

GROUP 1 – TEMPLE WORSHIP

The Temple, or Aalayam, is the place where God resides and showers His Blessings. Because of this, it is said that you should go to the Temple and worship God. Fridays are a special day for Temple worship.

How should we go to the Temple? Traditionally, we should take a bath, wear clean clothes and take some pooja items to the Temple. There we should sing devotional songs and pray. This is why Auvai Parti says “Aalaiyum tholuvadu, Salavam Nandru” - It is always good to pray in the Temple.

So, we should go to the Temple regularly and we should pray and get the Lord’s Blessings.

GROUP 2 - THAIPONGAL

Thaipongal is celebrated as the New Year for the Tamil people.

It is celebrated on the first day of the month of Thai and is also the 1st day of the year, according to the Valluvar Calendar.

This festival celebrates Suryan the Sun God, who is essential for the successful cultivation of crops. We pay homage to Suryan by offering Pongal, which literally means "Boiling over" and refers to the boiling over of the milk during the ceremony.

When the Thaipongal day arrives, joy overflows from everyone and preparations for the Pongal Ceremony begin. The start of the ceremony is announced with cheers and lots of noise in large Tamil communities.

Amma will get up early, to clean the outdoor area where the ceremony will take place, and she makes a lovely kolam on the floor as decoration. Appa will place the niraikudham, the special decorated pot full of water, and Amma will light the kuttuvillaku - special oil lamps. Appa places the clay pot on the fire, and then Amma will make the Pongal. We children shout "Pongal Oh Pongal!" when the milk boils over, light firecrackers and thoroughly enjoy ourselves!

We then offer this sweet Pongal rice to Suryan, together with fruits, sugarcane, coconut water, vethilai and pahku.

We sing Thevarams and pray to the Lord. We share the delicious Pongal and exchange joyful Pongal greetings with family and friends. And once the ceremony is over, we look forward to our next Pongal the following year!

GROUP 3 – NAVARATHRI

Navarathri is an important annual festival for all Hindus. “Navam” means nine and “rathri” means night. There are therefore usually 9 nights of prayer for Navarathri, followed by Vijayadasami on the 10th day, which may also include “Vaalai Vettu”

Navarathri occurs in the ninth Lunar month of Purattasi, commencing on Prathamai thithi – the day after the new moon, for 9 days and is a great festival where God is worshipped as the Divine Mother.

The festival begins with the creation of a Kolu – a colourful stepped altar depicting our journey to God, with models of some of the plants, animals and humans that God has created on the lower steps, rising to the Gods and Mother Goddess in her many forms on the top steps, along with Navathanyam – nine types of grain planted in soil around a central decorated Kalasam.

The presiding deity for the first 3 days is Durga, the Goddess of Power and Courage; followed by Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, for the next 3 days. And finally Saraswathi, the Goddess of Knowledge, for the last 3 days. Every day, special poosais are done and children perform to thank the Mother Goddess for all that they have learnt – in music, dance, language and religion.

The Navarathri festival is also celebrated in schools in India and Sri Lanka. During Saraswathi Poosai, students come together to celebrate. They clean and decorate the school hall with a kolam, mango leaves and thoranum. They place the pictures of Malaimahal (Durga), Thirumahal (Lakshmi) and Kalaimahal (Saraswathy) as the 3 Shakthis on a decorated altar/table. They offer, as Nivethinam – Pongal, aval, kadalai, vadai and fruit. After the poosai, they sing the Navarathri thorthirangal – special songs sung for Navarathri. The Nivethinum is then shared with everyone.

As it says in the Saraswathi Anthaadhi:

“Aaya Kalaihal Arupatthu Naanginaiyum Ehyar Unarvikkum En Ammai

Thooya Uruppalingu Polvarlen Ullathin Ulle Iruppai Ingu Varaa thidar”

Goddess Saraswathi, the one who embodies the 64 art forms, Resides within my heart and will protect me from any harm.

GROUP 4 - DEEPAVALI

Deepavali is a special festival celebrated by all Hindus. It is also a main festival for Sikhs, Jains and for some Buddhists. For Hindu Tamils, it is celebrated annually in all the countries where the diaspora reside - including India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia.

Bathing with oil on Deepavali morning is considered very holy. In the early hours of Deepavali day, it is believed that Ganga resides in the water, Lakshmi in the oil, Saraswathi in the Arappu, Gauri in the Kumbham, Bhoomadevi (Mother Earth) in the sandalwood and Lord Vishnu in new clothes.

