

# REFLECTIONS

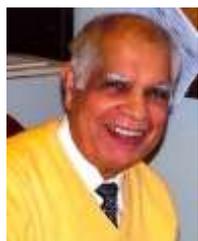
A Hindu Cultural Center of Albany Hindu Temple Society's Newsletter devoted to the Capital District's Indian-American community particularly its seniors



## Festivals of India Supplement

### Editorial: Indian Heritage Awareness for and Through Our Children

By Ram Chugh, Ph.D.



Namaste. At the outset, I express my deep gratitude to **Dr. Sastry Sreepada** for spearheading this initiative to encourage young boys and girls from Indian families to write short essays on festivals of India. I thank our 14 young writers for their time and effort, and their parents for their support. I also

thank **Vijay Oruganti** and **Kodi Kothandan** who formatted and designed this Supplement.

Our Albany area Indian community regularly celebrates the festivals captured in the essays. This is heartening because our festivals are a key vehicle for preserving our culture, values, and traditions. Nevertheless, members of our community are often deeply concerned whether our younger generation will assimilate, remain connected with, and carry forward, our rich Indian religious and cultural heritage.

This age-old concern of every generation, even in India, is addressed mostly within the family through daily routines (e.g., prayers) and periodic socio-cultural celebrations (e.g., festivals) as well as prayers. For example, our religious and cultural values have most-likely been shaped by the ethos provided by our parents and our extended family.

The absence of an extended family in our relatively small communities in the US is offset by religious and cultural organizations such as our Hindu Temple and Cultural Center. These institutions seek to create an extended family atmosphere that nourishes our socio-cultural well-being and growth.

This is the major reason for the large number of cultural, music and dance classes and performances, heritage classes, language classes, religious discourses and services, as well as festival celebrations offered and supported by the Hindu Temple and the Cultural Center.

A large number of children and adults participate in these activities. Through such engagement the younger generation becomes aware of our rich heritage, and adults themselves begin to further understand the nuances and significance of our culture and religious practices.

To encourage such engagement, the HCC Newsletter *Reflections* will publish short articles written by our young Indian-American students on various aspects of our religion and culture. This *Festivals of India* supplement is our first such issue.

We plan to publish one more supplement later this year. To encourage greater participation for the next issue, we will be seeking articles on three themes. We will announce these themes and submission guidelines through the Hindu Temple and the Cultural Center bulletin.

Dr Sastry gave a gift to each student writer whose essay was published within this Supplement to recognize and appreciate their motivation, and effort to write them. (All good writers know that writing well is not easy!). This gesture was much appreciated by the writers. Next time, I too will join Dr. Sastry in offering gifts to our young writers.

The support of parents is vital to encouraging their children to think about, research, and compose an essay on a theme of their choice related to Indian culture. This will not only increase our children's awareness of our heritage, but also improve our own understanding.

Thank you.

### In this issue

|                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Editorial -----1           | Sankranti Pongal -----6  |
| Kumbhabhishekam -----2     | Onam -----6              |
| HCC Board Message -----3   | Ugadi -----7             |
| Deepavali -----3           | Easter -----7            |
| Dussehra -----3            | Christmas -----8         |
| EID -----4                 | Vinayak Chaturthi -----9 |
| Krishna Janmashtami ---- 4 | Holi -----9              |
| Maharshi Valmiki -----5    | Rakshabandhan -----10    |
| Ramadan -----5             |                          |

## A 12-year rite consecrates temple\*

By Rob Brill



Tharunidhar Narravula clasps his hands in prayer before several dozen kalashas, copper and silver pots with holy water and yellow-colored coconuts, arranged in front of the idols of the Hindu deities.

**Background:** Born in the city of Tenali in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, he studied

mechanical engineering at Bangalore University and came to the United States as a graduate student in 1989, earning master's degrees in computer science from Mankato (Minnesota) State University and management from MIT. He worked in the telecommunications industry in Weston, Mass., and now has his own technology and investment consulting business. He and his wife, Sailaja, who is an anesthesiologist, and their son, Raghav, a student at Albany Academy, have lived in Loudonville since 2011, where they are members of the Hindu Temple on Albany Shaker Road.



We have been serving the community since 1976, starting out first in a church. So this year is our 40th anniversary. The temple was built in 1992. We are celebrating the second Jeernodharana Kumbhabhishekam, the practice in Hindu temples to reflect every 12 years on physical conditions and spiritual activities. It is an opportunity to improve the temple as a place of spiritual comfort. Jeernodharana, in Sanskrit "fixing the broken things," is the completion of repairs or expansion and beautification of the temple.

