

Vedic Religion and Hindu Dharma

A Thematic Adaptation of Kanchi Acharya's Deivathin Kural

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Adapted by: Lata Sundaram

The seven-volume series Deivathin Kural contains the original discourses in Tamil by Jagadguru Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swamigal. This work and its readers have received the blessings of Jagadguru Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswati Swamigal. A letter to this effect has been issued by Sri Kamakoti Peeta dated 07 January 2026.

The transformational quality of Acharya's teachings should reach others is the genuine urge that has brought about this book. It can be downloaded as a pdf file from https://www.kamakoti.org/

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MESSAGE OF BLESSINGS

Karmabhathignanamarga prachare
bhaddha kamkanam !
Sarvasastravidam Santham Namaste chitthasuddhaye (sl.3)
Laghuopadesair nasthikyabhava mardhanakovidham !
Sivam smithamukam Santham prnathosmi Jagadhgurum !! (sl.9)

In theses Slokas from "Sadhguru Dasakam" composed by the 70th Peetadhipati of Adhisankara Paramparagata Moolamnaya Sarvangya Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam,Sri Sankara Vijayendra Saraswati Sankaracharya Swamigal praises His Paramaguru Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Sankaracharya Swamigal regarding his dedication in reviving Karma, Bakthi and Gnana margas of devotion/ bhakthi and also removing atheist feelings of the people with his simple teachings. The discourses of H H Paramacharya have been compiled in "Deivathin Kural' in Tamil from which Smt Lata Sundaram from California USA has selected certain portions and translated to English language in lucid manner for easy understanding of those residing abroad under the topics such as Origin & Uniqueness of Sanathana dharma, Samanya dharma, Protection of Vedas & Cows as well as Worship of Vedic Gods.

This translated book " Vedic Religion & Hindu Dharma " by Smt Lata Sundaram has been brought to the divine notice of Their Holinesses Sri Acharya Swamigals of Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam and are happy to convey Their blessings for continuing her devotional activities and also to the readers of this book.

For SRI KANCHI KAMAKOTI PEETAM
SRIMATAM SAMASTHANAM
MANAGER

An Overview

This book draws upon all seven volumes of Deivathin Kural and presents a carefully adapted account of this monumental work, offering a comprehensive overview of topics related to the Vedic Religion and Hindu Dharma. By bringing related topics together, it is designed to address specific aspects of Acharya's teachings in a manner that reflects the original intent and depth of the source material. It introduces the essential beliefs, practices, and philosophies that form the foundation of Vedic religion, offering readers a comprehensive understanding of its core values and spiritual significance.

Organized into six chapters, the book begins by introducing the origins and foundations of the Vedic Religion. It then discusses individual dharma and common dharma as guiding principles of a way of life. The fourth chapter explores the historical background and practical importance of safeguarding Vedas and preserving the tradition of *go-rakshana* (cow protection). The final chapters explore the philosophy of Vedic Gods and Devatas (celestial beings), the meaning of worship practices in household and temple traditions, and the role of festivals in sustaining religious life.

Drawing from Vedas (Sruti), Vedic texts (Smriti/Shaastra), and narratives of Vedic truths (Puranas/Ithihasas), Acharya's discourses present the timeless wisdom of the Vedas. By

synthesizing the guidance and wisdom articulated in Deivathin Kural, this work aims to serve as a valuable resource for those seeking to understand the core concepts of Vedic faith and practice. It is written in English to make these teachings accessible to general readers, students, and organizations engaged in the study of Vedic texts who may not be able to read Deivathin Kural in Tamil. This book aims to present a clear understanding of Vedic Religion and Hindu Dharma – traditions that are often widely misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Introduction

Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami (20 May 1894 – 08 January 1994) also known as the Sage of Kanchi was the 68th Acharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peeta. He was installed as Acharya of Kamakoti Peeta in 1907 when he was barely thirteen years old. He was chosen when he visited Peeta with his mother following the unexpected demise of his cousin who had been installed as the 67th Acharya just a week prior to this visit. It was the turning point for this young child who went on to become an extraordinary teacher and guide for people from all over India and beyond. Acharya bore the huge burden to uphold Sanatana Dharma with great sincerity and devotion when its tenets were compromised for personal gains of political parties in the post-independence period in India. He conquered the hearts of his ardent followers and opposers alike with his quiet demonstration of knowledge while teaching evidence-based theology and philosophy which was combined with intense humility and compassion.

As the religious head of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peeta, the Acharya was obligated to perform spiritual duties. He travelled on foot across the country for eight decades from 1908 to 1979. He came to be known as the 'Walking God' and brought solace to innumerable masses. On several occasions he addressed common people on topics such as Vedic traditions, ethical living,

and Advaita philosophy. He delivered such discourses in simple venues such as small halls, riverbanks, and temporary thatched sheds which were the places wherein he stayed. All his discourses were well researched and well advised. His teachings are extremely important to people in India and across the world for understanding the Vedic religion. Acharya worked tirelessly to instill Hindu Dharma in people's minds and in the preservation of Vedas. Major segments of Vedas are known as 'Shakhas'. Shakhas were originally 1131 in number and were compiled as four Vedas by Maharishi Vyasa. Almost all these Shakhas have been lost and only 8 (0.7%) have survived with their sub-parts almost intact to this day. One of the eight surviving Shakhas is an Atharva Veda Shakha which was revived by Acharya by arranging to learn it from a lone oral chanter in Gujarat and propagated amongst followers of Atharva Veda. He endlessly worked for the revival of Vedic schools and held Vedic conferences to discuss and promote Vedas and Vedic scriptures (Shaastras).

Acharya's knowledge was extensive and limitless. He predated the advent of the internet and related resources from which information can now be accessed in most corners of the world at literally our fingertips. It is mind boggling to even begin to think of Acharya's curiosity, knowledge, and mastery of wide-ranging topics. He was an authority on texts pertaining to Hindu scriptures and religious practices as one might expect from a religious head. But, at the same time, he had a remarkable understanding of various fields ranging from sciences,

mathematics, languages, arts, literature, and the list goes on and on. Experts and masters in such fields have been shocked as to how Acharya could know and grasp difficult concepts on wide ranges of topics and break it down in simple terms for anyone in his audience to understand.

Acharya in his simplicity and humility would say that his scholarliness was just information gathered through his interactions with people, reading newspapers, and researching ancient manuscripts, inscriptions, and books. He never flaunted his divinity and would say that any miracle experienced by devotees was due to their own faith in God or Guru. His discourses from public gatherings or otherwise were collected by Ra Ganapati and published by Vanati Patipakkam, Chennai as a seven-volume book known as 'Deivathin Kural' in Tamil language. It is a monumental task performed by Ra Ganapati who retained the simple colloquial narrative style of Acharya, the very signature of his personality whether he was conversing with common folks in small remote villages, heads of state, or addressing small and large public gatherings. Acharya is fondly called 'Mahaperiyava' ('the great elder') in Tamil Nadu. There are no words to describe his greatness. Ra Ganapati has done a huge service to bring Mahaperiyava's teachings to all future generations.

Deivathin Kural is a compilation of talks by Acharya from different time periods and what is conveyed on a specific topic in one lecture gets elaborated multiple folds in other lectures and this evolution is observed as the volumes progress. There is some

repetition between volumes, probably to bring daily new audiences up to date. The repetition is very minimal compared to the expansive insights that are brought about with immense clarity during multiple talks on a given topic. It is necessary to read all seven volumes to get a complete picture on each subject. It was overwhelming at times for the adaptor of this work as to whether all seven volumes could be read, comprehended, and absorbed to make it an integral part of life. There is no doubt that Acharya keeps any reader spell bound as a master storyteller with his simple narrative style interwoven with Puranic stories and quotations from Vedic scriptures. He brings alive difficult to understand concepts in such easy terms to his audience who were mostly made up of common folks. For those who are not proficient in Tamil language, the English translation of Deivathin Kural has been published as 'Voice of God' by Sri Kanchi Mahaswami Trust, Mumbai. Books such as 'The Guru Tradition' and 'Hindu Dharma: The Universal Way of Life' are available as topic specific English translations from Deivathin Kural and published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai.

When such great works are already available, what is the purpose of this book? The main purpose of this book is to gather information from all seven volumes of Deivathin Kural and render an adaptation of this masterpiece which consists of providing comprehensive information on topics related to Vedic Religion and Hindu Dharma. This is a humble attempt to provide a glimpse of the clarity of each topic provided by Acharya which was the signature style of his talks. The adaptor, Lata Sundaram,

was born and brought up in India and followed Hindu faith as a way of life but with no clear understanding of the religion. She moved to the United States of America in the 1980s and read Deivathin Kural only after her retirement from the world of biological research in the 2020s. Endowed with a scientific bent of mind, she could relate to the excitement with which the Acharya brings out the evidence-based truth of each subject matter after extensive and thorough research. To write any book based on Deivathin Kural, there is a responsibility to keep its teachings intact. This prompted extensive notes taking, multiple readings, and contemplative thinking. There is an effervescent quality to the Acharya's teachings brought about by the phenomenal depth of his knowledge. He expressed profound ideas in simple colloquial Tamil. Though Acharya's simple Tamil colloquialism is lost in this attempted synopsis of Vedic Religion and Hindu Dharma, the authenticity and simplicity of his teachings are retained to the maximum. Words in Tamil and Sanskrit are italicized with explanations of their meanings during the first appearance of such words within the text of the book and hence there is no section on 'Glossary'.

It is Acharya's immense mercy that has motivated, propelled, and brought this book to completion. As a follower of Kanchi Kamakoti Peeta, the adaptor makes her humble *namaskar* (prostration), to the lotus feet of all Acharyas of Sri Adi Sankara Guru lineage.

Lata Sundaram
California, USA

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Chapter 1: Is there an Origin for Vedic Religion?

There is no name found in scriptures for Vedic religion. The name 'Hindu' was given by foreigners when they entered the land of Bharat situated next to Sindhu or Indus river. Sindhu became Hindu and Bharat became India. Sanatana Dharma implies practices, but it is not the name of the religion. The word '*sanatana*' signifies 'eternal' and '*dharma'* is that which supports and upholds principles ranging from individual to societal duties and righteousness. Sanatana Dharma is simply put, eternal or universal codes of conduct and duties recommended and expected in followers of Vedic religion. When there are different religions, a name is given to differentiate one from another. Where there was only one religion practiced as a way of life by all in the land of Bharat, the necessity for a name did not arise.

Religions other than Vedic religion have a founder and a date of origin and they did not exist prior to their founder's life. Examples include Buddhism by Gautama Buddha in the 5th century BC, Christianity by Jesus Christ in 1st century AD, and Islam by Mohammad in the 7th century AD. Vedic religion predates all known religions and there is evidence that it was spread out all over the world. Questions arise as to who is the founder of this religion? No research will yield one person as the

founder. One might name Vyasa or Krishna but they themselves sing the praises of the Vedas as their source of knowledge. Could we name the *rishis* (seers or sages) who started the oral tradition of chants called Vedas as the founders? The *rishis* categorically state that they delivered the Vedas but did not compose them! The *rishis* have said the Vedas were revealed to them when they were in union with the Supreme Reality (*Brahman*) in what can be loosely translated as their trance state. They have always said they were the '*mantra drashta'* or seer and not '*mantra kartha'* or doer/composer of the Vedic *mantras*. '*Mantra*' means 'instrument of the mind' in Sanskrit and refers to sacred words, sounds, or phrases. The words *Atman*, *Paramatman*, *Brahman*, and *Parabrahman* can be used interchangeably for the Supreme Reality. Vedas are the breath of '*Paramatman*' or the 'Supreme Self/Eternal Soul'. The inaudible Vedic sounds exist in space as vibrations which were perceived by the *rishis* and delivered to us as audible Veda *mantras*. We should be proud of being descendants of the Vedic religion which is '*anaadi*' or 'beginningless' or 'eternal' in its truest sense.

Vibrations from Vedic sounds or breath of *Paramatman* are the cause for creation. Vibrations from the flow of breath (*prana*) through energy channels (*nadi*) in humans create different mental states to experience the world. What is in the macrocosm is in the microcosm is the belief and many concepts related to the inner and outer world exist in Vedas. There are scriptures known as Shaastras that are derived from Vedas and expanded in a specific manner for understanding. Concepts specific to a topic

are compiled as ‘Sutra’, which is expanded as ‘Bhashya’, and ‘Bhashya’ is further expanded as ‘Vartika’. Sutra, Bhasya, and Vartika together form a Shaastra text. Shaastras are time-tested proven concepts and cover a wide range of topics like philosophy, worship, yoga, language, arts, and sciences.

Vedic religion is the most comprehensive religion. It includes all philosophies and *dharmas* akin to a banyan tree (Vata Vriksha) with its many roots and just like the Vata Vriksha is associated with immortality. Vedic religion is eternal. The spirit of every religion is in the Vedas. Their traditions and rituals might be different but the spirit of those traditions or rituals exist in Vedas. Every religion has certain elements or parts (*amsa*) of the Vedas that have been propagated as aspects of their religious *dharma*.

Evidence

Evidence of the ancient origins of this religion is found in archeology, religious texts, philosophies, and rituals. The proof that Vedic religion spread across the world can be found in many countries long before trade routes were established and modes of transportation existed.

A treaty between two kings invoking Mitra (sun) and Varuna (rain) dating to around 1300 BC with Mitra and Varuna named as witnesses has been excavated in Egypt. Similarly, Mitra and Agni (fire) have taken a prominent place in Zoroastrianism with close ties to the oral traditions of Chandogya Upanishad. Upanishads are subparts of main segments of Vedas known as Shakhas pertaining to philosophy of life. Zarathrushtra, the

founder of Zoroastrianism, was from Saurashtra, Gujarat. Saura means ‘sun’. Sun worship has existed all over the world. Mitra, Varuna, and Agni are deities (Devatas) found in Rig Veda. Native Americans such as Mayans and many indigenous tribes worship nature and follow symbols and rituals like Vedic practices as also the ancient Hellenistic religion of Greece. These reiterate that the existence of Vedic religion in these regions did not happen by trade or invasion but was eternally present and its religious practices underwent changes when these lands and many in the Far East were later overtaken by historically dated religions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. During autumn, there is a celebration in Mexico called Ram-Sita. Ganesh idols have been excavated in multiple locations in Mexico with relations to the Aztecs who ruled Mexico before the Spanish invasion. ‘Aztec’ sounds like ‘asthik’ which is Sanskrit for believers in God. Many ancient tribes in Mexico have ritualistic worship of various elements in nature like Vedic religion. Incas in Peru worship the sun in the ‘Temple of Sun’ in April which coincides with celebrations of solar New Year in Kerala known as Vishu. Lord Rama is referred to as ‘Inakula thilaka’ or the shining sovereign of the Sun (Ina) dynasty.

Acharya talked about the story of King Sagara in relation to the global existence of Vedic religion. King Sagara, an ancestor of Sri Rama, performed Aswamedha *yagna*. This was a practice in ancient times where a horse was sent across territories by a king to show his dominion over all kingdoms. All those who accepted the sovereignty of King Sagara would honor the horse and

become his vassals and those who opposed King Sagara would capture the horse and then must confront Sagara's army. Eventually, if the horse returned without being captured it would be sacrificed in the Aswamedha *yagna* and Sagara would be declared the undisputed king of all territories. Indra, the celestial *Devata*, was afraid of Sagara acquiring extreme power. He therefore captured the horse and hid it, unknown to anyone, in seer Kapila's ashram located in the netherworld. Sagara's sons went in search of horse by digging the earth and reached Kapila's ashram, Kapilaranyam. Thinking that Kapila captured the horse, they attacked him. Kapila opened his eyes and burned them to ashes. Straight beneath India on the other side of the globe is California. Words and names in languages change over the years like ancient 'Marudai' which is present day 'Madurai', a holy city in Tamil Nadu. Likewise, Kapilaranyam could have transformed to 'Kaliparanyam' which in turn could be thought to sound like 'California' in present day America. Interestingly there is an Ash Island just north of California near the western coast of the United States in the state of Oregon and Horse Island in Riverside County in California.

Around seventy five percent of the names in Madagascar have their origins in Sanskrit alluding to the existence of Vedic religion in this distant land from ancient times. Countries and certain places in the Far East such as present-day Bali, Cambodia, parts of Philippines, among others were predominantly followers of Vedic religion and there is ample evidence for the same. These regions used to be part of the Sree

Vijaya Empire which later came to be influenced by Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Trade routes to the Far East established many decades later, led to revival of Vedic religion in these regions and contributed to the construction of Tamil style temples in Angkor Vat, Borobudur, and Prambanan.

Acharya talked about a Vedic philosophical concept found in Judaism's Old Testament relating to the Adam and Eve story though not in its purest philosophical essence. These words of wisdom by Acharya elaborate on the presence of the spirit of Vedas in every religion. Vedic philosophical concepts are often in the form of stories and rituals to appeal to the common man whilst educating their profound inner meaning at the same time. Over time such stories can stray away from the inner meaning or even be forgotten. In the Old Testament is the story of God creating Adam and then Eve and that they were forbidden to eat the fruits from the Tree of Knowledge. Eve succumbed to temptation and ate the fruit and then shared it with Adam which led to their expulsion and so began sin and suffering in this world. This appears to be a modified version of the Mundaka Upanishad story where two birds sit on the *Pippala* or Bodhi tree with one enjoying the fruits (*Jiva* or individual) and the other acting as a witness (*Paramatman* or *Brahman*). The tree is akin to the body and within an individual or *Jiva* is the soul or *Atman*. The choice is either to eat the fruit and undergo the pain and pleasures of life or stay away from the fruit and attain liberation as *Paramatman* or *Brahman*. The two birds represent the egoism and divinity of a human being. The intention of the Upanishadic

story is for an individual (*Jiva*) to overcome worldly pleasures and attain liberation. In the Old Testament story, Adam ate the fruit equating to worldly pleasures and thereby stayed bound to earth and its temptations rather than attaining liberation. Similarities in these two stories with regards to sound or meaning of certain words as pointed out by Acharya include *Jiva*/Eve, *Atma*/Adam, pippala/apple, and Bodhi derived from '*Bodham*' which is knowledge.

Western research dating religion

Orientalists and Indologists have tried to create a timeline for Vedas. Sir William Jones, a linguist and lawyer, founded the Asiatic Society in 1784 to promote Oriental studies and its publication on Vedic books is astonishing. Max Muller, a Philologist, did translations into German of Rig Veda and many Hindu religious books. Kundalini Yoga Shaastra, a text on a form of science that unifies cosmic energy (macrocosm) and body's energy (microcosm), became popular through the books of Sir John Woodroffe. Along with these good deeds came some misinterpretations of Vedic religion by many researchers.

One of the motives of research into Vedic books by some westerners was to find faults and promote Christianity. Observing the similarity between western languages and Sanskrit, the field of Philology research came into existence. Sanskrit dictionary (Nirukta) was used by westerners to learn the language from *pundits* (scholars) in Kashi, a center of learning in India. Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Banaras, is in the

Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Language classification came from this research. Sanskrit and North Indian languages were labelled as Indo-European while Tamil and South Indian languages were labelled Indo-Dravidian. Such differences publicized by the foreign researchers instigated Aryo-Dravidian racist ideas which did not exist in the past. In addition, Philology research failed to address the origin of Sanskrit language in India to propagate the fictitious story that Aryans who used Sanskrit language invaded the Dravidians who used Tamil language, when in fact there is absolutely no proof for such a grand invasion.

There are two fundamental principles of Vedic philosophy. First, the universe is created by sound vibrations. Second, the universe is sustained by fire rituals (*yagnas*) with chanting of Vedas. Such concepts are difficult to understand for those who are not familiar with Vedic religion. With attempts at analyzing concepts that are beyond the realms of human understanding, westerners compiled their misinterpreted ideas into books that are now kept in libraries across the world. Misunderstandings and false interpretations of Vedic religion and its origins continue when such books and works serve as references for future generations.

Two methods were used by Orientalists and Indologists in dating Vedic religion. One is astronomy and the other is variation in language style. In Vedas, there are astronomical positions of planets mentioned and that specific combinations of planets occurred around 6000 years ago (~ 4000 BC). Similar combinations could have happened in other timelines before the great flood (*mahapralaya*) and all that knowledge is lost to us.

Mahapralaya is the event of dissolution of the entire universe that occurs as part of the endless cycle of periodic creation and destruction of the universe. Whatever has been brought forth by the great *rishis* cannot be contained in timelines quoted by Orientalists/Indologists.

The second method of determining timeline involves language variation in script as well as in sounds of words. By studying stone inscriptions, the change in the script was charted for every 100 years. What looks unrelated now used to have a relation many hundreds of years ago. Variations in sounds of words were charted every 200 years. For example, if there are 30 changes, then 30 x 200 = 6000 years was the assignment.

The dating of languages and therefore Vedas based on changes in script or sounds will not work due to multiple reasons. A spoken language such as Hindi which over the years has become a mix of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, and English has gone through many changes in a short period of time. Tamil with many centuries of documented literature, though spoken has fewer changes. Sanskrit is more a language of literature than spoken and has undergone even less changes. Hence general rules of assigning dates of origin of religion based on languages in India and especially based on Sanskrit will not work. And above all, Vedas were not even inscribed and existed as an oral tradition. There was no reason to use a script because of this phenomenal oral tradition. Compilation of Vedas in the Sanskrit language happened only in the late Dwapara *yuga* by Maharishi Vyasa. '*Yuga'* is an era and Dwapara *yuga* is the third of four cycles or

eras for our universe. This *yuga* witnessed a decline in spiritual practices and oral traditions of learning which led Vyasa to compile Vedic manuscripts in Sanskrit language to pass on to future generations. Even after such compilations, Vedic learning existed as an oral tradition involving weaving patterns of sounds to preserve the structure of the words and therefore its meaning. Such intricate weaving of sounds in Vedas cannot be written as a script. A religion that is absorbed by oral traditions and a language that has undergone very few changes over the centuries cannot be dated. Western research is bent upon proving that Vedas are not '*anaadi*' (with no beginning/eternal). They have been unsuccessful because of the limitations in their approach dictated by their theology and philosophy.

Vedic scriptures tell us that people of one race lived in all ten provinces of the Indian sub-continent or land of Bharat. There were five (*pancha*) provinces named 'gauda', north of the Vindhya mountain range and five (*pancha*) provinces called 'dravida', south of the Vindhyas. This was a regional division and not a racial division. Saraswata, Kanyakubja, Maithila, Utkala, and Gauda were the five provinces in the north. Gurjara, Maharashtra, Telunga, Karnataka, and Dravida were the five provinces in the south. In later years, 'Gauda' also came to mean Bengal and 'Dravida' came to mean Tamil Nadu. There was always movement of people between these provinces for purposes of learning from specialized Vedic schools that were spread all over the sub-continent.

Each region in India is unique with its language and art forms. Being a vast sub-continent, with varying geographical parameters, people have evolved with variations in language and art forms from region to region. Sanskrit language with its well-developed grammar and philology is considered as 'Lingua Franca' and is a link language between many languages and dialects of Bharat. The scriptural works of Vedic religion and literary collections in Sanskrit language far exceed that of its sister languages of Latin and Greek. Vedic religion is the foundation for India's cultural vibrancy and unity in diversity. What is remarkable and beautiful about Bharat is the kindness of the people and its most colorful culture. As a sacred land and cradle of Indus Valley civilization, it has attracted people from all over the world.

We are thus the land of birth of the Vedic religion which is eternal in its origin and existence. Sanskrit, whose name is derived from the word '*Samskrta*', is translated as a 'well formed' or 'perfected' language. Sanskrit was developed by celestials (*Devatas*) from the very sound of Vedas. We in Bharat should take pride in the profound depth and progressiveness of Vedic religion and the associated Vedic culture whose influence can be seen in all corners of the world.

Chapter 2: What is unique?

Every religion has its branches of both philosophy (*siddhanta*) and worship (theology). In addition, ethics that govern moral principles are present in every religion as Common Dharma. Individual responsibility within family and society are not dealt with as strongly in other religions as it is in Vedic religion. Religions observing Common Dharma when faced with external influences or internal divisions collapsed. On the contrary, Hinduism with its expansive *dharma* system has survived in the land of Bharat even when such forces have tried to destroy Vedic religion. Hinduism was able to absorb religious aspects of Buddhism and Jainism which sprung as offshoots of Vedas (5th century BC to 6th century AD). In addition, people of Bharat, could absorb the cultural aspects of Islam during Mughal rule (early 16th century AD to mid-18th century AD) and Christianity during British rule (mid-18th century AD to mid-20th century AD).

What is unique about Hindu religion? The answer to this profound question lies in Karma theory, Liberty in worship, Varnashrama Dharma, and Unity in diversity of Gods. Above all, there is the beautiful concept of '*Aham Brahmasmi'* or 'I am *Brahman*'. The simple and yet profound meaning of this phrase is that the individual soul or *Atman* is not different from the Supreme Soul or *Brahman* and thus exists as an inner witness (*sakshi*) to everything.

Karma Theory

Karma means action, and it operates under the principles of the 'Law of Cause and Effect'. It refers to the destiny that people make for themselves through their actions. *Karma* is explained in Vedic scriptures such as the Upanishads and Puranas. Upanishads are subparts of Veda Shakhas and Puranas are legends elaborating Vedic *dharma*. Good action brings merit (*punya*) and bad action brings demerit (*paapa*). Merits bring pleasure and demerits bring pain as an emotion. According to Vedic scriptures, there are three kinds of *karma*. 'Sanchita *karma*' is that which is accumulated from our past births and therefore it is that which exists at the beginning of this life. 'Prarabdha *karma*' is that which is experienced in this lifetime and therefore it is a portion of 'Sanchita *karma*' that is being lived out as the present destiny. 'Agami *karma*' is that which is created due to the thoughts and actions in this birth. Agami will be added on to the portion of Sanchita that remains after experiencing Prarabdha and this results in multiple births (reincarnations). This cycle of birth-death-rebirth goes on until one rids of all their demerits. This is accepted in Buddhism and Jainism but not in other religions that have origins outside of the Indian subcontinent. It is because of God's immense mercy that an opportunity is given in the form of re-birth such that by good activities in one's new life an individual can uplift oneself by decreasing one's demerits. Proof for *karma* and reincarnation is shown when one looks at innocent newborn children in a hospital and notes differences in aspects of beauty, health, family

background, among others which can only be explained based on their accumulated merits and demerits or *karma* in previous lives. Advents of saints and *avatars* (incarnations) during various times in history are to eliminate disharmony and unjust practices (*adharma*) and to restore harmony and the law of righteousness (*dharma*). The births of such divine beings do not follow the common norms of *karma* theory because they do not have an accumulated baggage of sins and their conception is beyond the confines of the womb or natural order. Some examples include the births of Rama, Krishna, Ganesha, and Muruga.

Liberty in worship

Vedic religion gives credence to worship with form (*Saguna*) and without form (*Nirguna*). Worship with form is ideal for beginners who have an oscillating mind because it is easier to focus on a form. One formless God (*Paramatman or Brahman*) appears as different Gods (Shiva, Vishnu, or Brahma) and celestial beings which includes natural elements and guardian spirits (*Devatas*). *Mantras* and rituals to worship each God or *Devata* are prescribed in Vedic religion. Every form of worship reaches the same formless God is the broad outlook and overview of Vedic religion. Religions with exclusivity rights such as Christianity and Islam state that others who don't follow their religion would go to hell. Vedic *dharma* does not claim that it is the only path for salvation and therefore the concept of proselytization or conversion does not arise. Hence Vedic religion, which has numerous rituals, has no ritual for conversion. Hindus should be

proud of such a liberal outlook which is absent in other major religions.

Social function (*Varna*) and Stages in life (*Ashrama*)

Vedic religion has given a sociological foundation in the form of functional occupation (*Varna*) and stages of life (*Ashrama*). It has four *Varnas* (brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra) and four stages (*brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, and sanyasa*).

1. Celibate life (*brahmacharya*): Students (*brahmacharis*) live with a teacher at a boarding school (*gurukula*) and focus on education. It starts with thread ceremony (*upanayana*) for three Varnas (brahmins, kshatriyas, and vaishyas) and ranges from 9 to 12 years of education with the accompaniment of a stick (*danda*) and deer skin. The *danda* is symbolic for absorption of *mantras* and provision of strength and the deer skin acts as a mat for chanting. *Upanayana* is not a requirement for the fourth Varna (shudras). The physical nature of their work brings them mental purity without the aid of a thread ceremony. Their hereditary craft requires hands-on practical training like in a trade school. This is best achieved by them staying with their families combined with occasional visits to the *gurukula* to clarify their theoretical doubts from a teacher. *Gurukulas* focusing on Vedas and Shaastras are not equipped for practical training

requirements of the various skilled trades of shudras. Upanayana is performed during *uttarayan*, or the brighter six months of the year starting with spring when the first term of the school year starts in the *gurukula*.

