

THE
UNUSUAL ESSAYS
OF
***AN UNKNOWN
SRI VAISHNAVA***
(2025 EDITION)

M. K.SUDARSHAN



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***UNUSUAL ESSAYS OF AN
UNKNOWN SRI VAISHNAVA***

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M.K. SUDARSHAN

A FEW READERS COMMENTS

“The whole set of essays beautifully integrates author’s own religious background with the world around him. The easy way in which the Author engulfs all that he sees around him and all the world religions, places and people is enjoyably. Of course, the array of topics covers wide range of in-depth themes of the Hindu and the Vaishnavite faiths, without imposing the same on you.”

- **V.Krishnan (Krishnan Venkatachalam), Chennai**

“EXCELLENT work. (The author’s) command over the subject as well as the languages (English, Sanskrit and Tamil) is superb. (He has) . . . written it in such a language that is easily accessible to even a novice like me. The scholarly treatment of the subjects/topics makes it a treat for researchers and laymen alike - A must read for Advaitins, Vishishtadvaitins and Dvaitins and all those who are interested in the subject of Vedanta. It is said that — “*Dharmo rakshati rakshitah*”—By this exquisite work (he is) protecting dharma which in turn will not only protect him but also those who will read this book.”

- **Dr. L.R.Chary, Mumbai**

“It is an exceptional high-octane intellectual journey. Raises several vital philosophical and religious issues with aplomb and venturesome-ness. There is a common thread of viewing our heritage with a discernment that is off-beat. I have just savored a couple of chapters. Shall take time to get engrossed and enjoy this rare treat.”

- **S. Parthasarathy, Pondicherry**

“This is an absolutely brilliant book . . . To hold the attention of readers through 700+ pages on a subject as vast and weighty as the author deals with, is impossible . . . Sudarshan has made the impossible possible . . . A gifted writer whose prose is poetic . . .”

- **K. Vaidyanath (Ex.Finance Director, ITC Ltd. India)**

“This book reflects the author’s triumph . . . not his “struggle” . . . in life in being able to reflect deeply upon, understand Sri Vaishnava philosophy and faith . His ability to connect dots is amazing . . .”

- —**Shekhar K. Swamy (Managing Director, M/s. RK Swamy BBDO)**

A FEW CRITICAL REVIEWS

“This book contains a wealth of information in simple language and can fulfill the needs of those who have not been formally tutored in the tenets of Sri Vaishnavism . . . all the fundamentals are illustrated with examples (taken) from the context of the modern world for immediate understanding and association . . . This volume deserves to be in the collection of those who value the hoary heritage and culture of Bharathavarsha . . .

- **Dr. Chithra Madhavan (TATTVALOKA (August 2018)**

Official magazine of the Sri Sankaracharya Mutt of SRINGERI

“This book contains . . . in every chapter an abundant wealth of information that is hard to find elsewhere all at one place.

The content has rich and resonant quality with its primary focus on “Bhagavath Ramanuja Darsanam” . . . There is a great need today for the kind of simple explanations that Sudarshan is able to offer readers, especially the youthful ones in our families who are so much exposed to the pulls and fleeting attractions of the modern secular world that they find they have little patience for the elaborate profundities of traditional literature.

Sudarshan’s essays to that purpose do succeed in providing help to anyone genuinely seeking to grasp Bhagavath Ramanuja’s sampradaaya in simple terms in the English language . . . This is a well compiled book of essays . . . and should in my opinion adorn the library of every devout family for in-depth reading at leisure.”

- **Dr. Varadachari Sadagopan www.sadagopan.org**

(Foreword to the First Edition (2016))

“Dedicated to the memory of my “maatha”, “pithaa” and “guru” . . .

“Mani & MK”

And

“U.Ve. Mukkur Sri. Lakshminarasimhachariar Swamy” . . .

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THE MODERN “SRI VAISHNAVA” IDENTITY CIRCA. 2020:

A Few Facets

What is *Identity* and what is the *Sri Vaishnava Identity* today?

The word “*identity*” has come to assume a certain assertive, even aggressive meaning in our public discourse today in India wherein we often hear words and phrases like “*politics of identity*”, “*social dynamics of caste identity*”, “*gender-identity*” etc. Any group or community that carries some long historical baggage of social grievance and wants redressal for it from the rest of the country will do this today: *make its identity into a burning social issue*.

Unlike other ongoing “*identity*” discoveries in India today, Sri Vaishnava identity has nothing to do with “*asserting*” any identity. In bringing up the questions of his identity, a Sri Vaishnava is not agitating for any social space or recognition, nor advancing any community interest, nor claiming any advantage or material benefit.

The prime motive for a Sri Vaishnava’s search for his identity that has its roots in history, heritage and ancestry—is a simple one: It is a deeply spiritual quest for the *ideal of an ethical life*.

It is a search for a certain way of living, for a certain human behavioral pathway that will lead to personal fulfilment, freedom and salvation . . . In the 14th century CE, a saint and poet, **Narsi Mehta** from Gujarat, India, gave voice to such a search for identity in a famous song that was the favorite of Mahatma Gandhi: “*Vaishnava janato tene kahiye, peed parayai jaane re . . .*”

“He knows the pain of others . . .

Pride never enters his mind

He tolerates and praises the entire world Does not speak ill of others

Keeps his promises, actions and thoughts pure He sees everything equally—

His tongue may tire but he never utters untruth He has renounced greed, deceit, lust and anger

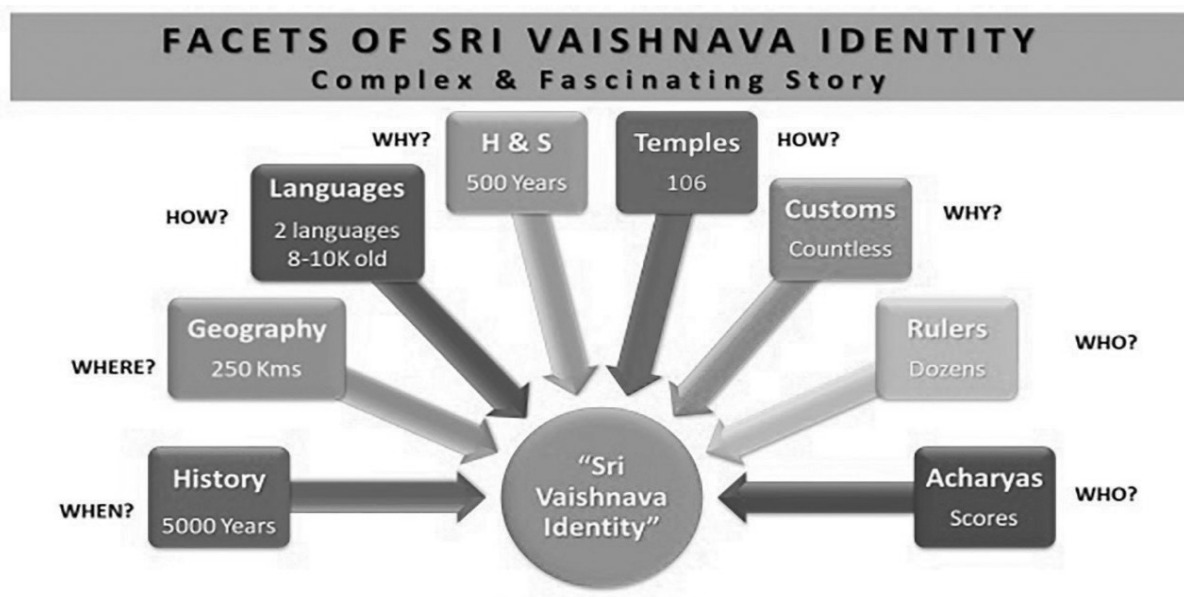
The poet Narsi would like to meet such a person By whose goodness, the entire family gets salvation”.

So, the fact of the matter is certainly this: “*Identity*” and “*History*” are inextricably bound together. You cannot tell the story of Sri Vaishnava identity without delving into Sri Vaishnava history. Sri Vaishnava history is such an ancient and long one, it is impossible to compress the entire narratives of the history of Sri Vaishnavas into a few dozen pages and try to distill from it, in rich and complete detail, the cultural identity of the community. The best that is possible for me in this book of essays is to present just a few “*facets*” of Sri Vaishnava identity. Which is why, the title of this prefatory chapter in this book is not “*The Sri Vaishnava Identity*” nor is it “*Brief History of Sri Vaishnavism*” . . . The title chosen for this Preface is a “*Few facets of Sri Vaishnava Identity*” to indicate that it a narrative drawn from my very own reading and understanding of *Sri Vaishnava history*.



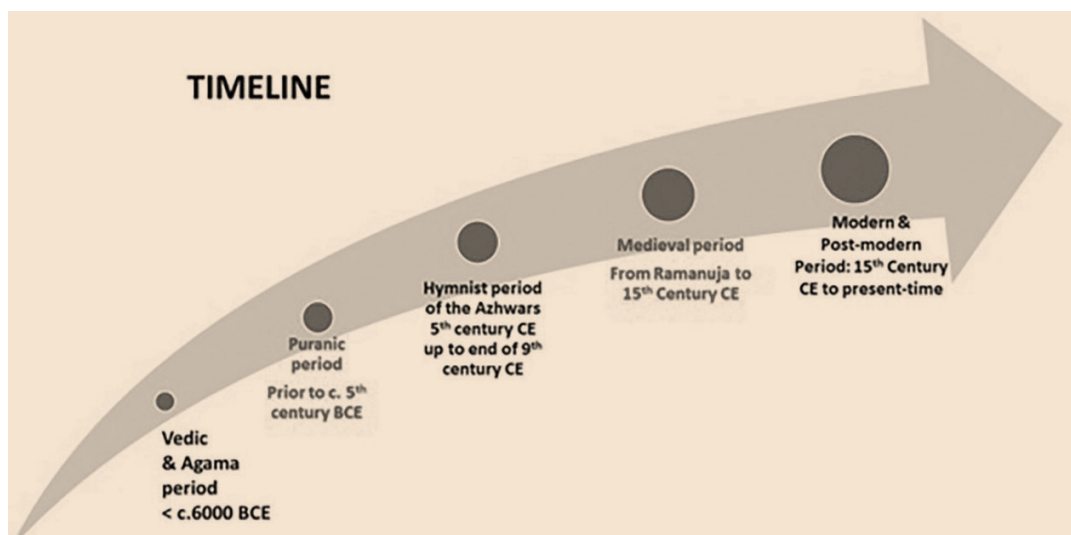
There is an *Impressionist* technique in artistic expression called Pointillism in which small, distinct dots of color are applied in patterns to form an image. My “limited study” of Sri Vaishnava history is akin to pointillism. Across the vast canvas of Sri Vaishnava history, I discovered lots of “dots or points” splashed about. They are in my perception “points of History” that I choose to describe as so many dots of “WHAT”, “WHEN”, “HOW”, “WHERE”, “WHO” and “WHY” . . . As in a painting of pointillism art, I realized that if I could somehow *connect all the points on the canvas in a meaningful way*, an overall image of a Sri Vaishnava Identity might eventually emerge.

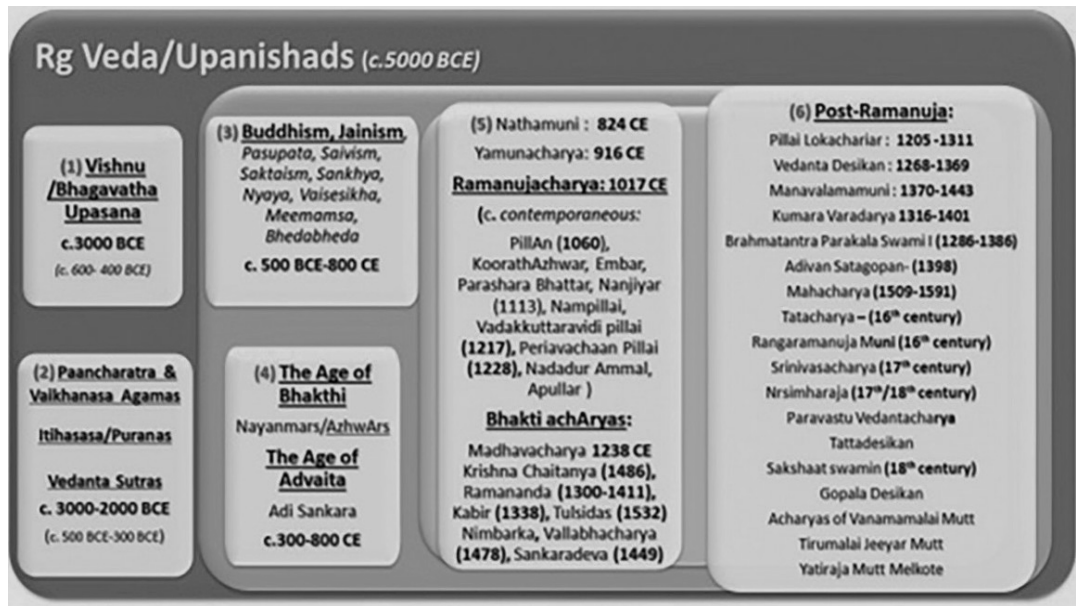
What then are those “dots” or “points” under *When, Where, Why, How, Who* and *What*? They are **Timeline, Geography, Customs, Language, Rulers, Acharyas and Politics** as set out in the matrix below and which will be elaborated upon in the following pages.



WHEN . . .

The first dot to connect is timeline. Sri Vaishnava history stretches from c.5000 BCE to the present day . . . with milestones marked as *Vedic/Agama period, Puraana period, Hymnist, Medieval, Modern* and *Post-modern periods*.





The roots of Sri Vaishnava identity can be traced back to the *Rg Veda*, the oldest religious literature of the world. *Vishnu* is one of the principal gods described in the *Rg Veda*, the other gods being *Mitra*, *Rudra*, *Varuna*, *Agni* etc.

The word *Vishnu* means he who is “*all-pervasive*” and “*protects and sustains*” . . . Speaking mostly in metaphors, the **Rg Veda** describes *Vishnu* as he who pervades the 3 worlds—(i) *terra firma* (ii) the subterranean worlds of land and sea and (iii) the heavenly spaces above. “*trini pada vichakrame vishnur gopaa adaabhyaha . . .ato dharmaani dhaarayan . . .*”.

Vishnu, is also the substrate and immanent spirit of the universe . . . *Vishnu* is conceived by the *Rg Veda* as the *Ultimate Reality* who reigns supreme in heaven beyond which nothing can be conceived . . . He is *Paramaatma* and his place is in “*parama padam*”—“*tad vishnoh paramam padam . . .and “Vishhnor yath paramam padam . . .*” The **Vishnu Sahasranaamam** confirms this: . . . “*putAma-paramAtma cha muktAnam parama-gatih:*” . . . “*ParamAtma*” is “*putAtma*” and “*muktAtma*” meaning “*a Being who is ever-unconditioned; in whom reside eternally an infinitude of perfect and blissful qualities*”.

From this fundamental Vedic conception of *One Supreme Being* as its source, Vaishnavism has arisen. In later Vedic times, *Vishnu* was also associated with a god called **Bhaga** . . . who had extraordinary powers to bestow auspicious blessings. *Vishnu* thus became “*bhagavath*” and later in time, during the post-Vedic age of the *Agamaas* (**Box 1 in the Chart above**), the worship of *Bhaga* became *Bhaagavatha-Upaasana* in which the conception of *Vishnu* underwent deification and came to be known as *Vishnu Upaasana*. (**Box 2 in the chart above**),

In the later *Puraana* period (**Box 2**), in the *Mahabharatha* we find a clear reference to *Vishnu-upaasana* being practiced in accordance with the *Paancharaatra Agama* system based on the *Ekaayana* recension of the *Shukla Yajur Veda*. And in the *Vedanta Sutra* or *Brahma Sutra* of Sage Vyasa also, clear reference is made to the *Paancharaatra* system of worship. Another *Agama* based on the *Rg Veda Kalpa Sutras* was expounded by Sage *Vaikhanasa* and developed by 4 *rishis* *Marichi*, *Bhrugu*, *Atri* and *Kaashyapa*. Their work survives today as treatises and manuals. They are known as *Samhitas* and *Smritis*. The *Paancharatra Agama* alone has about 225 *samhitas*.

There is thus enough reason to conclude that modes of worshipping Vishnu developed during a period which is later than the Vedas and earlier than the Mahabharata. They evolved from being abstract *tattva*-s and mystical insights of rishis into elaborate systems of formal, ritualistic worship that involved consecration of idols, construction of temples for this purpose and observance of certain prescribed daily rites and festivals formulated in the *Agamas*.

(Box 3) Vedic societies and common people in India by and large faithfully adopted the Agamic modes of worship during the long stretch of history between c. 500 BCE up to 800 CE. During this period, religious life predominantly meant engaging in Vedic *yagnya* or sacrifice for the priestly classes according to the *smriti*; and for the common people, it meant temple-worship according to the *Agamas* based on *samhita*. It was the general order of the day. *Siva* and *Vishnu upaasana* and *Sakta tantra* worship were widespread throughout India. Collectively, the “*samhita*” and “*smriti*” texts, “*itihasas*” and “*puraanas*” became sacred scriptures of all India.



In the post-Puranic period, Vedic thought and ideas were making rather slow progress trying to keep up with the ever changing political and social climate of the times when kings fought wars and kingdoms rose, declined and fell.

Around this time, *brahminical* and intellectual elites were ruling the roost with rituals, sacerdotalism, prevalence of *yagnya*-s, *homa*-s and rigid regimen of procedures and protocol imposed by ‘*samhita*’ and “*smriti*” texts and with whom common people began to feel a growing sense of alienation.

Rejecting such a hierarchic and ritualistic Vedic religion, Jainism and Buddhism then arose and spread rapidly to large parts of India. Anti-Vedic philosophies such as *shoonya-vaada*, *maayaa- vada*, and *naasthika-vaada* . . . flourished in large parts of India in the wake of the Jainist **Kalabhra dynasty** who ruled over much of ancient Tamil country between the 3rd and the 7th century. The ancient religion of dominant Vedic sacerdotalism went into defensive mode as even powerful kings of vast empires such as *Kalinga* (King Asoka) and the *Deccan* embraced this new religion of Mahaveer and Buddha.

By 8th century, however, Buddhism/Jainism too became rather feeble and fossilized in India. In Tamil country the Kalabhra kings were defeated by a coalition of Pallava, Chera and Pandya kings. People were generally disillusioned by Buddhism’s utter lack of a solid philosophical core and by its strident atheism too. Buddhism had no convincing answer to the fundamental question: “*Is there a God and if there is one, what is his relationship to the universe*”? This aspect of philosophy Buddhism and Jainism purposely ignored even though the human heart longed to know it. It was at this time that the old Brahminical order of ritualists attempted a revival again in India (of which Kumarila Bhatta was the chief champion).

With Buddhism and Jainism both waning, an existential vacuum existed in India. The empire of the old *meemaaksaka*-s and their *saastras of smriti and samhitas* were trying to make a comeback. But their efforts were little more than unseemly vengeance against the Buddhist and Jaina establishments which were, after almost 500 years of growth already beginning to wane and decay. They tried vindicating the Vedic religion again by establishing its infallible authority as self-evident, self-existent and timeless body of truth. This they tried to do by resuscitating the nearly dead ritualism of the old Vedic religion with its many and multiform sacrifices.

People and History were deeply divided and it was a time of great moral despair . . . It was a Hamlet-moment for religious life in general across India: *To be or not be* . . . was the question!



Into such a state of deep religious limbo in India, around the 8th century, stepped the giant of a Vedantic guru **Adi Sankara** who revived and rejuvenated “*sanaatana dharma*” through a new brand of philosophy called *Vedanta* based on a unique and new monotheistic interpretation of the Vedas. It was strongly anti-“*purva-meemaamsa*” and rejected the old-style, decadent ritualism of the Vedas. It also succeeded in firmly establishing the *Upanishads* as the crowning glory of the Vedas. The age of **Vedanta** was born. It became the new religion of India.

Adi Sankara’s Vedanta was founded on “*gnyaana maarga*”—the “*via contemplativa*” described in the Bhagavath-Gita which again distilled it from the *Brahma Sutras* of Sage Vyasa. It soon spread like a wave across much of India and captured the hearts and imagination of kings, intellectuals, students and laity. It vanquished both *Meemaamsakas* and Buddhists alike in India. For almost a century after Adi Sankara, his Advaita Vedanta held sway over large parts of the religious landscape and mindscape of India.

But as a theology, Advaita suffered greatly from one defect. It lacked a strong emotional connect with ordinary people for whom Advaita seemed to befuddle them. On the one hand, the Advaita philosophy centered on its Formless and Attribute-less conception of God (*Nirguna Brahman*) resembled almost the rarefied Buddhist conception of Godless-ness. And on the other hand, the Advaitin’s continued emphasis on the “*smriti*” based religious sacrifices (*yagnya*, *homa* etc.) seemed so much like a throwback to medieval “*meemaamsaka*” sacerdotalism. Advaita too gradually became too philosophical for the common human mind which could not derive religious satisfaction from it.

Which is the reason why in the times even before and after Adi Sankara, another great and parallel historical tectonic shift took place in religious life in India . . . (**Box 4**) sometime between the 7th and 9th century CE. The name of that great shift was **Bhakthi**. A mood of religious ecstasy overtook the spirit of the country when Vaishnava and Saiva counter-brahminical *bhakthi* movements began to sprout all over India.

A.K.Ramanujam, a modern poet-historian from India, tells the story of this great phase of *Bhakthi* in history in a very illuminating paragraph in his book “*Hymns for the Drowning*”:

“*Developments in the north during the period of the Guptas (320-540 CE), truly prepared the ground for this mood. The Gupta Kings called themselves devotees of God . . . “bhaagavataas”. They took the name of the gods, put the figures of Lakshmi, Vishnu’s consort and Varaha, his incarnation on their coins, and made mythology a state concern, enlisting particularly Vishnu and his heroic incarnations for their politics. The Guptas sponsored Vishnu and almost believed that Vishnu sponsored the Gupta Empire. Not only were the first Hindu temples built and the first Hindu icons sculpted during this period, but the official forms of Hindus mythology were set down in great syncretic Sanskrit texts called puraanaas. By the 5th century CE, Vishnu, Siva, their families and minions and enemies seem to have become as real as the human dynasties.*”

“*In South India, by the 6th century, the Pallavas (and later Pandyas) too had arrived. Their inscriptions record the end of one era (the anti-Vedic) in South India history and the beginning of a new one. In the*

culture of this time, the two “classicisms” of India, that of the Guptas and that of the Tamils seem to have met. From the 6th to the early 9th century (when the Cholas again made a decisive comeback), the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Pandyas of Madurai made Bhakthi blossom in Tamil Nadu. The imperial presence of Sanskrit, with its brahminical smriti texts of the Vedas and Upanishads, was a presence against which bhakthi in Tamil defined itself, though not always defiantly. Bhakthi thus arose out of the meeting of Sanskritic religions and mythology with Tamil conceptions of the same . . .”

It was during this period (7th to 9th century CE) that the great Tamil *bhakti* saints of South India were born. They helped spread the Saiva and Vaishnava faith in the vernacular instead of Sanskrit which by this time in history was spoken and understood only by the priestly and intellectual classes of the population. The Vaishnava saints were 12 in number and known as the *Azhwars* while the Saivite saints numbered 63 and known as *Naayanmaars*.

The mystic Azhwars were the true pioneers of later Sri Vaishnavism. They were the first to show a path for ordinary people towards religious fulfillment. It was a path that was free of too much Upanishad profundity and too elaborate “*smaartha*” ritualism also. It was a new and unique path of religious faith based on love, devotion and ethical conduct. In their mystical works in Tamil, “the *naalaayira divya prabhandham*”, a *bhaktha* at last found a new and easy pathway to God.

It was the *Azhwars* who were the first to fully understand the heart of a *bhaktha*: A *bhaktha* was not content to worship a god in word and ritual nor was he content to grasp God in a theology; he *needed to possess God*, and to *be possessed by Him*. He needed to also sing, to dance, to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture: to embody and personalize God in every possible way.

In *Bhakthi*, as AK Ramanujam wrote, “all arts of human invention became “*techniques of ecstasy*” and “*incitements to religious possession*”. And as Rao Bahadur Prof. Rangacharya said in his 1909 lecture, “*the common man’s need then was to have a God who would love him, who would rush to help him and render protection unto him whenever he got into difficulties—a God at whose feet he might throw himself unreservedly so that He in his divine wisdom might do with him whatever He chose.*”

It was the age of dawning for Sri Vaishnava “*sampradaayam*”!



Two rivers, the *Alkananda* and *Bhagirathi*, meet at the confluence of *DevaPrayag*. Both rivers have their source in the *Himalayas*, but one flows from *Badrinath* and the other from *Gangotri*. Gushing forth from *Devaprayag* thereafter, the two rivers give up their individual names and identity and flow as one river called the **River Ganga**.

Sri Ramanujacharya’s arrival on the scene in Vaishnava history in 1019-1137 CE, we might say, was in many ways the *Devaprayag* of 2 mighty streams of evolutionary waves! One wave is called *Upanishad* and the other wave is *Bhakthi*. Both waves had a common source in the Himalayan *Gangotri* of the Vedas; they flowed separately for a while but mingled into one in the end. In Ramanujacharya’s time and thereafter, they began flowing as one great river called **Sri Vaishnavism**.

Ramanuja had several predecessors who indeed prepared the ground for Sri Vaishnavism that he founded. He also had many successors who carried his torch forward, as later history of the Sri Vaishnava religion distinctly shows. (**Box 5 & 6**). But it was thanks to Ramanuja alone that Visishtadvaita Vedanta and theology were both forged into an extraordinarily beautiful worldview called “*ramanuja darsana*”.

The unique “*darsana*” of Ramanujacharya took elements from the ancient Rig Vedic worship of “*bhaga*”, combined it with the *Agamic* theism of “*Vishnu-upaasana*”; then infused them both with the monotheism of Vedantic Upanishad and, finally, welded them all together into the rich and vibrant tapestry of *Bhakthi*-emotionalism of the Azhwars.



Now that we have this high-altitude bird’s eye view of Sri Vaishnava history, we can and must make this assertion: *that Sri Vaishnavas did have an identity long before Ramanujacharya.*

The Sri Vaishnava identity is not a **history-centric** one but a **timeless one** going back to Vedic and Agamic times. This identity does not begin with *Ramanujacharya* nor should we see it ending with *Ramanujacharya*. The history of Sri Vaishnava identity clearly tells us that it is an amalgam of age- old traditions, sacred ideals and cultures. It is not so much a system of religion as an enlightened religious attitude. And that is the reason why Ramanuja’s *bhakthi* movement spread everywhere to India later, between the 12th and 17th century CE, and grew into the larger **Pan-India Vaishnava identity** which it is today—a movement that swept into its fold and embrace the later regional and sub-religious movements such as those of the *Madhvaas of Karnataka and Maharashtra, the Ramaanandis of all of Central and Gangetic India, the Vallabhaas of Gujarat, the Nimbarkaas of the Deccan, Chaitanya/Gaudiyas of Bengal and the many followers of Kabir in Uttar Pradesh.*

The Sri Vaishnava identity, thanks to Ramanuja, is thus to be likened with the **ever-flowing Ganga**. Stream and waves of many influences of pre-history, race, language, religious ideology and fervor flowed into it across great spans of centuries. All the myriad influences only helped to broaden its path and enrich its waters and their force . . . History tells us that the Sri Vaishnava identity was not the product of a system . . . It is and will always remain an enduring inspiration.

We now have to take a brief diversion to discuss Sri Vaishnava geography after the quick tour of its history.



WHERE



The fertile land stretching between the two cities Kanchipuram in the north of Tamil Nadu and **Sri Ranganam** in the south, was the cradle and nursery in which Sri Vaishnava identity was born, grew and flourished. Both cities were cultural epicenters for the Sri Vaishnava faith during and after Ramanuja's times.

One of the most frequently asked questions about Sri Vaishnava communities spread all across Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telengana and Karnataka states is whether they too like all other sects and denominations of Brahmins had come from North India to settle down here.

The theory of a Post-Vedic Aryan invasion ever happening in South India has been discredited completely today by modern historian-scholars like **Dr A. Nagaswamy**. But given the broad sweep of history across South India in the last 3000 years we have just seen, I believe it is reasonable to imagine that into Southern India, several thousands of **internal migrations**, back and forth, from the north, east and west did take place. Peoples moved across the subcontinental expanse throughout history . . . sometimes in waves, perhaps, but most certainly always in trickles and dribbles.

These *internal migrations* could've been triggered by any number of causes, both violent and peaceful. Wars, famine, epidemics and social repression and oppression could have been the reasons. People must have moved also from one part of the country to other regions purely for reasons of occupation, trade, employment, learning, marriage or kinship ties. It is not difficult to imagine that there must have been from time to time in history—both in the pre-Christian and post-Christian millennia—several millions of migrant populations that moved from the northern plains of India to the southern peninsula and *vice versa* too.

To cite only a very small but rather telling example of such migration, between 1644 and 1652, there was a family of Sri Vaishnava Ayyangars from Ambasamudram in Tirunelveli who were invited by the King of Kashipur, Panchakot Gournarayan Singh Deo, to become temple priests in the local Vishnu temple in the remote village of Gadibero, Purulia District, West Bengal, and given 1455 acres of land as gift of subsistence! That family of Ayyangars is found even today there! Similarly, if you go today to Pushkar in Rajasthan, you will see naturalized Sri Vaishnava families living there with their very old roots traced back in Tamil Nadu.

These *internally migrating populations*, could have been from varied, multifarious racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds and communities . . . They could have been *bhaagavatas*, *meemaamsakas*, *advaitins*, *Buddhists*, *Jains*, *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas*, Sanskrit and vernacular

speakers, *Vaishnavas*, *Smarthaas*, *Saivitics*, *tantric* worshippers, Gaudiyas or Raamaanandis etc. . . . Which is why even today we say that populations in every part of India are indeed but aggregations of *melting pots* and *salad bowls* of all sorts of cultures and identities tossed together. That is a historical fact.

The lands between Kanchipuram and Sri Rangam in the times before and after Ramanujacharya too were no exception. So, this Tamil-speaking country also witnessed several generations of Sanskrit- speaking peoples from northern parts of India arriving as *internal migrants* over several centuries to settle down here . . . Some in the Kalabhra country, some in Pallava, Chola and Pandya territories.

In such a melting-pot of history and geography grew the **sub-culture of bi-lingual Sanskrit- Tamil -speaking Ayyangars, Iyers, Smarthaas and Advaitins**. This thriving sub-culture thus had a very unique identity of its own.



Given this *historical and geographical background for the Vaishnava identity—as a sub-cultural identity*—we are better placed to understand the suggested answers for some frequently asked questions about the identity-names of Sri Vaishnavas:

How and why did the word Ayyangar and Iyer originate? Are all Iyers, Advaitins? What are the differences between the two?

There is more than one etymological explanation for *Ayyangar* and *Iyer* . . . the caste prefix denoting the Tamil Brahmins, colloquially referred today as “**TamBrams**”. Both are derived from the word “**Arya**” which in the Sanskrit lexicon means “*a very exalted person*”. Love of learning, mastery of languages, of Vedic sciences, arts and disciplines was found to be very common amongst these *Sanskrit-speaking communities* in the Tamil country. So, they were called **Arya** by the common folk. In time, the word *Arya* mutated by common usage into *Ayya* or *Ayyan*, a respectful term to address these men of high learning and wisdom. Further down the line, it became suffixed with the Tamil honorific “**-aar**” . . . Thus “*Ayyan*” became “*Ayyanaar*”. The common folk of Tamil Nadu perceiving intra-group differences between *Smartaa-Advaitins* and *Sri Vaishnavas* probably began differentiating them with even more unique designations to denote Sri Vaishnavas as “*Ayyanaaru*” and “*Ayyaaru*” as Smarthas. These again in course of time became “*Ayyangaar*” and “*Iyer*”.

I remember a scholarly article written by **Late Sri Navalpakkam Ammini Devanatha Tatacharya**, a Sri Vaishnava philologist and a recipient of **President of India’s award for Sanskrit studies**, about the origin of the word “*Iyengar*”. “*Iyer*” and “*Ayyangar*” have the same origin, he said, in the Tamil word “*Ayyan*” meaning a respectable person. “*Iyengar*”, he wrote, is a Telugu variant of *Aiyan* (*Aiyan* + *Gaaru*).

Another explanation I have heard is that originally there was a family of devout Sri Vaishnava Brahmins who were retained as *raja-gurus* of the great Vijayanagaram kingly Court. These *raja- gurus* were venerated as “*Taathachaaryas*” . . . meaning venerable elders. When the Raayar kings ruled Kanchipuram, they appointed some priestly Taathaacharya families to oversee the temples there. They were then respectfully referred to as “*Taathayya gaaru*”. In time, “*taathaa*” was dropped, and it became “*ayya gaaru*” and finally morphed into “*ayyangaaru*”. Later, the term came to be broadly applied to

all *Srivaishnavas* and especially to *Taathaachaaryas*. Even now, those who are familiar with Kanchipuram traditions, use “*Iyyangar*” to mean only Kanchipuram *Taathachaaryas*.

The most orthodox explanation for the origin of Ayyangar I have heard is this: the word “*ai*” denotes 5 (five) and is also a Tamil word for “*aindhu*”. The title *Iyengar* denotes “*A Person who performs the PANCHA or “aindhu” or “ai-SAMSKAARAM” or sacraments in their daily routine. To me it seems rather far-fetched.*

What are major differences between Iyers and Ayyangars?

- *Smaartha* Iyers place more emphasis on the observance of Vedic *Smriti* scriptures, while *Iyengars* place more emphasis on adhering to the precepts of their *Acharyas*. Not all *Iyers* are hard-core *Saivites*; nor are they all hard-core *Advaitins*. The *smaartha* tradition is a liberal one where worship can be offered to one or all the key Vedic deities - *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, *Shakti*, *Surya*, *Ganesha* and *Shanmuga* also. The main point is that *Iyers* draw their identity not from the God they worship; their identity flows from their strict observance of *smriti* texts, *smriti* rules, rituals, *homa-s* and *karma-anushtanam*. It may be mentioned here that *Vadakalai* Ayyangar, to some degree less than *Smaarthaas* but to a degree greater than *Tenkalai* Ayyangar brethren, also strictly observe “*karma anushtanam*” especially what is called “*Nithya*” and “*naimittika*” *karma*.
- In the matter of philosophy, *Iyers* do swear by *Advaita* Vedanta. *Adi Shankara* is their primary guru. Their preferred path to salvation is *Jnana* Yoga. *Iyengars* follow the Sri Vaishnava tradition where their identity pivots around the *Vishnu* pantheon. *Iyengars* embrace *Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita* as their primary philosophy. The goal for a Sri Vaishnava is to realize and attain servitude (“*daasatvam*”) to the Creator [*Isvara* or *Parabrahman*], through the path of *Bhakti*, love and devotion.
- Both *Smaartha/Advaitins* and Sri Vaishnavas cherish temple-going as a valuable tradition. *Smaarthaas* venerate 275 temples [*Paadal Petra Sthalam*] in the country glorified by the *Naayanmar* saints. Sri Vaishnavites glorify 106 temples of *Narayana* [*Divya Desam*] glorified by the *Azhwars*.
- The daily Vedic prayers of *Smaarthaas* consist of 5 or *Pancha-Sukhtaas* [*Purusha*, *Sri*, *Durga*, *Narayana* and *Rudra*]. Sri Vaishnava *pancha-Sukhtaas* include *Purusha*, *Sri*, *Narayana*, *Bhu*, *Nila* as the five key chapters from *Vedas* for their *Nithya paraayanam*.

Language: *Smaarthaas* include more of Sanskrit in their speech and prayers. Sri Vaishnavas, especially the *Tenkalai* group include much more of pure Tamil in theirs.

- Besides all this, there are noticeable differences in diets, festivals and traditions involving weddings and other *samskaaras* too numerous to list here.



WHO

Let us now briefly cover the role of Kings and Rulers who also played a historic role in shaping the Sri Vaishnava identity and its unique sub-culture in Tamil Nadu.

WHO: Rulers



850-1279 CE

Pre-dominantly Saivite
sympathy



1336-1646

Extent of Vijayanagara
Empire, 1446, 1520 CE

Pre-dominantly Vaishnavite
sympathy



1532-1673

Approximate extent of
the Thanjavur Nayak Kingdom, c.
1572

No marked leaning in
sympathies

Today the distance between the cities of Kanchipuram and Sri Rangam is only about 250 KMs by road. If you drive by car you can finish the journey in less than 8 hours. Indeed, the whole of Tamil Nadu today, north to south, is just about 500 KMs. It's a one day-journey. Yet, these distances which look so small to us today were so great in the 11th century CE that when Ramanuja set out on foot to Sri Rangam from Kanchipuram, he left behind one sub-culture and arrived in another sub-cultural environment.

The land that Ramanuja covered by journey on foot in the Tamil Nadu of his times had been ruled by several successive kingdoms and dynasties throughout the ages. Out of such ruling dynasties, three were outstanding in terms of longevity, influence and impact on Sri Vaishnava identity. They are the *Chola*, the *Vijayanagara* and the *Nayak* kingdoms.

These dynasties and kings were continually at war throughout history. Yet, amid raging battles and shifting boundaries, cultural expression blossomed under their rule. They were great patrons of both Sanskrit and Tamil languages. They considered both languages as not only the language of the gods, but also the language of royal inscriptions, court poetry, art, theater, and all the Vedic sciences. Of the oral and vernacular traditions of the native soil, whatever was deemed worthy of preserving (be it medical, astrological, or astronomical lore, or one of the many cycles of legends and tales), soon acquired a second parallel life in modernity. In other words, Sanskrit and Tamil sub-cultures began to feed off and feed into each other in mutual symbiosis.

A.K.Ramanujam summed the symbiosis as follows:

***"Sanskrit, brahmins and temples were part of the imperial design** (of the Tamil country under these rulers). The Sanskrit language gave dignity and resonance to any upstart king; Brahmins blessed and legitimized him, and often gave him a genealogy if he lacked one; and the temples assured towns and villages of his presence, his patronage and his fidelity to a popular god. All the three thus enlisted the gods."*

These kings gave away village lands to temples. They gave tax-free incomes and pensions to Brahmins . . . as "*brahmadeya*". They thus found many clever ways to join a coalition of Brahmins with peasants, royal centers of administration with the rural periphery—and a coalition of Sanskrit with Tamil too.

Meanwhile, saints' pilgrimages and celebratory songs about hundreds of holy places mapped the length and breadth of all Tamil country as much as the king's own other administrative officers and machinery did the same for him in their own ways. These saints—whether *Saivite* or *Vaishnava* or

Smartha or Advaitin—literally “sang new places into existence” (*A.K.Ramanujam*) thanks to the temples the kings built in those places.

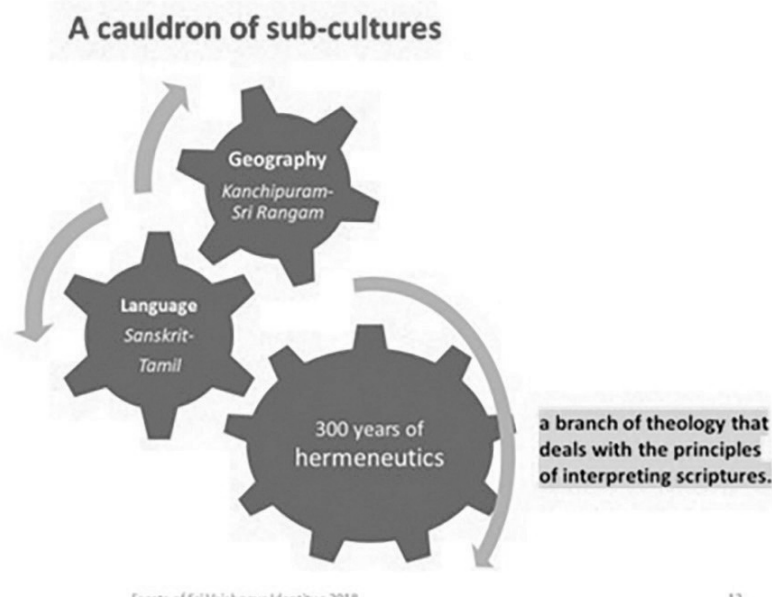
Sri Vaishnava gurus and acharyas like Ramanujacharya, and those preceding and succeeding him, were no exception. They too on behalf of their own following, their communities, laity and constituency engaged actively with these kings and rulers. And that is precisely how a distinct Sri Vaishnava identity evolved: as an essential and integral component of the overall “*imperial design*” of rulers who held the Tamil kingdoms together, politically and socially.

Whenever the kings extended patronage and largesse to their great temples, the Sri Vaishnava community went from strength to strength. Its cultural energies peaked in all spheres of creative endeavor—teaching and practicing Vedantic philosophy, Tamil literature, the native sciences and arts, music, sculpture, painting . . . Saints, acharyas, theologians, *gurus* and *kavi*-s of the Tamil country were in many cases beholden to kings.

And at the same time, whenever royalty cold-shouldered or gave little political patronage, the Sri Vaishnava identity waned and grew weak. To that extent, it must be said, Sri Vaishnava sub-culture was greatly impacted by royal patronage it received from the sovereign state.



WHAT & HOW



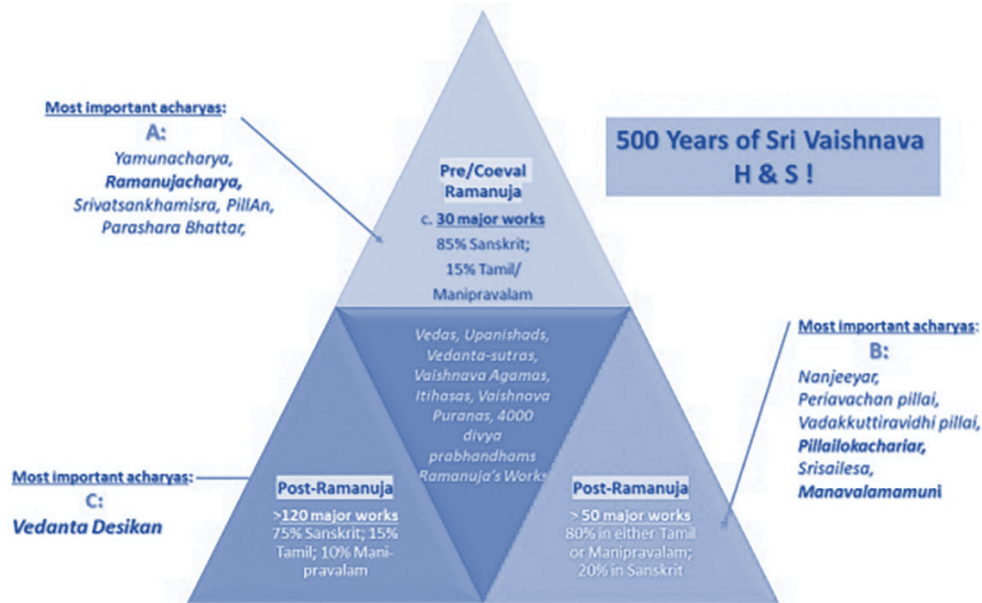
Let us turn now attention to another important facet of Sri Vaishnava identity viz. **Language or languages in which the Sri Vaishnava tradition (*sampradaya*) found expression.**

Sanskrit and Tamil were both great catalyzing agents in the cultural cauldron in which Sri Vaishnava identity got brewed. The identity of Sri Vaishnavas as men of learning in the Vedic tradition was completely shaped by a long lineage of Acharyas and theologians. For about 500 years these Acharyas straddled the era of Ramanuja. They were ceaselessly engaged in two principal vocations: ***Hermeneutics* and *Soteriology* (*H&S*)**.

- **Hermeneutics:** is a branch of theology that deals with the principles of interpreting scriptures.
- **Soteriology:** is the study of the doctrine of Salvation i.e. how believers secure it through the understanding of the doctrines of redemption, justification, sanctification, propitiation and atonement.



The core body of Sri Vaishnava scriptures constituted by the *Vedas*, the *Vaishnava Agamas* and “*samhitas*”, the *Prasthaana-traya*, the *Puraanas* and lastly the 4000 *divya prabhandhams* of the Azhwars was the main subject and focus of all Sri Vaishnava H & S.



In the period coeval with Ramanuja, about 30 important works of H&S were written. Most of them were in Sanskrit by a handful of acharyas. After Ramanuja, for over 400 years, more than a dozen stalwart theologians wrote a formidable number of H & S including on Ramanuja’s own works.

It was during this period that the differences and distinctions of historical and geographical sub-cultural influence between **Northern Kanchipuram/Southern Sri Rangam** and between the **Sanskrit/Tamil vernacular sub-identities** became more and more pronounced in the Sri Vaishnava fold.

In the SriRangam region, a host of Sri Vaishnava theologians authored at least 50 major brilliant interpretations and “*bhaashyas*” of which 85%, one might say, were all in either pure Tamil or *Manipravalam* (Sanskritized Tamil). They were written for the edification of the large mostly Tamil-speaking populations in the Tamil hinterland.

From Kanchipuram, there was **Sri Vedanta Desikan** who singlehandedly authored about 120 major works of H & S of which c. 75% was in Sanskrit and the rest in Tamil and Manipravalam. These scintillating works of Desikan were written by him keeping only partly in mind the common readership of Kanchipuram. His main target audience were his intellectual adversaries from various Kanchi schools of *Advaita*, *Buddhist*, *Jain* and other Vedantic branches of *Nyaya*, *Vaisesika* and *Meemaamsa* philosophy. There was no way he could have countered the formidable challenge they posed to Sri

Vaishnava school of Vedanta called VisishtAdvaita in the Tamil language. He had to engage them in the same language that they employed: Sanskrit.

In the chart below is a high-level summary showing how between the Kanchi and Sri Rangam lineage of Acharyas there was a marked preference for Tamil and Sanskrit in the H&S works and output that they produced.

Pre- and Co-eval Ramanujacharya	
Yamunacharya: <i>Siddhitraya, AgamaprAmAnyA, Stotra-ratna, Chattusloki, Gitartha-sangraha</i> (all Sanskrit) Ramanujacharya: <i>Sri-bhashya, Vedanta-deepa, Vedanta-sara, Vedarta-sangraha, Gita-bhashya, Gadya-traya, Nithyagranha</i> (all Sanskrit) Srivatsankha-misra: <i>atimanusastava, Sri-stava, varadaraja-stava, Vaikunta-stava, sundara-bahu-stava</i> (all Sanskrit) Parashara Bhattar: <i>bhagavath-guna Darpana, ashta-sloki, sri-guna-ratna-kosa, srirangaraja-stava,</i> (all Sanskrit) Pillan: <i>aaraayirapadi (bhagavath-vishayam)</i> (ManiPrv) Nanjiyar: <i>Onpattinaayirapadi</i> (ManiPrv) Azhagiya manavala jeeyar: <i>Panniraayarapadi</i> (ManiPrv) Periyavachan pillai: <i>Irupattunaalaayirapadi</i> (ManiPrv) Vadukkuuttiraveedi Pillai: <i>Idu Muppattiyaaraayirapadi</i> (ManiPrv)	
Post-Ramanujacharya – Vadagalai	Post-Ramanujacharya – Tenkalai
Vedanta Desika (<i>more than 100 works</i>) <i>Tattva-mukta kalapa, Sarvartha-siddhi, adikarana saravali, nyaya-siddhanjana, nyaya-parisuddhi, satadusani, taatparya Chandrika, Isavasyopanishad bhashya, pancharatra Raksha, dramidopanishad sara and ratnavali, sankalpa suryodaya, yadavaabhyudaya, hamsa-sandesha, paduka-sahasra, daya sataka, yatiraja saptati, 28 other stotras etc.... (Mostly Sanskrit and a few in ManiPrv, Prakrit and Tamil)</i>	Pillailokachariar: <i>Srivachana Bhushanam, Tattva-trayam, Artha-panchakam, Mummukshupadi, (ManiPrv)</i> Manavalamamuni: <i>several commentaries on Pillailokachariar's works and Peria-Azhwar, Upadesa-ratna malai, Tiruvoimozhi nutrandaadi, Arti-prabhandham – (ManiPrv) yatiraja vimshati – (Sanskrit)</i>

Over time, the narratives of the Tenkalai and Vadakalai acharyas to propagate their respective brand of H & S became indeed more and more stylized and assumed a distinctive sectarian posture. An American scholar of Sri Vaishnavism, Ms. Patricia Mumme wrote about the postures in her well- known researched work (*refer Select Bibliography*):

STYLISTIC DIFFERENCES : TENKALAI AND VADAKALAI H&S

Tenkalai Sri Rangam Achaaryas	Vadakalai Kanchipuram Achaaryas
Zeal to inspire the devotional piety of the Azhwars and carry on the tradition of bhakthi. Expounded their teachings in Tamil with great eloquence and diligence.	These Acharyas (led by Vedanta Desikan) were faced with their main challenge viz. attacks of rival schools (Advaita, Buddhist etc.) at Kanchipuram.
Addressed themselves to the <u>hearts</u> and religious sensibilities of the Sri Vaishnava community. Used the techniques that Sri Ramanujacharya had found effective in promoting religious <u>devotion</u> as embraced by the Azhwars.	Sought primarily to articulate Srivaishnava doctrine as a <u>coherent philosophical system</u> . Defended it in debate and polemics by appealing to accepted Sanskrit Vedic and Agamic texts and <u>correct reasoning</u> .
Mostly appealed to popular legends and everyday analogies to illustrate Ramanuja's themes, inviting a wide range of <u>doctrinal interpretations</u> and delighting in forceful hyperbole to get his message across to their audience.	Corrected doctrinal inconsistencies within the Sri Vaishnava tradition, and steered it along the straight line and course of Ramanuja's darsana.

The two characteristic styles of H & S of the Tenkalai and Vadakalai schools ultimately led to two very happy outcomes and two very unfortunate results at the same time:

The happy outcomes:

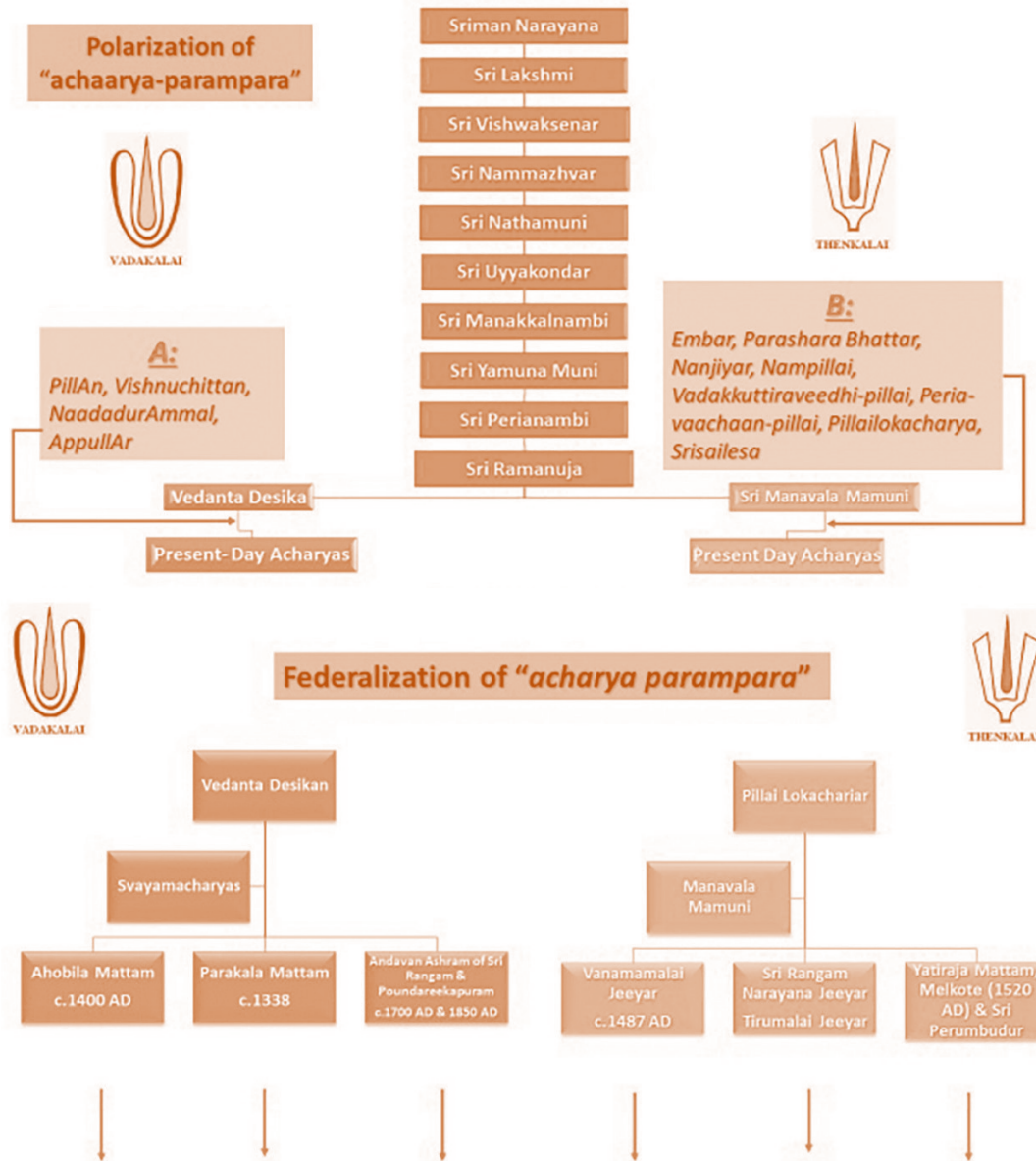
- Thanks to the Kanchi Acharyas' (led by Vedanta Desikan) robust H & S, the philosophy of *Visishtadvaita* got more firmly consolidated than it had ever been during Ramanuja's own times when it was constantly challenged by *Advaita*, *Dvaita* and *Bheda-abheda systems*.
- The other auspicious result was that Ramanuja's "*darsana*" came to be recognized popularly as "*ubhaya Vedanta*" i.e. *bhakthi* theology of the Tamil *Azhwars* underpinned by the metaphysics of the Sanskrit Upanishads. Being an Ubhaya-vedantin for a Sri Vaishnava of those times meant that he had the unique identity of being an excellent bi-linguist with Sanskrit giving him a *pan-India* status and Tamil giving him a *Pan-Peninsular* appeal. Sri Vaishnava identity in those times thus transcended all geographical and cultural borders in India.

The two unfortunate consequences were:

- The Acharya lineages of Sri Rangam and Kanchipuram became more and more **polarized** as their H & S assumed increasingly sectarian and linguistic overtones. This *polarization* grew acute by the 17th century CE when the great Mughal Empire expanded, Hindu kingdoms fell one by one and the entire **Sanskrit-Brahmin-Temple complex**—that great "*imperial design*" (A.K.Ramanujan's phrase) that once had given economic support and political patronage to the cohesive sub-cultural life of Sri Vaishnava paradigm for centuries in the Tamil country— began to fray and eventually disintegrate.

Confronted by economic decline and political uncertainty caused by Mohameddan invasion and rule, and outbreak of social tensions rife everywhere in the country, the Sri Vaishnavas too like other Tamil communities succumbed to intra-communal disunity and sectarian conflicts. Temple commonwealth and temple-lands were the only assets they possessed, and these assets were under constant threat of dispossession. Unable to face the onslaught of the larger enemy outside, they unfortunately took to infighting, and to turf-war and feuds.

The second unfortunate result was indeed the biggest casualty for the Sri Vaishnava community viz. that amid all the historical turmoil and meltdown happening in the country around it, its leaders—both in Sri Rangam and Kanchipuram—became helpless and powerless witnesses unable to arrest in any way the growing sectarian divide that overtook them. The result was steadily worsening polarization of acharyas themselves into so-called *North-South sectarian camps* from around the end of the 15th century CE to the very end of the 18th century CE. And thereafter began trending what one may call an increasing but rather loose **federalization of the Sri Vaishnava community** into Tenkalai, Vadakalai and many other formal Sri Vaishnava sub-sectarian denominations.

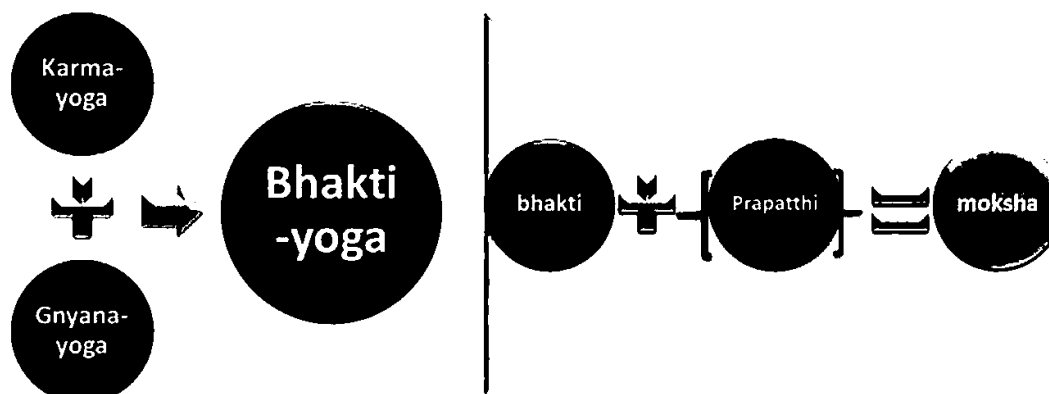


The central question that plagues the Sri Vaishnava Identity to this very day is this: **What are the differences between the sectarian hermeneutics and soteriology of the Sri Rangam and Kanchi acharyas i.e. between Tenkalai and Vadakalai theology?**

Both *Kalais* believe in a fundamental Sri Vaishnava doctrine propounded by Ramanujacharya called "prapatti" or "saranaangati" which I have tried to depict on the chart below:

Sri Vaishnava soteriology

"It is not possible to attain *moksha* without observing *prapatthi* in some form or the other.
 ("vedaartha-sangraha" Ramanujacharya)



It shows that for all Sri Vaishnavas, the way to *moksha* or salvation is through the paths of *gnyaana* and *karma* (what in Latin is called “*via contemplativa*” and “*via activa*”) combining in a lifetime to fuse into the path of *bhakti-yoga* which is the ceaseless and meditative adoration of God Almighty as Deity. But then, it is believed, in the age of *Kali-yuga*, *Bhakti-yoga* is an extremely difficult pathway strewn with pitfalls and perils. It is only adepts such as *gnyanis* and *karma-yogins* who reach the deep state of *bhakti*. For those of us who are incompetent to tread the path of *Bhakti*, there is an easier path called self-surrender or *prapatthi* unto God. Ramanuja, and more emphatically, Vedanta Desika, clearly established the various Vedic “*pramaana*” or scriptural authority on which this unique theological doctrine was founded. The chart below summarizes those scriptures:

“Pramaanam” for the “prapatthi” doctrine

<i>Rg Veda</i> : I. 189.1	("agne naya supathaaraaye asmaan.....")
<i>Rg Veda</i> : VIII. 19.5	("yah samidhaa ya aahuti....")
<i>Svetaasvatara Up.</i> VI.18	("yo brahmaanam vidadhaati purvam....")
<i>Taittiriya Up.</i> 147.8	("tasmaan-nyasaameshaam....")
<i>Agama samhitas</i>	<i>Ahimbudhnya and Lakshmi Tantra</i>
<i>Srimad Valmiki Ramayana</i>	<i>saraNagati saastra – Vibheeshana, Kaakasura</i>
<i>Mahabharatha</i>	<i>Draupadi</i>
<i>Bhagavath-Gita</i> : XVIII.66	"charama-shloka"
<i>Azhwar "prabhandhams"</i>	<i>Nammazhwar's prapatthi to Lord Venkateshwara</i>
<i>Ramanujacharya</i>	"saraNagati gadyam"

Over 1000 years after Ramanuja and over 750 years after Vedanta Desika, unfortunately, the Tenkalai and Vadakalai schools of H&S are still unable to reconcile and resolve what is perceived as the **18 principal differences** in the way they each respectively interpret this great doctrine of *Prappati*. They are classified into 3 distinct groups and shown in 3 separate charts below.

