

Path to Dharma

தர்ம நெறி

ஓம்

பீர்த் தாடீய



News Letter

3

செய்தி மடல்



கேதத்ர(வயல்)விநாயகர் ஆலயம்,
ஸ்ரீ முக்தகேஸ்வரம், சீலாபம், இலங்கை.

Kshethra Vinayaka Temple, Sri Munneswaram, Chilaw, Sri Lanka.
தி னு டேலி டேலாடீய (வெலே), இன்னேக்கரம், இலாபம், இலங்கை.
hot mail: kshethravinayaka@yahoo.com: munneswaram@yahoo.com

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

தி அன் டேவி டேவிடா (வெலி), இன்னைக்கரம், அலாபம், இலங்கை.
hot mail; ksbethravinaayaka@yahoo.com: munneswaram@yahoo.com

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கு னை டேலி டேவாலய (வேலூ), இன்னைக் கரம், கலாவம், சீலாவம்.

hot mail; kshethravinayaka@yahoo.com: munneswaram@yahoo.com

Edited by: B.S.Sarma , Kshethra Vinayaka Temple, Sri Munneswaram, Chilaw, Sri Lanka.

*extract from the book 'An Introduction to Hinduism' by B.S.Sarma

Hindu Religious festivals *

All Hindu festivals have a deep spiritual significance and import religious philosophical aspects. All festivals have social and hygienic elements in them. All the devotees get fully involved in the observation of the rituals of any religious ceremony. Mostly the festivals are held at temples where a large number of devotees participate with full devotion and belief. Though there are numerous festivals celebrated, a few are given below. All the festivals have their own mythology, procedure of the rituals and spiritual philosophy which forms the basis of the festivals. Only one religious festival namely Maha Sivaratri festival is dealt in detail as an example, though all could be dealt with elaborately.

Maha Sivaratri

The great night of Lord Siva is celebrated on the fourteenth day of the waning moon of the month of Maasi (February-March). Skaandha puranam describes about four Sivarathris. The first one is *nitya Sivaratri* (daily Sivaratri - every night). The second one is the *Masa Sivaratri* which is observed on the Krishna paksha chaturdasi (fourteenth moon day on the moon's diminishing phase). The third one is the *Maga prathamadi sivaratri* which is observed for the thirteen days starting from prathama tithi in the month Maga (Masi) and on the chaturdasi night the Lord is worshiped throughout the night. The fourth one is observed on the Masi (Maga) month Krishna paksha chaturdasi. This is the one observed in a widespread manner. It is also called Maha Sivaratri.

Of all the festivals that are dedicated and deemed to be holy to Almighty, the Maha Sivaratri festival is the most auspicious. Sivaratri festival dedicates the entire twenty-four hours of the day and night for the worship of Lord Siva. In the evening devotees generally go to a nearby temple and observe religious rituals. They remain awake without sleeping throughout that night. The devotees worship Siva the whole night, by chanting "AUM Nama Sivaya" or singing hymns in praise of Lord Siva, such as Rudram, Chamakam, and the *Shiva Mahimna Stotra* of Pushpadanta or Ravana's *Siva Tandava Stotra* are sung with great fervor and devotion. In many temples singing in eulogy of Lord Siva and listening to religious discourses interpreting the legends associated with the festival is very common on that day.

According to belief Lord Siva consumed the deity poison which emanated when the ocean of milk was churned by the Devas and Asuras, and this saved the universe. The worship that was offered to Siva on that night is being continued annually. The observance of Maha Sivaratri begins with the fasting during the day, and worshipping, Almighty during the great night. Maha Sivaratri rituals that takes place in a Siva temple includes pujas,

abishekams (Holy bath), archanas (offering flowers by chanting religious hymns), encircling lighted lamps (deepa alankaras) etc. In the rituals, leaves of a forest tree Bilva (Aegle marmelos) are traditionally used in the services.

Significance of Sivratri

- Kannappa Nayanar sacrificed his eyes and donated to Lord Siva. This incident occurred on Shivrathri day.
- Arjuna procured Pasupabatha asthram on this holy day.
- Markandeya was rescued by Lord Shiva on this holy day.
- Parvathi was given half-portion of Lord of the Lords on this holy day.
- Beema's arrogance, ego was destroyed and attained knowledge on this holy day

During the 'abishekam the deity is anointed with materials like cow's milk, curd, ghee during the first 'yama' (first three hours of that night), with 'panchamirtha' (the five varieties of fruits) during the second 'yama' (second three hours of that night), with honey during the third 'yama' (third three hours of that night), and perfumed religious water during the fourth 'yama' (last three hours of that night). Milk, honey, fruits, curd and ghee are symbolic of the five internal faculties which sustain the jiva namely mind (manas), intellect (buddhi), subconscious mind (chiththa), ego (ahankara), and emotion (hridhaya). The materials used for holy bath (abisheka) namely, milk, curd, ghee, honey, fruits and sandal paste and kumkumam produce a high negative ion concentration on the idol (murthy) after the abishekams (Holy bath). The energy created by the vibrations with the high concentrated negative ion are absorbed through nerve ending of the neuro sense organs inhaled by the devotees present during the puja ceremony in the sanctum sanctorum.

