

WORSHIP - THE HINDU WAY

The following article is compiled from series of articles that appeared in the Sai Vichaar Newsletter (www.saibaba.org weekly newsletter).

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The word Puja came from the Dhathu "Puj", which means to worship, to honor, to welcome. The root of the word Puja is "Yaja" Deva Poojaayaam" means the service or activities that one cannot avoid from doing to propitiate or please God. Every country, state, religion, caste, family and even individual has its/their/his/her own belief and ways of performing Puja. Whatever may be the method or system or practice that one adopts or follows, there are, as per Hindu scriptures 4, 5 (Panchopachar), 8, 10 (Dasopachar), 13, 16 (Shodashopachar), 24, 32, 64 or 108 types of Upacharas or activities or services to propitiate God.

The daily worship generally consists of sixteen phases or items according to a conventional practice usually referred to as Shodasopachara Puja. These sixteen items are not always necessarily the same throughout. They differ from occasion to occasion and may be from place to place or person to person. But a common sequence popularly followed by majority of the devotees is as follows:

1. Avahanam - Invocation
2. Asanam- Offering a seat
3. Padyam- Water for washing the feet
4. Arghyam- Water for washing the hands
5. Achamaneeyam- A few drops of water for sipping
6. Snanam- Bathing with water, milk or honey
7. Vastram- Garments to cover the body
8. Yajnopaveetam- The sacred thread placed across the left shoulder and the right bottom part of the trunk
9. Gandham- Sandal paste
10. Pushpam- Flower or flowers
11. Dhoopam- Burning incense for fragrance and to intensify the feelings of devotion
12. Deepam- Lighting to remove darkness, symbolizes enlightenment
13. Naivedyam- Food for nourishment
14. Tamboolam- Betel leaves with nut and other ingredients, a condiment that signifies completion of a meal.
15. Neerajanam- Offering of camphor enkindled to have a better look of the Supreme both within and without
16. Atma Pradakshina Namaskaram- Prostration before the Lord as a mark of self-surrender after making a parikrama.

(1) **Avahan or Invocation or Praan Prathishta:** We invite the Invisible Supreme Soul to manifest through the idol or photo that we keep in front of us for our prayers or Puja, or we imagine that God is residing in it or we imagine that God manifested in and through the idol or photo accepting our prayers or imagine that the idol or photo has life and God is accepting our prayers through the Idol or photo.

(2) **Asan or Simhasan or Throne:** As we cannot and do not have the capacity to offer a magnificent throne to Lord, Who is the owner of the whole universe, we offer HIM a seat, according to our capacity, thinking

that HE feels comfortable, and start decorating it inwardly with all kinds of precious stones, jewels, gold, flowers, cushions, etc., the best we can think of and request the Lord to be seated to accept our offerings.

(3) **Padyam**. This includes the symbolic offering of water for washing the feet. This custom dates back since the days when very few used to wear shoes or chappals and those days without convenient transport facility. Offering water to wash the dust and dirt off the feet. It is also a sign of respect to offer water to wash one's feet. We can see the references to this act in our scriptures, especially with reference to Rishis, Sages, etc. We also do Pada Puja (worshipping the holy feet) to Saints in our houses.

(4) **Arghyam**: As we imagine God has assumed the shape of a human being with two legs, two or four hands, one or more heads, etc., moved by our prayer, we offer HIM water with a feeling that HE would like to wash HIS hands before accepting our offerings, as we do before doing something good or important, sacred or taking food.

(5) **Achaman**: We do Achaman (i.e., we sip water three times with mantras like Om Govindaya Namaha, Om Narayana Namaha, Om Madhavaya Namaha, etc.)

facing or sitting towards East to cleanse our inner-self (Antharangam) with the water purified with Mantras, so that any thoughts that we might have entertained either before or after starting Puja will vanish from our mind. Like this, we purify ourselves. As we cleanse our body by taking bath, we cleanse our inner-self by taking water saturated or purified with Mantras.

Again here water is offered to God with a view that HE washes HIS face. It is the tradition in our houses that whenever any guest comes from outside, after ushering him into the house, we give him water for drinking as well as washing or at least sprinkling water on the face so that the guest feels relieved of the tiredness and strain of the journey.

(6) **Snanam/Bath**: Bath given to the God with Ganga Jal or milk, or honey, or with perfumed water, etc.

(7) **Vastra Yugmam**: Then we offer good clothes to God and decorate HIM with excellent quality clothes, according to our capacity, as we do to our children on their birthdays.