The 18 differences are undeniably the legacy of a long lineage of both SriRangam and Kanchi *acharyas*. They were first codified by one *Sri Varavaraguru* in a 19th century work titled “*ashta-dasa-vichaara*”. (Not to be confused with *Sri Varavara muni*).

Of the 18 differences, only 5 can be said to be disputes regarding philosophy. But even they are disputes of a very minor nature. For e.g. the Vadakalai view gives far more credence to the idea of human Free Will than the Tenkalai is ready to concede. Again, there are disputations regarding the ontological status of Goddess *Lakshmi*, the Consort of Vishnu, who is regarded by the Vadakalai as an absolute and countervailing principle of Compassion equal to *Isvara*, as Vishnu, even though it is He who is the supreme universal *tattva* of absolute Justice. In the Tenkalai view such a status attributed to the “*Lakshmi tattva*” would completely invalidate the monistic unity of *Isvara* or “*brahma ekatvam*” posited by Ramanuja’s Visishtadvaita and hence untenable. To counter such a view the Vadakalai counter-posit Ramanuja’s own doctrine of “*apprithak-siddhi*”. Then there are also other theological issues between the sects relating to different grades of *mokshaanubhavam*. There is also a difference of view about the liminal nature of the *kaivalya* experience. And so on and so forth, with some of the doctrinal stances bordering indeed on plain hair-splitting.

Sri Vaishnava North-South Divide



“ashta-bheda-vichaara”: Differences in hermeneutics of soteriology

- 1 **The essential nature (*svarupa*) of God’s All-Pervasion (*sarva-vyapti/vibhu*) and individual free will.**
- 2 **The ontological status of *Sri*: as equal and integral part of *Isvara***
- 3 **Concerning Grades of Bliss in Liberation (*Moksha*)**
- 4 & 5 **The Nature of “*kaivalya moksha*”
The path of Selfless work (*karma yoga*) and the path of discriminative wisdom (*jñana yoga*).**

There are 11 other extremely contentious issues too that relate to what in every religious theology of the world is a very subjective idea. It is called *Divine Grace*.

6	Powers of Sri.	
7	Concerning God's Grace (<i>nirhetuka-kripa</i>).	
8	Does <i>Prapatti</i> earn Grace?	}
9	Concerning God's "Maternal Love" (<i>vatsalya</i>)	
10	Concerning God's Compassion (<i>daya</i>).	}
11	Who should resort to <i>Prapatti</i> ?	
12	Conditions for taking Refuge — <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> chap 18; 66 : " <i>sera dharmam parityajya mamekam saranam vraja aham tva sarva-papebhyo mokshayishyami ma suca' </i> "	}
13	Qualifications of <i>Prapatti</i> -- Question:— Does the development of qualifications (virtues) required for the other paths of <i>Jhana</i> , <i>Karma</i> & <i>Bhakti</i> Yogas also apply to <i>Prapatti</i> ?	
14	The Components of <i>Prapatti</i> The <i>acharya</i> as mediator	
15	Penalty for a lapsed <i>Prapanna</i> .	
16	Taking Refuge in God. (<i>Prapatti</i>). Who gains by the act of <i>Prapatti</i> , the <i>Jiva</i> or <i>Narayana</i> ?	}

In Sri Vaishnava theology this idea of **Divine Grace** is known as "*nirhetuka kripa*". Grace is said to be the *unmerited and unconditional divine assistance* given to humans for regeneration: it is a virtue coming from God; a state of sanctification enjoyed through divine assistance. The views of the Tenkalai and Vadakalai regarding **Grace**—which is an "*adhyaatmika*" or soulful experiential subject of individual nature—differ widely.

The Vadakalai view is that to achieve salvation both *personal effort* and *grace* are necessary (*Sahetuka kripa*). The purpose of pursuing *Gnyana* and *Karma-yoga*, in the first place, is what conscious and deliberate spiritual practice i.e. *saadhana* is all about. Hence, the ethical choices we must make in life—to practice charity (*daana*), prayer (*japa*), various meditative disciplines like (*mananam*, *smaranam*) etc.—help in improving one's spiritual standing before God.

The view of the *Tenkalai* varies from the *Vadakalai*. Their position is technically what is called "*antinomianism*". Their view of the doctrine of "*nirhetuka kripa*" is that Grace is dispensed by God of his own Will, Accord and Pleasure. It cannot be either conditioned or influenced in any way by human behavior. It follows therefore that the moral, scriptural or socially established (dharmic) laws or other karma-yogic practices such as bhakthi-sadhana are either of no use or they are of lesser obligation. This is because complete *self-surrender*, in and by itself, unsupported by deliberate individual effort, is both necessary and sufficient condition for receiving grace and salvation.

The Vadakalai sees *prapatthi* as an active process of self-surrender. A constant aspirational effort from within Man and a supreme grace that answers from above him are the two powers that come together to lead to *moksha*. Divine Grace acts only in conditions of light (*sattva-gnyana*) and truth (*sathya-sankalpa*), for which one's lower nature must be surrendered. The term "*surrender*" for Vadakalais does not suggest abandonment of worldly responsibilities in the hope that God will do everything. Rather, it is meant to suggest living a life of ethical perfection in the world.

The Tenkalai do not see it that way. For them *prapatthi* is a genuine attitude of complete and passive self-surrender. One cannot earn salvation by any kind of *yoga* or *karma*. The illusion that one can earn *moksha* or *Grace* is by itself a sign of egotism and hubris. It is one of the greatest obstacles to spiritual growth since it implies a lack of individual humility (*aakinchinyam*) and proper understanding of God's Grace . . . *nirhetuka kripa*.

Now, it is this theological dispute between the two sectarian views which over the centuries has given the Sri Vaishnava his modern identity: a deep schism in the soul.

The Vadakalai and Tenkalai concede very little to each other: The *Tenkalai* does not deny the importance of *dharmic* pursuit nor the value of *nishkaama karma* of self-sacrifice, but he regards them more as the fruit of *prapatthi* and not as a means of attaining *moksha*. The *Vadakalai* in turn agrees with the *Tenkalai* that *moksha* ultimately is indeed only God's gift of Grace to give but believes nonetheless that *dharma* and *karma* must be accepted as preparations to receive God's Grace.



Today in the 21st century, no Sri Vaishnava in either sect is truly all that appreciative of the profundities of the “*nirhetuka*” or “*sahetuka-kripa*” doctrines. In the hustle and bustle of modern life, the real substance of this theological dispute has little relevance. But since form often triumphs over substance in this world, it is Form more than Substance that has also shaped the modern Sri Vaishnava identity. Which is why perhaps they end up wearing the schism within their souls on their sleeves.

Identity is very important these days to Sri Vaishnavas. Why? Because *identity has somehow got all mixed up with status and self-importance* . . . The reasons for it, we will come to a little later below. But today, this H&S conflict is being kept alive by the two sects simply because it provides both sects what I call “**identity intoxication**”.

The most telling commentary of how *identity intoxication* has actually fractured the Sri Vaishnava identity is captured in two metaphors—a **feline** and a **simian** one that describe the Tenkalai and Vadakalai today. In this picture you see a supine *Tenkalai kitten* (*maarjaala-kishora*) and a *clinging Vadakalai baby monkey* (*markata-kishore*). The Tenkalai kitten believes it needs to do nothing to earn mommy-cat's protection. The Vadakalai baby monkey knows it has to grasp its mother tightly to enjoy the same protection.

In fanciful Sri Vaishnava “*pari-bhaashai*” or terminology, the Tenkalai sect affirms the “*maarjaala kishora nyaaya*” and the Vadakalai affirms the “*markata kishora nyaaya*”.

People curious to know the doctrine of “*prapatthi*” often ask if Sri Ramanuja had any stated view on these two *nyaaya*-s. As far as I know there is no evidence of a stated view. But scholars give an apocryphal twist to the dispute by saying that while writing his **Sri-Bhashya** (the commentary on the Brahma-sutras) he leaned towards the simian *nyaaya* but in his **Gita-bhaashya** (the commentary on the Bhagavath-Gita) Sri RamanujAcharya favored the feline *nyaaya*.

"maarjaala kishora nyaaya" (feline) & "markata kishora nyaaya" (simian)



The last 2 differences between the Kanchi and Sri Rangam acharyas mentioned in the "*ashtadasa-vichara*" relate to views about the age-old Vedic institution of "*varna-ashrama*"—Caste hierarchy in society—and the bearing it has upon *prappati*.

Sri Vaishnava North-South Divide



"ashta-bheda-vichara": Differences in the hermeneutics of soteriology

17

Varna-asrama — caste, occupation and social duties

18

Concerning caste status and the *Prapanna*.

Issue	Vadagalai view	Tenkalai view	Explanatory Note
Varna-asrama — Caste and Social Duties	The duties and vocations (<i>karma</i>) prescribed in the Dharma Sastras and Agamas for each of the four castes (<i>varna</i>) and four stages of life (<i>ashrama</i>) are to be followed by the <i>Prapanna</i> in accordance with his or her birth in order to please <i>Sriman Narayana</i>. ("narayana preethyartham"). "<i>Nithyo-naimittika karma</i>" should therefore be strictly adhered to with that end in mind.	It is presumptuous to think that the activities of the <i>Prapanna</i> such as caste or social duties actually please <i>Sriman Narayana</i>. They may or they may not. It is not for us to judge the effects on <i>Sriman Narayana</i> of actions initiated by ourselves. Prescribed caste duties and Dharma should be done as a way of setting an example to others and simply as service to God! Philanthropy — the welfare of all sentient beings (<i>Loka-sangraha</i>) should be the motive behind our actions and not the pleasing of God, which is audacity on the part of the <i>Prapanna</i>.	

Issue	Vadagalai view	Tenkalai view	Explanatory Note
Concerning Caste Status and the <i>Prapanna</i> .	Even after <i>Prapatti</i> , the caste distinctions as per the <i>Dharma Sastras</i> are to be retained in respect of all <i>Prapannas</i> .	All distinctions of caste are to be disregarded after <i>Prapatti</i> and all <i>Prapannas</i> are to be given equal respect and treated with complete equality. There are no divisions of caste or status amongst the <i>Prapannas</i> — all are to be treated with equality.	According to Vedanta Desika, members of society are classified not on the basis of caste or social status but on the basis of their attitude towards the Vedic religion. From the standpoint of Sri Vaishnavism there are 3 attitudes: A. Those favorable to a Vaishnava B. Those who harbor hatred towards Vishnu. C. Those who are Indifferent and constitute the majority of common folk who are caught up in bondage (ie. <i>samsaara</i>). Upon the first Category A, a Sri Vaishnava should look with a sense of delight and cultivate friendly association. Regarding Category B people their company should be avoided. Towards Category C people, a Sri Vaishnava may remain indifferent. If possible, he should try and uplift them by offering suitable guidance. If they do not respond, he should express pity on them rather than condemn them.

Given the backdrop of social realities in the 21st century in India, when not only Sri Vaishnavism but all religious institutions find themselves often at odds with the larger secular constitutional order of the day, one can say no more than this on the Sri Vaishnava attitude towards Caste and Social Equality:

The views held in this regard by the Tenkalai School may appear to some as being rather far too liberal-minded. And the views held by the *Vadakalai* may appear to some others as being rigidly conservative. It is not for me—I'm just an *Unknown Sri Vaishnava*—to make judgements on this matter. All I can and do wish to say, however, is that, here too, the Sri Vaishnava identity appears very badly fractured.

This unresolved and unhealed sectarian fracture is a real pity because the foremost leaders of the *Vadakalai* and *Tenkalai* sects did not even in their wildest imagination ever believe that “*sishyas*” or the laity might one day become mere camp-followers and not try to be enlightened Sri Vaishnavas. And no one could have summed it all up better than an American scholar, Patricia Mumme, in her book.

“In their own ways, both men were above all seeking to promote the integrity of the Sri Vaishnava faith and the closeness of the community of those following tradition of Ramanuja's Ubhaya Vedanta.

Unfortunately, history shows that the extreme loyalty and dedication that each man inspired in his followers worked against that aim.

In their faithfulness to each man and his doctrines, these two groups of followers lost sight of the primary value that both Manavalamamuni and Vedanta Desika gave to the unity and harmony of the Srivaishnava community. The bitter struggle between the Tenkalai and Vadakalai sects that broke out in the 18th century would have certainly dismayed both the men in whose names it was carried out”.

(Prof. Patricia Mumme: “The Śrīvaiṣṇava Theological Dispute: Maṇavālamūṇi and Vedānta Deśika”)



Sri Vaishnavism of the South migrating as Vaishnavism to North India

One of the most fascinating chapters in the history of Sri Vaishnavism is the one that traces and tells the story of how the virus of sectarianism that had crept into the body of what is called “*Ramanujadarsana*” in India—i.e. around two hundred years after Ramanujacharya’s death and began infesting it thereafter well into the 20th century CE—also began spreading in medieval times northwards, from the deep southern Dravidian parts of the country where Sri Ramanujacharya was born, had lived, worked, founded and had propagated a unique Sri Vaishnava religious mission and social reformation movement based on his new religious order called **Bhakthi**.

It is important that the long story must be compressed here very briefly only in a few pages since without it one will not be able to gain a Pan-Indian perspective of how Vaishnavism emerged in history as the dominant religious and cultural creed of close to c.500 million people across India today.

How did **Ramanuja’s Bhakthi tradition of Sri Vaishnavism** that had sprung from its roots in a relatively small location of southern India, and more especially in the Tamil-speaking country, grow and spread so rapidly northwards all across the Deccan plateau, scale over and then cross the Vindhya mountain-ranges and the rivers Godavari and Mahanadi too, to enter the vast Gangetic Plains, running from west to east, and become within half a century, a religious creed that was as popular and no less dominant than its rival creed of Shaivism that hitherto had held sway over peoples of Northern India for several centuries in the past?

The answer to the question lies, in fact, strewn in innumerable pages of scores of books written on the history and political historiography of India—from times of Maurya, Rashtrakuta and Gupta Kings, from pre-Moghul and Post-Moghul dynasties and right up to the colonial rule of both the British East Indian Company and the English Crown.

It is way beyond the scope of this essay and this book of mine to provide anything more than just a bird's eye perspective on how Sri Vaishnavism of Ramanuja 'darsana', from its 11th-century CE origins in the narrow sliver of land between Kanchipuram and Sri Rangam, grew and developed into the pan- and trans- sub-continental religion of Vaishnavism it became in the rest of India. (*For such a detailed, researched history, readers may wish to read my other published work: "A Tale of Two Cities: The Decline and Fall of the "Ubaya Vedantins" – An outline of the history of Sri Vaishnavas of Tamil Nadu that was never written"* (2024) (Blue Rose Publishers).

The growth of Vaishnavism in north India was triggered firstly by the long and tireless journeys Sri Ramanujacharya undertook with his disciples all across that countryside from the Kashmir valleys to the dry plains in and around Delhi, all the way across the Gangetic districts of Awadh.

The political atmosphere in these parts of India at that time was a turbulent one since much of the land had been the target and victim of repeated, sudden and savage invasion and marauding by the Afghan Pathan armies of Mohammed Ghazni (997-1030 CE) and later by Mohammed Ghori (1175-1206 CE).

When Sri Ramanuja travelled through these lands it was obvious to him that in many of the holy places of the Hindu peoples here—such as Kashmir, Nepal, Kasi, Prayag, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Ayodhya, Mathura and elsewhere—there were unmistakable signs of festering of what all of India then knew was the legacy of age-old wounds of the religious rivalry and competition between the Shaiva and Vishnu branches of the Hindu faith. They were hangovers from centuries since the Gupta era whose dynastic kings were predominantly Vishnu devotees while the dynasties that preceded and succeeded them—like the Mauryas and Rashtrakutas, the Saatavaahanas or the Chaulukyas— were predominantly followers and patrons of the Shaivite branch of Hindu faith.

The Shaiva-Vaishnava fault-line

Shaivas and Vaishnavas thus over the centuries became competitors for three resources that were necessary for their dominance as religious communities: the size of their respective followership and laity, control over pilgrimage routes and traffic and patronage from kings and rulers of provinces in which they lived. For example, Bengal, western Punjab and Marwar were seen as centres of Vaishnavism but other eastern and north-central parts of the country around the cities of Mithila and Kasi were held by the Shaivas.

It was the Shaivite sect however which came to acquire enormously the patronage of the ruling classes in north India under several successive dynasties and kings. And that was because of a very powerful militant group of martial sub-sects within the Shaiva community known as the "*Shaiva naagas*" whose interesting origins went back to the time of Sri Adi Sankara (8th century CE).

Bhagawan Sri Adi Sankaracharya,, it is believed, with the aid of Hindu kings in north India helped raise what is called a religious martial order called a "*Dashanaami*" army. (The nearest comparable corps of religious warriors in history would be what during the Crusades in Europe was known as the *Order of the Knights Templar*). These religious warriors of Adi Sankara were conscripted from different geographical areas each under their own respective chains of command . . . such as the "*Aranya*" (forest tribes and dwellers), "*Giri*" (hill tribes), "*Vann*" (woodsmen), "*Bharthi Sagar*" (seaside hordes) etc. This great army came to be known thereafter in history as "*Shaiva Naagas*" or "*Gossains*".

The Gossains as a martial clan came to be feared in all wars in the history of India even up to and during the times of the Mughal and British Rule. Unlike common soldiers these Naagas had a martial tradition that instilled in them absolute fearlessness of death. And hence every king and ruler of the

times always preferred to have the Naagas as allies. And it is to these Shaivite Naagas that is credited to some extent the defeat of Buddhistic dynasties and kingships in all of North India and the eventual resurgence of Hindu *Sanaatana Dharma*.

But then soon after overcoming the Buddhist challenge, the Shaivites together with their militant armies returned again to their old rivalry with the Vaishnava sects.

One gets very vivid glimpses, if not a full and objective idea, of the centuries old rancor and wrangling which beset relations between Shiva and Vishnu worshippers in north India during the time of Ramanuja's travels there by referring to numerous accounts in medieval Vaishnava literature, especially the biographies of Vaishnava saints of the time.

One such well-known reference-source is the "***Bhakthamaala***", a compilation of the biographies of several Vaishnav saints, believed to have been composed in the first half of the 17th Century CE by Nabhadass, a *Raamaanandi* ascetic. There is also similar biography written by one Vaishnav saint known as Shri Devamurari (said to be a contemporary of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605 CE)). The biography of Devamurari himself was written by another saint of the same Order, Shri Pandit Ramtahal Das. All these biographies of north Indian Vaishnav saints might be regarded as similar to the ones written by the Sri Vaishnava counterparts in the Tamil language (or Manipravaala dialect) that is known today as "***Guru parampara vaibhavam***": the hagiography of saint-acharyas of the pre- and post-Ramanujacharya lineage.

The above biographies and hagiographies (*vide* "*Uttar bhaarith mein Sri Vaishnava ka prachar kaise hua?*") being a rather colorful chapter in Devamurari's biography: **How did Srivaishnavism spread in north India?**), they all do state quite clearly that Vaishnavism had to overcome the violent and deadly obstacle of Shaivism in north India. And similar to the *North-South fault-line* amongst Sri Vaishnavas of Tamil country in South India, there seems to have prevailed an *East-West divide* in the north amongst Shaivas and Vaishnavas.

What was the reason for this east-west fault line?

The biographies like **Bhaktamaala** and of Devamurari explain it all this way:

"Vishnu worshippers were beset right at the beginning of medieval history against a violent, entrenched and rather militant Shaivism that had been established earlier to fight Buddhism. However in quick time thereafter, the same "*dashanaam*" army raised by Shankaracharya turned against Vaishnava saints. North India became a dangerous region for followers of Vishnu. There were legends floating around at that time that "if 500 *Vaishnavs* used to go to the north only 50 would return . . ." The *Dashanaami*-s with the help of north Indian kings who were allied with them started attacking Vaishnav saints who used to venture northwards for pilgrimages. It was the time of Muslim rulers and hence the sultans and nawabs of provinces had decreed that the Hindu sects be allowed to settle their scores without interference."

The biographies further went on to recount horrific, even sometimes exaggerated clashes between Shaivites and Vaishnavas in and around the holy places all across the Gangetic Doab:

"*Things were so bad that lakhs of brave men were killed in sectarian pitched battles, during that time it was not possible for a tilak wearing Vaishnava to be alive without hiding themselves. When priests from South India used to come to the north for pilgrimages, they used to wash off their 'tilak' on their forehead before leaving their dwelling places and when asked by a Shaiva about their identity, they pretended they were Shaivites too in order to save themselves*" wrote Pundit Ramatahal Das.

Against the militancy of Shaivite Nagaas—and against the Advaitic monotheism of Shaivism—the weaker Vaishnava populations at first had no defense until decades later when the Vaishnavas of Awadhi too began to organize themselves into militant and war-like religious bands that came to be known as “*Vairagya*” or “*Bairaaga*”. Furthermore, while rejecting the barrenness of the dry monotheism of Advaitic Shaivism too, the Vaishnava began to find in the Bhakti traditions, and in the philosophy and theology of “*Ramanujan darsana*” coming in from South India into their lands and hearts, a refreshing new replacement of inspirational faith. The entire population of Vaishnavas wholeheartedly embraced the Bhakti theology of Sri Ramanujacharya.

It was under such tumultuous historical circumstances thus that the influence of Sri Ramanujacharya gradually at first infiltrated into the minds and hearts of Vaishnava populations of north India.

By the time the Mughals took over the rule of all India in the 16th-17th century CE, the Vaishnava consciousness became a movement thanks largely to the advent of many saints who came on the scene amidst their midst and who professed their unshakeable belief in Sri Ramanuja ‘*darsana*’.

Saint Raamaananda

One of the greatest of such Vaishnava saints in North India was Sri Raamaananda. Saint Raamaananda was born in a Brahmin family, in 1300 CE and died about mid to late 14th- century. According to the medieval era *Bhaktamaala* text by Nabhadass, Saint Raamaananda studied under one *Raghavananda*, a *guru* in the Vedanta-based **Vadakalai school of Sri Ramanuja ‘darsana’**.

Raghavananda, who had come from South India, and after much wandering had settled at Benares, took Saint Raamaananda as his disciple. Raamaananda was greatly influenced by not only the Visishtadvaita philosophy of Ramanuja but also the unique theology of **Bhakthi** which the great Acharya had left behind in the Awadh region as his legacy after travelling back to Sri Rangam on completion of his tour on foot across parts of north India.

The legacy however that Saint Raamaananda himself left behind is often being honored as the founder of *Sant-parampara* (literally, the tradition of bhakti *sants*) in north India. His efforts, in a time when Gangetic riverine plains of north India (i.e. the Doab and Awadh) were under Islamic rule, helped revive and refocus Hindus to a personalized, direct devotional form of Rama worship (*Rama bhakthi*), and his liberalism and focus on the devotee’s commitment rather than birth or gender, set a precedent that attracted people to spirituality from various walks of life. His use of vernacular language instead of Sanskrit for spiritual ideas also made sharing of faith and reflection easier for the masses. The mass Vaishnava followers of Raamaananda came to call themselves *Raamaanandis*. Two of the greatest Raamaanandis of the period were Saint Kabir and Saint Tulsidas who authored the Ramayana in the vernacular called “*Ramcharitmanas*”, the holiest version of the Ramayana even today in all of North India.

Very soon the appeal of Sant Raamaananda and his “*Ram bhakthi*” cult began to spread exponentially in later centuries across North India. And one of the reasons for that broad appeal was his breaking away from orthodox Sri Vaishnavite tenets of the *Vadakalai* school of Sri Vaishnavism which had in the first place drawn him to embrace it. It is believed that because Raamaananda accepted disciples from all castes including *Shudhras*, the lowest in the caste hierarchy of Hindu society, he was thrown out of the *Shri Sampradaya* espoused by an orthodox caste-conscious group called “*Raamaanuji-s*”.

It is believed that it was this rift about caste that led to Raamaananda breaking away from the orthodox *Sri Sampradaya* group and starting his own sect called “*Raamaanandi*” which admitted ascetics from all castes and allowed them to become gurus and acharyas in the sect. Tradition records that

Raamaanand's radical reformist brand of Vaishnavism helped the Raamaanandi sect to emerge all across the Awadh and Doab provinces as an independent and militant force that could take on the might of not only the Shaiva "*naaga*" ascetics but of Shaivism itself.

Raamaanandi and Raamaanuji Sub-sectarian fault-line and British East India Company

Over the next 2 centuries after Raamaananda, the sectarian divide, rift and fault-line between Raamaanuji and Raamaanandi sects of Vaishnavism in all of North India widened and became more and more bitter . . . reflecting almost the like situation between the *Vadakalai* and *Tenkalai* sects of *Sri Sampradaaya* followers in the Tamil country of South India.

By the time the end of the Mughal Dynasty was nearing, the Shaiva sects in north India and their kingly patrons too began to decline rapidly in power and influence. The Shaiva "Gossain" armies were disbanded and many of the Shaiva monks and ascetics, after giving up their martial traditions, returned to their native "*aranyas*" and "*giri*" (forests and hills) soil to pursue more pacifist spiritual lives. Some even converted to Vaishnavism and became *Vaishnav Bairaagi*-s. The holy places of worship and pilgrimage gradually began to slip into the hands of Raamaanandi sects and Raamaanuji Mahants—Ayodhya, Kasi, Mathura, Prayaag, Haridwar and other such institutions.

When the British East Indian Company finally came on the scene in Bengal and Awadh in the second half of the 17th century CE, Vaishnavas were the entrenched group of Hindu majority ruling the religious life and hinterland of India in the north.

With the Mughal Dynasty on its last legs, the British saw however that the greatest challenge to their power was the rise of the great power of the Marathas from the Deccan of the south-west who saw themselves as the natural successors to the Mughals all over the Doab region.

The Marathas were Hindus and a large proportion of them were Vaishnavas too. Hence, for them control of all the holy places in Awadh and Bengal was of paramount importance to bolster their political and military superiority over the British. There thus soon began to emerge at that time a 3-way "tug of war" between the **East India Company armies and the Marathas**, in one theatre, between the **Mughals and Marathas** on one front and between the **British and Mughals of Delhi** on the other front. The British in line with their policy of "*divide and rule*" cleverly cultivated allies from within factions and dissident groups inside both the Hindu and Muslim camps. And that is precisely where the Raamaanandi Vaishnavas got dragged into the political maelstrom of that time. They were regarded by the British as allies worth cultivating against the Muslims of Awadh and to sometimes even serve as honest mediators or go-betweens between them and the powerful Maratha warlords.

In that shifting and shifty "*game of thrones*" that was being played between the warring Mughals, British and Marathas, the sectarian divide between Raamaanandis and Raamaanuji Vaishnavas flared and raged as each sub-sect tried to portray itself to the British East India Company as being the true legatee and torchbearer of the larger Vaishnava faith. And true to their form, the British only deepened the Vaishnava fault line even more in order to be able to exercise greater degree of control over the larger dynamics at play in the political battles being waged at that time between Hindu and Muslim populations all across Bengal and Awadh, and between Mughal and Maratha forces for seizure of power in the Mughal capital of Delhi.

The idea of Vaishnavism based on purity and morality, and of the Raamaanandis, based on the socially liberal philosophy of Raamaananda, acquired the approval and sanction of the Christian governors of the British-controlled provinces of that time. British patronage and political support thus became invaluable for the various Hindu religious Orders of which Vaishnavas were the foremost.

Both the socially liberal Raamaamandi and the purist Raamaanuji subjects hence jostled with each other to gain British support and patronage. However, within the Vaishnava sect itself, deep unresolved questions and irreconcilable issues remained on which the sub-sects did not agree and that led to internecine struggles for leadership of the faith. The question of caste still troubled them . . . and caste was always a very fecund fishing ground for the British who loved to fish in it just so to be able to exploit to the hilt their time-tested imperialistic policy of “*divide and rule*”.

There were 3 fundamental differences between the Raamaanandi and Raamaanuji sub-sects:

- a. **Raamaananda’s antecedents**—was he a true spiritual descendent at all of Sri Ramanajucharya?
- b. Abiding by the rules of “***varnaashrama***”
- c. Observing rules of **commensality** (which is cultural custom enjoined by religious rules for eating and drinking at the same table or assembly of groups in society (at banquets and feasts, often hosted for religious, ritualistic)—a social activity that creates and cements relationships but then also sets boundaries amongst themselves by either including or excluding people according to a set of criteria.

The Rise of the Raamaanandis

Sometime in 1918-1919, a venerable Sri Vaishnava *mahanth* or head-priest, **Sri Ananthaachaarya**, from a mutt (hermitage) in Tamil country called the “**Tothaadri Mutt**” was invited by the Vaishnavas to visit Ayodhya. (There was a steady 2-way traffic of Vaishnava priests, pandits and pilgrims between Ayodhya/Kasi and Sri Rangam/Kanchipuram in those times).

When Ananthaachaarya went around visiting temples around Ayodhya, he refused to prostrate to the deities consecrated in shrines set up by the Raamaanandi sects (viz. Kanak Bhavan and Bara Sthaan) there and also declined when offered the “*charaanaamruth*”, or holy water at the sanctum by Raamaanandi priests. Later he also refused to join the commensal meal offered to pilgrims within the temple precincts. Thereafter, when invited to give public discourses, sermons and hold religious seminars for the laity there, Ananthaachaarya spoke denigratingly of the Raamaanandi sect and practices. This deeply offended and enraged the whole Raamaanandi community in Ayodhya and further aggravated the conflict with the orthodox Raamaanuji group.

Again, not very late after the Ananthaachaari incident, came another *Vadakalai* Sri Vaishnava pilgrim-scholar from a temple in Mysore, South India, who although while accepting the holy water at the sanctum of all shrines in Ayodhya, staunchly refused commensality and declined to eat together with his Raamaanandi hosts.

In yet another incident in Ayodhya, another Sri Vaishnava Acharya called **Sri Balaraamachaari**, who was a Sanskrit scholar from South India who had relocated to the north, refused to teach Vaishnava pupils there who were not investitured with the Sri Vaishnava “*samskaara*”, or sacrament, of “*samaashrayana*”—a ritual in which acolytes are branded on the shoulder by their respective Acharya with the holy insignia of Vishnu, the *Sankha* (conch) and *Chakra* (discus)—even when he was fully mindful of the fact that the Raamaanandis tattooed themselves only with their own symbols of Bow and Arrow (being the insignia of Lord Rama). Balaraamachaari also in his public discourses in and around Ayodhya went on asserting the superiority of the Raamaanujis over the Raamaanandis in strict adherence to the fundamental tenets of ‘*Ramanuja darsana*’.

This constant sectarian bickering between the two Vaishnava sub-sects continued unabated in North India until finally matters came to a climax in **1921** at the time of the **Kumbh Mela in Ujjain**.

A great plenary assembly of all Vaishnava pontiffs of both sects, and pandits, priests and scholars from all denominations was convened by a very influential Vaishnava leader named Sri Bhagavadhachaarya. The great conclave of Vaishnavas gathered, and in a solemn forum, the defenders of both Raamaanuji and Raamaanandi faiths were given opportunity to make their respective representations and cases. Matters both theological, sectarian and secular were deliberated upon for a few days. At the end, given the sheer weight of majority numbers, opinion and the general political ethos of the time, the Raamaanuji sect lost and the Raamaanandis declared themselves as a breakaway and independent sect of Vaishnavism in North India.

By the time India became independent in 1947, the Raamaanandi takeover of Vaishnava holy places and religious Orders and establishments all over northern India was absolute. It was claimed by them that it became possible only because their creed was more “*inclusive*” and “*pluralistic*” than that of the orthodox Raamaanujis who were thereafter consigned to the margins of their own less important and much fewer centres and shrines of religious activities in and around Ayodhya, Mathura, Kasi, Prayaag, Badarinath and other places.

Sri Vaishnavism in British India and following post-Independence India

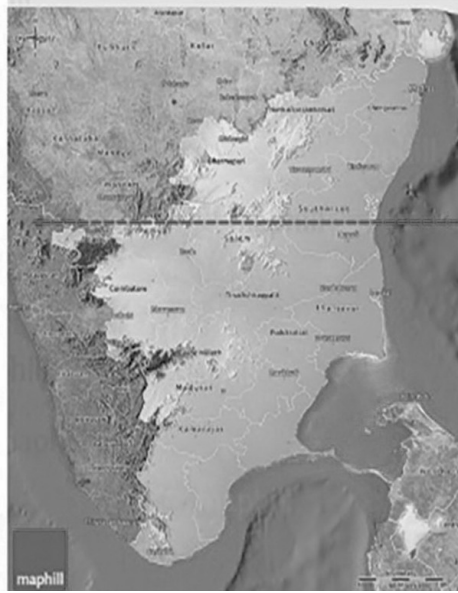
I now leave North India and return to the history of South India and the Sri Vaishnavites there. I take an aerial view once again of the time and terrain over Tamil country in India that straddled (i) the British colonial era and (ii) the immediate post-Independence period that followed to show how they both impacted the Sri Vaishnava identity in South India.

The Hindu dynasties that once ruled South India generally embraced the pluralism of Vedic society and its diversity of faith, traditions and customs. As mentioned earlier, the temples were political institutions as much as they were religious centers . . . As A.K.Ramanujan wrote “*temples, brahmins and Sanskrit*” were part of the larger “**imperial design**” . . . They were also, at the same time, part of a greater **cultural commonwealth**. So, in administering their empires, the kings always tried their best to maintain and promote social cohesiveness and fine balance if not complete unity amongst their vast number of subjects.

Despite the careful social balancing that the Sovereign rulers maintained, the North-South divide between Tenkalai and Vadakalai sub-cultures, I strongly suspect got aggravated by a combination of *history, geography and demography* that created some degree of economic disparity between the two sects. This is a matter on which I wish some expert future historian or social anthropologist will produce better research findings than what is available today.

If we study a map of the way in which Sri Vaishnava temples are dispersed today in Tamil Nadu. It leads us to infer that the Southern ripple-ring around the Sri Rangam epicenter was much larger than the ripple-ring around the Kanchi epicenter. Here is a map to illustrate the point I make . . .

The 106 “divya-desa” TEMPLES: Impact on Identity



Andhra Pradesh: 2
Kanchipuram: 15
Chennai: 7
Total : 24
(North India: 8
Western India: 1

Mayiladuthurai and Sirkazhi: 17
Thanjavur : 19
Tiruchi : 6
Madurai : 8
Tirunelveli : 10
Kanyakumari : 2
Kerala(malai nadu): 11
Total : 73

The number of Sri Vaishnava temples or “*divya desams*” built by several past Hindu dynasties in the South of India clearly outnumbered those in the north by a margin of 3 to 1 i.e. **73 to 24**.

It is logical to infer therefore that economic wealth and social influence of the Sri Vaishnavas around the time when the British became the new rulers of India was significantly greater around the sub- cultural Tamil hinterland of Sri Ranganam than it was in Kanchipuram’s Sanskrit-speaking belt.



**Sri Varadaraja Temple,
Kanchipuram**



**Sri Ranganatha Temple,
Srirangam**



Now, when British Imperialism came and ruled India, throughout the 250 years of their suzerainty, they made it an effective policy of governance to “*divide and rule*” Indians. It was the only way to systematically weaken and subjugate them. Sri Vaishnava institutions, mainly the temples with their commonwealth and great social influence, also fell victim to that British colonial policy.

Having lost the political patronage of Hindu dynasties, Mughal rule thereafter hastened the economic decline in prosperity and viability of Sri Vaishnava temples across Tamil Nadu, north and south. Despite temples being sacked, looted and plundered under Mohammedan rule, thanks to the faith people still reposed in temples, by and large, the Sri Vaishnavas managed to still hang on to remnants of their vast commonwealth in terms of temple jewelry, temple icons, temple treasuries and granaries, temple lands, property in the villages and small towns. The British (the officers of the East India Company at first and thereafter Her Majesty's viceroy and the governor generals in the British provincial protectorates of India) were very well aware of such substantial wealth still possessed by temples.

Rather than openly covet such economic wealth, the Crown Administrators used it instead to further their devious policy of "*divide and rule*": pitting local kings and princes against the temples, turning the *sub-culture of pan-Indian Sanskrit versus that of vernacular Tamil*; then by sowing the seed of *language discord*, by *aggravating geographical North-South divide*, *injecting caste consciousness* and bigotry, *taxing temples* differently and arbitrarily, even *demanding tribute* (i.e. taking huge loans from temples never to be repaid) etc., and inciting *disputes between landowning priestly communities with rural peasantry* in the name of social and land-reforms etc.

My Sri Vaishnava great-great-grandfather, who was a lawyer in those days of British Rule might have held brief for the British Crown in a few cases. My early ancestors of that period might have also been village *tahsildars* or *munsiffs* on British payrolls. I am sure they were all convinced that British Rule was really a great thing to have happened to India. I am equally sure they would have protested if anyone had said to them that the British cared really very little for the long-term viability of temple institutions in the way the old Hindu dynasties did and systematically impoverished both the economic and cultural commonwealth of Sri Vaishnavas.

In earlier history, Sri Vaishnavas actively resisted Muslim invasions and Mughal oppression. Sri Ranganam and other temples, as we know, were sacked and looted. Ramanujacharya and Vedanta Desikan were themselves personally involved in the resistance against Islamic expansionism. Surprisingly, against British Imperialism, later Sri Vaishnavas did the very opposite. They humbly accepted the British as overlords and took their jobs and salaries. They willingly assumed the identity of subservient servants to alien masters. I have no doubt in my mind that whole generations of my Sri Vaishnava ancestors during the British colonial times were good men, virtuous men . . . but I believe they made wrong choices in life . . . they chose to be on the wrong side of history.

To the best of my knowledge, no Sri Vaishnava historian has ever adequately researched this chapter in history. I know I am being uncharitable when I say that it is perhaps because the British cleverly spirited away Sri Vaishnavas from their temples in large numbers and co-opted them into Her Majesty's Government service during that period. Sri Vaishnavas were loyal British servants and employees. How can anyone write unflattering history about one's employer who weakened Sri Vaishnava religious institutions and traditions? That wouldn't be English cricket nor Sri Vaishnava dharma, would it? If the Brahmins of India—and more especially the Sri Vaishnavas of Tamil country—had refused to cooperate with the British Administration in any capacity and renounced all employment opportunities in its service—would the History of India have been different? Who knows?! It will forever remain an imponderable of history.

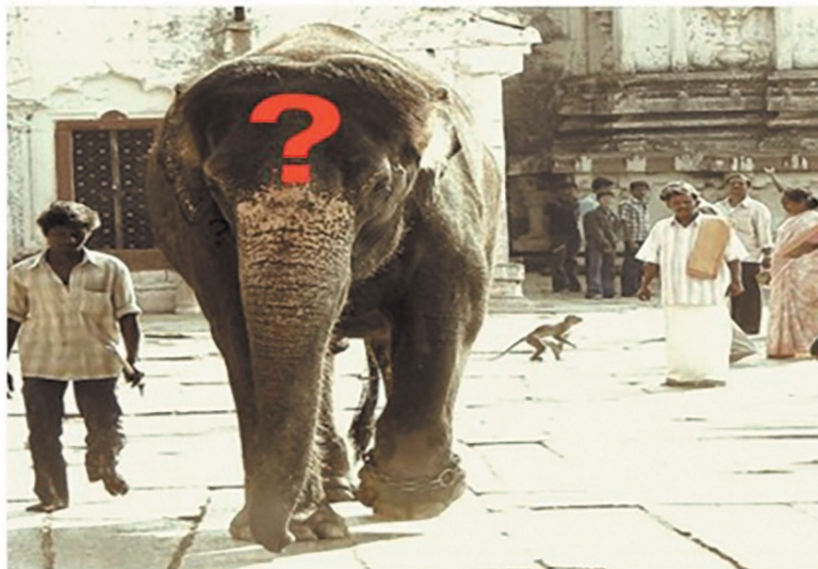
The British did care very little really for the long-term viability of temple institutions in the manner of the old Hindu dynasties. (Again, this is a subject on which not much of research has been done by modern Sri Vaishnava historians and I wish some young historian does so).

I believe it was the British who first invented and patented what we all know today has become in the Indian States the fine art of devious political interference in Hindu religious institutions.

How was it done?

The British did it by politely offering at first, and then eventually **imposing English jurisprudence** on Sri Vaishnavas as though it were the most impartial and equitable mechanism for settling disputes relating to Hindu community, property, marriage, religious belief, worship, customs and social practices. The first thing they did was to systematically denigrate and degrade the centuries old institution and social order called *Varnaashrama* as codified in the set of “*dharma saastras*” that came to be known as the Laws of Manu, or the **Manu Smriti**, the seminal code book of Hindu Laws governing social and religious life of Hindu peoples. Manu and Varnaashrama order were vilified by the British as inherently evil and oppressive of lower castes by higher castes. And the only way to redress iniquity and discrimination amongst the castes in India was to reject *dharma saastras* and adopt modern European jurisprudence based on fundamental human rights of equality and liberty.

This very poisonous idea of resorting to civil litigation in courts of law to resolve even intra-community religious bones of contention was first seeded into the Tenkalai and Vadakalai mindset back in 1792. It was a case relating to elephants being led in procession as part of festive pageantry in the Kanchipuram temple: The famous Privy Council case of whether the elephant should bear Vadakalai or Tenkalai *naamam*. The case dragged on bitterly in the court until 1976!



In the following 200 years, the Tenkalai and Vadakalai sects went on to also fight numerous court battles over other arcane and obscurantist matters of sectarian significance . . . The cases were agitated in the courts of Tamil Nadu and even the Supreme Court. Even today there are still a few such cases pending between the two sects! Most such cases relate to matters like which *litany Vadakalai or Tenkalai*, i.e. “*saatrumarai*” procedure has the right of precedence over the other at various shrines in Sri Rangam, Kanchipuram and other important *divya desam* temples on festive days when *idols of either the Deity or Acharyas are taken out in procession*. To anyone in the world outside the Sri Vaishnava community, it would come as a surprise to know that the Vadakalai and Tenkalai litany called “*saatrumarai*” is really nothing more than singing hallelujahs to their respective “*acharya parampara*”. They are both virtually the same in spirit but in the letter, they are bitterly opposed.

Vadagalai “saatrumarai” Itany	Tenkalai “saatrumarai” Itany
rAmAnuja dayApAtram GYAna vaiRAgya bhUshaNam srImat vEngkatanAthAryam vandE vEdAnta dESikam paIANdu paIANdu paIAraththANdu * pala kOdI nURAyram maIANda thiN thOL maINaNNAI * un sEvadi sevu thuvkAppu adYOmOdum ninnOdum * pirinRi Ayram paIANdu * vadivAy nin vala mArbunI * vAzhgnRa mangaiyum paIANdu * vadivAr sOdhi valaththuRayum * sudarAzhayum paIANdu * padaI pOr pukku muzhangium * appAnjhasanniyamum paIANdE sarvadEsa dasAAkA shvayAghata parAkrama rAmAnujArya dIyArinjA vardhatAm abhivardhatAm rAmAnujArya dIyArinjA pratinAsaram ujjaVA dIgantayApni bhUyAt sA hi kOla hitashNI srIman! sIranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya srIman! sIranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya namO rAmAnujAryAya vEdAntArthapradAyinE AtREya padmanAbhArya sutAya guNashAlinE	srIshailEsha dayApAtram dhibhaktYAdi guNArNavam yatIndra pravaNam vandE ramya jAmAtaram munim paIANdu paIANdu paIAraththANdu * pala kOdI nURAyram maIANda thiN thOL maINaNNAI * un sEvadi sevu thuvkAppu adYOmOdum ninnOdum * pirinRi Ayram paIANdu * vadivAy nin vala mArbunI * vAzhgnRa mangaiyum paIANdu * vadivAr sOdhi valaththuRayum * sudarAzhayum paIANdu * padaI pOr pukku muzhangium * appAnjhasanniyamum paIANdE sarvadEsa dasAAkA shvayAghata parAkrama rAmAnujArya dIyArinjA vardhatAm abhivardhatAm rAmAnujArya dIyArinjA pratinAsaram ujjaVA dIgantayApni bhUyAt sA hi kOla hitashNI srIman! sIranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya srIman! sIranga sriyam anupadravam anudinam samvardhaya nama: srIshaila nAthAya kuntI nagara janmanE prasAdalabdha parama prAPya kankarya sAlinE

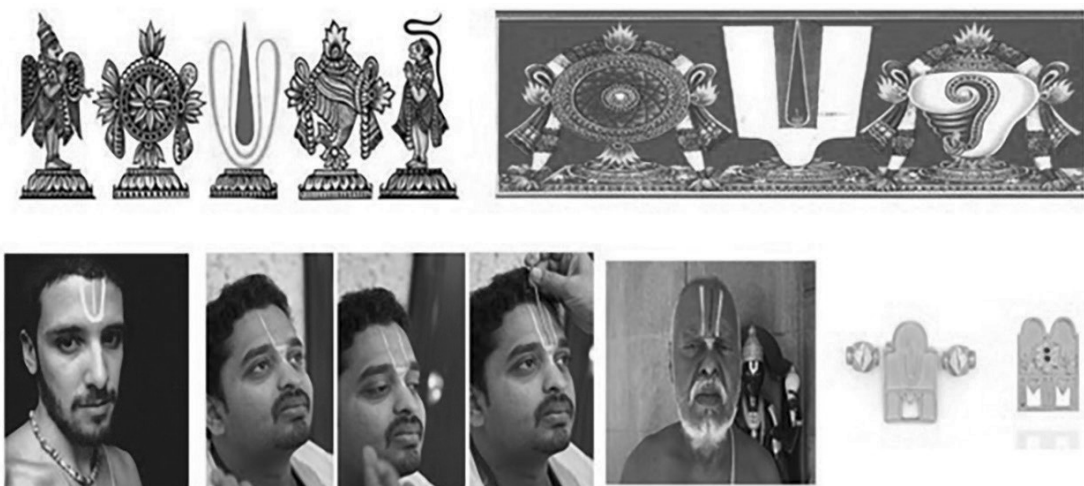
Vadagalai “saatrumarai” Itany	Tenkalai “saatrumarai” Itany
rAmAnuja dayApAtram GYAna vaiRAgya bhUshaNam srImat vEngkatanAthAryam vandE vEdAnta dESikam vAZhi rAmAnujap pILLan mAthagavAI vAZhum * aNinigamAnthaguru – vAZhhyavan * mARan maraiyum rAmAnusan bAshiyamum * thERumpadi uraikkum sir vanjchap para samayam mARra vandhOn vAZhiye * mannu pugazh pudhuran manam ugappOn vAZhiye * kanjath thirumangai ugakta vandhOn vAZhiye * kaiyan urai kudi konda karuththudaiyOn vAZhiye * senjoi themizh maraigal theUndhuraippOn vAZhiye * thirumalai mAI thirumalaiyAy sirakka vandhOn vAZhiye * thanjchap paragathiyai thandharulvOn vAZhiye * thaiN themizh thUppu thiruvEngkadaven vAZhiye nAnikum thAn vAZha * nAnmaraiyal thAm vAZha * mAnagarai mARan marai vAZha * - GYAniyargal senni aNI tEr thUppu vEdAnta dESikanE * inum oru nURRandirum vAZhi aNI thUppu varu nigamAndhAsiryan * vAZhiyavan padhAravinda malar * - vAZhiyavan kOdhAaththAM malarai kondaAdak kondaikkum * thidhila nAIOr thiral	vAZhi thiruvAymozhip pILLai * mAthagavAI vAZhum maNavALA mAmunivan * - vAZhiyavan mARan thiruvAymozhip porulai * mAnilaththOr thERumpadi uraikkum sir seyya thAmaraith thALINai vAZhiye * sElai vAZhi thirunAbi vAZhiye * thuyya mArbum purinukum vAZhiye * sundharath thiruththOLINai vAZhiye * kaiyum Endhiya mukkoOum vAZhiye * karuNai pongkaiya kaNNINai vAZhiye * poy ilAdha maNavALA mAmuni * pundhi vAZhi pugazh vAZhi vAZhiye adiyArgal vAZha arangka nagar vAZha * sadaKOpam thAndamizh nUl vAZha * - kadai sUzhndha mannulagam vAZha * maNavALA mAmuniyE * inum oru nURRandirum

Facets of Sri Vaishnava Identity c. 2018

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Behind such ostensibly sectarian disputes is the raw reality of a *power-struggle for absolute control over temple property and temple-influence*. Why? Because control paves the way for pandering to larger and more powerful *political group-interests* and for ingratiating patronage from the State. “*Temples, brahmins and Sanskrit*”, as AK Ramanujam wrote, are still part of the “*imperial design*” today . . . but then today’s “*imperial design*” in Tami Nadu means a perverted and cynical social milieu that can hardly be compared at all to what prevailed during the time of the Chola, Pallava or Vijayanagara empires.

A 200-year-old sectarian squabbling has thus today resulted in the Sri Vaishnava identity getting even further fractured. Both the Vadakalai and Tenkalai, inebriated by “*identity intoxication*”, compete to be different and exclusive from the other in many ways . . . in customs, weddings, modes of household worship such as *tiruvaaradanam* etc., and even sartorial attire and deportment:



All these differences are too trivial to warrant narration in detail. However, it must also be said emphatically that it goes to the great credit of both Sri Vaishnava sects that their differences have never turned self-destructive. They generally maintain admirable mutual tolerance and self-respect of a very high order . . . quite unlike so many other sectarian conflicts in the world.

Sectarian rifts: Global Perspective

- **Tolerance** between two groups of the “faithful” implies control by one group over another that does not conform to the norms of the former; the former allows the latter some, though not all of the rights and privileges it enjoys.
- Tolerance is a patronizing posture, whereas “**mutual respect**” implies that one group considers another group to be equally legitimate.

Faith	Sectarian Groups	Nature of relationship	Group relationship
Christianity	Roman Catholic; Protestant	No respect, no tolerance	Violence; war...
Islam	Sunni; Shia	No respect, no tolerance	Violence; war...
Buddhism	Mahayana; Hinayana	Respectfully tolerant	Indifferent Co-existence
Sikhism	Akali; Nirankari	Intolerantly respectful	Frictional Co-existence
Judaism	Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements	Respectfully tolerant	Easy co-existence
Confucianism	Mencius, Xunzi, Dong Zhongshu, Ming, Korean, Song, Qing, and the Modern sect.	Respectfully tolerant	Extinction; recent revival
Sri Vaishnavism	Vadakalai; Tenkalai	Mostly respectful; Sporadic intolerance.	Testy co-existence



I am going to stick my neck out and take a risk in airing some personal perspectives on what the Sri Vaishnava identity is today *circa.2020* . . . in the backdrop of all I have presented so far.

Today we all are ruled by the Constitution which “**We, the People of the Republic of India**”, solemnly gave ourselves as a secular republic. Living under this great Constitution means all of us can and must aspire for birthrights of which the three most valuable are: *Equality under Law, Economic equity and Social inclusivity*.

I must confess I am neither a student nor an expert in the Indian Constitution. As an *unknown Sri Vaishnava*, I have only an ordinary citizen's grasp and understanding of the Constitution. Based on that confession, let me state this with humility even if some might mistake it to be temerity.

The Constitutional Order

Equality under Law

Economic wealth equity

Social inclusivity

ETHICS ?

While the Constitution speaks much about *Fundamental Rights* of citizenry, *Directive Principles*, *Social Equity and Justice* etc., by deliberate and intentional design, it is extremely reticent on the question of human Ethics. In fact, in many rulings by the courts of India I have read, the honorable judges are often quoted as saying that it is not the business of courts of law to adjudicate substantial matters pertaining to personal or social Ethics. Ethics is a subject held to be also beyond the pale of legislation in India . . . as it is in pretty much every country of the world.

The Constitution distancing itself from Personal and Social Ethics is no doubt a virtue, especially in a vast, pluralistic and socially competitive and, of late, acquisitive society such as ours in India. But Constitutional aloofness creates very painful crises of identity for many unique sub-cultures in India like the Sri Vaishnavas for whom the true index of happiness in life is "*parama-purusha artha*"

i.e. pursuit of an ethical life to reach the goal of spiritual fulfillment.

The Indian Constitution is no doubt a magnificent instrument of the State that wishes to usher in social transformation in India. But because it carefully and completely avoids dealing with issues of social ethics, Dharma, it is found to be many a time quite unsympathetic towards—and many a time even deeply distrustful—of people's deeply instinctual and aspiration for the ideal ethical life. For a people like the Sri Vaishnavas steeped in a distinct sub-culture of spirituality and ethics, it seems as though the larger Constitutional order by which they must abide is just one cause for their weak, fractured and socially outdated identity.



In this chart below is a rough sketch of my own artist-impression of the "fractured identity" of a Sri Vaishnava in circa.2020.



A Fractured Identity

+ (function)	- (dysfunction)
Upholding the institution of temples	Large-scale emigration – geographical, occupational and cultural.
Preserving and propagating traditional literature – 4000 Divya Prabhandhams	Lack of mastery in Sanskrit, Tamil and Mani-pravalam “sampradaaya grantham”; decline of “ubhaya-Vedanta” scriptural traditions
Memorializing Acharya “parampara”	Lacking thought-leadership to defend “sampradaaya”. Inability to effectively resist/repulse attacks from foreign religious hegemonies on their own turf and terms
	Inability to internally resolve and permanently reconcile sectarian strife and rivalry. (“Identity intoxication”)
	Encrusted by short-term historicity. Disconnect with evolutionary process of individual and social identity. (“post-Ramanuja second millennium obsession”)
	Formalistic religious practices and customs
	Insularity, Disengagement and Irrelevance

This is not a judgmental summing-up on my part. In truth, it is only a critical self-appraisal of my own fractured self-identity in the form of a Balance Sheet, mirroring the plight of an *Unknown Sri Vaishnava* who earns his livelihood as a Chartered Accountant in the modern word of corporate business.

- On the right column are what I perceive to be are liabilities or **dysfunctionalities** of the Sri *Vaishnava* identity.

On the left column are its great and still **functioning** Assets.



VADAKALAI

“Balance Sheet” of a “Non-Entity’s Identity”



UDAKALAI

+ Assets	- Liabilities
Upholding the institution of temples	Large-scale emigration – geographical, occupational and cultural.
Preserving and propagating traditional literature – 4000 Divya Prabhandhams	Decline of “ubhaya-Vedantic” tradition and identity
Memorializing Acharya “parampara”	Abdication of leadership role in the religious domain
Outstanding contributions to social development of India and state of Tamil Nadu in the professions of law, medicine, scientific research, humanities, art, music, academia, to business & industry and philanthropy: in the period 1850-2000 CE	Encrusted by historicity
	Throwback to formalistic religious practices and customs

The Liability side:

- The Sri Vaishnava community is a numerically very small population.

According to an unofficial 2011 census report (“*Tamil Brahmins: Making of a Middle Class Caste*” by C.J.Fuller/Haripriya Narasimhan), the global Tamil Brahman (Tambrahm) population was 1.85 million only of which c.100, 000 is resident overseas. Sri Vaishnava numbers in this population, it is my guess, might account for no more than 40% say, **c.75, 000**.

Extinction by Emigration ?

Estimated Tamil Brahmin Population in Different Locations in 2011

(source: “Tamil Brahmins: Making of a Middle Class Caste” by C.J.Fuller & Haripriya Narasimhan)

LOCATION	POPULATION	%	(my guesstimate)	SRI VAISHNAVA POPULATION ?
CHENNAI	390,000	21.1	25%	98,000
REST OF URBAN TAMILNADU	920,000	49.7	30%	276,000
TAMIL NADU VILLAGES	80,000	4.3	10%	8,000
ALL TAMIL NADU	1,390,000	75.1		382,000
BANGALORE, MUMBAI, NEW DELHI	200,000	10.8	15%	30,000
REST OF INDIA	160,000	8.6	10%	16,000
OVERSEAS	100,000	5.4	10%	10,000
TOTAL POPULATION	1,850,000	99.9		498,000 (27%)

In the last 50 years, a lot of Sri Vaishnavas have emigrated out of India. It is my estimate that their diaspora could be around 10,000-12,000. IN this same period, it is estimated that close to 80% of the remaining 65,000 Sri Vaishnavas in India have emigrated out of religious occupations into modern, secular professions. Which means that no more than about 10-12,000 Sri Vaishnavas are today actively engaged in a life and lifestyle that could be said to be grounded in “*Sri Sampradaaya*” identity.

The resultant “*fracturing*” effect overall on the cultural ethos and identity of Sri Vaishnavas of the world is there for all to see. Today we have not only *Vadakalai* and *Tenkalai* Sri Vaishnavas but also a third “*kalai*” called “*NRI Kalai*” in the USA and Arabian Gulf states. There is also a 4th Sri Vaishnava *ersatz* “*kalai*” calling itself “*secular Sri Vaishnava*”, whatever that means! And finally, there are many Sri Vaishnavas like me who are an inexplicable mix of the traditional and the secular. For them I coined the label “*Unknown Sri Vaishnava*” (which is the title for this book!) . . . The *Unknown Sri Vaishnava* is someone who suffers from religious schizophrenia. He is orthodox Sri Vaishnava on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday, a free-thinking liberal-secular man-about-town on Mondays and Saturdays . . . And on Tuesdays when he starts hearing voices inside his head, he professes to be an agnostic.

How many “kalai-s” or identities now?



2. Because of this widespread *emigration* that has fractured their whole ethos, the Sri Vaishnava community has completely lost the one distinctive identity history gave them viz.: mastery of Sanskrit, Tamil and Manipravalam languages as well as mastery in the age-old scriptures of “*ubhaya Vedanta*” written in those languages. In my opinion, this is the single most fatal cause for identity loss amongst Sri Vaishnavas today.

My “*maanaseeka guru*”, “*vaikunta-vaasi*”, **U.Ve.Sri Mukkur Lakshminarasimhachariar**, once jokingly told me in casual conversation that the loss of the “*ubhaya Vedanta sampradaya*” also meant the sad loss of traditional Sri Vaishnava “*pari-bhaashai*”, a very charming day-to-day dialect in which ordinary Sri Vaishnava households and families in olden days used to converse.

I asked him to explain. He told me that Sri Vaishnava “*pari-bhaashai*” is so sweet because it encourages politeness in inter-personal behavior. To illustrate, he recalled that the **Kanchi Paramaacharya** once mischievously remarked that Sri Vaishnavas carry politeness to extremes and narrated an incident to that effect: one young Sri Vaishnava gentleman was politely and respectfully beckoning another elderly Sri Vaishnava scholar to climb in and settle down into a “*pallak*” (a palanquin). The polite request in Sri Vaishnava “*pari-bhaashai*” is “*swaminah, devareer eLLareeraa!*” The latter being aged took his own sweet time to do so. The former grew very impatient. Hiding his impatience, he told the old gentleman with exaggerated politeness: “*devareer eLareereraa illa adiyen daasan tangallai eLLa pannattumaa?!*” The literal translation is “*Will Sire please settle himself here or would he rather I carry him here?*” The phrase “*eLLa pannattumaa*” is *double-entendre* for “*pall bearing*”!

