



Gitanjali 2024

An Ohmkaram Publication

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Kerala cultural organization based in St. Louis, MO

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The picturesque backwaters of Kerala



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From the Editorial Desk

The 2024 version of Gitanjali is finally here.

This year we chose to highlight the wonders of the backwaters of Kerala through this magazine. It is one of the most unique and recognizable features of our land, visited by tourists all over the world each year.

Thanks to the contributions from the members of Ohmkaram and their children, there are several articles pertaining to hinduism concepts, yoga, and the Hindu way of living. In addition, there are articles highlighting the Kerala town of Aranmula, discussion on COP29, etc.

Several pages are dedicated to pictures of the year in action at Ohmkaram. In addition to the yearly celebrations of Vishu, Onam and Vallomkali, Ohmkaram members also participated enthusiastically in several other temple related events throughout the year.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all contributors, members, and well-wishers who bring life to Ohmkaram and its magazine Gitanjali. Together, let us continue to build bridges, celebrate our roots, and create a legacy for generations to come.

Hope you all enjoy Gitanjali!

Wishing you all a very Happy New Year 2025!

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President's Message

Dear Ohmkaram Members,

As the year 2024 comes to a close, so too does my term as President of this incredible organization. Over the past year, we have navigated challenges, celebrated successes, and built a stronger foundation for the work we are so passionate about. Together, we have advanced our mission, touched countless lives, and reinforced the values that make Ohmkaram a force for good in our community.

Our accomplishments this year are a testament to the collective dedication of our members, the tireless efforts of our volunteers, and the unwavering support of our donors and partners. Highlights of our journey include Anniversary, Vishu, Onam, Vallomkali and Picnic events.



As always, the Malayalam School kept up its mission of providing Malayalam literacy to our next generation. Also chanting and listening to Ramayanam Parayanam under the guidance of our guru Sri. Narayanan Namboothiri at the Hindu Temple of St. Louis was a blissful experience.

We raised funds for Scholarships during events and were able to sponsor additional students for their education. I thank the members of the scholarship committee in selecting the ideal candidates for the scholarship.

Our special program this year called "Chithra Varnam 2024" was the biggest highlight as we could invite Padma Bhushan K.S. Chithra and Team for a live music performance. The program was made possible by grants from Missouri Arts Council and Regional Arts Commission and donors and partners.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Executive Committee and Board Members whose guidance and collaboration have been invaluable, to our volunteers whose passion and hard work are the heartbeat of this organization and to our supporters and community partners whose belief in our mission fuels everything we do. Thank you for trusting me to lead and for making this experience so rewarding.

As I prepare to pass the baton, I am confident in the future of Ohmkaram. Leadership transitions are opportunities for renewal, and I am excited to see the fresh ideas and energy that will propel us forward. I know that under the capable leadership of the next President and the new Executive Committee, this organization will continue to thrive and expand its impact.

Thank you for the privilege of serving as your President. Let us celebrate all we have achieved and embrace the promise of what is yet to come.

With gratitude and best wishes,

Kalyani Ganesh
President 2024

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Backwaters of Kerala

By: Amritha Navjith

Spanning nearly 900 kilometers, the backwaters of Kerala are one of its most distinctive and enchanting geographical features of the region, offering a serene and picturesque experience attracting tourists from around the globe.

Rivers directed westward toward the Arabian Sea deposited sediments along the coastline, creating sandbars and spits. The action of waves and shore currents further created low barrier islands across the mouths of these rivers. This led to the formation of estuaries and lagoons along the coast which over time, enclosed parts of the sea. This in turn created brackish water lagoons and lakes.

The backwaters of Kerala are thus a mix of freshwater and saltwater with five large lakes, including Vembanad Lake (the largest), Ashtamudi Lake, and Kayamkulam Lake, connected by both man-made and natural canals. The system is fringed by lush tropical vegetation, paddy fields, coconut palms, and small villages, which create a stunning backdrop for exploration.

The unique brackish water ecosystem supports a rich variety of flora and fauna. It is home to several species of fish, crabs, and birds, including kingfishers, cormorants, and herons. The mangrove forests along the shores act as natural habitats and breeding grounds for various aquatic species and help maintain ecological balance.

The network of canals and lagoons plays a central role in daily life, with most people using boats for commuting, accessing markets, and visiting neighbors. Coconut farming is a significant part of the local economy, with coconut trees lining the waterways and providing a source of income. Another common means of livelihood is fishing.

Uniqueness of the Kerala Backwaters

Houseboats (Kettuvallams):

The backwaters are best explored aboard traditional houseboats called *kettuvallams*. Originally used for transporting rice and spices, now these boats have been transformed into floating luxury accommodations, complete with bedrooms, dining areas, and observation decks. The slow glide of a houseboat through the tranquil waters offers an intimate view of Kerala's rural life and scenic beauty.



Unique Ecosystem:

The backwaters are a rare example of a natural and human-made water system coexisting harmoniously. The dikes and bunds, locally called *thannermukkom bunds* prevent salt water from the sea from entering the deep inside, keeping the fresh water intact. Such fresh water is extensively used for irrigation purposes, making parts of the water system suitable for agriculture and aquaculture.



Ayurveda and Wellness:

To attract tourists, the backwater regions have nurtured the ancient medicinal science of Ayurveda and many resorts and houseboats have sprung up offering Ayurvedic treatments and wellness programs to cater to the tourist population visiting and exploring these areas. The serene natural environment and gentle rhythm of the water create a perfect setting for relaxation and rejuvenation.

Coir Villages and Local Culture:

The backwaters are dotted with small villages that specialize in coir-making (rope and mats made from coconut fiber) and traditional boat-building. Visitors nowadays can witness the craftsmanship and interact with the locals, gaining insights into their way of life, which has remained relatively unchanged for centuries.



Biodiversity:

The Ashtamudi Wetland and Vembanad Lake are recognized as Ramsar sites of international importance, emphasizing their ecological significance. These areas are a haven for migratory birds and aquatic life, making them ideal for birdwatching and nature photography.

Crabs, frogs, and over 200 species of fish and shellfish abound in the area. Also birds like terns, kingfishers, darters, cormorants, and herons are a common sight. Mangroves help to stabilize shorelines and protect the ecological balance in addition to providing shelter and breeding space for aquatic fauna.

Cultural Experiences:

The backwaters are a hub for Kerala's rich cultural heritage. Traditional art forms like Kathakali and Mohiniyattam are performed at several resorts and cultural centers. Festivals such as the Nehru Trophy Boat Race on Punnamada Lake showcase the region's vibrant traditions and the locals' deep connection to water.

Sustainable Tourism:

Efforts have been made to promote eco-friendly tourism in the backwaters. Houseboats use solar energy, and many initiatives aim to protect the fragile ecosystem while ensuring that local communities benefit from tourism.

Top Destinations in the Kerala Backwaters

Alleppey (Alappuzha): Known as the "Venice of the East," it is the most popular starting point for houseboat cruises.

Kumarakom: A tranquil village on the banks of Vembanad Lake, known for its bird sanctuary and luxury resorts.

Kollam: A gateway to the Ashtamudi Lake, offering the longest backwater cruise in Kerala.

Kuttanad: Known as the "Rice Bowl of Kerala," it features paddy fields below sea level.

Bekal and Kasargod: Emerging destinations in northern Kerala, offering less-explored backwater experiences.

The Kerala backwaters are a testament to the state's harmonious blend of natural beauty, cultural richness, and sustainable living. They offer an escape into a world of tranquil waters, verdant landscapes, and timeless traditions. Whether it is a houseboat journey, a village visit, or simply soaking in the serene environment, the backwaters provide a unique and unforgettable experience that captures the essence of Kerala, often referred to as "God's Own Country."



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Yoga: Not Just Exercise, but Harmony of Mind and Body

By: Rathi Narayanan, PhD in Yoga

Yoga is not merely physical exercise; it is a means to achieve harmony of the mind and body. Its ultimate goal is to turn the mind inward from the external world, leading towards self-realization. The final aim of yoga is spiritual liberation or *samadhi*. By living a life guided by virtuous thoughts, words, and deeds, yoga opens the door to self-realization for humanity.

However, centuries forward from its ancient roots to the modern high-tech era, yoga is no longer predominantly pursued for self-realization. Instead, it has gained popularity for alleviating physical and mental discomforts and achieving well-being. Even so, the practice of *asanas* (physical postures) and *pranayama* (breath control)—which many undertake for physical health—subtly guide practitioners toward awakening their subtle body, often without conscious awareness.

Typically, before embarking on yoga practice, two foundational paths - *Yama* and *Niyama* - must be observed and cultivated.

Yama outlines certain ethical disciplines for daily life, including:

Ahimsa (Non-violence): Fostering compassion and empathy while avoiding harm to any being.

Satya (Truthfulness): Promoting honesty in all spheres and situations of life.

Asteya (Non-stealing): Refraining from coveting or taking others' possessions.

Brahmacharya (Self-restraint): Channeling the mind from indulging in spiritual pursuits.

Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness): Freeing the mind from attachment to material gains.

Practicing these virtues prepares one to embrace *Niyama*, which outline methods for inner purification:

Shaucha (Cleanliness): Encompassing physical, mental, and environmental purity, including food and living spaces.

Santosh (Contentment): Cultivating satisfaction and a cheerful disposition.

Tapas (Discipline): Maintaining consistency and commitment to spiritual practices despite challenges.

Swadhyaya (Self-study): Gaining knowledge that aids spiritual growth.

Ishwarapranidhana (Surrender to the divine): Acknowledging and offering oneself to the omniscient, omnipotent universal consciousness.

According to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, one should delve into *asanas* only after mastering these disciplines. Yet today millions of people practice yoga solely to combat physical ailments and mental stress, often without awareness of these foundational aspects. Even then, consistent yoga practice can help control the mind and body significantly, even if one does not achieve the ultimate state of yoga (union).

In an era where non-violence, truthfulness, and non-attachment are fading, aggression, deceit, and greed prevail, yoga emerges as a means to bring individuals back to balance. At its core, human life is built upon reciprocity. Yet, in a time when mobile phones, WhatsApp, and Facebook are turning people into "cyber beings," human connections are dwindling. People spend more time interacting with strangers than smiling at their neighbors. In this context, yoga encourages individuals to turn inward, observe themselves, and reconnect with their inner selves.

Those unfamiliar with *yama* and *niyama* but practicing yoga, unknowingly progress toward mental stability and self-discipline as described by Patanjali. The differences between those who practice yoga regularly and those who do not are visibly significant.