### Jeernodharana Kumbhabhishekam

Five days of celebration by the Hindu Temple Society of the Capital District conclude this weekend. Saturday's activities include a cultural presentation from 1:30 to 4 p.m. including dancing and devotional singing. The culmination will be Sunday at 10 a.m. after prayers with a procession around the temple and outside when 150 members put a kalasha — a copper or silver pot — on their heads with a coconut and holy water for a half-hour. This too

will be followed by a cultural presentation. The public is invited.

**Kumbhabhishekam** is the process of bathing the idols with holy waters that are energized by the Gods invoked by prayer in offerings through fire. This week, starting Wednesday, there has been a fire ceremony in the tent outside the temple, a thanksgiving with sacrifices in gratitude to the Gods. Fire, water, earth, air and sky play a significant role our ceremonies and in prayers to God in whatever form you want.

The celebration involves three things: rejuvenation of the temple; passing on the knowledge of the elders to the next generation; and proving to the elders that we understand their sacrifices through our contributions. The benefits of our practices go not only to us in the temple but to all those wherever the fire smoke travels. We believe the whole universe is one family and that people's lives should be peaceful, free from suffering.

My role this week has involved coordinating the volunteers in cleaning, painting the building, helping to publish the souvenir book and fundraising. It is my duty.

\* From the Albany Times Union, June 25, 2016, p. D-2. Reprinted with permission. Photograph by Michael P. Farrell

**All religions enjoined worship of the One God who was all pervasive. He was present even in a drop of water or in a tiny speck of dust.**  
(M.K. Gandhi)

**Dear Readers:** We wish to express our thanks to Dr. Ram Chugh and Dr. Sastri Sreepada for putting this Supplement on Festivals of India together and to Vijay Oruganti and Kodi Kothandan for formatting it. We congratulate the young students for writing these essays. We thank Rasik Shah for his service to this newsletter project. This Supplement to the newsletter, *Reflections*, is being distributed through the HTS/HCC mailing lists. There may be some duplication. If you are not interested in getting future issues, please send an email to Rasik Shah at [Rasikpshah@hotmail.com](mailto:Rasikpshah@hotmail.com) to unsubscribe. We are interested in hearing from you. Please send your suggestions, story ideas, and comments to Dr. Ram Chugh at [reflections.hcc@gmail.com](mailto:reflections.hcc@gmail.com). He can also be reached at [518-786-9008](tel:518-786-9008).

**Swatantra Mitta and Shashi Patel, HCC Board**

\*Meghana, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Guilderland Elementary School. ■



## Dussehra (Vijayadashami)

By Somida Oruganti\*



**Dussehra**, otherwise known as Vijayadashami, Dasara, Navratri and Pranay is a well known religious holiday amongst Hindus, celebrating the victory of goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura.

This name originated from the fact that goddess Durga battled this demon for ten days and nine nights, and the common term for this holiday "Navratri" meaning nine nights.

The significance of this holiday is good over evil, and is celebrated on the tenth day of the month Ashwin, according to the Hindu calendar. Since the harvest season of India begins at this time, goddess Durga is invoked through rituals in temples and homes. Devotees pray to Durga at this certain time for fertile soil and healthy crops.

**Celebration in Different Parts of India** although this important festival has the same meaning and significance, it is celebrated in different unique ways in different parts of India. Here are some ways Dussehra is celebrated.

**North India-** In Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Uttarakhand and western Bihar, it is a long tradition to plant barley seeds. On the ninth day of Dasara, the nine day old plants are picked and are put in caps or behind the ears for good luck. At festival fairs, a play of the Ramayana story may also be put on. In the mid-day, a statue of Ravana, the evil king of Sri Lanka, will be burned down.

**South India-** In south India, Dussehra is celebrated in a variety of ways, and is known as a day to express gratitude for success in life. Festivities include worshiping goddess Durga to displaying a colorful array of tiny statues named *golu*. Also, Dussehra is an important holiday for beginning formal education. Many pujas are performed for new items such as cars and homes..

**Tamil Nadu and Kerala-** On the ninth day of Navratri, Saraswati Puja is performed. The day begins with prayers and worship at home, schools, or temples. On Vijayadashami, Vidyarambham takes place with children starting their education. Children write for the first time with their index finger, on a plate of rice, usually guided by an elder.