In general, common spoken Sri Vaishnava *pari bhaasha* even today is musical to the ears if spoken with the right *bhaava* (attitude) of politeness: e.g. “*swaminaha tirumeni paanga*” (are you keeping well?), “*tiruvulla kushalam*” (hope you are fine?), “*parama bhogyam*” (this meal is so satisfying), “*daasasya vinnappam*” (my humble request) and so on and so forth . . . In Sri Vaishnava *Ubhaya-Vedanta* tradition, even the inauspicious is made to sound very auspicious . . . for example, death is never referred to as “*maraiivu*” or “*saavu*” as in ordinary Tamil. A Sri Vaishnava would never say “*avar kaalam aanaar*” . . . He would say the same in a very gracious and auspicious way “*Swami Tirunaatukku ezhundaruLLinaar!*” or “*achaaryan tiruvadi adaindaar*” or “*parama padam*”

naadi senraar” . . . where “tirunaadu”, “achaaryan tiruvadi” and “parama padam” all mean the Empire of *Sriman Naraayana*!

3. Sri Vaishnava *achaaryas* of the pre- and post-Ramanuja times were intellectuals . . . great Vedantic philosophers, theologists, preceptors and active social reformists too. Because of their intellectual stature, they were in the very forefront of defending religious “*siddhaantha*” and “*sampradaya*” against ferocious attacks by rival systems. Adi Sankara with his Advaita took his battle into the Jain/Buddhist camp. Ramanujacharya took his battle into the camps of Shaivite bigotry and Advaitic dominance. Later, Vedanta Desika came and decisively established the pre-eminence of Ramanuja’s Vedanta over all other rival schools of religious philosophy . . .

Later Sri Vaishnava Achaaryas, from Vedanta Desika until the present day, failed completely to engage with foreign religious systems such as Islam and Christianity. Here I would like to paraphrase what **Rajiv Malhotra** wrote in a very interesting book titled “*The Battle for Sanskrit*”:

Hindus have always been good at engaging in debates only amongst themselves. Buddhists and Jains essentially arose from within the Hindu culture . . . Acharyas and thinkers were able to digest elements of Buddhism and Jainism into the Hindu discourse and then succeed in revising, improving and strengthening their point of view, their own “darsana” in the process. Adi Sankara established his great Advaita siddhanta in the same way engaging with the Meemamsa traditions and Buddhism. And in turn Ramanujacharya established his school in the same way over Saiva-Smaartha and Advaitin schools in the Chola period . . .

But the important question is: Why did those Acharyas and those who have come after them in all these years, fail to wage a similar successful conquest over Islam, Christianity and modern secularism? . . . By the 14th century CE, both Christianity and Islam were expanding in India . . . Yet, Hindu intellectuals could focus only on inward debates and analysis. They could lay down the groundwork for their own systems relative to other Hindu systems, but they completely ignored non-Vedantic systems that in fact challenge their mission and following. Modern-day Sri Vaishnava Acharyas simply continue the same path . . .

Sri Vaishnavas Acharyas today also have failed to provide thought-leadership in this respect. Instead, they choose to act only as gatekeepers of the “*sampradaya*” . . . In the 1000 years after Sri Ramanuja, not one Acharya or his school has made a mark as an original, path-breaking or pioneering Sri Vaishnava thinker or philosopher with ideas and thought out-classing religious rivals who come attacking us from the West.

In the past, in the battle for the soul of India, it was Acharyas like Sankara and Ramanuja who led from the front and showed the rest of society a way out of conflict, despair and spiritual degeneration. Today, Sri Vaishnava Acharyas have wholly abdicated that role and responsibility—of defending “*siddhaanthas*” of “*sanatana dharma*” from attack by inimical forces from outside—to career or street politicians, to quasi-religious NGOs and to dime-a-dozen pseudo-spiritualists and yogic-charlatans.

4. Sri Vaishnava sects today suffer from what I have already explained is “*identity intoxication*” . . . which leads to their being engaged in continual squabbles for control of temple and temple- wealth, in needless litigation and petty feuding that brings little credit to the community within the larger social milieu of India.
5. I have sought to present the Sri Vaishnava identity as an ever expanding and evolving one as it swept across a vast timeline of history. But today’s Sri Vaishnava unfortunately seems to have been

dinned into believing that his identity begins in the 11th century from the time of Sri Ramanuja and ends with Sri Manavala Mamuni of the 15th century CE.

Our identity today stands trapped in a time-warp of our own making and hence suffers from tunnel-vision. We live encrusted in historicity . . . much like Semitic religions—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—which are all completely fixated with only the life and personality of some prophet, messiah or imam. Unlike *Sanatana Dharma*, they are not founded on eternal ideals and universal principles. Such an unhealthy obsession with mere historicity and personality is what leads to several of today’s Sri Vaishnava sectarian tensions and intolerance.

6. Lastly, our community-identity today is tending towards (or shall we say trending?) a formalistic approach to religion reminiscent of a sacerdotal period in history. Ritualism is making a comeback in the lives of ordinary Sri Vaishnavas. Because Sri Vaishnavas today are numerically such a miniscule population in the country, there is danger therefore, of such a narrow and overly ritualistic approach to “*sampradaaya*” herding us all into a petty and collective “*ghetto-mentality*”.

The Assets side:

1. To be Sri Vaishnavas today is to certainly be proud that, even in the face of all social and political odds, we have ensured that our great temples and other institutions, large and small, associated and affiliated to temples, survive and thrive today. Sri Vaishnavas must be given credit for at least ensuring the physical preservation of the vast commonwealth and religious infrastructure of the “*divya-desams*” and “*abimaana sthalams*” of Tamil Nadu.
2. Side by side, the Sri Vaishnavas have also ensured that their great vernacular Tamil scripture, *naalayira divya prabhandhams* of the *Azhwars* has survived and continues to inspire people.
3. The 3rd admirable asset of Sri Vaishnava identity today is “*achaarya abhimaana*”. We cherish “*achaarya parampara*” and hold it in great esteem and veneration. And in turn our *acharyaas* are doing yeoman service to the community in upholding traditional lineage, customs, and sacraments and in propagating scriptural knowledge of our ancient land, Bharathavarsha.

The most valuable of all its assets that the Sri Vaishnava community can possibly claim is the enormous contribution it made to post-colonial independent India and the State of Tamil Nadu in terms of economic, social and cultural development and advancement between c. 1850 and 2000 CE—most notably in the field of the professions such as Law, Medicine, Scientific Research and Academia as well as in the Arts, Culture and Public Philanthropy. So many indeed are the names of eminent Sri Vaishnavas who could be deservedly included in the “**Hall of Fame**” if ever there were one drawn up in each of the fields mentioned but it would not be out of place to name here only a few of the most outstanding examples—

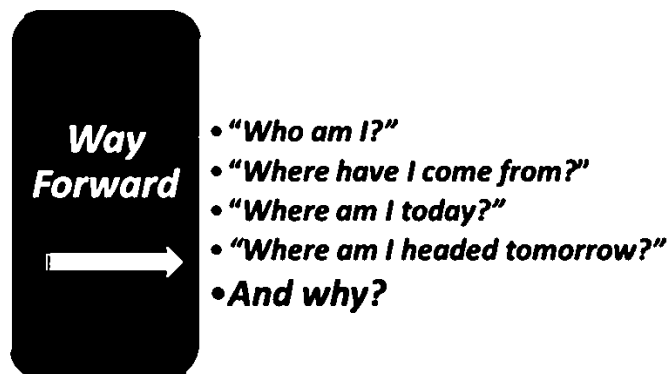
C. Rajagopalachari, M.Gopalaswamy Ayyangar, C. Doraiswamy Iyengar, Salem C. Vijayaraghavachari, H.V.Iyengar, Kasturi Ranga Iyengar, S. Srinivasa Iyengar, M.Ananthasayanam Iyengar, T. T. Krishnamachari, T. V. Sundaram Iyengar and sons, Srirangam Thathachariars, Dr. Soundram, Smt. Ambujammal, Smt. Savithri Vaithy, Dr Rangachari, Dr Rajam, Dr. Raghavachari, V. Bashyam Iyengar and Vembakkam family, S. Varadachari, N. Rajagopala Iyengar, V.T. Rangaswami Iyengar, K. Parasaran and 3 prior generations, S. Ranganathan, G. Parthasarathy, Gen. Krishnaswamy Sundarji, Srinivasa Ramanujam (brilliant mathematician of international fame), Prathivadi Bhayankaram Annangaraghavachariar, Tirukudanthai Andavan Swami of the Andavan Ashram, Sri Injimetu Azhagiyasingar, the Jeer of the Sri Ahobila Mutt, Agnihotram Ramanuja Thathachariar, Raghava Iyengar, K. S. Krishnan (scientist who worked with Nobel Physics Laureate Sir C V Raman), Srinivasa

S R Varadan (NYU), C S Seshadri (mathematician), M S Narasimhan (mathematician), Raja Ramanna, V.Kasturirangan, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Mysore, Doraiswamy Iyengar, Smt. Vyjayanthimala Bali, C.V. Narasimhan, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, K.R. Rangaswami Iyengar . . . and many, many more.

It is not within the scope of this book to detail the biography and individual achievements of the above galaxy of eminent Sri Vaishnavas—that would be a very ambitious task for even a trained scholar-historian going about trying to reconstruct a slice of time in a certain period of history of modern India. But it is indeed rather disappointing for an *Unknown Sri Vaishnava* like me to note that even until today, no attempt has been made by any young social researcher or historian, either of the past or present generations from the Tamil Sri Vaishnava community, to chronicle a comprehensive account of all the many-faceted, many-splendored accomplishments of Sri Vaishnavas who have contributed so much to such a vast array of human endeavour in the last century and a half. A meaningful and truly insightful work of socio-anthropological research is long overdue—one that will reveal and explain what trait or quality exists and is inherent in the Sri Vaishnava cultural DNA, psyche and identity which enables it, against all odds and vagaries of life, era or historical ethos, to rise above its circumstances and, through work and achievements, leave behind an enduring legacy of noble value for society and posterity.



Sri Vaishnava Identity: way forward (circa.2021 CE)



We think all Life is linear forward. Life, however, often moves cyclically backward. It has a funny way of taking us all back in life right to the start: when we kept searching for our real identity as a human soul.

With all the wonderful secular education and great modern technology, we have, it is tempting for us to think that identity derived from religion, faith or spiritual beliefs is totally irrelevant. The identity that really matters most to me is the one that education, profession or social status has given me . . . So, if “*I am a doctor, a lawyer, an entrepreneur, an IAS, or a scientist*” who cares whether I am a Sri Vaishnava or a *Smaartha* or Advaitin? That sort of general outlook in life is fashionable and pragmatic today among young Sri Vaishnavas.

The problem however is that secular identities are not permanent identities. There comes a time in my life when I realize that being a chartered accountant or some super-corporate honcho does not fully or satisfactorily define who I really am, or explain my inner being even to my own self. That is when the search for real identity starts all over again in life.

It is a spiritual search for clear Truth, for real Knowledge, for everlasting Freedom and Salvation in life . . . the search for the ideal of an ethical life Narsi Mehta sang about. About 1500 years ago, Nammazhwar, the greatest mystic of all Sri Vaishnava saints, also prayed to God in the same way. He begged Vishnu to grant him an Ethical Life and a clear sense of self-identity . . . a life free of all “dirt of the flesh” . . . “azhukkuddumbu” was his phrase for all false identities and pretentions of Man.

பொய்ண்ணின்ற ஞானமும் பொல்லா வொழுக்கும் அழுக்குடம்பும், இந்நின்ற நீர்மை இனியா முறாமை, உயிரளிப்பான் எந்நின்ற யோனியு மாய்ப்பிறந் தாயிமை யோர்தலைவா. மெய்நின்று கேட்டரு ளாய், அடி யேன்செய்யும் விண்ணப்பமே. (NammAzhwaar – “tiruviruttam” 2) poyNNinRa NYaanamum pollaa vozhukkum azhukkudambum, in^inRa niirmai iniyA muRAmai, uyiraLippAn en^inRa yOniyu maayppiRan^ thAyimai yOr_ thalaivaI meyn^inRu kEttaru LAy,adi yEn_cheyyum viNNappamE.	<i>Lord of the Immortals!</i> <i>Having come down here amongst us,</i> <i>Feigning birth in many a womb,</i> <i>And countless forms!</i> <i>Listen to me, this humble prayer:</i> <i>Save us from false knowledge,</i> <i>From evil ways, the dirt of all flesh!</i> <i>Save us from endless re-births!</i> <i>Give us Life!</i>

* * * * * CONCLUDED * * * * *

BOOK 1

**Who is the “*Unknown Sri Vaishnava*”?
(And why are His Essays “*Unusual*”?)**



CHAPTER 1

THE ‘UNKNOWN’ SRI VAISHNAVA AND HIS ‘UNUSUAL ESSAYS’

This book is a compendium of essays about ‘Sri Vaishnavism’.

Much of it, the reader will easily perceive, is personal and intense rumination on the wide-ranging cultural traditions of Sri Vaishnavism found in its ancient system of Vedantic philosophy, theology, scriptures, literature, legend, and personalities.

Most of the essays were penned by me sporadically over the last twenty years (1995—2015) and have appeared earlier as blog-postings on various Sri Vaishnava cyber-fora or groups. Many readers of those blogs of mine, within and outside the Sri Vaishnava community, in India and abroad, who had been appreciative of the original blogs then, suggested to me the idea of this compilation.

Hence this book.

General readers of this book may be of two kinds: those who are either unfamiliar with Sri Vaishnavism or those who are knowledgeable about it and yet curious to know what is so ‘*unusual*’ about these essays.

Both ought to first understand and appreciate the prime motivations (and here I must crave the reader’s indulgence for being partly autobiographical) that led to my penning these rather discursive and eclectic essays in the original blogs. Such a reader must first in fact start at the very beginning viz. to know who a ‘Sri Vaishnava’ of the twenty-first century is.

As I went about writing my essays, I realised how difficult—virtually impossible—it was to explain in plain English language to a lay or general reader the various themes and aspects of Sri Vaishnava thought and practices without the aid of allusions, references, extracts, and quotations drawn from the ancient, even rather arcane theological or doctrinal literature, which in their original were all written in Sanskrit and Tamil. To overcome such difficulty, I adopted a self-imposed standard of writing: I resolved to present my essays in such a manner as would enable the reader to cope adequately with them. **Firstly**, I provided transliterated equivalents in English of the Sanskrit and Tamil quotations. **Secondly**, I provided easy enough English translations of whatever in the narrative I suspected the reader coming across might find rather arcane or possibly unintelligible material. The translations were made carefully with the further hope that the more diligent and interested reader, if he perhaps truly wanted to, would be urged to go the extra mile to unravel or fathom those ideas and passages through the simple expedient of referring to standard reference aid such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or merely taking the trouble to ‘Google’ it.

Using that simple yet severe standard of writing, I presumed the reader of this book would first then ask, ‘*Who is Sri Vaishnava?*’ before asking, ‘*Who is an unknown Sri Vaishnava?*’ or, ‘*What is unusual about his essays?*’; and would thus find, if he looked it up in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, this simple definition:

‘A member of a sect of Hindus, most numerous in South India, who pay absolute allegiance to their deity Lord Vishnu and follow the teachings of the philosopher, Ramanuja “Sri” refers to Vishnu’s consort, also called Lakshmi, to whom Vishnu first taught the doctrine.’

Then, looking it up further, he would find the *Britannica* says this too about Ramanuja:

‘Sri Ramanuja [AD 1017—1137]: south Indian Brahmin theologian and philosopher, the single most influential thinker of devotional Hinduism; He provided an intellectual basis for the practice of bhakthi [devotional worship] in 3 major commentaries: the Vedartha Samgraha [on the Veda], Sri Bhashyam [on the Brahma Sutras], and the Gita Bhashya [on the Bhagavath Gita].’

As a very young boy, I too came to look upon myself as a Sri Vaishnava in terms of the blandly matter of fact, rather simplistic *Britannica* definition above.

SRI VAISHNAVA ANCESTRY

My ancestry is a long lineage of devout Sri Vaishnavas dating back to the times of Ramanuja. Several generations of my family, on both paternal and maternal sides, have lived, prospered, and breathed their last in the lands surrounding the ancient Vishnu temples of Tirupati-Tirumala, Kanchipuram, or those dotted today all across the states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh (now named ‘Seemandhra’) in India.

In the musty old archives of my paternal grandmother’s house in Tirupati, I remember, many years ago I once saw an old, withered parchment recording our family-tree sketch. In it I found that grandmother’s lineage could be traced all the way to the tenth century AD, and back to a venerable old Sri Vaishnava Brahmin who had lived all his life in the service of the great hill temple of Tirumala. He was called **Sri Tirumala Nambi, and he was none other than the maternal uncle of Sri Ramanuja.**

As a young boy, I remember querying my old grandmother not only about her ancestry and the family’s link to Sri Ramanuja, but more importantly, what it meant to be, in the old days of Sri Tirumala Nambi, a true ‘Sri Vaishnava Brahmin’. What she explained to me pretty much corroborated whatever I had read in *Britannica* again:

‘Sri Vaishnava Brahmins are much given to scholarly religious pursuits and have earned for themselves the honorary titles of “Acharya” or in Tamil, as “ayyangaars” [also spelt “iyyangaar”].’

It was thus that I understood that my ‘*Tamil Ayyangaar*’ past and ancestry really belonged to a hoary unbroken lineage of several generations of Sri Vaishnava Brahmins, given to the priestly occupations of scholastic pursuit and enquiry into the great philosophy of Sri Ramanuja, the foremost of Sri Vaishnava preceptors in India.

THE AYYANGAR IDENTITY

The outlines of my hazy past and distant ancestry in Tirupati were made vivid though to me by my grandmother’s family tree. As I grew up to be a young man, it helped me gain and possess a reasonably good sense of identity; I vaguely understood who I was as an ‘*Ayyangaar*’ and where I had come from too. But it was the present that made far less sense to me, the reason being that I was so acutely aware that by no stretch of imagination could I be said to be devoted in any way to any ‘*scholarly pursuit*’ nor could I be said to be deserving any honorary title such as ‘*Acharya*’ or the Tamil equivalent of ‘*ayyangaar*’.

My childhood and life as a young man had all been spent in the city of Madras (now Chennai) far away from the temple environs or ambience of either Tirupati or Tirumala. My education was not traditional but utterly modern. My schooling was at a Catholic missionary convent. My schoolteachers had

been Irishmen of ordained Catholic priesthood. Later I went to study at the Madras University, again at a Jesuit-run graduate school. I was fed on a copious intellectual diet of English classics, European history, and contemporary novels; my literary heroes were Victor Hugo, Graham Greene, and Sartre; my political idols were Gandhi and Mao; my ideological inspirations were Rousseau and Russel; I liked to listen to the Beatles and Pink Floyd; I watched Hollywood movies.

Growing up in the '70s and '80s in Madras, with an educational background as utterly Western and liberal as mine, I had little more than mere passing familiarity with Sri Ramanuja. I was utterly unaware too of the copious wealth of Vedantic, philosophical, and scriptural literature to which a galaxy of Sri Vaishnava 'Acharyas'—i.e., his disciples, who came after c. twelfth century AD in South India—had also contributed to both the Sanskrit and Tamil languages.

The 'Nominal' and 'Real' Sri Vaishnava

Very early in life, I realized that I was only a nominal not a real 'Sri Vaishnava Brahmin'.

All through the decades after Indian Independence in 1947, and throughout the decades of the '50s, '60s, and '70s, the Brahmins of Sri Vaishnavism, who had been living hitherto for generations in the villages and temple-towns scattered across South India, left their ancestral homes, and emigrated *en masse* to the great cities of the country in search of modern secular education and in pursuit of lucrative careers in modern professions, trade, commerce, and government service.

My grandfather and father were both lawyers. On my maternal side, most family members went into professions like law, engineering, and accountancy. Some went into business. Even the women folk went in for modern education. To add to the demographic change that was wrought then upon the community—by a silent wave of social upheaval, as it were—very significant numbers of Ayyangaars, all highly professionally qualified, began to emigrate too to the Americas, Western Europe, the Arabian Gulf countries, and Australia, all in search of secular fortunes. Population census of those decades estimated that the Sri Vaishnava population had rapidly dwindled to between half to three-quarter of a million in Tamil Nadu and perhaps a few hundred thousand in the world diaspora.

At home and within the community in which I lived and grew up, the occupations and lifestyles of relatively well-off Ayyangaar families too underwent dramatic change. My kinsmen no longer bore any resemblance to the ethos of the past and, quite certainly, could no longer be accurately characterized as '*Sri Vaishnavas given to scholarly pursuits*'.

The sort of Sri Vaishnavism that families like mine actually practiced in that increasingly '*secularised*' environment suggested '*token Sri Vaishnavism*', i.e., you could still find idols and icons of Lord Vishnu in our little incense-lit shrines at home; you could find us still making perfunctory weekly visits to the neighborhood Vishnu temple to make, again, only '*token*' offerings of devotion and worship; we undertook annual pious and perfunctory '*pilgrimages*' to Tirupati and Sri Rangam or some other famous Vishnu temple in the country; and you could see us proudly claiming membership in any one or more of the exclusive sectarian, denominational Sri Vaishnava '*mathams*' (monastic orders) presided over by tutelary Sri Vaishnava pontiffs. But it was all only '*token*', not real Sri Vaishnavism that we really practiced.

As a young man of the '70s/'80s, I soon grew impatient, even rather weary of this hollow '*token Sri Vaishnavism*'. Nowhere in it did I sense kinship or connection with my age-old ancestors of Ayyangaars, the Sri Vaishnava Acharyas of Ramanuja's times. Inside me, I felt a widening rift in awareness between identity and self.

The Stunted Sri Vaishnava

Mere ‘*tokenism*’ indeed was really all the Sri Vaishnava heritage that I, as a young Ayyangaar, could really lay claim to.

I could read and write a bit of Sanskrit and Tamil, the language of my ancestors, but could hardly comprehend any of it as found in the works of Sri Vaishnava Acharyas; even though my mother tongue was Tamil, and it was spoken at home, I could read and write classical Tamil only with great difficulty. Thanks to my modern, secular education, English had effectively killed any motivation I might have had in wanting to gain fluency in these native languages. Apart from second-hand knowledge, acquired through English commentaries, on the great Indian epics, *Mahabharatha and Ramayana*, I had little acquaintance with the original works of Sri Ramanuja’s philosophy; I could appreciate precious little about Sri Vaishnava history and traditions and much less about scripture, commentaries, literature, legends, temples, personalities; again, and again, I realized myself that I was nothing indeed but a ‘*phony Sri Vaishnava*’.

But then I also realized, not without some sense of consolation, that I was not alone: I was one amongst many thousands like me who too were youthful, secular, proudly modern Ayyangaars, successful in secular careers, upwardly mobile in society, getting ahead in the brave new world, but were utter ignoramuses and philistines with respect to their cultural roots, ancestry, and heritage. Like me, they too were Ayyangaars all adrift in a netherworld of either benign atheism or else insouciant agnosticism.

To describe myself, to characterize my generation of Ayyangaars and its deep-rooted crisis of self-identity, I coined a rather special expression. I began to see myself as a rather ‘*stunted Sri Vaishnava*’. I saw myself and my generation as one caught in the middle of tumultuous modern history that would witness the gradual descent of Sri Vaishnavism into cultural oblivion in India. After us, in say about a few hundred years, nothing extant within our community would even remotely resemble Sri Vaishnava culture or ethos as it had survived thus far. To me it seemed, in a truly sociological sense, that the tribe of Ayyangaars could well become extinct in a few decades. I was indeed seriously obsessed about a whole generation of Sri Vaishnavas simply passing away into the haze of history, i.e., ***becoming unknown and unrecognisable***. As I continued to dwell on the idea in grim, brooding reflection, I began calling myself an ‘***unknown Sri Vaishnava***’. My own native heritage could neither reach out and claim nor embrace me as one of its own; I didn’t speak its tongue; I was not firmly rooted in it; I was incapable of partaking, in any meaningful sort of way, in its unique worldview and ways of life.

The Expatriate Sri Vaishnava: Self, Identity, and Chosen destiny

Soon after the first war in the Arabian Gulf ended in 1990 with the liberation of the state of Kuwait, there was a big upsurge in demand amongst corporate employers in the Gulf countries for professional expatriate talent and experience from the Indian sub-continent. As a chartered accountant specialised in corporate and project finance, I received several lucrative offers of very gainful employment in the Arabian Gulf. I then left the shores of India in 1993 to launch my international career that later spanned the ensuing twenty-four years.

As a young expatriate manager, I lived and worked with my family for several years in Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. In the course of my official assignments on many projects worldwide, I travelled too to all parts of the globe from Japan, China, and Taiwan in the east, through all of Middle Eastern, North African, and Levant countries, much of Western Europe, and the United Kingdom, and all parts of the USA as well. After so many years spent working for so long abroad in my career, one could say my outlook in life gradually turned global. Living and working abroad in multinational or

multicultural environments, especially in the land of Islam, brought me time and again to face—in deeply spiritual self-encounters—the fundamental questions of self, identity, and chosen destiny.

Watching the sun go down during the month of Ramadan in a city like Riyadh, Kuwait City, or Cairo, and hearing every day the strident calls for the Islamic ‘*Maghreb*’ prayer as it emanated from the muezzin towers of some nondescript downtown mosque; listening to the prayer-calls piercing the air across silent streets with strangely mesmerizing melody mingling and wafting with the sound of the evening wind blowing through the ancient minarets and quarters of Giza or the famous Azhwar; wandering about as a curious tourist in the by-lanes of Khan Khalilee in Cairo to strains of soulful Arabic music . . . They were all strange experiences in foreign lands that made me realize, in some intuitive but inexplicable way, how deeply religious-minded much of the world seemed even in modern times. Similarly, while walking silently across the cool marble floors under the vaulting stone roofs of Notre Dame or the Basilica of Sacre Coeur in Paris made a deep impression on me. More than ever before, I began to realize how deeply influenced is Christian Europe by its long religious past and heritage.

Then throughout my international career, I had also made innumerable friends and colleagues in the Islamic, Christian, and Buddhist world. In every one of them I saw how strongly rooted and identified they were in their own respective religious past and ethos. The Muslim friend I knew in Aswan could recite his Quran flawlessly, and unfailingly too every day in the fasting month of Ramadan; the deeply Catholic friend I had met in Blois, France, was an acknowledged master in the history of the Crusades; the Japanese colleague I worked with on a project in Oita, Japan, could over dinner explain to me with impressive authority the differences between Shinto and Buddhist practices in his country.

Thus, the experience of twenty-five years working as an international expatriate manager made me more acutely aware of the shortcomings and incompleteness of my own understanding and appreciation of my own past and heritage as a Sri Vaishnava. Having lived and worked for so very long amidst some of the largest societies of believers in the world, having witnessed how strongly anchored they all were in their respective religious identities, and how devotion and worship was for them a natural way of life, all of that made me suddenly discover, in a moment of impactful truth, that to be human is really all about dealing with spiritual hunger and aspiration. Was I truly human?

As the years rolled on, the central questions of my *stunted*, rather *retarded identity* as a Sri Vaishnava, it began to also loom ever larger in my mind:

- ‘Am I doomed to be an *unknown Sri Vaishnava*, a perennial stranger to my own native roots?’ I asked myself.
- ‘Like the hero of Albert Camus’s famous novel *L’Etranger*, am I condemned all my life to remain the constant *outsider* who cannot let himself into any faith?’
- ‘Should I remain an alien within my own country, within my community?’
- ‘How am I to break the barriers between me and the resolution of existential questions the spirit daily grapples with: *Who am I? Where do I come from? And where am I going?*’
- And I asked myself further too, ‘If I cannot find answers to such questions within the system of philosophy into which I have been born—this ancient body of available, inherited wisdom hailed as Sri Vaishnavism—then of what avail is the natural advantage accruing to me by the fact of my birth amongst this community and in the ancient land called India?’

It was thus for years that I, as a rather rootless and footloose international expatriate worker, came to experience the loneliness of being a Sri Vaishnava disconnected in spirit from nativity, from rich natal

heritage, from philosophical moorings; it was a disconnect—I explained to myself often, as the poet did, in *‘vacant or in pensive mood’*—brought about largely by modern education, by career choices in life I had made and by the vagary of circumstances that had similarly afflicted a whole generation within my community.



The Mind as Your Best Friend and Worst Enemy

As time went by, and as I progressed through my secular career in life, the ‘disconnect’ between self and identity—I had by now come to recognize it as the ***broken identity of the unknown Sri Vaishnava***—it began to also gradually arouse in me a great subliminal desire. It was a strange desire that lasted all through the decade of the ’90s and well into the new millennium too. It was a sudden big desire to exert every sinew I could to somehow regain spiritual connection with my lost Sri Vaishnava ancestry, past, and heritage.

Looking back, I believe the desire was an instantaneous trigger inside the mind brought about as I was flipping desultorily, one Friday afternoon at home in Bahrain, through the pages of the Bhagavath-Gita when a verse caught my attention. It struck me with the force, I must admit, of a minor revelation:

uddharet atmanatmanam natmanam avasadayet atmaiva hy atmano bandhu: atmaiva ripu: atmanah

The Bhagavath Gita 6.5

‘Reshape yourself through the power of your will; never let yourself be degraded by self-will. The will is the only friend of the self, and the will is the only enemy of the self too.’

I suddenly decided that very day that I had just about had it with being spiritually stunted and sterile. In a moment of rare self-clarity, I saw I simply had to *‘reshape myself through the power of my will’* and elevate my mind *‘uddharet atmanatmanam’* as the Gita put it. I recalled a famous expression of William James: even if I had to grope, stagger, and stumble, I wanted to find a way out of the *‘dark night of the soul’*. I resolved, almost reflexively, to embrace my past because therein lay, I believed, the best hope for me to find a seeker’s path to the future of my own spirit. It was resolution that is perhaps best

described through the French phrase: *‘reculer pour mieux sauter’*. *A few steps in retreat are sometimes necessary to perform the great leap forward!*

From dithering about in the ‘tokenism’ of my spiritual quest and remaining mired in an existential rut (the Gita called it *‘avasadayet’*) I had myself created over the years by giving it a fanciful title, making it seem real and calling it the existential condition of the ‘unknown Sri Vaishnava’—I wanted to turn and transform myself instead into a *hopeful Sri Vaishnava*, someone who perhaps might never fully measure up to it at all, but then would not be utterly unworthy either of the great titles his ancestors of yore once bore viz. *‘Ayyangaar’*: that tribe of men, the followers of Sri Ramanuja, given much indeed to scholarly and perennial pursuit of truth in life.

I remembered instantly what I had read in the *Britannica* too: that Sri Ramanuja was the first of many great Vedantic philosophers to *‘emphasise that discursive thought is necessary in man’s search for the ultimate verities, that the phenomenal world is real and provides real knowledge and that the exigencies of daily life are not detrimental or even contrary to the life of the spirit’*.

I resolved then firmly to go find for myself my own ‘discursive’ methods to explore and plumb the depths of Sri Vaishnavism and conduct my own modest enquiry into its ‘ultimate verities’ as revealed by Sri Ramanuja. The ‘*exigencies of my life*’, I told myself, that had turned me into an ‘unknown Sri Vaishnava’ were never again going to be allowed to be *‘detrimental or contrary to the life of my own spirit’*.

The Impulse for Self-Learning

It was about this time in my life, well into middle-age, that I set for myself an intense program of self-learning in the traditions of Sri Vaishnavism.

I reckoned that with my family and busy career-preoccupations, it would be impossible for me to do so in any other way but self-instruction. The old Hindu tradition of one seeking out a personal spiritual guru on full-time or formal basis seemed to me an unaffordable luxury. Furthermore, no traditional Sri Vaishnava guru in India would ever willingly accept me as student-disciple given my secular, almost Western and utterly non—Sri Vaishnavite lifestyle and my professional peripatetic commitments abroad as well. So, I boldly proceeded to formulate my own program of home-based, self-study, and self-learning in Sri Vaishnavism. It was nothing but a leap of faith.

I reckoned that even with my woefully meagre knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamil languages, if I could somehow succeed in undertaking an extensive study of the following principal scriptural texts of India, I could perhaps gain a modicum of knowledge and understanding of their subject matter, and that would just about be enough to help me reclaim not only my Sri Vaishnava identity but also find some degree of release out of the deep spiritual morass into which I knew the ‘unknown Sri Vaishnava’ had sunk. With such resolve in mind, I set out to construct for myself the following informal, basic curriculum of self-study in Sri Vaishnava religious literature:

1. **The Principal Upanishads** (*timeless*)
2. **The principal works of philosophy of Sri Ramanujan** (*twelfth century AD*)
3. **The devotional Sanskrit poetry of Swami Venkatanathan**, (*another great Sri Vaishnava Acharya, a.k.a. Vedanta Desika, AD 1268—1369*)
4. **The Bhagavad-Gita**
5. **The Ramayana and Mahabharata** (*c. first millennium BC*)

6. **The lives of the twelve Dravidian mystic saints called Azhwars** (*c. seventh to ninth century AD*), **the authors of the four thousand hymns in classical Tamil** (called '*naalaayira divya prabhahdham*')
7. **The Tamil "Tiruppaavai" of Sri Andal, the sole woman amongst the twelve Azhwars**
8. **Standard commentaries and exegesis of all the above** (*from fourteenth to seventeenth century AD*), **some in Tamil, others in Sanskrit.**
9. **A few miscellaneous aspects of 'Sanatana Dharma or 'the Hindu Way of Life'** (*contemporary works*)

I then went about putting together a formidable medley of a bibliography covering broadly all the above subject matters. I set myself what I thought was a realistic timeline, about three years in all, and promptly plunged headlong into my adventure.



I struggled. I labored. I trudged, heaved, and huffed.

For month after month, I read and re-read. I took down notes. I copied references and looked them up wherever I found them. I read the Azhwars and tried to make head and tail of the archaic Tamil. I read the sparkling Sanskrit '*stotra*' (hymnology) of Sri Vedanta Desikan and tried to rekindle my taste for Sanskrit poetry. I read the gloss on Sri Ramanuja's '*Sri Bhaashya*' (commentary on the Vedantic aphorisms of Sage Vyasa). I grappled with the Upanishads.

After six months of sweat and toil, I gave up. I was utterly, thoroughly frustrated, and I knew I was getting nowhere at all in a journey of the spirit whose course I had made bold to chart out (foolhardily I soon realized) and to navigate on my own. I was truly at my wit's end. Lost and forlorn.

An Authentic Sri Vaishnava Guru, at Last

It was then, by sheer stroke of good fortune, that I came across a true and authentic Sri Vaishnava guru. His name was **Sri Lakshmi-Narasimha Acharya**. He hailed from the small village of Mukkur, near Kanchipuram, and was popularly referred to as '*Mukkur Swamy*'.

Sri Lakshmi Narasimhan was a Vedic adept, a scholar extraordinaire steeped in the traditional scriptures and literature of Sri Vaishnavism. At the relatively young age of 40, he had earned acclaim and renown, far and wide amongst the community as a great exponent of Sri Ramanuja's Visishta-advaitic school of philosophy. Equally facile and felicitous were his popular lectures and public discourses on the mystic literature of the Tamil Azhwars, the great epics, Valmiki Ramayana and Mahabharatha, the Upanishads and the Vedantic treatises of Sri Ramanuja and Sri Vedanta Desika. By the age of 56, when he suddenly passed away in the year 2000, Sri Mukkur Laskhmi-narasimha Acharya had earned eminence and commanded high respect from peers, scholars, and laymen alike in the Sri Vaishnava community. His brilliant and illuminating commentaries on the popular works of Sri Vaishnava religion, theology, and philosophy were held by both pundit and plebeian to provide refreshingly contemporary perspective on Sri Vaishnava thought and faith. (I have devoted a separate chapter at the end of this book as my personal tribute to this remarkable Sri Vaishnava Acharya.)



Empathy from a Teacher

Every year throughout the '90s I used to take my annual vacation for a whole month from my expatriate job in the Arabian Gulf to visit my home in India. In the four weeks I thus got to spend at home in Madras, I made it a point to attend every public lecture of Mukkur Swami held in and around the city. With his permission, I sometimes even visited him at home on several occasions. He always treated me with extreme kindness and cordiality.

Our personal meetings were devoted mainly to casual discussions about the state of my own advancement in learning, understanding, and living out Sri Vaishnavism. He took a mentor's interest in me but with no real explicit understanding of any kind of guru-disciple relationship between us. The Swami would simply enquire what I had been able to gather from listening to his public discourses; what I had been reading; what were my thoughts and feelings about a variety of subjects that dealt with the works of Sri Ramanuja, the Azhwars, or of later Sri Vaishnava Acharyas. I shared with him, with due regard to objectivity and discretion, a bit of my inner turmoil and frustration with my efforts at self-study and growing disappointment with its results.

Mukkur Swamy was a truly empathetic teacher. He could acutely intuit the almost Sisyphean nature of the utterly misguided program of self-study I had embarked upon and my struggles with it. He knew I had no formal grounding in Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures; the ancient Vedantic texts and Sri Vaishnava treatises and commentaries had proven to be quite beyond me. Without me having to confess to him, he easily sensed that there was confusion swirling about in my mind. It was clear to him I was grappling with abstruse concepts and doctrines. I was failing to sift dogma from the fundamental tenets of Sri Vaishnavism, solid principles from mere doctrinal interpretation. He could also silently judge—but in a very gentle and non-judgmental manner—that mentally I was experiencing severe conflict too in all sorts of complex ways while trying to reconcile everything I felt was tradition-bound in the Sri Vaishnava belief system with what I saw as contemporaneous secularity of real life around me in my personal world.

He knew . . . and I knew he knew . . . I was simply going around in absurd circles, much like a dog chasing its own tail.



Nine Guidelines for an ‘Unknown’ Sri Vaishnava

As months and years rolled on, I kept trudging on. I kept studying as well as I could to the best of my modest ability; I lurched from one Sri Vaishnava text or Vedantic treatise to another, trying to make sense of it all as best as I could with the help of scholarly articles and dissertations, which I picked up along the way just as they appeared in religious magazines and sundry publications put out by various Sri Vaishnava sects and missions in India.

But the greatest help of all came to me via listening to scores of Sri Mukkur Swami’s public discourses, which I got recorded on tape and then went repeatedly over for months and years. Those tape recordings were excellent and simple tutorials provided a wonderful supplement to my self-study regimen. Meanwhile, at the end of each public lecture of his that I attended, I would button-hole him briefly to seek clarity on doubts and elaboration on specific questions of doctrine or principle. The Swami was so kind to spare me time so I could share my notes with him. Later and more sporadically, whenever we got to meet at his house, he would be more generous with his time and provided me some of the most expansive, most valuable nuggets of personal counsel and mentoring that I could ever hope to have received throughout my program of self-study.

Looking back on those days, I am sure it was Mukkur Sri Lakshmi-Narasimha Acharya’s wise, patient, and empathic counsel that enabled me, finally after so many years, to come to terms with the method and purpose of the quest in life I had made my very own. Drawing from distant memory, I paraphrase below in my own words the sage counsel received from this venerable Acharya in nine simple yet illuminating summaries:

1. There is no time left for you in life to pursue study in Sri Vaishnavism in the old, traditional way. Let go of such ambition. The eclectic and contemporary method you seem to have stumbled upon is good enough; it may well work for you. Do not abandon it.
2. There is no such thing as a standard, hard-and-fast curriculum in Sri Vaishnavam. Don’t be misled. However, the curriculum I see you have set for yourself is quite adequate for your limited purpose. Persevere in its study. The message of the Upanishads, the Ramayana, or the Azhwars will never be lost on any genuine seeker in whichever way he approaches them.
3. Mastery in Sanskrit or Tamil is not a pre-requisite to understand the philosophy or theology of Sri Ramanuja. There are good English translations that abound and are sufficient for your purpose. You don’t need to master the deep nuances of theology or the abstruse dialectics of his philosophy. Just grasp his fundamental ideas. They are more than enough to appreciate ‘Ramanuja Darsanam’, his paradigm.
4. Your efforts at understanding Sri Vaishnavism at a purely platonic level will not succeed unless you faithfully practice at least a few of its rituals and sacraments. The most important thing I recommend to you is the daily meditative exercise of ‘*sandhyaavandanam*’ and ‘*gaayatri-mantra japa*’. Never fail to meditate. You will find it definitely brings mysterious Light into your understanding of even Darkness.
5. Use the commentaries, treatises, and exegesis of the traditional Sri Vaishnava masters (i.e., the translated English publications of the original Sanskrit/Tamil) wisely. Use them as crutches if your understanding limps along, but do not ever look upon them as vehicles on which you can have an easy ride home.
6. You cannot understand Sri Vaishnavism unless you devise your own little creative ways to view it through the prism of your personal condition and experiences in life. That indeed is the true challenge of your life and your quest.

7. I see that you are naturally attracted to literary art forms. Sri Vaishnavism is a very literary tradition indeed. You are a bit of a wordsmith yourself in English, aren't you? Don't be afraid to indulge yourself in transmuting Sanskrit and Tamil idea and idiom, found in the hoary Sri Vaishnava texts, into literary expedient and experiment constructed and fashioned according to your own unusual imagination, your own creative fancy. Nobody in the Sri Vaishnava orthodoxy will frown at you just because they see you trying to understand the tenets of the faith in terms of your personal—again unusual—predilections.
8. Look upon Sri Ramanuja as a great pathfinder and a safe guide. His works were not intended really to be holy writ but to serve as spiritual beacon and divine signposts. Follow them then like a humble pilgrim on a journey. Not like a blind or bigoted acolyte.
9. Above all, learn to enjoy Sri Vaishnavism as a means of wholesome, why, even if sometimes unusual spiritual entertainment. As a holistic way of nourishing your soul continually while you undertake the arduous journey of life.



The Eternal Human Verity: ***Know Thyself***

Such indeed was the precious counsel I received from Mukkur Lakshmi-Narasimha Acharya.

Over the years I strove to put it into practice constantly. The effort indeed largely paid off for me in terms of benefits that, I must admit, only Spirit understood but which the Flesh found impossible to describe. And yet it got somehow all reflected in the several '**unusual essays**' that I then began to pen and blog all through the later years.

'*The unknown Sri Vaishnava*' found at last that he had stumbled upon a long-lost trail that led straight from the traditional past to the secular present in a line that my ancient Ayyangar ancestors perhaps might have found very strange and highly '*unusual*' to tread. To me however, it really seemed I was upon a '*road less travelled*', which led to the same destination they had all aspired to arrive at. It was a trail, a road I was sure I could tread with good hope, with firm and certain steps, and journey towards a destiny that is the pursuit of every Sri Vaishnava.

The book of '*unusual essays*' that you, dear reader, hold now in your hand is thus little more than an attempt by an '*unknown Sri Vaishnava*' to pursue the highest of human eternal verities: '**Know Thyself**'.





CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE USED IN THIS BOOK OF ESSAYS: ‘ANGLO-MANI- PRAVAALAM’

(Notes for the Reader)

For most part, the essays in this book are written in common English language, but it is English of a distinct sort having its roots and usage in the native soil of the provinces in South India called Tamil Nadu where Sri Vaishnava Brahmins, otherwise known as ‘*ayyangaars*’ or ‘*iyyangaars*’ today live. This version of English, that is indeed peculiarly their very own, is what I use in my essays and it may be called ‘**Anglo-mani-pravaalam**’ (a dazzling mixture of gem and coral).

‘Anglo-mani-pravaalam’ needs to be explained a bit to the lay reader.

Half a millennium ago, in this part of India, the priestly Sri Vaishnava classes, the ‘*ayyangaars*’, were devoted to scholarly study of the ancient Vedas, Vedantic philosophy, religious scriptures, epics, and classics of India. The originals of most of these were in the Sanskrit language and, to a much lesser extent, in Praakrit. The vernacular prevailing, however, in the various provinces they lived in was another ancient and rich language called Tamil. With the passage of time, these Sri Vaishnava priests who devoted their entire lifetimes to scholarly exegesis, commentary, and re-interpretations of the ancient Sanskrit texts began to develop, use, and write profusely in a hybrid dialect that was a rich, beautiful admixture of both Sanskrit and Tamil. This hybrid dialect came to be called ‘*mani-pravaalam*’.

Over the span of 250—300 years after the time of Sri Ramanujacharya, scores of Sri Vaishnava scriptural commentators authored several ‘*mani-pravaalam*’ classics, which survive to this very day in South India. They are wonderful works of unique literary style and great religious merit and have become indeed standard reference books for even contemporary scholars and exponents of Sri Vaishnavite theology and scripture.

In modern times, the Sri Vaishnava laity too—i.e., ordinary members of the community living today in India and to an increasingly greater extent, the Sri Vaishnava diasporic community that has emigrated in very large numbers to the USA, UK, Arabian Gulf countries, Australia, and New Zealand—depends upon and frequently refers to these medieval ‘*mani-pravaalam*’ works in its ongoing efforts to gain real understanding and insights into the hoary original Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures.

Much of present-day, modernistic discourse on Sri Vaishnavism, be it amongst the community as well as in its outreach efforts to communicate with outsiders and foreigners, is however tending to be more and more in the English language sprinkled generously with ‘*mani-pravaalam*’. If you walk today into any bookshop or library in India stocking books on Vedic or more specifically Sri Vaishnava literature, you will find that much that has been written is indeed in the English language, but with one rather unique feature and difference. The authors of these modern works write in English in a style that closely imitates, without however ever caricaturing, the old ‘*mani-pravaalam*’ style in which the ancient Sri Vaishnava masters wrote. The English prose and narrative, we see, is embellished by a profuse infusion

and interpolation of Sanskrit and/or Tamil idioms and phrases, quotations, expressions, and even colloquialisms.

Today, amongst the Sri Vaishnava laity, therefore, one sees a clear and emerging trend of people using, generously and quite comfortably, the majesty of the English language in attempts to either explain to themselves, or to others, their understanding and appreciation of their traditional Sri Vaishnavite classics. The style of English writing they adopt does seem at times odd but none amongst the community is really complaining. In fact, on the contrary, they are all beginning to enjoy it as an exceptional medium of communication with *sui generis* appeal and flavour: It is most certainly their very own brewed form of ‘Indian English’ and they are quite proud of it.

So widely prevalent has this hybrid form of English usage become amongst the Sri Vaishnavas of the world today that the community itself, especially the youth, clearly recognises that by combining the beauties of four different languages—Sanskrit, Tamil, ‘mani-pravaalam’, and English—they are perhaps witnessing the advent of a new phase of development in the history of Sri Vaishnava literature going forward. They believe that they may see evolution, in a few hundred years hence of a new style of writing called ‘Anglo-mani-pravaalam’!

Unusual Essay Of an Unknown Sri Vaishnava

A few decades ago, the Sri Vaishnavite orthodoxy in India might have laughed away or pooh-poohed the trend. Not anymore. Now even the venerable ‘Acharyas’ and ‘gurus’ of the Sri Vaishnava sects in South India have come around to accepting the ‘anglo-mani-pravaalam’ dialect, cranky, and fanciful though it might seem and sound today. They accept it as today’s prophesy that may well be fulfilled, well, if not exactly tomorrow, surely then in a few decades. They believe that perhaps the great, great- grandchildren of Sri Vaishnavas may truly and more fully bear the prophecy out in some distant time but surely within this millennium.

An interesting example of a hybrid ‘anglo-manipravaalam’ can be found today even among the Sri Vaishnavas in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India. While Telugu (the local vernacular) combined with English serves as the primary means of casual conversation among families in Andhra, many of them very easily, and without hesitation, utilise Tamil words and phrases too to refer to such sacred aspects of life as family, food, holidays, and of course, the Lord and His worship. Thus, words like ‘*Perumal*’, ‘*Saatrumarai*’, ‘*Koil*’, ‘*Thiruman*’, ‘*Aradhanai*’, ‘*Chithappa*’, ‘*Paatti*’, ‘*Maami*’, ‘*Teertham*’, ‘*Saadham*’, etc., are eloquently interwoven with Telugu and English to produce a distinctive dialect that would clearly identify one as being a follower of the Sri Vaishnava tradition albeit a hybrid one combining Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, and English!

As one young Sri Vaishnava friend of mine in Phoenix, Arizona, USA, once explained to me: ‘Language is a very powerful force in the preservation and identification of a culture.’ While we may not be able to pass all the riches of our Sri Vaishnava literature, scripture, epics, and classics in the original languages onto future generations, I would like to suggest that we make the conscious attempt to use even such simple words as those described above—in Telugu, Tamil, Sanskrit blended with ordinary English—such that our progeny in India or the diaspora in the US and elsewhere, can connect to the unique elegance, wisdom and cultural nuances of our wonderful heritage. I would like to think that one day ‘Anglo-manipravaalam’ would be as distinctive as the Yiddish-English spoken among the Jews in America today.



Important: Readers will come across in the following essays a profusion of Sanskrit and Tamil extracts and quotations transliterated into English. In transliterating, a free-flowing structure has been followed and diacritical marks used only in some cases. The reader may hence find it a bit confusing on occasion while coming across the English spelling of certain terms, expressions, and words not being phonetically uniform and found italicised at times and in parenthesis at other times.

Readers might also find that the short and long vowels/syllables in both Sanskrit and Tamil words are transliterated into the English as “a” and either “aa” or “A”; and similarly, in the Tamil as ‘u’ or ‘U’ or “ooh” . . . While craving the readers’ pardon for such inconsistency, the author hastens to assure them that they should not be unduly concerned since care has otherwise been taken to ensure reasonably faithful English translations of most Sanskrit/Tamil passages transliterated herein. Should more discerning and scholarly readers wish to access the Sanskrit/Tamil excerpts from the respective original source, the relevant citations/references can be found cited against each transliterated quote.

A **Bibliography** of select sources from which the author has drawn much material for his essays is appended at the end of this book as well as an **Index** for key references.

BOOK 2

“Gaayatri”: Mother of Purity





CHAPTER 3

THE ‘DIVYA DESAMS’ OF AMERICA

As I sit here before my keyboard to pen this essay, I recollect a famous passage in the ‘*mahA-narayana-upanishad*’. It’s both a sacred and poignant paean to what perhaps is the most precious of the five great natural elements of the world—water, known in Sanskrit as ‘*aapa*:’

aapO vA idam sarvam
vishvA bhUtAnyApah:
prANa vA aapa:
pashava aapO
amrutham aapO
annam aapa:
samraat aapO
viraat aapO
svaraata aapa
chandaamsi aapO
jyOtimshi aapO
satyam aapO
sarva devata aapO
bhur-bhuva-suvar-aapa . . . (pranavam) II

(meaning):

All existence is verily Water:
all beings are in Water,
all vitality is Water,
all animals are Water,
the nectar of life is Water,
the food of life is Water—
Water is the brilliance of life,
Water rules Life,
The Vedas themselves are Water,
The celestial bodies are Water,
Truth is Water—
All the gods live in Water!



For a long, long time I have wondered why the Upanishad sings this ‘mantra’, which is a panegyric, as it were, to Water. It’s a mantra that never fails to resonate deep within Hindu hearts. Till today I have not yet fully fathomed the true intent or import of the Vedic passage. Why does the Upanishad place Water upon such a lofty elemental pedestal? Water is no doubt an essential need for all life on earth, but then so too are other great elements of nature such as the air we breathe or the earth we tread. Why does the Upanishad ‘mantra’ single out Water for deification in such absolutely universal and effusive terms of awe and reverence?

Travelling through America, I believe I was able to grasp, even if only in the vaguest or feeblest of terms, some idea of the transcendent vision of Water found in the Upanishads.



Last month, work took me for over three weeks from my base in Kuwait City to one corner of the world in the island of Taiwan in the South China Sea all the way to the other end in the tiny island of Bermuda in the Atlantic and onwards thereafter to the Eastern seaboard of the USA—to parts of New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Pittsburgh, Maryland, and Washington DC. The scorching pace of my tour schedule was partly set by the official tasks I had to complete as well as by my own eagerness to cover as much of territory as possible and to visit and see as many places of interest as could possibly be squeezed into my rushed itinerary.

On this very first visit of mine to the USA—many more followed in later years, but none as exciting as this first one—I recollect it as the country known to be the proverbial ‘land of milk and honey’, the land everyone on earth wants to go to, live and make a fortune in, a country variously hailed as virtual paradise on earth, the ‘*bhOgha-bhUmi*’ (the land of plenty), a land that, more than any other in the entire world, appeals to popular imagination in India, at least, as the closest possible approximation to the Kingdom of God on earth.

The moment I set foot on its hallowed soil, I was seized by a strong desire to see as much of USA as I possibly could in the limited time available to me—to take in and experience its many fascinating sights, historic landmarks, its grandeur, its natural vibrancy, its teeming prosperity, and its great many variety of people.

America did not disappoint me. It was indeed every bit of plenty, the veritable ‘*bhOgha- bhUmi*’ my imagination had all along led me to believe it truly was.

The first sign of God-given plenitude I saw in America was the overwhelming supply of fresh water the country possesses. As a native of the rain-deficient and often water-starved city of Chennai, India, and furthermore, as a long-time expatriate-resident of the desert-cities of the Arabian Gulf countries, where a barrel of potable water costs more than it does in the rest of the world to buy a barrel of precious crude oil, I was simply overawed to see America’s seemingly inexhaustible supply of fresh water everywhere I went.

The first sign of Water I saw was as soon as my plane began its descent into Newark International Airport. All around the state of New Jersey and right along the ruddy horizons stretching across New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, certainly as far as my eyes could see, from my seat in the aircraft, over the sprawling landscape they call ‘New England’—I saw nothing but vast, white, and seemingly unending sheets of snow in the distance.

It struck me then immediately like a flash of revelation: Snow! Snow it is! Snow it is that is the precious, perennial, plentiful groundswell of America's live-giving, life-nourishing wealth: Water, 'aapa:.'

From the port-hole window of the aircraft, I saw a sight that made me momentarily seize my breath! I could not remember having beheld ever before in any one single moment (except in movies perhaps or in some odd serial on Discovery Channel) so large an aggregation of water mass of such great proportions upon so vast a tract on planet Earth. I held my breath in wonder as I took in the scene: it was like watching a giant, benign, and blindingly white glacier crawl—stately, magnificent, and majestic. It seemed to me nature, in that moment, was verily showcasing for my sake, seemingly me alone, a first-time visitor to the land of America—in one fell swoop the immensity of all her life-sustaining force. 'Here at last', I whispered to myself as my plane descended, 'here at last stands before me the secret behind all of America's riches, prowess, and greatness—the overwhelmingly plentiful supply of fresh Water, the elemental force that the primeval Vedas extoll as *aapah*.'



I flew into NJ from Bermuda on a late afternoon on a not too long Continental Airway flight. I was told I could not have chosen a better day to first set foot on American soil: winter was over and spring would be officially announced across the whole country precisely at dawn the following day, March 21: my very first one in the land I recalled (from my old geography lessons in school) had once been called 'the New World'.

When I woke up at 5 a.m. dawn the next day, America woke up to herald a brand-new season of spring. I performed my '*prAtah:sandhyA*' ritual—a daily Vedic rite of meditation on the Gaayatri mantra—in the semi-darkness of the plush guest bedroom my kind host had put me up in. I could hardly see the ritual water ('*arghya*', '*aapah*', or oblation) cupped in my palms.

Outside the window, I took my first good look at urban America just as the first sunrise of spring began to spread its smile all over the country. It was however still biting cold. In the streets of New Jersey, for the first time in my life, I was presented with the sight of real snow, first-hand and at close quarters.

I stepped out from my host's apartment into the street and into the dark and nebulous morning and, immediately, felt the soft crunch of fresh white snow withering away crisply beneath my boots. It was a strangely delicious feeling that overcame me. I could hardly explain to myself why the sound of crunching snow should move me at all. Was it because it somehow reminded me momentarily, in some vague, ineffable way, of similar sounds echoing a whole continent away? The sounds my feet made as they trod upon fine, burning sands across some forlorn stretch of the Arabian Desert just outside Kuwait City in the place where I lived and worked.

Later, I was told the part of America I was in, New Jersey state, was not really the best or the most attractive part of the country. On the contrary, New Jersey was one of the oldest, most industrial, and hence environmentally one of the most polluted states. New Jersey was said to be such a dark and dinghy state, that it had acquired, I learnt much to my amusement, the dubious distinction of being known as the 'Armpit of America'. And yet that morning, as I looked out of the window offering '*aapah*' as '*arghya*' to the Vedic deities of my faith, all of snow-clad and water-covered America looked to me just about picture-perfect. The dawn of spring and the first spring of dawn, the enchanting whiteness, the sense of all-pervading, frozen stillness around me. It all appeared to me as one of the

most serene places I had seen in life. To my eyes all of America stood in that moment swathed in the sheer, sacred magic of sweet and sacred Vedic Water, ‘*aapah*’.



Later during the week, while visiting Washington DC, I took the oft-trodden, tourist-beaten track down the mall right along the route from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial.

Strangely, it felt as though I was on some sort of pilgrimage. It is the twenty-first century AD, after all, and America is still the most powerful nation on earth, militarily, economically, and politically; Washington is the epicenter of all worldly power and here I was at the doorsteps of the White House, the seat of all temporal power in the world! Well, well, it did feel like some kind of a pilgrimage while treading the winding path down Independence Road, Seventh Street, and Pennsylvania Avenue, past the Smithsonian Museums to be finally led past the Jefferson Memorial and reaching the grand Lincoln Memorial on the lush banks overlooking the magnificent river Potomac.

As if arriving at some sacred ‘*teertha-sthala*’ or ‘*pushkariNni*’ (temple pond or stream) somewhere in the holy lands back home in India, I came upon the swift Potomac and felt immediately as though I was witnessing some ancient fount spouting and gushing forth crystal-fresh Vedic ‘*aapah*’.

Seeing so much of deliciously white snow around me on my first day in America, and the later memory of those vividly blue and historic waters of the River Potomac, it all made me silently wonder again and yet again at how overwhelmingly copious God’s blessing of fresh, clean Water has been bestowed upon the length and breadth of this vast, gracious land.



There is a famous ‘mantra’ usually chanted during the ‘*sandhya*’ rite in praise of the ‘*aapah: devata*’. It is a very inspiring one even in normal times. For some strange reason I can hardly fathom, it seemed suddenly to assume, on the first day I stepped into America, a resonance more powerful and far deeper in significance than normal:

aapah: punanthu prithivIm
prithivI pUthA pUnAthu mAm.
‘sarvam pUnanthu mAm-apO’satAmcha pratigraham svAhA!’

‘May the Waters purify this earth!
May the Earth thus cleanse me too and my heart of all sins.
May the Waters render pure All that be.’



A line from a very famous Vedic passage echoes in my ears. In the Vedic ‘*prashna*’ or passage called ‘*chamakam*’, there is a ‘mantric’ chant that speaks of the many wondrous blessings of life bestowed

upon a Vedic adherent. To the repeated chant of the Vedic litany, *may cha cha may!* (meaning, ‘May I be bestowed with [such and such] blessing’), the euphonious ‘*chamakam*’ passage goes on to recount an exhaustive list of several human blessings to aspire for in life, such as, for instance, well-being, love, wealth, progeny, plentiful food, worship, so on and so forth:

sam cha may, mayas-cha may
priyam cha may ’nukAMascha may.

. . . .

deerghAyucha may ana ’mitram cha may.

Now, towards the end of one ‘*anuvAka*’ (passage) of the ‘*chamaka-prashnam*’ there is a curious phrase, so full of significance, that describes one of the rarest blessings of life—‘*anamitram cha may*’—and ‘*amitram*’ in Sanskrit means ‘a state of being friendless in this world’; ‘*ana’mitram*’ denotes never having to be being in such a state i.e. friendless.

One of the rarest of blessings a man can hope for is never—not for a single moment in life—to be in a state of ‘friendless-ness’. Being friendless in this world is the next worst thing to being orphaned. To be orphaned in life is a tragedy; to be friendless is a curse. At every stage of one’s life, says this ageless Vedic mantra, be it in childhood, youth, or manhood, one must always be blessed with the company of good, innumerable friends. A friendless world is a desolate world.

