and society became corrupt. Empty rituals and sacrifices were given greater importance. Mother Nature intervened and corrected the situation by bringing the Buddha, who said, "All this must stop. This is not religion." Buddha was the specially chosen one who was sent down in the appropriate form to correct the wrongs and sufferings in the world. Suffering is inevitable and Sri Aurobindo says in his Epic Savitri, "Pain is the signature of ignorance." It is this suffering that finally awakens man and puts him on the right path to salvation. The Buddha says, "The teacher but points the way, the work has to be done by yourself."

To the Hindus, Buddhism is the philosophy of the Upanishads. It is not that Buddhism as a distinct sect disappeared from the land of its birth, but was re-absorbed into the main current of Hindu thought because in essence it was part of it and the ethics of Buddhism became an essential part of Hindu religious teaching.

Vaikaasi Pournima is also Periyalvar's jayanti. He was an Alvar saint - a Vaishnava mystic who sang of God Sri Krishna as his child and he the mother, Yasodha.

Year after year, the Vaikaasi full moon walks the sky reminding the Hindus and Buddhists alike, of their ancient spiritual heritage. May we, on this sacred day re-dedicate ourselves to foster love and compassion and be blessed with the choicest grace of Murugan and Buddha.

#### NOTES

1. ஐந்து முகத்தோ டதோ முகமுந்தந்து  
திருமுகங்களாறாகி - குமரகுருபரது கந்தர் கலிவெண்பா.
2. ஆமே பிரான்முக மைந்தொடு மாருய  
ராமே பிரானுக் கதோமுக மாறுள - திருமந்திரம்.
3. அருவமும் உருவுமாகி அநாதியாய் பலவாய் ஒன்றாய்  
பிரமமாய் நின்ற சோதிப் பிழம்பதோர் மேனியாகக்  
கருணைகூர் முகங்களாறும் கரங்கள் பன்னிரண்டுங் கொண்டே  
ஒருதிருமுருகன் வந்தாங்குதித்தனன் உலகம் உய்ய  
திருவவதாம் 92.
4. Mrs. Ratna Navaratnam - Karttikeya, the Divine Child - The Hindu Testament of Wisdom.
5. சரண கமலாலயத்தை அரைநிமிட நேரமட்டில்  
தவமுறை தியானம் வைக்க - திருப்புகழ்.



## AANI UTTARAM

### and the significance of Aadavallaan, the Lord of Dance

The special abhishekam and pujas performed for Aadavallaan the Lord of Dance, falls in the month of Aani, under the constellation Uttaram. These are the Aani Uttaram or the Aani Tirumanjanam observances. Tradition has it that on this day Siva as Nataraja, danced the Nadanta Dance at Thillai for the benefit of His devotees. The legends of this dance are associated with the famous temple at Chidambaram. He is said to have danced the mystic dance performing the Panchakritya. Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy states in the Dance of Siva, "Whatever the origins of Siva's dance, it became in time the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of. Of the various dances of Siva, the first is the Evening Dance in the Himalayas, the second is the well known dance called the Tandava Dance and thirdly is the Nadanta Dance of Nataraja before the assembly in the golden hall at Chidambaram or Thillai."

Siva is represented here in His celebrated aspect as Nataraja, the king of dancers. The Dance of Siva is said to represent the primal rhythmic energy - rhythm, harmony and orderliness. The world itself is the theatre, the dancing hall of Siva. Saint Tirumular speaks of this theatre as, 'Andangal oar elum, aakaasangal ainthum, tendinirt sakti tiruambalamaaka,"<sup>1</sup> the seven Universes as His abode, the five

elements as His pedestal and the central Kundalini Sakti as the Divine Hall, He danced.' The central motif of the sacred dance is also explained in the Nineth Tantra of the Tirumantram in the words,

" Engum tirumeni engum Siva Sakti  
Engum Chidambaram engum tirunattam....." <sup>2</sup>

'His form is everywhere; all - pervading is His Siva - Sakti; Chidambaram is everywhere; everywhere is His Dance; everywhere is this gracious dance made manifest'. This conveys the wonderful meaning that the dance takes place in the heart of every individual.

Siva as Nataraja is a Unique concept, the noblest symbolism of the supreme power. He performs the Panchakritya (five functions) through the mystic dance at Chidambaram. It is also said that independently each of the five functions were performed at different places - as shristi or creation at Tirunelveli Taambrasabhai, sthiti or preservation at Tiruppuththur Chitsabhai, samharam or destruction at Kanchipuram, Tirupovanam or concealment at Tirukokanam Tatnasabhai, anugraha or bestowal of grace at Tiruvaalankaadu. All the activities are combined together in the Kanagasabhai at Chidambaram as the Nadanta Dance. In the Temple of Chidambaram, the image of Nataraja dancing His cosmic dance, is separated from the sanctum by a veil which is seldom raised except on special occasions when puja is performed.<sup>3</sup> This is the famed "Chidambara Rahasyam." Which one is expected to experience at some stage of his life.

Manavasagam Kadanthar in the Unmai Vilakkam cogently summarises the significance of the Nataraja image in the words.

" Thotram thudi adhanil thoyum thithiammaippil  
Saartrividum angiyile sangaaram - utramaa  
Undru malarpathaththil ultra thirothamuthi  
Nanra malarpaaththathe nadu."<sup>4</sup>



The image symbolises the Divine cosmic activity - the panchakrityas. 'Creation arises from the drum' protection proceeds from the hand of hope; from fire proceeds destruction; the foot held aloft gives release; the fourth hand pointing to the lifted foot is the refuge of the Soul.'

The dance of Siva is the dancing universe - the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another. It symbolises not only the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, but also the daily rhythm of birth and death which is seen in Indian mysticism as the basis of all existence. At the same time Siva's manifold forms in the world are maya - not fundamental, but illusory and ever changing - as He keeps creating and dissolving them in the ceaseless flow of His dance.<sup>5</sup>

The reading and interpretation of this profound concept becomes more clear when based on philosophical thought. He has represented creation (srishti) as arising from the drum in the right upper hand and destruction (samhaara) as arising from the fire in the left hand. The drum represents the rhythmic nature of life and connotes sound that is naatham from which springs creation while in the left upper hand, within the ardhachandra mudra is the fire, signifying destruction where the worldly fetters are removed. This not only destroys but also purifies. These two depict the opposites, one creating and the other destroying - sound and fire in the play of the cosmic dance and the artist has achieved this beautifully by placing the fire on the same level as the drum creating a perfect balance between creation and destruction. The dance is a mixture of the opposites - the terrific and the auspicious, creation and destruction, good and evil. The blending of the opposites are effectively documented in Hindu art and this is understood by the Hindu mind which sees it in its totality as the good and evil, the joys and sorrows, the beauties and horrors of this material life.

Next, protection is depicted by the lower right hand which connotes the abhaya mudra, "fear not", the symbol of preservation (sthiti). The lower left hand is lifted across the chest pointing to the

uplifted foot, and is the refuge of the embodied Soul. This is the symbol of grace (anugraha). The foot held aloft indicates refuge and salvation. The suppression of evil is symbolically represented by the foot on the demon Muyalakan, who personifies forgetfulness, ignorance and evil. This represents concealment or obscurity. The removal of ignorance in man, brings true wisdom, which releases one from worldly bondage. The hand pointing to the lifted foot indicates the link between creation, preservation and destruction to concealment and the granting of grace. All these gestures suggest the whirling energy of the cosmos and yet the movement appears effortless - this is perhaps brought out by the co-ordinated rhythm of the left leg arm. Auguste Rodin, a famous French sculptor seeing these gestures in the Tiruvalangadu and Velankanni bronzes said, "gesture can well contest for superiority in gracefulness with the gesture of the Venus de Medici's which defends its charms by the arms while Nataraja does the same by an ingenious gesture."

The head of Nataraja is adorned with the crescent moon and the Ganga; the snake adorns the body and the tiger skin is wrapped tightly round the waist. A fluttering scarf, the sacred thread and unmatched ear-rings have also been included. The image is on the lotus pedestal from which rises the arch, the tiruvasi fringed with flames representing the Pranava mantram 'Om,' the mystic syllable from which all sounds emanate. This is the basic image, varying in details as seen in certain other images in stone and metal. Ananda Coomaraswamy interprets this figure saying, "He wraps about him as a garment the tiger fury of human passion; the guile and passion of mankind he wears as a necklace; and beneath his foot is for ever crushed the embodiment of evil."

The posture of the body and the limbs, both arms and legs, thrown in various directions appear a little violent but the artist has introduced the concept of "anugraha" or compassion by chiselling the face into a beautifully calm and serene countenance. The whole signifies a deep philosophy as told in the Tiruvaatavoorar Puranam, "Our Lord is the Dancer who like the heat latent in firewood, diffuses His Power in mind and matter and makes them dance in

their turn.<sup>6</sup> In the Abhinava Bharati, there is a description of the meaning of the cosmic Dance of Siva which says, "verily shines Siva, the Great Dancer on the super Cosmic Stage with all the potentialities of his gestures and movements ready for manifestation. And verily shines he, the Architect of the Cosmic Stage, exhibiting forms out of formlessness and in his own image."

According to Ananda Coomaraswamy the significance of the dance is threefold. "First it is the image of His rhythmic play as the Source of all Movement within the Cosmos which is represented by the arch. Secondly, the purpose of his Dance is to release the countless souls of men from the snare of illusion. Thirdly, the place of the Dance, Chidambaram, the Centre of the Universe, is within the Heart."

The ceremonies that commemorate the Nadanta dance of Lord Nataraja are the Aani Uttaram observances, which are religiously followed in all Sivan Temples. In the sacred shrines of Sri Lanka, namely in Tiruketheshwaram in the Mannar District, Tirukoneswaram in the Trincomalee District, Naguleshwaram in the Jaffna District, Munneshwaram in the Puttalam District and Ponnambalavameshwara Temple in Colombo, ceremonies are elaborately performed.<sup>7</sup> The devotees fast on that day, sit in prayer and meditation, chant and sing mantrams and Tevarams and then in the evening go to the temple to watch the elaborate ceremonies and participate in them.

At Chidambaram abhishekams and pujas for Lord Nataraja are performed six times an year corresponding to the six pujas of a day. These special abhishekams are based on the stars and thithis. Those determined by the stars are Tiruvaadirai in Maargali, Tirvonam in Chittirai and Uttaram in Aani - these are Margali Tiruvaadirai, Chittirai Tiruvonam and Aani Uttaram respectively. The pujas associated with the thithis are in Maasi, Aavani and Purattaadhi.<sup>8</sup> One year of the human being is one day of the Devas. The month of Maargali is the dawn for the Devas and the abhishekam in Maargali is the mid - night abhihekam corresponding to the Margali

Tiruvaadirai culminating in the Aardha Darisanam. Aani is the sixth month of the year and corresponds to twilight of the Devas; this is the evening abhishekam of Aani Uttaram. Similarly the Chittirai Tiruvonam corresponds to the abhishekam at dawn. Which these are the three special pujas in Maasi, Aavani and Purattaadhi. Of these the abhishekam that presedes the Uttaraayanam is the Maargali Tiruvaadirai Tirumanjanam and the anhishekam that preseds the Dakshanaayanam is the Aani Uttara Tirumanjanam. These two abhishekams are very important and the ceremonies associated with them take place twice an year for ten days.

The elaborate abhishekams that are performed are ways of worshipping the Almighty ceremonially. The human mind by nature is deeply attached to worldly pursuits and needs these rituals to help control these pursuits.

The Aani Uttara abhishekam in Chidambaram and all Sivan temples is performed with much piety by the priests. The priests first perform the aanmaartha or personal puja purifying themselves. This is followed by the piraartha puja, the ceremonies performed for the benefit of the congregation. The images of the Deity and His Consort are first annointed with oil, the 'ennaikkaapu.' Next is the abhishekam, where the Deity in the sanctum sanctorum is bathed, robed, jewelled and garlanded before the pujas are performed. At the same time the Kurukkal (the Chief Priest) kindles and maintains the Homam chanting Vedic mantrams. He also does the Kumbha puja invoking God to be present in the Kumbham - 'aavaahanam pannudhal' as it is said. By inviting God to be present in the kumbham, the priest makes the congregation conscious of God's grace. He then offers oblations to the fire invoking various devas to protect the ceremony. The eight guardians of the directions are also invoked. The Kumbham is then taken round in procession along the inner pathway and brought to the Nataraja image and the power is transferred from the kumbham to the image through bhavana. The kumbham water is first poured over the image and then the water from the remaining nine kumbhams are poured. The devotees believe that once the abhishekam is over, the grace of God is

bestowed on them who have gathered there. While the abhishekams and pujas are conducted the devotees observe silence and gradually forget all their worries and concentrate on worshipping God. At the end of the abhishekam the images of Nataraja and Sivakama Sundari are beautifully dressed and adorned with jewels, flowers etc and special pujas are performed followed by the chanting of the Vedas and the Tirumurais. The images are then brought out, taken first along the inner pathway and then in the chariot along the outer pathway with great pomp and pageantry. When the chariot returns back to the entrance of the temple, coconuts are broken, offerings of flowers and fruits are made and aarati is done. The images are then brought back to the Vasanta Mandapam and with the final aarati, the observances come to an end. Vibhuti, sandal paste, kumkum and prasaadam are given to the devotees with the words.

" Sarve janata sukino bhavantu  
Samastha san mangalani bhavantu"

'Let happiness and peace prevail amongst all.'

#### NOTES

1. அண்டங்கள் ஒரேமும் அம்பொற்பதியாகப் பண்டையா காசங்கள் ஐந்தும் பதியாகத் தெண்டினிற் சத்தி திருஅம் பலமாகக் கொண்டு பரஞ்சோதி கூத்துகந்தானே. 2749
2. "எங்குந் திருமேனி எங்குஞ் சிவசக்தி எங்குஞ் சிதம்பரம் எங்குந் திருநட்டம்"
3. Tradition has it that there are five Siva lingams corresponding to the five elements namely, prithvi or earth as at kanchipuram, appu or water as at Jambukeswara, theju or fire as at Tiruvannamalai, vayu or wind as at Kalahasti and akasha or ether as at Chidambaram.
4. With reference to this, one could compare Tirumular's explanation of the symbolism of Siva's dance in the nineth tantra.

தோற்றம் துடியதனில் தோயும் திதியமைப்பில்  
சாற்றிவிடும் அங்கியிலே சங்காரம் - ஊற்றுமா  
ஊன்று மலர்ப்பாதத்தில் உற்ற திரோதமுத்தி  
நான்ற மலர்ப்பாதத்தே நாடு.

" Hara's drum is creation; His hand gesturing protection is preservation;  
His fire is dissolution; His foot planted down is obscurator;  
His foot raised in dance is Grace abiding. "V2799

5. Fritzof Capra - The Tao of physics p. 270.
6. From the author's book, The Grandeur that is Hindu Art.
7. Due to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, regular pujas are not observed in some temples.
8. Tradition has assigned an year of the human being as being a day of the devas and the six pujas either way correspond to the 'daily' six pujas.

## GURU POURNIMA A Homage to the Guru

" Gurur Brahma Gurur Vishnu Gurur Devo Maheshwara  
Guru shaakshaath Para Brahma Tasmai Sri Gurave Namah,"

'Prostration unto the Guru, who is Brahma, Vishnu, Ishawara and the supreme Brahman.'

Guru Pournima falls on the full moon day in the month of Aadi, a day that is observed with prayer and meditation and a day dedicated to the Guru and to the process of learning. The day heralds the beginning of the rainy season after a period of dry spell. All that water that had been collected as clouds in the hot summer now manifests as showers bringing in fresh life. Swami Sivananda likens this to man's knowledge that had been stored saying, "Let all that you have read, heard, seen and learnt become through saadhana, transformed into a continuous outpouring of universal love, ceaseless loving service and continuous prayer and worship of the Lord seated in all beings." Thus tradition has enjoined on the devotees that this day be a day of fast, japa, meditation and study of the shaastras.

Guru Pournima is also known as Vyasa Pournima, since Veda Vyasa is the Loka Guru, the teacher of the universe. It is said that the Supreme manifested as Vyasa the Loka Guru, to dispel darkness. In reality through the Vedas, the Puranas, the Brahma Sutras,

the Upanishads and the Epics, Narayana as the Guru Vyasa dispels the darkness of ignorance and helps to bring out the illumination hidden in all beings. Tradition has it that he composed the eighteen Puranas to teach mankind two fundamental actions namely, 'Paropakara punyaaya; paapaaya parapeedaanam,' do good to others and avoid doing harm.'

Any pournima signifies illumination and Guru Pournima exemplifies spiritual illumination - the illumination of God realisation.

The Guru as the shaastras describe, is the embodiment of perfection and he is resplendent like the full moon, cool refreshing and re - assuring to his disciples. The moon is the presiding deity of the mind and man's wayward mind is compared to the moon - waxing and waning, from brightness to darkness and being pournima man's mind too becomes bright and effulgent.

The word Guru has been interpreted in many ways; 'Gu' means darkness and 'Ru' means that which destroys darkness namely one who destroys the ignorance in man and enlightens him towards self - realisation. 'Gu' also means the giver of blessings and 'Ru' the destroyer of sins. These speak of the Guru as one who saves man and uplifts him to attain his goal. In what ever way the word may be interpreted, it means that the Guru guides one to his goal of Moksha.

The traditional concept of Guru is a unique and wonderful idea in the Hindu cultural heritage. It is this conception that has been responsible for the handing down of the spiritual heritage verbally from age to age when nothing was written down. It is the institution of Guru - paramparai, the lineage of gurus which has safe - guarded the living experiences of the rishis of the Vedic and Upanishadic age and handed them down to succeeding ages.

Sri Shankara says that there can be no comparison to a Guru in the world. A lodestone for example can alchemize another stone into gold but this second stone cannot effect a similar change on another stone. But a Guru can change his pupil into an enlightened

person who in turn can be a Guru to another pupil. A Guru is thus a unique person and in ages past every pupil took pride in proclaiming himself as the pupil of his Guru. Shankara called himself as 'the sishya (student) of Govinda Bhagavadpada.' The reverence that these disciples had for those who dowered them with the sacred lore, was indeed great. Our ancient ancestors have deified the personality of the Guru Lord for he represents that sublime transcendental state.

Man's first experience of a Guru is of his parents. "Maatha Pitha Guru Deivam,"<sup>1</sup> is a beautiful aphorism where he lauds his parents as God and Guru. Next come the teachers in the various institutes of learning guiding the students in the different subjects. But the Guru who is remembered on this hallowed day is the Teacher guiding the spiritual progress of the disciple. And finally comes the Guru who is God Himself, for among the Gurus He is the primordial Guru, "Guru shaakshaath Para Brahma." It is said that when the disciple is ripe in the path of devotion, he meets the Guru who appears as the Teacher.

One could quote a number of examples where God appeared as the Guru to guide His sincere and true devotee to his destination. He descended and instructed mankind in His dual aspects of Siva and Vishnu.

As Siva He is the Cosmic Guru, sitting under the banyan tree facing southwards - Dakshinamurti. Dhakshinamurti is the Youthful Preceptor. He is pictured as a Youth of blissful mien and benign countenance, the left arm resting on the knee and the right poised in a Chinmudra<sup>2</sup> pose. The banyan tree under which He is seated symbolises the phenomenal life. One should use this phenomenal life, avail himself of this earthly existence to attain the noumenal - the final goal.

His students, Sanatkumar, Sanandhanan, Sanaka and Sanaadanan are the four sages who sit in front of Him. He teaches in symbolic silence the nature of the Supreme Self, the Truth of "Soham" - 'I am That,' where the Jivaatman is none other than the

Paramaatman and the Silence personified in Him now passes on to the disciples, dispelling darkness by the significant Chinmudra.