## Deepavali – Festival of Lights

By Meghana Uppala\*



**Deepavali** is celebrated in the month of Kartika in the Hindu calendar. As per English calendar, Deepavali comes in October/November. It is the festival that celebrates the victory of good over evil.

It is believed by most people that Deepavali is when Sathyabhama, the reincarnation of Bhoodevi and the wife of Krishna, killed Narakasura. Bhoodevi was the mother of Narakasura. Narakasura had got a boon from Brahma that he would die only in the hands of his mother. Narakasura turned evil and started torturing and killing people and Devathas. So, Bhoodevi took the form of Sathyabhama and fought alongside with Krishna and killed Narakasura. Deepavali is also celebrated when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana returned from their 14 years of exile from Ayodhya.

During Deepavali, we wear new clothes, light oil lamps made from clay and do pooja to Lakshmi Devi. We go to temples to offer prayers to God (ess) on this auspicious day. Newly wedded couples will be invited by their in-laws to their houses. Everyone takes blessings from the elder members in the family. We also light firecrackers and decorate with Rangoli. Sweets will be prepared at home and distributed to friends and relatives.

**Deepavali is one of the fun-filled festivals that is enjoyed by all members of the family.**

**Western India-** In Maharashtra, deities installed on the first day of Dussehra are soaked in water. People visit, talk, and exchange sweets too. The apta tree is worshiped, and its holy leaves are traded for good luck and prosperity. Also, citizens cross the border of their village in a ceremony called Simollanghan. This day is very important to the people of towns and villages and is considered auspicious.

Overall, Dussehra is a very religious holiday with its own ceremonies, festivals, and loads of fun for the people who celebrate it. Many parts of India enjoy the thrills of Dussehra, and love the excitement. This is Vijayadashami for you!

\*Somida, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Menands School. ■

## EID

By Yahya Ali\*



**Eid** is an Arabic word it means festival. There are two big festivals in Muslim culture 1) Eid ul Fitr and 2) Eid ul Adha. These two Eids festivals are celebrated in two different Islamic Lunar months all around the world.

On the day of Eid people enjoy and express happiness and offer prayers in the form of group usually they gather in an Open land or in a Mosque and lot of people join together and pray in congregation and ask Allah (The God) for His blessing, forgiveness of all sins and ask for success in this life and hereafter that is good life.

Also they ask for the true path to live in this life and get forgiveness for all sins and get to destination that is heaven. Muslims believe success in this life and hereafter is obtained only if they lead this life on true path, never lie, never do harm to others with their hand and with their tongue and believe uniformity in all human beings. God has blessed us with this quality and we are always thankful to our god and try to help others especially the poor, before all should have faith in the Oneness of God.

So it is clear that Eid celebration is not only an expression of our happiness but also it expresses the spiritual happiness. After Eid prayers and meeting on the occasion of Eid, people hug each other. Eid is the time to spread happiness, love and triumph thereby creating enthusiasm among all the family members.

\* Yahya, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Lisha Kill Middle School. ■

## Krishna Janmashtami

By Ruchika Kilaparty\*



**Janmashtami** is a festival that celebrates the day Lord Krishna was born. It is a day that is celebrated all over India. The festival is usually celebrated at the end of August.

Krishna was the eighth son of Devaki and Vasudeva. Kamsa had locked both of them up after hearing a prophecy that their eighth son would kill him. He killed the first six, the seventh was Balarama, and the eighth was Krishna. When he was born, Vasudeva took him and crossed the Yamuna River so that he could give Krishna to Nanda and Yashoda in Gokul. Many people celebrate this festival by fasting, staying up till midnight, the traditional hour of his birth, worshipping Krishna, sing devotional songs, and also do readings of the Bhagavad Gita. Then the image of Krishna is bathed in water and milk, dressed in new clothes, and worshipped. Temples and household shrines are decorated with leaves and flowers. Sweets are first offered to the god and then distributed as prasada to the members of the household. In North and East India, people go to nearby temples to worship and fly kites.

In Tamil Nadu, people decorate the floor with kolams, and offer fruits, betel, and butter to Lord Krishna.