At no time in life is the value of friends more strongly felt than in two situations. One is sickness or old age. The other is when one is in an alien land, far from home, and amongst utter strangers. The need for human friends and warm companionship in old age is indeed very acutely felt. It is a terrible thing indeed—far more terrible than sickness --- to have enough friends in old age. In the evening of our lives, when it seems as though everyone is shunning our company, it is in that late hour of our lives more than ever that we need lots of friends with whom to spend the little time left for us in the world. Similarly, too, landing up on foreign soil amidst alien people, and not knowing the native language, customs, or manners—i.e., being ‘friendless’ or ‘*amitram*’, or feeling lost and friendless in a faraway land—that can also be equally distressing.

One of the many reasons we are asked to chant the famous passage of mantras from the Vedic ‘*chamakam*’ is to protect ourselves against falling into a state or situation of such abject ‘friendless-ness’ in life. If ever proof was needed of the compassion and solicitude the Vedas have for human beings, it is truly in this significant phrase—‘*anamitram cha may*’: ‘May you never be friendless in this world’ is the Vedic blessing.



I regarded my first ever visit to the vast and great land of America with a certain amount of nervousness since I hardly had any true friends (*mitra:*) there to welcome me (although I must hasten to add here that I have many close kin). But thanks to a very pleasant experience that befell me by sheer chance, I did not, after all, have to go friendless—or ‘*amitram*’—in America. On the contrary, the real significance of the Vedic phrase ‘*anamitram cha may*’ was driven home more starkly to me in America than at any place else or anytime ever before.



Every year numberless people go to India as excited tourists. Many of them transform into humble pilgrims.

One may go visiting the great many historic temples of India as a casual tourist but there should be no surprise if it is as pilgrim that one returns. I have seen this happen all too often—the tourist who went to enjoy himself at the hill-resort of Kodaikanal returns instead as a pilgrim of the famous Madurai Meenakshi-Amman temple; the tourist who went with the purpose of shopping for silk returns from Kanchipuram talking more about the great historical temples there than about sarees or scarves; the tourist who went to Calcutta to see the colonial splendour of the Victoria Memorial there returns instead with accounts of a trip to the Ramakrishna Mutt at Belur or Dakshinেশ্বর.

I too went to America with a tourist's expectation of plain fun and curiosity. Certainly, I did enjoy the grand sight of the New York skyline from the edge of Ellis Island. I watched too with gaping admiration, along with hundreds of tourists, the great Statue of Liberty. Again, as I drove through the maze of streets in Manhattan and past 'Ground Zero', the sad remains of the Twin Tower site of the '9/11' carnage, I too, like any ordinary tourist, could not suppress a lump in my throat.

But although America greeted me as a plain tourist—one unknown Sri Vaishnava amongst millions of a hundred other different faiths who throng the country from all parts of the globe every year—it was with a pilgrim's humble attitude that I eventually returned from the tour. And the reason was, quite simply, a temple. Yes, a temple, again indeed, but a 'temple' of an entirely different sort.

There are 106 great Sri Vaishnava temples in India designated in the Tamil language as '*divya-dEsam-s*', or sacred provinces. They are divine spots on earth for those of the Sri Vaishnava faith that live in India. Thousands of worshippers flock every year to these beautiful places. In America, across the length and breadth of the land, there are similar such wonderful 'temples'—probably 106 or even more of them—which, in my opinion, deserve no less to be duly designated and revered as '*divya-dEsam-s*'. These 'temples' are 'temples of higher learning'. I mean the great many universities of America—such as Yale, Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Duke, Brown, Princeton, and a host of others— all the great universities that collectively have made America the world's wonderland of higher education. Young and brilliant minds from the farthest corners of Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa—so many students every year --- flock to these '*divya-dEsam-s*' of advanced learning in so many fields and disciplines. It would make anyone wonder why. I was no exception.

If there be but one compelling reason for touring India and should that be in being able to visit a '*divya-dEsam*' temple, then by the same token, I would have no hesitation in saying, a tour of the USA is well worth it for the sake of a few hours spent inside any of the country's great many eminent universities. The American university as a place of lofty learning and knowledge is as sacred a patch of soil upon earth as any holy '*divya-dEsam*' I have been blessed to visit.

America, I realised, is more sacred '*gnyAna-bhoomi*' (temple of knowledge) or '*vidyA-bhoomi*' (temple of learning) than mere '*bhOga-bhUmi*' (temple of self-gratification). (Although at that time I could have had no inkling of the future event, many years later, my young son, a graduate electrical engineer from Chennai, India, too did set out on his own personal voyage of holy pilgrimage to one such '*divya-dEsa*' temple university, to pursue higher studies at the famous Duke University in the State of North Carolina.)



On a clear and fine day in spring—my first day in America—I set out from New Jersey on a long four-hour route on my first ever pilgrimage to an American ‘*divya-dEsam*’, which in this case was the University of Connecticut or ‘U-Conn’ as many young American students, I later discovered, call it with the same sort of fondness a Sri Vaishnava like me, say, would refer to the ‘*divya-dEsam*’ of Tirupati, back home in India, as ‘*malai*’ or SriRangam as ‘*kOvil*’ or Kanchipuram as ‘*Perumal-Kovil*’.

The route took me past the arterially busy George Washington Bridge, a big, bustling, and nodal gateway through which an unending stream of gnarled, and often snarling, automobile traffic gushes in and out of the states of New Jersey and neighboring Connecticut. As my car swung into the fast lane along the long, winding, and snow-swept Interstate, I became aware I’d entered, for the first time ever in my life, into a whole new fabled world—the world of the great American highways, a vast, labyrinthine, but efficient network of roadways crisscrossing miles and miles over a giant of a continent.

My companion and chaperone on the trip to the American ‘*divya-dEsam*’ was my good Muslim friend, my ‘*mitran*’, Syed Nawaz Ahmed. Nawaz and I had been classmates in school thirty and more years ago in Chennai, India. We had not met — nor had we corresponded with each other—since 1972 when we both left high school each to follow his separate way in life. It was by sheer accident—one of those miraculous happenstances one often hears occur these days on the worldwide internet circuit—it was pure happenstance that Nawaz and I came into contact again in late 2003—after almost three decades!

Nawaz had migrated to the USA in the early ’80s where in New York he had set up his own limousine car service company. He and his family had thrived, he told me, and he was now presiding over a prosperous business with many important clients including (he told me in hushed tones) ‘top-ranking officers of the FBI’!

After thirty long years, to meet up again with a dear old school friend, a dear ‘*mitran*’, in far off America was a rare moment of renaissance indeed in life. It was too a blessing of Vedic character, for had not the ‘*chamaka-prashna*’ line told me beforehand: *namitram cha may*’. For quite some strange reason, the same mantra began to ring ceaselessly in my ears, and it did not stop until long after I’d even wound up my first tour of America to return home days later.



More miracles of friendship were to follow!

Motoring down an American interstate into Connecticut with my old friend, Nawaz, I found myself eagerly looking forward to meeting with—miracle of miracles!—yet another old schoolmate of ours residing now in the ‘*divya-dEsam*’ of U-Conn. It was at the invitation of this other friend, in fact, that we, both Nawaz and I, were headed that way. We were journeying to a grand class reunion in America—three friends from Chennai who hadn’t met in more than thirty years!

His name—Narasimhan Srinivasan—he and I, I instantly recalled, had been the only two Sri Vaishnava boys in the whole of that class of ’72 way back in the Catholic missionary school where we’d studied together. ‘Hans’ (as Narasimhan] was being called by everybody in America) was now (tenured) associate professor of marketing at U-Conn. How he had changed indeed! His lectures and published papers, Nawaz later told me, were now legend in academic circles. He had attained some kind of near ‘campus-guru’ status amongst his students. But by God, Nawaz said to me, though transformed in

America into ‘Hans’, Narasimhan remained still the same old fellow we’d known in our school days, a jolly good friend, a true ‘*mitran*’.



As I now look back upon the moment of my reunion with two good friends whom I’d all but forgotten for thirty years, but brought together again by sheer, blessed accident, in far-off America, on the sacred grounds of a great American temple of learning, a ‘*divya-dEsam*’ of sorts, what can I say about such a moment except that it seemed somehow pre-ordained.

As Nawaz drove me through America past the cities of Hartford and Yale and into the snow-swept county of Glastonbury, heading towards U-Conn, the familiar chant of the ‘*chamakam*’ kept ringing silently in my ears — ‘*anamitram cha may*’.



On a bright, sunny day in spring (20 March 2004), just as the beautiful winter snow was beginning to gradually melt across the expanse of the University of Connecticut, two good friends from a distant, thirty-year past of mine—my two old schoolmates from Chennai, India, Syed Nawaz Ahmed and Prof. Narasimhan Srinivasan—they took me around on my first ever tour of the inside of a famous university in America, a country which by then I was convinced surely deserved to be acknowledged foremost as ‘*vidyA-bhUmi*’ (land devoted to learning) rather than as ‘*bhOga-bhUmi*’ (land of pleasurable self-gratification).

My first impression upon entering U-Conn was a certain sense of hallowed ‘gravitas’. It was a Saturday, a weekend, and the campus precincts remained largely empty and quiet. There were only a few score students and faculty cheerily going about their business but otherwise everywhere I looked appeared wintry and serene. Strangely, to me it felt a bit like entering into the wide and sacred spaces of the outer concourse or ‘*prAkAra*’ of some giant temple back home in India. It was the sort of feeling I’ve often felt creeping upon me on rare occasions (when there are no raucous crowds of pilgrims that usually throng) inside the massive front-yard of the Varadaraja Temple in the great ‘*divya-dEsa*’ of Kanchipuram.

The sky cleared and the air became crisp as we quickly took the tour of U-Conn strolling down the paved, tree-lined pathways, promenades, and boulevards and past the sprawling blocks of academic buildings, one following another, each housing a faculty, a separate discipline. There were so many of them that I soon lost count of the numerous branches of learning and research to which I later learnt U-Conn was host. The buildings all looked so stately with architecture so typically New England— quaint, gothic, and very imposing.

For a good part of the next hour, a virtual pageantry passed me by—libraries, stadiums, labs, auditoriums, tennis and basketball courts, dorms, cafeterias, lecture halls. As I witnessed the slow stream of grand academic sights, I couldn’t help falling momentarily into a private reverie: ‘*So here it is, the famed American university!*’ I thought to myself, ‘Here is one among America’s many great temples of learning! Here is a fabled American knowledge centre! Here is one of those knowledge nurseries from where some of the world’s greatest-ever ideas in modern science and technology have sprouted. Here is where some of the loftiest discoveries and advancements in contemporary history

have been born! Here is where the largest number of Nobel Prize heroes and laureates have come from! Here is where the best of mankind's minds from all over the world seek to come, to live, to dream, to dare, to work, and to achieve.'

As I took in all of the campus, for the first time perhaps in life, and in a moment of reflective clarity, I understood truly what is really meant when it is said there is rare joy, a certain ineffable '*aananda*', an indefinable air of romance and adventure surrounding all academia. I at once understood why poets and the wisest men of this world all speak of the university as a sacred institution, as the '*Arcadia of Academe*', as a veritable springboard, indeed, from where the human spirit, through abstract thought, can hope to soar skyward and reach the celestial spheres even.

Quite instantly, the grand opening lines of the famous Sanskrit '*stOtra*' of Swami Vedanta Desika (which he had composed in praise of the God of Gnosis, '*Lakshmi-Hayagreeva*', the Supreme Deity of Knowledge), came to my mind:

*gnyAna ananda mayam devam nirmala sphatika aakritim
aadhAram sarva vidyAnAm Hayagreevam upAsmahE*

Where there is true '*gnyAna*', as Swami's lines clearly suggest, there is always unbounded '*aananda*' too. True knowledge is true eternal joy. They are merely two sides of the same coin—you could say it is the coin of human spiritual experience God mints as legal tender in his own divine treasury, his eternal kingdom called '*Sri Vaikunttam*'.

In a place of higher learning, such as a great university, where the highest human effort is expended in trying to advance the frontiers of knowledge, there is indeed a nameless but real joy, '*Ananda*'. It is impalpable but it is certainly there in the air. It verily envelops the atmosphere. To use the AchArya's apt choice of expression, it is '*gnyAna ananda mayam*'.

It is often said, if one hasn't made pilgrimage to the ancient temple site of Benares, or hasn't walked along the banks of the great River Ganga, one can't ever claim to have felt the stirrings of the soul of India. Likewise, I felt that day, if I had not walked some distance along the silent pathways of America's great temples of learning, the hallowed universities, I would never have been able to boast as I do today: 'I have reached out and touched the breast of America and felt her vibrant heartbeat.'



As I left the shores of America, flying across the Atlantic returning home, I found myself recalling with good reason—given my experiences of my short '*yatra*', my rather unusual 'pilgrimage' to the '*divya-desams*' of the country—the great Gayatri Mantra and its beautiful soul-stirring prayer: Everything in Existence moves thanks to the great elemental force of Water. Where there is Water in abundance there indeed is to be found the fountainhead of sustenance, health, prosperity, happiness, and knowledge ('*gnyAna*') too.

*Aapo hi stha mayo bhuvah; Ta na urje dadhaatana
Mahe ranaya chaksase; Yo vah sivatamo rasah
Tasya bhajaya teha naha; Ushatiriva maatarah
Tasma aram gamama vah; Yasya ksayaya jinvaatha
Aapo janayatha cha naha.*

“The deities of Water are verily the cause of all happiness. May they please nourish us with divine vision so that we may bear witness to the glory and loveliness that fills all life.

May they act towards us as does a loving mother that feeds her children, making us fit to receive that auspicious bliss.

We pray to you eagerly, O Mother Gayatri, bless us with that illumination of understanding which, in itself is of your own form and shines forth in all these worlds.

Bestow on us, O Mother, the boon of a lifetime sanctified by the waters . . . of true knowledge”.





CHAPTER 4

‘BHOOGHA BHUMI’ AND ‘KARMA BHUMI’

A friend—one amongst the several I have in the Sri Vaishnava diaspora of the USA—asked me some time ago:

‘Sir, from the ancient *puraana*, the Srimad-Bhagavatham, we know that *Bhaaritham* or *Bhaarithavarsha* i.e., India, is the only *Karma BhUmi* on earth. All other nations and regions have been defined as *Bhoga BhUmi*. Can you kindly elaborate on this? What does it mean, what significance is to be attached to living and working in a *Bhogha-bhUmi* like the USA and in a *Karma- bhUmi* like India?’

‘It’s a very interesting question that you raise’, I told my friend, and ‘there is no easy answer to it. I will try however to provide one to the best of my meagre knowledge.’

Please remember the word ‘*bhOga*’ in Sanskrit means self-gratification, enjoyment, or delighting. And the word ‘*karma*’, as used in this context here, means ‘living life selflessly’. The saying that ‘*bhAratham*’ or India is ‘*karma-bhUmi*’ and the rest of the world is ‘*bhogha-bhUmi*’ is an age-old and very popular one, no doubt. But as far as I know, it is not founded on any clear texts from India’s religious and literary roots in the Vedas.

As you know, the majesty of Vedic appeal is universal in its sweep. The Vedas do not confine themselves to earthly territories such as ‘*bhAratham*’ or elsewhere. The Vedas give expression to universal principles and to cosmic aspirations of the universal mind of Man. They rarely speak in terms of any specific geographical boundaries. The ageless ‘*sruti*’ knows indeed no barriers, either natural or man-made, and hence does not speak in such narrow terms with such narrow sentiments.

The statement that ‘*bhAratham*’ is ‘*karma-bhUmi*’ and other nations are ‘*bhOga-bhUmi*’ is, if you examine it very carefully, a very ambiguous one. It leaves us rather unsure as to whether it is meant to present the land of India in good or bad light. Is it meant to convey pride or patriotism for India in a condescending sort of way? Or is it that by contrasting ‘*karma-bhUmi*’ with ‘*bhOga-bhUmi*’ it is trying to say something against lands other than India in a rather subtly xenophobic or jingoistic manner? We may ask, why is there no ‘*bhOga*’ at all in ‘*bhAratham*’? And conversely, is there no ‘*karma*’ at all in nations other than ‘*bhAratham*’? All these questions and ambivalent feelings crop up in our minds when we examine the statement closely.

References to ‘*karma-bhUmi*’ in the ‘*purAna*’-s are very, very rare indeed. Apart from the famous reference in the ‘*Srimadh Bhagavatham*’ one can hardly find it repeated in any other ‘*purAna*’ (except perhaps, one may argue, in the ‘*bhavishya-purAna*’ where a reference in far less similar form is made to the lands in the River Tamraparani basin in T. Nadu). Nowhere else in the ‘*purAna*’-s (to the best of my knowledge) can one come across any reference to lands other than ‘*bhAratham*’ being ‘*bhOga-bhUmi*’. It is my opinion that the word ‘*bhOga-bhumi*’ first came into use only as late as in the 1880s CE when Swami Vivekananda used it to describe the land of America while he was touring that country giving his famous series of lectures in Chicago at the World Congress of Religions.

Let's turn to the actual reference to 'karma-bhUmi' in 'Srimadh BhAgavatham':

*etadeva hi deva gAyanti
ahO amIsham kimakAri shObanam
prasanna esAm sviduta svayam HarIh:
yairjanma labdham nrshu bhAratajIrE
Mukunda sevaupayikam sprhA hi nah:

kim dushkarair nah kratubhih tapOvrataih
dAnAdibhirvA dyujayEna phalguna;
na yatrA nArAyaNa pAdapankaja
smritih pramushta atisaya indriyotsavat—

kalpAyushAm sthAna jayAt punarbhavAt
kshanAyushAm bhAratabhUjayO varam;
kshanEna martyEna krtam manasvinah:
sannyasya samyAnti abhayam padam harE:
‘srimadh bhAgavatham’ (V.xix. 20—22)*



The above verses have been translated as follows:

*The gods in Heaven sang of the glory of human birth in the
land called 'bhArata' (India):*

*Oh, what good deeds have these souls done That Hari, the indweller of all things,
Has seen it fit to reward them
With birth in the continent of India—
A birth that enables a life of loving service unto Him!*

*Oh! What would we not do to earn such a reward ourselves?
After all, what have we the denizens of these heavens achieved
Through years and years of austere 'tapa' fasting and charity?
The joys of heaven are ours to feast on, no doubt,
But alas, the memory of Narayana still escapes us.*

*Far better, we think, it is to live in Bhaaritham
Even if for but a few moments,
than ages in these heavenly provinces—
For there great souls,*

*Fearless, free, and merry—
Having renounced all unto the feet of God
Live though forever in Him!*



If you notice in the verse as well as in the translation, nowhere is there mention of ‘*bhAratha*’ as being ‘*karma-bhUmi*’—that specific word is not used at all. What is said is that the ‘*dEvA*-s’ are envious of earthlings who live in the land called ‘*bhAratam*’. Now why are they envious? Because human beings in this land can perform undisturbed ‘service to Narayana’—‘*Mukunda sevaupayikam*’. In other words, the people of India live a happy life of complete renunciation and contentment.

There is a very interesting truth here to note.

The ‘*dEvas*’ live in the celestial worlds (*svarga*). There is no dearth of delight (*bhOga*) in those worlds. The right to enjoy such celestial ‘*bhOga*’ was earned through strenuous ‘*tapa*’ and ‘*dAna*’ by the “*devas*”—*tapOvrataih dAnAdibhirvA*—i.e., through ceaseless work, sacrifice, and striving.

Yet the Bhagavatham tells us that the ‘*dEvas*’ still whine and moan! What do they complain about? They say humans in the land of India are better off than they are! Now why do they say so? Because there is no sense of fulfilment in the celestial worlds. A sense of consummation, of complete soulful satisfaction eludes even the world of ‘*devas*’.

The plight of the ‘*devas*’ in the celestial world and those of us here who live in the so-called ‘*bhOga-bhUmi*-s’ of this world are not so very dissimilar.

Living in a nation or society that has the highest standards of living is no perfect guarantee for individual happiness. We can live anywhere we choose, enjoying all kinds and modes of self-gratification and self-titillation through every conceivable means of ‘*bhOga*’. And yet (as we see in many so-called developed countries even today) we may not be able to escape suffering individual fear, misery, and unhappiness.

The purpose of the above verse from Srimadh Bhagavatham is really not to glorify the physical landscape of India or for that matter any other land in the world. Its chief purpose is only to help us understand that the greatest of ‘*bhOga-bhUmi*-s’ is no source of happiness—not for humans, not for devas—if in such a land there is no opportunity for ‘*nArAyaNa pAdapankaja smritih*’, the unending contemplation of God and loving service to Him.

The ‘*bhOga*’ available plentifully in a particular land may well be the fruit of great ‘*tapas*’ and ‘*dAna*’—of ceaseless work, sacrifice, striving, and charity. But if such ‘*bhOga*’ distracts one away from or, worse still, impedes ‘*nArAyaNa pAdapankaja smritih*’ or ‘*Mukunda Seva*’—of what use then is living in such a land? The devas in the Bhagavatham hence are seen to exclaim, ‘Better to live in the land of humans, where means of *bhOga* are far inferior to our own in our celestial realms and yet be able to sing the Glory of God than to live in this heaven—*svarga*—and lose all thought of Him!’



The ‘*bhAratham*’ or India of the Srimadh Bhagavatham days was obviously a nation where ‘*nArAyaNa pAdapankaja smritih*’ was widely prevalent amongst the people and which is why Sage Vyasa perhaps made the ‘*devAs*’ appear so envious of the citizens of India.

Whether such a similar state as Vyasa witnessed in those ancient times still exists today in present- day ‘*bhAratham*’ or, for that matter, anywhere else in the world, is a moot and debatable question. But one thing that can be indisputably asserted is this: the real land of ‘*bhAratham*’ lies anywhere and everywhere where there is true and constant ‘*nArAyaana-smritih*’, the unceasing contemplation of Narayana!





CHAPTER 5

PURIFICATION AT GIZA

In the summer of the year 2003, I was in Cairo, Egypt, for a few days and seized the opportunity to visit the Great Pyramids of Al-Giza and Saqqara.

The monumental pyramids of the Giza are three in number. To this day they rank as one of the world's greatest wonders whose glory and grandeur remain unsurpassed by lesser monuments, past and present. The first is the great pyramid of the Pharaoh King Khufu whom the ancient Greeks called 'Cheops'. The second, and only slightly smaller one, is a few kilometres away from the first and is the great pyramid of Khufu's heir, the Pharaoh King, Khafre. And the third one, not far from the second, is known as the Pyramid of Menkaure, the son of Khafre.

These great pyramids of Giza are only three, amongst almost a one hundred others of lesser stature and fame known today to have survived four thousand and more years of history. They stand now dotting the vast lands of Egypt, from Aswan to Alexandria, through which the great River Nile flows.

The sight of the Giza pyramids is a sight for the gods, indeed! They truly take their breath away. The pyramid of Khufu is a massive structure of 3.5 million blocks of ageless limestone. Each block weighs an average of 2.5 tons although some weigh as much as 30 to 60 tons each! The pyramid rises majestically, an awesome monolith in the desert, hovering straight above the bright, shimmering sands of the barren pharaonic landscape—481 ft. into the clear azure skies (almost twice the height of the '*rajagOpuram*' at the temple of Sri Ranganatha at SriRangam temple); and it stretches for 751 feet on each side covering a massive area of 564,000 sq. ft. (bigger than any '*prAkAra*' I have seen back home in India). It simply dwarfs and overwhelms everything in its vicinity by sheer size and presence.

For 4,500 long years since Giza was built, the pyramid of Khufu has weathered everything that time or history has thrown at it. It has survived floods, earthquakes, violent sandstorms, and plague. It has stood witness to some of the greatest epochal events of the world ever since the dawn of human history—wars, invasions, upheavals, and vandals. It is said that Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon have all in their own times stood at its feet and marveled at this ancient edifice. Historians, travelers, archaeologists, artists of every generation have been captivated, even mesmerized, by the unfading magic of Giza. It is an old Arab saying, '*The world fears time; yet time fears the pyramids.*'

On a strangely quiet and dustless summer forenoon in May 2003, beneath a cloudless sky with brilliant Egyptian sunshine beating down the melancholy sand dunes of a Giza skyline, I too, like some lone, unknown traveler of the past, stood silently watching the great pyramid of Khufu, taking in its ageless mystique, ruminating on its distant legends and tales, feebly trying to unravel what has remained ever unraveled, trying to understand what has yet been barely understood, in other words, what to this day remains the inscrutable immortality of the Giza.



It is not only by its physical magnificence that Khufu's pyramid deeply stirs one's soul.

The pharaonic Egyptians deeply believed in an after-life awaiting the human spirit. In this they were quite like all great religions of the world that went before and after the Nile civilisation. The Vedic religion, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam—all do postulate an after-life. The afterlife these faiths speak about is the afterlife of the soul (*atmA*) alone. The body (*dEha*), according to these faiths, is abandoned by the soul (*'atmA'*) before it embarks upon the onward journey into the heavenly realms. The pharaonic faith however differs from this view. The Egyptians believed death did not necessarily render the body useless for the purposes of the soul. They believed that in the journey of the afterlife, no less than in the soul's earthly sojourn, the spirit (*atmA*) continues to employ the body (*'sarIra'*) as its vehicle.

The unique pharaonic practice of preserving the mortal remains of their great kings was founded precisely on the above belief. When a great king like Khufu or Djoser died, his body was meticulously embalmed and entombed according to ancient, esoteric rites of mummification. (They even deified a god of mummification whom they called 'Annabis'). These elaborate rites and processes took about seventy days. The corpse was then placed inside an ornate vault (like the famous Tomb of Tutankhamen—110 kgs. of solid gold!). All the dead king's personal effects too were buried alongside the sarcophagus since it was believed that every item of daily use in this world would be needed to continue serving the king in his journey across the other world. And thus it was that, in the tomb of Tutankhamen when it came to be excavated centuries later, historians found all manner of royal treasures inside the great pyramid—regal wardrobe, great thrones, chariots, palanquins, priceless jewels, boats and oars, and even 365 little iconic replicas made of the finest alabaster . . . all representing a king's personal courtiers, royal servants, and retinue who would render unto the king every single day of the year all manner of services befitting a king even in the other-world!

It was thus that everything that had been put inside the great Giza 4,500 years ago, the mummy, the sarcophagus, the tomb, and all kinds of royal paraphernalia, everything was found intact in exactly the same condition as perhaps it had been first placed! It became a marvel and a wonder the world had never witnessed before! It was as though through their great pyramids, the ancient Egyptians had virtually bidden time and eternity to stand in frozen stillness! Giza was not only an architectural marvel; more importantly, it was also a bold statement of a metaphysical idea of towering proportions. What idea? The idea that, after all, time can be conquered by man. It was the seed of this idea, the human conception of the pyramid as it first arose, germinated, and then sprouted in the minds of the ancient Egyptians, and which eventually inspired and gave birth to those towering tombs we see today in Giza, it is that idea itself that is indeed far more arresting and overpowering than the monument's physical presence.

Khufu's pyramid truly leaves us wondering again and again, and yet again: *'Whither did the Egyptian pharaoh conceive the pyramid? What motivation, what soul-force was it that made whole generations of common Egyptian quarry-workers, artisans, and sculptors toil away a large part of their individual lives helping to erect these massive temples for their dead kings? What larger and innermost aspiration of the human soul is it of which these pyramids are but outward expressions? Were these great tombs of the Pharaoh Kings built only to symbolize man's defiance in the face of death? Or were they meant to be man's humble acknowledgement of the eternal nature of time?'*



For a casual visitor like me who came from an altogether different part of the world, and from a distinctly distant cultural background, i.e., Vedic and Sri Vaishnava, feelings towards the great Pyramids of Giza can be quite unexpectedly mixed.

Though marvel and reverence did predominate my feelings, I could not, however, suppress a vague sense of distaste arising in me as I stood witnessing the spectacle of Giza. Grand and glorious as the pyramid truly was, I could not help thinking, the prime purpose to which it had been put to use by the ancient Egyptians, was '*prEta-samskAra*'—i.e., the pyramid essentially represented a funereal institution. And to my Vedic sensitivity, Giza really belonged in the '*smashaana-bhUmi*'—a graveyard or a crematorium where the last remains of '*deha*' are confined and a wholly unfit and inauspicious ('*asowcham*') place for any human purpose from every Vedic viewpoint.

The true Vedic adherent or Sri Vaishnava has indeed no use or regard at all for the body after the soul has left it. It is the '*atmA*', not the '*dEha*', which is eternal and timeless. Yet the hallowed quality of timelessness, that quality of eternity which the majestic pyramids seek to symbolize, it is, after all, associated with the body of an ancient pharaoh king, isn't it? And hence how could I, a Vedic follower, stand here atop the dry and barren desert of the Giza plateau and gaze with awe and wonder at the tomb of Khufu?

Back in my hotel room that evening, I could not resist the urge to quickly get into a cold shower and rub myself down thoroughly in a bath. Deep down in my heart I felt pulled by some strong, nagging, and atavistic Vedic sentiment to go and get myself an ablution and quickly perform a few score spirit-cleansing '*gayatri-japa*'. Or else, I feared, the defilement of the graveyard—in other words, the '*asowcham*' of the '*smashaanam*' I had somehow, rightly or wrongly, begun to associate with the Great Pyramid of Giza—that particularly magnificent defilement (or '*theetu*') would never rub off me!



Every evening at the site of the Giza pyramids they hold what has now become a world-renowned 'sound-and-light show'. This show has now become a fabulous tourist attraction—an 'absolute must'—for anybody visiting Egypt. Under the open twilight sky and amidst the ancient monuments, this show employs modern technology—laser lights, holograms, psychedelic ray beams, and stereophonic soundbites—to present the magnificent pyramids, the Sphinx, and the pharaonic Valley Temple at Giza under splendidous arc-lights, sound, and colour.

In spite of the previous day's misgivings about visiting a '*smashana-bhUmi*', I found myself once again attracted by the magnetic pull the sight of the great Giza exerts on anyone's mind. And before I could say '*dEha*' (or '*prEta-samskAra*'!), I found myself once again seated at the foot of the Khufu pyramid, enveloped by a silent, gathering twilight. I gazed for long again at the looming hulk of the ancient relic. I sat utterly transfixed, humbled in way I could scarcely explain to myself, enchanted by its ghostly shadows, I became captive once again of the Giza's matchless mastery, its haunting, enduring mystery.

'Ah! How wonderful it would be', I said to myself wistfully, how wonderful it would be to stand like this day after day and keep beholding time itself frozen, as it were, in a moment and in a form as grand as this pyramid! How wonderful indeed it would be, as the poet William Blake once said, to *hold eternity in the palm of your hand*.'

*To see a world in a grain of sand
and heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
and eternity in an hour. (William Blake)*



It was then that a strange, final thought flashed across my mind like a streak of passing revelation.

- The purpose of the ancient pyramid of the pharaonic age and that of the timeless ‘mantra’ of the Vedic faith—like the ‘gAyatri-mantra’ for instance—are, after all, one and the same, aren’t they?
- Both enable us, do they not, to witness and experience the essential timelessness residing within each of us?
- Both in their own separate ways do tell us, do they not, of our kinship with things far beyond this world, with things far greater and subtler than ‘dEha’?
- The Giza is only 4,500 years old. The ‘gAyatri’ is simply dateless. When we look at the Giza, we feel a profound sense of timelessness. How much more intense, indeed—we should pause to think—how much more reverential should that sense of ‘*anantham*’ or infinitude then really become every time we utter the ‘gAyatri-mantra’ which is, in a manner of speaking, a thousand times more ‘timeless’ than the Giza?
- The sheer size of Giza of the ancient pharaohs inspires reverence in us. How much more reverence then should the ‘*vEda-giri*’—that towering body of ‘*mantra-shabdha*’ handed down to us by our ancient ‘*rshi-s*’ of India—how much more reverence, indeed, should that Vedic tower of vibrant sound, a thousand times taller than any pyramid, inspire in our hearts?
- To witness Giza in all its majesty and splendor, one needs to travel far to the valley of the River Nile and wait for the twilight hour before one can cup the eternal moment in the palm of one’s hand. To visit the ‘gAyatri’, I need merely to await the hour of the ‘*sandhyA*’ every day, cup a mere few drops of water in the hollow of my palms, utter the ‘mantra’ sonorously within the quietude of my heart, delve silently into my mind, and then watch myself drift away gently into the arms of eternity.





CHAPTER 6

THE SIX VEDIC ‘*DHIK-S*’ OR DIRECTIONS

Once in the year 2001, while on an official trip to the great city of Tokyo and Shimizu in Japan, I came across one morning a strangely wonderful experience in the hotel room into which I had checked.

I had just finished ‘*prAtah-sandhyAvandanam*’, the ritual performed by all Sri Vaishnavas thrice daily, dawn, noon, and dusk, in obeisance to the mother of all Vedic deities: Goddess Gaayatri. As you all know, towards the end of the ‘*sandhyA*’, we offer salutations (‘*namaskAram*’) to the ‘six directions’ or six ‘*dhiks*’ (Sanskrit) or ‘*disai*’ (Tamil) by circumambulation clockwise, by turning on our heels facing each direction one after another viz. first, east (*prAchi*), then south (*dakshina*), west (*prateechee*), north (*udeechi*), zenith (*oordhva*), and nadir (*adhara*).

Having finished the ‘*sandhyA*’, I quickly got ready to go to work. But noticing that I had a little more time to spare, I picked up the complimentary copy of *The Teachings of the Buddha* the hotel had provided in the room. Casually flipping through the same, I was astonished to find that the very first page I turned was the following passage from the Buddha’s teachings:

‘There is a custom that has come down from ancient times that common people still follow. When they get up in the morning, they wash their face and rinse their mouth, and they bow in the six directions one after another—to the east, west, south, north, above, and below—wishing that no misfortune may come to them from any direction and that they may have a peaceful day.

‘But it is different in the Buddha’s teaching. Buddha teaches that we are to pay respect to the six directions of truth and then that we are to behave wisely and virtuously and thus prevent all misfortunes happening to us.

‘Now what are these six directions of truth? They are east for the way of parents and child, south for the way of teacher and pupil, west for the way of husband and wife, north for the way of a man and his friend, below for the way of master and servant, and above for the way of the disciples of Buddha.

‘A child should honour his parents and do for them all that he is supposed to do. He should serve them, help them at their labour, cherish the family lineage, protect the family property, and hold memorial services after they have passed away.

‘The parents should do five things for their children: avoid doing evil, set an example of good deeds, give them an education, arrange for their marriage, and let them inherit the family wealth at a proper time. If the parents and child follow these rules, the family will always live in peace.

‘A pupil should always rise when his teacher enters, wait upon him, follow his instructions well, not neglect an offering for him and listen respectfully to his teaching.

‘At the same time, a teacher should act rightly before a pupil and set a good example for him; he should correctly pass on to him the teaching he has learned; he should use good methods and try to prepare the pupil for honours; and he should not forget to protect the pupil from evil in every possible way. If a teacher and his pupil observe these rules, their association will move smoothly.

‘A husband should treat his wife with respect, courtesy, and fidelity. He should leave the housekeeping to her and sometimes provide for her needs, such as accessories. At the same time, a wife should take

pains with the housekeeping, manage the servants wisely, and maintain her virtue as a good wife should. She should not waste her husband's income and should manage the house properly and faithfully. If these rules are followed, a happy home will be maintained and there will arise no quarrelling.

'The rules of friendship mean that there should be mutual sympathy between friends, each supplying what the other lacks and trying to benefit the other, always using friendly and sincere words. In this way, their friendship will be maintained, and they will be increasingly happy together.

'A master in his dealings with a servant should observe five things: He should assign work that is suitable for the servant's abilities, give him proper compensation, care for him when he is in ill health, share pleasant things with him, and give him needed rest.

'A servant should observe five things: He should get up in the morning before his master and go to bed after him, should always be honest, take pains to do his work well, and try not to bring discredit to his master's name. If these rules are observed, there will be peace and no controversy between master and servant.

'A disciple of Buddha should see to it that his family observes the teachings of the Buddha. They should cherish respect and consideration for their Buddhist teacher, should treat him with courtesy, attend to and obey his instructions, and always have an offering for him.

'Then the teacher of Buddha's teaching should rightly understand his teaching, rejecting wrong interpretations, emphasizing the good, and should seek to lead believers along a smooth path. When a family follows this course, keeping the true teaching as its centre, it will thrive happily.

'A man who bows in the six directions does not do so in order to escape from external misfortunes. He does it to be on his guard to prevent evils from arising within his own mind.

'It is wrong to think that misfortunes come from the east or from the west; they originate within one's own mind. Therefore, it is foolish to guard against misfortunes from the external world and leave the inner mind uncontrolled.'



On reading the Buddhist conceptions of the spatial directions of the cosmos, I was struck by the coincidence of the situation! It made me think about the parallel reasons why in the 'sandhya' ritual we Vedic followers of the Sri Vaishnava fold too offer our daily salutations (*vandanam*) to the six 'disai-s'.

In our Vedic pantheon, there are '*Dhik-paalakaas*', deities who are said to be guardians of the different directions, the '*dhiks*' by which man is surrounded all his mortal life. These deities (*devatas*) are, for example, Somaraaja to the North, Yama (Lord of Death) to the South, Devendra to the East, and Varuna the Lord to the West, and so on.

At the end of the '*sandhyaavandanam*' rite, which we perform daily, we Vedic adherents ritually turn to each of these Dhiks or directions and offer our grateful salutations to these '*Devatas of Direction*', the '*Dhik-paalakaas*', thanking them for providing us humans on earth, on a daily basis without ever failing, with wherewithal and sustenance of every conceivable kind (in the Christian prayer these are referred to collectively by the metaphor '*Daily Bread*') necessary for our continued well-being and prosperity on earth viz. rains, water, fresh air, fertility of soil, plentiful food, and so on.

The Dhiks or deities of directions in the Vedic faith are meant indeed to remind us daily that in the vast overwhelming universe surrounding us, we need not feel that we are nothing in it but an utterly inconsequential, insignificant, and ineffectual speck. On the contrary, the Vedic rite of ‘*sandhyaavandanam*’ affirms and grants to us our rightful spot in the infinite expanse of the cosmos; it is the Dhiks, the guardians, or deities of the six conceivable cosmic directions thus who provide for us our clear and present spatio-geographical coordinates in the spiritual continuum that verily is our existence. We get a sense thus of what really constitutes our spiritual locus in vast, immeasurable cosmic metaphysics. If the Dhik-paalakaas did not exist, we as atomic spiritual particles floating through the mystery of eternal time and space would simply have no clue to who we are, where we come from, and where are we going.

One’s spirit, in other words, would be utterly directionless. It is the sense of ‘*dhik*’ or ‘*disai*’ that indeed gives us a comforting sense of spatio-temporal mooring amidst a dark, cold, and frighteningly impersonal void of a limitless, dimensionless universe. Without it, our mind would teeter on edge and become unhinged from itself. It would find itself all at sea and unable to recognize or realize its essential relation with the reality called *Atman*, the eternal soul, in which it remains rooted.





CHAPTER 7

“GAAYATRI” AT DWAARAKA

My desire to visit the famous **Dwaarakadeesa Temple of Sri Krishna** in Gujarat had been a longtime one ever since, at the rather late age of 21, my beloved parents finally thought it was time for me to undergo the sacred rite of passage called the “*upanayana samskaara*” and become a “*Dvija*” like all other Brahmin boys.

In the Vedic scheme of *Varnaashrama-dharma*, a young boy undergoes investiture with the sacred “*Gaayatri brahmopadesam*” before he commences his 12 or 15-year long period of Vedic education in life as a “*Brahmachari*”. In my case, sadly, it was the reverse: I completed my graduation in Loyola College, Madras University, before I became rather ripe and amenable to receiving the grace of the mother of all spiritual grace, **Devi Gaayatri Maatha**. I do not however rue the delay in Grace . . . the grace called “*Bhagavath kataaksham*” when it finally entered my life. Everything that happens to oneself in life . . . every event and experience . . . is timed perfectly by the Almighty.

One of the best things about the Gaayatri is that it inculcates in every “*dvija*” a virtuous habit of constancy: I’m talking about the prescribed “*best practice*” of daily “*Sandhya Vandanam*”. Performing the Sandhya ritual faithfully for the last 40+ years has ingrained in me a certain steadfastness of mental focus that is very hard to define or describe in mere words. The ritual is a reward in itself. You do not need to perform Sandhya for any purpose other than itself. It is a “*nishkaama karma*” in the best sense of the word and idea exactly as explained in the Bhagavath Gita. The deep significance of *nishkaama karma* dawns on one only when it is performed constantly, ceaselessly and willingly . . . which is why the Sandhya ritual—performed at dawn, noon and dusk by every “*dvija*”—has been enjoined on us as a “*nithya karma*” . . . the small daily act of spiritual renunciation which ultimately influences, defines and determines the very course and direction of one’s spiritual journey and destiny. It helps one greatly in retaining focus on the real goal of human life: “*Parama purushaartham*” which in the Sri Vaishnava tradition is the special name given to the Vedantic concept of salvation, “*moksha*”.

Those who perform the Sandhya daily will know that at the very end of the ritual when oblation is completed, they are enjoined to repeat a very sacred and poignant Shloka. This *shloka* is found in the Mahabharata and is said to be Draupadi’s plaintive cry of despair, her desperate call for aid that burst forth from her heart as she beseeched Lord Krishna to come to her rescue in the moment of distress and when an existential crisis had overtaken her:

**“Sri Sankha Chakra gadhaa paaNe
Dwaarakaa nilayaachutha
Govinda pundareekaaksha
Rakshamaam saraNaagatam!”**

When I first started performing the daily Sandhya soon after my *upanayana*, the significance of this little Shloka that I used to recite by rote was completely lost on me. To me it was just a piece of ritual litany. I gave no thought to it. But over the years as I grew older in life, the constant and repetitive chant of the Shloka gradually opened up its deeper import for me, leading to a more intuitive understanding of it.

The Shloka talks about “*Saranaagatha*” . . . a soul surrendering itself to a higher agency of life. Surrender happens only when the soul realises its true nature of utter dependence on God . . . the realization of helpless “*paaratantraya*”: I have no existence at all without the grace of the *parabrahmam*. Such indeed was the realization that had dawned on Draupadi in her moment of crisis. It struck her with the mighty force of a revelation that her life, her identity, her mind, faculties, her consciousness were all nothing that she could own or possess or call her very own without the Grace of an Almighty God whose own existence and presence, though felt everywhere and at all times and in all circumstances of life, yet remained unseen, unknown and ungraspable.

Draupadi turned towards the direction of the city of Dwaaraka then. It was as though her deepest instinct told her that the Unseen, Unknown and Ungraspable Presence of the Almighty was verily there as living reality less than a thousand miles away from where she stood in the city of Hastinapur. Since Krishna lived then in Dwaaraka, she called out to him desperately as “*Dwaarakaa-nilayaachyutha*”!

In a trice the truth was revealed then to her: her Salvation was not an eternity away . . . it was near at hand; that she needn’t anymore struggle and thrash about in life for it; it was there just for the asking and the taking. It stood there like the sun shining on a morning sky on a clear fresh day in spring . . . she merely had to stand there and bask in its warmth and felicity . . . it stood there as the presence of **Sri Krishna in Dwaaraka!**



Every time I have performed the Sandhya all these years in my life, at dawn, noon and dusk, I have never ceased to be amazed by this little concluding Shloka. It is one of the most marvelous passages in the entire annals of Vedantic *Puraana* literature. Every time I chanted it, the miracle of Draupadi and *Saranaagathi* seemed to flash inside my mind like some vision. Every time I chanted it, my desire to travel the journey of barely a few thousand miles from my home deep in the south of India, in the city of Chennai, all the way to the sacred soil of Dwaaraka took deeper and deeper roots . . . until at last the

desire became an obsession that would not leave me until I had myself made a pilgrimage to the place where Krishna was said to have lived and ruled . . . and from where indeed he bestowed on Draupadi the reward for her *Saranaagathi* in life, Salvation or “*moksha-rakshakam*”.

Finally, on one fine summer day in May 2018, I did make it to the Temple of Dwaarakaa. I went there simply to perform the Sandhya ritual and to chant Draupadi’s Shloka. It was reward in itself! I sought nothing else but to be able to proudly claim that I had accomplished something even Draupadi in the Mahabharata hadn’t been able to do: she wasn’t physically present in Dwaarakaa when her prayer went forth from her heart and lips, whereas I was there myself in person and in his very presence and I had repeated Draupadi’s prayer to Krishna!





CHAPTER 8

ADI SANKARACHAARYA'S TRIBUTE TO HIS MOTHER: “MAATRU PANCHAKAM”.

In March 2002, when I was in Kuwait where I was living and working then, my mother called me one day from Chennai, India, on the phone to give me both good news and bad news.

First, she gave me the bad news: her diabetes and heart condition were getting worse. And the good news was that the Government of India was offering to grant her the **Padma Shri Award** in recognition of her lifetime contributions to classical Carnatic music of South India. Would I be able to be travel from Kuwait to New Delhi and be present on the occasion in the Rashtrapati Bhavan when the President of India conferred on her the national honor?

I flew the following day in late March 2002 to Delhi and was proud to be present when President K R Narayanan conferred the award on her in the central hall of the Presidential quarters at a grand but solemn ceremony.

After the ceremony the President graciously invited my mother, other awardees and guests like me for tea. It was one of her proudest moments in life. And for my father and the rest of the family too.

On the way back to her hotel that evening in the car she turned to me and said, “I am happy, my son, life has been good to me. God has been generous to me. He has given me a loving family, fame, career success and fulfillment. You are happy. My daughter-in-law, husband and grandchildren are all happy. This is the moment I should be departing from this world. A moment when all the world around me I see is so happy”. I chided my mother then for speaking of death at a moment when we were all celebrating her achievements in life.

I flew out to return next morning back to Kuwait after seeing her off with my father on their flight back to Chennai.

On July 12 *Sangitha Kalanidhi Padma Shri* Dr Mani Krishnaswami breathed her last.

A year after she passed away, I came across Adi Sankara's “*maatru panchakam*”, a verse the great Achaarya had composed in memory of his mother in Kaladi, Kerala, who had passed away while Sankara was in *sanchaaram*, wandering about on foot on his spiritual mission somewhere in North India. In the verse Sankara expresses his deepest regret for not being with his mother in her last dying days on earth. He begs forgiveness and sings in praise of her memory in such endearingly simple, lilting and beautiful lyrics that his poem becomes verily the idealization of Motherhood itself.

When I read the words of the Sanskrit original of *Maatru Panchakam* my heart broke with grief for my own mother in whose last moments in this world I could not be present. There was no way that my feeble heart or humble vocabulary could match the great Adi Sankara's in giving voice to what we all know is common human grief when we are bereaved of a mother. But I then thought I could do the next best thing possible: write a personal appreciation of *Maatru Panchakam* in my own personal way just to soothe the pain in my own wrenched spirit.

That was how I came to write this essay.



Adi Sankara's "*maatru-panchakam*"

In large parts of the world—certainly in the English-speaking Western countries—the second Sunday of May every year is celebrated as “MOTHER’S Day”.

In India, people don’t make such a fuss about Mother’s Day, though for the sake of their dear mothers they really ought to. To the faithful of the Veda/Vedantic Path (“*vedAnta-mArga*”), the “*Veda-vAkya*” is an article of faith to be embraced in both precept and practice, in letter and spirit, in part and entirety. One oft-quoted “*Veda vAkya*” known to millions of Indians across the world is this one: “*maatru devO bhava!*” “Revere thy mother as if she were a celestial on earth!” This pithy Veda ‘*vAkya*’ appears in the Taittiriya Upanishad under the section known as “*sIkshAvalli*”.

At first glance, the statement does not appear profound. In fact, it sounds like a bland and well-worn platitude, a “*motherhood*” statement, a piece of holy didactic. Most truisms of the world indeed sound like dull platitudes when, long after they were first enunciated, they get repeated a zillion times by a zillion people who quote it at the drop of a zillion proverbial hats at every opportune occasion. Such holy ‘*vAkya*-s’ sink so very deep into the collective subconscious of ordinary people they usually end up being hailed as “*gospel truth*”; and “*gospel truth*” is so obvious it often sounds trite . . . a tad banal and boring too. The great sense of awe and wonder they first aroused, or the curiosity and debates they once inspired amongst people, gradually pales and then diminishes altogether. The hallowed “*vAkya*” ends up being taken so much for granted and for good reason too.

For much the same reason, I confess I too have long taken the famous Upanishad ‘*vAkya*’ of “*maatru devO bhava!*” as a rather didactic piece of Vedic injunction—a bland matter of fact in life: to be taken as much for granted in much the same way a mother’s love for her child is taken for granted everywhere in the world, both human and animal.

In the year 2002, my mother died suddenly. At the time of her death, I was living and working for over 10 years on foreign shores far away from home in Chennai, India. I remember well the rude shock and pain I felt when word of her death reached me via telephone. Until that precise moment in life I had assumed my mother would always be around in my world. The fact of her death refused to register in

my mind for quite a while. It felt absurd and surreal somehow that she, who had seemed for so long a constant in my world, at a single stroke of Fate's pen, had been simply deleted and cancelled irrevocably. In those black moments of grief, I was moved to recall Shelley's famous lines:

*"Now the last day of many days
All beautiful and bright as Thou,
The loveliest and the last, is dead.
So, arise, Memory, and write its praise!
Up, to thy wonted work!
Come, trace the epitaph of glory fled,
For now, the Earth has changed its face,
A frown is on the Heaven's brow."*

("Recollection": Percy B. Shelley)



When one's mother passes away the Earth's face does seem to change and a dark, permanent frown seems to appear on Heaven's brow.

When a parent is lost, it is a bit like losing a little part of ourselves. When one's mother dies, it is the closest to a near-authentic near-death experience one can get. It then takes months and sometimes years to overcome the sense of loss that envelops one who has lost a dear mother. In those silent grieving years we start searching for solace in poetry, in philosophy or religion. It becomes, we realize in time, very much a search really for the meaning of our own existence on earth. It is also, in many ways unclear to our own selves, a silent but intense search for answers to the larger unspoken questions about love, life, death and salvation.

For several years after my mother's demise, I found myself unable to come to terms with the loss. And it was to help me overcome such feelings of helplessness and drift that one day my wife recommended to me that I read and ruminate upon Adi Sankara bhagavathpAdA's poignant Sanskrit elegy to the memory of his mother, the 5-stanza "*maathru-panchakam*".

The "*maathru-panchakam*" is balm to any bereaved son. It is a fitting paeon, I would like to think, to be sung in praise of all mothers whose memory the children of this world value and cherish life-long. It is a hymn that is even apt and perfect indeed to recollect and recite on the occasion of "*Mother's Day*".



Reproduced below is an English transliteration and translation of "*maathru-panchakam*" in my own words. I hope readers will enjoy this little but magnificent work of Adi Sankara. It does not matter which Vedantic school or "*mattam*" or "*darsana*" one belongs or is affiliated to in order to be able to appreciate and enjoy the "*maathru panchakam*" . . . so long as one loves one's mother and genuinely wishes to express gratitude to her on any fitting occasion. Following the translation, is a short personal commentary on the 5 stanzas of the "*maathru-panchakam*" inspired by the inner delight I derived and

experienced while reading this most intimate, this most human of all of **Sankara BhagavathpAdA's** works.

maatru-panchakam

- (1) *“aasthAm tAvadiyam prasUti samayE durvArshUla’vyayAda nairUchyE tanushOshaNam malamayee sharayyA cha sAmvatsaree I ekasyApi na garbha-bhAra bharaNa-klEsha-sasya yasyamakshamah: dAtUm nishkrutimmunanntOpi tanayah: tasyai janannyai namah: II*

In the throes of painful labor, O mother, you suffered much to beget me who was then but mere burden of ugly, noxious fetal flesh to be borne long and patiently. And so you did with loving expectation! For that one act of love—One act and the gift of suffering, O mother, nothing that I offer thee shall ever suffice as fitting repayment except eternal worship at thy feet!

- (2) *gurukulamupasrutya svapnakAlE tu dhrushtvA yatisamuchitavEsham prArudO mAm tvamuchhyai: I gurukulamaBhasarvE prArudathE samaksham sapadi charanayOh: tE mAtarastu praNAmah: II*

How can I forget the overwhelming love you felt for me! Remember the day, O mother, when you came running from home all the way to the doorsteps of my teacher’s school with tears welling up in your eyes to tell us about an ill-omened dream you’d had the night before—a dream that spoke of the imminence of a mother’s loss when the son appeared dressed in the ochre robes of a renunciant: the nomadic mendicant ‘sannyAsi’. You were heart-broken that day, O mother, and you broke the hearts of my teacher and my fellow students too, so forceful was your motherly passion!

- (3) *na dattam mAtastE maraNasamayE tOyamapi vA svabaddhA bA nOdEyA maraNadivasE shraddha-vidhinA I na japtO mAtastE maraNa-samayE tArakamanuh: a kAlE samprAptE mayi kuru dayAm mAtaratulAm II*

In your final moments, O mother, I regret I wasn’t around to be able to hold you in my arms, help quench your parched throat with those morsels of water every son pours into the lips of a dying parent as a last farewell gift. The vows of ‘sannyAsa’ I embraced, O mother, held me back from the rites of “shrAddha” meant for your soul; Nor could I administer to thee, as every dutiful son should, the words of the sacred chant of “taraka-nAma mantra” as you breathed your last. I turned up late, so very late, O mother of mine, to bid farewell. Show me kindness, a mother’s kindness, in your very last act of forgiveness for the son that failed you.

- (4) *mUkthA maNistvam nayanam mameti rAjEtijeevEti chiram sutathvam I ithyukthavatyA tava vaachi mAtah: dadAmyaham tandulamEva-shushkam II*

“My precious gem”, “My precious eyes”, “My little king”, “My very breath and life!” . . . Such were the terms of endearment you used to heap upon me, O mother! For all the love showered on me in such phrases, I have only these few uncooked seeds of rice to pour upon your lifeless lips in solemn and final thanks as sacred obsequy: a token of the un-cancellable debt this son owes his mother.

- (5) *ambEti tAtEti shiveti tasmin prasUtikAlE yadavOcha ucchaih: I krishnEti gOvinda hare mukundE tyahO janannyai rachitOyamajalih: II*

When you brought me forth into the world from out of your agonized but compassionate womb, you uttered aloud, it is said, the holy names of God: “O Divine Mother! O Lord my father! “O Shiva! O Krishna! Govinda! “Harey! Mukunda!” That was an act of kindness too, O mother! For

that was the chant of sacred names and the moment of my deliverance too! How shall I thank thee for that deed except by offering thou my soul's eternal worship!



Commentary on Verse 1:

The expression “*durvArshUla'vyayAda*” is very significant. It is Sankara's phrase for the “ugly, noxious” embryo that takes seed inside a mother's womb and begins to grow for 9 long months before the moment of birth arrives when it gets to see daylight for the first time ever in life. There are 2 profound ideas this phrase evokes in the mind of the reader:

- (1) Firstly, during the 9-month long pregnancy, a mother undergoes all kinds of pain, discomfort and bodily trials about which the fetus knows nothing at all—not during incubation, not after birth, and not after growth into adulthood. None of us in the world can ever imagine or realize fully what a terrible physical burden we must have been to our mothers while she carried us. Our existence in our mother's womb was unquestionably parasitical. Now, the natural biological response of any host-body to a parasite is to try rejecting and expelling it. But our beloved mothers, all through the 9-month long period of pregnancy, give the parasite nothing but “TLC”—tender loving care in gratuitous and spontaneous measure. One who has received an act of extraordinary favor, beneficence or kindness in life from another must never fail to show due gratitude. It is easy to feel and show proper gratitude for known or clearly recollected acts of kindness. But how is one to show due gratitude for the hundred little acts of loving kindness our mothers showered upon us during the difficult days of pregnancy—such acts always remaining unknown to us and ever beyond possible recollection?
- (2) The second central idea in the stanza is this: The mother's love for her unborn fetus is a unique one indeed. The feeling of love does not arise in the human breast unaided or in an utterly spontaneous manner, out of the void or a vacuum as it were. Love is inspired by sterling qualities—those qualities of body, mind and heart that the lover perceives the object of love to be possessing. Romeo loved Juliet for her beauty, for instance; King Midas craved gold for its value; the average Indian cricketer fan loves Sachin Tendulkar for his genius. To love somebody or something is thus always love felt for certain palpably attractive, endearing qualities or attributes (“*guNa-visEsha*”): physical, mental, moral or intellectual. If you wish to arouse love in someone, you must necessarily possess some quality or attribute, bodily or mental, that the other will find attractive or “lovable”.

Now, a human embryo taking shape inside the mother's womb is nothing but an amorphous and unattractive piece of growing tissue. It has no character. It has no identity or intelligence. It has no great qualities of beauty, intelligence or virtue, nothing certainly that anyone would want to describe as endearing or attractive. The raw and clear truth is the human fetus is not exactly “lovable”; in a purely physical or mundane sense, it is quite grotesque, and it can only arouse feelings of queasy revulsion in everyone. Everyone except the mother.

The pregnant mother alone is overwhelmed with extraordinary feelings of love overflowing towards what Sankara describes as “*durvArshUla'vyayAda*”—an amorphous piece of living tissue possessing no apparent or palpable human quality even remotely “lovable”, “attractive” or “endearing”. But our mothers gave us all such extraordinary love in spite of our pathetic fetal state when we were all undefined, attribute-less and under-embodied.

At the very beginning of our earthly existence, we were all indeed nothing but mere genetic speck, biological cipher and grotesque morphological monstrosity. The rest of the world would have regarded us certainly as nothing but that; our mothers, however, saw us differently and treated us differently. It is the mother who looked upon us as part of her very own flesh, blood and soul. In our mothers' eyes what defined and characterized us in our fetal condition and predicament was not what or how we were in that state but what we were going to be and how we would evolve in and through life.

It is for this particular reason therefore—the reason that our pregnant mothers gave us nothing but kindness, nurturing and soulful love when we were least “lovable”, least “attractive” or “endearing” in the eyes of the rest of the world—it is for this particular reason that every one of us is born into the world, remains ever so deeply and profoundly indebted to our mothers.

Commentary on Verse 2:

In this stanza, Sri Sankara bhagavathpAda is being very autobiographical indeed leaving one a little surprised why of all persons, an avowed ‘sanyAsi’ should want to indulge in intimate, personal nostalgia even if it is all about his beloved mother. We are all used to regarding “achAryAs” or “sanyAsis” as being rather stone-hearted and un-emotional. After all they have renounced the world, become hermits, cut off all their worldly ties, purged their hearts of all feelings for a family, have transcended human bondage and hence they ought never to show the kind of emotional “weakness” or soft-heartedness that afflicts ordinary mortals of the world—“samsArins” like us who are inextricably attached to kith and kin, our flesh and blood, parents, spouses, children and lovers.

Strange then therefore that the great Sankara himself, a giant amongst the foremost “sanyAsis” of the Vedantic fold, and he who had otherwise cut asunder all human ties of the world, should in this hymn reveal an altogether human side to his personality. Was the great ‘achArya” too as frail as we are? This is the almost blasphemous but not unreasonable thought that crosses one’s mind as one reads the second stanza of the “*maathru-panchakam*”.

To understand Sankara’s true intention of mind in this stanza one must closely examine a few biographical details. Sankara lost his father when he was but a toddler of two or three years. The burden of his upbringing fell entirely on his mother. Life generally was very difficult for a widow in the brahminical society of those times. We can only imagine today the extreme trials and tribulations Sankara’s mother must have surely endured in providing for little Sankara and getting him educated. In keeping with the tradition of those times, Sankara’s mother, with the help of in-laws and relatives, managed to get her son admitted into a Vedic “*gurukula*”. (The biography of Sankara reveals the great “*advaitin*” **Sri GaudapAda** as Sankara’s “guru” but it is not clear if the “*gurukula*” Sankara went to was indeed his). In any case, Sankara was an extraordinarily precocious student. It is said by the age of 6 or 7 he had mastered the Vedic syllabi that other students would have taken ordinarily all of 12 or 15 years to cover and attain proficiency in. By the age of 7 or 8 Sankara became not just a Vedic adept . . . but a consummate Master endowed with that spark of enlightenment or “*brahma- tejas*” that marked him out in later life as a true “*jagadguru*” (universal teacher).

