

SCIENCE AND SYMBOLISM IN SAIVAISM (HINDUISM)

Professor R Kanagasuntheram, Adelaide, South Australia

Emeritus Professor R. Kanagasuntheram was the Professor of Anatomy at the National University Singapore for many years. After his retirement, he served at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka as the Professor of Anatomy during the difficult political period. He was actively involved in organising annual Thirumurai Conferences in Singapore for a number of years. He had authored many religious articles and delivered religious talks at many occasions. He is having his retired life in Adelaide, South Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Saivism which forms a major section of Hinduism is practised chiefly in South India. The followers of Saivism are called Saivaites and they regard Lord Shiva as their supreme deity. Hence there is the common saying, Praise to Shiva from South (njd;dhLila rptNd Nghw;wp). Although Saivism is mainly confined to South India at present, the origin of Saivism is shrouded in antiquity and mystery. The archaeological findings of Mohenjadarro and Harappa speak of an ancient pre-aryan civilisation on the banks of the Indus valley dating back to more than 2000 B.C. The relics and modes of worship of these highly civilised people who are considered to be of Dravidian stock do indeed point to Shiva worship. It is, therefore, highly probable that it is these Dravidians who had migrated towards South India when the Aryans gained supremacy over the Indo-Gangetic plains.

The term "Hinduism" appears to have been a word introduced by the foreign invaders to denote the religion practised by all those people living south and east of the Indus valley. From "Indus" came the word Hindus and the religion of them, therefore came to be known as Hinduism. In actual fact, the religion of ancient India was known as "Sanadana Dharma" which means the righteous type of living for all times.

Saivism regards Lord Shiva as Pathy (புதி) or the Supreme under whose control are the souls (புது) and bondage (பாசம்) which binds the souls towards worldly enjoyments thus preventing the souls of individuals from realising divinity i.e. Mukthi, Moksha or Liberation. The trinity of Pathy, Pasu and Pasam is symbolically represented by the fingers of the hand. The thumb representing Pathy (God) stands apart while the index finger representing the soul stands in close companionship with the 3rd, 4th and 5th fingers representing the three aspects of Pasam known as Anavam (Ego), Karmam (effects of good and bad deeds performed by the individual) and Maya which refers to the world and all its living and non-living objects which cause delusion.

From the above example it is clear that the soul is bound to pasams. However, when the soul (index finger) attaches itself to God

(thumb), the soul is then liberated and attains Moksha. This example illustrates the use of symbolism in explaining the more difficult philosophical concepts of God, Soul and Pasam.

Saivism has as its scriptures the twelve Thirumaraigal (திருமுறைகள்) and the Fourteen Siddhantha Shastras which include Sivagnana-botham and Sivaganana Sithiyar. The Thirumuraigal and the Shastras which are the equivalent of Vedas and Agamas describe the paths and methods such as rituals and worship to be adopted for attaining Moksha. In addition, Saivism believes in the concept of the Law of Karma i.e. the phenomenon of cause and effect. In simple terms, this means "as you sow, so will you reap." So one's happiness and misery are the result of one's own creation and not the result of some intervention by others. Saivism also upholds the theory of reincarnation which is said to be determined by the sum total of the good and evil we do in this world.

Saivism maintains that one can attain Moksha by Devotion or Bhakthi, in which the devotee worships God as his master, father, friend or by adopting the path of sanmarga. These attitudes or paths are described as *Sariyai* (சரியை), *Kiriyai* (கிரியை), *Yoga* (யோகம்) and *Gnana* (ஞானம்).

The path of Sariyai was adopted by Thirunavukkarasar whose devotion to Lord Shiva was that of a servant to the master or Dasya. The attitude of a son to father (Vatsalya) - Kiriyai was the path taken by Thurugnanasambander who started singing in praise of Lord Shiva at Sirkali at the

age of three years. Sundaramoorthy Nayanar regarded Lord Shiva as his friend and even requested him to go as a messenger to Paravaiyar whose wrath was roused when she heard that Sundaramoorthy Nayanar had got married to Sankiliyar without her knowledge. This attitude of Sundaramoorthy Nayanar towards Lord Shiva is the Yoga or Sakhya relationship. The path of Gnana or the path of virtuous was the one followed by Manicavasagar who was ordained by Lord Shiva himself under the *guruntha* tree at Thiruperunthurai. So God himself becomes the Guru if only one has single pointed love and devotion towards Him.

