

Swamiye Sharanam Ayyappa

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With verses traceable back to the Vedic ages, and a presence continuously seen until the present day, worship of the Lord Dharma Shaasta most popularly known as Ayyappan remains a strong forte of the Hindu faith. However, with origins hazy and shrouded in mystery, there is also a thick cloud of mystery and controversial notions surrounding the Lord, with the real truth being as good as deeply hidden and buried underground. The discussion attempts to address this topic from all angles such as literature, temples and spirituality.

Spiritual Significance: Who is Ayyappan?

"Antah Pravishta Shaastaa Jananaam Sarvaathma | Sarvaa Praja Yatraikam Bhavanti]", or "Where all are united, He who has entered within, that are born, and is the self of all, is beyond comprehension, He is Shaasta the ruler of all things".

Similarly, in another verse, "Antah Pravishta Shaastaa Jananaam Ekasanbahudaa Vichaara | Shatha Shukraani Yatraikam Bhavanti"]".

This is what Taittiriya Aranyaka of the Krishna branch of Yajur Veda says in verses 3-11-1 and 3-11-2. Who is this Shaasta? We need to start from the basics to understand this Lord, also called Vipra Poojya (Worshipped by the Vedas).

The basic premise is the premise of Advaita, ie. the body, mind, world and everything understood by the five senses, thoughts, feelings and memories is unreal, figments of the mind and is the delusion called Maaya, revolving around a false sense of identification with the finite body and mind, also called Ego or Ahankaara. Transcending this Maaya, one kills the Ahankaara and the unreal 'world' to reveal the true Self (Atman), which is infinite, eternal truth (Sat), fundamental consciousness (Chit) and pure unalloyed bliss (Aanandam). This Self is very much the Absolute, Parabrahman, which gives rise to the entire universe through its 'playful act' of Maaya, and thus as the playful source, is called 'Lalitha Ambika', the Universal Mother. Because the Mother is beyond form, descriptions and intellectual comprehension, She is termed 'Nirguna'.

As the epitome of the esoteric Sri Vidya tradition Lalitha Ambika is nothing but the Aanandam or Atman itself, as the ultimate destination in all of Spirituality - "Aham Iti Eva Vibhaavaye Bhavaanim", says the Dhyana (invocation) of Lalitha Sahasranaamam (1000 names of the Universal Mother).



Then comes the triad of Shiva-Shakti-Maayon. Maayon, an ancient Tamil Sangam term is today better known as Narayana, and each of these three is completely non-distinct, completely inseparable and in every way equal to each other. Maayon or Narayana is the realm of Maaya, which is the fundamental canvas on which the universe is created and operates. Maayon, the realm of Maaya, because of the virtue of assuming form is called 'Saguna'. In this realm of Maaya, comes existence of Shiva, called Prakaasha, which is nothing but pure existence, without any understanding of what its nature or features are. Shakti, called the Vimarsha is the attributes such as name, form etc of this existence. For example, is the statement "Apple is tasty" - the scope of the statement is Maayon, existence 'is' is Shiva, and the attribute 'tasty' is Shakti. Without existence and attributes, the realm of Maaya makes no sense, and without the realm of Maaya, existence and attributes do not exist. Thus, all are inseparable and interdependent of each other. Shiva is the Father Appa, Shakti the Mother Amma and Maayon the Revered Ayya.



Then comes an interesting stage, as an intermediate between Saguna and Nirguna. To do this, the vertical Saguna-Nirguna duality must assume a horizontal duality. For this, Maayon, along with Shiva and Shakti combine to form a single Saguna aspect, called 'Narayana', and this union takes the place of Shakti. This is the basis of associating Maaya, which is Maayon, as Yoga Maaya or Maha Maaya, the Goddess (Keralites often chant Amme Narayana). Nirguna on the other hand conflates taking the place of Shiva. At this point, Shiva, as Arunachala transcends form and emerges as a tall pillar of fire (The 'Formless Form' of Lingam), and is now called Shankara.