They also draw his footprints on the floor. In the Western region of India, Pots of milk are hung from tall poles in the streets, and men form human pyramids to reach and break the pots—this in imitation of Krishna's childhood play with the cowherd boys, when they stole the curds hung out of reach by their mothers. In Andhra Pradesh, young boys dress up as Lord Krishna and visit neighbors and friends. Some famous temples that are visited are the Dwarkadhish Temple located in Dwarka in Gujarat and the Rajagopalaswamy Temple located in Tamil Nadu.

\*Ruchika Kilaparty, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Shaker Junior High School. ■

## Maharshi Valmiki



By Ratna K Bandaru\*

This is a story of a man who transformed from a dacoit to a sage. Story of a person who authored the great epic "Sri Ramayana" to this world.

"Ratnakara" was the son of sage "Prechesta" & when he was young, lost in a forest and started crying. A hunter, who didn't have any kids found Ratnakara & adopted him. As he grew up, he became an excellent hunter and got married. As he couldn't feed his family enough & properly, he turned as a dacoit. He used to rob villagers and steal things from them.

One day, while he was waiting for victim, he saw sage Narada was passing by with full of devotion and chanting "Narayana-Narayana". Ratnakara tried to threaten Narada and Narada didn't get scared & stated that stealing other's property is a sin and asked if his family would also share the sins he is doing. Ratnakara was really shocked, when his family said they would only be ready to take the part in the happiness and not the sins he is committing. This was an eye opening to him & he fell on the feet of Narada. Narada told him to chant "Rama" and Ratnakara was not able to pronounce it. So, he was told to chant "Mara" continuously and Narada indicated him this chanting will erase all the sins. Ratnakara did tapam for several years with a great devotion and ant hills formed around him. Sage Narada, named Ratnakara as Valmiki (Valmika means ant hill).

Near river "Ganga" Valmiki built an ashram. One day on his way, he saw two krouncha birds together on a tree. He observed, the male bird was shot and falling down suddenly and female bird weeping. Valmiki cursed the hunter and uttered the below Sanskrit sloka un-knowingly. This sloka is considered to be a first sloka in "Hindu Literature"

(Meaning: You will find no rest for the long years of Eternity. For you killed a bird in love and unsuspecting)

Lord Brahma appears in front and blessed Valmiki Maharshi to visualize and write the story of Lord Rama a great epic "Ramayana", which gave the world a value system on how to be obedient to elders, how to take care of family system, how to be committed to the friendship & how to stick with dharma in any situation

\*Ratna, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Glencliff Elementary School, New York. ■

***A Calm mind brings inner strength and self-confidence, so that's very important for good health. (Dalai Lama)***

## Ramadan



By Neha and Nabeel Pattan\*

**Ramadan** is the 9<sup>th</sup> month in the Islamic calendar. During this month, Muslims fast (which means we eat something before dawn and we wait until sunset to break our fast). By the end of the month, we have a celebration to celebrate us for fasting for 30 days. It is called Eid-ul-Fitr.

The term Ramadan literally means scorching in Arabic. It was established as a Holy Month for Muslims after the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in 610 CE on the occasion known as Laylat al-Qadr, frequently translated as "the Night of Power".

We Muslims do many religious activities during this month. We fast; when you don't eat for a whole day, we have Iftar; which is the time where we break our fast. After the Iftar, we pray Taraweeh ; which goes on until midnight (literally!). We also give money to charities. There is this particular day in Ramadan where you pray for the WHOLE night; which is called Laylatul-Qadr. It falls on any odd number day within the last ten days of the month. When you stop praying until, like 4 o'clock, you have Suhoor. Then you start fasting a whole new day again.

On Eid- ul-fitr, Muslims also follow many celebrative traditions. We wake up early to go to Eid prayer. We can eat something small for us to feel a little more energized. We say the takbir and then we pray. After that, we greet all our families and friends, "Eid Mubarak!".

Our traditions are that we go to our friends' house to have breakfast after prayer. Also, we have a Eid party on either the Friday or weekend that is closest to Eid, since Eid varies every year. Sometimes, parents give their children and their friends some money as a gift.

\* Neha 6<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Acadia Middle School.  
Nabeel 5<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Tesago Elementary School, Clifton Park. ■

***Festivals are fun for kids, fun for parents and offer a welcome break from the stresses of the nuclear family. The sheer quantities of people make life easier; loads of adults for the adults to talk to and loads of kids for the kids to play with. (Tom Hodgkinson)***

## Suggestions

Please send your comments and story ideas to Dr. Ram Chugh at: [reflections.hcc@gmail.com](mailto:reflections.hcc@gmail.com)

## Sankranti (Pongal)

By Vijayasree Kakarala\*

**Sankranti** is a word that means transmigration of the Sun from one Rashi to the next. A Rashi is constellation of the zodiac which is part of Indian astronomy. Since Sankranti is based on a constellation that appears 12 times in a year, there are 12 Sankranti's in a year.