(8) **Yagnopaveetam**: We then offer HIM Yagnopaveetam, a sacred thread placed across the left shoulder and the right bottom part of the trunk.

(9) **Gandham**: We offer God scented chandan (sandal paste) so as to give coolness to HIS body. The royal kings used to do this in the olden days. We offer Oordhwapundram or decorate God with Tilak or some such decoration to God's face. The next step is Alankar God with Abharanas or jewels. As we feel that by wearing such and such ornaments, we look beautiful or we beautify ourselves with all kinds of alankaras, the same way, we should also feel that the Lord is Self only and we should decorate HIM with the same feeling and purpose so that HE looks beautiful.

(10) **Pushpa Puja (Archana)**: We offer flowers to God with a lot of love and devotion to please HIM. Of late it has become a practice to offer broken or withered flowers, may be due to scarcity and sky-racketing prices of flowers, but, in fact, it must not be done so. God is full of compassion and mercy and HE does not protest, as HE understands our compulsions. We should offer a flower for each one of HIS sacred and kalyana name that we recite, whether it is Ashtothra or Sahasranama. Here we should always remember one very important point that most of us just throw flowers and Akshatas at God, in a routine way. But, it is not the right procedure. We should recite the names of our Lord with a lot of love and affection and with each name that we recite with love and bhava (feeling), we offer a flower to the Lord in such a way that first we bring the flower near to our chest or heart and offer it at the feet of Lord with a feeling that, Oh God! I am offering my heart (Colorful Hridaya Pushp) at Your Lotus Feet. Kindly accept it and remove all my Doshas such as Kama, Krodha, Lobha, Mada, Macharya, Irsha, Dwesha, Ahankara, etc. Kindly take me into your fold my Lord. That is the essence or meaning behind offering colorful flowers to Lord. Bhava is very important in all our spiritual (of course, even in social) activities. The same method is applicable while offering Akshitas or Kumkum or any such offering to Lord. It should always be humble, and never routine and mechanical. In other words, Archana is the heartfelt offering of Love to God. In Archana a devotee calls God with a variety of names as a loved one is called by different names affectionately.

(11) **Dhoopam**: Dhoop represents the Gandh (fragrance) aspect of the senses. A Satvic sense of depicting a pure Gandha sense is the Dhoop. As we give Dhoop to babies in our residences, which is still in vogue in villages, especially in rainy season, so as to make the skin dry and fresh and protect them from diseases like cold, etc., due to high content of water in the air, we offer Dhoop to Lord also.

(12) **Deepam**: Deepam is the Tejas or fire aspect. We light the lamp immediately after Dhoop with a view to see Lord more clearly and also to witness the beauty and majesty of the Lord is after alankaras.

The words Tamasoma Jyothirgamaya, indicate the essence of bhava behind keeping a lamp in front of the Lord. The spiritual significance is: Oh God! Light my heart with the prakasha of knowledge and dispel the darkness of ignorance. It also signifies that the (true) Atman is revealed if one lights his heart with the lamp of Pure Love and Right Knowledge. With this bhava at heart, we light a lamp (Diya) or lamps in front of God. The other angle to this is that the lamp indicates auspicious sign. It has an important position in the Puja of Hindus. The main reason for keeping the lamp in front of God is that it is a sign of good omen (Mangala or Shubha kaarakam). The other reason is that in the olden days, where there was no electricity or limited use of electricity, our ancestors used to keep lamp(s) in front of God, so as to see HIS image or photo or HIS Divya Rupa clearly. Probably, even today one can notice in olden temples, in the sanctum sanctorum, that they do not keep or allow electricity bulbs. They show the God to devotees with the help of Aarati. Another reason, which I feel true, is that after we decorate God we perform Aarati, immediately after offering Dhoop with an anxiety or eagerness or desire to see how the Lord looks

and see the Deity to one's heart content. The light in front of the Deity will help us to see the image more clearly, especially in the smoke of Dhoopam.

(13) **Naivedyam:** Naivedyam is the Rasa (taste) aspect of the senses. We offer all kinds and varieties of delicious food items, which include sweets, fruits, etc., to God, with all love, as if Ma Yashoda is feeding Krishna, or Mata Sabari is offering fruits, although tasted first, to Lord Rama. See the Bhava here. In fact, I was told that coconut is not compulsory in Puja, but somehow it has become a part of it now. (The meaning and purpose of breaking a coconut is dealt with separately and will follow later).

