

The Symbolism of
Hindu Gods
and Rituals



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OF
HINDU GODS AND RITUALS



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Introduction

The Hindu scriptures are a unique blend of the subtle philosophy of Vedanta on one hand and gross, fetish worship on the other. Hinduism appears a strange amalgam of the highest classical literature with gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals, ceremonies and celebrations. The Hindus themselves are confused and confounded by this mixture. The Vedas, the very source of Hinduism, authoritatively proclaim that the Reality is one and one alone. Why then do the Hindus fall into manifold denominations and follow a variety of conflicting spiritual practices? Why so many gods? So many divisions? Sects, creeds and castes? Why then does not Hinduism concentrate on one god, one ritual and one practice like other religions? Such questions have baffled even intellectuals from time immemorial.

The Hindus are not polytheistic. Hinduism speaks of one God that is the supreme Self in man, Atman, Brahman. The different gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are mere representatives of the powers and functions of the one supreme God in the manifested world. There is a general misunderstanding that the Hindu worships innumerable gods and goddesses. The different forms of worship, the number of superstitions and misleading spiritual practices have all contributed to the wrong impression that the Hindus

are polytheistic. This is far from the truth. In fact, the Hindu worships one God be it directly as Brahman or through his manifested representations and expressions.

The Hindu religion is ingeniously designed to treat all types of disorders of the mind. The human mind is most complex. It suffers from multifold diseases. Religion is meant to cure these diseases and regain the spiritual health of individuals. Each individual has to be treated separately according to his disease. There cannot be one doctor, one medicine, one cure for all diseases. Hinduism is like a hospital with its many wards, sections and divisions. Each of them has a distinct purpose to attend to particular needs of a particular disease. They are taken care of by specialists with special equipments. All of them put together cater to all types of ailments of all sorts of people so that every one of them can come out of the hospital as a healthy person. So too does Hinduism have different treatments for different types of individuals to make them whole and realise their supreme godhead.

The mind of man is in a chaotic state because of his **vasanas**, desires. As long as there are desires within, the mind helplessly runs in all directions seeking fulfilment of its desires. Consequently it is agitated. An agitated mind cannot concentrate. It is unfit for contemplation and meditation which alone leads him to the eternal bliss of Self-realisation. Religion is meant to help man to withdraw his mind from its pre-occupation with the world at large and converge it to the single-pointed thought of the Self within. When

the mind is brought to single-pointedness it can be directed towards meditation and realisation of the supreme Godhead. Without practising spiritual courses according to one's own constitution, there can be no progress towards meditation and the bliss of realisation.

One cannot stop the mind from its ramblings as long as it possesses desires. To circumvent this great hurdle Hinduism has thoughtfully brought in gods and goddesses, rituals and festivals, ceremonies and celebrations. The master plan of the Hindu sages is to divinise everything in this world since man's attention has always been upon the world. The plan has been drawn logically, scientifically, practically. By this plan the mind is reminded of the supreme even as it is engaged in the desired objects of the world. For instance, Hinduism has personified wealth and riches in the form of the goddess Laxmi. So a man who runs after material wealth is made to remember the goddess in all his transactions. Thus a touch of divinity is lent to his material pursuits. Another man may pursue knowledge. Knowledge is personified as the goddess Saraswati. So his mind is also drawn to the higher even though he is engaged in the pursuit of worldly knowledge. Thus there are numerous gods covering the entire sphere of human activities.

The life of a Hindu is a series of prayers and worship. Everything is divinised from the cradle to the grave. There is a ritual associated with every aspect of the Hindu life. The entire passage from birth to death is nothing but a series of rituals and religious ceremonies, prayer and worship. The idea is

to remind his dissipating mind constantly of the purpose of his existence in the world. That is to unfold his Self, to realise his godhood.

The plan of Hinduism is to help the seekers reach the goal of religion. Religion is derived from the Latin terms "re" and "ligare". "Re" means "back, again", "ligare" means "to bind, to unite". Etymologically, religion means "that which binds one back to the origin". The origin of man is his real Self. Religion helps man discover his real Self, his supreme Self, to draw out the divinity in man. Hinduism deals with the process of this union most systematically and scientifically.

These pages cannot do justice to the master plan of the Hindu sages. The greatness of the plan is its scientific approach and its practicality. It is designed to serve as a friend and benefactor of the childish mind. It helps to pull the mind away constantly from its indulgence in the lower fields of sensuality and fix it on the higher thought of the realisation of the supreme.

India has always been accepted as a great spiritual country in the world. Hinduism has survived the ravages of time and changing environment. It has withstood the influences of many organised and rich religious institutions. The genius of the **Rishis** preserved the spiritual culture by keeping the truths and tradition alive among the people as a whole and not confining them to a few erudite scholars. The scholars were given the highest philosophical and religious truths directly through Vedanta — the Upanishads, the

Bhagavad Geeta and the Brahmasutras. But these truths were beyond the grasp of the common man. Hence they have been presented in a veiled form through Pūranic stories, rituals and symbols. The dilution of the supreme wisdom with such stories and illustrations proved more assimilable to the ordinary man. The great truths of the Vedas were thus handed down from generation to generation with their pristine glory.

The Puranas contain innumerable stories of gods and goddesses. Many of them are exaggerated narrations bordering on absurdity. The very absurdity of these stories is meant to show that they are not to be taken literally but to be delved into deeper to recognise their allegorical significance. The Puranas are so popular in India not only among the illiterate masses but also the intelligentsia. Almost the entire population of the Hindus treat the Puranas with utmost devotion and derive spiritual sustenance from them. The Hindu is deeply aware of the allegorical reference to the supreme Truth in the seemingly absurd stories. The intelligentsia maintains an intuitive perception of the Reality hidden behind the superficial absurdities. But a good many have also taken these narrations literally resulting in superstitions and perversions of truths.

The Hindu philosophical and spiritual truths conveyed through the Upanishads and Puranic literature have also been ingeniously presented to the masses in the form of symbols. A symbol is a known idol representing the unknown ideal. The art of god-symbolism helps both the literate and the illiterate Hindus. The illiterate derive at least some idea of the supreme Truth

through the symbols which help them to maintain their ancient culture and heritage. As for the literate the understanding of the inner significance of the symbols establishes a greater conviction of the Truth that they represent. Symbolism plays an important role in life. Even language which man uses for communicating ideas is symbolic in character. The art of symbolism is not peculiar to Hinduism. Religious and philosophical ideas have been expressed through symbols in other religions as well. It has been an age-old practice. But no other religion has ever developed this art to the extent Hinduism has done. Hinduism has perfected this art. Unfortunately, this art has not been studied at all by the modern generation with the result that the Hindu symbols have been shorn of their philosophical and religious significances and reduced to mere superstition. Thus Hindus have grown to accept them blindly or reject them as meaningless superstitious beliefs. Hence the need today is to revive this great art and educate the world with the knowledge concerning the symbolic character which gives the deep inner meaning of the different forms of Hindu worship.

This book is meant to initiate the reader into learning this art. It is by no means exhaustive. A few examples of the more popular deities, rituals and ceremonies have been taken and their philosophical significance explained. It should give the reader an insight into the treasures of Hindu thought and unearth the deep truths represented by the symbols.

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PART I

Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Ganapati, Vinayaka

Ganesha

Vinayaka

Ganah in Sanskrit means 'multitude'. **Isa** means 'Lord'. Ganesha therefore literally means the 'Lord of all beings'. Ganesha is the first son of Lord Siva. Siva represents the supreme Reality. The son of Siva symbolises one who has realised the Reality. One who has discovered the godhood in him. Such a man is said to be the Lord of all beings.

Ganesha is known by other names as well. Ganapati, Gajanana, Vinayaka, Vighneshwara. Ganapati has the same literal meaning as Ganesha. Gajanana means 'elephant-faced' **Gaja** = elephant, **anana** = face. Vinayaka means the supreme leader, literally one who has no leader himself. Vighneshwara is the Lord of all obstacles, worshipped in the initiation of Hindu rituals and ceremonies. As his name suggests Vighneshwara removes all obstacles, overcomes all challenges of life. There is a belief that no undertaking will meet with failure if the grace of Vighneshwara is invoked.

In the Hindu mythological literature Ganesha is described as having a human form with an elephant's head. One of the tusks in his head is broken. He has a conspicuously large stomach. He sits with one leg folded in. At his feet a variety of food is spread. A rat sits near the food and looks up at him as if it were



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asking him for sanction to eat the food. This mystical form of Lord Ganesha represents not only the supreme state of human perfection but the practical path to reach that state. The details of his description suggest deep philosophical significance which can guide you to reach that ultimate state.

The first step of spiritual education is **sravana** which means listening to the eternal truths of Vedanta. The second step is **manana** which is independent reflection upon those truths. The large ears and head of Ganesha indicate that he had gained previous wisdom through **sravana** and **manana**. An elephant's head on a human body in Ganesha is meant to represent supreme wisdom.

The trunk which springs from his head represents the intellect, the faculty of discrimination which necessarily arises out of wisdom.

Intellect is the discriminating faculty, the discerning ability or the judging capacity in man. Man's intellect is of two distinct types, namely the gross and the subtle. Gross intellect is that aspect of his discrimination which is applicable to the realm of the terrestrial world, that part of the intellect which distinguishes between the pairs of opposites existing in this world, distinguishes between day and night, black and white, joy and sorrow etc. Subtle intellect is the other aspect of his discrimination which distinguishes between the infinite and the finite, the real and the unreal, the transcendental and the terrestrial. A man of realisation like Ganesha is one who has fully developed both his gross and subtle intellects. He has perfect under-

standing and knowledge of the terrestrial as well as transcendental.

The trunk of an elephant has the unique capacity of performing both gross and subtle activities. A trunk can uproot a tree. It can pick up a needle from the ground. One rarely finds gross and subtle operations being performed by a single instrument. A spanner which is used for fitting a locomotive is useless for repairing a wrist-watch. The elephant's trunk is an exception to this rule. It serves both ways. So does Ganesha's intellect penetrate the realms of the material and spiritual worlds. That is the state which man must aspire to reach.

A man of Perfection is thus rooted in the supreme wisdom. He is not victimised by likes (**raaga**) and dislikes (**dwesha**). He is not swayed by agreeable and disagreeable circumstances, pleasant and unpleasant happenings, good and bad environment. In other words, he is not victimised by the pairs of opposites existing in this world. Heat and cold, joy and sorrow, honour and dishonour do not affect him, influence him or harass him. He has transcended the limitations of opposites in the world. He is **dwanda-ateetha**, beyond opposites. This idea is well represented in Ganesha by having one of his tusks broken. The common man is tossed between the two opposites (tusks). He should endeavour to overcome the influence of the pairs of opposites on him. Man ought not to act merely by his likes and dislikes; these are his worst enemies he has to control and conquer. When he has completely mastered the influence of these pairs upon him, he becomes a Ganesha.

Ganesha's large belly is meant to convey that a man of Perfection can consume and digest whatever experiences he undergoes. Heat or cold, war or peace, birth or death and other such trials and tribulations do not toss him up and down. He maintains an unaffected grace in and through all these fluctuations of the world. Figuratively, he is represented as being able to stomach and digest all types of experiences.

In the Hindu mythology, Kubera, the god of wealth offered a dinner to Ganesha in his palace. Ganesha ate all the food that was prepared for the entire gathering of guests. Thereafter still dissatisfied, he started eating the festive decorations that were used for the occasion. At this juncture his father Lord Siva approached him and offered him a handful of roasted rice. Ganesha consumed the roasted rice and his hunger was satisfied immediately. This story is a directive to mankind that man can never be satisfied with the joys provided by the world of objects represented by Kubera's feast. Material pursuits can never give peace, contentment or happiness to mankind. The only way to attain absolute fulfilment or peace is by consuming your own **vasanas** which are the unmanifest desires in you. The destruction of **vasanas** is represented by the consumption of roasted rice. When rice is roasted it loses its capacity to germinate. The consumption of roasted rice indicates the destruction of **vasanas** or desires in you. Thereafter you remain in a state of absolute peace and bliss.

Ganesha sits with one leg folded up and the other leg resting on the ground. The leg on the ground indicates that one aspect of his personality is dealing with

the world while the other is ever-rooted in single-pointed concentration upon the supreme Reality. Such a man lives in the world like anyone else, but his concentration and meditation are ever-rooted in the Atman within himself. This idea is symbolised in the above posture.

At the feet of the Lord is spread abundance of food. Food represents material wealth, power and prosperity. When a man follows the high principles of living indicated above he achieves these material gains. He has them always at his command though he has an attitude of indifference towards them.

Beside the food is a tiny rat looking up towards Ganeshā. The rat does not touch the food but waits for the master's sanction as it were for consuming it. The rat represents desire. A rat has a small mouth and tiny sharp teeth. But it is the greediest of all animals. Its greed and acquisitiveness are so great that it steals more than it can eat and hoards more than it can remember, often abandoning burrows full of hoarded grains through forgetfulness. This predominant trait in a rat justifies amply its symbolism as desire. One little desire entering man's mind can destroy all his material and spiritual wealth earned for many long years. The rat looking up therefore denotes that the desires in a perfect man are absolutely under control. The activities of such a man are motivated by his clear discrimination and judgement rather than by an emotional craving to enjoy the variety of sense objects of the world.

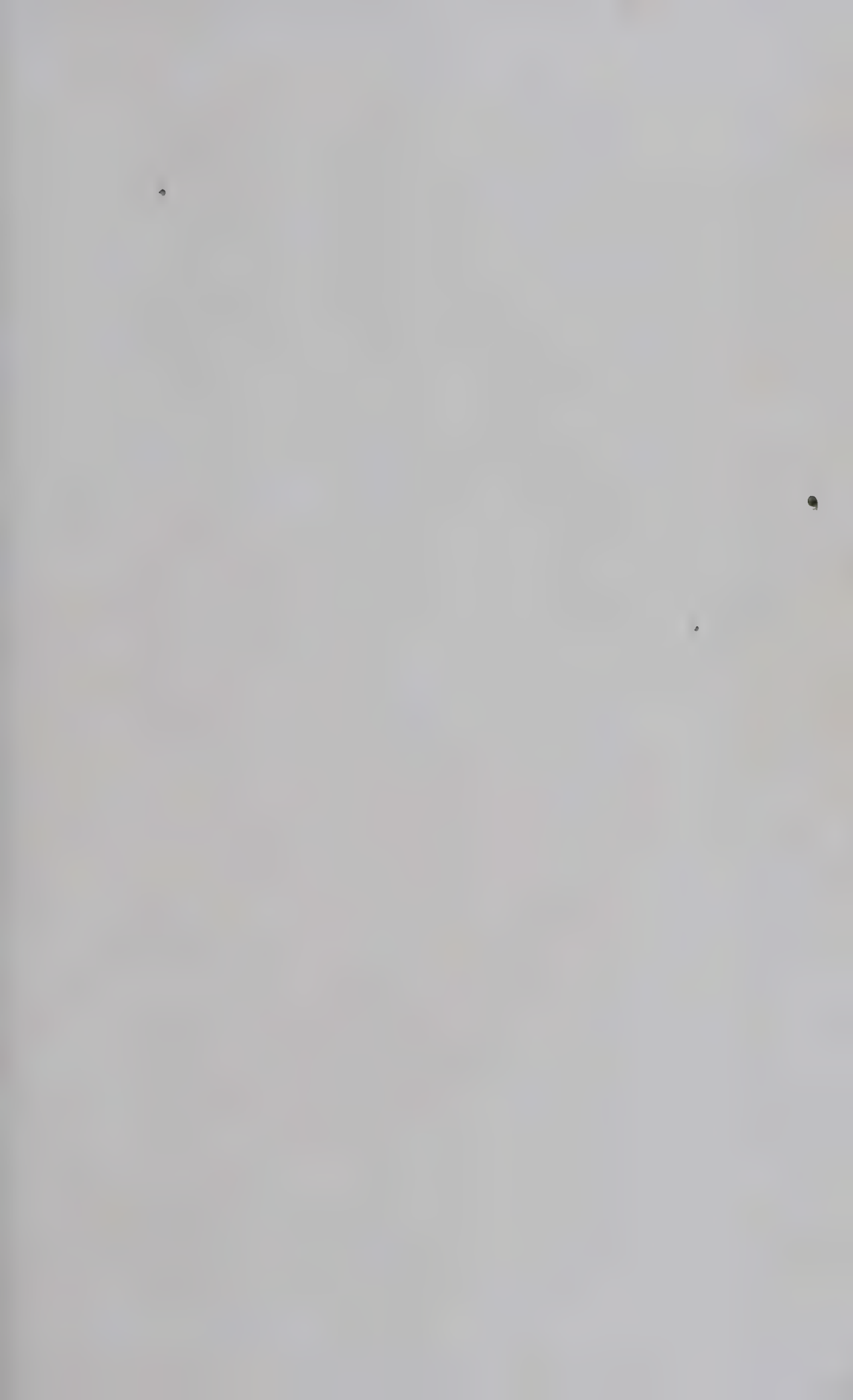
There is a belief amongst the Hindus that it is inauspicious to see the moon on the Vinayaka Chaturthi day, that is, the birthday of Ganesha. The Puranic story says that the moon saw Ganesha riding on his tiny rat and laughed at the ludicrous scene. For this reason the moon is condemned and people are forbidden to see it on this day.

Ganesha riding on his rat indicates a man of Perfection trying to use his limited body, mind and intellect to convey the illimitable Truth. The body, mind and intellect are finite. They cannot express the infinite Atman. A man of Realisation finds it almost impossible to convey his infinite experience through his finite equipments. Hence we find the words and deeds of all spiritual masters are peculiar and incomprehensible. The common man's intellect cannot comprehend the Truth. The moon is the presiding deity of the mind. The moon laughing at Ganapati riding on the rat indicates the ignorant scoffing at the man of Realisation's attempt to convey the Truth. This attitude of scoffing at spiritual preceptors and precepts is detrimental to humanity. The generations are therefore warned not to laugh or scoff at the spiritual messages. If they do, they meet with degradation and disaster.

Ganesha has four arms. The four arms represent the four inner equipments of the subtle body, namely mind (**manas**), intellect (**buddhi**), ego (**ahamkar**) and conditioned-consciousness (**chitta**). Ganesha represents the pure Consciousness, the Atman which enables these four equipments to function in you.

