shrI kapAlishvarAShTakam

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INTRODUCTION–
Shri Kapalishvara is the name of Lord Shiva who is the presiding deity at the ancient temple of Shiva in Mylapore, Chennai - the capital of the State of Tamilnadu. His consort has the name Kalpakambal. Ashtakam (ಅಷ್ಟಕ) means a poem consisting of eight verses. In this case the verses are in praise of Shri Kapalishvara. He is praised here with qualities referred to in the vedas, puranas and also as the Infinite Supreme Being. This shows that it is the Supreme Being that appears as Kapalishvara in the temple in Mylapore as any god in any other temple.

NOTE:-
The following symbols are used in the explanations that are given below.
(1) - SA :- Saiva Agama. (2) - SP :- Shiva Purana. (3) - SAN - Shiva 108 Namavali. (4) - SL - Shivanandalahari of Shri Shankaracharya. (5) - VS - Vishnu sahasranama. (6) - BG - Bhagavad Gita. (7) - SS - Siva sahasranama (From Padmapurana) with the commentary by late H.H. Sri Parasivendra Saraswati of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham.

The vedas (Taittariya Upanishad, Anandavalli) declare that the Supreme Being is beyond reach of senses and mind. For this reason His qualities cannot be adequately portrayed by anyone. The Shiva Mahimma stotram (22) puts this up in a graphic manner. The poet says that even if the blue mountain were to be a lump of ink powder, the ocean the ink-pot, the branch of the heavenly tree Parijata be pen, the earth itself the writing leaf, and by taking these Saradha the Goddess of Learning writes for eternity, even then His virtues cannot be fully described.
The question then is, why should one take up the futile job of writing a stotram in praise of the Lord knowing full well that it can never be done satisfactorily? The same author of Mahimna Stotram provides the answer right at the beginning of the work.

He says that the Lord has given out the wonderful vedas which are sweet as the nectar. So, even the hymns composed by Brihaspathi, the learned guru of the devas will be insignificant to the Lord. This being so, I have ventured to praise You because the act will purify my speech.

Our puranas repeatedly say that chanting the Lord’s names and singing His glories destroy one’s sins. One need not worry about the level of his learning to start in this endeavour. Sage Narada pointed this out to Sage Vyasa and advised him to write about the glories of the Lord.

The composition may be replete with faults. Yet, if each vesre speaks of the Lord’s glory, such a work alone will be liked by noble souls. They will hear it, sing it and repeat it to the listeners. Because of this reason scholars and poets continue to write hymns in praise of the Lord.

THE TEMPLE:-
The temple of Shri Kapalishvara is many centuries old. The Lord here has
been sung by several Tamil saints known as Nayanmars. The famous composer Papanasam Sivan lived in Mylapore near the temple and was an ardent devotee of Kapalishvara. He had composed many songs in praise of the Lord and Devi Kalpakambal. Originally, the temple was situated on the sea shore. But it was badly damaged by tidal waves that battered the structure in the second half of the 16th century. It was later moved to the present location where a magnificent temple has come up. There is a large tank before the temple which is used for the float festival.

Being a major temple devoted to Lord Shiva all the important festivals associated with Lord Shiva are observed punctiliously. The temple is very popular and attracts a large number of devotees even on normal days. It includes locals and tourists from from all over India and abroad too. The crowds are particularly heavy on weekends, Fridays, on important days such as pradoshams (on the Trayodashi days) and Sivaratri.

NOTE:-
In the passages that follow there may be statements that will appear to eulogise Lord Shiva as the Supreme Being and place other Gods on lower pedestals. These statements may cause some confusion or displeasure to some. There is no need at all for such feelings. Our puranas always resort to this kind of statements in which one form of God is praised as the Supreme Being and others are shown as an inferior to that particular deity. This is just to glorify that particular form. The intention is never to slight any deities. All puranas are particular in stating what is said in the vedas - that it is the one Supreme Being which appears as different Gods and in essesence all are one and the same. The Lord says clearly in Gita that He receives worship offered to God in any form.