The Lingotbhava puja and abhisheka (holy bath) rituals which takes place during midnight yama are the most important aspect of the Sivaratri festival. The Lingotbhava murthy (form of idol) is seen in the niche in the external side of the western direction of the sanctum sanctorium of a Siva temple. This form of Lord Siva is seen to be depicted as emerging out of the Siva linga with the apex and the bottom of the form seen missing. That is the top portion of the head and the bottom portion of the legs is curved off, from the 'Chandrasekara murti' form. Lord Brahma is seen seated on swan in flight at the top and Lord Vishnu seated on a boar burrowing at the bottom of the Lingotbhava murthy of Lord Siva. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity in the Lingotbhava murthy shows the combination of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva which defies the conception of the creator, preserver and destroyer all are one and the same.

When we expect God to shower upon us the boon of supreme bliss, He naturally expects us to become worthy recipients of the boon. He expects us to be prepared, to sacrifice what is most dear to us. One of the dearest requirements for man is 'sleep', which is very essential for life. On the Sivaratri day if we are ready with a determined mind to sacrifice that dear object of us, which is sleep that we enjoy with great pleasure, then we can call ourselves to be fit to receive boons from God. The main idea is to prepare us to sacrifice things most dear to us. In order to prove ourselves to be good receivers, we are awake throughout the night and the following day. We must not fall asleep on the following day.

Mythology of Maha sivaratri

Once when everything in all the worlds got condensed into Lord Siva, in that darkness of nothing present, the mother Parvati worshipped Lord Siva in the Agamic way with great dedication. Lord Siva delighted by the prayer blessed Her. She asked for the do well to of all the creatures that in future whoever worships the Lord on the Sivaratri day with devotion; they should be blessed and should be given the ultimate liberation. The Pashupati granted that showing way for all of us to get blessed easily.

When Brahma and Vishnu fought between themselves as "who is the supreme", Lord Siva appeared before them as a pillar of fire. They were not able to find the origin and end of that pillar. This day is now being celebrated as Thirukkaarthikai festival. Then Brahma and Vishnu repented for their mistake and prayed to Lord Siva for forgiving their sin worshipping the Siva lingam which is the form of the flame. In the night of Sivarathri day Lord

Siva appeared before them and blessed them. Devotees pray to the God throughout the night of Siva rathri by performing Abisheka, chanting and other holy deeds. Every month in 'Krishna Paksha chathurdhasi' (fourteenth moonday) is called Masa Sivarathri. The one that comes in the month of "Masi" (mid February to mid March) is called Maha Sivarathri. This is considered as the most important vrata by the devotees.

The Linga from in which Lord Siva revealed Himself on Maha Sivaratri is the Sivalinga which is considered the symbol of the formless all pervading Divine spirit which is discernible in all operations of the phenomenal universe. Linga is the sign of rhythmic creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe which expresses itself in different forms and periodically returns to its primal primordial unity before being reborn.

There is story regarding keeping awake during the night of the Sivaratri. In the Shanti Parva of the *Mahabharata*, Bheeshma, whilst laying on the bed of arrows and discoursing on Dharma, refers to the observance of Maha Sivaratri by king Chitrabhanu. In the past King Chitrabhanu of the Ikshvaku Empire, who ruled over the whole of Jambudvipa, was observing a fast with his wife, on a Maha Sivaratri day. The learned sage Ashtavakra came on a stopover to the court of the king. The sage inquired, the king Chitrabhanu why he was fasting on that day, for which king told the sage that he had the gift of power of remembering the incidents of his earlier birth (peculiar power of recollecting Poorva Janma). The king explained the sage, that in his previous birth he was a hunter in Kasi (Varanasi). His name was Suswara. And his livelihood was to kill and sell birds and animals. The story goes as follows;