"Deepam" means light/lamps and "Avali" means a row. So, on this day, special clay lamps are lit in rows all over the house and in the Temples, and the Lord is worshipped as the embodiment of light. Deepavali signifies the fact that the Supreme Being is the source of all living beings, and that all living beings "jeevatmas and jeevarasis" come from that one eternal light, the "Paramathma".

The fact that this is the day when the Lord destroys evil and restores goodness is evident in the different stories related to Deepavali. There are many stories amongst Hindus about the origins of the festival of Deepavali. However, for Hindu Tamils, Deepavali is the day when Kannabiran, Lord Krishna, along with Mother Sathyabama, killed the deadly demon king Narakasura.

Deepavali falls on the day before the new moon (Amavasai) in the month of "Aipassi" (10th Tamil month), is considered to be the beginning of the Deepavali festival.

Narakasura, the vicious demon, spread fear and terror amongst the demi-gods and the people. They appealed to Lord Vishnu who, in the form of Lord Krishna along with his consort Sathyabama, killed Narakasura and restored peace to the world. At the time of his death, Narakasura realized his terrible mistake and prayed to Lord Vishnu that people should celebrate his death every year with joy and happiness, as a symbol that good will always triumph over evil. And that is why we celebrate Deepavali.

Children love this festival, because it's a chance to get gifts and new clothes from their parents, help to decorate the house with beautiful clay deepams and to eat lots of delicious food! This festival is about family, friends and feasting. It is a day of fun and laughter, but it is also a day of prayer and thankfulness for all the good things that God has given us, on this holy day of Deepavali.

GROUP 5 - SIGNIFICANCE OF SHIVARATHRI

Shivarathri is a festival of fasting that is observed for Lord Shiva. One of the principles of Saivism is that every human being who has taken birth in this world should ultimately reach God and attain eternal bliss.

Saivism has devised four methods of attaining God. They are: - Chariyai, Kiriya, Yoga and Jnana. Each can choose a method that suits his or her own potential.

Chariyai is service and fasting. This can be observed by the majority of people. Other methods are more difficult to follow by everyone. But what can be obtained by these four methods is muthi (liberation). This system of bringing human beings to God is unique to Saivism.

Those who observe fasts, following the right method, observe the Shivarathri fast with great dedication. What is the philosophy of this Shivarathri fast? According to scientists, the Sun is a great ball of fire. It exploded and formed the planets of our solar system, including Earth. Each of the planets rotates itself and also revolves around the Sun.

They operate as a single family because of the gravitational nature of the Sun. In the beginning, the earth was a sphere of fire. Due to cooling and chemical changes, it reached its present state. All of this has a fundamental force, running through everything, which is God.

It was on this basis that Saivism introduced the deities of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti to the people of the world.

The value of Shivarathri is combined with such philosophies. Shivarathri yaagam is the day when the five elements on the earth are further influenced by the gravitational pull of the sun and the moon. The Vedas say that those who fast on this night will get the blessings of the Lord.

According to Saiva Siddhanta, Brahma, the Lord of Creation, and Vishnu, the Lord of Preservation, quarrelled about who was the greatest. Lord Shiva appeared as a huge, never-ending pillar of fire between the two of them. They decided to have a competition, agreeing that whoever could find the beginning or end of the pillar first, would be the greatest. But they both failed to reach the Thiruvadi or Thirumudi of that great Pillar of fire. Suddenly, Lord Shiva appeared in place of the pillar, in all His glory, and both of them bowed and acknowledged that He was the greatest! The day that marks the formation of the pillar is observed as Shivarathri, and that is why Lord Shiva is known as "the one who has no beginning and no end."

Shivaratri falls on the Theipirai Chaturdashi (day before the new moon) of the month of Masi (2nd Tamil Month) every year. Those who observe Shivaratri should pray to Lord Shiva throughout the night, without eating food or sleeping. Pujas should be performed to Lord Shiva for every jama (period of time). 12 am marks the time when Lord Shiva appeared to Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu in the form of the Jyothi Linga. According to the Puranas, worshipping Lord Shiva at this time is a great blessing. After worshipping for all the four jamas, devotees take a bath the next morning and eat food after worshipping the Lord. If you cannot fast fully, you can do so by drinking only milk. Or you can only eat food for one meal. Those who are unable to keep awake the whole night, can stay awake until the "Lingodbhavam" and then go to sleep.

Our scriptures state that those who observe the Shivarathri fast every year, with full devotion, will attain Jivan muthi. This is the unique aspect of Shivarathri.