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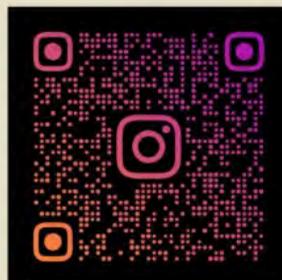
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The Science and Philosophy of Idol Worship

By: Dr. Sudhir Prayaga

Generally, there is a misconception that Hindus have a lot of Gods and that idols are our Gods. This notion is especially amplified by Western missionaries claiming polytheism and idol worship as pagan rituals, either due to a lack of understanding or a deliberate attempt to discredit Hinduism. Many times religious conversions are made based on these kinds of misleading and incorrect arguments. Unfortunately, even many Hindus are not educated enough on these subjects and are unaware of the purpose and intent of idol worship. Here I will try to give a brief overview of the concept of 'idol worship' and the scientific basis for it.

Before that let me clarify the meaning of the words 'idol' and 'worship' used in the context of Hinduism. These labels coined by Westerners from their religious perspective are incorrect and lead to misunderstanding of Hinduism. In Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) worship of God is paramount, where blind faith and belief are warranted without questions decreeing that the information provided in their holy book is the word of God. In contrast, according to the ancient Hindu way, we call it variously as *japa*, *upasana*, *yagna*, *pooja*, etc. depending on the type of practice, and are done for self-improvement and self-knowledge. Practitioners should question information provided in religious texts until they are convinced of the facts. In Sanskrit, '*vigraha*' means that which helps to understand and clearly, has a different connotation than commonly used for idol.

The biology of human spirituality

Man, since the dawn of civilization, has been curious about the supreme and the nature of reality. All cultures or groups of people around the world have developed their own rituals and practices for God realization and spirituality. We can find archeological evidence of these across the globe, from simple burials to great pyramids. Most of them did not survive the test of time, belief, intellect, or science. In addition, during medieval and modern times, western organized religions called them pagan and uncivilized to show their superiority and this led to the destruction of most of these native or indigenous cultures, customs, rituals, and practices from around the world.

Dean Hamer in his book '*The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired in Our Genes*', gives scientific and genetic evidence for human religiosity. He proposes the God gene hypothesis, where he reasons that human spirituality is hard-wired into our genes and is heritable. Humans by nature are gregarious and the sense of optimism is the advantage provided by the natural selection (evolutionary advantage) of spirituality. The psychosomatic changes brought out by the God gene product at the effector level are proteins which cause the release of feel-good neurochemicals such as serotonin, and dopamine by the pineal gland in the brain. The pineal gland is associated with the ajna chakra or the so-called third eye of the Shiva. Mystic experiences, a feeling of connection to nature and the universe, and God realizations are examples of these.

Psychologist Claude Robert Cloninger, author of '*Feeling Good: The Science of Well-Being*', developed methods to quantify human spirituality and concluded that spirituality is an innate human behavior. While specific religious beliefs, such as belief in a particular God, have no genetic connection and are cultural. One of the qualities he measures is 'self-forgetfulness', the tendency to become totally absorbed in some activity, such as meditation. This is described in Gita as '*apohanam*', (Gita 15:15). The arrival of communism in the late 19th century and the establishment of communist governments in many countries in the 20th century led to the thinking that belief in God is not required, and human religiosity is ephemeral. But communism turned out to be worse than other organized religions (I am comparing it to other Western religions because its inherent structure and principles are like that of other organized religions).

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In less than 100 years communism and communist governments are almost non-existent around the world. Probably one of the major reasons for its demise is its active suppression of religious practices. This is the most physical evidence for the requirement of religiosity for human existence at the population level.

Although I am driving the point that biologically religiosity is an innate human behavior, it does not mean every person is religious or spiritual at an individual level. In fact, religiosity varies from individual to individual based on their genetic makeup (nature) and epigenetic modification (nurture). In Hinduism, God realization is personal and varies from person to person, unlike that claimed by Western religions, and is one of the major differences which sets Hinduism apart. That is why at the practical level Hindus have very many Gods to suit individual needs. Our modern scientific understanding of spirituality also supports this view of variance.

The philosophy of idol worship

According to Vedanta (Hindu philosophy), the whole universe is encompassed by a single supreme spirit or being, the *Brahman* or *Purusha*. God is omnipresent and everything in the universe (Isavasya Upanishad-1), there is nothing else in the universe other than God (Gita 7.7). God is within you and without you (Gita 13.16, Isavasya Upanishad 5). Thus, unlike the God of the Abrahamic religions, Hindus believe that God is not separate from oneself or the universe (the subject and object are the same). So, to know and understand God is to know oneself first. Not our physical body but the eternal spirits in all of us (*atman*). Unlike the body, the *atman* is eternal and indestructible (Gita 2:30).

In contrast to Abrahamic religions, God realization is not a one-size-fits-all, according to Vedanta. For example, some people have talent in sports, while others in music, and so on. Similarly, dedication to God realization also varies from person to person. Our ancient Rishis have recognized this universal fact and developed many scientific and well-founded practical ways for God realization according to one's abilities and interests. These include Samkhya yoga, Raja yoga, Karma yoga, and Bhakti yoga, which are described in Bhagavat Gita and other texts.

Just like everything else in life, Hindus believe God realization also requires constant practice and dedication (Gita 6.35), but is possible. For example, if it takes ten hits with a hammer to break a stone did the first nine hits go to waste? Those are the ones which lead you to the final goal of breaking the stone. A dedicated practitioner should strive to convert his knowledge or *jnana* into a practical and personal experience or *vijnana*. This is like the butter coming out with repeated churning of milk. Or the knowledge that fire is hot is *jnana*, and you feel the heat when you place your hand on fire is *vijnana*. Unlike most other religions, in Hinduism, faith and belief are personal and to be experienced by dedicated devotees. Bhakti yoga offers a simple and practical way for all to follow God realization, converting *jnana* into *vijnana*. This can be divided into *Sagunopasana* and *Nirgunopasana*.

Sagunopasana is a scientific, but practical and simple approach to focus your mind (*cit*) during the practice on an image or 'idol'. The idol itself is not the God but an imagery. It can be considered as a personal God. In Hinduism, we do not worship God, but do *upasana*, which is mostly meant for self-development. *Upasana* includes many techniques, rituals, or practices aimed at focusing our mind for self-realization. As mentioned before, the purpose is to know yourself first. These techniques help to take your mind off mundane matters and onto the absolute. Once the practitioner has achieved his goal, he can discard the imagery and move on to *Nirgunopasana*, where no images are used. This is like a pole vault jumper who uses a long stick to jump but discards the stick after crossing the bar. *Nirgunopasana* is difficult for practitioners who have not attained detachment from one's body and the mundane (Gita 12:5).



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The psychology of idol worship

All religions have rituals and practices for God realization. Practices like fasting for example, help to control physical desires and interests. They alone are not effective at controlling our wandering senses and mind (Gita 2:59) but remain a ritual and outward appearance without affecting the atman. Controlling the mind and senses is of paramount importance. Our ancient Rishis recognized this fact and developed many techniques, including idol worship as a means to focus our minds. During *sagunopasana* the idol helps one to focus all five senses, mind, and intellect on the absolute.

Human beings are endowed with five sense organs (*jnanaindriyas*), to perceive the universe around them and to interact with it. But these organs often work independently until we put our mind (*cit*) to focus. Similarly, our mind also wanders until we put our intellect (*buddhi*) to focus. Hindus believe that with proper practice, one can bring all *jnanaindriyas*, *cit*, and *buddhi* to focus. Katho Upanishad gives a good analogy- it compares the body to a chariot (*ratham*), *atman* as the chariot owner, *bhuddi* as the charioteer (or the driver), five horses pulling the chariot as the 5 sense organs or *jnanaindriyas*, and the mind or *cit* as the reins of the horses (Katho Upanishad 3 - 4, 5). An intelligent person controls the senses with the mind and vice-versa. If not, the body will follow the senses for physical and material wealth like the untamed horses.

During idol worship or *vighraha upasana*, the idol and the decoration like flowers help our visual senses. Bhajans, *japa* or ringing of bells during the puja help our hearing sense. Burning incense help our sense of smell. *Prasadam* or *nivedyam* help with sensing taste. Finally, the physical posture and beads used during *japa* help with touch sense. All these work together to bring your mind into a single focus. Our ancient Rishis clearly understood psychology, or the mind and devised techniques and rituals to achieve this. For example, *Bhajans* (singing songs), is the simplest form. Then comes *japa*, (chanting a mantra like Ohm Namoh Narayana, loud, quiet, or in the mind) or other levels like yoga and meditation. In his book '*59 Seconds*', Richard Wiseman reports on a study concluding that in a relationship if images or materials connecting with your loved ones are around you, the relationship will last long and strong. For example, we place pictures of our loved ones in our office, but the picture itself is not our loved ones. Similarly, if you like to have a relationship with God, it helps to have images or materials that identify God's presence. An Idol is a good example. Of course, we do not know how God looks, and God does not look like what is depicted in an idol.

Sri Sankaracharya is once said to have prayed to God to forgive him for 3 mistakes. 1) That he prayed to God with idols who cannot be described by images; 2) Praised God with words, who cannot be explained or described in words; and 3) Searched for God by going to sacred places on pilgrimage, while God is omnipresent. Similarly, in Upanishad it says that whatever you are worshipping as Brahman is not really Brahman, they should be discarded once it is understood.

The physics and mathematics of idol worship

From the very dawn of religious consciousness, people have attempted to approach and know the divine by using various physical devices. Such vehicles of worship included images, sacred geometry, celestial objects, etc. A good example from Hinduism is the number 108. The use of images to know God has been the norm rather than exception, in the history of the world's many religions. The use of mathematics, trigonometry, and astrology in this context is known. Hinduism takes a different approach to religion and requires one to use intelligence and experience. The human mind wants logic, reason, and facts to experience reality. That is why Hinduism has no conversion because it is not based on a set of belief systems but on realization. It is based on logic, reason, and the experience of each individual.

Everything in this article is my interpretation only and I am solely responsible for any errors or misinterpretations. My other articles can be found on my blog - prayagaprinciples.blogspot.com.