The observances of Guru Pournima teach that this idea of "Soham," must be incessantly revolved in the mind with vairaagya (renunciation) and jnaana (wisdom). The Atman alone exists and is real; all that exists is but the manifestation of the Supreme because, "He is the only existence and nothing can be except as either a real figuring or else a figment of that one Reality. Therefore every conscious being is in part or in some way a descent of the Infinite into the apparent finiteness of name and form" says Sri Aurobindo. This Reality is Siva and the finale about Him is Dakshinamurti and there is an incessant eloquence in His silent communication with the Incommunicable.<sup>3</sup>

Krishna is the Vishnu Avataar, teaching Arjuna, the science of the Atman - Atmavidya. In the Gita the symbolic companionship of the Teacher and disciple is the Divine and human Soul working together showing that the performance of one's duty dispassionately is important and leads to knowledge. In this instance the imparting of knowledge was not in the peaceful hermitage of meditation but in the battlefield. The Guru here is not just God in man who world of action, the Master and the Friend of man.

The Guru is verily a link between the individual and the Immortal, where the imperfect being is led to perfection, the finite becoming Infinite, where from death one passes on to immortality. The Guru effects this change by teaching the Atmic aroma of Divinity, proclaiming the immortal. This is the sacred significance of the Guru's role and each year on Guru Pournima this ancient concept of the Guru is commemorated afresh.

In today's context, where values have deteriorated a great deal, where the young speak in terms of knowing everything and with so much of free thinking, free reasoning, the concept of the Guru becomes very relevant. A human being needs to be taught and guided in all mundane matters, more so would he need guidance in the all important spiritual aspect of life.



Let us digress and ponder awhile on, 'Who is man in this universe to whom the Guru becomes necessary?' Man is a puny creature struggling under innumerable limitations - pain, frustrations and misery bog him down. He is engulfed by pettiness and ignorance. Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Baba says that man is a mixture of divine, demonic and humane forces - daiva, danava and maanava forces. He advises that the demonic forces must be got rid of by the practice of mercy and compassion while egoism and pride must be got rid of by self-control, renunciation and detachment. The words renunciation and detachment are often misleading. They certainly do not mean retiring into the forest, renouncing all worldly life. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna, 'Your duty is to work, but never to the fruits thereof.' This explains the fact that one should lead a full life in this world and do one's duties without attachment renouncing the results.

Saint Sundarar was one such person who lived his life fully in this world, was a dutiful householder and a grand devotee of God consecrating all his actions to Him. His life shows that one can live this life fully but in a detached manner and this detachment will not bind one karmically to life on earth.<sup>4</sup>

That actions can or rather should be performed in the spirit of renunciation and dedication is easily said than done because human nature has two sides, the positive and negative elements - the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde elements. When the negative elements dominate, the evil consequences of passion, lust, anger etc become predominant. Strangely enough the positive elements are also there in all, more in some and less in others. The good elements create progress in the spiritual field while the negative elements tend to pull one into the mire of material conflicts. Man fails to realise that he is essentially divine but is tied up in knots of worldly pursuits and ignorance and Maya draws a thick veil over his true nature. He fails to see that he is the heir to Perfection, Cosmic Consciousness and Illumination.

It is the Guru who helps man to understand these fundamentals and re-discover himself and helps in the spiritual evolution of

his embodied Soul involving him in saadhana, that is prayer, meditation and self-discipline. There should be implicit faith in the Guru and a deep commitment to spiritual practices. Ultimately in life, God the primordial One is the Guru, the Indweller within all who prompts, guides and grants grace taking man along the spiritual path to salvation.

One can draw several examples of Guru - sishya traditions from the Hindu spiritual archives. To Saint Manikkavasagar<sup>5</sup> and Tayumanavar,<sup>6</sup> God manifested as the Mystic and Silent Guru respectively, Coming nearer home Yogar Swami<sup>7</sup> of Jaffna had the blessings of Guru Chellappah Swami, whom he refers to, as Gurunathan and says "Ennai enakku arivithaan engal Gurunaathan," it was the Guru who taught me who I was.' Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Baba's first message to humanity was,

" Manasa bhajare Guru saranam  
Dhustara bava saagara tharanam,"

'Meditate on the lotus Feet of the Guru and cross the ocean of Samsara, are his words of advice and goes on to say,

" I am your Guru. I do not want flowers, fruits etc which you buy and bring with the show of devotion. Instead give me something that is yours - genuinely yours - something that is clean and fragrant with the perfume of virtue and innocence and washed in the tears of repentance. Place the Lord in your heart and offer Him the fruits of your actions and the flowers of your thoughts and feelings."

In conclusion I would like to leave a thought in the form of a delicate picture in the minds of our readers, of a perfect fully blossomed lotus flower with its bud bowing low in obeisance before it. This symbolic expression of the artist describes the Guru - sishya relationship where the flower represents the illumined Guru while the bud bending forward is the disciple, humbly seeking guidance and grace to attain Divine Perfection. The unfolding



petals in the bud suggest the gradual expansion of the Soul, the growth of its pure beauty from the muddy depths, signifying a benign spiritual promise.

## NOTES

1. மாதா பிதா குரு தெய்வம்.
2. In the Chinmudra, the thumb represents Siva and the fore finger represents the individual self; the three remaining fingers represent Aanavam, Kanmam and Maaya; through the observance of silence and the mudra, the threefold dross is negated from the individual self which when relieved of all impurities regains his union with the Lord.
3. Swami Chidbhananda - Facets of Brahmen.
4. Saint Sundarar was one of the four main saints in Tamil Nadu and belonged to the seventh century; the others being Saint Sambandhar, Saint Appar and Saint Manikkavasagar.
5. Saint Manikkavasagar was the Chief Minister of the Pandyan Monarch but he was a soul in conflict yearning for a Guru. God appeared as a Mystic Guru saving and guiding him at every turn. He belonged to the ninth century.
6. Saint Tayumanavar belonged to the seventeenth century and he too was the Chief Minister who renounced the world guided by the Mauna Guru - the silent teacher.
7. Yogar Swami lived in Jaffna and passed away in the sixties of this century. He was the Guru to a great many families in Sri Lanka.

## HINDUS AND AADI AMAAVAASAI

Aadi is a sacred month for the Hindus. The birth of Aadi itself known as Aadi Pirappu, is important and on that day special food is prepared to herald the month - the aadi kool, a porridge which is served to all who may call on that day. Together with this, Aadi Sevvai, the Tuesdays in the month of Aadi, Aadi Puram, the Puram asterism in the month of Aadi and Aadi Amaavaasai, the Amaavaasai day in the month of Aadi, are all important days. Despite all these important days, the month of Aadi is considered an inauspicious month for occasions like weddings, housewarming ceremonies etc.

It is inauspicious because the month has been astrologically associated with the performance of rites to the departed Souls known as the "Pitir kadan," a duty by the dead (father) ancestor<sup>1</sup> so that the Soul will be blessed on its onward journey. These rites are performed on the Amaavaasai thithi, in the month of Aadi. Amaavaasai occurs when the moon is positioned between the sun and earth and this takes place every month, but the Amaavaasai in the month of Aadi is special. Both Amaavaasai and Paruvam are considered auspicious days and if any thing is undertaken on that day, victory is assured, say the ancients.<sup>2</sup>

In an year, there are twelve Amaavaasais and twelve Paruvams - new moon and full moon days respectively. Of these, the Paruvam

in the month of Chittirai and the Amaavaasai in the month of Aadi are of significance, since one's dead mother and dead father respectively are remembered with special observances.<sup>3</sup>

Amaavaasai literally means 'combined' that is when the Sun and new moon are together in the same house. The Sun symbolises Light and Knowledge while the moon is considered to be the Lord of the mind and when these two come together, it naturally becomes important.

In Hindu traditions, from time immemorial, the remembrance of the departed ancestors by way of tarpana, shraddha and pinda, is an important feature. The shastras have entrusted upon every householder tarpana, with a view, to make him remember and propitiate his departed ancestor. Shraddha is the most common ceremony performed by the householder annually for the upliftment of the pitris. It is in reality, a day reserved for invoking the departed one and was meant for prayer and fasting in his name. Annadana<sup>4</sup> is another important aspect of this ceremony where the poor are fed and the members of the family share the food with the relatives after it is offered to the pitris. Both tarpana and shraddha should be performed regularly but in today's world, it is done on the annual thithi or on common days like the Aadi Amaavaasai of Chittra Paruvam (for mothers) or the Mahaalaya Amaavaasai<sup>5</sup> in Purattaadhi, which are particularly regarded as suitable for the shraddha ceremonies as they are sanctified days for offering oblations to the departed ones.

The departed ancestors are referred to as pitris and the Vedas give a prominent place to the existence and honouring of the pitris. When a parent dies, he expects the son to perform the funeral rites, offer pujas, give gifts to the Brahmins and serve food to the needy as a mark of remembrance. Beginning with the thirty first day remembrance, this is an annual feature performed on the thithi and on month which the parent passed away. It is commonly felt that when ever a departed one's shraddha takes place, that person, in his invisible form is present at the ceremonies. The homage to the

dead is a continuing process from one generation to another in a family and it depends on the continuance of the family line. Thus the production of an off-spring is regarded as one of the principal duties of a householder.

The pitri is the invisible form of the departed one and it is said that it is a centre of power, according to its spiritual elevation. The pitris are divided into three groups namely the Divine or eternal pitris, the mortal pitris and living ancestors. The mortal pitris are the immediate departed ancestors and are said to be our guardians to the other world in etheric form. Tradition has it that the pitris go to the other world by the devayaana or pitriyaana paths. Those who take the pitriyaana path return back when effects of their good deeds are exhausted while the divine pitris stay on to guide the world.

The tarpana, shraddha and pinda ceremonies go back to the Vedic age and two conceptions of ancestors namely the pitris and pretas could be distinguished in the ancestral offerings from that time onwards. The pitris are the distant half forgotten ancestors and the preta is the recently departed parent. At the ceremonies, the preta is ranked first amongst the ancestors who number only three for the ceremonies and with the offering of pindas, the great grand father of the preta is left out and the process continues in this manner.

On Aadi Amaavaasai, when shraddha is performed, three pindas are offered and the three fathers invoked by name and symbolically, libations of water mixed with sesame seeds, are poured through the fingers of the one who is performing the ceremonies.

In Sri Lanka the Aadi Amaavaasai fast is observed at the Keerimalai Temple of Naguleshwaram, the Amirthakali Mamangeshwara Temple in Batticaloa, the Palavai Thertham of the Tiruketheshwaram Temple in Mannar and the Mutwal Temple, In some of these temples, the Theerhotsavam takes place on this

sacred day where the image of the temple is taken to the temple tank, for ablutions and brought back in procession to the temple for special pujas. In India the more important shrines for these observances are Rameshwaram in the deep south and the sacred River Ganga itself, in the north.

On these sacred days, when one remembers the departed parent, in reality one is doing him good as he would if the departed one was alive. It is the motive of the giver that is important for it retains the character of a pious remembrance of the one who is no more. The principle in all these observances and pitri rites is the worship of the departed one and satisfying their wishes so that they could be at peace with themselves for the rest of the year.

#### NOTES

1. For the mother, the day is in the month of Chittirai on the full moon day, known as Chittra Paruvam.
2. Tradition has it that just before the Mahabharata war was declared, Duryodhana had asked his cousin Sahadeva, on the Pandya (enemy) side, to name an auspicious day to begin the war; Sahadeva replied that if war is declared on Amaavaasai, then victory is assured. Krishna realised that this information would create a problem for the Pandavas and through His divine powers, brought about Amaavaasai a day earlier and nullified the would be victory. Knowing his cousin's desire for honesty and his competence in astrology Duryodhana was shrewed enough to ask this from his cousin !
3. Full moon occurs when the Sun is exactly 100 degrees from the position of the moon. Each full moon is given the name of the star in which it occurs - for example since the full moon occurs under the star of Chittirai, the month is called Chittirai.

Philosophically, the Sun signifies the Atman while the moon is the mind and in the material world, they signify the father

and the mother respectively. Thus the Hindu who has lost his mother holds the full moon day in Chittirai sacred and remembers the dead mother by fasting and offering food to the needy, as is done on Aadi Amaavaasai for the dead father.

Mythology has linked the story of Chittra Gupta with the Chittirai Paruvam which is considered specially sacred to them. Chittra Guptas are the 'recording angel' of the Hindu pantheon. By maintaining a record of the merits and demerits of each person, the day of death is determined by them. It is to appease them that special worship is performed, prasaadam offered and homam done. These observances remind one that there is a Power above who is constantly watching over all his actions. This helps man to do good and avoid evil actions.

4. Feeding the poor and hungry is a meritorious act and all observances are generally associated with annadaana, especially those with the pitris. The body has to be kept healthy and fit for sadhana and food is an extremely important human need.
5. The Mahaalaya Amaavaasai in Purattaadhi is linked with the story of Karnan of the Mahabharata, the great Giver of charity who helped many with material benefits but forgot to feed the hungry and needy. Tradition has it that when he died on the battlefield of Kurukshetra and left his mortal coil, he ascended up to the region of heroes. There he learnt that in his service he had forgotten the all important annadaana, the feeding of the hungry and needy and had to return to earth. It was in the dark fortnight of the month of Purattaadhi ending on Amaavaasai day, that he returned and fed many hungry persons and finally came back to rest.

## THE VEL FESTIVAL

### The Symbol of Peace and Unity in the month of Aadi

The Vel Festival in the month of Aadi, is an event with deep religious strands woven into it. It is not merely the lining of the streets by thousands and thousands of devotees in all their colourful attire but more, the symbolic significance of the gathering of the Hindus and Buddhists in the capital city's most spectacular festival. As the Vel carts carved out of silver and gold and laden with the images of Deities, richly adorned and studded with precious stones, move out of the temples in Sea Street to wend their way to the temples in Bambalapitiya, they symbolise pomp and grandeur outwardly but peace and harmony, inwardly.

The beginnings of the Vel Festival are closely related to the Kathirgaamam (Kataragama) Festival where Skanda is annually worshipped in the month of Aadi ending the day after the Kathirgaamam water-cutting ceremony. The worship of Skanda is very popular amongst the Hindus and Buddhists. He is the embodiment of Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram - truth, peace and beauty - the everlasting fragrance of life. The Skanda Puranam weaves a fascinating story about how Skanda was born as the incarnate of Light and Knowledge, fighting evil in order to establish righteousness. The Vel is His instrument of combat and He is represented with the Vel in His hand. This symbolises knowledge. The pointed end

denotes that knowledge should be sharp and piercing but at the same time one should be humble and tranquil with equanimity of mind so that this knowledge would be profitable to all. According to the Puranic story, He used the Vel to split the Asura Soorapadman who had assumed the form of a tree and each half became two birds, the peacock and cock. The birds were subdued and made into His vehicle and banner respectively.

This unusual story of a little Child fighting the indomitable asura brothers, endeared Him to humanity and it was natural that even in the early nineteenth century devotees flocked to the sylvan shrine in Kathirgaamam in the deep south of Sri Lanka, through unpaved and unchartered tracks, ignoring all the difficulties that arose on the way. Amongst the devotees, were two Indian communities namely the Nattukottai and Semmankottai Chettiyar communities. Members of these two rich communities undertook the annual pilgrimage by foot - paada yaatra, with deep faith and piety and returned after the theertham, the water-cutting ceremony.

It is said that in 1818 an epidemic of cholera broke out in the Moneragala district and the devotees were not allowed to enter the district where the hallowed shrine is situated. This upset the devotees a great deal and it was during this time that Skanda is said to have appeared in a dream to one of these Chettiyar devotees saying, 'in order that I may shower My choicest blessing on the people, you may build Murugan Temples and organise the same festival here in Colombo.'

The temples were duly built by the Chettiyar clans. The Semmankottai Temple is said to have been built on the spot where the message of the cholera epidemic was first received. This is the Semmankottai Manikka Vinayagar Temple in Bambalapitiya and the new Kathiresan Temple was built adjacent to it. Since then, every year on Paruvam, the full moon day in Aadi, Kathirvelayutha Swami leaves His Temple in Sea Street in the regal cart and wends His way to the Manikkava Vinayagar Temple in Bambalapitiya. Before the cart leaves, peacock feathers and the paal kaavadies

(pots of milk) are carried by devotees on their heads to the Gintupitiya Murugan Temple where ceremonies are performed. Here 'the saying of Kattiyam' that is the narration of the Vel story, is had and with that, the main ceremonies begin. Two days later, Skanda leaves with His Consorts in the golden cart in all grandeur and comes to the Kathiresan Temple. At the temples the carts stop over for two nights and then return giving devotees plenty of time for their offerings of puja. The temple compounds are also full of small vendors' trade stalls where there is brisk buying - unusual items like fancy glass bangles, bead-ware, hair ornaments, pottery, stainless steel-ware, plastics etc. together with sugar cane, fruits, flowers etc. are sold. One sees the different communities jostling with one another in this frenzy buying spree.

Both the carts are accompanied by naadasvara musicians and followed by hundreds of devotees singing bhajans, carrying kaavadies, dancing and merry making. The carts go through the streets of Colombo where Governors and President, Prime Minister and High Commissioners wait to receive them at President's House, Indian High Commission and Temple Trees respectively offer pujas, pay their respects and invoke the blessings of God Skanda. One also sees many Hindu business establishments ready to receive the Vel carts. The entrances of such establishments are adorned with pairs of bannana trees laden with fruits and flowers and tables arranged with the Poorna-kumbam, the lighted kuththu villakkus, together with fruits and flowers for offerings to Skanda. In this traditional way the devotees receive the Vel carts, break the coconuts as the carts pass their way, offer puja and receive blessings.

The Vel Festival is a major religious festival in the Hindu Buddhist tradition emphasising the underlying oneness of our society reflecting the homogeneity of thought and tradition. It is a wonderful unifying force that brings the various communities together as they stand shoulder to shoulder to have a glimpse of Skanda and His Consorts riding the carts in all their regality and bargaining together at the trade stalls - a wonderful and unique experience.

Esotrically, the whole festival symbolises the progress of life. Each cart symbolises the human being and the image of Skanda is the Atman within each one. The wooden horses depicted as drawing the carts, are the senses reined in by the image. These represent the human passions that have to be checked. The journey from one temple to the other, through the streets symbolises the life of man and how he should control his senses and use them profitably and not in an unrestrained manner. (see Mahotsavam) Exotrically the Vel Festival is an interesting 'gathering' where all mix together shedding racial and religious differences to receive the darshan of Skanda on one hand and merry make on the other.

May the blessings of Skanda be on one and all!



## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EKADASI FAST

The Hindus are accustomed to observe fasts around the year and from ancient times they have observed complete fast on Ekadasi. This is the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight. In the lunar calendar, the eleventh day after the new moon and the eleventh day after the full moon, are the two Ekadasi days; but the Ekadasi with the waxing moon is auspicious and is the day meant for fasting. This day is also known as "Harivasara," the day liked by Lord Hari.

The different phases of the moon influence the mind and this is referred to as occult influence. It is said that on certain days of the fortnight, spiritual 'rays' flow towards the earth helping in contemplation and meditation. The eleventh day, Ekadasi, is one such day. The moon goes through the various phases and the corresponding astral counterpart in man's subtle body too goes round from head to toe through the different centres. On the eleventh day of the light and dark fortnight, the astral principle is located at the eye brow centre and the naval centre and is in contact with the higher and lower influences respectively. It is to take advantage of the former and lesser of the latter that fasting and prayer are observed on these days.<sup>1</sup>

Ekadasi is a fast that helps to re-orient man's life to face the present needs with success. The observance of fast on this day, not only tones up his health but also develops the sattwic temperament

in him. Medical science says that fasting helps in the respiratory, circulatory, digestive and urinary systems by destroying impurities. Fasting denotes abstinence of food coupled with prayer and meditation. Restraint on food particularly those of rajasic quality which hinders spiritual development is also practised. This controls emotions and the sense organs, purifies the mind and heart and thereby becomes conducive to prayer and meditation. It gives a certain amount of power of will over hunger which is one of man's basic urges. When hunger is conquered, man naturally grows stronger because of his prayer and meditation. Thus our ancients designed fasts like the Ekadasi as a training period, as a means of tapas, which would help develop a more purposeful life, ensure a healthy constitution and spiritual progress.