Students learn oral chanting of Vedas (*adyayana*) during the first term which requires rigorous practice. The second term during *dakshinayan*, or the darker six months of the year, starts with autumn when students learn the auxiliary subjects that help with the understanding of Vedas. There are fourteen spiritual subjects (*Chaturdasa Vidyas*) which includes four Vedas, six Vedangas ('limbs of Vedas' or auxiliary branches of Vedas), and four Upangas ('sub-limbs' of *Vedas*). In addition, there are four non-spiritual subjects (Upa-Vedas) for practical living. After the completion of learning of each branch of Veda, proficiency in chanting is showcased (Brahma *yagna*).

Brahmachari in *gurukula* performs fire ceremonies (*Samidadhana*) twice daily with collected dry sticks, takes alms, and does other chores. Such activities efface ego and bring humility. *Brahmachari* should not focus on taste and food preferences but there is no restriction on the quantity of food eaten. There are time restrictions and fasting restrictions. Essential breaks are given between lessons and school terms. There is a ritualistic bath (*snana*) when the student graduates from school and

returns home to practice what was learned in school as a way of daily life.

2. Householder (*grihastha*): A young adult living a family life fulfilling the expansion of progeny and performing daily duties towards family and society. Marriage is an important sacrament for it. During marriage, all *Varnas* receive the fire from the groom's father that is used for lighting the ceremony and is maintained by the couple for life. This fire is used for twice daily fire rituals (*Aupasana homa*) by all four *Varnas*. The five compulsory daily duties (*Nitya karma*) for all four *Varnas* include feeding the poor (*manushya*), oblations to ancestors (*pitru*), worship (*devata*), caring for creatures (*bhuta*), and *homa* or fire rituals for family (*kula*). Chanting of Vedas accompanied with elaborate fire rituals (*yagnas*) is restricted only to Vedic brahmins who have dedicated their entire life to Vedas.

3. Forest life (*vanaprastha*): It is a phase in life of removal from family and worldly duties. Detaching from worldly life, a couple can move into the forest and live to only perform daily rituals to completely surrender to God.

4. Renunciation (*sanyasa*): It is devoting one's life to the formless Absolute, or Supreme Self. In this phase, the oneness of the individual Self (*Atman*) and the Supreme Self (*Brahman*) is to be realized. A qualified student is initiated into monastic life by a *Guru* who is a knower of

the Absolute. Qualification to enter this stage is earned from the first three *ashramas* or stages in life. It is wholesome knowledge (*para vidya*), where only longing for God is required. All other worldly knowledge and internal awareness is only fragmented knowledge (*apara vidya*). Manifested God (Iswara) or *Guru's* grace is required to overcome limitations of mind to experience oneness of *Atman* and *Brahman*, and this state is also known as *Paramatman* or *Parabrahman*.

Varna Dharma has been subject to a lot of criticism lately. Varna Dharma is equated to caste divisions and discrimination in society. In fact, *Varna* is different from caste. While *Varna* refers to the four primary occupational groups in society - brahmin (priest), kshatriya (warrior), vaishya (trader), and shudra (laborer) - caste or *Jaati* refers to the countless sub-divisions within each *Varna* that have developed over time, often influenced by regional and occupational variations. To understand this Acharya gave examples of *Jaatis* specific to *Varnas* and *Jaatis* non-specific to *Varnas*.

Examples of *Jaatis* specific to *Varnas*:

- The word '*raja*' means king (kshatriya) and includes *jaatis* such as Raj, Rai, Roy Varma, Bhosle etc.
- The word '*pandit*' means priest (brahmin) and includes *jaatis* such as Iyer, Iyengar, Sastri, Pandey, Chatterjee, Sharma, Joshi etc.

- The word '*sreshta*' means eminently wealthy (vaishya) and includes *jaatis* such as Chettiyar, Satte, Shetty, Agarwal etc.

- The word '*pusan*' means nourisher (shudra) and includes *jaatis* such as Nayar, Goundar, Mudaliar, Kamma, Reddy, Yadav etc. They are also known as Vellalars and historically included chieftains and landlords.

Examples of *Jaatis* non-specific to *Varnas*:

- Nayakar / Nayak are leaders and can belong to any *Varna*. They can be brahmin in Maharashtra and kshatriya in Tamil Nadu.

- Rao can be a brahmin in Karnataka whereas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana they can belong to any *Varna*.

What does all this mean? It highlights two important points. First, it is essential to recognize that *Varna* is fundamentally different from caste or *Jaati*. Secondly, it is important that the system of occupational Varna Dharma continues to exist and be respected. Within the different *Varnas*, people took rightful pride in the value and contributions that their group made to society. This sense of pride was not divisive but was instead accompanied by mutual love and respect among all the *Varnas*. Each group recognized the unique role that others played, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose within the larger community. Though modern thinkers consider Varna Dharma to be the cause of societal collapse, it is the reason for its survival. Varna Dharma

brought discipline in occupation as well as co-operation in society through divisions of labor.

Unity in diversity of Gods

Worship of 5 deities (*Panchayatna*) in the form of Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti have existed since time immemorial. In Vedic religion no difference is seen between the deities, and each is seen as an expression of formless God (*Paramatman* or *Brahman*). Stones such as red jasper from Sona river, clear quartz from Vallum river, black ammonite fossil from Gandaki river, banalinga from Narmada river, and golden pyrite from Swarnamukhi river represent Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti respectively. Keeping these materials together in our homes is like uniting the entire country.

Acharya explained unity in Varna Dharma using a common-sense example. If many wooden sticks are tied into a single bundle, even if a single stick gets loose the whole bundle will collapse. But if tied into smaller bundles first and then put together into a large bundle, even if a single stick gets loose, it will not affect the large bundle. Similarly, a large community (*Varna*) was divided into smaller groups called *Jaati* (loosely translated as caste) instead of a single big group. The *Jaati*'s members specialized in their hereditary trade, and each had a headman. Headmen disciplined the groups and corrected if any misdeeds happened, the highest punishment being expulsion from caste or '*Jaatibhrashta*'. This brought peace to society until the mid-1900s. The switch to the penal system using prisons

established by the British government, did not necessarily lead to eradication of problems. To be discarded from one's caste affected an individual deeply as each caste member felt like a king in their own way. When police come to dissolve a commotion, people often oppose their action which did not happen to the headmen. By implementing *Varna* rules, the headman was able to bring order without much force. Despite *Varnas* and their corresponding occupations and rules, there was unity in Vedic society.

Divine witness (*Sakshi*)

There is a concept that God is witness to all events at the microcosm and macrocosm level. He is the indwelling spirit in all sentient and insentient beings. In Vedic philosophy, the *Atman* or *Brahman* is mentioned as a witness. However, it is not the same as used in the transactional world as one witnessing the act of another. A witness to such events is not a participant. He does not take part in any transaction. But the event occurs in his presence. A witness has no power behind the actions. On the contrary, there is nothing other than *Atman* or *Brahman*, and therefore there is no such action of witnessing. Why is it then called witness or *sakshi*? Since there is no deed without *Atman* or *Brahman*, it is the eternal witness to everything. It is the basis and power from which all events take place in time and space. Without *Atman*/*Brahman*, there is no action. Thus *Atman/Brahman*, while a witness in the sense of being the pure awareness of everything, is more specifically an eternal state of reality.

Though *Atman*/*Brahman* is the source of everything from germs, insects, fishes, turtles, birds, and humans, it is not the cause for all actions. Every iota of existence has a mind of its own and the capacity for action. Everybody has a mind, feelings of love, hate, and desires, and so on as an entity or unit. Although everything and everybody is oneness in so many garbs, the magical power of our ego assigns separate individuality. We are all deluded thus from eternal reality and think of the part we play as our reality. Eventually, when ego is shed and the mind settles in the cave of our heart (*hrudaya guha*) we experience oneness with *Brahman*.

During festivals in India, smooth wooden poles (*malkhamb*) would be erected in public arenas and smeared with a thick coating of greasy oil. Young athletes will try to climb such slippery poles, perform acrobatics and reach the top to win a prize as they balance at the top. Life is like this act. Strong willpower enables progress upwards, while fleeting desires make us slip and fall to our doom. It is alright to go up and down and have fun experiences. But when it comes to finding the purpose of life, however slippery our path might be, one must keep a part of oneself apart as the uninvolved spectator. The goal is that, at least after many lifetimes of trials, we stop slipping and raise ourselves above all tendencies to realize our oneness. Unless one comes to function purely as an instrument of God and surrenders, this show of individual thoughts and actions as a doer goes on with its accrual of merits and demerits (*karma* theory). But one will be held responsible for his actions, as in its absence there can be no morality and no rules of justice or jurisprudence. To

say everything is God's act, that without him no blade of grass moves, and that God is the only doer (*karta*), can be taken by some as a license for individual irresponsibility. Though it is true that without God not a blade of grass is going to move, we must take individual responsibility for our speech and actions.

God is omnipresent (*sarva vyapi*). God exists everywhere, envelops everything, and acts both as witness and judge (*phala dhada*). When a witness and judge are one, there can be no question of a false witness. It is that inner conscience in each of us that is saving us from total anarchy and chaos from time immemorial. In Vedic religion, God is represented mainly as fire, and making a contract in front of it is called 'Agni *sakshi'*. Marriage is one such agreement between a man and a woman for their life-long commitment to be husband and wife. Agni was also witness between Sri Rama and King Sugreeva who was banished by his older brother Vali from his own kingdom after Vali took over as king. A bond of friendship was sealed by extending Sugreeva's hand towards Sri Rama's after going clockwise around the fire. At this moment, the left eyes of Sita Devi (Sri Rama's wife) and King Vali twitched. This phenomenon of the left eye twitching is since considered a good omen for women and bad omen for men! The handshake, though evidently a 'monkey custom' in this scenario, signified that henceforth all pleasures and problems were to be shared between Sugreeva and Rama. This bond eventually led to Sugreeva defeating Vali and reclaiming his kingdom. In marriage, the bridegroom takes the hand of the bride as an act of taking

complete care of her for a lifetime while walking around Agni as *sakshi*.

There are situations when someone subjected to injustice and left with no other way to prove their innocence will pray to God and challenge God to serve as divine witness and prove their truthfulness. God will present himself in some form and establish the truth to everybody's satisfaction when there is complete and honest devotion and surrender to God.

Acharya gave a few scriptural examples to illustrate God's role as divine witness and his rescue of those who sincerely believed in him. There is a story of Sakshi Gopal (Sri Krishna or Gopal as divine witness) who came all the way from Mathura to Kanchi to show that he was the witness to the promise made to a poor boy by a wealthy man. The poor boy was hired by the wealthy man as a helper for his round-trip pilgrimage from Kanchi to Mathura. Because of the wealthy man's ill health, the poor boy needed to carry him most of the way. The wealthy man was moved by this act. Upon reaching Mathura, the land of Gopal, he made a promise to give his daughter in marriage to the boy when they returned to Kanchi. After reaching his home in Kanchi, the wealthy man took one look at his beautiful daughter and thought about their social status. He failed to keep his promise. Since there was no human witness to the promise made, the poor boy walked all the way back to Mathura and sought Gopal's help as his witness or *sakshi*. Touched by his sincerity, God accompanied the boy and got himself established in the outskirts of Kanchi. Upon seeing Gopal, the rich man admitted his wrongdoing and

gave his daughter's hand in marriage to the poor boy. King Ganapati of Orissa later invaded South India and took the deity to Puri. A pilgrimage to Puri is now considered incomplete without a visit to Sakshi Gopal.

Acharya recounted another story illustrating how Lord Shiva served as divine witness of the marriage of his trusted devotee Sangili Nachiyar to Sundarar Nayanmar. Sangili Nachiyar made garlands and served Lord Shiva in Thiruvotriyur temple in Tamil Nadu. This temple is dedicated to Shiva as Thyagaraja and Shakti as Vadivudai Amman. Sundarar visited the temple and was smitten by Sangli Nachiyar's beauty when she handed over the garland to be placed on Shiva. He asked his 'friend' Shiva to act as a messenger and convince Sangili to marry him. Shiva successfully delivered the message to Sangili. Sangili laid one condition that Sundarar should promise not to leave Thiruvottriyur and must take that oath inside the temple's sanctum. Unwilling to be confined to one place and wishing to visit other Shiva temples, Sundarar secretly asked Shiva to move out of the sanctum and reside under a nearby makizham tree instead of the sanctum when he made his promise to Sangili. Makizham tree is native to the Indian subcontinent and is famous for its fragrant flowers which are used for worship in temples. Shiva agreed to Sundarar's request, but he also appeared in Sangili's dream and informed her of Sundarar's plan for deception. He advised her to insist that Sundarar take the vow under the makizham tree instead of the temple's sanctum. When Sangili's friends conveyed her new demand to Sundarar, he was

shocked and realized he had been outwitted by Lord Shiva. He had no choice but to take the promise and marry Sangili under the makizham tree with Shiva as their witness. It is believed that Shiva's footprints can still be seen in this temple. Sundarar stayed in this temple for a long time to keep his promise to Sangli Nachiyar and composed many hymns on Shiva.

God keeps tabs on all of us, and we will be held accountable. There is a Sakshi Ganesha, 3 miles from the Srisailam Mallikarjuna Swamy temple in Andhra Pradesh where Lord Shiva resides with his consort Brahmarambika. This temple is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva and one of the 51 Shakti Peeths of Goddess Parvati. '*Jyothi*' means 'light' and '*linga*' is the symbolic representation of Shiva and there are twelve sacred Jyothirlinga sites spread across Bharat where Lord Shiva is represented as a powerful column of light. Shakti Peeth's are holy sites spread across the Indian sub-continent for Goddess Shakti or Devi or Parvati. Sakshi Ganesha must be visited by devotees before and after getting darshan of Shiva-Shakti in Srisailam. Since Shiva can be easily pleased to grant boons, this Sakshi Ganesha is keeping an account in terms of who is really visiting Srisailam as a true beneficiary of his father's boon. This Ganesha is huge in form with one leg folded and the other hanging down, holding a palm leaf in one hand and a sharp nail (*ezhuthani* in Tamil) in another for writing. Another popular deity who keeps tabs of all our actions is Chitra Gupta in the court of God of death (Yama Raja). There is a temple for Chitra Gupta in Kanchipuram.

Nothing can be hidden from the divine witness. *Atman* is the essence of life in an individual (*Jiva*) and is also called *Jivatman*. There is no difference between *Jivatma* nand formless *Paramatman* or *Brahman*. Hence the Upanishads state that ‘You are not the body’, ‘You are not the mind’ but ‘You are *Atman*’ and to experience this is the ultimate purpose of an individual's life.

Chapter 3: Common Dharma

Common Dharma as in Vedic scriptures are simple actions and gestures which can be followed by all. In nature everything happens as a natural order of things without being requested or demanded. During Indian New Year (March-April), mother earth makes the peepal and neem trees to shed their leaves and Ganesha and Snake God (Nagaraj) that are typically installed underneath them enjoy the mild warmth of the open skies during the post-winter season. When the sun gets hot in summer, the same trees put forth leaves and bring shade to the Ganesha and Nagaraj. This is nature performing its job. Common Dharma exists for humans since our minds go astray and we fail to follow our duties. An act done for the wellness of the world brings the supreme God’s love.

Considering one's reasoning, man looks for happiness in wrong places and overlooks *dharma*. All our activities are circled around desire and when that desire is not fulfilled, anger sets in and this affects us more than the person under attack. During attempts to destroy desire, thoughts will indulge in them even if the activities seeking them are stopped. Besides, activities cannot be stopped. However, they can be diverted to do social service. If such service is done without profit motivation or desired outcome it will reduce desire. Qualities such as finding faults or getting angry at others can be reduced by self-analysis to reveal

that no one is devoid of fault or anger and therefore not qualified to show them.

There are two kinds of practice (*sadana*) that is recommended - inner discipline (*antharanga*) and outer discipline (*bahiranga*). Inner discipline uses non-violence, truth, non-stealing, cleanliness, and sensory control. Outer discipline uses social service and love for others.

Non-violence (*Ahimsa*)

It is emphasized in two ways in Vedic *dharma*. For a common man, intention of action is more important than the action itself. For a monk (*sanyasi*), both intention and action are important. Monks should live a life without causing any injury to any being including vegetation. For common good, a just war or animal sacrifice in Vedic fire ritual (*yagna*) is not considered sinful. In contrast, in Buddhism, total non-violence needs to be followed by everyone. But this gets violated even in something simple like non-adherence to recommended vegetarian food habits and people indulge in meat eating. When total non-violence is not enforced on the common man, voluntarily many communities in India have taken to vegetarianism. Why is vegetarianism less harmful? Though plants have life, they do not experience pain to the same degree as animals. Few vegetables are harvested from the ground; the rest are plucked. Plucking is like cutting nails or hair. A plant-based diet, in addition, augments good quality (*sattva guna*) in humans.

Truth (*Satya*)

God has endowed man with the power of speech only to speak out what is in his mind. Contradiction of mind and speech is defined as untruth (*asathyam*). Both identity of mind and speech as well as intention of speech are important in Vedic *dharma*. When a person talks good about something but on the other hand bad thoughts arise in his mind, the expressed speech becomes untruth. Truth always produces good results. If a person stands firmly in truth, whatever he says becomes truth. An example from religious texts is the story of Abhirami Bhattar. He was a staunch devotee of Goddess Abhirami in Tamil Nadu's Thirukadaiyur temple. One day when he was fully absorbed in his truth (Goddess Abhirami), the local king Sarfoji asked him what was the *tithi* or the day in the lunar cycle. Abhirami Bhattar said it was full moon when it was a new moon night, but the Goddess rewarded him by changing the face of the moon and it became a full moon night! Beautiful hymns of 'Abhirami Andaadi' came into existence which is recited to this day.

Non-stealing (*Astheyam*)

Non-stealing is neither taking nor desiring what belongs to others. Earning money in wrong ways amounts to stealing. A prime example of *astheyam* is from Ramayana. Bharata was given the kingdom by his father King Dasharatha under the insistence of Sri Rama's stepmother and Bharata's mother Kaikeyi when Sri Rama was sent to exile. But Bharata had no

desire to take what belonged to Rama and wanted to give it back to Sri Rama and thus practiced *astheyam*.

Cleanliness (*Saucham*)

External cleanliness will help internal purity. Taking bath at prescribed times and not sharing personal use items like clothes, plates, and cups are some observed practices recommended in Vedic religion.

Sense Control (*Indriyanigraham*)

To control sense organs is by restricting them. Examples include limiting the quantity while eating and the times engaged in talking. Turning the mind away from external attractions and distractions brings internal peace.

Social Service (*Paropakara*)

Trees give fruit, rivers give water, and cows give milk to benefit others. Likewise, our body is meant to help others. Digging wells and tanks, feeding the needy through small contributions made daily by individuals (example: a fistful of rice and a coin), and maintaining temples and adjacent gardens is called wholesome (*purtha*) *dharma*. Tanks were dug in the past exclusively for cattle use. Every day, at least a handful of grass was given to cattle. Cow protection (*gorakshana*) is important because all its products are essential for Vedic rituals. The benefit equivalent from performing an elaborate horse sacrifice (Aswamedha *yagna*) is obtained by performing funeral rites for unclaimed

bodies. Similarly, when a person is dying, chanting God's name will help to bring their focus on God or at least will benefit in their next life. There was no occupation (*Varna*) or status separation in social service. Example: Spiritual luminaries like Appayya Dikshita, Govinda Dikshita, and Sridhara Ayyaval who lived between 16th century AD and 18th century AD in South India, served everyone irrespective of their caste or *Jaati*. Every action to benefit others is meant for mental purity (*chitta shuddhi*) in Vedic religion.

Our forefathers held a simple *dharma* of holding relatives and friends in high esteem. As a result, the entire community came together in conducting marriages and obsequies. If a person was in difficulty, others contributed in small measures to perform such functions. Social disparities between the rich and poor were minimal and the rich extended great help to the poor. Helping a person in hardship will contribute more to the purification of the mind of the giver than that of the receiver.

People's talents and wealth should be used for social service. To arrange marriage ceremonies (*Kannika Dhana*) for poor families and to run *Veda patasalas* (*Vidya dhana*), trust funds should be created. By making donations to these trust funds, the demerits accrued by non-Vedic brahmin families can be overcome. Varna Dharma did not place one *Varna* superior to another contrary to what is believed today after centuries of distortion of Vedic scriptures by invaders of Bharat. There should be no barrier to the progress of any community. Hindu Dharma should be taught as an optional subject in schools for it brings *bhakti* or devotion

and humility which are lost in secular western education. Students coming out of such schools can be productive citizens and contribute in a small way by giving back to society in the form of social service.

Upanishads (Brihadaranyaka and Taittiriya) insist on donation. They state that it should be given with humbleness and with happiness. According to Dharma Shaastra, the rich should use their wealth for social service. Instead of the rich simply donating money and remaining hands off, they should also be physically involved in the work. Similarly, the poor should contribute a little as well and offer physical labor. Service should happen in small groups instead of an organization. Organization involves electing board members to conduct affairs which bring jealousy, corruption, and wrong doings. Service should begin at home. Neglecting parents or family or relatives and doing social service is nothing but hypocrisy. Love and kindness are essential qualities of social service.

Maharishi Vyasa's disciples asked him for a synopsis of his eighteen Puranas in one or two *shlokas* (verses). Puranas are teachings in the form of historic tales on Vedic truths that can be understood easily by common folks. To the request of his disciples, Vyasa delivered the essence of the eighteen Puranas in just half a *shloka.* The meaning of this *shloka* is, 'If you want to earn *punya* do *paropakara*, if you want to accumulate *paapa* do '*parapeedana*'. '*Parapeedana*' means inflicting harm on others. Vedic religion helps us in understanding the difference between what is merit and continuing it and what is demerit and removing

it. When asked the question whether there is room in Vedic religion for social service, Maharishi Vyasa gave the answer, and no further discussions are required.

Love (*prema*)

Love is the most natural (*sahaja*) and pure state of being. '*Anbe Sivam*' is a phrase in Tamil meaning 'Love is God and God is love'. This phrase is found in Thirumular's 'Thirumandiram'. This is an earliest known exposition of Shaiva Siddhanta, which is a Vedic philosophy where devotees worship Lord Shiva as the supreme God. Every activity must be rooted in love. Even when fighting a war or giving punishment in a criminal justice system, the action should be carried out without hate and the essence of the activity should be directed by love. If love is the basis for all actions, evil will disappear from the world. A life without practicing love is essentially useless. Pangs of sorrow are felt when the object of love is lost. For love to be eternal and unchanging, it should be directed to God or *Guru* (teacher) for such an association exists in an unconditional state without expectations. This results in an expansion of the heart for love to be shown to all beings. When we do this, we are utilizing love as a tool for inclusion of all beings as one rather than the exclusion of some which is derived from the egoistic self. Love is indeed a state of bliss.

Common Dharma is practiced in many religions. Most religions talk about one God and devotion of their God (*Bhakti*). The house of God (temple, vihara, church, and mosque) and the

symbols inside and the rituals followed might vary but all worship leads to the formless God. It is okay to use any symbol or ritual. There is no need for all religions to conform to the same practices. Uniformity is not needed, only unity is needed. As such, Hindus should be proud of their *dharma* and respect it. Any human being who respects his religion should have no necessity to indulge in conversion as this means that one's God is lesser and the other's God is greater. This baselessly narrows the understanding of the all-pervading one '*Atman*' or '*Brahman*'.

Chapter 4: Protection (Rakshana) of Vedas and Cows

Vedas derived from the breath of *Paramatman* and delivered to us by the *rishis* or seers were only learned by oral traditions and passed on from one generation to another. Major segments of Vedas are known as *'*Shakhas*'*. The sub-parts of Shakhas are hymns (Samhita), fire rituals done in accordance with hymns (Brahmana), explanation of inner meaning of rituals (Aranyaka), and philosophy of life (Upanishads). There were originally 1131 Shakhas which were incorporated into four branches of Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, and Atharva) by Maharishi Vyasa. Only 8 of the 1131 Shakha*s* have survived with all their sub-parts almost intact. Philosophy or Upanishad sub-part alone survived in some Shakhas and currently we have 108 Upanishads in existence with commentaries written by Upanishad Brahmendra during 18th century AD. Each Veda Shakha is enormously vast and contain many thousands of hymns. They cover a wide range of subjects and unfortunately what the world now has is less than 1% of what was known earlier. Even if Vedas are not understood, there is an obligation to preserve and protect them for future generations to benefit from it.

The job of a brahmin as per Dharma Shaastra is to protect Vedas but in what way does it benefit society? Veda *rakshana* brings universal wellness more so than benefit the brahmin who does it

as an occupation. Brahmins traditionally used to learn Vedas by listening (*adhyayana*) from a very young age while staying with their teacher (*gurukula*). As an adult, they would chant Vedas daily along with fire rituals (*yagnas*). They were required to teach (*adyapana*) to at least four students. Training in Veda chanting is rigorous to maintain proper pronunciation and intonation (low, normal, high) to bring the right effect to sustain the world. In the universe everything happens with a certain discipline suggesting that a great mind, God, is orchestrating it. For clouds to form and rain to occur there is an underlying tonal vibration. What is in space is in the human body (macrocosm is in microcosm) and the science that unifies both energy is yoga. *Yogis* (practitioners of Yoga) and *Jnanis* (practitioners of Jnana path, a path of inward contemplation and self-realization) deciphered Vedas in their trance state (*samadhi*) where the differentiation between the inside and outside disappears and oneness happens.

Like the government run by different officials, celestial beings (*Devatas*) are responsible for universal wellness. Every deity's sound form is a *mantra*. When *mantra* is chanted and food is offered to the fire (*yagna*), energy in subtle form reaches the deity and enables it's functioning. It is like tax given to officials for proper functioning of the government. For example, when there is no rain, recitation of the rain *mantra* (*varuna japa*) helps to bring rain, but when it sometimes fails it does not mean the *mantra* is ineffective. It could be that certain rules (*niyama*) like specific food restrictions required of brahmins were not

followed. For example, following an observance of a saltless fast, which is a suitable preparatory discipline for conducting a solemn ritual such as bringing rain to a drought-stricken place. It is a science and certain rules must be followed. Religious texts impose strict food restrictions, multiple bathing and fasting injunctions on brahmins for *mantra* fruition (*siddhi*).

Power from *mantra* comes from clear pronunciation and repetition according to intonations (*swaras*). Teeth play a major role in this action. With loss of teeth, speech becomes distorted and *mantras* will be ineffective. Once we understand the power of sound, the unnecessary debates of changing the *mantra* or its language will not arise. First and foremost, Vedas should not be learned only by writing or reading. They should be heard repeatedly and learned by heart. It is passed on to the next generation orally. Since creation, this tradition has existed for thousands of years and continues in Vedic schools (*patasalas*). Vedas have the name '*Sruti*' which means that which is heard. In Tamil, Vedas are called '*ezhudhaa kilavi'* meaning 'unwritten verse'. The great Tamil poet Avvaiyar said, 'Do not pass even a single day without Veda *odhudal*'. '*Odhudal*' in Tamil means repetition/recitation. Vedas should not be only in book form because daily recitation and memorizing by heart will disappear, resulting in tonal impurity and consequent adverse results.

Vedas were not in any written format until the beginning of Kali *yuga*. In Vedic cosmology, *yuga* is cyclical and there are four eras which include Satya (Krita), Treta, Dwapara, and Kali *yuga*. The strength and moral standards of people decline gradually from

Satya to Kali for one half of cycle and then increase gradually from Kali to Satya for the other half of cycle. We are presently living in Kali *yuga*. Kali *yuga* started in 3102 BC following Sri Krishna's death at the end of Dwapara *yuga*. After Sri Krishna's demise, a great darkness enveloped the world. To reduce Kali *yuga*'s intensity and for Vedas to be protected, Maharishi Vyasa compiled the Vedas as a manuscript in Sanskrit language. It is the Veda chanting with *yagnas* that brings wellness to the world. Although written as a manuscript, oral traditions of learning Vedas continued because the Vedic chants contain many sounds that are in-between syllables which cannot be put into written language. In addition, many weaving patterns exist in Veda chanting to retain the structure (*rupa*) and tone (*swara*) of the words. Even if diacritical marks are available in books, pronunciation mistakes happen due to these reasons. Veda *mantras* have been delivered to us by *rishis*. *Mantras* in their original version have created a *rupa* or form of a *Devata* to bring the desired effect from chanting them and hence no addition or deletion of syllables is allowed. Understanding this profound concept further clarifies the importance of oral tradition of learning Vedas.