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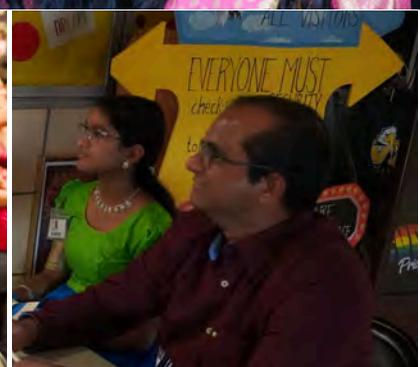
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How Caitlin Clark Became Basketball's Ultimate Game-Changer

By: Lakshmi Kadungath, 7th grade

Caitlin Clark is a name most basketball fans know. But for those who haven't heard of her, let me introduce you to a player who's changing the game. Caitlin has shattered records, including the most points scored by a rookie in the WNBA, the most three-pointers in a season by a rookie, and the most assists in the league's entire history. Her talent, dedication, and charisma have made her a global basketball phenomenon.

Scoring Machine

One of Caitlin Clark's biggest strengths is her ability to score from almost anywhere on the court. Whether it's a three-pointer, a layup, or a jump shot, she makes it look effortless. Her accuracy and confidence make her a nightmare for defenders, as she can score from spots that most players wouldn't even attempt.

Three-Point Superstar

Caitlin is famous for her long-range shooting. She can sink incredible three-pointers, even from far beyond the arc, making it look like magic. She's broken records for the most three-pointers in a season and a single game, leaving fans and opponents in awe. Watching her confidently shoot from deep is always thrilling—you never know when she'll pull off the impossible!

Overcoming Challenges

Despite her incredible achievements, Caitlin faced challenges in her career. Even with her record-breaking performances, she struggled to find the recognition and opportunities she deserved early on. But Caitlin never gave up. Her determination and hard work led her to overcome these obstacles and become one of the top players in the game.

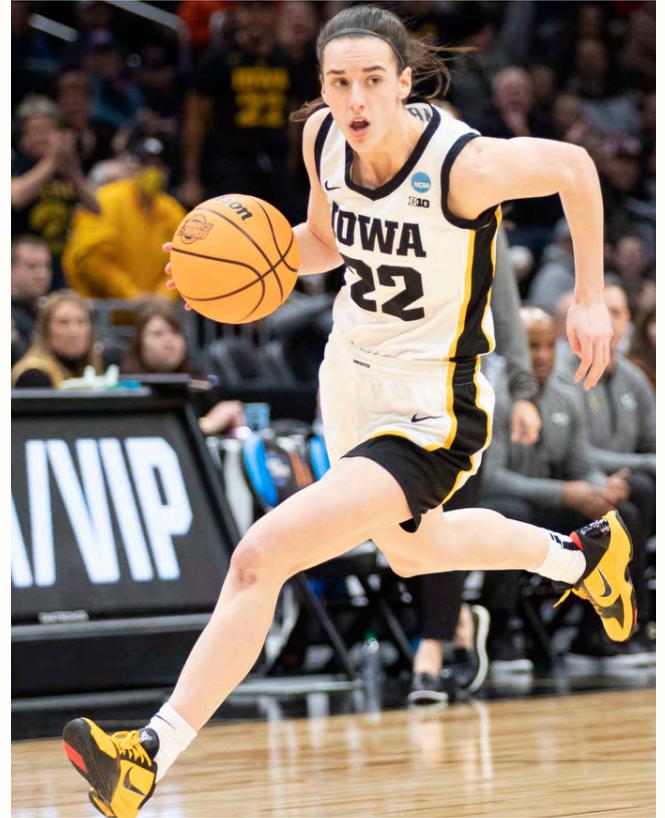
Team Player and Record Breaker

Caitlin isn't just a scorer—she's a complete team player. With an average of 8 assists per game, she's one of the best playmakers in basketball history. Her court vision and smart decision-making help her elevate her teammates and lead her teams to victory after victory. Caitlin's ability to balance her own scoring with helping others makes her a true all-around player.

An Inspiration for All

Caitlin Clark is more than just a basketball player—she's an inspiration for everyone. Her journey is a reminder that hard work, confidence, and resilience can lead to greatness. Whether it's her record-breaking skills, her leadership on the court, or her determination to succeed no matter the obstacles, Caitlin shows us all what's possible when you believe in yourself.

If you haven't heard of Caitlin Clark before, now you know why she's one of the most talked-about players in basketball. And if you already knew her, this is just another reason to cheer her on as she continues to make history and inspire people around the world.



മണ്ഡലകാലത്തിലെ മഹാപ്രതം

പി. എൻ. നാരായണൻ നമ്പൂതിരി, ശബരിമല മുൻമേൽശാന്തി

മണ്ഡലമാസഓർമകളിൽ ആദ്യമെത്തുന്നത് പുല്ലിലും, പൂവിലും, കല്ലിലും, മുളളിലും ഈശ്വരചൈതന്യം ഉണ്ടെന്ന് ഓർമ്മപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന ശരണം വിളികളാണ്. ആദ്യമായി ശബരിമലയിലേക്ക് പോയത് ഏഴാം വയസിലാണ്, അമ്മാവൻറെപ്പുമായിരുന്നു യാത്ര. പിന്നീട് എത്രയോ തവണ ആ സന്നിധിയിലെത്തി, ഒടുവിൽ ഓരോ പ്രഭാതത്തിലും സാക്ഷാത് കലിയുഗവരദന് മുന്നിൽ തിരി തെളിയിക്കാനും, ഹരിവരാസനം മുഴങ്ങുമ്പോൾ സ്വാമിയെ ഉറക്കി നടയടയ്ക്കാനും മഹാഭാഗ്യം ലഭിച്ചു. അങ്ങനെ ഒരു വർഷം മുഴുവൻ അയ്യപ്പസന്നിധിയിൽ.

മാലയിട്ട ഭക്തനും മലയിലെ ദൈവവും ഒന്നാകുന്ന ലോകത്തിലെ ഒരേ ഒരു പുണ്യസങ്കേതമാണ് ശബരിമലയെന്നാണല്ലോ. തേടി വന്നതാരെയാണോ അത് നീ തന്നെയാണെന്ന് ഓർമ്മിപ്പിക്കുന്ന സ്വാമിക്ക് മുന്നിൽ ജാതിയും മതവുമില്ലാതെ വന്നുപോകുന്ന ഭക്തകോടികളെ അതിശയത്തോടെയേ കാണാനാകൂ. യാഗത്തിനൊരുങ്ങുന്ന യജമാനൻ കഠിനമായ നിഷ്ഠകളിലൂടെയും വ്രതങ്ങളിലൂടെയും കടന്നു പോകണം. വൈദികകാലത്തെ ആചരണമാണത്. ഏതാണ്ട് അതുപോലെ തന്നെ കഠിന വ്രതങ്ങളാണ് അയ്യപ്പസ്വാമിയുടെ ദർശനത്തിന് മുന്നോടിയായി കലിയുഗത്തിലെ ഭക്തരും സ്വീകരിക്കുന്നത്. അപരിഷ്കൃതമെന്നും, അപ്രസക്തമെന്നും പറഞ്ഞ്



വിമർശിക്കുന്നവരോടും തർക്കിക്കുന്നവരോടും പുച്ഛിക്കുന്നവരോടും എന്ത് പറയാൻ. ആർത്താഹ്ലാദിച്ച് എനിക്കെന്നും, എന്റേതെന്നും മാത്രം ചിന്തിച്ച് ജീവിതം ആഘോഷിക്കുന്നതിനിടയിൽ 41 ദിവസം പതിവ് രീതികളിൽ നിന്ന് മാറി ജീവിതത്തിൽ അൽപ്പം വിട്ടുവീഴ്ച ചെയ്യുന്നത് ഒരു ചെയ്ഞ്ച് എന്നുമാത്രം ചിന്തിച്ചാൽപോലും വ്യത്യാസം മനസിലാക്കാനുള്ളതേയുള്ളൂ. മനസീനും, ശരീരത്തിനും അത് ഊർജ്ജം പകരും.

മാലയിടുക എന്നാൽ ഒരു മുദ്രധാരണമാണ്. അതൊരു ഓർമപ്പെടുത്തലാണ്. ലൗകികതയിൽ നിന്ന് ആത്മീയതയിലേക്ക് കടന്നെന്ന് കഴുത്തിലെ തുളസിമാലയോ രുദ്രാക്ഷമോ സാധകനോട് നിരന്തരം പറഞ്ഞു കൊണ്ടേയിരിക്കും. കുട്ടികൾ

പോലും മാലയിട്ടാൽ നൂണ പറയാൻ മടിക്കും. മാലയിടുന്ന വ്യക്തി അയ്യപ്പൻ എന്ന പേരുകൂടി സ്വീകരിക്കുകയാണ്. അദ്ദേഹത്തെ പിന്നെ സാധാരണ ഒരാളെപ്പോലെയല്ല മറ്റുള്ളവർ കാണുന്നത്. അറിയാതെ തെറ്റ് പറ്റിയാൽ സ്വാമി ശരണം എന്ന് ക്ഷമാപണം നടത്തുന്നവരാണ് പലരും. ശ്രീകോവിലിൽ നിന്ന് പുണ്യാഹം തളിച്ച് ശുദ്ധമാക്കിയ മാല പുജാരിയിൽ നിന്ന് ഏറ്റുവാങ്ങുന്ന ഗുരുസ്വാമി അയ്യപ്പമൂലമന്ത്രം ഉരുവിട്ട് ഭക്തനെ ധരിപ്പിക്കുന്നതാണ്



വ്രതാരംഭത്തിന്റേ തുടക്കം. പിന്നീട് ആ മാലയിട്ടയാൾ സമ്പൂർണ്ണമായി അയ്യപ്പന് സ്വയം സമർപ്പിക്കുകയാണ് ചെയ്യുന്നത്.

ശരിയായി വ്രതം ആചരിച്ചുവേണം ശബരിമലയ്ക്ക് പോകേണ്ടത്. അയ്യപ്പഭക്തൻമാർ രണ്ട് നേരവും കുളിച്ച് അടുത്തുള്ള ക്ഷേത്രത്തിൽ പോയി തൊഴുത് കഴിയുമെങ്കിൽ നൂറ്റിയെട്ട് തവണയെങ്കിലും സ്വാമിയേ ശരണമയ്യപ്പാ എന്നുരുവിടാൻ ശ്രദ്ധിക്കണം. മത്സ്യമാംസാദികൾ പൂർണ്ണമായും വർജിക്കണം.