Sankara’s mother, the poor widow that she was, and wholly dependent for subsistence on the charity of her relatives, watched the scholastic and spiritual progress of her little son with a mixture of both great pride and deep anxiety. The pride in the son’s growing fame as a Vedic Master was greatly overshadowed by a growing premonition that Sankara would soon take the vows of worldly renunciation or “*sannyAshrama*” and go away into the wider world to fulfill his earthly destiny and purpose viz.: to bring about the restoration and renaissance of the Vedic faith in India and establish its pre-eminence in the land of his ancestors, the great “*rishis*” of yore.

Sankara's mother knew in her heart that one day her son Sankara would heed the call of his destiny and on that day he would simply pack up his bags and take leave of her and go away forever in pursuit of his lofty goals in life, the loftiest of all being his own liberation. For the poor widowed mother, the prospect of losing her sole and beloved son to the order of "*sannyAshrama*" was a kind of second bereavement.

To a widow a son is really the last lifeline and if it snaps then there is really nothing left in the world for her except abject emptiness and endless despair. A son for a widow represents the promise of emotional wellbeing and the prime source of material security. Sankara's mother knew that if he went away as a "*sannyAsi*" into the wide world, he would never be hers to call her own again. She would lose everything in life.

In the ancient Vedic scriptural text known as the "*ushanha-samhita*" the duty of a son towards his mother is laid out clearly: "Let a son be devoted to the service of the parents as long as they live, if they are satisfied with his virtue, he gets the reward of all religious deeds; there is no god equal to the mother, no guide on par with the father; there is no complete exoneration from a man's obligation to them; let him do for them daily what is agreeable and let him not engage himself in any religious rite without their permission, the sole exception being what would lead to liberation." ("*Usanhsamhita*" I.33-37).

Purely from a maternal perspective, it is perhaps rather heartless irony that while the great Vedic "*samhita*" loudly acknowledges the paramount nature of a son's duty towards his mother and father, by way of a singular proviso of exception to the general rule however, the "*samhita*" recognizes that should the son hear the call of the heavens that beckon him to seek spiritual liberation, then that call must be heeded at any cost, with or without the leave of mother or father.

Sankara's mother, aware as she was of her son's growing spiritual stature and promise, must surely have anticipated the moment when he would hear the call of the spirit and that would be the moment he would walk away to seek his liberation. It was this sense of gnawing insecurity and foreboding that perhaps caused Sankara's mother her troubled sleep and gave her too that strange but clairvoyant nightmare: the nightmare in which her darling son Sankara donned the ochre robes of a novice into "*sannyasa*", took the solemn vows of celibacy, snapped all ties with family and went away into the wide world to do his life's work.

The nightmare made her one-day scurry in desperation to the school classroom where Sankara was undergoing "*gurukulavAsa*" and there she lamented aloud to him, his guru and to all his classmates about her terrible premonition. What an embarrassment his mother must have caused indeed to Sankara and the class! Poor lady! Her mother's heartbeat with love for her child but it was also filled with the fear of being deserted by him. Who else but mothers and sons of the world can truly fathom and empathize with Sankara's mother?

It certainly was empathy that drove Sri Adi Sankara too to indulge in the slightly maudlin sentiment that overcomes any son who, in moments of somber recollection of times bygone, allows himself to shed a silent, private tear or two in memory of a dear, departed mother. Such emotion, such sentiment, is always great and noble when it moves the heart of ordinary sons; when it overwhelms one who is as mighty of spirit as the great Adi Sankara himself, without doubt or hesitation, it sanctifies and indeed glorifies the other-worldliness of "*sannyAsis*" even.

In the other world as much as in this, shall we say, they all know that "*it is the hand that rocks the cradle which truly rules the world*"?

Commentary on Verse 3:

In the 3rd stanza of the “*maathru-panchakam*” Sri Adi Sankara recollects the terminal moments spent with his mother on her deathbed. It is a verse of heart-breaking lamentation. But more importantly it contains an implied but fervent appeal to every son in the world not to fail in his duty to perform last rites for a deceased mother and to ensure she receives the honor and dignity deserved in death that perhaps in some measure, for reasons good or otherwise, might have been denied her in life.

The great Vedantic “achArya”, after having left home as a mere boy-“*sannyAsi*”, returned after several years to his little non-descript village of Kalady (Kerala) as a world-renowned Vedantic “*jagadguru*”. The hagiographical account, the “*sankara-digvijayam*” is the standard narrative in India on the life of Sri Sankara BhagavathpAdA and it describes this homecoming in some detail.

The text speaks of how Sankara who was busy with his mission while sojourning in North India, one day had a clear premonition of his mother’s impending death and so hastened to his village to be by her side in the last mortal moments. When Sankara arrived, his mother was already in the throes of death. The biographical details are rather shrouded in inconsistency.

One account of Sankara’s last meeting with his mother is that she breathed her last after he had chanted into her ear the sacred “*tAraka-mantra*”. But if one goes by the 3rd stanza of the “*maathru-panchakam*”, we cannot help inferring that when Sankara arrived at her deathbed, his mother had already passed away. He clearly does express regret at not having arrived in time to administer the final “mantra” to the departing soul.

Anyway, whichever version is true, the pathos of the moment itself and the pain that swelled up in Sankara’s heart is very vividly portrayed here in the 3rd stanza of the “AchArya’s” “*maathru-panchakam*”. We must remember that the circumstances surrounding the death of Sankara’s mother were extremely unfortunate and tragic. Since Sankara was a “*sannyAsi*”, he could not perform for his dead mother the traditional last-rites since it was against age-old brahminical codes (the “*sAstrAs*”) for “*sanyAsins*” to have anything to do with Vedic “fire-rituals” and his mother’s obsequies necessarily involved ritual fire. Sankara was hence compelled to run from pillar to post in the village to find a relative who could act as his proxy and perform the obsequies but then no one was willing to oblige. Even in the days of Sankara, as much as it seems now, performing death-rites in the manner prescribed by sacred custom was never without its difficulties. The community did not cooperate willingly, and the necessary means were not easily available. Even close kith and kin balked and in general everyone grudged the effort and expense. Any convenient excuse or pretext that could be found to avoid volunteering help to those bereaved was readily claimed by everyone.

Sankara the “*sannyAsi*” had over the years gained both fame and notoriety as both a trail-blazing and an iconoclastic philosopher and radical reformer (anti-“*mimAmsaka*”). In Kalady particularly he had come to earn local enmity from amongst the village orthodoxy. They simply turned their backs on him in his hour of grave need and gave him the proverbially haughty and imperious brahminical cold-shoulder.

His mother’s body thus lay unattended for a long while before some sympathetic neighbors eventually came forward to make amends for the lapses of Sankara’s erstwhile kin. This bitter and traumatic experience must have left a deep and permanent scar on Sankara’s mind, and we see evidence of it in the anguished words of the celebrated 3rd stanza of the “*maathru-panchakam*”. From the time he finished his Vedic “*gurukula*” studies at the age of 8 years, only to formally renounce the world as a “*sannyAsi*”, until the time he returned to Kalady to be at his mother’s deathbed, Sri Adi SankarAchArya had already gone around India twice on foot, had founded a great philosophical order and 4 great monasteries in the 4 corners of the country which still survive and flourish to this day as pre-eminent centers of the Advaita

Order; he had also written about 80 books, dissertations on Vedantic philosophy and numerous devotional hymns in purest Sanskrit; he had restored the Brahmin-Hindu tradition of India which had been almost submerged in what was at that time popular Buddhism and, finally, he had safely established his reputation as undeniably the foremost scholastic philosopher of the millennium in this part of the world . . .

And yet . . . yet, ironically, when such a man of herculean accomplishments, finally, arrived at his mother's deathbed, he found to his deepest chagrin, dismay and regret that there wasn't any way he could himself perform or otherwise arrange to have performed the customary Vedic past rites that would convey his beloved mother's soul from this world to the other.

The great philosopher who preached a whole great philosophy that prided itself upon having solved the mysteries of the human soul, its true nature, purpose and destiny . . . such a great one found himself helpless at Kalady in his efforts to see his mother's soul off from its earthly abode!

In the brief lifetime of 33 years that the AchArya spent on earth he could not have spent but more than a few years—5 or 6 at the very most—in the company of his dear mother. The bond of love between mother and son in those very brief and fleeting years might have been rich and intense but then it could never really have been seen by either one as growing to endure very long in life. She as a hapless widow might not have been able to give or demonstrate care and affection in the true measure she might otherwise have felt in her heart for her one and only son. And he too, when he embraced “*sannyAsa*” at the tender age of 8 and went away from home on his life's mission, could scarcely have had time thereafter to spare very many moments for an affectionate thought for his forlorn mother languishing back in the village of Kalady . . .

Such a man as Sankara, yet, when he arrived at his mother's deathbed to see her breathe her last, was moved to speak these heart-rending words: “*na dattam mAtastE maraNasamayE tOyamapi vA svabaddhA bA nOdEyA maraNadivasE shradha-vidhinA I*” Of what value or worth my monumental accomplishments in life as a “*sannyAsi*”, as a philosopher, as a “*jagadguru*”—Sankara seems to be saying in this stanza in the “*maathru-panchakam*”—of what merit is all this if at the moment of your passing away, dear mother, there is no way I can offer you the due courtesies and honors that I know you deserve and which a son must show his mother's departing soul?

This soul-stirring verse should indeed make us all sit up and reflect deeply: If the great Sankara showed no mercy to himself and, in fact, severely castigated himself for it and took no shelter or defense behind any lame or valid excuse for failing to perform the obsequies for his departed mother, how can we, we who are indeed less-than-ordinary mortals by comparison, ever venture to think that we may, after all, be able to find, amidst the vast vagaries of our busy, modern and sophisticated lives, those convenient excuses we eagerly seek, in order that we may be able to shirk the sacred duty we owe to our departing mothers?

Commentary on 4th and 5th Verses:

These 2 verses of Sri SankarAchArya once again show us that the heart of an ascetic is not all cold, arid, lifeless stone.

Renouncing the world, embracing the vows of “*sannyAsa*” and wearing the ochre robe all do help the human heart to cultivate a certain worldly detachment but do not in any way for that reason either dehumanize or desensitize it. The sense of loss and anguish that the death of one as near and beloved as one's mother arouses in anyone is felt by a “*sannyAsi*”, even one as great as Sankara, no less deeply or painfully than any ordinary ‘*gruhashthA*’ or householder of the world. It is only when we encounter Death at close quarters that we begin to realize, even if only dimly, that “*we are not human beings here in the world undergoing spiritual experience but rather that we are all spiritual beings*”

undergoing human experience". (Teilhard de Chardin). To both "*sanyAsin*" and "*samsArin*" in equal measure of distress, Death is indeed an essentially human experience.

In the 4th verse SankarAchArya does not fight shy of sharing with us a tender and intimate memory of his. He recalls the way his mother called him fond "names"; the many ways she used to address him as a child, using little terms of motherly affection such as "*my shining gem*", "*apple of my eye*", "*my little king*" etc. . . . the sort of common but sportive fancy monikers most mother's give their children while, say, coaxing or cajoling their child to finish a meal . . . one "name" being thought up for every morsel, as it were!

"In return for those terms of endearment and affection", Sankara seems to be saying in this verse, "in return for all that love, mother, all that I have to now offer you finally by way of a son's inadequate reciprocation, is this fistful of raw uncooked rice to pour upon your lifeless lips".

The reference here in this verse to the age-old Vedic custom of "*pouring a fistful of rice*" or "*pindapradanam*" (as it is known in Sanskrit) upon the lifeless lips of the dead is quite significant. The custom is part of the elaborate '*preta-samskAra*': the last solemn rites of passage that are traditionally administered by the offspring to a dead parent. It is a ritual act so rich in a two-fold symbolism explained below:

- (1) On the part of the deceased parent, the ritual act is meant to symbolize the departing soul consuming its very last morsel of "food" as a human, being released thereafter from the "*annamaya kOsa*" and "*prANa maya kOsa*", the realms (or "shrouds") of earthly Sustenance and Energy respectively, in which the soul had lain ensconced and thrived all through its mortal existence, and now at last readies itself to begin its onward journey to celestial destinations where food and energy are no longer the means of sustenance.
- (2) On the part of the offspring it is an act of final thanksgiving. Sankara, as already explained, being an ordained "*sannyAsi*" was forbidden from performing any one of the last rites for his mother in the prescribed Vedic manner. But even die-hard Vedic orthodoxy places no obstacles in the way of a son who chooses to perform the symbolic "*samskAra*" involving the mere simple act of offering a single morsel of "*annam*" to a departed mother in the genuinely humble spirit of final thanksgiving. It is in a way a kind of '*samskara*' too and one that perfectly reciprocates another equally hoary and traditional Vedic "*samskAra*" called "*anna prAsana*" which is solemnly administered by every mother and father to an infant child who begins teething usually 6 months after birth. In the "*anna prAsana*" ritual, the mother and father take a fistful of freshly cooked rice, and to the chant of appropriate Vedic "mantras", pour it gently through the lips of the beloved infant-son. It is the child's very "first morsel of cooked rice" in life and is meant to bestow upon the child the life-long blessing of robust health and longevity.

If there is but only one lesson to be learnt from a reading of the 4th verse of Sankara's "*maathru-panchakam*" it is this: no son who has received in infancy the maternal blessing inhered in the "*samskAra*" known as "*anna prAsana*"—a fistful of rice—would fail to return the kindness in like form to his mother after she breathes her last on a death-bed. And so it is precisely why a "*sannyAsi*" hastened to his mother's side, as she lay dead, alone and unattended in a village square in Kalady, to ensure that he could at least render unto her a reciprocal "*samskAra*" described in the moving words of the "*maathru-panchakam*": "*ithyukthavatyA tava vaachi mAtah: dadAmyaham tandulamEva-shushkam*"II



A distant but remarkable parallel to the episode in the life of Sri Adi Sankara described in the verses of the “*maathru-panchakam*” can be found in a passage of rare but overwhelming poignancy written by St. Augustine (354 AD-430AD), the great mystic saint of pre-medieval times, in that all-time classic of religious autobiography, “*Confessions of St. Augustine*”.

Augustine, who too like Sankara was at his mother’s side on her death-bed, wrote eloquently about the misgivings that overpowered him as he witnessed his mother Monica pass away before his eyes. Both the Christian saint and the Vedantic “*jagadguru*” found themselves in a similar situation of extreme human distress and reading the former’s account of his experience written in Latin prose helps us gain some valuable insight into the emotional state that may have inspired the latter to describe the same experience in Sanskrit poetry:

“One day as she lay ill, she (Monica, St. Augustine’s mother) lost consciousness and for a little while she was withdrawn from all present things. We rushed to her, but she quickly regained her senses. She looked at me and my brother as we stood there and said to us, after the manner of one seeking something.

“Where was I?” And she continued talking to me: “Son, for my own part, I now find no delight in anything in this life. What I can still do here and why I am here, I do not know, now that all my hopes in this world have been accomplished. One thing there was, for which I desired to linger a little while in this life, that I might see you a Catholic Christian before I died. God has granted this to me in more than abundance, for I see you His servant, with even earthly happiness held in contempt. So, what am I doing here?”

“I also heard later that my mother one day in my absence, she had talked with a mother’s confidence to certain friends of mine about contempt of this life and the advantages of death. They were amazed at the woman’s strength which you, my Lord, had given to her, and asked if she did not fear leaving her body so far from her own city, she replied, “nothing is far from God. I need not fear that He will not know where to raise me up at the end of the world.”

“So, on the ninth day of her illness, in the 56th year of her life and in the 33rd year of mine, this devout and holy soul was set loose from the body.

“I closed her eyes, and a mighty sorrow welled up from the depths of my heart and overflowed into tears. At the same time, by a powerful command of my mind, my eyes drank up their source until it was dry. Most ill it was with me to fall into such agony!

“What was it that grieved me so heavily if not, the fresh wound wrought by the sudden rupture of our most sweet and dear way of life together? I took joy indeed from her testimony, when in that last illness my mother mingled her endearments with my dutiful deeds and called me a good son. With great love and affection, she recalled that she had never heard me say a harsh or disrespectful word to her. Yet, O my God who made us! What comparison was there between the honor she had from me and the services that she rendered to me? When I was bereft of such great consolation, my heart was wounded through, and my life was as if ripped asunder. For out of her life and mine own life had been made.

“Those around me thought I was free from all sense of sorrow. But in your ears, my God, where none of them could hear, I upbraided the weakness of my affection, and I held back the flood of sorrow. It gave way a little before me, but I was again and again swept away by its violence, although not as far as to burst into tears, nor to any change of expression. But I knew what it was I crushed down within my heart. Because it distressed me greatly that these human feelings had such sway over me, for these needs must be according to due order and our allotted state, I sorrowed over my sorrow with an added sorrow, and I was torn by a two-fold sadness.

All day long and in secret, so heavy was my sorrow, and with a troubled mind I besought you as best I could to heal my anguish. You did not do so, and it was I think to impress upon my memory by this one lesson how strong the bond of any habit is, even upon a mind that no longer feeds upon deceptive words. I also thought it good to go and bathe then as I had heard that the bath (Greek “balnea”) is so-called because the Greeks say that it drives anxiety from the mind. See, O Father of orphans, this fact too do I confess to your mercy, for after I had bathed, I was the same as before I bathed. Bitter grief did pour like sweat out of my heart. But then I slept, and I woke up, and I found that my sorrow had in no small part been eased. As I lay alone on my bed I remembered those truthful verses about you, and for who You are, my Lord Almighty: “God, creator of all things, ruler of the sky, Who clothes the day with beauteous light, and the night with grateful sleep, That rest may weakened limbs restore for labor’s needs, And ease our weary minds, and free our worried hearts from grief”.

“Little by little, I regained my former thoughts about my mother, your handmaid, about the devout life she led in you, about her sweet and holy care for us, of which I was so suddenly deprived. I took comfort in weeping in your sight, my God, over her and for her, over myself and for myself. I gave way to the tears that I held back, so that they poured forth as much as they wished. I spread them beneath my heart, and it was rested upon them, for at my heart were placed your ears, not the ears of a mere man, who would interpret with scorn my weeping.

“Now, Lord, I confess to you in writing. Let him read it who wants to, let him interpret it as he wants. If he finds a sin in it, that I wept for my mother for a small part of an hour, for that mother now dead to my eyes who for so many years had wept for me so that I might live forever in your eyes, let him not laugh to scorn me. But rather, if he is a man of large charity, let him weep over my sins before you, the Father of all brothers of your Christ.””



In the 5th and final stanza of the “*maathru-panchakam*”, Sankara recollects what he had been told about his mother that when she was pregnant with him, even while undergoing labor and painful birth-pangs she uttered the holy names of the Almighty, “*O Shiva! O Krishna! Govinda! “Harey! Mukunda!”*” It was an act of maternal kindness of far-reaching power and consequence, says Sankara, for by doing so his mother had gifted him at the moment of birth itself what otherwise ordinary men of the world struggle to earn only in the moment of death. His mother at the very moment she gave birth to him gave him a birthright, says Sankara: the birthright of spiritual salvation that is obtained through merely uttering the sacred names of Vishnu!

One final thought that arises in my mind on a reading of the “*maathru-panchakam*” is that none of us should be surprised at all that the great Adi Sankara wept for his departed mother. Having received the highest spiritual reward in life from his mother at the very moment of birth even—the everlasting fortune of Salvation served on a gold platter as it were—it is really no wonder that Sankara considered himself eternally beholden to his mother: “*tyahO janannyai rachitOyamajalih:*.” To use the words of St Augustine in paraphrase: “I wept for my mother for a small part of an hour, for that mother now dead to my eyes who for so many years had wept for me so that I might live forever in Your eyes, My God!”.

BOOK 3

Veda and Vedanta





CHAPTER 9

VEDAS AS ‘APOURUSHEYAM’

Sometimes when I travel abroad (mostly as part of my job) to parts of the world in Europe or the Far East cities, I meet with people in those countries who the moment they come to learn I hail from India strike up a conversation about Indian philosophy, religion, and spiritualism.

It all invariably starts with their noticing my vegetarianism at the dinner table. They curiously ask me how I manage to survive on a strict diet of milk, bread, butter, jam, cornflakes, and green salads and soups and then invariably the conversation gradually veers around to talk of Indian mysticism, the ‘*kumbh-mela*’, varieties of Indian gods and cow worship.



During such conversations, I have always been amazed at how little is the knowledge the average Western mind possesses about the fact sheet of India’s great religion and philosophy. In comparison, the average Indian mind’s knowledge of Christianity or Buddhism, I would venture to say, is almost encyclopedic.

For example, very few commoners in the Western world know anything about the source of all religious scripture in India—the Vedas. A few of them have heard of the ‘Bhagavath-Gita’. The Gita has crept a little into the common awareness of the West mainly because it has been popularized somewhat over the years by serious literary personalities in Europe and America such as Aldous Huxley, Herman Hesse, Schopenhauer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others. But little do common folk in the West know that the Gita owes its original inspiration to yet another even more ancient source viz. the Upanishads, which in themselves are again only a subtext of a vast body of scriptures known as the Vedas.



When I start explaining to my curious Western friends about the fundamental features of the Vedas, the first thing to utterly amaze them is the fact that the Vedas have no human authorship; that there is no one person who actually wrote it down; that they have all been bequeathed, from one generation to another, across millions of years in India through the oral tradition of learning called ‘*guru-sishya parampara*’ (master-disciple school of oral learning).

When I further explain to them that we Hindus regard the Vedas as ‘*apourushEyam*’—i.e., it does not owe its existence to any human authorship; that it stands alone as a self-existent, self-evident, and eternal body of truth; that it was only revealed to ancient seers (‘*rshis*’) who merely intuited it all through spiritual insight gained by years of ‘*tapas*’ (penance and self-sacrifice). When all this is

explained to them, the Western friends cannot help asking me incredulously, ‘But how can what you say be true?!’

On my part, I try not to be unduly surprised or offended by the incredulity of the average Western mind vis-a-vis the very idea of ‘*apourushEyam*’. After all, Christians and Muslims, we know belong to the religious tradition of ‘Peoples of the Book’ (i.e., the Bible and Koran), which are sacred scriptural books that owe their authorship and inspiration to individuals, such as the prophets Mohammed, Jesus, Moses, and others. To the average Western mind so accustomed to its principal book of scripture, the Bible, being attributed to authorship by the Apostles of Jesus, it can be indeed very, very difficult to comprehend the very idea of ‘*apourushEyam*’



To convince such incredulous Westerners, very often, I resort to a simple analogy to drive home to them the validity of the idea that the Vedas are ‘*apourUshEyam*’. Analogy is borrowed from the Western world, the world of physics and classical music—and then constructed in simple terms, in the language and idiom of the Western world again, so as to help them relate really well to the idea, to grasp its essentials and comprehend it thoroughly.

Here is the analogy which I share with you all too in the hope that you may all wish to ponder upon it and, if found convincing, may well want to use it yourself in explaining the concept of ‘*apourushEyam*’ to your own friends and acquaintances (Western and otherwise) who may appear to you as difficult ‘doubting Thomas’s’.



Einstein once said that while Beethoven only created or crafted his music, Mozart’s own was so pure that it seemed to have been ever present in the universe, waiting to be discovered by the master.

Einstein believed much the same of physics too—i.e., beyond observations and theory, lay the music of the spheres which, he wrote, revealed a ‘pre-established harmony’ exhibiting stunning symmetries. The laws of nature such as those of relativity theory were waiting to be plucked out of the cosmos by someone with a sympathetic ear. Thus, it was far less laborious calculation than the creative or intuitive processes of ‘pure thought’ to which Einstein attributed his theories.

Scientists often describe the general relativity theory as the most beautiful theory ever formulated. Einstein himself always emphasized the importance of recognizing the theory’s beauty. ‘Hardly anyone who has truly understood it will be able to escape the charm of this theory.’

The theory is essentially one man’s view of how the universe ought to be. And amazingly, the universe did turn out to be pretty much as Einstein imagined.



The great Einstein regarded his general relativity theory not as something born out of personal effort or intellectual sweat but as truth which he happened to ‘discover’ as ‘pure, pre-established harmony’.

Einstein held the music of Mozart in the same light. Mozart's music too was not so much music 'composed' as music '*waiting to be plucked out of the cosmos by someone with a sympathetic ear*'.

In much the same way as Einstein regarded his discoveries in physics, or he appreciated the music of Mozart, I explained to my Western friends, the Vedas—the principal source and inspiration of all religious thought and scripture in India—they too are regarded by the Hindus as '*apourushEyam*': in other words, the Vedas are '*so pure that they seemed to have been ever present in the universe*', '*waiting [as it were] to be discovered by the masters*' known once in ancient India as '*rshis*'. The Vedas too are thus '*pure thought*'; they are '*pre-established harmony*' revealing the great laws and the '*stunning symmetries*' of the cosmos and all existence.

And like Einstein's theory, I further go on to explain to my friends, the Vedas too are '*essentially one man's view—i.e., the “rshi's” view*—of how the universe ought to be. And amazingly, the universe did turn out to be, in several ways, pretty much as the Vedas and the "*rshi-s*" imagined'!



When I had taken the pains to explain all the above to my Western friends, it sometimes occurred to me that notwithstanding the simple but persuasive relevance of the analogy, they still went away a little confused and unconvinced by the thought that anything in this world could be '*apourushEyam*'—un-authored, self-existent, self-evident, and eternal.

Let us for a moment leave Westerners aside; their incomprehension and incredulity can be quite forgiven. What about Hindus themselves, I ask? How many of you are totally convinced and yet not so convinced about the idea?





CHAPTER 10

THE BURDEN OF THE SELF: ‘AHANKARAM AND MAMAKARAM’

The Conception of Ego in Vedanta

In a short poem titled ‘*nyAsa-dasakam*’, which contains earnest prayer as well as profound philosophy, the great dialectician and foremost defender of Sri Ramanujacharya’s philosophy, Swami Vedanta Desikan (1268—1368 CE) begins with a truly memorable stanza:

*aham madh-rakshana-barO madh-rakshana-phalam tathA
namama sripatEr-Eva AtmAnam nikshipEdh buDha-ha*

The meaning of the stanza is, ‘Wise ones, knowing this to be the truth, say: The burden of preserving myself is not mine; whatever is to be reaped by self-preservation is never mine. It is the Lord of “Sri” alone who both bears and reaps from the burden of myself.’

In two pithy lines in one gem of a stanza, Swami Desikan compacts a grand essay on human psychology. The stanza begins with ‘*aham*’, which is Sanskrit for the English ‘I’. The second line begins with ‘*na-mama*’, which is Sanskrit for ‘not-mine’. Between ‘*aham*’ and ‘*na-mama*’, between ‘I’ and ‘not-mine’, stretches the whole Vedantic subject of man’s ego and salvation.

In Vedantic philosophy, the human ego is referred to as ‘*ahankAram*’/‘*mamakAram*’. The Visishtadvaitic doctrine of ‘*prapatthi*’ or self-surrender, of which Desikan was a great exponent, is also built around this very important concept.



The human ego as commonly understood by us is not the same as the larger sense in which Vedanta (and the doctrine of ‘*prapatthi*’ or self-surrender) deals with it.

Let us see how:

Without clothes a man is bodily naked. Similarly, in the day-to-day world, it can be said that without ‘*ahankAram*’/‘*mamakAram*’ man would feel, psychologically speaking, just as naked.

Just as it is said that ‘clothes maketh the man’ in a physical sense (in Tamil, ‘*aaL pAdhi, aadai pAdhi*’), it can be said with equal validity that ego, in a psychological sense, too maketh the man. For example, even if people knew nothing about a certain lady personally, she might yet have a great social reputation thanks to the sort or style of clothes she is normally known to wear, whether shabby, showy, or superb. Likewise, even if one knew nothing about the real character of a man, word usually gets around about how big or small his ego is. If he is overly submissive, timid, or vulnerable it might be said of him, ‘That poor man is like a child! He has an undeveloped ego. He should be more self-assertive if he wants to get ahead in life.’ Conversely, it might also be said of a man, ‘That man has too big an ego. He is so autocratic and arrogant. If he doesn’t curb his ego, he won’t get far ahead in life.’

The inner self within man is thus seen to be constantly asserting itself through the outward functioning of the ego. In the ordinary world, we see both the lack and excess of ‘ahankAram’/‘mamakAram’ manifested clearly in man’s outward personality.

Whether clothes fit well or ill, man must have his clothes. And he will even bend and twist and turn himself crooked to fit into his clothes. Likewise, whether big or small, for good or for bad, man must have his ego too, and he will be willing to bend, twist, and turn his mind to fit his ego.

In terms of normal human psychology, we can thus say that a man’s ego, i.e., his ‘ahankAram’/‘mamakAram’, provides his inner self a ‘beautiful suit’ of personality as much as a custom-made coat gives sartorial protection (‘rakshanam’) to his body. But we must understand that in Vedanta and in the ‘prapatthi’ doctrine (and in the way Swami Desikan spoke of it in the ‘nyAsa-dasakam’ above), ego is dealt with in a far more profound sense.

Let us examine it further.



Man is naturally endowed with five sense-organs (‘indriyas’), a unique faculty called intelligence (‘buddhi’) and a strong, inalienable sense of selfhood called ‘ahankAram’/‘mamakAram’—ego. This ego is very dear to man as it is the seat of his ‘survival instinct’—that powerful instinct, which wills him to self-preservation (‘rakshana-bAram’ or ‘rakshana-phalam’, as Desikan calls it).

When life begins to pass away from the body, the five senses and ‘buddhi’ begin to take leave of man. The dying man then has little control over their departure. They all simply fade away, one after another, and the man who is dying is helpless about it. It is not so in the case of the ego. Even in the last throes of death, man finds it next to impossible to give up his deep-rooted sense of self called ‘ahankAram’/‘mamakAram’.

He claws and clings to it in desperation since it is the last and most precious shred of consciousness remaining with him before death finally claims him.

The late UVE Sri. Mukkur Lakshminarasimhachariar Swamy, a great Vedic scholar of recent times, used to recount a parable illustrating the power of man’s ‘ahankAram’/‘mamakAram’ even on a deathbed.

In a village somewhere in India, a wealthy old merchant was in the throes of death. The old man had lived a full life. He had sired a dozen children, amassed wealth, and lived the life of a successful and respected gentleman in his community. He had had no desires left unfulfilled. But towards the end of his days, the merchant contracted some incurable disease. It racked his body and spirit to no end. Everyone around him pitied him. Soon the merchant was a pale ghost of his old self. His sickness made him rapidly lose zest in life. Even humdrum workaday living filled him with loathing (‘virakti’) for the world. He raved and ranted beseeching the gods to release him from his earthly plight.

At last, the fatal day arrived. The merchant, now frail and comatose, was laid out on a deathbed to breathe his last. Everyone was relieved that the sick old soul would soon be naturally put out of its misery. Now, one well-meaning relative of his, who was present at that time, was eager to solemnize the merchant’s departure with divine absolution. He hoped the dying old man, filled as he was with utter disgust for the world and himself, i.e. ‘virakti’, could be made to pass away at complete peace with himself. This he thought was possible if the old man were somehow enabled to take his brooding thoughts away from personal misery and instead focus on an object or idea divine. He hoped therefore

to somehow make the dying man take the sacred name of ‘Narayana’ upon his lips in the terminal moments on earth.

Fortunately, the last child of the old merchant was a 10-year-old with the name of ‘Narayana’. So the good relative took hold of the lad and leading him to the deathbed bade its occupant to open his eyes and look at the young visitor. The relative hoped the old merchant would do so, recognise the lad, be urged perhaps in the moments before demise to utter the holy name of ‘Narayana’ and be led thereby unto the blissful consciousness of God rather than of the petty self.

‘Sire, O sire!’ yelled the relative into the dying man’s immobile face, ‘Sire, open your eyes and look at who’s come to visit you!’

After a few minutes of similar coaxing, the dying merchant stirred and slowly opened his eyes. Although his faculties were rapidly failing, the old man seemed to recognize the dim outlines of the person beside him.

Greatly encouraged in his efforts, the relative persevered further. He now drew the son closer to the dying man and asked again, ‘Sire, do you see who is before you? Can you recognize him? Can you name him please?’

The dying man, gasping for breath, once again turned his eyes on the lad and nodded feebly as if to convey, ‘Yes, I know who this is!’

‘Name him! Name him then, sire,’ pleaded the good relative with desperate urgency, sensing now that the end was very near. ‘Say it out loud, this lad’s name! For the sake of God, please! What is his name? Cry his name out, sire, please! And say it now!’

Then as everyone around watched with mute amazement, the old man suddenly opened his eyes wide, raised himself slowly on the bed and then turning to Narayana, his youngest son, clasped him to his bosom. They heard the old man cry out loud and clear, ‘Of course, I know who this is! This . . . this is the youngest of *my* one dozen sons!’

In the very next instant, they saw him slump dead!

The moral of the story: Even in the terrifying moments of death what was foremost in the mind of the old man was not thoughts about the divine; it was possessive kinship (‘ahankAram’/ ‘mamakAram’)—my youngest son! —which prevailed over every other thought.



Thus, ‘ahankAram’, Vedantic psychology teaches us, not only influences man’s behaviour and personality, but is at the very epicentre of man’s being. Take away a man’s sense of his self, his identity, and you destroy him completely. You might kill his sanity even.

‘MamakAram’ too is no less powerful than ‘ahankAram’. It is man’s sense of possessiveness. It is what gives life its earthly meaning and purpose. If a man were never able to say, ‘This is my life’, ‘this is my home’, ‘this is my family’, ‘this is my country’, or even, ‘This is my God, my Faith’, he would find himself living in a world that is terrifying void and nothing but dark emptiness. If there was nothing he could claim as his very own in the world, existence would cease to have any meaning for man.

Which is precisely the reason why, even on the deathbed, a man resigns himself to giving up everything else in life—wealth, wife, kith, even his five senses, and the unique ‘Buddhi’—but he is never, never willing to let go of his precious ego.

Without a strong sense of ‘I’ (‘ahankAram’) man would indeed never be able to navigate across the sea of life. We can understand how deeply and inalienably man is rooted within that sense of ‘I-ness’ by reflecting for a moment on the way English language grammar rules lay down how the pronoun in first person singular should always be used. *‘It’s odd, and a little unsettling, to reflect upon the fact that English is the only major language in which “I” is capitalised; in many other languages “You” is capitalised and the “i” is lower-case’* (Sydney J. Harris).



We may now ask: If man’s ego is such an inalienably intimate part of him, what does Swami Desikan mean by saying that the burden (‘bAram’) of ‘ahankAram’/ ‘mamakAram’ is ‘namama’, ‘not-mine’, but that of God (‘sripati:’)?

*aham madh-rakshana-barO madh-rakshana-phalam tathA
namama sripatEr-Eva AtmAnam nikshipEdh buDha-ha*

The clue to understanding Desikan’s statement lies in the story of the Mahabharata.

The epic Mahabharata deals comprehensively with all matters discussed so far above viz. man’s ego, death, his salvation, God, even ‘clothes’! All we need to do is to recall the incident of Draupadi’s humiliation in the Court of Hastinapur.

In the court of the royal Kauravas, Draupadi was subjected to the humiliation of being disrobed in public. As the villain Dushassan kept peeling away by brute force her clothes (vastram’), one by one, Draupadi appealed to her five husbands, the Pandava brothers, to save her. The husbands forsook her. Then she turned pathetically to King Dritarashtra for sovereign protection. The king was blind and hence conveniently ‘looked the other way’ in the way sovereigns we know many a time do. In man’s moment of death too, as life slips away much as Draupadi’s clothes did, the departing five senses and ‘buddhi’ behave in exactly the same way as the five Pandava brothers and Dritarashtra did. Everything and everyone begin to forsake a man in the hour of death.

Every piece of Draupadi’s clothes was removed until finally there was virtually nothing left, she could protect herself with. Moments before the last stitch was ripped from her body, Draupadi realised her sense of personal modesty, that precious birth-right womanhood cherishes, that too would soon be removed. It was the moment Draupadi’s ‘ahankAram’/ ‘mamakAram’, her innate sense of personal identity too would be lost. Therefore, when Draupadi kept clinging on to her clothes, she was actually clinging, in a deeply instinctual, metaphorical sort of way, to preserve her sense of self—precisely what is called the ‘aham’ and ‘mama’ that Desikan alludes to in that phrase ‘aham madh-rakshana- barO . . . na-mama’.

A wise man once said, ‘Death is only one of the many ways of dying’, and in the Mahabharatha, for Draupadi, the terrifying moment of death arrived when she was about to be stripped naked in full and open view of the large assembly at the royal court of Hastinapur—forsaken by husbands, king, kith, and kin—everyone. In clinging to the last shred of fabric covering her body, she fought to preserve (‘rakshanam’) the last remnant of ego—the sense of ‘aham’, ‘I-ness’, that she believed was still her very own (‘mamakAram’).



Considering all the above, man is compelled to ask finally:

- *If I am not 'I' (aham'), and this self (ego) which for long I had regarded to be the real me, is 'not mine' at all ('namama'), then who or what really am I? If my sense of who I am is not my own, then what does being self-possessed mean?*
- *If 'I' am not the preserver/protector of my own 'self' (as Draupadi in the Mahabharata found out), then who is to preserve/protect me in my ultimate hour of crisis called death? If I am to be ultimately stripped of even my sense of 'I-ness' ('ahankAram'/'mamakAram')—as Draupadi was stripped of her 'clothes'—what else in life is there left for me? Nothing but void?*
- *If it is only a Being called God ('sripatEr-Eva'), as Swami Desikan says) who bears the burden of preserving my 'self', who is He?*

All these are familiar but nagging questions of eternal puzzlement to man. But Draupadi, according to the Mahabharatha, found answers to them immediately when, in the final moments of her crisis, she chose to voluntarily let go of not only the last shred of fabric she was clutching but every vestige of her ego as well. Reposing an all-abiding faith in the Almighty, the Mahabharatha tells us she simply let go of the raiment she was clutching, raised her hands to the heavens, and surrendered the burden of her deepest self unto Him ('bAra-samarpaNam', 'saraNagati', as per what in Sri Vaishnava theology is known as the cardinal doctrine of 'prapatthi'):

***sri shanka-chakra gadhA pANe, dwArakA nilayAchyutha
gOvinda pundareekAksha rakshamAm saraNagatam***

The epic narrates how Draupadi was then saved, at the very last nick of the moment, by a great miracle wrought by the avatar of Lord Krishna. In the climactic moment of that miracle, Draupadi came face-to-face with the presence of God and witnessed His infinite power, glory, and compassion!



Draupadi of the Mahabharatha might well have finally found answers to the troubled questions of man, 'ahankAram', of death and salvation. But what about the fate of ordinary folks like us? Where are we to go for answers?

The Upanishads tell us that the journey of human life is nothing if not an unceasing quest for answers to such questions. The answers shall be revealed to us no less clearly and surely than they were to Draupadi (or Swami Desikan) but only if we willingly subject ourselves to the same intense practice or spiritual experience as hers viz. the experience of what lies beyond the 'burden of the self'.

Giving up 'ahankAram'/'mamakAram', i.e., giving up the 'clothes' of our ego as Draupadi did, is a central part of all such intense spiritual practice. Giving up the ego is required not only in the banal sense in which ordinary men and women of the world know it; 'ahankAram'/'mamakAram' has to be given up in a more genuine and profound 'Draupadic' sense too. Then, and only then, shall we see the miracle of 'I' become 'not-I', 'mine' becoming 'not-mine', 'aham' becoming 'na-mama'. In that moment we will see ourselves to be who we truly are. The Upanishad declared it to be so too in a famous verse:

*jyOtir-jwalati brahmA~ham~asmi
yO~ham~asmi brahmA~ham~asmi
aham~asmi brahmA~ham~asmi
aham-EvAham mAm juhOmi svAhA-a II
(‘Taaittiriya mahAnArAyana Upanishad’)*

‘I am of that Supreme Light! I am of that supreme Light of Brahman that shines as the inmost essence of all that exists. I am of the same infinite Brahman too even when I am experiencing myself as a finite self, due to ignorance. Now with the onset of knowledge I know who I really am: that Brahman is my true nature!’



CHAPTER 11

THE SLEEP OF THE AWAKENED

A Beginner's Introduction to the Mandukya Upanishad

As a child I remember I was ordered by my mother not to go to bed without the name of God upon my lips. Without asking for the reason why, I would obediently mutter the 'nAma' of 'mAdhava' thrice and turn off to sleep. Similarly, immediately on waking up I was told I should almost bellow out the 'nAma' of 'hari' seven times before starting the day. ('It does not matter if others around you too are startled awake. That's part of the purpose, anyway!' Mother would chuckle!) The habit grew on me over the years, thanks largely to my dear departed mother.

It was not until many years later that I learnt the practice of uttering the 'nAma' of God, before and after a night of sleep, has its origins in ancient scriptures. AndAl in the 'tiruppAvai', for instance, sings: 'uLLatthu kondu munivargaLUm yOgigaLUm mELLa-ezhundhu ari-yenra pEraravam, uLLam pugundhu arULelOr empaavaay!' (stanza 6)

'Yogis and "muni-s" awaken with the blessed name of Hari upon their lips and minds.'

Sleep is a deeply mystical, sacred experience. We all sleep. Hence, we are all mystics and to utter the name of God before and after going to sleep is a good way to remind ourselves of the fact.

'Mother of Fresh Thought'

We work hard all day, go about the hectic business of our daily life, and expend precious life energy on a hundred things and activities through the restless waking hour. When night falls, however, we quietly but instantly wind down. No matter how grave or pressing the burden of care weighing upon its mind, when night falls, the world downs shutters, drops everything, and simply goes to sleep, even if it is only to 'sleep over the matter'.

Some people in the world have great difficulty going to sleep—insomniacs, neurotics, and sleepwalkers.

Those with 'sleeping disorders' are really very ill people. Incapacity for sleep and insufficiency of sleep are the chief causes of much ill health and unhappiness in the world. If the world slept well, there would perhaps be fewer wars and less marital discord in it. Who can tell? It is said that a large part of the global profits that big multinational pharmaceutical companies make is derived from, guess what? Sale of drugs and medications meant to make people sleep like normal human beings!

There are as many people in the world who suffer from an excess of sleep as those who either lack it or have too little of it. The character Kumbhakarna in the epic Ramayana is an extreme example of such men. Such men (and women too) just love to sleep. You call them in the morning you are told, 'Sorry, he's still in bed.' You call again midday and the answer is, 'He's having his afternoon siesta'. You call in the evening, 'Sorry, he retired to bed early tonight.'

Then there are ladies too who believe long sleep enhances their beauty and adds lustre to them looks!

All such men and women actually suffer from a chronic 'sleeping disorder' or syndrome, which the Bhagavath-Gita (Chapter 18 Stanza 39) calls 'tAmasa-nidra' (the sleep of the slothful). The afflicted

ones get very special mention from Lord Krishna. He calls them by a bewitching name—‘mohAnamAtmA’. It is a name that with a single syllable wrongly stressed might easily be confused with another Sanskrit word, mOhanamAtmA’, meaning ‘beautiful soul’! If we take care not to fall into the trap of Krishna’s naughty wordplay, we will understand that ‘mohAnamAtmA’ refers to soporific souls (‘AtmA’) condemned to remain slumbering in the seductive embrace of ignorance (‘mohA’):

yadagrE chAnubandhe cha sUkham mohAnamAtmAnah: I

nidrAlasya pramAdOttham tat-tAmasam-udhAhritam II (XVIII.39)

People who suffer from such ‘tAmasa nidra’ are clearly headed towards spiritual delusion and degradation, not enlightenment, warns Sri. Ramanuja in his ‘Gita-Bhatia’: nidrAyA mOha-hEtutvam spashtam’.

Then there is another type in the world that neither sleeps too much nor too little but just well. They are said to enjoy the sound and ‘soulful sleep of the carefree’. (In my experience, they also attract good-natured envy wherever they go. Travelling on Indian Railways, in an unreserved third-class chair-car, I always envy the blessed few amongst my travel-mates who can sleep soundly, blissfully snoring too, amidst all the din and bustle of the rattling train!) These good souls wake up from bed and begin to immediately shine like the morning sun. They are vibrant, cheerful, very sweet tempered; and they remain pink with health all their lives. One of many reasons why I think little babies, the ones we might see cuddled up in cosy cribs or mother’s arms, one of the reasons why I think the babies of the world, without exception, are all so angelic in disposition is that they sleep so very well!



Genuine mystics, the ones AndAl calls ‘munivargaLum, yOgigaLum’, they are another sort of angels that sleep really well. They sleep the sleep of the awakened.

The mystic often goes into deeply meditative states when it appears to us as though he has drifted off to sleep. The Sanskrit word for such a state too is ‘nidra’—literally, sleep. But since this deep meditative state is the special sleep of great yogis (such as NammAzhwAr or NAtthamuni, for instance), and not the pathological slumber (‘tAmasa nidra’) of ‘disordered’ mortals, their ‘nidra’ is differentiated as ‘yOga-nidra’. When mystics emerge from ‘nidra-yOga’, they radiate grace, like morning sun rays bouncing about splendorously inside misty woods of a dark rain forest. Indeed, so fresh do mystics look, so magnetic, and so full of ineffable beatitude.

(They say the ‘paramAchArya’ of Kanchi Mutt, pujyasri’ Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, often went into ‘yOga-nidra’ only to emerge shining. In my personal experience, the same could be said too of the great ‘narasimha upAsaka’, vaikuntavAsi’ UVe. Sri Mukkur Lakshminarasimhachariar. He frequently would slip into ‘yOga-nidra’ in the course of the many ‘mahA-yagnyA-s’ he performed. When he re-emerged, he certainly looked more radiant.)

The sleep of good, ordinary mortals—the ‘nidra’ lasting just the right length of time, say, five to six hours a day—though not of the same nature as the sleep of the yogis, is nonetheless very invigorating.

We go to sleep every night as extremely tired men, exhausted by all the strife and stress of the world; but when we wake up in the morning, we arise as different persons altogether, isn’t it? We feel a new energy surging through our limbs and new light dancing in our eyes! Like lesser mystics perhaps, but mystics all the same, we too arise, make no mistake about it, we too arise from the experience of deep sleep exactly as yogis do from their own ‘nidra’—we wake up strengthened, uplifted, and revitalised! The

famous English poet William Wordsworth, in his poem ‘To Sleep’, describes exactly this kind of deeply nourishing sleep in lines that are memorable indeed:

*Last night, and two nights more, I lay,
and could not win thee, Sleep! By any stealth:*

So do not let me wear tonight away:

*Without Thee what is all the morning’s wealth? Come blessed barrier between day and day, Dear
mother of fresh thoughts and joyous health!*

(W. Wordsworth, ‘To Sleep’)

Sleep, beloved Mother Sleep whom we beseech to take us into her embrace each night, she turns even plain men like us into mystics all.



Why Do We Sleep?

There are times when a rare awareness about Sleep suddenly dawns on us; and when it does, we seem convinced:

- Sleep is indeed a fascinating and complex experience, and more than a mere biological act, we are programmed to carry out as daily, mechanical routine.
- Sleep is not just a ‘physiological response’ of our body which medical science might explain away as nothing but a ‘nature call’.
- Sleep is such a wondrous, near-mystic experience it moves even poets to reflect upon it—as Wordsworth did call it ‘blessed barrier between day and day’.

When such awareness dawns, it then occurs to us to ask some deeply philosophical questions:

- (1) Why do we sleep? What happens to us during sleep?
- (2) What is it really that we experience in sleep which enables us to awaken fully re-energised?
- (3) What is this mysterious state of sleep we all pass through every night almost half our lifetimes (pAdhi-
yUmm urangipOgum ninradir padhinai-Andu,’ said Saint Tondaradip-podi referring to slumbering
humanity) and yet seem to know almost nothing about its real nature or cause?
- (4) Why should the source of so much of our vitality and well-being be Sleep? If sleep is a reservoir
of energy to be used daily in ‘recharging’ us, wherefrom does the reservoir itself draw its kinetic
supply?
- (5) Might there perhaps be another state-of-being beyond Sleep somewhere? Someplace where one
might discover Sleep’s own fountainhead: a primal well-spring of mysterious life-energy from
which much more could possibly be drawn than what we know we now do, in fits and starts,
through our daily ration of five to six hours’ sleep?
- (6) Where might Sleep’s own power source lie? Is it possible to directly tap into that original
powerhouse, if there should be one?

It is these and other profound questions that get aroused in our minds when we read the great Upanishad called the ‘mAndUkya’.

The Mandukya Upanishad

The ‘mAndukya’ is the pithiest of the ten principal Upanishads which in our Vedantic tradition are collectively known as ‘dasOpanishad’. It belongs to the Atharvana Veda. It contains only twelve brief ‘mantrA-s. Scholars both past and present have regarded this Upanishad to be brilliant but the most inscrutable. Nonetheless, all the great Vedantic ‘achAryA-s, from VyAsa and Gaudapada to Adi Shankara, RamanujAchArya, and Ranga-ramanuja-muni, have all alluded, either directly or indirectly, to this Upanishad in their respective commentaries. Shankara, it is said, once declared that if a person could only study a single Upanishad in a lifetime, it should be this one. In another less-known, minor Upanishad called ‘Muktika’ (Deliverance), there is an account, it is said, of Rama appearing before a devotee and saying ‘the Mandukya alone is sufficient for the deliverance of the spiritual aspirant’, though less eager devotees will have to read the ‘dasOpanishad’, or thirty-two or even all one hundred and eight. ‘In its succinctness, the Mandukya distills essentials of mystical insight,’ wrote a scholar, Sri Eknath Eswaran.

No Upanishad study is recommended without the guidance and supervision of a personal and qualified teacher. Mandukya is no exception. The Mandukya’s terse description of the experience of Sleep as ‘sUshUpta-sthAna’ (literally, a ‘place of Sleep’) and as ‘truteeyah: pAdah:’ (the third state of human experience) is extremely difficult to comprehend in layman terms. Only a Vedantic guru can illumine a student on the truth of the Mandukya passages. However, even in the absence of a proper teacher, and even when left to his own means, a serious student placing his trust in God and doggedly pursuing the Upanishad, can still expect to grasp at least the outlines of the central theme of the sacred text, if he diligently and wholeheartedly applies his mind to the task. The task begins, firstly, in being able to imagine Sleep to be a journey into the night Man undertakes—a journey with three stops along the way. Let us follow it.



The Three States of Human Experience

The Mandukya, at the outset, opens our eyes to the fundamental truth that to human beings there are only three natural planes of experience available viz. the Waking, the Dream, and the Sleep states. (There are other states known to man perhaps, such as the drunken state or the drug-induced states of mind, but they can never be regarded as natural at all. It is for this reason that many of the findings in Aldous Huxley’s famous book, ‘*The Doors of Perception*’, about ‘mystic states’ induced by the drug, mescaline, or LSD, can only be regarded as spurious, even dangerous experimentation, and never genuine experience in the true Upanishadic sense.)

‘VaishvAnara’

The Mandukya calls the Waking state as ‘jAgruti’. This is the plane in which all of us experience this world through perception via the medium of each of our sensory faculties ‘turned outward’ (viz. sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, mind, intellect, intuition, and ego). It is within this plane of ‘jAgruti’ that we live and experience all the gross objects of the external world, including thoughts, desires, and passions arising out of them as well as the resulting feelings of joy and pain. The welter of all such gross sensory experiences is what the Upanishad calls ‘vaishvAnara’. These experiences are common across all humanity; in other words, since everyone has the same set of sensory organs, everyone perceives objects in the same way; and normally, objects too arouse the same experiences in everyone.

‘Taijasa’

The second plane of experience is ‘swapna’—the Dream state into which we slip when we go to sleep. In this state all our sensory apparatus is ‘turned inward’. They continue performing their respective functions of perception but do so in an exclusively ‘introverted mode’, i.e., none else other than the dreamer himself can experience his dream. No two people can dream alike since the respective experience of it is uniquely his own.

Furthermore, in the ‘swapna’ state, it is not the gross objects of the Waking world that is experienced but their subtle impressions or images as imprinted upon our subconscious. We do not carry with us into the dream state all of the objects of our desire and hope, passion or fear as they exist in ‘jAgruti’. Only a residual few—the strongest and most intense of desires—follow us into the ‘swapna’ state and they manifest there either as (a) subtle, and often very strange images, or (b) as oracular, sometimes even clairvoyant messages. The anger of one’s waking moments, for example, might manifest itself as a hideous viper in the dream state. Similarly, repressed lust in the ‘jAgruti’ state might unexpectedly surface as carnal dream images. And sometimes our dreams foretell or in some vague way anticipate events yet to happen in the Waking world.

It is the state of such ‘swapna’, the netherworld of suggestive dreams, which the Mandukya recognises as reality and as an inalienable part of human personality and experience. The sum total of such subtle experiences is called ‘taijasa’. (What the Mandukya recognised long, long ago became, centuries later, in the hands of Dr Sigmund Freud, the pioneering science of psychopathology and psycho-therapy: the theory and method of treating psychological disorders through clinical interpretation of dreams.)

The experiences of both ‘jAgruti’ and ‘svapna’, although very different in character, substance, and duration, have one thing in common—Desire (‘kAmA’). Our desires in the Waking state are multitudinous and multifarious indeed. However, when we cross over in sleep from the Waking into the Dream state, we do not carry with us all of such longings and latent yearning. On the journey from ‘jAgruti’ into ‘taijasa’ we take with us as subliminal baggage only the most deeply rooted elements of our ‘kAmA’ and with which we have identified ourselves so inseparably that it continues to cling to us like a shadow. We cannot, or rather we do not want to shake it off.

‘Praj~nya’

The third plane of human experience is what the Mandukya calls ‘truteeyah: pAdah:’ (The word ‘truteeya’ in Sanskrit means ‘Third’ and ‘pAda’ means, part’.) In the celebrated fifth and sixth stanzas, the Upanishad gives us great insight into the real and mystical nature of Sleep experience, which it calls ‘praj~nya’.

The experience of ‘praj~nya’ is not the same as ordinary ‘nidra’ that we experience fitfully during daily sleep, i.e., it is not our nocturnal shuttling, in and out, between ‘jAgruti’ and ‘svapna’. The Upanishad says, ‘Praj~nya’ is experience of sheer unending “Atmic” bliss readily available at a certain exclusive “spot” or “station” en route the journey of sleep. The “spot” is called “sUshUpta-sthAna” —a virtual locus of mystical delight to be found beyond the first and second states of Waking and Dreaming.

In ‘praj~nya’, unlike ‘taijasa’ or ‘vaishvAnara’, there is no trace of ‘kAmA’. The residual but deep-seated desires of our Dream state do not and cannot infiltrate into this blessed region. Since there is no ‘kAmA’ here, there is no work left, and hence no use for, our sense organs which therefore withdraw and retract into the mind. The mind itself then lies absolutely still. The resultant state of experience is ‘Praj~nya’, says the Upanishad. It is a subtle mass of pure consciousness unconditioned by the senses. It is quite unlike any sensory experience and hence cannot be described in words. It is composed wholly of ‘Atmic’ bliss.

praj~nAnaGhana EvA-nandamaya:
yatra sUptO na kamchana kAmum kAmayatE
na kamchana svapnam pashyati tat sUshUptam I
sUshUpta-sthAna Eki-bhUthah: praj~nAnaGhana
EvA-nandamayO
hyAnanda-bhUkchEthO-mukha: prAj~nyas~truteeyah:
pAdah: II

*Praj~nya, is the third state, one of deep sleep
in which a being neither dreams nor desires.
In this state there is no mind, there is no
feeling of Separateness; but the Sleeper himself is not conscious of this. But should he become
conscious
of his state of being in Praj~nya.
It will at once open the door indeed
to the glorious state of abiding joy. ' (Translation mine)*

Esha sarvEshwara Esha sarvagnya EshO'antaryAm-yEshu
yOnih: sarvasya prabhAvApyayow hi bhUtAnAm II

*'It is this state of consciousness [i.e., the "sUshUpta-sthAna"] that is the acme of all existential
conditions. It is a state of omniscience in which the inner controller of all existence emerges; such a
state is the cause of every other thing in existence; such a state of consciousness is the place of origin
and the end of all beings. ' (Translation mine)*



The Journey of 'SUshupti'

When we go to sleep daily each night, little do we realise that we also embark upon an extraordinary journey that takes us away from the diverse world of 'vaishvAnara' far across to the frontiers of our consciousness in 'taijasa' and 'praj~nya'.

It is in the vast landscape of dreams that much of our journey of sleep is undertaken. Then for a very brief while, no more than a few fleeting minutes, the journey manages to leave behind the domain of 'taijasa' and advances even further. It is then that, with tentative steps, we approach the gateway to the wonderland of 'abiding joy' the Upanishad calls 'praj~nya'.

Conveyed thus to within sighting distance of the outskirts of the city of 'praj~nya', both our body and spirit begin to experience the faint whiff of 'Ananda' (sheer spiritual bliss) wafting across to us from the 'sUshUpta-stAna'. It is the special moment during sleep when our breathing becomes deepest and sweetest. It is the moment when the precious life energy within each of us, called 'prANA', undergoes invigoration. The muscles of our sleeping body completely relax. (Medical science too confirms this.)

There are no dreams, pleasant or otherwise, to disturb or distract this brief but blessed state. In this near-‘sUshUpti’ state there is no sensation of anything—neither objects of desire nor their impressions. There is not even a sense of our individuality. This is the experience the Mandukya calls ‘Ananda’, pure and serene, but then it is mere intimation, not the real experience of ‘praj~nya’. And it is this mere intimation of ‘Ananda’ that we should recognise constitutes the delight of a ‘good night’s sleep’. It is the source of our bodily well-being and the reason for our mental vitality. Like Wordsworth, we value it more preciously than ‘all the morning’s wealth’.

Yet ironically, what the Mandukya reveals to us is that the joy or vitality in a ‘good night’s sleep’ is but a mere infinitesimal fraction of the full-blown experience of ‘Anandamaya’ found in the inner city of ‘praj~nya’ where ‘sarvEshwara’, the Almighty Himself, is said to reside in ‘sUshUpti’.



Just at the moment when sleep is about to take us beyond the dream state of ‘taijasa’ and to the very doorsteps of blissful ‘praj~nya’, we are suddenly turned back. We do a U-turn and head right back again into the uneasy and motley world of ‘svapna’. And there we remain wandering and maundering for a few more hours until the morning, when we finally wake up to return to the harsh glare of common, sensory reality: what we may call the ‘jAgruti’ pell-mell of ‘vaishvAnara’.

Night after night, all through our lives, without yet being truly aware we are repeating and retracing the same steps of this Upanishadic shuttle-journey of ‘sUshUpti’. We depart from the external world of ‘vaishvAnara’, travel across the dreamland of ‘swapna’ and approach the very doorsteps of the ultimate source (yOnih) of joy and energy, ‘praj~nya’. Alas, at the very last moment, we are turned back. We never really get to gain entry into that great city of ‘sUshUpta-sthAna’. All that we manage to bring back with us every morning, as the journey’s poor reward for the effort, is only so much of a whiff of divine ‘Ananda’ as will last us or linger with us, for a day or two at best, no more! Come nightfall, when we are worn out and exhausted once more by the external world (of ‘vaishvAnara’), we will embark again upon the same unconsummated trip to ‘sUshUpti’—to forage for yet another day’s petty ration of energy, to gather ‘fresh thoughts and joyous health’. In the Chandogya Upanishad, man’s inability to fully seize and realise the opportunity of ‘sUshUpti’ is captured brilliantly in a single line (8-3-2):

Like strangers in an unfamiliar country

Walking over a hidden treasure day by day,

We enter the world of Brahman while in deep Sleep

But never find it, carried away by what is false.