Sounds and Creation

Sounds in the universe cause creation. There are four stages to sound before it emerges as speech. The first 3 are inaudible (para, pashyanti, and madhyama) and the last is audible (vaikhari). The first inaudible 'para' emerges below the navel in the root or 'muladhara' *chakra*. *Chakras* are energy centers in our body.

There are six of them that are found along the spine and the seventh ends in the crown or head. Muladhara *chakra* is at the base of the spine. 'Para' from Muladhara passes through inaudible 'pashyanti' in the stomach or 'manipura' *chakra*, to inaudible 'madhyama' in the heart or 'anahata' *chakra* and finally emerges as audible 'vaikhari' in the throat or 'vishuddha' *chakra*. Advanced *yogis* and *jnanis* can hear and absorb inaudible 'para' from space or *akasa* with their cognitive abilities and they then reveal them to us as audible Veda *mantras*.

Paramatman's breath (Vedas) and individual's breath (*prana*) are interrelated as a sound vibration. Vedic vibrations cause creation and the *pranic* vibration travelling through energy channels (*nadis*) in the body cause mental states. Breath alternates between the right and left nostril at regular intervals. The breath through the right (sun) nostril is energizing and through the left (moon) nostril is calming. It is predominant in one nostril depending on the individual's mental state. Our mind is often not in order and acts like a mad dog. In 'Nadi Shodhana' *pranayama*, a form of breathing exercise, breath is conditioned to be the same in both nostrils such that there is balance of mind. In deep meditation, breath stops and the mind is blissful. Unlike our chaotic egocentric mind, there is a certain order to the creative vibrational forces of the universe.

The vibratory effects of different sounds to create different patterns on water and sand are shown by science. When a *Siddhar* (an individual who has attained spiritual powers or '*siddhi*') applies *vibhuti* (sacred ash) chanting 'Namah Shivaya',

a five syllabled (*panchakshara*) *mantra*, diseases are cured. It is his intense concentration and perfect *mantra* tone (*swara*) that bring about the effect. Sound has creation, sustenance, and dissolution capabilities. During the great floods (*mahaparalaya*), manifested God (Vishnu) sleeps. From his sleep, Brahma emerges and creation starts. Brahma in his austerity or '*tapas*' (penance) can absorb vibrations of Vedas in his heart and creation starts in his mind. Different vibrations create different universes.

Veda chanting methods

For pronunciation and tone to be intact in chanting, there are rules. In Vedic chanting, there are two distinct forms to preserve its immutable character: linear (*prakriti*) and crisscross (*vikriti*). The word sequence is retained in '*prakriti*'. In crisscross '*vikriti*' recitation, successive words are uttered in specific combinations or patterns. It is easier to understand *prakriti* and *vikruti* by numbering the words. For example, if there are eight words, number them as 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 and include punctuation as necessary.

Prakriti:

Type-1 (*Samhita* or continuous)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8/
Type-2 (*Pada* or word by word)	1/ 2/ 3/ 4/ 5/ 6/ 7/ 8/
Type-3 (*Krama* or pairs)	1 2/ 2 3/ 3 4/ 4 5/ 5 6/ 7 8/

In *Vikriti*, there are 8 combinations. Four of them are given below. The last four (*Dhvaja, Danda, Ratha, and Ghana)* are not given because the combinations are more complex and Acharya

said it would be like a mathematics class and the head will explode!

Vikriti:

Type-1 (*Jata*)	1 2 2 1 1 2/ 2 3 3 2 2 3/ 3 4 4 3 3 4/…..
Type-2 (*Mala*)	1 2/ 2 1/ 1 2/ 2 3/ 3 2/ 2 3/ 3 4/ 4 3 /3 4/…..
Type-3 (*Sikha*)	1 2 2 1 1 2 3/ 2 3 3 2 2 3 4/ 3 4 4 3 3 4 5/…..
Type-4 (*Rekha*)	1 2/ 2 1/ 1 2/ 2 3 4/ 4 3 2/ 2 3 / 3 4 5 6/ 6 5 4 3/ 3 4/…..

Ghanapati is a person who has acquired complete knowledge of the ultimate complexity in this weaving and changing patterns of chanting. When a *Ghanapati* recites, recognizing the patterns and the changing variations can bring blissfulness to the listener. Those that only specialize in certain patterns of chanting include *Jata* experts, *Sikha* experts, and so on.

Maharishis have protected and preserved Vedas by creating these learning methods. The student thus retains each word and sound in its original state which is the very purpose of this kind of oral chanting. The research of how it changed and establishing a timeline for Vedic religion based on written script alone will be deemed meaningless if the logic behind its immutability is understood.

Significance of Mantras

Vedas are not composed by man (*Apaurusheya*). Jesus and Mohammed said that it was not their words but God's. It is God's words that have become books. Even Einstein said that his 'Relativity Theory' came to him as a flash of intuition. When we

are ready to accept all these, why cannot we accept that Vedas are cosmic sound vibrations that came into the hearts of our *rishis* on their own accord? Its vibrations alone stayed during the great deluge (*mahapralaya*) for creation to start in Brahma's mind. The sounds that we create don't die. It stays in space (*akasha*). Whatever Christ spoke 2000 years ago can be extracted and repeated using his voice. Likewise, retracing the path of how creation happened will end in Brahma *Loka* or heaven. Certain *mantras* creating those specific vibrations in the body will take us to heaven.

Sound is more important than even what the *mantras* mean. We are more forgiving if we make mistakes unknowingly. If we chant by faith, it is good enough because Vedas are beyond understanding for most. However, if the necessary intellect and humility are present, knowing the meaning helps to create interest in the learning process. From this understanding the scientific basis will be known. For some, there is an emotional appeal when the meaning is known. In Veda chanting, of all the many mistakes that could happen, chanting in a low voice is unacceptable. Mantras bring good '*nadi*' or channels of vibrations to the person chanting. It can bring the same effect for listeners as well as and to the atmosphere. It should be chanted loudly so that it can bring wellness to everyone.

When we hear classical music and its '*raag alaap'* (the introductory improvisations or '*alaap*' of an artist within a specific melodic framework or '*raag*'), it creates happiness and sadness effects. Many *shlokas* bring such strong emotional

effects. Some bring specific effects like curing a disease or bringing rain, and so on. In Adi Sankara's 'Soundarya Lahari', each *shloka* is a *mantra* and has a specific effect which is not the case with his own 'Sivananda Lahari'. In addition, every creation has a beginning known as '*beej*' in Sanskrit or 'seed' in English. A seed has the full potential of a tree and similarly *beej* in a *mantra* has multitudes of potencies. *Mantras* with *'beej'* pertaining to various Gods and *Devatas* are used in Veda chanting and these send out a series of vibrations into the environment which can be transformational for the chanter and the universe. Examples include *'gum'* as *beej* in 'Gum Ganapathaye' and *'kleem'* as *beej* in 'Kleem Kalikayai', which are *mantras* invoking Ganesha and Kali respectively. Chanting of Vedas in the form of *mantras* tremendously benefits our physical and mental health and as its practitioners we are weaving spirituality into our worldly life.

Significance of Yagnas

Yagnas are fire rituals performed with chanting of Vedas. Chanting loudly as a group in *yagnas* brings universal wellness even more so than internally chanting the Vedas. Vedas insist that the individual Self (*Atman*) and formless God (*Paramatman or Brahman*) are the same. To enquire into ourselves (*Atma Vichara*) and experiencing it requires a lot of conditioning. Such conditionings are brought about by daily duties such as fire rituals (*yagna karmas*).

Yagnas are for *Devatas*. This is again unique to Vedic religion and not found in Buddhism and western religions. With Veda chanting many things are offered to the fire (Agni). Fire converts the offered material into a form that is acceptable to *Devatas*. *Devatas* don't have a physical body like us. Even for humans, food is digested in the 'fire' as in acids and enzymes inside our stomach and absorbed into the blood stream for distribution. *Yagnas* signify the same concept.

There are three effects of *yagnas*:

1. Brings wellness in this life
2. Brings happiness in the afterlife (Brahma *loka*). This is temporary and lasts until merits (*punya*) exist and then there is a need to be reborn.
3. Brings mental purity leading to permanent bliss of self-realization (*moksha* or *mukti*) in this very life, thus breaking the cycle of birth-death-rebirth or *samsara*.

Bhagavad Gita Chapter 3 has stated that when Brahma created human beings, *yagnas* came alongside. *Devatas* who fully comprehend the Vedas appear upon hearing Vedic chants in *yagnas*. Each chant is like writing a postal address for a *Devata* to receive the offerings. In the western world, making a toast in a gathering is done with the belief in the power of thought to bring wellness to the host. Similarly, *yagnas* increase our spiritual power and fulfill *Devata*'s wishes, who then help in many ways for the benefit of society. For example, the right

amount of rain falls with the help of *Devatas*, not more and not less because both can have detrimental effects.

God has given us the strength of activity and *Devatas* the strength of protection. Factories and farms are for activity. Police and courts are for protection. The factories and farms are on earth (*bhumi loka*). The officers are the *Devatas* in sky (*deva loka*) and they report to Gods in heaven (*swarga loka*). It does not mean one is of higher importance than the other. Without the effort of workers, the office workers will go without food and similarly only with the protection of the officers, the workers' produce is distributed in society. There are mutual benefits between the parties. Only a *sanyasi* can worship God directly. All others should please *Devatas* through *yagnas*. A king cannot be approached directly but only through his officers and so are the *Devatas* who help us reach God. Chanting '*idam na mama*' meaning 'not belonging to me' when we make offerings to the fire, signifies that all that is offered reaches the *Devatas* and we are all therefore benefited by them.

A fire ritual for the wellness of humans is '*manushya karma*', for Gods is '*Devata karma'*, and for our forefathers is '*pitru karma*'. The prerequisite for *Devata karma* is devotion (*bhakti*) and for *pitru karma* is faith. There are some recommendations for performing these rituals. There was a practice in the past for men to have long hair and this should be tied up and *puja* (worship) performed sitting facing east. When one sits facing east, the right shoulder faces south (direction for *pitrus*) and the left shoulder faces north (direction for *Devatas*). Sacral thread or '*poonal*' in

Tamil is placed in a specific manner depending on the activity. For daily activities, it is hung from the neck like a garland or '*mala*' but this practice is long gone. For the benefit of both humans (*manushya*) and celestials (*Devatas*), it is worn placed on the left shoulder and across the chest and when performing *pitru karma* it is worn from the right shoulder across the chest. For *devata-pitru-manushya karma*, *poonal* (sacred thread) is needed. A *sanyasi* who has renounced the world does not need to wear *poonal*.

Fire rituals (*yagnas*) involve 3 aspects - *Devata*, *Mantra*, and *Havis*. One must visualize the *Devata* internally, chant the *Devata* related *Mantra* and make sanctified offerings or *Havis* to the fire. This ritual brings the mind, speech, and body (*mana-vak-kaya*) into focus. Clarified butter (ghee) or items cleansed with a drop of ghee are offered. In some *yagnas*, an animal part is asked to be given. When it is prescribed as a cow, it does not mean 'cattle' in the literal sense. All animals in Sanskrit are given the name '*pashu*' which therefore also means cow. The great saint Madwacharya said cows can be made from flour with essence of life or *Atman* infused into it (*prana prathista*). In Chandogya Upanishad, '*ahimsa'* or non-violence/non-injury is emphasized but exception is given to *yagnas*. A *sanyasi* who should practice total *ahimsa* will therefore not perform *yagnas*.

There are three kinds of *yagnas*, and they are Paka, Havir, and Soma. There are seven simple fire rituals that can be performed at home called 'Paka' *yagna* pertaining to monthly and yearly ceremonies for dead ancestors (*pitru karma*). There are seven fire

rituals, some simple and some elaborate, called 'Havir' *yagna* corresponding with lunar phases (new moon and full moon), seasons, and harvests which are performed for the wellness of society. In addition, there are seven fire rituals that are done on a grand scale and span many days in big arenas or '*yagnasalas*' known as 'Soma' *yagna* pertaining to the wellness of the world. For the performance of Soma *yagna*, juice of a plant called 'somalata' is offered in small amounts with a total quantity not exceeding one ounce. It is ridiculed that celestial Indra became drunk with soma juice offered in *yagnas* and that brahmins perform *yagnas* to eat meat. Indra is a *Devata* and not a human and anyone getting drunk with little soma juice is unheard of. Soma *yagnas* included animal sacrifices such as cows and horses in ancient times but only certain parts and certain portions of those parts were recommended to be used.

Is animal sacrifice allowed in Kali *yuga*? 'Brahma Vaivarta Purana' explained the five practices prohibited in Kali *yuga*: horse sacrifice, cow sacrifice, taking *sanyasa*, offering flesh to forefathers, and begetting a child in the womb of one's own brother's wife. We should adhere to these recommendations except for not adopting *sanyasa*. Adi Sankara, an *avatar* of Parameshwara who re-established Vedic traditions which were on the decline with the advent of Buddhism, did not ask to stop the performance of *yagnas*. However, cow and horse sacrifices are not permitted in Kali *yuga*. Sacrifices of some smaller animals for *yagnas* are permitted. Vedic brahmins (*rithviks*) take in less than a single *toor dhal* (yellow lentil) amount as '*prasada'*

(a religious offering that is given to devotees) in animal sacrifice and it is gulped down. This is not slaughter. The animal reaches higher realms. The *yagna* itself brings universal wellness. In Dharma Shaastra, there is a *shloka* that until Varna Dharma and chanting of Vedas exists in Kali *yuga*, *yagnas* and *sanyasis* should prevail.

Fire rituals are typically performed by Vedic brahmins (*rithviks*) pertaining to each branch of Veda and the owner (*yajaman*) is a kshatriya or vaishya who as a sponsor participates in *yagnas*. The role of *rithvik* is defined in each Veda as follows.

Conductor	**Title**	**Function**
Rig *rithvik*	*Hotri*	Chants Rig Veda hymns.
Yajur *rithvik*	*Adhvaryu*	Chants Yajur Veda and takes care of fire rituals.
Sama *rithvik*	*Udgatri*	Chants the musical Sama Veda that is pleasing to *Devatas.*
Atharva *rithvik*	*Brahma*	Chants Atharva Veda, supervises the *yagna*, and corrects errors.

Among the 7 Paka, 7 Havir, and 7 Soma *yagnas*, one is original (*prakriti*) and the remaining six are modifications from the original (*vikriti*). The original for Paka is ‘sthalipaka’, for Havir it is ‘darsapurnamasa’, and for Soma it is ‘agnistoma’. The original Paka and Havir *yagnas* are meant for family and societal wellness respectively and are performed bi-monthly in homes on new moon and full moon days. The original Soma *yagna*, agnistoma, brings universal prosperity and honors Vedas (*Vaithikasri*). Agnistoma is performed in *yagnasala* and lasts for

many days. Three assistants are added for each of four main *rithviks*, totalling 16 *rithviks* for performance of Soma *yagna*. Whenever earnings were good, people saved money to perform Soma *yagna*. Smaller Paka *yagna* pertaining to home ceremonies like marriage and upanayana are now celebrated on a grand scale but those needed for the larger wellness of the world are unfortunately not a consideration for people these days.

Why is protection of Vedas important?

Vedic religion has grown without any organization behind it or lured conversions but purely based on the strength of individuals observing daily duties (*anushtana*) pertaining to chanting of Vedas and conducting *yagnas*. Each major segment of Vedas (Shakhas) containing many thousands of hymns was propagated by a specific *rishi* lineage (*kula* or *gotra*). Each Shakha was taught in a *gurukula* or Vedic school. It was common to attend multiple *gurukulas* to gain knowledge in various branches of Vedas and Shaastras. When the *gurukulas* expanded into a university (*ghatikasthana*) for students to learn multiple subjects, a head teacher (*kulapati*) hired many teachers proficient in various branches of Vedas and Shaastras. Maharishi Vashista (Sri Rama's *Guru*) was a *kulapati*. Sri Krishna and his brother Sri Balarama mastered all 64 Shaastras in 64 days, by studying one each day in *Guru* Sandipani's ashram, located in present day Ujjain in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Vedic universities existed in religious centers in various regions of Bharat like Kasi (north), Kanchi (south), Kathyavar (west), Ujjain (middle), and Navadweep (east). Vedic schools dwindled in the 13th century

AD with invasion of Bharat by Muslim emperors and establishment of Delhi Sultanate rule. Buddhist universities like Takshashila and Nalanda propagating Buddhism and secular Vedic Shaastras (arts and sciences) vanished by this time.

Although Vedic schools dwindled during Muslim rule in India from 13th century AD to mid-18th century AD when Hinduism was attacked from every direction possible, individual practitioner of Vedic religion followed their *anushtana* as prescribed in Dharma Shaastra. This practice disappeared during British rule from the mid-18th century AD to mid-20th century AD. While Indians belonged to one race, a non-existent Aryan race was invented by the British. They successfully divided the society into brahmins (or Aryans who were invaders) and non-brahmins (or Dravidians who were native to India). Brahmins who performed their individual dharma for universal wellness without taking monetary remuneration required protection from rulers of the land (kshatriyas) and trading communities (vaishyas). During British rule, this support system dwindled secondary to divisions in society caused and promoted by the British. Brahmins moved away from their native villages giving up on the performance of their religious duties and took secular jobs in towns and cities to earn a livelihood.

Brahmin communities who are the guardians of the Vedas as a hereditary trade and do so by dedicating their entire life for generations were put at odds with this responsibility by the 20th century because of the above-mentioned reasons. When India gained independence from British rule, this brahmin vs. non-

brahmin divide, initiated and incited by the British, was further widened by political parties fueling Aryan-Dravidian separation in Tamil Nadu as vote-bank politics. These ideologies were promoted and propagated even though victory in elections is not determined by this small community. Despite the numerous individuals and groups that criticize or show hostility towards this community, a small group of brahmins need to dedicate their whole life to Vedas and serve as a powerhouse to ensure prosperity for the entire world. For Veda chanting and *yagnas* to continue, Acharya had the following suggestions:

1. Brahmins who have dedicated their lives to preserve this hereditary trade for universal wellness and prosperity need protection from other communities such that they don't starve or fall short of requirements for *yagnas*. Generously offer money for their services both for their survival and performance of *yagnas*.

2. Strict boundaries related to daily life and education of brahmins in Vedic schools are important. This helps create a supportive environment, a protected space for the radiation effects or 'akashic vibrations' from chanting Vedas, and a serene place that keeps them connected to God for their chants to be effective.

3. Many Veda Shakhas and Shaastras have been lost. They should be traced and researched. Teachers who understand these ancient texts should be encouraged to develop and spread their knowledge. To preserve Vedas

and Shaastras, what is even more important than publishing them as books is teaching children in the *gurukula* style. Survival of residential *gurukulas* is critical for the preservation of Vedas and Shaastras.

4. It is necessary for struggling Vedic schools (*patasalas*) to survive. We must also establish new ones to teach the basics of Vedas, the commentaries (Bhashya) on Vedas, and to conduct examinations to establish proficiency. In addition to providing financial help to run Vedic schools, help should be extended to students and teachers for their basic needs. Cash awards should be given for graduating students depending on their performance.

5. Conferences (*sadas*) such as those held in Kanchi Mutt where experts in Vedas and Shaastras are invited will help debate and clarify questions and much can be gained in such environments that promote the *Guru-Shishya* tradition.

6. Trusts should be established for protection of Vedas and Shaastras. Some suggested contributions include:

    - Save a small sum of money each month and send the total at the end of the year to a Veda protection trust known as '*Veda rakshana nidhi*'.

    - Donate immovable assets like land or house.

Why is protection of Cows important?

A cow is essential for Vedic life as its products are used in fire rituals. A cow is known as '*go-mata*'. '*Gau*' or '*go*' is cow and '*mata*' means 'mother' in Sanskrit. Her milk feeds not only her calf but others as well. '*Panchagavya*' is a product made with five ingredients which include milk, curd, ghee and a very tiny amount of cow-dung (*go-maya*) and cow urine (*go-mootra*). It is consumed in small doses as an Ayurvedic formulation. Cow-dung mixed with water is used as a disinfectant to clean the house and is sprinkled on soil in front of homes and decorative designs with rice flour are made (*kolam*) to invite Goddess Lakshmi. For the conduct of *yagnas*, two things are essential. One is a sponsor called '*yajamana*' and the other is a cow which provides most of the things used in the offerings. Ghee or clarified butter called '*aajya*' and dried cow-dung cakes are the mainstay that keeps the fire alive during yagnas. Without *yajamana* and cow, there is no *yagna*.

To take care of a cow is tantamount to taking care of the whole world. There is a prayer at the end of religious ceremonies, 'let the cows and brahmins be taken care of and kept in ease and comfort forever so that the entire world can be happy'. The cow as stated earlier is paramount for all items necessary for *yagnas*. A brahmin performs *yagnas* as his daily duties (*agnihotris*). His personal benefit is only a small fraction compared to the benefits for the world. A Vedic brahmin is essentially doing 'worldwide social service' daily. The whole world stands to gain from cows and brahmins.

The cow has the divine power to cause *mantra*s to be effective by its very presence (*sannidhya*). That is why doing '*japa'* or meditative repetition of *mantras* in a cowshed known as '*goshala*' is said to be more powerful than chanting elsewhere. All the thirty-three crore *Devatas* reside in the cow. All the sacred and divine waters (*teertas*) are in the cow. The cow is a mobile temple of all *Devatas*. Lakshmi Devi resides in cow. There are five places considered as abodes of Lakshmi: parted hair of faithful married ladies, inner part of lotus flower, head of an elephant, reverse side of bilva leaf, and posterior side of cow. Ceremonial *puja* is done to the posterior side of a cow with the humps on both sides and tail in-between. In Kanchi mutt, the first *puja* every morning is done to the cow, and only then other rituals follow and thus you can understand the venerable position occupied by the cow.

'Thirumandiram', an ancient Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta text by sage Thirumular, has hymns that defined daily duties as follows: offering one bilva leaf to Lord Shiva, one handful of cooked food to a beggar, at least a handful of grass to cow, and finishing with 'sweet words' which would be best for all. Taking good care of cows by feeding them well and keeping the cow-shed clean is important. It is an unpardonable crime if we do not feed the cow properly after it stops producing milk or sending it to a slaughterhouse.

The cow should be declared a national asset. Even after it stops yielding milk, it is an asset that continues to benefit mankind. Cow dung is useful as manure in agriculture. 'Gobar gas' is

methane that can be produced from it. When a cow dies naturally, its skin is used in percussion drums and '*gorochana*', a piece of hardened bile, is used as an additive in preparation of highly valuable aromatic fragrances. The horn of a cow is used to bathe Shiva Linga with milk. Bulls work hard in the field and help provide us with cereals and pulses. The whole of humanity is indebted to cows and bulls for countless benefits. We should show our gratitude by caring for cattle even when they get old instead of being sold to a slaughterhouse. It is tantamount to killing one's own mother. Eating cow meat is like eating one's mother's flesh. The slightest hurt to the cow is a sin and should be avoided.

Acharya pleaded to consider protection of cows or '*go-rakshana'* as one of our imperative duties. Cows can be fed with saved vegetable peels, leftover cooked rice, and water used for washing rice. We should grow '*agathi keerai*' which is a leafy vegetable enjoyed by the cows. Let us wholeheartedly establish several protective farms for stray or abandoned cows, where they can get fed to survive in healthy and hygienic surroundings. '*Go-rakshana'* should not be viewed from a commercial angle but from Vedic and divine angles and should be embedded deeply in our blood as an intrinsic *dharma*.

We must create awareness in society as to how important it is to take care of cows. If we awaken society to this need, then there will be enough donations and volunteers to do the needful. In each location, a few like-minded people can get together to tackle this job. To take care of cows is a noble venture with wonderful

returns. Vedic religion is full of anecdotes which help the common man understand profound hidden messages. One such story is that of King Dileepa of the Sun dynasty. He reached the celestial realms (*deva loka*) and failed to circumambulate Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling divine cow. This resulted in a curse that when he was reborn on earth, he would be without progeny. He, along with his wife Sudhakshina, served *Guru* Vasishta's cow Nandini. The couple helped with grazing, washing, and caring for Nandini for a certain period. King Dileepa's curse was then lifted, and the royal couple had an offspring who was named Raghu. Raghu became so famous that the Sun dynasty itself came to be known as '*Raghu-vamsa'*. Lord Vishnu was himself born into this dynasty as Sri Rama, who came to be known as Raghurama.

In ancient times, there were common grazing lands, ponds for cows to quench their thirst, and irregular edged stone pillars for them to scratch their itching body parts. Such was the *dharma* of people. The British, unaware of the usage of grazing grounds or ignoring the need to look after cattle, took all these lands as their property. The ponds and lakes disappeared in city development. Now-a-days we are letting them roam under-nourished, uncared for, and letting them be killed for beef. This is something to be ashamed of and a sad commentary on our deplorable attitude as individuals and as a nation. Even Muslim rulers like Akbar and Shahjahan, and Amir of Afghanistan were fully convinced of protecting cattle from slaughter and had enacted laws in their time. If it is put across rightfully and sensibly, all people will

support this cause. Cows can get legal protection if the majority supports this noble cause.

In appreciation of those who help with *go-rakshana*, we need to express gratitude to communities that organize and manage '*goshalas*' like the Nattukottai Chettiars in South India and those that organize 'Pinjra Pole' in North India. Currently, there is almost no town planning in India because of the enormous value of real estate leading to a lot of underhand dealings and corruption in land transactions. At times, heads of municipalities wake up to the absence of 'lung/breathing space' and show interest in creating gardens and playgrounds. At least in suburban areas we should think of creating grazing grounds, ponds, and pillars for scratching for cattle as was done in the past.

Acharya emphasized that like protecting cows, we should pay attention to self-protection (*Atma rakshana*) and get rid of bad habits. Caffeine is harmful to the mind and body. Instead of drinking coffee with milk multiple times a day, we can donate milk to temples, poor children, and sick patients. Instead of coffee in the morning, we can drink '*mor kanji'* which is mixing buttermilk with leftover rice. From one measure of milk, we can get three measures of buttermilk. When butter is churned out, butter milk is free of fat and free of lactose and can benefit those who have certain medical conditions related to cholesterol or lactose. The ghee from butter can be used to light lamps which in turn will spread brightness around and instill sanctity. Thus, cows play a major role in our *Atma rakshana* as well.

As stated in Vedic scriptures, Dharma *Devata* himself stands as a bull with 4 legs symbolizing *tapas*, cleanliness, kindness, and truth. This bull stands together with its cow. Bhagavatam, one of the eighteen main Puranas in Vedic religion, says that '*Kali Purusha*' or men of the Kali *yuga* deal with this pair cruelly. This period is filled with immoral practices. '*Go-rakshana*' ensures some semblance of morality in Kali *yuga*.

In the thirteenth book (Anushasana Parva) of Mahabharata, which is a book of precepts or instructions, Bhisma instructs Pandavas on the rules of Vedic *dharma*. Both 'Vishnu Sahasranama' and 'Shiva Sahasranama', hymns on the thousand names of Vishnu and Shiva respectively, are written in this book. Bhisma elaborates the value of cows by way of a story from the past. Sage Chyavana was a famous and powerful *rishi* who undertook a penance of standing still at the confluence of mighty rivers Ganga and Yamuna. He became entangled in the net along with fishes that were meant to be caught by fishermen who then sought help from King Nahusha to solve this issue. The sage wanted a fair price to be paid to the fishermen for his release as he was their catch. The king knew the Maharishi was so extremely invaluable that even if he gave away his entire empire spread across the three worlds to the fishermen it could not equal the greatness of the Maharishi. The king was therefore in a quandary as to what he must do to free the Maharishi. At this juncture, a *rishi* born in the belly of a divine cow came forward and advised the king that he should give a cow to the fishermen as payment for the Maharishi as cows are respected enough to be

comparable to a self-realized person. Maharishi Chyavana wholeheartedly accepted the deal as there was nothing more valuable to him than a cow. Thus, King Nahusha purchased the Maharishi from the fishermen by giving them a cow as payment and set the Maharishi free from the fishing net. There is nothing greater than donating a cow and that is the best expiation of all past sins. But we must ensure that the recipient of the donation can look after the cow. Maharishi Chyavana showered glorious praises on cows. One of his quotations is 'where the cows are happily breathing without fear as to what peril awaits, that nation will be bright and cheerful and devoid of all sins'. Acharya sincerely wished that the land of Bharat would be similarly blessed by adhering to the truth in Chyavana's words.

