

# Path to Dharma

தர்ம நெறி (Dharma Neri)

62



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## Editorial

'Path to Darma' the monthly magazine, published by Kshethra Vinayaka Temple, Sri Munneswaram, Chilaw, Sri Lanka, is presenting the 62<sup>nd</sup> issue this month. The foremost intention of this magazine is to converse the perceptions linked to Hinduism and its ceremonial rituals, customs and dharma, to the anxious readers. The elucidation and investigation from the readers are appreciated.

B.Sivaramakrishna Sarma,

Kshethra Vinayaka Temple, Sri Munneswaram, Chilaw, Sri Lanka., February, 2013

### OPINION

Dear Sarma,

My new year greetings to you and your much-loved Dharma Neri. The JANUARY, 2013 issue begins with the elephant which is very much dwelt upon in our legends and mythologies. The VISWAROOPAM ceremonial is performed daily in the morning in SRIRANGAM RANGANATHA TEMPLE with elephant standing before the MOOLAVAR in the Sanctum Sanctorum. The procession of temple deities in certain places is preceded by gaily decorated elephants. Such instances show the extraordinary importance attached to the elephant. The interpretation of Panchagavyam and the special types of flowers to be offered to deities are informative.

Vseshadri, Chennai, India

03<sup>rd</sup> January 2013

Dear B.S. Sarma,

Went through the 61<sup>st</sup> January 2013 issue of 'Path to Dharma' and confer my opinion on your endeavor. The first topic on elephants provided a detailed account of it. The manner in which the relations of elephants shown in the background of religious and social settings and belief are quite incredible. The correlation of elephants with Buddha is remarkable. The idea given about the association of elephant with the puranic narration of churning of the ocean of milk is admirable. The English term 'holy nectar' for the relevant Sanskrit word is appreciable.

The details given on the topic 'Pancha gowya' is wonderful. The details of the different types of cows from where we get the different resources for the preparation of 'Pancha gowya' are to be known by all the devotees. The relationship of 'Pancha gowya' substances from Chandra to Agni is to be noted by the devotees.

The order of abisheka materials listed in where the order in which the abisheka substances, utilized and the benefits that the devotee gets by the perming the abisheka etc. are all useful to all.

Finally the list of flowers given for the puja is very good, The particulars and details given regarding the lotus flower is admirable. The manner in which the lotus flower is connected with Bagawath Geetha and Yoga is to be commended.

Elephant symbolizes Lord Vinayaka and I think that the January issue of 'Path to Dharma' starts with the concept of Almighty followed with 'Pancha gowya', 'Abisheka', and concludes with the flowers for puja. This is the specialty of arrangement of topics of the 'Path to Dharma' January 2013 New Year issue. May God blesses you.

With best wishes.

M. Jeyaram, Victoria, Australia

05-01-2013

## 1. What is the significance of snakes in Hinduism?

Snakes, specially the cobra have been one of the most significant symbols in Hindu religion and the mythology associated with cobra are mostly associated with wealth, power and fertility.

The cobra is most commonly linked with Lord Siva. A Cobra is shown to be coiled around the neck of Lord Siva. This symbolizes the power the Lord has over the deadliest of creatures.

Lord Siva, is wearing a snake on his neck. Lord Vishnu rests on a thousand-headed coiled cobra, the **Adi-sesha** in Vaikuntam. The thousand-headed Shesh Nag who symbolises eternity is the couch of Lord Vishnu. It is on this couch that the Lord reclines between the time of the dissolution of one universe and creation of another.

Kautilya, in his "*Arthashastra*" has given comprehensive description of the cobra snakes.

Hindu mythology shows that Cobra, (Snake God), symbolises the relation with eternal circle of life and death.

According to Hindu beliefs the souls of human beings take several births on this planet earth (re-incarnated several times) unless and otherwise the human beings are all honestly carry out their worldly duties and their souls become purified. On achieving this state only, the human beings can leave this physical world forever to amalgamate with almighty.

King Cobra also symbolises an association as a soul mate with Lord Siva.

Hindus believe in the immortality of the snake due to the shedding (*sloughing*) of its skin, and a snake eating its own tail is a Hindu symbol of eternity. As such eternity in Hinduism is often represented by a serpent eating its own tail.

The cobra is a symbol of *kundalini* power, cosmic energy coiled and slumbering within man. It inspires seekers to overcome misdeeds and suffering by lifting the serpent power up the spine into God-Realization.

