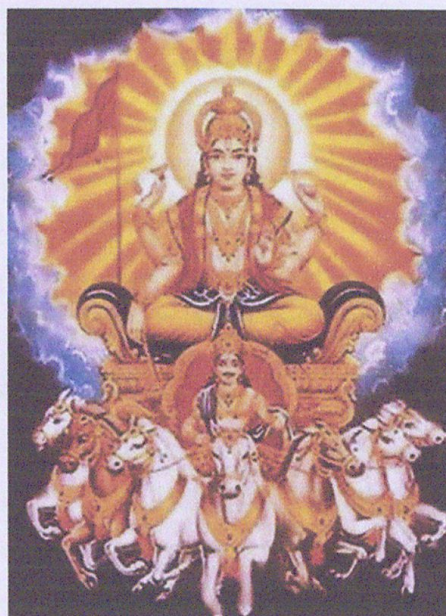


**SAFEGUARDING AND DOCUMENTATION OF RATHA SAPTHAMI
AS AN INDIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE FESTIVAL**



First Report

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- 1) Title : SAFEGUARDING AND DOCUMENTATION OF RATHA SAPTHAMI AS AN INDIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE FESTIVAL
- 2) Period of the Project : 01-04-2015 to 31-03-2016
- 3) Objectives of the Project :

The objective of this project is to safeguard the aspects of the celebration of Ratha Sapthami which has lost his ancient glory and significance now a days. This was marked with the singing of songs and use of Arka leaves while bathing, each action corresponding to the removal of one type of sin or other. Besides, it is also important to spread knowledge among people and bring light the astronomical, astrological, scientific and medicinal values inherent in the mode of celebration of this festival. It is not a mere religious activity and a ritual blindly followed by orthodox families but it is a beacon light drawing peoples to its latent content.

4) Implementation and progress of the Project :

This Project mainly focuses on the documentation of Rathasaptami festivals in Temples and houses. As the project has begun in the month of April 2015 and the festival of Rathasaptami was on 26th January 2015, I have to await for the upcoming festival in February 2016. Then only it will be ideal to document the entire festival activities. However, from the month of April 2015, I am collecting relevant research materials with regard to Rathasaptami. I visited many temples and libraries. I have collected research datas from Saraswathi Mahal library, Libraries at Tamil University, Madras University and Annamalai University. I visited many temples where Rathasaptami have been celebrated with more religious fervor and enthusiasm.

Rathasaptami festival at the following temples have to be documented for this project:

- 1) Sri Venkateswara Temple, Tirumala, Tirupati, AP
- 2) Sri Suryanarayana Swamy Temple, Arasavalli, Kakkinada, AP
- 3) Sri Neervannaperumal Temple, Thiruneermalai, Chennai
- 4) Sri Patalathri Narasimhar Temple, Singaperumalkoil, Chennai
- 5) Sri Suryanarayana swamy Temple, Suryanarkoil, Kumbakonam, TN
- 6) Sri Gomuktheswarar Temple, Thiruvavaduthurai, Kumbakonam, TN

Introduction

India is rich in its cultural diversity and she is a land of festivals where the people are engaged in celebrating social as well as religious festivals round the year with great enthusiasm and fervor. There are many important festivals that are celebrated all over the country. To name a few, the festivals like *Makara Sankranti*, *Dussehra* and many such festivals are celebrated with great fervor across the country. While there are few festivals that are confined to a particular region or state of the country. But *Ratha Saptami* is one such festival which is celebrated across the country.

Ratha Saptami counted as one of the most significant Hindu festivals. The ceremonial was occurred on the 7th day of Shukla Pakhsha also known as lunar fortnight of the Hindu month Magha. Ratha Saptami holds on anytime between December and February as per English calendar. In several parts of India this festival is observed as Surya Jayanti.

Ratha Saptami has astrological significance. It is believed that during this auspicious day, sun travel from the zodiac sign Simha Rasi into Makara Rasi. The festival indicates the beginning of summer, and also indicates the rise in atmospheric temperature. Ratha Saptmi celebrated just before the festival of Ugadi.

In Mythology

According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that Surya Deva or the Sun God sits in a golden chariot which is driven by seven horses and is driven by Arun -the charioteer of Lord Surya. The seven horses symbolically represent the seven colors of rainbow that are dispersed from the white light of the sun. According to another version, these seven horses even represent the seven days of the week.

The chariot has 12 wheels, which represents the 12 signs (each of 30 degrees) of the Zodiac (360 degrees) and constituting a full year, named Samvatsara. The Sun's own house is Leo (Simha) and he moves from one house to the next every month and the total cycle takes 365 days to complete.

The festival is also known as Surya Jayanti and the festival represents the movement of the Sun in the North-east direction. It is actually from this day that the Northern hemisphere of the Earth starts tilting towards the Sun and hence it marks the onset of spring season.

Importance of the festival

The festival of *Ratha Saptami* is a very important festival of the Hindus and the Hindus across the country start the day with a Holy Dip in the seas, oceans or holy rivers and perform *surya namaskaaras* - salutations to Sun god. And then they perform special poojas to the lord and offer *kheer* or the sweet rice to the Sun god. And in some regions of the country, the Hindus even offer *Pitru Tarpan*s on this day as it is believed very auspicious to do so on this day.

Also people visit the Sun temple and perform *pradakshana* - going round the main temple. It is believed that by doing so one will enjoy good health as Sun god is considered to give good health to his devotees.

Religious Aspect

Ratha Saptami is a very happy celebration of the Sun God who is said to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Hindus have always worshipped or believed in the Sun god or Surya. On this day rangolis are made on all sides of a picture with the chariot and the seven horses. In the centre cow dung is burnt. Also on this day, milk is boiled in earthen vessels, it is a common belief that boiling milk reaches the sun.