The appeal by Acharya for protection of cows helped develop protective farms run by '*go-rakshana*' trusts. Acharya's appeal for a trust fund (*nidhi*) created for the protection of Vedas has been successful in the survival of many Veda *patashalas* (Vedic schools). Students trained in such schools follow the Vedic traditions and are known as '*vaidika*' and perform rituals for the wellness of the world.

Chapter 5: Vedic Gods

In Vedic religion, the Gods for each sect may be different but all their scriptures have roots in the Vedas. The words ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hinduism’ given by the foreigners brought unification in this context. The five deities (*Panchayatana*) of the five major sects of Vedic religion or Hinduism include Shiva (Shaivite), Vishnu (Vaishnavite), Ganesha (Ganapatya), Sun (Saura), and Shakti (Shakta). Majority of the Hindus belong to Shaivite and Vaishnavite sects. Adi Sankara added Muruga’s (Kaumara) weapon, a spear (*Vel* in Tamil) to Panchayatana and thus unified the six sects as a ‘smartha’ tradition (Shanmata). Religious texts pertaining to different sects address their God and Vedas with equal importance.

The unmanifested God (*Paramatman* or *Brahman*) exists as three manifested Gods. They are Lord Brahma for creation, Lord Vishnu for sustenance, and Lord Shiva for dissolution. Nature’s five elements (*pancha bhutas*) such as earth (Prithvi), fire (Agni), water (Apas), air (Vayu), and space (Akasha) with their presiding King Indra and the other celestial beings are called *Devatas*. Gods involve *Devatas* for proper functioning of nature to benefit mankind. In creation, animals have more bodily power (*kriya shakti*) and man has more intellectual power (*jnana shakti*). *Devatas* have both high *kriya* and *jnana shaktis*. There are thirteen different kinds of *Devatas* with varying skills and attributes known as Siddhas, Kinaras, Yakshas, Gandharvas,

Nagas, among others. These *Devatas* exist in different grades or levels and are innumerable in numbers. They are invisible like the wind and endowed with strength and skill superior to ordinary humans. They exist in three forms:

1. In the celestial world or *deva loka*, they exist as luminous beings (*adhideivika*).

2. In the earth or *bhu loka*, they are dissolved in the *pancha bhutas* (*adhibhautika).*

3. In the human body, they exist in body parts (*adhyatmika*). Example: Surya in eyes and Vayu in nose.

In this world we are afflicted by three kinds of mental anguish:

1. Problems related to our fate like accidents and natural disasters (*adhideivika*).

2. Problems created by other people and living beings (*adibhauthika*).

3. Self-created or assumed needs such as desires, wants, and depravations (*adhyatmika*).

Every affliction experienced in this birth when put together is known as destiny or '*karma-vinai*' or '*prarabdha*'. In every problem, it is the mind that tortures us. It is the mind that converts the event into uncontrollable austerity. Worship of *Devata* or *Guru* helps us overcome such tortures of our mind. Any secret misconduct will be known by *Devatas,* and punishment will be

meted out in the form of disease, famine, and drought, among others. Offerings in fire rituals (*yagnas*) are the food for *Devatas*. The term '*Devata priya*' meaning 'loved by *Devatas*' applies to simple folks and not *jnanis*, who are self-realized and therefore are beyond the need to perform *yagna karmas. Devatas* favor us when we fulfill their wishes.

Why should there be thirty-three crore Gods in Hinduism? There is a difference between Gods and *Devatas*. When it comes to Gods, there are only three - Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. By ignorance we have put Gods and *Devatas* together to arrive at this number and often refer to *Devatas* as Gods. Our religion gives us the liberty to choose a deity of our preference (*Ishta Devata*) based on individual personalities, attitudes, and emotions and thus making it close (*ananya*) to that person. This does not mean one God or *Devata* is better than the other. Focused devotion to a God or *Devata* is the immediate goal which will eventually lead to liberation (*moksha or mukti*).

Ganesha or Pillayar

Parvati Devi created Ganesha from her own fragrant unguents and asked him to be the guardian of her abode in Kailasa. Ganesha was dutifully guarding Parvati's quarters when she was bathing. Shiva came home after years of being away and the two did not recognize each other. Ganesha prevented Shiva's entry to Parvati's living quarters which infuriated Shiva and a battle ensued. Shiva's army could not destroy Ganesha, and so Shiva took charge and severed his head. This act set off Parvati into a

rage, and she proclaimed destroying the entire creation. With Lord Brahma's intervention, Shiva was able to transplant the head of an elephant onto Ganesha and thus our beloved elephant-headed child God was born. He was declared by Shiva to be Ganapati or the leader of all beings or *Ganas*. One other reason for Parvati, also known as Goddess Lalitha, to create Ganesha was to help her defeat the demon king Bhandasura when the two were engaged in war. Bhandasura's brother Vishukra created a powerful tool (Yantra) called 'Jaya Vigna Yantra' which will be an obstacle to victory by opponents. When Vishukra hurled this at Goddess Lalitha's army, it was shattered to pieces by Ganesha, thus removing all the obstacles for Devi's army to march forward and continue their good deeds. This is mentioned in the 'Lalitha Sahasranama', which is a collection of hymns on the thousand names of Lalitha or Parvati.

Ganesha Purana and Ganapati Upanishad are scriptures very important to the Ganapatya sect for whom Ganesha is the main deity. Ganapatya sect and the eight (*ashta*) Ganapati temples dominate the landscape of Maharashtra. There are sixteen names of Ganesha mentioned in 'Ganapati Shodasa Nama Stotra' in Ganesha Purana. Chanting the following sixteen names of Ganesha over a period brings wholeness (*purnatva*) in life.

1. Sumukha: Meaning beautiful face. In Sanskrit '*mukha*' means both face and mouth. He is humble (*vinaya*) as shown with his trunk covering his mouth, even when food is picked up and put in his mouth. Covering one's mouth with a hand is an act of respect and a common practice when a disciple speaks to his

Guru so that salivary particles do not reach the *Guru*. Elephants are naturally endowed with such a display of respect and humbleness. True identification of a learned scholar is to keep the speech to an essential minimum. The pinnacle of all knowledge (*vidya*) is silence (*mauna*).

2. Ekadanta: Meaning single tusk. Male elephants have two tusks and female elephants do not have tusks. Ganesha broke his right tusk by his own volition to write the Mahabharata. Every animal has pride in a body part and uses it to showcase its beauty or power to the world. Musk deer (*Kavarimaan* in Tamil) values his tail, a peacock values his feather, and similarly an elephant values his tusk. Despite the tusk being his prized possession, Ganesha did not hesitate to break one of them to use as a pen when he was a scribe for Vyasa's narration of the Mahabharata. Vyasa recruited Ganesha as he was known for his ability to write at great speed. Ganesha accepted the role on one condition that Vyasa should not pause during the narration and Vyasa countered by stating that Ganesha should only write after understanding the meaning of each sentence. Vyasa tricked Ganesha by throwing in *shlokas* called 'kuṭashloka' or 'Bharata kuttu', some 8,800 of them, which are verses that are difficult to understand. Ganesha had to pause at times to absorb their meaning which gave time for Vyasa to gather his thoughts and resume his dictation. Thus, Vyasa and Ekadanta gave us Mahabharata.

3. Kapila: Meaning brownish red or brick red. Ganesha killed the demon, Gajamukha. The blood from this battle flowed like a river in Thiruchengattankudi village in Tamil Nadu. Ganesha's

black skin turned red and hence the name Kapila. Thiruchengattankudi is the native place of Paranjothi who later became a Shaivite saint, Siruthondar Nayanmar. Paranjothi was initially commander-in-chief of Mahendra Varma Pallava and defeated Chalukya king Pulakesi in his capital city of Vatapi. He is said to have brought Vatapi Ganapati and installed it in Thiruchengattankudi temple. This is when Ganesha worship became popular in Tamil Nadu.

4. Gajakarna: The most prominent feature of the elephant's head is the ears. Ganesha's distinctive ears signify his ability to listen attentively to the prayers and woes of his devotees. The large ears also suggest that he is ever aware and ready to respond to the needs of those who seek his guidance. This name serves as a reminder of the importance of active listening and empathy in our own lives.

5. Lambodara: Meaning one with a pendulous stomach. The entire cosmos is in his stomach. Seeing a pot-bellied child makes one happy. Purandara Dasa, the great composer, singer, and philosopher who was born in the 15th century AD, sang '*Lambodara Lakumikara'*, as Ganesha brings prosperity and well-being to all. Ganesha, who is Lambodara or one filled with abundance, is also known as 'Sthoola Kaayar' or big bodied. He is like a mountain and yet light in weight to be carried by a little mouse as his vehicle (*vahana*). Gods and *Devatas* choose their vehicle of transport not to seek any honor for themselves, but in doing so they honor the vehicle that carries them. Every vehicle bearing a God or *Devata* earns a place of honor on its own merit

in our worship. Sthoola Kayar thus honors the mouse and eases its burden by making himself light enough to be carried by the tiny mouse just as he eases the burden of his devotees. '*Pillai*' means child in Tamil and so Ganesha is often called Pillaiyar in Tamil Nadu, a respectful version of *Pillai*. Ganesha is our potbellied, big bodied, child God. Just looking at him brings motherly (*vatsalya*) love.

6. Vikata: Meaning humorous. Ganesha is full of wit and humor. When his parents are having a tiff, he will humor them and help reunite. Shiva and Parvati had a fight and no amount of reasoning and pleading from Shiva would make Parvati change her posture of remaining infuriated and livid with Shiva. When Shiva fell at her feet to obtain her pardon, the moon on his hair dropped down and shone brightly on the ground. Ganesha mistakenly thought the white shiny object on the floor was the white inner portion of the lotus stalks that he so loved to devour. Ganesha tried to hold and play with the moon and in the back and forth that ensued, Shiva and Parvati rejoiced at the actions of their child. They had a good laugh and soon Parvati let go of her anger towards Shiva and things became amicable between the divine couple, thanks to Ganesha.

7. Vigna Raja: King of all obstacles or problems which signifies that he is the king who keeps problems at arm's length. Problems are not created as an end in themselves. Sembakkam is a place near Nellore in Tamil Nadu, and there were eleven naturally occurring (*swayambhu*) Ganapathi which were hidden underground. A Maratha (one of the regions in India) minister,

Tukkoji, passed that way and the wheel of his horse drawn carriage hit a hard rock and the axle broke. He had to spend the night in that place and prayed to Vinayaka who appeared in his dream. Tukkoji was told in his dream that this minor inconvenience was caused so that he could excavate every Ganapathi, construct a temple for them, and attain name and fame for himself. The remover of obstacles, at times, creates blocks to remove them later with lessons learned during the process. These seemingly opposite actions are both blessings and help turn us back into the right path and guard us from going astray.

8. Vinayaka: It is customary to install twin Ganesha - Vigna-raja and Vi-nayaka - one causing obstacles and the other removing them. This does not mean Vigna-raja creates hurdles to harm us. Our sufferings are the outcome of our own *karma*. Vigna-raja helps decrease the intensity of our bad *karma* and makes it bearable by his grace. After we have experienced the bad *karma* that we accrued from our past, Vi-nayaka removes it. Vigna-karta and Vigna-harta, which carry the same meaning as the twin Ganesha are adjacent names in 'Shodasa Nama' *shloka* and 'Ashtottara Satanamavalli' or the one hundred and eight names of Ganesha. Vigna Vinayaka and Vigna Vinashaka also signify the twin Pillaiyar. Vinayaka can be split as 'vi' and 'nayaka'. In Sanskrit, the prefix 'vi' added to a word can make it an antonym. (Example: '*parita*' is orderly and '*viparita*' is disorderly). 'Nayaka' in Sanskrit is 'leader' and Vinayaka means one without a leader as Ganesha is supreme.

Lord Shiva had to go to war with the demon Tripurasura, and his chariot's axle broke in Acharapakkam which is in Tamil Nadu. He realized his mistake for not worshipping Ganesha first before any mission and rectified the error. Similarly, when Adi Sankara's marble statue was carried from Madras to Rameswaram by truck, it broke down in the same Acharapakkam. After breaking one hundred and eight coconuts for Ganesha, everything went smoothly with the installation of Adi Sankara in Rameshwaram's Sankara Mutt. Adi Sankara is an *avatar* of Lord Shiva. The incidents in Acharapakkam show the close connection between Lord Shiva and Adi Sankara. This reiterates the fact that all Gods and *Devatas* need Ganesha's help as a remover of obstacles but not the other way around.

9. Dhumaketu: 'Dhuma' means smoke and 'ketu' means flag. A flag of smoke or trail of smoke refers to a comet, which is considered ominous and could precede a huge catastrophe. One might wonder why Ganesha is assigned to such a foreboding name. The answer is loud and clear in Bhargava Upa-Purana. Upa-Puranas are secondary or minor Puranas which complement the major Puranas. This Upa-Purana has two sections, Upasana kanda' and 'Leela kanda'. In Leela kanda, there are twelve *avatars* of Vigneshwara and Dhumaketu is one of them. Dhumasura was an *asura* who was endowed with celestial good and demonic bad qualities, the latter being predominant. There was a king at that time whose wife was ready to give birth to a child and Dhumasura was fated to die in its hands. He sent his minister to kill the queen. However, the minister who had high

moral values was reluctant to kill the woman nor separate the couple. He carried the sleeping couple to a forest in the middle of the night and left them there. They were able to eke out a living in the forest by praying to Ganesha who was then born as their child. This matter came to the knowledge of Dhumasura, who went armed to the forest and sent arrows that would create poisonous smoke at the target end. Baby Ganesha swallowed all the poisonous smoke into his stomach. Finally, the tired Dhumasura was attacked by Ganesha by shooting back powerful blasts of Dhumasura's own smoke which then killed him. Ganesha made his flag fly high using the smoke and thus earned the name Dhumaketu.

10. Ganadyaksha: '*Adyaksha*' means head or leader. Shiva appointed Ganesha as the head of *Bhuta Ganas* or the supernatural beings of Shiva's army and Muruga as the head of *Deva Ganas* or divine beings. *Bhuta Ganas* who are difficult to control are managed by Ganesha with ease and delight. *Deva Ganas* and *Manushya Ganas* (human beings) are also respectful towards him. So Ganadyaksha signifies he is '*Adyaksha*' for all beings. 'Thiruvilayadal Puranam' was written by sage Paranjothi and has sixty-four stories which talk about Lord Shiva's playful acts and subsequent demonstration of kindness and blessings towards his devotees. Sage Paranjothi narrates the story of Shiva explaining an esoteric principle to Parvati. She was slightly absent minded, and Shiva cursed her to be born in the 'karaiyar' community, an indigenous fishing group. Long story short, Shiva later appeared as a fisherman, married Parvati, and blessed the

entire Karaiyar community. The initial demonstration of anger by their father towards their mother infuriated Ganesha and Muruga and they snatched the scriptural books in Shiva's hands and threw them away. This caused Shiva to curse Nandi (divine bull who is Shiva's *vahana* and guardian of Kailash) to be born as a shark as he failed in his duty to guard the children from coming into Shiva's inner chamber. Muruga was cursed to be born in sage Vyasa's family as a mute child. The only person Shiva did not curse was Ganesha. This is because any curse given will not affect Ganesha but rather affect Shiva multifold. Ganesha is Ganadyaksha or leader of all beings. He is endowed with eternal power to deliver bliss and grace. He has all forms of life within himself namely *Deva*, *Bhuta*, and *Manushya*.

11. Phalachandra: Meaning one who is adorned with the moon on his forehead. Moon mocked Ganesha's physical appearance on Chaturthi day (Chaturthi is 4th day of waxing lunar fortnight) of 'Bhadrapada' month (mid-August to mid-September) and incurred a curse from Ganesha that anyone seeing the moon on any Chaturthi night will develop misunderstandings between friends and family. When the moon requested pardon, Ganesha reduced the moon's curse from being incurred on all twenty-four Chaturthi (there are twelve waxing Chaturthi and twelve waning Chaturthi each year) to being in effect only on a single waxing Chaturthi day in the Bhadrapada month which is also Ganesha's birthday. Ganesha further glorified the moon by wearing on his forehead the first visible crescent moon which is seen on the third day after new moon or *Amavasya* and is called '*moondram pirai*'

in Tamil. This is comparable to how his father Shiva honored the *moondram pirai* by adorning it on his matted hair.

12. Gajanana: Meaning one with the face of an elephant, also called Gajamukha. Elephant is an animal that can pick up a needle weighing a milligram or a huge oak beam weighing a ton with equal felicity and ease using its trunk. Gajamukha can manage all major and minor complications. There was an incident when Parvati's fury and wrath needed to be reined in. Anger and rage will disappear only to be replaced with love and calmness at the very sight of Ganesha. Akhilandeswari, who is Parvati, resides with Jambukeshwar temple in Thiruvanaikaval in Tamil Nadu. Akhilandeswari was once filled with rage when people became wayward and defiant in Kali *yuga* with cruel non-Vedic tantric methods of worship. Adi Sankara, who is considered an *avatar* of Shiva himself and possessed great powers, utilized Ganesha to calm down Akhilandeswari. He installed a big statue of Ganesha in front of her at the temple. Instantaneously, Akhilandeshwari's anger dissipated and she was overcome with maternal love for her dear child Ganesha. Thiruaanaikaaval Jambukeswarar temple has references to Ganesha and *Jambu* fruit. '*Jambu*' or '*Naaval*' tree bears a fruit, *jambu* or *jamun* or Indian blackberry, which is one of Ganesha's favorites. '*Aanai*' in 'Thiru Aanaikaa' is the word in Tamil for 'elephant' and reminds us of elephant faced Ganesha, Gajanana.

13. Vakratunda: Means an arched trunk. It is curved to the right (*valampuri*) or left (*edampuri*). Appayya Dikshitar sang '*pranava swaroopa vakrathundam*' in praise of Ganesha's trunk,

as his trunk is in the shape of *pranava* or cosmic sound 'Om' when written in Sanskrit.

14. Soorpakarna: Means having big ears like a winnowing basket or '*soorpa*'. This is like what is called '*muram*' in Tamil. This is a tray that traditionally is 18 inches wide at the open end and twelve inches wide at the closed end and is used to separate raw grains of cereals or pulses from their unwanted husks. In Ramayana, Ravana's sister Soorpanakha, had a similar reference as she had nails like a tray. Omnipresent Ganesha known as Soorpakarna, listens to us and can filter the essential from the non-essential and blesses us with his grace.

15. Heramba: He has five faces, ten hands, and rides on a lion. His five faces signify his association with his father Iswara and the lion vehicle (*simha vahana*) associates him with his mother Parvati. Neelayadakshi temple in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu has a Heramba Ganapati which has four faces in each direction and a fifth on top like a crown. He is part of a collection of *Panchaloha murthis* (five metal idols) in this temple. Just a glimpse of this Ganapathi will give us happiness.

16. Skanda Poorvaja: Meaning elder brother of Skanda or Muruga. Normally the younger brother is referred to by the elder brother. Why should Ganesha be named in association with his younger brother? It is because the lives of Ganesha and Muruga are intertwined. A contest was held between the two brothers that whoever goes around the world first will win a divine mango fruit brought by sage Narada to their parents. Ganesha believed

that his parents were his world and walked around them and won the contest. This conveys the wisdom that for a child, parents are their 'be all and end all'. Muruga who took longer to literally circumambulate the world felt tricked over the loss of the fruit. He took a stance of renunciation in Palani hills where he is seen holding a staff and wearing a loin cloth. With renunciation came wisdom and he was soon pacified by his parents. Muruga became the commander-in-chief of Shiva's celestial army and defeated many demons, fulfilling the very purpose for his birth. Ganesha helped his brother Muruga when he wanted to marry Valli. Ganesha took the form of an elephant in musth and chased Valli towards Muruga who was standing nearby and was quick to save his damsel in distress. Valli was impressed and married Muruga. These stories show the closeness of the brothers. Acharya advised us not to separate the brothers but to worship them together.

Ganesha is worshiped as a remover of obstacles at the beginning of any endeavor. Even if one has *bhakti* or devotion only for a specific deity as his *'Ishta Devata'* or 'preferred deity' one cannot forget Ganesha. This is especially true for Shaivites. For Vaishnavites who don't pray to Ganesha in his known form, he still stands guard in Perumal temples as Viswaksena and every visitor must prostrate to him first and any function in the temple will start only after worshipping him.

Ganesha removes obstacles both for the devotees and for the *Devatas* for successful completion of their worship. This point is elaborated by Acharya using the invocatory *shloka* in '*Nyayendu*

Shekara', a book written by Raju Shastri also known as Mannargudi Periyava. Mannargudi Periyava was endowed with great knowledge and humility. He taught Vedic scriptures to many including learned *pundits* and even monks. He earned the title 'Mahamahopadhyaya' or 'great teacher of Vedas'. Mannargudi Periyava's intellect made him compose this befitting *shloka* intertwining Nyaya Shaastra which is reason/logic and Ganesha. The *shloka* states that a devotee who is a knower of '*tat hethu nyayam*' (logic or justification of attaining a goal using a strategy) knows that invoking Ganesha and praying to him alone is enough to remove the obstacles in his path. Ganesha is '*ekam param*', the supreme being and representative of non-duality of Advaita oneness.

A person who understands '*tat hethu nyayam'* knows that it is not just a good idea but rather mandatory to pray to Ganesha to assure that there will be no obstacles or interruptions to their worship. While worship to get the blessing of his *Ishta Devata* might be the main goal, worship of Ganesha is the subgoal for each devotee. This is needed to accomplish what a devotee sets out to do, because if there should be a problem the *Devatas* do not have the power to remove the obstacles and only Ganesha does.

Acharya explained in many ways the '*tat hethu nyayam*' concept of solely worshipping Ganesha. When we are engaged in worship of Lakshmi for wealth, Saraswati for knowledge or Suryanarayana for health, such *Devatas* themselves might be facing obstacles or hurdles. There is ample evidence for this in

the Puranas when a God or *Devata* himself faced an interruption in their actions and had to seek the help of Ganesha.

Invocatory *shloka* of 'Nyayendu Shekara' thus states that praying to Ganesha alone is enough, so one is left with the question if worship of Ganesha grants the benefit, why offer prayers to him and then go on to pray to the *Devatas*? Acharya elaborated on why the knower of '*tat hethu nyayam*', be it as it may, can look at worship from another angle as well. Ganesha, who is '*ekam param*' retains his obstacle removing power but permits other *Devatas* to do their duties as well. Similarly, even though many *Devatas* themselves are '*paramatma vastu'* or 'Supreme Souls' and have also been referred to as '*ekam param'*, they retain a certain duty and leave some for Ganesha to deliver. Variety is the spice of life for the common man in all aspects of his life. Worship of Gods and *Devatas* is no different.

Ganesha is fondly worshipped all over India. He is often worshiped with coconuts. Coconut represents the three eyed Shiva as it has three eye-like structures on its surface when the husk is peeled. Hence offering coconut, a symbolic form of Lord Shiva, to Ganesha symbolizes offering him whatever is superior to everything. Breaking coconuts into pieces in the presence of Ganapathy is a unique practice in Tamil Nadu. The broken coconut symbolizes that if the egoistic hard outer shell is broken in all of us, the nectar like coconut water is seen within.

Devotees often perform '*kuttu*' (gently tapping on the corners of forehead with knuckles of fisted fingers) and '*thoppukaranam*'

(crossing hands and holding ears while performing squats) in front of Ganesha. There are stories in Vedic scriptures to know how such practices came into existence. The story related to '*kuttu*' is associated with Vibhishana, brother of Ravana who fought alongside Sri Rama for the injustice done to Sita Devi. Vibhishana attended Sri Rama's coronation and upon his return to Lanka was presented with a small idol of Lord Vishnu in the form of Sri Ranganatha that was worshipped by emperors of Sri Rama's Ishvaku dynasty for many generations. Vibhishana was told by Rama that this sanctified idol cannot be put on the ground for it will establish itself on that spot as the permanent abode of Sri Ranaganatha. Vibhishana carried the idol as he set forth on his journey to Lanka. When Vibhishana reached Srirangam, it was time to perform his evening prayers, and he decided to do so after performing ablutions in the river Ubaya Cauvery or Kollidam which is a tributary of Cauvery river. Baths before daily prayers (*pavitra snana*) are recommended in Vedic religion as a form of purification. Vibhishana requested a *brahmachari* who was present nearby to hold Ranganatha during this time. The young lad agreed but held a condition that when he is unable to hold any longer, he would call Vibhishana's name thrice and if he did not return, he would put the idol down. The *brahmachari* was none other than Ganesha. Vibhishana agreed to this condition and entered the river. A while later, Ganesha called Vibhishana's name thrice and this call was not heard by Vibhishana who had swum to the other bank of the river. Ganesha therefore placed the heavy idol on the ground where it stood firm facing the southern direction. The intention of placing

the idol facing south was that even though Ranganatha did not reach Lanka, Vibhishana and his people in Lanka which is situated south of Tamil Nadu would always be blessed by Lord Vishnu. When Vibhishana returned, he was extremely disappointed to see Ranganatha on the ground. He wanted to punish Ganesha who was only known to him as the young boy that was supposed to hold Ranganatha till he returned from his *pavitra snana*. There was a chase that ensued which ended in Trichy's Rock fort hill. Ganesha had gone to the very top of the hill unreachable by Vibhishana. Ganesha then made himself available to Vibhishana so he could satiate his anger by knocking on Ganesha's head thrice with his knuckles ('*kuttu'* in Tamil). The Chola king during these times was Dharma Varma. Till date the outer periphery (*suttru*) of Sri Ranganatha temple is known as Dharma Varman suttru. The Chola king did *tapasya* (intense meditation) for the Ikshvaku family deity to visit his kingdom. This was the reason for Ranganatha to be established in Srirangam as stated in the temple's history (Sthala-Purana). Some might find these anecdotes unbelievable, but there is ample proof of the occurrence of this incident in Srirangam. Firstly, Ganesh temple which usually is never on top of hills is located here on the Rock Fort hill signifying the pursuit of Ganesha by Vibhishana and culmination of the chase on the hilltop. Secondly, the Ganesha in Trichy's Rock fort temple has dent marks from the knuckles of Vibhishana. These two facts authenticate the story for the naysayers. Vibhishana must have performed '*kuttu*' on himself in front of Ganesha once he realized the little boy was Ganesha and this has become a custom in South India.

Unlike the '*kuttu*' story, the '*thoppukaranam*' performed to Ganesha is linked with Lord Vishnu. He was visiting his sister Parvati's family in Kailasa. To spend a relaxing time with his sister's family, he retired his divine weapon, a discus named 'Sudarshan *chakra*', briefly to a corner. Attracted by the shiny discus, baby Ganesha placed it in his mouth. To get it back without force, Lord Vishnu tried many methods but failed. Finally, he performed the witty act of '*thoppukaranam*' which made Ganesha laugh, causing the *chakra* to fall out. This play act of Vishnu to please Ganesha continues as a form of worship to Ganesha among people of South India.

'*Pillaiyar Suzhi*', a Tamil syllable '', is used at the start of writings in Tamil. In this syllable, the coil represents the principle of formless God, and the straight line represents the manifested universe as a single continuum. Tamil poet-saint Avvaiyar who was a great devotee of Ganesha sung the 'Vinayagar Agaval', a hymn on Ganesha containing seventy-two lines. Understanding its meaning and daily chanting of Vinayagar Agaval brings self-realization knowledge (*Atma Jnana*) for it entails the entire 'Yoga Sutra' which is a path described in our scriptures to achieve spiritual liberation.