In Jainism and Buddhism snake is regarded as sacred having divine qualities. It is believed that a Cobra saved the life of Buddha and another protected the Jain Muni. Nagapanchami is an important Hindu festival associated with snake worship. It is celebrated on the fifth day of the moonlit- fortnight in the month of Shravana (July - August).

Hindu religion is multi-sided yet bound by a common search for Truth. Hindus consider their religion is a way of life and a fellowship of faiths. Hindus perform religious ritual to Snake God specially "King Cobra" on Nagapanchami day.

### The Legend

A legend of Hinduism narrates that Lord Krishna when he was a youth while throwing the ball when playing a game of with his cowherd friends, the ball fell into Yamuna River. It describes how Krishna defeated the snake by the name of 'Kalia' and saved the people from drinking the poisonous water by forcing Kalia to go away.

Nagas was an ancient tribe (clan) lived in prehistoric India who possessed a highly developed culture. The Indus Valley civilization dating back to 3000 B.C. provides abundant evidences of the esteem worship and devotion of snake amongst the Nagas, whose culture was comparatively wide-spread in India even before the Aryans came.

In a later stage the Naga culture got integrated into Hinduism. The Indo-Aryan culture acknowledged many of the snake deities of the Nagas in their traditions and a number of them even accepted and given prominent place in the Puranas of Hinduism.

The well-known Cobra snakes mentioned in the Puranas are;

- |            |              |                   |
|------------|--------------|-------------------|
| 1. Anant,  | 5. Kanwal,   | 9. Takshak,       |
| 2. Vasuki, | 6. Karkotak, | 10. Sankhpal,     |
| 3. Shesh,  | 7. Kalia,    | 11. Dhritarashtra |
| 4. Padma,  | 8. Aswatar,  | 12. Pingal.       |

The snake gods are adorned and celebrated from many centuries in many Hindu temples. The Female snake god is called as Sri Nagarani and the male snake god as Sri Nagaraja. In Northern India, Nagaraja is known as the "king of the serpents" and worshipped by devotees.

**Rahu** and **Ketu** are also the great snake gods as well as planetary deities of Hinduism. They are described as malefic planets as they are giving great tribulations to the people in case of unfavourable positions in horoscope.

The snake primarily represents rebirth, death and mortality, due to its casting of its skin and being symbolically "reborn". There are carved representations of cobras, nagas and stones as substitutes.

The Manasa-cult in Bengal, India, is believed and dedicated to the anthropomorphic serpent goddess.

Nāgas form a significant element of Hindu mythology. They play vital roles in various legends:

- i. **Shesha** (Adishesha, Sheshnaga, or the 1,000 headed snake) upholds the world on his many heads and is said to be used by Lord Vishnu to rest. Shesha also sheltered Lord Krishna from a thunderstorm during his birth.
- ii. **Vasuki** allowed himself to be coiled around Mount Mandara by the Devas and Asuras to churn the milky ocean creating the ambrosia of immortality. According to Hindu mythology the naga (snake) **Vasuki** is the eldest son of Kashyapa, ancient Tortoise-father who is the earth's foundation and Kadru ancient Garuda-mother served as the rope (Mount Mandara or Meru served as the paddle) with the help of which the Devas and Asuras churned the Milky Ocean at the beginning of time to get Amrita (holy nectar).
- iii. **Kaliya** poisoned the Yamuna river where he lived. Krishna subdued Kaliya by dancing on him and compelled him to leave the river.
- iv. **Manasa** is the queen of the snakes. She is also referred to as Manasha or "Ma Manasha". "Ma" being the universal mother.
- v. **Ananta** is the endless snake who circles the world.
- vi. **Padmanabha** (or Padmaka) is the guardian snake of the south.  
**Astika** is half Brahmin and half naga.
- vii. **Kulika** According to Hindu mythology, Lord Siva wears a snake named Kulika around His neck. Sesa or Ananta, Vasuki, Takshaka, Kumara, and Kulika are known to be the sons of Kadru.
- viii **Karkotaka** is the naga (serpent), worn around the neck of Lord Siva. Snakes represent eternal wisdom, since they are believed to be extremely long-lived.