The Padma Purana gives an interesting story about the origin of Ekadasi. It is said that in the Krita Yuga, the demon Mura had gained great strength with which he terrorised all. The devas and the sages appealed to Siva for protection. Siva directed them to Vishnu who promised to protect them. The war began and was raging as Vishnu wielded His weapon, the Chakra against Mura and retired to the cave Simhavati in the Badrika ashrama and lay asleep. Mura pursued and attacked Him. Here, a beautiful girl Sakti emerged from Vishnu's body challenged Mura, who defiantly pushed her aside. But at a sound from Sakti, the asura was burnt to death. When Vishnu woke up, he saw the exploits and named the Sakti, Ekadasi. It is said that the first Ekadasi appeared in the dark half of Margali.

This story, like all Puranic stories sounds fictitious. The ancient rishis allegorically illustrated the event as a meaningful incident that could be applied to one's life and impressed upon the common man the importance of the Ekadasi fast. Vishnu in this story, signifies the life - principle while Mura represents the tamo guna, the ignorance which surrounds one. When the tamasic and rajasic qualities within are subdued, through fast and prayer, one develops a great deal of strength which helps to remove the asuric forces within and the evils around.



Tradition has also linked the story of Bhima, the second Pandava brother with Ekadasi. The story says that Bhima wanted to know from Sage Vyasa the name of one fast which would bestow maximum results. The sage replied that the Ekadasi of the bright half of the month was very propitious and that he should fast on that day, perform japa and keep vigil through the night and take food only after offering prasaadam the following morning, Bhima was a deeply religious person who worshipped with no fanfare but at the same time he was one who loved food and found it difficult to be without it. Sage Vyasa's advice that Ekadasi should be observed by him shows the importance of the fast.

Besides these stories many ancient shastras speak of the importance of the Ekadasi fast. In the Narada Purana, the Ekadasi fast is stressed as being important:

'O lady,' the Puranas say, 'on Harivasara day, do not eat.' Harivasara is an Ekadasi day where the devotee of Hari (Vishnu) observes fast during the day and does rigorous japa and meditation and keeps vigil through the night. The Purana says in another instance that fasting is compulsory for all the four varnas and ashramas. To women this is an important fast.

Another religious work says:

'All those between eight and eighty must fast on Ekadasi of both the bright and dark halves of the month' - Katyayana Smriti

The Tattva Sangara speaks of the benefit that one gets from observing complete fast on Ekadasi days:

'There is nothing as holy as the fasting on Ekadasi. It endows on one kingdom, sons, swarga as well as Moksha.'

And in the Garuda Purana it is said:

'He who observes Ekadasi fast devotedly attains Vaikuntha, and ultimately becomes one with Sri Krishna.'<sup>2</sup>

In all the Vaishnava Temples<sup>3</sup> Ekadasi pujas are observed by all Hindus with piety and solemnity culminating in the Vaikuntha Ekadasi which falls in the month of Kartikai. On this sacred day, the devotees fast the whole day, if possible do not drink any water and observe vigil through the night singing Vaishnava bhajans, kirtans leading to prayer and meditation. The vigil at night helps man to remain wakeful in the midst of the darkness of ignorance.

#### NOTES

1. Swami Sivananda - Hindu Fasts and Festivals.
2. The Puranic verses are from V. A. K. Aiyer's article, 'Great Values of Ekadasi Vrata.'
3. In Sri Lanka, the Vishnu Temples in Jaffna are the Varatharaja Venkatesa Perumal Kovil, the Varatharaja Perumal Temple in Tholpuram and the Sri Vallipura Alwar Swami Kovil in Vallipuram in point Pedro. In Colombo, the Nedimali Kovil in Dehiwela is a recently renovated temple. In India the Sri Rangam Temple in the Trichinopoly district and the Sri Padmanabha Temple in Tanjore are important Vishnava Temples.

## KRISHNA JAYANTHI

The story of Krishna is a grand saga of a many splendoured legend which has been handed down the ages by various people who have woven an embroidery of inspiring stories round Him. These stories carry messages of love and peace truth and righteousness and are specially relevant to the strife torn world of today which is bereft of these values.

Krishna was born in a prison cell in Mathura on the banks of the Yamuna River on a dark and rainy night. The whole atmosphere was dark and gloomy because the demon King Kamsa had unleashed a reign of terror. It was predicted that the eighth child of his cousin Devaki would destroy him. This prompted the cruel Kamsa to imprison Devaki and her husband Vasudeva and ordered that each child of theirs should be put to death as soon as it is born!

But God works in ingenious ways and the eighth child was born to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning, on Ashtami the eighth day of the dark half of the month of Aavani. This was Krishna, a blue baby boy like a lotus flower with a beautiful smile on his tiny lips. Seeing this extra-ordinary son, the parents bowed low in a reverential attitude. A voice was heard directing Vasudeva to take the child to Gokulam and entrust him to Yasodha and bring back her baby girl to Mathura. All the prison doors opened and the

river parted for Vasudeva to take the child to Gokulam and bring back the baby girl to Mathura.

In the dark gloomy atmosphere the baby boy in Vasudeva's arms was the luminous Lamp of Wisdom that had come down to dispel the darkness of ignorance, assuming various forms - now appearing as the resplendent Maha Vishnu carrying the discus, mace, conch and lotus; now being the new born babe sleeping quietly in the basket with the big toe in his mouth; and now appearing with the hood of the cobra as a canopy over the basket to protect it from the lashing rain. Strange and fascinating were the scenes depicting the descent of the avataar, Lord Sri Krishna.

Krishna is the eighth of the ten incarnations of Maha Vishnu, each incarnation fulfilling a set cosmic scheme in a particular age.<sup>1</sup>

The Krishna avataar is the purna avataar, the full manifestation of the Supreme where His godliness was clearly manifested through the revelation of His Cosmic Form, the Vishvarupa, which occurred on three occasions. He gave the Vishvarupa dharshan first to His mother, then to His friend Arjuna and lastly to grandsire Bhishma. The other avataars are only partial revelations of the God-head.

In the Gita, Sri Krishna says,

" Parithraanaaya saadunaam vinaashaaya cha dushkritam  
Dharma samsthaapanarthaya sambhavaami yuge yuge,"  
IV - 7,8

'for the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age.'  
And so descended God as Krishna to rid the adharma in the world.

The ideal relationship between God and man is illustrated by using every tender emotion (bhaava) that one reads of in the legends of Krishna. These are the vatsalya bhaava, the nayaka-nayaki bhaava, the sahitya bhaava and lastly the emotion where man seeks God as the Supreme Absolute.

A beautiful verse in the Rig Veda explains the vatsalya dhaava where God is conceived as the father. It reads,

' Stay still, O Beautiful One! do not go away  
With this sweetest song, I grasp the garment's  
Hem, as a child grasps his father's robe.'

Here the Beautiful One is God and He is conceived of as the Father and man stands as a child in relation to Him. But in another Vedic hymn one sees this sentiment reversed and the poet speaks of himself as the mother while God is the Infant she fondly embraces. This evolved into tender devotion and affection for God conceived of as the Child as in the case of Bala Krishna or Bala Kumara.

The cult of infant Krishna has indeed been a profoundly humanising influence amongst the Hindus, the Vaishnavites in particular. Kunti Devi<sup>1</sup> in the Bhagavatham, speaks of Yasodha, Krishna's foster mother, as taking a rope to tie up the naughty Krishna who had committed several offences, stealing the cream, breaking the milk pots etc. Seeing the rope in the mother's hand, Krishna bowed his head and wept. Here, Krishna the child is seen in a unique picture of sub-ordination before his mother. Yasodha is the mother who renders service to the child out of pure love and affection and while discharging such devotional services, she forgets the position of the child in her arms. There is no reverential attitude but a spontaneous love and pure affection. Had she been conscious of the Son's exalted position, her behaviour would certainly have been different. In one instance reflecting his human attributes of stealing butter, eating the cream, she reprimanded and asked him to open his mouth. Low and behold it was His Vishvarupa the indescribable Cosmic Form, that she saw. This was a revelation to her.

In reality, God is Unborn and is no one's son, but He is the father of all.

The Nayaka-nayaki bhaava is seen in the co-relation of human and divine qualities of the gopis of Brindaban and Krishna. All living

beings, according to Hindu religious concept are viewed as brides and God as the only Bridegroom capable of espousing and guiding each one. Krishna literally demonstrated this position during his earthly sojourn. Here, the love of the gopis was no mere physical passion. It was supreme love Prema, that they had for Krishna and their minds became Krishna-maya and they gained Oneness with God by dancing with him in pure nuptial love. In the Rasa Lila dance that Krishna performed with the gopis, he multiplied himself and each gopi felt that God was specially near to her. This love for Krishna portrays the nayaka-nayaki bhaava, the culmination of bhakti. The gopis dance with God in perfect ecstasy and in the process the lover and the loved one become identical. This is the Oneness of Vedanta.

Who are the gopis in the mundane context? How could one relate this story to the present times? are questions that could puzzle some who may not see the connection. The human beings, namely the individual Souls, are the gopis seeking through deep devotion to realise God within. This world is verily Brindaban to those who are full of love, service and devotion to God. The Rasa Lila dance could be brought right down into each one's life so that the nearness to God could be felt by the individual. The melody from Krishna Flute lures the entire creation towards Him and also portrays His love for His creation. The Blue Krishna Wearing yellow silk with a peacock plume on the head and a garland of woodland blossoms, plays the flute for all beings and it is for man to try and capture the Divine melody.

The symbolic companionship of Arjuna and Krishna, the human and Divine Soul is next seen not in a peaceful hermitage but in the midst of a battle. He plays the eternal role of a friend of man for the eradication of adharma. He is here, the Charioteer, (Sarathi) driving Arjuna's chariot. His advice to Arjuna in the form of the Bhagavad Gita is meant for all human beings and for all times.

Bhagavan Sri Satya Sai Baba brings the Kurushetra war right up to man's door step. It is not just a war fought several millennia ago but in the subtle form, the sukshma rupa, the war rages within man

which Swami refers to as the Hridayaksha or the subtle firmament of the heart. In this battle the five Pandava brothers and the hundred Kaurava brothers were fighting for the kingship of Hastinapura where all of them were born, nurtured and trained. Krishna was the Charioteer guiding the Pandavas to eradicate adharma, the Kaurava tyranny.

Though several millennia have passed since the Bhagavad Gita was preached to Arjuna by his Friend, God, the Hindus always find something living in the Gita, something that fills into the developing thought and has a freshness and applicability to the spiritual problems that afflict the mind. It is a poem of crisis, of political and social crisis and even more so, of crisis in the spirit of man. In times of crisis, when the mind is tortured by doubt and is torn by the conflict of duties, it has turned to the Gita for guidance and light. The Gita deals essentially with the spiritual background of human life and it is in this context that the practical problems of every day life appear. It is a call to action, to meet the duties of life but always keeping in mind that spiritual background.<sup>3</sup>

In life, the Pandavas are represented by the five good qualities of Satyam, Dharma, Shanti, Prema and Ahimsa which are constantly at war with the many evil qualities the Kauravas, numbering perhaps hundred or more. Man's make up is a combination of good and bad tendencies. Evil tendencies are due to blind ignorance and good tendencies originate in the whiteness of purity. Strangely these good and bad qualities are related to each other because of their common origin. Being opposed to each other, they become the disputants for the kingship of the heart. Krishna is the Atman deep within helping man to eradicate all that is evil in him so that the good qualities triumph.

The Krishna Jayanti observances in all Vishnu Temples and Cultural Centres are elaborate as usual with abhishekam and pujas with hundreds of devotees participating in the singing of bhajans. The fast is meant for both husband and wife who fast and mentally live near God on this day and as each devotee turns inward in

meditation engulfed by the silence within, God is 'born' - the Light to guide the future.

## NOTES

1. Each of the ten incarnations of Vishnu is allegorically represented in Nature and the evolutionary pattern of the living species could be discerned - from the lower to the higher order - through the Matsya, the fish representing the lowliest forms, through Kurma or tortoise, Varaha or boar, Narasimha or half lion and half man, Vamana or dwarf, Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and lastly Kalki, a personification of the Law of Nature that drives the manifest universe into the unmanifest state.

In the congenial environment of water, the aquatic beings made their appearance. This event in Nature is allegorically represented as fish - Matsya Avataar as being the first where God assumed the Matsya form and dived deep into ocean and reclaimed the lost Vedas in the form of four babies.

Next in the evolutionary pattern is the Kurma, which could live both in water and on land and tradition has it that God came as the Kurma or tortoise to support the celestials who churned the ocean of life for prosperity.

The Varaha or boar incarnation in the order of evolution comes next, where God took this form to retrieve the Earth Goddess when she was plummeted deep down to the bottom of the ocean by a demon who was vanquished by Him. The boar species live on land but are partial to water.

Narasimha or half-man and half-lion is the fourth where in the ladder of evolution, animals like the monkey ape etc are evolving towards the human form. Tradition speaks of a demon named Hiranyakasippu, who acquired the boon of not being killed by a living being in the world and so God assumed

this strange form in the fascinating story of Prahladha, the saintly son of the demon himself.

Vamana is the fifth incarnation where the physical structure of man has been somewhat formed but his mind not developed, a dwarf. Mythology speaks of God coming as a dwarf to the ego-centred King Bali asking for a piece of land just three strides in extent. When it was granted the dwarf assumed the Cosmic Form and covered the created world in two strides and for the third stride placed His foot on the King and tamed him.

The sixth is Parasu Rama, the evolved man carrying the axe with which the bad were exterminated.

Evolution reaches its climax in the seventh incarnation, Sri Rama, the model of human perfection and the Epic Ramayana allegorises the tenets of Vedanta where Sri Rama is the Paramaatman and the Rama-Ravana conflict is the war between good and bad.

Sri Krishna is the eighth Avataar. Though human in form He is Paramaatman, the Reality.

The ninth incarnation is the Buddha where He shows that man can rise to the pinnacle of perfection through self-discipline and saadhana. And the tenth is yet to come, Kalki a personification of the Law of Nature that drives the manifest universe into the unmanifest state.

2. Kunti Devi is the mother of the Pandavas - Arjuna being the third son. She was devoted to the service of Krishna and requested God to give her problems all the time, so that she could constantly turn to Him and remember Him.
3. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru - Thoughts from Nehuru on the Gita.

## GANESHA CHATURTHI

Ganesha Chaturthi is the traditional jayanti of Ganesha which is observed on the fourth day of the new moon in the month of Aavani. To a non-Hindu, these jayantis could be confusing. But from time immemorial, the Hindus have always considered God and invoked Him as a distinguished Guest performing abhishekam and alankaram, offering pujas and prasadam followed by aarati and namaskaram. It is natural that jayantis are observed with piety and joyfulness. And Ganesha Chaturthi is one such observance.

The Puranic version of this jayanti speaks of the auspicious Nriya Ganapati as having come at the beginning of this age when the long night of Brahma was dark and still with only shantam, peace every where. It says, 'Suddenly there was a little rustling, a feeling of expectancy and through the still night the Great God appeared in the form of OM to recreate the world. The vibrations of Om were followed by a beautiful soft Light, the first dawn heralding a new Sun.' The sound of OM was embodied in the form of Ganesha or called by any one of His numerous Names namely Vinayaka, Vigneshwara, Ganapathy etc. He is the Lord of beginning, the very embodiment of the material universe and presides over the intellect. He is venerated with deep affection by every Hindu.



He is One -

'Who causes or removes Obstacles,  
Who withdraws or bestows Success,  
Who ignores or fulfills all Desires,'

These actions of causing and removing obstacles, withdrawing and bestowing success or ignoring and fulfilling all desires are seemingly paradoxical to a sincere devotee who venerates Him with deep affection. The causing of obstacles, the withdrawing of success or the ignoring of desires could be poignant and painful but in due course of time it may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. This process takes place inexorably in Nature where greater evils are warded off through the intervention of lesser evils. Such acts are not always understood but Vigneshwara, by creating obstacles at the correct moment averts something painful through lesser evils bringing good to all concerned. He is indeed the guardian Deity of man guiding him along the right path in his sojourn on earth.

Tradition has also linked the story of the demon Gajamukan with Ganesha. Gajamukan had acquired untold power through penance and was terrorising the devas and sages who, unable to bear the tyranny, appealed to Siva for help and help came in the form of Ganesha. Ganesha broke His right tusk and aimed it at the asura. This hit the asura hard and he rushed menacingly towards Ganesha in the form of a huge rat the *mushika*, hoping to kill Him! Instead Ganesha subdued him and made him His *Vahana* (vehicle).

The essence of the story is related in the words,  
" *Devargal devan sindhumakaththavan*

.....  
*Thaavuru Vinayaka Chaturthi enparaal.*"<sup>1</sup>

Observances of the Chaturthi fast explain not only its importance but also the necessity to remove the obstacles in life and work towards achieving one's goal.

Ganesha Chaturthi is a day filled with piety and thanks - giving and a day of rejoicing, "in the knowledge of life's inherent goodness,

of seeking Ganesha's blessing for the removal of all impediments," while devotedly singing and chanting His Name.

The ten day festival ends with the ceremonial immersing of His images or effigies in the sea. This immersion is said to symbolise His return to *Satchidananda*. But to man in the mundane world, the consigning of Ganesha to water is based on the idea that the *Persisting Reality* is worshipped with the aid of the perishing non-reality.<sup>2</sup>

Chaturthi is widely observed both in India and Sri Lanka but with a difference. In North India for example, the Chaturthi observances and the festivities that follow are spectacular. These consist of offering traditional puja to His image or effigy in the style as one would do for a guest who comes home. When the guest departs food and gifts are offered for the journey and the devotees, thousands of them, walk with Him, singing bhajans to the accompaniment of music and dance up to the river or sea (which symbolises the border of the village) and after He 'steps' into the water (immersed in the water) the devotees return. The whole programme is one of joy, camaraderi, devotion and music.

In Sri Lanka, the Chaturthi observances are different to those of India. Elaborate *abhishekams* are done with thousand and one conch shells known as '*Sangaabhishekam*', or special *abhishekam* with milk, honey, curd, fruit and ghee; this is followed by special pujas and archana's in all Ganesha Temples. The garlands used on this occasion are made of *Aruham pullu* and the *prasaadam* is essentially *Modhakam*, His favourite sweetmeat.

Ganesha puja becomes interesting to children rousing their imagination and creating a connection between the visible human and invisible super-human. Dame *Avvai*, the celebrated poetess, as a little girl sang in childish fervour invoking Ganesha as ' *Thungak Kari mukaththu*,' the Deity with the elephant head' and saying that she would give Him milk, pure honey, sweetmeat and dhal, she asked in return that she be blessed with the three forms of *Sangam*



Tamil namely Iyal, Isai and Natakam.<sup>3</sup> This was a child's prayer with a deep request.

To the adult, Ganesh puja means something more. It is associated with prayerful rituals followed by meditation. The puja includes the fast during the day with the offerings of sandal paste, flowers, incense, sacred camphor and prasadam namely fruits and sweetmeats. The puja is concluded with the singing of bhajans, arati and namaskaram. The prasadam is given to all, especially the needy on this day, symbolising an attitude of service to humanity.

The Hindu genius has brought forth concrete symbols to help the ordinary man to understand the abstract truths and through elaborate ritualistic pujas, subtle concepts are transformed into soul-stirring human relationships.<sup>4</sup> The observances of the Chaturthi fast explain this clearly and also the necessity to remove the obstacles in life and work towards achieving one's goal through selfless service to the community.

It is in keeping with Hindu traditions that one begins something new with the symbolic breaking of the coconut and seeking Ganesha's help to remove all obstacles saying, 'Let the Lotus Feet of Ganesha confer on us unmixed blessings.' In all ritualistic worship, the very first offering goes to Ganesha. A conical effigy of Him is made out of saffron, sandal or cowdung paste and decorated with a strand of grass known as Aruham pullu. This effigy is placed on a betel leaf and the puja is first done to this and the main puja or ceremony follows.

