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The Hindu Home



Community of Hindu TRAC, Sydney

FOREWORD

THE HINDU HOME

When I visited Sydney several years ago, and gave a 1½ hour presentation on my thoughts regarding Hindu TRAC (the revival of Hindu Tradition, Religion, Aspiration and Culture), to give back to Hindu youth their precious heritage, little did I imagine the kind of impact it would have on the conscience of elders and the consciousness of youth.

The youth absorbed the message of the revival of their TRAC, at the level of the home, to make their home the first temple and their parents living Gods to be revered and respected, like a dry sponge receiving and holding on to precious water.

Somewhere hidden in the psyche of the Hindu youth in Sydney, amidst the glitter and clatter of modernisation and the tantalising *maya* that society seemed to offer, was a sense of "Paradise Lost". In the psyche of some adults and some youth a warning bell sounded. We were close to crossing the "spiritual" Rubicon - the flow of knowledge. Once the river was crossed, the precious heritage of tradition, religion and culture would be lost and there would be no return.

Guided by visionary elders, the youth responded and today even as TRAC has been introduced / launched in Malaysia, Singapore, Manila, Jakarta, Toronto, New York and Fiji - the youth of Sydney have shown a daring initiative that is quite startling and they can well become an inspiration for others.

This booklet on "The Hindu Home" is such an example of spontaneous initiative, the youth

responding to the challenge of the moment, the needs of their time!

The Hindu TRAC programme (as indeed the Chinese TRAC launched in Malaysia) is based on the premise "Hinduism with Understanding and Understanding Hinduism". This effort is an offering by the Hindu Youth of Sydney, of the torch of understanding, for those who need such a torch.

I would plead with elders who may read this book with a critical eye, to look beyond and see the eager hearts that went into this effort and give encouragement and support. I would particularly like to mention such a visionary adult, Brother Krishnan Nair who has been such a pillar of strength for the youth! "Thank You" and may God bless you.

We do not know where the gentle ripple that this book will create will end and how many or from where will benefit from this. But, this is not the issue - it is sufficient that a sincere effort has been made and if Divinity is the judge, He will surely bless the sincerity of this effort and the nobility of the endeavour.

God bless!

J. Jagadeesan
For
TRAC

CONTENTS

Foreword	
Introduction	
1 Prayers and Worship	2
Home Shrine Room or Mandir	
Compass Directions	
Tripundra	
Sricharanam, Urdhvapundra or Nama	
Milk	
Suprabatham or Thirupallierichi	
Prostrating to Divine Parents	
Thuvasam	
2 Decorating the Home	7
Kolums and Rangoli	
Mango Leaves	
Lighting the Lamp	
Gesture of Greeting	
Planting the Seeds of Hinduism	
Bilva Leaves	
Tulasi Leaves	
Durva Grass or Aru-Gam-Pullu	
Banana Trees	
3 Introduction to "Food is God"	11
Food Chain	
Food for Sustenance of Life: Why have Dietary Guidelines?	
"Eat what you are"	
"You are what you eat"	
Vegetarianism	
Offering Food to God	
Super Foods or Prasad	
Leftovers	
The Value in Giving the Gift of Food	
Value in Fasting as Taught by Mahatma Gandhi	
4 Celebrations of Values	18
Deepawali or Diwali	
Onam	
Maha Shivrathri	
Vijayadashami	
Holi	
Krishna Janmasthanmi or Krishna Jayanthi	
5 Children's Stories	23
Ganesha	
Krishna	
Rama, Lakshmana, Bharat & Shatrughna	
Acknowledgements	28

INTRODUCTION

The objective of *The Hindu Home* is to expound the significance of Hindu customs and rituals practised in the home. Hindu rituals and practices have been handed down through the generations uncorrupted by the test of time. What has not been possible in the modern context is the widespread teaching of the understanding, reasoning or values that inspired the practices and rituals in the first instance. It is hoped, that a publication such as this demystifies the ritual act by explaining the symbolism and their underlying principles and values.

Notwithstanding the role of the temples, it is the Hindu home that has nurtured the customs of Hinduism. Hinduism is not an institutionalised religion; it relies on the ordinary household to uphold its doctrines. The Hindu home should be considered the first temple: Parents the first Gods and the objective, to create Divinity within the Home. The numerous spiritual texts are undoubtedly the source of light in Hinduism. Hindu households act as crystals, catching this Spiritual light and reflecting it in a multitude of colours.

Particular methodologies are prescribed but there are no steadfast rules. The rituals allow individual expression, reflective of the inner journey that is religion. The practise of rituals and customs in the home on a regular basis has the same value as a prayer. Prayers maybe offered orally or through meditation. Similarly, the practice of rituals and customs makes it possible to express a prayer through *physical actions*. A ritualistic prayer is a complete form of prayer that produces an inner

feeling of goodness or completeness. An analogy to a ritual prayer is the custom of sending and receiving cards upon special occasions, such as birthdays. The feeling of care may exist in the mind, but it is only when the card is written, signed and delivered to the recipient, that the feeling of care becomes real or manifested in the intellect. No longer is the feeling of care a vague sense within the mind but firmly set in the perception of reality. Likewise, ritual prayers make the wishes expressed in the prayers a reality. This aspect makes the ritual spiritually more potent than the prayers said orally or through meditation.

A guidebook on Hindu rituals in the home inevitably risks misinterpretation as advocating the practice of strict rituals. Care has been taken in the presentation of the material to *explain* customs or prayers and not to *dictate* them. It must also be acknowledged that each Hindu community has its own traditions, tempered by regional differences, and coloured by culture. Any custom or ritual can only inspire the wonder or emotions felt by their creators' experiences of God. Nevertheless, care and respect must be given in passing this gift to future generations, that we keep it as uncorrupted as when we received it.

This is a guide to motivate one's self to seek the Divinity within. Love what you do. Enjoy what you do. Simple or complex, love and sincerity will guide you.

- HARI OM -

PRAYERS AND WORSHIP

HOME SHRINE ROOM OR MANDIR

The shrine room is set aside and maintained to create a temple like atmosphere¹ where *pujas* or *japas* can be performed. God is omnipresent but nevertheless a room or space for prayers is set aside to inspire an individual's mind to a single-pointedness.² Holy Sages tend to seek riverbanks, mountain summits, sacred forests, solitary groves and temples for their prayers and meditation. The humble home or the home of a guru serves the same purpose and has the advantage of being more accessible. The room is ideally separated from the usual family rooms to allow the individual to more readily access the presence of God by entering the room. The focal point for the shrine, however, need not be a room. It can be a symbol or picture in the kitchen or any other part of the house.

The following features of the altar room or shrine have an underlying theme. Each of the features appeal to different aspects of a devotee, namely:

- body;
- emotion;
- turbulent mind;
- spiritual air or awareness; and
- intellect.

Oil lamp or Vilakku symbolises the dispelling of ignorance or darkness with the illumination of the light from the lamp. As the light of the lamp falls on the shrine, the deity is revealed. The significance of this lamp is that the light symbolises the mind, free from the bondage of ignorance and it is in this light alone that God is revealed to the devotee. In the oil lamp, a cotton wick is placed from which burns a single flame. The oil represents the ocean of knowledge and the single flame symbolises the single pointedness of the mind.³ Like the oil lamp, the message is to pursue knowledge without distraction.

The various elements of the *Lakshmi vilakku* (lamp) also has other representations. The lamp itself represents the home, the flame the wife, and the oil the husband. A balance is required between these

elements. The home must become a *jyoti* by husband and wife working in harmony.

Flowers or Pushpa are placed at the altar. The flowers represent the element of water, as flowers grow by the synthesis of water and sunlight. Flowers are the procreative part of a plant as such they represent the same procreative and emotional life of human beings. The flower also represents the human heart – the offering of your heart to God.

Sandalwood Paste or Gandha has a pleasant fragrance. The instinctive nature of humans associated with the sense of smell is a quality shared with the rest of the animal kingdom. Thus, the significance of the *gandha* is to induce a calming and soothing effect on the mind of the devotee by its pleasant fragrance. Placing the sandalwood paste on the forehead also has a cooling effect over the “third eye”.

Incense Sticks or Dhupa represents a number of things when burnt. First, the burning and the rising smoke express a desire that the devotees' poor qualities vapourise like the smoke.⁴ Second, as the fume diffuses into the air, it symbolises a wish on the part of the devotee that the consciousness of the mind be raised to the realm of the spirit.⁵ Third, the diffused fragrance into the air is a reminder of God's love that fills the air that enters us through our breath. In the altar, the *Dhupa* represents the Element Air.

Holy Ash or Vibuthi is smeared on the forehead and represents two aspects. First, it symbolises the indestructibility of humans; that is, the spirit that exists even when the body is destroyed is likened to ash that cannot be destroyed further. Second, it reminds devotees of the inevitable death that follows life.

Kumkum is placed in the middle of the forehead. The significance is in the location - yoga teachings state the human consciousness to be situated in this “third eye”. By placing *Kumkum* on the forehead, the spiritual consciousness is awakened. See discussion below of *bindu* or *pottu*.

Ringing of the Bell or Ghanta ⁶ in a ritual *puja*, calls all the senses to attention. Ringing the bell is a summons to God. The sound stimulates the inner ear and passes over, like waves. The bell reminds the individual that the material world may be perceived but not possessed, the effect being again to awaken the spiritual conscience. The ringing sound is also a symbol of the "Om" sound.