So love is the instrument through which we can approach God most easily. "காதலாகிக் கசிந்து கண்ணீர் மல்கி ஒதுவார் தம்மை நன்னெறிக்கு உய்ப்பதும்"

Indeed it is said that God is love and love is God -

அன்பும் சிவமும் இரண்டென்பார்

அறிவிலர்

அன்பே சிவமாவதாருமறிகிலர்

அன்பே சிவமாவதாருமறிந்தபின்

அன்பே சிவமாய் அமர்ந்திருந்தாரே.

WHY DO WE USE SYMBOLISM IN RELIGION?

A simple example will illustrate the rationale behind symbolism. We can pose the question as to why a teacher makes use of only a relief map of Africa to explain to the students where the mountains, rivers, forests, grasslands and deserts are situated. Thus the map merely serves as a symbol to the student to study the geography of

Africa although the student had never set foot in Africa. Hence the use of a symbol in religion is to simplify and thereby overcome the difficulty of understanding the concept of God who is beyond time, space and causation and therefore beyond definition.

ஊரிலான், குணம் குறியிலான்,
செயலிலான், உரைக்கும் பேரிலான்,
ஒரு முன்னிலான், பின்னிலான்,
பிறிதோர் சார்பிலான், வரல்
போக்கிலான், மேலிலான், தனக்கு
நேரிலான், உயிர்க் கடவுளாய்
என்னுளே நின்றான்.

Thus, God is attributeless and infinite. So how can the finite mind of man understand the infinite? It is through the love of the Bhakta that the infinite projects Himself as the finite God e.g. Shiva, just like the waters of the vast ocean become condensed to form ice thus assuming shape and form from the shapeless and formless water. Hence it is understandable why we need symbols for our prayer, worship and meditation. It is also well known that Hinduism and Catholicism which have a large number of symbols have also the largest number of sages and saints. Thus by providing attributes to the attributeless God, the human mind is able to concentrate and meditate on the God-head.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHIVALINGAM

The significance of the Shivalingam has been unfortunately misinterpreted by some observers as merely representing the male sex organ and that this is a primitive form of worship. However, the adoption of Shivalingam in Saivism

was due to the genius of our ancient sages and saints who symbolised it through their intuitive mind. Their interpretation of the Shivalingam appears to be both scientific and sound. Shiva means the "Supreme" and Lingam means a "Symbol". Therefore Shivalingam is the symbol of the supreme.

The Shivalingam is often made out of stone and is elliptical in shape and stands on a circular receptacle. The base or stand lies below the receptacle. Shiva is represented by the circular receptacle since a circle has no beginning or end and so Shiva is without beginning or end. Indeed He is the beginning, the middle and the end; just like any point on the circle can serve as the beginning, middle or end. Thus, the circular disc representing the absolute i.e. Shiva is not only symbolically justified but also scientifically correct. The Lingam which projects out of the circular disc is the symbol of the Universe which is projected out from the absolute, namely Shiva. Thus, from the absolute **issues** the relative Universe which without the sustenance of Shiva will have no independent existence.

Moreover, the Lingam is elliptical in shape. This has a scientific basis since the Universe is elliptical and not circular as is usually imagined. The planets themselves have an elliptical orbit while the minute particles called the atoms have electrons (smaller particles) moving round the central nucleus in an elliptical orbit. Moreover, even our astral bodies which are subtler than the gross body are also said to be elliptical in shape. Thus the elliptically shaped Lingam has not

only symbolic value but also has an underlying scientific basis. Hence it may be concluded that the circular disc represents the "being" and the Lingam below the circular disc probably represents the soul which has its attachments with the Lingam representing the Universe. In other words, the soul is attached to the external world (Universe). It has to free itself from the Maya of the Universe by merging itself with Shiva. Hence both the Universe and the Souls emanate from the absolute (Shiva) and later become one with the "Being" (Absolute) at the time of dissolution.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NATARAJA

Nataraja, the dancing Lord has his abode in Chidamparam in Cuddalaore. Nataraja is said to perform his cosmic dance in Chidamparam where He dances in ecstasy and absorbs everything into Himself. The "secret" (சிதம்பர ரகசியம்) is nothing but an empty space which represents pure consciousness. It is only with the pure consciousness in his heart that the devotee can experience the Absolute in His transcendental aspect (அருபம்). So at Chidamparam, the symbol of space represents the expansion of pure consciousness, to be attained by the devotee in the temple of his own heart.

