

Significance of Aartee

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THE EVENING SONG CALLED *Aartee* is a popular ritual invariably witnessed and sung in all temples. The devotees gather for this evening worship to receive The Blessings of God. The famous *aartee* at Haridwar is a case in point. The melodious rendering of shlokas when beautifully lit lamps are lowered into the river Ganga has been depicted in many ways. Similarly, the *aartee* performed to Lord Krishna (Lord Jagan Nath) at Puri is also famous. Thus, the *aartee* or the evening worship (with lighted lamps/fire) has become an integral part of the daily life of devotees.

We can only guess that the use of fire in worship must have been practiced since prehistoric times. Early in civilisation, people must have gained the knowledge of fire by observing things in Nature, such as lightning, the fire from volcanoes, and the heat of the sun. Fire was considered sacred because it was essential for the welfare of the people. Fire worship and sun worship have existed since early times. Because fire was difficult to produce in ancient times, the custom of keeping a public fire burning at all times, became common. The Temple of Vesta in Rome was an outstanding example of the importance of fire to the Romans. This has resulted in the fact that fire rituals have been associated with almost all religions of the world, and the evening *aartee* is one common example in the orient.

In this context, let us compare the evening *aartee* of temples with the one rendered in the gurudwaras all over the world. Let us remind ourselves of what our Guru Sahiban understood of this important aspect of our worship.

Guru Arjun, in a beautiful composition: "*Aartee kirtaan sada anand, maha sundar sada beanth*" (SGGS:393) comments on this form of worship. The *shabad* has been translated as follows: "His *Aartee*, his lamp-lit worship service, is the Kirtan of His Praise, which brings lasting bliss". It enlightens us in a wonderful manner.

Thus, the evening prayer, or *aartee*, brings enlightenment and when it is performed as a *kirtan* (*melodious rendering of prayers*), it brings bliss. Therefore, the *aartee* rendered in the gurudwaras is a beautiful combination of several compositions, each of which conveys a central theme. The evening *aartee* rendered in the gurudwaras begins with a composition by Guru Nanak in Dhanasri Raag. Historians record the fact that Guru Nanak rendered this composition when he witnessed the evening *aartee* at the Jagan Nath temple in Puri. This is followed by four compositions by different Bhagats/Sants (the second by Bhagat Ravi Das, the third by Sant Sain, the fourth by Bhagat Kabir, and the fifth by Bhagat Dhanna), and in the end, there is a composition by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It would be interesting to examine this in some more detail.

The First stanza - "*Gagan mein thaal, rav chand dipak bane, tarika mandal janak moti. Dhoop malyan lo pavan chavro kare sagal banraya phulant jyoti. Kaisi arti ho-ay bhav khandana, teri arti*" was composed by Guru Nanak. It is translated as follows:

"One Universal Creator, God. By the Grace of The True Guru:

“In the bowl of the sky, the sun and moon are the lamps; the stars in the constellation are the pearls. The fragrance of sandalwood is the incense, the wind is the fan, and the vegetation are the flowers in offering to You, O Luminous Lord. What a beautiful lamp-lit worship service this is ! O destroyer of fear, this is your AARTEE, Your worship service.

“A thousand are Your eyes, and yet You have no eyes. Thousands are your forms, and yet You have not even one form. Thousands are Your lotus feet, and yet You have no feet. Without a nose, thousands are Your noses. I am enchanted with your play!

“The Divine Light is within everyone; You are that Light. Yours is that Light which shines within everyone. By the Guru’s Teachings, this divine Light is revealed. That which pleases The Lord is the true worship service.

“My soul is enticed by the honey-sweet lotus feet of the Lord; day and night, I thirst for them. Bless Nanak, the thirsty song-bird, with the water of Your Mercy, that he may come to dwell in Your Name.

Guru Nanak emphasises the importance of nature and suggests that mere symbolic worship should be replaced by proper understanding. Therefore, Guru Sahib compares the “worship plate (*thal*) with the entire universe and continues the comparison of the lamps with the celestial bodies (sun and moon), the pearls and precious jewels with the stars. Thus an aartee of this kind (helping mankind to understand nature and its true worship) is more meaningful for receiving The Blessings of The Almighty.

The second stanza - “Naam téro arti majan muraare Har ke Naam bin jhoothey sagal passaarey” – [SGGS:694] was composed by Bhagat Ravi Das. It is translated as follows:

“Your Name, Lord, is my adoration and cleansing bath. Without the Name of the Lord, all ostentatious displays are useless. Your Name is my prayer mat, and your Name is the stone to grind sandalwood. Your Name is the saffron which I take and sprinkle in offering to you. Your Name is the water and your name is the sandalwood. The chanting of your Name is the grinding of the sandalwood. I take it and offer it all to you. Your Name is the lamp and your Name is the wick. Your Name is the oil I pour into it. Your Name is the light applied to this lamp, which enlightens and illuminates the entire world.