Mantras or chants are an active invocation of God to bestow blessings upon the devotee. Prayers likewise are an appeal to God.

Offering Food to God or Naivedya is the offering of food to the deities that is then returned to the devotee as *prasad*. Whatever you offer to God comes back to you, or others, because we are all one and part of the same *Brahman*. This food that sustains the body represents the Element Earth at the altar. ⁷ See discussion on *Offering Food to God*.

Water in a cup is kept at the altar. Water, as a medium is believed to absorb vibrations (sounds) well. By keeping it at the altar, the water becomes sanctified by the Deities invoked in the prayers and mantras. The water is then sprinkled or sipped to wash away the impurities in food and persons.

Offering the light or Arathi (Jyoti) is the climax of the *puja*. The camphor is burnt before the Deities and offered in a clockwise motion whilst the bell is being rung. The camphor represents ego, the flame being fire or *agni* - messenger of God - that burns and evaporates the camphor (ego) leaving no physical matter as residue. The *arathi* is a sacrifice of the devotees' ego in the presence of God. The fire in this instance acts as a medium for the messages to God. The medium of fire is chosen in this act as fire reduces all physical matter to aerial particles that rise up and is absorbed into a diffused condition that can no longer be distinguished. ⁸ The thoughts within the prayers are absorbed into fire, so that thoughts too may be diffused and indistinguishable. There need not be concern as to whether the prayers reach God's address. The medium of sending through fire teaches about the omnipresence of God. As Manu ⁹ said "The offering put into the fire goeth to the Sun; from the Sun cometh rain; from rain food; from food all creatures." ¹⁰

Rudraksha Seeds symbolise the compassionate tears of Lord Shiva, shed for the suffering of people. ¹¹ These bead necklaces are either worn or used in meditation by Saivites as a symbol of God's love.

Puja is a form of ritual worship and **Japa** is what is said whilst doing *puja*. If the *puja* is performed with faith and devotion, it is intended to purify the mind and prepare the devotee for wisdom and righteousness. Furthermore, the *puja* should not be an imitation of a ritual; rather, the participants should experience it, fully.

Meditation to conclude the puja or japa. The *puja* has until now consisted of chanting, singing and *mantras*. These are all instruments used to calm the mind and senses. Having successfully achieved this objective, the *puja* concludes with meditation, which varies in duration depending on the devotee. Meditation can be basically described as a prayer or *puja* done in the mind. If meditation is done by chanting the Lord's name, then that alone ought to be the single thought activity. After all the external prayers have been done, you can enjoy the Divinity within yourself through meditation.

Prostrating before the altar is done to show deep respect, humility and "surrender". Surrender means submission by the devotee to offer their mind to be guided by the will of God. It is an acceptance to follow spirituality and inwardly declare that "God's will be done". Though the Divine is sought within each Self in most Hindu rituals and customs, prostrating acknowledges submission to a higher presence. The ability to be without pride and acknowledge God is a valuable Hindu teaching.

COMPASS DIRECTIONS

Hinduism also stipulates the direction Deities face at the altar as being important. The altar is set up so that the Deities face east, the direction of the rising sun. The sun has a central place in Hinduism as the provider of heat and light, the principal energy required for life. Lord Venkateshwara is the exception to the above rule; He is positioned in the altar facing West. Distinctions are also made between north and south. Persons are discouraged from sleeping with their head pointing north. The

reasoning stems from the magnetic fields that operate. The north magnetic fields are believed to be disconcerting on the human body and to be avoided even after death.

TRIPUNDRA

Among the Saivites, the tripundra is a common mark drawn on the forehead and is highly significant. Three stripes of holy ash or *vibuthi* are drawn on the brow. It is also referred to as *thiruneer* in South India, meaning divine or holy ash. The holy ash signifies as a reminder of the cycle of life, death and purity. Like the physical ash, it symbolises the burning away of *anava*, *karma* and *maya*.

*Anava*¹² means the "impurity of smallness"; it refers to the ignorance of an individual in believing that the soul is separate from God and universe. It is the misapprehension that space, objects and time limit the soul. The burning away of *anava* means to remove the ignorance of the individual.

*Karma*¹³ means action or deed and its consequences, the principle may be summarised as stating that what we sow we shall reap in this life and future lives, whether they be good or bad actions. *Karma* is the cosmic law that brings a soul to the evolutionary cycle of life after life. When the *karmas* are resolved or burnt away, the Soul realises itself and is liberated from rebirth.

*Maya*¹⁴ is understood as illusion of relative reality as opposed to the unchanging Absolute reality of God. *Maya* is the creative force that is forever in the process of creation, preservation and destruction and can be readily observed. The burning away of *maya* enables the individual not to be blinded by the illusions of creation, preservation and destruction but to behold the Absolute reality of God. *Maya* is what hides man from the Divinity, intervening in the relationship between the two.

The *bindi* or "*pottu*" (circular spot at the centre of the tripundra) is placed over the third eye or the spiritual eye to quicken the individual's spiritual insight. The third eye symbolises the "mind's eye" which sees things that the physical eyes cannot. The bindu is worn as a reminder to use and cultivate the

individual's spiritual vision, to strive to understand the inner meaning of life. Usually the bindu is made of *Kumkum* or red powder, sandalwood paste or other substances. In South India, unmarried women wear a black bindu in the belief that it wards off evil while married women wear red as a symbolism of the *agni* (fire) over which their marriage was solemnised.



SRICHARANUM, URDHVAPUNDRA OR NAMA

Literally means a religious mark (*Pundra*) worn upright (*Urdhva*).¹⁵ This is a symbol worn by the Srivaishnavas. Through the centre of the *Urdhvapundra* a single vertical line is drawn upwards with *kumkum*. The red colour represents light and the vertical line serves as a reminder of the goal to be merged with Divinity through Self-realisation.¹⁶ The three lines in conjunction symbolise a special meaning drawn from the *Ramayana*¹⁷. During their years of exile, Rama walked in front, followed by Seetha and then Lakshmana. In this sequence, Rama represents *Purusha* or Divinity; Seetha represents *Stri-Shakti* or *maya*; and, Lakshmana represents *Prakriti* or nature of humans. When walking in the forest Rama is visible to Lakshmana only when Seetha is not in his line of vision. The message here is that *maya* obscures Divinity from the individual. The *nama* is drawn as a reminder to remove *maya* from the relationship between Divinity and the devotee.



MILK

A new home usually entails a ceremony before commencing to live in the new surroundings. This ceremony consists of boiling milk as the first item of cooking in the new home. A Priest visits the home and performs a *Lakshmi puja* offering prayers and invoking blessings to the house. The milk is heated until it begins to boil over. The white milk in this instance symbolises purity and nutrition. The action of boiling over is symbolic of "abundance" of "wealth". "Wealth" denotes the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi, and refers to the wealth of love, kindness, devotion, patience, endurance and material wealth. The prayer by the householders is that like the boiling milk - the family in the new house has an abundance of noble qualities.

SUPRABATHAM OR THIRUPALLIERLICI

As a matter of practice, the household is awoken to the sounds of *subrabatham* or *thirupallierlichi* each morning. These devotional songs express love to divinity and seek the awakening of the Gods within us. The purpose of these songs each morning is that the first thought to cross the mind of the householders is that of Divinity. God is thus, invoked into the house and within the individual. The request to God to awaken from slumber echoes a desire for persons not only to awaken from the slumber of sleep but also from the spiritual slumber.

PROSTRATING TO DIVINE PARENTS

Hinduism encourages young children to develop the habits of sacredness in their relationships with parents. Traditionally, the manifestation of this value was the early morning practice of children prostrating to their parents by touching their parents' feet with their forehead and hands, before the morning *puja*. In Sanskrit dictums it is written: *Matrudevo bhava, pitridevo bhava, acharyadevo bhava* meaning "be the one that respects mother as God, father as God and guru or teacher as God"¹⁸. This has also been translated into popular tamil dictums like, "*annaiyum pithavum munnari deivam*" meaning "mother and father are the first and foremost Deity". The significance lies in the development of family bonds and in understanding *Iswara* or God.

Reverence demonstrated by prostrating to parents creates a serene feeling to the child (see *Prostrating before the altar* above). The relationship between the child and parent is then built upon respect. The gesture also has profound impact upon parents. It inspires emotions of love, protective instincts and desire to reciprocate that which is offered. It enables both the parents and the child to face life's challenges from this mutually helpful position. Naturally, forcing such a practice upon families does not carry these benefits.

The custom of worshipping parents through prostrating is a learning process for children, whose first understanding of God is the association with parents. Qualities demonstrated to children through the various stages of growth demonstrate growing understandings of *Iswara* or God. As helpless babes, parents provide round the clock care and attention. As children grow, awareness of the world and right conduct is taught with forgiveness and love. Wisdom (masculinity) and unconditional love (femineity)¹⁹ are given in balance. God is both Father²⁰ (wisdom) and Divine Mother (unconditional love), the all pervasive that watches over each *atman* or soul from before birth to after death. The result of this unique Hindu custom is that qualities of *Iswara* are understood and *Iswara* is brought into the hearts of the children.