Nataraja means "the King of dance". The dance of Nataraja, also known as the cosmic dance, is symbolic of the rhythmic movements of the Universe. Indeed every planet and every particle or atom is performing the same dance. This is not a chaotic movement but a well

orchestrated rhythm directed and guided by some unseen intelligent principle. Indeed even the scientists are beginning to concede that the Universe is intelligent. The recent book entitled "The intelligent Universe" by Sir Fred Hoyle, F.R.S, of Cambridge University bears testimony to the above view. Hence, it is clear that the Universe does not operate on mere physical and chemical law. So it may be surmised where this intelligent principle is coming from. The Tamil saying that "அவனன்றி ஓர் அணுவும் அசையா" perhaps provides the answer. It means that even a small atom will not move with the wish of the Lord.

Such a view was put forward by Saint Thirumular who lived at least one thousand years ago in his book entitled Thirumanthiram that the dance of Shiva brings forth the movement of every particle in the Universe. It is almost unbelievable that the discovery was made with the Saint's intuitive super-conscious mind while the modern scientists confirmed this discovery only a few decades ago.

The Nataraja form or image has four arms. In the upper right hand he holds the drum, udukkai or damaru. This is the symbol of sound i.e. the sound of creation. The scientists themselves admit that there was an explosive sound when the Universe was created. This is known as the "Big Bang" theory. This is the beginning of evolution or Srishti. The left upper hand of Nataraja holds the flame, the symbol of destruction or Samhara when involution of the Universe takes place. The right lower hand is in a raised posture assuring the devotee of protection so that he could be

free from fear. This is the symbol of preservation. The lower left hand pointing towards the raised left foot of Nataraja instructs the devotee to take refuge and surrender at the foot of the Lord. "தூக்கிய திருவடி துணையென நம்பினேன் துரிய நடராஜனே"

The prostrate titan or demon who is being crushed by the right foot symbolises the crushing of the ego or evil nature of men. The entire symbolic aspect of Nataraja is well summarised by the following poem:-

"தோற்றம் துடியதனில்
தோயும் திதியமைப்பில்
சாற்றியிடும் அங்கியிலே
சங்காரம் - ஊற்றமா
ஊன்று மலர்ப்பதத்தில்
உற்ற திரோதம்முத்தி
நான்ற மலர்ப் பாதத்தே நாடு"

Behind Nataraja lies the prabha consisting of 36 deepams or lights. These represent the 36 tattwas or stages in the evolution of the soul towards the realisation of cosmic consciousness resulting in Moksha or Liberation. It is also said that earrings worn by Nataraja are of two types (male and female) thus symbolising Shiva, the energiser and Shakti, or the energy principle. The cobra coiling round the neck and arm of Nataraja represents the indifference of the Lord to the presence of evil forces which do not affect him in the least as He performs his Anantha Thandavam (ஆனந்தத் தாண்டவம்). The coiling cobra may also symbolise the awakening of Kundalini Shakti. This removes all fear from the hearts of Bhaktas to whom no evil can befall as is well illustrated by the Kolarupathikam (கோளறுபதிகம்) of Thirugnanasambandar. Finally, the three

vibhuti markings and the Tilak (பொட்டு) on Nataraja's forehead will be explained in the following note on "The significance of vibhuti".

According to Anandacoomaraswami, the significance of Shiva's dance is three fold. First it is the image of his rhythmic activity as the source of all movement within the Cosmos which is the arch: Secondly the purpose of the dance is to release countless souls of men from the snare of illusion. The place of the dance at Chidamparam, the centre of the Universe is within the heart. In conclusion, he says that the dance is a synthesis of science, religion and art. "This is poetry: nonetheless, the truest science"

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VIBHUTI

It is said that vibhuti (வியூதி) or holy ash as its commonly known, is the symbol of the supreme in its transcendental and immanent aspects, being and becoming i.e. unmanifested and manifested. Shiva Himself has smeared his body with ash indicating that the whole Universe is dissolved and absorbed unto Him. This means that the ash is symbolic of the universal which is changeless and infinite. The ash also signifies the transient nature of all material things which when burnt leave only the ash behind. Thus the ash symbolises the destruction of all material objects and desires. Another meaning conveyed by vibhuti is based on the puranic story that Shiva burnt the God of desire, Kama (who is responsible for causing agitation of the mind) into heap of ashes and adorned himself with that ash signifying that He has conquered all desires and that his

Bhaktas should do like-wise in order to attain him.