In Kanchi Mutt, cow puja (*go-puja*) is done in the daytime and elephant *puja* (*gaja-puja*) in the evening. The cow is considered as sacred as a mother. Along those lines, the only animal that is similarly venerated is the elephant. In *gaja puja*, an elephant is decorated with red ochre tilak on its forehead and given fruits. The elephant does *puja* to Adi Sankara's footwear (*paduka*) by

placing flowers and waving a fan (*chamara*) signifying that the day's accounts are submitted to Adi Sankara, an *avatar* of Shiva. When everyone is doing *namaskar* (prostration) to *paduka*, the elephant lifts its trunk up as a salute and gives out his clarion call. This *puja* is called '*devatte salaam*'. Ganesha has the eternal power of delivering bliss and grace. Ganesha is *Deva* (God), *Bhuta* (beings), and *Manushya* (man) combined, meaning his divine essence transcends all forms of existence and thus brings order to the entire universe. It can also mean that his elephant head is *Bhuta*, he eats cooked food like *Manushya*, and he is a celestial *Deva*.

Karthik or Muruga

The name 'Swami' specifically applies to Muruga more so than any other God or *Devata*. The book 'Amarakosha' by Amarasimha lists many names of Muruga and Swami is one of them. In South India, he is worshiped as a youthful warrior full of effulgence, beauty, and brilliance and in contrast he is considered a child (*kumara*) in North India.

The birth of Muruga is very interesting. We learn from 'Brahma Sutra' derived from Upanishads and written by Maharishi Vyasa, that Muruga was an *avatar* of Sanat Kumara who was a *Brahma Jnani*, a person who had attained complete knowledge of the Supreme Reality or *Brahman*. Sanat Kumara once had a dream that he was the commander-in-chief of *Devatas* or celestials in their war against the *Asuras* or demons. He went to his father Lord Brahma to ask the significance of the dream to which Lord

Brahma explained that in his previous birth Sanat Kumara studied the Vedas and learned about the war between the *Devatas* and *Asuras*. He then had an urge to vanquish the *asuras*. Therefore, now that thought in his mind will come true. Sanat Kumara did not think much of it until Lord Shiva decided to make his dream come true.

Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati visited Sanat Kumara who saw everything as *Brahman* and did not acknowledge their presence. Lord Shiva threatened to curse Sanat Kumara for insulting the divine couple to which Sanat Kumara replied that no curse would affect his soul or *Atman* and that was the answer Lord Shiva expected from a true *Brahma Jnani*. He lured Sanat Kumara with the grant of a boon which also did not entice Sanat Kumara as he was beyond the effects of curses or boons and instead asked Lord Shiva if he wanted a boon from him. Lord Shiva praised Sanat Kumara for being a fully realized soul or *Brahman* and expressed his wish to have Sanat Kumara as his son. Sanat Kumara promised Lord Shiva that he would be born as his son in his next birth. There was a catch in this statement as Sanat Kumara would only be born as Lord Shiva's son and not from the womb of Goddess Parvati. Sanat Kumara stated this was in keeping with the Shaastras which recommend granting a wish only to the one who requests it and not to the one who does not make the request. In this case it was Lord Shiva and not Goddess Parvati who made a request to Sanat Kumara. This made Goddess Parvati sad, and nothing would change Sanat Kumara's mind. Therefore, Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati went into their trouble shooting mode

and remembered the story of Bhasmasura. Lord Shiva had granted a boon to Bhasmasura that when he laid his hand on the head of anyone they would turn to ashes. Bhasmasura decided to test it on Lord Shiva himself, and Lord Shiva disappeared to escape from Bhasmasura. Goddess Parvati became distraught and started to melt away and became a pond, known as Saravana Poigai. When Lord Shiva returned after the death of Bhasmasura, Goddess Parvati returned to her form but blessed Saravana Poigai to continue to exist and be considered as Goddess Parvati herself.

Now let us fast forward to the story of Sanat Kumara being born as Lord Shiva's son Muruga. Sanat Kumara, in keeping with the wish granted to Lord Shiva, was reborn like lightning coming out of clouds as six sparks emerged from Lord Shiva's third eye and therefore, he is named *Skanda*. Shiva has five faces and the sixth one facing the sky is combined with Shakti which accounts for the six sparks. The divine sparks were carried by wind *Devata*, Vayu, and when the heat became unbearable Vayu handed them to fire *Devata,* Agni. Agni deposited them in the Ganga and when the waters of Ganga began to evaporate from the intense heat of the sparks, she took them to Saravana Poigai where the sparks developed into six babies. How could the heat from the sparks that could not be handled by the mighty Ganga be handled by a small pond named Saravana Poigai? This is because as stated earlier, Saravana Poigai is Parvati Devi herself. Muruga's birth is thus a divine conception. These babies were nurtured by six Krittika stars or celestial beings and later fused into one being by

Parvati and thus was born Kartikeya. Muruga is thus also known as '*Shanmukha*' meaning six faced God. The dream of Sanat Kumara came true, and Muruga became the commander-in-chief for the *Devatas*.

Muruga is worshiped mainly in South India. There are six main temples called 'Arupadai Veedu' in Tamil Nadu. Each site is to celebrate a specific event in Muruga's life.

1. Pazhani: Muruga's angry stance of feud with family over a divine mango fruit. This is elaborated earlier in the section on Ganesha in the discussion of Ganesha's sixteenth name as *'*Skanda Poorvaja*'*.

2. Swamimalai: Muruga taught the meaning of cosmic sound 'Om' to his father Lord Shiva. The meaning of 'Om' as was taught by Muruga is that the entire creation, including the Trinity of Brahma-Vishnu- Shiva, is contained within this single cosmic sound.

3. Thiruchendur: Muruga won over the demons Taraka, Simhamukha and Surapadma and restored Indra's kingdom. This event is celebrated every year as a big festival with re-enactment of the story in Thiruchendur temple on the 6th lunar fortnight (Shasti) of the waxing moon (*sukla paksha*) in the 'Karthik' month of the Vedic calendar.

4. Thiruparankundram: Muruga married Devasena, daughter of Indra.

5. Tiruttani: Muruga married Valli, daughter of tribal chief Nambiraja.

6. Pazhamudircholai: Muruga along with Valli and Devasena blesses his devotees.

In Kukke Subramanya temple on the west coast of Karnataka, the idol is in snake form. Muruga is revered in the form of a snake in Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Muruga is symbolic of Kundalini energy in the form of a coiled snake in Muladhara *chakra*. *Chakras* are energy points which are six of them along the spine and the seventh or last ending on the top of the crown or head. The main channel for Kundalini energy flow is '*Sushumna nadi'* which runs from Muladhara *chakra* at the base of the spine to Sahasrara *chakra* at the top of the head. '*Sushumna*' means '*compassionate*' and represents Muruga. The 2 subsidiary *nadis* are '*Ida*' and '*Pingala*'. '*Ida*' meaning 'comfort' is the channel on the left of the spine. It represents Valli and the cooler, lunar, feminine energy. '*Pingala*' meaning 'orange-brown' is the channel on the right of the spine. It represents Devasena, and the energetic, solar, masculine energy. Valli is representative of '*Iccha Shakti*' or power of desire, and Devasena is representative of '*Kriya Shakti*' or power of action. Muruga represents *'Jnana Shakti'* or power of knowledge. When desires and actions are directed towards divine wisdom embodied in Muruga, dualistic thoughts are overcome from union of individual energy with cosmic energy. Kundalini Yoga is described in detail in the 'Goddess' section on Parvati.

The six syllable *mantra* 'Saravanabhava' is for Muruga. His weapon is a spear or '*Vel*' that he received from his mother Parvati before going to battle with the demons. He rides on a peacock that claws a snake. His divine energy controls the opposing energies of a predator (peacock) and a prey (snake) in individuals which is essential for their survival. Like his mother Parvati, Muruga grants both worldly pleasure (*bhoga*) and liberation (*moksha* or *mukti*). Muruga is worshiped on the 6th day of each lunar fortnight (Shasti) with worship and fasting. If fasting is combined with silence, it settles the mind in the bliss of cosmic energy on Shasti days. Chanting 'Kanda Shasti Kavacha' composed by Devaraya Swami in Tamil or 'Subramanya Bhujanga' composed by Adi Sankara in Sanskrit removes bodily afflictions.

Surya or Vivaswan

In Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna that he first taught Jnana Yoga or experiential knowledge of soul to Surya or Vivaswan. Self-realization is attained by selfless activity (Nishkama karma) and remaining focused on Iswara (God). Surya or Sun God imparted it to Manu, the first man with a thinking mind. Arjuna was left perplexed as to how Krishna could have taught Surya this divine principle of the eternal continuum of *Atman* and *Brahman*. Krishna relieved Arjuna of this conundrum with the manifestation of his '*Vishwa-Rupa*' or vision of cosmos with no separation of time and space.

Rig Veda glorifies Surya as the perceptible (*prathyaksha*) *Devata*. He is the primary source of energy and has influences over seasons, rains, vegetation, among many others in this universe. Surya is involved in the manifestation, maintenance, and dissolution of life. Vedic rituals invoking Surya bring spiritual energy. There is a Sun salutation called '*Surya Namaskar*', a Yoga exercise that energizes the body and stabilizes the mind.

Sun along with eight planets known as 'Navagraha' is worshiped to alleviate the sufferings brought about by planetary transits (astrology). Exclusive worship of Surya is found in Suryanar temple in Tamil Nadu. Many Sun temples are in ruins with no worship (example: Konark temple in Orissa). In Ramayana, Agastya *rishi* imparted 'Aadithya Hridayam' to Sri Rama. It is a hymn dedicated to Surya to reinforce spirituality and bestow courage in Rama to vanquish demon Ravana.

Shiva or Hara

In the Hindu Trinity of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva for creation, sustenance, and dissolution respectively, Shiva is Rudra. Rudra is fearsome and brings about the dissolution of the universe. At the same time, Rudra as Shiva is benevolent and helps devotees overcome sufferings and facilitate liberation (*moksha* or *mukti*). This is the permanent annihilation of an individual's mind in the heart's cave (*hrudaya guha*) and becoming one with God. Understanding the actions of Shiva requires an in-depth insight and comprehension of the Vedas. Both 'Pancha Rudram' from

Rig Veda and 'Sri Rudram' from Yajur Veda is used by Acharya to help us understand that Shiva and Rudra are the same God.

Pancha Rudram is a collection of five sections of hymns or Suktas on Rudra from Rig Veda. Each section was composed by a *rishi* (seer or sage) and they are Kanwa, Angeerasha, Gritsamada, Bharadwaja and Vasishta. There is absolutely no reference to Rudra as a God of anger and cruelty in the Vedas. The essence of these hymns in praise and worship of Rudra is to shower us with benefits such as good health and prosperity. The first *shloka* of Pancha Rudram describes Rudra as *prachetas* - highly knowledgeable; *meedustama* - 'superlative benefactor'; and *tavyasa* - strong. Rudra despite being omnipresent and omnipotent resides in our hearts when we worship him. The Suktas go on to further describe Rudra as a compassionate provider of divine grace and mercy, curer of diseases (*vaidyanatha*), and a protector of *yagnas* and not once is there a mention of Rudra as a creator of trouble and havoc!

'Sri Rudram' *shloka* from Taittiriya Samhita of the Yajur Veda starts with the phrase '*Ya te Rudra Shiva tanuh'* meaning 'That which is Rudra is Shiva'. It acknowledges that Rudra's power in the form of Shiva is auspicious, joyous, and benevolent and in the non-terrifying form of Aghora can destroy evil by mere remembrance of him. This reiterates without doubt that our scriptures do not associate negativity with Rudra but that his blessings are sought for well-being, protection, and forgiveness.

These profound concepts have been widely misinterpreted by some Indologists to promote Aryo-Dravidian race theory. Indologists have been wrong about the origin of the name 'Shiva'. They claimed that it came from 'sivappu', which is Tamil for 'fair' which cannot be any farther from the truth as 'Shiva' is always a proper noun in Tamil literature. In Sanskrit, the word '*shiva*' stands for all things good and auspicious. Amarakosha, written by a Jain named Amarasimha, is the oldest known dictionary-thesaurus of Sanskrit and contains sections on Hindu Gods and *Devatas* and their various names. *Shiva* is best described in Amarakosha to be synonymous with '*bhadram*', '*kalyanam*', '*mangalam*', and '*shubam*'. The meaning of all these words which indicate 'Shiva' is 'auspicious'. That which is auspicious is good, and gives happiness, comfort, and prosperity. The essence, significance, and the higher meaning of Shiva and all its synonyms is 'love'. It is love, not desire that spreads goodness and happiness and gives us comfort and fulfillment. Tamil saint Thirumoolar described Shiva as '*Anbe Shivam'* (Love is Shiva or God / God or Shiva is Love) as Shiva embodies love and purity which is how Shiva is described in the Vedas.

The so-called researchers from the west also went on to say that there exist an anger-filled cruel Rudra and a pleasant Shiva and they are two different Gods, one worshipped by Aryans and the other by Dravidians. They further went on to say that over the ages we fused them into a syncretic deity! There is nothing more absurd than to say Rudra and Shiva are two separate Gods or to say Rudra is the harbinger of cruelty to mankind. For westerners

who believe God is an embodiment of everything good and Satan the epitome of everything bad, Vedic religion could not be understood in its purest sense. Acharya has exposed the faults of western research meddling with India's ancient history and Vedic religion with his thorough research of Vedic scriptures. In his modesty and humbleness, he would say that even if we are not convinced in his words, we can choose to listen to Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, both highly knowledgeable in historical research and modern reforms. These spiritual and literary giants have not accepted the 'Two-race theory' of India and have vehemently denied it to be a rubbish idea!

Sadashivan-Sadashivom-Sadashivam are names for Shiva with profound meanings. Sadashivan is one who is the supreme ruler of all worlds, whose main job is delivering blessings and grace (*anugraha*). Sadashivam is formless, actionless, and exists as an inner experience (*anubhava*). The names ending with 'n' and 'm' are common in South India and so it is Sadashivan and Sadashivam. In Hindi language, 'n' and 'm' are generally eliminated from divine names and so Sadashivam and Sadashivan are both Sadashiva in the northern regions of Bharat.

There are 5 faces of Shiva according to Shiva Purana.

1. '*Sadyojata'* is the face looking westward, to bless Lord Brahma's process of creation.

2. '*Vamadeva'* is the face looking northward, to bless Lord Vishnu's preservation of Creation.

3. '*Aghoram'* is the face looking southward, representing the destructive/ regenerative energy of Shiva as Rudra.

4. '*Tatpurusha'* is the face looking eastward, representing Shiva as a deluded or misled *Purusha* (cosmic being).

5. '*Eeshanam'* facing the space above is Sadashivam who is Eternal, Omnipotent and Omnipresent.

Five faces of Lord Shiva essentially administer five duties known as '*Panchakritya*'. It includes '*Srishti*' (creation), '*Stithi*' (preservation) and '*Laya*' (destruction), '*Tirobhav*' (illusion or *Maya*) and '*Anugraha*' (salvation/grace).

The five faces have associated Veda *mantra*s and are written in 'Narayanavalli' from Taithriya Upanishad. This section is also called Maha Narayana Upanishad. The *mantra* for *Eeshanam* face of Lord Shiva is:

Esanassarva Vidyanam Eswarassarva Bhootanam
Brahmadhi patir Brahmanodhi pathir
Brahma Sivome astuh Sadashivom

This *mantra* explains that *Eeshan* (Shiva) is the Lord of all knowledge and all beings. The *mantra* starts with Shiva performing the duties of '*Tirodhana*', who is the giver of joys and sorrows (*Tirobhava*) by which he essentially ties up the universe in *Maya* or illusion. He, then as Sadashiva goes on to perform his duties to bring liberation (*moksha or mukti*) and he is thus the one liberated form (*moksha swaroopam*),

Sadashivom. Sadashivom became Sadashivam through the years of usage in day-to-day life.

Divine grace or *anugraha* is the most important function for Shiva and is five in number. The four *anugrahas* for daily life in this world of illusion are '*thanu*', '*karanam*', '*buvanam*', and '*bogam*' which stand respectively for blessings of our body, senses, the world of enjoyment, and experiences obtained from it. Most of us cannot cancel the accrued *karmas* of our past lives using just the four *anugrahas* thus mentioned. On the contrary, we utilize these *anugrahas* and accumulate more bad *karmas*. When humans are bound by desire they are called '*pashu*' or animal and the lord of *pashus* is Shiva (Pashupati) who releases humans from the bondage of accumulated *karmas*. Finally using his fifth function, grants the most significant '*Moksha pradhaana' anugraha*.

Parvati, also known as Lalitha, Bhavani, and Hemavathy is Lord Shiva's wife. She is the chief executive of divinity and does the important job of giving blessings (*anugraha*) through Sadashiva and she grants pleasure from worldly experiences (*bhoga*). She helps attain liberation (*moksha or mukti*) with Sadashiva in conjunction with *pranava* Om or cosmic sound as Sadashivom (Shiva is combined with Shakti). Shiva without Shakti (Goddess) is a state of inactivity or unawareness and therefore '*shava*' or 'corpse'. Shiva with Shakti is the cause for creation. Shiva and Shakti should be worshiped together. As Ardhanari, the right half is Shiva, left half is Parvati, and they are in perfect union. It is

the static (Shiva) and dynamic (Parvati) forces existing in balance.

Sadashivom is the state of formless *Paramatman or Brahman* and is also described as *Shantam* and *Advaitam* in Mandukya Upanishad which is an extensive treatise on cosmic sound or *pranava* Om. Sadashivom is the state of liberation that comes with annihilation of the concept of an individual and his ego. This is the truth (*satya*) and this dissolution is bliss (*ananda*) and beautiful (*sundara*) and referred to as Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram. Reference and usage of Satyam-Sivam-Sundaram have been in vogue in South India for a long time and was later popularized by Brahma Samaj as a parallel to '*Sat-Chit-Ananda'*. *Sat-Chit-Ananda* can be described as truth-consciousness-bliss which is the same as *Satyam-Sivam-Sundaram* or truth-consciousness-beauty and to experience this is the goal of our spiritual journey.

Shiva as the ultimate cosmic dancer is Nataraja. Nataraja's abode is Chidambaram, and his sanctum sanctorum is the heart of the universe and is called '*Chidakasa*'. '*Chid*' means consciousness and '*akasha*' means space. It is to show that the invisible outer space or *Brahman* exists in the inner heart's cave as *Atman*. The dance of Nataraja is called '*pancha-kritya paramananda tandava*' which enlightens the world of the *pancha kritya* duties of Lord Shiva. The right foot of Nataraja is on demon 'Muyalaka' representing the illusory world (*Tirobhava*). The left foot known as 'Kunchitapada' is held high for the individual to hold onto it for liberation. The drum in one hand indicates creation (*Shristi*),

the fire in the other hand is dissolution (*Samhara*), the hand raised up is for sustenance (*Stithi*), and the hand pointing to raised feet is for blessings (*Anugraha*).

Shiva is also worshipped using his names with the 'maha' prefix such as Mahadeva, Mahalinga, and Maheswara. '*Maha*' means 'great'. Mahadeva is the greatest of all *Devatas*. Lingam signifies Supreme Reality or *Brahman* and is oval like the cosmos. Mahalingam is this great Lingam, representing unmanifested and manifested *Brahman* (*arupa-rupa*) encompassing all possible ideas, notions, principles, and concepts. '*Ish*' means 'having possession' and Iswara is one having dominant power and possession of the entire universe. Shiva as Iswara is benevolent and will easily grant anyone's wish if approached with love and worship in simple ways. Maheshwara is the great Iswara. Similarly, we refer to many of our Gods and *Devatas* with the 'maha' prefix such as Mahavishnu, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati, Mahasena, Mahakali, and so on. The prefix 'sada' derived from '*sat*' however is unique only for Shiva and not used for other Gods or *Devatas*. '*Sat*' is 'eternity' and '*Sada*' is eternal and so Sadashiva is eternal Shiva.

In the pursuit of understanding Shiva, we have learned the various forms and actions of Shiva. Lord Shiva is worshiped mainly in the Linga form which is symbolic of the ellipsoidal (egg-shaped) universe. Shiva appeared as an infinite column of light (*Jyotirlinga*) when Brahma and Vishnu had an argument over who among them was superior. The challenge was to find the ends of this infinite column. Brahma as swan and Vishnu as

boar went above and below to find its head and feet respectively. They could neither find them nor decipher the enormity of the column of light. Vishnu was honest about his failed attempt. Brahma however lied and asked '*thazhampoo*' or 'ketaki' flower which usually grows in the higher elevations to pretend as his witness and claimed to have reached the upper end of the Linga. At this point, Shiva emerged from the column of light condemning Brahma for lying and rewarded Vishnu for his honesty. In many Shiva temples, the outer walls of sanctum sanctorum depict Lingodbhava, a *murthi* or idol of Shiva emerging from Linga with a boar at the bottom and a swan on the top. Linga is often bathed in water (*abhishekam*) and offered '*bhel*' or bilva leaf to cool and please Shiva.

Iconographic representation of Shiva is a meditative human (*yogi*) whose head has matted hair adorned with the crescent moon and the flowing Ganges river. He has a third eye on his forehead, a snake around his neck, and wears elephant skin. His weapon is a trident with a drum tied to it. *Yogis* meditate upon the light (*jyothi*) that is at the center of the Sahasrara *Chakra* on the top of their head. When *yogis* achieve a state of union with Shiva, nectar (*amrit*) oozes out from this center and is blissful.

Formal *archana* (worship) to Lord Shiva is done reciting his *sahasra* (1000), *trisati* (301), *ashtottara* (108), and *ashta* (8) names. Reciting the following *shloka* describes how Shiva expressed himself in eight ways to create and sustain the universe. Acharya said that reciting the following *shloka* and its variations is an easy form of worship.

Easy (*lagu*) *shloka* for Shiva and Shakti

Shiva	Shakti
Sarvaya devaya namah (earth)	*Sarvasya devasya patnyai namah*
Bhavaya devaya namah (water)	*Bhavasya devasya patnyai namah*
Eshanaya devaya namah (sun)	*Eshanasya devasya patnyai namah*
Pasupataye devaya namah (lord of creatures)	*Pasupatayasya devasya patnyai namah*
Rudraya devaya namah (dissolution)	*Rudrasya devasya patnyai namah*
Ugraya devaya namah (wind)	*Ugrasya devasya patnyai namah*
Bhimaya devaya namah (space)	*Bhimasya devasya patnyai namah*
Mahate devaya namah (supreme)	*Mahato devasya patnyai namah*

Easy (*lagu*) *shloka* for Shiva's children and Muruga's spouses

Ganesha and Muruga	Valli and Devasaena
Sarvaya devasya putraaya namah	*Sarvasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Bhavaya devasya putraaya namah	*Bhavasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Eshanaya devasya putraaya namah	*Eshanasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Pasupataye devasya putraaya namah	*Pasupatayasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Rudraya devasya putraaya namah	*Rudrasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Ugraya devasya putraaya namah	*Ugrasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Bhimaya devasya putraaya namah	*Bhimasya devasya putrasya patnyai namah*
Mahato devasya putraaya namah	*Mahato devasya putrasya patnyai namah*

Vedic chanting as ‘Sri Rudram’ and ‘Namah Shivaya’ *mantra* is from Taittiriya Samhita of the Yajur Veda. Sri Rudram chanting is done during Pradosa time (1.5 hours before and after 4pm), on the 13th day of the lunar fortnight (Trayodasi). Chanting of ‘Thevaram’ hymns collectively known as ‘Thirumurai’ composed by Shaivite saints known as Nayanmars is prevalent in South India. Shaivites wear ashes horizontally on their forehead. This reminds us of the impermanent body burning down to ashes. It is auspicious to pray to Shiva after sunset to bring lasting peace when work-related commotions of the outer world subside. In Smartha (Iyer) tradition, every ritual starts with ‘Parameshwara preethiyartham’ and ends with ‘Krishnaarpanam’. How can Shiva’s *preethi* (love) be offered to Vishnu? It is because there is no difference between them and they are one and the same.

Vishu or Hari

Lord Vishnu as the sustainer is the universal monarch (*chakravarti*). He is dark skinned and wears gemstone (*kaustubha*) garland and yellow silk (*pitambara*) garment. He holds the conch (*sanku*) and disc (*chakra*) representing the cycle of life and the establishment of *dharma* respectively. His benevolent form sleeps on the serpent Sesha floating in the primeval ocean accompanied by his consort Goddess Lakshmi with a lotus from his navel holding Brahma. When the world is threatened with destructive forces, Vishnu descends in the form of an *avatar* to empower the good and to destroy evil, thereby restoring *dharma*. Vedic literature particularly Puranas

(historical accounts) and Ithihaasas (eyewitness accounts) narrate the various *avatars* of Vishnu. '*Purana*' and '*Ithihaasa*' literally mean 'ancient' and 'this is what happened' respectively in Sanskrit. The most known *avatars* are Sri Rama in Ramayana Ithihaasa and Sri Krishna in Mahabharata Ithihaasa and Bhagavata Purana.

Sri Rama is a *yogi*, or one who is deeply absorbed in truth and righteousness. His name means happiness, but he endured many sufferings in life including fourteen years of forest life, abduction of his wife Sita Devi by demon Ravana, and losing pregnant Sita when he had to send her into the forest to uphold a ruler's *dharma* (*Raja neeti*). Unaffected by the sorrows of the outer world, he was immersed in bliss. Rama himself worshiped Shiva to overcome the ill effects of killing Ravana by installing the Jyothirlinga in Rameshwaram. Every act of Rama as a sovereign ruler was to establish *dharma*. Chanting 'Rama' *mantra* brings mental purity and happiness. 'Ra' is the '*beej*' (seed) *akshara* (syllable) for fire *Devata* Agni which burns our sins (*papa harana*) and 'Ma' is a reflective power to know ourselves. 'Rama' is the only *mantra* that is also referred to as 'Taraka *mantra*'. *Taraka* means that which helps to cross and Rama *mantra* helps us to cross the ocean of *samsara* and attain spiritual liberation.

Sri Krishna is most venerated among the Vaishnavas. Krishna, whose name means 'black' in Sanskrit, is dark skinned. He is often depicted as a charming cowherd boy, adorning a peacock feather in his hair and playing an enchanting flute. His form is

very endearing. He stole the hearts of Gopis (cowherd women) and made them completely immersed in love. They gained the status of '*mahishi*' or 'queen/chief consort' and lived blissfully ever after. Among the Gopis, Radha is portrayed as the very breath of Krishna, and they are worshipped together as a symbol of pure love. He is married to Rukmani or Mahalakshmi and Satyabhama or Earth Goddess Bhudevi.

In the Mahabharata war, Sri Krishna's teachings to Arjuna on selfless duty (*Karma* path), devotion (*Bhakti* path), and self-realization (*Jnana* path) is the timeless scripture known as 'Bhagavad-Gita'. The Vedic scriptures are broadly classified into '*Shruti*' and *'Smriti'*. *Shruti* is 'heard' or divinely revealed knowledge as Vedas. *Smriti* is 'remembered' or inspired knowledge based on understanding of Vedas. Bhagavad-Gita is a *Smriti* text expanded from *Shruti* Upanishads, a sub-part of Veda Shakhas. Sri Krishna's legendary killing of demonic rulers like Kamsa, Sishupala, and Jarasandha came from a place of love, justice, and righteousness. Sri Krishna is considered as a full (*purna*) avatar for he displayed all divine qualities such as human-like intimacy (as childhood pastimes in Vrindavan), cosmic divinity (revealing universal form to Arjuna), supreme sovereignty (as ruler of Dwaraka), and '*rasa lila'* (playful divine love to Gopis), a dimension considered the highest spiritual expression in Bhakti traditions.

The ideal time to worship Vishnu is in the morning. Chanting of 'Divya Prabandham' hymns which were composed in Tamil by Alvars or Vaishnavite saints can be heard in South Indian

temples. Srirangam temple in Tamil Nadu is one of holy shrines or '*Divya desam'* to be visited by Vaishnavites. 'Vishnu Sahasranamam' is chanted daily in many households which includes 1000 names of Vishnu. Vishnu Sahasranamam is a dialogue between Bhisma and Yudhistira. It is a compilation of Bhisma's answers to Yudhistira's queries as the former laid on his deathbed during the end of the Mahabharata war. Internalizing simple names of Vishnu like Rama, Kesava, Govinda, Narayana, and Vitala are considered very holy and powerful for they relieve the individual from the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. For Vaishnavas, the '*Pancha kriya*' or five forms of Lord Vishnu include unmanifest or omnipresent (*para*), emanations or the cosmic form (*vyuha*), incarnation (*vibhava*), icons (*archa*)**,** and in-dweller or inherent (*antaryami*).