In one hand he holds an axe and in another a rope. The axe symbolises the destruction of all desires and attachments and their consequent agitations and sorrows. The rope is meant to pull the seeker out of his worldly entanglements and bind him to the everlasting and enduring bliss of his own Self. In the third hand he holds a rice ball (**modaka**). **Modaka** represents the joyous rewards of spiritual seeking. A seeker gains the joy of satisfaction and contentment as he progresses on the path of spiritual evolution. In the fourth hand he holds a lotus (**padma**). The lotus represents the supreme goal of human evolution. By holding the lotus in his hand he draws the attention of all seekers to that supreme state that each one of them can aspire for and reach through proper spiritual practices. He blesses all his devotees to reach the supreme state of Reality.

Thus by indicating to mankind the goal of human evolution and the path to reach the same, Lord Ganesha occupies a place of distinction in the Hindu pantheon. May he give us all the strength and courage to pursue the path which he has led and may we gain that supreme goal which he has reached.





Subramania

The second son of Lord Siva is Subramania. Subramania is also known as Kartikeya and Shanmukha. Subramania holds a spear or javelin (**shakti**) in his hand. He rides a peacock. The peacock grips a snake with his feet.

Subramania like other gods is a picture of human perfection. Through symbolism he indicates ways and means to reach that perfection.

A normal human being goes through three experiences of the waking, dream and deep sleep states of consciousness. Waking state is the state of consciousness which man experiences when he is awake. The dream is the state of consciousness which he experiences when he is dreaming. The deep sleep is dreamless sleep when he is experiencing a world of nothingness. Beyond these three states is the state of God-consciousness. That is the fourth state called the **turiya**. Man is hardly aware of this state much less does he experience it. Nevertheless, that is man's original and real state, the core of his personality, his essential and infinite being. When you transcend the limitations of the waking, dream and deep sleep you reach that state. This is the state symbolised by Subramania.

Subramania holds a spear (**shakti**) in his hand

Most of the Hindu gods wield weapons of destruction. Siva holds the trident (**trisula**). Vishnu carries a discus (**chakra**), Rama carries a bow. These weapons are meant to attack, to destroy desires (**vasanas**) within oneself. It is only by destruction of **vasanas** or desires that you attain your divine state. Your **vasanas** or desires are the impurities covering the godhead within you. Man minus desires is God. God plus **vasanas** is man. Holding a spear Subramania declares the destruction of all his **vasanas**. You too by destroying your **vasanas** can attain your supreme stature.

The peacock is the vehicle of Subramania. The significant characteristic of a peacock is its vanity. The vanity of the peacock is seen during its continuous dancing with its colourful feathers spread out like a fan. . The peacock is blue in colour. This subtly suggests the means the seeker should adopt to attain the state of Subramania.

Man is now absorbed in the material layers of his personality. All his attention and interest are upon his physical body, mind and intellect. Identifying himself with them he imagines himself to be a perceiver-actor at the physical level, a feeler at the mental level and a thinker at the intellectual level. He is proud of his physical, mental and intellectual achievements. He is lost in the mire of perceptions, emotions and thoughts. Thus he assumes a limited personality. He has no glimpse of the supreme Self within him. He has now to shift his attention and concentration from his body, mind and intellect to the godhead (Atman) within him. The godhead is his supreme Self within. The essential nature of man is his godhood and not

his physical-mental-intellectual personality. He must now lose the false vanity of his physical-mental-intellectual personality (ego) and develop the true "vanity" of his infinite being. He must ride on the blue bird representing his infinite being. Blue colour is associated with infinity. The sky is blue, so is the ocean. He must repeat to himself that he is God — **Aham Brahma Asmi**. **Aham** means I, **Brahman** means God and **Asmi** means am. He must constantly remember the Truth — I am God. If he practises this, concentrates and meditates upon his real Self he becomes the Atman. He attains the state of Subramania.

The peacock is the enemy of the serpent. It is seen clutching the serpent with its claws. The serpent is not killed but held in captivity. This symbolises complete control over the ego. The serpent represents the ego. The ego carries the poisonous mind. It is interesting to note that the poison in the fangs of the snake does not kill the snake. It is harmful only when it is directed outside. Similarly, the mind is harmless as long as it is contained within. The moment it is directed outside, used extrovertedly it assumes the vanity of I-ness and my-ness. It becomes poisonous. It generates desires and destroys peace and tranquillity. The infinite Atman becomes the limited individual. But when the ego is held firm and the desires are kept under perfect control, man gains mastery over the mind and reaches perfection.

In the old Testament Moses is said to have fallen into this state of slavery. Walking on the Mount Sinai, Moses saw a serpent. He trembled at the sight of it. Just then he heard a voice saying, "Hold it, hold that

hissing serpent, Moses." It was the voice of God. Moses hesitated. He shuddered at the thought of it. The voice was insistent, "Get hold of it". Moses took a bold step and held the serpent. Instantly the serpent turned into a staff. And that staff worked miracles. Moses touched a rock with the staff and fresh water gushed forth from it. When the Israelites were fleeing for safety the Red Sea stood in their way. Moses again used his staff. No sooner did his staff touch the sea than the waters divided and dry land appeared before them. Thus the Israelites passed into safety.

Similarly, Reality seems terrifying. You would keep off from it. You would prefer to indulge in the pleasures of your senses. You do not want to stifle your ego and experience your godhead. You are afraid to leave the comforts of the known and plunge into the unknown. You are ignorant of the supreme bliss of godhood. Your ignorance is the cause of your fright. Vedanta offers you knowledge to overcome ignorance, emboldens you to smother your ego and reveal your Self. It seems difficult. The suggestion to annihilate your ego appears frightening. But you must take the plunge fearlessly. Get hold of the ego. Destroy your selfishness. Assert your divinity. Embrace your godhead within. You will become the monarch of all you survey. All your worries and anxieties vanish instantly. You live in perfect peace and bliss.

Another form of Subramania is Shanmukha. This form has six faces. **Shat** means six, **mukha** means face. Shanmukha is a deity with six faces. It only

means that the supreme Self expresses itself in the human being through the five sense organs and mind. The Self within has no expression but when it functions through the sense organs and mind it manifests itself as a human being.

Siva

Siva is one of the gods of the Trinity. He is said to be the god of destruction. The other two gods are Brahma, the god of creation and Vishnu the god of maintenance. The three gods represent the three fundamental powers of nature which are manifest in the world viz. creation, destruction and maintenance. These powers exist perpetually. Creation is going on all the time. So is destruction and maintenance. All three powers are manifest at all times. They are inseparable. Creation and destruction are like two sides of a coin. And maintenance is an integral part of the processes of creation and destruction. For example, morning dies to give birth to noon. Noon dies when night is born. In this chain of birth and death the day is maintained. To indicate that these three processes are one and the same the three gods are combined in one form of Lord Dattatreya. Lord Dattatreya has the three faces of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

Siva is married to the Goddess Uma. Uma represents **prakriti** which means perishable matter. Siva's marriage with Uma signifies that the power of destruction has no meaning without its association with perishable matter. Destruction manifests itself only when there is perishable matter.

Lord Siva sits in a meditative pose against the white background of the snow-capped Himalayas in



Mount Kailas. His posture symbolises perfect inner harmony and poise, experienced by a man of Realisation. He is rooted in God-consciousness. He revels in the bliss of the transcendental Reality. Nothing disturbs him. The vicissitudes of nature, the challenges of life, the trials and tribulations of the terrestrial world do not affect him at all. He maintains perfect serenity, equanimity and tranquillity in all environments and circumstances.

The snow-white background symbolises the absolute purity of mind. When the mind is disturbed, agitated, you do not see the divinity in you. Recognising your divine Self is like seeing a reflection in a pool of water. When the water is dirty or disturbed you cannot see your own reflection. Only when the water is clear and steady do you recognise your reflection. Similarly, the divinity in you is lost in a pool of thoughts. If the thoughts are dirty (**tamasic**) or agitated (**rajasic**) you miss your divine Self. By spiritual practices you ought to raise your personality from its **tamasic** and **rajasic** states to the state of **sattwa**. In the **sattwic** state when the mind is absolutely pure and steady you recognise your supreme Self. That is the state of Siva in Kailas.

Lord Siva not only represents the supreme state of perfection in man but in his very pose indicates the way to reach it as well. Siva has his eyes half-closed, that is neither fully-closed nor fully open. It is called **samabhavee-mudra**. Closing the eyes completely would mean that the individual has shut out the world. He is not at all in this world. Opening the eyes fully would mean that he is totally involved in

this world. Half-closed eyes therefore signify that his mind is absorbed in the inner Self while his body is engaged in the outer world. One aspect of his personality is ever-rooted in God-consciousness while the other is dealing with his worldly duties and responsibilities. He conducts himself in this world like an actor does on the stage. An actor plays various roles but in truth he has nothing to do with them. He retains his real identity throughout the play and merely acts the scenes detachedly. So is the man of realisation in this world. Ever-rooted in Atmic Consciousness he goes about in the world like any other man.

The state of meditation shown in Siva's posture is again symbolic. Meditation is the final gateway to Self-realisation. To attain the state of Godhood you need to meditate. However in order to meditate successfully you must possess a pure mind. To develop a pure mind you need to work impersonally in this world. The process of self-development first necessitates selfless dedicated actions (**karma**). By such **karma** your ego and egocentric desires fall away. In the process your mind gets purified. Such a man is brought to the state of meditation. Through meditation you realise your Supreme Self. All that is suggested in the pose of Lord Siva sitting in Kailas amidst snow-capped mountains.

On the auspicious occasion of Mahasivaratri Siva performs the ecstatic dance of realisation. In the dance pose Siva is known as Nataraja. The dance symbolises the thrill of god-realisation. Beyond the realms of the waking, dream and deep-sleep states of

consciousness. Beyond the experiences of the body and its perceptions, the mind and its feelings, the intellect and its thoughts lies the bliss of Godhood. Siva reaches this state of Godhood and dances with the intoxication of supreme bliss.

Siva is said to have a third eye known as **gyana chakshu**. **Gyana chakshu** literally means eye of wisdom. The eye whose vision reaches beyond that of the two mortal eyes. The idea of the third eye is not to be taken literally to mean that a third fleshy organ exists in Siva. It only means that Siva has a divine vision of Reality. Your vision is confined merely to perceptions, emotions and thoughts but when you transcend the limitations of your body, mind and intellect you gain realisation of your inner Self. That is indicated by the opening of the **gyana chakshu**.

A man of realisation is one who has conquered his ego, is the master of his ego, unlike the worldly people who are victimised by the demands of the ego. In the Hindu scriptures ego is represented as a serpent. The ego serpent harasses you with its venom of desires. Man suffers all his lifetime from the pressure of his own desires. You use your ego to pronounce your limited personality. Consciously or unconsciously you repeat to yourself that you are your body, mind and intellect. You hypnotise yourself to believe "I am the perceiver", "I am the feeler", "I am the thinker". Thus you assume a limited personality of perceiver-feeler-thinker which is pressurised by the demands of the body, mind and intellect. When you change your focus of attention from the body, mind and intellect to the supreme Self within, when your

ego takes to the supreme in you, when you identify yourself with your immortal Self you become the immortal Siva. When you develop the ego of the supreme Self you become God. The same ego that has degraded you into a limited existence now 'adorns' your personality. This idea is indicated by Siva coiling the serpent around his neck. (There is an Indian custom of men wearing a folded cloth around the neck as a decoration).

Siva is also known as Gangadhara. Gangadhara literally means the carrier of Ganga (River Ganges). Siva is said to carry the Ganges in his locks. There is a mythological story describing the descent of the river Ganges from the heavens to earth. The origin of the Ganges is said to be in the heavens, where it is known as **Akash-ganga**. **Akash-ganga** is personified in mythology as a goddess. King Bhagiratha prayed to the goddess to descend from the heavens and bless the people of the earth with her prosperity. The prayer was granted. **Akash-ganga** was willing to come down to earth. The goddess however warned Bhageeratha that the flow of water from the heavens will be so torrential, that the earth would not be able to bear its force. The only person who would be able to receive such torrential flow was the Lord Siva. So Bhageeratha again went into penance and prayer and implored Siva to bear the flow of descent of the waters. Siva acceded. He received the waters of the **akash-ganga** in his locks where they were imprisoned. Siva retired to the jungles for meditation. But the Ganges did not flow on the earth. The king again implored Siva, this time to release the waters of the holy Ganges from

his locks for the people of the world. As the story goes the Lord granted this prayer as well. The present Ganges is said to be the water flowing out of Siva's locks.

Strange as the story may sound it has a deep inner significance. Ganga stands for the ultimate Truth, the ultimate Reality, the knowledge of the Atman or the divinity in man. The knowledge of Atman is the state of perfection in man. It is well above the terrestrial realm of experiences. It is symbolically represented as being located above in the heavens. In order to make the divine knowledge available to you a great soul like Bhageeratha is required. Bhageeratha is therefore a sage who brought the divine knowledge to the people of the world. Again to receive the knowledge of the sages you need to be a man of **tapas** or self-control, an introvert, a man of contemplation. An indulgent, extroverted man cannot receive spiritual knowledge. The primary qualification needed for the receipt of knowledge is symbolised in the personality of Siva. Siva is reputed for his great **tapas**, contemplation and meditation. Such a man alone can describe the great spiritual truths. The truth so received has to be assimilated and ingrained into your life to bring about your spiritual unfoldment. That state is achieved by your independent reflection and meditation, which has been indicated by Siva retiring to the jungle. Having attained spiritual unfoldment, the knowledge of Truth has to be communicated to the people of the world gradually, carefully. The power to understand the higher truth is limited. This idea is again beautifully indicated by the release of the Ganges from Siva's head in trickles. Thus by gradual and slow education

spiritual knowledge is gained in this world. Ganges water stands for spiritual wisdom. Hence a dip in the Ganges is considered sacred. When a pilgrim submerges himself in the sacred river it symbolises his union with the supreme Reality.

Siva is sometimes shown with his trident (**trisula**) in his hand. The **trisula** is a three-pronged weapon which symbolises the destruction of the ego with its three-fold desires of the body, mind and intellect. Siva with his weapon indicates his victory over his ego and attainment of the state of perfection.

Nataraja

Nataraja is Lord Siva in the dance pose. On Mahasivaratri day Siva lays down his trident (**trisula**) and performs the ecstatic dance of Nataraja. Mahasivaratri literally means the great night of Siva. Night or darkness symbolises ignorance — ignorance of the supreme Self. Man is steeped in ignorance. He is enmeshed in the world of plurality. He has no knowledge of the supreme Self within himself. The dance of Nataraja on the auspicious night depicts the thrilling experience of self-realisation, the dawn of the knowledge of the Self, the destruction of spiritual ignorance, the change from the terrestrial to the Transcendental being.

The trident that Siva carries has three prongs. The three prongs also represent the three **gunas**, the three thought-textures, viz. **sattwa**, **rajas** and **tamas**. The **sattwa-guna** is the state of the mind when it is pure, serene and contemplative, **rajoguna** when it is passionate and agitated, **tamoguna**, when it is dull and inactive. These three **gunas** combined in different degrees of concentration constitute the variety of human beings all over the world. Every human being is composed of the **sattwic**, **rajasic** and **tamasic** thought-patterns enveloping the supreme Self, Atman. When the **gunas** are eliminated man unfolds his supreme Self and attains Self-realisation. The weapon (**trisula**) is meant to destroy the three **gunas** and realise the Atman. The

laying down of the trident symbolises man's victory over the three **gunas** and the ecstatic experience of the bliss of the Atman.

The dancing deity has four arms delicately poised. The upper right hand carries a small drum known as the **damaru**. The **damaru** is shaped like an hour-glass. It regulates the rhythm of the dance. The upper left hand makes a half-moon posture with its fingers called **ardha-chandra-mudra**. It bears on its palm a tongue of flame. Nataraja is represented as dancing with one foot firm on the prostrate body of a dwarfish demon (**apasmara purusha**) and the other foot raised in a well-known posture in Indian classical dance. The ring of flames encompasses the dancing deity. It is known as the **prabha-mandala**. The lower hands are held in the **abhaya** and the **varada mudras**.

The dance posture with one leg on the dwarf and the other resting is significant. A man of perfection lets one aspect of his personality deal with the world below while the other is in single-pointed attunement with his higher Self. The dwarfish demon crushed under the feet of Nataraja represents man's ego. The ego is insignificant compared to the Atman. But it has demoniac qualities. It destroys the peace and bliss inherent in man. The ego is conquered and crushed by a man of Perfection. Thereby he regains his supreme bliss.

Desires constituting man's ego represents his lower nature. This lower nature is compared to a serpent in scriptural literature. When desires overpower man he becomes a slave of his own lower nature.

It is a disgrace for him to fall into such a state. The glory of man is to conquer his lower nature, become a master of his desires. That is his dignity and prestige. By coiling a serpent around his neck he proclaims that state of perfection when he has total mastery over his desires, his senses, his ego.

The lower nature of man tempts him with various desires. Consequently man indulges in his senses and gets totally involved in the world. He is bound by attachments to the world. He is afraid to leave the comforts of the known and plunge into the unknown. Nataraja symbolises the bold step that a man of perfection takes. The beauty of life is to conquer these desires and realise your godhead, to revel in the ecstasy of the supreme bliss of realisation.

Nataraja also represents the absolute Reality, Brahman. The halo of flames encompassing him signifies the number of creatures (**jeevas**) of this world. The primeval source of creation is Brahman. When man reaches the state of spiritual perfection, when he becomes Nataraja he merges with that primeval source. Man becomes Brahman, the source of all creation. This idea is indicated by the flames issuing forth from Nataraja. Brahman is the underlying Reality from which the phenomena of creation, destruction and maintenance emerges. This idea is depicted by Nataraja holding the drum (**damaru**) in one hand and flame in the other. The drum produces sound. Sound is the essence of space, the first of the five elements that constitute all creation. Production of sound therefore indicates the phenomena of creation. The flame on the other hand denotes destruction. The continu-

ous chain of creation and destruction maintains the universe. For example, the seed is destroyed when the tree emerges. The tree perishes giving birth to seed. The egg is no more when the chicken emerges. The chicken dies leaving the egg behind. In this perpetual process of creation and destruction the universe is maintained. This universe arises from Brahman, from Nataraja.