THUVASAM

This worship is offered to the souls of dead kin and is performed annually on the relevant date upon which the kin passed away. Hinduism²¹ explains this worship by drawing an analogy between death and dreams. In a dream, a sleeping individual visualises their self as being of a physical form. Their real life physical characteristics are painted on to the dream figure. The soul is believed to likewise imagine itself to have certain physical characteristics. That is, even after death, the soul imagines itself as "looking alike" to the dead body. This is believed to be a hindrance for the progress of the soul, especially when taking another form in re-birth.²² To render spiritual support or energy to the soul, prayers are offered. The passage of time as measured by days, months and years is irrelevant to the soul. Thus, a hundred years on a calendar may only be a day for the progressing soul. To ensure

the soul is not left without this spiritual support, the practice of *thuvagam* is encouraged for three generations.

The worship is conducted by inviting the Priest to the house to perform a *puja*. The beneficial effects of these prayers are believed to find the soul. If the soul has already passed to another body, then the prayers are offerings to *Iswara* (God). A picture of the deceased is kept at the altar with flowers and food prepared for the deceased. The members of the households then provide alms to those less fortunate who are invited to bless the occasion.²³ The significant blessings from those receiving alms are also beneficial to the Soul as it accumulates good *dharma* referred to as *anna-thaanam*.

¹ Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, *Dancing with Siva, Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*, Himalayan Academy (1993) p 335.

² *Gandharva-tantra* translated in Louis Renou (Ed), *Hinduism*, Washington Square Press (1969) p 150.

³ Discussion with Ms S. Venkatramani, disciple of Chinmaya Mission, Sydney.

⁴ Gana Jega Deva, *A Celebration of Life Worship of the Mother Goddess Navarathri Rituals and Home Worship* SSBC Bangsar Publications p 29.

⁵ J.J. De Reede, "Universal Symbolism" in Swami Nityanand (Ed) *Symbolism in Hinduism* Bombay, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust (1993) p 35.

⁶ Note 1 *supra* p 281.

⁷ Note 5 *supra* pp 34-5.

⁸ SPIRITWEB ORGANISATION, March 1999 at <http://www.spiritweb.org>

⁹ Manu was a 15th Century scholar whose writings have earned him the reputation of "lawgiver" with respect to Hindu customs. Many of his writings have been translated and are being re-studied.

¹⁰ Note 8 *supra*.

¹¹ Note 1 *supra* p 399.

¹² Glossary in Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, note 1 *Ibid*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Swami Harshananda "What is Behind Symbols?" in Swami Chinmayananda, *Symbolism in Hinduism* Bombay, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust (1993) p 76.

¹⁶ Discussion with Mr. Kathirgamanathan, interview 17 March 1999, Sydney.

¹⁷ Discussion with Dato J. Jagadeesan, 2 April 1999, Sydney, Australia.

¹⁸ Note 8 *supra*.

¹⁹ Paramahansa Yogananda *Man's Eternal Quest Self-Realization Fellowship* (5th ed, 1996) p 372.

²⁰ Jesus spoke to God as Father. Paramahansa Yogananda in *Autobiography of a Yogi* Jaico Publishing House (1986) spoke of God as Divine Mother. Note the association of masculine words to Fathers and feminine words to Mothers is purely grammatical. A parent demonstrates both qualities in some balance. Single-parent families have been observed as having a more equal balance of wisdom and love being demonstrated by the one parent.

²¹ Note 12 *supra*.

²² Swami Dayananda Saraswati, *Series of Talks, "Understanding Iswara"* presented in Sydney March 2-6, 1999 Strathfield Town Hall.

²³ See discussion on alms giving in "The Value in Giving the Gift of Food"

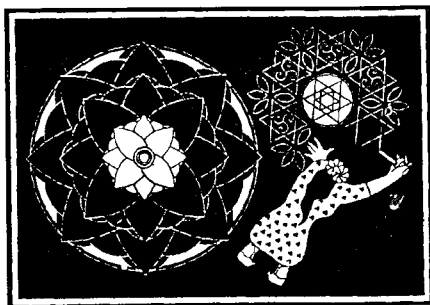
DECORATING THE HOME

KOLUMS AND RANGOLI

Kolum and Rangoli are traditional folk arts of decorating courtyards, walls, places of worship and kitchens dating back 5000 years. Paste made from the powder of white stone, lime, or rice flower, is used to draw intricate designs. The motifs used in the designs are from plants, flowers and animals. For example, coconut, lotus, mango, aswarth, cow, peacocks, swans, etc. are popular choices. The colours are derived from natural dyes, from barks of trees, leaves and indigo. The patterns and styles differ across India with each State offering its own unique input.

The word Rangoli derives from "Rang" meaning colour and "aavalli" meaning coloured creepers¹. The use of colour in the design distinguishes Rangolis from Kolums. Spaces are blocked in various colours according to the design of the Rangoli. Kolums are line drawings formed in geometrical and symmetrical shapes. Dry rice powder or rice paste is used to draw them.

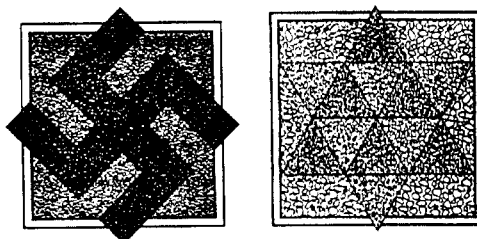
The purposes of this art form are two fold. First, the designs drawn with a liberal application of rice flour enable small life forms, like ants and birds to be fed² and looked after. Secondly, certain designs have spiritual value. Kolums called *Yantras* are spiritual instruments believed to have energy in their designs. *Yantras* drawn while reciting *slokas* or prayers enables the drawer to interact with the subtle radiations emitted by planetary movements. Particular importance is given to the *Navagrahas* (nine heavenly bodies) drawn on different days of the week.³



Sun	(Surya)	Sunday
Moon	(Chandra)	Monday
Mars	(Kuja)	Tuesday
Mercury	(Budha)	Wednesday
Jupiter	(Guru)	Thursday
Venus	(Sukra)	Friday
Saturn	(Sani)	Saturday
Ascending moon	(Rahu)	
Descending moon	(Kethu)	

The nine *grahas* are the nine closest heavenly bodies to the Earth. Their relatively short distance is believed to emit pressures not only on the physics of the planet Earth but also upon humans. The drawing of the *yantras* is believed to neutralise negative influences and enhance positive influences. This reaffirms that humans are not limited by planetary pressures but have spiritual resources far greater.⁴

Swastika is a symbol of auspiciousness and good fortune.⁵ It means, "It is well". The right-angled arms of this ancient sun-sign denote the indirect way in which Divinity is apprehended by intuition and not by intellect.



Shatkona or the six-pointed star,⁶ is a popular kolum design among the Saivites. The design consists of two interlocking triangles, the upper triangle stands for Shiva, *purusha* (the Supreme Being or soul, *atman*, pure consciousness that is not manifest) and fire. The lower triangle stands for Sakti, *prakriti* (in contrast to *purusha*, it is the tangible manifestation as the physical cosmos and energy) and water. The union of the two gives birth to *Sanatkumara*, whose sacred number is six. *Sanatkumara* is also known as Karttikeya, Murugan, Kumaran, Skanda; the second son of

Lord Shiva, responsible for guiding the evolution of religion.

MANGO LEAVES⁷

Mango leaves are hung at the entrance to the house and are a permanent fixture in the home. The mango leaves demonstrate certain properties that translate as messages to persons entering and leaving the home. Mango leaves do not decay in the same fashion as other plants, when dry it does not emit a foul odour. This signifies to persons that unpleasantness nor hurt should be caused to others. It is a special reminder to persons entering not to bring poor qualities into the home. Mango leaves also represent shields, protecting the home from any negative energies.



LIGHTING THE LAMP AT DAWN AND DUSK

Traditionally an oil lamp is lit outside or inside the home every day, at dawn and dusk. This practice is accompanied by prayers but is considered to be separate from the normal household *puja*. At dawn the rising sun dispels the darkness of the night. This is reflected in the symbolism of lighting the lamp at dawn. It reminds the individual to instil the wisdom (light) that dispels the ignorance of the mind for the duration of the day. At dusk, as darkness descends, lighting the lamp signifies the dispelling of ignorance (darkness) by wisdom (light).

GESTURE OF GREETING

Anjali, the gesture of two hands brought together near the heart is a traditional gesture of greeting. In Hinduism, the thumb of the hand represents God while the four other fingers represent qualities that separate the individual from God. The gesture symbolically points the two thumbs back towards the individual. It expresses recognition that "I am Divinity". The gesture, when used in a greeting, means to "honour or celebrate" and offers worship to the Divinity within the person being greeted. The message is, "I, the Divinity, honour the Divinity within you."

The gesture also signifies two aspects of the individual, the matter and spirit, being brought together by the two hands joining. The Self meets the Self in all.