### **The narrative of the Snake**

Moon in its ever returning cyclic patterns is considered a universal symbol of life, death and rebirth. As the Moon is believed to be the primary symbol of the Goddess in the Heavens, the snake is regarded as the primary symbol of Earth. It was noted that the life history of snakes underwent a strange transformation. Similar to the Moon shedding the shadow of death, the snake would periodically shed its skin, and come out renewed. Immortality reveals the life processes of the serpent, as it was replicated in the ever returning cycles of the Moon.

In Hindu philosophy the paradigmatic or classic character of the union of opposites constituted major characteristics of religious concept.

The *Aitareya Brahmana* states that the serpent *Ahi Budhnya* is invisible what Agni, (the 'furious serpent') is visible. In other words, the serpent is a vitality of fire, whereas darkness is nonmanifested light. Again, when the sun rises at dawn, he 'frees himself from night. Just as Ahi frees himself from his skin'.

Many aspects of the divine snakes are mentioned in various Hindu scripts.

In some passages, King Varuna is regarded as being among the most preeminent of the Nagas, and he is included in the discussion of these mythical divine serpents. (Mahabharata 1.26.1. and 25.4) The 'naga' is a divine serpent who is a son of Kadru, the daughter of Daksha.

The term 'naga' is a Sanskrit term means "serpent" (snake). These serpents are believed to live in deep down places (Patala) in the underground city of Bhogavati. They are believed the protectors of springs, wells and rivers. They bring rain and therefore symbolize fertility.

The myths of **Malay** scripts shows that the nagas are revealed with many-headed dragons of gigantic size. In countries like Java **and Thailand**, the naga is a serpent-god, a ruler of the netherworld. This serpent-god has possession of abundance wealth. In Thailand, the naga is shown to have five heads. In **Mexico** the term "Nagal" gives a meaning of a class of serpent guardian spirits.

The avenue leading to the main temple at **Ankhor Wat** at Cambodia is lined with seven-headed nagas. In **Tibet**, the naga are believed to be a religious symbol and are called "Lu". This is the Tibetan word of "naga".

The **Vaskui** is the naga- goddess of Mount Kailasha.

### **Symbolism of snake in Hinduism**

The representation of snake around the neck of Lord Siva is called '*naga bushana*'. This snake symbolizes death, the power of which Siva is beyond, and which he controls. They also represent that energy coiled at the base of the spine which yoga practitioners say is the base for all self-realization.

The Naga (cobra) represents cosmic power; they are a manifestation of the Vedic god *Agni*, ( fire), and as such becomes the 'fierce spirit' who is the guardian in many Puranic myths. The cobra/naga is a mount (vahana) of Vishnu and as such represents knowledge, wisdom and eternity. As Vishnu sleeps on the cosmic ocean, he sleeps on the coiled serpent on the primordial waters.

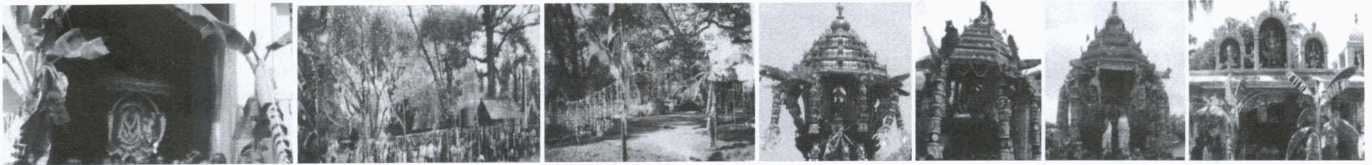
Two serpents with downward and upward movement represent the divine sleep and divine awakening. The Naga (Sri Nagaraja - male snake god) and Nagni (Sri Nagarani - female snake god) are serpent kings and queens, which are divine in their own right. They are portrayed as either fully human, fully serpent, humans with cobra heads and hoods, or as humans from the waist anterior (upwards) and serpent posterior (below).

Naga Kanya can also be seen with nine serpent heads with expanded hoods. As Lord Vishnu sits his head and shoulders are protected by these nine serpent heads. Vishnu, is often depicted as resting on the coils of the great serpent known as Ananta (the 'endless' or infinity), is also called Sesha. Ananta has 1000 hooded heads of snake which form a canopy for Vishnu, Ananta represents the cosmic ocean.