The **abhaya** and **varada mudras** shown by the lower hands signify the offerings of protection and boons. The allegory of Nataraja brings out the dual manifestation of the supreme Reality, Brahman, the absolute tranquillity of the pure Self and the dynamic expression of the universe. In one and the same form of Nataraja both these aspects are indicated. The Lord maintains a blissful, silent countenance within while he is engaged in his untiring dance. The serenity and utter unconcern in the countenance of Nataraja represents the supreme tranquillity of the Atman. In significant contrast the passionate agility of the swaying limbs of the dance represents the dynamic activity in the world. The effect of the unmanifest and manifest constituting the one divinity is brought out in this form of Nataraja.

Siva's tresses are long and matted symbolising the continuous **tapas** (austerity) undertaken by him. However in the triumphant frenzy of his dance of realisation the tresses loosen and spread out. The suggestion in the loosening of the tresses is that the state of realisation is **trans-tapas**.

Mythology further relates that in whatever direc-

tion Lord Nataraja looks with his third eye that part of the world is destroyed. It means that a man of realisation gains the knowledge of Truth in the light of which the ignorance-created world disappears. With the apprehension of Reality there is no longer the misapprehensions of the pluralistic world. The cosmic dancer shows to mankind not only the highest ideal that man is to reach but indicates the path to it as well. He is therefore not to be considered as a mere mythological creation.

Vishnu

Vishnu is one of the gods of the Trinity. Vishnu represents the power of sustenance. The other two powers manifest in the world namely creation and destruction are personified as Brahma and Siva respectively. Vishnu is wedded to Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. The significance is that sustenance or maintenance involves wealth. In order to maintain anything the maintainer must necessarily possess wealth.

In the **Vishnu Purana**, sage Vyasa refers to Vishnu as the supreme all-pervading Reality. Reality which is the substratum of the microcosm and macrocosm. The root '**vish**' means 'to pervade'. Vishnu is the core of the human personality. He is the Atman which manifests itself through body, mind and intellect as the individual. The same Vishnu pervades the entire cosmos as Brahman.

Vishnu is said to be lying on a great serpent (**shesha** or **ananta**) in an ocean of milk (**ksheerabhdhi**) in heaven (**vaikuntha**). He is said to be in yogic sleep (**yoga-nidra**). The body of the serpent is coiled to form Vishnu's bed. The serpent has a thousand heads and its hood is turned inward looking at its own coiled body. Vishnu's consort, Laxmi, sits at his feet serving him.

Vishnu represents the supreme within the human



body, mind and intellect. The picture of Vishnu lying on the serpent-bed in the milky ocean suggests the means of recognising the Atman, the innermost core of man's personality. The ocean is the mind with its infinite thoughts. The milky ocean stands for the **sattwic** mind. A **sattwic** mind is pure and serene. It is the highest quality of the mind. The other two states of the mind are **rajasic** and **tamasic**. The **rajasic** mind is ever agitated. **Tamasic** is dull and stupid. When the mind is in the latter two states man gets involved in the mundane world. Only the **sattwic** mind lifts man to the higher realm of Divinity. In a **sattwic** mind alone man can recognise his Godhead.

The serpent is the ego with its many desires. In a **sattwic** mind the ego is turned inward. An extroverted ego loses sight of the Divinity within. When the same ego turns its attention inward, when its concentration is upon the inner Self instead of the outer objects of the world it recognises the supreme Self, the Atman. The thousand heads of the serpent turning inward indicate that the thoughts are directed to single-pointed meditation upon the Atman. When man holds his mind thus in deep meditation upon his supreme Self he realises Vishnu, the all-pervading Reality.

Vishnu is shown to be in **yogic** sleep — **yoga nidra**. **Yoga** is derived from its root **yuj** (unite). This indicates his perfect union with the infinite Reality. **Nidra** means sleep. A man who is totally absorbed in the supreme Self is asleep as it were to the happenings of the terrestrial world, revelling in the infinite bliss of Self-realisation. He is disinterested in the experiences of the finite world.

Goddess Laxmi, the consort of Vishnu, sits at his feet, serving him. Laxmi symbolises the wealth, power and glory of this world. When man seeks the higher Truth and is disinterested in the world the sense objects seek him. When Vishnu is sought Laxmi necessarily follows the seeker. But the trouble in the world today is that people try to seek Laxmi directly. The moment man runs after wealth, starts desiring, craving, asking, begging for it the object of desire leaves him. That is the law.

Vishnu is the one eternal, unmanifest Reality. The manifest world of plurality has emerged from the unmanifest Reality. Brahma, the creator of the world is shown as emerging from the navel of Vishnu while he is lying on the serpent-bed. The navel portion represents the psychological centre (**chakra**) from where sound originates in the form of **para-vak** (transcendent speech). This inaudible sound passes through two more stages of development namely **pashyanti** and **madhyama** before it becomes audible speech called **vaikhari**. This audible sound is the quality of space (**akash**). Space is the first of the five elements which constitutes the entire universe. The production of sound therefore symbolises creation. This idea of the manifested world created from the unmanifested Reality is illustrated by Brahma emerging from the navel of Vishnu.

Vishnu is known to be blue in colour and clothed in a yellow garb. He wears a crown and stands upon a lotus. He has four hands. All these are significant symbols indicating that Vishnu is none other than the supreme Self, the changeless Reality around which all

the terrestrial changes take place, the imperishable essence in the perishable world.

The blue colour of Vishnu indicates His infinite stature. Blue is associated with the infinite since immeasurable entities like the sky or ocean appear blue in colour. Yellow is usually attributed to the earth for two reasons : one the earth (**silica**) glows with a yellow fire when introduced in a colourless flame and two, anything that is buried in the earth for a long period of time gathers a yellowish colour. Vishnu, blue in colour and clothed in yellow, therefore, represents the descent of the infinite, immeasurable, transcendental Truth to the terrestrial realm i.e. god in a human form.

When the Infinite expresses through a finite form, there is a manifestation of an individual (**jeeva**). The individual comes in contact with and reacts to the world with the help of four subtle instruments in him. They are the four constituents of his subtle body, viz. the mind (**manas**), the intellect (**buddhi**), the ego (**ahamkar**) and the conditioned-consciousness (**chitta**). The four hands of Vishnu represent these four instruments.

The crown on Vishnu's head signifies his supreme sovereignty and lordship over the entire world of plurality. He is the one who maintains and protects all things and beings in the entire universe.

The deity stands upon a lotus. The lotus represents Truth. 'Standing upon the lotus' therefore, means that the ground or substratum which supports a god

man is the Brahman i.e. a god-man is ever rooted in the supreme Truth.

In his four hands Vishnu holds a conch (**shanka**), a discus (**chakra**), a mace (**gada**) and a lotus (**padma**). The lotus indicates the final goal of human evolution. **By showing the lotus** Vishnu invites mankind to reach this goal of perfection by realising his pure Self within. The Lord blows his conch (**shanka**) calling the people of the world to lead a pure and noble life so that they may shift their attention and interest from the material world to the supreme Self within. This call is the whisperings of the inner conscience. The conscience of man tells him to give up sensuous appetites and extrovert living and directs him to the higher life. But man does not heed this sacred voice from within. He continues with his passionate living until he experiences knocks and shocks leading to disappointment and dissatisfaction with life. The mace in the third hand is meant as a warning to draw man's attention to this stern law of nature. If man, despite the growing sense of restlessness and agitations in his bosom, still persists in his sensual indulgences and does not turn towards the spiritual path, he meets with total disaster. The discus is meant to show man this inevitable end that he would reach if he were totally heedless to the warnings of nature.

On the other hand, a seeker who listens to the call from within and follows the spiritual path leading to the Truth, does not experience the knocks of the mace or the destruction of the discus. He lives a life of contentment and bliss until he reaches the sacred abode of Truth and becomes one with Vishnu.

Vishnu's message conveyed by his four hands is true not only with reference to an individual but to a society, community or a nation as well. As long as people do not heed the sacred advice of the scriptures and take to the spiritual values of life, they meet with sorrow and suffering in life. If this warning also is not heeded and the people continue to live extrovertedly fulfilling merely their sense gratifications, they are bound to meet with disaster. This is what history has been recording from generation to generation as evidenced by the rise and fall of nations and empires.

Sastha

On the peak of Sabari Hill at the southern tip of the Sahyadri range stretching southward into Kerala, there is an ancient temple dedicated to Lord Ayyappan who is popularly known as Sabari Mala Sastha. This temple can be reached only by foot through the jungle which is infested with wild animals. Thousands of pilgrims reach this shrine trekking through the jungle paths.

Like all of the Hindu deities Sastha has a mystical significance. Mysticism is a technique of employing symbols and stories to convey the knowledge of the highest Reality to mankind. It is used by all religions. In the Hindu scriptures this technique has been developed to artistic perfection.

Sastha is the son of Lord Siva and Mohini. Mohini is the enchanting form of a maiden taken by Lord Vishnu. Sastha is reputed as a very powerful deity. He is considered to be a protector of the weak. He is said to have saved mankind from physical and mental sickness and endowed them with spiritual knowledge.

The scriptures have always represented a constant strife between the gods and the demons. In the Vishnu Purana, the gods and demons decided to sink their differences temporarily. They came to a mutual



understanding to make a combined effort to churn the milky ocean and draw the nectar (**amrutam**) from it. They chose the **Manthara** mountain to serve as the churner and Vasuki the mighty serpent as a rope for the purpose of churning. The gods and demons stood on opposite sides and started the great churning of the milky ocean.

The churning first produced a deadly poison called **halahala** which started spreading everywhere. Living beings panicked and ran for protection to Lord Siva. Siva, in His divine compassion for them, took the poison in his palm and not knowing what to do with it, decided to swallow it himself. When Siva put it into his mouth and was about to swallow it, his consort Uma clutched his neck and stopped the poison from descending any further. The poison spread through the neck staining it blue. Henceforth he was **Neelakanta**, the 'blue-necked'.

The churning went on and several beautiful and powerful things issued from the ocean. They were all distributed and the gods and the demons persisted with their churning until at last the nectar was produced. But as soon as the nectar appeared, the demons snatched and ran away with it.

The gods prayed to Lord Vishnu to retrieve their loss. Vishnu answered the prayers and agreed to bring back the nectar to them. Meanwhile, the demons quarrelled among themselves. They could not decide as to who should distribute the nectar and the quantity each should get. In such a state of confusion, Lord Vishnu appeared in the form of an enchanting maiden,

'Mohini'. Fascinated by Mohini the demons stood gazing at her beauty. Having attracted them thus, Mohini offered to distribute the nectar justly between the gods and the demons. The demons accepted her offer. Vishnu made the gods and demons sit in different rows and started the distribution with the gods. By the time the last god had been served the nectar would have run out. One of the demons perceiving this trick left his row and sat among the gods. He got his share and put it in his mouth, but before it could reach his stomach Mohini realised her mistake and Vishnu's discus cut off the demon's head, which however had become immortal the nectar having passed through it. Thus came into being the celestial Rahu who every now and then swallows the sun or the moon but cannot retain them as he has only a head with two holes in it and no body. Thus is accounted the phenomenon of a solar or a lunar eclipse.

On a later occasion Siva wished to see that enchanting form of Mohini which had tricked the demons. He was warned that the delusory form was irresistible. Siva, proud of his power of austerity insisted on seeing Mohini. But lust is the last weakness to leave one's bosom, and when Vishnu took on Mohini's form Siva was overcome by her charms and his asceticism gave way. Out of the sexual union of Siva and Mohini was born the divine child, Sastha.

This story also has a mystic significance. It explains how man purifies his inner personality and reaches the state of immortality. **Mrutam** means death and **a-mrutam** means deathlessness. Deathless again

means changeless. That is the state which man reaches on realisation of his godhood.

The milky ocean represents the pure **sattwic** mind. The gods represent the higher nature of man, the demons his lower nature. There is a constant conflict between the demands of the lower nature and the aspirations of the higher. When this conflict is resolved man seeks his supreme Self within. The serpent represents his ego and the mountain his vast experiences (**karma**) in the world. He makes use of these two — his ego and his experiences — to draw the nectar of Atman out of his **sattwic** mind. The mind is first to be purified of its desires. The pure mind is then directed through the processes of assertion and negation which is the churning. The seeker asserts the supreme Self. He negates his body, mind and intellect. He directs his mind to repeat "I am Atman, not the body," "I am Atman, not the mind", "I am Atman, not the intellect". When the mind keeps repeating the thought of Atman it gets attached to it. Attachment arises out of repetition of thoughts. That is the principle of attachment. Hitherto man has been constantly repeating that he is the body, mind and intellect. Consequently, he becomes a physical, mental and intellectual personality. He loses sight of the Atman. Now when he asserts the Atman he becomes the Atman. This is the process of evolution.

Spiritual evolution is first marked by the purging of **vasanas** or desires symbolised by the emission of poison from the ocean. These **vasanas** are detrimental to the well-being of mankind. They pollute the head (discrimination) and the heart (feelings). Hence

Parvati arrested the poison in the throat of Siva. She stopped it in between the head and the heart not allowing the poison to contaminate the feelings of the heart or the discrimination of the intellect.

As man evolves further in his spiritual path he acquires great powers in the world. These are represented by the attractive objects that arose out of the churning. Thus if the seeker continues in his spiritual pursuit he reaches the final state of self-realisation, the bliss of godhood, the **amruta**.

The negative tendencies in man trade even on the spiritual treasures gained by him. Man makes use of his newly-acquired spiritual powers for low, self-aggrandising purposes. Such men fall an easy prey to the enchanting objects of the world. They are blind to their spiritual beauty. Enchanted by the senses they lose whatever wealth they have gained as the demons enchanted by Mohini lost their nectar.

Sastha is also known as Harihara putra meaning the son of Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Siva). Being the son of Siva and Vishnu, Sastha has the powers of both his parents. He destroys all negative tendencies through the power of destruction gained through his father. He maintains the thought of the supreme through the power of maintenance of his mother. The devotees of Sastha invoke these two qualities. Thus invoking the grace of Sastha, the seeker purifies his mind and directs it to a single-pointed meditation and realisation of the supreme.

Another name of Sastha is Ayyappan. The Ayyappan temple in the Sabari Hill, Kerala, is one of the most

popular pilgrim centres in South India. Devotees from all over the country belonging to all creeds and classes visit this sacred shrine. Unlike other temples, the pilgrims visiting this temple have very strict and rigorous preparations to go through before reaching the divine altar. The usual custom is to observe strict austerities and self-control for forty-one days preceding the visit to the temple. By such **tapas** (austerities) the mind is made to withdraw its attachments to the world and slowly direct it to the thought of the Reality — **Ayyappa Swami Saranam**. During this period of austerity, the devotee is allowed to wear only black or saffron clothes and a **mala** (rosary) and strictly observe the daily rituals. The black or saffron clothes are meant to convey the pilgrim's mental resignation from the world. Black indicates darkness. The world is dark to him. The saffron colour represents fire. This indicates that his body is burnt or dead to this world. Thus with his symbolic attire the pilgrim withdraws from his mental preoccupation with the world. With such a prepared mind he cries '**Swami Saranam** — the Lord is my protector' all along the way to the shrine.

The way to the temple is through jungles and the pilgrimage is undertaken by foot. The idea is to further develop the concentration of the mind which has already been prepared by strict austerities. All along the ascent to the shrine, the devotee tries to maintain the one thought of the Lord in his multiple experiences. When such single-pointed concentration and meditation is maintained, the Truth reveals itself to the seeker, which is symbolised by the **darshan** (vision) of the Lord in the temple.

Brahma

Lord Brahma is the first member of the orthodox Brahmanical triad, Vishnu being the second and Siva, the third. Brahma is the god of creation and he is traditionally accepted as the Creator of the entire universe.

An individual's subtle body is constituted of his mind and intellect, that is, his entire thoughts. Man's subtle body is responsible for the creation of his gross body and also the world that he experiences. The thoughts of an individual determine the type of physical body he possesses. The same thoughts are also responsible for the type of world that the individual experiences around him. As the thoughts, so the world. If a man possesses good thoughts he sees a good world. If his thoughts are bad he sees a bad world. Yudhisthira, a virtuous man saw virtue everywhere, while Duryodhana saw vice everywhere. When thoughts are absent there is no world at all. In deep sleep there are no thoughts, no world. This phenomenon is true not only of the microcosm but of the macrocosm as well. The cosmic subtle body is the aggregate of all subtle bodies of all living beings. The cosmic subtle body called the Hiranyagarbha, is said to be the creator of the entire universe. This creator is Brahma.

The manifested world of plurality has emerged from the unmanifest Reality. To indicate this Brahma



the creator is described as being born from the navel of Vishnu as he is lying on the great serpent, Ananta in the milky ocean.

One of the earliest iconographic descriptions of Brahma is that of the four-faced god seated on a lotus. The Lord has in his four hands a water-pot (**kamandalu**), a manuscript (**Vedas**), a sacrificial implement (**sruva**) and a rosary (**mala**). He wears the hide of a black antelope and his vehicle is a swan (**hamsa**).

The description of Brahma like those of other deities of Hinduism bears a mystic symbolism. The lotus represents the Reality. Brahma sitting on the lotus indicates that he is ever-rooted in the infinite Reality. Reality is the foundation on which his personality rests. The four faces of Brahma represent the four **Vedas**. They also symbolise the functioning of the inner personality (**antahkarana**) which consists of thoughts. They are the mind (**manas**), the intellect (**buddhi**), ego (**ahamkara**) and conditioned-consciousness (**chitta**). They represent the four ways in which thoughts function. They are the manifestations of the unmanifest Consciousness.

The animal hide worn by Brahma stands for austerity. A seeker who desires to realise his godhead must first go through spiritual disciplines. Observing such austerities the seeker must carefully study and reflect upon the scriptural truths which are suggested by the manuscript (**Vedas**) held in one hand. Having acquired the knowledge of scriptures he must work in the world without ego and egocentric desires, that is engage in dedicated and sacrificial service for the

welfare of the world. This idea is suggested by the sacrificial implement held in the second hand. When a man works in the world selflessly he drops his desires. He is no longer extroverted, materialistic, sensual. His mind is withdrawn from its preoccupations with the world of objects and beings. Such a mind is said to be in **uparati**. A man who has reached the state of **uparati** is in a spirit of renunciation. That is indicated by Brahma holding the **kamandalu** in his hand. **Kamandalu** is a water-pot used by a **sanyasi** — a man of renunciation. It is a symbol of **sanyasa** or renunciation. The mind of such a man which is withdrawn from the heat of passion of the world is available for deeper concentration and meditation. The rosary (**mala**) in the fourth hand is meant to be used for chanting and meditation. Meditation is the final gateway to Realisation. Through deep and consistent meditation the mind gets annihilated and the seeker attains godhood. A god-man maintains his identity with his supreme Self while he is engaged in the world of perceptions, emotions and thoughts. He retains the concept of unity in diversity. He separates the pure unconditioned-consciousness underlying this conditioned world of names and forms. Brahma's association with a swan is most appropriate in this context. A swan is described in Hindu mysticism as possessing the unique faculty of separating pure milk from a mixture of milk and water. It is reputed to have the ability to draw the milk alone and leave the water behind. Similarly does a man of Realisation move about in the world recognising the one divinity in the pluralistic phenomena of the world.