(14) **Thaambulam/Betel Leaves:** As we offer Nut-powder (Supari) or Paan to guests at the end of a meal, we offer Lord betel leaves with supari (nut powder and spices) so that HE digests easily whatever we offered to HIM to eat. Here we should not offer HIM money, as it is offered only when we offer Dakshina.

(15) **Neeraajanam:** After completing all the above Upacharaas to Lord, we do Neerajanam with a view to remove any Drishti Dosh (evil sight) as we all know that HE has a wonderful personality and added to it, HE has been decorated so well and looking so handsome that it is very difficult for a devotee to take away his sight from HIM. This we do with pure love as we do it to our own small children. It is the practice in our houses/temples that immediately after Aarati, we pay our respects to that camphor flame by putting our palms over it and putting those hands on our eyes. But, I was told that, it is wrong, because the intention behind giving Aarati is to remove any evil sight (Drishti Dosh) and also to show God more clearly to the devotees, but not for any other purpose. As we do not pay respects to such activity when we do it for our children, the same way, we should not do it in temples or at homes after Aarati. And that flame should be kept aside and sprinkle a few drops of water to remove Dosh, as we wash the legs and hands of our children and wipe the eyes with water, immediately after removing Drishti Dosh.

Neerajanam signifies the end of Sakara or Bahya (outward) Puja and is at the end to denote that all the Doshas and impurities will vanish in thin air after burning the Ajan in the Jnanagni or Tapas.

(16) **Atma pradakshina,** Mantra pushpam and Uavasana: We offer flowers and Akshatas with Mantras to Lord. It is done mainly to highlight and explain the divinity, greatness, compassion and love of God over HIS subjects or devotees.

After doing all the above, if knowingly or unknowingly we commit any mistake, either in the performance of Puja or in our Bhava, we request God to forgive us, as we are human beings and our Manas or mind is subject to flirtations, and keep us in HIS Karuna Dhrishi (Merciful eyes) always so that we will not repeat such mistakes in future. Also we request HIM to bless us as we wish to offer all the above upacharas every day to HIM. Then we do Pradakshina, not only around the Lord, but also around ourselves, to indicate that my Lord you are in me as Soul and doing Atmapradakshina means doing Pradakshina around YOU only. Then we do pranam (prostration) and then offer Kshama Prardhana or Aparatha

Kshamapana, with a view to offer all the mistakes at the Lord's Lotus Feet.

Having manifested in and through the idol that we kept in our Puja Mandir and accepted our prayers and sevas, now we request the Lord to take rest in our hearts and live there forever, so that the divinity is manifested through us and ultimately we realize our innate divinity within and without, in other words, we merge in HIM thus removing the ignorance forever.

The Sevas both in Sakara or Nirakara procedures are performed with a view to reach Him ultimately, which is known as Puja. In the Sakara or Bahya Puja style, the devotee directly (if he knows the significance) or indirectly worships his Ishta Daivam through offer of sevas in the shape of external articles to the object of worship, thereby involving Pancha Tanmatras (i.e., Sabda, Sparsa, Rupa, Rasa and Gandha) or Panch Jnanedriyas (i.e., Eyes, Ears, Nose, Tongue and Skin) while offering Dhoopa, Deepa, Naivedya, Alankaras to the Lord. The gross aspects of the Pancha Tanmatras in Puja are the Pancha Upacharas. They are Pushp, Dhoop, Deep, Naivedya and Gandh. The corresponding Pancha Mahabhoothas (Five Elements) are Sky/Ether (Akasam), Air (Vayu), Fire (Agni), Water (Jal) and Earth (Prithvi), which indicate respectively the vastness of heart, the fastness of manas, the tejas, the amrit and the patience (saburi) aspects of human being. In Manasik Puja, the devotee mentally dedicates everything at the sacred feet of his Ishta Daivam. In fact, Manasika Puja is considered superior to Bahya Puja.

In other words, Puja should not and cannot be a rigid and systematic procedure, without which one cannot offer oneself to God, but it should be more of love oriented or bhava pradhana offering to God. Then only the heart opens up, otherwise it would be a routine and mechanical procedure to be followed. Through Puja, the devotee's love and sense of belonging for his Ishta Daivam grow and thus the Bhava or relationship with Ishta Daivam matures and finally the devotee will succeed in establishing in his real self (Swa-swarup) through gradually experiencing oneness with the Ishta Daivam. Having understood what Puja is, now let us try to analyze and understand the essence behind Sakara and Nirakara or Bahya and Manasika Pujas.