Once at Kasi a hunter went to the forest early in the morning to hunt. On that day he was roaming along the forest in search of animals. He had shot a deer in evening on that day, but he had no time to take it home. He was overtaken by the darkness of night and he was unable to return home. The night at the thick forest resounds with the roaring sounds of lions and other quadrupeds. He climbed on to a tree for safety. It happened that the tree he climbed was a bael tree. (Bilwa tree-Aegle marmelos). He bundled up the animal that he had killed and tied it to a branch of the tree. As he was tormented by hunger and thirst, he kept awake throughout the night due to fear of deadly wild animals. He shed profuse tears when he thought of his poor wife and children who were starving and anxiously waiting for his return. He engaged himself in plucking the bael (Aegle marmelos) leaves and dropping them down onto the ground to pass away the time that night. When the day dawned he got down from the tree and saw a black solid column like granite stone like structure under the tree and then he returned home and sold the deer. He bought some food for himself and for his family. He was about to break his fast when a stranger came to him, begging for food. He welcomed the stranger with his pleasant melodious voice that he naturally had, and served the food to the stranger first, and later then took his food.

At the time of death, he saw two messengers of Lord Siva. They were sent down to conduct his soul to the abode of Lord Siva. He learnt that for the first time of the great merit that he had earned by the unconscious worship of Lord Siva during the night of Sivaratri. They told him that there was a Sivalingam at the bottom of the tree. The leaves that he dropped fell on the Lingam. His tears which he had shed out of pure sorrow for his family fell onto that Sivalingam and washed it, and he had fasted all day and all night. Thus he had unconsciously worshipped the Lord.

He lived in the abode of the Lord and enjoyed divine bliss for long ages. He is now reborn as Chitrabhanu. Fortunately for him it was a Maha Sivaratri night, the tree he climbed on was a Bilwa tree, there was an ancient Sivalingam just below him, since he did not get any pray he was without any meals or water from the morning. He shed profuse tears, thinking of his poor wife and children who were starving and anxiously awaiting for his return had fallen drop by drop on to the Sivalingam, as religious bath (Abhishekam). He, to keep himself awake started plucking one leaf at a time and putting it down which without his knowledge fell on the Sivalinga just below him. The hunter though unwittingly fulfilled all the requirements of Maha Sivaratri Viratham he was blessed with the Almighty.

Spiritual Significance of the Ritual

It is an allegory. The wild animals that the hunter fought with are envy, anger, greed, emotion, infatuation, passion, jealousy and hatred. The jungle is the fourfold mind, consisting of the subconscious mind, the intellect, the ego and the conscious mind. It is in the mind that these 'wild animals' roam about freely. They must be conquered or killed. The hunter was pursuing them. A real Yogi conquers these evil tendencies. So the hunter would have been a yogi. The name of the hunter was Suswara. The word 'Suswara', gives the meaning of melodious. The hunter had a pleasant melodious voice.

If a person practices Yama and Niyama and is ever conquering his evil tendencies, that person will develop definite external marks which show the features of a Yogi. The first marks are lightness of the body, health, steadiness, clearness of countenance and a pleasant voice.

This stage has been spoken of in detail in the *Swetaswatar Upanishad*. The hunter or the yogi had for many years practiced yoga and had reached the first stage. So he was named Suswara. His birthplace was Varanasi. The yogis mention the Ajna Chakra by the name Varanasi. This is the point midway between the eyebrows. It is regarded as the meeting place of the three nerve currents (Nadis), namely, the Ida, Pingala and the Sushumna. A confident aspirant is instructed to concentrate on that particular point. That helps him to conquer his desires and evil qualities like are envy, anger, greed, emotion, infatuation, passion, jealousy and hatred and so on. It is there that he gets a vision of the divine light within.

His getting on to the bael (Aegle marmelos) tree is extremely noteworthy. The bael tree has three leaves on one stalk. The tree represents the spinal column. The leaves are threefold. The leaf symbolize the Ida, Pingala and Sushumna Nadis, which are the regions for the activity of the moon, the sun and fire respectively. These may be considered as the three eyes of Siva.

The climbing on to the bael tree is meant to represent the ascension of the Kundalini Shakti, the serpentine power, from the lowest nerve center called the Muladhara to the Ajna Chakra. That is the work of the Yogi.

The Yogi was in the waking state when he began his meditation. He bundled up the animal that he had killed and, tying them on a branch of the tree, he rested on the branch of that tree. That means he had fully conquered his thoughts and rendered them inactive. He had gone through the steps of Yama, Niyama, Pratyahara, etc.

He was practicing concentration and meditation while being on the tree. When he felt sleepy, it means that he was about to lose consciousness and go into deep sleep. So he would have been strong-minded himself to keep fully awake.

His wife and children were none other than the world. One who seeks the Grace of God must become an embodiment of love. He must have an all-embracing compassion. His shedding of tears is symbolical of his universal love. In Yoga, one cannot have illumination without Divine Grace. Without practicing universal love, one cannot win that Grace. One must distinguish one's own Self everywhere. The preliminary stage is to identify one's own mind with the minds of all created beings. That is fellow-feeling or sympathy. Then one must rise above the limitations of the mind and merge it in the Self. That happens only in the stage of Samadhi, and never before that stage or earlier.