Surya is believed to be extremely important as he is the source of life. There is absolutely no life without the sun. This is the prime reason why the sun is placed between the nine planets or the navagrahas. People believe and pray to the sun god for many reasons, one main reason is that the

sun is said to be the provider of health and wealth. It is a common and popular practice that exposure to the sun in the morning every single day makes you feel radiant, energetic and more than anything very happy. People on this day should ideally pray to the Surya Dev by reciting or chanting or even listening to Vedam or the various parayanams. Praying to the sun everyday helps keep problems at bay and ensures good health and prosperity. There are many people who make offerings to the sun god every single day without fail. Their beliefs and faith in the sun keep passing on to their next generations.

This is how people even today have their faith intact. Ratha Saptami is the day when Surya was born to saint Kashyapa. The sun travels both north and south in a year. The first half of the year is considered to be more auspicious than the second half.

Meaning of Rathasapthami

Ratha Saptami is formed by addition of two words; Ratha means procession-chariot, and Saptami signifies to the seventh day of Magha month of Hindu calendar

Ratha = chariot. *Sapthami* = the seventh thithi.

Ratha Sapthami is the seventh thithi after the Amavasya (new moon) thithi in the month of the *Thai* (mid-January - mid February). There are deeper interpretations of what Ratha Sapthami stands for. *Saptha* means seven. It's indicative of the *saptha swaras* that underlie all of music. In other words, it's indicative of sound in general. We also know that *Sabda* means sound too. Thus there's a correlation between sound and Ratha Sapthami.

We give form to our thoughts through sound. The nature of sound is to *travel* from its place of origin. It does not need *aratha* or any other vehicle to travel. Thus the correlation between *ratha* and *sapthami* is not obvious. When something is not obvious, we seek the insight of the Siddhas so that we can learn the hidden meaning and use it for our upliftment.

The Siddhas say the word *ratha* is symbolic of the mind. The mind is the chariot. Many are the thoughts that arise in the human mind. These thoughts are like many different horses which pull the mind in many different directions. But for the mind to make systematic progress towards the Divine, the right set of horses should pull it in the right direction. This, indeed, is the Siddha insight

on the deeper meaning of Ratha Saptami. *Reining in the mind and putting it on the path to God is the philosophy behind Ratha Saptami.*

Legends of Ratha Saptami

There are two legendary tales that lend themselves to the celebration of Ratha Saptami:

The Sun God, Surya is believed to ride a chariot drawn by seven horses around the world. These seven horses represent the seven days of the week. The twelve wheels of the chariot represent the 12 months of the year. Surya rides his chariot between the 12 zodiac symbols in the sky and takes about a month to move from one sign to another and a year to complete one full circle. On Ratha Saptami, Surya turns his chariot towards the northern hemisphere in the north – east direction, changing the season from winter to spring. Hence, the Ratha Saptami day is considered auspicious.

Centuries ago, a king named Yashovarman of the Kamboj Empire had no children. Due to his great devotion to the Gods, he was blessed with a son. However, Yashovarman's trials did not end. His son was very sickly and was not in a position to rule the kingdom after him. Once a noble saint visited the kingdom and told king Yashovarman to ask his son to perform special prayer ceremony to the Sun God, Surya. When the king's son did as the saint said, he was restored with health and ruled his father's kingdom successfully.

It was mentioned in the Yuddha Kanda of the epic Ramayana that the Sun God is embodied with the power to award good health. Lord Rama was preached by Sage Agastya to chant Aditya Hridayam, a verse to please Lord Surya to grant him good health, when Rama became extremely tired of due to participation in the war against Ravana to rescue his wife Sita. Lord Rama chanted the mantra thrice and rejuvenated and lastly beat Ravana.

According to some historic tales, the king Yashovarman, king of Khambhoj blessed with a son after long struggle, but his son was not a healthy one. One day Sage Vinit came to the king's palace and aware of the situation of King Yashovarman's son. Sage Vinit proposed King to celebrate Ratha

Saptami. The king performed the rituals of Ratha Sapatami in a holistic way. In a little while his son became devoid of all ailments and became well.

This festival is celebrated as birthday of sun god (Surya Jayanthi) is born to the couple Kashyapa (sage) and Aditi.

It is believed that sage Bhisma breathed his last breath a day after the Ratha saptami day. As per mythology Lord Sri Rama worshipped sun god before going to battle with Ravana. King Satragit worshipped the sun god for the gem Samanthakamani (cause of prosperity) which is later given to Lord Krishna and Satyabhama marriage.

Surya Namaskaram even once a year on the Ratha saphthami day will give you good health for the whole year.

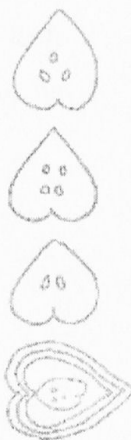
Ratha Saptami Worship Procedure

The Ratha Saphthami worship procedure is designed to imbue us with *gnaana* (knowledge of the Divine) and launch us towards the Divine. Sri Agasthiar informs us that the practice of wearing one's hair in the *sikha* form is very conducive to the blossoming of gnaana. When sunlight falls on that head where the hair is tied in the *sikha* knot, it sets spiritual wheels in motion that start the process of gnaana acquisition. But since this practice is not followed in modern times, there needs to be another technique by which humans can gain the same spiritual effect. This technique is the one revealed to us by Sri Agasthiar.

The centerpiece of this worship procedure is the Ratha Saphthami ritual bath. The leaves of the *erukku* shrub (*Calotropis gigantea*) shrub form an important part of the Ratha Saphthami ritual bath. Sri Agasthiar says that these leaves have an innate spiritual force that's similar to the one

derived from the sihka knot and thus they can be used to achieve spiritual effects similar to those gotten from the sikha. The *erukku* leaves have to be arranged one on top of the other in seven layers as shown in the adjoining figure.

North



1. One *erukku* leaf with its tip pointing north. On this leaf, place three rice whole *akshadai* rice grains, i.e., rice grains colored with turmeric. As a general rule, these rice grains should be blemish less and they should be selected and mixed by couples who are 60 or older.