Thus, Shiva-Shakti now becomes Shankara-Narayana, the horizontal manifestation of the vertical Nirguna-Saguna. This Shankara Narayana manifests as Dharma Shaasta or Ayya-Appa (Ayyappan), which is nothing but a two-way bridge between Saguna and Nirguna.

In the upward path of ascent, from Saguna to Nirguna, one sees the Shaasta (Teacher) aspect, where Dharma Shaasta is the Guru (Preceptor), enabling and guiding us towards transcending Maaya and attaining Self-Realization.

In the downward path of descent, from Nirguna to Saguna, one sees the Dharma (Righteousness) aspect (Krishna as Narayana states "Dharma Samsthapana Arthaaya Sambhavaami Yuge Yuge"). Dharma Shaasta thus upholds righteousness, gracing the devout, encouraging discipline and austerity, punishing the wicked and destroying the evil elements and spirits, protecting the people.

Exaggeration of the Shaasta aspect gives rise to the Dakshinamurthi form, seen in temples, whereas exaggeration of Dharma aspect gives rise to Aiyannar form, seen as a protector village God.

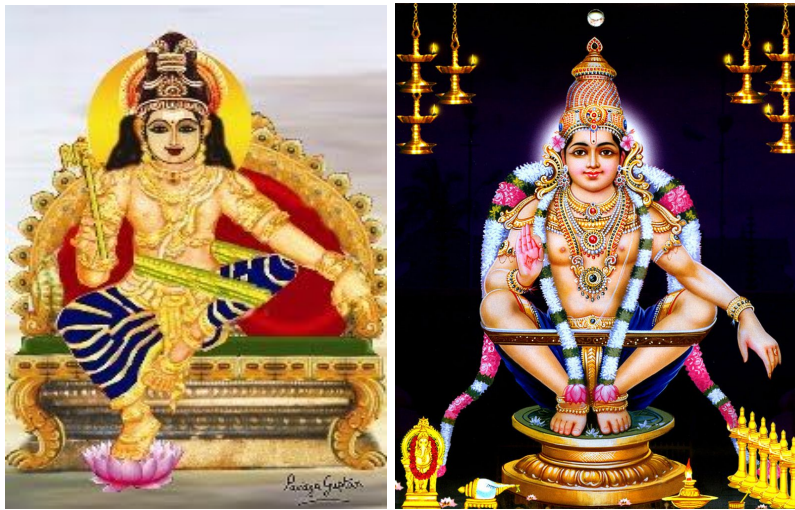
The true form of Ayyappan with both aspects is seen in very few temples where Sri Vidya is predominant (Kanchipuram, Tiruvarur, Papanasam, Sori Muthaiyan Koil, Sabarimala). One can always see Meru, or Sri Yantra, or Goddess as Kamakshi and Kamalamba near the Lord in all these temples, showing His significance as the direct manifestation of Lalitha Ambika, in the extolled position of Guru. In Sabarimala, one sees the words "Tat Tvam Asi" (That Thou Art) at the entrance - this is a golden Mahavakya, showing the direct teaching of the Lord as Guru, to identify with the real Self which is the infinite and blissful Atman.

Understanding this important concept of Lord Dharma Shaasta clearly shows the significance of the above Yajur Vedic verse praising the Lord, as well as many other verses in Vedas, Tantras and other treatises extolling the Lord, who combines Shiva, Shakti and Narayana aspects and occupies the highest spiritual significance. As the very Lalitha Ambika in the Guru form, the Lord is the protector and the revealer of the greatest secret - Atma Jnaana, and this is why He is called the Paraaya Guptha.

These concepts are seen in Lalitha Sahasranaamam as Nirguna (139), Govinda Roopini (267), Rudra Roopa (269), Poorna (292), Tatpada Lakshyaartha (363), Paraa (366), Tattvasana (424), Tat (425), Tvam (426), Guru Moorthi (603), Shaastra Mayi (705), Guhya Roopini (707), Guru Mandala Roopini (713), Dakshinamurthi Roopini (725), Pushkara (804), Dharma Dhara (884), Vipra Priya (887), Vipra Roopa (888), Dharmini (958), Jnaana Mudra (979).