In Hindu mythology the naga (serpent) is represented as the symbol for water. Hence, the enormous anthropomorphic structure and the boundless elemental sea is Vishnu. Vishnu is regarded as god, ocean and snake. According to a Puranic evidence, a lotus stem bounces forth from the navel of Vishnu, and on the dorsal side of the flower sits the god Brahma who creates the world. Ananta spits out venomous fire at the end of each Kalpa (era) to help out god Siva in destroying the creation.

## 2. Give important facts about the Banana fruit and the importance of its fruit in Hinduism?

Banana is one of the oldest cultivated plants. Banana is the common name for monocarpic flowering plants of the genus *Musa*, for the species *Ensete ventricosum*, and for its fruit. *Musa* species are native to tropical South and Southeast Asia. Almost all modern edible parthenocarpic bananas come from two wild species – *Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*.



The banana plant is the largest herbaceous flowering plant. The plants are normally tall and fairly sturdy and are often mistaken for trees, but their main or upright stem is actually a pseudostem that grows 6 to 7.6 metres tall, growing from a corm.

Each pseudostem can produce a single bunch of bananas. After fruiting, the pseudo (false) stem dies, but offshoots may develop from the base of the plant. Many varieties of bananas are perennial.

Leaves are spirally arranged and may grow up to 2.7 metres long and 60 cm wide. They are easily torn by the wind, resulting in the familiar frond look.

Each pseudostem normally produces a single inflorescence, also known as the *banana heart*. The inflorescence contains many bracts between rows of flowers. The female flowers (which can develop into fruit) appear in rows further up the stem (closer to the leaves) from the rows of male flowers. The ovary is inferior (petals and other flower parts appear at the tip of the ovary).



The term "banana" usually refers to soft, sweet, dessert bananas. By contrast the firmer, starchier fruit are called plantains or "cooking bananas".

Its fruits, rich in starch, grow in clusters hanging from the top of the plant. They come in a variety of size colors when ripe. The banana fruits that develop from the banana heart, in a large hanging cluster, is made tiers (called *hands*), with up to 20 fruit to a tier. The hanging cluster is known as a bunch, comprising 3–20 tiers.

During the ripening process, bananas produce a plant hormone called ethylene, which indirectly affects the flavor. Among other factors, ethylene stimulates the formation of amylase, an enzyme that breaks down starch into sugar, influencing the taste and aroma of bananas. The greener, less ripe bananas contain higher levels of starch.

Banana is a very sacred plant and all parts of the plant are used for some purpose or the other. The whole plant of banana with its fruits and flower is used to erect welcoming gates.

The leaves are used to make the ceremonial pavilion for Hindu religious ceremonies.

The leaves of banana are used to serve "prashad" in some rituals of the ceremonies during poojas.

The fruit of Banana is offered to Lord Vishnu and Lakshmi. The eleventh day of the bright half of Pausa (December-January) is considered auspicious to offer banana to Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi.

The fruit of Banana is offered to Sun god on the sixth day of the bright fortnight of Kartika (October-November) which is considered very auspicious.

'Manampoo' ritual is celebrated on the tenth day of the Navaratri festival (Dasami/Dasara) in Hindu temples, where a banana plant is fixed on to the ground in the middle of the platform decorated around with 'thoranas'(decorative work) of tender coconut leaves, mango leaves etc and ceremonially cut during the ritual by the officiating priest in front of the deity.

Any auspicious ceremony is incomplete without the presence of banana leaves in the Hindu culture. Be it a wedding or a child's birth, young banana plant with leaves, fruits with its flower is used to decorate the occasion symbolizing growth, progress, prosperity and regeneration. It is traditional and customary to eat on these leaves after a religious ceremony. The banana (plantain) tree is an evergreen tree of a large number of generations. In most Hindu weddings, there is a pre-wedding ceremony, which depicts the significance of the wedding. On an auspicious day, the married women of the bride's family perform a *pooja* of a full-grown banana tree and later fasten to one of the gateposts of the marriage canopy. This function is called the fixing the *pandhakaal (muhurthaka)*. In most south Indian weddings, the wedding food is served on banana leaves.

Banana Coconut, rice, mango and sugarcane represent Nature's reward and form part of fertility rites as marriage, childbirth etc. By placing symbols of bounty in and around the house, one hopes to harness prosperity from the cosmos

The meaning changes slightly when used at weddings or other social ceremonies. Here instead of two bananas, normally a whole comb is used and other fruits are also included.