2. On top of the above, place another *erukku* leaf with its tip pointing north. On this leaf, place four *akshadai* rice grains.



3. On top of the above, place another *erukku* leaf with its tip pointing north. On this leaf, one's mother should place two *akshadai* rice grains after *Gomatha* (cow) worship. She should circumambulate *Gomatha*, feed her and then only is she ready for placing these two *akshadai* rice grains. If one's mother has passed on, one's wife or father or daughter in law can do the needful for this step of the procedure.

4. On top of the above, place three *erukku* leaves with their tips pointing east. On top of these, place another *erukku* leaf with its tip pointing west. On this leaf, place one parboiled rice grain, one white rice grain and one *kaar* rice grain (a rice variety that's reddish in color).

5. On top of the above, place another *erukku* leaf with its tip pointing north. On this leaf, place three rice grains; each of these three should only be three quarters of a whole grain. These should be selected after due meditation on Lord Sri Trivikrama Vishnu (see picture below).

6. On top of the above, place another erukku leaf with its tip pointing south. On this leaf, place three rice grains that you have dehusked. In other words, these should not be processed by machine.

7. On top of the above, place another erukku leaf with its tip pointing in that direction where north and northeast meet. On this leaf, place a fragrant flower, place a piece of banana, mango or jack fruit and either thulasi or vilvam leaves or both.

On Ratha Saphthami day, wake up before sunrise, place a block of wood in the bathroom and seat yourself facing east. Place the seven layer erukku leaf arrangement on your head and have your ritual bath with your mind fixed on God. Concentrate on Sri Agasthiar and the Siddhas and think about the possible symbolism behind this unique worship procedure. (The Siddhas will reveal the symbolism soon.)

After the ritual bath, wear dry clothing and perform *Soorya Namaskar* and recite Sri Agasthiar's Aditya Hrudayam hymn. If you do not know this, just say "Om Salutations to Sri Soorya" 108 or 1008 times. At sunrise, offer *neivedyam* to Sri Soorya. Make sure that the food you offer is not too hot; it should be at a temperature that's fit for consumption. Make sure you feed the poor on this important day. This is the ancient Siddha worship procedure for Ratha Saphthami. Practice this and launch yourselves towards the Divine.

Important Facts

Hindus consider sun as an important god. Sun worship is needed for the physical and mental well-being of an individual.

Many Mandatory daily routines like surya namaskara, Sandhyavandana, and Gayathri japa are incorporated in the NityaVidhis.

The main deity of the Navagrahas or the Nine Planets of Hindu Astrology as well, he is also considered as one of the Navagrahas. Surya is often portrayed as riding a chariot driven by 7 horses or alternatively, by 1 horse with 7 heads. These 7 horses represent the colors of the rainbow and the 7 chakras in the subtle human body as well. Surya is sometimes shown with 2 hands, holding one lotus in each and sometimes with 4 hands, holding a lotus, Sankha (conch), Chakra (discus) and Gada (mace).

Surya Devata in Hinduism is considered to be an eye of the Virata Purusha, or the Vishwarupa (Universal Form) of Lord Sri Krishna himself. Incidentally, Surya is worshipped by people, saints and even asuras or demons. Certain groups of Rakshasas, called the Yatudhanas, were staunch followers of the Sun God.

Surya Devata is regarded as the Supreme Being among the followers of the Saura sect, which has now become very small and is almost endangered. The Sauras worship him as one of the five major forms of God.

One can find many temples, all over India, dedicated to the worship of Surya. He is worshipped in the early hours of dawn, especially on Hindu festivals such as Makar Sankranti, Ratha Saptami, Chhath and Samba Dashami.

Scientific Reasons:

As per the science all the planets revolve around the sun. When the earth rotates and revolves around sun day and night comes. Our lives start with sunlight. The sun is very far from earth and the sunlight takes 8.3 minutes to reach the earth. The ultra violet rays from the sun have antiseptic properties, kills germs and bacteria (unseen to x-rays and scanners). Plants prepare food. Sunlight is the rich source of Vitamin-D.

When the sun is in Capricorn constellation, it moves northward. It not only turns around, but ensures some important events to happen during the six months period of the movement. The six months will be Month of Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Gemini and Cancer. The power of Sun rays can be physically and practically seen.

Arka Leaves has many medicinal benefits. It is used to cure skin diseases, digestion problem, joint pains, abdominal pain, tooth aches etc. Chemicals present on these leaves will strengthen root of hair and cools scalp. The skins of its roots are used to cure cough and asthma. All kinds of diseases and illness can be cured so the bath is very sacred. It is called as a healing herb like Sun God as a healer.

According to astrology, the Sun gains more power (exaltation) in Mesha, lose power in Libra and own house is Leo. If the Sun is in Libra means Karthika masam (cold weather) i.e. sun rays will be weak. Without sun bacteria & virus raises so karthika Masam rituals came to protect ourselves from the weather. If the Sun is in Aries (Mesha) starts in April (gains full power) that means hot weather. On the day of Ratha Saptami Sun's northerly movement (north-easterly direction.) sun starts gaining power (beginning of hot weather). If the Sun is in Leo (own house) then Mix of Cool breezes and hot summer (august). Again in September bacteria and virus will start to take birth. so vinaya chavithi festival comes up to perform special puja only with variety leaves (patri) and especially Arka (jilledu) leaves.

Most Common Forms of Surya

Surya is worshipped in many forms. But two of the most common forms of the deity are Arka and Mitra.

- Surya in the form of **Arka** is worshipped mostly in North and Eastern India. The very grand and elaborate Konark Temple in Orissa, the Uttararka and Lolarka in Uttar Pradesh, the Balarka temple in Rajasthan and the Sun Temple at Modhera, Gujarat, are all dedicated to his form of Arka. Yet another temple, the Balarka Surya Mandir built in Uttar Pradesh in the 10th Century, was destroyed in the 14th Century, during the Turkish invasion.

- The other most common form of Surya, namely, **Mitra**, is found mostly in Gujarat. "Mitra" literally means "friend".