Brahma is said to be the Lord of creation. The

creator must necessarily possess the knowledge to create. Without knowledge no creation is possible. Hence Brahma is said to be wedded to the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati. Life in this world is a manifestation of the three principles of creation, sustenance and destruction. In fact these three are interconnected. The apparent destruction is only an essential forerunner to creation. Destruction and creation go hand in hand. They are like two sides of a coin. For example, the destruction of morning is creation of noon and the destruction of noon is creation of night. This chain of continuous destruction and construction maintains the day. Similarly, the destruction of childhood is the creation of youth and the destruction of youth the creation of old age. In this process of birth and death the individual is maintained. Hence the three gods of the Trinity viz. Brahma, Vishnu and Siva representing creation, maintenance and destruction, are essentially one and the same.

The above idea is well portrayed in Lord Dattatreya, in whose form the three gods are combined. Dattatreya has the three faces of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva to indicate that the three principles for which they stand are inseparable. Lord Dattatreya is shown with four dogs following him. The four dogs represent the four **Vedas**. A dog is one of the most faithful animals in the world and it follows its master in all environments and circumstances. So, too, the **Vedas** are said to follow a man-of-Realisation in the sense that all his actions, thoughts and desires are in perfect accord with the principles enunciated in the **Vedic** textbooks.

All creations arise out of **vikshepa** (thought dis-

turbances). This **vikshepa-sakti** is Lord Brahma — the total mind-intellect-equipment. Man, being essentially constituted of his mind and intellect, has already invoked this **vikshepa-sakti** and realised Brahma. Hence the worship and invocation of Brahma is practised by few.

Yet there are a few shrines dedicated to Brahma. He is worshipped and invoked particularly by scientists and kings for generating more creative ideas to serve the world of men and matter. The rulers invoke the Lord in order to surrender their ego and produce plans and schemes to serve the nation. Similarly, the research scholars invoke creative inspiration and flashes of new thoughts revealing the secrets of nature.

Lord Brahma is not popularly worshipped in India. This is so, because the idea of creation is repugnant to seeker of Truth since the creation of thoughts has veiled the infinite Reality. The attempt of all spiritual seekers is to destroy the existing thoughts and maintain the state of single-pointed thought until the Reality is revealed. Hence, Siva (god of destruction) and Vishnu (god of maintenance) are worshipped more than Brahma. In fact, there are very few temples of Brahma — one in Rajasthan and another in Orissa — compared to innumerable shrines of Siva and Vishnu existing all over India.



Consorts of the Three Gods

SARASWATI : The Goddess of Knowledge

The Vedic tradition of India from time immemorial has given women the highest place of respect and recognition. The Hindu scriptures are referred to as Mother Shruti and the Bhagavad Geeta as Mother Geeta. Knowledge itself has been personified as a feminine deity — the goddess Saraswati. Saraswati literally means “one who gives the essence (sara) of our own Self (swa)”.

The goddess Saraswati is represented as sitting on a lotus. She holds the sacred scripture in one hand and a lotus in the other. With the third and fourth hands she plays the Indian lute (veena).

The seat of the lotus indicates that the Goddess is firmly established in the experience of the supreme Reality. She is rooted in Truth which the lotus represents. By holding the lotus in her hand Saraswati indicates to man the supreme goal that he should reach in his lifetime, the goal of Self-realisation. The path of that goal is shown by her other hands. There are two distinct paths taking man to the highest experience of godhood — the path of knowledge and the path of devotion.

The path of knowledge is shown by the Goddess

holding the sacred book. It is called **gyana marga** in Sanskrit. It expounds Vedanta, the philosophy of the **Vedas**. It is a systematic and scientific presentation of the realities of life. It explains the various layers of matter that man possesses and the core of Reality that lies beneath them. By careful study and reflection the seeker unravels the mystery of his inner life until he reaches the core of his supreme Self. This path is meant for the intellectuals.

The path of devotion is called **bhakti marga**. This path also leads to the goal of Self-realisation. This is meant for those who are predominantly devotional, who use their heart to sing praises of their Lord. Through music, **keertans** or **bhajans** they maintain a single-pointed devotion to the Lord and thereby attain godhood. This is indicated by Saraswati playing the **veena**.

The four hands of the Goddess represent the four aspects of the inner personality of man namely **manas** (mind), **buddhi** (intellect), **ahamkar** (ego) and **chitta** (conditioned-consciousness).

Saraswati is the consort of Brahma. Brahma is the creator. Creation is not possible unless the creator has the knowledge of what and how to create. Knowledge therefore is an essential prerequisite for creation. This idea is symbolised by the marriage of Brahma with Saraswati.

During the nine-day festival of devi-puja Goddess Kali (Durga) is worshipped on the first three days, Goddess Laxmi in the next three days and Saraswati in the last three days. Kali represents the power of



destruction. By invoking Kali the devotee is said to draw her mighty power to destroy all his negative tendencies. Thereafter the worship of Laxmi the Goddess of wealth is meant to cultivate and preserve his noble qualities like self-control, tolerance, love etc. These are his inner wealth. Having cleansed the inner personality of the negativities and substituting them with positive qualities the devotee is qualified to receive the knowledge of the Self. The study of the scriptures is futile if one approaches it with an unclean mind. An unclean mind is ever agitated. Such a mind is not fit for study and reflection upon the highest truths of life. A pure mind and an enquiring intellect directed to research of the Self together bring about spiritual awakening. This is symbolised by the devotee worshipping Goddess Saraswati in the last three days. On the tenth day an effigy is burnt or thrown into the sea to indicate the destruction of the ego, the annihilation of the lower nature of man. That day is the day of enlightenment, Vidyarambha.

LAXMI : The Goddess of Wealth

Laxmi is the consort of Lord Vishnu. Vishnu represents the power of maintenance. In order to manifest this power Vishnu must necessarily possess wealth. Even in the world a person who is in charge of maintenance needs wealth. A pauper cannot maintain anything. Vishnu is the maintainer of the entire universe. Hence he is married to the Goddess of wealth.

Laxmi is said to be **swarna-hasta** meaning golden-handed. As this name suggests the Goddess pours out riches to the community. Where there is Laxmi there is prosperity. Wealth here also includes moral and ethical values, the nobler aspects of life, the power of the mind and intellect. This kind of wealth has to be acquired by a seeker before his initiation into spiritual knowledge. That explains why Laxmi is worshipped before Saraswati during the **devi-puja**.

Wealth however does not come to a person by merely begging at the feet of Laxmi. Worship of Laxmi, these days has become mere solicitation of material wealth. Man does not realise that when he runs after wealth it moves away from him. The way to command wealth is to leave it alone and to seek the higher values of life. This idea is well-brought out in the allegory of the churning of the milky ocean. The ocean of milk represents a pure (**sattwic**) mind. When man contemplates with a pure mind on the higher ideals of life he evolves spiritually. By gradual evolution he reaches the goal of perfection. A man of perfection gains everything in the world. He commands peace, power and prosperity. Wealth is at his feet. This is the way to gain wealth to win over Laxmi. Laxmi emerging by the churning of the milky ocean symbolises this truth.

Laxmi is described as being seated on the lotus. She holds a lotus in her hand. This is a common symbol amongst most of the Hindu gods and goddesses. It only means they are well-rooted in the supreme



Reality. By holding a lotus in their hands they only point out to mankind that the goal of their existence is Realisation of the inner wealth.

GODDESS PARVATI

Parvati is also known as Uma. Uma represents **prakriti**, matter. Matter is destructible. The power of destruction can manifest itself only where there is destructible matter. Destruction ceases to have any meaning without destructible objects. Siva being the Lord of destruction has necessarily to wed Uma to manifest his power of destruction.

Parvati is also referred to as **anna poorni** which means 'bestower of food'. **Anna** means 'food', which is to be taken in a wider connotation to mean food for all sense organs i.e. all sense objects.

GODDESS DURGA

The other forms of Parvati are Durga and Kali which are awesome and terrifying. In these forms the goddess rides a lion, wields a number of weapons and wears a garland of skulls, holds a severed head in one hand and a lotus in another etc. — all these represent destruction of evil and protection of good (lotus). This goddess is therefore invoked by the

seeker to destroy all his desires (**vasanas**) and unveil his supreme Self.

Man at present is riddled with innumerable desires, agitations and sufferings. He is tormented by his own negative thoughts and feelings like selfishness, jealousy, hatred, greed etc. These are the greatest enemies in man's bosom which loot his inner peace and bliss. They have to be totally annihilated for man to reach the abode of everlasting happiness. Even as he destroys a few of his sins more spring up in the same form. They grow and spread like bacteria and destroy his peace and tranquillity. There is no room for persuasion or softness in dealing with these arch enemies of man. They have to be ruthlessly struck and destroyed. By worshipping Durga this idea of ruthless destruction is invoked to annihilate all the desires and unfold divinity.



Krishna

Krishna was a dynamic incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He was an **Avatar**. An **Avatar** is one who is attuned to the supreme Consciousness from his very birth. Krishna's incarnation brought about a profound and powerful influence upon Indian thought and life. There is no aspect of Indian life, culture and civilisation which does not receive his revitalising touch. India's philosophy and religion, mysticism and poetry, painting and sculpture, music and dance articulated Krishna's theme and thought. Every aspect of Krishna's life and deeds has a mystic symbolism indicating a sublime truth. Some of them are explained below. They should set a direction to the reader for deeper study and discovery of the allegorical significance of the entire story of Krishna.

Krishna in Sanskrit means dark. Krishna stands for the inner Self, the Atman. The Atman is dark in the sense that it is unknown to man as long as he is involved in his terrestrial experiences. Man's knowledge is limited to the realms of perceptions, emotions and thoughts. He gains these experiences through his three equipments of body, mind and intellect. He knows not the Atman within. The body, mind and intellect by themselves are inert and insentient. They constitute the material aspect of man. The Atman is his spiritual being. The Atman is the living

principle in man which transforms his inert matter into a living being.

Krishna is blue in colour and wears yellow clothes. Blue colour has been always associated with infinity. The sky appears blue. So does the ocean. Yellow colour represents earth. When sand is introduced in a colourless flame, the flame turns yellow. The blue form of Krishna clothed in yellow therefore suggests the Infinite Reality reduced to a finite human being. The incarnation of Krishna represents the descent of God on earth. This idea of the limitless, formless Reality being constricted and restricted to a limited, human form is again suggested by Krishna's birth in a prison. The divine child was however not confined to the prison. No sooner was Krishna born than the prison doors miraculously flung open. The guards could not hold the child back. The child's father, Vasudeva, carried him out of the prison in spite of the severe restrictions imposed on him. This episode is meant to convey that the infinite being can never be really restricted or limited to the human form. A Godman is ever free and liberated. The Atman in man is limitless. Only his body, mind and intellect are limited, finite. These material equipments have a beginning and an end. They cannot restrict the Atman. The Atman is eternal, all-pervading, infinite. Krishna represents that Atman.

Krishna was born in Mathura. His uncle, Kamsa was a tyrant. Kamsa imprisoned his father and usurped the throne of Mathura. He reigned over Mathura. His minister Chanura was equally wicked and cruel. Under the rule of these two tyrants Mathura suffered greatly

from confusion and chaos. Krishna destroyed them both and restored peace and order in that land. The word "madhuram" means sweetness. The land of Mathura represents the personality of man. Man's essential nature is his Atman. His real nature is ever sweet, peaceful and blissful. But when the evil forces of ego and egocentric desires usurp man's personality he suffers from stress and strain, worries and anxieties. He is agitated and sorrowful. He loses his blissful nature. To regain the lost bliss man has to destroy his ego and egocentric desires and establish his identity with his supreme Self.

There is a Puranic story which speaks of Krishna killing a mighty serpent with many heads. It lived in a lake poisoning its water. The entire village suffered because of this dragon. Krishna jumped into the lake and began to crush down its heads. But as he crushed them other heads sprung up in their place. Krishna ultimately crushed all the heads and killed the serpent. He danced on its crested head playing the flute. The wives of the dragon paid homage to the Lord.

This story again has an allegorical significance. The lake represents the mind. The dragon and its many heads the ego and egocentric desires. The ego and egocentric desires poison the mind and make its world miserable. When man turns his attention inward, when he contemplates and meditates upon his Atman (Krishna) he overcomes his ego and egocentric desires. Thereafter he revels in the bliss of Realisation. The sense objects of the world become subser

vient to such a man. This is symbolised by the wives of the serpent paying homage to Krishna.

Krishna is often represented as playing a flute. The enchanting music emanating from the flute of the Lord is the bliss of Godhood enjoyed by the man of Realisation. The flute is hollow but it can produce enchanting music. So too when man empties himself of his **vasanas** and desires the Divinity within him flows out with enchanting bliss. Man has to give up all his claims upon his body, mind and intellect, give up all his egocentric connections, all thoughts of 'mine' and 'thine', rise above them all and chant OM (Krishna), remove all selfishness from the flute of his body and fill it with the divine breath of OM. Man becomes God.

The milkmaids of Brindavan were called **gopis**. These **gopis** were enchanted by the divine music flowing out of Krishna's flute. They danced in their ecstasy around Krishna. The dance of the **gopis** is known as **rasa-leela**. Krishna again represents the Atman, pure Consciousness while **gopis** represent thoughts. Atman in man is the enlivening factor by which he becomes conscious of his thoughts. Thoughts by themselves are insentient. In the presence of Consciousness thoughts gain sentiency or consciousness. Thoughts dance around the Atman as it were. But the Atman is ever-immaculate. It is unaffected by the thoughts around it. So is Krishna pure, immaculate. He remains detached and unaffected by the dancing **gopis**. Losing this allegorical significance of the **rasa-leela** much criticism has been levelled against Krishna's association with the **gopis**. The **gopis** were in fact deeply devoted

to Lord Krishna. They remembered Krishna through out the day in all their activities. Their limbs were ceaselessly engaged in their obligatory duties while their minds were constantly attuned to the Lord. To dedicate oneself to a higher being and work in the world without ego and egocentric desires is **karma yoga**. When man works in a spirit of **karma yoga** he gets rid of his desires or **vasanas**. This idea is suggested by Krishna stealing the butter which the **gopis** had churned and collected in their pots. The desire for realisation of the Self alone remains. This last trace of desire gets eliminated by itself through single-pointed meditation upon the Lord. In Verse 66 of Chapter 18 of the Bhagavad Geeta the Lord gives man this assurance :

“Abandoning all dharmas, take refuge in me alone,
I will liberate thee from all sins, grieve not.”

There is yet another beautiful incident in Krishna's life indicating his absolute state of detachment. It served as an eye-opener to the two wives of Krishna when they began to doubt his association with many **gopis**.

One day the great sage Durvasa camped with his many disciples on the opposite bank of river Jamuna where Krishna lived. Krishna's wives saw the sage and prepared a lot of sweetmeats to take to him. In the evening when both the ladies with their trays of delicacies approached the river it was flooded. They could not cross over to the other bank to make the offering to the sage. They returned and sought Krishna's help. Krishna asked them to go back to the

riverside and pray to Mother Jamuna (the rivers in India are deified as goddesses), "If sage Durvasa is a **nitya-upavasi** please show us the way". '**Nitya**' means eternal, permanent. '**Upavasi**' means one who fasts. So **nitya-upavasi** is one who is always observing fast. The ladies did not understand the implication. They followed Krishna's advice and prayed to Goddess Jamuna. The goddess granted their prayer and instantly the waters subsided. They crossed over and offered the sweets to the sage. The sage ate every bit of the food and returned the empty trays. A **nitya-upavasi** !

Krishna's wives took the sage's blessings and reached the river bank to return home. Again the river was flooded preventing them from crossing over. This time they sought the help of Durvasa. The sage advised them to go back to the river bank and pray to goddess Jamuna, "If Krishna is a **nitya brahmachari** please show us the way". (**Nitya brahmachari** means permanent celibate). The ladies followed the advice and prayed to the Jamuna. To their amazement the waters subsided forthwith enabling them to cross over to the other bank.

The significance of this episode is obvious. Durvasa was totally free from mental attachment to any type of food. He had absolutely no desire or craving for them. Eating to him was a ritual, an obligatory function. Such a person though eating eats not. A man of perfect detachment "even though acting acts not" (Bhagavad Geeta Chapter IV, Verse 20). Durvasa belonged to that rare category. He was ever mentally detached from food. Hence he was called a **nitya upavasi** even as he was eating like any other man.

The same principle applied to Krishna. It is not man's physical expression but his mental impression that determines his attachment or detachment to the world. Krishna's association with the **gopis** does not in any way affect his total detachment, his mental resignation from them. He was ever maintaining an inward dispassion and disinterest even as he was closely associating with the gopis. His mind was ever in a state of celibacy (**brahmacharya**). Hence he was called a **nitya-brahmachari**.

In his childhood, Krishna is said to have eaten mud on an occasion. His mother Yashoda chided him. Krishna denied having eaten mud. Yashoda would not take his word. She asked him to open his mouth. The child did so. Yashoda was wonderstruck to see the entire universe within the child's mouth. This episode has a deep philosophical implication. Krishna is the Infinite, Omnipresent, Omnipotent Reality. The Reality alone exists. Nothing else does. The universe is nothing but the same Reality, though seen differently by men with limited vision. Yashoda was one of those who could not see the supreme being in Krishna. She only saw her child in him. But in truth Krishna is that all-pervading Reality which includes the earth as well. The earth is a part of the Reality which Krishna is. Krishna therefore gave the right answer to his mother when denied eating earth. How can Krishna (Reality) eat mud (Reality)? Krishna was therefore speaking the Truth. When Yashoda insisted on knowing the truth Krishna had to reveal it by opening his mouth and showing the universe in him.

Man's essential nature is the supreme Reality. The

world is also nothing but Reality. Yet man finds the necessity to run after the world of objects for his pleasures. Is this not an absurd situation — Reality in the form of man craving to enjoy Reality in the form of the world? This absurdity of man's pursuit is subtly implied when Krishna as a baby is shown sucking his own big toe.