ലഹരി പദാർത്ഥങ്ങളുടെ ഉപയോഗവും പാടില്ല. അയ്യപ്പനുള്ള വീട്ടിലെ മറ്റ് കുടുംബാംഗങ്ങളും മലയ്ക്ക് പോകുന്നില്ലെങ്കിലും അതേ വ്രതം അനുഷ്ഠിക്കുന്നു എന്നതാണ് മഹത്വം. കുളിച്ച് ശുദ്ധമായാണ് അവർ അയ്യപ്പനുള്ള ഭക്ഷണം പാകം ചെയ്യേണ്ടത്. തലേന്നാൾ ബാക്കി വന്ന ഭക്ഷണം കഴിക്കാൻ പാടില്ല. നാൽപ്പത്തിയൊന്ന് ദിവസം ബ്രഹ്മചര്യം അനുഷ്ഠിച്ചാൽ വ്രതം അത്രയും ശക്തിമത്താകും. മനസും, ശരീരവും പൂർണ്ണമായി ശുദ്ധമായി സൂക്ഷിക്കാൻ ഓരോ അയ്യപ്പനും ശ്രദ്ധിക്കണം.

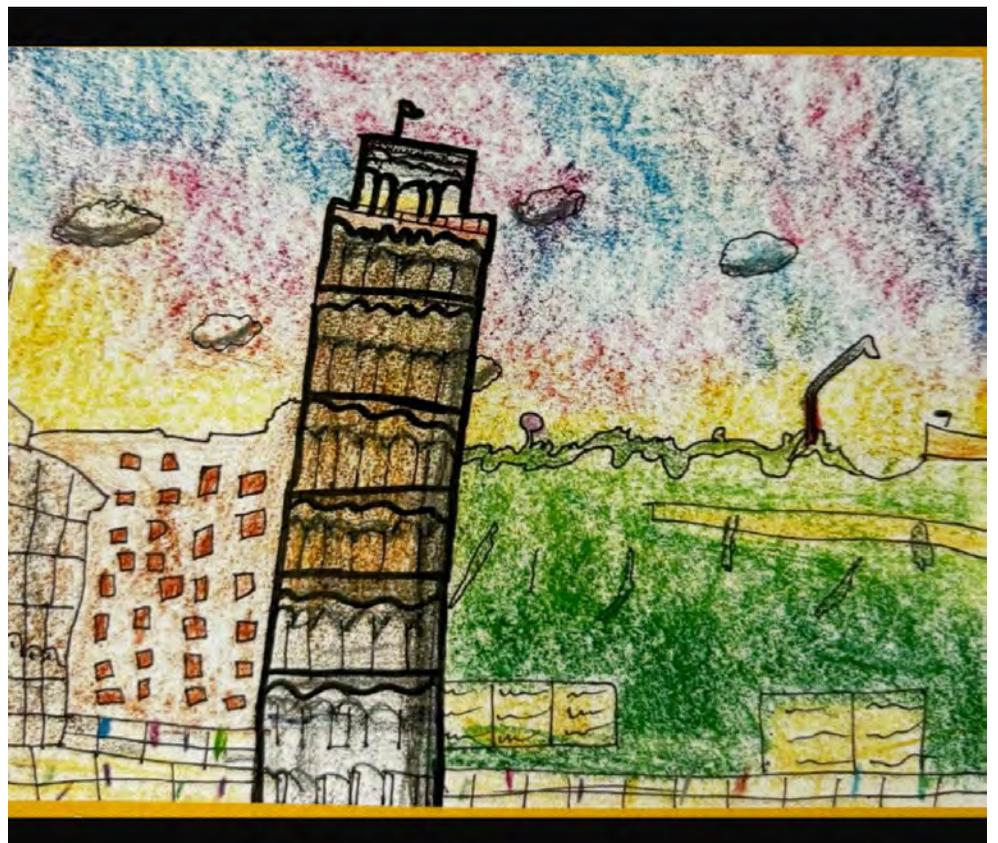
ഇരുമുടിക്കെട്ടുമായി വേണം ശബരിമലയ്ക്ക് പുറപ്പെടാൻ. ഇരുമുടിക്കെട്ടിൽ മുൻകെട്ടും, പിൻകെട്ടുമുണ്ട്. അതിൽ ഏറ്റവും പ്രധാനം നെയ്യഭിഷേക പ്രിയനായ അയ്യപ്പനുള്ള നെയ്ത്തേങ്ങയാണ്. അതോടൊപ്പം കാണിപ്പൊന്നും. ഇതൊക്കെ മുൻകെട്ടിലാണ് നിറയ്ക്കേണ്ടത്. ഒപ്പം അയ്യപ്പന് നിവേദ്യത്തിനുള്ള ഒരു പിടി അരിയും, മലരും, ശർക്കരയും, കദളിപ്പഴവുമൊക്കെയുണ്ടാകും. മാളികപ്പുറത്തമ്മയയ്ക്കുള്ള കുങ്കുമവും, മഞ്ഞൾപ്പൊടിയും പ്രത്യേകം കരുതണം. പഴയകാലത്ത് കാട്ടിലൂടെ നടന്നായിരുന്നല്ലോ മലയ്ക്ക് പോകുന്നത്. ആ യാത്രയിൽ തീർത്ഥാടകന് അത്യാവശ്യം വിശപ്പടക്കാനുള്ള കാര്യങ്ങളാണ് പിൻകെട്ടിൽ കരുതിയിരുന്നത്. രാത്രി കാലങ്ങളിൽ ഇടത്താവളങ്ങളിൽ ഉപയോഗിക്കുവാനുള്ള പുതപ്പും വിരിപ്പും നന്നായി മടക്കി തലയിൽ വെച്ച് അതിന് മുകളിലാണ് ഇരുമുടി വെയ്ക്കുന്നത്.

ഒരു വ്യക്തി വ്രതമെടുക്കുമ്പോൾ ആ കുടുംബവും, ആ ഗ്രാമവും, ആ ദേശവും ഒന്നാകെ വ്രതത്തിലാകുന്ന ഒരു വലിയ സംസ്കാരമാണ് ശബരിമല വ്രതാനുഷ്ഠാനം കാണിച്ചുതരുന്നത്. ആചാരാനുഷ്ഠാനങ്ങൾക്ക് അപ്പുറം പ്രകൃതിയും, ഹൃദയവും ഒന്നാകുന്ന അനുഭവമാണത്. സ്വയമൊരാൾ വ്രതമെടുത്ത് അയ്യപ്പനാകുമ്പോൾ അതിന് അനുസൃതമായ ഗുണങ്ങളിലേക്ക് കടക്കപ്പെടണം. അങ്ങനെ കടക്കുന്ന ഒരാൾ തന്റെ ചുറ്റിലുമുള്ളവരെയും ആ നന്മയിലേക്കും, സത്യത്തിലേക്കും ആകർഷിക്കുകയാണ്. അത് തന്നെയാണ് മണ്ഡലകാലത്തിന്റെ മഹത്വവും.

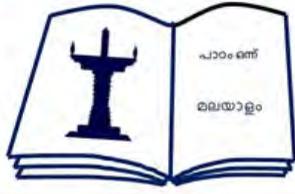
Little Artists' Gallery



Dharshan Natarajan
5th grade



Vedhika Rajesh
3rd grade



മലയാളം സ്കൂൾ

Malayalam School of Saint Louis

Malayalam School of Saint Louis is entering its 18th year of service to the community. Malayalam School of Saint Louis is a voluntary organization open to the public and free to attend. It is an affiliate program sponsored by Ohmkaram, a nonprofit voluntary organization of Malayalees in St Louis, Missouri, USA. Malayalam School was started with the perception of the need to educate our next generation of Malayalees growing up in St Louis.

Malayalam School of Saint Louis has been operating remotely, with classes and other activities conducted exclusively via Zoom. The school meets every Saturday and runs from August through May every year. All classes are run by dedicated volunteer teachers. Graduates of Malayalam School are proficient in reading, writing, and speaking in Malayalam.

Malayalam School of Saint Louis is a registered study center of Malayalam Mission, Government of Kerala since 2018 and is also affiliated with USA Missouri Zone, and Missouri Chapter. We offer Certificate Course (Kanikkonna), Diploma Course (Suryakanthi), Higher Diploma Course (Ambal) and Senior Higher Diploma Course (Neelakurinji). The successful completion of the Neelakurinji course will be awarded the 10th Standard equivalent certificate.

Kanikkonna Certificate Award Ceremony



Malayalam School Annual Day 2024



Teachers: Anjana Prayaga (Coordinator - Phone: 636-293-1174), Kavitha Vijayaraghavan, Sona Prabhakaran, Seeja Rakesh, Sangeetha Santhosh, Sreemani Rajesh, Binu Suraj

More information about the school is available on its website.

<http://www.ohmkaram.org/MalayalamSchool.html> | Email: malayalamschool@yahoo.com

Kicking Goals: Why I chose Soccer as My Sport

By: Anshuman Nair, 5th Grade

Sports are important to everyone's lives including you. Sports can be a type of exercise but it's fun not boring/repetitive as a regular, physical exercise. Winning/losing in a sport gives you lessons in life. I chose soccer as my sport because of multiple moves like the rainbow flick, sombrero flick, Ronaldo chop, and many more. In addition to that soccer involves team spirit, teamwork, communication, and leadership. There also has to be a usage of your feet, head, eye contact, and the body (not including hands) to possibly kick the ball into the goal. Soccer is a great sport, but if you don't like it then there are various other sports that can be chosen around the world. I would highly recommend choosing soccer to any of you if you are aggressive, fast, and good with kicking a ball.

There are some things you need to learn before your parents sign you to a club. First, you need to learn a simple trick, aka, the sole turn. It's basically where you hold the ball to your feet and then pull it back. There are other things you have to learn to become efficient at the field and there are some products that can help you with that. But I mostly recommend a book that is all about IQ and can turn your game around easily. You can buy it on Amazon, and the book is called "Soccer IQ". If you really want to become a great, athletic, and professional soccer player, I would highly recommend STL Soccer Club. The coaches there are really nice and are determined to help you with anything you need. I hope, with all the above, you are ready to join the world of soccer and "kick it off".



Best Wishes

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Aranmula - Boat races, Parthasarathy Temple & Vaalkannadi

By: Kavita Menon

Aranmula, a scenic picturesque temple town, is located on the banks of the sacred river Pampa in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. It is located at a distance of around 116 km from Trivandrum, and is well known for its annual boat races, the Sree Krishna Parthasarathy Temple and the world famous Aranmula Kannadi.