Different Names of Surya

Lord Surya is hailed by 108 names. The commonest among them are Aditya, Adideva, Angaraka, Arka, Bhaga, Brahma, Dhanwantari, Dharmadhwaaja, Dhatri, Dhumaketu, Indra, Jaya, Maitreya, Prabhakara, Ravi, Rudra, Savitri, Soma, Teja, Vaisravana, Vanhi, Varun and Vishnu.

Surya: Family and Relationships

Surya, or Vivasvata, had 3 queens, namely, Sharanya (also called Saraniya, Saranyu, Sanjana or Sangya), Ragyi and Prabha. Sharanya was the mother of Vaivasvata Manu (or Satyavrata, the present Manu) and the twins Yama (the God of Death) and his sister Yami. Later, she also gave birth to the Ashvin twins, who were the divine horsemen and physicians to the Devas.

Being unable to bear the extreme radiance emitted by Surya, Sharanya created a superficial shadow of herself, called Chhaya. She asked her to act as Surya's wife. In due course of time, Chhaya gave birth to 2 sons, namely, Savarni Manu and Shani (Planet Saturn) and 2 daughters, namely, Tapti and Vishti. Surya's other wife, Ragyi, gave birth to their son, Revanta or Raivata.

Incidentally, Surya Deva's sons, Shani and Yama, are the judges of human life and karma. While Shani Deva bestows positive or negative results for one's deeds committed during one's lifetime, Yama Deva grants these results after one's death.

In the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

In the **Ramayana**, Surya is said to be the father of King Sugriva. Sugriva was the one who helped Rama defeat the terrible demon king, Ravana. He imparts training to Hanuman to help him lead the Vanara Sena or the Army of Monkeys. Interestingly, Lord Rama himself is a descendant of Surya – he is a Suryavanshi that is, hailing from the dynasty of the Suryavanshas.

Surya bears great significance in the **Mahabharata** as well. According to this epic, Kunti receives the diksha for a mantra from the short-tempered sage, Durvasa. She was given the boon that whenever she chanted this mantra, she would be able to summon a Deva and also bear a child by him. Without realizing its seriousness, Kunti tested the mantra, summoning Surya. As Surya was forced to fulfill the obligation of the mantra, she miraculously begot a child from him, while actually retaining her virginity. Not able to bear the thought of becoming an unwed mother, princess Kunti was compelled to abandon her son, Karna, who later grew up to be one of the greatest ever warriors and a central character in the battle of Kurukshetra.

Incidentally, the first book of the Mahabharata does not mention Surya as one of the Adityas. However, he may be regarded as the joint strength of all the 12 solar deities, namely, Dhatri, Mitra, Aryaman, Sakra, Varuna, Amsa, Vaga, Vivaswat, Usha, Savitri, Tvashtri, and Vishnu.

In Other Cultures

The Sun God enjoys great importance in Greek and Egyptian mythology. Surya's Greek counterpart is Helios and the Egyptian Sun God is Ra.

In Zoroastrianism, which is based on the worship of Fire, the Sun is described as the "Eye of Ahura Mazda". This bears resemblance to Hinduism, which considers Surya to be one eye of Sri Maha Vishnu.

In Vedic Astrology

In Vedic astrology, Surya is regarded as slightly volatile, due to his nature of being too radiant and emitting too much heat. The Sun thus represents the soul, vitality, courage, willpower, authority, royalty and so on. His position is exalted in Mesha or Aries and takes a backward position in Tula or Libra. In Hindu horoscopes, the best location for Surya is considered to be right overhead, on the 10th house and on the 1st, 5th and 9th houses. Surya is the Lord of Kritika, Uttara Phalguni and Uttara Ashadha. He is often associated with reds, coppers and metallic colors and his gemstone is ruby.

Sun Temples in India

One can find several temples in India, dedicated to the worship of Surya. Here is a list of the major temples:

Konark Sun Temple, Orissa

The Konark Sun Temple is the most famous in India. Built in the 13th Century, it is also known as the Black Pagoda. It is located in Konark, Odisha and was supposedly built by King Narasimhadeva I of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty. This temple is built in the shape of a huge chariot with elaborately carved stone wheels, walls and pillars. A UNESCO World Heritage Site; also considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of India; this temple is now partially in ruins.

The name "Konark" is derived from the roots, "Kona" (corner) and "Arka". The structure was originally built at the mouth of the river Chandrabhaga, but now, the river has notably receded. Strictly adhering to the Kalinga style of architecture, this temple was built with Khondalite rocks and faced the east in such a way that the first rays of the sun could strike the main entrance. The Konark temple is well known for its intricate and erotic sculptures of maithunas.

Two smaller temples have been found nearby. One of them is the Mayadevi Temple, who is supposedly one of Surya's wives. The other one is a Vaishnava temple, comprising sculptures of Balarama, Varaha and Trivikrama. But neither of the temples has a main idol.

According to legend, Samba, the son of Krishna, suffered from leprosy. The sage Kataka asked him to worship Surya to cure his disease. Samba undertook penance for 12 years near the shores of Chandrabhaga and then built Konark and other temples as well.

Multan Sun Temple

This temple is also known as the Aditya Sun Temple and is located in modern Punjab, Pakistan. The original Multan Sun Temple is said to have been built by Samba. This temple is supposed to have been visited by Hsuen Tsang in 641 AD. The temple, rich in its opulence, gold and gems, became a great source of revenue for the Muslim invaders, post their invasion. He plundered and

looted its wealth, sparing only the idol, which was made of wood. Before the invasion, this idol had been covered with gems and gold, with two red rubies for its eyes.

The city of Multan probably got its name from the Sanskrit word, "Mulasthan", which is the location of this temple. However, the exact location of the original Multan temple is presently under debate.