We see in some movies that one actor plays the roles of the hero and also other characters. The hero frequently fights with others (played by same person). And finally some event reveals
the fact that all of them are born to the same lady and are brothers. They hug each other in great joy and live happily ever after. Similarly, the one Supreme Being alone appears in various forms. So, essentially all forms depict the same Being.

LINGAM -
Shri Kapalishvara in the sanctum in the temple is in the form of a lingam. The form has esoteric significance. The word lingam means a sign or emblem that characterises an object. The Agama texts, however, interpret the word to describe the Supreme Being from which the universe emerges and into which it finally merges. The Supreme Being is without parts and form. However this form is not easily understood or suitable for worship by most people since they have intense attachment to their bodies. Krishna says this clearly.

Considering this problem that will face many, our shastras provide three concepts of the Lord. That is, sakala (one with form, rupa, like Nataraja, DakShinamurty etc., ), nishkala (one without form, arupa) and sakala-nishkala (one with and without parts or specific form, rupa-arupa). The lingam belongs to the third category - a combination of form and formlessness. It is thus extremely suitable for worship. Its form is made of mantras and hence it is said that the Sivalinga is constituted of vidya or mantra deha. The three chapters of the Shiva linga, namely the square base, the octagonal column and the upper part relate respectively to Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preservator and Rudra the annihilator.

Thus the lingam represents the Supreme Being that embodies in itself the...
triad of gods. One of the names of Shiva is

Now we will say a few words about some important days observed in the temple. These days may be divided into two types - festivals and vratams. Their purpose is the same, that is to make strong the remembrance of the Lord and bring us close to Him. Festivals like Deepavali and Dusserrah are marked by celebrations. The vratams, such as the Ekadasi and Shivaratri are marked by fasting, devotion, austerity and observance of vows.

PRADOSHAM:

We are familiar with the story of the churning of the ocean by devas and asuras to obtain the Amrit or nectar. It is said that they used the mountain Manthara as the churning pestle and the snake Vasuki as the rope. The asuras held the snake near the head and the devas the tail portion. As they started churning the snake suffered intense agony and vomitted its venom. It was very potent and threatened to engulf the world. The devas ran to Lord Shiva and prayed to Him to save them and the world. Shiva, who is the embodiment of compassion took pity on them and consumed the venom. All the devas who gathered at that time felt immense relief and worshipped the Lord in gratitude without taking any food. This was the Ekadasi day. The Lord was pleased with their worship and distributd the Amrit to them. On the following day (that is, on the dwadasi) the devas finished their puja early in the morning and had their food. On the next day, that is on trayodashi, the Lord who was pleased with their devotion performed a dance in the evening. Devi Parvati was watching the dance along with the devas. This dance performance lasted for one yAma
or three hours. The period came to be known as pradosham. This is a vratam and devoted exclusively for the worship of Lord Shiva.

If the pradosham falls on a Saturday then it becomes specially auspicious. The pradosham is auspicious as on that occasion all the gods and devas assemble to have the darshan of Lord Shiva and witness His dance. So, by visiting the temple on that occasion one can have the benefit of having the darshan of Lord Shiva as also all gods. Some verses from Shiva Puranam that talk about the glory of pradosham are given below. Rough translations of the verses are also given.

On that occasion (evening of pradosham day) Lord Shiva alone is to be worshipped, and not other devas like Vishnu. For, all of them are there in the presence of Lord Shiva. So, one who seeks liberation should do His puja, listen to stories that narrate His glories and chant His mantra. Those who are severely afflicted by poverty and sorrow will get relief by this. This will serve as a boat that will help those who are immersed in ocean of debts.
During pradosha time Lord Shiva dances along with Parvathi Devi. Sarasvati Devi plays on veena. Vishnu plays on mridangam. Laxmi Devi sings and Brahma plays on cymbals. Indra plays on flute. All gods witness the glorious sight. One should reach a holy shrine and worship Mahalingam by prostrating to Him five times. By saluting thus one gets to live in Shivaloka for as many years as the dust particles that had stuck to his body.