Each Sankranti is marked as the beginning of a month in the sidereal solar calendars which are followed by in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, and Odisha. But, in a sidereal solar Assamese calendar, and Bengali calendar, is marked at the end of a month in a calendar, and the following of a new month.

Some important Sankranti's are: Makar Sankranti (Pongal), Mesha Sankranti, Dhanu Sankranti, and Karka Sankranti. Makar Sankranti marks a transition of the Sun into the Maka rashi also known as Capricorn on its celestial path, and also the six-month Uttarana period. Mesha Sankranti marks the beginning of the New Year in the Hindu Solar Calendar. Dhanu Sankranti is celebrated on the first day of the lunar month Pausha. Karka Sankranti which is on July 16, marks the transition of the Sun into Karka rashi (Cancer).

\* Vijayasree, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Lishakill Middle School. ■



## Onam (Thiruvonam)



By Praaghya Meyyan\*

The **Onam** festival is a Hindu festival mainly celebrated in the state of Kerala, India. The legend goes that once there lived a kind and generous king named Mahabali. Lord Vishnu disguised himself as a poor Brahmin dwarf named Vamana to test his generosity. He went to King Mahabali and asked him for some land. The King, not knowing that he was talking to Lord Vishnu, said that he could take some of the land. Vamana said that he only needed enough land that could be covered by his own three steps. But when Vamana started taking his first step, his size got ten times larger! One of his steps covered the sky. The other step covered the earth! The king offered his head for the third step. Right before Vamana stepped on the king's head, which would send him to the underworld, he asked for one wish. He wanted to visit his people every year. Vamana happily granted his wish because of King Mahabali's generosity. Thus, Onam festival is celebrated to honor the homecoming of King Mahabali called Atham. Atham is regarded as a holy and auspicious day for the traditional people in Kerala. People make beautiful flower arrangements called pookalam. Each pookalam is unique.

The second day is Chithira. There are not any marked rituals for this day, but people offer prayers to evoke great, and divine blessings. The third day is Chodhi. On this day, people shop for new clothes, and gifts for friends and family. The fourth day Visakam is when women shop to prepare for the big feast. On fifth day, Anizham, a very popular boat race takes place at the river of Pamba in Aranmula. On Thriketa, the sixth day, people who stay away from their homes come back to their families. The seventh day Moolam, People do their last bit of shopping. The eighth day is called Pooradam. People make little pyramids out of clay, and decorate them with flowers. This clay pyramid is called a Ma. The ninth day is called Uthradam. Houses are cleaned up on this day and people are getting ready for the events that will be taking place on the last day of Onam.

Tenth and the final day is Thiruvonam. People will say their prayers at the temple, and enjoy a big feast consisting of eleven to thirteen dishes! People will enjoy the dances, games, shows, fireworks and more. This is the day that King Mahabali returns to visit the people. The Onam festival reflects the rich culture of Kerala.

\*Praaghya Meyyan, 7<sup>th</sup> Grader goes to Goff Middle School at East Greenbush, New York. ■

## Ugadi



By Kireeti Chakilam\*

**Ugadi** is a Hindu New Year's Day. Ugadi is also known as Yugadi. In Sanskrit Yuga means "age" and adi means "starting"- "the beginning of a new age". It is

believed that Lord Brahma created the universe on Ugadi.

Ugadi is celebrated on the First new moon after Spring Equinox. It usually comes in the late March or early April. Ugadi is officially recognized New Year by Indian Government.

Ugadi is celebrated in Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Goa. A special paste with 6 tastes is prepared on Ugadi, made from jaggery, neem buds, tamarind juice, salt, pepper, and raw mango. The sweet and sour tastes remind the people of their happy and sad events.

In India Ugadi day is a public holiday. People decorate their homes and celebrate the festival traditionally. Nava Ratri starts on Ugadi and ends on Rama Navami with divine Wedding of Lord Rama and Sita Devi.

### Our Tradition

In our home we start our day with eating Ugadi pachadi after taking a shower. A special food menu is made and offered to god. That includes Bobbatlu and Mango Rice. On that day we all go to a temple and do a special Pooja. In temple, there will be a special reading of a book (Panchangam) which tells about our Horoscope.