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF HINDUISM

BILVA LEAVES

Planting Wood apple trees (*Aegle marmelos*)⁸ around the home or temple is believed to be sanctifying by Saivites. *Bilva* leaves from the Wood apple (or *bael*) tree likewise has a special significance to Saivites. Its leaves are picked in three and offered in worship to the Shivalingam. It is offered in worship in multiples of three to represent Shiva's trident.⁹ The three leaves also signify the three divine forces of creation, preservation and destruction.¹⁰

TULASI LEAVES

Planting the *tulasi* plant in the garden and temples is believed to purify the atmosphere. All prayers, especially prayers to Vishnu and Krishna are done with the presence of *tulasi*. Furthermore, the plant in the courtyard of the home is well tendered and watered regularly, oil lamps are lit and *kumkum* is sprinkled on the plant. *Tulasi* is worshipped as Divinity Herself. It is believed in Ayurvedic medicine that *tulasi* has great medicinal qualities, recommended for colds, congestion and influenza.

DURVA GRASS OR ARU-GAM-PULLU

This species of grass (*Cynodon Dactylon*) is used as worship to Vinayagar or Ganesh. The offering is made by moulding a small statue of Vinayagar with turmeric and water. At the tip of the statue, a single stem with three blades of *arugampullu* is placed. The abilities to grow well and spread far are the valuable qualities that are recognised by this offering. Vinayagar is associated with the gaining of knowledge and is worshipped with *arugampullu* and a prayer that wisdom grows well and spreads like the *arugampullu*. The turmeric is known as the King of Ayurvedic medicine and is used for its antiseptic qualities.

BANANA TREES

Banana trees are popular plants in the gardens of Hindu homes. It offers fruits to the households and historically, its leaves served as plates for food. The inner and outer bark is also used for household purposes. Its service to humanity is symbolic of sacrifice.

Banana trees in Tamil are called *valhai maram* or "life tree". Its significance is that once the tree is planted in the garden, saplings soon surround the adult tree. When the adult tree is dying, there are sufficiently younger, stronger trees to continue offering fruits and leaves. The blessing sought from the presence of the banana trees is that the family in the house is likewise filled with children and the family grows well. So entrenched is the traditions of handing down values across generations in Hindu culture, there is a common idiom said of people, "*Valhai adi valhai*." This means each generation behaves and prospers like the one before, as with the case of the banana tree.



¹ SPIRITWEB ORGANISATION. March 1999 at <http://www.spiritweb.org>

² See "Value of Giving the Gift of Food".

³ SPIRITWEB ORGANISATION. March 1999 at <http://www.spiritweb.org>

⁴ Pramahansa Yogananda. *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Jaico Publishing House (1986) p 162.

⁵ Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. *Dancing with Siva, Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*, Himalayan Academy (1993) p 135.

⁶ *Ibid* p 223.

⁷ *HINDU Temple Worship* Compiled by CITRAC Sri Sathya Sai Council of Malaysia p 11.

⁸ Note 3 *supra* p 105.

⁹ Note 5 *supra* p 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

INTRODUCTION TO "FOOD IS GOD"

FOOD CHAIN

From food, from food
creatures, all creatures
come to be.

Gorging, disgorging,
being come
to be.

By food they live,
in food they move,
into food they pass:

food, the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be,

Food, food, Brahman is food:
only they eat
who know
they eat their God.

For food is the chief
of things, of all things
that come to be:

elixer,
herbs to herbs
for mortals.

From food all beings
come to be,
by food
they grow,
into food
they pass.

And what eats is eaten:
and what's eaten, eats
in turn.

Taittiriya Upanishad, translated by A. K. Ramamujan¹

It is a common saying in Hinduism that "Food is God (*Brahman*)". Like *Brahman*, food has many functions: it is the source of life: it sustains life; it

communicates a message about life and it teaches about life. Hinduism scrutinises each of these aspects and says to understand *Brahman*, the food cycle can be studied.

In Hinduism, food does not symbolise or represent *Brahman* or the Ultimate Reality, rather food is an actual part of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is the trinity of three universal forces or functions, *Brahma* (creation), *Vishnu* (preservation) and *Shiva* (destruction). Food likewise performs these three functions by its production and circulation. The poem cited from *Taittiriya Upanishad* demonstrates that the source of life requires nourishment as does preservation of life. The destruction of one life begins and preserves another thereby completing the life cycle. It is by recognising the forces of *Brahman* in the food chain that the understanding of food as none other than *Brahman* is gained.

According to Hinduism, *Brahman* has undertaken to feed His or Her creations. The corollary of understanding that *Brahman* is the ultimate or infinite is that *Brahman* has no other force to delegate the task of taking care of His or Her creations. In other words "God does not have a baby-sitter."² Vedanta³ thus formulates that *Brahman* does not create that which cannot be sustained and further the power to create is accompanied by the power to destroy. The availability of food to all creations is part of *Brahman's* moral order known as *dharma*. The preservation of all creatures and the distribution of food or sustenance is viewed as a given undertaking by God.

"God does not have a baby-sitter."

An individual being is regarded as being constituted by food. A human individual is analysed as consisting of the soul (*atman*) and five other levels or "sheaths" (*kosas*) that clothes the soul.⁴ The five sheaths are: the physical body; life-breath or life-force; mind; intellect or understanding; and bliss (true nature). The physical body is important in that

it is the most distant sheath from the *atman* and interacts the most with the physical world. This physical body consists of bones, muscles, skin, tissues, etc., that are built by the food and nourishment consumed. This concept expands on the popular idiom, "You are what you eat."

Hinduism teaches that food has personality and character capable of being communicated. The character of food encompasses language, speech and actions surrounding the food. It is believed these energies or sound waves are absorbed into food and are conveyed to the recipient. As startling as this seems, it is helpful to remember that vegetables do not lose their life force once removed from the plant but continue photosynthesis of heat, light and moisture. Hinduism says not only are these tangible forces absorbed but intangible or subtle nuances in speech and action when concerned with the food are also absorbed. Thus "good" and "bad" foods are produced from actions concerned with food.⁵ This characteristic is referred to as "speaking food"⁶

meaning that the food consumed carries a message to the inner-Self. From this idea develop the notions that the physical ailments, personal temperament and emotional fluctuations are connected to the foods consumed.

...food has personality and character capable of being communicated.

Food in Hinduism is a doorway to understanding Hindu philosophy. The variety of rituals and customs that have developed with respect to food are innumerable. The reasoning outlined in the above paragraphs develops with more intricately woven cultural values in these customs and rituals. Cultural developments like the formulation of dietary guidelines, use of food in *pujas* (worship), vegetarianism and the practice of fasting are examined as follows.

FOOD FOR SUSTENANCE OF LIFE: WHY HAVE DIETARY GUIDELINES?

"Food is, verily, greater than strength. Therefore if a man sustains from food for ten days, even though he might live, he would not be able to see, hear, reflect, become convinced, act and enjoy the result. But when he obtains food, he is able to see, hear, reflect, become convinced and enjoy the result."

(Chandogya Upanishad VII, ix, 1).⁷

In Hinduism, food helps rather than hinder the search for Self-knowledge. It is considered a duty to stay alive - to sustain the Self. Hinduism does not allow for death by starvation. Food is a necessity for human survival, hence Hinduism views food as a "helper" in the exchange between the Self (*prana*), the body and the world. In extremities this means eating forbidden foods or abominable foods (this is referred to as *apaddharma* or *dharma* under distress).⁸

Food may enlighten or give knowledge to the Soul or may hinder it. When food is approached with self-

control it enlightens the soul. When food is approached with greed or indulgence it becomes part of the worldly illusion (*Maya*).

In understanding the dietary guidelines it is important to stress that Hinduism states the guidelines are not imposed but rather should be voluntarily striven for. There is a strong relationship between food and the Self. The "speaking food" conveys messages to the inner Self, hence it is a linkage between *Brahman* and the Self. Two propositions arise from the preceding principles: first, "You eat what you are"⁹ and second, "You are what you eat."¹⁰ Each of these propositions needs to be well understood.

"EAT WHAT YOU ARE"

In the first proposition, Hinduism says that eating habits of an individual reflect his or her moral dispositions. Moral dispositions or *gunas* are believed to be the fruits of good and bad actions

performed both in this life and previous lives, this being the law of *karma*. So, one's food preferences are reflections of his or her karma-inherited moral dispositions. *Gun*as are tendencies exhibited by an individual such as moral or immoral behaviour, active or passive characteristics, extroverted or introverted personalities, etc.

The relationship between *gun*as and food can be explained by a cyclical model. If the moral disposition is given then the thoughts churned through the mind reflects this disposition. The mind in turn communicates to the intellect (*bhuddhi*), the intellect in turn discriminates between what it wants and does not want. The Intellect sends messages to the five sensory organs, which carry out what is contained in those messages. Thus the foods chosen contain properties similar to what the *gun*as tell the mind to seek, hence the foods chosen perpetuate the cycle.

“YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT”

In the second formulation, Hinduism says that the food consumed determines the type of person you are. In modern medicine, physical health is associated to a balanced diet and illnesses to a dietary deficiency. Hinduism expands this principle. The food consumed not only sustains the physical body but also the spiritual body. It is the latter influence that often concerns Yogis and Sadhus.

Food is a triangle with three basic “qualities”¹¹ that enter the body and influence the moral dispositions (*gun*as), flows (*dos*as), moods (*bh*avas) and attachments (*rag*as). Refer to Table below.

The conclusion in the second formulation is that one should always regulate, control and improve one's food to pursue health and spiritual goals. In this sense, the controlled practice of eating is similar to the yogic model and has the same purpose, means and end.