Sree Parthasarathy Temple (Arjuna's role):

The Parthasarathy temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu's avatar in the epic Mahabharata. The deity of this temple is fondly known by the name Parthasarathy. Lord Krishna played the role of Arjuna's Charioteer in the Mahabharata war and hence got the name Parthasarathy. 'Parth' as in Arjuna's name, and 'sarathy' for 'charioteer'. The Parthasarathy temple is one of the five temples built by the Pandava brothers who arrived at the banks of River Pampa after leaving their capital city, Hastinapur for pilgrimage after the Mahabharata war.

It is believed that the Sri Parthasarathy Temple was built by Arjuna as a penance for his role in the Mahabharata battle. When Arjuna was in a quandary and faced with the difficult decision of going against his own family and people whom he respected the most in order to uphold his duty as a warrior to fight for what he believed was a righteous cause, it was Sree Krishna who guided and advised him. These dialogues are available in the Bhagavad Gita. The learnings from Bhagavad Gita are relevant and enlightening even to this day and age.

This temple is considered to be one of the most important Krishna temples in Kerala. According to the legends, the idol of Parthasarathy was brought to this temple in a raft made with six (malayalam: 'aaru') pieces of bamboo (malayalam: 'mula'), and that's how the temple got to be known as Aranmula.

Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple is built in typical Kerala style of architecture and is regarded as one of the "Divya Desams", the 108 temples of Vishnu revered by the 12 poet saints or Alvars. The temple walls display paintings dating back to the early 18th century.



Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple



Aranmula Thiruvonathoni (Boat)



Aranmula Kannadi

Vallamkalli (Boat Races):

The Aranmula Boat festival is one of the oldest river boat festivals in Kerala. It takes place on the river Pamba, near Sri Parthasarathy Temple. Arjuna's part in this history-filled town extends to the boat races too.

Among other legends which tell how the races began, there is one story about Arjuna's connection to its origin. It is believed that Arjuna crossed the Pampa River after a period of penitence to return to his birthplace carrying an idol of Lord Krishna. When he reached the north bank, the river was flooded and he couldn't cross to the other side. A villager offered to take him across in a makeshift boat. It is to honor this villager who helped Arjuna, that the boat races are held on the river opposite the Krishna temple.

There are other legends too pointing to the start of the races. A boat carrying provisions to the Aranmula Parthasarathy temple was attacked by looters. Local families in snake boats came to the rescue, chased off the attackers, and accompanied the boat to the temple.

Whichever legend may be true, the Aranmula Vallamkali, or Aranmula boat races, have originated from a combination of ancient traditions, royal patronage, and local folklore, evolving over centuries into the grand event it is today. The Vallamkali festival recreates the legend each year, with the race held on the day of Uthrittathi, the day after Thiruvonam in the malayalam month of *Chingam*. The race is a religious offering to Lord Krishna, the presiding deity of the temple.



Aranmula Palliyodams (Snake Boats)



Aranmula Vallamkali

Aranmula Valla Sadya

വിഭവങ്ങൾ ഇങ്ങനെ



- 1.ചോറ്
2. പരിപ്പ്
3. പരിപ്പിടകം (വലുത്, ചെറുത്)
4. നെയ്യ്
5. അവിയൽ
6. സാമ്പാർ
- 7.തോരൻ
- 8.പച്ചടി
- 9.കിച്ചടി
- 10.നാരങ്ങ
- 11.ഇഞ്ചി
- 12.കടുമാങ്ങ
- 13.ഉപ്പുമാങ്ങ
- 14.ആറമ്പുള എരിശേരി
- 15.കാളൻ
- 16.ചാലൻ
- 17.രസം
- 18.മോര്
- 19.അടപ്രമമൻ
- 20.പാൽപ്പായസം
- 21.പഴം പ്രമമൻ
- 22.കടല പ്രമമൻ
- 23.ഏതത്തു ഉപ്പേരി
- 24.ചേമ്പ് ഉപ്പേരി
- 25.ചേന ഉപ്പേരി
- 26.ശർക്കര വരട്ടി
- 27.സ്സു
- 28.കാളിപ്പഴം

- 29.എള്ളുണ്ട
- 30.പരിപ്പുവട
- 31.ഉണ്ണിയപ്പം
- 32.കൽക്കണ്ടം
- 33.ശർക്കര
- 34.പഞ്ചസാര
- 35.ഉണക്ക മുന്തിരി
- 36.കരിമ്പ്
- 37.മെഴുക്ക്പുരട്ടി
- 38.ചമ്മന്തിപ്പൊടി
- 39.നെല്ലിക്ക അച്ചാർ
- 40.ഇഞ്ചിത്തൈര്
- 41.പഴം നൂറുക്ക്
- 42.ജീരകവെള്ളം
- 43.അവൽ
- 44.മലർ

പാടി ആവശ്യപ്പെടുന്ന വിഭവങ്ങൾ

- | | |
|------------------|------------------------|
| 1. പഞ്ചസാര | മെഴുക്ക് പുരട്ടി |
| 2. വെണ്ണ | 12. അമ്പഴങ്ങ |
| 3. കാളിപ്പഴം | 13. ഉപ്പുമാങ്ങ |
| 4. കടലിപ്പഴം | 14. പഴുത്ത മാങ്ങാകറി |
| 5. പൂവൻപഴം | 15. പാളത്തൈര് |
| 6. തേൻ | 16. ഇഞ്ചിത്തൈര് |
| 7. ചുക്കുവെള്ളം | 17. വെള്ളിക്കിണ്ടി പാൽ |
| 8. ചീരത്തോരൻ | 18. അടനേര്യം |
| 9. മടന്തയില തോരൻ | 19. ഉണക്കലരി ചോറ് |
| 10. തകരയില തോരൻ | 20. പമ്പാ തിരീഥം |
| 11. വഴുതനങ്ങ | |

The boats used in the race are called *Palliyodam*, a type of *Chundan Vallam*, or snake boat, and are symbolic representations of Lord Parthasarathy. They are made to look like Sheshanaga, the serpent on which Lord Vishnu rests. The boats, in a show of pageantry, are often over 100 feet long and are decorated with vibrant colors, intricate carvings, ornamental umbrellas and flags. The race is more of a ritual than a competition, and is a celebration of unity, teamwork, and the blending of tradition and festivity.

The snake boats or *Chundan Vallams* move in pairs to the rhythm of full-throated singing of traditional boat songs *Vanchippattu* by oarsmen wearing white mundu, to the encouragement & excited cheers of the thousands of people gathered on the banks of the river Pampa to watch the snake boat races. The races are a vibrant and exhilarating event, featuring the majestic *Palliyodams*, adorned with ornate decorations and manned by skilled oarsmen. Along with the sheer energy of the participants they create a mesmerizing spectacle, drawing spectators from around the world.

After the immense drama & excitement of the races, people are hungry and look forward to the much talked about *Valla Sadhya*. The *Valla Sadhya* is a religious tradition where devotees offer *sadya* (traditional meal) to the crew of snake boats to please Lord Krishna. It showcases food items & tastes unique to Central Travancore region, having as many as 63 items on its menu. The two-month-long *Valla Sadhya* begins during the malayalam month of *Karkidakam* and may run for a two-month long period. It is estimated that nearly 2 lakh people visit the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple annually to enjoy this grand feast.

Aranmula Kannadi:

Aranmula is also well-known for its world-famous Aranmula Kannadi. Aranmula Kannadi is different from glass mirrors and is handcrafted meticulously from highly polished metal. The craftsmanship involved and the chemical formula used to prepare the mirror is a closely guarded secret passed down through generations of artisans and known only to the valkannadi craftsmen of Aranmula. These mirrors are considered auspicious and are often used in religious rituals and as decorative items.

The Valkannadi is a front surface reflection mirror and does not undergo refraction, thus eliminating secondary reflections unlike glass mirrors. In 2002, the world recognized the craftsmanship of these traditional metallurgists and Aranmula Kannadi was assigned a GI tag identifying it as intellectual property originating from Aranmulla and thus distinguishing it as a genuine product.

Connection with the Sabarimala Temple:

The Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple was originally built near Sabarimala. The sacred jewels, called *Thiruvabharanam* of Ayyappan are taken in procession to Sabarimala each year from Pandalam, and Aranmula Temple is one of the stops on the way.

Thanka Anki, the golden attire donated by the King of Travancore to Ayyappan, the deity of the Sabarimala Temple, is stored at the Aranmula Temple. It is taken in a procession to Sabarimala during the Mandala season in late December. The procession is a major event, with devotees gathering to witness the start of the journey.

Aranmula is a village that beautifully blends rich history, deep spirituality, and vibrant cultural traditions. Its ancient temples, iconic boat races, and craftsmanship in metal mirrors offer a glimpse into the unique heritage of Kerala. Surrounded by peaceful landscapes and vibrant festivals, Aranmula is a living proof of the region's rich cultural heritage, making it an unforgettable destination for every visitor.

Hymn Of Creation From Rig Veda

NASADIYA SUKTA

The Hymn That Bridges The Earthly And The Celestial

By: Dr. Suresh Krishnan

NASADIYA SUKTA is the 129th Sukta of the 10th Mandala of the Rig Veda. Max Muller the German philologist and orientalist considered *Nasadiya Sukta* to be a profound philosophical hymn that explores the concept of a primordial formless reality before creation, questioning the origin of existence and expressing a sense of awe and wonder in the face of the unknown.

According Carl Sagan, an American Astronomer, often quoted this hymn. He states that, the cosmos itself undergoes infinite number of deaths and rebirths.

**1) *Nasad asin no sad asit tadarim, nasid rajo no vyoma paro yat*
*Kim avarivah kuha kasya sarmam ambhah kim asid gahnam gabhiram***

*Then even Nothingness was not, nor existence,
There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it,
What covered it, Where was it, In whose keeping
Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed*

This sets the stage of primordial ambiguity, where it sets the stage for Time before time a state where neither existence nor non existence prevailed. Modern science echoes this concept such as, Before the big bang there was no time or space as we understand it. Stephen Hawking aligns with the notion that time itself began with the Big Bang aligning with the Vedic notion of a timeless void.

**2) *Na mrtyur asid amrtam na tarhi na ratrya ahna asit praketah*
*And avatar svadhaya tad exam tasted dhanyam na para Kim canasa***

*Then there was neither death nor immortality
Nor was there then the torch of night and day
The One breathed windlessly and self-sustaining
Then there was that One then, and there was no other.*

Here the hymn speaks of a state, devoid of duality neither day nor night, neither life nor death. This one that breathed without air can be seen as a metaphor as a singularity from which the universe expanded. This aligns with the scientific thought today that the universe expanded from a singular point evolving and expanding into the cosmos that we observe today. Current modern theory based on the Cosmic Microwave radiation boundary also states that the universe is about 13.8 billion years old.

