

Group 1 - Thirunavukarasar

My favourite Nayanar is Thirunavukarasar. He was born in the 7th Century and his parents named him Marul Neekiar.

When he was young, he converted to Jainism, which made his family very sad. His eldest sister prayed to Lord Shiva to bring him back to Saivism and the Lord gave him a terrible pain in his stomach. The Jains could not cure him, so he went to his sister, who gave him Thiru neeru (Holy Ash), and told him to pray to Lord Shiva. As he put the holy ash on his body, he sang his first song to Lord Shiva –
“Kootraayinavaaru....”

Suddenly, Lord Shiva appeared before him, took away his pain and blessed him. Lord Shiva gave him the name “Thirunaavukkarasu” and told him to always sing His praises and serve His devotees.

The Jain leaders were very angry and tortured him, but he prayed to Lord Shiva and he was kept safe. Finally, they took him in a boat, tied him to a huge boulder and threw him into the sea. He immediately sang the thevaram “Sottrunai vediyan” and he was saved! From then on, Thirunavukarasar spent all his time cleaning the temple gardens and served the Lord, always remembering Him day and night. His one desire was to be permanently at the feet of his beloved Lord Shiva. And, at the age of 81, his wish was granted.

Group 2 - Maha Shivarathri

Maha Shivarathri is one of Saivism's most unique festivals. Unlike other festivals, this festival is celebrated throughout the night and is a festival of fasting rather than feasting. People usually fast during the day and, at sunset, begin their special prayers to Lord Shiva.

According to our Hindu Calendar, Maha Shivarathri usually comes on the 14th day after the Full Moon in the Tamil month of Masi. This year it was celebrated on the 21st of February.

The symbol of Lord Shiva, is the Shiva Lingam. It is a form that represents the "formless" and it is worshiped with great splendour during Maha Shivaratri. There are many stories about the Shivalingam that are told to us children during Shivarathri, and here is one of them:

Once upon a time, a hunter worshipped Lord Shiva unknowingly on Shivaratri night. He was hiding in a Vilva tree to escape from a tiger and, to stop himself from falling asleep and falling out of the tree, he spent the night picking leaves from the tree and dropping the Vilva leaves onto a shiva lingam below. For this he was forgiven all of his sins. So, think what can be achieved if you observe Shivarathri with faith and with knowledge! Indeed, it is said that worship offered on Shivarathri Day is equal to a whole year of normal worship!

The night's worship is divided into four jaamams and the whole night is spent performing prayers and poojas to Lord Shiva. 11pm to 1am is a special time during Maha Shivarathri and is called the "Lingothbava Kaalam".

Devotees chant the "Panchaachara Mantra" recite the Shivapuranam and sing Thevarams and other devotional songs dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Religious rites and ceremonies are repeated for every Jaamam and worship continues throughout the night. Lord Shiva is worshiped with intense devotion and the prayers are concluded at daybreak, with a simple meal to break the fast.

Shivarathri, if observed annually, with faith and devotion, will help to grant us perfect spiritual peace.

Om Namah Shivaya...

Group 3 - Navarathri

Navarathri is a great religious festival where God is adored and worshipped as the Divine Mother. The festival starts on the first bright fortnight of the Tamil month of Purattasi, between September and October in the western calendar.

This special celebration begins at sunset and is celebrated for nine days. “Nava” means nine and “rathri” means night. The first three days are dedicated to Mother Durga, the second three days are for Mother Lakshmi, whilst the last three days are for Mother Saraswathy.

There is a special significance for the duration of the festival being for nine days. Nine is said to be a mystical number. Any multiplication of the number and it’s aggregation leaves it undisturbed of it’s original number. It is said that the number nine contains in it all other numbers of one digit, but is not contained in any of them. Similarly, Devi encompasses within her the whole universe.

Mother Durga is the destructive aspect of Goddess Parvathi, consort of Lord Shiva. In this form, she is quite fierce and helps us to purify ourselves physically by destroying the thamasic guna, the negative qualities in man. Thus, the first three days of Navarathri are dedicated to her, to cleanse our physical form in readiness for the spirituality to come.

The next three days are dedicated to Mother Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity and the consort of Lord Vishnu. Lakshmi represents the rajasic guna, reminding man that after the removal of negative qualities, one must be active in the world to acquire the necessary wealth for life and living. Contrary to popular belief, rajas is not always negative! It means dynamic activity. Rajas has both negative and positive aspects, and Lakshmi represents positive dynamism.

The last three days are dedicated to Goddess Saraswathy, the consort of Lord Brahma. Mother Saraswathy represents wisdom, learning and the creative arts. She is usually seen sitting on a white lotus, representing purity of body and mind. To worship Saraswathy is to invoke the sathwic nature in man, the qualities of wisdom and spirituality. After one removes negativity and has earned enough wealth for a proper life, then comes the inner search for a balanced sathwic life – for it is knowledge that will ultimately set man free.

Navarathri traditionally commences with the setting up of a “Kolu”, a display of dolls/statues of the Goddesses. Sakthi is the primal universal energy of great power, as she is the guardian of the universe and is supposed to sit in royal display for these nine special days.

