

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAKARA VILAKKU POOJA

The annual Makara Vilakku Pooja is being conducted in the month of January between 12th and 14th; the last day of the celebration being **MAKARA SANKRANTHI** (vernal equinox) Day. Mandala Pooja extends to 41 days prior to Makara Sankranthi Day.



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## The Legend and History of Ayyappan

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The legend and history are intermingled in the genesis of Ayyappan. It is believed that Ayyappan was born as progeny of the union of Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu appeared as Mohini, the beautiful enchantress - the alluring damsel appearing at the time of the churning of the Ocean Of Milk to entice the asuras and divide the nectar (**Amrith**) among the Devas themselves. Shiva succumbed to the beauty of Mohini and Ayyappan was born out of this union. Hence the name **Hari Hara Putra** - Hari (Vishnu), Hara (Shiva), Putra (son). Ayyappan is regarded as the third son of Shiva, the other two being Ganesha and Muruga.

In an another legend, the asura Bhasmasura obtained a boon from Lord Shiva in that whoever he (Bhasmasura) touched on the head with his hand would be turned into ashes. To test the efficacy of this boon, Bhasmasura tried to touch the head of Shiva himself. The frightened Shiva sought help from Vishnu. In order to distract Bhasmasura, Vishnu appeared as the seductress Mohini in front of Bhasmasura. Bhasmasura lost control of his senses and asked Mohini to be his consort. Mohini agreed to his request on one condition: that he should promise her by touching his forehead that he would not take another wife. Bhasmasura readily agreed to this condition and promised her by touching on his forehead. Immediately, the boon given to him by Shiva became effective and Bhasmasura was reduced to a heap of ashes. In the meanwhile, Shiva was himself enticed by the charm and beauty of Mohini and as a result of their union, Ayyappan was born on the auspicious day of Makara Sankranthi, when the star Utrarn was on the ascendance. His mortal life was to annihilate **Mahishi** (buffalo faced asura).

The child was abandoned on the banks of the Pampa River. King Rajasekhara of Panthalarn (in Kerala), who belonged to the Pandya dynasty of South India, while hunting heard the crying of the child found lying on the banks of the river, with a radiant face and a olden bell tied around

his neck. The King, who had no child of his own, took him to the palace and brought him up as his own son. He was named **Manikanda** because of the gold bell found around his neck. Soon after this incident, the Queen conceived and gave birth to a son. Both sons grew up in the palace as brothers. When the time came to decide on the heir apparent, the Queen favoured her own son and the King nominated Manikanda as the Prince (Yuvaraja). The Queen conspired with the Chief Minister and thought out a plan to get rid of Manikanda. She feigned sickness and prevailed upon the palace physician to prescribe a medicine which included the milk of a tigress. Manikanda was assigned to the task of milking the tigress and was sent out to the forest. It was the intention that he would be killed by wild animals in the process. The King advised Manikanda to take along a coconut of tri-netrom (three eyed coconut) to represent Shiva in order to protect him and some food items to sustain him till his return, in a cloth bundle known as **irumudi** which was to be carried upon his head.

During his wanderings in the forest of Sabari, the battle between Mahishi and Ayyappan took place at the bank of **Azhutha**. Ayyappan killed Mahishi and threw the dead body into a nearby place called **Kallidurnkundu**. Mahishi's soul emerged and was redeemed from a curse sustained from her previous life when she was known as Leela. She requested Ayyappan to marry her and take her as his consort. As Manikandan was to be a **Brahmachari** (celibate ascetic), he refused her request, but he agreed to give her a place as his **Shakti** on Sabari Hill. This place is now known as **Malikapurathamma** shrine. Manikanda returned to the palace, using Devandra the king of Devas, to take the form of a ferocious tigress and riding on it accompanied by a fleet of tigresses. The King and the Queen realized that Manikanda was an avatar, a human incarnation of Shiva, and prayed for his mercy.