Lord Krishna is also described as holding a staff in one hand and showing a symbol of wisdom (**gnana mudra**) with the other. A staff is used by a cowherd boy to drive the cattle to the pasture lands for grazing. The **gnana mudra** is a symbol made by holding the little, ring and middle fingers erect and bringing the index finger to touch the middle portion of the thumb. This again has a philosophical meaning. Krishna represents the Atman in man. Atman is the Life-principle which enlivens his body, mind and intellect. Without the life spark man cannot act at all. All actions are possible because of the life spark. Actions broadly classified will fall under two distinct heads — actions that are degrading and devolutionary and those that are elevating and evolutionary. Man can make use of the Atman to evolve or to devolve. Atman is neutral. It helps man to pursue whatever direction he wants. The first type of actions is indicated by Krishna holding the staff. The cattle represents the sense organs. The sense organs constantly feed upon the sense objects of the world. Eyes go to colour and form, ears go to sound, the tongue to taste etc. The sense objects are the pastures for the sense organs. Man spends all his life driving his sense organs to their respective fields of enjoyment for sensual pleasures. He uses his Life-principle merely to indulge in sense gratification. That

seems to be his main occupation in life.

The other type of actions, indicated by the **gnana mudra** leads man to Self-realisation. The index finger represents the ego. It is the pointing finger which creates duality, plurality. Man develops his ego by his association and identification with his body, mind and intellect, with his gross, subtle and causal bodies, with his **sattwa, rajas** and **tamas gunas**. This idea is indicated by the index finger remaining in contact with the other three fingers. The thumb represents the Atman by virtue of the vital role it plays in all actions. The index finger bending towards the thumb to form a circle shows the ego's detachment from the three bodies or **gunas** and total surrender to the Atman. When man does that he reaches his Infinite state, the state of Self-realisation. This state of infinitude is indicated by making a circle. The circle has no beginning or end. That which has no beginning or end is said to be infinite. Krishna gives this choice of action to man, that is to spend his lifetime in merely gratifying his senses or to transcend the limitations of his body, mind and intellect and reach the state of Realisation. Krishna is a mere witness, a **sakshi**. He does not interfere with your choice. He merely presents the truth for you to decide your course of life. In the **Bhagavad Geeta** Arjuna surrenders to Krishna completely and seeks his advice. Krishna gives him the entire philosophy of life in the eighteen chapters of the Geeta and towards the end of the last chapter he declares to Arjuna "I have declared the highest wisdom to you reflect upon it and act as you choose to".

Rama

Lord Rama stands out as the most glorious of all characters found in scriptural literature. In the Ramayana sage Valmiki has symbolised Rama as an ideal of perfection. No other character has been described with such idealistic perfection displayed in all aspects of life in a single individual.

The human personality consists of different facets functioning in diverse aspects of life. In most human beings only one or two of these facets are well-developed. The rest lack perfection. In the life of Rama each facet of human personality is seen projected to absolute perfection. Thus the various roles that Rama played in his lifetime were of idealistic perfection. He was a perfect son, an ideal king, a true husband, a real friend, a devoted brother, a noble enemy etc. While painting the picture of each facet of his personality Valmiki would not compromise with its highest standard of perfection. Consequently when the sage highlighted one facet of Rama's personality to absolute perfection he could not do justice to the other aspects. That explains why some critics read certain apparent inconsistencies in the divine character of Rama.

One such instance is the criticism levelled against Rama for leaving his aged father, King Dasaratha and going away to the forest. Dasaratha was protesting against Rama's departure from the palace. Rama his



self knew that his father would not survive the sorrow of his exile, and yet Rama left. This criticism has no bearing when one understands the role that Rama was playing at that time. Sage Valmiki was depicting Rama in that episode as an ideal son to a father. An exaggerated situation was created purposely to highlight the greatness of the **son** in Rama. Consider the facts of the situation. It was the eve of Rama's coronation. All the subjects of Ayodhya were eagerly waiting for the coronation of the young king. And Rama himself was aware of his duty to them. His step-mother Kaikeyi's demand to have his younger brother Bharata crowned and send Rama away to the forest was preposterous to say the least in the light of the irresistible love that his parents bore for him and he for them. In spite of all these extreme challenges Rama stood out as a real son. It was a son's duty to fulfil the father's promise in spite of the insurmountable obstacles. Rama would not compromise with the fulfilment of his duty as a true son. All other considerations were kept aside while this aspect of his character was highlighted. That is the way one has to study and appreciate the beauty of Rama's character.

Another common criticism of Rama's character is his action in sending away his queen Sita to the forest in response to an irresponsible prattle of a washerman questioning the purity of the queen. Here again one aspect of Rama's personality is highlighted almost to a point of fault and that is his ideal kingship. An ideal king in those days was one who was accepted by all his subjects unlike the present system of majority or at times minority rule. So when King Rama heard a single dissenting voice against him he made the great

est sacrifice in sending his queen away. This action of Rama though apparently absurd portrays the sanctity that he attached to accepted standards of ideal kingship in his days.

In striking contrast to this gesture you find the deep concern of a husband in Sri Rama when Sita was carried away by Ravana. In that situation Rama displayed the ideal husband that he was. He put forth superhuman efforts until he regained Sita.

Another serious criticism of Rama's character is his apparent cowardice when he hid behind a tree to shoot his arrow at Vali. Vali and Sugreeva were kings of the monkeys. Vali was the vicious king who threw his brother Sugreeva out and usurped the throne. On Sugreeva's representation to Rama, Rama devises a plan to help him out of his troubles. He bade Sugreeva challenge his brother and fight him. As the fight was in progress Rama shot down Vali from his hiding place behind a tree. Here again is the friend in Rama blown up to a point of fault. Rama would go to any extent to help a friend. Besides this character being demonstrated there is a deeper mystical significance in this episode which Valmiki is trying to convey to mankind.

Vali, the vicious and immoral brother, represents just the lower nature of man. Sugreeva, the virtuous and moral brother, represents man's higher nature. Vali is said to have gone through extensive austerity (**tapas**) and earned a boon. By this boon he acquired half the strength of the adversary whom he met in battle. Consequently he was able to overpower anyone because half the strength gained thereby plus his own

was always more than the opponent. All this was meant to convey that the sense objects of the world are extremely powerful. The power of lust has toppled great minds. The moment man comes in contact with the sense objects the latter draws away half his strength and overpowers him. Man becomes a slave to his own senses. In this episode Valmiki suggests to mankind the means of overcoming the power of lust. As long as man is in the midst of sense objects it is extremely difficult to exercise his control and overcome temptations. The way to deal with them successfully is to stay away from them initially until he gains sufficient control over them. This is a practical approach to self-control. It is not to be construed as escapism. When a man is already under the influence of the senses he cannot afford to mix freely with the sense objects in question. The initial abstinence is therefore recommended as a practical approach to gain the control over them. Once man gains self-control he can then afford to mix freely with the sense objects. This idea is communicated by Rama avoiding Vali and shooting him from a distance.

Lord Rama carried his bow and arrows all the time. This symbolises his alertness and readiness to fight against iniquity and thus establish justice and peace. Iniquity will always be there in this world. By his example Rama gives mankind strength and conviction to fight it. Man ought not to be weak and accept unrighteousness passively. He has to rise actively against anything that is inconsistent or contrary to righteousness or morality. That is called aggressive goodness. Rama, Krishna and all other gods wielded weapons which symbolised this quality that man needs

to develop.. They stand for righteousness and oppose and destroy all that is unrighteous. Thus throughout the Ramayana there are several such actions and anecdotes expressing the divine brilliance of the ideal personality of Lord Rama.

P A R T II

Epics, Rituals and Festivals

The Mahabharata

The celebrated sage Vyasa who compiled the Vedas also gave the epic poem Mahabharata to the world. The Mahabharata is a divine work recounting great deeds of godlike heroes of the golden age of India. Besides the main story there are several short, yet immortal anecdotes and endless surmises, theology, philosophy, natural sciences, law, worldly and spiritual knowledge of life. The kernel of the great epic is the Bhagavad Geeta which establishes the existence of the highest Truth and prescribes different techniques to recognise it.

The important characters of this seemingly terrestrial drama and the events depicted therein have a deeper significance. The epic has a message for mankind which is of far greater importance than its mere story on the mundane plane. It portrays to man his own lower self (**jeeva**) with all its terrestrial problems, as well as its higher Self (**Atman**) with its transcendental glory. It explains how to merge the little self with the greater Self and bring about the all-embracing synthesis of man and God. The great works of Indian arts and literature — be they the **Mahabharata** or the **Ramayana** or the images of gods and goddesses — are all infused with the idea of penetrating the terrestrial realm and discovering the transcendental truth beyond it.

The central narrative describes the rivalry between two branches of a royal family known as the Pandavas and Kauravas. The jealous and vicious Kauravas led the Pandavas finally to a fratricidal war which ends in an all but complete extinction of that large family along with their allies and supporters.

Krishna represents the Atman. The Atman is the inner Self, the life spark in man. Atman is the source of all actions be they noble or ignoble. Both good and bad actions are not possible without the presence of the Atman within. Atman however is not in any way responsible for the quality of the actions emanating from it. It is as it were a silent witness of all types of activities projected by the body, mind and intellect. This idea is brought out in the **Udyoga-parvan** where Krishna is asleep while Duryodhana and Arjuna sit on either side waiting to advance their claims for help in the impending war, each hoping to secure Krishna's help exclusively for himself. Krishna wakes up and satisfies both the parties by giving his armies to Duryodhana and his personal service, unarmed, to Arjuna. From the metaphysical plane, this episode conveys that the noble (**daivik**) and the ignoble (**asuri**) forces symbolised by Arjuna and Duryodhana both derive their power from the primeval source which by itself has no activity (sleeping Krishna) to its credit or discredit. In other words the Atman or Consciousness is the substratum from which all activities, good or evil, emanate but itself remains pure or uncontaminated by any such activities.

The Pandava hero, Arjuna and the Yadava chief-tain, Krishna are also represented as incarnations of

two sages 'Nara' and 'Narayana'. **Nara** stands for man and **Narayana** for the supreme being. Thus the pair represents man and God, that **jeevatman** and **paramatman**. Arjuna, fighting the Kaurava army is indicative of the efforts put in by the **jeevatma**, the lower self, the empirical ego to conquer its desires and passions, hatred and greed, envy and malice and a host of other negative tendencies. This conquest is made possible by the **jeeva's** association with the **divine Self**.

The homeland of this royal family was sacred and blissful (**Dharmakshetra**), as long as the Pandavas were reigning over it. No sooner did the blind king Dhritarashtra and his hundred wicked sons take over the kingdom than there was a complete change in policy from the spiritual to the secular and consequent fall in integrity of character culminating in the disastrous war of Kurukshetra. The king was blind by birth but the queen denied to herself the use of her eyes by voluntarily tying a piece of cloth around her eyes as a mark of subservience to her blind husband. **Dharmakshetra** represents the divine and blissful nature of man because of the presence of the supreme Self within. The mind of man is however blind to his infinite stature. It is ignorant of the supreme Self. Its ignorance changes man's blissful state to a stormy field of strifes and struggles, trials and tribulations, worries and anxieties. The intellect also, blindly following the mind denies to itself the capacity to rise to spiritual heights and apprehend the pure Self.

The mind and intellect are constituted of thoughts. The hundred wicked sons of Dhritarashtra

the Kauravas, represent the vicious thoughts and emotions like lust, greed, hatred, anger, envy, pride, vanity etc. The five Pandavas stand for the virtuous thoughts and emotions like love, kindness, sympathy etc. The negative propensities in man generally outnumber his positive propensities. The civil war of Kurukshetra hints at the psychological conflict between these two opposing forces in the human personality. In short, it points to the perpetual war between the higher and lower nature of man.

It is interesting to know that the Pandava army though smaller in number ultimately established its victory over the larger army of the Kauravas. The Pandavas however owed their victory to Lord Krishna. On the battlefield when Arjuna collapsed in a hysterical coma, laid down his bow and arrows and surrendered to Lord Krishna for guidance, the Lord administered the great message of the Bhagavad Geeta in the chariot driven between the two armies. The Geeta revived and recharged the Pandava prince with a higher vision. Consequently Arjuna fought the battle and emerged victorious. The victory symbolises the revival of the spiritual values of Indian culture.

The goal of human evolution is realisation of the Atman, the inner Self. The Atman lies beyond the realms of the good and bad. Good and bad are relative terms, the Atman is absolute. Goodness is gained as a result of virtuous actions which are propelled by pure and noble emotions. Similarly, badness is the result of vicious actions propelled by impure and ignoble emotions. In both cases actions emanate from emotions rather than higher intellectual discrimi

nation. Such actions always create desires or **vasanas** which veil the Atman. For unveiling the Atman, man has to purify his mind and apply his intellect detachedly towards the higher following the guidelines of the Geeta. This idea is well brought out by Arjuna, the purified one, standing in between the armies of the good and the bad and receiving the message of the Geeta from Lord Krishna.

The chariot in which Arjuna rides in the battle is also significant. The chariot idea is taken from the Kathopanishad. Krishna is the charioteer. The chariot and horses represent the human body and its five sense organs. The reins stand for the mind and charioteer for the intellect. The rider is the individual (**jeeva**) or the ego in man. When the charioteer is asleep the reins become loose and the horses go out of control resulting in the destruction of both the chariot and the rider. So too, when man's intellect is not alert the mind loses control over the senses which leads the individual to disaster. The chariot well-controlled by the charioteer therefore represents a self-controlled man who alone can understand and derive the benefit from spiritual instructions.

The Mahabharata therefore is not a mere story of a war fought between two armies. It picturises an everlasting cosmic drama wherein men and women are actors and actresses taking sides in the conflict between right and wrong, between good and evil, justice and injustice and playing their own appointed parts. However the sum and substance of the epic is that man's real friend and enemy are both within him,

not outside. They are his higher spiritual aspirations and his lower sensual desires. The Lord advises man to fight and conquer his great enemy and thus regain his lost glory, the pure Self, the Krishna within.

The Ramayanam

The Ramayanam is a great epic of the Hindus. The epical narrative with its many stories, anecdotes and incidents explains how man has fallen from his supreme state of peace and bliss to his limited existence of sorrow and misery and how he regains his original glory.

As the story goes King Dasaratha lived in Ayodhya with his three queens Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. They lived a life of peace and contentment. Dasaratha means a man who has controlled his ten senses. The three wives represent the three mental qualities or **gunas** namely **sattwa**, **rajas** and **tamas**. To a self-controlled man the three **gunas** are at his service. In contrast a man who has no control over his senses is victimised by his own **gunas**. Lord Rama was born into such a house of self-control, peace and contentment. Sita was married to Rama. Both Rama and Sita lived happily in Dasaratha's palace in Ayodhya. With all the royal comforts and amenities of the palace at her disposal Sita was always single-pointedly devoted to her divine husband. She was ever contented and happy. As days passed by King Dasaratha decided to retire leaving his kingdom to his eldest son Rama to rule. The coronation day was fixed. The entire Ayodhya was revelling in ecstasy. Just on the eve of the coronation Kaikeyi, the stepmother of Rama demanded from Dasaratha that Rama should be

sent away to the jungle for fourteen years and instead her son, Bharata be crowned king. Consequently, Rama left Ayodhya followed by Sita and Lakshmana. in the jungle Sita remained devoted to her Lord Rama. She continued to live with the same contentment and happiness which she enjoyed in the palace, at Ayodhya.

The significance of this portion of the story is that man is ever happy and contented as long as he is attuned to the inner Self. All the sorrows of man are caused by his preoccupation with the external world. Rama represents the Atman, the supreme Self and Sita the ego, the individual.

As long as Sita's attention was on Rama she was ever blissful be it in the luxuries of the palace or the exigencies of the jungle. Similarly if man's attention and interest are upon the inner Self and not the enchantment of the world he would remain ever peaceful and happy whether he be placed in a state of prosperity or penury.

One day Sita saw a beautiful golden deer in the jungle. She was enchanted. She desired to possess it. She pleaded with Rama to capture it for her. Lakshmana warned her that the beautiful deer was a demon (**rakshasa**) in disguise. Sita turned a deaf ear. She insisted on having it. Rama yielded and went after the animal. The deer was in fact a **rakshasa**. It led Rama faraway from their hut. Rama shot it with his arrow. The deer fell and as it was dying it shouted the names of Lakshmana and Sita as if to indicate that Rama was in trouble. Sita heard the cry and bade Lakshmana rush to the scene to help his

brother. Lakshmana again warned her that it was a trick being played on them by the **rakshasa** but Sita would not heed the words of Lakshmana. Lakshmana therefore had to leave her alone in the hut and go. As Lakshmana disappeared into the jungle a mendicant with a begging bowl appeared before Sita. That mendicant was Ravana, the ten-headed **rakshasa** coming in disguise. Ravana carried away Sita to Lanka.

The meaning of this portion is simple. Man is contented and happy as long as his attention and concentration are upon his real Self. The moment he looks out extrovertedly at the sense objects of the world he develops a desire. The golden deer represents the fascinating sense objects like colour and form for the eyes, sound for the ears, taste for the tongue, smell for the nose and touch for the skin. The joys derived from the sense objects are transient, fleeting. They swiftly pass away like the deer. And yet man falls a prey to their golden enchantment and becomes a slave to his own sense organs — the five organs of perception and the five organs of action. He becomes a captive of the ten-headed Ravana as it were.

In Lanka, Sita refused to enter the golden palace of Ravana. She chose to stay away in the garden of the Asoka trees called the **Ashokavanam**. There she remained dissociating with Ravana. Sita was tempted with gifts. She was harrassed with threats but she would not deviate from her unswerving devotion for her Lord Rama. As days passed by her devotion and dedication to Rama were rewarded by the appearance of Hanuman, the messenger of Rama. Hanuman gave

Sita the ring that Rama had sent as a token. Sita was overjoyed and thereafter gained supreme confidence in her re-union with Rama. With the renewed faith and confidence she continued to contemplate upon her Lord until Rama came and liberated her.