In a wedding ceremony, when the bridegroom's side and the bride's side exchange the betel leaves, areca nuts and **bananas** the prayer is that God grant the other party health, wealth and ripeness and happiness. As both sides exchange these items both parties get blessed and positive vibrations are produced. Selflessness is taught and realised through this act.

In addition, the plant hormone ethylene stimulates the production of pectinase, (enzyme which breaks down the pectin between the cells of the banana), causing the banana to soften as it ripens. Bananas can be made into jam and pancakes. Banana chips are a snack produced from sliced dehydrated or fried banana or plantain. Dried bananas are also ground to make banana flour. Plantains are used in various stews and curries or cooked, baked or mashed in much the same way as potatoes.

Bananas are a great source of phosphorous, calcium, potassium, vitamin A, vitamin C, niacin, vitamin E and vitamin B6. Bananas have more calories than an apple or an orange, but less sugar. Bananas are also a healthy source of carbohydrates.

### 3. Where is the largest bronze statue of Lord Nataraja the dancing Siva found?

The largest bronze Nataraja in the world is the Chola bronze statue is found at Thirunallam, Konerirajapuram temple, which is approximately 8ft in high. Konerirajapuram is about half hour drive from Kumbakonam, in Mayiladithurai taluka of Nagapattinam district in Tamil Nadu.

### 4. What are Upachara puja in Hinduism?

**Shodasha upachara** is a complete procedure in performing the rituals of a puja while worshipping the deity in a temple. The shodasha upachara or the offering of 16 items to the deity is performed after the ritual abisheka (holy bath). The practice of this ritual has symbolic meaning. Ancient Vedic hymns speak high on these Shodasha upachara rituals through hymns.

The list of Shodasha upachara (offering of 16 items to the deity)

1. **Dhyanam** – prayer (as in thinking about our expected guest)
2. **Avahanam and Aasanam** - welcome and provide a comfortable seat
3. **Padyam** – water to wash feet
4. **Arghyam** – water to wash hands
5. **Achamanam** – water to drink (traditionally in India, people walking into the house from the street, first wash off their hands, feet and face and take a glass of water). It is very hygienic and keeps harmful germs away.
6. **Snanam (Abhishekam)** – sacred bath (with milk, yogurt, honey, ghee and fruit juice)
7. **Vastram** – offer clothing
8. **Yagnopavitam** – sacred thread
9. **Gandham** – sandalwood paste for decoration
10. **Pushpam** - flowers and garlands
11. **Dhoopam** – incense for a pleasant fragrance
12. **Deepam** – light
13. **Naivedyam** – offer food, fruits.
14. **Neerajanam** – camphor light
15. **Mantrapushpam** – offer flowers and rice with Vedic chanting
16. **Pradakshana** – going around the deities.

It is accepted that the shodasha upachara with 16 items were very integral to the temple worship tradition from the 14<sup>th</sup> century where the inscriptions that mention kings gifting 16 items of the shodasha upachara to temples.

The shodasha upachara fulfil the appeal to all the senses of the devotee namely; lamps and fire to the eyes (to see), incense for the nose (smell), prasadam, the offered food items (to touch) and eat (to feel and enjoy) and music (to hear). In appealing to these senses they attempt to elevate the devotee to a higher plane.

The shodasha upacharas are similar for Vishnu and Siva temples with variations in the forms of the objects used. The Vaikanasa agama for Vishnu temples list 32 upacharas, and qualifies who can do them and for whom it should be done.

**The list of upacharas of 22 items are given in another script of rituals, which are;**

1. **Asana** (offering seat),
2. **Swagatha** (welcoming)
3. **Anumana** (asking permission to perform the upacharas)
4. **Padhya** (washing feet with fragrant water)
5. **Achamana** (lustration, this is repeated several times later)
6. **Pushpa** (offering flowers)
7. **Gandha** (offering sandal and other perfumes)
8. **Dhoopa** (offering incense)
9. **Deepa** (ritual of waving lighted lamp)
10. **Arghya** (offering fragrant water to wash hands)
11. **Snana** (bathe with fragrant water)
12. **Plotham** (cleaning the wet body of Lord with a soft cotton cloth)
13. **Vastra** (offering garments)
14. **Uthreya** (offering an upper garment)
15. **Yagnopavita** (offering sacred thread)
16. **Havis** (offering food)



17. **Paneeya** (offering water)
18. **Thamboola** (offering betel leaves )
19. **Bali** (offering water,flower and food to the guardians of the lord, and other divine souls )
20. **Pranama** (namaskara)
21. **Dakshina** (offering gold or silver with thamboola)
22. **Pushpanjali** (saluting with flowers).