“Your Name is the thread, and Your Name is the garland of flowers. The eighteen loads of vegetation are all impure to offer to you. Why should I offer to You, that which You Yourself created? Your Name is the fan, which I wave over you.

“The whole world is preoccupied with classical Puranas, the sixty eight sacred shrines of pilgrimage, and the four sources of creation. But, says Ravi Das, Your Name is my *Aartee*, my lamp-lit worship service. The True Name, Sat Naam, is the food which I offer to you.”

This composition emphasises the fact that true worship lies in repeating the holy Name of God because, without the Blessings of God, there is nothing. Thus, according to Bhagat Ravi Das, the true aartee is in remembering God’s Name and following the true path.

The third stanza, “Dhoop deep ghrít saaji arti vaarne jaau Kamlapati” – (SGGS: 695) - was composed by Sant Sain. It is translated as follows:

“With incense, lamps and ghee, I offer this lamp-lit worship service. I am a sacrifice to the Lord of Lakshmi. Hail to You, Lord, Hail to You! Again and again, Hail to You, Lord King, Ruler of all!

“Sublime is the lamp, and pure is the wick. You are immaculate and pure, O Brilliant Lord of True Wealth! Raamanand knows the devotional worship of the Lord. He says that the Lord is all-pervading, the embodiment of supreme joy!”

Here, Bhagat Ravi Das emphasises that true worship must lead one to complete submission in all humility. Thus when we perform the evening worship we must forego our ego to seek the blessings of God.

The fourth stanza, “Sun sandhya teri dev devaakar adhpat aad samaayi”: (SGGS:1350) – was composed by Bhagat Kabir (a Muslim weaver of Benaras). It is translated as follows:

“Hear my prayer, Lord; You are the Divine Light of the Divine, the Primal, All-pervading Master. The Siddhas in samaadhi have not found Your limits. They hold tight to the protection of Your Sanctuary. Worship and adoration of the Pure, Primal Lord comes by worshipping the True Guru, O siblings of destiny.

Standing at His door, mythical Brahma studies the Vedas, but he cannot see the unseen Lord. With the oil of knowledge about the sense of reality, and the wick of Naam, the Name of the Lord, this lamp illuminates my body. I have applied the Light of the Lord of the Universe, and lit this lamp. God, the knower knows. The unstruck melody of the Panch Shabad the Five Primal Sounds, vibrates and resounds. I dwell with the Lord of the world. Kabir, your slave, performs this Aartee, this lamp-lit worship for You, O Formless Lord of Nirvana”

Bhagat Kabir, in this composition, elaborates on the fact that mere rituals do not help one to receive the blessings of God. Understanding the true nature of devotion is essential for knowing about God and the worship should lead one to this goal.

This is followed by “Gopal tera arta, jo jan tumri bhagat karante tin ke kaj sanvarta” – (SGGS:695). This composition by Bhagat Dhana (A Jat from Rajasthan) is translated as follows:

“O Lord of the world, this is Thy lamp-lit worship service. You are the Arranger of the affairs of those humble beings who perform your devotional worship service. Lentils, ghee and flour – these things, I beg of You. My mind shall ever be pleased. Shoes, fine clothes, and grains of the best cultivation – I beg of You. A milch-cow and a water buffalo, I beg of You, and a fine Arabian horse. A good wife to care for my home – Your humble servant Dhana begs for these things, Lord.”

Bhagat Dhana Ji reminds us that we perform the evening worship for seeking blessings. **He asks for basic necessities of life so that he can continue worshipping God. He firmly believes that a devotee’s true worship is always rewarded.**

Finally, a composition by Guru Gobind Singh: “Ya te prasann bhaye hain maha mun devan ke tap mein sukh pav. Jag kare ik ved rahey bhav taap rahey mil dhayan lava,” completes the evening aartee in the gurdwaras.

This reminds us that – “The Lord is pleased by discipline of penance, prayer, rituals, recitation of the scriptures, meditation, music, dance of the celestial beings and the melody of the arti. The cosmic worlds rejoice and chant the Divine Name”.

According to Dr. J. S. Batra, Rabindranath Tagore was once asked by the actor, Balraj Sahni to compose an international anthem, on the same lines the national anthem of India.

Tagore replied that Guru Nanak had already composed an anthem for the whole universe.

Poet Tagore was referring to the first stanza composed by Guru Nanak Dev Ji mentioned above. This has also been translated into Bengali by Tagore because of its universal appeal.