Biranchinarayan Temple, Buguda

Also known as the abode of Biranchinarayana or the Wooden Konark, this temple is situated in the Buguda town in Orissa. It was built immediately after the Konark temple, by King Bhanjadeva in 1790. The main deity in this temple is Biranchi Narayana, whose idol was recovered from the ruins of Maltigad. The idol shows a chariot driven by seven horses with only one wheel on the left; also with Arjuna as the charioteer.

Made of wood, this temple faces west and is built in such a way that the setting sun's last rays fall on Surya's feet.

Sun Temple, Modhera

The Sun temple in Modhera, Gujarat, was created in 1026 AD by King Bhimdev of the Solanki dynasty. This impressive stone temple is located along the banks of the river Pushpavati, about a 100 kms from Ahmedabad. Though prayers are no more conducted in this temple, it still retains its earlier grandeur. At present, it is under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India.

According to the Skanda Purana and Brahma Purana, the regions surrounding Modhera was known as Dharmaranya. On the advice of Sage Vasishtha, Lord Rama had come to this place to purify himself after killing Ravana. He stayed in a place called Modherak and performed a yagna there, after which he set up a village named Sitapur, which eventually came to be known as Modhera.

Though the Solanki dynasty lost its power during the Turkish invasion, it regained its glory in the later years. The Solankis were considered to be Gurjars or descendants of Surya. They helped bring back the region's lost glory.

The temple is so built that the first rays of the sun fell on the idol of Surya, at the time equinoxes. Now, the temple is partially in ruins. However, a dance festival is annually held, in order to keep the ancient culture and tradition alive. Renowned artists travel from all over the globe to perform at this wonderful location.

Martand Sun Temple

Situated near Anantnag in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, this Sun temple is now in ruins. It was built in the Aryan style in the 8th Century and is now one of the most important archaeological sites in India. Built by King Lalitaditya Muktapida, it is said that the foundation of the temple was built around 370-500 AD.

Now, the Martand temple appears in the list of India's centrally protected monuments.

Suryanar Temple

The Suryanar Temple is situated in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu. This temple was built even before the Konark temple, by Kulottunga Choladeva. Comprising a 50-foot Gopuram or tower, there is an idol of the Surya with his chariot and horses, right at the entrance. The central sanctum sanctorum is dedicated to Surya, with shrines of the other planets situated all around it. This Navagraha temple is considered to be extremely powerful and attracts a large number of devotees every year, especially during festival times. Earlier, this temple was also known as Kulottungachola-Marttandalaya.

Festivals for Sun God

Many festivals are dedicated to Lord Surya. Apart from Rathasapthami, the major festivals are as follows:

Makar Sankranti is the most popular, also the most widely celebrated festival, dedicated to Surya Deva. Referred to as Pongal by Tamil people residing all over the world, this event is to show gratitude to the Deva for bestowing a good harvest. Here, the first grain is dedicated to him.

Chhath is yet another Hindu festival celebrated in Surya's name. Said to have been started by Karna, the son of Surya, it is held in Bihar, Jharkhand and certain regions in Uttar Pradesh, Nepal and even Mauritius.

Samba Dashami is a Surya-related festival celebrated in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. This is held in honor of Samba, the son of Krishna.

Surya Namaskara or the "Sun Salutation"

Many devout Hindus regularly perform the Surya Namaskara, literally meaning, "Sun salutation". This mode of worship is essentially made up of 11 asanas or yogic postures, which are assumed in successive movements, along with breath control, to form a flowing series of one complete namaskara. 12 mantras are chanted for each of these namaskaras. The Surya Namaskara is not only considered auspicious, but is also very beneficial for all-round health and wellness, both physical and mental.

Suryopasana or Sun Worship

Many Hindus perform regular Suryopasana that is, offering worship to the Sun God. The period from April 12th to 23rd is considered most auspicious for the worship of Surya. Surya is believed to be the giver of intelligence, confidence, good health, courage, strength, leadership qualities, independence, fame, success, power and much more. While an ill-placed position of the Sun in a person's horoscope could indicate low self-esteem, lack of confidence, ill health and dependency; an overly strong placement of the Sun could also trigger many negative qualities in the person concerned. After having a bath early morning, the seeker has to offer jal or water to Surya, looking in his direction, paying salutations to the Lord. Surya is regarded as a manifestation of the Brahman and so he is often referred to as Surya Narayana.

One can chant the Vedic mantra of Surya, which is mentioned right at the very beginning of this article.

The puranic mantra of Surya is as follows:

*"Japa Kusuma Sankasham Kashyapeyam Mahadyuthim
Thamognam Sarvapapagnam Pranathosmi Divakaram"*

- Surya's Beeja mantra is *"Om hran hrin hron sah suryay namah"*
- The mantra, *"Om ghrini suryay nama,* is commonly used as well.

Adityahridayam

Adityahridayam is a sloka or hymn in praise of Aditya, the Sun God. It was originally recited by Sage Agastya to Rama on the battlefield, before the latter went to fight the demon king, Ravana. Belonging to the Yuddha Kanda of the Ramayana, this hymn starts at the beginning of the Rama-Ravana duel. Rama was exhausted after a long day's fight with the army of Lanka and so, Agastya taught him the mantra in order to gain the courage and strength to face the enemy. The hymn was later compiled by Sage Valmiki. The Adityahridayam comprises a total of 30 slokas, which contain the whole episode of Agastya telling Rama about the greatness of Lord Surya; relating the benefits of reciting the hymn; the sloka itself; and how the Lord pervades the Consciousness and is actually one with the jeevatma.

The Adityas

The word "Aditya" in Sanskrit refers to something "that comes from Aditi". In other words, it refers to "the offspring of Aditi". Aditya also means the Sun.

In the Rigveda

According to the Rigveda, the Adityas are the 7 sons of Aditi. These celestial beings are Varuna, Mitra (or Surya), Aryaman, Bhaga, Amsa, Dhatri and Indra. Aditi had an eighth Aditya as well, called Martanda, who she rejected and disowned.

The Yajurveda records the existence of 8 Adityas, the last one being, Vivasvan. Some believe that this entity was actually Martanda, who was revived and then became Vivasvan.