Vijaya Dasami, the day after Navarathri, marks a day of victory of good over evil and there are many stories linked to this, including the slaying of Mahishasura by Durga. In the Temple, Vijaya Dasami is the most auspicious day for students to begin learning the arts and sciences, and a chance for existing students to pay their respects to their Gurus. Nursery children are also given initiation on this day in the Tamil alphabet by the Temple priests.

Navarathri is a festival of great significance to Hindus in all parts of the world. It is the time to give special prayers to the Divine mother and to offer intense worship to earn Her grace. May our Gracious Mother bestow upon us all spiritual power, divine qualities, and the knowledge to set us free.

**Thanumtharum; Kalvitharum; Orunaalum Thalarvariya Manam Tharum;
Theiva Vadivum Tharum; Nenjchil Vanchamillaa Inamtharum;
Nallana Ellaamtharum; Anbar Enpavarkkea;
Kanamtharum Puungkuzhalaal Abiraami Kadaikkankalea**

Group 4 - Sri La Sri Arumuga Navalar

Throughout the history of Hinduism, there have been many great people who have been revered as great reformers within Hindu society, revitalising the religion and stemming the tide of conversions to other religions. One such figure was Arumuga Navalar, who is regarded as the “father” of modern-day Tamil prose and an architect of Saiva Hindu destiny in Eelam.

He was born in Nallur, in the Jaffna peninsula, in 1822. His parents, Kanthapillai and Sivakamy, named him Arumugam Pillai. His father was a Tamil poet, and so Arumugam became very well versed in Tamil literature from a young age. At this time, British rule was well established in the area and, like many other boys from well-to-do families, he was placed in a Christian mission school in order to learn English and other subjects.

During this time, there were many conversions of Tamils to Christianity and there was a real danger of losing the culture, language and religious identity of Sri Lankan Tamils, who were predominantly Saiva Hindu in religion. It was at this critical juncture that Arumugam appeared on the scene and took up the task of bringing about reforms among Saivites and a general awakening among the Tamils about the need to protect their religious and cultural identity as Hindus.

After finishing his schooling, he was asked to continue at the school as a teacher of Tamil and English. Peter Percival, the school principal, appointed him as one of his assistants to translate the Bible and Christian prayers into Tamil, by the end of which he was well acquainted with the Bible and Christian doctrine.

Meanwhile Christian missionary attacks on Hinduism were intensifying and an anti-Christian backlash arose within Hindu Tamil society, in response. Until then, Arumugam had been more of a silent observer rather than an active participant in this whole drama, but this was about to change. Whilst he was at the mission school, he had studied the Bible but had ultimately rejected it in favour of his own heritage, showing that he had the intellectual honesty to examine his opponents views thoroughly, before commenting on them.

In September of 1842, at a gathering of over 200 Hindus in Jaffna, it was decided to establish a Veda and Agama school and the purchase of a printing press, to publish educational materials refuting anti-Hindu propaganda. Evidence shows that this was the beginning of his role as a Hindu revivalist.

He began writing letters to the Morning Star, a bilingual monthly run by Christian missionaries, defending the Saiva position against missionary attacks. In this, his primary approach was to draw parallels between the rituals mentioned in the Bible and our Saiva rituals, asking the missionaries how only the Saiva rituals could be wrong whilst the Christian one's were right, despite so many similarities? In 1848, he resigned from the missionary school in order to immerse himself in his work of defending Saivism. By this time, he had also mastered Sanskrit, as he felt he needed to study the ancient Hindu texts thoroughly, from their original source.

In 1846 he began teaching Saivism classes and successfully prevented many conversions. In 1848, he founded a school known as “Saivaprakasa Vidyasalai - The School of Saiva Splendour” in Vannarpannai. He also decided not to marry, in order to devote himself completely to defending and promoting Saivism.

The school he established was modelled along the lines of the Christian Protestant school he had studied in, since he felt that the traditional Tamil schools were inadequate to face the Christian missionary onslaught; which he saw as Lord Shiva’s way of chastising the Tamils and awakening them to their own heritage. In July of 1849 he, along with a former student named Sadashiva Pillai, set out for Chennai to buy a printing press. On the way, he met several leaders of Saiva Orthodoxy who were impressed by his knowledge and conferred on him the title of “Navalar” which means “Authority in prose form” in Tamil, by which he is now known.

By 1850 he had managed to set up the printing press and began publishing religious texts. Many texts, like the Periyapuram, Kandapuram, Nannool etc are in verse form. These were difficult for the ordinary man to read and understand. So Navalar wrote them in prose form and published them, enabling the beauty and richness of their contents to reach a much wider section of the community. He also wrote many wonderful books like Saiva Vina Vidai; Paalapaadam and Paalabothini for young Saiva children like us! In 1865, he established another school at Chidambaram, in Tamil Nadu, which is still in existence today.

Although he is more well known for his anti-missionary stance, his work was also directed against unethical practices he saw amongst Hindus, which he felt went against the teachings of the Agamas. Due to these activities, he also faced significant opposition among certain Hindus, who did not like his efforts to reform their backward practices and ways of life! But he was respected and revered by all who had a passion for our true cultural traditions and religion.