\* Kireeti, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade goes to Tesago Elementary School, Clifton Park. ■



## Easter



By Andrea Thomas\*

Easter is usually showcased as a day for children to go on a hunt for Easter eggs from the Easter Bunny and to find some sort of prize such as candy, or even money. It's thought of as a day where kids receive yet another opportunity to fill their stomachs with candy. Christians view this holiday as something different. For Christians, Easter is a day to rejoice and celebrate and commemorate the death and resurrection of their lord and savior, Jesus Christ. This is one of the most major celebrations in their liturgical calendar.

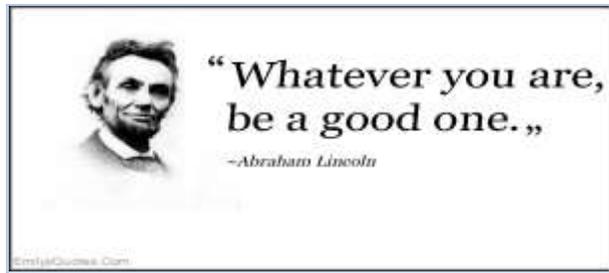
To fully understand Easter, one must first understand the basics of Christianity. Christians believe their Savior, Jesus Christ, came to earth to save mankind. He came as the son of God but in human form. This meant that he could feel pain and also lived as one of us. This is a core concept of Christianity. You may wonder what mankind needs to be saved from? Christians believe that we need to be saved from sin. The Christian bible says in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" This eternal life is not in this world but is to live forever in the Kingdom of God. This is commonly referred to as heaven. Easter is a time of hope and assurance. It is humanity's turning point from destruction to glory and salvation.

The story of Easter begins with Jesus performing many miracles and drawing large crowds of people and converting them. Jesus at a young age even began to teach the teachers of the Jewish law about their own faith. As Jesus got older, the Jewish high priests began to see him as a threat to their own power. They then persuaded the government of Rome to Capture him and accused him of Blasphemy and pleaded that Jesus be killed. The leader of Rome at this time was Pontius Pilate and he was reluctant to kill Jesus because he felt that Jesus was an innocent man who had done nothing wrong. The Jewish high priests then rallied the people against Jesus and this left Pilate no choice, but to execute Jesus. You may wonder how the Son that God has sent to save us was to be put to death on unjust convictions of blasphemy? But this was all written in the scriptures and Jesus was destined to be put to death by the people he was to save. Hence Jesus was put to death by one of the cruelest means possible, crucifixion. He had to carry his heavy cross to Calvary after being whipped and tortured. He was forced to strip all of his clothing and then nailed to the cross by his hands and feet. Just thinking of that is painful, imagine dying for people who are against you and in such a painful way. Jesus despite all this still loved and forgave those who did this to him. He eventually died on the Cross and cloud and darkness came over the entire area.

Jesus took all the people's sins upon himself and went into the hands of the devil for three days. On the third day, he rose from the dead and went to continue his ministry. Three women went back to the tomb on Easter Sunday and saw it was empty, an angel of God appeared to them and told them that Jesus has risen and is walking among them again! They were so filled with joy and went to tell the others. This was Jesus' ultimate miracle. He had conquered the grave and open the gates to Heaven! Word of this spread rapidly and many people began to believe in Him and follow him. Then forty days after he rose from the dead, he almost as if by magic, ascended into heaven.

Jesus' story is one that is much unexpected and truly amazing. Christians view Jesus as the son of God whom came to save them from sin. God could have sent a god like being into the world to save us, but he sent his son in the form of a human to suffer the ultimate sacrifice so that we may be able to enter God's Kingdom after this life. Christians celebrate this occasion ever year with big beautiful celebration for what Jesus has done for us. He wasn't any ordinary man; he was the Son of God. To this day Christians await Jesus' joyful second coming.

\***Andrea Thomas**, 7<sup>th</sup> Grader goes to Mater Christy School, Albany, NY. Class Representative, Artist ■



world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life". The reason that Jesus Christ came in the first place was to take our sins upon Himself. We – in our brokenness – needed a Savior to bridge the gap between our sinfulness and the perfection of God. Jesus would later go on the cross and conquer the grave. The unique truth of Christmas is that the Word of God in the scriptures was made flesh and dwelt among common people like us. The unique outcome was that this marked the beginning of a new creation, a possible rebirth of humanity. God, through His Son, entered into people's life so that we might receive power to become "sons and daughters of God." The baby who had no cradle, but a manger became the one Lord and Savior of mankind! Christianity is not a creed to be recited but a new life to be lived in God.