Shiva versus Vishnu

Shiva and Vishnu are not engaged in any competition and are one and the same. Skanda Upanishad teaches us that Shiva resides inside Vishnu's heart and Vishnu resides inside Shiva's heart. The static calm is formless Shivam and dynamic action is Vishnu. All actions, thoughts, and habits should be surrendered to Vishnu. The *shloka* to this effect is:

Kayena vacha manasendriyair vaa
Bhudyatmana vaa prakruteh swabhaavat
Karomi yad yat sakalam parasmai
Naryanayeti smarpayaami

Like all waters on earth emptying into the ocean, the destination for all prostrations or *namaskar* from wherever to whomever is Narayana. Narayana or Vishnu is considered the first *Guru* in the traditional practice of a teacher (*Guru*) imparting knowledge to a disciple (*shishya*) while Shiva as Dakshinamurthy, is the silent embodiment of knowledge and the ultimate first *Adi Guru*. In Adi Sankara lineage, *Gurus* are trained to constantly engage their mind in Narayana and to perform puja to Shiva Linga which represents the Supreme Self or *Brahman*. The oneness of Vishnu and Shiva is known even to small children in India. In Tamil Nadu, children in villages sing, 'Hariyum Haranum onnu, ariyathavar vayil mannu' meaning 'Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva) are one, and those who don't know this deserve sand in their mouth'. We can learn from children in this simple and uncomplicated way that Vishnu and Shiva are one and the same.

Nataraja is Lord Shiva in Chidambaram and Ranganatha is Lord Vishnu in Srirangam. They are both so revered that simply the word '*Koil*' which in colloquial Tamil means 'temple' automatically refers to Chidambaram's Nataraja temple for Shaivites and Srirangam's Ranganatha temple for Vaishnavites.

Nataraja and Ranganatha are kings of the universe *(sarvaloka rajas*) and have the responsibility of universal governance (*sarvaloka paripalana*). Nataraja and Ranganatha though different in their activities are similar in the context of helping their devotees achieve the ultimate supreme truth or *Brahman*. Nataraja, king of dance, is fair skinned and does the cosmic dance in Chidambaram. He represents the static Shivam as a

dynamic dancer. Rangaraja, king of theater, is dark skinned and is peacefully resting in Srirangam. He represents dynamic Vishnu in 'yoga-*nidra*' state, which is a blissful sleep state. Ranganatha and Nataraja are also similar in facing south in their temples. The southern direction is feared as it is governed by Yama or God of death and by facing south, these deities help us overcome our fear of death. Their sanctum sanctorum is considered as a stage/theater or *sabha/arangam* in Tamil.

Nataraja's stage/theater is Chit Sabha in his abode in Chidambaram where he performs his cosmic dance and his devotees who are his audience get to see him in an adjacent theater called Kanaka Sabha. The formless Shivam is in dynamic dance as Nataraja. Through this dance he is showing that this world is not real and it is an illusion of our mind. The '*Pancha-kritya*' function of Nataraja is described in detail in the 'Shiva or Hara' section. It is not just a simple dance but the foundational proof of the supreme truth that the world is unreal and what is real is the stillness of the limitless consciousness, also known as Chidakasha or Chidambaram.

Ranganatha's stage is Ranga Sabha or '*arangam*' in Srirangam where he is in his sleep state. In a literal sense, no one goes to a theater to see the protagonist sleeping. To understand the performance in Ranganatha's *arangam,* one must understand the deep philosophy behind the 'yoga *nidra*' pose. It is only when we sleep, we dream. In this theater, Ranganatha is a master illusionist who uses his divine power to create the world as an extraordinary dream, and he then administers the world (*loka*

paripalana). He also reveals the supreme truth in this silent, still, and resting state. The invisible silent state is the state beyond sleep, wake, and dream states. This state is called *'turiya'* and this is what even our Upanishads want us to aspire to realize the Supreme Reality or *Brahman*.

The formless Shivam is the blissful consciousness internally and embodiment of beauty externally and that is the truth. Thus, expressions such as *Sat-Chit-Ananda* or truth-consciousness-bliss and *Satyam-Sivam-Sundaram* or truth-consciousness-beauty are one and the same. In Sanskrit, the word *satya* is derived from the root word *sat* meaning truth. Likewise, the meditative, blissful Ranganatha and the graceful, dancer Nataraja are expressing the same truth as an inner world existence and outer world expression respectively. Chidambaram and Srirangam temples are divine places not just for worship of manifested God but to experience this supreme truth or oneness with *Paramatman or Brahman*.

In the universe everything is dynamic and dancing. The earth rotates around its own axis and revolves around the sun in its orbit. All the planets in the solar system are performing this double dance simultaneously. The whole universe of all the seen and unseen worlds from micro to macro levels are dancing, spinning around themselves and around each other, without revealing as to which is the inner, outer, or the center. We do not know where the world is heading or whether the universe is expanding or contracting.

Living beings, especially humans, have circulatory, digestive, respiratory, nervous, endocrine, and other functioning systems in the body. All of them include the cyclical systems of input-process-output and feedback with internal and external circumambulations and dances galore. An even more intense dance is that of the actions of our minds such as imagination, fears, desires, distrust, anger, and disappointments. Comprehending all this will only leave us astounded beyond belief and expression.

There is a still center for storms around which whirl the turbulent waves or winds just like the still center of the atom around which whip the electrons at unfathomable speeds. Similarly, all the chaotic and maniacal dances of life are played out every moment as God's dream in his mind, which is still and invisible. The constantly changing universe is not real. What is not true or real is considered a play or dream. We understand that a dream is not real. When we expect something to happen and if it does not happen, we say that it was all a dream.

Ranganatha is in his formidable sleep state to reveal that the whole world is a dream. Ranganatha is enacting the play in a meditative state. We also understand that pretend acts by young children, sports like soccer or chess, and even dance shows or dramas depicting various characters or emotions are all just plays. Plays can result in actions that can be joyous or have adverse effects, just like life. As a dance drama, Nataraja enacts a performance and takes us through the stages of creation, sustenance, dissolution veiled by *Maya* and ultimately the act of

unveiling of *Maya* to realize the supreme truth. Nataraja and Ranganatha are trying their best to help us overcome our deception of believing that this world is real and illustrated in ways we can understand that the world is all but an illusion and dream. We are only characters in God's dream and can never hope to comprehend the dreamer. It is not a form that can be seen. *Jnanis and Yogis* realize the full form of this supreme truth only as an intrinsic experience (*anubhava*).

Brahma or Prajapati

Brahma is the creator of the universe. He is part of divine Trinity along with Shiva and Vishnu. Brahma is often depicted with four heads and as elaborated in Vedic scriptures, Brahma's four heads are chanting the four Vedas and creation happens by this vibration. His great attributes result in the spread of universal knowledge and wisdom contained within the Vedas.

Vishnu temples worship different forms of Vishnu, his consorts (Shri Devi or Lakshmi and Bhu Devi or Earth), his vehicle (Garuda), his disciple who is always at his service (Hanuman), and his devotees (Alvar saints immersed in Vishnu bhakti). However, Vishnu's son Brahma is not widely worshipped.

There are very few temples for Lord Brahma. There is a temple for Brahma in Pushkar located in Rajasthan. There is a shrine for Brahma in Thirukkandiyur temple in Tamil Nadu, where one of his heads was severed by Shiva. There is an explanation for this act of Lord Shiva. Brahma, the creator, became consumed by arrogance and ego, as he believed his power over creation made

him supreme. Driven by this pride, Brahma manifested a fifth head. This was to enable Brahma to witness his creation in every direction and Brahma's growing pride and ego created disruptions and sufferings. All of this at one point confused Goddess Parvati as she did pooja to Brahma mistakenly instead of her five faced Lord. Shiva was aroused from his deep meditation and was called upon to tackle this issue which he did by wielding his trident and severing Brahma's fifth head. This is the triumph of humility over ego and balance was restored to creation. The severed head clung to Shiva's hand as a curse of slaying a brahmin (*Brahmahatya dosha*), emphasizing the gravity of his act. In this form, Shiva came to be known as Brahmasirakandeeswarar. The temple's sanctum houses a shrine where Shiva is worshipped in this fearsome yet righteous form, reminding devotees of the importance of humility and surrender before the divine.

Why is Brahma not worshipped? One of the reasons was his act of lying when competing with Vishnu in the challenge to determine the ends of the column of light put forth by Lord Shiva as elaborated in the section on 'Shiva or Hara'. The other reason was secondary to his assumption of superiority over Rudra or Shiva with his five heads as stated earlier. The Puranic stories do not explain the entire reason why Brahma is not worshipped widely when there is evidence that he was worshipped in Vedic times. *Devatas* would run to him if there were issues. *Asuras* did *tapas* on him and got boons from him. Except for immortality, he would grant *Devatas* and *Asuras* wishes to overcome one

another by providing each with the necessary strength and expertise.

Manmatha who is Vishnu's son and appeared from Vishnu's mind (*manas*) is also not worshipped like Brahma. Brahma is considered Vishnu's son as he emerged from the navel of Vishnu. Is this due to one causing creation (Brahma) and the other bringing the desire for progeny (Manmatha)? All sufferings are due to birth. All *sadanas* (methods and practices to achieve self-realization) are to overcome *samsara*. *Yagnas* facilitated direct communication with Gods and *Devatas,* to appeal to them and appease them to bring relief to various problems. In ancient times, occurrence of *adharma* (unrighteousness), sufferings, and natural disasters in creation were minimal and hence much anger towards Brahma for being the creator was not prevalent. This could be another reason why Brahma is not worshipped widely and the necessity to appease him with *yagnas* did not arise.

Acharya felt Brahma should have been given a place in temples. In the main temple tower and in the sanctum sanctorum's outer three walls, the holy Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are housed. However, these are obviously not noticeable places of worship. Brahma is also the God whose writing on our foreheads at birth called '*Brahmalipi*' determines our destiny for life. We are Brahma's created arrow. Instead of blaming the arrow for its actions, we are blaming the creator. Our birth is due to our accumulated *karma*. Not all *karma* gets accounted for in one lifetime and the body leaves with this unfulfilled act. *Karma* resulting from actions, thoughts and intentions of the body and

mind will not dissolve when the physical body dies. The mind along with the soul or *Atman* survives physical death. This combined force takes birth in another body, and this is what is known as reincarnation. Reincarnations will keep happening until this *karma* score is settled and to achieve this Brahma gives us another body. Would it not be appropriate for us to worship the God who has given us our life? We are given an opportunity by Brahma only to increase *punya* and reduce *papa* with every birth and yet the thought to worship Brahma does not cross our minds!

Worship in temples is always for someone we regard as a great teacher or a great disciple. Brahma does not fit into these specific categories. Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, *Devatas*, fierce deities (Mariamman-Erulan-Viran), planets (Navagraha), and saints (Alvars-Nayanmars) have temples but the one who created us and is chanting the four Vedas all the time has no temple. The formless *Brahman* of any manifested God is the source for fulfillment of prayers. It should apply to the divine Trinity as well. However, when Adi Sankara established worship of six deities (Shanmata), he did not include Brahma. Acharya summarized that all of these and other factors may play a role in us not praying to Brahma in contrast to Shiva and Vishnu.

Brahma's consort, Saraswati, also does not have many temples dedicated to her. There is a Saraswati temple in Koothanur, TamilNadu. Once Brahma did a *yagna* in Kanchi in which Saraswati did not want to participate. *Yagnas* are performed by a Vedic brahmin in attendance with his wife. Brahma therefore

appointed Gayatri and Savitri as wives for that *yagna*. This angered Saraswati who transformed herself into a river Vegavathi, a tributary of Palar river, and tried to stop the *yagna* by flooding. Vishnu protected the *yagna* by lying across the flood like a dam. Gayatri and Savitri who served as Brahma's wives also do not have temples. Brahma's son Narada, a Vishnu *bhakta* or devotee, who wrote 'Bhakti Sutra' and was made to roam the three worlds because of a curse from Daksha, also has no temples. Daksha is one of the ten sons of Lord Brahma. The ten sons of Brahma, also known as Prajapatis, were born to procreate and populate the world. Since Narada made two of Daksha's sons renounce the world instead of populating the world, he was cursed by Daksha. It is evident that Brahma, Manmatha, Narada, Saraswati, Gayatri and Savitri who are all in some way related to each other are not getting their due respect in temple worship in Kali *yuga* compared to other deities in the Hindu pantheon.

Shakti or Goddess

Manifested Goddesses are in the form of Saraswati Devi, Lakshmi Devi, and Parvati Devi and they are the consorts of Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva respectively. They can be understood knowing the attributes of their spouses. Attribute (*guna*) applies only to the manifested God. Brahma as creator is dynamic (*rajas*), Vishnu as sustainer is harmonious (*satva*), and Shiva as dissolver is symbolic of inertia (*tamas*). The manifested Goddesses are imbued with the same attributes as their divine spouses and are complementary to each other. They

are always in perfect union. Parvati, Lakshmi, and Saraswati are all forms of *Parashakti* or *Brahman*.

Navaratri is a nine-day celebration of Goddess. The 'sharat' or autumn season when we celebrate Navaratri, is neither hot nor cold and its pleasant weather makes it conducive for us to enrich ourselves with divine knowledge and develop clarity. Interestingly, all over India the weather is the same and pleasant during this time unlike every other season where the climate in one region is very different from the other. In other seasons, the peaceful atmosphere during the predawn (*brahma muhurtha*) and evening (*sandhya kala*) twilight hours control our mind to help absorb ourselves in meditation and thus connect our mind to the cosmic mind.

Saraswati or Sharada: Kashmir in the north of India is a place where Saraswati Devi's worship was widely prevalent. There was a Sharada Peeta in Kashmir which is sadly in ruins now. It was a temple and a center for learning where pundits (scholars) thronged to further their education. It was a temple-university, and pundits considered it the crowning glory of their careers to be able to go to Sharada Peeta and showcase their knowledge. Acharya drew similarities to the existence of similar sounding places of importance in the north and south of India such as Krishna's Mathura in the north and Meenakshi's Madurai in the south, and Viswanatha's Kasi in the north and Then-Kasi in the south. Present-day Kanchi or Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu was known in ancient times as 'Thondai Mandalam' and also as

‘Kashmir Mandalam’. Kanchipuram was Kashmir of the south in terms of being a center of excellence for learning. Adi Sankara came to Kanchipuram, showed his proficiency in all aspects of learning, and established the ‘Sarvagnya Peeta’ in Kanchi, meaning an omniscient center that is a seat of all knowledge and wisdom. These draw the relationship between Saraswati and Kanchi which is a center of Vedic learning to this day.

Appar Nayanmar, a Tamil saint, described Kanchi as a place without borders for education (*kalviyil karaiyillatha Kanchi).* The great poet elf, author of ‘Mooka Panchashati’ and who later became the 20th Acharya of the Kanchi mutt referred to Kanchi in his works as the kingdom of wisdom and knowledge (*Saarasvata Purushakaara Saamrajye*). Mooka was born deaf-mute and became a great literary scholar when he was given the boon of speech by Goddess Kamakshi herself in whose temple is the eight-armed Goddess Saraswati, full of grace and elegance. Mooka Panchashati’s ‘Arya Shataka’ has a beautiful *shloka* where he views Kamakshi as Saraswati herself complete with wearing her white, spotless, and pure garb.

Saraswati is the Goddess of knowledge and wisdom. She wears a white saree and holds *japamala* (rosary) and palm leaf as signs of knowledge. In addition, there is a crescent moon in her hair, a third eye in her forehead, and her matted hair is twisted high up like a pyramid. Crescent moon is an indication that learning needs to grow all the time and there is no need to think egotistically that one has reached the pinnacle. Tamil poet Avvaiyar so correctly wrote: ‘what you have learned is a mere

handful and what you haven't learned is the size of the world'. Knowledge can lead to heated debates and differences of opinion amongst scholars, but with Saraswati's grace true wisdom can be attained by all. Saraswati's third eye indicates the need to burn desires to gain wisdom, and her matted hair is a sign of knowledge.

Adi Sankara had two encounters with Saraswati. Adi Sankara was a scholar beyond compare and had to debate scores of intellectuals for their acceptance of Advaita Vedanta and practice of Jnana Path for self-realization.

1. Amarasimha, a Jain scholar, kept Saraswati Devi as his *Ishta Devata* and sought her help from behind a veil in his debate with Adi Sankara. Adi Sankara sensed her presence and released her and thereafter defeated Amarasimha. Amarasimha was highly dejected and threw away his literary works into the fire. Adi Sankara was able to save Amarasimha's classic work 'Amarakosha' from being destroyed.

2. Mandana Misra, an authority on Mimamsa Shaastra, was Adi Sankara's contemporary and rejected Jnana Path. Mimamsa Shaastra is concerned with the observance of daily duties (Purva) and with dedicating the outcomes of these duties to God (Uttara). Adi Sankara defeated Mandana Misra in debate, leading Misra to become his disciple and pursue Jnana Path. Adi Sankara's second encounter with Saraswati Devi was through Mandana

Misra's wife Sarasavani, who was also known as Ubhaya Bharti. She was a great scholar and philosopher and was considered an *avatar* of Saraswati Devi herself. Sarasavani wanted to leave this earth when Mandana Misra took *sanyasa* and became Sureshacharya. Adi Sankara stopped her with the 'Vana Durga' *mantra* and requested her to follow him in his wanderings for her continued presence is needed in the world. She agreed to follow him from behind with a condition that wherever he stopped and turned to look back at her, she would end her wanderings and become stationed in that place. When they reached Sringeri, Adi Sankara saw a hooded cobra protecting a pregnant frog from the sun rather than preying on her. The cobra's act of protecting its natural prey symbolized a place where even natural adversaries could overcome their instincts and coexist peacefully. Inspired by this remarkable scene, Adi Sankara decided to establish his first monastery, the Sringeri Sharada Peeta, at this very spot. Sankara turned to look back at Ubhaya Bharti when he witnessed this scene and thus, she ended her wanderings in this auspicious location and installed herself as Sharada Devi.

Worship of Goddess Saraswati is important because she represents knowledge, wisdom, creativity, and the arts. The arrival of spring is celebrated with honoring Saraswati as Vasant Panchami in temples and schools promoting Vedas and Shaastras. By mediating upon Saraswati, one attains purity of

speech, success in learning, and ultimately the self-realization knowledge (*Atma vidya*).

Mahalakshmi or Shri: Mahalakshmi is the Goddess of wealth. She will uphold justice and grace us with enough wealth in accordance with the needs for performance of our daily duties (*Nitya karma).* She wears a golden thread bordered red saree, holding a lotus and an elephant by her side which represents purity and hard work respectively. Mahalakshmi graced great scholars like Adi Sankara, Vedanta Desika, and Vidyaranya Swami to make their benevolent acts come true.

1. Mahalakshmi rained gold on a poor brahmin lady when Adi Sankara intervened on her behalf with 'Kanakadhara Stavam', the first of many hymns authored by him. Kanakadhara stavam is important and interesting because it is based on a story in Adi Sankara's life before he renounced the world and became a monk or *sanyasi*. He was a young boy in Kaladi and was studying in a Vedic school (*gurukula*) and would go from house to house seeking alms. One morning it was Dwadasi *tithi* (Dwadasi is 12th day of lunar fortnight and *tithi* is lunar day in Vedic calendar) and young Adi Sankara went to a nearby house and asked for alms. The house belonged to a very poor brahmin family and the husband himself had gone out seeking alms. His wife found nothing available in the house for giving as it is customary to fast on Ekadasi *tithi* which is the day prior to Dwadasi *tithi*. She

felt bad to tell the divine boy full of effulgence to go away empty handed. She searched and searched and found a smudged gooseberry and finally with much hesitation dropped it in the outstretched palms of Adi Sankara. Adi Sankara could see how generous the lady's heart was. His heart melted for her, and he prayed to Mahalakshmi singing 'Kanakadhara Stavam' to bestow this poor family with wealth. Goddess Mahalakshmi was moved and appeared before him and said 'My dear child, the members of this poor family did not perform any meritorious act in their past lives. How can I bestow wealth on them?'. Adi Sankara replied, 'Dear Mother, this lady gave me the only gooseberry she had and she owned nothing else. Is this not powerful enough to cancel their past sins? You are an ocean of mercy. Remove their scalding bad past with your cool glance. Kindly offset their poverty with a material shower of grace. Please take care of this lady who is helpless just like a small fledgling of a bird'. It is a beautiful expression of concern from the small boy and his request for sweeping relief of abject poverty of a selfless woman. Pleased with his prayer, Goddess Lakshmi showered the lady's house with golden gooseberries. This hymn is special because it is the amalgamation of the loves of Adi Sankara, the poor brahmin lady, and Mahalakshmi. Those who sing Kanakadhara Stavam will be able to overcome their hardships and proceed with their practices of

righteousness (*dharma*) as related to their recommended duties.

2. Vedanta Desika, a follower of Sri Vaishnavism and a scholar of Vishishtadvaita, lived in Kanchi. Vishishtadvaita, is a philosophy propagated by Sri Ramanujacharya where Vishnu as indweller (*antaryami*) controls the individual soul (*Jivatman*) as part of the Supreme Soul (*Paramatman*). Vedanta Desika had the divine blessing of being able to perceive Hayagreeva, the horse faced form of Vishnu. Vedanta Desika did not own any wealth and only lived off alms. He was addressed as '*Sarva tantra swatantra'* meaning 'independent or self-reliant master of all branches of learning'. Anyone who enjoys eternal freedom and appreciation from people is bound to have enemies. His enemies had a plan to shame him by sending a poor and unintelligent brahmin boy to get money from Vedanta Desika as the boy needed money to take a girl's hand in marriage. They knew Vedanta Desika had no money to offer and when he sends the boy back without fulfilling his wish, he would be put to shame. Desika could see through the ulterior motives of his enemies. He recited 'Shri Stuthi' to invoke Mahalakshmi to help the poor boy and immediately there was a golden rain shower. He gave the gold to the boy, and this only brought more fame to Vedanta Desika much to the dismay of his distractors.

3. Vidyaranya Swami was a scholar of all four Vedas, scriptures pertaining to *dharma* (Dharma Shaastra), and statecraft (Artha Shaastra). When he did *tapas* as a poor brahmin seeking wealth, Mahalakshmi appeared and granted that his wish will come to fruition in his next life. He took *sanyasa* immediately, because as a scholar he knew it is a passage from bodily existence into a new life. As was promised, Mahalakshmi granted him wealth. What will a *sanyasi* do with wealth? A clarification came to him on how to use wealth. He appointed two boys Harihara and Bukka as founders of Vijayanagara Empire in South India when Malik Kafur, the general of the Muslim Delhi Sultanate in the north was invading southern India. Harihara and Bukka ruled by the advice and counsel of Vidyaranya and their first cousin Kampanna was appointed the commander-in-chief of their army. With Kampanna Udaiyar as commander-in-chief, Vijayanagara defeated Malik Kafur and the Delhi Sultanate in five hundred wars. Kampanna Udaiyar restored temples near Trichy, Tamil Nadu. An example is Pocchaleshwarar temple in Kannanur near Samayapuram in Trichy. There is an inscription on the temple's *gopuram* (tower) walls that says 'this temple was protected by Kampanna Udaiyar during the times of destruction by Muslims'. He brought newfound enthusiasm among Hindus and revived Vedic traditions. Valadi Nallur, is a village where Kampanna established funding for Vedic brahmins by giving them tax free land

so that they could have the resources to perform worship and *yagnas* that benefit the entire universe. To this day, these Vedic brahmins write 'Kampa Raaya Chaturvedi Mangalam' when documents are drafted expressing the greatness associated with Kampanna who helped establish these settlements for brahmins well versed in the four Vedas. His wife Gangadevi accompanied him everywhere. She was a great Sanskrit scholar herself and wrote in detail about Kampanna's conquests in 'Mathura Vijayam'.

Words cannot describe Vidyaranya Swami's contribution to Sanatana Dharma. In addition to establishing the Vijayanagar Kingdom, he also provided counsel to its emperors. This helped Hinduism recover from forty to fifty years of destruction of Hindu temples and suppression of Vedic religion by Muslim rulers. Vidyaranya restored many old Sankara mutts in regions which are now in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. He established new mutts as well and expanded old mutts with branches to revive and spread Advaita tradition. Vidyaranya Swami used weapons (Shastra) and scriptures (Shaastra) to protect the Hindu community whose religion and faith were on the verge of rapid decline. His books, 'Panchadasi Prakarnam' and 'Jeevan Mukthi Vivekam', are notable for their depth of knowledge and wisdom. He was the 12th acharya of Sringeri Mutt and was the *Raja Guru* or royal advisor for the Vijayanagara Empire.

One should worship Mahalakshmi to lead a lifestyle without greed. We should learn from our great teachers such as Adi

Sankara, Vedanta Desika, and Vidyaranya Swami to lead a life that fulfills not just our own needs but also benefits the wellness of others (*parapokaram*). Fortune in the form of wealth may or may not visit us, but we must always yearn for wealth that is pure and does not add to our sins and to that end we must do prostrations (*namaskar*) to Mahalaskhmi.

Parvati or Gowri: Addressed as Ambal by Acharya, Parvati is the personification of love for all living creatures. She is the divine mother (*Ishwari*) who protects the entire universe (*akhila*) in her womb '*anda*' ('*anda*' means 'egg' and in this context it is the cosmic egg), so she is Akhilandeshwari. She is the presiding deity in Jambukeshwarar temple in Thiruvanaikaval, Tamil Nadu along with Lord Shiva as Jambukeshwar. Ambal is also known as Lalitha, or one who is charming and filled with love and complete happiness.

Ambal can transform from being pleasant Lalitha into being fierce Kali, when her anger rises to its pinnacle. Such was the turn of events for Akhilandeshwari when people resorted to cruel non-Vedic tantric worship in Kali *yuga*. Adi Sankara, an *avatar* of Shiva, was someone who could approach Ambal and calm her down even when she was filled with rage. But Adi Sankara took this opportunity to showcase Ganesha's love filled personality trait. Anger and rage cannot come anywhere near Ganesha. Even a highly enraged person will turn peaceful on his own accord in Ganesha's presence. Adi Sankara installed a big idol of Ganesha just inside of the temple's compound wall in front of Ambal's

sannidhi (sanctum). Akhilandeshwari's anger melted away into great maternal affection at the very sight of her dear child (*chella pillai* in Tamil) Ganesha or Chellapillaiyar. Ganesha has the power to cool down and transform even fierce Ambal into the bestower of grace and blessings for the universe. Adi Sankara also channeled Ambal's anger into 'Sri Yantra' earrings. Earrings or '*thaatangams'* signify something very auspicious which is the mark of married women in Vedic scriptures. 'Sri Yantra' is a complex geometric device that symbolises the union of Shakti with formless Shivam.

During *mahapralaya*, or the great dissolution of the universe, everyone who drank the nectar (*amrita*) from churning of the ocean died except for Paramashiva (Eternal Shiva with Shakti). Adi Sankara raised a question on this occurrence in 'Soundarya Lahiri'. He answered it himself with a gem of a summary: '*tava janani thaatanka mahima*' which means that the reason for this phenomenon is the glory and auspiciousness of divine mother's earrings, a symbolism of her status as '*sumangali*' or being married to eternal Shiva.

Parvati like Saraswati is *Vak Devata* or Goddess of speech. *Avatar* like Adi Sankara, and poet-saints like Kalidasa and Mooka were blessed with great proficiency in language with Ambal's grace. Ambal is the personification of syllables (*aksharas*) of the Sanskrit language which are fifty-one in number. This count is used by practitioners of Vedic tantric traditions such as the Sri Vidya practitioners. The syllables relate to vibrational energy of the universe presenting itself as Ambal

and other deities in Sri Yantra. Like Shiva, Shakti performs the '*Pancha-kritya*' or five functions of creation (*Shishti*), sustenance (*Stithi*), dissolution (*Samhara*), illusion (*Thirodana*), and overcoming illusion (*Anugraha*).

Parvati as Kamakshi has showered gold in Kanchi demonstrating that there is no difference between her and Mahalakshmi. Mooka has sung in his 'Mooka Panchashati' about the golden shower which occurred in Thondai mandala which is present day Kanchi. Interestingly there is a village near Kanchi called 'Pon Vilaintha Kalathur' which literally means 'a place where gold grew'.