Other Yajur Vedic verses extolling the Lord Dharma Shaasta are Taittiriya Aranyaka 5-4-6 , Taittiriya Brahmana 3-10-1-13, 3-10-9-7, Taittiriya Samhita 2-6-9-7, 3-1-8-3, 3-2-4-2, 5-7-4-4 and 6-3-8-4.

Symbolism of Dharma Shaasta



Typically, Dharma Shaasta is shown with two consorts, namely Poorna and Pushkala. These names translate to "Completeness" and "Prosperity", and are allusions to the two paths - Jnaana and Bhakti, through which one reaches the Absolute as Self-Realization.

Rather than the two consorts, these represent the two halves of the Lord itself, in the pure Yogic posture and form one sees at Sabarimala.

The Lord is seen in a unique Yogic posture, sometimes also seen in Lord Narasimha, Dakshinamurthi or Aanjaneya. Here, the Lord is seated upright, with His legs bent and both ankles touching the Mooladhara or root Chakra. The erectness of the posture enables free flow of Kundalini Shakti or the Life force through the seven Chakras. It is humanly difficult to maintain such a posture for long duration, and to prevent the legs from straying away, the Lord has a band (Yoga Pattai) tying his legs with the back.

The right hand of the Lord shows the Chinmudra, holding index finger and thumb together, with the other fingers held straight. Those three fingers middle, ring and little fingers are said to represent the three states of Jaagraka (Waking), Svapna (Dream) and Sushupti (Deep Sleep). The index finger is the Maaya as mis-identification or Ahankaara that pervades through these

states. Bringing the index finger to the thumb symbolizes killing of the Ahankaara, and merging the sense of self with the true Self or Atman, represented as the thumb.

Thus, Chin-Mudra, or the gesture of concentration, consciousness and reality is the true and ultimate teaching of Self-Realization. One sees this exact same Mudra in the form of Dakshinamurthi. Thus, the right half of Dharma Shaasta highlights the teacher or Shaasta Aspect, and this is precisely Poorna Devi - completeness of wisdom, knowledge and understanding of reality.

The left hand of the Lord rests on His leg, pointing towards His feet. In all seated forms of Ayyappan, one will definitely see the left leg lifted up, irrespective of whether the right leg is lifted up (as in Yoga Asana form in Sabarimala) or hangs down (as in Veera Asana forms in other temples). Thus, depending on the height of the statue, when the devotee stands or sits before the Lord, he will find the Lord's raised feet at the level of the heart. This, and the Lord pointing to His feet, is His message to place His feet firmly in the heart (Hrudkamalam). The Lord as Krishna or Narayana says the same in the Bhagawad Gita - "Maam Ekam Sharanam Vraja".

Having the Lord's feet in the heart and constantly contemplating on Him is the cultivation of Bhakti or Divine Love, and this is also the easiest way to cultivate Sattva Guna, good conduct and Dharma, and ultimately reach the Lord. Thus, the left half of Dharma Shaasta highlights the righteousness or Bhakti or Dharma Aspect, and this is precisely Pushkala Devi.

Thus, the two consorts, or rather the two halves of the Lord signify the concept of Dharma-Shaasta with predominance of Narayana and Shankara aspects respectively.