The activity of plucking and dropping the bael leaves was only to show that he had no extraneous thoughts. He was not even conscious of what he was doing. All his activity was confined to the three Ida, Pingala and the Sushumna Nadis. The leaves of bael (Aegle marmelos) tree represent the three Nadis. He was in fact in the second state, namely, the dream state, before he passed into the deep sleep state.

Keeping vigil the whole night means that he passed through the deep sleep state successfully. The dawning of day symbolizes the entrance into the Fourth state called 'Turiya' (super consciousness).

His coming down and seeing the Lingam means that in the Turiya state he saw the Siva Lingam or the mark of Siva in the form of the inner lights. In other words, he had the vision of the Lord. That was an indication to him that he would realize the supreme, eternal abode of Lord Siva in course of time.

The sight of the lights is only one step, albeit a difficult one. He goes home and feeds a stranger. A stranger is a person who has shown his sight before. The stranger is the hunter himself, transformed into a new personality.

The food was the likes and dislikes which he had killed the previous night. But he did not consume the whole of it. A little still remained. That was why he had to be reborn as king Chitrabhanu. Going to the world of Siva (Salokya) is not enough to prevent this. There are other stages besides Salokya. These are Samipya, Sarupya and finally Sayujya.

Navratri

During Navaratri, we invoke the energy aspect of God in the form of the universal mother, commonly referred to as "Durga," which literally means the remover of miseries of life. She is also referred to as "Devi" (goddess) or "Shakti" (energy or power). With the help of God to proceed with creation, preservation and destruction. God is motionless, absolutely changeless, Divine Mother Durga, the sakthi. This confirms the scientific theory that energy is imperishable. It cannot be created or destroyed. It is always there.

Nine Nights

Navaratri is divided into sets of three days to adore different aspects of the supreme goddess. On the first three days, the Mother is invoked as powerful force called Durga in order to destroy all our impurities, vices and defects. The next three days, the Mother is adored as a giver of spiritual wealth, Lakshmi, who is considered to have the power of bestowing on her devotees the inexhaustible wealth. The final set of three days is spent in worshipping the mother as the goddess of wisdom, Saraswati. In order to have all-round success in life, we need the blessings of all three aspects of the divine mother; hence, the worship for nine nights.

Dasara/Navarathi, Saraswathi Pooja, Vijaya Dhasami

This is among the most auspicious days in the Hindu calendar and comes as the finale of the nine-day festival, Navaratri. This festival of victory is preceded by worship of Saraswati the Goddess of learning and of Durgaa the Goddess of strength. Vijaya Dashami is preceded by the Aayudha pooja on the Mahanavami day (ninth day), when not only the weapons are worshipped by the warriors, but the blacksmith, the potter, the carpenter, the tailor, the mason, the typist, the musician, the artist and every type of technical worker - worships his instruments and tools.

Deepavali

Deepavali is the Hindu Festival of Lights. Deepavali is one of the most popular. It is celebrated in the Hindu month of Iyypasi which usually corresponds to the month of October or November. Hindus, Jains and Sikhs celebrate Deepavali and use the occasion to celebrate life and strengthen relationships. Celebrations focus on lights and lamps. Fireworks may also be associated with the festival in some regions.

Vaikunta Ekadasi

This vrtha is observed the 11th day of the lunar fortnight is auspicious to Vishnu. Vaikunta Ekaadasi, falling in December- January, is celebrated as a special festival when the "gates of Heaven" ceremoniously open for devotees to enter.

Thiru Karththikai

On the full moon day of the month of Kartigai (November-December) which falls on the ascension of the Kartigai star, the Hindus celebrate the Kartigai Deepam. It is on this day that the huge beacon is lit on the holy hill Arunachala, in South India.

On the Kartigai Deepam day devotees make bonfires in front of temples in the evening. It is said that Lord Shiva burnt the chariots of several demons that were torturing sages and celestials. This bonfire symbolises this legend. People place rows of earthen lamps in front of their houses on the evening of Kartigai Deepam and worship the Lord. They also light a variety of fireworks. Annihilate the three impurities, namely, egoism, selfish action and delusion. Burn the mind, senses and the desires in the fire of knowledge of the self or Siva-Jnanam and attain full illumination and behold the light of lights, which illumines the mind, intellect, sun, moon, stars, lightning and the fire.