The worship of Ganesha seems to go back to almost five thousand years. Indus Valley seals bear the imprint of the elephant God. With the spread of Buddhism, His worship spread as far as China, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Afghanistan and South East Asia. As Ganesha His popularity spread to Java, Bali and Borneo - perhaps in these regions, the quality of protection, annihilation of obstacles brought about reverence towards the Deity. In North India, Ganesha is conceived as having Buddhi and Siddhi as His consorts; in the

South He is considered as a bachelor. Esoterically, the consort is His energy, Shakti. A piece of sculpture with Vinayaka as two elephants intertwined, has been found in China. How this form developed is a mystery but early evidence of His worship in China has now been established.<sup>5</sup> Tradition has it that Ganapathy was also worshipped in ancient Persia (Iran). A plate with the carvings of an elephant faced God Ganapathy has been recently excavated in Luristan (western Iran) and the archaeologists say that it belongs to a period between 1200 and 1000 BC.<sup>6</sup>

Ganesha is depicted as elephant-headed, pot-bellied and with the torso of a man. He has one broken tusk and He sometimes wears a serpent as His sacred thread. Artists depict Him with four hands. In one He holds a hatchet, in another a goad, in the third a noose and in the fourth the sweetmeat, the modhaka. These symbolise certain principles, namely, the goad cuts through the deceptive while the hatchet is symbolic of cutting away false perceptions and fears. The noose is used to restrain obsessive desire. The mouse is the vahana of Ganesha and represents the craving in each one which can eat away a mountain of merit that he may have gained in life. This is a reminder to be vigilant and prevent such incidents. His elephant body is bulky representing the cosmos in its entirety and embodies cosmic intelligence. The Sound symbol OM, the Pranavam is represented by the trunk. Thus the spiritual and philosophic thoughts behind this unusual form is fascinating. In Havell's words, "..... the Indian genius has here given us a really noble conception of Ganesha in a serious mood, as a personification of man's animal nature, imbued with something of the mystery of the Sphinx and a certain super-natural solemnity, carried out with magnificent strength and breadth of modelling."

The concept of Ganesha is interesting when His iconography is examined. One marvels at the ingenuity of imagination and application of the artist who first conceived this form - perhaps the concept of the Pranava OM and the story in the Puranas guided him! But still, it is fascinating to think that one's imagination could put together an elephant head on a pot bellied body of a child creating an image of curious beauty! As one beholds His counte-

nance some new interpretation seems to come up and the whole becomes more awe-inspiring preaching something new and drawing one closer to Him.

Though the story of Ganesha is shrouded in mythology and his iconography very special, yet as it has been seen, He is deeply related to the sacred syllable OM. This is the first principle, the Pranava mystic syllable which is the essence of the Divine, the simplest form of the word of God. It is composed of three sound syllables 'A', 'U' and 'M'. This, being representative of the Divine and the concentration on enlightenment and knowledge, came to be associated with Ganesha, the embodiment of all wisdom. **A-U-M** stands out as the supreme symbol that ever has been devised. Linguistically it is pre-eminently suited for being taken as the symbol for the whole gamut of the universal sound, **Shabdabrahman**. "A" is the first sound that arises when the vital breath manifests itself to produce a sound. The "U" sound marks the passage of the breath from the interior to the exterior part upto the lips, with the requisite movement of the tongue. "M" culminates the sound process with the closure of the mouth and the blowing of some breath through the nostrils. Thus the sound **A-U-M** represents the basic parts of the vocal mechanism in man and is thus qualified for being considered the most significant of symbols.

To the devotee, the **A-U-M** is the Vachaka or word for God and it is also called Pranava because it enables the individual self to merge in the Brahman through the awakening of the Prana in the Kundalini. From the navel region through 'A' the Kundalini is awakened and it traverses through 'U' upwards and reaches the crest with 'M'. **A-U-M** is thus synonymous with Ga-ne-sha and contains in microcosm the entire cult of Hindu spiritual thought and belief.<sup>7</sup>

"Ganesha is a symbol of social order and stability: an apotheosis of all the qualities which man shares with the animal creation. Siva is the symbol of the Soul - Atman; Ganesha, His son, stands for Manas - the mind,"

says Havell. It is believed that Ganesha sits upon the psychic lotus of the Muladhara Chakra, the ganglia of nerves at the base of the spine of man, which governs time, matter and memory. Worship of Him strengthens the memory and brings knowledge from within and at the same time protects one from lower forces. The Muladhara Chakra becomes activated as the spiritual aspirant climbs higher in the spiritual plane of conscious awareness and his sense of fear and confusion in him gradually fade away.

Ganesha is the closest to the material plane of consciousness making the contact between the devotee and the Almighty easier. In modern parlance, Ganesha puja becomes computerised in the words, "Close your eyes and code in the magnificent form of Ganesha in the computer terminal of your brain. On the remarkable Inernet, with Ganesha firmly seated within, you could access all information and answers to every question." Such is the closeness that many a devotee has with a truly remarkable Ganesha.

#### NOTES

1. தேவர்க டேவன் சிந்து முகத்தவன்.....  
தாவுற விநாயக சதுர்த்தி யென்பரால்.
2. Facets of Brahman - Swami Chidbhavananda.
3. பாலுந் தெளிதேனும் பாகும் பருப்புயிவை  
நான்கும் கலந்துனக்கு நான் தருவேன் - தோலஞ்செய்  
துங்கக் கரிமுகத்துத் தாமணியே  
சங்கத் தமிழ் முன்றுந் தா
4. Facets of Brahman.
5. Bhavan's Journal
6. Vanden Berghe's article - Historical Studies of Iran Aug-Sept 1970.
7. Whisperings of Eternity.

## THE MAHOTSAVAM OF A TEMPLE

### The significance of Durga Devi and Her Mahotsavam

The Mahotsavam<sup>1</sup> in all temples is one of the most intricate, highly choreographed and spiritually powerful ritual in Hindu Culture - it is indeed rooted in the millennia of the culture encouraging total surrender to a sense of unity with the Supreme One. It is the grand annual festival beginning with the hoisting of the flag - the Kodi-etram, followed by various yaagams, abhishekams, pujas and ceremonies over a period of several days. These ceremonies are conducted in the Moolasthaanam and in the Vasanta Mandapam where pujas are offered to the utsava murti.<sup>2</sup> The Thertiruvila is the colourful Chariot festival followed by the Theerthotsavam, the water-cutting ceremony on the next day. In many temples, the Tirukkalyaanam, the wedding ceremony is also conducted and finally the lowering of the flag - Kodi-irakkam.<sup>3</sup> Each one of these events has a deep significance in the macro and microcosm corresponding to the panchakrityas, namely creation, preservation, dissolution, obscuration and granting of grace.

One such Mahotsavam is the interesting festival held annually in the month of Aavani at the Durgai Amman Temple in Tellipallai, Jaffna. The celebrated Temple with all its grandeur and sculptured magnificence stands sublime in silent meditation amidst the palmyrah groves in Tellipallai. The faint crimson blush in the eastern firma-

ment ushers in the Aavani dawn with a shaft of sunlight touching the temple tower. Basking in the golden warmth, thousands and thousands of devotees watch Mother Durga in Her chariot and worship Her with implicit faith and devotion. The faith of the devotees in Durga Devi, re-affirms their tenacity and strength. The devotees come to Her not only during the festival but also throughout the year carrying their stresses, strains and worries and return with a sense of peace and solace. She is conceived of as the Mother of the Universe while the devotees are Her children who come to offer their love and devotion. She holds 'Her daily court' at puja times and the devotees flock to offer their tributes and present their request and petitions.

The temple is the venue of the Mahotsavam and all ceremonies associated with it, take place within the temple first and then the utsava murti of the festival is brought to the Vasanta Mandapam for ceremonies. The hoisting of the white flag, Kodietram marks the beginning of the Mahotsavam, and takes place at the flag staff, the Kodistambam. The unfurling of the flag represents the act of creation. The devotees observe this day with prayer and fast and come to the temple for the special pujas and ceremonies. On these occasions the Deity, Durga Devi appears in Her Divine splendour looking ethereal each time. According to the Durga Saptasati, She is Sarva Mangala the auspicious, Sive the bountiful, Tryambake the protectress and Gowri Narayani and the pujas and ceremonies performed to these various aspects of Durga, represent the act of preservation - that which is created is nourished and preserved.<sup>5</sup>

Several abhishekams, yaagams and pujas are conducted for several days and on the ninth day of the festival, the beautifully attired Durga Devi is brought out from the Vasanta Mandapam with great pomp and pageantry and placed in the chariot.<sup>6</sup> She rides the elaborately carved chariot with thousands and thousands of devotees around Her. Behind Her the very air is vocal with the singing of the varam, bhajans, chanting of mantrams and the naadasvaram music. The whole picture is beautiful and charged with spirituality; it is indeed a wonderful opportunity to experience

Durga Devi's tangible laser-like spiritual blessings which could only be felt and not described. The Chariot festival symbolises the act of destroying bondage and helping in the holy communion with Her.

The Chariot festival is followed by the Theerhotsavam, the water cutting ceremony. The utsava murti is taken to the temple pond, the Kerni and is dipped in the water. The devotees then plunge in to cleanse themselves of their sins. This signifies the 'bathing' in the Grace of God.<sup>8</sup>

On the night of the Theertham, is the Tirukkalyaanam that is observed in some temples. The actual wedding ceremony is conducted by the priests and with the tying of the Thaali by the Bridegroom, the Lord and His consort are worshipped. With the lowering of the flag, the curtain comes down on the Mahotsavam.

These festivals are important. They give man something to believe in, an anchor in the troubled world and some idealism bringing with it love, peace and sanctity. Man does share these moments of prayer with God and the entire festival portrays the Immanence of God in one's life. The Pati, Pasu, Pasam concept is depicted fully where man detaches himself from his worldly bondage and surrenders completely to the Supreme.

God in His aspect of Durga Devi, the Mother Divine, is thus worshipped at the Durgai Amman Temple. She is worshipped as Mahishasura Mardini, the one who destroyed the buffalo demon. There is a buffalo in each one of us and the beast symbolises ignorance. The concept of destruction is associated with the removal of ignorance and the worship of Durga thus symbolises the conquering of ignorance.

The image of Durga is well known for the spiritual power it radiates - Her excess power is interned in the Sri Chakra<sup>9</sup> in the centre of which She in Her aspect as Lalitha, the bestower of spiritual light and wisdom, stands. Special pujas, known as Sri Chakra pujas are performed regularly at this temple.

In the Svetasvatara Upanishad, there is an exquisite verse which reads, 'You are woman; You are man; You are the lad as also the lass; You are as an old man tottering with a stick.' God comes in various forms, in the gracefulness of a woman; in the strength of a man; in the joy of youth and in the wisdom of age.

The Nirvana Tantra describes Durga as being black because, 'as all colours, white, yellow and others are absorbed in black, so all the elements are in the end absorbed in Kali and as the absence of all colours is black, so Kali is represented black in order to reach man that She is without substance and without gunas.' The ancient rishis declared, 'There is only one cosmic energy with pulsates, pervades, permeates and interpenetrates every atom in the universe - the world evolves out of it, revolves round it and resolves into it' These are the processes of creation, preservation and dissolution. This Cosmic Energy to the Hindus is Sakti, the Mother Divine. The physicist speak of the infinite Conscious Energy behind the universe as the quantum energy.

The Devi Sukta of the Rig Veda (X 125) says, 'Although I am One by My powers I appear manifold.' And one of these manifestations is Durga Devi. Contrary to Her is Maha Tiripurasundari, who is the embodiment of love, beauty and joy. Thus the Mother is not only the beautiful Creator but is also the terrible Durga, the dark Goddess, the destroyer of evil who in reality destroys the demonic tendencies, the ignorance within.

Durga Devi, the Mother conceived in all Her infinite Power and Grace resides in the Durgai Amman Temple in Jaffna. She is the unfailing refugee of all beings.

### Durga Devi Saranam

### NOTES

1. Maha+utsavam, literally meaning the great festival is the annual festival of a temple. Each temple has its special day which is commemorated and followed by the ten day festival.

In the bigger temples the Mahotsavam is grand and the temple Deity is taken round the temple in a chariot.

2. Utsava murti is the temple Deity that is specially presented at these ceremonies
3. உட்சவமூர்த்தி; கொடியேற்றம்; தேர்த்திருவிழா; தீர்த்தோட்சவம்; திருக்கல்யாணம்; கொடியிறக்கம்
4. The unfurling of the flag represents the act of creation. The flag-post is made of wood encased in copper and silver plate with a flag made of the same material facing the sanctum sanctorum. The post represents Pati, God. The white flag with the impression of the vahanam of the presiding deity on it is Pasu, the Soul. The flag is wound round the post with a white cord which represents the Grace of Durga and a string made of tharppai grass which represents bondage and ignorance, Pasam. The fact that God is the Primordial One on which everything rests is reflected in the flag-post and round which the flag is wound with the two cords. The whole represents the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy of Pati, Pasu, Paasam - God, Soul, Bondage.
5. Saint Sambandhar speaks of the various aspect God takes to come down to earth to save mankind -  
வேதமோதி வெண்ணூல் பூண்டு வெள்ளை  
எருதேறிப் பூதம் சூழப் பொலியவருவார் புலியினுரிதோலார்.
6. Each of the bigger Hindu temples has a sacred chariot known as the 'Ratham' or 'Ther.' This is a huge ornamental chariot in wood with a high canopy rising tier over tier and is awe inspiring in its towering size. It is fashioned with intricate carving and exquisite wood work and its chasis is massive with heavy wheels.
7. Puranic tradition has it that Siva mounted the chariot Earth and with Mount Meru as His bow and Agni as His arrow destroyed

the three citadels of the asuras - in man these are the three malas namely aanavam, kanmam, maaya.

8. Saint Manikkavasagar sings of this as:  
ஆர்த்த பிறவித் துயர் கெட நாமார்த்தாடும் தீர்த்தன்  
He is the holy water where we sing and bathe so that we may be free from the shackles of births.

Saint Appar sings:

அத்தாஉன் அடியேனை அன்பா லார்த்தாய்  
அருள் நோக்கில் தீர்த்த நீ ராட்டிக் கொண்டாய்  
அதாவது சிவனருளில் முழுகிச் சிவானந்தமாகிய பேரின்ப  
அனுபவத்தை எய்துவதாகும்.

மேல் கூறிய நால்வகை அமசங்களிலும் பஞ்சகிருத்தியத்தில்  
படைத்தல், காத்தல், அழித்தல், அருள் என்னும் நான்கை  
அவதானிக்கலாம். மறைத்தல் தொழில் காத்தல் தொழிலோடு  
எண்ணப்படுவது பொருத்தமாகும்.

9. The Sri Chakra consists of the Bindhu, a dot in the centre with innumerable triangles upright and inverted edged with a circumference of lotus petals. Pujas and archana is performed to it and this is known as the Sri Chakra Puja.



## AAVANI MOOLAM IN SAINT MANIKKAVASAGAR'S LIFE

• Aavani Moolam is a very auspicious occasion when Siva is said to have come down in the form of a young Coolie in answer to the call of Saint Manikkavasagar. In Chidambaram one sees the Aavani Moolam street which was named to commemorate this event bringing Saint Manikkavasagar right up to our present times and pointing towards the sanctity of this day. The observances on this day are simple and is confined only to fasting and remembering Saint Manikkavasagar who has bequeathed to humanity the key to love and peace, transcending all barriers of race, caste, creed and communal consideration. On singing the songs of the Tiruvasagam, one realises that these are, 'Songs of man's faith and love of things Eternal.' The Tiruvasagam leads one on to the Upanishadic prayer - "Asatoma sad gamaya; Tamasoma jyotir gamaya; Mrityor a amtitam gamaya." It is indeed from the slumber of darkness that one is awakended to perceive the Light and escape from death to Immortality.

' See what I have seen  
See the One whose rosy Feet touched the earth  
See Him whom I have recognised as Siva  
See Him who has made me His and showers Grace,"

sings Saint Manikkavasagar in his celebrated Tiruvasagam showing that this world is a place where man can find salvation, where he can be redeemed.

The events leading to the Aavani Moolam episode where God appeared as the Horseman and later worked a an old woman's Coolie carrying sand, could be gleaned from his composition itself.

" Madurai perunan maanakar irundhu  
Kudhirai sevakan aaki kolkaiyum  
Aangadhu thannil adiyavatkaakp  
Paangaai man sumandhu aruliya."<sup>2</sup>

narrates the sage, giving all the details.

History has it that Tiruvathavoorar was born in the village of Vadavoor in the Pandyan Kingdom. It was from the turmoils of a difficult political career that Tiruvathavoorar rose to sainthood and was blessed as Manikkavasagar. From a very young age with singleness of purpose he endeavoured to understand and establish a connection with God, a conscious urge in him to transcend his finite existence. And in this search he realised that he was only an instrument in the Hands of God and his duty was to serve Him. In one instance he sings, "Tell us the ways of serving You and we will obey You.' To serve God was his all consuming passion even though his talents and sagacity drew the attention of the ruling monarch who appointed him as his Chief Minister. But he was a Soul in conflict, yearning for the grace of God and seeking a Guru who would guide him towards this end. The ardent wish for a Guru was soon answered when he was sent to Tiruperunturai to purchase horses for the Pandyan cavalry. While journeying through Tiruperunturai, he heard divine music and perceived a mystic Guru, who exerted an indescribable sense of wonder in the young man. On seeing Him, Tiruvathavoorar fell prostrate at His Feet with the words "Namasivaya," on his lips. He forgot his immediate mission and changed allegiance from the mundane ruler to the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. He was inspired and being charged with spiritual fervour he poured out his yearnings for God in

garlands of songs. On hearing these songs, the Guru blessed and named him 'Manikkavasagar' one whose utterances are gems.' Thus the unseen Power like a Divine fragrance lured Tiruvathavoorar to discover the Truth and teach mankind these eternal verities.

Manikkavasagar became oblivious of his purchasing mission and spent the money in selfless acts of service. When the Pandyan King learnt that his orders had been flouted and the money squandered away, he had him arrested demanding an explanation. Manikkavasagar was helpless against the might and wrath of the King. But succour came to him through Divine intervention, as it would, to any true devotee of God engaged in selfless pursuits. Taking refuge at His Feet, he prayed for assistance. He was directed by an inner Voice to proceed to the capital and say that the horses would reach Madurai on Aavani Moolam. And on this auspicious day, a contingent of fine horses did appear in the city led by a Stranger whose cavalier behaviour angered the King. That night, the horses changed into jackals creating pandemonium in the city! The King was very angry and his wrath and indignation were directed against his Chief Minister, who once again became the victim of torture and punishment. He was stripped of his position and thrown on the hot sands of the Vaigai river bed.

' He is the King of the world who carried earth in noisy Madurai, earned His wage and got caned by the Pandyan King on His golden Form which carries wounds! Let us sing O Ammaanaai,<sup>13</sup>

sings Manikkavasagar in one of his hymns giving the rest of the story of the unfailing support that came to his rescue once again.

The King realised his mistake in punishing Manikkavasagar and that the Youth was none other than God Himself and that all this was His Tiruvilaayadal. Manikkavasagar was immediately released and the King begging his pardon offered the kingdom at his feet. He declined everything and renounced the world becoming a wandering minstrel, visiting temples and singing the glories of

God in 'holy strains of beautiful word.' Finally he settled down at Chidambaram, as he had been bidden by God.