Arranging the Articles: First of all, before sitting in front of our Ista Daivam, we keep all articles that are required for performing Bahya Puja wholeheartedly and successfully.

Physical freshness: Purity of body is conducive in making the mind pure, so that only purity emanates from us. So, we keep ourselves fresh before we start any Puja or any sacred work in order to get only right feelings and thoughts while we are performing Puja, and also emanate only such statements from us. Freshness also helps us to keep our concentration on what we are doing or offering to God. One should wear vibhuthi, chandan, namam or kumkum. Then we do Pranayamam before Sankalpam.

Sankalpam: Sankalp or Sankalpam, literally means, taking a firm decision or forming a firm opinion. No work can be successfully accomplished without dedication. Like-wise, no Puja can be performed satisfactorily without invoking HIS blessings through sincere devotion and complete surrender. We pray to Lord to bless us to successfully fulfil our

resolve to worship HIM through performing HIS Puja with heart, mind, soul and all senses together. Here in Puja, Sankalpam means reciting those words which will indicate what, who and where we are. Unless one starts any work, especially the one which is being done for the society at large, with pure and sacred sankalpa, the end result will be disastrous. Sruti Smruti Puranokta Phalaparyartham, which means, that in Srutis (Vedas), Smrutis (Manu Smriti, etc.) and Puranas, it has been said that any karma being done with a desire should be started with a pure and sacred Sankalpa to get the expected result. The idea behind praying for the Sankalpasiddhi is to eradicate the feeling of doership or Ahankar. In other words, the result of Puja is thus offered to God. To achieve this object, first one should visualise the purpose or goal and plan meticulously what work should be done to achieve that particular goal and then start seeing the other points such as, who is the doer, where it is being held, when it is being performed, what is being done and what is the result of it. Once these have been identified and verified, then one needs to take Dhruda Nischay (firm resolve or Sankalpam) to do it according to the prescribed rules and regulations of that particular karma. These points have been included, probably, to make the devotee know and remember the place, the year, the month, the gotram, birth star, the thithi (star) or day, etc. I personally feel that it was included in our system or tradition in olden days because the people from Brahmana varna were ordained to do all Puja ceremonies, astrological predictions, ceremonies in temples and society, etc., and if they do not remember the important points such as the time, day and date, the position of grahas, the name of the month or year or the relevant thithi, etc., they may err in their decisions and calculations resulting in wrong predictions. Now it has become a part and parcel of the Puja so as to tell God every day in which Kal(time)/Yug we are in, where (which area) we are offering Puja, which is the current year (name of the year -- there 60 names), month, ayana (side), paksha (shukla/krishna - i.e., first half or second half of the month) date and day (thithi), etc.

Kalasa Sthapanam or Kumbha: This involves invoking Lords Vishnu, Rudra and Brahma, four Vedas, Gayathri, waters from all oceans and sacred rivers, such as, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Krishna, Thungabhadra, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, Cauvery, etc., in the water of Panchapatra, then sanctifying the vessel with Gandham, Kumkum, Akshata and Pushpam. After invocation, the Kalasodaka has to be sprinkled on all Puja materials and the persons performing Puja for purification. If Sankhapooja is to be done, then purified water has to be filled in the Sankha, then Puja offered to Sankha add a few drops of Sankhodaka to the vessel and then sprinkle the water on Puja materials and the persons performing Puja or Self (Atmanam ca Prokshyan). Then, Ghantanadam is to be done.

Kumbha means water-pot. It symbolises fullness. Sanyasins and eminent persons are welcomed with a Purna-Kumbha (a pitcher filled with holy water). All the sacred rivers like Ganta, Yamuna, Saraswati, Krishna, Godavari, Kaveri, etc., are supposed to flow into the Kumbha, filling it.

The Kumbha stands for generative power. Hence it is associated with the Divine Mother, the Grant Creation.

In worship, the deity is invoked to enter the Kumbha, remain there throughout the Puja and then go back to His or Her own abode.

As the Kumbha is meant to serve as a temporary image of the deity, its various components are equated with various parts of the deity. Thus the jar represents the body of the deity; the water in it stands for blood; the nine gems (navaratnas) placed in it represent the nine-fold spiritual power (siddhis); the kusha grass in the pitcher stands for blood vessels; the triple strands of yarn over the mouth of the jar stands for the nerves; the tower wound around the vessel is the skin, the coconut placed at the mouth of the jar represents the face, the kusha grass over the coconut stands for Lord Siva and the mango leaves above everything else stand for the matted locks of Siva.