## CHRISTMAS: A Day to Celebrate



By **Amal Thomas\***

Every year during the holiday season we hear Christmas songs on the radio and see Christmas decorations everywhere. We may even see nativity scenes of a baby boy laying in a manger surrounded by many angels and shepherds and a big beautiful star above the entire scene. Have you ever wondered what this might mean? To understand this, you must first understand what Christmas means to Christians and what it actually celebrates and how Christians view this holiday.

Christians believe that God created the world in six days. He then created a man named Adam and later used the rib of Adam to create a woman, Eve. God allowed Adam and Eve to do what they wished with the land and to eat from all but one tree that bore fruit. He also gave them free will to do as they wanted. Adam and Eve then get tempted by the devil in the form of a snake and ate from the forbidden tree. Hence sin or an immoral act considered to be a transgression against the divine law of God was introduced into the world. The future generations of humans also sinned and this led to much corruption and it also led to many people turning away from God and deviating from their faith. Hence humans needed a savior to bring us back to God.

Christmas is a major holiday for Christians and is a nice time to spend with family, reflect on the past year, and – most of all – remember and celebrate the birth of the Christian Savior, Jesus Christ, who came to earth to save mankind. This is the core concept of Christianity. You may wonder what mankind needs to be saved from? Christians believe that we need to be saved from sin. The Bible says in John 3:16, "For God so loved the

One very interesting and very miraculous aspect of Jesus' birth is that he was born of a virgin mother. His mother, Mary, was betrothed to a man named Joseph and then the Angel Gabriele came down from heaven and told Mary she will have a child and that she shall "...call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins." God's redeeming love was at the very core, and the main reason for Jesus' coming. One may find it impossible for any human to have a baby by nonsexual means. But as Christians believe, anything is possible with God. Jesus' distinctive birth isn't a myth nor merely a random fact from the Christian Gospels. It is a special honor conferred only on the Son of God. And it is full of significance for knowing the person of Jesus and the God who has revealed himself in him. If God sent his own son to save us, why would he need to be conceived to a human mother? Well one important thing to keep in mind about Jesus is that he was a human like us. He could feel pain like we did, believed similarly to the way we do even today. Jesus "became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld His glory, glory as the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Jesus was the son of God and came into the world to bring us back from our path of sin and wrong doing. He came to help us and was born in a lowly animal stable. He feels for us because he was one of us, a human being. To this day we still celebrate his Birthday, Christmas. With all the terror in the world we as people

need someone to save us and bring peace back to our lives. In the Christian Bible it says "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

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## Vinayak Chaturthi



By **Vaishnavi Kanakamedala\***

**Vinayak Chaturthi** is always an exciting time of year for my family. My mother's favorite God is Ganesh so the preparations we did at home are always fun. Lord Ganesh is the destroyer of obstacles. Vinayak Chaturthi is also known as Ganesh's birthday.

The story of Ganesh is a very well-known one. We all know Shiva's wife Parvathi. One day Parvathi wished to take a bath, so she ordered Nandi to guard the entrance while she bathed. While she was bathing, Lord Shiva had walked in. He was the master of the house, so his order overruled Parvathi's. Because of this, Parvathi was furious. She made her own child with the turmeric paste. The child was unbelievably strong. Under his mother's orders, he didn't allow Lord Shiva to pass. Lord Shiva was enraged and cut off the child's head. Parvathi was heartbroken and angry at Shiva's actions. To make up for his actions, he went out and cut off the head of the first sleeping animal he saw. And that animal turned out to be an elephant. Shiva bonded the head and the body together with his powers and thus, Ganesh was born.

The celebrations start off with the making of a clay Ganesh. The sculptures could be made out of clay or all natural materials like vegetables and fruits. I wish more and more Indians could use the indigenous and environmental friendly materials. On the day of the festival, the idol is put on a platform and thus the puja begins. The puja is called pranapratishttha. For ten days, Ganesh is worshipped. The eleventh day is when the fun begins. During the eleventh day, the clay sculpture of Ganesh is carried through the streets while worshippers dance and sing around it. There are many fun things to do on Ganesh's birthday. It is a fun holiday with a rich history.