This part of the Ramayana symbolises the ways and means of liberation for mankind from his abject slavery to his sense organs, to his sovereign state of Godhood. Sita's refusal to enter Ravana's golden palace and her choice to remain in the **Ashokavanam** signifies the first step that man has to take to rise from his fallen state. Having fallen a prey to the enchantment of the senses man ought not to indulge indiscriminately in sense gratification. He must first withdraw himself from such indulgence and perform austerity (**tapas**) as Sita did. **Tapas** is an intelligent conservation and utilisation of energies towards higher pursuits in life i.e. conserving energies which are dissipated in sensual indulgences and directing such conserved energy to the goal of Self-realisation. When a man practises this he gains a relative peace and contentment which is symbolised by Sita remaining in the **Ashokavanam**. **Shoka** in Sanskrit means grief, **a-shoka** means non-grief. With his consistent efforts towards self-control and contemplation upon the higher truth he gains faith and confidence in his spiritual pursuits. This is symbolised by Rama's ring that Hanuman gives to Sita, which gives her the assurance of Rama's arrival. Hanuman represents that strength and faith born in a spiritual man.

After his meeting with Sita, Hanuman sets fire to the whole of Lanka. He left behind a blazing red city

to warn Ravana of the might and glory of Rama. Lanka represents material splendour. The burning of Lanka indicates that material splendour has no value to one who is spiritually evolved. As man advances spiritually the sense objects of the world no longer allure him. They lose their power of enchantment. They are burnt as it were.

Vibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana pleaded to Ravana to give up his vicious deeds and return Sita to Rama. Ravana was far too proud and lustful to yield to his brother's advice. The three brothers — Vibhishana, Ravana, Kumbhakarna — in fact represent the three **gunas**, the mental qualities of human beings namely **sattwa**, **rajas** and **tamas** respectively. **Sattwa** is the pure and noble quality of the mind **Rajas** is passion and agitation. **Tamas** is dullness and inertia. Vibhishana was ever-poised and pure in nature. Ravana was always riddled with passionate desires and agitations. Kumbhakarna was known for his inertia. He would sleep for months together at a stretch. Vibhishana's appeal to Ravana represents the **sattwic nature** in man directing his passionate nature to the right channels. But rarely indeed does man heed the inner appeal of his **sattwic** nature. Ravana thus rejected Vibhishana's advice and prepared himself and his army for facing Rama in battle. Consequently Vibhishana left Lanka and surrendered to Rama.

On the other side Rama and Lakshmana with the help of Sugreeva and his monkey forces prepared themselves to cross the ocean to conquer Ravana and release Sita from her captivity. The metaphysical explanation to these events is based on the fundamental relation-

ship between a monkey and a thought. A 'monkey' and 'thought' are identical in some respects. The monkey forces represent the human mind. A monkey like the human thought has two distinct qualities namely **asthira** and **chanchala**. Both these words mean unstable. **Sthira** means being firm at one place. **Asthira** is not being firm i.e. moving from one place to another. **Chanchala** is movement of the body while it is stationary in one place. A monkey is **asthira** in the sense that it cannot remain in one place. It keeps jumping about all the time. That is the nature of a monkey. Even if it is tied up in one place a monkey keeps fidgeting all the time indicating its **chanchala** nature. The human mind has these two qualities as well. It keeps on jumping from thought to thought. When it is given a fixed point of contemplation even then it slips into other thoughts.

These monkeys were under the suzerainty of Vali (lusty king) who usurped the kingdom of his brother Sugreeva (the virtuous king). Rama destroyed Vali and made Sugreeva the king of the monkey forces. This is the first step that Rama had to take to win back Sita, to destroy evil and substitute virtue in its place. The mind at present is under the governance of lust and greed. In order to gain one's spiritual nature the initial step to be taken is to divert the mind from lust and greed to self-control and sacrifice. A mind so prepared must surrender itself to the supreme and put forth all its efforts to attain liberation. When man makes a concerted effort with consistency of purpose, help is showered from all sides. The ocean of delusion, the sea of likes and dislikes is crossed over. The ego with ten sense organs (Ravana) is destroyed. The

individual regains his lost Self. Sita unites once again with Rama.

The battle was won and Sita was brought before Rama. She passed through the test of purity by literally going through fire. She was unscathed. Rama accepted her wholeheartedly. After the union, Rama and Sita ruled over Ayodhya. It was a glorious reign — Ramarajya. This last portion signifies that an individual must be cleansed of all his **vasanas** and desires before the dawn of Realisation. When this is accomplished man gains the ultimate realisation of the Self. He lives a life of absolute peace and bliss.

The four Ashramas

There are four distinct stages in man's life according to the Indian tradition. They are the following four ashramas.

1. **Brahmacharya** (celibacy)
2. **Grahasta** (household)
3. **Vanaprastha** (recluse)
4. **Sanyasa** (mendicancy)

The four **ashramas** correspond to these four stages of life.

Brahmacharyashrama is the early period of life when the young boy is initiated in the study of the scriptures. The religious master (**guru**) takes him as a full-time disciple and personally imparts the sacred knowledge of Vedanta to him. The **brahmachari** (celibate) observes the vow of celibacy and takes in the knowledge in a spirit of surrender and worship. The

initiation is usually done between the age of six and eight years and the training imparted for about 12 years. When the boy returns after completing his studies (called **samavarthanam**) he is fully charged with spiritual knowledge. He is well-equipped to face any situation or challenge of life and work himself up to realisation of his supreme Self.

The **brahmachari** goes through the initiation or **upanayana** ceremony when his intellect matures. That is the time when he is able to think independently. The parents of the boy conduct this ceremony in their home. The hair on the boy's head is shaven off leaving a small tuft at the back. The sacred thread consisting of three white cotton strands is put around his neck and waist like a cross belt. The verse from a hymn of the Rigveda called **Gayatri mantra** is whispered in his ear. Soon after the ceremony is over the boy is sent to the **gurukula** (guru's residence) for spiritual education. The word '**upanayana**' literally means 'bringing near' (**upa** = near, **nayanam** = bringing). The ceremony is meant to bring the disciple near the master both physically and spiritually. The disciple is guided carefully and taken gradually to the highest spiritual awakening in which his **guru** revels.

The shaving of the head indicates the removal of desires. When the disciple approaches the teacher he is expected to leave behind all material and sensual desires and bring with him only a few spiritual desires. They are desires to serve the master, learn from him, apply his teachings to his own life and realise his supreme Self. The hair that is removed represents the material and spiritual desires while the tuft left behind

symbolises a few spiritual desires that he needs to carry to his master for his ultimate realisation.

The tying of the two ends of the sacred thread around his neck and waist signifies the boy's determination to unite his finite personality to the infinite Self that he really is. The three strands of cotton comprising the sacred thread may be taken as representing the **sattwic**, **rajasic** and **tamasic gunas** which are the three states of mind that every man is composed of, or they could be taken as the waking, dream and deep sleep which are the three states of consciousness that man goes through. The determination of the student indicated here is his commitment to transcending these three states of the mind or the three states of consciousness and reaching the fourth state called **turiya** in Sanskrit which is his supreme state of Realisation.

The second stage of life is that of the **grahast-ashrama**. The **grahasti** (householder) leads his life with his wife and children performing his obligatory duties. He fulfils his sacramental rites to ancestors and gods in submission to the spiritual authority of the **brahmins**. The husband and wife live a normal marital life — disciplined, never indulgent. Both of them find a beautiful opportunity to live a life based on "giving rather than taking" and learn to love, to serve, to sacrifice. In short, married life is an ideal field for one to develop the noble qualities necessary to lead a true religious life.

Having imbibed such qualities through a disciplined life the **grahasti** enters the third stage called **vanaprashthashrama**. In this stage the married man

continues his companionship with his family members but develops more mental abstinence and detachment. The **vanaprasthi** (recluse) gains greater spiritual maturity. He practises the art of living in a spirit of dis-
possession amidst his possessions. He maintains a sense of detachment in all his transactions of life. With the coming of age of his sons he even renounces worldly possessions and family life and retires to solitude for contemplation and meditation.

The last stage of life is the **sanyasashrama**. The **sanyasi** (mendicant) is a homeless beggar-saint. He renounces the world and fully attunes himself to the pure Consciousness within him. He wears an ochre-coloured robe. Ochre is the colour of fire. His ochre robes are therefore meant to indicate that his body is burnt away and he has no right to claim anything from society. He wants nothing from the world. His life is dedicated to giving, to service, to sacrifice for the betterment of humanity.

Even though there are the above four stages of life man need not mechanically go through all the stages. Some men may be qualified to skip over the stage of a householder if they have no **vasanas** or tendencies to go through marital experience. Others may lead a true life of a **sanyasi** without having to go through a ritual of taking ochre robes of a **sanyasi**. In other words, the four categories enumerated above are only meant to picturise the different stages of development of a normal human being and the necessary training needed at each stage to escalate him to the realisation of the Self.

Yagna

Yagna is one of the oldest rituals of India, a respected tradition coming from the Vedic period. It is still observed in all parts of India particularly among the orthodox Hindus. It has a deep philosophical significance which is hardly known to the worshippers. The Hindus perform the ritual religiously more out of belief than understanding.

The ritual is based mainly on worship offered through fire. A mud or brick wall trough called **kund** is first prepared. Firewood is placed in the **kund** and lit by the Hindu priest. The priests sit around the fire and chant prayers. A large congregation assembles for the ritual. They bring grains from their homes and deposit them in the corner of the hall where the ritual is performed. As the priests chant the prayers each member of the congregation takes a handful of grains from the stock collected and offers it to the fire with a prayer. (Ghee, clarified butter is also used as an offering). Thus one by one all the participants offer the entire grains to the Lord of fire. When the grains are offered to the fire in the **kund** the flames shoot up. That is considered as a sign of blessing bestowed by the Lord upon the participants. When all the grains are burnt away along with the fuel the ash is distributed as **prasad** (gift) to everyone. The participants of the ritual smear the ash on the forehead in three stripes

and visit the nearest temple. That concludes the entire ritual which is called **yagna**.

Fire is worshipped in most rituals. In Hinduism worship of the Lord of fire (Agni) is of great significance. The reason for fire being the symbol of worship is by virtue of it being first of the five elements which is seen. The five elements namely space, air, fire, water and earth (in the order of grossness) constitute the entire world which is perceptible, conceivable. The Reality which transcends the world cannot be directly perceived, conceived. Therefore it becomes necessary to choose a symbol from the world. Since the world is constituted of the five elements the choice of the symbol is limited to these five. Since fire is the first to be seen it has been chosen as the appropriate symbol of the unseen. Another reason for the choice is perhaps the comforting nature of fire in the cold northern part of India where the idea originated. It was easier to associate fire with Atman (Reality) because of its benevolent and beneficial character.

The entire yagna symbolises worship for active as well as contemplative persons. The same ritual explains how the activities of a man of action and a man of contemplation can be converted into worship in their respective fields.

A man of action is one who has many **vasanas** or desires. He needs to get rid of them to purify his inner personality and unveil his real Self. This can be achieved by working in his field of activity without ego and egocentric desires in a spirit of surrender to a higher altar. Human activities these days are selfish

and egocentric. Such activities produce more **vasanas**, more desires, more agitations in an individual. To render them more spiritual one has to direct the activities to a higher cause, a common purpose, a nobler ideal and work selflessly without looking for the fruits thereof. Then the actions are blessed with material success and mental peace.

The **kund** represents any field of activity in this world. The offering of grains to the **kund** symbolises the offering of each one's faculties in one's field of activity. Each one performs one's activity in a spirit of surrender to a higher cause instead of entertaining a selfish motive. This attitude converts selfish action into a spiritual action. The result is that his **vasanas** and desires are destroyed and that is indicated by the consummation of the fuel in the **kund**. **Vasanas** or desires are of three distinct types namely **sattwic**, **rajasic** and **tamasic**. The smearing of the ash on the forehead is meant to declare that the individual has transcended all the three types of **vasanas**. Entering the temple thereafter signifies that he has merged with the god-consciousness. He has realised the supreme Self.

The same ritual also symbolises how a man of contemplation worships in this world. A man of contemplation is spiritually more advanced than a man of action by virtue of a reduction of **vasanas** or desires. When desires are reduced man becomes less active, more contemplative. In other words, his organs of action (**karmendriyas**) do not function as much as his organs of perception (**gnanendriyas**). Owing to the lack of desires his reactions and res-

ponses to the external stimuli are reduced to the minimum. He merely perceives the world. The **yagna** explains how such a person can convert his mere perceptions into spiritual practice. How an introverted person can worship through perceptions alone. The **kund** in this case represents his physical body. The fire element in the **kund** stands for the supreme Self. The **pundits** sitting around the fire represent his sense organs. When the stimuli from the external world like colour and form for the eyes, sound for the ears, taste for the tongue, smell for the nose and touch for the skin reach him he sees, hears, tastes, smells and feels respectively. In being conscious of various perceptions his mind is directed to the presence of the pure Consciousness (Atman) within him. In every perception he becomes aware of the Consciousness which is responsible for his perceptions. Stimuli are like **ahuti** (offerings) and perceptions are like the flames glowing. Thus every perception becomes a worship. Worship is a full-time awareness of the Reality not a part-time ritual. The **yagna** should go on all the time through action and perception. That alone will take you to Godhood.

Temple

India is a land of temples. The Hindu temple is a house of worship like any other but it has certain unique features which elevate it to great spiritual merit and recognition. The orthodox Hindu temple is symbolically designed. Its location, construction and rituals are of special significance. They are all designed to indicate the path that man has to take to evolve himself spiritually and reach the goal of Self-realisation.

The main temples in India are situated on the top of the hills. The paths to these temples were narrow and rugged. The pilgrims had to walk up the hill single file. They had to brave the many exigencies and difficulties of the jungle path before they could reach the shrine. They carried with them fruits and flowers to offer to the Lord in the temple. All these are significant.

The location of the temple at a high altitude signifies that spiritual evolution is above all mundane achievements in this world and to gain spiritual perfection one needs to put in a great deal of self-effort. The seeker has to be single-pointed and consistent in his efforts and overcome the many temptations and challenges that confront him in his spiritual path. The single file foot path to the temples indicates that the

seeker of truth is all alone in his spiritual pursuit. He cannot share it with anyone. He may seek the help of his **guru** and other associates but ultimately he has to proceed all by himself in his journey to truth.

Today there are broad asphalted roads and fast transport systems to reach the same temples. People visit them in groups making a picnic out of a pilgrimage. The purpose of the age-old spiritual practice has been lost.

Fruit is taken by a spiritual seeker and offered to the temple or his **guru**. The priest in the temple or guru receives it from the seeker. In such long journeys the ideal fruit that would stay fresh without decaying is the coconut.

A fruit is the product of a tree. It is the result, the effect produced. Similarly, the result or product of all past activities (**karmas**) of man is his present **vasanas** or desires. When **vasanas** or desires are removed from a person he gains his godhood.

Man minus **vasanas** (desires) = God.

Both fruit and **vasanas** are similar in the sense that they are end products. A fruit is chosen to represent the **vasanas** or desires of man. When a devotee offers a fruit to the Lord it signifies offering of his **vasanas** or desires and thereby unfolding his inner Self. His visit to the temple therefore symbolises exhaustion of his **vasanas** and desires and realisation of his Self.

The coconut is the most popular offering in the

temples of India. Besides the fact that the coconut stays fresh for many days its choice for the offering has a deeper significance. The coconut has a smooth skin on the outside while its inside is all coarse, knotted up with coir. The coir grows out of the hard shell. Within the hard shell is the kernel. The seeker removes the coir from the shell leaving a small tuft on one side and offers the full coconut to the priest. The priest breaks the shell and tears the tuft of coir away exposing three black spots on the shell. The pure white kernel is then exposed. The prayers are chanted and the coconut is offered to the deity.

The smooth outer skin of the coconut represents man's gross physical body. Within the gross body is the subtle body consisting of desires and attachments. The coir matted together represents man's entanglement with desires and attachments in this world. These desires and attachments arise from his causal body which again is represented by the hard shell.

When a seeker goes to a temple or **guru** he leaves all his worldly desires and attachments except those that are necessary for his spiritual evolution. These few desires left in him solely for his spiritual pursuit are symbolised by the small tuft of coir. The removal of the tuft means the exhaustion of the last traces of desires in the seeker. The breaking of the shell is the transcendence of the causal body and the exposure of the kernel is realisation of the supreme Self.

The flowers offered in a temple also represent **vasanas**. Each flower is a **vasana**. The ritual of

flower offerings is to be done in a particular way. The devotee uses the five fingers of the right hand to pick up a flower gently, then turns the fingers with the flower upwards and softly offers the flower at the Lord's feet. This ritual is performed repeatedly until all the flowers are offered. The Lord's feet represent the supreme Reality. Feet are the substratum upon which the personality rests. They represent the foundation of one's personality. That foundation is the Reality. So offering the flowers signify giving up your **vasanas** or desires and merging with the Reality. This is indicated by the ritual. The five fingers are directed towards the ground to pick up a flower. The fingers represent the five senses. When man's five senses are drawn towards the mundane world they pick up a **vasana**. But when the senses are directed towards the higher Self, represented by the fingers turning upwards the **vasanas** get eliminated. When this practice is maintained consistently all the **vasanas** get exhausted and man becomes one with God.

The devotee prostrates himself before his **guru** or in the temple. He lies flat on his stomach with arms stretched over his head and his palms together. His head (intellect) and his heart (mind) are in line with the Lord's feet (Reality). This signifies that his entire personality has merged with God.

Again the very construction of the temple indicates the path to Self-realisation. The idol is in the sanctum sanctorum, a dark room where there is a small oil lamp burning perpetually. Around the sanctum sanctorum is a closed passage on all four sides.

Outside this is a wider passage with the roof covered. Beyond the walls of this is a still broader passage without a roof over it. The entrance to the temple leads to this wide open passage. Thus there are three passages enveloping the shrine. The three passages leading to the sanctum sanctorum refer to the gross, subtle and causal bodies of man. Within his three bodies lies the supreme Self which is unknown (dark) to him. If man wants to reach his inner Self he must cross the limitations of his gross, subtle and causal bodies and seek within. The outermost passage of the temple which is open to the sky indicates the gross body which deals with the outer world. Man identifies himself with his gross body and gets involved in the external world. To regain his spiritual Self he must first rise above worldly entanglements and delve deeper into his personality. When he does that he enters the realm of his subtle body consisting of his desires and thoughts. That is indicated by the devotee moving to the next passage in the temple with the closed roof. Remaining there again is spiritual stagnation. He must rise above desires and thoughts and move on to the next passage, the causal body, and transcend it. The causal body is his **vasanas** which is the seat of ignorance. He must get rid of his **vasanas** through spiritual knowledge before he can come in contact with his real Self, the Atman represented by the shrine.