3) Tama asit tamasa gulham agre prakitam salilam sarvam a idam

Tucchyenabhv apihitam yad asit tapasas tan mahinajaytaikam.

At first there was only darkness wrapped in darkness

All this was only unilluminated water,

That one which came to be, enclosed in nothing,

Arose at last born of the power of heat.

This verse describes the Primordial darkness of void covered by cosmic waters. In today's scientific terms this state can be described as the state of the universe immediately after the big bang where it is opaque and filled with high energy particles. The force of heat mentioned here could be interpreted as the intense energy that led to the formation of matter.

4) Kamas tad agre sam avartatadhi manaso retah prathamam yad asit

Sato bandum asati nir avindan hrdis pratishya kavayo manisa

In the beginning desire descended on it.

That was the primordial seed, born of the mind

The sages who have searched their hearts with wisdom

Know that which is kin, to that which it is not

The fourth verse describes the triggering of big bang, the perpetual expansion that got triggered by desire, the primal seed and germ of spirit. A Point came when this calm singularity underwent an extremely brief and dramatic period of inflation expanding faster than the speed of light, it doubled in size perhaps one hundred times or more all within the span of a few tiny fractions of a second, the desire had risen. What is existent today started to develop from the nonexistent.

5) Tirascino vitato rasmir esam adhah svid asid upari svid asit

Rethoda asan mahimana asan svadha avastat prayatih parastat

And they have their cord across the void,

And they what was above and what below

Seminal powers made fertile mighty forces

Below was strength and above it, was impulse.

The fifth verse describes what happened moments after the big bang. The expansion of the universe started and it had no specific direction, there was a chaos and a 10 billion degree centigrade with a sea of protons neutrons photons electrons and neutrinos. The expansion started and so was the gradual cooling of the universe.

6) Ko adda veda ka iha pra vocat kuta ajata kuta iyam visrstih

Arvag deva asya visarjanenatha ko vata abab

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it?

Whence it all came and how creation happened?

The gods themselves are later than creation

So who truly knows whence it has arisen

The sixth verse describes what the scientists know today. No one can conclusively prove anything about the big bang. Einstein's theory of relativity talked about the idea of singularity. However Sean Carroll denies this theory on the grounds of quantum mechanics. This resonates with Carl Sagan's perspective on humility required in the face of cosmic mysteries.

*7) Iyam visrstir yata ababhava yadi va date yadi na va
Yo asyadhyakash parame vyoman so anga veda yadi va na veda
Whence all creation had its origin,
He whether he fashioned it or whether he did not,
He who surveys it all from highest heaven
Whether God's will created it, or whether he was mute,
Perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not,
The supreme Brahman of the world all pervasive and all knowing
He indeed knows, if not no one knows*

This final verse of the Nasadiya sukta concludes that no one in the world even the first born of this creation knows about the creation of this universe. It's hard to comprehend by the human mind and impossible to be proved conclusively by any living being. It invites us to honor the mysteries of existence with an open mind embracing both scientific enquiry and philosophical contemplation.



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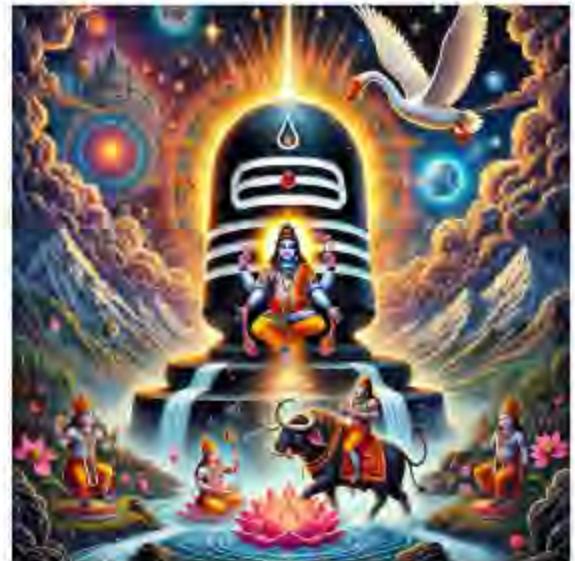
ബ്രഹ്മദേവന്റെ അമ്പലത്തിൽ പോയിട്ടുണ്ടോ?

ഇല്ലെങ്കിൽ, ഇതാകാം കാരണം.

By: Amritha Kossery

ഭാരതത്തിലെ ഒട്ടുമിക്ക ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങളും വിഷ്ണു, ശിവൻ, ദേവീക്ഷേത്രങ്ങൾ ആയിരിക്കും. ബ്രഹ്മാവിനെ ആരാധിക്കുന്ന ക്ഷേത്രങ്ങൾ എണ്ണത്തിൽ കുറവാണ്. ഇതിനു പിന്നിൽ ഒരു കഥയുണ്ട്. ഒരിക്കൽ ബ്രഹ്മദേവനും വിഷ്ണുദേവനും തമ്മിൽ ഒരു തർക്കമുണ്ടായി. ഇവർ രണ്ടുപേരിൽ ആരാണ് കേമൻ എന്ന കാര്യത്തിലായിരുന്നു തർക്കം. തർക്കത്തിന് ഒരു പരിഹാരമുണ്ടാക്കാൻ അവർ ശിവഭഗവാന്റെ അടുത്തെത്തി. ശിവഭഗവാൻ ഉടനെ ജ്വലിക്കുന്ന ഒരു ശിവലിംഗരൂപമെടുത്തു. ഈ ശിവലിംഗത്തിന്റെ അറ്റം ആദ്യം ആർ കണ്ടെത്തുന്നുവോ അവരാണ് ശക്തൻ എന്നുറപ്പിക്കാം, ശിവഭഗവാൻ പറഞ്ഞു. വിഷ്ണുഭഗവാൻ വരാഹരൂപമെടുത്ത് താഴത്തെ അറ്റം കണ്ടെത്താനായി പുറപ്പെട്ടു. ബ്രഹ്മദേവൻ ഒരു അരയന്നരൂപമെടുത്ത് മുകളിലെ അറ്റം കണ്ടെത്താനായി പറന്നുയർന്നു. എത്ര താഴെ പോയിട്ടും വിഷ്ണുഭഗവാന് അറ്റം കണ്ടെത്താനായില്ല.

ബ്രഹ്മദേവൻ അതിവേഗത്തിൽ പറന്നുയരുകയാണ്. അപ്പോഴതാ കൈതപ്പൂവിന്റെ (കേതകി) ഒരിതൾ താഴത്തേക്കു വീഴുന്നത് കണ്ടു. "നീ എവിടെനിന്നു വരുന്നു?", ബ്രഹ്മാവ് പൂവിതളിനോട് ചോദിച്ചു. തന്നെ ശിവപൂജക്കായി ഉപയോഗിച്ചതാണെന്നും, താൻ ശിവലിംഗത്തിന്റെ മുകളിലെ അറ്റത്തുനിന്നും വരികയാണെന്നും പൂവിതൾ പറഞ്ഞു. ബ്രഹ്മാവ് ഒരുനിമിഷം ആലോചിച്ച ശേഷം പൂവിതളിനോട് ചോദിച്ചു, "ഞാനും മുകളിലെ അറ്റം കണ്ടു എന്ന് നൂണ പറയാൻ പറ്റുമോ? അങ്ങനെ ബ്രഹ്മാവും കൈതപ്പൂവിതളും തമ്മിൽ ഒരു ധാരണയിലെത്തി. ബ്രഹ്മദേവൻ പൂവിതളും കൊണ്ട് ശിവഭഗവാന്റെ അടുത്തെത്തി മുകളിലെ അറ്റം കണ്ടെന്നും അവിടെ നിന്നും കിട്ടിയ പൂവിതളും കാണിച്ചുകൊടുത്തു.



ബ്രഹ്മദേവൻ കള്ളം പറയുകയാണെന്ന് മനസ്സിലാക്കാൻ ശിവഭഗവാന് പ്രയാസമുണ്ടാകുമോ? നൂണ പറഞ്ഞ ബ്രഹ്മാവിനെ ഭൂമിയിൽ ആരും പൂജിക്കില്ല എന്ന് ശപിച്ചു ശിവഭഗവാൻ. കള്ളം പറയാൻ കൂട്ട് നിന്ന കൈതപ്പൂ, ശിവപൂജക്കായി ഇനി ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്നതല്ല എന്ന ശാപം കൈതപ്പൂവിനും കിട്ടി. തോൽവി സമ്മതിച്ച വിഷ്ണു ഭഗവാന് ഒരു കാര്യം വ്യക്തമായി. പരമവും, അനന്തവുമായ ബ്രഹ്മം, ശിവൻ തന്നെ.

ഈ കഥയിലെ ജ്വലിക്കുന്ന ശിവലിംഗ പ്രതിഷ്ഠയാണ് തമിഴ്നാട്ടിലെ തിരുവണ്ണാമലൈ ക്ഷേത്രത്തിലുള്ളത്.



Scholarship Program

Ohmkaram supports many voluntary and charitable activities. In addition to supporting its own members Ohmkaram strives to help the needy who struggle with meeting the cost of an academic education. Ohmkaram scholarship fund was established to help poor and deserving bright students with financial need in Kerala.

There are two types of Scholarships - donor sponsored Scholarship & Scholarship provided by the general fund. In donor sponsored scholarship, fund is fully generated or provided by the donor. So the donor can select a candidate for Scholarship and decide on the amount of award. Fund for the other type of scholarship is collected by fund raising or by member contribution.

Selection of the scholar and the amount of the award are decided by the Scholarship committee. Ohmkaram members can be a part of this activity by volunteering to run the program or donating some money to the fund or both. For more information please check the link www.ohmkaram.org/scholarship.html

One of the scholarships offered this year was made possible by the contributions of general public during the special program "Chithravarnam 2024". Another Scholarship (donor sponsored) was offered due to the contributions of Anupama and Valsapradeep Kolakkampadath. Third scholarship was offered due to the contributions collected by certain members through the matching funds program of their employer.