Arumuga Navalar created an awakening among Sri Lankan Tamils and set the standards for modern day Tamil prose. What Swami Dayananda and his Arya Samaj achieved in North India, Arumuga Navalar achieved in Eelam. It is thanks to pioneers like him that the Tamils of Sri Lanka did not lose their religious identity and culture under the onslaught of British colonial imperialism and Christian missionary activities. His dedication and devotion ensured that we were able to preserve our cultural, linguistic & religious identity up to the present day and should be an inspiration to us all.

Group 5 – Saivites And Their Beliefs

Saivites worship Lord Shiva as the supreme omnipresent Lord. Saivism is the oldest form of Hinduism or Sanathana Dharma. Other denominations of Hinduism include Vaishnavism and Sakthism. It differs from all the other major religions of the world in that it has no single founder or prophet. It was created by a group of rishis, highly elevated spiritual souls who created a religion that would help all of us to reach God, regardless of intellect, status, caste or creed.

Saivism, as practised today, can be divided into three main sects – Kashmir Saivism in the North, Vira Saivism in the Middle and Siddhantha Saivism in the South of India, Sri Lanka and in other Tamil-speaking areas of the world.

Saivism has no single central book (as it does not seek to confine its ideas or devotees) but has a variety of sacred scriptures. The Vedas and Agamas, revealed by God, are Saivism's sovereign scriptures. Their timeless truths, passed down from generation to generation, are expressed in the most profound mystical poetry known to man. The Vedas permeate Saiva thought, ritual and meditation, proclaiming life's sacredness and the way to oneness with God. The Agamas are revelations on sacred living, worship, yoga and philosophy, specific to each denomination, and many are over 2,000 years old. The 28 Saiva Agamas form the bedrock of the rituals and philosophy of Saivism. Puranic stories are important scriptures that explain the complex Vedic philosophy to the common man, in the form of popular folk narratives about the Gods and Goddesses that teach us about faith, belief and moral codes.

The twelve Thirumurais, dating from the 3rd century, contain the Thevarams, Thiruvagam, Thirumanthiram, Thiruvissaipah, Thirupallaandu and other divinely-inspired outpourings of our Saivite Saints in Tamil. These devotional songs, many of which are still sung in our temples today, are dedicated to Lord Shiva and often refer to the Vedas and ancient Puranic stories that highlight our Saivite beliefs.

The Thirumurais also contain the Periyapuram, by Sekhilar, which tells the life stories of our 63 Nayanmar (Saivite saints). Principal among them are the four Saiva Samaya Kuravar – Thirugnanasampandar, Thirunavukarasar, Sundaramoorthy Swamigal and Manickavasagar. These 4 Nayanmar, by their Thevarams and Thiruvagam, performed many miracles. They demonstrated the power of God's name, Thiruneeru and the Panchaatchara Manthiram – "Om Namah Shivaya". They are regarded as the apostles of the Saiva religion and should be known and venerated by every Saivite.

The philosophy of the Saiva religion is called Saiva Siddhantam. In his book "Sivagnanapodham", Saint Meikandar, in the 13th century, codified these philosophical thoughts from the Vedas, Agamas and early Tamil works, including the devotional hymns of the Nayanmar. This forms part of the 14 Meikandar Sastras, which are the authoritative Tamil Books of Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy.

Saivite beliefs and practices include:

- 1) The belief that there is only one, all-pervasive, omnipotent Supreme Reality – Lord Shiva “Pathi”, “Pasu” – souls and “Pasam” – materials of bondage.

“Pasam” is made up of three things:

“Aanavam” our egoism and ignorance,
 “Kanmam” our good and bad deeds, and
 “Mayai” the ever-changing physical world.

Saivism teaches us how to get rid of these three things so that we can reach the feet of our beloved Lord Shiva and gain “Mukthi” or liberation.

- 2) A belief that temple worship, rituals, community and personal prayer create a communion with their favourite God forms (e.g. Lord Ganesha – Remover of obstacles, Goddess Saraswathy – Goddess of Knowledge) which are symbolic representations of that Supreme reality.
- 3) A belief in Karma or Kanmam, the law of cause and effect, creating our own destiny by our thoughts, words and deeds.
- 4) The belief that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved and moksha (spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth) has been attained.

Even though there are so many beliefs, the most fundamental and most significant belief in Saivism is to show love to all and to be kind to all.

Saint Thirumoolar beautifully illustrates this fact in his following Thirumanthiram:

<p>“Anbhum Sivamum irendenpar arivilaar Anbe Sivamaavathu aarum arikilaar Anbe Sivamaavathu aarum arinthapin Anbe Sivamaay amanthirunthaare”</p>	<p>Only the ignorant say that love and Siva are dual, Seldom do they know that love and Siva are one Once they realise that love and Siva are one & the same, They will become the very embodiment of love.</p>
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“Thennaadudaiya Sivane porttri Ennaatavarkum Eraiva Porttri”