Historical Aspect

Having understood the significance and symbolism of Dharma Shaasta, it is interesting to now examine the historical evolution of the concept, through various temples, keeping in mind this essence of the above discussion: **Dharma Shaasta or Ayyappan is a Saguna-Nirguna form, emphasizing Righteousness (Dharma, Bhakti) and Wisdom (Jnaana) as His left and right halves, through the conflated aspects of Shankara-Shiva and Narayana-Shakti.**

A. Shaasta

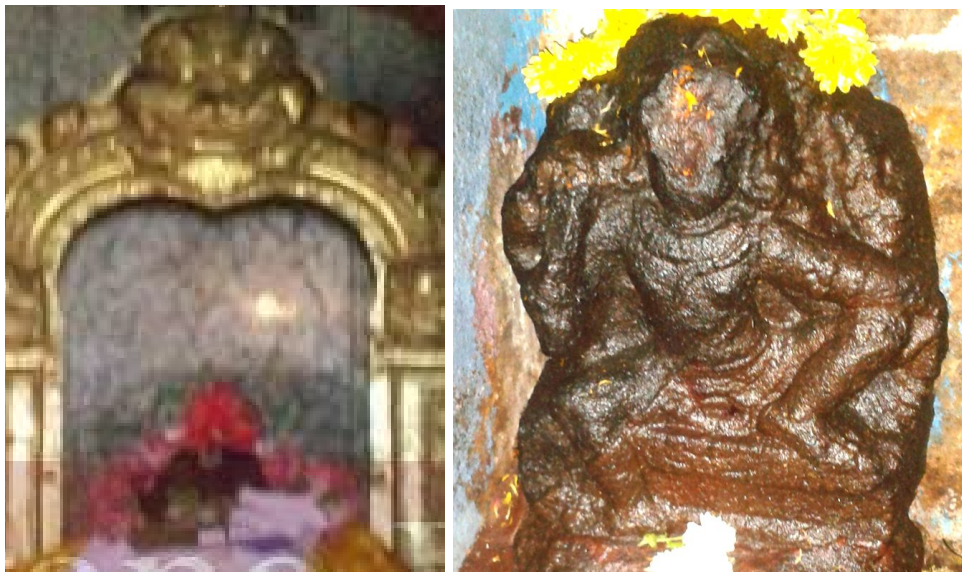
As a starting step, we note that the verse in Yajur Veda Taittiriya Aranyaka 3-11-2 mentions the name of the Lord as just "Shaasta" (as in contrast to "Dharma Shaasta"), despite containing descriptions of both Shaasta ('Antah Pravishtha', 'Sarvaatma') and Dharma ('Sarvaa Praja') aspects. The same trend is seen in other verses from the Vedas too. Being the earliest known mention of the Shaasta, this can be taken to be the earliest representation of the Lord Dharma Shaasta under the name of Shaasta. In the set of ten verses called Saastha Dashakam, one finds the sixth verse as: **"Trayambaka puraadheesam Ganaadhipa Samanvitham**

Gajaaroodham Aham Vande Shaastaaram pranamaamyaham” - (I salute that God Sastha, Who rides on an elephant, Who is the king of Tryambaka, And who is near to Lord Ganesa). This description also coincides with the Yajur Vedic verse, and also indicates the mount of the Lord (Vaahana) to be the elephant (Gajaaroodham).

Spiritually, the Vedas, culminating in Vedaanta or Upanishads are epitomes of the Jnaana path towards Self-Realization. Thus, these texts are always interested and focused on the ascent from Saguna to Nirguna and not vice versa. This is the reason why, though both aspects of Dharma and Shaasta has been mentioned, the latter alone has stuck as the name of the Lord in Yajur Veda.

Even in Sri Vidya, the same suit follows, with the tradition describing the flow of life force Kundalini energy from root Chakra Mooladhara through the seven Chakras or wheels of energies to the Sahasraara, merging with Shiva there, with the ascent of Saguna to Nirguna resulting in Self-Realization.