During Kumbha-abhishekam the sanctified water in the vessel is poured over the pinnacle of the vimana above the garbhagriha of the deity. The is the climax of the consecration ceremony and huge crowds of men, women and children throng to get a sprinkling of the sacred water on their heads (taken from the Vedanta Kesari, February 2000 - A Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order)

The absolute God cannot be grasped by the human mind, so we require symbols. If the devotee is very philosophical man, his symbol may be very abstract in nature: a vast expanse, the infinite sky, something unlimited. These are other images and conceptions, though subtle. A person who cannot think in an abstract way prefers to have more concrete symbols. So he has been given forms of the anthropomorphic type. This is consistent with the three major conceptions of God: God the Absolute; the personal God with qualities, such as kindness and love, but no form; and the personal God with both form and qualities. In Hinduism, we find that the personal God has not only qualities, but a variety of forms as well. And why should this not be so? From a psychological point of view, the ideal needs to be presented according to the understanding of the devotee, all the while reminding him that it is through the worship of the form that he is to reach the formless aspect of the divine. This is the idea behind image worship in India. Image worship does not mean that some inert substance such as wood or stone is being worshipped. The image is also not a mere icon. It is a symbol of the lord. It reminds the devotee of the Lord, just as a photograph reminds us of the thing photographed (Ref. "Concept of God in Hinduism" by Swami Swahananda from The Vedanta Kesari, February 2000)

The idol is a support for us in spiritual childhood. A form or image is necessary for worship in the beginning. It is an external symbol of God for worship. It is the reminder of God. The material image calls up the mental data. Steadiness of the mind is obtained by image worship. The worshipper will have to associate the idea of infinity, omnipotence, purity, perfection, freedom, holiness, truth and omnipresence. It is not possible for all to fix the mind Absolute. A concrete form is necessary for practicing concentration. To behold God everywhere and to practice the presence of God is not possible for the ordinary man. Idol worship is the easiest form of worship for the modern man.

Idol worship is not just limited to Hinduism. Christians worship the Cross. They have the image of Cross in their mind. The Muslims keep the image of the Kaaba stone when they kneel and do prayers. The people of

the whole world keep some image or the other in their mind. The mental image is also a form of idol. Everyone is thus idol worshipper. Pictures, drawings, symbols etc. are all forms of idol only. Idols are not the idle fancies of sculptors, but are shining channels through which the heart of the devotee is attracted to God and flows towards him. Many would say, "Oh God is an all pervading formless being and how can God be confined to this idol!" Are these people ever conscious of His omnipresence? Do they always see Him alone in everything? No, It is their ego that prevents them from bowing to the idols of God and with that motive, they put this excuse forward.

The idol is a substitute or symbol. The image in a temple though it be made of stone, wood or metal is precious for a devotee as it bears the mark of his Lord, as it represents something which he holds holy and eternal. A flag is only a small piece of painted cloth, but to a soldier it stands something that he holds very dear. He is prepared to give up his life in defending his flag. Similarly, the image is very dear to a devotee. It speaks to him in its own language of devotion. The image arouses devotion in the devotee. A piece of ordinary white paper or colored paper has no value. We throw it away. However, if there is the stamp of Government on the paper (currency note), we keep it safe in pocket. Even, so an ordinary piece of stone has no value for us. We throw it away. However, if we behold the stone idol, we all bow our heads with folded palms, because there is the stamp of beloved lord on the stone. When you worship an image, we do not say; "this image has come from Punderpur. It was bought by Shriram. Its weight is 50 lbs. It is made of white marble. It has cost me Rs. 500/-" No! We superimpose all the attributes of the Lord on the image and pray. When our devotion and meditation become intense and deep, we do not see the stone image. We behold the Lord only who is pure Consciousness.

Image worship is very necessary for beginners. By worshipping the idol, the Lord is pleased. The idol is made up of the five elements. The five elements constitute the body of the Lord. The idol remains an idol, but the worship goes to the Lord. If you shake hands with a man, he is highly pleased. You have touched only a small part of his body and yet he is happy. He smiles and welcomes you. Even so, the Lord is highly pleased when a small portion of his cosmic body is worshipped. An idol is a part of the body of the Lord. The whole world is His body. The devotion goes to the Lord. The worshipper superimposes on the images the Lord and his attributes. This is one of the easiest forms of self-realization. It is one that suits the majority of people today. A look at the picture of God will elevate our mind to divine heights. This is truly a wonder and a miracle.