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## Holi - The Colorful Indian Festival

By **Hariharan Conji\***



**Holi** is a colorful and most important festival of the India. It is celebrated annually in the month of March on Purnima or pooranmashi by the people of Hindu religion. People wait for this festival very eagerly and enjoy by playing with colors and eating delicious foods. Children come out of their homes in the early morning with colors and pitchakri to enjoy with friends. Women of the houses started preparing needed things for the Holi celebration like special and delicious dishes, sweets, snacks and other things to welcome their neighbors, friends and relatives at Holi.

Holi is a festival of joy and happiness which spreads real color and pleasure in the life of everyone. People sprinkle real colors or colored powder to each other and break all the barriers of discrimination between them. The significance behind celebrating this festival is the great history of Prahlad and his aunt Holika. Long ago, there was a devil king, Hiranyakashyap. He was father of Prahlad and brother of Holika. He was granted a boon by the Lord Brahma that he cannot be killed by any man or animal, neither any ashtra or sashtra, neither inside the home or outside and neither in the day or night. Getting such power he became very arrogant and ordered everyone including his own son to worship him instead of God as, he is a real God.

Because of his fear, people started worshipping him except Prahlad as he was a true devotee of Lord Vishnu. After seeing such type of behavior of the Prahlad, Hiranyakashyap made a plan with sister Holika to kill Prahlad. He ordered his sister to sit in the fire by having Prahlad in her lap. Holika did so but unfortunately she burnt in the fire however Prahlad was not harmed and even not touched by the fire as he was under the protection and blessings of God. From then, Hindu people started celebrating that event as Holi festival after the name of Holika. This festival is celebrated to remember the victory of goodness over bad or devil power. In the night or evening, a day before the colorful Holi, people burn a heap of wood and co-dung in the nearby areas in the myth of burning Holika.

Everyone enjoys this festival by singing, dancing, playing colors, hugging each other and eating delicious food. It is a Public Holiday when all the schools, colleges, universities, offices, banks and other institutions become closed so that people can go to their home and fully enjoy this special festival.

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## Rakshabandhan

By Aadya Kaushik\*



There are many Indian festivals, of which one is Rakshabandhan. Rakshabandhan celebrates the bond between brother and sister. Generally on Rakshabandhan, a sister ties a rakhi (sacred thread) on her brother's wrist. This symbolizes the sister's love and prayers for her brother's well-being, as well as the brother's lifelong vow to protect her.

Personally, Rakshabandhan has always been one of my favorite cultural festivals. I grew up watching my mother tie a rakhi around an earthen pot each year on this day, but never really understood why she did until I was older. My mother's brother lived in India while she lived here in the U.S., so she was not able to meet him each year to tie a rakhi on him in person. She used the pot as a symbol of her brother.

On my father's side, Rakshabandhan is similarly celebrated. However, seeing as he is the brother, he has one older sister and one younger sister who send him rakhis in the mail

every year since they both reside in India. When we receive the packages complete with rice and kumkum, my little sister and I act as surrogates and tie the rakhis and apply the kumkum to our father. Though my sister and I do not have any brothers of our own, we have two cousins, Shivashu and Shridhar, who are like brothers to us. We mail them rakhi packages yearly, similar to those sent to our father by his sisters. I am lucky enough to have been able to tie rakhis in person to my cousins when we visited India at the time of Rakshabandhan one year.

Even though my mother can't be with her brother, my aunts can't be with my father, and I can't be with my cousins every year, the strengthening of our bond on Rakshabandhan warms my heart. To be truthful, it's also nice that my sister and I get sent gifts from our cousins in exchange for our rakhis. This is our cousins' way of telling us that they love us, and that they will always protect us.

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**Indian Festivals celebrated by varied cultures and through their special rituals add to the colours of Indian Heritage. Some festivals welcome the seasons of the year, the harvest, the rains, or the full moon. Others celebrate religious occasions, the birthdays of divine beings, saints, and gurus (revered teachers), or the advent of the New Year. A number of these festivals are common to most parts of India. Many festivals celebrate the various harvests; commemorate great historical figures and events, while many express devotions to the deities of different religions.**

**Every celebration centres around the rituals of prayer, seeking blessings, exchanging goodwill, decorating houses, wearing new cloths, music, dance and feasting. In India every region and every religion has something to celebrate. The festivals reflect the vigour and life-style of its people. Vibrant colours, music and festivity make the country come alive throughout the year." From:**

<http://www.festivalsfindia.in>