Having darsan of Shivalingam, circumambulating It and performing tarpanam will pay off the five obligations one is born with. One should not indulge in eating, sex, oil bath, darsan of Hari and idle gossip during pradosham.

One should worship Lord Vishnu always except on pradosham days. It is beneficial to have darsan of Lord Narasimha and worship Him on pradosham time. One who is unable to do puja etc., as said above during pradosham can get the benefit by having a darsan of the temple of Lord Shiva.

NOTE:-
It is said here that one should not have darsan of Vishnu on pradosham days but it does good to have darsan and worship Narasimha. The reason is that Narasimha is Shiva only and not different from Him. The following quote from Nrisimhapurvatapani upanishad states this clearly.
SHIVARATRI.
The pradosham day occurring in the Magha month (11th in the Hindu calendar) is very special and is celebrated as Shivaratri. This is the day when Lord Shiva revealed His glorious form to the gods to show that He alone is the Supreme Being. He appeared to them in the form of infinite effulgence. He told them that they all can derive benefit by worshipping Him. Accordingly the gods offered special puja to Him. Lord Shiva was pleased with their worship. He added that the day will be known as Shivaratri and will be a very auspicious one.

Later the infinite form transformed itself into a lingam. The Lord said that whoever fasts on that day or worships Him will get all that is good in this life and will escape rebirth. He also said that the lingam will get installed in all the temples and the place where the lingam appeared first will be known as Arunachalam. Aruna means red - the colour of the flame. Achalam means mountain. Shiva in this place is known as Arunachaleshvara.

This have occurred in Tiruvannamali where the lingam in the temple is known as tejolingham (텔ожет링엄). The event is celebrated as an annual festival in that town. A big lamp is lighted at the top of the hill behind the temple to mark the event. Thousands of people gather to witness the light.

Shivaratri day is celebrated with great deal of fervour in Shiva temples all over the country. This is a vratam and so is marked by pujas, fasting and offering prayers throughout the night. After having bath one should wear vibhuti, necklace of rudraksha beads, worship the Lord with bilva leaves, chant thr sacred panchakshara mantra and visit Shiva temple and participate in the pujas that are done throughout the night. Fasting is prescribed as an
aid to curb the wandering tendency of the mind so that it can concentrate on the job on hand - in this case the puja of the Lord. This is known to us for long. Shri Krishna mentions this in Bhagavad Gita (2-59).

Some verses from the Shiva puranas that extol the important day are given here with rough translation.

Fasting on the chaturdashi day in the fortnight following the full moon day in the Magha month (ie) on Shivaratri day is not something that is easily got by everyone. Still more difficult to get is the possibility of keeping awake during the night on that day.

It is very difficult to have darshan of the Shiva lingam. Still more difficult is to get a chance to worship the Lord.

Even in performing that worship to that omnipresent Lord the good fortune to offer bilva leaves to Him is got only by the fructification of good deeds done in innumerable births.

What merit one earns by taking bath in the river Ganga for ten thousand years is got by worshipping Lord with the bilva leaves on Shivaratri day.

Fasting on the night of Shivaratri is equivalent to performing hundred vedic sacrifices. Keeping awake on that night is superior to austerities.
performed in ten million years.

Nothing in all the worlds equals the merit one earns by offering one bilva leaf to the Lord on that holy day.

OH! great is the power of maya. Ignorant people do not observe Shivaratri which is so glorious. This is just like the ignorant people not caring to study the vedas.

Fasting on Shivaratri day, keeping awake during that night, visiting the temple of the Lord, the holy place of Gokarna constitute the steps for one to reach the abode of Lord Shiva.