At first blush, it seems inevitable that one consumes foods attractive to one's own disposition. Controlling one's diet to affect a change in disposition seems contradictory and fatalistic. However, this is the challenge of Hinduism: the intellect must assert control over the mind and actively seek the spiritual goal. A healthy body is thus a product of discrimination and controlled nourishment.

*“The Lord has given us the fruits of the good earth. We like to see our food to smell it, to taste it - the Hindu likes also to touch it!”
One does not mind hearing it, either, when no one else is present at the meal!”¹²*

- Swami Sri Yukteswar Giri

Foods

Meat and liquor.*

Foods described as stale, tasteless, putrid, spoilt.

Onion, garlic, heavy spices.
Foods described as bitter, sour, dry, saline, very hot, pungent, dry and a burning sensation.

Milk, butter, cheese, rice, pulses, sugar and wheat.
Foods described as sweet, soft, nourishing and agreeable foods.

Gunas

Tamas in nature, means that it is a force of inertia, density, force of contraction and resistance.

Rajas passion, inherent in energy, movement, action, emotion, life.

Sattva in nature means quiescent, rarefied, translucent, pervasive, reflecting the light of the Pure Consciousness.

Effect

Prolonged spiritual upheaval.

Sluggishness, spiritual disquiet and immoral thoughts. Some cause a lot of energies but these are uncontrollable energies.

Calming to the mind and senses. Increases the vitality in a person and not bulk. Foods which will augment joy and cheerfulness¹³.

* Meat and liquor has both tamasic and rajasic qualities.

VEGETARIANISM

Vegetarianism is encouraged but not mandated for two reasons. First, it is believed to be beneficial to a person's health and second, it is consistent with the principle of *ahimsa*. The consumption of meat, fish or eggs involves a direct or indirect act of violence against the animal kingdom,¹⁴ contrary to *ahimsa*.

Ahimsa or non-injury is a broad ethical concept in Hinduism that encompasses non-violence be it physical, mental or emotional. It is abstinence from causing harm or hurt to all living beings by thoughts, words or deeds. A desire or thought to eat meat is thus the same violation of *ahimsa* as the physical deed of killing an animal.

The philosophical basis of *ahimsa* is firstly, the law of *karma*, the law that harm caused to others returns to oneself. Secondly, the recognition that the same divinity or *Brahman* lies in all persons and things creates a compassion and reverence that does not allow harm or pain to be directed towards any living being. The practice of *Sakahara* or vegetarian diet, is hence, the natural outcome that evolves from an abhorrence of injury and killing.

...Sakahara or vegetarian diet, is hence, the natural outcome that evolves from an abhorrence of injury and killing.

Ahimsa is not a switch-on switch-off concept but rather a question of degree. A vegetarian diet is not free from violation of *ahimsa*, rather its recommendation is that the degree of violation is less than when a non-vegetarian diet is pursued. Likewise, a vegan diet (no animal products) is preferable in Hinduism to vegetarianism for it causes less injury. In the same vein, eggs are considered to be of a lower degree of *ahimsa* than meat because consuming an unfertilised egg has not destroyed actual life but potential life. Furthermore, *ahimsa* in a food item includes injuries to the source of food. For example, an egg from a caged chicken that is mistreated carries a greater violation of *ahimsa* than an egg borne by a free-ranging and healthy chicken. The concept of *ahimsa* is wide and encompasses any interference with another's well-being.

OFFERING FOOD TO GOD

Despite the rules of worship and strict stipulation on food preparations as offerings to God, it is the common wish of devotees to give or entertain God with what they have. Thus any offering made with sincerity has always had a place in traditional worship. In *Bhagwad Geeta*, Krishna said to Arjuna;

"I accept and relish anything given to me in the spirit of worship by a person, be it a leaf, a fruit or a drink" (Geeta 9:26).

SUPER-FOODS OR PRASAD

Hinduism views the Self as both that which is seen and unseen. The same principle applies to food. Food to a Holy person has tangible form as well as intangible (subtle) dimensions. The practice of offering foods to God, Sadhus and Yogis relies upon

these subtle dimensions. The austerity of a Sadhu empowers his Self, the food being no more than his Self, is likewise empowered. A Sadhu accepts the food from a disciple, empowers the food given and returns to the disciple as leftovers the remaining empowered food. The leftover food is the blessings that the Sadhu gives. Common types of offerings include sweets made of milk, sweets and flowers. In the home "Fruits, flowers and leaves" are the normal types of offerings.

This prasad transaction embedded in Hindu custom is the offering food first to God or Sadhu before the devotee or disciple begins to eat the leftover. The offering to God is done through prayer before eating. This serves the dual purposes of cancelling negative energies in the food transaction and generating positive energies to the food recipient.

This custom has attracted much attention in literature. While offering freshly prepared food to God is considered noble and right, the offering of ones own leftovers to God or even the notion of it is regarded as taboo. Hindu literature has continued to ridicule and override these leftover and fresh food distinctions. Krishna accepted the leftover food of his devotee Vidura over the elaborate feast of Duryodhana's, thereby stating that a devotees' love surpasses all social stature and wealth. Likewise, Sabari, an old woman greeted Rama returning from his exile by feeding him fruits after she had taken the first bite, to ensure that the fruit was sweet enough. The hunter who offered meat to *Shiva's* shrine was blessed by *Shiva*, who was so impressed by the hunter's devotion that He accepted the offering. The stories also can be understood to mean that *bhakti* or devotion will always be viewed as taking precedence over custom.

LEFTOVERS

Milk is left over
from the calves.
Water is left over
from the fishes,
flowers from the bees.

How can I worship you,
O *Shiva*, with such offer?
But it's not for me
to despise the leftovers,
so take what comes,
lord of the meeting rivers.

(*Basavanna* from Kannada; Ramanujan 1973)¹⁵

THE VALUE IN GIVING THE GIFT OF FOOD

Hinduism places emphasis upon "giving" food away. In the context of the home this has two applications. Firstly, food prepared in the home is shared with all members of the household; and secondly, food is given to poor or less fortunate persons. Numerous religious texts and folklore on this subject have entrenched these practices into household customs.

Manu wrote, "He who prepares food for himself (alone), eats nothing but sin".¹⁶ Such strong messages are not uncommon, however their purpose

The following treatment given to food in temples, may also be of relevance for the home.

SAIVAISM

- In general, *Shiva's* devotees avoid contact with leftovers (called *bhojana*, not *prasada*) which are only consumed by the Priests. The devotees of *Shiva's* son, *Murukan* also generally avoid leftovers except for the *tinaimavu prasada*. The reasons are in the association of *Shiva* with poisons and destruction. He is believed to eat and digest the foods, hence the leftovers are believed to be energised by these dangerous qualities. As a result, *Shiva* temples serve the foods used to bathe *Lord Shiva* and not the foods offered as a diet.

VAISHNAVISM

- The Sri Vishnu temples are renowned for sweets and savouries, the dietary menu for the deity that is then distributed as *prasada*. *Lord Vishnu* is believed to not consume nor digest the foods offered to him, only to touch the food with His halo. Thus the foods are accessible to the devotees as blessings of *Vishnu's* virtues, namely his role as the preserver of all things.

is not to isolate sinners but rather to help in understanding the value in giving gifts. There are cultural reasons why status accords to the individual giving as opposed to the recipient. Giving a gift without expecting reciprocity is an act of unselfishness that reduces an individual's ego and promotes the happiness of the giver. Indian culture thus places the status of the giver over the status of the recipient. This is another reason why offering food to Deities returns as *prasada*, otherwise the devotee would remain superior to the Deity worshiped.¹⁷

***“(S)he who prepares food for themself
(alone), eats nothing but sin”***

The giving of food is culturally more significant than giving wealth; giving knowledge; or giving sons and daughters in marriage. Like food, these gifts make the cycle of life possible. The value of the gift of food over and above these other gifts is that it is a recognition of *Brahman* in other living beings. It expresses recognition of the food as a sustenance of life and the preservation of life as a function of God or *Brahman*.¹⁸ Ideally, all food eaten must have

first been offered to another. When practised, this simple deed promotes the awareness and knowledge of the giver. Another reason is that food is part of the cycle of *Karma*, that is of actions and consequences. The act of giving returns to the giver the merits of giving. Adverse consequences of food not being offered to others also returns to the non-giver. This is Manu's warning, having prepared food it should be offered to others and not eaten alone. Reinforcing this message is the Hindu belief that Deities are unable to feed themselves¹⁹ but continually serve the world, only when devotees feed the Deities are They able to eat (*Naivedya*).

VALUE IN FASTING AS TAUGHT BY MAHATMA GANDHI

Spiritual considerations aside, small periods of fasting are encouraged for health reasons. The body continually works through three hundred and sixty-five days a year, fasting is the only way by which these hard working organs are given a rest.²⁰

Fasting in a spiritual context means fasting the five senses. Guidelines on fasting emphasises not only dietary commendations but also abstinence from anger, gossip, injuring others and excessive speech. The goal of fasting is to purify the mind; if the mind deviates to jealousy, pride or vanity the benefits of the fast are lost.²¹

Unlike a marathon, fasting is not a test of endurance. Its purpose is solely to train an individual in spiritual orientation. Fasting should be carried out within an individual's own limits.²² That is, if physical weakness, headaches or dizziness begins than it is recommended that the fast be ended.