The devotee reaches the sanctum sanctorum. It is all dark. The idol is not seen. The oil lamp burning indicates that the Atman is the everlasting light of wisdom. Man can use it at any time to destroy his ignorance and regain the knowledge of his Self.

The priest lights a piece of camphor from this oil lamp and shows it to the idol. As the camphor burns the smoke escapes and the image brightens. The devotee has his **darshana** — vision of the Lord.

The burning of the camphor is again significant. Camphor is in a solid form. But when a pure sample of camphor is left exposed for a period of time it sublimates into mere fragrance leaving no solid substance behind. It is most aptly suited to represent the human personality. For man is nothing but his **vasanas** in a substantial form. **Vasanas** themselves are the insubstantial, inconceivable, inexpressible essence of the human personality. They determine the individual nature. They give out his personal fragrance as it were. When **vasanas** are eliminated what remains is his pure Self, the Atman.

Atman plus **vasanas** = man.

Man minus **vasanas** = Atman.

This is achieved by taking the light of wisdom from the altar of the Self. When **vasanas** (ignorance) are destroyed by knowledge, the ego vanishes and man realises his supreme Self.

Prasada (gift of food) is distributed after the **darshana** (vision of the Lord). **Prasada** in Sanskrit literally means calmness, equanimity. The distribution of **prasada** therefore signifies the attainment of the supreme bliss of Realisation, the bliss of the Self that man gains when he transcends the limitations of his gross, subtle and causal bodies.

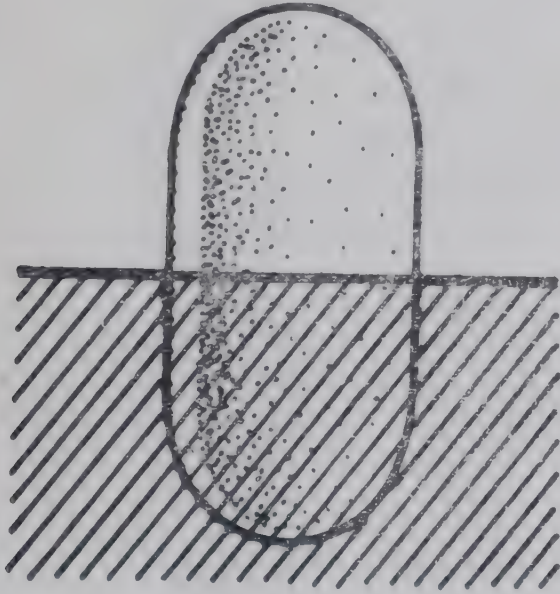
Siva Linga

The infinite Reality is beyond the reach of the finite equipments of man. Reality cannot be experienced through direct perception (**pratyaksha**). The scriptures therefore rely mainly on two sources of knowledge namely inference (**anumanam**) and comparison (**upama**) for expressing the inexpressible Reality. Siva Linga is one such indirect means of communicating the Reality.

Linga in Sanskrit means symbol. Siva Linga is a symbol of Siva. Siva in this context refers to the infinite Reality. Symbolism is an art of representing thoughts and ideas, objectives and ideals etc. through the medium of signs or symbols. Symbolism is not a science to be investigated. A symbol merely takes one to the thing symbolised by virtue of some similarity between the two. Hindu symbolism explains the Truth of religion and philosophy through idols and forms, signs and stories. All Hindu symbols have spiritual significance relating to life. The study of symbolism lies in proper and faithful interpretations of the relationship which exists between the Reality and the form symbolising the Reality.

The Dravidians originated the Siva Linga as a symbol of the supreme Reality. The Narbada river contained marble-like stones shaped beautifully in the form of an ellipsoid by the running waters. An ellip

soid is shaped like an elongated sphere having two foci instead of one as in the case of a sphere. The ellipsoid represents **Siva-sakti**. The two foci of the ellipsoid correspond to the two aspects of the Reality viz. **Siva** the immanent and **sakti** the manifest.



The Siva Linga ellipsoid is fixed in such a way that one half of it lies embedded in the earth while the other half remains outside the surface. The upper half that appears above the surface represents the seen, visible manifest world of plurality (**sakti**). The lower half under the surface is the unseen invisible substratum, the supporter of the upper half. That rightly represents the unmanifest supreme Reality (**Siva**). The properties of the ellipsoid are ideally suited for symbolising the two aspects of the Reality — the unmanifest and manifest.

A cross-section of the ellipsoid cut along its axis is an ellipse whereas its cross-section cut at right

angles to its axis is a circle. The ellipsoid thus is a combination of ellipses and circles. The circle represents the Supreme Reality. A circle has no beginning or end. The Reality also has no beginning or end. One part of an ellipsoid namely the circle therefore represents the unmanifest Reality. The other part which is the ellipse represents the manifest universe. The entire universe consisting of an atom right upto the solar system is in a way related to the ellipse. The solar system consists of the sun with the planets revolving around it. The motion of each planet around the sun describes an ellipse. Strikingly similar is the motion of the electrons around the nucleus in an atom. The orbits described by the movements of the electrons are also ellipses. Hence the other aspect of the ellipsoid namely the ellipse is most suited to represent the universe.

Another interesting reference to the Siva Linga is that it represents the phallus. This has provoked criticism both from the West and the East. The critics feel that this idea has reduced the Hindu ritual and worship to absurdity. Whether the **linga** was originally meant to represent the phallus is difficult to establish authoritatively. Nevertheless a subtle inner meaning could be read in the seemingly absurd symbolism.

Lord Siva represents the power of destruction while Lord Brahma and Vishnu represent the power of creation and maintenance respectively. These three powers are the manifestation of the supreme Reality in this world. In fact, these three powers are inseparable. In other words, they are only three facets of

the same power. There can be no creation without destruction neither can there be destruction without creation. For example, when the morning is dead noon is born, when noon is dead evening is born, when evening is dead night is born and so on. In this chain of births and deaths, creation and destruction, the day is maintained. Thus the third power namely the power of maintenance also is ingrained in the other two powers of creation and destruction. To indicate this inseparable nature of creation and destruction Siva the Lord of destruction has been represented by the organ of procreation.

Secondly, the ancient thinkers by introducing this sex symbol have ingeniously divinised sex and thereby purified the minds of men. The same principle has been observed in several ancient temples where there are stone carvings of sexual acts particularly near the shrine. These carvings have also been subject to much criticism. The orthodox devotees are confused but have accepted them generally through blind faith. Few have really enquired into the meaning and purpose of such sensual display right in front of the sanctum sanctorum. The carvings serve a distinct purpose. The wise men of ancient India have effectively used them to educate the human mind to divinise the very concept of sex. When the parents went to the temples they took the children along with them. As they approached the sanctum sanctorum the bells were ringing, the incense burning, the camphor was lit and the chanting of the prayers was pitched upto the highest devotion. At that time the children, immature as they were, strolled around looking at the different sculptures. They noticed the

sensual carvings but could not understand what they meant. But they remembered them because of repeated observations. It is interesting to note the psychological reaction that this experience produced in the minds of these children. The sensual presentation and the devotional ecstasy at the sanctum sanctorum always went together. A sort of synchronisation developed between the two. When the same children grew up and had marital sex they were automatically reminded of the Divinity that was associated with it. Their sexual experiences were naturally divinised. Thus because of the ingenious plan of the ancient masters was developed a healthy attitude towards what is condemned by many as sensual and base.

The same principle may be applied to the Siva Linga to meet the criticism of immature minds.

The Bull and the Cow

The Hindus consider the bull and the cow as sacred. This has a significance. The worship of these animals means worshipping the principle of sacrifice and service which they represent so that the worshippers could imbibe this great principle into their own living. Today the basis of worship is lost, the principle of sacrifice and service hardly practised by anyone although the orthodox Hindus hold on to these animals fanatically.

The bull is called Nandi. A stone carving of the Nandi is seen in the Siva temple outside the sanctum sanctorum with its head turned towards the shrine. The idol and its positioning carry a meaning. India being basically an agricultural country the bull plays a very important role in the lives of people. Even after the innovation of the tractors in the agricultural fields the bull is indispensable. Besides its utility in the agricultural fields the bull also epitomises the very culture of India. It demonstrates a great principle of living. The bull toils the whole day in the hot sun for cultivating the fields for producing grains throughout the length and breadth of India. In return for its hard labour it gets only some dry grass and water for its sustenance. It seems to function on the principle "Maximum work with minimum profit." There is no ego or egocentric desires polluting its work. No

karttritwa bhavana (I am the doer) or **bhoktritwa bhavana** (I am the enjoyer) attitude at all. Its activities are not driven by any desires. Neither does it crave for the fruits of its actions. It merely plays its role without worries of the past and anxieties of the future. It does just what it ought to do in life. That is the highest principle of action, the best code of living. The ancient Hindus recognised this lofty principle in the life of a bull. They tried to emulate it in all their activities. They invoked the sacrificial spirit of the bull in their own lives. They worshipped the bull.

The head of the bull is turned towards the shrine in the temple. This indicates that the bull's actions are dedicated to god, an absence of ego and egocentric desires. By worshipping the bull the Hindu invokes its spirit of dedication to higher values and service to fellow-beings. That is the spirit of **karma yoga**.

Lord Krishna refers to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Geeta as a **Bharatarishabha**. It literally means 'bull among the **bharatas**'. Today people all over the world seem to follow the principle of "minimum work and maximum profit". There is a need to change the basic attitude towards work, to imbibe the spirit of sacrifice and service, to graft the principle of "maximum work and minimum profit" in their day-to-day living. To be a bull in the society! That is the advice given by Krishna.

The cow is also considered a sacred animal revered and worshipped by the Hindus. Here again

you find in the cow a spirit of true sacrifice and service. The cow also follows the great principle of life based on the attitude of giving. It gives wholesome milk to the society. Milk is a universal food consumed by one and all, the new-born, the child, the youth, the middle-aged man and the old man, the invalid and healthy, the American and the Indian, the Chinese and the Japanese — all drink milk. The cow gives something valuable to the society and takes hardly anything in return.

The cow worshippers are only trying to imbibe this great quality — the attitude of 'giving' into their own lives. If the attitude of 'taking' prevails in a society its members develop selfish demands and desires. Consequently there is struggle, stress and strain in that society. Let their attitude change to giving, their demands and desires drop their selfishness. Harmony, peace and happiness reign in that very same society. The dignity of the human race is founded on the principle of giving. Victor Hugo summarizes an ideal life in one simple sentence "Life is to give, not to take". The ancient Hindus tried to instil this high principle in their own lives. For this reason the cow was considered sacred. Unfortunately this principle was lost and people worshipped the bodies of the cow fanatically.

Now with a fuller understanding of the lofty principles for which the cow and the bull lived the modern man can not only better his life but present these truths to humanity for a better living.

Tilaka and Namaskara

Tilaka is the mark of red powder or sandalwood paste that is applied on the forehead. It is used by the Hindus. It has become practically a symbol of Hinduism.

To a Hindu the daily bath carries a lot of sanctity. It is a part of his prayer and worship. Immediately after bath the Hindu performs his daily prayer usually in his temple or in his own house. After his prayer is over he takes a little red or sandal powder placed at the feet of the Lord and applies it to his forehead. The ladies usually make a round mark and that is called **tilaka**. Men are more accustomed to use it in the form of a straight line. Whatever way these marks are made the Hindu retains it throughout the day.

This practice has a significance. The Hindu believes that the purpose of life is to realise the Infinite Reality. This is achieved by reflection and contemplation which he practises in his prayer-room. But he cannot continue his prayer all day long since his duties and obligations compel him to go into the world and work. He therefore leaves his prayer room with the idea of coming back to it after fulfilling his obligations. While leaving he takes a little powder from the Lord and applies it to his forehead with an idea to remember that all his actions in the external

world are dedicated to the achievement of this supreme goal of Realisation. The forehead is the seat of memory. Applying the **tilaka** on the forehead symbolises the retention of the memory of the Lord in all his activities. That is to remember, to reflect and contemplate upon the Reality in and through his activities throughout the day.

When a Hindu meets another Hindu the first thing that strikes them both is the mark on the forehead. It constantly reminds each other of the purpose of their existence, their dedication to the realisation of the supreme Reality. They confirm this understanding by greeting each other with folded arms. This gesture is called **namaskara**. The gesture of **namaskara** is to join the two palms together in front of him and bow his head to the joint palms.

Each palm represents the separate individuality. Each palm supports the five fingers. Similarly, each personality has the five sheaths called the five **koshas**. The five different parts of the personality are called **pancha-koshas** literally meaning the five sheaths. They are the food sheath (**annamaya-kosha**), vital-air sheath (**pranamaya-kosha**), mental sheath (**manomaya kosha**), intellectual sheath (**vignanamaya kosha**) and bliss sheath (**anandamaya kosha**). These five sheaths are supported by the Atman, the supreme Self which is the eternal Reality. The five sheaths are different from individual to individual but the Reality that supports them all is one and the same in all individualities. This truth is declared when the Hindus greet each other with **namaskara**. The two palms joined

together as one indicates that the Reality or Atman in both are one and the same. To this unifying Infinite Atman the Hindu bows in reverence when he does **namaskara**.

Festivals

DIVALI OR DEEPAVALI

India is a land of festivals. Divali is the festival of lights, a festival of the Hindus traced back to ancient times. It is the most gorgeous festival celebrated all over the country.

'Divali' is derived from 'Deepavali' meaning 'a cluster of lights'. The celebration of Divali is marked by illumination everywhere. Rows and rows of small earthenware lamps are seen in every town and village. Divali is also known for fireworks which go on practically the whole night. In every house the children and even the elders light fire crackers. That night sounds like a battle field everywhere.

Early next morning before sunrise every member of the family takes the holy bath and wears new clothes. From the poorest to the richest Indian wearing new clothes is an established ritual. Thereafter all of them visit relatives and friends where gifts are exchanged and sweets consumed with much gaiety.

Divali, or more correctly Deepavali is a joyous celebration of the death of the Titan of hell, Naraka sura at the hands of Lord Krishna. Narakasura, the son of the earth as he was known, was all-powerful. He was an intolerable menace to the gods, sages and

all men of piety. He looted and plundered not only the earth but heaven as well. He carried away 16,000 fair daughters of the gods and imprisoned them in his harem. The gods led by Indra approached Lord Krishna and supplicated the Lord to destroy the demon. Krishna readily agreed. He fought a fierce battle. After destroying thousands of demons Krishna slew Narakasura. Thereafter he rescued the imprisoned damsels and at their earnest prayers took them as his wives.

This festival, like all other festivals and rituals, explains the inner personality of man and his deliverance from his ignorance and ego to attainment of his supreme nature of God-realisation. The darkness of the night represents man's total ignorance of his Self, ignorance of his godhood. In that darkness reigns the desire-ridden ego which destroys peace and brings about sorrow and misery in the bosom of man. The 16,000 damsels represent the desires that arise in an egoistic man. Desires dwell in ignorance under the control of the ego. All these desires cannot find fulfilment in this limited world. They remain frustrated. Thus man is driven to a state of sorrow and suffering by his own negative tendencies.

To pull himself out of this state man has to employ his positive tendencies to direct his attention to the higher **S**elf. Every man has within him both positive and negative tendencies. They have been represented in almost all religions as gods and demons respectively. The gods' approach of Krishna for help signifies man's positive tendencies reaching the Self. When man turns introvert and seeks the inner Self his

negative tendencies get destroyed one by one. His desires get annihilated. This is represented by the fireworks on the night of Divali. The battle with the ego, the fight with the negative tendencies, the destruction of the desires go on the whole night, that is as long as ignorance lasts. With the rising of the sun all darkness is dispelled, all ignorance removed, all desires destroyed. Ego, the Narakasura, is killed. Man is transformed to his original godhead.

The bath at dawn of Divali indicates the cleansing of the egoborn, egocentric desires. The new clothes signify the newly acquired godhood. That transformation brings about gaiety, joy, bliss represented by eating sweets and merry-making. The visiting of relatives and friends the next morning carries this new vision, the vision of divinity, the vision of the supreme Self in one and all.

DUSSEHRA VIJAYADASHAMI

Dussehra is another popular festival of India. The festival lasts for ten days beginning on the first day of the Hindu month of Ashwin (September/October). It is celebrated in various ways all over the country. It is observed as Durga puja, as Vijayadasami celebrating the victory of Lord Rama over Ravana, as Navaratri or the festival of nine nights.

The goddess Durga was created by the three gods — Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara — for destroying the **dasyus** or demons. The demons sent their most powerful representative Mahishasura in the form of a buffalo to fight Durga. The goddess fought with this great demon and killed him. The buffalo represents the lower animal instincts in man in an aggressive form. The goddess represents the higher, nobler tendencies also in an aggressive form — the form of Durga.

Man is a mere expression of his inner nature. Man's inner nature falls under two broad classifications. You may call them the aggressive and the passive. Again each of these is of two types depending on their qualities of goodness or badness. Thus there are four distinct natures covering the entire range of inner personalities of human beings.

A passive man is one who functions according to the fancies of his mind without the intervention of his intellect. He follows a routine, mechanical, traditional pattern of life. His actions emanate from his feelings and emotions rather than his discrimination. He does not question the merit or demerit of his actions. He lives blindly the life set by his predecessors and ancestors. Environment and circumstances shape his individuality instead of his individuality shaping them. In short, he lives an unintelligent dogged life of passive acceptance of whatever he encounters in the world. He has neither the initiative nor the enthusiasm to utilise his resources intelligently for a more meaningful and purposeful life.

Passivity in man may lean towards good or bad. A passively bad man is one who is involved in wrong, immoral activities but does not intend to be so. He does not wilfully and cunningly plan or scheme activities to meet his private ends. He does not mean to be bad. He merely continues a wrong way of life usually inherited from his past. His intellect does not consciously analyse and supervise his activities or their repercussions. He is caught up in a mode of living which happens to be bad. So it is with a passively good man. A passively good man is involved in a way of life which happens to be moral and benevolent. He may not realise his activities to be good. He merely executes his good impulses. He does not intend to be virtuous. A passively good man also does not intellectually analyse and supervise his activities or their consequences. Such unintelligent benevolence at times proves detrimental to his community and himself.