The Mandukya’s extraordinary account of ‘sUshUpti’ provides us with this very valuable insight too: Instead of stating that Sleep is a deeply mystical experience, it would be more accurate to say, rather, that every night of sleep in the life of man is a night of missed opportunity for mystical fulfilment—it lies virtually round the corner, and is yet so elusive.

The Weight of ‘KAma’

The line of study of the Mandukya we have followed so far will not fail to raise some more questions in our mind:

- What is the reason for the opportunity of blessed ‘sUshUpti’ being missed again and again in the daily journey of sleep? Even after going almost the full distance, why do we repeatedly fall short of our mark, the great ‘praj~nya’?
- Why are we ordinary souls unable to penetrate that third plane of human experience the Upanishad calls ‘trutheeya-pAda’? Why are we unable to commune with that state of ‘abiding joy’ known to the Upanishad as ‘praj~nyanaGhananandA’? Why must we remain content with mere crumbs of ‘Ananda’ in sleep when there is a veritable ocean of bliss just beyond it?
- Why can’t we too enjoy, in the manner of AndAl’s yogis and ‘muni-s’, that deep and serene state of ‘sUshUpti’ otherwise known as ‘yOga-nidra’?

The answer according to the Upanishad is simple:

If we grasp the reason why our passage from the Waking state to the Dream state is easy, it will help us see why exiting the Dream state and penetrating into the borders of ‘sUshupti’ is so very difficult. When we lie down to sleep at night, we must ask ourselves, what happens to us? We abandon and leave behind all frivolous desire and fears, all trifling thoughts and feelings of our Waking world, isn’t it?

What is this act of ‘abandoning’? It is really nothing but shedding of ‘vaishvAnaric’ weight and excess baggage. We ‘give up’, renounce’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘surrender’, or ‘let slip’ as much of ‘kAma’ as is necessary to wrench us out of the clutches of the Waking world. The voluntary ‘load-shedding’ (‘nyAsa’, it is called in the parlance of VisishtAdvaita Vedanta) is what enables the stilling of the senses and enables our ascent to the second plane of ‘taijasa’, the greater experience of subtle worlds.

In the state of ‘taijasa’, however, we are unable to repeat the success of the first one. The clinging dead-weight of our deeper ‘kAma’ is not so easily jettisoned (na kamchana kAmum kAmayatE’ are the words the Upanishad uses here suggestively). It is his inability to ‘abandon’, to leave behind his deepest desires that firmly blocks man’s advance into ‘sUshUpti’, turns him away from its doorsteps and seals him off from the bliss of pure ‘Ananda’. This is the reason why in that long journey of sleep into the night, the city of ‘praj~nya’ appears to man to be so near and yet so far.

The Mandukya’s vivid portrayal of all this is a passage (stanza 5) that is truly immortal: The third state is called Praj~nya, of deep sleep

In which one neither dreams nor desires.

... But the sleeper is not conscious of this.

Let him become conscious

In Praj~nya and it will open the door to the state of abiding joy.’



The Leap of the Frog

The word ‘mandUka’ is Sanskrit for ‘frog’; so ‘Mandukya Upanishad’ is ‘Frog Upanishad’. No one really knows how this Upanishad got its rather odd name. Some say it was associated with the ancient Sage Varuna who had power to assume the form of creatures like even the frog; hence the name of ‘mAndukyOpanishad’. Some Western scholars say that the Upanishad was for long preserved by the branch of an ancient family whose totem carried the tribal insignia of a frog; hence ‘mAndUkyOpanishad’. This does not seem a credible explanation since ancient Vedic families were

always known by the name of their ‘gOtra’ (unbroken lineage) and no ‘gOtra’ bearing the name of ‘mandUka gOtra’ was ever known in India.

The most credible explanation why this Upanishad got its strange name is put forward by the pontiff of the Kanchi Sankara Mutt, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati in his book of discourses ‘Deivattin Kural’. The frog is a creature that is known for its prowess of leaping. Some sub-specie of the frog family is known to cover up to 10—12 feet in a single leap and that is perhaps the inspiration behind the English coining the phrase ‘to leapfrog’, meaning ‘to vault over’ or ‘bound over’. This Upanishad describes how yogis and ‘muni-s’ similarly leapfrog like ‘mandUka-s’ and vault themselves from the Waking and Dream states straight into the consciousness of the third state of blissful ‘sUshUpti’. (The Upanishad text, in fact, says they catapult themselves into the fourth plane of ‘tUriya’—the state even the Upanishad is unable to describe adequately: the absolute experience of Brahman in the transcendent abode [‘parama-pada’] of the Almighty. For the limited purpose of our study, we stay with the third state of ‘sUshUpti’ and proceed no further.)

Unlike ordinary mortals who have no choice but to plod along the long path from Waking to the Dream state and then trudge again from Dream state to the state of ‘sUshUpti’ without ever completing the journey, yogis, and ‘muni-s’ are able to go straight from ‘jAgruti’ to ‘sUshUpti’ with minimal effort. By dint of spiritual prowess, gained partly by effort and partly by the grace of God, yogis manage to pare down the multitude and complexity of ‘kAma’ in their lives to a single simple one: attain Godhead. Freed of desire, fear and selfishness, there is nothing to hold the yogi back in either ‘vaishvaanara’ or ‘taijasa’. As if possessed of a magic switch, he turns on and shuts off his sense-apparatus at will. When turned off, he soars into the pure consciousness of ‘praj~nya’. There is no better affirmation of this ‘Mandukyan’ experience than the evidence available in the lives of such yogis. Their example is clear proof that the Mandukya is indeed a document of mystical verity, not fancy.

The Mandukyan Exemplars

There are several yogis and ‘muni-s’ in the land of India that one may want to cite as exemplars of the Mandukya experience. Personally, I regard three of them to be very appealing and convincing. Let me share only them here.

The first is Sri Parashara Bhattar (eleventh century AD) of SriRangam who was a disciple and protégé of Sri Ramanujacharya (tenth century AD). Bhattar was the chief ‘purOhit’ (priestly administrator) of the SriRangam temple; he was also Sri Vaishnava theologian and scholar. Although he was not generally given to outward expression of mystical fervor, an incident in Bhattar’s life does lead us to infer his ability to easily traverse the mystical path of the Mandukya. Bhattar died young at the age of 32. He was diagnosed to be suffering from a malignant tumor that grew so painful that attending doctors of those days ventured to perform surgery on him. Knowing the procedure would be excruciatingly painful, they advised Bhattar to consume a crude concoction (probably a heavy sedative) that would serve as general anaesthesia. Bhattar is reported to have replied: ‘I do not need anesthesia.” Just let me recite the blessed verses of the ‘tiruppAvai’ [of AndAL]. You can then perform any surgery on me you want.’ To Bhattar, reciting the sacred verses of the ‘tiruppAvai’ possessed power, far greater than any anesthesia, to take him into the deep regions of ‘sUshUpti’ where no mortal pain could ever touch him.

The second instance is a similar one and it is an incident in the life of the sage of Tiruvannamalai, Sri Ramana Maharishi (nineteenth century AD). In his advanced years, Ramana was afflicted with a virulent form of cancer that in an ordinary man would have caused unbearable pain and distress. Doctors wanted him to undergo surgery, but the sage would have none of it. ‘The cancer is in my

body’, he said calmly, ‘The pain is the body’s problem.” I am not the body, and the pain is not mine.’ (The event has even been reported with wonder in a published clinical dissertation of the world-renowned neurosurgeon from Madras, Dr B. Ramamurthy.) Once again, we see here a living example of a yogi shrugging off pain by remaining oblivious to all bodily (i.e., ‘vaishvAnaric’) conditions. It is only deep absorption in the ‘sUshUptic’ state that could have made it possible.

The third and rather dramatic instance of a yogi simply vaulting across the three states of experience is Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (nineteenth century AD). There is a popular account, which I paraphrase below, of how his master Totapuri first taught Sri Ramakrishna to go into ‘sUshUpti’ (or what in the Advaitic School is called ‘nirvikalpa-samAdhi’). It is a vivid illustration of a typically Mandukya journey in which a yogi simply ‘leapfrogs’ from the plains of ‘jAgruti’ to the very summit of ‘praj~nya’:

It is said that Totapuri instructed his disciple in the central ideas of the path of Vedantic ‘gnyAna’. He exhorted Sri Ramakrishna to fix his mind on the unconditioned Brahman (spoken about in the Upanishads). Ramakrishna in his later years recollected that experience and narrated it to his own disciples one day in the little temple-town of Dakshineshwar on the banks of the River Ganges flowing past the city of Calcutta.

After the initiation, Ramakrishna is reported to have said, “The guru asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive into the Atman. But in spite of all my attempts, I could not cross the realm of names and forms and bring my mind to that unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in withdrawing the mind from all other objects (of the world) except one, the all-too-familiar form of the blissful Mother (Durga), which appeared before me as a living reality, preventing me from passing beyond the realm of names and forms”.

In despair, Ramakrishna told the guru Totagiri that it was hopeless and that he could not raise his mind to the unconditioned state and come face-to-face with the supreme state of consciousness of the Atman.

Totagiri is said to have then rebuked Ramakrishna sharply and asked him to try harder. He cast his eyes around, and finding a piece of glass, he took it up and pressed it between the point of Ramakrishna’s eyebrows and ordered him to concentrate on the point. Under the guru’s stern command, Ramakrishna once again was determined to meditate and sat down. Almost miraculously, no more obstructions came in the way of Ramakrishna’s mind, which he said, ‘at once soared . . . and I lost myself in samAdhi.’

Totapuri sat for a long time watching his disciple. Finding him still motionless, he left the hut, locking the door from outside lest anyone should intrude without his knowledge. It is reported that Totagiri remained outside awaiting the disciple’s call from within to open the door. The day passed, night came, a second and a third day and night also passed and still there was no call.

Totapuri was astounded. He opened the door and entered the room. He was struck with wonder to see Sri Ramakrishna seated frozen in the very same position in which he had left him. The face was serene yet radiant. The guru examined the disciple’s heart and respiration and felt the disciple’s almost morbid body with his palms. There was no apparent sign of consciousness. Totagiri became bewildered by the miracle of young Ramakrishna achieving in a single day and single attempt the highest realisation of ‘nirvikalpa samadhi’ that had taken him all of forty years of hard practice to achieve.

Totapuri immediately took steps to revive the mind of his disciple back to the ordinary phenomenal world. The little room where the guru and disciple sat began to resonate with the holy mantra of ‘praNava’ uttered in low and solemn tones by the teacher. Little by little, Sri Ramakrishna’s mind

came to an awareness of the outer world; as he opened his eyes, he saw his guru looking at him with tenderness and admiration. Reverently, it is said, Ramakrishna prostrated himself before the guru who in turn locked him in a warm embrace.



The Sleep of the Awakened

We go to sleep each night not only to rest our tired limbs and jaded minds. A study of the Mandukya—and deep reflection upon its theme as exemplified by the lives of yogis—enables us to understand that Sleep is not only a bodily need but a spiritual function too. ‘SUSHUPTI’ is God’s way of extending a standing invitation to us to drop in on Him, take a little tour of His realms, and find out for ourselves about the ‘abiding bliss’ that the Upanishad declares prevails there. If man chooses not to take up God on his invitation, it could only be due to sloth and ignorance— ‘nidralasya pramAdOttham tat-tAmasam-udhAhitam’ to recall the words of the Bhagavath-Gita above. It is only sloth or ignorance, or both, that can keep our spirit from advancing upon heaven’s gateways situated in the inner world of our consciousness, the world which our Waking state, preoccupied as it is forever with what is mundane and desire-ridden, conspires to keep shut always.

Sleep is certainly not, on account of all this, the equivalent of God-experience; but it is perhaps the nearest approximation of it known to man. It is within easy grasp, too, of one and all. The secret of ‘sUSHUPTI’ lies in being able to wake up in sleep’ and look through the eyes of the Mandukya at what lies beyond. Sleep will then no longer seem slothful activity (tAmasa-nidra’). Instead, every night we go to bed it will seem to us as if we are preparing to go into ‘yOga-nidra’ where, like AndAl’s ‘munivargaLUm yOgigALum’, we might seize the sacred opportunity for true meditative joy and lasting mystical fulfillment.

Who knows? It is probable we might then find it quite easy to cultivate the old custom of our wise forefathers: going to bed uttering ‘Madhava, Madhava, Madhava!’ and awaking with ‘Hari’ bellowing seven times upon our lips!





CHAPTER 12

MANTRA: POWER OF PURE THOUGHT IN PURE SOUND

Our long Vedic tradition tells us that sometimes what may appear to ordinary ears like unintelligible syllables, phrases, or expressions carries extraordinary potency when imparted by a realised master to his deserving disciple. The Vedic ‘rishi-s’ understood the power of sound to a degree that we simply don’t.

We must ponder over what really is ‘mantra’.

‘Mantra’ represents the triumph that the spirit scores over matter through the medium of sound.

Sound, as even modern physics tells us, impacts us both on the physical and non-physical levels. I have watched a trained soprano singer raise her voice to such a shrill pitch that the ensuing vibration made a wineglass on a nearby table shatter. Glass-panes of houses near a busy airport very often experience the same phenomenon.

The power of sound is often felt at the non-physical level too. The most common experience of such power is music. The sound of music has power to transform our deepest moods even—from black depression to ineffable exultation. No one can exactly say why a ThyAgaraja ‘kriti’ or a Kabirdas ‘dOhE’ or a Beethoven symphony lifts one’s spirit up, but it undeniably does. Such is the power of sound, the power to bring about remarkable changes in our behaviour, in the way we feel and think our way through this world!

In south-western Namibia (Africa), there is a desert where herds of elephants’ roam about all the year round in search of water. They travel miles into the wilderness. Often a bull elephant, in its quest for some subterranean water spring, will stray away from its family and be virtually lost to them. Yet when the bull comes across a water source, its family will be notified instantly wherever they are, no matter how many scores of miles away. How? The bull elephant has a way of communicating with its family through emitting a series of sounds/syllables, which travel across the barren wilderness at radio frequencies no human ear can ever pick up.

Deep in the cold waters of the northern Pacific Ocean, giant blue whales use the same medium of sound to let their mates know where precisely they are out in the vast seas. During the mating season, the female whale will emit extremely low-frequency mating calls that travel through the water body of the ocean. The male whales a few thousand miles away will pick up the signal. The whales will then swim towards each other to a spot that is their natural mating grounds in the sea.

In each of the above cases, we see how spirit triumphs over matter through the medium of sound. In the case of the soprano singer, we get a glimpse of the raw destructive power that may be found in sound. In the case of soothing music, we see the ability of sound power to alter and modify human mood or behaviour. In the case of the Namibian elephant herd and the blue whale of the Pacific Ocean, we see how sound can conquer limitations of time and space.



When a true ‘guru’ gives his disciple a ‘mantra’—through the solemn rite of ‘mantrOpadEsa’—he gives him the opportunity to be able to invoke that awesome power there is in sound (‘vEda- shabda’). It is the power with which the ‘sishya’ can destroy all obstacles that matter may place in the way of his soaring spirit. It is the power with which the disciple can bring about changes in being and in behaviour. It is the power with which he can hope to triumph over the constraints of physical matter, space, and time.



CHAPTER 13

DA, DA, AND DA

The Upanishads narrate many simple parables that really tease our wits and challenge our deepest thoughts. One such parable from the ancient BrhadAranyaka Upanishad is paraphrased below:



‘WHAT THE THUNDER SAID’

The children of Prajapati, the Creator—gods, human beings, and ‘asuras’, the godless—lived with their father as students. When they had completed the allotted period of study, the gods said, ‘Venerable One, please give us instruction’. Prajapati answered with one syllable: ‘Da’.

‘Have you understood?’ he asked.

‘Yes’, they said, ‘you have told us daamyata, be self-controlled.’

‘Very good. You have understood,’ he said.

Then the human beings approached. ‘Venerable One, please teach us.’

Prajapati answered with one syllable: Da.’

‘Have you understood?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ they said. ‘You have told us datta, give.’ ‘Very good. You have understood,’ he said.

Then the ‘asuras’, the godless ones, approached. ‘Venerable One, please teach us.’

Prajapati answered with the same syllable: ‘Da.’

‘Have you understood?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ they said. ‘You have told us dayAdhvam, be compassionate.’

‘Very good. You have understood,’ he said.

The heavenly voice of the thunder too repeats this teaching: Da-Da-Da!’ Be self-controlled! Give! Be compassionate! ‘Om shanti! Shanti! Shanti!’



What are we to make of this story?

The Upanishad tells this story with stark, child-like simplicity. At first sight, it seems to us as though the parable is one of those bedtime morality tales meant for children, with the endearing caper of ‘Da, Da, Da’ thrown in for effect. The story’s main theme too appears rather plain and obvious to us. It

affirms self-control (dama'), charity ('dAna'), and compassion ('dayA') as ideals of behaviour in this world.

So, is this then really all what the story is about? We begin to wonder.

The Upanishads are divine revelations. It is said nothing uttered by them, not even the smallest phrase or expression is ever without significance if only we knew how to plumb their depths to glean it. In this little story too, it seems to us there is perhaps more than meets the eye. Surely, there must be more to learn from the encounter between Prajapati and his children. And from 'What the thunder said' too?



In the Vedic pantheon of gods, Prajapati (or 'chatur-mukha-brahmA') is pre-eminent. He is the first-born of the Almighty, the 'paramAtma'. In power and glory Prajapati is next only to the Supreme Lord Himself. It was thus that Prajapati came to be entrusted with carrying out God's own function of 'srushti'—cosmic Creation. Prajapati is the Progenitor of all beings everywhere and they include 'dEvAs' who are higher beings (like gods and celestials), 'manushyAs' or humans who are like you and me, and 'asurAs' who are the inhuman (or the godless beings) amongst the celestials. Hence, in the Upanishad story, Prajapati is their common father and is addressed as 'venerable one'.



All these classes of being—devAs, manushyAs, and asurAs—the story tells us, were living along with Prajapati as students. It makes us immediately wonder.

If the great first-born of God Almighty himself created these beings, why did they have to spend a so-called 'allotted period of study' under Prajapati?

We are led to conclude from this that Prajapati's handiwork of 'srushti', although great and marvellous in the first place, evidently fell quite short of perfection. All the worlds and all this cosmic reality gloriously teeming around us— 'Prajapati's children', to use the Upanishad's metaphor for it—they all somehow ended up being seriously unfinished. Had the 'children' been indeed perfect at the very inception, there would have been no need at all for 'devA', 'manushya', or 'asurAs' to undergo further 'education' at the University of Prajapati, isn't it?

Thus, the work of cosmic Creation—Prajapati's 'srushti'—was not 'done right the first time'. It remains so even to this day—perennially unfinished. Prajapati's task, alas, did not end with the mere Act of Creation. After 'srushti', he found he still had to go back to work again. The job of perfecting (or 'educating') that which had been created remained. It still remains. Which is why all the world and all the vast universe surrounding it (bhUmim vishvatO vruttvA', the 'purusha-suktam' calls it) are still undergoing a non-stop, inexorable process of cosmic flux ever since the dawn of time until this very moment. And this great process of flux is precisely what we have all come to know as 'evolution'.

Indeed, evolution is but an Upanishadic metaphor: It is Prajapati's workshop where all things great and small— 'dEvas', 'manushyAs', and 'asurAs'—all go through the ceaseless milling and grinding of a unique process called life until eventually, at the end, they emerge as perfect beings in God's own image in the very likeness of 'parabrahmam' Himself.

In the brief time it might take to recount a child's bedtime story, the BrhadAranyaka Upanishad thus gives us a short history of the whole of cosmic evolution:

Nothing, no creatures of this world—none of 'Prajapati's child-students'—is indeed perfect. Yet everything, every being that lives and breathes in God's vast, boundless empire—whether 'dEva', 'manushya', or 'asura'—every being carries within itself the promise of perfection. And all life on earth is but a process by which perfection is brought to fruition by evolution.



One by one, Prajapati's students troop up to him and ask their master for a final word of 'instruction' in a touching gesture of farewell. The entire story, in fact, if we read it carefully, reminds us of what in any modern university campus might be the scene of a solemn convocation (or 'graduation') ceremony.

Today's convocation ceremony (at Indian universities that I know or read about) is however anything but solemn. It is not anymore, the teacher, the real hero of the piece, whose honour it is to address students on such a momentous occasion in their lives. It is the local political big-wig, a mayor or senator, or a high-ranking government official, or else a corporate or stock-market tycoon who is invited to make an appearance, don the academic robe and 'grace' (!) the occasion. Nowhere can anyone anymore see university convocations reflecting the true spirit of the real ceremony, which is to invoke and celebrate that ancient Upanishadic ideal of the master-pupil relationship.

In the story, Prajapati's convocation address to his students consists of nothing pithier than three syllables: Da, Da, Da'. This strikes us as a bit of over-dramatization but there is far more wisdom in three little syllables of the Upanishad than there is perhaps in all the gaseous verbosity of a present-day VIP's convocation speech. Prajapati's final instruction to his students is in fact a clear, even if slightly histrionic, enunciation of the true value and purpose of all education: evolve, evolve, and evolve.

In the Upanishadic University, education does not culminate at a graduation ceremony where a diploma or doctorate is handed out or conferred. Education only inaugurates evolution; education ends when it is clear that evolution has truly begun. The students of Prajapati are in effect told by their teacher, 'My children, your creation and education may have been my responsibility all these years, but your evolution is now in your own hands.' You are now masters of your own destiny. Your education cannot perfect you. It is what you do with it that will decide what you might become and what you will be.'



The extent of a man's education can be easily measured by the degree, diploma, or doctorate he has earned. How to similarly ascertain the extent of his evolution?

The Upanishad teaches us to measure it using three 'Da-s': 'dama', 'datta', and 'dayA'—self-control, charity, and compassion. 'Prajapati's children' are three in number— 'dEva', 'manushya', and 'asura' and each, in effect, represents a measure of man's evolution.

The ‘dEva’ (sometimes also called ‘dEvata’ in the Vedic pantheon) is a benign celestial with superhuman powers and qualities (e.g., varuNa’, ‘agni’, ‘vAk’, etc.). The ‘asura’ is also an equal superhuman but of a demoniac mould. The Vedic ‘purANAs’ are full of illustrations of the ‘asuric’ character (e.g., Hiranyakasipu, SakatAsura, etc.). The ‘manushya’ is that species all the world knows as ‘the ordinary man’—the being who is a curious, sometimes tragic amalgam of both the celestial and the satanic, of Beauty and the Beast, of both the sublime and the slime.

The Upanishad story explodes here the myth which the so-called ‘man of science’, for a very long time indeed, had held about himself: the myth that he, great ‘homo-sapien’, represented the crowning achievement of evolution, biological and otherwise; that with the arrival of man on earth, nature’s work stood, once and for all, fulfilled. In PrajApati’s estimation however, we see the evolution of ‘manushya’ in a far less flattering light. Man’s advancement is clearly rated ‘second grade’, stranded as he seems at a forlorn crossroad somewhere in no-man’s land between inhuman ‘asurA’ and demi godly ‘dEva’.



In the Vedic pantheon the god of fire is ‘agni-dEva’. He is a very important and sacred one. No Vedic ritual (‘yagnya’) can normally be undertaken without ‘agni-dEvata’. This ‘dEva’ is a benign god bestowing upon the whole world the comfort of warmth, protection against dark dangers, the blessings of good health, and the wholesomeness of spirit.

The seven-tongued flame of ‘agni’ (sapta-jihvA’) that glows inside a sacrificial mound of fire is reverentially tended to in the ancient Vedic rite called ‘nitya-agni-hOtra’. The fire that appears in such a sacred rite is worshipped as a ‘dEva’, only because it is firmly ‘controlled’ by the restraint of ‘dama’.

Yet ‘agni’, the same ‘dEvata’, is feared and loathed whenever he is seen to lose self-control or ‘dama’. A wild forest fire that goes berserk is everybody’s nemesis. An accidental fire that suddenly blazes out of control is everybody’s nightmare. An inferno brings about tragedy and death on an epic scale. No one ever calls such malevolent, uncontrollable fire as ‘agni-dEvata’.



In the ‘Srimadh-Bhagavatham’, a Vedic ‘purANa’ of lofty spiritual values and insights, there is the story of Hiranyakasipu, the great ‘asurA’ who had no ‘dayA’, not an iota of compassion, in his heart, not even for his little child.

Hiranyakasipu’s little son, Prahlada, a mere boy of 6 years, in spite of the father’s best, and often violent efforts, could just not be weaned away from his religious conviction that the Almighty was no one else than Srimann-Narayana. The father furiously resented the son’s faith. He wished the boy would instead recognise and defer to Hiranyakasipu’s own power and glory, he being, as he was, the monarch of all that he surveyed. The ‘asura’ was indeed a great one, he had attained superhuman powers and qualities by dint of long and severe austerity, will, and labour. He had conquered empires and subjugated people all over the world. He believed he was entitled to the obeisance of all. Why his son alone should think otherwise and persist in his apostasy in search of another God, another faith was beyond Hiranyakasipu’s understanding.

After subjecting the little child to all manner of oppression and torment only to make him somehow recant, and meeting with no success whatsoever, the ‘asura’ finally decided to have Prahlada murdered in cold blood by his own palace courtiers.

The story of the ‘Bhagavatham’ tells us that the ‘asura’ king possessed all great and noble qualities behoving a world leader. Except one: ‘dayA’, compassion. He lacked the unique compassion, which normally would move any father’s heart, however steely, towards his child no matter how errant or wayward the little one may be. And for the one solitary virtue that mighty Hiranyakasipu lacked, he paid the penalty with his own life in the end, at the hands of God Himself.



There is another story in the Bhagavatham which tells the story of a ‘manushya’ and the Upanishadic virtue of ‘datta’ or ‘dAna’. It is the story of Sudama (also well-known by his alias, Kuchela).

This man was a good Brahmin who had a loving wife. The couple had lovable children. They were all living a modest but happy life, until one day they woke up to the rude reality that they were destitute. The children’s next meal was an uncertain prospect and Sudama desperately had to do something.

Brahmins are generally not obliged to give alms. They are sanctioned by Vedic scripture (‘sAstra’), in fact, to receive charity. Looking around for a kind donor in town to help the family in dire straits, Kuchela’s wife suggested the husband should try knocking on the royal doors of his old friend and schoolmate, Lord Krishna, whom Kuchela had not met for several years. Kuchela the Brahmin, thus set out, a trifle reluctantly, on the mission to seek alms from his old boyhood friend and benefactor, Krishna.

Krishna and his queens, Rukmini and Satyabhama, received Kuchela into the royal quarters with all the courtesy due to an old friend, but no more. They feasted him, entertained him, and Krishna recollected all their pleasant boyhood memories. And then, quickly enough, it was time for the guest to go. The Lord and consorts politely prepared to take leave of him and Sudama knew it was the moment to exit. A sense of shame overtook him and prevented him from disclosing to his host the real purpose of the visit. Kuchela resigned himself to returning empty-handed to his wife, his mission an utter failure.

On his way out, Kuchela suddenly remembered he had brought with him a little gift meant for Krishna, just for old times’ sake. It was a little pack of rice bran. In his boyhood days, Kuchela had remembered, Krishna had relished bran so much as an afternoon snack. ‘Oh, Krishna, I almost forgot’, said Kuchela as he took leave, ‘Here is some rice bran I brought for you!’ I remembered how much you’d enjoyed bran snacks back in those young days! Here, please accept this.’ The Bhagavatham recounts how Krishna received the little gift of rice bran with great joy! He embraced his poor Brahmin friend for the kindness.

Joy, notwithstanding, the Bhagavatam records, Krishna still let poor Sudama return home empty-handed.

It was when the Brahmin journeyed back home, however, that the miracle happened!

Kuchela’s shabby hutment turned into a grand mansion with liveried servants on call! His wife and children were no longer in tatters! They were dressed in finest silks and all decked up in brilliant gold! Sudama was invited into his own opulent quarters by a bevy of handmaidens who showered petals upon him, washed his feet with perfume, laid out a moonlit banquet for him with serenading bards in attendance.

Sudama and his family lived happily thereafter!

A ‘manushyA’s’ single act of ‘datta’ or ‘dAna’ had possessed enough power to work God’s own miracle upon Sudama.



Although the story in the BrhadAranyaka Upanishad gives us the impression that Prajapati is addressing ‘dEva’, ‘manushya’, and ‘asura’ separately, as if they were three distinctive individuals, actually it is man alone, the ‘manushya’, who is being addressed here. It would be quite tempting otherwise to conclude that the virtues of self-control and compassion are of little concern to man since, as Prajapati himself makes it appear in the story, ‘dama’ and ‘dayA’ are for celestials and demons to worry about! In the story ‘dEva’ and ‘asura’ are really the Upanishad’s metaphor for the higher and lower self within man. Each represents a certain stage of advancement along the path up the ladder of man’s evolution. The ‘asura’ represents the lower rungs; and the ‘dEvas’ are the higher reaches of the evolutionary spiral.



The ‘manushya’ with no ‘dayA’ in his heart is an ‘asurA’ worse than Hiranyakasipu; and the ‘manushya’ who has mastered the senses, that man of ‘dama’, is verily a ‘dEva’ greater than ‘agni’.

To man’s eternal question of life, ‘To be or not to be?’ the BrahmadAranyaka Upanishad thus gives a direct but profound answer: ‘If you must “be”, then be with compassion. If you must “not be”, then be not without self-control.’

This is the principal message of the story. This is the call of the ancient ‘sruti’. This is the wisdom of the Upanishad. It is also the eternal song of the voice from the clouds: the thunder which keeps saying to us: ‘Da, da, da’.”



CHAPTER 14

A THOUGHT FOR FOOD AS FOOD FOR THOUGHT

‘All this world is verily *annam*, food’—is a famous saying from the sacred Upanishads. Most of you know exactly what the old wisecrack, ‘Money makes the world go around’, is meant to convey. If one were to paraphrase it and say instead, ‘Food makes the world go around’, one would get a true, although less than full measure of the profundity of the Upanishadic statement.

annAdvai prajA prajAyantE

yAh kAscha pruthiveem srithAh athO

annae-naiva jeevanti

athainadapiyan-yant-tatah:

anna-nagumhi bhUtAnAm jyEshtam . . .

annAdbhUtAni jAyantE

jAtAn annEna vardantE.

(Taittiriya Upanishad, ‘Anandavalli’)

(meaning):

Know this to be truth:

Everything that lives was born from food lives on food

and in the end,

shall merge into food!

food is verily the greatest amongst all Creation!

Just take a moment to look all around you and you will see at once that the entire world runs on energy—from motor cars and airplanes to air-conditioners, toasters, and cellphones. And all the energy needed to run the world is generated by a precious thing called ‘fuel’. Without ‘fuel’—whether fossil, thermal, hydroelectric, wind, or nuclear—without fuel, even the best model to roll out of a Cadillac assembly line in Detroit is a little more than gleaming metal junk.

Planet earth has about 6 billion human beings. In much of their normal functioning, whether it is plain locomotion, strenuous manual work, or great creative thinking, human beings are not unlike machines. They need ‘energy’ too, ‘*prANa*’, and lots and lots of it. Humans need to guzzle energy just to be able to simply carry on in life. What generates this ‘*prANic* energy’, the Upanishad says, is ‘*annam*’, food. A human being with no ‘*prAni-c*’ fuel inside to energise him/her is just about as worthless as a Cadillac with no fuel in the tank. One is just beautifully engineered junk while the other is biologically evolved junk.

The Three Commandments

Since ‘*annam*’, food, is recognised to be the ultimate source of all energy, the Upanishad exhorts us to take great care in conserving and using it wisely. There are three great commandments that have been issued in this regard:

- (1) ‘*Annam na nindhyAth!*’
- (2) ‘*Annam na pari-chaksheeta!*’
- (3) ‘*Annam bahu kurveeta!*’ (Taittiriya Upanishad, ‘*Brghuvalli*’) (meaning):

‘Thou shalt not abuse food!’

‘Thou shalt not discard food!’

‘Thou shalt grow food in abundance!’

Tragically, we live today in a world where all three Upanishadic commandments are observed more in the breach than in obedience.

The clearest example of large-scale abuse of food one can find is in the industrial rearing of cows, sheep, and goats meant for slaughter far more than for dairy. Cows are reared on modern, ‘scientific’ methods of dairy farming. Instead of letting cows to natural pasture, they are fed with an artificial steroidal diet to boost tissue growth and body weight. Way back in 1995, there was a worldwide disaster called the ‘mad cow disease’, which was a direct result of industrial dairy farming. Thousands of cattle afflicted with the ‘mad cow’ disease were forthwith slaughtered and destroyed. It was man who had mindlessly abused an important food source of the world but blamed the insanity of it all on poor cows. It was a brutal violation of ‘*annam na nindhyAth!*’

Early in 2004, close to 2 million chickens raised in poultry farms across countries such as China, Thailand, and Taiwan, and meant for sale to worldwide fast-food retail franchisees like McDonald’s and KFC, were all thrown into incinerators and destroyed wholesale. The reason? Because they were found to have contracted a deadly epidemic called ‘bird flu’. Once again, this was a direct result of greedy, profit-driven, industrial approach to poultry farming. Two million poultry were farmed mindlessly and then slaughtered equally mindlessly. This in a world where 2 million children are known to suffer from severe malnutrition every year! There cannot be a more glaring example of ‘*annam na pari-chaksheeta!*’ in this world!

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, there was a craze amongst farmers to switch from cultivating paddy to prawns. They saw there was far more profit to be made from intensive farming of prawns on their fields and exporting them to US, Europe, and Japan than in growing rice and selling it to the government of India. The result was a dangerous decline in food stocks in the country’s warehouses not to mention environmental degradation of some of the most fertile coastal belts of rural India. This was a case of farmers getting more excited about ‘greenbacks’ than about ‘green revolution’, and it was a grim reminder of what happens when man does not abide by the Upanishad dictum: ‘*annam bahu kurveeta!*’

‘anna shuddhi’

The machines and inventions we see in man’s mechanical world are countless in number, but it is very significant to see that they do not all run on a single kind of fuel.

Simple machines like kitchen stoves or petromax lanterns can run on the crudest of fuel even—like kerosene or paraffin. Motor cars however need processed fuel like hi-octane gasoline, while heavy-duty trailer trucks with big engines and massive sea-going ships with giant turbines powering them all need superior grade diesel. Supersonic aircraft are the ultimate in mechanical sophistication. They can run on nothing, but the most refined of fuels called ‘aviation grade’ fuel.

Hence, we must appreciate how different classes of machines, depending upon how sophisticated, advanced, or superior they are in design, construction, or functioning, require entirely different types of fuels.

There is only one fuel type most appropriate for the functioning of every machine in the world. If a machine must function as it must, efficiently and purposefully, then it has to be fed exactly the type of fuel it deserves—no less, no more. An F-16 fighter jet can run on kerosene no more than a woman’s hair dryer can run on nuclear power.

Now, as with machines, so is it with humans, says the Bhagavath-Gita. Every man must consume the food most appropriate to his inner nature (*‘gUNa’*). The type and quality of food he consumes generates for man the ‘energy’ (*‘prANa’*) of requisite intensity, which in turn enables him to function best in life. But then it is man alone who can and must take full responsibility for the quality of food he consumes. It is a very grave responsibility of life and in the Vedantic *‘mArga’*, or way of life, it is called *‘anna shuddhi’*.

‘sAttvic’ Food

It must be clearly understood that *‘annam’*, the principal fuel or energy source for man, comes too in different grades of quality. Just as, say, automotive fuel comes in many retail grades (leaded, unleaded, premium, super, etc.) human fuel, i.e., *‘annam’*, too comes in three distinct grades each meant specifically for three types of human beings—the *‘sAttvi-c’*, *‘rajasi-c’*, and *‘tamasi-c’* individual.

The *‘sAttvic’* man is like the sophisticated F-16 jet fighter designed to perform extraordinary functions—flying supersonic speeds at near-stratospheric altitudes. The *‘sAttvic’* man too is similarly born to strive for the higher things of life such as knowledge, illumination, goodness, and selfless work. He is different from lesser men of the world. Such a man deserves the highest grade of fuel, the highest of *‘anna shuddhi’*. If he must function in life as he really must—in accordance with the innate nobility and superiority of his inner aspirations—he must feed upon an essentially *‘sAttvic’* diet.

The Bhagavath-Gita prescribes for such a man only such varieties of diet (*‘aahAram’*) that can promote robust bodily growth, mental alertness, well-being, longevity, intellectual vigour, health, affability, and happiness. Such food or *‘aahaara’* is said to be full of sweetness, oleaginous in character, and wholly nutritious. It is well described in chapter XVII.8 in the Bhagavath-Gita. Examples of *‘sattva aahAra’* are fresh fruits and vegetables, milk and milk products, rice, and wholesome grains and cereals, etc. Generally speaking, vegetarian food tends to be *‘sAttvic’* in nature.

It is this type of food particularly which, in its third commandment, the Upanishad says should be grown abundantly in the world—*‘annam bahu kurveeta!’*

‘rajasic’ Food

Then there is food that is fit only for the man of ‘*rajas*’—i.e., for him who is of Dionysian character, who is filled with restless energy, constantly being driven to action by powerful passions and impatient inner drives, who wants to conquer the world or change it, be a leader of men and of the times.

Such men, says the Bhagavath-Gita, will need a dietary regime that will keep the inner engines of their ‘*rajasic*’ personality running full steam on all cylinders. The general diet of such men will tend to consist of food that is bitter, sour, very salty, exceedingly spicy, and pungent, dry, and burning (chapter XVII.9).

Judging by the standards of the Bhagavath-Gita, much of what the modern world of today eats is essentially of the ‘*rajasic*’ grade. It is meaty, greasy, spicy, rich, palate-tingling, tangy, aromatic, and irresistibly tasty. In a word, it is all that the popular expression ‘*Yummy, yummy!*’ might suggest to us! ‘*Rajasic*’ cuisine is essentially meant to titillate and satiate deep-seated instincts of the gourmet and it is the reason why it is so very tempting. It is very easy in fact to over-eat and over-indulge in the full range of ‘*rajasic*’ foods available in the world today—hamburgers, sausages, steak, pizzas,

pasta, enchiladas, biriyani, exotic chocolates, caramel, creamy pastries, and so on and so forth.

If we understood well the nature of ‘*rajasic*’ foods we would not fail to also understand why millions of children and teenagers in the world quickly fall in love with and become slaves to all kinds of ‘junk food’ peddled by any number and all manner of ‘fast-food’ chains and restaurants. If over-eating and obesity are fast assuming alarming proportions as health hazards throughout the world, it is mainly because of the enormous content of ‘*rajas*’ in the food the people eat.

The amount of ‘*rajasic*’ food that is over-eaten and over-indulged in the world is exceeded only by the huge amounts of it that is also criminally wasted. If one were to take a census of all the ‘fast-food’ chains in the world and of all the hotels, restaurants, and eating joints, and actual stock then taken of the heaps of ‘left-overs’, ‘throwaways’, and discarded foodstuff which all ultimately find their way into millions of trash cans and garbage dumps in the world, if one could visualise all that, it would not be difficult at all to imagine the colossal amounts of food being wasted away daily in our own lifetime. If one were to impute an economic value to all the food so discarded in the world today, it would be quite enough indeed to set up yet another UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, another FAO!

It was keeping in mind the mammoth potential for food wastage on a global scale, especially of the ‘*rajasic*’ variety, that the Upanishad warned—‘*annam na pari-chaksheeta!*’

‘tamasic’ Food

Next says the Bhagavath-Gita, there is food that generates ‘*tamas*’—energy that is actually all ‘anti-energy’.

‘*Tamasic*’ food is fit for the man who conforms to the mould of the hedonist. He is the quintessential degenerate. He is so full of sloth, lust, and ignorance. He wallows in the many follies he himself authors in life and of which he ultimately becomes victim. Such a man’s dinner plate, says the Gita, is generally heaped with all manner of stale, putrid, fermented, intoxicating, and stimulating foods. ‘*Tamas*’ in food degrades and destroys everything fine and noble within the human body—virility, good cheer, moral integrity, and intellectual vigour (chapter XVII.10).

The most common examples of ‘*tamasic*’ food is what the Gita calls ‘*yAta-yAmam*’, i.e., foodstuff that has been unnaturally preserved for unduly long periods of time. Under this category would fall all manner of foods kept ‘preserved’ throughout a period of so-called ‘shelf life’ through methods of

innovative packaging, refrigeration, cold storage, and microwave as well as by the use of chemical additives and preservatives.

All ‘packaged’, ‘ready-to-cook’, ‘ready-to-eat’, ‘frozen-fresh’, ‘instant-food’, ‘ready-to-microwave’ foodstuffs that one might see while strolling along the long shelves and aisles of any large supermarket or department store anywhere in the world, might eminently qualify indeed to be called ‘yAta- yAmam’. They are all essentially ‘*tamasic*’ food in nature. Consumption of liquor, wines, tobacco, soporifics, and many of the carbonated, tinned, and canned foods of the world would also, going by the standards of the Gita, be wholly ‘*tAmAsic*’ in nature. The advent of the ‘packaging industry’ and the mass proliferation of its ingenious products—viz. tetra packs, aluminium foil, plastic cartons, etc.—has done much indeed to promote and purvey ‘*tamasic*’ foodstuff in the modern consumerist world. Thanks to modern packaging methods, even ‘*sAttvic*’ foods can now be turned into the ‘*tamasic*’ kind.

The refrigerator and the microwave are both excellent kitchen conveniences of the modern day. As long as they are used to keep home food or foodstuffs fresh and unspoiled over limited periods of time, they have enormous utility. But unfortunately, both appliances in recent times have come to be over-exploited. Like industrial packaging, they too now have become tools of ‘abuse through preservation’.

Prolonged preservation, not temporary refreshment, has become the sole purpose of these two appliances. One merely has to inspect a sample of home refrigerators anywhere in the world today and the inventory will almost certainly reveal half the food items therein to be a week or more old, if not months. In other words, do not be surprised to find a lot of ‘yAta-yAmam’ inside your refrigerator at home.

The purpose of the household refrigerator lies increasingly today only in ‘preserving’ rotten packaged, ready-to-cook food. And the microwave, that wonder tool of modern invention, the pride and envy of housewives all over the world, too only serves in turning the condition of stale or rotten food from a state of ‘*tamas*’ into ‘piping hot’ one of ‘*rajas*’.

Between the three of them—modern packaging, the refrigerator, and microwave—they seem to have succeeded very well indeed worldwide in perpetrating precisely that sort of ‘abuse of food’, which the Upanishad warned against through that famous commandment—‘*annam na nindhyAth!*’—‘Thou shalt not abuse food’.

‘anna shuddhi’ and ‘atma shuddhi’

In the sixth chapter of the Bhagavath-Gita, there is a line which finally sums up the Vedantic view of ‘*anna-shuddhi*’.

nAth-yashna-tatsu yOgOsti

na chykAnta-mashnataha: I

(Bhagavath-Gita. Ch. VI.16)

‘The path taken by the Wise Ones (Yogi) in the journey of life’, says the Gita, ‘is not for he who eats too much or too little.’

Too much or too little of any type of food—whether ‘*sAttvic*’, ‘*rajasic*’, or ‘*tAmasic*’ is bad. The wise human—the ‘yOgi’—is he who knows exactly what should constitute his diet. It is that diet (‘*aahAra*’), which is just right for him (‘*shuddhi*’), that which is in absolute consonance with his inner nature (‘*gUNa*’) and which shall promote his all-round well-being in life.

The Gita line above is not merely a call for men to observe moderation in the consumption of food. There is a far greater lesson implicit in it. It tells us that we can learn a great deal about what we should

eat, what diet is right for us, and what food we must avoid by simply following the precept and example of the ‘yOgi-s’ of the world.

In the long Vedantic tradition of India, many indeed are the great masters of past and present, ‘achAryA-s’ and ‘guru-s’ who in their own lifetimes observed strict rules of diet, i.e., ‘anna shuddhi’. They knew in their wisdom what balance of ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’, and ‘tamas’ should go into their diet. (The Sri Vaishnava ‘AchArya’, Swami Venkatanathan [thirteenth century CE], even wrote a useful treatise on ‘anna shuddhi’, called ‘aahAra-niyamam’, which is even today a useful manual of good dietary practices.) The example of such ‘yOgi-s’ shows us clearly how we must carry out one of the most important responsibilities in life we have towards ourselves viz. ensuring our ‘atma-shuddhi’ through ‘anna shuddhi’.

Human life is a rather long and hectic journey. One needs the highest and most refined form of energy (‘prANa’) to undertake it. And it is food, ‘annam’, that is the basic fuel needed for travel. Good food, like good fuel, determines to a large extent what the quality of the journey experience shall be.





CHAPTER 15

THE GUEST IS GOD

There is a famous passage called ‘sIkshAvalli’ in the Taittiriya Upanishad (an ageless Vedic revelation of India). In Sanskrit ‘sIksha’ refers variously to the science of phonetics, prosody, diction, and intonation. It is also a broad term for education, science, arts, and all crafts in general. The whole of this Upanishadic passage is a Vedic teacher’s convocation address to his class of students who, having completed their course of study with him for twelve long years, are finally departing to return to their respective homes—to face the world and live out their time on earth as ‘brahmins’, seekers of Truth.

While bidding them all goodbye, the Vedic teacher gives his students wise counsel on many matters. It is a very moving scene indeed if one knows how to visualise it vividly in one’s mind. The teacher knows he might be seeing his beloved students for the last time. Their paths may not cross again in the journey of life. And that’s why he is eager to speak to them from the depths of his heart.

He tells them how they should conduct themselves in life, what values they must embrace, what personal qualities they must cultivate, what is the nature of Truth, what is God, what is the meaning and purpose of human life. The whole of the ‘sIkshavalli’ is a truly soul-stirring passage indeed full of lofty, ancient Upanishadic thought and wisdom.

One of the most famous lines in the passage is the following:

mAtr dEvo bhava
pitR dEvO bhava
AchArya dEvO bhava
atithi dEvO bhava.

In simple translation, the lines mean:

Regard Mothers as God, Fathers as God, Teachers as God,
and the Guest that enters your home too As God incarnate!

At first glance, the above lines may seem to us as no more than obvious homily or stale truism. Respect and love of parents and teachers is, after all, urged and sanctioned in all cultures of the world. The ancient Upanishad thus is not telling us anything particularly new or profound.

But behind the apparent simplicity of the Upanishad pronouncement, there is a not-too-obvious message that affirms four great universal human values. They are (a) family, (b) gratitude, (c) learning, and (d) charitableness.



The first two lines—i.e., about looking upon the Mother and Father as God—emphasise the importance of the family as a human institution. If mankind must survive and thrive, the family must survive and thrive. (‘The happiness of all humanity lies in the happiness of a family’, is in fact another old and famous Vedic prayer— ‘lOkA samasthA sukhinO bhavantu’.)

How are we to judge if the family as an institution is hale and hearty? The litmus test is to find out if our aged and sick mothers and fathers are well cared for. Wherever we find the old and the dying increasingly being neglected by or alienated from their children; wherever we find an increasing number of old-age homes or sanatoriums springing up in the community or neighborhoods around us; wherever we find aged ‘senior citizens’ struggling in the evening of their lives, living alone and anxiously, trying to scrape through from one day to another, and living from hand-to-mouth upon paltry pensions and pathetic doles; wherever we come across such tell-tale signs, we can be sure they are symptoms of societal degeneration brought about by the decline of the family institution. It is a sign mankind that is headed down the wrong road.



The first two lines of the Upanishad edict above, when read together, serve also to underscore the importance of gratitude as a human value.

We owe an eternal debt of gratitude to our parents for giving us so much in life that is priceless—unconditional love, care, and support. Our parents bring us from nothingness into being. It is they who delivered to us God’s gift of life. Thereafter they prepared us for everything in life. Thanks to them we grew to maturity and evolved into full, fine human beings. Everything needed to succeed in life, and to find fulfilment in it, we surely received from our parents. Hence, in that respect, the parent is like God, i.e., like he who has bestowed upon us all the priceless, life-enhancing bounties of his benevolence, viz. this very planet we live upon, which is our only home in an otherwise vast, empty, and terrifying universe, and filled with sunshine, fertile earth, food, air, sparkling water, and beautiful forests.

If there is no gratitude in our hearts to show our parents, there is really no true gratitude that we can return to God Almighty.

There is a beautiful affirmation of this same human value in that grand religious Sanskrit epic of India—Srimadh Valmiki ‘Ramayana’. We have the hero of the epic, Sri Rama, the very incarnation of God upon earth, saying this about the debt of gratitude every man owes his parents:

*yathA-shakthi pradAnEna snApanAcchAdanEna cha
nityam cha priya-vAdEna tathA samvardhanEna cha*

(II.111.10)

‘A hundred things the mother and father do for their child (as the English poet wrote, ‘little nameless unremembered acts of kindness and love’)! Who can tell, who can measure, who can ever describe, who can ever repay the million kindly acts received from one’s mother and father?’



The third line of the Upanishad ‘vAkya’ (dictum) is

*AchArya dEvO bhava
Regard the teacher as God!*

This simple statement is not just about teachers as persons. It is about the universal value of education. Human life has no real meaning without education. A life spent without learning is sheer waste and futile existence. It is the teacher—the ‘guru’ and ‘AchArya’—who leads us from ignorance to enlightenment. The school room, the library, the museum, the university laboratory, the seminar hall—it is these institutions of man that are his spiritual workshop and retreat. It is through education alone that we can hope to discover and understand the world and what life itself is indeed all about, and who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.

Without a ‘guru’ or ‘AchArya’, a teacher, guide, and mentor, there can be no progress in our lives, neither material nor spiritual. Hence we are exhorted by the Upanishad to regard the teacher as God incarnate.



The real profundity of the Upanishad commandment however lies in the last line:

athithi dEvO bhava

Regard the guest who enters your home as God!

Mother, father, and teacher are to be regarded as veritable God since they give us so much that is priceless in life. We find this quite easy to understand. Those who give are god-like indeed.

But what about the guest? Why should he be regarded as God? The guest who enters your home is not the one who showers you with benevolence. On the other hand, it is he who needs your benevolence and hospitality. He is in the position of a ‘receiver’, not ‘giver’. So why should the Upanishad want him to be regarded as God?

The beauty of this Upanishad line is that it gently changes our perspective of the givers and receivers of the world. It takes away the god-like status from the former and bestows it upon the latter. We are exhorted to regard those in life to whom we give—in kindness, charity, and generosity—as gods.

We all give and engage in charity because deep down it makes us ‘feel good’. What is this ‘feel good factor’? It is the feeling that makes us feel god-like. It makes us take a little pride in our own nobility and charitableness. Although we might not want to admit it even to ourselves, the fact remains that we often give because it makes us secretly feel a bit like God.

But that sort of giving is not Upanishadic in character at all. It is, in fact, the very opposite of genuine charitableness. We give truly only when it is the receiver who, by our act of charitableness, we wish would feel like God, not the other way around.

When we entertain a guest—an ‘athithi’—at home, we must ask ourselves what our true intention is. Is it to make the guest ‘feel good’ or is it make ourselves ‘feel good’? If we brought guests into our home only to show off the pomp in the house, our wealth or to make a statement about our social status, then it is not kindness or generosity that is extended to the ‘athithi’. It is mere vainglory and selfishness on our part.

The Hindu religious scriptures, called ‘itiAhAsA-s’, are legendary accounts of the events of God’s avatic life on earth. The ‘Ramayana’ and the ‘Mahabharata’ are two such splendid scriptural works. In both works are recounted how the Almighty Himself went as humble ‘athithi’ to the homes of his devotees, how He ‘received’ their hospitality and how, as a result, they came to be blessed with everlasting grace.

In the Ramayana, Sri Rama went as 'athithi' to the abode of Guha, a lowly tribesman of the forests; then as 'athithi' to the abode of the Sage 'rshi' Gautama deep in the forests; then as 'athithi' to the humble hut of the old lady Sabari, who had lain in wait for years on end for the Lord's visit; and as 'athithi' again to the royal home of Sugriva. Throughout the pages of the Ramayana, as we see the avatar of God going as 'athithi' from the home of one good devotee to another's, we see the affirmation, again and again, of the great Upanishad ideal of 'athithi dEvo bhava'.

(In the Mahabharata, too, we find similar affirmation of the 'athithi' ideal in the account of Lord Krishna's visit to the home of Vidura.)

To conclude, the long and short of the Upanishad message is simply this:

If we all did learn to look upon those to whom we give as God Almighty; and again, if we all learnt to sincerely, please our 'athithi-s' as we might want to please God, then we can be certain of this: We will be inspired to give more and more to each other in life in the true spirit of charitableness. And a world filled with such universal generosity and kindness, where each regards the other as an 'athithi', would surely be God's own kingdom founded upon earth!



CHAPTER 16

‘SHANTI’: THE VEDIC CALL OF PEACE

Whenever Vedic chanters or ‘*ghanapAtin-s*’ begin their chants, they preface their recitation with a brief invocation called ‘*shAnti-pATam*’.

For example, before the famous ‘*purusha-suktam*’ is chanted one will first hear the invocation of ‘*tacchamyO rAvriNamahE, gAtum yagnyAyA*’, etc. Similarly, before we proceed with reciting the ‘*sIkshAvalli*’ in the Taittiriya-upanishad, we first chant the invocation ‘*shamno mitra-sham varuNa:*’, etc. Again, before we begin the ‘*narAyaNavalli*’, we are taught to begin with the preliminary chant of ‘*sahanAvavatu sahanow bhunaktu*’, etc.

In each of the above Vedic recitations, there is always a prefatory chanting of what is called a ‘*shAnti-pATam*’. This ‘*shAnti-pATam*’ is repeated at the end also.

The ‘*shAnti-pATam*’ chant, both in the beginning and the end, tapers off to the resonating chant of ‘*shAnti, shAnti, shAnti:*’ meaning ‘Let peace ever prevail’ and this is recited thrice in a most emphatic manner.

We must enquire into the reason why all Vedic chanting is prefaced by this ‘*shAnti-pATam*’. It is not without significance.

All religions lay down that the purpose of human life is to realise divine purpose. Religions help in that endeavour. The Vedas tell us however that nobody can practice religion outside an environment conducive to ‘*shAnti*’ or peace. Such peace is three-fold: *shAnti*’, ‘*shAnti*’, and ‘*shAnti:*’.

- (1) In the first case of ‘*shAnti*’, what is conveyed is that one becomes truly religious-minded only after one has learnt to be at peace with oneself. We cannot be angry with ourselves and at the same time hope to contemplate upon the glories of God. Anger and contemplation are diametric opposites.
- (2) In the second instance of ‘*shAnti*’, the Veda says we must be at peace with our fellowmen. In the world we live today, we may not have compelling causes that make us love our fellowmen. Nonetheless we cannot have great hate for them either if we each want to pursue our religious ends. If we are all the time at war with each other—especially at ‘religious war’ with each other, as we increasingly seem to be these days everywhere in the world, from Palestine to Kabul and Baghdad, and from New York to Islamabad to Ayodhya—we will be left with simply no time in life to practice our religion. In the ‘*shAnti-pATam*’ beginning with ‘*sahanAvavatu*’ the chant prays for peace to prevail between even the master (guru) and the (‘sisHyA’) disciple. It makes us wonder why the Vedas presume ill-will between even such close partners in religious pursuits like a guru and his sisHyA. The Vedas do so because they know in their infinite wisdom that in the history of mankind it is not infrequent to find even gurus and sisHyAs falling out and going to savage war with each other. And when they do, the Vedas wisely remind us, the warring master and disciple can no longer say they are engaged in the pursuit of religious ends.
- (3) In the third instance of ‘*shAnti*’, the Vedas teach us that if we are to be regarded as being religious, we have to be first at peace with the world at large. We cannot practice religion in a world with which we are in deep disharmony. If we go on destroying the forests of this world, how can we expect to go into them to engage in contemplation? If we all turn the temples, mosques, and churches of this

world into arenas of secular conflict, how can we enter into them and offer worship? If we wish the hills and the rivers of this world to be our main destinations of pilgrimage, how can we afford to turn them into war zones and fortresses?

By prefacing the Vedas with the '*shAnti-pATam*', the Vedic religion hence clearly teaches us that **we first must learn to be peaceful before we can learn to be religious**. And that there is no such thing as a 'religious war' or a 'holy war'. If anything is holy, it cannot be war; and if it is war, it can hardly be holy.

In the troubled times in which we live today and in this insane world into which we all seem to be waking up every morning, where we can find, we often ask ourselves, where can we find the true source of comfort and balm for our minds and souls? Surely it is in the universal chant of '*shANti, shANti, shANti*:' that echoes at both ends of the eternal Vedas.





CHAPTER 17

‘VEDAADHYAAYAM’: THE DUTY OF A BRAHMIN

A human being easily secures prowess, fame, and well-being in life not only in this world but in the afterworld too simply through faithful performance of the prescribed ‘dharma’ (i.e., the various codes of right conduct) enshrined in the Vedic scriptures known as ‘sruti’ and ‘smriti’. The truth of this fact has been vouched for by none other than Manu in a single revealing ‘shlOka’:

sruti-smrutyuditam dharmanu-thisTan hi mAnavah: I iha

keertimavApnOti prEtya chAnuttamam sukham II

Common experience tells us that which is born into this world must one day certainly die. However, it is a fundamental tenet of the Vedic faith that death is merely a corporeal event, not a spiritual phenomenon. Although the body, the ‘sthoola sarira’, ages and eventually passes away from this world, the indwelling spirit that enlivened the body all through its earthly sojourn—that ever-present entity called Atma, however, never knows death. It lives eternally.



As long as a man lives in this world, it is his lot and wont to constantly seek and draw support and sustenance from a variety of things or beings around him, such as parents, kith, kin, wealth, etc. Once the time arrives, however, for him to shed the mortal body—the ‘sthoola sarira’—the same parents, kith, kin, or wealth, which once were his constant companions and mainstay no longer serve him in any useful way. Once he is ready to shed the mortal coil, these support systems too are ready to forsake him. None of them ever accompany him in the onward journey of the Atma.

Though none of his long-standing earthly companions ever accompany a man into the other world, there is however one intangible or ethereal thing, that is his very own, which continues to doggedly travel with him wherever he goes in the great cosmic journey of the spirit. The ethereal thing that serves as man’s faithful travel companion in the other world, the great empire called ‘para-Ioka’, is said to be the ‘dharma’ he performed while he lived in this world. This truth has been attested amply and clearly by all Vedic ‘sAstrA’. (Students of Shakespeare too will not fail to recollect here those famous lines: ‘*The good that men do lives after them; the evil is interred with their bones*’. My note.)



It is never easy for a man of this world to continue abiding by the dictates of ‘dharma’. Time, circumstance, and the innumerable vagary of life will all constantly conspire to divert him from the chosen path and lead him astray. The will to stay the straight and narrow course of ‘dharma’, the will to remain steadfast in one’s conviction in the face of any vicissitude, is never easy to exercise in life. It is a constant struggle indeed for man to carry out his ordained dharma, but it is a struggle he must engage in, whether he likes it or not, for human destiny itself lies in this great struggle.

Although the dharmic struggle of man is long and arduous, there is however always plenty of help, encouragement, and inspiration at hand in the form of Vedic ‘sruti’, ‘smriti’, and ‘dharma-sAstra’. These Vedic scriptures collectively form a formidable but handy and exhaustive source of strength and guidance for the man who has resolved to realise his dharmic destiny. Which is why we say before a man can proceed to live in accordance with ‘dharma’ it becomes immediate necessity for him to first learn about it through a study of the Vedas. It is out of such necessity indeed that there arises the sacred duty of ‘vEdhAdhyAyana’—the pursuit of Vedic study enjoined upon every man who is born into the faith.