Fasting is an instrument wielded to achieve a spiritual goal. It follows that an instrument could be beneficial or detrimental. Fasting is to be undertaken with care. Inappropriate fasting could easily disintegrate the dialogue between the body and the soul to fear, coercion and violence. This especially occurs, when the fasting is done with fear that the body shall become weak from the fast.²³ The benefits of correct fasting, explained Mahatma Gandhi, are manifold.

Gandhi considered fasting as central to spiritual life. His writings showed that his reasons for fasting included resolving moral dilemmas and help in making decisions. “My religion teaches me that whenever there is distress which one cannot remove, one must fast and pray” (Gandhi, 1965, 8).²⁴ Gandhi viewed fasting as a supplement to his prayers. Fasting helped to abstain evil or injurious thoughts or activities, selfishness, anger and impatience while the prayers concerned the “heart which knows God by faith”. (Gandhi, 1965, 10). Hence, both the fast and the prayer must work together to reach the spiritual objective.

Fasting as a form of *tapas* (religious austerity) to Gandhi, served to exert control over others who came within his influence. He describes spiritual fasts as a “revolving door” in the influence that it exerts on society. The beneficial effects of the fast aid not only the individual undertaking the fast but persons who come into contact with the individual fasting.

***“My religion teaches me that whenever there
is distress which one cannot remove, one
must fast and pray”***

Fasting is a necessary act to limit over-indulgence in food that distorts one's perception of what they are. To think that food sustains the body fails to understand God as the force that really sustains life in the body.²⁵ A body in deep sleep is unaware of food and the intake of breath.²⁶ Fasting strives to reach this level of calmness and understanding in the body and mind. Restraints and controls upon food intakes emphasise the dominance of the Soul as separate and superior over the physical body.

When a Saint fasts, fasting is taken to all new gastronomical levels. For example, the Saint Giri Bala ate neither water nor food from the age of twelve and four months onwards. Using a yogic technique, this Saint freed her body from the need to eat food. Her purpose was to demonstrate that humans are Spirit and spiritual advancement makes it possible to live by Divinity alone. Swami Giri Bala's favourite hobby was to cook and feed people.

¹ A. K. Ramanujan, "Food for thought" in R. S. Khare (Ed.) *The Eternal Food Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*, State University of New York (1992) pp 222-3.

² Swami Dayananda Saraswati, *Series of Talks. "Understanding Isvara"* presented in Sydney March 2-6, 1999 Strathfield Town Hall.

³ Hindu texts written in 15th Century.

⁴ R. S. Khare (Ed.) "Introduction" note 1 *supra* p 5

⁵ *Ibid* p 6.

⁶ The terminology used by R. S. Khare.

⁷ Sanatkumara Quoted in R. S. Khare (Ed.) *Ibid* p 31.

⁸ R. S. Khare "Food with Saints" in R. S. Khare (Ed.) note 1 *supra* p 31.

⁹ *Geeta* (XVII, 7-10)

¹⁰ Upanishad instructs that pure nourishment leads to pure mind or nature.

¹¹ *Guna* in Hinduism is the three constituent principles in all things found in nature (including humans).

Nature is believed to have a balance of all three of these gunas. Arts, environments and personalities are also believed to have these constituent principles.

¹² Pramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Jaico Publishing House (1986) p 455

¹³ Swami Chinmayananda, *The Bhagwad Geeta Chapters xvi & xvii*, Chapter 17, stanza 8 discourse.

¹⁴ Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, *Dancing with Siva, Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*. Himalayan Academy (1993) p 201

¹⁵ Note 1 *supra* p 237.

¹⁶ (*Manu III, 18*) Cited in R. S. Khare (Ed.) *Ibid* p 148.

¹⁷ Manuel Monroe "Pancamirtam" in R. S. Khare (Ed.) *Ibid* p 155.

¹⁸ See earlier discussion in "Introduction to 'Food is God'"

¹⁹ Manuel Monroe "Pancamirtam" in R. S. Khare (Ed.) Note 1 *supra* p 148.

²⁰ *Ibid* p 103.

²¹ Discussion with Dato J. Jagadeesan, 3 April 1999, Sydney, Australia.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Pramahansa Yogananda, *Man's Eternal Quest Self-Realization Fellowship* (5th Ed. 1996) USA p107.

²⁴ Quotation in R. S. Khare (Ed.) note 1 *supra* p 32.

²⁵ Note 20 *supra* p 104.

²⁶ *Ibid* p 106.

CELEBRATIONS OF VALUES

The celebration of festivals is an important aspect of Hindu culture. Many of the celebrations have a basis in literature and in significant events that took place thousands of years ago. On these calendar dates, Hindu theology is taught in a festive and enjoyable way. Unlike other forms of worship, festivals reach out to the whole family and not solely to an individual. There are a vast number of festivals celebrated in India and by Hindus throughout the world. The festivals celebrated differ according to the culture and traditions of different regions and communities. However, the underlying beliefs and philosophies remain unchanged.

DEEPAWALI OR DIWALI

This is the Festival of Lights. Deepawali means, "row of lights" or the "effulgence of light". It is a family festival celebrated around October to November. For many Hindus, particularly for those in the northern part of India, Deepawali also signifies the New Year.

The custom is to decorate homes and temples with lit lamps. The illumination symbolises the scattering of spiritual radiance all around and the victory of divine forces over evil. Naturally, victory calls for celebration. Deepawali sees the spring-cleaning of houses, painting of kolums (*rangolis*) on the floors, and the adorning of family members and relatives in new clothes and ornaments. The significance of Deepawali is associated with two stories

In northern India, Deepawali commemorates Lord Rama's return to Ayodhya, after many years in exile. The row of lights can be interpreted as lighting the pathway for Rama's return. The people of Ayodhya, overwhelmed with joy, create a festive atmosphere. Rama is *ananda svarupa* meaning the essence of joy, that is, Lord Rama is our own spiritual nature or joy. By welcoming Rama into our homes the festival celebrates the growing awareness of our own spiritual nature.

Another story is based on the demon King Narakaasura, who ruled over Praagiyotishapura in

north-east India. The Devas approached Krishna and asked that he save the people of Praagiyotishapura. Krishna fought the huge army that opposed him and finally beheaded Narakaasura. Having slain Narakaasura, Krishna bathed himself by smearing His body with oil on the early morning of Chaturdashi. From this story developed the custom of taking an early morning "oil bath" on Deepawali day.

Deepawali or Diwali in modern societies has been reduced to a festivity without recognition of its religious significance. The sanctity of the occasion deserves the same respect as all other Hindu festivals, including abstaining from consuming meats and liquor. The festivities of Deepawali or Diwali provide the appropriate environment for families to join together and to teach the youth the religious values embodied in these customs.

Early morning family prayers, adornment of new clothes, spring cleaning of the home the previous day, visiting elders to pay respects and welcoming family and friends into an auspicious home are practised features of this day of joy.



ONAM

Onam is the most important festival in the southern Indian state of Kerala and falls between mid-August and mid-September. The festival derives its name from the star 'Thiruvonam' wherein falls the full moon.¹

Onam is said to commemorate the granting of a wish to the demon King Mahabali, ruler of Paataala - the netherworld. Onam is celebrated on Balipratipada, the day Lord Vishnu descended to earth as a dwarf called Vaamana. Legend has it that King Mahabali, through *tapas* (austerities) achieved great powers and conquered other kingdoms and claimed himself as their ruler. To protect the people of the land, Vaamana approached Mahabali and asked him for a plot of land the size of his three footsteps. Considering the size of Vaamana, Mahabali granted the boon without hesitation. Vaamana began to grow into a gigantic form and covered the entire earth with his first step. He covered the outer sky with his second step, and then turned to Mahabali and asked where his third step should be placed? To keep his promise, Mahabali offered his own head. Vaamana placed His foot on Mahabali's head and pushed him down into the netherworld. Mahabali, however, asked Lord Vishnu that he be permitted to visit Earth once a year. Lord Vishnu granted his wish.

It is the annual return of Mahabali that is celebrated in Kerala as Onam Festival. Homes are decorated with kolums and lights, and there is much happiness and love as people dance, boat-race, and celebrate with family and friends.

MAHA SHIVARATHRI

Shivarathri means the night dedicated to Lord Shiva. Of the five types of Shivarathris, Maha Shivarathri is the most auspicious. It is the day dedicated to intense worship of Lord Shiva to purify oneself spiritually. The scriptures say that worship offered on Shivarathri day attains that result which is normally attained in continuous worship for one year.

The "leap of faith" associated with Shivarathri day is based on the beneficial alignment of the planets.

Examples of such "leaps of faith" are detailed in *The Journey Within*.²

A twenty-four fast and vigil is observed on the day of Maha Shivarathri. The day is spent in virtuous deeds such as service to the less fortunate, religious activities, and feeding the poor.



On Shivarathri day, Shiva is represented as seated in Kailas in a state of meditation and *tapas*. He is represented as getting up from His seat and dancing in ecstasy. This dancing of Shiva is not the *bharathanatya* dances we know of, rather it is the inward expressions of joy that comes to an individual from Self-realisation. Shiva then opens His Eye-of-Wisdom or Third Eye and all that He looks upon is annihilated. The annihilation represents the destruction of plurality; no longer does Shiva regard Himself separate from Brahman. Shiva looks around Himself and sees nothing but Brahman.