Thus, even though possessing Wisdom and Righteousness aspects, the Lord is almost always enshrined in Vedic and Sri Vidya contexts in the position of Guru, guiding the devout towards Self-Realization. This earliest representation of the Lord as Shaasta, is seen mainly in two temples:



1. Trayambakapuram - the temple mentioned in the above prayer, this can be found near Thiruvavarur in Tamilnadu, under the name of Erumathalai village near Sengalipuram. The Lord is enshrined in the form of a young boy - Baala Shaasta, and is seen as a small idol of 1 foot height, riding an elephant.
2. Thiruvavarur - As one of the earliest and foremost Kshetras, this place, enshrining Thyagaraja and Kamalaamba as principal deities, is seen as the very capital of Sri

Vidya. From Skanda Puraana Naagara Khaandam, one understands that the Kshetra dates back to much earlier periods to the shrine of Haatakeshwara, asserted by Lord Shiva Himself to be the most important and powerful among the 68 Shiva Peethas. One sees the Sri Vidya aspect in almost every shrine of Thiruvavur temple, making it the foremost Kshetra for all the Shanmatha deities including Jalashaayina Vishnu, Mooladhara Ganapathi, Baalasubrahmanya and Pushpa Aaditya, apart from Thyagaraja. In this temple complex, Kamalaamba, seen as the Universal Mother Lalitha Ambika is seen with a separate small temple, and in this temple, one finds Lord Shaasta under the name of Sri Vidya Shaasta. With the lack of any Dakshinamurthi shrine in the Kamalaamba temple, the Lord is enshrined as the Guru aspect.

B. Aadi Bhoothanaatha

Eight principal incarnations of Lord Dharma Shaasta are most often worshipped, and among these, the first and earliest is the Aadi Bhoothanaatha form. Here, the Lord is seen very similar to the earlier “Shaasta” form, but with the addition of the two consorts Poorna and Pushkala. This is in alignment with the famous prayer **“Gajaaroodham Mahaadevam Sarva Vidhya Pradaayinam Poorna Pushkala Pathim Devam Vandhe Hariharaathmajam”**.

It is in this form that the Lord gives Darshan to Sage Agastya in the temple of Sori Muthaiyan Koil near Papanasam in Tirunelveli district, Tamilnadu. This temple is considered to be the foremost of the six Kshetras of Lord Shaasta corresponding with six Chakras, with Muthaiyan Koil representing the Mooladhara Chakra.



This form denotes a transition from earlier Shaasta representation to a slightly less subtle level, with the two aspects of Jnaana and Bhakti represented as two consorts of the Lord. One finds this representation in many more temples, including the one installed by Lord Parashurama in Achankovil, Pathanamthitta, Kerala - another of the six Chakra Shaasta temples. One also finds the form in Kanchipuram Kamakshi Temple, a temple as the very center of Sri Vidya enshrining the Universal Mother as Kamakshi.

C. Dakshinamurthi

Meanwhile, conventional Shiva and Vishnu temples came to be established in various regions, in accordance with Vedic and Agamic procedures. In the context of Lord Shaasta, all these temples drew inspiration from the Yajur Vedic verses and the earliest representations in Sri Vidya Temples such as Thiruvavur.

What was subsequently seen is a gradual transition of the representation of Lord Shaasta to a more Shaiva form, highlighting the Shankara or Shaasta aspect as the Guru, and gradual absorption into a principal Shaiva form that would in later days be known as Dakshinamurthi.

The key element enabling such transition was the form of Lord Dharma Shaasta as Jnaana or Vidhya Shaasta, seen as another among the 8 incarnations. This representation shows the Lord seated under a banyan tree, holding the book and the musical instrument Veena, and surrounded by disciples, and praised in invocation (Dhyaana) as South (Dakshina) facing. This representation came to be known in due course as a completely new name - Veena Dakshinamurthi.



One finds this representation in the temples of Kuthalam and Dharmapuram, Tamilnadu, while Sri Vidya Shaasta is enshrined in Verikarampalayam, Salem, Tamilnadu.

The next stage in the transition is seen as the eschewing of the Veena aspect retaining the pure Jnaana aspect alone with the generic name of Dakshinamurthi. In the Shaiva-Vaishnava temple of Cumbum, Tamilnadu enshrining Kashi Vishwanatha-Kambaraya Venkatesha, one can see the shrine of 'Kamandala Dakshinamurthi', very similar to the Veerasana posture of Dharma Shaasta including the band (Verea Pattai), as well as left hand pointing towards the Lord's feet.