The Rigveda describes the Adityas as akin to pure streams of water, free from all guile, falsehood and negativity. They have also been attributed as being completely Dharmic or righteous. They are benevolent divine beings, who protect all beings and also guard the world of the spirits.

In Other Texts

- The **Brahmanas**, which are commentaries on the 4 Vedas, list the existence of 12 Adityas, as Amsa, Aryaman, Bhaga, Daksha, Dhatri, Indra, Mitra, Ravi, Savitr, Arka (or Surya), Varuna and Yama.

- The **Linga Purana** too talks about 12 Adityas, namely, Vishnu, Indra, Dhata, Bhaga, Twashta, Amshuman, Varuna, Mitra, Vivasvan, Pusha, Savitr and Aryaman.
- In the **Chandogya-Upanishad**, Aditya is another name of Vishnu, in his fifth avatara as Vamana, the Dwarf. Interestingly, Vamana's mother, according to this Purana, is Aditi.
- One other list from the **Vishnu Purana** names 12 Adityas, as Amsa, Aryaman, Bhaga, Dhuti, Mitra, Pusan, Sakra, Savitr, Tvastr, Varuna, Vishnu and Vivasvat.

Rathasaptami festival in Temples

Tirumala – Immense importance is attached to Rathasaptami festival at Tirumala and it is always celebrated in a grand manner. Lord Venteswara is taken in a big procession on seven different vahanas in periodical intervals during the Rathasaptami day around the thoroughfares of the temple town reminding one of the mini Brahmotsavams. The festival commences with the break of dawn when the Lord takes a celestial ride on ‘Surya Prabha Vahana’ and concludes with ‘Chandra Prabha Vahana’ in the night.

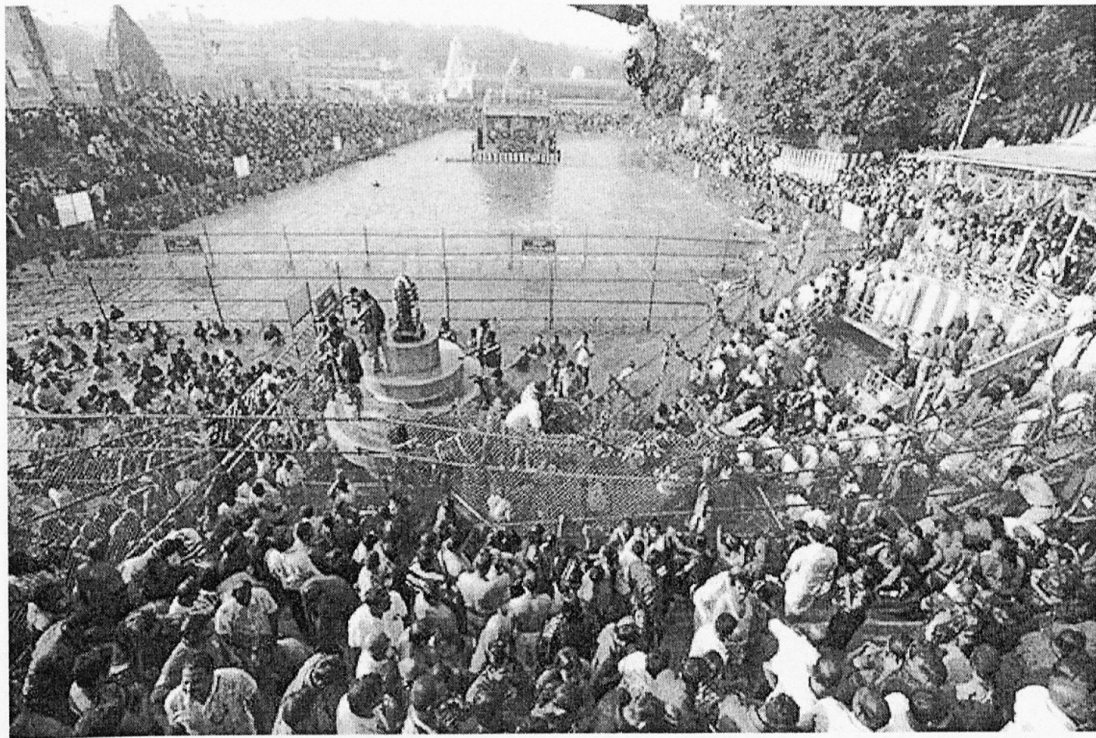
Tens of thousands of devotees from all and India congregate at the temple town to witness the celestial event of the first ray of the sun descending on the feet of the deity atop the ‘Surya Prabha vahana’.

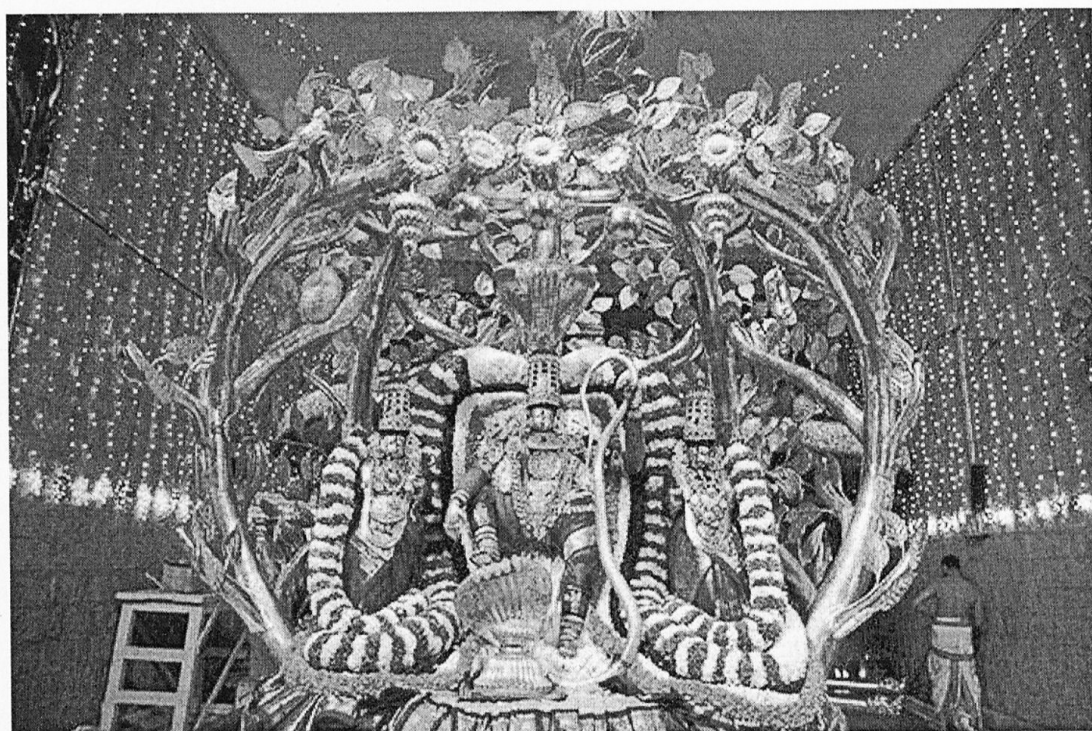
The following Timings are followed in the procession:

- Surya Parbha Vahanam by 5.30 am,
- Chinnasesha Vahanam by 9.00 am,
- Garuda Vahanam by 11.00 am,
- Hanumantha Vahanam by 1.00 pm,
- Chakrasnanam to Sri Chakrathalwar by 2.00 pm,

- Kalpa Vriksha Vahanam by 4.00 pm,
- Sarva Bhoopala Vahanam by 6.00 pm,
- Chandra Prabha Vahanam by 8.00 pm.

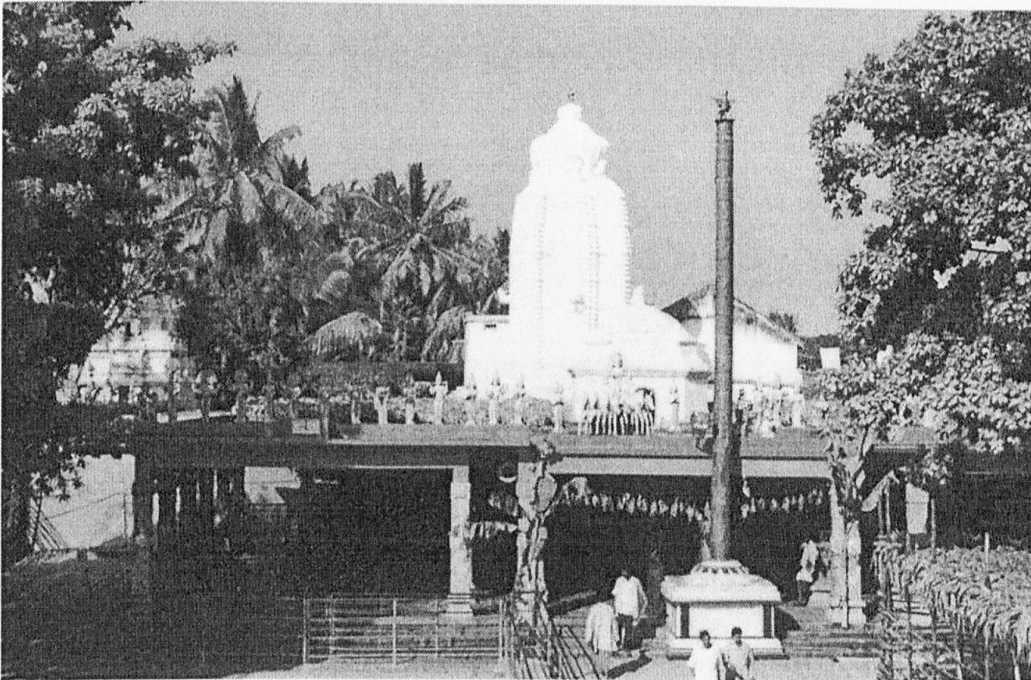






Sri Suryanarayana Swamy Temple, Arasavalli - The famous Sun God Temple situated in Arasavalli Village which is at a distance of about 1 KM. east of Srikakulam Town District headquarters of the North Coastal Andhra Pradesh. It is one of the ancient and all among two sun God temples in our Country. According to Padmapuranam, Sage Kasyapa installed the Idol of Surya at Arasavalli for the Welfare of mankind. Therefore, the Surya is of Kasyapasa Gotra. He is also termed as planetary King. According to the ' Sthalapuranam ' of the temple, Lord Devendra found this temple and installed the existing idol of the sun God commonly known as Lord Suryanarayana Swamy Varu under the following circumstances.

Once Lord Devendra, Ignoring the words of Dwarapalaka Nandi, attempted to force his entry for Darshan of Sri Rudrakoteswara Swamy varu at an untimely hour when Lord siva was along with his consort. The Dwarapalaka Nandi in the discharge of his duties kicked the intruder. Thus kicked and injured by the Devine attendant Indra fell down senseless. And in his unconscious state Indra dreamt that he would be relieved of his pain of injury in his chest caused by Nandi if he had built a temple and install an Idol of the Sun God . After regaining his consciousness, he remembered what he dreamt.