The night worship is divided into four 'jamams' (four three-hour periods).³ The whole night is spent in devout worship of Shiva, commencing with

invocations to Lord Ganesha, (to remove obstacles). Then a *Shivalingam* is worshipped as a symbol of the Divine.

In the first 'jamam', the *Lingam* is given a divine bath ('*abhishegam*') and donned with holy ash, sandalwood paste and vermilion. The *Lingam* is then decorated with fresh garlands and ornaments and prayers are recited. Unbroken rice, lotuses and bilva leaves are common offerings made on these occasions.

In three subsequent 'jamams' this *puja* is repeated, accompanied by music, dance and devotional songs. Then, till daybreak prayers, dances, singing and other festivities are carried out in the adoration of *Lord Shiva*. When the sun rises, worshippers bathe and conclude their worship with the offering of a handful of flowers and prostrating to *Lord Shiva*.

The fast, rites, and worship undertaken during *Shivarathri* are beneficial towards spiritual advancement. It helps cleanse the inner self so that one may be closer to attaining Divinity.

VIJAYADASHAMI

Meaning ten days of victory, Vijayadashami is one of the most auspicious days in the Hindu calendar and comes as the finale to the nine days of worship known as *Navaraatri*. This festival is preceded by worship of the three Goddesses, *Durga*, *Lakshmi* and *Saraswathi*. Each aspect of the Divine Mother is worshipped for three days and three nights. In the *Kena Upanishad* the Divine Mother defeated the demon *Mahishasura*. The battle ensued for nine nights and ended with the killing of all the demons on the tenth day, known as the day of victory or *Vijayadashami*. Swami Chinmayananda's writings take us through the significance attaching to this festival.⁴

The first three days are devoted to the worship of Mother *Durga*, who is described as a warrior of "terrible power" to vanquish and kill. Her invocation inspires the individual to battle against and vanquish the influences of desire, passion, lust, greed and jealousy. Her ten arms are symbolic of the ten sins to be vanquished. The ten are none more than the five sensory organs that are stimulated by the world and the five influences

described. The strength to destroy these illusions or *maya* lies within, but the realisation is activated in these three days of worship.

The next step encompassed in the next three days of worship is devoted to Goddess *Lakshmi*. Her wealth of love, kindness, devotion, patience, endurance and charity is sought by the devotee. This positive aspect of worship comes about only as a result of having first turned away from the illusions of the world.

The third step is to seek the invocation of *Saraswathi*, the Goddess of Knowledge. The mind having been cleansed and filled with love of God is ready to receive knowledge, contemplation and meditation. Mother *Saraswathi's* invocation allows the mind the ability of study and understanding. It is customary to place books at the altar for these three days and to spend time in contemplation and study.

The nine day battle that rages within, allows the devotee to emerge, having transcended his or her senses and understand the Self or *Brahman*. This, the ultimate Victory, is the significance of *Vijayadashami* and the very essence of Hinduism.

HOLI

Holi is a Spring festival in North India. It is a festival of mirth and merriment following the end of Winter and the completion of harvests. *Gulal* (coloured powder) is thrown on each other by children and the elderly, men and women, and rich and poor alike. The powder is symbolic of the dust from Krishna's feet. There is an atmosphere of air and gaiety. Symbolically, a bonfire of *Kaamadeva* or *Holika* is made in every town or village during the festival of Holi. Games depicting the pranks of infant Krishna are also played by children singing and dancing around the fire. The lighting of fires is a symbol of *Yagna* (worship through sacrifice) in which our bodily desires and propensities are offered in the pure and blazing flame of spiritual enlightenment lit within our hearts. The Puranic legends have instilled faith in us that the forces of divinity shall triumph over demonic forces. These Puranic legends associated with this day are detailed below.



...coloured powder is thrown on each other by children and the elderly, men and women, and rich and poor alike.

Holi is the day that signifies the burning of the God Kaamadeva (Cupid). *Parvathi* was in deep penance to acquire the hand of *Shiva* as Her spouse. However, *Shiva*, himself was in deep meditation oblivious to the world. *Kaamadeva* came to *Parvathi's* rescue and shot his amorous arrows of love at *Shiva*. Disturbed from His blissful trance, *Shiva* opened His third eye. The flames of wrath leapt from his third eye and burnt *Kaamadeva* to ashes and thereafter bound *Kaamadeva* to remain as a spirit without form. The burning of lustful infatuation into ashes by penance is the message signified by this story on Holi.

The story of *Holika*, the sister of demon *Hiranyakashipu* is also significant on this day. The demon-father having failed in various ways to force his son to denounce Lord *Vishnu*, asked his sister, *Holika* to take his son, *Prahlada* in her lap and enter a blazing fire. *Holika* had been granted a boon by *Vishnu*, to remain unscathed by fire. *Holika* agreed to commit this act of murder. However, the moment she entered the flame, *Holika's* boon ended

by her supreme act of sin against a Lord's devotee. *Holika* was burnt to ashes while *Prahlada* came out of the fire unharmed.

In the *Mahabharatham*, *Pootana* came disguised as a charming woman to kill the infant *Krishna* by feeding him with her poisoned breast. *Krishna*, however, sucked all her blood and left her dead.

KRISHNA JANMASTHAMI OR KRISHNA JAYANTHI

Krishna Janmasthanmi or *Krishna Jayanthi* signifies the birth of Lord *Krishna*, an avathar of *Maha-Vishnu*. The celebration in the household takes the form of *pujas* (prayers), decorations and fasting. Fasting is important in this context as *Krishna* who represents Enlightenment can only be born when the senses are not attuned to the world.⁵ The popular arts of decorating the house include, painting baby footsteps on the driveway and doorways to signify the coming of the baby *Krishna*. At midnight, a *puja* is held as a celebration of His birthday. Some households re-enact the scene of rocking the baby *Krishna* in a silver cradle with love and devotion.

The many romantics and heroic tales of *Krishna* depict Him as a God of divine attributes. *Krishna* personified in himself all the various divine pathways - the *Bhakti* (devotion), *Jnaana* (knowledge) and the *Karma* (the law of action and consequence) to reach the highest goal of Self-realisation.

Krishna was born quietly in the dark dungeons of His uncle *Kamsa's* palace while everyone was asleep. The dark dungeon represents the contemplation of the *Rishis* who were seeking answers to the questions as to the goal of life and the purpose of life. *Krishna*, the Truth, is born into their minds and hearts quietly and peacefully, the only way by which truth reveals itself. The sleeping of ego and senses is a prerequisite for meditation being performed and for Truth to be born.

Krishna mingled freely with the *gopis* in *Nandogokula* and they loved Him more than their own life for His charming manners and heroic exploits. Their stories show how once fixed on the

Divine, whatever happens, joy and happiness can only grow.

Modern artistic impressions of Lord Krishna and the Gopis depict the figures as grown adults and carry connotations of Krishna as having had numerous affairs. This is a fallacy as Krishna lived with the Gopis only in his childhood. The love the Gopis shared for the Divine child is the supreme love that devotees aspire to. Numerous literary works praise this pure and divine love the Gopis gave to the infant Lord.

Sri Krishna affirms His role when he explains to Arjuna the intricacies of the highest spiritual philosophy. Krishna says, that he was engaged incessantly in worldly actions only for the welfare and sustenance of society, though He Himself had no need nor desire to be satisfied by society.

Krishna Jayanthi signifies not merely the birth of a great and divine teacher but also the lighting of the spark of the divine power within all. This enables us to play our role in this world with a sense of spiritual purpose.

Festivals are joyous occasions that bring families together to celebrate Hindu values. The inert beauty of the Spiritual texts are brought out in festivals of mirth and merriment. It shows that religion need not be a closeted study but can be an extraordinary experience of life.



¹ Unpublished, Sri Sithi Vinayagar Temple, 21 Hindu Festivals, Jalan Selangor, Petalang Jaya, Malaysia (Working Draft, April 1999) Chapter titled "Onam."

² J. Jagadeesan, *Sai Baba The Journey Within Journey To God Part III*, Sathya Sai Baba Centre of Bangsar (1991) pp 47-53.

³ *Ibid*, Chapter titled "Shivarathri."

⁴ Swami Chinmayananda "Vijaya Dasami" in *Symbolism in Hinduism*, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, Bombay p 268-270.

⁵ *Ibid* p 253.

CHILDREN'S STORIES

- GANESHA¹ -

One day the wife of *Shiva*, *Parvathi*, was going to take a bath so She asked *Shiva's* Gana (attendant) *Nandi* to stand at the palace door and not let anyone disturb her. Later, *Shiva* came to the palace. *Nandi* was in a dilemma as to whether he should let *Shiva* enter His home.

Shiva entered the palace, very much to *Parvathi's* surprise. She became annoyed that *Nandi* had disobeyed Her orders. *Parvathi* thought to Herself that she needed a Gana of Her own, who would obey only Her. She discussed this idea with Her friends, and they all agreed with Her suggestion.

Parvathi created a boy from saffron paste. A boy who was young, handsome, and strong. After dressing him with ornaments, *Parvathi* gave him a staff and led him to the door where She told Her son to let no one enter without Her permission.