Once Brahma and Vishnu due to the ego started arguing with each other "who is the greatest". Both claimed to be the greatest, instead of doing their duty. At that time the God appeared in the form of fire and told them whoever finds the top or bottom of the fire is the greatest. Brahma took the form of Annam (swan) and tried to find the top of the fire pillar. Vishnu took the form of Varaha (giant pig) and tried to see the bottom of the pillar. As the God has no limit in His size or power, both of them could not see either top or bottom of the fire. When their ego went down and they prayed the God, He appeared before them. The day in which the God appeared as a pillar of fire is Thirukarththikai.

This Thirukarththikai viratha indicates the non measurable infiniteness of the God and shows that the God is the light that will drive away our ignorance. Lamps are lit in the houses to pray His 'Jyothi Swarupam'.

Pongal

Pongal in Tamil literally means *boiling over*. It is really the harvest festival and also thanksgiving festival. It is traditionally celebrated at the time of harvest of crops and hence is a celebration of the prosperity associated with the event. Pongal is historically a secular festival independent of religion. *Pongal*, festival normally falls on the first day of the Tamil month *Thai* (January 14 or January 15). The *Pongal day* is celebrated by boiling rice with fresh milk and Jaggery early in the morning and allowing it to boil over the vessel, a tradition that is the literal

translation for *Pongal* (in Tamil). The moment the rice gets boiled over and bubbles out of the vessel, it is offered to the sun God, a gesture which symbolises thanksgiving to the sun for providing prosperity. People also prepare savories and sweets, visit each other's homes, and exchange greetings. On this day, sweets, and sweet rice is prepared in every home.

The pot in which the rice is cooked is beautifully adorned with tumeric leaves and roots, the symbols of auspiciousness. The cooking is done with great faith and devotion, feeling from the bottom of their hearts that it is an offering unto the Lord. When the milk in which the rice is being cooked boils over, the ladies and the children assemble round the pot and shout "Pongalo Pongal" with great joy and devotion. Special prayers are offered in temples and houses. Then the people of the household gather together and partake of the offerings in an atmosphere of love and festivity. There is family re-union in all homes. Brothers renew their contacts with their married sisters by giving them presents. The next day, *Mattu Pongal*, is meant to offer thanks to the cattle, as they provide with milk and are used to plough the lands.

The astronomical significance of the festival is that it marks the beginning of Uttarayana, the Sun's movement northward for a six month period. In Hinduism, Uttarayana is considered auspicious, as opposed to Dakshinayana, or the southern movement of the sun. All important events are scheduled during this period. Makara Sankranti refers to the event of the sun entering the zodiac sign of Makara or Capricorn. As already mentioned; this is the Pongal festival in South India. It is closely connected with agriculture. To the farmer, it is a day of triumph. He would have by then brought home the fruits of his patient toil. Symbolically, the first harvest is offered to the Almighty, and that is Pongal. To toil was his task, his duty, but the fruit is now offered to Him, that is the spirit of Karma yoga.

Skanda Sashti

Devotees of Lord Skanda observe weekly and monthly days in His honour. Every Friday, or the Kartika Nakshatram day every month, or the sixth day of the bright fortnight, all these are sacred days for His devotees. The sixth day of the month of Iyappasi (October-November) is the most auspicious of them all. This is the Skanda Sashti day. In many places the festival commences six days prior to the Sashti itself and concludes on the day of the Sashti. During these days, devotees recite religious hymns of Lord Subramanya and they worship the Lord and take *Kavadi*. They go on pilgrimage to the various shrines of Lord Muruga.

Pradosha Vrata

The Pradosha worship is observed in the evening twilight on the 13th day of each lunar fortnight. It is the worship of Lord Siva for victory and success in all undertakings, and the fulfilment of all your heart's cherished desires. Worship of Lord Siva, together with Parvati, Ganesha, Skanda and Nandi. After the worship of Ganesha, Lord Siva is invoked in the special *kalasha* placed on a square *mandala* with a lotus drawn in it and spread over with *darbha* grass. After the formal worship by the recitation of the Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra 108 times. At the end of the ritual, the sacred *kalasha* water is partaken of; the sacred ash is applied to the forehead. During this auspicious period all the hosts of celestial beings and gods come down from the heavens and attend the worship in their subtle forms. This Pradosha Vrata is highly lauded by the scriptures and is of very great sanctity and importance to worshippers of Lord Siva. Even a single *bael* leaf offered to the Lord at this unique is auspicious.

Yogic interpretation of the Pradosha.

According to the Siva-Raja yoga, concentration is directed towards the central point in the middle of the eyebrows, where the spiritual light can be perceived by the yogi who turns the vision inwards. The yogi passes through various stages, all of which are subdivisions of the four states of waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and the superconscious state or samadhi.