That ‘vEdhAdhyAyana’ is one of the cardinal duties of man is affirmed by the ageless ‘sruthi’ itself as follows:

***brAhmaNEna nishkAraNO dharmah:
shadangO’vEdhO’dhyEyO gnEyascha***

i.e., the Brahmin dedicates himself to sincere and relentless study of the Vedas, together with its six great branches known as ‘sIksha’, ‘vyAkaraNa’, ‘cchandAs’, ‘niruktam’, ‘jyOtisham’, and ‘kalpam’, and to the realisation of its meaning and true purpose.

The message of the ‘sruti’ above is reiterated by Manu too in his famous ‘smriti’ wherein he describes the true Brahmin to be one who has realised the Vedas and Upanishads through life-long effort and discipline, i.e., through the ‘tapa’, ‘vrata’, etc., that are integral to ‘vEdhAdhyAya’:

***tapOvishEshaih: vividhah: vrataischa vidhi-chOdhitaih: I
vEdhah: krutsrO’dhigantavyah: sarahasyO dvijanmanA II***

The Brahmin who follows the above path of ‘vEdhAdhyAya’, deep Vedic study, easily secures knowledge of all ‘dharma’ and through such knowledge obtains abiding happiness and fulfilment (‘shrEyas’). Manu issues, on the other hand, a dire warning to the Brahmin who fails in the duty of ‘vEdhAdhyAya’. He predicts such a Brahmin would soon be overcome by the fear of death:

***anabhyAsEna vEdAnAm aachArasya cha varjanAth I
aalasyAth annadOshAccha mrutyuh: viprAn jighAmsati II***

To enable a young Brahmin to easily take to ‘vEdhAdhyaya’, it is very often emphasised that there should never be even a day’s delay in performing ‘upanayanam’ and getting the youth initiated as early as possible into Vedic study under the tutelage of a qualified ‘ÁchArya’:

garbhAshtamE’bdE kurveetha brAhmaNasyO’panayanam

The importance of early initiation into ‘vEdhAdhyAyana’, preferably well before the age of 16, is underscored elsewhere too in the Gautama Samhita:

aashOdashaath brAhmanasyApathithA sAvitree

To further underscore the importance of early initiation into ‘vEdhAdhyayana’ (enabled by early performance of ‘upanayana’) Manu severely warns Brahmins against associating themselves, through contracts of marriage or otherwise, with those who, call themselves Brahmins, yet remain without undergoing ‘upanayana’ and without performing ‘vEdhAdhyAya’.

atha Urdhvam trayOpyEthE yathA-kAlam-samskrutAhA:

sAvitree patithA vrAtyA bhavanthyArya vigarhitAh: I

nai-thair-rapU-thair-vidhivadApadhyapi hi karhichith

brAhmAn yownAmscha sambhandhAn aacharEth brAhmaNah: saha II

Before a young Brahmin boy is initiated into ‘vEdhAdhyAya’ and other Vedic curricula, his ‘AchArya’ usually spares no effort in first inculcating in him the daily discipline of bodily and spiritual hygiene known as ‘shoucha-achAra’. This regimen of ‘shouchAchAra’ primarily includes the rite of ‘sandhyAvandanam’ and a few other ablutionary rites, which though being minor in nature and format, are yet essential pre-conditions for all other Vedic ‘karma’ or duties. Without regular performance of these ‘shouchAchArA-s’, and especially the ‘gaayatri sandhyA’, a Brahmin simply cannot proceed to undertake any other Vedic initiative. Even if he does, the resultant effort simply bears no fruit:

sandhyAheenO’shucchir nitya manarhah: sarvakarmasu

It is for this reason that a true Vedic ‘AchArya’ always ensures that his wards first and foremost, and above everything else, learn to perform the ‘sandhyA’ rites in the proper manner, giving due and scrupulous importance to the ‘svara varna’ of the ritual ‘mantra’, i.e., taking care to ensure correct pronunciation and intonation. It is the correct articulation of the Vedic mantra that ensures its efficacy and results in auspicious effects. Improper articulation, on the other hand, can quite easily result in adverse and unwanted consequences.

The unintended consequences one reaps because of inappropriate or inadvertent articulation of Vedic mantra are well described in a famous passage from the Vedic branch of study called ‘śikṣā’. It is the story of Tvashta, the man who sought revenge against the King of gods, Devendra (also known as Indra):

mantrO’heenah: svarathO varNathO vA mithyApra-yukthO

na tamartha-mAha I

sa vAgvajrO yajamAnam hinasthi yathEndra-shathruhu:

svrathO’parAdhAth II

Indra had killed Tvashta’s son and so the bereaved father resolved to perform a Vedic fire sacrifice by which he hoped to beget another son who would grow up to battle Devendra and kill him. In the course of the fire sacrifice, Tvashta was to invoke the proper mantra for the purpose called ‘*indra shathruhu vardhasva*’. It involved articulation of the expression,

shAthayateethi shatruhu,

indrasya shathruhu indrashathruhu

Instead, through sheer negligence or inadvertence, the words came out as

indrah shatruhu shAthayitA yasya saha

The mantra now assumed a totally unintended and unfortunate twist in meaning. A son was indeed born to Tvashta in good time. He grew up to challenge Indra to fight to the finish. Indra slaughtered this son of Tvashta too without much ado and the heart-broken father was bereaved once again. When the cause of the matter was investigated, it was found Tvashta had committed a grave lapse in the articulation of the mantra which instead of meaning ‘*Grant me the birth of a son who will grow up to kill Indra*’ unfortunately had come out as ‘*Grant me the birth of a son who will grow up to be slain by Indra*’.

In chanting Vedic mantra, in the sacred discipline of ‘vEdhAdhyAya’, a mere slip of the tongue or a single false note of the voice is indeed enough to cause disastrous effects.



Another of Manu’s great pronouncements on ‘vEdhAdhyA’ is found in the following shLOka:

***na hAyanaih: na palithaih: na vitthEna na bandhubhih: I rshayascha-krIrE dharmam
yO’nuchAnah: sa nO mahAn II***

Answering the question ‘What makes a Brahmin worthy?’ Manu says in the shLOka above that it is neither age nor wealth, nor is it family lineage that bestows honour and nobility upon a Brahmin. It is ‘vEdhAdhyaya’ alone that bestows distinction and worth upon a Brahmin in his lifetime.

yO vai yUvA’pyadheeyAnah: tam dEvAh: sthaviram viduh:

Manu even goes to the extent of saying that a Brahmin youth, so long as he is engaged in ‘vEdhAdhyAya’, is fit to be venerated by even those who are his elders or superiors in other secular respects. (This is the reason why even today in India, even older men and women will not hesitate to prostrate at the feet of young Brahmin ‘brahmacharis’ who are engaged in ‘vEdhAdhyAyanam’. My note.)

It is interesting how Manu severely castigates a Brahmin who fails to follow the dictates of his dharma and does not perform ‘adhyAya’:

***yathA kAshtamayO hasthee yathA charmamayO mrugah:
yascha viprO’nadheeyAna-srayasthE nAmadhArakAh: II***

‘Just as you cannot expect a toy elephant to accomplish the workload of a real elephant, and just as you can never substitute the beauty of a toy deer with that of a real one, so can you never hope to realise the goals and high ideals of the Vedas with the help of Brahmins who are Brahmins in mere name only and are far from well-versed in vEdhAdhyAya.’



One of the cardinal duties enjoined upon a true Brahmin is the daily regimen called ‘brahma-yagnya’. This involves ‘vEda japa’ or ‘sruti japa’—the daily chanting at home of various Vedic passages and hymns. It is a life-long duty he must carry out without fail if he must be faithful to his dharma. This duty has been cast upon him by a number of injunctions as seen in the ‘sAstras’.

yascha sruti-japah: prOkthah: brahma-yagnyah: sa ucchyatE

Sage KatyAyana revealed that a Brahmin who is engaged regularly in ‘vEdhAdhyAya’ is indeed faithfully carrying out his duty of ‘brahma-yagnya’.

Another sage of yore, a ‘rshi’ named Pydeenasi said:

***sva-shAkhaAdhya-yanam yatthath brahma-yagnyam prachakshathE I
brahmayagnya-parO viprO brahmalOkE maheeyathE II***

i.e., Brahmins who faithfully perform ‘brahma-yagnya’, chanting the passages from the respective Vedic ‘shAkAs’ to which they may belong, soon attain the celestial realms of ‘brahmalOkA’ and enjoy celebrated status there.

Another passage in the Vishnu Smriti prescribes the order in which ‘brahma-yagnya’ must be performed:

***Omkaaram vyAhrutee-tisrO gaayatreeem cha taditya-rccham I
manasaithaan anusmrutya vEdhAdeen samupakramEth II***

i.e., One must daily chant the prefatory mantras of ‘vyAhrutee’ and ‘gAyatree’ and then proceed to recite other ‘veda prashna’ or Vedic passages.

From all the above-mentioned injunctions of ‘sAstra’, it becomes exceedingly clear to us that ‘vEdhAdhyAya’ and ‘brahma-yagnya’ are mandatory daily tasks—they are ‘nitya karma’ for any man who calls himself a Brahmin.

brahmayagnya-viheenasha brahmhA keerti-thO buddhaih:

Practice is said to lead to perfection, and hence constant ‘vEdhAdhyAyanam’ automatically leads to excellence in the execution of the sacred duty of ‘brahma-yagnya’. A Brahmin who excels in Vedic chanting easily achieves spiritual exaltation and enlightenment.



In the scripture called ‘Vishnu-dharmOttara’, it is said that even if a Brahmin is unable to attain perfection in the disciplines of the full range of ‘vEdhAdhyAya’ or is otherwise incapacitated in the performance of the daily duty of ‘brahma-yagnya’, at least he should strive to attain perfection in the chanting of the foremost Vedic passage or ‘prashna’ of the Vedas known as ‘purusha-sooktam’.

***brahma-yagnyE japann sUktam powrusham chintayan harim
sa sarvAn japathE vEdhAn sAngOpAngAn vidhAnathah: II***



(Many of the ‘prashna-s’ or passages in the various ‘shAkA-s’ or branches of the four Vedas are replete with potent mantras invoked and uttered usually only on the occasion of conducting specific ‘yagnya-s’ or ritual fire sacrifices. Many of such Vedic ‘yagnya-s’ are elaborate and formidable affairs and it is usually beyond the capacity of ordinary men to undertake such ceremonies.)

Merely by engaging in ‘vEdhAdhyAya’, with utter faith and humility, and persevering in the daily routine of chanting Vedic ‘prashna-s’ related to such ‘yagnya-s’, a Brahmin is said to easily attain the very same fruits as would otherwise be yielded by such ‘yagnya-s’. The Sage Yagnyavalkya attested to this when he said that a Brahmin who faithfully performs the duty of ‘brahma-yagnya’ attains well-being through abundant wealth, ‘land, and cattle’ in this world and beyond.

yam yam kratumadheeyEtha tasya tasyApnyUyAth phalam I
trirvittha-pUrNa-prutthuvee-dAnasya phalamasruthE II



The greatest disservice a Brahmin can ever do to himself as well as to the community is to abandon ‘vEdhyAdhyAyanam’ altogether after having learnt it well for some period of time:

adheethamapi yO vEdham vimuncchati yadA narah: I
brUNahaa sat tu vignyEyaha: viyOnimadhi-gacchathi II

The ‘sAstrA’ above says that such a Brahmin who is derelict in the duty of ‘brahma-yagnya’, and eventually forgets the Vedic passages learnt earlier out of sheer neglect, is to be regarded as a heinous sinner. He is said to be a moral delinquent of the worst order. There is no pardon anywhere for such sinners.



vEdamEva japEnityam yathA-kAla-mathan-drithah: I
nahyasyaahuh: param dharmam upadharmO’nya ucchyathE II

Manu’s ringing and final affirmation above is that for a true Brahmin there is no dharma in life that is higher than or superior to the dharma of ‘vEda japa’.

Hence, all Brahmins should be encouraged and enjoined to engage wholeheartedly in the chanting and study of Vedas. Even in the modern times, when Brahmins have to perforce engage in other secular pursuits in life, it is their bounden duty to attempt learning at least some parts of the Vedas—such as the various ‘sooktam-s’, the ‘purusha-sooktam’, for example, and the many beautiful Upanishad ‘prashna-s’ that are found in the Vedas. In so far as one’s station and conditions of living permit it, a Brahmin must make a sincere effort to take up at least minimal efforts at ‘vEdhAdhyAya’. It is the only way he can fulfil his dhArmistic destiny and realise the true purpose of his existence.





CHAPTER 18

THE VEDANTIN OF ATHENS

(An Adaptation of 'The Last Days of Socrates')

When read with an open and unprejudiced mind, the classic biography of the great Greek philosopher Socrates (469—399 BC) written by his equally great disciple Plato (427—347 BC) does tempt one to regard the great master as a credible albeit alien exemplar of practical Vedanta. If Vedanta is timeless philosophy and universal creed, then in Socrates of Athens, it shouldn't be difficult to see how Vedanta transcends both the geography and ethnicity of the world.

Very recently I read an old classic: 'The Last Days of Socrates' written around 380 BC by Plato. It is a book in four parts ('Euthyphro', 'Apology', 'Crito', and 'Phaedo') and is an engrossingly vivid account of the last days of Socrates before he was sentenced to death (execution by drinking lethal hemlock) by a court of law in Athens for the alleged crime of impiety, spreading false and irreverent philosophy in society, corrupting the minds of youth, and mocking the religious order of the state and the pantheon of Greek gods. Arraigned by a group of long-standing enemies comprising Athen's powerful politicians and noblemen, Socrates was tried in a public court and was hard-pressed to defend himself against trumped-up charges of 'failing to acknowledge the city's gods, substituting his own private ones and undermining the moral fabric of the young'.

Each part of the four-part book is a narration of very thoughtful 'dialogues' Socrates reportedly had with powerful enemies in court. The last 'Phaedo' however is a dialogue with a group of his closest disciples in the prison-room days before his execution.

In the first part, 'Euthyphro', the dialogue addresses the basic question: What is true piety in a man?

Why is it important for a man to be pious?

In the second part, 'Apology', there is a verbatim account of Socrates's brilliant self-defence—part judicial and part rhetorical but solemnly eloquent throughout in its tone of high moral authority—in court against the charge of impiety levelled against him. In this famous 'dialogue' Socrates also expatiated on the two ideals of 'the philosopher's life' and the pursuit of human wisdom. The picture of the 'philosopher' Socrates painted, bears striking resemblance indeed to the ideal Vedantic man (the 'gnyAni', the 'dhIra', or the 'sthitha-pragnya') one comes across described in **the Bhagavath-Gita**.

In the third part, 'Crito', Socrates counters the arguments of his closest friends in Athens who beseech him to slip away from the long arm of the law in Athens and take asylum in nearby Macedonia. During the course of this 'dialogue' with Crito, one of his dearest students, Socrates profoundly holds forth on what constitutes right and ethical human behaviour. To a student of Vedanta, the dialogue does seem remarkably reminiscent of the Hindu ideal of Dharma (righteous conduct) essayed voluminously in the pages of the Srimadh Valmiki Ramayana.

The last part, the 'Phaedo', is a masterpiece of philosophic enquiry and one that is so delightfully redolent of the ancient Vedantic practice of 'pari-prashna' alluded to by Sri Krishna in the Bhagavath-Gita. In this famous 'dialogue' with a band of close disciples that spent time with him during the days, the master languished in death row awaiting the final day of execution, Socrates discoursed on a variety of philosophical themes. To a serious student of Vedanta, Socrates's thought processes seem to be clear

echoes of those expounded in the Bhagavath-Gita! There are glorious passages of penetrating thought in this dialogue that leave the reader breathless with intellectual excitement. Socrates holds forth marvellously on a wide array of themes that we know are the staple of Greek philosophical tradition but which, again, are truly so closely evocative too of the more ancient tradition of Vedanta with its eternal quest into truths such as the following:

- (a) the immortality of the soul (*sankhya*')
- (b) the nature of knowledge and self (*atma-gnyAna*' or '*atma-vichAra*')
- (c) the nature of existential condition (body-soul schism or '*sarira-sariri sambandha*')
- (d) the need to control the human senses (*indriyas*') and conduct oneself according to the code of **Dharma**, a natural order, or constitution of all existence
- (e) the final liberation of the soul (*mukti*' or '*mOksha*')
- (f) the ultimate purpose of life (*nissrEyasa-purushArtha*')

I will seek to present here below a brief study in comparison showing how the '**Dialogues of Socrates**' are indeed familiar echoes of the many concepts of **Vedanta found in the Bhagavath- Gita**. I wish to make it clear here that the purpose of my effort is not so much to argue that Socratic (or Greek) philosophic thought is Vedantic in character as to highlight rather that the Vedanta of ancient India, as a paradigm of philosophical outlook, was, continues, and shall forever be universal.



If human life is a long journey, undertaking it might be far less arduous than we find it if only before actually, setting out on it, we took the trouble to learn exactly where and how it will ultimately end.

Philosophy, which is a roadmap for life journeys, should first fully account for death, the end of the journey, before it helps us grasp and deal with the other weighty questions of existence such as cause or meaning or purpose. The Bhagavath-Gita, the mother of all philosophical thought, it must be remembered, starts off answering the question of death first, before it takes up other epistemological or ethical issues. Arjuna, crushed and overwhelmed in spirit by the prospect of death and annihilation on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, turns to Krishna for solace and for the answer to the fundamental human dilemma of what must he do with the fact of life when faced with the even larger fact of death.

Now we know Socrates to be a philosopher 'extraordinaire', and so if we embark upon a study of his life, it would be fitting indeed to first try and draw important philosophical lessons from the way he faced his death—his journey's end—before proceeding to examine where he began or how he travelled his seventy-year long and eventful life path.



Equanimity in the Face of Death

The details of Socrates's death on his last day in a prison in Athens are narrated in the 'Phaedo'. The narrative is in the form of a dialogue between two of Socrates's disciples, one Phaedo of Elis, who was physically present to witness Socrates drink poison and the other, Echecrates, a Peloponnesian, who was

not present there, and hence, in the course of their dialogue, Echecrates eagerly seeks from Phaedo all details of the master's passing away.

The saddest fact about Socrates's death was that he had to wait for several days on death row in an Athenian prison. To ordinary mortals, waiting for death is a deeply mortifying experience, more morbid perhaps than the moment of death itself. The reason why the execution had to be put off was, Phaedo explained to Echecrates, a rather peculiar Greek custom. In Indian villages, it is quite common to hold or put off important public and personal events (like rallies, festivities, inaugurations, etc.) if the time is regarded to be inappropriate to hold such event. Usually, one waits for the 'impure or inauspicious moment' to pass. (In Sanskrit it is commonly referred as 'a-kAla'.) A similar time of such 'a-kAla' seems to have held up the execution of Socrates causing much anxiety and pain to all those around him except his own ever un-perturbed self.

Echecrates asked Phaedo, 'What did the master say before he died, and how did he meet his end? We are surprised because there was obviously a long interval between sentencing and the execution. How was that, Phaedo?'

Phaedo answered, 'A fortunate coincidence, Echecrates, I should say, for it enabled us to spend valuable and unforgettable time with the master in his last days and gain from discoursing with him intensely. It so happened that on the day before the trial they had just finished garlanding the stern of the ship which Athens, by long custom observed every year at the time, sends to Delos.'

Echecrates: What ship is that? What custom?

Phaedo: The Athenians say it's an old custom built on some age-old legend. There was Theseus who many ages ago sailed away to Crete with the seven youths and seven maidens, and saved their lives and his own as well from some natural scourge that almost destroyed the rest of Athens. The story says that the Athenians made a vow to the god Apollo that if these young people's lives were saved they would send a solemn mission to Delos every year; and ever since then they have kept their vow to the god, right down to the present day. They have a law that as soon as this mission begins the city must be kept pure, and no public executions may take place until the ship has reached Delos and returned again, which sometimes takes a long time, if they meet winds which hold it back. The mission is considered to begin as soon as the priest of Apollo has garlanded the stern of the ship; and this happened as I say on the day before the trial. That's why Socrates spent such a long time in prison between his trial and execution.

Echecrates: What about the actual circumstances of his death, Phaedo? What was said and done, and which of the man's companions were with him? Or did the authorities refuse them admission, making him pass away without a friend at his side?

Phaedo: Oh no, some of them were there—quite a number, in fact. And the man actually seemed quite happy, Echecrates, both in his manner and in what he said: he met his death so fearlessly and nobly.



Phaedo then continued: On this particular day we met earlier than usual, because when we left the prison on the evening before, we heard that the boat had just arrived back from Delos. When we went inside (the prison), we found Socrates just released from his chains, and Xanthippe, his wife, sitting by him with the little boy on her knees. As soon as Xanthippe saw us, she burst into the kind of lamentation women generally do: 'Oh, Socrates, this is the last time that you and your friends will be able to talk together!' Socrates looked at Crito. 'Crito', he said, 'someone had better take her home.' Some of Crito's servants led her away crying hysterically.

Socrates then said, 'A man can be confident about the fate of his soul—as long as he has abandoned those other pleasures and adornments, the bodily ones, as foreign to his purpose and likely to do more harm

than good, and has devoted himself to the pleasures of acquiring knowledge, and by so adorning his soul not with a borrowed beauty but with its own—with self-control, and goodness, and courage and liberality and truth—has settled down to await his journey to the next world.

‘You Simmias and Cebes and the rest, will each make this journey some day in the future; but for me the fated hour calls even now. In other words, it is about time that I took my bath. I prefer to have a bath before drinking poison, rather than give the women the trouble of washing me when I am dead.’



If we have witnessed how ordinary humans are generally aroused to feelings of extreme fear, bewilderment, and grief in the hour of death, we will not fail to be simply awestruck reading about the placid stoicism, bordering on utter nonchalance, with which Socrates calmly regarded his imminent death.

Crito said, Socrates, have you no directions for the others or myself about your children or anything else? What can we do to please you best?’

‘Nothing new, Crito’, said Socrates, just what I am always telling you. If you look after yourself, whatever you do will please me and mine and you too, even if you don’t agree with me now. On the other hand, if you neglect yourselves and fail in life to follow the track that we have spoken of both now and in the past, however fervently you agree with me now, it will do no good at all.’

‘We shall be keen to do as you say, Socrates’, said Crito, ‘But how shall we bury you?’

‘Any way you like’, replied Socrates lightly, ‘that is if you can catch me and I don’t slip through your fingers.’ He laughed gently as he spoke, and turning towards us went on, I can’t persuade Crito that I am this Socrates here who is talking to you now; he thinks that I am the corpse whom he will see presently lying dead; and he asks how he is to bury me! My explanation that when I have drunk the poison I shall remain with you no longer, but depart to a world of happiness that belongs to the blessed, my words seem to be wasted on him though I console both you and me. You must all . . . [help Crito understand] that when I am dead I shall not stay but depart and be gone. Crito must be kept from being too distressed on my account when he sees my body being burned or buried as if something dreadful were happening to me, or from saying at the funeral that it is Socrates whom he is laying out or carrying to the grave or burying. No you must [all] keep up your spirits and say that it is only my body that you are burying; and you can bury it as you please, in whatever way you think is most proper.’

With these words Socrates got up and went into another room to bathe. We felt as though we were losing a father and should be orphans for the rest of our lives. Meanwhile, when Socrates had taken his bath, his children were brought to see him—he had two little sons and one big boy—and the women of his household, you know, arrived again. He talked to them in Crito’s presence and gave them directions about carrying out his wishes; then he told the women and children to go away and came back himself to join us.



It was now nearly sunset, said Crito to Echecrates, and Socrates had spent a long time inside. He came and sat down, fresh from the bath, and he had only been talking (with us again) for a few minutes when the prison officer came in and walked up to him.

‘Socrates’, he said, ‘at any rate I shall not have to find fault with you, as I do with other [prisoners similarly sentenced to death in the jail], for getting angry with me and cursing me when I tell them to

drink the poison—carrying out the magistrate’s orders. I have come to know during this time you have been here that you are the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all men that have ever come here, and now especially I am sure that you are not angry with me but with them in court; because you know who are those really responsible for your death sentence. So now—you know what I have come to say—goodbye and try to bear what must inevitably be as easily as you can.’ As he spoke, he burst into tears and, turning round, began to go away.

Socrates looked up at him and said, ‘Goodbye to you too; we will do as you say.’ Then addressing us all he went on, What a charming person! All the time I have been here in this prison he has visited me and sometimes had discussions with me and showed me the greatest kindness; and how generous of him now to shed tears at my departure! But come Crito let us do as he says. Someone had better bring the poison if it is ready prepared; if not tell the man to prepare it.’

Crito a while ago had said to Socrates ‘that the man who is to give you poison has been asking me for an equally long time to tell you to talk as little as possible, Socrates; he says that as you talk more it increases your [body] heat, and that you ought not to do anything to affect [or hasten] the action of the poison. Otherwise, it is sometimes necessary to take a second dose, or even a third.’

Socrates replied quietly, ‘Leave him to his own devices, Crito. Let him, for his part, make ready to administer it twice or three times or more, if necessary.’ And Crito said, ‘I virtually knew your answer to that, Socrates, but he’s been bothering me for ages.’ And Socrates again replied with a smile, ‘Never mind him, Crito.’

Crito finally made a sign to his slave, who was standing nearby. The slave went out and after spending considerable time returned with the man who was to administer the poison; he was carrying it ready and prepared, in a cup. When Socrates saw him, he said, ‘Well, my good friend, you understand these things; what ought I to do?’

‘Just drink it’, he said, and then walk about until you feel a weight in your legs, and then lie down. Then it will act of its own accord, the poison.’

As he spoke, he handed the cup to Socrates who received it quite cheerfully, without a tremor, without any change of colour or expression and said looking up from under his brows with his usual steady gaze, ‘What do you say about me pouring a small libation from this drink [for sake of the gods]? Is it permitted or not?’

‘We only prepare what we regard as the normal dose, Socrates,’ he replied.

‘I see,’ said Socrates. ‘But I suppose I am allowed or rather bound to pray to the gods that my removal from this world to the other may be prosperous. This is my prayer, then; and I hope that it may be granted.’ With these words, quite calmly and with no sign of distaste, he drained the cup in one draught.

Up until this time most of us had been fairly successful in keeping back our tears; but when we saw that he was drinking, that he had actually drunk it, we could do so no longer and in spite of ourselves, the tears came pouring out so that I covered my face and wept broken-heartedly—not for him but for our own calamity in losing such a great friend and teacher. Apollodorus, who had never stopped crying even before, now broke out into such a storm of passionate weeping that he made everyone in the room break down, except Socrates himself, who said, ‘Really, my friends, what a way to behave! Why, that was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of discordant behaviour; because I am told that one should make one’s end in a reverent silence. Calm yourselves and be brave.’

In the Bhagavath-Gita, there are two very beautiful verses in which Krishna tells the agitated Arjuna, *‘Why all this fuss and breast-beating over death, Arjuna? I tell you, my learned and valiant friend,*

death doesn't really deserve the exaggerated awe, fear, grief, or bewilderment ordinary men succumb to when they confront it.' The real significance of that verse flashes across one's mind indeed when one reads the account of how Socrates regarded the imminence of his death with extraordinary composure and indifference, with neither fuss nor trepidation:

ashochyaananvashochastvaM praGYaavaadaa.nshcha bhaashhase.

gataasuunagataasuu.nshcha naanushochanti paNDitaaH. 2\11

dehino.asminyathaa dehe kaumaara.n yauvana.n jaraa.

tathaa dehaantaraprapaap{}tirdhiirastatra na muhyati. 2\13

Let us return to the story of Socrates.



Phaedo continued: The calm words of Socrates to us made us all feel ashamed, and we controlled our tears. Socrates walked about and presently saying that his legs were heavy, lay down on his back—that was what the man recommended. The man (he was the same one who had administered the poison) kept his hand upon Socrates, and after a little while examined his feet and legs, then pinched his foot hard and asked if he felt it. Socrates said no. Then he did the same to his legs, and moving gradually upwards in this way let us see that the master was getting cold and numb. Presently, he pinched him again and said that when it reached the heart, Socrates would be gone.

The coldness was spreading about as far as his waist when Socrates uncovered his face—for he had covered it up—and said (they were his last words): 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius [as ritual sacrifice]. See to it, and don't forget.'

'No, it shall be done,' said Crito. 'Are you sure that there is nothing else?'

In the Greek pantheon, Asclepius was the god of healing, and it must be assumed that when he made it known in the moment of death his thoughts were on the god Asclepius, it was Socrates's way of announcing to the world that his soul was now wholly and finally healed'.

Socrates, after a little while, stirred a little; and when the prison official uncovered him, his eyes were fixed. When Crito saw this, he closed his mouth and eyes.

This, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those who we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most just.



From the 'Phaedo' of Plato, we learn how Socrates faced his moment of death with the kind of philosophical equanimity and grace and fearlessness that may well be described as stoic or, still better, as being truly Vedantic, judging from the way he displayed a surprising sense of good humour too.

Sitting in his prison amidst his disciples waiting patiently but cheerfully for the day of execution, Socrates joked about his situation: I suppose that for one who is soon to leave this world there is no more suitable occupation than enquiring into our views about the future life, and trying to imagine what it is like or will be. What else can one do in the time before the sunset [of one's life here on earth]?'

The consummate Vedantin is one who through constant inquiry and contemplation, what Socrates called ‘pursuit of wisdom’ in life—has already made wise and advance preparations for the day of departure from this earthly abode. Ordinary men of the world fear the moment of departure mainly because they are unprepared for it. All their lives, they have simply postponed and procrastinated engaging in the serious but necessary business of properly understanding philosophy. They find they have postponed it to the ‘sunset’ years of their lives when it has become far too late to cover lost time and ground. The accomplished philosopher or Vedantin, on the other hand does not flinch, does not protest, and does not regard death with grim or heavy resignation of the heart but with a knowing and welcoming smile upon his lips.



How did Socrates come to cultivate that attitude of supreme composure in the face of death?

The ‘Phaedo’ records a series of famous ‘Socratic dialogues’ in which the master explained to his students Simmias, Cebes, and Crito the logical and well-reasoned arguments based on which any man may easily assure himself of the profound questions of life and death. These famous dialogues form the bedrock of the Greek philosophical tradition. Students of Indian philosophy have long been fascinated with comparisons of the same with the more ancient and more variegated traditions of classical Vedantic thought viz:

1. What is the nature of death?
2. How does the philosopher (the Vedantin) view the afterlife and why?
 - (a) Why that pure knowledge or wisdom which the philosopher (Vedantin) seeks, he will never attain elsewhere other than in the next world (the ‘theory of affinity’, akin to ‘sankhya’).
 - (b) Death and life being extensions of each other; and that one simply emerges from and merges back into the other (the ‘theory of opposites’).
 - (c) If we ‘recollect’ our past lives, we will realise that the soul is immortal and ‘death’ as we know it relates to the body and not to the soul (‘theory of recollection’).
3. The fate of men who are devoid of philosophical knowledge and hence unprepared for death: What happens to them? Do they also have an after-life? (Akin to theory of karma.)
4. The reality of the immortality of the soul and why theories contrary to reality are false (‘the attunement theory’ of the Pythagoreans; akin to ‘chAruvaka-vAda’).



What Is Death?

The famous dialogue between Socrates and Simmias conducted while the master waited for his execution day in a prison in Athens in the year 399 BC clearly shows that the Socratic view of death closely resembles that of classical Vedanta. The dialogue is reproduced below:

Socrates (Soc): Do we believe that there is such a thing as death? Simmias (Simm): Most certainly.

Soc: Is it simply the release of the soul from the body? Is death nothing more or less than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul, and the separate condition by itself of the soul when it is released from the body? Is death anything else than this?

Simm: No, just that.

Soc: Well then, Simmias, tell me this: do you think that it's a philosopher's business to concern himself with what people call 'pleasures'—food and drink, for instance?

Simm: Certainly not, Socrates. Soc: What about those of sex? Simm: Not in the least.

Soc: And what about other ways in which we devote attention to our bodies? Do you think that a philosopher attaches any importance to them? I mean things like providing himself with smart clothes and shoes and other bodily ornaments; do you think that he values them or despises them—in so far as there is no real necessity for him to go in for that sort of thing?

Simm: I think the true philosopher despises them.

Soc: Then it is your opinion in general that a man of this kind is not preoccupied with the body but keeps his attention directed as much as he can away from it and towards the soul?

Simm: Yes, it is.

Soc: So, it is clear first of all in the case of physical pleasures that the philosopher frees his soul from association with the body (as far as possible) in a way that other men don't? Simm: It seems so.

Soc: And most people think, do they not, Simmias that a man who takes neither pleasure nor partake in these things does not deserve to live, and that anyone who thinks nothing of pleasures connected with the body has one foot in the grave?

Simm: That is perfectly true.

Soc: Now take the acquisition of wisdom; is the body a hindrance or not if one takes it into partnership to share an investigation? What I mean is this: is there any certainty in human sight and hearing, or is it true, as the poets are always dinning into our ears, that we neither hear nor see anything accurately? Yet if these senses are not clear and accurate, the rest can hardly be so, because they are all inferior to the first two. Don't you agree?

Simm: Certainly.

Soc: Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously liable to be led astray.

Simm: Quite so.

Soc: Is it not in the course of reasoning, if at all, that the soul gets a clear view of reality? Simm: Yes.

Soc: Surely the soul can reason best when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind—that is, when it leaves the body to its own devices, becomes as isolated as possible, and strives for reality while avoiding as much physical contact and association as it can.

Simm: That is so.

Soc: Then here again the philosopher's soul is most disdainful of the body, shunning it and seeking to isolate itself.

Simm: It seems so.

Soc: Here are some more questions, Simmias. Do we recognise such a thing as justice itself?

Simm: Indeed, we do.

Soc: And beauty itself and goodness too? Simm: Of course.

Soc: Have you ever seen any of these things with your eyes? Simm: Certainly not.

Soc: Well, have you ever apprehended them with any other bodily sense? By ‘them’ I mean them all, including ‘tallness’ or ‘health’ or ‘strength’ in themselves, the real nature of any given thing—i.e., what it actually is. Is it through the body that we get our truest view of them? Isn’t it true that in any enquiry you are likely to attain more nearly to knowledge of your object in proportion to the care and accuracy with which you have prepared yourself to understand that object in itself?

Simm: Certainly.

Soc: Don’t you think that the person who is most likely to achieve this flawlessly is the one who appreciates each object, as far as possible, with the unaided intellect, without taking account of the sense of sight in his thinking, or dragging any other sense faculty into his reckoning—the man who pursues the truth by applying his pure and unadulterated thought to the pure and unadulterated object, cutting himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body, as an impediment which, if present, prevents the soul from attaining to the truth and clear thinking? Is not this the person, Simmias, who will reach the goal of reality, if anybody can?

Simm: What you say is true, Socrates.

Soc: So long as we keep to the body and the soul is contaminated with the resulting imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily the object of our investigation or enquiry which we assert to be the truth, the reality, and the goal. In the first place, the body provides us with innumerable distractions in the pursuit of its necessary sustenance, and any diseases which attack us hinder our quest for reality. Besides, the body fills us with love and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that we literally never get an opportunity to think at all about anything. Wars and revolutions and battles, you see, are due simply and solely to the body and its desires. All wars are undertaken for the acquisition of wealth; and the reason why we have to acquire wealth is the body, because we are slaves in its service. That is why, on all these accounts, we have so little time for philosophy. Worst of all, if we do obtain any leisure from the body’s claims and turn to some line of enquiry, the body intrudes once more into our investigations, interrupting, disturbing, distracting, and preventing us from getting a glimpse of the truth. We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things with the soul in isolation. It’s likely, to judge from our argument, that the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime. If no pure knowledge is possible in the company of the body, then either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge, or it is only possible after death, because it is only then that the soul will be isolated and independent of the body. It seems that so long as we are alive, we shall keep as close as possible to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely necessary; and instead of allowing ourselves to be infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance. In this way, by keeping ourselves uncontaminated by the follies of the body, we shall probably reach the company of others like us and gain direct knowledge of all that is pure and uncontaminated—that is, presumably, of truth. For one who is not so pure himself, to attain to the realm of purity would no doubt be a breach of divine order. Something to this effect, Simmias, is what I imagine all real lovers of learning (truth, wisdom, and reality) must say to one another and believe themselves; don’t you agree with me?

Simm: Most emphatically, Socrates.

Soc: Very well then, if this is true, there is good reason for anyone who reaches the end of this journey which lies before me to hope that there, if anywhere, he will attain the object to which all our efforts have been directed in life gone by. So this journey which is now ordained for me carries a happy prospect for any other man also who believes that his mind has been made ready—and pure, so to speak.

Sim: It does indeed.

Soc: And doesn't this 'purification', as we saw some time ago in our discussion so far, consist in separating the soul as much as possible from body, and accustoming it to withdrawing from its dispersal throughout the body and concentrating itself in isolation? And to have its dwelling, so far as it can, both now and in the future, alone by itself, freed from the chains of the body. Does not that follow?

Simm: Yes, it does.

Soc: Is not that what which we call death a freeing and separation of soul from body?

Simm: Certainly.

Soc: And the desire to free the soul is found chiefly, or rather only, in the true philosopher; in fact, the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of soul from body. Isn't that so?

Sim: Apparently.

Soc: Well, then, as I said at the beginning, if a man has trained himself throughout his life to live in a state as close as possible to death, would it not be ridiculous for him to be distressed when death comes to him?

Sim: It would, of course.

Soc: Then it is a fact, Simmias, that true philosophers make dying their profession, and that to them of all men death is least alarming. Look at it in this way. If they are thoroughly dissatisfied with the body, and long to have their souls in isolation, when this happens would it not be entirely unreasonable to panic and be annoyed? Would they not naturally be glad to set out for the place where there is a prospect of attaining the object of their lifelong desire, which is wisdom (or enlightenment), and of escaping from an association of which they disapproved? Surely there are many who have chosen of their own free will to follow dead beloveds (and wives and sons) to the next world, in the hope of seeing and meeting there the persons whom they loved. If this is so, will a true lover of wisdom/ truth, who has firmly grasped this same conviction—that he will never attain wisdom worthy of the name elsewhere than in the next world—will he be grieved at dying? Will he not be glad to make that journey? We must suppose so, my comrade, that is, if he is a genuine 'philosopher'; because then he will be of the firm belief that he will never find wisdom in all its purity in any other place. If this is so, would it not be quite unreasonable (as I said just now) for such a man to be afraid of death?

Sim: It would, indeed.

Soc: So, if you see anyone distressed at the prospect of dying, it will be proof enough that he is a lover not of wisdom but of the body (this same man would presumably be a lover of money) and of prestige, one of the other, or both.



Life After Death

The secret of the good cheer with which Socrates faced his hour of death surely lay in his unshakeable conviction about life beyond earthly existence and which a human soul, that has attained 'purity and enlightenment' sufficiently enough, can surely look forward to in the hereafter with hope and happiness. Such firm and amazing conviction did Socrates display when he faced the jury that condemned him to death in Athens. In his final defence in court on the final day of trial, Socrates addressed his accusers and delivered a splendid peroration about his belief in a life after death. It is a soul-stirring speech that any true Vedantin from the sacred soil of India would have been glad and proud to call his very own:

Socrates: Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation, and the dead have no consciousness of anything; or as we are told, it is really a change: a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvellous gain. I suppose that if anyone were told to pick out the night on which he slept so soundly as not even to dream, and then to compare it with all the other nights and days of his life, and then were told to say, after due consideration, how many better and happier days and nights than this he had had spent in the course of his life—well, I think, that great kings to say nothing of ordinary private citizens would find these days and nights easy to count in comparison with the rest.

If death is like this, then, I call it gain; because the whole of time, if you look at it in this way, can be regarded as no more than one single night. If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this, gentlemen of the jury? If on arrival in the other world, beyond the reach of these so-called jurors here, one will find there the true jurors who are said to preside in those courts, Minor and Rhadamanthys and Aeacus and Triptolemus (men who were mythical and judges of the Greek underworld who were exemplars of justice) and all those other demigods who were upright in their earthly life, would that be an unrewarding place to settle down upon? Put it in this way: how much would one of you give to meet Orpheus and Musaeus, Hesiod and Homer (great epic poets of the Greek legend)? I am willing to die ten times over if this account is true. For me at least it would be a wonderful personal experience to join them there, to meet Palamedes and Ajax, the son of Telamon (all Greek mythological characters), and any other heroes of the old days who met their death through an unjust trial, and to compare my fortunes with theirs. Above all, I should like to spend time there, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is.

Their company and conversation would be unimaginable happiness.

At any rate, I presume that over there they do not put one to death for conduct such as mine as this court has found punishable; because apart from the other happiness in which their world surpasses ours, they are now immortal for the rest of time, if what we are told is true.

Nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death, and his fortunes are not a matter of indifference to the gods. This present experience of mine does not result from mere earthly causes; I am quite clear that the time came when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions.

For my own part, I bear no grudge at all against those who condemned me and accused me although it was not with this kind intention that they did so, but because they thought that they were hurting me; and that is culpable of them.

However, I ask them to grant me one favour. When my sons grow up, gentlemen, if you think that they are putting money or anything else before and above goodness, take your revenge by plaguing them

as I plagued you; and if they fancy themselves for no reason, you must scold them just as I scolded you, for neglecting the important things and thinking that they are good at something when they are good for nothing. If you do this, I shall have had justice at your hands and my children.

Well, now it is time to be off, I to die and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God.



Serious students of Vedanta know that some of the most memorable and quotable ‘shlOkas’ in the *Bhagavath-Gita* are those which Sri Krishna uttered in the second chapter (II.23.24.25.26.27.28) while explaining to Arjuna the truth of the human soul being immortal and eternal:

- ‘As a man abandons worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out a new one is acquired by the self, who lives within.’
- The self cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire; water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it. It is everlasting and infinite, standing on the motionless foundation of immortality. The self is un-manifested, beyond all thought, beyond all change. Knowing this, Arjuna, you should not grieve.
- Arjuna, even if you believe the self to be subject to birth and death, you should not grieve. Death is inevitable for the living; birth is inevitable for the dead. Since these are unavoidable, you should not sorrow. Every creature is un-manifested at first and then attains manifestation. When its end had come, it once again becomes un-manifested. What is there to lament in this?



‘Antima-smriti’: Thought in the Terminal Moments

In the eighth chapter of the *Bhagavath-Gita*, ‘shlOkas’ 5—6 and 12—13, Sri Krishna says this:

‘Those who remember me at the time of death will come to me. Do not doubt this. Whatever occupies the mind at the time of death determines the destination of the dying; always they will tend toward that state of being. Remembering me at the time of death, close down the doors of the senses and place the mind in the heart. In that state you will go forth from the body and attain the supreme goal.’



Simmias to Socrates: Socrates, I think the problem remains—the ordinary man’s fear that the soul may be disintegrated at the very moment of his death, and that this may be the end of its existence. Suppose that there is some other source from which the soul is constituted at birth, and that it exists before it enters the human body: after it has entered one, is there any reason why, at the moment of release, it should not come to an end and be destroyed itself?

Cebes to Socrates: Simmias is quite right, Socrates. It seems that we've managed to prove about half of what we wanted—that the soul existed before birth—but now we need also to prove that it will exist after death no less than before birth, if our proof is to be complete.

Socrates: To answer this question, we need to first ask ourselves this: What sort of thing is it that would naturally suffer the fate of being dispersed? And what sort of thing is it that would not suffer that fate? When we have answered that question, then we should next consider to which class the soul belongs.

Socrates: Would you not expect a compound or a naturally composite object to be liable to break up where it was put together? And that which is in-composite is not affected that way?

Cebes: That seems to be the case.

Socrates: So, is it not extremely probable that what is always constant and invariable is in-composite, and what is in-constant, and variable is composite?

Cebes: That is how it seems to me.

Socrates: Let us return to the same examples which we were discussing before. Does equality, or beauty, or any other thing as it is ever admit change of any kind? Or does each one of such entities, being uniform and self-contained, remain always constant and invariable, never admitting any alteration in any respect or in any sense?

Cebes: They must be constant and invariable, Socrates.

Socrates: Well, what about the many instances of beauty—such as men, women, horses, clothes, and so on—or of equality, or any other things which have the same name as those others? Are they constant, or are they, on the contrary, scarcely ever in the same relation in any sense either to themselves or to one another?

Cebes: You're right again about them, Socrates; they are never free from variation.

Socrates: And these latter things you can touch or see or perceive by your other senses, but those constant entities—like beauty, equality—you cannot possibly apprehend except by the workings of the mind; such things are invisible to our sight.

Cebes: That is perfectly true.

Socrates: So, you think that we should assume two classes of things that may be such-and-such, one visible and the other invisible?

Cebes: Yes, we should.

Socrates: The invisible being invariable and the visible never being the same? Cebes: Let's assume that too.

Socrates: Well, now, are we not part body, part soul? Cebes: Certainly.

Socrates: Then to which class do we say that the body would have a closer resemblance and relation?

Cebes: That's obvious to anybody—to the visible. Socrates: And the soul, is it visible or invisible?

Cebes: Invisible to men, at any rate, Socrates.

Socrates: But surely, we have been speaking of things visible or invisible to our human nature. Do you think that we had some other nature in view?

Cebes: No, human nature.

Socrates: What do we say about the soul, then? Is it visible or invisible?

Cebes: Not visible.

Socrates: Invisible then?

Cebes: Yes.

Socrates: So soul is more like the invisible, and the body is more like the visible?

Cebes: Inevitably, Socrates.

Socrates: Did we not say some time ago that when the soul uses the instrumentality of the body for any enquiry, whether through sight or hearing or any other sense (because using the body means using the senses) it is drawn away by the body into the realm of the variable, and loses its way and becomes confused and dizzy, as though it were tipsy, through contact with that kind of thing?

Cebes: Certainly.

Socrates: But when the soul investigates by itself, it passes into the realm of the pure and everlasting and deathless and changeless; and being of a kindred nature, when it is once independent and free from interference, it consorts with it always and strays no longer but remains constant, invariable when busied with them, through contact with things of a similar nature. And this condition of the soul we call wisdom.

Cebes: An excellent description and perfectly true, Socrates.

Socrates: Very well then, in the light of all that we have said, both now and before, to which class do you think that the soul bears the closer resemblance and relation?

Cebes: I think Socrates, the soul is in every possible way more like the invariable than the variable.

Socrates: And the body?

Cebes: Like the other.

Socrates: Look at it this way too. When the soul and the body share the same place, nature teaches the one to serve and be subject, the other to rule and govern. In this relation, which do you think resembles the divine and what's like what's mortal? Don't you think that it is the nature of the divine to rule and direct, and that of the mortal to be subject and serve?

Cebes: I do.

Socrates: Then which does the soul resemble?

Cebes: Obviously, Socrates, soul resembles the divine, and body the mortal.

Socrates: Now, see whether this is our conclusion from all that we have said. The soul is most like that which is divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, and ever self-consistent and invariable, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, dissoluble, and never self-consistent. Can we adduce any conflicting argument, my dear Cebes, to show that this is not so?

Cebes: No, we cannot.

Socrates: Very well then; in that case is it not natural for the body to disintegrate rapidly but for soul to be quite or very nearly indissoluble?

Cebes: Certainly.

Socrates: Of course you know that when a person dies, although it is natural for the visible and physical part of him, which lies here in the visible world and which we call corpse, to decay and fall to pieces and be dissipated, none of this happens to it immediately; it remains as it was for quite some time,

particularly so if death takes place when the body is in attractive condition and the weather is also fine. Indeed, when the body is dried and embalmed, as in Egypt, it remains almost intact for an incredible time; and even if the rest of the body decays, some parts of it—the bones and sinews and anything else like them—are practically everlasting. That is so, is it not?

Cebes: Yes.

Socrates: But the soul, the invisible part, which goes away to a place that is like itself, glorious, pure, and invisible—the true but unseen world—into the presence of the good and wise God (where, if God wills, my soul must shortly go), will it, if its very nature is such as I have described, be blown to bits and destroyed at the moment of its release from the body, as most people claim? Far from it, my dear Simmias and Cebes.



Practicing Death in Life

In this concluding section is reproduced parts of the famous dialogue between Socrates and his disciples Simmias and Cebes, just days before the master's death in Athens. It contains a brilliant exposition by Socrates of many philosophical strands in traditional Greek thought. At many places, however, during his wonderful discourse a keen student of Vedantic philosophy can easily recognise the strong resonance of ancient Vedantic thought, concepts, and themes, viz. '*sarira-sArira sambhanda*', '*karma-bandha*', '*samskAra*', '*tri-guNa*', '*atma-shuddhi*', '*mumukshu*', '*kaivalyaAnubhavam*', and '*mOkshAnandam*'.



Socrates: If at its release the soul is pure and does not drag along with it any trace of the body, because it has never willingly associated with it in life; if it has shunned it and isolated itself because that is what it always has practiced—I mean doing or living philosophy in the right way and really getting used to facing death calmly; now wouldn't you call this 'practicing death' (even while living)?

Cebes: Most certainly.

Socrates: Very well; if this is its condition, then it departs to the place where things are like itself—invisible, divine, immortal, and wise; where, on its arrival, happiness awaits it, and release from uncertainty and folly, from fears and gnawing desires, and all other human evils; and where (as they say of the initiates in the mysteries) it really spends the rest of the time with divine beings ('*muktAtmAs*' in Vedantic parlance). Shall we adopt this view Cebes or some other?

Cebes: This one, by all means.

Socrates: But I suppose, if at the time of its release the soul is tainted and impure; because it has always associated with the body and cared for it and loved it, and has been so beguiled by the body and its passions and pleasures that nothing seems real to it but those physical things which can be touched and seen and eaten and drunk and used for sexual enjoyment, making it accustomed to hate and fear and avoid what is invisible and obscure to our eyes but intelligible and comprehensible by

philosophy—if the soul is in this state, do you think that it will be released just by itself, uncontaminated?

Cebes: Not in the least.

Socrates: On the contrary, it will I imagine, be permeated by the corporeal, which fellowship and intercourse with the body will have ingrained in its very nature through constant association and long practice.

Cebes: Certainly.

Socrates: And we must suppose, my dear fellow, that the corporeal is heavy, oppressive, earthly, and visible. So the soul which is tainted by its presence is weighed down and dragged back into the visible world through fear of the invisible and hovers about tombs and graveyards. The shadowy apparitions which have been seen there are the ghosts of those souls which have not got clear away, but still retain some portion of the visible; which is why they can be seen.

Cebes: That seems likely enough, Socrates.

Socrates: Yes, it does, Cebes. Of course, these are not the souls of the good, but of inferior people (*baddha*-s' as per Vedantic terminology), and they are compelled to wander about these places as a punishment for their bad conduct in the past. They continue wandering until at last, through craving for the corporeal, which unceasingly pursues them, they are imprisoned once more in a body. And as you might expect, they are attached to the same sort of character or nature which they have developed during life. ('*poorva-janma-vAsana*' in the parlance of Vedanta).

Cebes: What sort do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates: Well, those who have cultivated gluttony or assault, or drunkenness ('*tamas*') instead of taking pains to avoid them, are likely to assume form of donkeys and other perverse animals; don't you think so?

Cebes: Yes, that is very likely.

Socrates: And those who have deliberately preferred a life of injustice, suppression, and robbery with violence (*rajas* ') become wolves and hawks and kites; unless we can suggest any other more likely animals.

Cebes: No, the ones you mention are exactly right.

Socrates: So it is easy to imagine what sort of animals all the other kinds of souls will go, in accordance with their conduct during life.

Cebes: Yes, certainly.

Socrates: I suppose the happiest people and those who reach the best destination are the ones who have cultivated the goodness of an ordinary citizen, so-called 'temperance' and 'justice', which is acquired by habit and practice, without the help of philosophy and reason.

Cebes: How are these the happiest?

Socrates: Because they will probably pass into some other kind of social and disciplined creature like bees, wasps, and ants; or even back into humans again, becoming decent citizens ('*sAtviks* ').

Cebes: Very likely.

Socrates: But no soul which has not practiced philosophy and is not absolutely pure ('*suddha- sAttva* ') when it leaves the body, may attain to the divine nature ('*parama-padam* '); that is only for the lover of learning. This is the reason, my dear Simmias and Cebes, why true philosophers abstain from all bodily

desires and withstand them and do not yield to them. It is not because they are afraid of financial loss or poverty, like the average man who thinks of money first; nor because they shrink from dishonour and a bad reputation, like lovers of prestige and authority.

Cebes: No, those would be unworthy motives, Socrates.

Socrates: They would indeed, Cebes. And so those who care about their souls and do not devote themselves to the body dissociate themselves firmly from these others and refuse to accompany them on their haphazard journey; they believe that it is wrong to oppose philosophy with her offer of liberation and purification, so they turn and follow her wherever she leads.

Cebes: What do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates: I will explain. Every seeker after wisdom (*'mumukshu'*) knows that up to the time when philosophy takes it over, his soul is a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars, and wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy can see the ingenuity of the imprisonment, which is brought about by the prisoner's own active desire, which makes him first accessory to his own confinement. Well, philosophy takes over the soul in this condition and by gentle persuasion tries to set it free. She points out that observation by means of eyes and ears and all the other senses abounds with deception, and she urges the soul to refrain from using them unless it is necessary to do so, and encourages it to collect and concentrate itself in isolation, trusting nothing but its own isolated judgment upon realities considered in isolation, and attributing no truth to any other thing which it views through another medium in some other thing; such objects, she knows, are sensible and visible but what she herself sees is intelligible and invisible. Now the soul of the true philosopher (*'mumukshu'* in Vedanta) feels that it must not reject this opportunity for release, and so it abstains as far as possible from pleasures and desires and griefs, because it reflects that the result of giving way to pleasure, fear, pain, or desire is not as might be supposed the trivial misfortune of becoming ill or wasting money through self-indulgence, but the last and worst calamity of all, which the sufferer does not take into account.

Cebes: What is that, Socrates?

Socrates: When anyone's soul feels keen pleasure or pain it cannot help supposing that whatever causes the most violent emotion is the plainest and truest reality, which it is not. It is chiefly visible things that have this effect, don't they?

Cebes: Quite so.

Socrates: Is it not on this sort of occasion that the soul passes most completely into the bondage of the body?

Cebes: How is that?

Socrates: Because every pleasure or pain has a sort of rivet with which it fastens the soul to the body and pins it down and makes it corporeal, accepting as true whatever the body certifies. The result of agreeing with the body and finding pleasure in the same things is I imagine that it cannot help coming to share its character and its diet, so that it can never get clean away to the unseen world, but is always saturated with the body when it sets out, and so soon falls back again into another body, where it takes root and grows. Consequently, it has no share of fellowship with the pure and uniform and divine.

Cebes: Yes, that is perfectly true.

Socrates: It is for these reasons, Cebes, that true philosophers exhibit self-control and courage; not for the reasons that most people do. Or do you think it's for the same reasons?

Cebes: No certainly not.

Socrates: No indeed. A philosopher's soul will take the view which I have described. It will not first expect to be set free by philosophy and then allow pleasure and pain to reduce it once more to bondage, thus condemning itself to an endless task; no, this soul brings calm to the seas of desire by following reason ('*vivEkam*') and abiding always in her company, and by contemplating the true and divine and unambiguous and drawing inspiration from it; because such a soul believes that this is the right way to live while life endures, and that after death it reaches a place which is kindred and similar to its own nature, and there is rid forever of human ills. After such a training, my dear Simmias and Cebes, the soul can have no grounds for fearing that on its separation from the body it will be blown away and scattered by the winds, and so disappear into thin air, and cease to exist altogether.

BOOK 4
The Ramayana

CHAPTER 19

WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION

(In the final scenes of the Valmiki Ramayana, the famous scene of Sita's "agni-pariksha" occurs. After winning the battle against and slaying Ravana, who had earlier abducted Sita and kept her imprisoned in his palace for several months, Rama succumbs to a fleeting sense of mistrust. He accuses Sita of possible infidelity. "You have been held captive by Ravana. You could have fallen in virtue, for all I know. Hence, I reject you now. You may go anywhere you wish but not with me to return to Ayodhya!" he says cruelly to her.

The whole world is shocked at Rama but he remains firm he will not take Sita back.

This scene is often used by critics of the epic to place the blame of anti-feminism or misogyny on the shoulders of the character of Rama. Such blame is countered by the more traditional-minded readers of the Ramayana on the basis of a number of reasons, some theological and a few based on principles of "dharma".

In this following essay, the debate between the "misogynist" and "dharmaic" arguments are sought to be both dispelled on the grounds that the "agni-pariksha" episode in the Ramayana is not really about modern "anti-feminist" prejudice. It is also not so much about "dharmaic" ethics. It is far more about the true implication of the doctrine of "saranagati", the true nature of Self-Surrender that forms the bedrock of Sri Ramanujacharya's theology.

This essay is written in the form of a mock court-room drama. Sri Sadagopan Iyengar, a devout Sri Vaishnava friend of mine living now in Chennai plays the role of Defence Attorney stoutly defending Lord Rama basing his arguments on traditional dharmic principles. In counter, I appear here as the Public Prosecutor fighting Sita's cause in court on the strength of the doctrinal principle of Saranagati.)



The Case for the Defendant, Sri Rama

by Sadagopan Iyengar

When we hold someone very dear to us, we lavish all our love, affection, and care on the loved one and spare no effort to ensure his or her comfort and well-being. What would happen if we were to be

separated from the beloved person, due to circumstances beyond our control? We would be beside ourselves with worry and sorrow and make every possible effort to ascertain the whereabouts and bring back the dear one at all costs, moving heaven and earth in the process. For instance, we find that parents are prepared to pay any sum within (and often beyond) their means, to regain a kidnapped son or daughter. The number of ransoms that have been paid to abductors the world over for the release of near and dear relatives would easily amount to astronomical sums beyond anyone's imagination.

Well, after monumental effort and sacrifice, when we regain the lost person, what would we do with him or her? (For convenience's sake, let us treat the person as a 'him'.) We would lock him in a bear hug, unwilling to let go of the precious person lest he be lost again. We would look at him for long as if for the first time, smothered him with endearments, and take all possible measures to ensure his inseparable presence thenceforth. We would thus treat him with greater love and care than before and would not even let him out of our sight.

Contrary to such accepted norms of behaviour towards a lost and regained person, would we ever throw him into the fire, immediately after his return? Would we deliberately heap insults on the poor person, who too has undergone quite a lot of trials and tribulations during the period of separation from us? Would we disappoint him by turning to him a cold and unsmiling face, making him anything but welcome? No right-thinking person would answer yes to the aforesaid questions, nor would anyone even think of adopting such conduct.

However, someone did conduct himself in such a fashion towards a long-lost and dear relative. And this someone was not just anyone, but someone whom we hold in high esteem and regard, someone we have put on a very high pedestal and consider worthy of unending adulation. And it is this conduct that has raised irreverent and perhaps unwarranted questions in our minds from time immemorial, making us wonder whether there indeed a minor, cruel streak in was this someone, which remained hidden and reared its ugly head when the occasion arose.

The hard-fought battle of Lanka has just concluded. The entire exercise, involving considerable bloodletting and loss of innumerable lives, has been directed towards securing the release of Sita, abducted and kept prisoner by Ravana. Ravana is now dead, all his ten heads cut off by the Rama bANam. Vibhishana has been anointed the king of Lanka. Then, and only then, after all this has happened, does Sri Rama remember the very objective for which he and the entire vAnara sEnA have been toiling for months together and shed blood and sweat for. Even then, He does not go in person to Ashoka Vana, where his beloved Sita has been languishing for long, to fold her in a tight embrace, as would any husband—he just sends a message through Sri Hanuman, about Ravana's demise and her own freedom. It is left for Hanuman to remind his master to have a look at his ladylove, pining away for him, for whose sake the entire monumental endeavour had been undertaken:

yannimita: ayam Arambha: karmaNAm cha

phalOchaya: tAm dEvIm shOka santaptAm MaithilIm drashtum arhasi.