Vibhuti is a symbol worn by the Hindus who are worshippers of Shiva. Vibhuti can be applied on the forehead and other parts of the body in the form of three parallel lines. Only those who have received Theedchai (தீட்சை) or initiation are allowed to wear in this manner. This initiation prepares the individual to destroy one's world of attachments. Thus wearing Vibhuti in the form of three parallel line indicates the destruction of the three Malams namely Anavam (ஆணவம்), Kanmam (கன்மம்) and Maya (மாயை). Hindus, who are not initiated, smear Vibhuti on the forehead and over the rest of the body just like Shiva has besmeared his body. Still others wear Vibhuti as a small circular dot on the forehead. This is the site of the third eye of Shiva which opens in an individual, to reveal to him the true nature of God, Soul and Universe.

The holy ash unlike most other materials does not change colour nor does it fade or produce any unwelcome smells. Its usual white colour indicates purity. Hence Vibhuti is regarded as the most precious object in the spiritual sense and it reminds its wearer to become pure in thought, word and deed. The sacred ash is also known to have been used by sages, saints and Avatars to produce miraculous cures and to remove any obstacles that came in their way while performing their duties for the benefit of mankind. Thus Thirugnanasambandar who started singing about the glories of Lord Shiva at the tender age of three years made use of Vibhuti to cure the Pandyan King

who was afflicted with severe burning sensation all over his body. The king was made to suffer from this ailment as the Samanas (சமணர்) who were the King's advisers set fire to the residence where Thirugnansambandar was staying. This was done with the concurrence of the King and on realising this atrocious deed, Sambandar ordered the fire to scorch the King பையவே சென்று பாண்டியற்காகவே. The King was first treated by the Samanas whose treatment merely increased the intensity of his ailment. So Sambandar was then called in and he sang the Thiruneetu Pathigam (Eleven verses extolling the virtues of Vibhuti). And this immediately cured the King. In these songs the potency of the holy ash in overcoming obstacles one may encounter in one's own life has been extolled. Hence all Saivaites should recite these verses at least once a day.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

In the modern world it is admittedly true that science and technology have provided mankind with advancements in agriculture, education, health services, transport and communi-cation, power supply and other material comforts. It is also equally true that science and technology have taken us to the brink of catastrophe as there is a real threat to the very survival of mankind owing to the danger of a nuclear holocaust. Hence it is urgent to consider why this danger signal has been hoisted. It is not difficult to decipher the reasons for the present dilemma in which man finds himself. The answer to the present dilemma

lies in the neglect of the practice of religion which alone can reduce the animal nature in man.

Science and religion are not contradictory but are complementary to each other as both are seekers of truth. Science investigates the truth in the external or material universe and hence scientific findings are within the perception of our senses. Religion, on the other hand, delves into the inner nature of man such as his soul and mind. Thus science is concerned with the objective world while religion deals with the subjective world. Hence the methodology applied for investigating the gross material universe is totally inadequate and unsuitable for finding out the subtle nature of the soul and God. Scientific investigations are carried out in red-brick universities while religious experience can be gained only by prayer, worship, concentration and meditation in solitude. So, in order to gain religious experience, we have to spend much more time in contemplation and meditation than what we are doing at present. Most of us do not devote even an hour or two a day for religious practices which alone can build up the character of man. How then can one ask "Have you seen God?" Most people do not even understand the nature of God which is well expressed by the following song:

விறகில் தீயினன்

பாலிற் படுநெய்போல்
மறையநின்றுளன் மாமணிச்சோதியன்
உறவுகோல் நட்டு
உணர்வுக்கயிற்றினால்
முறுகவாங்கிக் கடையமுன்றிற்குமே

CONCLUSION

Symbolism in Saivism is only a means to understand God who is beyond human description. The symbols of Shivalingam, Nataraja and Vibhuti have a deeper philosophic and scientific meaning. This interpretation holds good for other symbols used in Saivism. This has to be fully explained to the young Hindu children so that they could understand the use of symbolism in Saivism.

It becomes clear from the preceding remarks that progress in science and technology must be matched by an evolution in the spiritual nature of man which alone can remove the miseries of the present day world. Hence, it is the duty of parents and teachers to inculcate the spiritual values among children so that there is a fuller development of human potentiality which will enable future generations to understand the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. With this in view, let us all pray: Let all religions prosper and let there be harmony among all religions. Let there be peace, good will, progress and prosperity not only in Australia but also among nations and peoples of the world. Finally, in conclusion it may be stated that a synthesis of science and religion would perhaps provide a lasting solution to the problems confronting the world.

Visit <http://www.eng.uts.edu/~ravir>
under Personal to view other related
articles