Ohmkaram 2024 Scholarship Recipients



Asrith Mathur, Palakkad
Mechanical Engg,
Govt. Engineering College, Srikrishnapuram, Palakkad
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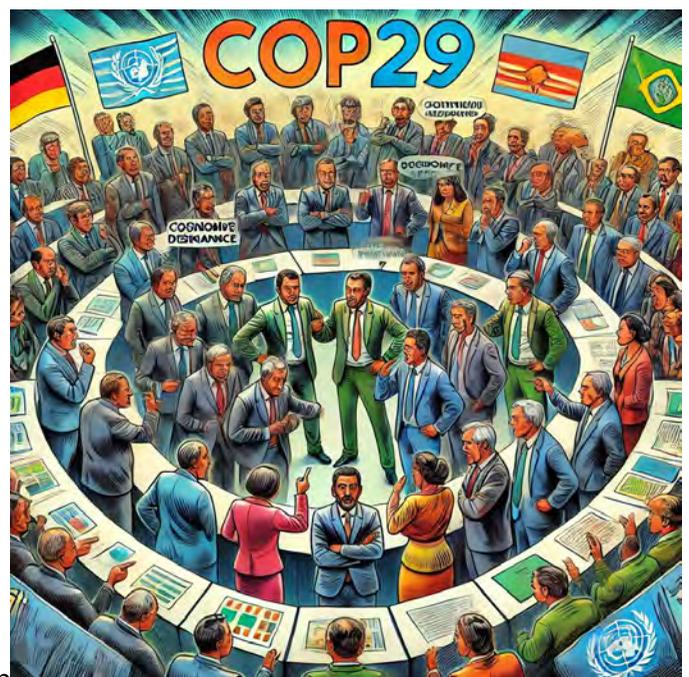
Cognitive Factors Impacting COP29

By: Lakshita Senthil

This essay examines how cognitive dissonance, the self-fulfilling prophecy, and group polarization may have contributed to unproductive discussions at COP29, offering insights for enhancing future UN Climate Change Conferences, rather than attributing the issues solely to the inherent selfishness of wealthy nations.

Nations at the COP29 climate summit agreed to a \$300 billion per year climate funding deal, however developing nations who initially asked for a \$1.3 trillion investment from wealthier nations are describing this deal as a “betrayal” and “false solution”. The developing nations’ opinion is that wealthier nations are simply selfish. Because of this distrust, developing nations such as India, Nigeria, Malawi and Bolivia have rejected the offer. That sort of simplistic thinking ignores what truly may be holding wealthy nations from providing more and also social psychological factors that may have been exacerbated during the ongoing discussion. Shedding light on these ideas is important to provide a better way to approach future COP discussions and reach agreeable terms.

Firstly, cognitive dissonance - the discomfort a person feels when their beliefs contradict each other - may offer a lens to see what inhibited wealthy nations from providing more money (rather than just a selfish nature). Individuals reduce dissonance by one of three ways: changing their beliefs, changing their behavior (actions), or adding some new belief. For example, in a study, participants who believed they were about to eat meat rated animals as having a lower mental capacity than did those who believed they were about to eat fruit, in order to feel better (Bastian et al., 2012). Perhaps wealthy nations in the COP29 summit also had conflicting beliefs: 1) the moral recognition of their responsibility to fund developing nations (historically as well) and 2) the need to protect their own nation's economy for stability. Similar to the tension between eating meat but realizing animals can feel pain, mental tension arises because wealthy nations can't provide funding while not hurting their economy at the same time. In this scenario, it may be that the wealthy nations are changing belief 1, like the study participants, by reframing the problem. They may think that the continued state of poverty and poor economy (both of which must be combated for climate change to be prevented) in developing nations suggests that these fundings by themselves are not the right direction to target the root cause and requires a different method. This makes wealthy nations feel less guilty like the animal lovers, but understanding their thought process highlights how economic and policy constraints make it difficult for wealthy nations to provide full funding even if they wanted to, illuminating this decision process beyond just greed.



So, the decision of the wealthy nations' may be more complex than assumed, but developing nations may not have been aware of this complexity, and instead used their pre-existing negative viewpoints on the wealthy nations to fuel a self-fulfilling prophecy. This prophecy is best explained by the "Bloomer" study (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968/2003). Teachers were told some students have more potential than others. Teachers unaware of this false statement behaved differently with these "bloomer" students, giving them more attention or special treatment than for students they perceived as having less potential. This resulted in bloomer students being more successful, and ultimately confirming the teachers' initial expectations.

Like teachers teaching with pre-existing assumptions about their students, developing nations may have entered the conversation viewing wealthier nations as historically self-serving and unreliable as mentioned by Ralph Regenvanu and therefore taken defensive stances of distrust such as public rejection of the offer rather than open-minded cooperation. As a result of these defensive stances, the wealthy nations, like students who were not given attention, may have seen no opportunity for negotiation or honest cooperation. The wealthy nations' stern stance may have reaffirmed developing nations' beliefs of the wealthy nations as inherently selfish.

At this point, it is evident that some misunderstandings may have been at play during COP29. Such misunderstandings may have been ignored further due to group polarization, or the tendency for groups to make decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclinations of their members, as a result.

For example, in one study, people were asked to consider whether a low-ranked chess player should attempt a risky winning move against a high-ranked chess player. When deciding alone, people said that the chess player should make the risky move only if there was at least a 30% chance of success. But after discussing the problem in a group, people said that the chess player should go for it even if there was only a 10% chance of success - a more extreme decision (Wallach, Kogan, & Bem, 1962).

Like the 30% chess constraint, it may be that developing nations' delegates initially came into this discussion with a less extreme view, such as wishing for an offer as close as possible to the \$1.3 trillion ask but accepting that wealthier nations may end up giving a lower amount. However, during the discussion, the developing nations may have shared narratives about historical injustices and urgency to reduce the climate crisis in their nations. Being in a group may have exposed them to persuasive arguments (easy to expect in a room full of persuasive public speakers and leaders), that highlighted why developing nations should not "back down," reducing the likelihood for a happy compromise. This extreme stance, such as the 10 % chess constraint in the study, is clearly seen when Nigeria, Malawi and Bolivia followed India in rejecting the deal, but they may have been less likely to reject the deal publicly if that initiative had not been taken by India.

In conclusion, cognitive biases as opposed to just selfish qualities of wealthy nations may have resulted in an unproductive discussion at COP29. Simply raising awareness of these factors may have led to a more agreeable negotiation. Perhaps awareness of the cognitive dissonance reasoning may have inspired an open discussion on how to maintain a strong economy while providing funding. Furthermore, if developing nations were made aware of the self-fulfilling prophecy at play, they may have focused more on mutually shared goals such as climate change rather than judging based on pre-existing assumptions. This may have also encouraged cooperation and open discussion from wealthy nations. Finally, raising awareness on the impact of group polarization could encourage members to challenge persuasive viewpoints within and outside of the two groups - wealthy and developing.

The Partition of India

By: Rama Alakassery, 7th grade

Though the Partition of India could be considered the Greatest Migration in History, it isn't talked about or taught as much because of the Holocaust being around the same period in history. From 1858-1947, the British-ruled region consisted of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. When the British came, they amplified their differences like caste, religion, etc. The majority of the population in India before it was split into different countries was Hindus and the biggest minority group was Muslims. They both had their different political groups and beliefs. The All-India Muslim League was the Muslim political group and they wanted a separate country for Muslims while the Hindu group the Indian National Congress (INC) wanted India to stay as one country. The groups' points of view, influenced by their religion, wanted different outcomes. With lots of people migrating, many jobs were abandoned causing the economy to crash, though many people didn't feel that leaving everything behind was worth it which caused them to separate. The Partition of India negatively impacted the countries' economies and their citizens.

Hindus made up the majority of India's population and Muslims were the biggest minority. Due to their different views and beliefs, it built tension and caused conflicts before and during the partition. The British partitioned India based on the majority religion in each region, which forced large populations of people who were not the majority in their area to migrate to the new nation based on their faith. Many of the people trying to get to the other country couldn't make it because of the violence during the journey.

Before the partition, tension was slowly building between the political groups because of their different views and beliefs and they weren't able to find a solution that made both happy because they wanted opposing results from the British leaving. The Indian National Congress (INC) wanted them to be united and not split up into different countries. In contrast, the Muslim League was afraid that they wouldn't get any or adequate representation in the government because they were a minority group and stood for the creation of separate countries based on religion. So when the latter side agreed to the solution the former side would oppose as it wasn't what they believed in, which created tension between them from the start. Not only was there tension between the two political groups, there were also tensions between people of different religions and castes. Since the Hindus and the Muslims had political groups that represented them during the partition they had a choice in what they wanted, but the minorities other than the Muslims didn't have any representation in the government leaving them to fend for themselves.



After the partition, people started moving and the non-muslim minorities didn't have a place to go and didn't have a government to protect them and no one cared whether they made it to a country alive or not. Similar to minorities, the lower castes also lacked representation and support. Many individuals from the higher castes owned houses and land, which they could trade with people from the other country who wanted to migrate. In contrast, lower castes such as the untouchables, typically did not own houses or land. They were also left to take care of themselves

which caused them to always feel unsafe even if they were in a country that was led by their own religion. Numerous such factors contributed to the growing tension between different religions and communities, and migration exacerbated these issues. The movement of people led to a significant decline in population, leaving many jobs and businesses unoccupied and unattended. This, in turn, caused severe economic downturns in the respective countries.

Many jobs and businesses were left neglected causing the countries' money flow to drastically decline. Many of the poorer and lower classes had to start a new life without any guarantee about anything. The wealthier and upper classes, though they also had to start anew, often had connections with others in the new country who were similarly displaced. They could simply exchange houses and land with these connections. However, their businesses were abandoned, causing even those who didn't relocate to lose their jobs due to the shutdown of these enterprises. Many individuals chose to stay behind to maintain their jobs or manage their businesses. However, business owners faced challenges as many potential customers avoided patronizing establishments run by someone of a different religion. Similarly, those who stayed for their jobs often risked losing them if their employer belonged to another faith. This led to regret among those who remained, as they were forced to separate from their families to ensure their loved ones' safety. This separation came with the constant fear that family members, now apart, might face life-threatening situations without being able to communicate. Furthermore, all three countries experienced significant economic and social struggles due to this mass exodus.



The Abyss

By Veda Valsa Pradeep, 5th grade

Everything changed when the lights went out. The dizzying lights and the falling sensation had all come to an end. I awoke to find myself lying in a dusty room. A thin old man was sitting at a desk with a giant book.

"You are a fighter, eh? You hung in there".

"Where am I? What is this place?", I asked.

"Let me explain," said the old man, "You just crossed the abyss. Not every soul makes it through the abyss to get to the land of the dead."

"The Land of the Dead? What do you mean?"