THE SUMMER FESTIVAL:-

The summer festival (March-April) lasts for ten days. It attracts huge crowds from in and around the city of Chennai. We can have the darshan of the Lord riding on the bull Nandi on the fifth day. One of the Lord’s name is ऋषींग्. The bull or rishabha (मरसे) represents dharma which showers all desired results like dharma. artha kama and also gives purity of mind that helps in pursuing mokSha. The commentator says :-

The Lord also has the bull as the mark in His flag. Because of this He also has the name श्रनांस।SAN(39)। This shows the great importance the Lord attaches to dharma.

On the seventh day we have the car festival when He goes round the streets in a car. It is very popular and attracts huge crowds. It is said that one who can have the darsan of tha Lord in the car will escape rebirth. .truth
The car represents the body.

The Self within the body is the charioteer, the one who rides in the chariot. The \textit{తదా} or dwarf mentioned herein refers to the Self, Supreme Being, the size of the thumb, who resides in the body, in the small chamber of the heart of everyone. The Katha Upanishad says this. (KU-2-1-12).

Even though the Self is all pervading, It is conceived as a dwarf residing in the heart to facilitate meditation on It.

Another important festival is the day when the 63 saivaite saints, known as Nayanmara\'s are taken in a procession and the Lord follows His devotees. A popular Tamil poet Avvaiyar has said in one of her poems that a devotee of the Lord is greater than the Lord Himself as he has the Lord enshrined in his heart! This will remind us of what Sri Krishna told about His devotees to His friend Uddhava in the Uddhava Gita.

He said that He invariably follows His devotees.

This festival is celebrated on the eighth day.

On the ninth day one can have the darshan of the Lord as \textit{తదా} a mendicant going around the streets with a begging bowl. The question now arises as to why the Lord is reduced to state of nothingness? Puranas tell that Lord Shiva took on the role of a beggar with a dishevelled appearance to teach a lesson to some sages who were staunch adherents of the path.
of karma and ignored the higher path of jnana. They were proud of their achievements in this path that got them some supernatural powers also. The beggar was extremely handsome. On seeing Him many of the men and women in the ashram precinct lost their balance and started following Him. When the sages saw this they were furious. They cursed him and let loose some demons created by their spiritual power. But their attempts to harm the beggar utterly failed and they felt humiliated. They surrendered to the Lord.

The ten days festival concludes with the wedding of the divine couple (Lord Kapali and Devi Kalpakambal). The function is celebrated with great deal of enthusiasm by the people as they consider it as a marriage happening in their own house. Everyone brings presents to the bride and groom in the form of silk sarees and silk dhoties etc. Many offer pieces of jewellery. They also bring sweet and savoury items prepared specially for the occasion. Thus the marriage turns out to be a memorable occasion. After the function gets over the devotees are given prasad offered to the divine couple. The wedding signifies the union of the Jivatma and Pramatma who were never separate, but felt separated due to the veil of avidya or nescience. The Lalithasahasranamam describes Devi Lalitha as नमः त्रिकृपाक्षी देवी ललिताः स्यायत्रेयाः सदापुरुषः

Devi’s neck shines with the Mangalya thread tied by the Lord who, therefore has the name अंभोत्तरायुद्धं = अंभोत्तरायुद्धं अंभोत्तरायुद्धं अंभोत्तरायुद्धं अंभोत्तरायुद्धं

We also have the float festival (in January-February) when the Lord goes round the tank in a float. This symbolises the fact that the Lord Siva, like a boatman, goes in a boat or raft, scours the ocean of samsara and looks for people who are struggling in the ocean and seeking His help to come out of it. So Siva has these names.
This will bring to our mind the verse from the popular Karavalamba stotram wherein Shri Shankaracharya beseeches Lord Laxmi Narasimha to extend His hand and pull him out of the fearsome ocean of samsara.