In the famous temple of Thiruvaiyaru, Tamilnadu, one sees Dakshinamurthi with the Trishoola weapon - a clear Shaiva representation, while stamping on a tortoise.

Finally with all aspects such as the Veerasana, banyan tree, Chinmudra, leg stamping the Muyalakan Asura and the unique hairstyle, one sees the completion of the Shaasta to Dakshinamurthi transition in most Shiva temples including Alangudi, reverred as the Guru Kshetra.

D. Aiyanaar

While Veda and Agama based temples were evolving with the Dakshinamurthi transition, the other sections of society, comprising mainly of non-brahmins in various professions, developed a different version of the Lord Dharma Shaasta. With lack of knowledge or lack of access to Vedaanta and the related concepts, the ascent of Saguna to Nirguna was not given much importance. Rather, the descent from Nirguna to Saguna, with the Lord seen as the upholder of Dharma was celebrated. Thus, the Lord evolved to become a protector God, destroying evil elements, and protecting the devout people with their property and livestock. This Dharma Shaasta or Ayyappan as a village God, focussing almost exclusively on the Dharma or Narayana aspect, came to be called as Aiyanaar, eschewing the "Appan" aspect.

As such, the Lord is usually seen as a small shrine in the borders of villages and towns, seated on a large horse, and occasionally carrying a sword. The Lord is typically appeased with various village rituals, and might include animal sacrifices.



E. Manikantan

Seen as the key incarnation of Lord Dharma Shaasta, the most popular among various legends of Manikantan, named so because of a bell around His neck, is best given as follows:

Lord Ayyappa had His human sojourn as the son of the Raja of Pandalam. At that time, Raja Rajasekhara Pandiyan ruled the kingdom of Pandalam. During one of his hunting expeditions, the Raja was puzzled to hear the wails of a child on the banks of the river Pampa, and was surprised to find a resplendent infant there. The beautiful baby with radiant face wore a bead ('mani') around his neck. The King, though pious, charitable, just, and God-fearing, had no children. He accepted the child as God's gracious response to his fervent prayer for an heir to his throne. Manikandan grew into a boy well versed in academic lore and martial arts. Meanwhile, the Rani gave birth to a son. The King regarded Manikandan as his elder son. He decided to crown him as the Yuvaraja. The King's corrupt Minister had a deep dislike for Manikandan, and made the innocent Queen believe that ill would befall her if Manikandan was crowned Yuvaraja and that the kingdom actually belonged to her son.

They conspired to get rid of Manikandan by hook or crook. They bribed the royal physician into becoming an accomplice of theirs. The Rani pretended to be afflicted with severe pain in the stomach, and the physician prescribed the milk of a tigress as the only cure. The King knew that none could be deputed for a mission that was so patently suicidal. However, the youthful and valiant Manikandan stepped forth and volunteered to fetch the milk. Despite the worried protestations of his foster-father, he set out for the fearful forests.

Days later, Manikandan entered the palace precincts riding a fierce tigress and followed by a pack of its cubs. The schemers were frightened into confessing their nefarious plot. They and others now knew that Manikandan was no ordinary being. They were convinced of His divine origins, and prayed to Him to be with them for their own salvation and for the safety of the kingdom. However, Manikandan was now determined to leave the place.