"Boy, where do you think you are? You. Are. Dead. Believe me"

"Uh? If I'm dead, how am I talking?"

"Do you honestly think there's no afterlife?". I decided not to answer the question.

"Here," he pushes the giant book on the table towards me. This has all the answers.

"No thanks," I say, eyeing the book titled *The Unabridged History of the Two Worlds*, about a foot thick.

"Fine," the man says, "at least take this map. It should help."

"Thanks," I say. I opened the door, looking around to see souls strolling casually down the street, though some seemed distraught. Suddenly a girl about my age appeared in front of me.

"Hi, I'm Alice. It's nice to meet you."

I stumble backward. "Thank you I guess, I'm Ben", I say.

"It seems like you're new here. How was your journey through the gap? "She asked.

I was getting confused.

"No, I came through the abyss,"

I said. She suddenly looks at me curiously,

"You could be the one! No one has made it through the abyss. The one the prophecy is about. For eternity there has been a balance between the land of the dead and the land of the living. But now, it's unsteady, with souls traveling across these lands without reason. No one knows the cause, but the prophecy states the one who will bring back balance will conquer the abyss."

"Well," I say, staggered by this onslaught of information,

"I think I crossed the abyss. At least that's what the old desk guy told me".

"The desk guy? You mean Mr. Ruthberg, the soul guide."



“Yeah,” I say. In a poof, Alice vanishes. What? Before I could question more an idea comes to me, I flip over the map and see a note scribbled on the back. Mr. Ruthberg must have written this! Hastily I read. “*Under the Earth, deep and dark, near the heavenly falls, lies the key to the balance of existence*”. I mull things over as I scour the map for answers. Under the Earth, deep and dark – the caverns, this should be it! I fervently hope as I set out.

It felt like forever to get to the caverns. It’s dank and dark and had nothing heavenly about it. I trudge along in the dark until my breath caught in amazement, entranced by the sight - a clearing with a shimmering majestic waterfall that uncharacteristically fell upwards! Yes, I was on the right path. I look to where the waterfall rose and see something glinting. Could it be the key? I walk behind the waterfall and scale the jagged rocks to the top. The rock edges had cut into my hands but I scrambled to find the key. There was no key here, just a weird black-and-white round rock! But then it hits me, it doesn’t have to be an actual key like I had imagined. This is to restore balance. I reached to pick up the rock. As soon as I touch it, the dizzying lights and the falling sensation return, and everything goes dark again.

I wake up half expecting to see the desk guy. But Alice bounds up yelling “Ben, you did it. Look everything’s back to normal now. We are back to the land of the living!”. I look around and see my mom waiting for me at the front door.

Gayatri Mantra

It's challenging to identify the "best" sloka among the Vedas, as each sloka carries profound meaning and is significant in its own context. However, one of the most widely revered and profound slokas in Hindu rituals and spirituality is the Gayatri Mantra from the Rigveda (Mandala 3, Hymn 62, Verse 10).

Transliteration of the Gayatri Mantra:

*Om Bhur Bhuvah Svah,
Tat Savitur Vareṇyam,
Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi,
Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodayat.*

Essence of Gayatri Mantra:

We meditate on that most adored Supreme Lord, the creator, whose effulgence (divine light) illumines all realms (physical, mental and spiritual). May this divine light illumine our intellect.

Chanting the Gayatri Mantra (1,008 times or at least 108 times daily) during the Brahma Muhurta (approximately 1.5 hours before sunrise) is believed to inspire the pursuit of knowledge, foster inner purity, and guide one toward enlightenment.





is a nonprofit voluntary organization of Malayali Hindus in the Greater St. Louis area of Missouri, USA.

Ohmkaram is created with a vision to encourage active participation in the Hindu culture, foster cooperation and unity among Kerala Hindus throughout St. Louis and adjoining cities. In the midst of a collage of cultures, it is easy to forget and even lose track of many subtleties of our tradition that give a meaning to our identity. The mission of this organization will be to rejuvenate and reinforce the Kerala Hindu traditions. Participation and involvement of our youth will be facilitated enabling them to appreciate our cultural roots. This Organization will also serve as a platform for effective networking of Hindus from Kerala, or anyone interested in Kerala Hindu culture. This association will try to provide Hindu cultural resources not available through other sources in the Greater St. Louis area.

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Recipe Corner

Few recipes from the backwaters to your home!

Because of the abundance of fish, these regions offer a variety of flavourful fish recipes.

Alleppey style coconut milk fish curry

Works well with seer fish, maybe tried with others as well.

Seer fish/ Neymeen - 1 kg	Kashmiri Chilly powder - 40 gm
Fenugreek seeds - 5 gm	Turmeric powder - 10gm
Ginger crushed - 40 gm	Tamarind soaked - 15 gm
Garlic crushed - 20 gm	Sea salt to taste
Shallots sliced -6	Coconut milk thick - 200 ml
Onions sliced - 2	Coconut oil - 20 ml
Green chillies -	Curry leaves - few
Tomato ripen -2	Green mango sliced - 1



In a clay pot add fenugreek seeds, ginger garlic green chillies tomatoes shallots onions tamarind water seasalt and add enough water and hand crush the ingredients and bring to boil (add fish heads for stock flavour)

On slow fire, onions and tomatoes cooked and mashed add the fish, mango and Curry leaves bring to boil for 5-7 minutes add the coconut milk reduce the heat and mix well the curry without breaking the fish

Add little coconut oil and switch off the curry and cover it and rest for 20 minutes.

Serve with boiled rice, cassava, appams or porotta.

Recipe courtesy: Chef Suresh Pillai

Karimeen Pollichathu

This traditional dish made using Pearl Spot, a freshwater fish native to the backwaters, will stun anyone you serve it to! It's equally tasty served with any fish, wrapped in aluminium foil, parchment paper, etc.

Pearl spot fish	2 tbsp coconut oil
Banana leaves	1/2 tsp fennel seeds
1 tsp chili powder	1 tsp chopped ginger, garlic
1/2 tsp turmeric powder	3 tbsp chopped pearl onion
1/4 tsp pepper powder	1/2 tsp chili powder
Half a lemon	1/2 tsp turmeric powder
Fresh curry leaves	1 chopped tomato
Salt to taste	1,5 tsp coconut milk



Mix the chilli powder, turmeric powder, pepper powder, juice of ½ a lemon, a pinch of salt with a bit of water together to a smooth marinade. Score the clean fish and marinate.

Add coconut oil in a pan and pan-fry the fish 2-3 minutes. After removing the fish from the pan, add some more coconut oil, fennel seeds, chopped ginger, garlic, green chilli, onion, and fresh curry leaves. Saute till the ingredients start to get golden brown, then add the powders, salt and the tomato. Let it simmer for another 5-10 minutes on low heat. Add the coconut milk and let it simmer for 1-2 more minutes.

Roast the banana leaves for a few seconds above the stove. Add the above masala on the banana leaves, put the fish on top and finish with some more masala on the fish. Fold the banana leaves and roast it in a pan for a few minutes without oil.

Recipe courtesy: Internet

Recipe Corner

Ambalapuzha Palpayasam

A divine dessert from Alleppey, the "Venice of the East"

Ambalappuzha Sree Krishna Swamy Temple is one among the 108 renowned Vaishnavite Indian Hindu temple in Alappuzha district of Kerala. Pal Payasam is the main offering to the deity after Nivedyam in the Noon. It is said that Guruvayurappan (Lord Krishna) visits this temple daily for Nivedyam to have Pal Payasam.

Ingredients:

Payasam rice-1/2 cup

Milk-1 1/2 litre

Water-5 1/2 cup

Sugar-1 1/2cup

Cardamom powder-1/4tsp (optional)

Cashew nut -10 roasted(optional)



Add 1 1/2 liter of milk, 2 1/2 cup of water and 1/2 cup of sugar in a deep bottomed kadai (Uruli) or in cooker. Cook them in a very low flame and stir well occasionally, till the volume drops to 1/2 liter. By then, it would have developed a light pink color.

Now add washed (crush if grain size is bigger) rice with 3 cup of water and 1 cup of sugar.

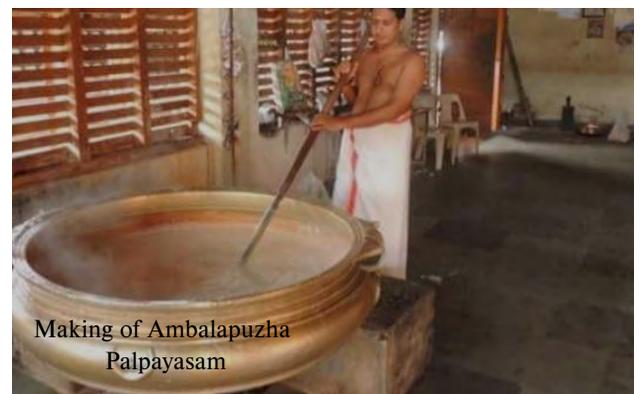
Stir occasionally and cook till it attains your preferred consistency.

If you are preparing in a pressure cooker, close the lid of the pressure cooker after adding washed rice and sugar, put on the weight and keep it on a very low flame till the first whistle comes. If the milk starts to come out in between, place a thick wet cloth (preferably a small turkey towel) over the cooker, close to the whistle. You will need to remove the cloth in between and wet it again and place it on the cooker, as it will turn dry.

Remove the weight after the pressure settle down. Once the cooker cools down, remove the lid and check the payasam. It would have turned pinkish cream in color.

Add cardamom powder and cashew nuts roasted in ghee (avoid if allergic to nuts). Serve the tasty payasam warm or cold, based on your preference.

Preparation under low flame with patience is the key to authentic color and taste.



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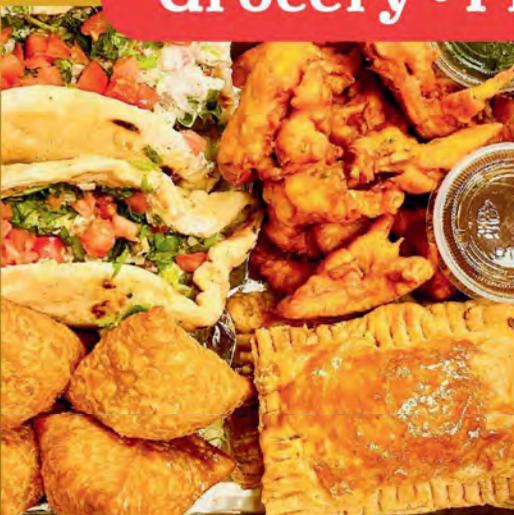
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