The aggressive nature of man's personality is distinct and different from his passivity. Contrary to the passively bad, an aggressively bad man is one who intends to be bad. He wilfully and viciously plans and schemes, manipulates and manoeuvres corrupt and immoral ways of life for meeting his own selfish ends. He has no scruples to follow. He breaks customs, tradition, rules and regulations to get things done to satisfy his ego and egocentric desires. The aggressive are more powerful; they dominate over the passive good and bad. The simple reason for their superiority is that they employ their intellect whereas the passive use only their mind in their activities.

An aggressively good person is one whose basic

nature is good. He also uses his power of discrimination all the time to decide the type of activities that he executes. He does not act impulsively. He studies facts, foresees consequences, reasons carefully and acts in the best interests of all. At times the actions of the aggressively good may appear prima facie bad but they are benevolent to the core. They may be 'cruel only to be kind'. Even a single aggressively good person present in a community can bring about peace, prosperity and happiness to all its people.

The proportion of passive individuals in any society far exceeds the aggressive. Most human beings are content to lead a routine stereo-typed life. They do not care to exert and strive to achieve anything beyond a mechanical existence. The aggressive ones who utilise their superior power of reason and reflection are fewer in number. Even among the aggressive the percentage of the good is small.

The law pertaining to the inner personalities of human beings holds good universally. The layman is not even aware of its existence, much less does he understand how it functions. Consequently he does not make use of the law in practical living. He becomes frustrated in life. He complains bitterly that the world is polluted, that honesty does not pay in these days. Why do the good and honest have to suffer at the hands of the bad and dishonest? — that is his question. The problem is easily answered in light of the above analysis of human nature. The vast majority of human beings are passive. The aggressive bad prey on the passive good and bad. They intelli-

gently calculate and manipulate things to benefit themselves at the expense of others. The passive ones are naturally the victims of such vicious practices. The passive continue to be passive. They merely mumble and grumble at the success of the aggressive. The only solution to the problem is for them to shed their inertia and operate with their intellects. They must appreciate the working of the law of human nature. Remaining in their mental and emotional plane they cannot combat those who operate from a higher level of human personality. They must employ their available intellectual faculties and seek, if necessary, intellectual guidance from others to meet the viciousness of the aggressive bad. Thus the passive have to turn into aggressive goodness to be able to fight and conquer the aggressive bad elements in society. There is no other way to do it.

A classic example of passive goodness is depicted in the character of Yuddhistra, the eldest brother of the Pandava princes in the epic Mahabharata. Yuddhistra was an embodiment of goodness. But his goodness rose largely from his emotional personality. Consequently his brothers, wife and he suffered untold humiliation and excruciation at the hands of his royal cousin, the Kaurava prince Duryodhana. Duryodhana was a perfect specimen of aggressive badness. He schemed and planned the destruction of his passively good cousins. In this context the epic shows how aggressive goodness, the supreme of all human natures, combats and wins over aggressive badness. Lord Krishna was a picture of aggressive goodness. Krishna employed his goodness intelligently to destroy the

aggressively bad Kauvaras and relieved the suffering of the Pandavas. Thus even a single aggressively good individual can resurrect the righteousness of a country lost to the evil doings of the aggressive bad.

The victory of Durga is the triumph of the aggressive good over evil, the destruction of *vasanas*/desires and realisation of the divine Self.

Even Rama is said to have performed Durga-puja and invoked the blessings of the goddess before he left for Lanka to fight Ravana. Rama killed Ravana and regained Sita. This story again represents the destruction of evil (Ravana) and the reunion with the supreme Self (Rama).

The nine days' worship is divided into three days worship for each of the three goddesses — Durga the goddess of protection and valour, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. The tenth day, Vijayadashami, is the day of victory when huge effigies of the demon Ravana are burnt with fireworks. This is followed by feasting, entertainment and rejoicing.

The effigies represent the ego. The fireworks is the battle with the ego. When the **vasanas** are all destroyed, the Self, the Atman is realised. The worship of Durga for the first three days of the festival signifies the destruction of negative tendencies or **vasanas** inherent in man like jealousy, greed, passion etc. The next three days' worship of Lakshmi signifies the establishment of positive tendencies like affection, charity, forgiveness, etc. The last three days dedicated to

Saraswati is the gaining of knowledge of the supreme Self. Three days are allotted to each Goddess to indicate the discipline and training to be practised at the three levels of personality namely physical, mental and intellectual to achieve the goal set for each type of worship. The nine days of spiritual discipline and training are only symbolical. It is not to be considered as the time required for a man to achieve spiritual unfoldment. The tenth day — Vijayadashami — represents the day of enlightenment when all **vasanas** are destroyed and the knowledge of the Self has dawned in the individual. The individual is said to have attained God-realisation.

PART III

Invocation and Prayer

The Symbol (OM)

ॐ (pronounced as Om) is a symbol of the supreme Brahman. Om is an 'idol' representing the divine ideal. It is considered the most powerful word-symbol used for meditation. Brahman is the ultimate Reality sought by all spiritual practitioners. It cannot be reached directly through human equipment. Brahman is not something you can perceive with your sense organs. Nor is it an emotion that you can feel with your mind. Nor a concept you can comprehend with your intellect. Brahman is the ideal unknown to you. You need a 'known' idol to reach the 'unknown' ideal. An idol takes you to the ideal. The idol can be either gross or subtle. An example of a gross idol is the stone image in a temple. Fire is a subtler idol. Sound is the subtlest of all idols. It is considered subtlest because only one of the five sense organs viz. the ear can contact it. Of all sounds Om is the most potent, most natural. There are reasons for choice of Om :

- (i) Sounds are of two kinds — articulate and inarticulate. Articulate sound is that which can be represented by letters of the alphabet. The articulate or alphabetical sound is concerned with topics which deal with the knowledge of the head. The other type of sound is the inarticulate or intonational. The inarticulate or intonational sound deals with the heart. Articulate sound has

a limited application. It is understood only by people who have learnt it through artificial training. A man comes and speaks to you in Persian or Russian. You do not understand him. You have not undergone that training. He does not know your language either. Nevertheless when he begins to laugh you understand him. You know that he is happy. Suppose you begin to cry. He understands you are unhappy. This language is inarticulate. It is intonational, a universal language uttered and understood by even babies and animals. Music is another example of intonation. The sound of music has a marvellous effect. It produces wonderful results. The word Om has the advantages of both the articulate and inarticulate, alphabetical and intonational. It has a deep philosophical significance. You will appreciate it when you learn its meaning. Besides, the chant of Om has an extraordinary effect on human beings. It produces harmony, peace and bliss to one and all. Om brings the individual being in perfect attunement with the eternal being.

- (ii) The proper way to write Om is A-U-M अ-उ-म् in Sanskrit. According to Sanskrit grammar अ (A) and उ (U) when connected together coalesce into ओ (O). Even the mute can produce the sounds of A-U-M. अ (A) is the sound emanating from the base of the throat. उ (U) is the sound produced by the impulse rolling forward in the mouth. म् (M) is the sound produced by closing the lips. There is no sound beyond these two extremities viz. throat and lips. So Om covers the full range of sounds. It represents the entire

phenomenon of sound.

(iii) The symbol ॐ (OM) stands for the pure consciousness which pervades the three states of waking, dream and deep-sleep. It is also called **pranava**. **Pranava** means something that pervades life or runs through **prana** or breath. The sound अ (pronounced aah), according to Vedanta, represents the so called material world, the solid-seeming world, all that is observed in the wakeful state of consciousness. The second sound उ (pronounced oo) represents all the experiences of the dreamland, the subject and objects of the dreaming state of consciousness. म् (pronounced em) represents all the unknown in the deep-sleep state of consciousness. While chanting Om you will have to concentrate your attention and put forth feeling in realising that your Atman, your Self is the stern Reality pervading the three worlds.

(iv) Om is the real name of the Almighty. It is the key that unlocks the kingdom of heaven. This mantra does not belong to any particular language. The Hindus took it up. It does not mean that it belongs to the Hindus. It is a natural syllable. It is nature's word, nature's **mantra**. It is the name of god. Some people discard it because they believe it comes from Sanskrit, from the Hindus. They reject it on the ground that it is not their special label. The word Om is not subjected to the same conjugation or reflection or other grammatical manipulations to which all other sanskrit words are subjected. So it is not a Sanskrit word. It is a word of nature, a pure and genuine word

by itself. The Hindus made good use of it. So can you. Om occupies a very prominent place in all languages of the world. Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent are the highest names for god. They begin with Om. In your prayers when you reach the point of silence you utter Om in some form or other. In English you end the prayer with Amen. In Arabic, Persian and Hindustani you say Amin.

In meditation the mind keeps chanting the **Om-mantra**. The momentary silence that exists between every two successive chants is called **amatra**. **Amatra** represents the pure Consciousness, the Atman. In the final stage of meditation your mind is held in single-pointed chant. The function of the intellect is discrimination between pairs of opposites. Your intellect is engaged in discriminating between **Om** and **amatra**. In the peak of meditation you must stop the chant. What follows is absolute silence. There is no more sound of Om. No thought. With the extinction of the last thought your mind is extinct. There is no longer the pair of sound and silence. In the absence of a pair no discrimination is possible. Without discrimination your intellect is extinct as well. Your mind and intellect are thus transcended in that absolute silence. That is the sacred moment of realisation. Your individual self merges with the infinite Self.

Invocation

ॐ सह नावतु । सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं
करवावहै । तेजस्वि नावधां तमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ।

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः

ॐ Om सहनौ – us both together अतु (may) He protect
सह नौ – us both together भुनक्तु – may (He) cause us to
enjoy (the Supreme) सह -- together वीर्यं – with great energy
करवावहै – let us do तेजस्वि brilliant नौ – our अधीतम् - study
अस्तु – may become मा – not विद्विषावहै – may hate each
other.

ॐ – Om शान्तिः – peace शान्तिः – peace शान्तिः – peace

Om May He protect us both. May He cause us both
to enjoy. May we both exert together. May our study
become brilliant. May we not hate each other.

Om Peace Peace Peace

This prayer is chanted both by the preceptor (**guru**)
and the disciple (**shishya**) before starting the study of
the scriptures. There are other prayers as well. The
chanting of the invocation prayers helps to calm the
mind and tune in the subtle intellect for comprehending
the philosophy ingrained in the scriptures.

The human intellect is of two distinct types viz.
gross and subtle. When your intellect engages its
discriminating faculty in the realm of the terrestrial

world it is said to be 'gross'. Gross intellect thinks thoughts pertaining to the world. It discriminates between the pairs of opposites all within the boundary of this world. It could range from the simplest discrimination of a dog between its master and a stranger to the finest discrimination of a scientist in nuclear technology. But all of them are still classified as 'gross' because its field of operation is the terrestrial world. When however your intellect crosses the boundary of the terrestrial world and conceives the possibility of a transcendental Reality it is called the 'subtle' intellect. No other creature except a human being can posit the transcendental Reality. The subtle intellect is the discriminating faculty which contemplates upon and distinguishes the transcendental Reality from the terrestrial world, discerns the difference between Spirit and matter, between Atman and the world you experience through your material equipments.

The common man engages his gross intellect in the affairs of the world practically all day long. He hardly uses his subtle intellect. It is therefore important to invoke and tune in his subtle intellect for understanding the deeper import of the scriptures. This is achieved by chanting the invocation prayers. The prayer starts with Om which represents the supreme Reality, the goal of all spiritual pursuits.

The protection sought by the teacher and the taught is only a temporary safeguard against any disturbances that may prevent their study. The prayer is not to be understood as beggary which arises out of lethargy. Neither the teacher nor the student means to avoid action and begs the Lord to take care of every

thing. Both of them will be engaged in deep study and reflection. Hence their request to the Lord is to protect them during the period of study from any disturbances. This line conveys their spirit of surrender to the supreme being and their earnestness for study.

In the next two lines they pray for enjoyment and exertion. Spiritual study can bring about results only when the preceptor and the disciple put in their best efforts. They exert their maximum to teach and to learn the knowledge respectively. The teaching and the learning are thoroughly enjoyed by both. Spiritual study ought not to be a drudgery. With the right attitude the study becomes a pleasure.

The next line speaks of the goal of spiritual study. The aim of the spiritual study is the unfolding of the supreme Self. The supreme Self within is at present clouded by **vasanas**/desires. The study, reflection and the meditation of the knowledge contained in the scriptures help the seeker to exhaust his **vasanas**/desires and bring out the brilliance of the Self within. This idea is indicated by praying for brilliance.

In the last line the teacher and the taught pray that there be no hatred between them. This appeal is necessary because spiritual knowledge is difficult to administer, difficult to comprehend and that leads to a lot of controversy, arguments and bitterness. The prayer is meant to caution both to avoid such a contingency by being humble and refrain from egoistic and dogmatic assertions.

The three "**shantihs**" chanted at the end of the

prayer is an appeal to the phenomenal powers to lend peace to their hearts for the pursuit of their study. **Shantih** means peace. The three **shantihs** are directed to the three sources of disturbances that destroy mental peace necessary for teaching and learning the contents of the scriptures.

The three sources of disturbances are :

1. Aadhidaivikam आधिदैविकम् ।
2. Aadhibhowthikam आधिभौतिकम् ।
3. Aadhyatmikam आध्यात्मिकम् ।

The first type of the disturbances is from the phenomenal powers like lightning, thunder, rain, earthquake etc. Hence the first **shantih** is chanted loudly. The second type is the environmental disturbance like noise around, animals prowling, insects crawling etc. The second chant is softer than the first to indicate that it is directed to the environmental disturbances. The third type is the disturbances springing from one's own body or mind like sickness, worry etc. The last chant is therefore in whispers directed to the inner disturbances.

The invocation prayer when sincerely and devotedly chanted prepares a proper mental climate for spiritual study and reflection.

Gayatri Mantra

Om Bhur Bhuva Svaha ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः
Tat Savitur Varenyam तत् सवितुर्वरेण्यम्
Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि
Dhियो yo nah prachodayat धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात्

ॐ - Om भू भुवःसुवः - Three worlds/universe तत् - That
सवितुः - Sun वरेण्यम् - Most excellent भर्ग - Effulgence (radia-
nce, splendour) देवस्य - Divine, godly धीमहि - (We) Medi-
tate upon धिय - Buddhis, intellects यः Who - नः - Our
प्रचोदयात् - Unfolds.

Om Bhur Bhuvah Svaha. We meditate upon the adorable
effulgence of the divine Sun. May that unfold our
intellects.

The one-lettered word symbol ॐ (Om) called
pranava represents the supreme Reality beyond the
three worlds of the waking, dream and deep sleep.
For a study of the detailed significance of the symbol
please refer to the chapter on "The Symbol Om" on
page 117

Bhur bhuvah svaha — are called the **vyahritis**.
They represent the three worlds experienced by man.
It could be taken in the subjective sense as the waking,
dream and deep sleep states of consciousness or

in the objective sense as the higher (heaven), middle (earth) and the lower (hell) worlds. In either case it is meant to represent the whole universe. When man conceives this first he understands his relative insignificance in the vast universe. Man is only an infinitesimal speck in the universe. Yet he asserts his ego and arrogance. This part of the prayer is meant to humble him. He goes through the initial preparation necessary for his mind to lift itself to the realisation of the supreme Self in him.

The prayer is directed to the Sun (**savitur**). In Manusmriti it is said that the Gayatri japa is to be chanted twice in a day at **samdhya** time. There are two **samdhyas** in a day — dawn and dusk. **Samdhya** literally means holding together, union, junction. The meeting point of day and night that is twilight in the morning and evening. At this time the Gayatri mantra is repeated — “We meditate upon the adorable effulgence of the divine sun. May that unfold our intellect”.

The structure of the Gayatri has three distinct parts. The first part is the first line consisting of the **pranava** ॐ and the **maha vyahritis**. The purpose of the first part is to prepare the seeker’s mind for prayer, meditation and realisation.

The second part consists of the second and third lines. It is directed to intensify the seeker’s aspiration or determination to reach the goal of realisation. To develop an intense desire for liberation which is called **mumukshutwa** in Sanskrit.

The first two parts involve effort on the part of

the **sadhak** (seeker) while the third part consisting of the last line brings about an attitude of self-surrender. The stage of no-effort.

A beautiful metaphor compares these three stages to shooting a target with a bow and arrow. The first stage of preparing the seeker's mind is compared to making the bow by bending a tough flexible rod and tying its ends with a string. The second stage of developing **mumukshutwa** is comparable to positioning the arrow in the bow and pulling the string to its maximum tension. These two aspects of preparation involve effort. The last stage of self surrender is similar to the release of the arrow when effort has ended. The result of all this is the striking of the target which is the realisation of the supreme Self.

The Gayatri mantra is said to be one of the oldest of the divine hymns. It is referred to as the mother of the Vedas. Gayatri has a compelling charm of its own to millions of Hindu hearts. The repetition of this mantra with the right understanding of its sacred meaning is believed widely to have the power to dispel all the negative tendencies in the human mind and thereby unfold the supreme Self within.

The greatness of the Gayatri is that it has both the power of **mantra** and the power of prayer. The pure **mantra** has an inherent effectiveness called **mantra shakti** that is the power contained in inarticulate or intonational sound. It may or may not have meaning. But Gayatri has both. It has both meaning. It has the advantage of both. That is, it has the power of prayer

power of prayer is combined with the power of **mantra** the seeker is fully equipped with the most effective instrument for the unfoldment of the spiritual potentialities. That is the uniqueness of the Gayatri.

Gayatri is the **mantra** that is given to the boy at his spiritual initiation called **upanayanam**. **Upanayanam** is the thread ceremony performed to Hindu boys at a very early age generally between 6 and 8 years. The **Guru** (preceptor) initiates the boy to spiritual study by giving him the sacred Gayatri **mantra**. The boy is then considered **dwijah** which means twice born. The first birth of the gross personality is when the physical body emerges from the mother's womb. The second birth now is that of the subtle body when the mind and intellect are fully grown and ready to receive the knowledge of the supreme Reality.

The Gayatri is chanted both at dawn and dusk facing the sun. The devotee carries a little water in his folded palm and at the end of each chant of the **mantra** he offers the water to the sun. As the water is offered the devotee says "**Asavadityow Brahma**" which means "This sun is Brahman (God)". While saying so he performs the '**Atma prakashina**' by turning himself round from his right side. The gayatri is chanted generally a minimum of ten times during each **samdhya** but one could chant more according to one's personal capacity.

In the **Upanishads** there is a story built around the daily chanting of the Gayatri. The story is full of mysticism about it. The story says that once there a tribe of devils called



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