#### NOTES

1. கண்ணால் யானுங் கண்டேன் காண்க  
.....  
புவனியிற் சேவடி தீண்டினன் காண்க  
சிவனென யானும் தேறினேன் காண்க  
அவனெனை யாட்கொண்டு அருளினன் காண்க
2. மதுரைப் பெருநன் மாநகர் இருந்து  
குதிரைச் சேவகன் ஆகிய கொள்கையும்  
ஆங்கது தன்னில் அடியவட்காகப்  
பாங்காய் மண் சுமந்து அருளிய
3. .... கடவுள் கலிமதுரை  
மண் சுமந்து கூலிகொண்டு அக்கோவால் மொத்துண்டு  
புண் சுமந்த பொன்மேனி பாடுதும் காண் அம்மானாய்.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NAVARAATRI FAST

### A Saga of Devi during the Nine Nights

Hindus regard nature as part of the manifested Divine Energy and do not separate it from God, while scientist, till radio activity was discovered, thought that matter and energy - the two fundamental entities of the Universe were distinctly separate from each other. Now we know that matter can be converted into energy and back to its original form as water to steam and back again through condensation to water. Matter can also be changed into another through pressure - the chief agent being energy - Shakti. Modern science recognises nature as part of a manifold energy which produces the phenomenal Universe and says that this Universe existed in a potential state in that energy. This eternal energy is Cosmos, a combination of matter and mechanical forces guided by regular laws for a definite purpose. The ancient Hindu rishis conceived the whole Cosmos, as revolving in constant rhythmic vibration, where the minutest particles of electrons and protons and the mightiest galaxies of the Universe move in a definite fashion. It is a harmonious whole with an orderly chain of changes, namely evolution.

The scientist are synthesising the microcosmic and macrocosmic laws of the Universe into one unified theory but the ancient

rishis knowingly declared, "There is only One, the Cosmic Energy which pulsates, pervades and permeates and interpenetrates every atom in the Universe: that the world evolves out of it, revolves round it and resolves into it." These are the processes of creation, preservation and dissolution performed respectively by Maha Saraswati the Consort of Brahma, Maha Lakshmi the Consort of Vishnu and Maha Kali the Consort of Rudra - the three significant manifestations of Devi, the Primordial Sakti or the Divine Principle beyond form and name. Her glory is ineffable and Her splendour is indescribable. The three forms as Consorts of Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra are inseparable from their Lords as heat from fire conveying the prime truth that manifestations of Sakti are ultimately God Almighty, the Para-Brahman in action.

" Sarva Mangala Mangalye,  
Shive Sarvartha Sadhike,  
Sarnye Tryambike,  
Gowrie Narayani Namosthute,"

says the Devi Mahatmyam, delineating the Mother as the auspicious One. 'Thou art Sarva Mangala the auspicious; Sive the bountiful; Triyambike the protectress; Gowrie Narayani - I prostrate at Thy Feet.' This adoration has grown down the ages into a philosophical and mystic worship of Sakti as the most auspicious One and the inherent power of the Divine.

In the Rig Veda which is a very ancient scripture of the Hindus, the Divine Mother says. 'I am the Queen of the Universe, the Giver of all wealth and fruits of work. I am intelligent and Omnipresent. Although I am One by my powers I appear manifold. My glory is the phenomenal Universe. Such am I by My powers.' [X - 125]

In the Saundari Lahari, Sri Shankara delineates Devi as Mother Supreme who is near enough to us and yet far away; that She is in this world and yet beyond it and that She is both immanent and transcendent.

The Hindus from time immemorial have worshipped God the Supreme One as the Divine Mother of the Universe. The conception of God as the Divine Mother is realistic for it brings Him very close to one just as the mother is the closest person to her child. Human beings know and understand a mother's love and will naturally be able to approach the Universal Mother with greater ease. Saint Manikkavasagar speaks of God as being more concerned and loving than even a mother. It is this Divine Mother who comes in answer to the prayers of the devotee and helps to break the shackles of delusion, guiding him on the correct path. Sri Aurobindo very succinctly reminds us that we should surrender ourselves to the Divine Mother in the words, "Self-surrender to the Divine and Infinite Mother, however difficult, remains our only effective means and sole abiding refuge; self-surrender to Her means that our nature must be an instrument in Her hands, the Soul, a child in the arms of the Mother."

God as Mother supreme in Her threefold aspect as Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, is annually worshipped in the nine day festival called Navaraatri which falls in the first nine nights of the bright half of the month of Purattaadhi.

" Purattaadhithingalil sukla patchaththu pirathamai muthal varum onpathu naatkal,"<sup>1</sup>

is the Navaraatri, a period of prayer and meditation for moral, material and spiritual upliftment, culminating in cultural festivities. It is the call that awakens the Hindu, year after year to experience and express afresh, the inherent divine nature, to make manifest the eternal truth and love, to subdue and finally eradicate the evil forces within himself. Goodness, prosperity and knowledge are the three aspects of Navaraatri Puja which have to be brought into our lives. Goodness reveals love, while prosperity brings happiness through selfless service and lastly knowledge leads the way to Truth and God realisation. The translation through the outward rituals of worship and prayer into the practical aspect, is the real invocation and adoration of the Divine Mother, for this truly transforms and spiritualises one.

Devi, Ambal or Sakti as She is variously called is the living manifestation of Divinity in its Holy Trinity revealed as the lila of the Omnipotent Power. She is depicted as the great Goddess Parvati, the Consort of Siva and the daughter of Himavat. In the Navaraatri Puja, the glorious Mother in Her aspect as Durga is first worshipped for three nights in order that the evil nature in man could be destroyed. She as Durga, fought the demon Mahishasha and killed him and is referred to as Mahishasura Mardini. Here, She is the Samhara Sakti, the all destroying Power of God Siva as Rudra. Durga astride a lion, is the symbolic annihilator of evil. She is represented with many arms each bearing a weapon. She thrust Her trident into the chest of Mahishasura who emerges in human form, from the carcase of a buffalo. This is allegorical for there is in each one a buffalo demon in the form of ignorance and dullness, which has to be removed. Durga, contrary to Maha Tripurasundari who is the embodiment of love, beauty and joy, is Kali, the terror. Thus as Mother She is not only the beautiful Creator but is also the terrible Durga, the dark goddess, who revels in the dance of death. Whom does She destroy? She destroys the evil forces, the Mahishasuras within man.

The next three nights are dedicated to Mother Divine in Her aspect as Maha Lakshmi. Blessings for material and spiritual welfare are sought. She is portrayed on a red lotus draped in a red saree. She is the protective and sustaining power of Vishnu and the Goddess of Wealth. She blesses Her true and sincere devotees. Wealth has to be acquired by man's endeavours and Maha Lakshmi blesses the endeavours of one who strives in a dharmic way. Tradition has it that the devas and asuras churned the ocean of milk to obtain the ambrosia. While churning, Maha Lakshmi rose from the bed of the ocean and encountered the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. The churning of the ocean is an allegory where the ocean is man's pure mind which is churned through reflection so that the good qualities emerge and Maha Lakshmi symbolises the creation of the spiritual values of life.

During the final three nights the Mother in Her aspect as Maha Saraswati is worshipped. She is the creative power of God as

Brahma and worshipped as the Goddess of Learning. Maha Saraswati is depicted seated on a white lotus draped in a white saree playing the veena, indicating that She sings the melody of life inviting devotees to merge into the Naada Brahman. Saraswati's appearance connotes purity and transcendence. The white swan is a symbol of spiritual transcendence and perfection. She is worshipped for knowledge - the wisdom which will guide one on the onward march to the final goal of liberation. On the tenth day is the day of victory - Vijayadasami, when the Mother is adored in the written word. Literally the little ones are initiated into the three Rs on this day - Vidyaaarambam. On Vijayadasami, special and colourful rituals are observed in Devi Temples where the battle between Durga and the demon is re-enacted. This ritual is referred to as Maanampu. The image of Durga is carried by the priest and she aims the arrow at the Vanni tree which represents the demon. Today, the banana tree is used instead and is finally, cut into two with the devotees singing 'haro hara' in acclaim.

Each family generally observes the Navaraatri fast and ceremonies at home. In these observances both at the home and the temple, the Poorna-kumbam is a significant feature, symbolising Devi. At the beginning itself, the devotee requests Her to reside in the kumbam during these sacred days - 'Aavahanam pannudhal.' Pujas are done to the kumbam. The kumbam consists of a brass or silver kudam or chembu of water on which is placed a coconut fringed with five or seven mango leaves. This chembu is placed on a bed of sand strewn with nine varieties of grains, the navathaniam. The grains grow during these nine days round the kumbam and it is said that if it grows lusciously then prosperity to the household is assured. The kumbam is donned with first green, then red and finally white silk sashes representing Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati respectively, surrounded by oil lamps during the entire Navaraatri puja.

The puja consists of pratista, archana, bhog, aarati and namaskaaram. (See page - 14) Pratista or consecration is an attitude of invocation by which the devotee feels the living presence of Devi in the kumbam and the kumbam becomes a Reality and not just a

symbol. Ambal songs and bhajans are sung by the members of the family. This is followed by the offering of flowers while chanting the Name of Devi one by one ending with "namaha," I bow. The flowers stand for the offering one's love to God in an attitude of submission. Bhog or prasaadam is the offering of food specially prepared, first to the kumbam and after the evening puja is over, taken as prasaadam or grace by the members of the family. In the philosophical sense this signifies the very offering of oneself unto Devi - 'I am Thine. All is Thine. Thy will be done,' is indeed a true offering. Mangala aarati, the act of waving lighted camphor signifies the total burning down of the ego and later the total illumination of the human personality by Divine illumination. The Light of Grace lights the individual consciousness which in turn experiences the Light within. and finally is the namaskaaram, where the devotee prostrates before the kumbam in total surrender and submission to the Divine Will.

The outward rituals of the puja are very colourful, inspiring and grand and the arrangement of Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati in the Puja conveys a significant Truth. It is a revelation of an actual law which is the return journey of the embodied Soul of man to the final goal of merging with the Paramaatman.

It is said that when the Transcendent Power which is unmanifest and is without name and form, becomes manifest as the visible Universe, the Power or Brahma, Maha Saraswati creates - the process of evolution takes place. Here the Supreme, the subtlest becomes progressively gross and finally inert matter. The Soul in its embodied form is created and is subject to time, is sustained and finally due to its perishable nature, dies. This is the order of the One becoming many, the unmanifest becoming the manifest and the cause becoming the various effects. Names and forms spring from Prakriti into the realm of Maaya where these forms and names come under the sway of time, past, present and future. As they have to exist during three periods of time, there arises the preserving and sustaining factors. The Power of the Preserver, Maha Lakshmi sustains and keeps up the universal process. Due



to the fact that these names and forms are of a perishable nature and are limited by time, the process of breaking up or dissolution is performed by the Power of Rudra, Maha Kali or Durga Devi. Thus we see that these functions start with creation, then sustenance and finally dissolution. This is the descent of Spirit into matter.

The arrangements of Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati in the Navaraatri puja conveys a significant Truth, a revelation of an actual law, the return journey of the embodied Soul to merge with the Paramaatman. In this mundane world, consciously or unconsciously, man constantly struggles to realise the Atman within him and be one with the Paramaatman. In the inner realm of the spiritual ascent and the outward rituals of the puja, the devotee invokes Mother Durga, the Mahishasura Mardini first in order to remove the demonic qualities which enmesh the embodied Soul in ignorance. These negative tendencies have to be first broken to free oneself from the grip of matter. Mother Lakshmi is next invoked so that the one's spiritual life is sustained, nourished and preserved. Lakshmi is the Goddess of Aiswarya which is not mere wealth but is the Divine wealth of love, kindness and devotion - these are the noble values which should blossom from within oneself. From this stage, when one's base qualities have been removed and noble ones instilled, he proceeds through constant prayer and meditation and invokes the great Mother in Her aspect as Maha Saraswati, the bestower of knowledge to give him wisdom in order that he may unite with the Paramaatman.

These nine days of worship culminating in the Vijayadasami puja is not merely a religious festival where the social bonds of a life of culture are strengthened, but is also a realisation that the Navaraatri which signifies the prowess of Devi and the battles She fought in various aspects to vanquish the asuras, are in reality battles waged in one's life. Life is a constant battle, a war between good and evil, light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehood, immortality and death. Sri Aurobindo compares, "The Soul of man to a kingdom in which armies clash to help or

hinder a supreme conquest, a house where the Gods are our guests and which the demons strive to possess." Thus in the battle of life man must ally himself with the Divine forces of Truth and Light and face a relentless battle with the asuric forces.

May we remember in the hallowed days of Navaraatri, that the real worship of Mother is our inner co-operation with Her in breaking our mundane egoism, imitations and weaknesses in our march towards realising the ultimate goal in life. We should consecrate Devi in the holy altar of our hearts in order that She may manifest Her Divine Power within us. We should serve, do good and bring prosperity into the lives of all, and radiate knowledge. This would indeed be the worthiest and loftiest form of aaradhana to Devi.

#### NOTES

1. புரட்டாதித் திங்களில் சுகல் பட்சத்து பிரதமை முதல் வரும் ஒன்பது நாட்கள்.

## DEEPAVALI - THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

### A Reflection

" Which else shall beautify a home  
But the flame of a lovely lamp.  
Which else shall adorn the mind  
But the Light of Wisdom deep,"

is a beautiful verse which glorifies the lovely lamps of Deepavali, the festival of lights. These little lights mysteriously beautiful, in the row of lamps, proclaim our inherent and deep seated wish to be free from the path of darkness, misery and evil and remind us that our essential nature is Light. In the troubled torn world of today, Deepavali becomes very relevant for this festival represents hope, promise and renewal to humanity as the lamps are lit on the dark new moon night making the place beautiful with the innumerable lights brightening all homes.

Deepavali falls on the 14th day of the dark half of Aippasi, when the moon is in the lunar mansion of Swati. Even though its origins are wrapped up in antiquity, this festival of lights conjures up in every Hindu mind, however young or old, man or woman, a vision of lights, rituals, baths, prayers and festivities. It is the triumph of light over darkness, of dharma over adharma, of enlightenment

over ignorance. Tokens of love are exchanged among members of the family; new cloths are worn. It marks the commencement of a new financial year for the commercial sector and Goddess Lakshmi is invoked to ensure prosperity. This is the spirit of renewal - a new beginning closing down the old. Lovely lamps are lit and above all, the members of the family visit the temples with offerings of flowers, fruits, silk, incense etc. These community gatherings at temples convey deeper meanings, meanings of friendship and love, humility and enlightenment, caring and sharing ushering in peace, unity and compassion as expressed in the last hymn on Peace and Unity in the Rig Veda -

" Let your aim be one and single; let your heart be joined in one; The mind at rest in unison, at peace with all, so may you be,"

was the benediction of the Vedic Sage. Peace and love go together while hatred and violence are disturbing conditions breeding fanaticism, as the ancient sages said, "What ever you love you are its master; what ever you hate, you are its slave."

Deepavali, is a very auspicious occasion where the darkness of ignorance and evil is illuminated by the Light of Knowledge. "Tamasomaa jyotir gamaya," through the Light of Knowledge, lead us O Lord, from darkness unto light', was the yearning prayer of the Vedic sages, for a life more beautiful and an existence more spiritual. The Lamp of Knowledge is enshrined in man's heart, it is the Deepam the Light that symbolises Atma Jyoti. This deep seated light is unfortunately wrapped up by the layers of ignorance that one has accumulated over his various births. The Light must be brought out in order to drive away darkness and ignorance so that the Vedic Rishi's prayer for the Light of Eternal Bliss - 'Mriyormaa amritam gamaya,' lead me from death to Eternal Bliss, O Lord,' becomes a reality.

Hindus from time immemorial have been worshipping the Almighty as the Jyoti, the Light with neither beginning nor end -

"aadhiyum andhamum illaa arumperum jyoti,"<sup>1</sup> sang Saint Manikkavasagar, referring to the incomparable Light with no beginning nor end. "Piravithorum vinaimikunthu perukukinra irulinai Akalavikkum arunadeepam Om namo naaraayanaaya,"<sup>2</sup> "oli valar Vilakke,"<sup>3</sup> "katipanai kadantha jyoti,"<sup>4</sup> "thottra sudar oliyaa,"<sup>5</sup> "deepa mangala jyoti namonama,"<sup>6</sup> are some of the phrases in the sacred Thirumurais, where God is portrayed as Light. And God resides in the cavern of one's heart, "thedonnaath devanai ennulle thedik kandukonden,"<sup>7</sup> sings Saint Appar, 'I found God in my very being.' It is to dispel the darkness of ignorance that the Light of Knowledge already within, must be brought out. The observances of Deepavali guide us on to seek this knowledge deep within.

Tradition has associated Deepavali with Narakasura Samhaaram, the annihilation of Narakasura, a Puranic story where dharma triumphs over adharma. According to Hindu mythology, Narakasura, an all powerful demon, was a tyrant King ruling from his capital, Pragjyotisa, He had acquired untold strength through severe penance and he used it to harass every one. He terrorised the kings and imprisoned their daughters. He harassed the devas and the sages, who were unable to bear the tyranny, complained to Krishna. In the Song Celestial the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says that whenever there is decay of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, then He manifests Himself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, He is born in every age. And so Krishna, the destroyer of evil and the protector of righteousness, "Thushta nikkiraka sishta paripaalana," answered the prayers, and with His consort Satyabama, killed Narakasura. He restored dharma and peace. He freed all the maidens who were held captive.<sup>8</sup>

Narakasura obtained enlightenment at the last moment and was blessed with God's darshan in accordance with the teachings of Hinduism that no one is eternally doomed. According to his request, the world remembers and celebrates this glorious event with light and festivity.

The story of Narakasura is strange; perhaps the battle episode gruesome but it brings with it a wonderful message of enlightenment, peace, joy and cheer, by the destruction of ignorance, darkness, sorrow, hatred etc. Man's life is a constant battle between right and wrong, between darkness and light, between knowledge and ignorance, between love and hate etc. and the spirit of Deepavali becomes very relevant to him.

This story may be a myth but as Ruskin describes, a myth is a story with a deeper meaning and a deeper significance attached to it; something more than what is apparent. Mythology should not be dismissed as mere fiction. It is in fact, a clever device adopted by the ancient sages to teach humankind, not only literature, history and the science but also religion and the grandeur of a religious life. The deliverance of dharma and enlightenment from the clutches of evil and hatred through the Grace of Light, brings peace, joy and cheer. This is the spirit and essence of the Deepavali message. The saga of lights therefore reminds us that within each one, are the Narakasuras, the evil tendencies which have grown upon us and which must necessarily be removed through the Light of Knowledge in order that we may attain our goal. The whole episode denotes victory of good over bad.

The philosophical aspect of the story of Narakasura and his downfall could also be analysed as the depiction of the three gunas namely, tamasic, rajasic and sattvic qualities. The demon represents the quality of tamas - 'Narakastama unnaahah,' (Bhagavata XI-19-43). Varaha is symbolic of the Atman and the word 'Vara' means excellent and most beautiful, while Bhumi Narakasura's; mother, symbolises the material things of life.<sup>9</sup> In short this portrays the Atman and its true nature of excellence being veiled by a cloud of material things. Naraka's tyrannical activities, represent the quality of rajas. Thus Naraka, the embodiment of tamas and rajas was completely swayed by wrong thoughts and actions and was totally under the control of his ego and desires. And at this juncture when the Devas asked Krishna to help, the sattvic aspect comes into the story portrayed by Krishna and His Consort, Satyabama. The whole

episode is symbolic of the conquest of *tamas* and *rajas* the two base qualities by *sattva* the noble quality. This conquest unveils one's own true nature, the *Atman*.

All Hindus await the festival of *Deepavali* eagerly; days ahead the women start preparing for the occasion - cleaning up the houses, preparing sweetmeats and stitching new clothes. Everywhere there is an exuberance of activity manifesting love and affection. With the dawn of *Deepavali* all cleanse themselves with an oil bath, the *Ganga-snaanam*, as it is called. Metaphorically, this is to wash off the contamination caused by the impurities, the *Narakas* within - 'Malankaluvuvaar' as Saint *Manikkavasagar* sang. Good thoughts are likened to the oil that is smeared on the body, washing away the dirt and grime of evil thoughts. This is the inner meaning of the bath. The *Tulasi puranam* speaks of Goddess *Lakshmi* as the One associated with oil and water and is known as *Ganga Devi*; and a bath of this nature is sacred and brings prosperity, removes sin and secures merit. On this day, Goddess *Lakshmi*, is said to grace homes and places of work that are bright with illumination. Legend has it that in the *Samvat* era, the wise King *Vikramajit* instituted *Deepavali* as the New Year's day of the business community and was dedicated to *Lakshmi*, Goddess of Wealth, Beauty and Prosperity. The myriads of lamps lend a fairy tale air of enchantment.