Kamakshi is the Goddess of Kanchi and is called '*Tripura Sundari'* (most beautiful in all three worlds). Her sanctum sanctorum is the navel of the universe and is called '*Bilakasa*' where '*Bil*' is cave and '*Akasa*' is space. The invisible outer space entered the cave or inner space of her navel. She holds a sugarcane bow which controls the mind and 5 flower arrows which control the senses. These arrows originally belonged to Manmatha or Kamadeva (*Devata* of Love), which when released aroused powerful emotion of love in the targeted person. Manmatha was commissioned by *Devatas* to help them in their fight against demons such as Soorapadma, Tarakasura, and Simhamukha who were creating havoc in the celestial world. The *Devatas* knew an offspring of Shiva would be the one to kill these demons. Shiva as always was absorbed in deep meditation. Manmatha was asked to create an interest in Shiva towards Parvati as that would ensure the birth of a child that can destroy

the demons. Manmatha fired a love arrow at Shiva, disrupting his meditation and briefly awakening feelings of desire for Parvati within him. Shiva became furious when interrupted and, as punishment, burned Manmatha to ashes. Although Manmatha was destroyed, he fulfilled his mission. As a result, Muruga was born and went on to defeat the demons mentioned earlier. The Devatas requested Shiva to show compassion towards Manmatha, as his actions were carried out in accordance with their instructions. Consequently, Shiva revived him, stipulating that this Devata of love would henceforth remain formless, or 'ananga'. Subsequently, Manmatha undertook rigorous tapas directed toward Lord Shiva with the aim of regaining his physical appearance.

Kamakshi took pity on Manmatha, whose actions regarding Shiva and Parvati were misinterpreted, and withdrew the power from Ambal statues in Kanchipuram temples, causing Shiva to become inert. Shiva is only dynamic when activated by Ambal or Shakti; without Shakti, he is lifeless and lacks divinity. At Lord Brahma's request, Parvati revived Shiva by restoring herself. Kamakshi’s shrine in the Kamakshi Amman temple is called ‘Kamakottam’, meaning ‘House of Kama’, serving as a lasting tribute to Manmatha’s successful tapas. To celebrate Manmatha’s triumph over Shiva, Kamakshi declared that Kanchi should be known as Sivajit and ensured that other Shiva temples in Kanchipuram would not have a sanctum sanctorum for Ambal. This narrative is detailed in ‘Kamakshi Vilasam’, part of the Markandeya Purana.

Sage Durvasa's 'Arya Dwishati' with two hundred *shlokas*, Mooka's 'Mooka Panchashati' with five hundred *shlokas*, and Adi Sankara's 'Soundarya Lahari' with hundred *shlokas* bring out the majestic splendor of Parvati Devi like an expert artist's masterly painting. Of the three, Soundarya Lahari is the crowning glory in the praise of Kamakshi. The *puja sampradaya* (tradition of worship) in Kanchi Kamakshi temple is a composition of sage Durvasa.

Mooka Panchasati is an outpouring of the poet's heart and is an ode to Kamakshi. In Mooka Panchasati, her color is red in some places and black in others. In a benevolent Lalitha form, she is red and as destructive Kali, she is black. However, for Mooka there was no difference in either form of his Kamakshi. He describes her by widely opening his heart and unveiling his soul. In the first hundred hymns called Arya Shatakam, he glorifies Kamakshi as noble or '*arya*', as she gave back Iswara his Iswarhood in Kanchi. She is in the center of everything in Kanchi, wearing the newborn crescent moon which is symbolic of acquiring knowledge or the very essence of Vedas.

In Soundarya Lahari, Kamakshi's color is early dawn crimson. Shiva is capable of creation only when united with Shakti. Shakti is the creative power (*Maya*) and Shiva is wielder of that power (*Mayi/Mayin*). Shakti when approached is seen with Shiva's crescent moon and third eye. As a devoted wife (*pathivratha*), Shakti is bestowed with half of Shiva's body. In fact, Shakti has slowly taken over the other half and made Shiva herself. She is seated on Sadashiva as a bench with Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, and

Iswara as legs, in a state of bliss that is pure knowledge or '*Cit*'. Sadashiva is unseen due to the brilliance of her redness dominating the scene. One should visualize this divine scene during meditation.

The formless Shivam with Shakti resides in an island city located at the peak of Mount Meru, the center of the universe in Vedic cosmology. The upright conical three-dimensional device of Sri Yantra or Sri Chakra is known as 'Purna-Meru'. When it is two dimensional, it is called 'Bhu-Meru'. Shakti resides at the very tip of the three-dimensional Purna Meru and in the center dot (*bindu)* of the two-dimensional device. Ambal is worshipped as Sri Yantra by practitioners of the Sri Vidya tradition. Shakti is hidden in Sri Yantra by nine concentric layers or '*avaranas*'. In 'Devi Khadgamala Stotram', *Devatas* residing in each *avarana* are described. The *siddhi* or spiritual power granting deities are at the very outer periphery and serve as her gatekeepers. Such is the power of Kamakshi. Her energy became uncontrollable during the times of cruel non-Vedic tantric worship and needed to be reined into the Sri Chakra. Adi Sankara placed a two-dimensional Sri Yantra in front of Kamakshi which transformed her into a benevolent form.

Kundalini Yoga is described in Soundarya Lahari. Kundalini Yoga is the awakening of Kundalini energy or energy of Shakti. *Kundal* is Sanskrit for 'coiled' and Shakti is the cosmic energy coiled as a snake at the base of the spine. This Yoga is the arousal of Shakti from the base of the spine and her ascend through the six *chakras* or energy centers (Muladhara, Svadhisthana,

Manipura, Anahata, Vishuddhi, and Ajna *chakras*) along the spine. The six *chakras* represent earth, water, fire, air, sky, and mind and their representative manifested deities are Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Iswara, Sadashiva, and Paramashiva respectively. The culmination of this Yoga is the union of Shakti with the transcendent Shiva on the top of the head in the seventh Sahasrara *chakra*. '*Sahasrara*' in Sanskrit means that which is thousand petaled and is a representation of the thousand petaled lotus flower which is metaphorical for the infinite possibilities for spiritual awakening. The journey of this energy travel from Muladhara to Sahasrara *chakra* is through a main '*nadi*' or channel called '*Sushumna*'. The union of Shakti and transcendent Shiva in the Sahasrara *chakra* graces the individual with Advaita bliss. In this transcendental state, Shakti manifests her feet in Sahasrara *chakra* and nectar (*amrit*) oozes out from this center and bliss is experienced. Kundalini Yoga is best avoided by most of us common folks for its intense energy can burn us and leave us debilitated when it is not learned from a proper teacher (*Guru*).

Parvati is worshipped in three forms, each with her special attributes.

- As Durga, she is without Shiva and holds *sanku* and *chakra* of Vishnu and slays the demon Mahishasura. She exudes dynamic energy or '*rajas*'.
- As Kali, she holds a sword and a skull. She steps on Shiva to restrain her energy, extending her tongue in the

process. Her energy in this form is to dissolve or '*tamas*'. She removes our ego.

- As Bhuvaneshwari, she holds *Vara mudra* (boon granting gesture) and *abhaya mudra* (gesture for fearlessness) in place of sugarcane and flower arrows of Kamakshi. Her energy in this form is pure or '*satva*'. She sustains the universe.

Parvati as Annapurna in Kasi gave alms to Shiva who was a wandering mendicant with Brahma's skull stuck to his palm. This curse (*brahmahatti dosha*) resulted when Shiva severed one of Brahma's head as narrated in the earlier section on 'Brahma'. When Shiva received alms from Annapurna, he overcame his curse as well as his hunger. Adi Shankara's 'Annapurna Ashtaka' enables bodily and spiritual nourishment for beings in all three worlds (Earth, Sky, and Heaven).

Worship of Ambal's feet grants fearlessness. Fearlessness is not a trait that is given and taken like a commodity. It is another name for Advaita oneness. 'Only when there is duality, there is fear' says Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Only when there is a second entity, there rises the fear of losing the first at some point. The palm of the right hand extended upward is '*mudra*' or gesture for *abhaya* or fearlessness. In Dvaita schools, it points to Vaikunta or Kailasa and in Advaita it directs to the wide space or '*akasa*'. The palm of the left hand extending down is the *mudra* for *vara* or boon. The desires like 'I want this and I want that' are indicative of the selfish egoistic mind. The right hand '*abhaya*'

gesture of Ambal is representative of fearlessness or Advaita or self-realization (*Atma Sakshatkara*). The left hand '*vara*' gesture of Ambal points to her feet as our last refuge. Meditate on Ambal's feet to achieve spiritual liberation. Even if one in a million attains this state, the world is benefited by their holy presence (*sannidya*).

Ayyappa or Sastha

Ayyappa is often addressed as Hari-Hara *putra*, the son of Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva). Soundarya Lahari describes how Parvati Devi empowers Vishnu to transform himself into Mohini and enchant ascetic Shiva. Lord Shiva has been disturbed and enticed occasionally during his long periods of meditation when the world was in immediate need of a solution for huge problems posed by demons. Ayyappa was created by the union of Shiva and Mohini for the urgent need to destroy demoness Mahishi who sought revenge for the death of her brother Mahishasura by Durga. Shiva was enchanted by Mohini's beauty and grace. From these qualities of Mohini combined with the wisdom and knowledge of Shiva emerged a great radiant light, Ayyappa.

Ayyappa is also known as Sastha and Ayyanar. 'Ayyan' is derived from '*Arya*' which means 'noble' or 'esteemed'. Acharya noted that adding 'ar' to names elevates their status, as seen in group names like 'Mudaliar', 'Chettiar', or divine names such as 'Ayyanar' and 'Pillaiyar'.

Ayyappa is worshipped as Ayyanar in every village in Tamil Nadu where he sits guard at the border of the village defending

and shielding its citizens against all enemies, as the ultimate protector like Vishnu and as the bestower of liberation like Shiva. He is worshipped with great pomp and splendor in Sabarimala in Kerala by devotees who throng from near and far after performing many weeks of severe austerity. The temple is called Aryankavu meaning 'forest of *Arya*'. Even during times of prevalence and propagation of atheism, Ayyappa keeps expanding his kingdom of followers with every passing day.

Acharya quoted an interesting anecdote relating to Ayyappa. Appaya Dikshitar was a great scholar and saint who lived in the 14th century and was the ancestor of Mannargudi Periyava, the author of 'Nyayendu Shekara' who was mentioned in the 'Ganesha' section. Appaya Diksihtar was a follower of Shaiva Siddhanta traditions and modified its concept of Shiva from that with form (*Saguna*) to formless (*Nirguna*). He sang the glories of Lord Shiva at a time when Vaishnavism was taking over in South India. Sri Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita philosophy (qualified monism) gained momentum with the later period Vijayanagara rulers from 15th century AD to 16th century AD. Sri Ramanuja's followers were known as Sri-Vaishnavites. They had no qualms belittling Shiva and the worship of Shiva. Appaya Dikshitar however saw no difference between the greatness of Vishnu and Shiva as they were both one to him as *Nirguna Brahman*. Thathachariyaar, a great scholar who had a lot of influence with the kings of the Vijayanagara kingdom played a major role in the propagation of Vaishanavism and was Appaya Dikshitar 's contemporary.

Appaya Dikshitar and Thathachariyaar were asked to accompany Vijayanagara's king to a temple where Sastha or Ayyappa was sitting with a finger on his nose as if in contemplation. The challenge posed by the king to these two scholars was to decipher why Sastha was in this form. The local citizens had grown up with the legend that the sculptor of this idol had a dream where Sastha appeared to him in this thoughtful posture. He was told in this dream that there will come a time when a scholar announces to the world the reason for Sastha's posture and only then will this Sastha resume the form by which the rest of the world knows him. The artist sculpted the form of the God of his dreams. Many scholars attempted but this Sastha was not convinced with the explanations they provided. The king asked Thathachariyaar and Appaya Dikshitar what their thoughts were on this matter. They articulated their responses with great eloquence, each reflecting their respective philosophical position.

Thathachariyaar:
Vighno suthoham, Vidhinaa samoham
Dhanyas thathoham, Sura sevithoham
Thadhaapi bhoothesa suthoham, yethair
Bhoothair vruthas chinthayatheeha sasthaa

Appayya Dikshitar:
Ambhethi Gaurim Aham aahvayaami
Pathnya pithur mathara yeva sarvaa
Kadham nu Lahshmim ithi chinthayantham
Saasthaaram eede sakalartha sidhyai

Thathachariyaar's said that Sastha as son of Vishnu was honored and served by *Devatas* but as son of Bhoothesa (Shiva), he was surrounded by *bhootas* or fierce creatures which made Sastha thoughtful. Sastha in the temple was not moved by this explanation of Thathachariyaar.

Appayya Dikshitar on the other hand said that while Sastha knew Vishnu as Mohini was his birth mother, he considered Gauri, wife of his father Shiva, as his mother as well. But he was in a quandary as to how he must address Lakshmi, who is wife of his mother Vishnu in the form of Mohini and hence this pensive posture in the temple. Sastha removed the finger on his nose much to the amazement of the king and the two great scholars. Since then, Sastha is found here to be in the same seated posture as he is in all the other temples.

Shiva is the leader of the *Devatas* and *Bhootas* because he engages them to maintain cosmic balance. Shiva's children play a vital role in this function. Shiva's *Devata* army is led by Muruga. His *Bhoota* army is led by Ganapati and Ayyappa, also called Bhoothanathan in Kerala. Thus, Appaya Diskhitar exhibited knowledge, humility, and devotion. He did not differentiate between the status of Parvati and Lakshmi.

Acharya joked that after hearing the story of this Sastha idol, the listeners crowding around Acharya would place a finger on their nose in contemplation and question if such a wonder is even possible!

Hanuman or Anjaneya

Anjaneya is the son of Anjana (celestial monkey) and wind *Devata* (Vayu). He is fondly called Hanumar, Anjaneyulu, Maruti, and Mahavir in the different regions of India. He is a part of Shiva himself and is considered an *avatar* of Rudra (*Rudramsa*). He is endowed with great traits of wisdom, strength, courage, humility, and devotion. It is a rare combination of traits. Most of us may possess at the most one or a few of these traits but not all of them. His uniqueness is not just in possessing such phenomenal qualities but blessing those who seek him with the same.

Hanuman as the supreme devotee of Rama attributed all his great characteristics and proficiencies simply as blessings from Rama. Hanuman was a devotee who did not flaunt his attributes and who completely surrendered to Rama (*Rama dasa*) and this gave him supreme bliss. He was celibate, with no desire but to serve Rama, and was blessed with a mind like the clear quartz (*spatika*) devoid of any impurity (*vasana*). He is the prime example of service in this world and had the courage and brilliance to protect the world against all evils. He was positioned on Arjuna's flag in Mahabharata war and heard Bhagavad-Gita teachings firsthand. Anjaneya gave the commentary called 'Pisacha Bhasya' on Bhagavad Gita. Rama described Hanuman to Lakshmana as '*Nava Vyaakaran Vetta'*, as he was an expert (*vetta*) in all the nine (*nava*) grammar works (*vyakarana*) of the Sanskrit language. He was also described as a master of words or '*Sollin*

Selvan' in Kamba Ramayanam, a Tamil epic written from original Valmiki Ramayana.

Hanuman's role in Ramayana is so well described by Acharya. Hanuman was the *avatar* of Rudra and Rama was the *avatar* of Vishnu. They can both independently achieve what they set out to do. However, they had intense love and appreciation for one another and complemented each other to achieve their goals. Rama had foresight of all that was to happen and Hanuman was recruited as his trusted deputy. Hanuman was commissioned by Rama to help monkey king Sugreeva who lost his kingdom and wife to his brother Vali. If Valmiki Ramayana is divided into seven sections or *kandams*, Hanuman arrived in the fourth section of Kishkinda *kandam* where the monkey kingdom and their issues were taken care of by Rama. Hanuman was suffering a curse from a *rishi* and Jambavan, the immortal bear-like divine being, helped release him from the curse and became a mentor to Hanuman. Hanuman was the main protagonist in Sundara *kandam*, the fifth section of Valmiki Ramayana. Hanuman with his never-ending devotion to Rama and constant utterance of 'Rama Rama' (*nama japa*), found the strength to fly across the huge ocean to reach Lanka from Bharat to find Sita Devi. He transported an entire mountain containing the medicinal (*sanjeevani*) herb to save Lakshmana's life on the battlefield. Rama glorified Hanuman as the nail that holds the axis of the chariot of this universe.

Rama and Sita were always gracious in their praise of Hanuman and acknowledged with humility his role in their lives. During

the coronation ceremony of Rama in Ayodhya, which was celebrated with great pomp and splendor, Rama gave a pearl necklace to Sita. Sita wanted to give it to the most deserving person in the audience and sought Rama's advice. Rama, without naming names, recommended Sita to give it to the one who was endowed with power, intelligence, and humility and with no hesitation Sita awarded it to Hanuman. Acharya commented that the award was presented in the most objective manner to the most deserving recipient, leaving no room for criticisms of subjective preference.

Hanuman was entirely humble and selfless with no trace of ego in his acceptance and recognition of Rama's blessings in anything he accomplished. Hanuman attributed everything to Rama and Sita's grace and blessings. He felt privileged to be of use to Rama and Sita and felt deeply indebted to them. We are constantly looking for appreciation, recognition, and acknowledgement in any act of service and we expect reciprocity as well. We should pray to Hanuman to give us the strength, intelligence, and humility to help erase these horrible traits of arrogance and egoism.

Hanuman's presence in the Mahabharata war perched on Arjuna's flag restored Dharmarajya or the rule of righteousness in Bharat. In later years when Vedic religion was crushed by invading rulers, Hanuman manifested as Samarth Ramdas. He served as a spiritual mentor to King Shivaji and provided guidance that enabled Shivaji to triumph over numerous Muslim rulers. As a result of these victories, Shivaji was able to restore

and revitalize many Hindu temples that had been destroyed by Muslim rulers. Samarth Ram Das and thereby Shivaji's contribution to Sanatana Dharma is beyond compare.

When we chant Sri Rudra of Yajur Veda in '*ghana meter'* which is the most complicated cross-cross rhythmic pattern, the word 'sankar' appears thirteen times. It shows the close connection between Shiva and Adi Sankara. We do not associate 'thirteen' with bad omens in Vedic religion. Thirteen has many auspicious associations. Thirteen is the number of syllables in 'Shree Ram Jaya Ram Jaya Jaya Ram', the *mantra* uttered by Anjaneya repeatedly. The same *mantra* was the *japa* of Samarth Ramdas for whom *Nirguna* Rama was his *Ishta Devata*.

We can worship Anjaneya in simple ways such as just thinking of him or saying 'Rama Rama'. When we do Rama *nama japa*, Anjaneya is silently listening to us. Prayer rituals in Vedic religion usually end with singing of '*mangalam*' which is the conclusion of the prayer proceedings, and we sing the praises of Anjaneya to bring blessings to devotees.

Anjaneya is not always making an appearance only in the end as in '*mangalam*'. He is the first to welcome us at the entrance to the Adi Sankara Mutt in Rameshwaram. When we begin a religious text, first there is worship to *Guru*, then to Ganesha and then there is a prayer to Saraswati as a sequence that reflects source of knowledge, removal of obstacles in the undertaking, and expression of knowledge. Saraswati is the guide who is always behind a *Guru* even in Vedic scriptures. Saraswati *murthi*

(idol) is behind *Guru* Adi Sankara's idol in Rameshwaram Mutt. Adi Sankara composed 'Hanumath Pancharatnam', a hymn with 5 *shlokas* in praise of Hanuman. In one of these *shlokas* is the phrase '*puratho mama bhatu hanumatho murthihi*' meaning 'may Hanuman be in front of me'. Hanuman in the Mutt stands in front of Adi Sankara as expressed in his hymns. Hanuman with his outstretched hand faces the mighty Indian Ocean as if he were to control the ocean. And surely Hanuman has continued to keep the ocean God in control as the mutt stands strong on the shores of the mighty ocean for over many centuries. There is no beginning or end in the Advaita principle of *Atman* (individual Self) and *Brahman* (Supreme Self) as a single continuum, which is reminiscent of Hanuman as narrated by Acharya. Hanuman, whose praise is usually sung at the end, guides us in the beginning as well just as he is doing by being stationed in front of *Guru* Adi Sankara in Rameshwaram Mutt.

Acharya said Hanuman is referred to as 'Daasoham' meaning 'I am servant (*daasah aham*)'. At the devotional level, Hanuman is the perfect servant of Rama (*Daasoham*). At the highest realization, there is no separation between Hanuman and Rama (*Soham*). Thus, Hanuman is beginning of the beginning and end of the end or the very beginning and the very end, signifying that he pervades the entire path – from dualistic devotion to non-dual realization. Anjaneya thus graces us with fearlessness to control the turbulent waves of the mind and delivers the ultimate gift of peace and bliss of oneness in God.

A Hanuman *shloka* is chanted before starting any discourse on Valmiki Ramayana which brings out his 8 important qualities. The *shloka* is:

Buddhir Balam Yasho Dhairyam Nirbhayatvam Arogataam Ajaadyam Vak Patutvam Cha Hanumat Smaranaat Bhavet

Sanskrit word	**Meaning**
Buddhir	Power of discernment to understand a situation
Balam	Physical and mental strength
Yasho	Name and fame
Dhairyam	Courage of conviction
Nirbhayatvam	Being fearless and causing no fear in others
Arohataam	Healthy enough to be free of diseases
Ajaaddyam	Free from laziness
Vaak Pattutvam	Power of spoken and written expression

Tulsidas wrote 'Hanuman Chalisa' containing 40 verses which can easily be committed to memory and makes us feel energetic and guarded. This hymn describes Hanuman's strength, courage, wisdom, power, and unwavering devotion to Rama.

The teachings of Sri Rama to his student (*shisya*) Hanuman exist as 'Muktikopanishad' which contains two chapters. The Upanishad states that *rishis* (seers or sages) and *munis* (thinkers or ascetics) gathered to witness the teachings (*upadesa*) of Sri Rama to Hanuman. Present in this esteemed gathering were the first four mind-born sons of Brahma, Sanaka, Sanatana, Sanandana, and Sanat Kumara, who received teachings from Dakshinamuthy himself and had renounced the world. Hanuman was inquisitive and kept asking questions one after the other as

the teachings proceeded, like milking a cow until the last drop. He desired to know the philosophy (*siddhanta*) and tools to attain liberation (*moksha* or *mukti*) from the never-ending cycle of birth-death-rebirth or *samsara*. Sri Rama educated Hanuman just like the great teacher or God of Wisdom, Dakshinamurthy. The first chapter is a lesson on the one hundred and eight Upanishads, the Veda Shakha they are derived from, and the '*Shanti mantra*' (mantra for peace) required for each to learn chanting (*adhyayana*) and gain spiritual knowledge. The second chapter deals with destruction of mind or ego and absorption in non-dual *Nirguna* Rama.

Sri Rama is referred to as '*Maryaada Purushottam*' or 'the perfect man' as he is the embodiment of all that is best among ideals to be emulated. This epithet is equally applicable for Hanuman. He has physical strength, fearlessness, devotion, and to top it all, intense humility. Hanuman should be perceived as a *Guru* because of these great attributes and yet he himself was an ardent student of Sri Rama. The take home lesson from the life of Hanuman is that even when we are righteously performing worldly activities, we should remain a student throughout life with constant remembrance of God. Let us always remember (*smarana*) Hanuman in the guise of a student of Sri Rama, who, as our *Guru*, brings well-being to all beings.

Chapter 6: Worship (Puja)

A small shrine is used as a place of worship in every Indian household. Daily worship is done to God and *Devatas* who are in the form of pictures, *murthis* (idols), or naturally occurring stones from rivers. Depending on each family's tradition, a particular *Devata* can take a central place in *panchayatana* worship. Early in the morning and near sunset (*sandhya*) are good times for worship (*puja*), chanting (*japa*), and meditation (*dyana*). *Puja* can be simple or elaborate depending on the time and affordability. It can be as simple as washing idols or stones with water and offering five items as a '*pancha upachara*'. They are sandal wood paste with kumkum, a sacred red powder (*gandham*), flower (*pushpam*), incense (*dhoopam*), lamp (*deepam*), and cooked food (*naivedyam*). Rice coated with turmeric (*akshata*) can replace flowers and dried fruits or rock candy can take the place of cooked food when flowers and food are not available. That which is given by God is being offered to God. A sense of humility and thanksgiving comes from eating sanctified food (*prasadam*). The entire *puja* is to purify our mind. No matter how we worship, omnipresent God will reveal himself in a way we can perceive. Such is the grace that God possesses.

Temple

Temple worship is central to Indian society. Manifested Gods are worshiped in temples. Some images worshiped in temples are

naturally occurring stones, known as '*swayambhu*'. Many Ganesha and Lingams are of this nature. For example, Ganesha of Ashta Ganapati temples in Maharashtra and Omkareshwar Jyotirlinga in Madhya Pradesh are *swayambhu*.

The deities in temples are infused with universal energy (*Paramatman* or *Brahman*) before installation. There are 4 kinds of deities based on the type of installation.

1. When celestials (Gods or *Devatas*) do the installation, it is called '*deivika*'. Example: Rameswara Lingam by Lord Vishnu.

2. When demons (*asuras*) do the installation, it is '*asura*'. Example: Onakanthali Lingam by Onan and Kanthan in Kanchipuram.

3. When the installation is done by a king, it is '*manushya*'. Example: Raja Raja Chola with the help of Siddhar Karuvurar installed Brihadeshwara Lingam.

4. When *Maharishis* do the installations, it is '*arsha*'. Example: Thiruvanaikaval's Jambukeshwara by Maharishi Jambu.

The ancient temples were built in accordance with 'Agama Shaastra' and 'Shilpa Shaastra'. Agama Shaastra contains the rules for temple architecture and temple rituals. Shilpa Shaastra, a component of Agama Shaastra, contains the rules for sculpting. The sculptors (*shilpis*) and architects (*sthapatis*) who are central to temple building are experts in Shilpa Shaastra and Agama

Shaastra respectively. Agama Shaastras are detailed manuals that cover:

- Temple construction.
- Deity installation and infusion with universal energy (*prana pratisthaa*).
- Ritual worship (*puja, upachara*).
- Mantras used in rituals.
- Proper conduct of festivals

Agamas are the method of expression of Vedas in temples. Agamic procedures facilitate the ongoing worship of permanently installed deities, allowing universal energy to be imparted to individuals to enhance their spiritual development. Restrictions are placed on visiting temples during childbirth, death in the family, and when women are menstruating. '*Theetu*' in Tamil means unclean and there is a period of '*theetu*' for each of the above situations. One questions these restrictions as "There is no '*theetu*' for God". It is true that God exists everywhere without the concept of '*theetu*'. God can be worshipped in one's own mind on all those days and only worship in temples is prohibited to uphold their sanctity as per Agama Shaastras.

It is important to renovate and maintain ancient temples as a community effort. The consecration ceremony (*kumbabishekam*) is performed for renovated temples. Serving God physically or monetarily brings permanent good or auspiciousness (*shreyas*). Everyone must visit a nearby temple at least once during the

weekend and combine it with social service activities. People can gather first at the temple for worship and then provide service either for the temple itself or its nearby areas. This helps with individual divinity and to develop a community that supports one another.

Maintenance of temples in good condition and its continued worship is our responsibility. The surroundings of the temple should be clean and peaceful. Now-a-days, temples in India are surrounded by stores that sell cigarettes, tea, and the like. Temple authorities rent these places to generate income. In the process, *Bhakti* or devotion is reduced. Besides, temples have come under government control. People should collectively express their opinion if any injustice happens. To overcome injustices in terms of worship or maintenance of temples, we should demand remedies in compliance with what is stated in Agama Shaastras.

Other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are organized and their worship is congregational. Though we worship in temples, it is not mass service. Temple worship as *puja (archana)*, festivals, and *kumbabishekam* are done as a collective responsibility of devotees. Why is our temple noisy? It is because it is not for meditation or congregational worship. For us God or *Devata* is like a king overseeing the world. Like how a king and his palace are decorated, we decorate our Gods and *Devatas* and temples. We celebrate Gods and *Devatas* as a thanksgiving with music, bells, drums, cymbals, and fireworks. *Puja* rooms in homes, temple tanks, and riverbanks can serve as quiet places for meditation. That does not mean that temples are

for chit-chatting. Ritualistic sounds in temples based on Agama Shaastras will enhance our spiritual effort (*sadana*) even if we sit quietly for a while. Surrender to God is expressed physically through the actions of worship as well as with *anjali* (bringing palms of both hands together in front of our hearts) and *namaskar* (full-body prostration) at the end of worship as a sign of respect and humility.