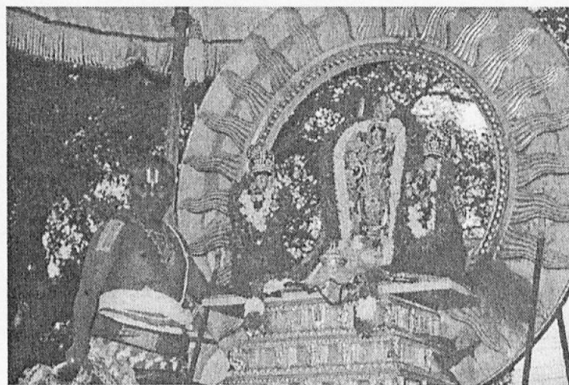


Sri Neervannaperumal Temple, Thiruneermalai - This is a hill temple. There are two big temples both at the top and the foot hill. Lord appears in four forms representing three incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The temple has a beautiful Teppakulam-tank covering three acres with a Mandap at the center. This is praised as Suddha Pushkarini, Ksheera Pushkarini, Karunya Pushkarini and Swarna Pushkarini. Two time puja is performed in the temple according to Vaikanasa Agama rules. Lord Sri Rama is in separate shrine.

Brahmmotsavam is celebrated to Lord Ranganatha in the hill temple in Chithirai (April-May) and in Panguni (March-April) to Lord Neer Vanna Perumal at the foot hills. On the Vaikunda Ekadasi day in December-January, Azhagia Manavala Perumal passes through the Sorga Vasal. He also grants the Garuda Seva darshan on Masi Magam day in February-March. A one day festival is celebrated for Narasimha in Aani (June-July) and for Ulagalanda Perumal in Aadi (July-August). Wedding festival for Neervanna Perumal and Anima Malar Mangai is celebrated on the Uthiram star day in Chithirai-April-May.

We have seen Gods coming in procession on one vahana only during festival days. But Ranganatha comes in seven vahanas in procession in a single day on the Rathasapthami day in Thai month (January-February). During the sunrise, Lord Ranganatha comes in Surya Prabha vahan when Arti is shown from foot to face as if Sun God himself performs this puja. Then He comes in procession on Hanumantha, Garuda, Sesha, Horse, Lion and Surya Prabha vahanas.

Tiruneermalai Neervanna Perumal temple is one among the 108 Divya Desas of Perumal. Lord appears in four postures. Narasimha blesses here as Lord Bala Narasimha.



Sri Patalathri Narasimhar Temple, Singaperumalkoil - Going around the hill on Poornima (full moon) day is an important event in the temple. Rays of Sun fall on Lord Narasimha's feet in Margazhi (December-January) and Thai (January-February) months and on the Rathsapathami day occurring during January-February day. Generally Lord Narasimha graces sitting with His left leg folded and the right leg down. Sri Patalathri Narasimhaswami in Singaperumalkoil graces with His right leg folded and left down. The idol is big in size.

Maharshi Jabali performed intense penance in this place seeking the darshan of Lord Sri Narasimha. Lord granted the Rishi His darshan at the Pradosha time (twilight time). Based on the event, Tirumanjanam is performed to the Lord at this time on Pradosha days.

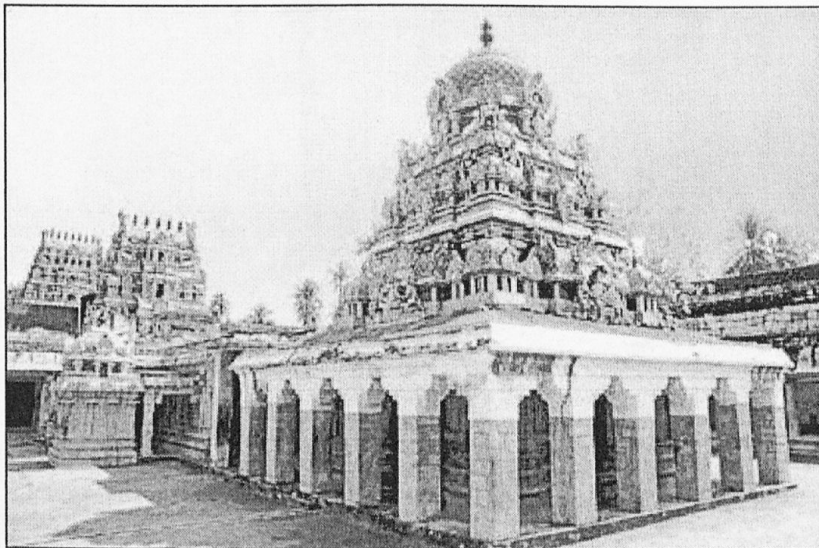
Presiding deity Patalathri Narasimhar graces with conch and the discus, his right lower hand gracing (abhaya hastha) the devotees and the lower left on His hip. He is facing east with His three eyes.

Procession deity Prahladha Varadha graces with consorts Sridevi and Bhoodevi in standing form under the Pranavakoti Vimana. As the presiding deity is on the cave temple on the hill, the devotee has to go round the hill top in his clockwise walk called Padakshina.



Sri Suryanarayana swamy Temple, Suryanarkoil - Lord Sun graces in the temple facing west with a Lotus on both hands accompanied by His consorts Ushadevi on the left and Pradhyushadevi on the right. The Navagrahas (nine planets) are without their their vahans-vehicles.

10 day Ratha Sapthami in Thain month (January-February) is a very important festival in the temple. This marks the 'U' turn of Lord Sun's Rath-Car from South to North beginning the six months called Utharayanam from Thai to Aani month – June-July. Seasons are calculated by the movements of Sun God. On the first day of each Tamil month special pujas and abisheks are performed to Lord Suriya-Sun who heads the Zodiac family. This is called Maha Abhishek drawing huge number of devotees. Also Saturn (Sani) and Jupiter (Guru) transition days are celebrated with special pujas.



Sri Gomuktheeswarar Temple, Thiruvavaduthurai –

Lord Shiva and Mother Parvathi were playing the dice in Kailash. At the end of each game, Lord Shiva was successively winning the game. As Parvathi grew angry, Lord cursed her to become a cow on earth. Lord said that the curse would end at this place where she should perform penance. Ambica did penance as a cow here. Go in Sanskrit means cow. Mukti means relief. As the cow got the relief from the curse here, Lord Shiva is praised as Gomukti Easwarar – Lord who relieved the cow from its past curse. Lord is a swayambumurthy. The Jeeva Samadhi (tomb) of Thirumoolar is in the temple.