Each one of these states is further sub-divided into four states, for example, the waking-dreaming, waking-deep, waking-fourth, and waking-waking. It will be seen that when the states are sub-divided in this way, the first three states comprise a total of twelve sub-states. The thirteenth is the fourth-waking. There is correspondence between this and the 13th day of the lunar fortnight, either bright or dark.

Pradosha Purana

Once Dhevas and Asuras using the serpent Vasuki and the hill Mandhara were trying to get Amrutham (nectar) from the Kseerabthi (Milk Ocean). Then the terrible poison (Halahal) came up. All got frightened and pleaded to Lord Siva for rescue. Being the peak of mercy Lord Siva ate that poison. Then as per His order they resumed

their effort to get Amrutham. They got it on Dhwadhasi (twelfth moon day). Without praying and thanking the God, by whom they got Amrutham, Devas started celebrating their victory. On thrayodhasi (thirteenth moon day) they realised their sin of not praying the God and pleaded for forgiveness. The pleased graceful Lord Siva forgave them and appeared between the horns of the Nandhi (holy bull). That time is called Pradhosham. Whoever prays Lord Siva at that time; Lord Siva fulfills their wishes and gives them mukthi.

Ganesh Chaturthi

Ganesh Chaturthi is a festival which commences on the fourth day of the bright half of the month of Purattaasi. (August or September). The day commemorates certain events connected with Ganesha. It is the day on which he materialised as Mayureshwara, to kill the demon Sindhu, who had acquired extraordinary powers through the worship of Surya. Mayureshwara is also one of the Ashtavinayakas, this is also the birth that Siva has chosen to celebrate in Kailasa. The puja is performed once in the morning and again in the evening. Ganesha is offered special leaves and flowers, twenty one of each and white durva grass. The idol is formally installed on the first day and given life in the presence of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, and the Vedas. Touching the idol with blades of durva grass, he is brought to life step by step and made to go through 15 of the 16 rites of passage that each Hindu goes through in his lifetime. (The sixteenth one, which is for death, is omitted). The Ganesha mantra is chanted, followed by a Ganesha prayer, rice grains are placed on the head of the idol, which is moved, symbolically unseating him.

Krishna Janmaashtami

This day is also known as "Krishnaashtami", "Gokulaashtami", "Srikrishna Jayanti", "Sree Jayanthi" or sometimes merely as "Janmaashtami", is a Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Krishna, the eighth avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu. Krishna Janmashtami is observed on the eighth day of the dark half, (new moon day - Krishna Paksha) of the month of Purattaasi in the Hindu calendar, when the Rohini Nakshatram is ascendent. The Hindu calendar being luni-solar, these two events [the day being the eighth of the waning moon (Krishna-paksha Ashtami) and the Rohini Nakshatram being ascendent] may overlap for only a few hours. In such an event, the festival may be celebrated on different (but successive) days by different people, depending on their local or family traditions. The celebrations begin with the fasting on the previous day (Saptami). This is followed by a night-long prayers commemorating the birth of Krishna at night. At midnight, the idol of the infant Krishna is bathed, placed in a cradle and worshipped. After ablutions, morning prayers and worship, the devout break their fast with Prasadam, food that has first been offered to the lord.

Soma Vara Vratam

One of the names of Lord Siva is *soma - saha uma*. For the Lord someshvara Who wears (the soma) the moon crescent on the matted hair, on the somavara day (Monday), this festival is observed. Though all Mondays can be observed as Soma Vara vrata there are special Mondays when it is much more emphasised to observe like the shravana somvaram and karthikai somavaram. According to skandha purana, on the Mondays of the month *karthikai* (mid Nov to mid Dec) this vrata is observed. After taking bath and having done the morning twilight salutation, praying the auspicious and graceful Lord siva, the observer of this vratam eats only one time food that day.

Thiruvadhirai

Thiruvadhirai is one of the famous vradhas celebrated, on the Thiruvadhirai nakshaththram day in the month of Maarkazi (Maargasira-December). Thiruvadhirai is considered as the nakshaththram of Lord Nataraja. Though the Lord never takes birth and hence no nakshaththram to celebrate, on Thiruvadhirai. He appeared to the holy saints Pathanyali and Vyaagra Paadha. Lord Siva is believed to have given darshan to saint Manickavachar on this day on the completion of his recital of Thiruvampavai. In Perur of Melai Chidambaram, Lord Siva is believed to have given darshan to Kamadhenu (the divine cow of plenty) on this day. In the small hours of morning oil, milk, honey, coconut-water, and curd are poured over image of Siva and the ceremony continues till day-break when the lord give darshan to the cow.