A little later *Shiva* came to the palace door and wondered who the stranger standing at the entrance was? To *Shiva's* astonishment the young boy stopped him from entering the palace. *Shiva* became annoyed and forced the boy to move, only to be struck by the youngster's staff. *Shiva* became furious. But, the youth only raised his staff and struck *Shiva* again. *Shiva* turned to His Ganas and ordered them to get rid of the young boy.

The young boy was confused. Knowing that *Shiva* was his Mother's husband, he was unsure as to whether he should fight the Ganas or not. *Parvathi* sent orders, however, telling him not to give in to anyone.

The Ganas asked *Shiva* what they should do. *Shiva* did not want to give in either, so He told the Ganas to fight the young boy. The youngster, however,

proved too strong and defeated the Ganas. *Shiva* then called upon *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Indra* and *Kaarthikeya* for help. But even they were defeated. They returned to *Shiva*, amazed at the strength of such a young warrior. *Shiva* decided to take matters into his own hands and set out to kill the young boy himself. The Gods distracted the youngster whilst *Shiva* waited for an opportunity. He charged at the boy, first with his trident and then his bow, but was unsuccessful. At last a moment came when, as the boy picked up his staff to hit *Vishnu*, *Shiva* came from behind and cut off the boy's head.

The Ganas and Devas celebrated but *Shiva* was not joyous. He was troubled because He had killed *Parvathi's* son, who was also His own son. *Parvathi* became very angry and set out to destroy all the Devas and Ganas. *Brahma* and *Vishnu* pleaded for mercy and begged Her for forgiveness. *Parvathi* agreed, on the condition that Her son be brought back to life and given an honourable status amongst the Gods.

For the sake of peace and happiness *Shiva* agreed to *Parvathi's* request. *Shiva* ordered the Gods to bring the head of the first creature that crosses their path and to fit it to the boy's body. It was a single-tusked elephant that greeted them. *Brahma*, the God of Creation, fitted the elephant head to the boy's body and he sat up.

Shiva placed his hand on the boy's head. Impressed with the great valour shown by the young boy, *Shiva* named him *Ganesha*, the presiding officer of all his Ganas. He was also named *Vigneshwara*, the God of obstacles.

¹ This story is from *The Sons of Shiva - Ganesha*, a story from the *Shiva Puranas*.



- KRISHNA¹ -

A long time ago the city of Mathura was ruled by a King called Ahuka. He had two sons called Dhevaka and Ugrasena. When these two sons grew older, they were made kings of their own territory within their father's kingdom.

Dhevaka had a daughter called Dhevaki and Ugrasena had a son called Kamsa, who loved Dhevaki as his own sister. Dhevaki was given in marriage to a nobleman called Vasudheva. After the wedding, as Kamsa took Dhevaki and Vasudheva to their new home, a voice from the sky spoke "You foolish Kamsa! The eighth child born to Dhevaki will one day kill you for all your misdeeds". Frightened by this, Kamsa pulled out his sword to kill Dhevaki, but Vasudheva pleaded with Kamsa to spare the life of his bride and promised to give him all the children born to her. Kamsa hesitated but warned Vasudheva to honour his promise.

As Dhevaki gave birth to each new child, Vasudheva took the new-born to Kamsa only to have the child handed back, because Kamsa was only interested in the eighth child. With time, however, Kamsa's fear of being killed became such an obsession that after six children were born to Dhevaki, he had them all killed. To spare the life of Dhevaki's seventh child, Vasudheva plotted with the family priest to have the child smuggled out of the palace and a still-born child substituted in its place.

When Kamsa heard about the still-born child, he thought that Dhevaki was trying to trick him so as to spare the life of her eighth child, so he imprisoned her and Vasudheva in a closely guarded prison.

When Dhevaki was carrying her eighth child, Kamsa took extra precautions and had Dhevaki and Vasudheva chained by their hands and feet. He also increased the number of guards.

As Dhevaki was about to give birth, Lord Vishnu appeared before them and told them that He was about to be born as their son. He also told them as soon as He is born, the chains would break free and the prison doors would open by themselves. Lord Vishnu instructed Vasudheva to take the Baby to the home of Nandha, a cowherd chief in Gokul, and

leave it by the side of his wife Yashodha, who at that very moment would be having a baby girl. Vasudheva was to bring the baby girl back to the prison. Blessing Vasudheva and Dhevaki, Lord Vishnu entered Dhevaki's womb as a flash of light.

Shortly afterwards, in the early hours of the morning at an auspicious time, a beautiful Baby was born. As Lord Vishnu had told, the chains broke free and the prison doors opened. Vasudheva did as he was told, exchanging the babies, unknown to Nandha and Yashodha and returned to the prison. As the baby girl started crying, the guards informed Kamsa of the arrival of the eighth baby. Kamsa entered the room and picked up the baby to kill her, but she slipped from his hands and flew out the of the window. A voice from the sky said, "Your destroyer is still alive".

Meanwhile, in the village of Gokul, Nandha and Yashodha celebrated the birth of 'their' child and named him Krishna.



¹ This story is from *Bhajanamaala, A Garland of Bhajans*, Dr. Don Wijeratne (ed) Sri Sathya Sai Books & Publications Trust.

**- RAMA, LAKSHMANA,
BHARAT & SHATRUGHNA¹ -**

In ancient times, there was a kingdom to the north of the river Ganga called Kosala. The capital of this kingdom was the beautiful city of Ayodhya. In this old city, the wind sweeps through wide and even streets, and climbs up tall and magnificent buildings. The air is always clean and fresh and carries the scents of different flowers from the gardens. The streets echo to the sounds of horse drawn carriages, the clatter of hooves and snorts of horses. At night, the city is quiet and you can hear soft gentle tunes being played on the *veena* and *mridangam*. In all the houses the men, women and children were happy and content.

The ruler of this beautiful city was King Dasaratha. He was a good and virtuous King who ruled wisely and fairly. King Dasaratha was also a very strong warrior and was known by all for the brave things he had done. In his Court there were two wise Sages who advised the King and performed the religious services and pujas. These wise Sages were called Vasishta and Vamadeva.

Although King Dasaratha had all the glory, fame and prosperity of a king he was not happy. He longed to have his own children and not having them made him sad. The King had three wives: Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, who were all endowed with the blessings of virtue, culture and beauty. The Queens too, were disappointed that the palace did not have princes and princesses to play in its gardens and halls.

King Dasaratha went to Sage Vasishta and told him of his sorrow and how he wished to be a father. Sage Vasishta assured him that the King would be blessed with four sons who would make the kingdom so famous that it will be remembered forever. The King then visited the Sage Hrishya-shringa who listened to the King's troubles and then advised him to perform a special yagna, the Shubha Putrakameshti Yagna, to be blessed with children.

King Dasaratha happy to receive this advice began to make preparations for this special puja. There were many men who came to build the sacrificial platform and the city was humming with activity.

From all around Ayodhya, Princes and important Sages came to the city. There was a lot of cut coconuts, mangoes and other sacred items collected. King Dasaratha carefully looked after all the details and neglected nothing. In this air of excitement the important Yagna began.

In another far distant land there was an evil king called Ravana who was terrorising the earth. Ravana had performed many austerities and had been granted a boon by Lord *Brahma* that Ravana would not be killed by the devas, asuras nor gandharvas. Ravana grew arrogant knowing that he was invincible and continued to perform wicked deeds. Fearful of Ravana, the mother earth in the guise of a cow and the devas approached *Brahma*. *Brahma* consoled them and reminded them that a human could kill Ravana. The devas then went to *Lord Vishnu* with their problem. *Lord Vishnu*, the protector promised them that he would be born as a son to King Dasaratha to end the tyranny of Ravana.

Back in Ayodhya, the yagna was being performed. The ghee was poured into the yagna fire when suddenly there emerged a Yagna-Purusha (Spirit of the yagna) - resplendent and glowing. He handed to the King Dasaratha a bowl of *paayasam* (kheer) and asked him to distribute it among his three wives. King Dasaratha happily accepted. The King handed half to his wife Kausalya and the other half to his wife Kaikeyi. Each of the queens then shared their portion with Sumitra.

A short time later, all three Queens had babies. Queen Kausalya and Kaikeyi had a child each and Sumitra had twins. Kausalya gave birth to Rama, Sumitra to Lakshmana and Shatrughna and Kaikeyi to Bharat.

The whole city of Ayodhya celebrated when they heard the news. The King and the new mothers were very happy and felt their hearts fill with joy. There was singing and dancing throughout the city for many days. The King offered sacrifices to the Gods to express his gratitude and he distributed gifts of horses, cows and cattle to the priests and the poor citizens of Ayodhya.

The princes grew up learning the art of warfare, archery and the Scriptures in the Vedas and

Upanishads Between the brothers there was deep affection and care for one another. As they grew older, each brother showed remarkable characteristics. Rama showed a devotion to duty and truth, he was a natural leader and was a remarkable archer. Lakshmana was strict and impulsive. Bharat was noble and dutiful. Shatrughna was kind and gentle. As the brothers grew older, they were praised by all the citizens of Ayodhya. Mothers and fathers would wish their

sons were as well behaved as the Princes were. King Dasaratha felt pride and a deep love for his sons. There was also rejoicing in the heavens, as the devas showered the family with their blessings.

¹ This story is from Swami Chinmayananda and Bharathi Nair *Bala Ramayanam*. Central Chinmaya Mission Trust Bombay (1995).



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