Tradition has also associated *Deepavali* with Lord *Rama's* and *Sita's* return to *Ayodhya*<sup>10</sup> after fourteen years of exile. That evening, *Sita* went to the bank of the river to perform the *Sandhya puja*, the evening prayer, carrying an oil lamp with her. In like manner she was followed by all the *Ayodhya* women. They returned to their homes after the *Sandhyopasana* with the lamps and this day came to be known as the Festival of Lights. The return to *Ayodhya* connotes a return to peace and a righteous rule by Lord *Rama*.

In certain parts of India, *Deepavali* synchronises with the harvest festival where the whole community comes together - it is

a period of thanks-giving and rejoicing. Hindus, Sikhs and Jains celebrate *Deepavali* interpreting its significance differently, while the Hindus living in Fiji, South Africa, Mauritius and West Indies observe this season with great enthusiasm.

*Deepavali* is thus a colourful festival with religious, social and cultural strands woven into it, adorning the entire fabric of Hindu society, making it one in essence. On this occasion we must kindle the flame deep within anew as *Rabindranath Tagore* says,

" Come *Deepa-awali* waken hidden flames  
Out of the desolate dark  
and offer a symphony of praise  
to eternal light.  
The stars are dimmed,  
The night is desolate  
And the call comes from the deep:  
'Man bring out your lamps.' "

#### NOTES

1. ஆதியும் அந்தமுமில்லா அரும் பெருஞ் சோதி
2. பிறவிதோறும் வினைமிகுந்து பெருகுகின்ற இருளினை அகல வைக்கும் அருண தீபம் ஒம் நமோநாராயண.

The Lights of *Deepavali* inspire us and lead us from the darkness of ignorance that has accumulated during the various births, to the Light of knowledge peace and harmony and help us to attain the Lotus Feet of God, *Om Namō Naaraayanaaya*.

3. ஒளிவளர் விளக்கே
4. கற்பனை கடந்த சோதி
5. தோற்றச் சுடரொளியாய்

6. தீப மங்கள சோதி நமோ நம
7. We all know that a lamp of light consists of the lamp, the oil, the wick and the flame, all put together. It is said that these four represent the legitimate goals of human kind, namely aram, porul inbam, veedu, that is dharma, wealth, love and spiritual liberation. Saint Appar sings of this in a lovely psalm - "Udambenu manaiyakaththu ullame thakaliyaaka." Here he speaks of the body being the House where Lord Siva resides and due to the darkness of ignorance God is not visible, and adds, that the mind which is the lamp, should be filled with ghee which is the spirit and the wick of life placed in it and lit up by knowledge and then the darkness is removed and God's Feet could be discerned. This Light is mirrored in the rows of lights of Deepavali.
- உடம்பெனு மனையகத்து வுள்ளமே தகனியாக  
மடம்படு முணர் நெய்யட்டி யுயிரெனுந்திரிமயக்கி  
இடம்படு ஞானத்தீயா லெரிகொள விருந்து நோக்கில்  
கடம்பமர் காளைதாதை கழலடி காணலாமே.
8. These maidens while in prison had meditated on the lotus feet of Sri Krishna and mentally chose Him as their beloved Lord. The Lord liberated them accepting their love and devotion. This is a reminder to humanity that all who genuinely desire to attain God's feet shall be accepted.
9. It is said that he was born of Bhumi, that is earth, by the touch of God in His incarnation as Varaha.
10. The word Ayodhya is derived from the Sanskrit a-yudha - the absence of war.

## SKANDA SHASTI

In the fast moving world of today, marked by tremendous scientific advancement, man has taken giant strides across the material world and his goals are naturally wrapped up in material pursuits. He is torn between his needs and wants and with the pursuit of his wants, has come tensions and conflicts. He is a victim of his own desires and is caught up in his passions of hatred and violence thereby forgetting his inner spiritual life of faith, love and harmony.

The Skanda Shasti fast becomes very relevant in today's tension ridden world. The story as narrated in the celebrated Skanda Puranam, symbolises a deeper meaning where the episodes of the battle<sup>1</sup> could be related to man's life. (See pages 52 - 56). According to the story, Shanmugan with His general Verrabahu of the celestial army had to fight the three asura brothers, Soorapadman, Singhamuhan and Taarakan. They destroyed Taarakan first and then asked the other two asuras to free the devas they had captured. Since they did not agree war broke out. In his arrogance Soorapadman did not realise who the young Warrior was and took different forms hoping to confuse Him. He took the form of a mango tree which was split in two by Skanda's weapon, the Vel; having been split, he then took the form of a peacock and cock to escape the onslaughts. At this stage Skanda cast His benevolent grace on the two birds blessing them with knowledge



and they grew meek and humble. He rode the peacock making it His vehicle. This signifies the victory of knowledge over selfishness and ignorance. The cock, served as His banner, signifying Sivajnaanam, absolute knowledge. It is the cock that proclaims dawn and in this context, this symbolises the dawning of knowledge which destroys ignorance. Shanmugan did not annihilate Soorapadman, instead He subdued him making part of him, His vehicle and the other part His banner. In reality this symbolises the expression of God's grace and love for His erring children.

The great war is an allegorical description of a fundamental truth where the Divine effects liberation in a Soul by removing all the stains of evil and ignorance and bestowing grace. The three asura brothers personify the evil aspects of ego, lust and ignorance and the thoughts that arise from these, form the army of the evil forces. The devas represent goodness and knowledge backed by Skanda Himself. In the mundane life, the qualities of the asuras, namely aanavam, kanmam, maaya tend to be greater than the spiritual forces. It is the individual's duty to fight them through prayer and meditation, invoking God within. Just as Veerabahu, the embodiment of viveka, (discrimination), who was often knocked out by the asuras, was revived again and again, similarly, the good forces within should be brought out repeatedly to the inner battlefield, in order to fight and win over the evil forces so that the potency of the ego is weakened and ignorance will disappear with the good forces emerging and liberating man.

The important aspect of the battle is seen as the continuing struggle between ignorance and knowledge between the lower asuric forces and the higher Divine forces. These forces occur in the Cosmic level and, in the individual level they operate from within the human consciousness. And it is for man to discriminate and see that good triumphs over evil.

The Skanda Shasti fast begins on the first day of the waxing moon in the month of Aippasi<sup>2</sup> ending on Shasti, the sixth day with the grand Soorasamhaaram festival. It is Murugan who is worshipped and adored as Skanda during these six days. The word

Skandan itself is very special; it means that He merely lessens or rather nullifies the enmity of the enemy converting him to a better person rather than destroying him.<sup>3</sup> In all Murugan temples dotted all over the world, special abishekams and Shanmuga archanais are done. Murugan songs, the Kandashasti kavasam, Kandar anuputhy, Kandar alangaram are religiously sung by the devotees.

The Skanda Shasti fast is observed in many ways and these six days are days of fervent prayer, concentration and meditation on Skanda. The devotee generally abstains from food during these days breaking the fast after the puja at sundown with a meal of fruit and milk or coconut water. Some fast by merely missing one or two meals a day, for the six days. The fast is called Upavasam meaning drawing oneself close to God where the mind is detached from the material world for spiritual progress. The main aim of this fast is to strengthen the virtues and prepare the mind for the descent of Divine Grace, for to us Hindus the goal of life is perfection and freedom from bondage.

The six days of fast is actually a period of retreat where the devotee spends all six days in the temple away from home. During this time he turns inwards remembering Skanda in his mind with intense faith and devotion. Gradually the mind gets quietened and withdrawn from the material world becoming filled with sublime thoughts. This entire exercise of fasting which includes the abstinence of food coupled with prayer and meditation and recitation or religious hymns plus the pujas, aided by the peaceful atmosphere of the temple, prepare him for the Grace of God. This would be the beginning of discipline for a spiritual life. The mind gets disciplined and it perseveres to remove evil and negative qualities from within. In this state of solitude, the devotee experiences a sense of peace and tranquility during the retreat. In Tiruchendur, such observances are closely followed and many Sri Lankan devotees go there annually for this period. Today more and more devotees tend to observe the fast at home, recite the various poems of Skanda and go to the temple for the evening puja and then come back to break the fast.

On the sixth day of the fast is the grand festival of Soorasamhaaram which is enacted in the outer quadrangle of all Murugan temples. This is the drama of the battle between the asuras and Skanda in the macrocosm and the great struggle between the animal nature of man and his Divine nature, culminating in the final conquest of ego by knowledge in the microcosm. At the end of the battle, the "I" aspect of the ego gets sublimated and transformed into the peacock while the "mine" aspect into that of the cock. In reality, the drama high lights the victory of the spirit over the flesh and virtue over vice.

Socially the preparation of the fast and the festival is the bringing together of the people in a spirit of unity and brotherhood. The merriment during the Soorasamhaara enactment enlivens the spirit of the devotees and relieves them of tedium.

The religion of the Hindu is based on the Truth of the One Supreme God who may be approached and worshipped through any of His innumerable manifestations. Skanda is one such form of the Almighty Absolute. He is portrayed in various forms as Murugan, Shanmugan, Karthikeyan, Saravanabhavan, Guhan, Arumugan etc and when he is worshipped in any of His forms, it is the subtle force behind that form which may be an image or a symbol,<sup>4</sup> that is in reality worshipped. Hinduism accepts symbolism for, according to the philosophy the Divine is both personal and impersonal - Saguna and Nirguna Brahman respectively. It is the personal aspect that is symbolised becoming the Ishta Devata, making it easy for the devotee to understand and draw nearer and nearer to the transcendent One. Skanda, more popularly referred to as Murugan is the Ishta Devata of many Hindus particularly the Tamils.

Saint Nakkirar in his immortal composition, the Tirumurugaartruppada (திருமுருகாற்றுப்படை) weaves a golden picture of beauty round Murugan and His six faces. In the opening lines, the poet compares the rising Sun to Murugan conveying the immortal concept of God as Light.

" Ulakam uvappa valanerppu thiritharu  
Palar pugala jnaayiru kadartkan aangu  
Kovara imaikkum senvilankaviroli,"<sup>5</sup>

'Like the glorious ruddy Sun rising from the blue green sea, is Murugan riding the peacock.' The sun removes the outer physical darkness while the Light of Murugan removes the inner darkness of ignorance. The author adds fragrance and divinity to the attributes of Murugan's beauty and youth. "Manam kamila theivaththila nalan kaati,"<sup>6</sup> - 'Thou art ever young, fragrant and beautiful,' sings the poet. Sweet fragrance distinctly signifies love and devotion.

The poet describes each face delineating the form as a personification of various Divine aspects and powers. He says, 'One lights up the world's dense darkness, by spreading afar its rays of Light.' 'The second, seeketh His beloved devotees and answers their prayers.' 'The third, protects the sacrificial fires which are maintained according to the scriptures.' 'The fourth, explains the inner meaning of the knowledge of Self.' 'The fifth, destroys evil demons and rejoices and the sixth, glances lovingly at His Bride Valli, from the hills.'<sup>7</sup>

This young and ever beautiful One is the Lord of Kaliyuga, the supreme One, reminding humankind, "Everything changes, but I am the Changeless Eternal - the Timeless Eternity." He resides in various shrines dotted all over the homelands of the Tamils. These shrines are citadels in sylvan, mountain or sea-shore settings. Six of these are the encampments from where He launched His attack against the evil asuras and returned back to celebrate. These are referred to as 'Aarupadai vedugal,'<sup>8</sup> in Tamil and are Tiruchendur, Palani, Swamimalai, Agar koyil, Tiruparamkunram and Tiruththani, where elaborate pujas are performed to this day on all occasions sacred to Murugan.

#### NOTES

1. The battle between Murugan and the asuras is allegorical - the battle between the Divine Self and the ego in man. Hinduism

teaches us that awakening the Kundalini Sakti that lies at the very base of our physical being helps one to overcome his ego. From the base or Mulatharam, the power through meditation and prayer moves upward through swathittaanam, Manipoorakam, Anaakatham, Visuththi to Anjai. In this journey, it is said that Lord Murugan is the Divine Guide and at the microcosmic level, these centre correspond to His six sacred encampment, namely Tiruchendur, Palani, Swamimalai, Algar koyil, Tiruparamkunram and Tiruththani. This was adapted from a talk given by Mr A. Gunanayagam.

2. ஐப்பசி மாத வளர்பிறை முதல் ஷஷ்டி வரை வரும் நாட்கள் கந்தஷஷ்டி நாட்கள், says the Hindu Almanac, the Panchangam.
3. In Tamil this becomes very clear - பகைவர்களை அழிப்பவன் அல்ல - அவர்களின் பகைமையை வற்றச் செய்பவன் ஸ்கந்தன்!
4. The various symbols satisfy the philosophic sense of the devotee and make it easy for him to understand and draw nearer to the indefinable Absolute. In reality they are stepping stones to a higher conception. It is not the idol that is important but the power behind the idol. We human beings are not all philosophers and it is difficult for us to contemplate on the Absolute. God resides every where - in the human being and in every particle of creation. But due to our limited comprehension we do not fully understand and appreciate this fact and so spiritual sanctity is specially attributed to Temples with the idea that 'God resides there,' in the form of a deity.
5. Nakkirar was a poet of the sangam Age - the Tamil Academy which belonged to the first century AD.

உலக முவப்ப வலனேர்ப்பு திரிதரு  
பலர்புகழ் ஞாயிறு கடற்கண் டாஅங்  
கோவற இமைக்குஞ் சேண்விளங் கவிரொளி

6. மணங் கமிழ் தெய்வத் திளநலங்காட்டி.
7. மாஇருள்ஞாலம் மறு இன்றி விளங்கப்  
பல் கதிர் விரிந்தன்று ஒரு முகம்; ஒருமுகம்  
ஆர்வலர் ஏத்த அமர்ந்து இனிது ஒழுகிக்  
காதலின் உவந்து வரம் கொடுத்தன்றே; ஒருமுகம்  
மந்திர விதியின் மரபுளி வழாஅ  
அந்தணர் வேள்வி ஓர்க்குமே; ஒருமுகம்  
எஞ்சிய பொருளை ஏம் உறநாடித்  
திங்கள் போலத் திசை விளக்குமே; ஒருமுகம்  
செறுநர்த் தேய்த்துச் செல்சமம் முருக்கிக்  
கறுவுகொள் நெஞ்சமொடு களம் வேட்டன்றே; ஒருமுகம்  
குறவர் மடமகள் கொட்போல் நுகுப்பின்.  
மடவரல் வள்ளியொடு நகை அமர்ந்தன்றே;
8. Six is a sacred number in respect of Murugan. He has six faces - Shanmugan and He has six distinct encampments - ஆறு படை வீடு; His mystic mantram is Sa Ra Va Na Pa Va - six letters.

## THE SPIRITUAL SYMPHONY OF MAARGALI

### And the Tiruvempaavai Hymns

As the dawn comes with its ineffable beauty to awaken the world to every day life again, to bring to much that is new, revive so much that may have been briefly forgotten for mankind, so comes the month of Maargali. In Maargali when the long nights are chilly and the days bright, Nature adorns herself with a spiritual kind of loveliness, a loveliness which inclines the heart to prayer, meditation, love and peace. The lingering chimes of the temple bells float through the stillness and purity of the Maargali dawn reminding the Hindus of the Brahma Muhurtham, the auspicious hour of dawn.

An aspect that becomes very important to us is the significance of dawn, the hour just before sunrise. Dawn is referred to as Usha, the goddess in the Vedas. Sri Aurobindo while explaining the poem Dawn in the Rig Veda says, "The Dawn comes as the bringer of Truth, is herself the outshining of the Truth. She is the Divine Dawn and the physical dawning is only her shadow and symbol in the material Universe." Thus the dawn indicates the dawning of the awareness of God's presence dispelling the darkness of ignorance and the fog of doubt within us. The light of Dawn is indeed the symbol of an inner illumination bringing spiritual riches while in the outer world, the deep orange glow that paves the way for the

coming sun, dyes the sky blotting out the sun and the new day smiles upon a sleeping world.

The earth while revolving on its axis rotates round the sun giving a twenty four hour day and an year of twelve months. A complete year of the mortals becomes a complete day for the Devas with the first six months as the day and the next six, night - uttaraayanam and dakshanaayanam respectively. The month of Maargali is the hour of dawn, the usath kalam<sup>1</sup> of the Devas and the charm of Maargali dawn has been captured in the Tirupalli elluchchi, Tiruvempaavai and Tiruppaavai hymns making it all the more sacred to us. Even though Krishna says in the Gita, "Maasaanaam Marglilo aham," of the months I am Maargali, paradoxically Maargali is considered a dark month!

The Tiruvempaavai observances in the month of Maargali become a retreat for the Hindus, a training period for mental and physical purification. To get up early morning, particularly in the cold Maargali days and take a bath keeps one physically fit and mentally alert. In the immortal Tiruppaavai lyrics, Sri Andal speaks of these aspects and the importance of being physically fit. She sings one instance, "nei unnom paal unnom,"<sup>2</sup> clearly implying that a simple fatless diet sans animal proteins is necessary for mental and physical well-being. 'Avoiding these would enrich the mind and create good thoughts and subtle vibrations', sings Andal and concludes, ' "Thoo malar thoovith tholudhu vaayinaal paadi manaththinaal sinthikka,"<sup>3</sup> one should think of the Almighty, sing His praises and offer pure flowers.'

Through the period of Maargali, special rituals are performed daily in all temples and Hindu homes. The day starts with the singing of the Tiruppalli elluchchi hymns, awakening God from His slumber-

" Emperuman palli elunth arulaaye."

'Praise O Being, Thou the Source of all my life! 'tis dawn  
From off Thy couch arise (O Lord) and grant us Grace,"

According to Hindu traditions, the rituals associated with the last puja in the temple is singing of the lullaby and laying the deity on a couch to sleep and in the morning, the deity is awoken from slumber. The refrain "Emperuman palli eluntharulaaye," is thus an allegory for in reality what is sleep and what is awakening of God the Omniscient One? This ritual, based on waking up the deity in the temple means waking oneself up from the slumber of ignorance.

Tradition has connected Saint Manikkavasagar and his celebrated Tiruvempaavai lyrics with the month of Maargali. It is said that when Manikkavasagar was on a pilgrimage to Tiruvannaamalai, he noticed young girls waking up very early in the morning of Maargali, singing the praises of Siva, calling their friends and going to the lotus pond for a bath. Seeing these young maidens, Manikkavasagar composed these lyrics to enable them to sing more beautifully the praises of God as they vend their way to the pond. After the bath they would worship Gowrie praying not only for prosperity but also for good husbands who are sincere devotees of Siva. This religious observance is known as Paavai Nonbu, the fast of the maiden.

In the opening lyric itself Manikkavasagar delineates Siva as being the embodiment of spiritual Light and wisdom with neither a beginning nor an end -

"Aadhiyum andhamum illaa arum perum jyothi,"<sup>4</sup>

'we sing the splendour rare and greatness of Him, the embodiment of Light, who has neither beginning nor end,' sing the maidens chiding the one who is asleep saying, 'How dost thou sleep on after hearing the resounding praises of God? Or art thou hard hearted and dull? Why my friend, is this thy nature.'

God Almighty is next praised as having many blessed qualities. He is the Omniscient One capable of healing all diseases. He is the embodiment of Divine knowledge and beauty.

" Vinnukku oru maruntai veda vilupporulai kannukkiniyaanai.  
..... empavaai,"<sup>5</sup>

'He is heavens's ambrosia and embodiment of the essence of the Vedas; the sweetest sight. We shall sing His praises with deep devotion and stand enthralled with melting hearts. Therefore you count the numbers and sleep on, if you will, O maiden.'

Singing the praises in beautiful cadences, the maidens go for a bath. 'Let us plunge into the tank filled with fresh blue kivalai flowers and rosy lotus buds in order that we may wash away our sins,'

" Paimkuval kaarmalaraal semkamalap paimpothaal  
.....