Uma Maheshwara Vratam

This is one of the *Ashta maha Vvartams* explained in *Skaandha Puranam*. It is observed on the full moon day when the sun is in the *vruchchika rasi* in the month of *karthikai* (November / December). On that full moon day,

devotees worship Lord Siva in the form of Uma Maheshwara. One, who observes this vrata sincerely, would get the material benefits of the world.

Kedara (gauri) Vratam

Kedhara Gowri vradham is one of the important Saivite vratas. This Kedhara vratam is observed for twenty one days starting from *shukla paxa ashtami* (Eighth moonday in its growing phase) in the month of *purattachi* (September to October). The final day (*deepavali*) also should be observed in great devotion. Brungi rishi is a great Siva bhaktha. When he prayed to Lord, he prayed only to Lord Siva, ignoring Sakti. Angered by his act Sakti removed the energy from his body. He was not able even to stand up. He prayed to Lord Siva, and got a stick to support his body. To overcome this situation Sakti wanted to become part of Lord's body, and She observed the Kedhara vrata. Pleased by Her austerities Lord Siva gave the left part of His body to Sakti and became ardha narishwara. The vrata is then called kedhara gauri vrata since Gowri observed it.

Panguni Uththiram (Kalyaana Vratam)

Panguni Uththiram (Kalyann vratam) is one of the eight auspicious vratas. When the sun is shining in the Pisces sign (*mina rasi*) that is in the month of Panguni (March to April) on the *uththara naxaththiram* during *shukla paxam*, this vratam is observed. This vratam is explained in the *skandha puranam*. The marriage of the god and goddess is an annual event in all temples in the month of Panguni. The Uttiram festival is celebrated in this month for Lord Subrahmanya (Muruga) for ten days. For villagers, this is an important festival, all of them participate in this festival and give offerings of paddy to the temples. On the early morning of the final day the Vel (lance), which is the chief weapon of Lord Subrahmanya, is taken out in a procession to the river bank, where devotees make offerings. Along with the deity, a pair of wooden sandals, Kavadi - a palanquin-like structure with other decoration on it and a baton known as the Idumban Thadi are also anointed. The day following the Panguni Uttiram is set apart for the Idumban festival. On this day, Pujas and offerings are made to Idumban vassal (gate) of Lord Subrahmanya.

Shula Vratam

Shula vratam is one of the eight maha vratam. The day when the sun in the *makara rasi* (capricorn) during the month Thai, on a new moon day is called the shula vratam day.

Vrishabha Vratam

This is one of the eight great austerities. In the time when the sun is in the *Rishhabha rasi* (Taurus), in the month of *vaikasi* (May to June), on the eighth moon day (*ashtami*) in the lunar phase (*shukla paxam*) this vratam is observed. This vratam is described in the *skandha puranam*.

Thai Poosam

It is the pusa naxatram of the month Thai (*pushya*) that is called Thaippusam. It normally falls on a full moon day. Kartikeya is worshipped on Thaippusam. Special poojas and festivities take place on this Poosam day in the Murugan temples.

Aadi Pooram

Andal, the incarnation of Mother Earth, Bhoodevi, is one of the twelve Alvars, great devotees of Vishnu. "Aadi Pooram" and "Aani Thirumanjanam" are important festivals to Andal.

Maasi Maham

This day is celebrated on the Makam day (*regulus*) in the month of Maasi. On this day, the deities are taken around in procession to the nearby rivers/tanks/sea for bath. It is an important festival day for Lord Muruga. Once in twelve years, the Maham festival is celebrated in a grand manner (known as Mahamaham) in Kumbakonam.

Sri Rama Navami

Sri Rama Navami as a festival marks the birth of Lord Rama is celebrated and worshipped by the Hindus seeking well being of all people. Such community celebrations are held in not only in Lord Rama temples but also in many other temples too.

Tamil New Year Day

As the name indicates, this day marks the beginning of the Tamil New Year in the month Chithirai (April). The movements of the stars, sun, moon and other planets showed that there was an order and rhythm in the nature. The sun which is the nucleus of the solar structure influenced the entire life of all the living beings. The sun was worshipped as the Supreme God Brahman, 'Tat Savitur' the center of the astrophysical system which regulates the time factor, sustainer and the basis of nourishing all the bodies. According to Hindus, the dawn of New Year ushering in the debut of spring in the month of Chithirai (April) is marked by the transition of the Sun from the last house of the planetary position (Pisces), to the first house (Aries), which occurs yearly at a precise moment. The period just preceding and following this auspicious time is known as 'Vishu Punniyakalam'. The Sun in traversing through the twelve houses of the Zodiac covers a period of time of one year. Religious observances, rituals and celebrations, associated with the advent of this incident is a marked feature of Hindus all over the world.