Every individual is struggling in the ocean of samsasra, but does not know how to reach the shore. Also he does not have the ability to know the means. In such a precarious situation the kindly acharya tells us that reaching out to the Lord is the only way. One struggling in the sea for a long time swallows the bitter water, feels weak and faint. In the same way one caught in the ocean of samsara takes in the poison of pleasures and pains through the
senses and is befuddled. The acharya herein gently reminds the Lord that saving someone caught in the sea is not something new to Him. On an earlier occasion He had rescued Prahlada who was bound to a big slab of stone and thrown into the sea by saying ಪರ್ಣಿ-ರಂಭ-ಪೂರಿ-ರಂಭಾರ್ತ. The kindly Lord is one who is capable of helping us to get out of samsara and administer the required treatment. He is renowned in the vedas as the foremost and devine physician. Shri Rudram says this. The kindly Lord is one who is capable of helping us to get out of samsara and administer the required treatment. He is renowned in the vedas as the foremost and devine physician. Shri Rudram says this.

There is a separate temple inside the main temple for Devi who bears the name Kalpakambal. It is said that She took the form of a peacock and worshipped the Lord here to demonstrate the power of devotion. Peacock is called mayil in Tamil. Thus the place has come to be known as Mailai or as Mayilapuri and as Mylapore.

Kapali is one of Shiva’s names. (No.24-Shiva 108 namavali). Kapala means a skull. Siva wears a garland of skulls. Each skull in His garland is said to be that of one Brahma, the creator god after Brahma’s demise at the time of resolution or pralaya. Brahma is only the name of the post, like that of the President or the Prime Minister. When the post is vacated by the occupant another suitable person takes up the post and the work of creation continues. This period is known as ಕಲ್ಪ ಕಳಪ. At the time of Kalpam, Shiva withdraws the creation within Himself and releases it at the beginning of the next Kalpa. Krishna says this in Gita-(9-7).

Brahma has a very long life according to our calendar. We may get an idea about Brahma’s longevity from the following figures. 360 human years = 1 year of devas. 12,000 years of the devas = The duration of 4 yugas. 2000 such periods = One day of Brahma. Brahma has a life of 100 years made of
such days and is equal to 432 million years of mortals. Thus, it is very very long as per our reckoning. Still, Brahma has a finite life only, however long it may be. It has an end. So, every one, including Brahma, is absorbed by Lord’s Prakriti and released again. Shiva wearing a garland made of skulls of Brahmas indicates that Shiva is beyond time, is eternal and lasts even after other lesser gods like Brahma who are in the grip of time meet their end. Shri Nilakanta DikShita explains this in his Shивatattvarahasyam as follows. SAN(24).

Now we are faced with a peculiar problem. What can we ask of Kapaleeshvara, who Himself goes around with a begging bowl (kapalam or skull) in His hand? Shri Shankaracharya too faced this problem and had come out with an ingenious solution. He had seen that wandering beggers usuallu keep with them dogs, monkeys and such small animals. They make the animals do some simple tricks, entertain the people and collect alms. He says that he has a monkey called his mind that is very frisky, mischevous and uncontrollable. He beseeches the Lord to tie it with the cord of devotion and take it with HIm. Please look at this entreaty that is addressed to Kapali.

Thus, the hymn that follows is about the Infinite Supreme Being who appears as Kapali for the benefit of devotees and who is none other than Lord Shiva. Devi Kalpakamba is His Maya shakti also known as Prakriti. The Supreme Being associated with maya is known as Ishwara or Maheshwara. This is said in the Svethasvarpanishad as: श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य श्वेतस्वारपराणस्य

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So is also Devi Kalpakamba who has the name Mangala (meaning auspicious). The following popular verse from Saptasloki Durga says this clearly.

Thus, by saluting them whose very names spell auspiciousness, one is bound to get all that is good in life here and hereafter. The following popular verse says this.

The Kaivalyopanishad (7) says:-

that one, by meditating on the highest Lord who is allied to Uma, supremely powerful. three eyed, has a blue neck and tranquil reaches Him who is the source of all, the witness of all and is beyond darkness (ignorance or avidya).

This is said in the following verse also.
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