Thangal malam kaluvuvar vanthu saarthalinaal  
Engal piraatium emkonum ponruisainthu  
Pongumaduvil pugap painthu  
.....aadu elorem paavaai,"<sup>6</sup>

This pen picture of the tank is beautiful; the abundance of the lotus flowers besides the blue lilies in the water resemble the picture of Siva - Sakti. Just as the devotees go to the tank to wash off the dirt on their bodies so do they also go to Siva and His Consort to wash away their bonds - aanavam, kanmam and maaya. The bath is purificatory and bathing in the holy waters of the tank is symbolic of the bathing in God's grace. These maidens sing and pray not for material gains only but for mental purity and freedom from births and deaths -

" Aartha piravithth thuyar keda naam aarthaadam"<sup>7</sup>

'we sing and bathe in His holy grace, the waters of the pond, so that our griefs of binding births may flee.' Singing and bathing together gives a sense of social awareness and togetherness, caring and sharing the pleasures with one another brings about social harmony.



Thus the entire observances of the young maidens waking each other up going for a bath, bathing in the pond are allegories. The maidens are in reality the advanced Souls and those whom they wake up are the ones living in ignorance bound up in the material world. The spiritual significance of waking the ones who are asleep is in reality to wake them up from the state of ignorance to the state of spiritual enlightenment. The Souls pine for God and the prayer is one of deep devotion to attain Him. Saint Manikkavasagar considered himself as one of these maidens who worshipped God and sought liberation and sings of His praises as being endless,

" Veda mudal vinnorum mannum thuthithhaalum odha ulavaa,"<sup>8</sup>

'Even if the Vedas, the heavens and earth should sing His praise, it grows endlessly,' sing the maidens. These sentiments are echoed by Kabir centuries later in the words, "If I make the seven oceans ink, if I make the trees my pen, if I make the earth my paper, the glory of God cannot be written."

Some researchers give the Tiruvempaavai a mystical interpretation saying that these songs speak of the precosmic process where each one of the nine saktis wakes up the other. The nine saktis are Manonmani, Sarva Bhutadamani, Palapramadani, Palavikarani, Kalavikarani, Kali, Rowdri, Settai and Vamai.<sup>9</sup> The waking up process starts with Manonmani waking up Sarvabhutadamani and so on. Finally all sing in chorus in praise of Siva and as a result of this awakening of Saktis, creation of the world takes place. A mundane connotation to this poem is more appropriate with the maidens of Tiruvanaamalai awakening each other on their way to the river or pond for a bath. The requests and prayers of the maidens are very mundane and worldly despite the inner meanings for in one instance the prayer is very straight forward - 'we would want for our husbands those who are your true devotees and if you grant us this request we have no grievances -

" Unnaip peraanaakap pettra un seer adiyom,  
un adiyaar thaal panivom,.....  
annavare em kanavar aavaar ....  
.....emakku enkon nalkuthiyel  
enna kuraiyum illom ....<sup>10</sup>

We see that the aim of Manikkavasagar is to uplift humanity to the Divine level, through these immortal hymns.

The last day of the Tiruvempaavai fast culminates in the early hours of the morning with the Aardra Darisanam on Tiruvaadirai. This is a day of great significance to the Hindus, the day Nataraja disports Himself in the Universe and in the Souls of individuals. Tradition has it that Nataraja danced the Cosmic Dance in the golden hall of Chidambaram on this day. This dance is symbolic of His gracious perpetual actions, the Panchkryias.

It was also on this day that Siva annihilated the demon Andhaka which is an allegory depicting the conflict between knowledge and ignorance within oneself. God is the spiritual wisdom while Andhaka is avidya, the personification of ignorance and darkness. During the traditional rituals of Tiruvaadirai one of the rites performed is the burning of a straw effigy of the demon Andhaka, signifying the eradication of evil.

The Tiruvaadirai festival has been an important festival from very early times. In the Sangam literature which dates back to around the first century AD references are made to Maargali Nonbu, the Maargali fast. Saint Karaikkaal Ammaiyaar of the fifth century speaks of Siva as, "Aadirai Nannaalan;" Saint Appar addressing the Lord of Tiruvaroor speaks of Him in almost the same words as, "Aadirai nai amaranthaan." One is also reminded of Nandanar, who was a great devotee of Siva, but was not permitted to enter the Temple by the priests because of his low birth. He appealed to the Lord of Tillai, 'O Lord, since Maargali Tiruvaadirai is nigh, grant me permission to come to You in Chidambaram,'

" Maargali Tiruvaadirai naal varap pokuthaiye  
Poivaa enru sollaiya,"<sup>11</sup>

Tiruvaadirai is propitiated by elaborate abhishekams with cold water, milk, sandal paste, curd, fruits etc. in the early hours of the cold Maargali morning in all Sivan temples. Referring to this long and cold abhishekam, a poet in one instance asks God, " 'By what powers are you able to endure the cold of such magnitude' - iththam seetham prabhootham," and answers the question himself by saying, 'You reside in the inmost recess of my heart and this O Lord is white hot with anxieties, fears, hatred and jealousies. To endure this scorching heat in my heart, I need to perform these cooling abhishekams.' These elaborate rituals performed with sincerity brings about devotion and adoration leading the devotee to perform internal abhishekam with pure bhakti and love thereby cooling off all the anxieties, hatred etc.

It is in the thousand pillared Hall at Chidambaram, the 'aayiram kaal mandapam,' that the special abhishekams on Tiruvaadirai are performed during the night, in accordance with the Agamas. The experience is wonderful, carrying one higher into the realm of prayer and spirituality. The Hall is packed with devotees from various parts of the world who make a special pilgrimage to Chidambaram during this period. The chanting of the mantrams, blowing of conch shells accompanied by naadaswara music reverberate through the Hall, creating a mystical atmosphere of faith and devotion. Tirumular in the Tirumantiram speaks of 'Chidambaram as being everywhere, everywhere is His Dance. The Dance of Siva takes place in the heart of every individual.' To saint Manikkavasagar Chidambaram was a holy place revered by the whole world and says that Siva is of South India but He is God of all nations,

" Tennaadudaiya Sivane Portri  
Ennaatavarkkum irraiva potri."<sup>12</sup>

The early hours of Maargali dawn are very special to every Hindu. The temples and religious centres of Tamil Nadu in particu-

lar, relay the gentle symphonies of the Triupaavai and Tiruvenpaavai hymns sung by Maestros and the soft breezes carry them, gently charging the atmosphere itself with spirituality. These are unforgettable experiences stored away in one's memory!

The month of Maargali, thus connotes esoterically the awakening of the embodied Soul from its long slumber but exoterically is the dawn of a new way of life awakening man's religious instincts. May these spiritual symphonies of Maargali, rooted in the millenia of our ancient Hindu Culture and traditions, encourage us along the path of bhakti and help us to surrender to the Almighty, leading us from darkness to Light.

#### NOTES

1. The dawn of a day is also referred to as Usath Kalam - the sacred hour conducive to prayer and meditation. Scientists tell us that at that time of the day, there is more ozone than carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The ancient Hindus realised the sanctity of dawn and observed it with reverence.
2. நெய் உண்ணோம் பால் உண்ணோம்.
3. தூ மலர் தூவித் தொழுது வாயினால் பாடி மனத்தினால் சிந்திக்க.
4. ஆதியும் அந்தமும் இல்லா அரும் பெரும் சோதி.
5. விண்ணுக்கொரு மருந்தை வேத விழுப்பொருளை கண்ணுக்கினியானை.
6. பைங் குவளை காந் மலரால் செங்கமலப் பைம்போதால் . . . . தங்கள் மலம் கழுவுவார் வந்து சார்தலினால் எங்கள் பிராட்டியும் எங்கோனும் போன்றிசைந்த பொங்கு மடுவிற் புகப் பாய்ந்து ஆடேலோரெம்பாவாய்.
7. ஆர்த்த பிறவித் துயர்கெட நாம் ஆர்த்தாடும்.
8. வேத முதல் விண்ணோரும் மண்ணுந் துதித்தாலும் ஓத உலவா.

9. Tiruvachchaka mani Balasubramaniam - Tiruvachakam.
10. உன்னை பிரானாகப் பெற்ற உன் சீர் அடியோம்  
உன் அடியார் தாள் பணிவோம் ஆங்கு அவர்க்கே பாங்காவோம்  
அன்னவரே எம் கணவர் ஆவார் அவர் உகந்து  
சொன்ன பரிசே தொழும்பாய்ப் பணிசெய்வோம்  
இன்ன வகையே எமக்கு எம் கோன் நல்குதியேல்  
என்ன குறையும் இலோம் . . . .
11. மார்கழி திருவாதிரை நாள் வரப்போகுதையே  
போய் வா என்று சொல்லையே.
12. தென்னாடுடைய சிவனே போற்றி  
என்னாட்டவர்க்கும் இறைவா போற்றி.

## A HINDU WEDDING

A popular theme in medieval Hindu art was the marriage of Siva and Parvati which craftsmen represented in bronze and stone. Tradition has it that Siva wedded Parvati on Panguni Uttaram. It is a sacred day for Hindus and elaborate ceremonies are performed in all Sivan temples culminating in the Tirukkalyaanam, the wedding ceremony. (See pages 37 - 40).

The marriage of Siva and Parvati symbolise the union of the Immobile Absolute Siva, and the Mobile Creative Energy, Sakti. These represent the potential and kinetic states of energy in the universe. They are inseparable and are the two aspects of the same Reality - the unity of Being and Becoming. This ceremony is allegorical and conveys a deep philosophical truth. Though the Bridegroom and His Bride are seemingly two, they are in reality One. The Absolute unfolds into duality for the sake of the universe and all its creatures. In the mundane nuptial ceremony of the Hindus. The bride and groom represent the Divine Couple.

The Hindu wedding is essentially a religious ceremony. The spiritual traditions emphasise the fact that marriage and family life should be viewed as stages in the growth of the soul towards Moksha. The couple are spiritual partners, each of whom supplements the other and both proceed towards a spiritual goal. Marriage is considered a step in the evolution of the human soul.

The heavenly hosts, Siva Parvati, Agni and the spirits of the forefathers are invoked as witnesses and sponsors.

The religious ceremony consists of a series of rituals replete with traditions, symbolism and allegory. The sanctified ceremonial area is holy ground decorated with a square kolam within which the ceremonies are performed and is embellished with brass lamps round the Arasaani, a branch from the Arasa tree which is symbolically planted in the middle for worship. The entire ceremony is accompanied by naadaswara music - mangala vaathyam.

The Maapillai alaippu (மாப்பிள்ளை அழைப்பு) is the preliminary arrangement, where close relatives of the bride, three or five married ladies together with their men folk accompanied by the tholan, the bride's unmarried brother, go to the groom's residence and invite him to the bride's residence, where the ceremonies are held. The groom's parents and elders receive the guests and after partaking of refreshments, the groom and his relatives leave for the bride's place accompanied by the tholan and the guests. He takes with him the traditional 'Koorai Tray' consisting of the Thaali and the Koorai saree which is carried on his behalf by his three married sisters or ladies who are his relatives.

The bride's parents receive him at the entrance and after his feet are washed by the tholan, for which he is presented with a ring, he enters the wedding hall. This marks the beginning of the ceremonies. The officiating kurukkal (priest) welcomes the bridegroom at the auspicious hour at the bridal throne, the Manavarai, in the wedding hall. The throne faces the East; the symbols of deities and heavenly hosts and other necessary objects for the ceremonies to follow are spread before it, according to Agama Shaastras. The following rituals are performed namely, Sankalpam which is an expression of the purpose and the groom's willingness to participate; this is followed by the all important Vigneshwara puja that is the worship of Ganesha. Next is the Punniyathanam or purification followed by the Raksha Bandanam, the tying of the saffron thread, 'kaappu kattudhal,' for spiritual protection. While this is being tied, an uncle of the groom breaks a coconut signifying well - being.

The bridegroom then returns to his reception room and the tholi who is the bridegroom's married sister or relative, ushers in the bride leading her to the bridal throne and the same rituals are followed after which the groom joins her and sits on her left. The main service commences and the Kurukkal performs the Kumbha puja for the two kumbhams representing Siva and Sakti. This is the Siva - Parvathy puja signifying the representation of the couple as the Divine Couple. He does the Navagraha puja to mitigate any evil planetary influence, lights the sacrificial fire, the homam. The giving away of the virgin bride, the Kanikhathanam, now begins. She is given away to the groom by her father with the consent and participation of her mother and in the presence of the groom's parents. The bride's father performs this by placing the bride's right hand in the palm of the groom with the 'Mangala Porul' namely the symbolic objects like betel, arecanut, saffron, flowers and a gold sovereign. The bride and her father remain seated while the groom stands before them to receive his bride amidst naadaswara music and he hands over the symbolic objects to his parents. The Kurukkal now proclaims the names of the bride and bridegroom with their geneological tables atleast up to the fourth generation and calls upon Agni - the sacrificial fire and all those present, visible and invisible, to bear witness to and bless the event.

At this stage the bridal Thaali treadled in the nuptial cord and Koorai saree are taken round by a relative of the bridegroom to the guests to be blessed by them. The priest blesses the Thaali and symbolically purifies it over the homam.

After this the bride is given the koorai saree placed on a silver tray and she retires to her chamber to dress herself in the koorai saree. She returns carrying a garland of flowers which she places round the neck of her groom. The main Thaali ceremony now takes place. The Thaali consists of an emblem with the Trident inscribed on it and two gold coins on either side. These are threadled on to the kodi which was originally a saffron coated sacred cord, but today it is in gold. The groom ties the Thaali round the neck of the bride to the chanting of sacred mantras by the priests and to the

resounding naadaswara music. The bride now sits on the groom's left symbolising the position of Parvati on Siva's left. The groom then places the mangala pottu, vermillion on the bride's forehead and on the Thaali. The couple exchange fruit and milk and then exchange garlands - maaladaranam.

The newly married couple now walk three times round the sacrificial fire - the Agni pradakshanam led by the tholan and followed by the tholi. They perform first the Panigrahanam, where the bride places her hand in the groom's hand and they go round the homam. When they come back to the manavarai, they offer oblations to Agni. Next comes Arundhati darshanam where the bride is reminded of her role as a dutiful chaste wife similar to Vashista's wife Arundhati. The bride now places her foot on the 'ammi,' or the grinding stone and the groom puts the minji or toe ring on her right second toe first and on their final pradakshinam, he puts it on the left second toe. This is interpreted by some as the pledge of protection to his bride. The placing of the foot on the ammi signifies the whole hearted support she gives her wedded groom.

The couple then return to the manavarai offer oblations for the third time and are blessed - asirwatham by showering blue grass and raw rice by the officiating priest, his assistants, the parents and then the guests. The couple greet the guests as they are blessed.

Finally Aalaathi is performed by two married ladies, relatives of the bride and groom. This consists of a tray with three halves of banana fruits, into each of which a wick is placed. These wicks are lighted and the two ladies standing in front of the couple take this tray in a circular motion up and down three times, snuff out the light in the little oil on the tray with the carbon paste, place a black pottu each on the forehead of the bride and groom to ward off any evil effects, thereby completing the blessings.

The guests are then treated to lunch or dinner. The food that is served is vegetarian as in all Hindu ceremonies. The couple have

their food and are taken to the temple by a group of married ladies and the parents of the couple, marking their first visit as man and wife. At the temple, the priest receives them and offers puja at the sanctum sanctorum and after deepaaraadhana gives the couple a Kaalaanji. And thus the newly - weds begin their married life together.



## THE LAST JOURNEY

" Aiyun thodarntu viliyum cheruki arivalinthu  
Meiyum poiyaaki vidukinra pothu, onru venduven yaan,  
Seiyum Thiruvottiyur udaiyeer! thiruneerumittu  
Kaiyum tholappanni aintheluththu othavum katpiyume,"

was the fervent prayer of Saint Pattinaththar conveying the truth that we should pray and repeat God's Name continuously in our day - to - day life, so that when the time comes to make peace with Him, His Name would come naturally to us. 'O Lord of Thiruvottiyur, when my Soul leaves this mortal coil, teach me to raise my hands in prayer, repeat the Panchaakshara mantram and apply Holy Ash.' These thoughts are stored away as impressions called samskaras and after death continue to determine the next birth.

In the Gita, Krishna says that whatever thoughts become dominant in the dying moment, will determine the character of the next birth. This is a fundamental pattern. Every action whether it be physical or mental, makes an impression on the mind and these get collected and become a force - the habit of a person. At the time of death these get sorted out and those that have been foremost in one's life take precedence over the others. These are the forces that will be prominent in the next life. Thus we see that if such thoughts born of good actions are to be dominant, then these should be cultivated continuously. It is for this reason, that

Pattinaththar fervently requested that at the time of death, he should remember to raise his hands in prayer, wear the Holy Ash and repeat the Panchaakshara mantram, so that he may attain a higher place in the evolution of his embodied Soul. This prayer proclaims the human urge to move from death to immortality giving one faith and assurance and guiding one's transition from this mundane world to the next. In the Rig Veda the funeral prayer is a request for immortality - 'O Purifier, place me in the imperishable deathless realm where the Divine and eternal Light glows resplendently and make me immortal.'<sup>2</sup>

Hinduism teaches that one is born again and again, based on his own karma and this concept helps him to realise that this is the embodied Soul's pilgrimage to Moksha. Death and birth are the two sides of life's cosmic cycle leading finally to the goal. Yogar Swami's advice to his devotees is that one could put an end to birth by getting rid of desires and clinging to the Feet of God.

The eternal law says, that which is born must necessarily die and the funeral rites constitute the important ritual of the last journey in a householder's life. Since Hindu rites are essentially based on the grounds of health and social consciousness, the rites regarding the funeral ceremony correspond accordingly. At the same time the rites are so performed that the dead are respected, and the family and society protected, since the dead body exudes poisonous gas.

Hindus traditionally cremate their dead, burial is forbidden. In days gone by the body had to be cremated within twenty four hours for the Hindu believed that this is the best way to dispose the dead. Today with scientific advancement, the body is kept for longer periods of time by the process of embalming. This is specially done so that members of the family who may be out of the country could attend these last rites.

The funeral rites serve to explain as it were to the departed one that he has really died; this is necessary for those who are less

evolved and more materially bound up. It is said that such persons linger closely to the physical body that has been laid. Some of the rituals address the dead urging him to move on, while others are for the relatives allowing the family to say a farewell and express the grief and loss. It is also said that the main significance of the funeral rites lie in the inter - linking of this world with the next and the recognition that the family consists of the living plus the departed ancestors.

The Hindus believe that the dead go to the South where the God of Death, Yama, presides and in order to honour him the body of the dead person is laid with the head towards the South and the feet towards the North.<sup>3</sup> Sage Valluvar in his Kural confirms that the householder should pay respect to those who have departed to the southern realm - then pulaththaar.

" Then pulaththaar theivam virundhokkal than endraangu  
Aympulaththaaru ombal thalai,"

says the sage emphasising that the chief concern of the householder should be towards the departed (then pulaththar - those departed to the southern region), gods, guests, relatives and himself. Thus to the dead, a close relative who is a householder is important because it is he who performs the last rites.<sup>4</sup>

From the moment the body is laid, religious hymns, the Tirumurais are constantly sung to the very end of the ceremonies. This is done to help the Soul in its onward journey. The hearth is not lit in the home till the funeral is over and food is sent by the relatives and neighbours. In earlier times, this spirit of fraternity lasted until the thirty first day ceremony.

An oil lamp, the Kuththu vilakku is kept lighted near the head, incense burned and a canopy of white cloth is tied over the dead body. At the entrance to the house, a string of three mango leaves is tied across and a plantain tree with unripe combs of fruits minus the flower, is fixed on either sides<sup>5</sup> of the gate. In olden days the

beating of the funeral drum announced the death; today besides obituary notices and white flags, thoranams are tied announcing<sup>6</sup> the death of a person. In rural areas when people gather at a funeral, the women in particular stand in a circle with the chief woman mourner and wail together loudly, (புலம்பல்). This has psychological reasons for when one cries loudly it helps to lessen the sorrow and any pressure that may be built up.