The idol or photograph of any God or Goddess is not just Stone or paper or whatever other material but is a symbol of the true deity so that we can focus our attention to the deity. With constant Puja, even a personal photo or idol worshipped by a devotee acquires a distinct identity of its own and starts responding to the devotee. The idol of a deity in a temple is all the more powerful since the Deity is invoked by Mantras and regular Pujas. As prescribed in the AGAMA SASTRAS, Yantras are also installed under the idols to increase the power of the deity many fold. Thus a powerful aura is built around the idol. Any object, be it ARATI, kum kum, turmeric, sandal paste, or holy water or even the clothes used to adorn the deity acquire a part of the aura. Thus we get

a part of the deity's powerful and beneficial aura when we bring any of these sacred objects near to us. Scriptures say that humans have nine RANDHRAS, (Navarandhras) i.e., orifices in our physical as well as astral bodies. Out of them, seven are in our head (mouth, two nostrils, two ears, and two eyes). The other two are meant for excretion of waste products from the body situated at the posterior end. Thus when we bring the palms, which are placed over the ARATI to our eyes, not only our eyes but our nostrils too get charged with the positive aura. When we hear the hymns and bells, our ears get purified. When we take the holy water our mouth gets purified. When the SATHA GOPURAM (the bell shaped piece in a Hindu temple with the feet of the God, placed on the head of the devotee by the priest at the end of the worship) is placed on our head our SAHASRA CHAKRA gets charged.

Thus **ARATI** and other holy articles which are taken into the close proximity of the deity and are then given to us act as carriers or vehicles of the positive energy from the deity to us. The purpose is thus probably different from the ARATI given to small children to protect them from evil eye.

The first is of course to do with light. Many temples in India are dimly lit and Arati gives an opportunity to get a better view of the God. Thus the light is physical and the devotion it evokes in the mind of the devotee helps kindle the spiritual light. While Arati is performed with many types of lamps, camphor is the most common ingredient in all temples. Camphor has excellent medicinal properties; especially it protects against many diseases in a hot climate that pervades most of India. The camphor and other aromatic substances purify the atmosphere and when the devotees place their palms over the Arati and bring the palms to their eyes and nose, they absorb the medicinal benefits. This is born out by the books on Homeopathy.

The camphor used for Arati lasts for a little time thus signifying the short span of human life and the Avidya or Agnana caused by the attachment Maya, in the shape of physical and sensual pleasures. Thus, Arati inspires the devotee to seek God who is permanent and all pervading. "Make hay while the sun shines" is a popular adage. Since Arati lasts for a little time only, it compels the devotee to focus his attention on the God.

Bells are usually rung while the Arati is given. The rhythmic sounds of the bells have a nice soothing and calming effect on our mind and help us seeing and sensing the shapeless God in the physical image that is being worshipped in front of us. In many temples, the Arati is also accompanied by chanting of Vedic Mantras or beautiful songs, which extol the virtues of the presiding deity, especially the all-pervasiveness. This activity reinforces the devotion of the devotee in his chosen path to reach spiritual enlightenment.

Shri Sri Yogananda Paramahansa said, "When an offering is made of flowers or incense or flame from oil lamps or candles on the altar, they represent the devotion of man to God. The flowers symbolize the fragrant love of the devotee; the incense conveys reverence; the flame typifies the light of calmness in which is revealed the Divine Deity, residing on the altar of the heart"

One may see the ritual of worship not as a mere physical exercise but as a real means through a communication between the self and the supreme is established. Understanding of such a communication is essential to reap the harvest of spiritual benefits.. Rituals may not be limited to the act of reinforcing one's stance on earth, a religious identity. It should be the vehicle that leads one to the understanding of the entity that is fundamental to the origin of all religions. Such a communication can only be unifying and not divisive. This series may be aptly concluded by a quote from Ishopanishad, the mention of which is also made in Sri Sai Satcharitha:

Isa vasya midam sarvam yatkinch jagatyam jagat tena tyaktena bhujidha
ma grudhah kasya cit dhanam

God is omnipresent and HE owns this universe. We should, therefore, enjoy it with a feeling of sacrifice, to the extent that is necessary for us and the rest should be left to others in the society and never ever feel jealous of others.

The readers are also requested to visit <http://www.mantraonnet.com/practices.html>. for a good collection of explanations for different questions pertaining to the spiritual practices followed in Hinduism.

(Concluded. Contributions to this above series by Sai devotees SV Swamy, India, and Mala Gupta, UAE are gratefully acknowledged)