Namaskar and Anjali

There are 2 kinds of *namaskar* - *ashta-anga* (eight limb/body part) for men and *pancha-anga* (five limb/body part) for women. The procedure for *ashta-anga namaskar* for men is to bring the forehead, chest, stomach, knees, and front portion of the feet flat on the ground. Hands should be kept parallel to the ground with palms touching the ground. For the ears to touch the ground, alternatively the head is moved from right to left. Then the palms of hands are brought together above the head with thumbs directed up in an *anjali* posture. This completes the *namaskar*. For *pancha-anga namaskar* for women, the child-bearing uterus and milk producing breast should not touch the ground. This *namaskar* entails sitting with legs bent from the knee and torso going down with forehead on the ground and palms to the side of the forehead touching the ground.

The double handed '*anjali*' is a way to greet people. It is called '*vanakkam*' in Tamil. When the palms are put together, it is in the shape of a bud or *hrudaya guha* (heart's cave). There are different types of *anjali*. For the Guru, place it between the eyes, the third

eye center, as the *Guru* teaches transcendental knowledge. To our father, *anjali* should be held in front of the mouth and for our mother in front of the stomach, signifying father blessing us with education and mother satiating our hunger. For God, *anjali* is done in front of the heart but turned inward facing the heart's cave. For other people, it can be done in front of the heart but turned outward as a blessing to others. For worship of *Ishta devata*, the hands are raised above the head or over the Sahasrara *chakra* for the deity is held in its center for meditation. The greatest reason for the existence of hands is to perform *anjali*.

Namaskar is always done at the end of worship and is a form of worship. *Namaskar* to God or elders is done saying 'Namo namah Narayanaya' means 'I bow again and again to Narayana' who is omnipresent. This will bring down our inflated ego and express our humility. In 'Durga Saptashati', there is a *shloka* which ends in, 'namastasyai, namastasyai, namastasyai, namo namah', where 'namastasyai' means 'salutation to Goddess' and 'namo namah' is 'I bow again and again' to each form of Goddess. Amongst Vaishnavites, there is a tradition to perform *namaskar* to elders repeatedly till the elder says it is enough. In North India, there is tradition to touch elders' feet by bending the body down from the hip. Thus, *namaskar* tradition has been nurtured throughout India as a way of worship. It should remain in us as a treasure to pay respect to elders, Guru, God, and *Devatas* for it uproots our sins. The respect shown to elders and *Gurus* is akin to worship of the God within them. The in-dweller God or '*antaryami*' is unique to Vedic religion.

In terms of whom to do *namaskar*, the custom is to do it to someone who is older than us. The elder brother's wife, even if younger by age, is respected by a *namaskar* because the brother takes on the role of a father figure in the household. Similarly, a *Guru*'s wife should be respected as she is the one who takes care of the students in Vedic schools (*gurukula*). Anybody with high moral standards, experienced in certain fields, great devotees, those who are self-realized (*jnanis*), monks (*sanyasis*), and sons of *Gurus* should be revered even if they are younger in age. *Namaskar* for elderly couples should be done with both together as a unit. Performing *namaskar* as a family helps children develop humility.

When it comes to doing *namaskar* to elders, men must follow it up with a practice known as '*abhivadana*' meaning self-introduction. It is required to say their family's *rishi* lineage or '*gotra*' (example: Bharadwaja *gotra*), the first three *rishis* of that *gotra* (example: Angirasa, Brhaspati, and Bharadwaja), 'Veda Sutra' or rules that the family follows (example: Asvalayana Sutra of Rig Veda), and their own name (example: Arunachala Sharma). This introduction is done when men do *namaskar* to someone elder to them but not when they do *namaskar* to *sanyasis* or Gods. Men should be bare chested during *abhivadana*. Family ceremonies (*sadangu* in Tamil) might vary depending on the Veda Sutra followed. It is customary not to marry within the same *gotra*, as it signifies consanguineous marriage.

We should take pride in continuing our traditional ways of greeting and recognition when we meet each other with *anjali* rather than the preferred western way of greeting with handshakes. It is a common practice now to offer garlands or shawls when we honor individuals in India. It would be responsible to respect our Vedic culture which recommends such practices to be done by men to men and women to women. These carry great significance these days when women are equally or more qualified and successful in comparison to men and work alongside them in various walks of society.

Circumambulation and Prostration

Acharya explained the circumambulation or *pradakshina* that we must do at the end of our worship in the temples. *Pradakshina* is the left to right or clockwise movement as prescribed in Vedic scriptures.

Earth rotates on its own axis from west to east resulting in the phenomenon of day and night. It revolves around the sun in its orbit in an anticlockwise direction causing the seasons of the year. The rotation of earth is perceived as east to west because of the movement of sun akin to us being inside a train moving in one direction, when the objects outside seem to be moving in the opposite direction. The movement of the universe or *prapancha* therefore is in the anticlockwise direction.

Acharya elaborated on the reason why *pradakshina* and *prapancha* movements are in opposite directions. All movements in the macrocosm and microcosm are due to the

influence of Goddess or Shakti. She is on the left side of the body and Iswara is on the right side of the body. The *Atman* resides in heart's cave (*hrudaya guha*) situated on the right side in the center of our chest. This cave is in the form of an inverted lotus bud, and the size of a rice grain with a miniscule aperture (*dwara*) leading to this cave. The space inside this *hrudaya guha* is *Atman*. This *Atman* or our microcosm and the outside cosmic space or macrocosm manifested in the temple sanctum as Iswara are one and the same. Hence *Atman* is *Brahman* in Advaita Vedanta. This *hrudaya* cave, which is the home of *Atman*, must not be confused with the physical heart that sits on the left side of the chest and pumps blood. The clockwise *pradakshina* in the temple is a spiritual practice to keep God or Iswara who is infused with universal energy (*Brahman*) to our right as he is the same as the *Atman* on the right side of our body.

The universal (*prapancha*) movement is represented inside the temple tower with steps laid in the counterclockwise direction as per Agama Shaastra. The temple tower indicative of the outer world is the threshold for the inner world. While entering the temple, we are leaving behind the outer world and entering the inner world of spirituality. While leaving the temple, we sit on the temple steps for a few minutes to contemplate on the inner God before getting back into the outer world. In Vedic religion spirituality always exists alongside worldliness.

After *pradakshina* in the temple, the prostration or *namaskar* done is called '*pradakshina namaskar*'. There are guidelines for the direction we should face when we do *pradakshina namaskar*.

For God facing east or west, the *namaskar* is done facing north. For God facing north or south, the *namaskar* is done facing east. So *namaskar* is always facing north or east. *Namaskar* facing south and west should be avoided. In Agama Shaastra, east is the direction of rising sun favoring spiritual growth and north is the direction favoring wisdom and prosperity. South is considered as the direction of God of death or Yama and is used for ancestral worship. West is the direction of the setting sun which although ideal for resting from the day's activities is not ideal for worship that is intended to bring new growth.

Temples generally have one main deity known as '*Moolavar*' and many other deities or *Upa-Devatas* facing every direction. We are not to do *ashta-anga* or *pancha-anga namaskar* to every deity inside the temple due to two reasons. One, it is inconvenient for other devotees. Secondly, *namaskar* to one mostly means extending the legs in the direction of another deity. We can do *anjali* to all the deities. Temples have a flag-mast known as '*dhwaja stambha'* which is the recommended place to do *namaskar* by appropriately facing the direction of east or north depending on the direction faced by the '*Moolavar*'. This *namaskar* by a devotee is considered as *namaskar* to all deities in the temple. This is like pouring water on the roots to reach all branches of a tree. Within a temple, if there is a shrine (*sannadi*) with its own '*dhwaja stambha'*, like many *sannadis* of Goddesses, there is nothing wrong in doing a *namaskar* there.

Planets in *prapanjam* or cosmos revolve anticlockwise and fast for worldly benefits. We must do circumambulation or

pradakshina slowly, peacefully, and in clockwise rotation for our spiritual wellness. When we move in time from one point to another, we move in thoughts and space. Nothing remains static; everything is changing in this world. This movement of change is seen in all things, whether living or non-living, and our whole life is a journey. To embark on a journey, we should know the origin, destination, and route. With regards to '*disha*', or direction, the starting point is '*purva*' or east and the end point is '*uttara*' or north. Why is it so? This is because the journey of life is a circular path. In circumambulation of the temple, it starts from east to south to west to north. From north, one goes back to the starting point in the east to complete the circle in a clockwise manner. Life can be imagined as a circle with each point in this journey of life being a mirror reflection of the *Atman* or *Brahman*. Any ripple in this circle of life is the result of our own doings, and its effects will eventually subside into the ripple-less continuum. With such an attitude there is no way to lose focus and direction or be out of touch with our true essence or *Atman*.

Physical practices recommended in Vedic scriptures that are practiced and perfected over generations bestow inner strength to the practitioner. It is akin to the impaction of pure *carbon* over the years to become strong diamonds. Bearing this attitude or '*manobhava*' in our minds while doing *pradakshina* and *namaskar* in temples, will undoubtedly elevate us to the pinnacle of humility (*vinaya*). The outcome of this feeling of humility is the achievement of etherealness in life or in other words attain

an expansive state of being which is inclusive of others instead of being selfish and egoistic.

Function of Religion

Religion helps to achieve the goals and objectives of human life (*purusharthas*) by providing us with the tools to realize the same. The four tools provided by religion are righteousness (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*), and liberation (*moksha*). To earn money in society by proper means is *artha*. Fulfilling desires and enjoying pleasures in family life is *kama*. Maintaining *dharma* as a guiding fence and practicing *artha* and *kama* within its boundaries can result in immense wisdom and thereby liberation or *moksha* is achievable even by a family man. Thus, a Hindu way of life revolves around the outer world (*laukika*) and inner world (soul or *Atman*). Worship of God is the link between the two worlds.

There are two methods of worship. One is to perform worship in accordance with the procedures laid out in the Shaastras. These involve strict observances of cleanliness, dietary, physical, and mental restrictions of do's and don'ts. The other is to go as dictated by one's heart purely out of love which only a very few possess. Most of us must follow procedural worship. There will always be a dichotomy between old and new or disciplined and random approaches. Not all rebellions are sincere, and not all systematic procedures are steeped in love. The bottom line is worship should not be done mechanically but with heart felt love and dedication.

Worship known as '*Atma puja*' or '*Manasik puja'* is meant for adoring one's own Self with *pancha upachara* or five forms of offerings. God and the worshipper are one and the same. Just think about it. If we are the same as God, to whom are we directing our prayers? It appears to be the height of selfishness, but it is universal love. The attitude of identification with Self or *Atman* does not last long. The mood passes and we are back to square one - to our narrow selfishness that is exclusive to everybody. Other than agnostics and atheists, everybody has love of varying intensity for God. When intensity is less, effects are less. When procedural worship is followed, deep devotion is automatically instilled. There are devotional procedures in various countries as recommended by different religions. They are all in some way capable of drawing on God's grace. Vedas and Shaastras in India have been blessed with power and vibrational effectiveness. India is a '*karma bhoomi'* meaning 'land of action' which brings spiritual wellness to the world. Worship in the ancient temples following Agama Shaastras combined with conducting big Soma *yajnas* benefit all of mankind (*Jiva*) and universe (*Jagat*).

Main Festivals

Festivals play a vital role in Hindu culture, adding color and meaning to the flow of life. They follow the Vedic calendar and create a unique rhythm to life throughout the year. During these times, the streets come alive with vendors and bustling markets, offering goods unique to each celebration and the festivities can be palpably felt by everybody.

There are six seasons pertaining to Vedic calendar. It includes spring (*vasanta*), summer (*grishma*), monsoon (*varsha*), autumn (*sharad*), pre-winter (*hemant*), and winter (*shishir*). Each season is approximately 2 months in duration starting with March-April for spring and ending with January-February for winter. The brighter six months of *uttarayan* start with spring and end in monsoon. The darker six months of *dakshinayan* starts with autumn and ends with winter. The festivals that fall in *dakshinayan* are grand and bring brightness to those months when the days are short and weather can be gloomy. *Uttarayan* starts with small festivals in the first four months. This is probably related to people spending less time at home due to occupation with cultivation and harvest in their lands and weather that is conducive to their movement throughout India to visit holy sites.

In India each state follows lunar, solar, and hybrid lunisolar calendar. Acharya has described the solar and lunar calendar in simple terms.

Solar calendar: The sun calendar is known as 'Soura-mana'. The prominent stars in the earth's solar system are identified as 27 in number. The orbit of the sun is divided into 12 parts called '*rasi*' or 'zodiac' and each *rasi* contains 2 ¼ stars within its borders. Each *rasi* or zodiac corresponds to a month in the solar calendar.

Lunar calendar: The moon calendar is known as 'Chandra-mana'. Moon passes through a fortnight or 14 days of waxing in

brightness (*sukla paksha*) from new moon (Amavasya) to full moon (Poornima) and a fortnight of waning or darkening moon (*krishna paksha*) from Poornima to Amavasya. A month in the moon calendar is the period between two consecutive new moons. Twelve new moons will make a year in the moon calendar.

The Vedic calendar, its seasons, and main festivals celebrated are outlined below.

Lunar Month	**Solar Zodiac**	**Mid months**	**Season**	**Festival**
Chaitra	Pisces	Mar-Apr	Spring	New Year, Ramanavami
Vaishaka	Aries	Apr-May	Spring	Adi Sankara Jayanthi
Jyesatha	Taurus	May-Jun	Summer	-----
Ashadha	Gemini	Jun-Jul	Summer	Vyasa Jayanthi / Guru Poornima
Shravana	Cancer	Jul-Aug	Monsoon	Krishna Jayanthi
Bhadrapada	Leo	Aug-Sep	Monsoon	Ganesh Chaturthi
Ashvina	Virgo	Sep-Oct	Autumn	Navaratri
Kartika	Libra	Oct-Nov	Autumn	Deepavali
Margashirsha	Scorpio	Nov-Dec	Pre-winter	Karthigai Deepam
Pausha	Sagittarius	Dec-Jan	Pre-winter	Thiruvadirai, Vaikunda Ekadasi
Magha	Capricorn	Jan-Feb	Winter	Pongal
Phalguna	Aquarius	Feb-Mar	Winter	Shivaratri

Pongal: It is the first festival in the New Year and mostly falls on January 14th of the Gregorian calendar. Pongal is also known as Makar Sankranti and is celebrated as a harvest festival throughout India. Pongal is celebrated in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as a thanksgiving for the land where rice and sugarcane are the main cash crops and rotated in cultivation. Food offerings are made to Sun God and the special offerings on this day are a dish known as '*pongal*' in both sweet and savory versions and freshly harvested sugarcane.

Maha-Shivaratri: This festival falls in 'Phalgun' month (mid-February to mid-March) on the 14th day of the waning moon (*krishna paksha*) to celebrate the origins of Linga or ellipsoidal (egg-shaped) universe. Worshipping clear quartz or *spatika* Linga with water *abhishekam* and offering a bilva leaf will cool and please Shiva. It is auspicious to fast and stay awake on Shivaratri night. Fasting combined with silence, settles the mind in the bliss of eternal consciousness on Shivaratri night.

Ramanavami: Sri Rama was born on the 9th day of the waxing moon (*sukla paksha*) of the 'Chaitra' month (mid-March to mid-April). During Rama Navami festival, one must chant 'Rama' *mantra* at least for five minutes and 'Sriram Jayaram Jaya Jaya Ram' for at least ten minutes. It is celebrated with refreshing drinks like '*panakam*' and '*neer mor'*. Since the season is hot, these are offered to weary pilgrims traversing the country.

New Year: In some regions like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bengal, and Punjab, New Year falls on April 14th. In other regions like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, it falls in late March or early April. It is known by different names, '*Puthandu*' in Tamil Nadu, '*Vishu*' in Kerala, '*Baisaki*' in Punjab, '*Boishakh*' in Bengal and '*Ugadi*' in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. This difference in New Year between regions depends on following the solar vs. lunar calendar but makes no difference in terms of timing of other festivals celebrated. New Year is not celebrated on a grand scale. The highlight of the New Year festivities is the reading of the year's Vedic calendar (*panchanka*) in temples with general predictions for the country.

Adi Sankara & Veda Vyasa Jayanthi: Adi Sankara was born on the 5th day of the waxing moon (*sukla Paksha*) of 'Vaishaka' month (mid-April to mid-May). Veda Vyasa was born on the full moon day of 'Ashadha' month (mid-June to mid-July). Vyasa Jayanthi is the same day as Guru Poornima. These great saints are celebrated in temples.

Krishna Jayanthi: Krishna was born on the 8th day of the waning moon (*krishna paksha*) of the 'Shravana' month (mid-July to mid-August). Krishna Jayanthi is celebrated with great enthusiasm and devotion all over India. Since he was born at midnight, festivities go on till late in the evening. In South India, devotees draw small footprints with rice flour, symbolizing baby Krishna coming into their homes. Many sweets and savory items like '*appam*', *'seedai'*, and *'murukku'* along with butter and

‘*aval’* (pounded rice) are offered as they are the favorites of baby Krishna.

Ganesh Chaturthi: Ganesh was born on the 4th day (Chaturthi) of the waxing moon (*shukla paksha*) of ‘Badrapada’ month (mid-August to mid-September). This day is celebrated as Ganesh Chaturthi with ‘*modak’* sweets all over India. We celebrate Ganesh in our homes and in the community *'pandals'* or temporary fabricated structures where decorations are grand and Ganesh is worshipped in various sizes, preferably made from clay. The size of Ganapati in some pandals is massive. Ganesha is a beloved *Devata* to all, and he is celebrated with music and a large variety of fruit offerings. *Jambu* fruit, a variety of blackberry that grows in India, is a favorite of Ganesha and is in season during these festivities. The following day, the sanctified clay idol is immersed in water (*visarjan*), emphasizing our non-attachment to created forms.

Acharya talked about the story behind the belief of incurring ill effects if we look at the moon on Ganesh Chaturthi day. The story is found in Mudgala Upa-Purana. Moon had been cursed twice, first by Daksha and second by Ganesha. Daksha, known as ‘Prajapati’ or ‘Lord of the people’ was a procreator of the world and he had 27 daughters. Daksha’s celestial daughters were the stars, and he had them married to the moon. However, the moon was partial to one star named Rohini. This caused Daksha to curse the moon which resulted in its waxing and waning phases. The moon becomes visible to the naked eye on the third day after the new moon (*Amavasya*) and this is called ‘*Chandra Darshan’*

or '*Moonram Pirai'* in Tamil. Shiva took pity on the moon and wore the crescent shaped '*Chandra Darshan*' moon on his matted hair to glorify moon and to bring auspiciousness to people. This day signifies the equinox between light and darkness and is meant for spiritual reflection and growth. Despite the damage caused by Daksha's curse, the moon was vain and took pride in its beauty whilst shining on cool pleasant nights which poets often sing about. When Ganesh was roaming in the sky on a Chaturthi day on his little mouse, the moon laughed at him for his immense belly. This resulted in the second curse on the moon. Ganesha's curse was that whoever looked at the Chaturthi moon would develop misunderstandings amongst family and friends. Moon could not bear to be ignored on all twenty-four Chaturthi (twelve waxing Chaturthi and twelve waning Chaturthi) each year and hence hid in the ocean. Lack of moonlight results in outbreaks of diseases because it affects growth of herbs. *Rishis* sought the advice of Lord Brahma, our creator, and prayed to Ganesh to reverse the curse. Ganesh mitigated the curse from suffering the ill effects of sighting the moon on all twenty-four Chaturthi to a single waxing Chaturthi in 'Bhadrapada' month which is celebrated as Ganesh's birthday. Ganesh further honored the moon by wearing the crescent '*Chandra Darshan'* moon on his head just like his father, Lord Shiva. The waning Chaturthi of the same 'Bhadrapada' month is known as 'Sankatahara Chaturthi. In Sankatahara Chaturthi *puja,* Ganesh is worshipped as a remover of obstacles. Moon and Rohini as a couple are also worshipped at the end of this *puja*, reiterating again the kindness shown by Ganesha to the moon.

We learn from this story that the immensely gracious Ganesha will help us overcome any obstacle including any curse that might result from watching the moon on Ganesh Chaturthi day.

Navaratri: It is a festival of nine nights that falls in 'Asvin' month (mid-September to mid-October) starting after the new moon (Amavasya) day. It celebrates the victories of the Goddesses over demons. The demons are also within us, and this is a time to reflect and release them. The nine days of celebration during this season is called the 'Sharad Navaratri' as it is celebrated in the '*sharad*' or autumn season. Nine forms of Goddess are worshipped with attributes relatable to Parvati, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. The 9th day (Navami) is celebrated as Saraswati *puja* in Tamil custom. Books which represent Saraswati are collected from children and stacked on a wooden plank. It is decorated with vibrant runner cloth and flowers for worship. The offerings include '*sundal*' and '*payasam*'. Bengalis worship Durga on the 8th day (Ashtami) and her immersion in water (*visarjan*) on the 10th day (Dashami). It is good to start anything new from education to jobs on the 10th victory day (Vijayadashami) of Goddess.

Deepavali: This is a grand celebration of the triumph of Sri Krishna over demon Narakasura. It is celebrated on the new moon day of 'Kartika' month (mid-October to mid-November). It is celebrated by taking an oil bath before sunrise, wearing new clothes, and enjoying delicious sweets. It is celebrated in North India as a festival of lights by decorating homes with lamps along

with bursting of fireworks and performance of Lakshmi *puja*. In South India, it is celebrated with fireworks and Amavasya *puja*. All businesses close their previous year's account books and open new ones from that day.

The story of Krishna's triumph over Narakasura is found in Cauvery Upa-Purana. Narakasura was born when Vishnu as boar or Varaha *avatar* lifted Mother Earth (Bhudevi) from the bottom of ocean. When Narakasura's actions became destructive and unbearable, he had to be vanquished by the divine couple Krishna and Satyabama who are the *avatars* of Vishnu and Bhudevi respectively and therefore the creators of Narakasura. Bhudevi wanted Narakasura dead, so people could be at peace. His demise came in 'Kartika' month on the 14th day of waning moon. The next day is the new moon or 'Amavasya'. On this day, Satyabhama, who is Bhudevi got the approval from Krishna to take an oil bath before daybreak. This practice is considered inauspicious. However, this inauspiciousness is overcome by the auspiciousness of having the symbolic presence of Lakshmi in oil and Ganga in water. The belief is that the oil bath on Deepavali day brings the benefits of wealth from Lakshmi Devi and mental purity from Ganga Devi. We should get up early that day and take a hot oil bath an hour before sunrise. The greeting that morning in Tamil Nadu when people get together is, 'Did you have Ganga *snana*?' Ganga *snana* should be followed by 'Tula *snana*'. Our scriptures detail the significance of this second bath on Deepavali day.

Krishna incurred the '*veera hatti dosha'* or 'sin of killing a brave warrior' when he killed Narakasura. He approached Lord Shiva in Kailasa to help reverse this curse. This was during the solar zodiac of Libra or Tula *rasi* which corresponds to lunar 'Kartika' month. According to our scriptures, during this month, all the sixty-six crore holy waters (*punya tirtha*) from all worlds flow into Cauvery river for a period of 2 ½ hours after sunrise. Shiva advised Krishna to take Cauvery Tula *snana* to be rid of his '*veera hatti dosha'*. Sri Krishna, who is '*Yamuna theera vihari*' or the resident of the shores of Yamuna came to Cauvery to do Tula *snana* and in doing so his *dosha* left his body and his effulgence returned. Tula ghat on the banks of Cauvery in Tamil Nadu's Mayavaram, is now used for this purpose where scores of people gather to perform Tula *snana* to cleanse themselves and absolve their sins just like Sri Krishna did.

It is recommended that on Deepavali day, we should first have an oil bath in hot water before daybreak as Ganga *snana*. Then within the next 2 ½ hours we should have a cold-water bath as Cauvery Tula *snana*. In the first bath, we should remember Narakasura, Bhudevi, Sathyabama, and Sri Krishna. In the second bath, we should remember Iswara. These divine memories are the greatest tools for removing our inner dirt and bringing clarity in divine consciousness. Thus, Sri Krishna has granted us the grace and blessing of Ganga *snana* and Cauvery *snana* on Deepavali day in our very homes. Whenever possible, taking an annual dip in the rivers Ganges and Cauvery will be a blessing.

Karthigai Deepam: It is a festival popular in Tamil Nadu that celebrates Muruga or Karthik. Muruga is associated with the Krittika star. He was nurtured by six celestial nymphs (*Karthigai Pengal* in Tamil) who were later granted immortality by Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati to become Krittika star constellation, which western astronomy identifies as Pleiades star cluster. The worship of Krittika star is worship of Muruga. It is celebrated as per solar calendar. Krittika star falls on the full moon day of the solar zodiac of Scorpio or Vrishchika *rasi* (mid-November to mid-December) which is 'Karthigai' month in Tamil Nadu. It is celebrated with '*pori urundai'* sweets and the house is decorated with rows of earthen lamps. It is a grand festival in Thiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu where a massive lamp is lit on the top of the Arunachala hill that can be seen many miles away. Shiva as a column of light is condensed into Arunachala hill in Thiruvannamalai. Thus, both Shiva and Karthik are worshipped on this day in the form of light.

Thiruvadirai and Vaikunta Ekadasi: 'Thiruvadirai' also known as 'Arudra' is a grand festival in Chidambaram's Nataraja temple. Seeing Nataraja on that day is called 'Arudra *darshan*'. Vaikunda Ekadasi is a grand festival in Srirangam's Ranganatha temple, and people visiting the temple on that day are considered to have stepped into Vaikunda (heaven). These two festivals are celebrated as per solar calendar. The solar zodiac of Sagittarius or Dhanur *rasi* (mid-December to mid-January) is 'Maargazhi' month in Tamil Nadu. Ranganatha is celebrated with fasting on Vaikunta Ekadasi day which is the

waxing (*shukla paksha*) 11th day of the lunar fortnight. On all Ekadasi days, it is beneficial to combine fasting with silence, for it settles the mind in the bliss of eternal consciousness. Nataraja is celebrated on the full moon day with feasting on dishes like sweet '*kali*' and savory '*kootu*' consumed as a combination in homes.

The entire 'Maargazhi' month is a special time of worship in all Vishnu and Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu with devotional hymns filling the air in the early morning hours. Andal is an Alvar saint-poet and her 'Thiruppavai' in praise of Vishnu is popularly sung in Vishnu temples. Her hymn starts with the line '*maargazhi thingal madhi niraindha nannaalaal*' which means 'on this auspicious full moon day of maargazhi month'. Manikkavachakar is a Nayanmar saint-poet and his 'Thiruvampavai' hymns dedicated to Shiva are sung during this month in Shiva temples. Sri Krishna also appreciated this month and said in the Bhagavad-Gita's Chapter10, '*Maasanaam Maargasheershoham*', that amongst the months of the calendar he is 'maargasheersh', which is 'maargazhi' month.

Celebrating festivals and observing traditions has numerous benefits. They are unifying events that reinforce family ties, strengthen community bonds, and foster a sense of shared identity. Dharma Shaastra recommends us to live in one's native place and practice *dharma* even when faced with adversity. Given the demands of life, we might not be able to strictly adhere to this recommendation. We should at least strive to live with minimum possession and property by cutting down on our needs

and expenditure to be able to sacrifice for the sake of others. This is eternal *dharma* as directed by God. Live a simple life above superfluous pleasures and aspire for the great pleasure of refuge in God. We can learn from mistakes made in the name of social reforms and revert to simple ways of traditional living which will quell the ills troubling the world. Acharya pleaded to everyone to set aside differences and hoped for unity in diversity among Gods and humans alike.



GURU LINEAGE

Sadashiva Samarambhaam
Sankaracharya Madhyamaam
Asmad Acharya Paryantaam
Vande Guru Paramparaam

Salutation to eternal lineage starting with Sadashiva to Adi Sankara in the middle and continuing up to present and future Gurus