Chitra Pournami

The pournami (full moon) day in the Tamil month of Chitrai is celebrated with religious rituals in a grand manner ("chithirath thiruvizha").

Vaikasi Visakam

The pournami day of the Tamil month Vaikasi (May) is celebrated in Murugan temples when large number of people goes to the temple carrying "Kavadi". The asterism Visaakam is considered to be the birth star of Lord Murugan, hence He is called as Visaakan. Hindus consider this day as the day of descent of Lord Murugan. The Visaaka asterism is an amalgamation of three stars and their manifestation of pattern in the sky resembles that of a 'Torana' (entrance). The emergence of Lord Murugan is termed to as the 'Shanmuga avathaaram'. This descent was in answer to a prayer by the devas to rid the world of adharma caused by the three asura brothers, Surapathman, Singhamuhan and Thaarakan who obtained great powers through intense penance and were irritating the devas. The devas without knowing what actions to be taken appealed to Lord Siva for help. Lord Siva helped devas through Lord Muruga.

Aadi Amaavaasai

Hindus from time immemorial paid remembrance of the departed ancestors by the rituals called tarpana, shrardha and pinada. These rituals are performed with a view, to make a person to remember and propitiate his departed ancestors. The departed ancestors are known as 'pitris' and the Vedic scripts give an important place to the existence and honoring of the pitris. Sharadha ceremony is performed annually for the upliftment of the pitris by the descendants of the departed ancestors. The performance of the rites and rituals to the departed souls is the duty of the dead ancestor by which deeds the soul will be blessed on its onward journey. These rituals for the departed souls are performed on the Amaavaasai (New moon) thithi, in the month of Aadi (July). Ammavaasai is the occasion when the moon is positioned in between the sun and the earth, which takes place every month, but the Amaavaasai in the month of Aadi is auspicious.

Guru Purnima

The term Guru has been interpreted differently. 'Gu' gives the meaning of darkness and 'Ru' means that which destroys darkness. So Guru means that one who destroys the ignorance in man and enlightens him towards self-realization. 'Gu' also means the giver of blessings and 'Ru' means the destroyer of sins. Hence, the Guru is one who uplifts his disciples to fulfil their aims and finally reach the expected goal which is Moksha. The full moon

day in the Hindu month of Aadi (July-August) is observed as the auspicious day of Guru Purnima, a day sacred to the memory of the great sage Vyasa. All Hindus are indebted to this ancient saint who edited the four Vedas, wrote the 18 Puranas, the Mahabharata and the Srimad Bhagavata. Vyasa even taught Dattatreya, who is regarded as the guru of gurus.

Thirupalli ezhuchi

The entire month of Margazhi (December-January) is a period of early morning bath, prayer, and temple worship completed before dawn, in spite of the chilly weather. The songs sung are Thirupavai and Thiruvampavai.

Panguni Uttiram

The marriage of the god and goddess is the annual event in all temples in Tamil Nadu in the month of Panguni.

Aani Uttharam

This day is observed on the Utthara nakshathra (constellation) day of the month of Aani (June). According to tradition Lord Siva as Nataraja danced the Holy Nadanta Dance at Chidambaram for the benefit of His devotees. Lord Siva has danced the mystic Natana performing the Panchakritiya. Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy explains in his work, the Dance of Siva". Whatever the origins of Siva's dance, it became in time the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of. Of the various dances of Siva, the first is the Evening Dance in the Himalayas; the second is the well known dance called the Tandava Dance and thirdly is the Nadanta Dance of Nataraja before the assembly in the golden hall at Chidambaram or Thillai".

Ekaadasi Fast

Ekaadasi day is observed on the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight. In the lunar calendar, the eleventh day after the new moon and the eleventh day after the full moon, are two Ekaadasi days. The Ekaadasi day after the waxing moon is considered fortunate and observed with fasting. This day is also celebrated as 'Harivaasara'. Fasting is self-denial of food, with the observance of religious rituals, prayer and meditation. Restraint on food mainly those of Rajasic quality which hinders spiritual advance is also experienced. This controls emotions and the sense organs, purifies the mind and heart and thereby becomes conducive to prayer and meditation. It gives certain amount of power of will over hunger which is one of man's basic urges. When hunger is conquered, man naturally grows stronger because of his prayer and meditation.

Rama Navami

Rama Navami is celebrated in the Hindu month of Chaitrai (April) and on the ninth day of the bright lunar phase, to commemorate the birth anniversary of Sri Rama. The incarnation of Sri Rama materialized on this very day, to show the path of virtuosity and truth to the mankind, establishing the high standards of moral values and ideals. Rama Navami is an important religious and cultural festival. At the present day, when there is a tendency of greed, selfishness prevalent among the common people.