In Saktha tradition the 'Sri chakra Yanta pooja' consists of 64 upacharas during the pooja rituals. In addition, during the Chandi homa these sixty four upachara items are offered into the homakunda (the holy fire pit).

The Pancharathra tradition has a list of 128 upacharas. The upacharas in the Pancharathra tradition and in Kerala are done mostly with gestures of the hands, like in dance mudhras.

### 5. What is Dhoopa in short?

**Dhoopa**— is Benzoin resin that is obtained from the bark of several species of trees belonging to the genus *Styrax*. A few spoons of the roughly crushed powder are added to hot coal embers and they smoke as they disintegrate. The fragrance is strong and heady. The receptacles of the coals were large, shallow cups on an inverted s horizontally placed with attractive craftsmanship.

### The significance of Pushya Nakshatra a note written by A.G. Ananthasubramania Sarma

Pushya Nakshatra is the result of favorable alignment of stars. Pushya Nakshatra is considered the best among all the Nakshatras. The word 'Pushya' means to nourish. The ruler of Pushya is Saturn (Shani) and its deity is Jupiter, the lord of divine wisdom (guru). Pushya is the eighth constellation in the zodiac. The meaning of Pushya is to preserve, nourish, and strengthen and to bring in good fortune. The Pushya Nakshatra increases the outcome of our good deeds and efforts. The Pushya Nakshatra holds great importance in religion as well as spirituality. Buying gold during Pushya Nakshatra is considered highly auspicious. Moreover, any task can be initiated and the results that one achieves are always favorable and more than expectations. The dates of Pushya Nakshatra are given below in the chart along with their duration.

Pushya Nakshatra in 2013

Date & Month	Day	(Time) From	Till
26 January	Saturday	14:44	30:47*
27 January	Sunday	6:47	16:28
22 February	Friday	Sunrise	22:36
23 February	Saturday	Sunrise	24:15
22 March	Friday	7:11	Sunrise
23 march	Saturday	Sunrise	9:4
18 April	Thursday	14:31	Sunrise
19 April	Friday	Sunrise	17:47
15 May	Wednesday	22:52	Sunrise
16 May	Thursday	Sunrise	25:28
12 June	Wednesday	5:12	Sunrise
13 June	Thursday	Sunrise	7:54
9 July	Tuesday	11:3	Sunrise
10 July	Wednesday	Sunrise	13:41
5 August	Monday	17:14	Sunrise
6 August	Tuesday	Sunrise	13:41
1 September	Sunday	24:14	Sunrise

2 September	Monday	Sunrise	26:44
26 October	Saturday	16:25	Sunrise
27 October	Sunday	Sunrise	19:12
22 November	Friday	24:8	Sunrise
23 November	Saturday	Sunrise	27:6
20 December	Friday	7:0	Sunrise
21 December	Saturday	Sunrise	9:59

\*The time indicated here after 24 Hrs denotes the time before sunrise. For example, if the time indicated is 30:47, it denotes 06:47 am of the next day. The favorable position or alignment of stars on Pushya Nakshatra results into prosperity and success. It is considered highly auspicious for beginning new ventures or business and for buying jewellery. If the Pushya Nakshatra falls on Thursday or Sunday, it becomes even more promising and is termed as 'Pushya Amrit Yoga'. If it falls on Thursday, people call it as Guru Pushya Nakshatra and if its falls on Sunday, it is called as Ravi Pushya Nakshatra. However, the Pushya Nakshatra falls for several times in a year and it is a rare occasion when it falls on Thursday or Sunday. People prefer to start new ventures or buy gold on the Ravi Pushya Nakshatra or Guru Pushya Nakshatra. The day is considered best to make investments in gold. However, there are many other options too available this time, apart from investing in gold. The Pushya Nakshatra is very promising. It is highly fruitful and any task can be undertaken during the Pushya Nakshatra. It can be said that Pushya Nakshatra guarantees good results for anything that is being undertaken during the time period. It gives luxury and prosperity to the people. Any Pooja can be undertaken during Pushya Nakshatra and the effect is always greater than expectations. Hence, it can be said that Pushya Nakshatra is the best of all the Nakshatra (constellations).