The history of Ayyappan and the Kingdom of Panthalam revolves around the notorious robber called Udayanan. Udayanan built up many fortresses on the mountain of Talippara, Inchippara and Karimala in the forests of Pathalam. Udayanan used to plunder wealth from the palace and the village headmen. Udayanan wanted to marry the daughter of the King of Panthalam. As this was refused by the King, Udayanan abducted his daughter and kept her in one of his fortresses. A priest of an old temple, Sabarimala, rescued this girl from the clutches of Udayanan and married her. Udayanan came to know about this and he killed the priest. In the meanwhile, the King of Panthalam conducted a **Yaga yajna** to get the blessing of Lord Shiva in order to restore the order and sanctity of his kingdom. Lord Shiva appeared in his dreams and informed him that his daughter had been rescued by a priest and that she had married him. A son was born, known as Jayanthan, who would be an avatar of Shiva and Vishnu with the prowess of martial arts, soldiery and powers of Tantra to avenge Udayanan. During this period, a Muslim bandit named **Vavar** who came from Arabia, came to contact Jayathan while he was defeating Udayanan. Subsequently, this bandit was converted and he joined the army of Jayanthan. The King of Panthalam came to know the bravery of Jayanthan and invited him to the palace, named him as Ayyappan and accorded him all the powers to rule the kingdom.

After 12 years of establishing peace in the country, Ayyappan sought permission to leave the palace. The king wished to have an abode made in his memory at the site of the old ruined temple where his priest-father was killed by Udayanan. Accordingly, a sanctum was built to install an idol made of panchaloha (an alloy of five metals), climbing 18 steps to reach the sanctum. These 18 steps to represent 5 indriyas, 8 ragas, 3 gunas, vidya and avidya. Ayyappan

also advised the king of the nature of the austerities to be observed before the pilgrimage to this temple. On the day of consecration and installation of the idol, amidst the sound of saranam chanting and conches, pipes and drums, Ayyappan was transformed into a stroke of lightning and got absorbed in the idol of **Dharma Sasta**. This was his birthday, the auspicious day of Makara Sankrathi.

The 3 austerities prescribed for devotees are:

1). ***Austerity of body***

Purity, uprightness, continence and non violence

2). ***Austerity of mind***

Tranquility, gentleness, silence, self control and purity of thought

3). ***Austerity of speech***

Speech that causes no annoyance to others, truthful, pleasant and beneficial and recitation of scriptures.

Vegetarianism has been prescribed during the 41 days vritharn to help achieve the above austerities. Brahmacharya (continence) will help convert the physical energy to spiritual energy. Self surrender leads to self realization. The self that surrenders is the ego and the self that realizes is God. The carrying of irrunudi on the head and chanting of saranammantrain is a total surrender to God.

In temples, the celebration of Makara Vilakku Pooja is conducted along the tradition of Tantra, Mantra and Yantra rituals interwoven in its pooja programs. Mantrayana tradition is incorporated in the bhajan program. Ayyappan prayer songs, kirthans and chanting of "SwarniaYee Saranarn Ayyappa" are meant to activate the breath control vibrational activity.

Ayyappa sahasranarnarn (recitation of 1000 times of Ayyappan's name) together with other bhajan songs, create an elevated mental condition conducive to invoke a powerful and unique method of recharging the sub-conscious mind with spiritual vibrations.

According to Brahmopanishad, a deity is to be worshipped simultaneously at 4 places:

1). **Idol (Bimba)**

2). **Fire (Vahini)**

3). **Water pitcher (Kumbha)**

4). **Mystic diagrams (Mandala - yantra)**

All the above are incorporated in our pooja system during the last 3 days of Makara Vilakku. **Arathi** is the culmination of the offerings of prayers to the deity.

**Mandalaradhana** (yantra worship) originated in the early period of A.D. 300 and was perfected over the next 500 years. It was used in the beginning for the yaga yajna sacrificial rituals at a specially constructed pandal by the side of a hermitage, on the bank of a river or on a mountain top. At a later stage, it was adopted to be conducted inside a temple's premises. Yantra helps the process of meditation. There are very many types of yantras in use according to the deities. The main few are **Sri Yantra** of Goddess Lakshmi, yantra of Gayatri, yantra of Lord Vishnu (**Sudurshan mahachakra**), yantra of Lord Shiva, Rama and Krishna. Ayyappan yantra is one of the most powerful yantras.