Filled with happiness, grief, fear, wonder and bhakti and self-surrender, the king prayed for the mercy and blessings of Manikandan. He repented he could not fully visualize the truth of the divine powers of the Lord and repeatedly requested Him to forgive him for behaving as if He were only his son. The Lord lovingly embraced the King who continued to pray: " Lord, kindly bless me by freeing me from my egos and the worldly life of birth and rebirth and grant me ' moksha' (salvation). Kindly continue to be the saviour of my family and stay eternally in my kingdom." Manikandan then enlightened the King on the path of attainment of 'moksha'. These words of the Lord are contained in 'Bhuthanathageetha'. To the King who is by now mentally cleansed and completely immersed in 'bhakthi', Lord Ayyappa said: "I am to free you from all worldly sorrows & worries and to grant you 'moksha'. All those who are and would be born in your family shall have my blessings unfailingly. I am always accessible to 'bhakthi' and only 'bhakthi.'" The Lord told the King that he could construct a temple at Sabarimala, north of the holy river Pampa and install His deity there. Ayyappa also explained how the Sabarimala pilgrimage shall be undertaken, emphasizing the importance of 'vrutham' and what the devotees can attain by His 'darshan'.

The Lord further consoled the King saying that the devotees who held him and his descendants in 'bhakthi' shall happen to be devoted to Him as well. Manikandan then blessed the King and all others assembled there, and vanished. The King duly constructed the temple at Sabarimala, dedicated to Him.

Among the 8 key incarnations of Lord Shaasta, the representation of Manikantan coincides best with the Kiraatha Shaasta, often shown standing tall, armed with bow and arrows. This is the form one finds enshrined in most Shaasta temples in Kerala, including Kulathupuzha and Erumeli, two of the six temples of the six Chakras.



F. Other Forms

While the above forms signify the most popular ones of Lord Ayyappan as the Vedic Shaasta, Dakshinamurthi with predominance of Shaasta aspect, Aiyanaar with predominance of Dharma aspect and Manikanta as incarnation, there are other forms in which the Lord is enshrined in temples. Significant among them are two:

1. The temple of Kutraalam in Tirunelveli district, Tamilnadu enshrines Lord Shiva as the dancing Nataraja in the 'imagery hall' of Chitra Sabha - one of five such Sabhas of the Lord's dance. In this depiction of the Lord's dance as a painting, one finds Lord Dharma Shaasta as Yogeeshwara, seated below and playing percussion instrument Ghatam in tune with Lord Shiva's dance.
2. In Tirunelveli district, one finds the temple of Karanthapuri, where Lord Dharma shaasta, called Kulathooril Ayyan is enshrined in formless aspect, as an engraved Sri Yantra. During the Shaasta Preethi festivities, the deity is invoked through decorated lamps and other rituals.



Conclusion

After discussing in reasonable detail the spiritual significance and symbolism of the concept of Lord Dharma Shaasta, the evolution of the concept through history into various present day forms are examined, giving a hint as to why a concept enshrined originally in the Yajur Veda has over the years become a concept shrouded in mystery and mysticism, with a complete understanding of the spiritual significance almost non-existent in present day scenario.

The ultimate destination revered in all of Indian Spirituality is Moksha or Self-Realization, and this necessarily involves transcending of Maaya by an individual, killing the ego and journeying towards the Nirguna. Then, by sheer common sense, the preceptor guiding the individual through Self-Realization must necessarily be an entity that has already transcended Maaya. This condition is only satisfied in two ways.

1. The Nirguna, as the Mother Lalitha Ambika Herself must be the preceptor. This has been the case in Lord Krishna, who is non-different from the Mother as Sri Vidya Raajagopaala, and gave the world the supreme message in Bhagavad Gita.
2. The Saguna-Nirguna, or Lord Dharma Shaasta, who has transcended Saguna as the Guru aspect and embodies aspects of both Saguna and Nirguna. Apart from the Mother Herself, it is this Lord alone that can guide a person towards Moksha. Thus, He is the Atman itself as the eternal Guru Shaasta as well as upholder of Dharma, embodying both paths of Jnaana and Bhakti.

In Conclusion, Bowing down in total surrender to Lord Dharma Shaasta, the infinite ocean of compassion, all one can say is "Swamiye Sharanam Ayyappa!"

Photos and Other Details Courtesy: Dinamalar Temples Page, Shanmatha Shasta Blogspot, Google Images and Wikipedia.

[Om Sri Sai Venkateshaya Namah]