A non - brahmin,<sup>7</sup> called the Saiva Kurukkal performs the rites in an area sanctified by the kolam. The ceremonies consist of three parts namely the beating of the drum, cleanliness of the body and cleanliness of the Atman (பேரிகை யடித்தல், சரீரகத்தி, ஆன்மகத்தி) A member of the family<sup>8</sup> who is to light the funeral pyre, is the one who performs the rites guided by the kurukkal. He bathes and wears white verti and the kurukkal puts the sacred thread on the right shoulder under the left arm. This is worn thus only for such occasions.

In olden days, the dressing up of the corpse was done after certain purificatory rites were performed. Today these rites are performed symbolically. The body is anointed with various grains, sesame oil and cosmetics that are pounded as part of the ceremony. The pounding of turmeric, chunnam and other aromatic herbs placed in the wooden mortar to the accompaniment of the Tirupotchunnam songs is an important aspect of the funeral ritual. Originally these songs were specially composed by Saint Manikkavasagar for the young maidens who were pounding the aromatic herbs for the Deity's abishekam but unfortunately in Sri Lanka, the songs are associated only with the funeral ceremonies and are considered by some as inauspicious.<sup>9</sup> The crushed turmeric - chunnam paste is smeared over the body and put over the closed eyes. Turmeric and chunnam are disinfectants and are good germicides for this occasion.

The close members of the family participate in the ceremony that comes next. This rite refers to the day to day life pattern of the family, reminding one of the life and the mundane act of having an

oil bath - a purely sentimental gesture evoking emotion and it is said that this has a psychological effect on the mourners. This is the smearing of oil and the aromatic pounded mixture on the head of the departed one. The women relatives walk round the body and symbolically smear the mixture on the forehead, followed by the men.

Nine kumbhams filled with water, fringed with mango leaves around a cocount are placed and these represent the celestial beings who are invoked to help take the person across to the southern region. The water in the kumbhams is sprinkled over the body. It was originally used to bathe the body. A homam or sacred fire is lit and this was an important feature in olden days when the body was not embalmed. The homam burns up all the poisonous gases.<sup>9</sup> In crowded funeral gatherings, when people hug the mourners, the homa fire proves a destroyer of germs and a nullifier of any poisonous effects that may remain.

Throughout the latter part of the ceremonies, camphor is burned on the ground on plantain stems on the four sides of the coffin and if and when there are grand children, the 'pandam' (small lighted stick) is burnt by them standing round the corpse.

Finally the women and after them the men, once again go round the body and offer puffed rice into the mouth to help the departed one on the onward journey. The widow places her thaali symbolically round her dead husband's neck signifying her continuing link with him or the widower at this stage will remove the thaali from his dead wife's neck. Garlands and flowers are placed, sacred hymns, especially the Sivapuranam are sung. These songs speak of the Soul merging with God, and help in the forward journey. The body is now removed for cremation.

At the cemetery, the one who performed the rites walks three times round the pyre, holding a clay pot filled with water on his left shoulder and a fire brand behind his back. At each turn round the pyre, a hole is knocked in the pot letting the water out. This signifies

the Soul leaving the body. With the final turn the pot is dropped and with the face turned away from the body, the pyre is lit and he leaves the cremation grounds without looking back. Today with the gas crematoriums, the rites are performed symbolically and the coffin pushed in.

On returning home, the one who performed the rites, bites into a sprig of Vembu (Neem) leaves, crosses over the threshold where the ullakai (the pounding stick) is laid. The whole household has a bath, the rooms are washed and a lighted lamp and a tumbler of water are placed before a photograph of the departed one, on the spot where he breathed his last or in the room he occupied. Food is offered at meal times. This is done for thirty one days. Water is important because one often hears the elders of the family saying that the departed one is thirsty all the time and wants water.

On the second day after the cremation the ash and bones are collected and kept for a period of time. On the third, fifth or eighth day after the death, a special ceremony is performed purely by the household known as the 'Ettu chelavu.' Here the portrait of the dead member in 'collage dressing' is venerated and the various types of food that were special to him are offered as prasaadam and then served to all the relatives present. The family dhoby and the barber are specially remembered and rewarded on this day.

The 'Andhiyesti' ceremony is generally performed on the thirty first day but sometime, vegetarians have it on the eleventh day. This is an elaborate ceremony with three or five Brahmin priests officiating purifying the home and performing the 'sapindikarana' where a large pinda representing the departed one and three smaller ones representing the father, grandfather and the great grandfather, are offered. The large pinda is divided into three portions and each added to the other three. This signifies the symbolic uniting of this departed one with those of his ancestors. Oblations are made and water is poured with sesame seeds while the priest chants mantras invoking the holy rivers to help in dissolving the ash. Food is offered to the departed ones and gifts are

given to the priest, essentially household articles like mats, umbrellas symbolising that which the departed one used and plenty of vegetables and grains together with vertis and shawls. The poor are fed and the relatives join in the partaking of food with the family members. With this, the purificatory rituals end. Monthly repetitions on a smaller scale used to be done in olden days but now the twelve monthly rituals are done together in the thirty first day ceremonies. The ashes that had been collected are now immersed in the sea or river. Many Hindus wish that this last rite is performed in Rameshawaram or Benares.

An important literary presentation is made by the family in honour of the departed one in the form of a 'Kalvettu.' This is a book of appreciations of the departed one with his lineage sketched as a tree together with the biographical sketch of the family including the living is presented in verse form sung by the author.

The first anniversary of the thithi is the 'Aataththvashem.' On this occasion further rituals are performed. The Brahmin priest conducts the 'shraddha' ceremonies in the home offering pinda to the ancestors. Food is served to the poor and the guests gathered at the ceremony. And with this the ceremonies are completed symbolically concluding the earthly sojourn of the departed one.

All these rituals are associated with only the dead body and not the Soul. A cardinal fact in Hinduism is that the Soul is eternal. In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna tells the dejected Arjuna who did not wish to kill any of his relatives in battle, that the Soul in man is eternal and is part of the Divine. 'The body will die one day, but the Soul will remain for ever. In this body do we not experience childhood, youth and old age? The death of childhood is the birth of youth; the death of youth is the birth of old age. Do these changes affect you? So too is death. Rebirth is only a change of residence for the Soul. There is no pain; and there is a perfect continuity. But the body through which the eternal, indestrutable Soul expresses, is perishable.' Saying so He urges Arjuna to fight and get rid of adharma personified by his relatives, the Kauravas.

" It (Soul) knows neither birth nor death. It cannot come to exist or cease to exist. It is Unborn, Eternal, Changeless and Ancient. It is not slain when the body is slain."

## NOTES

1. ஐயந் தொடர்ந்து விழியுஞ் செருகி யறிவழிந்து  
மெய்யும் பொய்யாகி விடுகின்ற போதொன்று வேண்டுவென் யான்  
செய்யுந் திருவொற்றி யூருடையீர்! திருநீறு மிட்டுக்  
கையுந் தொழப்பண்ணி ஐந்தெழுத் தோதவங் கற்பியுமே.
2. Aitareya Aranyaka V. 6 - 11.
3. It is interesting to note that even the plantain leaf should be placed in north-south direction for sad occasions. Normally for festive occasions, the leaf is placed in an east-west direction.
4. G. U. Pope in his book, The sacred Kural of Tiruvalluvar Nayanar, says in his notes on Chapter V that the Hindus in common with the ancient nations of Europe attach great importance to this duty - pp201. Ancestral worship is also seen in the ancient Chinese communities.
5. This is an interesting feature in that for other festive ceremonies, namely a wedding ceremony five or seven or nine mango leaves are tied as the thoranam at the entrance and the plantain trees with ripe fruits and their flowers are placed on either side.
6. Thoranam consists of individual leaves from the coconut palm cut and designed into single strands. For weddings or secular functions, the thoranam is more elaborate and consists of groups of leaves tied together and designed into clusters of flowers.
7. The temple priests, the Brahmins, do not perform these rites because it is said that they should not do so for non-brahmins!

8. Generally, the eldest son performs the last rites for his father and the youngest, for the mother or in the event of no male children, a close relative is called upon to do so. But in the changing world of today even daughters perform these rites.
9. This celebrated song is considered sacred and are not sung at this ceremony.

திருபொற்சண்ணம் தெய்வீகமானது. தில்லையம்பலச் சிவனின் தீர்த்தம் ஆடும் பொருட்டு பாடப்பட்டதே திருப்பொற்சண்ணம் ஆகும். இப் பாடலில் ஆன்மா இறைவனை வியந்து ஆனந்த மனோலயப் பட்டு அவன் (இறைவன்) திருமுழுக்காடற் பொருட்டுப் பாடப்பட்டதே இப்பாடல்களாகும். அவ்வகையில் ஆன்மாக்களின் மலபந்த வினைகளைக் களைந்து இறைவன் தீர்த்தமாடலுடன் ஆன்மாவும் ஒன்று சேர்ந்து பரமானந்தப் பேற்றைப் பெறுவதே இதன் உட்கருத்தாகும். ஆகவே இது அமங்கலப் பாடல் அல்ல.

10. It was said that during the Bhopal tragedy, those who had lit the fire the agnihotram, were saved from the traumatic aftermath of the tragedy.

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## TAMIL

திருநாவுக்கரசர் தேவாரம்  
 திருஞானசம்பந்தர் தேவாரம்  
 சுந்தரமூர்த்தி நாயனார் தேவாரம்  
 மாணிக்கவாசகர் திருவாசகம்  
 கந்தபுராணம்  
 பன்னிருதிருமுறைத் திரட்டு  
 விநாயகர் புராணம்

## THE TRADITIONAL OBSERVANCES OF THE HINDUS

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Aadi - month of January - February.  
 Aadiamaavaasai - the new moon in the month of Aadi.  
 Aalayam - Temple.  
 Aanavam - bondage  
 Aaraadhana - worship  
 Aarati - waving of lighted camphor during puja.  
 Aashrama - the four stages in life - brahmachaari, grihasta,  
 vaanaprasta and sannyasa.  
 Aataththivasham - the first death anniversary.  
 Aavani - month August - September.  
 Abhaya mudra - gesture of reassurance.  
 Abhishekam - anointing the image of the Deity.  
 Adavallan - Name of Siva based on a particular dance pose.  
 Agama - South Indian text in Sanskrit on which the Saiva  
 Siddhanta texts are based.  
 Agni - Vedic fire god.  
 Aipasi - month of October - November.  
 Ahankara - pride.  
 Amaavaasai - new moon day.  
 Amman - Goddess or Sakti of the Lord.  
 Anada tandava - a dance of Siva expressing Bliss.  
 Andhiyesti - observances related to the 31<sup>st</sup> day after death.

Asura - demon.  
 Anugraha - grace.  
 Antaraala - a chamber in front of the sanctum.  
 Appar - a saint of the 6<sup>th</sup> century who composed the fourth, fifth and sixth Tirumurais.  
 Archanai - offering of flowers during puja.  
 Ardha mandapam - the mandapam in front of the main hall of the temple.  
 Arjuna - the third Pandava brother to whom the Gita was preached.  
 Asura - demon.  
 Atman - the embodied soul.  
 AUM - the break down of the mantra OM.  
 Avataar - the descent of Vishnu.

Balipeedam - sacrificial alter.  
 Bhajan - simple songs in praise of God sung in congregation.  
 Bhakta - devotee.  
 Bhakti - devotion to god  
 Bhima - the third Pandava brother.  
 Bhishma - the grandsire in the Mahabharata epic.  
 Bhog prasaadam.  
 Brahma - the creator.  
 Brahman - the Supreme One.  
 Brihaspati Chakra - the Hindu counterpart of a calendar.

Chakra - the wheel.  
 Chaturdasi - fourteenth day of the moon.  
 Chaturthi - fourth day of the moon.  
 Chinmudra - a pose where the fore finger representing the individual Soul, rests on the thumb which represents Siva.  
 Chittiraa paruvam - the full moon in the month of Chittirai - day consecrated to the memory of the dead mother.  
 Chittirai - month of April - May.

Dakshanaayana - when the Sun takes a southerly course.  
 Damaru - drum shaped like a hour glass.  
 Deepaaraadhana - aarati.  
 Devi - Sakti, the divine mother.  
 Dharma - righteousness.  
 Dharshana - receive blessings by seeing the image of the Deity.  
 Dhoti - garment consisting of a piece of cloth tied round the waist.  
 Dhyana - meditation.  
 Dravida - the Dravidian style of architecture.  
 Durga - consort of Rudra in Her terrible form.

Ekadasi - eleventh day of the moon.

Garbha - griha - the sanctum or cella is also known as the moolasthanam in Tamil.  
 Gopuram - monumental gateway.  
 Guru - teacher.

Hasta - hand.  
 Hridaya - heart.

Icon - image; the image in the sanctum is referred to in Tamil as the moolamurti.

Japa - repetition of God's Name.  
 Jivaatman - enlightened individual Soul.  
 Jyoti - thw light.

Kailasha - Sivas abode and is a peak in the Himalayas.  
 Kaivishesham - a monetary gift from parents to children on

New Year's day - the first transaction.  
 Kalyana mandapam - hall of marriage in the temples where the marriage ceremonies of the deities take place.  
 Kannikhathaanam - giving away of the virgin bride.  
 Kartikeyan - Murugan.  
 Kattiyam, saying of - relating the story of the drama that is to be enacted.  
 Karma - deed; acts of good and bad values entailing reward or punishment in this or futues life.  
 Kodistambam - flag staff.  
 Kolam - design drawn on the floor with rice flour.  
 Koshas - five sheaths of the body - anna, praana, mana, vijnaana, anandamaya.  
 kovil, koyil, aalayam - all mean Hindu temples.  
 Kumbabhishekam - special festival where the whole temple is consecrated.  
 Kurukkal - the temple chief priest.  
 Kuththu vilakku - lamp.

Lingam - a symbol of Siva.

Maalaadharana - exchange of garlands - bride and groom.  
 Maarga - spiritual path - kriyai, chariyai, yoga and jnaana.  
 Maargali - month of December - January.  
 Maasi - month of February - March.  
 Maaya - the creation of an illusion.  
 Mahabharata - the great Sanskrit epic.  
 Maha mandapam - great hall.  
 Mandapam - also referred to as mandapa - a large hall.  
 Manikkavasagar - a saint of the nineth century who composed the Tiruvagasam and Tirukkovai.  
 Moulding - the contour given to projecting lines.  
 Moolasthanam - the sanctum sanctorum.  
 Mudra - language of the hands and fingers.

Naadaswara - a musical instrument - wind.  
 Nadanta - dance of Siva as Nataraja.  
 Nagara - the Northern type of temple tower characterised by the sikhara.  
 Nakshastra - stars.  
 Namasivaya - the sacred mantram.  
 Naminandhi - a saint who lit the temple lamps with water.  
 Nandi - the bull of Siva.  
 Nandi mandapam - pavilion where the sacred bull is installed.  
 Nataraja - Siva as Lord of Dance.  
 Natya - literally mime.  
 Navami - nineth day of the moon.  
 Nayaka - nayaki bhava - bridal mysticism.  
 Nritya - dance

Panchkritya - the five - fold action of God.  
 Panchaalaathi - showing of lighted camphor.  
 Panchaamirtam - five varieties - milk, honey, fruit, curd and ghee used for abhishekam.  
 Paramaatman - the Supreme One.  
 Paruvam - full moon.  
 Parvati - consort of Siva.  
 Pati, Pasu, Paasam - the three entities of Saiva Siddhanta - God, embodied Soul and bondage.  
 Pillaiyar - Ganesha.  
 Pinda - offering of rice flour (ball) cake to the dead.  
 Poorna - kumbha - symbol of prosperity.  
 Pottu - or thilak, a big dot in red or black on the forehead to indicate the third eye.  
 Pradakshina - circumambulation of a sacred site.  
 Prakaaram - pathway round the temple.  
 Pratista - invocation at the beginning of the puja.  
 Prathosham - thirteenth day of the moon.

Preta - the dead father.  
 Pitri - the dead ancestors.  
 Puja - ritual of devotional service; worship.  
 Punnyathanam - purification.  
 Purana - religious stories.  
 Purataadhi - month of September - October.  
 Pusalar - a saint who literally built a temple in his heart.  
  
 Raashi - twelve houses of the Zodiac.  
 Rajoguna - active temperament.  
 Ramayana - an epic poem of great antiquity like the Mahabharata.  
 Ratha - a car used in temple ceremonies especially in South India and Sri Lanka.  
 Rishi - seer or sage of the Vedic age; a sage in general; also spelt as Rsi.  
  
 Saadhana - worship.  
 Shaastra - religious texts.  
 Sabha mandapam - assembly hall.  
 Sahadeva, the last Pandava brother, an eminent astrologer.  
 Sakti - the active power of God and thought of as His consort.  
 Sambandhar - a saint of the sixth century who composed the first, second and third anthologies of the Tirumurais.  
 Samhara - destruction.  
 Sanctum Sanctorum - also known as sanctum - the holy of holies in a temple; it is also referred to as moolasthanam in Tamil.  
 Sandhya - evening.  
 Sandhyopaasana - prayers at the meeting time of night and morning, forenoon and noon, dusk and night.  
 Shankara - a saint of the seventh century responsible for the revival of Hinduism.

Shraddha - a ceremony associated with the observances of the dead.  
 Shrine - the sanctum or also referred as the garbha - griha.  
 Sikhara - spire or tower. In North Indian temples, the sikhara refers to the entire tower which is curvilinear; in the South the term sikhara refers to the top most member only and its tower consists of gradually diminishing storeys or talas.  
 Silpa shastra - an ancient Indian treatise on building temples and other religious monuments.  
 Sivaraatri - the great night consecrated to Siva.  
 Sloka - Sanskrit verse.  
 Sri Chakra - excess power of Durga symbolically interned in the Chakra.  
 Staapana mandapam - hall where the homa kundam is placed.  
 Sundarar - a saint of the seventh century who composed the seventh Tirumurai.  
 Surya - Sun God.  
 Sutra - sacred text in the form of a verse.  
  
 Tamo guna - lazy temperament.  
 Tandava - dance of Shiva.  
 Tayumanavar - a saint of the seventeenth century who composed hymns.  
 Taval - musical instrument; a form of a drum.  
 Thai - the month of January - February.  
 Thaali - the sacred emblem sanctifying marriage.  
 Tirumular - a saint of the first century who composed the Tirumantiram.  
 Torana - gateway.  
 Tower - sikhara  
 Trimurti - the Hindu triad - Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu.  
  
 Upavasam - fasting; literally sitting near the teacher.  
 Uttaraayanam - the Sun's northerly journey.

Uttarsam - a star.

Uttsava moorti - the image of the Deity taken around in the chariot.

Vahanam - also referred to as vahana - the mount of the deity. The mandapam where the mount is placed is the vahana mandapam.

Vastu shastra - rules of architecture.

Vaikaasi - the month of May - June.

Valai - kaapu - a ceremony where bangles are gifted to a pregnant mother.

Vedas - ancient sacred texts of the Hindus.

Vesera - type of temple tower found mainly in the Deccan.

Vibhuti - holy ash.

Vijayadasami - tenth day of the Navaraatri puja.

Vina - a musical instrument.

Visaakan - Murugan.

Yaama - four watched of the night.

Yagasala - where yagam or homams are performed.

Yajnopavita - the sacred thread

Yogar Swamigal - a mystic sage who lived in Jaffna.

Zodiac - elliptical path of the Sun.



## ABOUT THE BOOK

The ancient Hindu Rishis and Sages, divised beautiful and inspiring legends weaving an embroidery of stories around auspicious moments and periods of time in order to guide humanity to achieve the goal in life. These legends are the Puranas which are closely associated with events and divine personages and Hindu fasts, festivals and observances are based on these and in turn carry with them the wonderful message of peace and harmony.

The religious observances strengthen the individual, the family unit and the community and help in their spiritual upliftment. The ancient religion of the Hindus is made vibrant and relevant through these observances as we move into the twentifirst century.

The scope of this book is more than a mere narration of the fasts and festivals; it is rather a compilation of the traditional observances using the various legends and weaving them into stories of immense human interests bringing them into the present day life of the Hindu. These would certainly help the Hindu to remember the age-old traditions.