It is indeed ironic that Rama needs to be reminded to see his beloved Sita, after months of separation. So reminded, Rama tells Vibhishana to bring Sita to him, duly bathed and bedecked in all finery. Sita, however, refuses initially to decorate herself and prefers her Lord to see her as she is, clothed in dirty and torn apparel, her face and body unwashed and long hair unkempt. However, when Vibhishana insists, quoting Rama, she complies, and comes to Rama in all her original splendour, borne in a palanquin. What do we expect Rama to do, at least belatedly? Even if he were not to embrace her in public (since display of intimacy in public was out of the question), we expect him to have looked at her with eyes brimming over with love, conveying the thousand endearments which could not be said in words in

public. We expect him to console her over the torrid times she had undergone and to assure her that all that was past, and the future would definitely be a bed of roses. We expect him to give her a detailed account of the suffering that he himself underwent due to her separation and to tell her how badly she was missed.

Sri Rama does not do any of the things normally expected of him. When Sita comes near and stands opposite him, looking at his face with eyes radiating love and relief and burst into tears, what is the prince's reaction? He looks at her with a heart and eyes full of anger and fury— '*hridaya antargata krOdho vyAhartum upachakramE*'. He doesn't even look her in the face, but looks out of the corner of his eyes, with his brows knit in anger— '*sa baddhvA bhrukutIm vaktrE tiryak prOkshita lOchana:*' He follows up this forbidding glance with words apparently dipped in venom. He tells her that whatever he has done to vanquish the foe and rescue her from his clutches was done to prove his valour and to discharge a duty. He had thus fully performed what was required of a husband, whose wife had been abducted, by destroying the abductor and setting her free. He had lived up to the standards of conduct prescribed for a scion of the Ikshvaku dynasty. He makes it clear that the entire exercise of Ravana *vadham*, etc., was not done for her at all, but only to protect his own name from the ignominy that attaches itself to a husband who is incapable of protecting his wife or avenging an insult to her— '*na tvat arttham mayA krita:*'. In venting his fury, Rama doesn't even wait for privacy, but hurts his ladylove with whiplash-like words, in full hearing of the assembled crowd of *vAnarAs* and *rAkshasAs*— '*abraveet parusham SIItAm madhyE vAnara rakshasAm*'.

And what are the words of venom that the prince directs at the helpless Sita, who is terribly bewildered at her husband's totally incredible reaction? He lets her hear what is probably the most mortal of insults that could ever be hurled at any woman—that he suspects her fidelity— '*prApta chAritra sandEhA*'. He says he hates her— '*pratikoolOsi mE dridam*'. And to crown all other insults he has heaped on the unprotesting Janaki, he tells her that she is free to go with any man of her choice. Adding insult to injury, Rama, the famed soft speaker (*mridu bhAshI*) tells Sita that she could go with Lakshmana, Bharata or for that matter, even with Sugreeva or Vibhishana, as she pleased. 'I have no use for you,' adds Rama, making His feelings abundantly clear, as if his earlier words left any room for doubt.

My hand trembles even as I write these words, for, what could be worse for a paragon of womanly virtue (*'nAreeNA m utttamA vadhoo'*) than to hear such words, which fall in her ears as molten lead? Are these words that any husband, let alone a model one like Rama, would address his wife? More so, are these words that emanate from one who loved his wife verily like his own life breath— '*Ramasya dayitA bhAryA nityam prANa samA satI*'? Did Rama forget for the nonce the glorious words of Sri Janaka at the time of giving his daughter in marriage, describing Sita as the greatest of chaste women and as an unerring adherent to the righteous path— '*iyam Sita mama sutA sahadharma charI tava . . Pativrata mahAbAgA cchAyEvAnugata*'? Are these words to be addressed to the most virtuous of women, who even doubled as his mother in showering affection and care, after the demise of Dasaratha? Are these really the words of a prince, who had previously hailed her as being in every way an honour to the *Ikshvaku vamsam*? Are these indeed sounds out of the mouth of a man who called her, not so long back, as dearer to him than his very life and his faithful adherent in all DhArmic endeavours— '*sa DharmachAriNi mE tvam prAnEbhyOpi garIyasi*'?

If it is difficult for us, living millennia later, to stomach such pitiless insults hurled at the hapless Sita, imagine how Sita herself would have felt! Just imagine what a cruel shock it must have been to the damsel, who had eagerly anticipated happy reunion with her beloved after a prolonged spell of separation, torture, and torment, to be told that her character was suspect and that she could go and live with anyone of her choice! How heart-breaking such venomous words must have been to her and

what a cruel surprise to find that the apparently unending spring of love in her husband's heart had dried up suddenly, to be replaced by a spout of pure venom!

Valmiki too cries, as is evident from the *slokas* describing the episode. The poet says that Sita suffered a physical withdrawal into herself, hurt beyond measure by words, which were worse than poisonous arrows. She was almost dead with the shame of hearing these insults spoken about her, of all people, and that too in front of a huge audience. Her tears were so profuse that they covered her entire body. Her body shook as a leaf caught in a hurricane and her sorrow became boundless before this ignominy, the torture and torment suffered by her at the hands of Dasagreeva and his minions paled into insignificance.

Any woman confronting such unjust accusations would react and react forcibly. Any woman would perhaps hurl back equally hurting barbs at the accuser and vent her justifiable anger at the unfair insults. Any woman would tell the husband to go to hell and walk her own way—any woman, that is, but not Sita. It is a hallmark of Sita's exemplary character and virtue that she says not a word out of place and merely appeals to Rama tearfully not to suspect her, advancing emotional but eminently logical arguments therefor.

And when Rama remains as unmoved by her distress as by her words of reason, Sita offers to enter the fire, to prove her chastity beyond any doubt. She performs a *pradakshiNam* of Rama (who doesn't even look up), instructs Lakshmana to make a fire. She says, 'If it is true that I am totally unblemished, if it is true that my conduct and character are the best possible under all circumstances, if I am true to Sri Raghava by thought, word and deed, then let the fire god protect me! If not, let me be burnt to ashes! If the ever-vigilant witnesses to everybody's actions, comprised of the sun, the wind, the directions, the moon, the two confluences of night and day, Mother Earth and the others—if these witnesses know me to be of impeccable conduct and as one whose allegiance is only to her husband, then let this fire protect me!'

And so saying, she respectfully circles the fire and enters it, with absolutely no concern for her body, in full sight of the huge crowd that watches with disbelief that this could be happening to the Universal Mother, the *loka-mAta* herself. There is a huge commotion emanating from the crowd, which is unable to stomach the incredible sight and deed. A collective sigh of wonderment, incredulousness, and sorrow rends the air. Women, aghast at the episode, burst out in tears, and beat their breasts, unable to digest the insult meted out to the best of their species. Even Rama, whose heart has apparently turned to stone, is horrified at Sita's sudden move and sheds tears at last (and so he ought to!).



It is a measure of Sita's purity that the entire clan of Celestials (including Brahma the Creator, Rudra the Destroyer, Indra the Chief of Devas, Kubera the Custodian of All Wealth, Yamadharmaraja who keeps meticulous count of our good and bad deeds, Varuna the Deity of Waters, et al.) turn up the moment Sita enters the fire, to swear by all that they hold holy, that Sita is absolutely free of any blemish and pure as driven snow. In fact, they chide Rama for not preventing his beloved from the *agni pariksha* and tell him he ought not to behave like an ordinary mortal husband in suspecting his wife.

As if this chorus of conduct certificates is not enough, the venerated Agni Bhagavan too emerges with Sita, (who is totally unaffected by her fiery bath) to add his two cents' worth. We are told that even the flowers she wore around her neck did not wilt despite their contact with fire. Agni says to Rama in a stentorian voice and for all to hear, that Sita is the purest of pure, untainted by stigma of any sort, and

had not committed any transgression by thought, word, deed, or sight. Every waking minute she had only her husband in mind and had thoughts for nothing else.

Apparently satisfied with all this vouchsafing for Sita's character by the most eminent of beings, Rama accepts her with due honour. He also provides a detailed justification for his having countenanced Sita's ordeal by fire, acknowledging that he had never had any but the highest of opinions about his consort. He proclaims for all world to hear that Sita is the embodiment of purity, whom even the vilest of influences cannot hope to stain. He clarifies that Sita could never have thoughts for anyone else, for she is verily an inseparable part of him, as are the heat and light of the sun— '*ananyA hi mayA Sita bhAskarENa prabhA yathA*'. So saying, Rama reveals his unvarying love for his consort and his unshakeable faith in her virtue. And the divine couple are reunited, with the passing cloud of apparent suspicion lifting to reveal the shining sun of love.

Though we are eminently unqualified to sit in judgement over divine actions, yet a few doubts plague us over the conduct of Rama in this instance.

1. Since we hear so much throughout the epic about the professed love of Rama for his princess, how was it possible for him to suddenly develop a doubt about her character?
2. What was the need for Rama to reveal his misgivings about Sita's chastity in public, that too before a vast gathering of monkeys and *rAkshasAs*?
3. Even granting Rama's right to suspect a woman who had been in the custody of a *rAkshasa* like Ravana, what was the need for him to tell Sita to go and live with any person of her choice? Was it not too much of an insult to heap on an unblemished woman?
4. Having accused Sita in public about her conduct, would it not have been appropriate for the prince of Ayodhya to have been satisfied with her eminently reasonable explanations and impassioned assurances and not let her go to the extent of proving her innocence by entering the fire?
5. How was it possible for Rama, even granting his anger and suspicion, to permit his beloved Sita to adopt the extreme step of ordeal by fire?
6. When there are any number of people standing around ready to do her bidding, why should Sita ask Lakshmana, of all people, to make a fire?
7. Did it need the combined character certificates of all the celestials for Rama to believe in Sita and to accept her back into his fold?

These and similar misgivings are cleared, once we peruse the words of Rama following the unscathed emergence of Sita from the fire, as also the words of commentators like Sri Govindaraja, who have a knack of reading and revealing the true purport of Valmiki's words. And we can find the following answers too through a perusal of the aforesaid passages.

1. There is absolutely no doubt about the boundless love Rama had for his queen. This is demonstrated in ample measure throughout the epic. However, for Rama to have unquestioningly accepted Sita (who had, all said and done, spent a year in custody of the vilest of *rAkshasAs* with a huge harem) would have attracted adverse comment from the undiscerning. Gossip-mongers would have said, 'Look at Rama, who is so head over heels in love with his wife, that he has accepted her without question, knowing full well that she was abducted and was in the custody of the notorious kAmuka Ravana.' Hence, it was indeed necessary for Rama to appear to enquire into his lady's chastity.
2. The suspicions about Sita's conduct could indeed have been voiced and clarifications obtained in private, or before a select audience of trusted acolytes. However, the public would still be unaware

of the proceedings and might continue to think Rama's conduct unbecoming of a scion of the Ikshvaku dynasty. Since Sita's innocence was proved beyond doubt for everyone to see, even the breath of scandal was avoided in the matter.

3. Commentators clarify that the actual purport of Rama's words about Sita being free to live with Lakshmana, Bharata, et al., is that once abandoned by her husband, a woman could seek the support and roof of her husband's relatives and friends. It was with this in mind (that Sita could find support from any of the worthies mentioned) that Rama's words were uttered and not with any other untoward purport, says Sri Govindaraja:

Atra LakshmanAdou mana: karaNam nAma anAthAyA: rakshakatvEna tat tat grihE vartanam.

BhartrA parityaktAyA: striyA bandhu grihE vAsa vidhAnAt.

4. If Rama were to appear to be apparently satisfied by Sita's own words of assurance and sworn protests of innocence, it would not have been adequate for the assembled public, who would have thought, 'What sort of justice is this, if the accused person is exonerated based solely on her own protestations of innocence?' Hence some solid proof was needed, if the proletariat was to be convinced as to where the rights of the matter lay. The *agni pariksha* was therefore necessary. Rama makes this clear, saying that this was essential for convincing the three worlds:

PratyayArttham tu lOkAnAm trayANAm satya samshraya:

upEkshE VaidEhIm pravisantIm hutAsanam

5. Despite his harsh words, Rama was absolutely convinced about Sita's impeccable character. He knew too that none of the five elements could cause her harm, since all were under the joint command of Himself and His Consort (*'bheeshAsmAt VAta: pavatE, bheeshOdEti Soorya: bheeshmAt agnischa indrascha, Mrityu: dhAvati panchama iti'*—the Taittiriyaopanishad). Since no injury could be caused by fire to Sita who was the embodiment of purity, and since it would prove her to be blemish-less beyond doubt, Rama didn't feel any qualms about permitting her to enter the fire.
6. Sita is ever conscious of the insults she meted out to Lakshmana, when he refused to leave the *parna-shaala*, in response to Maareecha's cry for rescue, uttered in Rama's voice. Sita accuses Lakshmana of having improper intentions towards her when he tries to convince her that his brother needs no assistance from anyone and is quite capable of defending himself. It was to atone for this inexcusable conduct towards a Bhagavata that Sita requests him to make a fire for her to enter and prove her innocence.
7. The prince of Ayodhya knew his consort like the palm of his own hand and needed no certificates from anyone, however eminent, as to her character and conduct. Yet since justice had not only to be done but also seemed to be done, Rama accepted Sita with these certifications, as they came from entities, which the public held in high-reverence. As such, it was for public consumption, rather than for his own requirement, that Rama waited for these celestials to pronounce Sita innocent, before accepting her.

The episode might have been painful to all concerned while it lasted, but both Rama and Sita emerge from it with their fame enhanced manifold. Just as gold glitters more after passing through fire, Sita too has her sterling qualities reaffirmed beyond doubt, after the ordeal by fire. And it proves too that Rama applied the same strict standards of ethics and righteousness in his own case, as he did in others', attesting to his impartiality and passion for justice and fair play. Detractors might still be found, criticising the prince of Ayodhya for what he said and did on the occasion, but for us, as students of Srimad Ramayanam, he would always be the shining paragon of virtue, the epitome of all merit and the compulsively righteous monarch, who could never do wrong. If some people think the worse of the

Magnificent Monarch on this count, it shows only their ignorance, for, being the embodiment of Dharma (certified as such by even His enemies—‘*RamO vighrahavAn dharma:*’), Rama was incapable of wrongdoing. If some of his actions appear to us to be incorrect, it is because we apply our own defective human standards in judging divine conduct, which we have no business to do.

For, if Rama did it, it must be correct. Thus, the defence counsel rests the case for Sri Rama.

The Case for the Plaintiff, Sri Sita

by M. K. Sudarshan

In your peroration, you end by saying, ‘*For if Rama did it, it must be correct*’. It is a line that does sound so much like an attorney’s closing statement in a court of law. Your arguments too, in fact, are set forth in the masterly manner of a skilful defence lawyer marshalling legal facts and precedents all meant to secure for the defendant an honourable acquittal on technical, if not substantive points of law.

Sir, since you have so admirably donned the role of a defense attorney, permit me for a while to act the part of a public prosecutor appearing on behalf of my beloved client, the plaintiff, Mother Sita, and make my own case.



Many of the arguments you made, which I must respectfully submit, are tenuous if not wholly untenable. Let’s look at a few of them and reason why.

- (1) The first argument is that the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ was a kind of justice meted out to Sita for the ‘*insults she meted out to Lakshmana, when he refused to leave the parNashALA, in response to Maareecha’s cry for rescue, uttered in Rama’s voice*’ It was to atone for this inexcusable conduct towards a Bhagavata, that Sita requests him specifically to make a fire for her to enter and prove her innocence’.

This is not true. Please refer to **sarga 59, shLOka 23—24 of the Aranya-kAnda**, where Rama clearly lays the blame for Sita’s abduction on Lakshmana alone and in fact holds Sita blameless. Lakshmana remonstrates and tells Rama about all the unpleasant, stinging words that Sita had hurled at him. What does Rama then say?

He says, ‘*I cannot forgive you. You left your post of duty and left her unprotected. Sita is in danger. Why did you come, merely because she was angry? When she became angry, mad, and said absurd things, you became angry too and you came away? You have disobeyed my command! No blame rests upon Sita! She became momentarily mad, but that’s understandable. But you, you cannot get angry with mad people.*’ (The suggestion is Lakshmana could have left the scene, pretending to go after Rama, go a short distance and hang about in the vicinity, out of sight but not going too far and still being able to protect Sita in case harm arises to her.)

The fact therefore clearly shows that Sita had already been forgiven by Rama for the harsh way she behaved towards Lakshmana in the Maareecha episode. She was temporarily unhinged in that grave moment. Women in such moments generally say all manner of things. It is quite understandable. You cannot take them to task for it. Insanity, even the temporary kind, is an admissible ground for acquittal in modern courts of law too. Having already forgiven Sita in the ‘*Aaranya-kAnda*’ for the misdemeanour, it is unlikely that in the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’, in the ‘*agni-pravEsa*’ episode, Rama would have wanted to punish Sita again for the same offence. Again, in a legal court of the modern day, no one can be accused and punished twice for the same crime.

As for Sita asking Lakshmana to light the pyre (and not anyone else), far too much meaning is being read into the gesture when there is none at all.

Sita asked Lakshmana to light the fire, because there just wasn't anyone else around there in the assembly at that moment whom she could have commanded to do so. It would not have been proper for her to ask a royal person like Vibheeshana to do an errand. She could not have approached 'vAnarAs' like Sugriva or Hanuman to do the task. How could she ask bears like Jambavan to light an 'agni-kundam'? The matter at hand was a delicate marital conflict between two humans—'manushya'. It would be improper for even the wise Hanuman, a 'vAnarA', after all, to interfere. Sita could also not have commanded her own husband Rama to light the pyre given the blazing mood in which he was in that moment! Who else could Sita then take the liberty to command? And who else present there other than Lakshmana was a person bearing a 'yagnyOpavitam'—the minimum qualification needed by a person to start a Vedic fire going?

- (2) The second argument you make is this: *However, for Rama to have unquestioningly accepted Sita, would have attracted adverse comment from the undiscerning. Gossip-mongers would have said, "Look at Rama, who is so head over heels in love with his wife, that he has accepted her without question, knowing full well that she was abducted and was in the custody of the notorious kAmuka Ravana." Hence, it was indeed necessary for Rama to appear to enquire into his lady's chastity.'*

This argument is untenable because it is totally and inconsistent with what Rama said about himself in that famous *shlOka 33-34-35 sarga 18 in the 'kishkindA kAndam'*:

*sakrudEva prapannAya tavAsmiti cha yAchatE
abhayam sarva-bhUtEbhyO dadAmyEtadh-vratam mamaII
aanayainam hari-shrEshta dattamasyAbhayam mayA
vibhishiNO vA sugrIva yadi vA rAvANa: svayam II*

'I offer protection without reserve to anyone who just comes and says, "Please protect me, I'm helpless and have no one else to protect me." From all dangers, from all enemies, I grant such persons full protection. Bring such people to me now. No matter who they are, whether Vibheeshana or Sugriva, even if Ravana himself were to come and seek my protection, I shall embrace him and give him my "abhaya-pradAna"!'

After having said all those grand things above, how can it be argued that it was not possible for Rama to 'have unquestioningly accepted Sita'? Did not Sita declare at many places in the Ramayana that she was like a true 'prapanna'—wholly dependent on Rama, her very life breath? Please read *shlOka 4—5, 7—9 of sarga 30 in the 'ayOdhya kAnda'*. In that scene, Rama is trying to persuade Sita not to go into exile with him into the forest, but to remain in Ayodhya and 'stay with Bharatha'. What does Sita tell him in that moment? Her words though sounding a little angry still ring true with all the passion and pathos of a true 'prapanna':

'Why are you afraid of taking me with you to the forest? O Rama, why do you reject me who has no other person to rely on earth? I am yours entirely, utterly, and yet you discard me?' Later on in the sarga she says, 'When I am with you Rama, I do not want food; plain fare will be like delicious viand for me. The dust of the forest on which you have trodden will be the sandals after my heart; and grass will be the most luxurious couch. Do not be anxious for me; I shall not be a burden to you. The place where I can be with you, whatever be its name, and wherever it may be, is heaven to me. If you are not there, whatever place it may be, it will be "niraya" to me. When

you abandon me, I will not want to live anymore. If I cannot live without you for a minute, how can you abandon me?’

What moving words indeed are above of Mother Sita? It brings tears to one’s eyes. Are they not the true words of one who is seeking the ‘*abhaya*’ of Rama? Here, the Sri Vaishnavite orthodoxy will rise at once to begin calling that Sita does not at all meet the technical definitions of a theologically ordained ‘*prapanna*’. She does not fit the bill, they will say waving their rulebook; she does not fit the bill in terms of the five-fold ‘*prapatti-angA-s*’. But if only one were willing to acknowledge with an open mind that always it is substance that triumphs over form, one will have no difficulty in recognizing that, throughout the pages of the Ramayana, the sentiments Sita expresses while describing her relations with Rama are all wholly consistent with and remarkably similar to the language of a true ‘*prapanna*’ who has surrendered his destiny unto the hands of God.

So then, why is it that the same Rama who declared that he will accord even Ravana ‘*abhayam*’—that too ‘unquestioningly’ and without any pre-conditions except that of the condition of surrender—why is Rama so reluctant to extend the same privilege to Ravana’s victim, Sita? Why the inconsistency on the part of Rama? If ‘charity must begin at home’ why does Rama too not begin granting ‘*abhaya- pradAnam*’ first at home to his wife before offering it to all and sundry in the world?

Why is one standard being applied to Ravana and yet another on his poor victim, Sita?

- (3) Your next argument is this: ‘*The suspicions about Sita’s conduct could indeed have been voiced and clarifications obtained in private, or before a select audience of trusted acolytes. However, the public would still be unaware of the proceedings and might continue to think Rama’s conduct unbecoming of a scion of the Ikshvaku dynasty.*’

Further, sir, you go on to argue: ‘*If Rama were to appear to be apparently satisfied by Sita’s own words of assurance and sworn protests of innocence, it would not have been adequate for the assembled public, who would have thought, “What sort of justice is this, if the accused person is exonerated based solely on her own protestations of innocence?” Hence some solid proof was needed, if the proletariat was to be convinced as to where the right of the matter lay. The agni pariksha was therefore necessary.*’

These arguments too from the counsel for defense are rather flimsy. Was Rama always so fastidious and conscientious about doing things in full view of the public? With full, utterly full, transparency? If he had indeed been so sensitive to public opinion—to the sacred opinion of ‘the proletariat’, as you say—and doing everything under open scrutiny, isn’t it a great wonder that he didn’t pause, not even an instant, to think twice about what the great ‘general public’ would say when they finally came to hear about how he got rid of Vaali in a less-than-straight duel in the forests of Kishkinda? In that episode your client Rama was evidently too keen on doing justice, and didn’t worry too much about ‘justice seeming to be done’?

Surely, Mr Defense Attorney, you do not mean to say that Rama, after all, did apply one standard to himself and yet another to Sita when it came to the business of public relations or public accountability, i.e., managing the perceptions of the public about his deeds? Are you suggesting that your defendant was in fact more worried about public opinion polls than about the moral propriety of his deeds? One was always under the impression that your client goes by the popular name of ‘*rAmo vighrahavAn dharma:*’?

Are we revising such impressions?

- (4) The next argument you offer is this: ‘*Commentators clarify that the actual purport of Rama’s words about Sita being free to live with Lakshmana, Bharata, et al., is that once abandoned by her husband, a woman could seek the support and roof of her husband’s relatives and friends. It was with this in mind [that Sita could find support from any of the worthies mentioned], that Sri Rama’s words were uttered and not with any other untoward purport, says Sri Govindaraja [atra LakshmanAdou mana: karaNam nAma anAthAyA: rakshakatvEna tat tat grihE vartanam BhartrA parityaktAyA: striyA bandhu grihE vAsa vidhAnAt].*’

With due respects to the traditional commentator, he has taken the trouble to quote, I cannot however help saying that the Hon’ble counsel for defense is attempting to put a skillful but deceptive ‘spin’ on the original stanzas of the Ramayana text just in order to soften the harshness and sting contained in Rama’s actual words.

I confess I am not an expert in the Sanskrit language, but what Rama said to Sita is this (VI.118.22 — 23):

lakshmanE bharatE vA tvam kuru buddhim yathAsUkhAt I

sugreevE vAnarEndrE vA rAkshasEndrE Vibhishane I

nivEshaya mana: seethE yathA vA sukhAmAtmanah: II

The words ‘*yathAsUkhAt*’ and ‘*yathA vA sukhAmAtmanah:*’ have unmistakable connotations of what kind of ‘*sukham*’ was meant, given the context of the Ramayana. So, this is what Rama said, ‘Lakshmana, Bharatha, Sugriva, or Vibheeshana . . . you may go ahead and fix your affections on any one of these four people. I do not care!’

The counsel for defense, I am afraid, is not only taking undue liberties with the facts of the case but also with the language and idiom in which the evidence is made available before the court.

- (5) Your next argument is: *Despite his harsh words, Rama was absolutely convinced about Sita’s impeccable character. He knew too that none of the five elements could cause her harm, since all were under the joint command of himself and his consort [bheeshAsmAt VAta: pavatE, bheeshOdEti Soorya: bheeshmAt agnischa indrascha, Mrityu: dhAvati panchama iti—the Taittiriyaopanishad]. Since no injury could be caused by Fire to Sita who was the embodiment of purity, and since it would prove her to be blemish-less beyond doubt, Rama didn’t feel any qualms about permitting her to enter the fire.*’

The evidence available in the Ramayana does not quite support your statement that ‘despite his harsh words, Rama was absolutely convinced about Sita’s impeccable character’. The available evidence in fact seems to suggest the exact contrary. Your client appears to have a steady and unmistakable past record of being incapable of implicitly trusting people. As in the present episode of the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ where we find he doubted his own very consort, so too in the case of his ally Sugriva and brother, Bharatha.

Let the facts speak for themselves.

In the ‘*kishkinda kAnda*’, at one point in time, your client became enraged with Sugriva. He suspected the latter was going back on his word given earlier that a whole ‘*vAnara sEnA*’ would be put at Rama’s disposal in the search for Sita.

Again, in the final scenes of the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’, when the whole entourage of Rama, Sita, Sugriva, Vibheeshana, and Hanuman were returning to Ayodhya, your client called Hanuman aside to tell him, ‘Now that we are nearing Ayodhya, Hanuman, I want you to go ahead of us and see what is happening in Ayodhya. I want you to report back to me whether my brother

Bharatha is ready to hand the kingdom back to me on my return or is otherwise pre-disposed. In case he's changed his mind and decided to appropriate the kingdom to himself, then I should know about it. Of course, if he wants to, he can have the throne all for himself. But I want to know in advance, so go ahead of us and find out.'

Your client Rama, thus, had an ingrained habit of doubting the intentions of even those who were close to him. In view of the facts above, it would be difficult to be convinced by what you, my dear learned defense counsel, have to say on behalf of your client, '*Despite his harsh words, Rama was absolutely convinced about Sita's impeccable character.*'



Sir, I want to bring my own closing argument in this case to an end by saying that my client, Mother Sita, can have no better counsel to represent her case than she herself. She speaks later in her own words, in the '*uttara-kAndam*' where one can find the bravest and most eloquent summation of her case. Let me allow her to do it, because there really is no need at all for someone like me to hold a brief for my client. I propose to merely reproduce her own words in the next session.

Although I rise to present the case for the prosecution, I shall leave the actual performance of the task to Mother Sita herself. She has spoken so forcefully and movingly, I should say, on her own behalf in the pages of Srimad Valmiki Ramayana, especially in the '*uttara-kAnda*'. It is there on record for all to see (students of Ramayana must make it a point in fact to read through the entire '*kAnda*', especially '*sargas*' **45 through 97**—at least in a good Tamil/English translation even if not in the original. I usually refer to '*Lectures on the Ramayana*' by Srinivasa Sastry and '*The Ramayana*' by Sri N. Raghunathan). We will merely reproduce it here.

"The words of Sita were spoken to Lakshmana on the banks of the River Ganges, far away from the city of Ayodhya, but very near a forest reserve of Vedic rishis and monks.

Sita at that time was pregnant with Rama's children. She had no idea at all why Lakshmana had brought her to the spot all the way from Ayodhya.

Suddenly, Lakshmana broke down and wept. 'Why do you weep?' asked Sita, taken by surprise.

It was then that Lakshmana broke the news to her that, under orders of King Rama, henceforth she must remain in the company of the forest rishis' and must never return to Rama or Ayodhya for at least twelve years. With eyes brimming with hot tears and a heart bursting with sorrow, Lakshmana explained to Sita that the king of Ayodhya had banished her to exile. Ordinary subjects in the land of Ayodhya, he said, were still carrying on a widespread whispering campaign to besmirch again her fair name that had been already established in the '*agni-pariksha*' event long, long ago in Lanka.

When she heard this, Sita felt the world spin around her and simply crumble. She was aghast. So many years after her innocence had been proven through '*agni-pravEsa*', the cloud of suspicion and black doubt, she realized, still hovered over Ayodhya! Above all else, Rama too had chosen to take cognizance of it, and once again, wanted to disown her and banish her out of sight.

Sita sank, but only for a moment.

Gathering herself quickly, and with a mighty effort of will, she spoke in a calm and composed voice to Lakshmana. It was an intense but dignified speech, probably the best one can find in all the Valmiki Ramayana. It is that speech which we shall reproduce below for the benefit and edification of the court.

After we have finished hearing Mother Sita, the prosecution will next duly proceed to frame charges against the defendant. Thereafter, I shall rest my case.



Voice of Sita

‘Why do you weep, Lakshmana? Do not weep for me. Hear Lakshmana, my last word to you. I was born to be unhappy. The spirit of sorrow is incarnated in me by the will of the Creator. So far as I can see, my conduct has been pure. I have not deserved to be abandoned by my lord and master. I must have committed some atrocious sin in my previous birth. Maybe I cruelly parted a man from his loving wife.’

Prosecution Comments

Readers should carefully note here what Sita says, ‘I have not deserved to be abandoned by my lord and master.’ There is no more clear and damning indictment of Rama’s injustice in the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ affair than this statement of Sita.

It is also significant to note that even at this late point of time in the Ramayana, Sita *does not* talk of her sad plight being the result of any divine retribution for the so-called words of ‘*apachAram*’ she once hurled at Lakshmana in the ‘*Maareecha*’ affair. Throughout the Ramayana, such a thought never even occurred to her! This is very, very significant indeed. If ever at all Sita felt guilty, even secretly guilty about having wronged Lakshmana in the ‘*aranya-kAnda*’, she showed no signs of it whatsoever. Not once does she give as much as a hint of a conscience troubled over the mistreatment Lakshmana received at her hands. The fact is, Sita never did feel guilty about the whole incident. And that is because she was indeed utterly blameless in that episode of the ‘*aranya-kAnda*’. It had been just temporary madness that seized her back then. She had said all sorts of harsh things to Lakshmana in that frenzied moment. Rama too realizing it had forgiven her long, long ago, as evident in the pages of the ‘*aranya-kAnda*’.

No, never. Sita’s plight was certainly not the result of any wrongdoing done unto Lakshmana. We see Sita here suspecting rather that it was due perhaps to something worse in a ‘previous birth’, but she knows not exactly what.

All this clearly proves that the usual ‘traditionalist’ commentary that Sita’s predicament in the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ affair was divine punishment meted out to her by Rama for wrong done unto Lakshmana in the ‘*Maareecha*’ affair—that commentary is speculation at best and myth at worst.

Voice of Sita

‘Lakshmana, when last I lived in hermitages, I was with Rama and devoted in service to him, and hence I did not feel any privation or hardship. Tell me now, how shall I explain my presence here, all alone, to these rishis? What crime shall I own up to as being the cause of my exile here? They will all only say this to themselves, “Our King Rama is the very soul of justice [dharma]. Why has he discarded his queen again?”

Prosecution Comments

Here we see how prescient Sita is even as far back as in the ‘*trEta-yuga*’, she correctly anticipated the facile argument that would forever prevail amongst the people of the world, for generations and generations to come until this very day! She feared that ‘even the good-hearted *rishis* of the forest will find it hard to believe I’m blameless! They would however have no similar difficulty in believing Rama, since Rama, after all, can do no wrong! If good *rishis* won’t believe me, where is the doubt that ordinary mortals of the world will blindly follow suit too?’

In fact, it is precisely that standard but glib argument—and Sita’s worst fear—which Sri Sadagopan Iyengar, honourable defense counsel, put forward in that infamous statement of his, ‘If it was done by Rama, it must be right!’

Voice of Sita

‘Ah Lakshmana, I have no use for life and may end it here in the waters of the Ganga. But I have in me the proper seed of the royal family and hence will not kill myself. Well, leave me then to my fate. Only I have something to say still. Take this as my message back to Ayodhya.

‘First, my humble prostrations, at the feet of my mothers-in-law, then at the feet of the king. Tell Him then on my behalf, O Lakshmana, this: “You know Dharma and practice it at all risks. In your heart you will admit my character is without a stain. I have never been false to you whether in mind or in body. Yet because your subjects suspect my purity, you throw me out. So be it. I submit.”

‘You honour and love your people, the same as you honour and love your brothers. If to preserve your good name among them, I must be sacrificed, I am content to be sacrificed. As you serve your subjects, so I serve you, not less but more. This body of mine is nothing. To me as to any woman, the husband is everything; he is kindred; he is preceptor; HE IS GOD. My duty is to be of use to him and in his service to lay down my life, if need be.

‘Only please take good note of my body, O Lakshmana. It bears obvious signs of pregnancy. Rama knows this well, but still, it is better that you witness my condition with your own eyes, and relate it back to the King and to the people of Ayodhya, so that there are no dark doubts in their minds later on.’

Prosecution Comments

It is clear from Sita’s own words and assessment as to what Rama’s true motives were in the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ episode. It was not to punish Sita for her alleged misdemeanor towards Lakshmana in the ‘*aranya-kAnda*’. (The so-called ‘misdemeanor’ is I submit little more than a figment of imagination). It was not to uphold some all-transcending principle of ‘*dharma*’ or anything. It was simply to ‘look good’ as a king in the eyes of his vast numbers of subjects in the kingdom as Sita herself says above: ‘You honour and love your people, the same as you honour and love your brothers. If to preserve your good name among them, I must be sacrificed, I am content to be sacrificed.’

In order thus to ‘look good’ in the eyes of the subjects, we saw that Rama was willing to sacrifice Mother Sita not once (as in the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’) but again, the second time, in the ‘*uttara-kAnda*’ above. Further, as if insult was not enough to add to injury, Rama was willing to sacrifice her on a third occasion yet again, also in the ‘*uttara-kAnda*’. That we will see below.

In the final chapters of the ‘*uttara-kAndam*’, there is one very moving event in which Sita speaks as she is compelled to defend her purity again. Sita’s two sons, Lava and Kusha, were both recognized for who they were in the palace of Ayodhya, and coming to know who their mother really was, Rama asked that

Sita be brought to his presence in the palace. Valmiki himself decided to accompany Sita into Rama's presence.

But before Valmiki can do that, Rama asks that Sita swear publicly about her purity. He commands that she must appear before the royal assembly and the public too, and before them take a solemn oath or '*sapatha*' testifying that she remained untainted. Rama makes that a pre-condition to a meeting with Sita in the presence of Valmiki.

Sita refuses point-blank. Hear what our Mother, who by then had already donned the saffron robes of a forest '*sAdhvi*', a forest-renunciate, says (**VII.97. 15—21**):

Voice of Sita

'As I have never let my thought wander away from Rama, so let my mother Earth [bhumi-devi] give me an opening. I will go back to where I came from. This earth is not for me, nor this husband, nor these subjects whom no proof can ever convince.'

Prosecution Comments

The '*uttara-kAnda*' ends with the scene of the Earth opening and a celestial throne appearing therefrom and Mother Earth beckoning Mother Sita with the most poignant words in the Ramayana:

'My daughter, come back to me. You have had enough of this earth.'



We shall now leave Sita alone and return to our own 'mundane' and litigated discussions.

The question of Sita's chastity arose in the Ramayana on three different and separate occasions— once on the battlefield of Lanka in the '*yuddha-kAnda*'; the second, at the beginning of the '*uttara- kAnda*' when Rama ordered Lakshmana to take her and leave her in the forests among rishis; and finally, at the end of the '*uttara-kAnda*', when Rama wanted her to take a public oath of virtue before the people of Ayodhya.

Now, the prosecution wishes to pose this question to the Hon'ble defense counsel:

If on the first occasion, the '*agni-pariksha*' of the '*yuddha-kAnda*', it is claimed Sita received due punishment for her alleged misdemeanor against Lakshmana in the Maareecha episode, what about the second and third instances in the '*uttara-kAnda*'? When Rama again dealt her severe punishment on the same charge as the very first one, i.e., her suspected purity, what was his great motive?

Can the defense counsel please elaborate?

I say, he cannot because he and his band of so-called 'traditionalist' commentators will have run out of ideas and imagination in concocting flimsy, facile, and fallacious grounds of argument on which somehow, they wish to make their desperate case stand: '*If Rama did it, it must be right!*'

My Lord, *amicus-curiae*, and members of the jury! The prosecution now seeks a brief adjournment. We have not yet concluded our arguments. In our next hearing, which will be final and brief, the prosecution will frame clear charges against the defendant. I beg for the court's patience and time.



As I rise today before the court to deliver the prosecution's closing statement, I confess a grave and mortal trepidation has suddenly taken hold of me.

I stand here today before the court as counsel for the prosecution—quite firm, on the one hand, in my resolve to do my job thoroughly: the job of arraigning the defendant, Sri Rama, for the injustice done by Him unto my client, Mother Sita.

On the other hand, when I realize who it is I am about to arraign and prosecute, and whom I am about to gravely charge, I cannot help shudder a little in holy fear. After all, who am I, a mere worm of a mortal, to dare arraign the Almighty who chose to live amidst us in the human garb of Rama?

Sir, my sense of fear, however, lasts less than a fleeting moment. It dissipates as quickly as I realise who it is that I am representing. I am appearing for my client, Mother Sita, who is but a human avatar too of the Consort of the Almighty. She is a deity no less endearing and venerable to all of us, and dearer still, above all, to Almighty Himself.

My fear gets completely extinguished when, further, I take a close look at the vast and magnificent body of evidence that is at hand right here before me, and I absorb its nature and purpose too. Sir, you should know I'm talking here about the truth of the *Srimad Valmiki Ramayana*. 'Know the truth', is an old saying, 'for the truth shall set you free'. It is on behalf of that truth too, besides 'Mother Sita' herself, that I stand before you today to make my case and petition for the justice that my client so rightly deserves.



Let me briefly talk to you about the evidence.

The *Ramayana* is a faithful record of the lives of Lord Rama and Mother Sita as divine incarnations. It recounts how they took birth on earth and acted out their respective roles as mere human beings in a drama they co-scripted, co-directed, co-produced, and co-enacted. (We may say Valmiki was the 'camera man', a divinely gifted one no doubt, but still a cameraman only.) And why did they do it? It was for the purpose of instructing mankind on 'Dharma': that ideal which in man's conception constitutes all that is said to be noble in human conduct.

Having said that much, sir, I offer this thought to your lordships for careful consideration: Since both Rama and Sita were play actors, they went about setting both 'positive' and 'negative' examples of '*dhArmic*' human conduct in the *Ramayana*. They sought to impress upon man not only what is 'To be' but also what is 'Not to be' (to borrow a useful expression from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). In other words, through the various scenes in which they played out the role demanded of them, Rama and Sita each portrayed not only righteous conduct but not-so-righteous conduct as well. In episodes like the '*Rama-Bharatha samvAda*' and the '*Vibheeshana-saranagathi*', for example, Sri Rama exhibited many lofty standards and ideals of 'dharma'. Likewise in scenes like the '*Sundara-kAnda*', Sita showed us what is true and high 'dharma'. But in a scene like the '*agni-pariksha*', although there might be something to say about the righteousness of Sri Rama's conduct in it, the real scene-stealer is Mother Sita and she alone! It is entirely her show, indeed, since the real and substantive lessons of highest 'dharma' are there to be learnt from 'Mother's' role and not from that of Sri Rama.

In trying to unduly project and magnify Rama's image in that scene, the Hon'ble defense counsel has wrongfully sought to steal and appropriate for his client the thunder that rightfully belongs to Mother Sita.



Milord, Hon'ble members of the jury, if we all properly understood and accepted my submissions above, then, I say we will hardly find it difficult to face the fact that in the Ramayana, it is not from Sri Rama's conduct alone that one may draw lessons on 'dharma'. There is plenty more available in the evidence—far more, in fact, than some people (like the Hon'ble defense counsel and his 'traditionalist' commentators, for instance) are normally accustomed to acknowledging—there is a great deal more indeed to learn from Sita's deeds too.

Sir, I now further go on to state that there is nothing in the script of the Ramayana to suggest that Sita, in her deeds, should never be held to appear more righteous or more '*dhArmic*' than Rama. If the script shows Sita completely overshadowing her illustrious mate, and if, in a few scenes of their '*avatAric*' life together on earth, and particularly in the '*agni-pariksha*' scene, we see Sita's conduct exemplifying a greater 'dharma' than Rama's own, I say that we must not let that fact in any way disturb our faith in the Almighty. We must not also seek to change or modify the given script or otherwise interpret it in ways which, however well-intentioned they might be, are still designed to merely fit into the smug framework of our ideological bias, or else, much more probably, only help calm down some wave of theological doubt which, alas, has arisen within us and threatens to rock and perturb the boat of our inner peace.

Our job, members of the jury, I say our job is not to read non-existent meaning, nor is it to otherwise unduly stretch existent meaning that is present in that body of evidence called 'Ramayana'. It is also not our job to go beyond the clearly scripted roles of its principal characters, Rama and Sita. It is not our job to imitate what the defense counsel has done in his elaborate arguments, i.e., seeking to divine the mind of the divine.

Milord, '*amicus-curiae*' and members of the jury, we thus hold this trial today of the divine couple, engaged fully as they were in their respective roles of 'plaintiff' and 'defendant' in the '*agni-pariksha*' episode. But this is a mock trial. By holding it let us not in any way fear we are mocking them. On the contrary, and however ironical it might seem, by summoning Sri Rama and Mother Sita to trial in this august court, and in seeking playfully to 'arraign' one and 'seek justice' for the other, we honour and celebrate, in a very special sort of way, two of the greatest artists ever to appear on the divine stage show.



Let us proceed with the case for prosecution.

The episode of the '*agni-pariksha*', and the events both immediately leading to and following from it in the '*uttara-kAnda*', is one where Sita in her role essayed a '*dhArmic*' value far greater than the one Rama demonstrated. It behooves one to glorify Sita in this episode and not Rama—as the defense counsel sought to do in his otherwise elegant defense.

The role cut out for the Almighty was to demonstrate a 'dharma' wholly secular in nature. It was '*sAmAnyā*'. No doubt, it represented the highest 'dharma', the highest duty a king—any king, in fact—owes his subjects and the state. And Rama did play that role to perfection, i.e., the role of a king who pursues a pitiless code of 'dharma' for the sake of his people, regardless of everything.

The role Almighty's Consort had to play was, however, a far more complex and formidable one. She had to play the part of a noble and pitiful lady who is wronged, reviled, and utterly humiliated by her husband in full view of a watching world.

It was a very difficult scene to act indeed. The script involved pitting the two principal characters (i.e., the hero and heroine of the Ramayana), bitterly against each other. And in the process, Sita had a message to deliver too—the message of a ‘*dhArmic*’ value whose order was significantly loftier and grander than Rama’s own.

Sita’s ‘dharma’ was not secular or ‘*sAmAnyā*’. In contrast, it was profoundly spiritual in character. It was rather very special, very exceptional, and very extraordinary, it was ‘*visEsha*’.



In the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ scene of the ‘*yuddha-kANda*’ (to be precise, at **VI.119.6 —8**) there is a very significant line spoken by Sita to Rama. It is the line that clearly makes out the prince of Ayodhya to be a ‘*sAmAnyān*’ in the whole ‘*agni-pariksha*’ affair.

First, we see Rama fulminating against Sita saying: I did not fight this war for your sake, Sita, but to redeem my honour! My honour has been redeemed but not yours. The honour and grace of pristine womanhood that adorns a woman of purity has taken leave of you. I cannot bear now even the sight of you. As light might hurt a diseased eye, so does your sight appall me.

When Sita listens to the above words, it is interesting to see almost the very first thing she says in response:

‘How can you say these terrible, horrible things to me?! O how can you stoop to say these low things to me as if I were a common woman and you were a common husband?’

It is so remarkable to witness Sita, for a moment, forgetting all about her chastity, honour and dignity being questioned. Instead, all she is worried about, first of all in that moment, is that Rama, her dearest Rama, the shining paragon of all ‘dharma’, has suddenly fallen low, has stooped to the abysmal depths of a ‘*sAmAnyān*’—a common man, not an *Arya*, a noble! It is so very uncharacteristic of her great Rama; she can hardly believe her eyes and ears!

Given Sita’s own words above in the scene, there should be no doubt in our minds, therefore, as to what we must hence naturally make of Sri Rama’s conduct in this episode of the ‘*agni-pariksha*’. It was ‘*dhArmic*’, of course but it was ‘*dhArmic*’ in a narrow, secular, and limited sort of way. It was ‘*sAmAnyā*’!



Which brings us, Milord ‘*amicus curiae*’ and members of the jury, to the important task of the prosecution: the task of framing charges against the defendant.

I have before me a host of grounds on which the prosecution can easily and quite convincingly bring charges against the defendant. But, sir, I propose to ignore all but the very last one as being the most heinous charge:

- (1) We do not wish to press the charge that Sri Rama wrongfully doubted the purity of Mother Sita. We shall ignore it.
- (2) We do not wish to press the charge that Sri Rama used invectives of the vilest kind against a poor, defenseless lady of noble birth. We shall ignore it.

- (3) We do not wish to press the charge that Sri Rama heaped indignity upon indignity on Sita not once but on three separate occasions—once in the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’ and twice in the ‘*uttara-kAnda*’, as already described in my earlier submissions before the court.
- (4) Sir, but we *do wish* to press the charge that Sri Rama, much as Mother herself bitterly complained in the Ramayana, acted like a ‘*sAmAnyan*’, holding steadfast to the conduct and ‘*dharmA*’ that was, when you carefully examine and sift through the facts of the case, far more becoming of a common earthling than of a moral celestial!
- (5) That, sir, is the gravest of all charges that the prosecution brings today against the defendant.



In stark contrast to the rather pedestrian ‘*sAmAnyA*’-ness (if I may be allowed to coin such an unusual expression) of Sri Rama’s conduct, Milord members of the jury, I pray that you now pay close attention to what the prosecution presently wishes to present to you is the exceptional (‘*visEsha*’) quality and character of the ‘*dharmA*’ which Sita in her turn, demonstrated to us in the whole affair.

Our faith in God is never a given constant. It is always susceptible to the vagaries of life that all of us must weather out, whether we like it or not. When things are all going well with us in life, we generally find it easy to glow with goodness. When we have enough wealth, good health and happiness, we say, ‘God is good to me. He is happy with my devotion. I’m happy to be his bhakta.’

But what happens to our faith when the weather of life suddenly and rudely turns dark and stormy, as it sometimes does?

What happens to one’s faith when, say, one’s own relative suddenly contracts cancer and dies? Or a hurricane hits town and flattens out one’s home and everything inside it, rendering one totally homeless and bankrupt overnight?

What happens to our faith when such catastrophes hit us in life? Faith, the deepest of faith cultivated steadfastly over several years, even such faith suddenly crumbles within us in those moments. It is quite natural for us then to beat our breasts in despair and wail aloud over our condition, ‘The God that I worshipped all these years has forsaken me! For all the devotion I showed him, this is how he returns it to me! But, why? Why has God heaped such tragedy on me? Why has he deserted me? And now, why should I have faith anymore in a God, in this God, who has rejected and forsaken me?!’

That is exactly what all of us will most certainly say when the faith that we held dear in our hearts suddenly fails us miserably. We will not hesitate then to rebel against and revile the very same God whom earlier we venerated and worshipped.

Our faith we must realize is, after all, only a ‘fair-weather craft’.

How many of us, on the other hand, can in such moments of great and painful tragedy conduct ourselves like Sita did? In the ‘*agni-pariksha*’ episode, and in the ‘*uttara-kANda*’ thereafter, we saw she lost everything—her honour, her dignity, her womanhood, her husband, her place as queen in the palace at Ayodhya, everything! It was a tragedy of epic proportions—tragedy with a capital T— that visited her and which few humans we know can ever bear stoically.

And yet as we see in the Ramayana, did Sita’s faith in her Rama waver? Did she wail aloud and beat her breasts in despair like any ordinary (‘*sAmAnyA*’) woman or wife would have surely done under similar

circumstances? Rama banished her, heaped invectives and insults upon her, ejected her out of his palace and sight. And for all that she underwent, do we see her faith in Her Lord waver one bit?

No. Never. Not an inch!

Instead, recall what the Mother, the great and gracious lady, did say in the final moments of the '*uttara-kAnda*':

'Take back my message to Ayodhya, O Lakshmana!

'First, my prostrations, my humble prostrations, at the feet of my mothers-in-law as well as at the feet of the King. Tell Him then on my behalf, O Lakshmana, this: "You know Dharma and practice it at all risks. In your heart you will admit my character is without a stain. I have never been false to you whether in mind or in body. Yet because your subjects suspect my purity, you throw me out. So be it. I submit."

'You honour and love your people, the same as you honour and love your brothers. If to preserve your good name among them, I must be sacrificed, I am content to be sacrificed. As you serve your subjects, so I serve you, not less but more. This body of mine is nothing. To me as to any woman, the husband is everything, he is kindred, he is preceptor, and he is God. My duty is to be of use to him and in his service to lay down my life, if need be.'



Let us all ask ourselves this then: When all else around us has been struck down and out by disaster and tragedy, when the very reasons and foundations of our faith in God lie in ruins around us, how many of us can keep our faith as steadily as Sita did and, finally, hold our head high as she did, and say aloud: '***So be it! I submit.***'



Milord '*amicus-curiae*' and members of the jury! Having shown you that there is a fit case against the defendant Sri Rama, and having also stated our charge against Him clearly, we have also finally shown the inherent merits of the case in favour of my client, Sita-*pirAtti*! We urge you all now to decide for yourself bearing in mind only this:

The Hon'ble counsel for defense, Sri Sadagopan Iyengar, ended his peroration with the now famous but clearly fatuous remark: '***If Rama did it, it must be correct!***' Tell me, Your Gracious Lordships, tell me honestly, does the above statement sound more convincing or more '*dhArm*ic' to you than this one made by my client Mother Sita? '**To me . . . he is God. My duty is to be of use to him and in his service to lay down my life, if need be. So be it. I submit!**'





CHAPTER 20

LORD RAMA: DEMOCRAT OR DESPOT?

The great Indian elections of 2004 are over. The din and dust has settled. The victors have been announced and the vanquished have been banished. In a few days from now the new rulers will take over the reins of power.

For ordinary folks like us, there is nothing more left to do now but quietly return to business as usual and carry on again with our humdrum lives. Actually, it's nice to welcome some semblance of normality back once again into daily living. It's been a tiresome experience indeed, following the Indian elections these past few weeks—reading editorials, browsing websites, watching TV talk shows, analysing opinion/exit polls and holding hot coffee-shop debates with friends in the evenings (and convincing none but our own armchairs!). I'm glad it's all finally over!

Last evening after the curtains came down on Vote 2004, I wanted to refresh myself a little. The week-long and feverish election watch had really drained my energies. So I went back, as I usually do under the circumstances, to an activity that for me has been an unfailing and immense source of relaxation viz. reading the 'Valmiki Ramayana'. And yet so badly afflicted was I with electoral hangover that no sooner had I turned a few pages of the Ayodhya '*kAnda*' than I stopped in the middle of a passage, utterly taken by surprise by a rather strange question that popped suddenly out of my head:

'Was Rama a democrat or a despot?'

It was an intriguing question indeed and I hence immediately proceeded to delve into the Valmiki Ramayana to try and cull out an answer for myself.

The history of mankind, if one looks at it from a certain angle, is really nothing but a series of periods of despotism and democracy succeeding each other. Sometimes democrats have ruled, at other times despots have ruled. Democratic despots and despotic democrats have ruled too. History remembers them today as either 'benevolent dictators' or democrats who ruled with their 'iron fist in velvet gloves'.

Now, what about Lord Rama of the Valmiki Ramayana? Was he a benevolent, democratic despot? Or was he a despotic democrat? The answer can be found, if at all, only in the pages of the Ramayana. Many are the scenes in the Valmiki Ramayana where we come across the will of the people directly clashing with the will of Lord Rama belying thereby the age-old dictum of '*vox populi, vox Dei*' (the voice of the people is the voice of God), which democracies all over the world today have come to regard as sacred cow.

The first instance of conflict between Rama and the popular will we can find in the Ayodhya '*kAnda*'. Rama leaves Ayodhya to go into exile in deference to his father, King Dasaratha's will. But the people of Ayodhya at large are very much against the idea. Rama, however, is firm in his resolve and takes leave of them and rides away in a chariot driven by the courtier Sumantra.

But the people of Ayodhya do not give up so easily. They follow Rama's chariot all the way out of Ayodhya and beyond the city's outskirts even. They keep trailing Sumantra's chariot, and entreating Rama not to leave the kingdom. We see that they simply would not let their prince go.

So persistent thus, was the general populace of Ayodhya that the Ramayana records that they kept following Rama's chariot in a long procession the whole day until dusk finally fell. There were several Brahmanas even of great sanctity following him obstinately. They went as far as the River Tamasa, where Rama and Sumantra crossed over to the other bank and ostensibly set up camp. The people watched Rama from a distance, on the other side, as he pretended to retire for the night.

After a while the people, tired after the long journey of the day, lay down and went to sleep on the other bank of the river. As they were asleep, Rama said to Sumantra, 'Now you had better quietly take this chariot and drive northward as if you were trying to return to Ayodhya. And when the people are off guard as it were, they come back from that side by another way. I'll come and join you and then we can steal away in night without them knowing anything.'

Sumantra did as he was told and that was exactly how Rama, by stealth and ruse, threw the people of Ayodhya off his trail—the people whom it was truly difficult to shake off since, in their loyalty and adoration, they were determined to follow him until he yielded to their request to return to their kingdom.



The second instance in the Valmiki Ramayana in which Rama chose to go against the express wishes of the larger public is again later in the Ayodhya '*kAnda*'. This time it is when the whole population of Ayodhya goes along with Bharatha to the forest abode of Chitrakoota where Rama has set up camp. The people meet Rama there and along with Bharatha entreat him to return to the throne at Ayodhya and take up his duty as king now that the old king Dasaratha is dead.

Bharata tells Rama, 'How can I take up the burden of governance when you are here in exile? What will the people say? I have brought everyone and everything from the capital. I have brought here all the women of the land; I have brought all the gurus; Vasishta is here; I have brought all the "*samagri*-s" necessary for your anointment as king; the army is here; ministers are here; musicians are here. It is my intention, and the intention of all assembled here now, that you must be crowned! Let us proceed, O Rama!' (II.106.22 —34).

rakshitUm sumahadrAjya-aham-ekastu nOth-sahE I
powra-jAnapadAms-chApi rakthAn ranjayitum tathA II
tvAmEva hi pratikshante parjanyamiva karshakAh: I

(II.112.12)

'Brother, I cannot go and govern Ayodhya! Who will obey me? All the people say, "We want Rama, we want Rama!" What can I do? I cannot govern. I have no capacity. What shall I do?' laments Bharatha to Rama. 'As in a dry season when the rain is late, the peasants lift up their hands and ask Indra to shower rain upon them, so are all the people, our relations, friends, poor subjects, ministers, and all—they all want you and you alone to be king.'

Despite all the entreaties and lamentations of the people of Ayodhya that day, Rama remained firm in his resolve not to return to Ayodhya. Once again, the will of the people was defeated by the will of God.



The third instance in the Valmiki Ramayana appears in the ‘yuddha-kAnda’ where we see that Rama’s action directly conflicted with democratic norms such as ‘rule by majority’, ‘collective responsibility’, and ‘governance by consensus’.

The scene in the ‘yuddha-kAnda’ is from the eighteenth ‘sarga’. Visbheeshana has come to Rama seeking asylum and protection. He surrenders to Rama. Rama then orders Vibheeshana to wait and immediately thereafter convenes a Council of War. The Council of War includes Sugriva, Jambavan, Angada, Hanuman, and all other important generals and chieftains in Rama’s camp. Rama then puts forth the case of Visbheeshana’s asylum to the council members and asks for their advice.

The council, with the notable exception of Hanuman, unanimously advises against accepting Vibheeshana into their camp. The chief objection is put forth by Sugriva himself:

Idrisam vyasanam prAptam brataram yah parityajEth I
kO nAma sa bhavEthasya yamEsha na parityajEth II
(VI.18.5—6)

‘A brother who deserts his brother’s side in the midst of such calamity and crisis, as Vibheeshana has done—who may hope to find faith in him? Whom indeed will he not traitorously forsake?’

The Council of War thus gave its unequivocal verdict. It was the general consensus. In having convened the council to decide on the matter, Rama did act in the highest traditions of democratic conduct. But what was the outcome? Did he abide by the decision of the council?

Despite the council’s verdict, Rama took exactly the opposite course of action. He decided to grant asylum to Vibheeshana based on the ‘minority’ advice given by Hanuman who said, ‘O Rama, Vibheeshana has seen how able you are and how effectively you helped Sugriva get rid of his evil brother, Vali. Vibheeshana too similarly desires to be king of Lanka and knows he can do it with your help. It is a natural ambition of the younger brother to overthrow an evil elder brother. This is why he has come here to you. I think it is therefore advisable to have him on our side in this war.’

That was Hanuman’s minority and dissenting view which Rama adopted and thereby ignored completely, the majority view of the Council of War. This is another instance in the Ramayana where we learn an important lesson: God may choose to observe democratic norms and niceties but may not always feel obliged to adhere wholly to them. In other words, God does not always ‘walk the talk’.



The only instance in the Valmiki Ramayana where we do see Rama bowing fully to the dictates of democratic will, when he did bow to the so-called ‘will of the people’, was, alas, the time when it also had the most disastrous outcome. That scene is in the ‘uttara-kAndam’, the seventh and final book of the Ramayana.

After the Lanka War, Rama returned to rule Ayodhya. He lived happily with Sita for many years. But one day, Rama’s state intelligence agency came to him and faithfully reported that the common people of Ayodhya were beginning to say downright slanderous things about his queen:

yathA hi kurutE rAjA prajA tamanuvartatE II
(VII.43.19)

Evam bahuvidhA vAchO vadanti puravAsinah: I
nagarEshu cha sarvEshu rAjan-janapadEshu cha II
(VII.43.20)

‘Whether you go into the streets of the city or walk into the rural parts, the people everywhere are saying slanderous things about Queen Sita and you, Your Majesty,’ said the agents.

‘The common people’s tongues are wagging—they say, “What sort of happiness can our King Rama be consorting with that woman who has lived for a time in Ravana’s house? How can he enjoy his intimacy with her? How does our king not shrink away from such a woman who has been taken to Lanka by a rakshasa?”’

Valmiki further adds a cruel twist to the tale here by sticking the knife up and turning it viciously. The people on the streets, he writes, were also wondering aloud:

asmAkamapi dArEshu sahaneyam bhavishyati I (VII.43.18)

‘Tomorrow or the day after, when our own women in the household misbehave, we must also much like our king put up with it, mustn’t we?’

In this scene of the ‘*uttara-kAnda*’, we hear the real voice of the common man of Ayodhya—not for a moment hesitating to stoop to cast a heinous, disgraceful slur on the fair name of Queen Sita! Sita! The same lady who everyone knew had come through pure and unsullied from the test of the agni-pravEsa! ‘*Vox Populi*’ had spoken and spoken loudly and most cruelly.

This was the moment when Rama, deciding to bow to the will of the people, and in the larger interest of the state of Ayodhya, chose to carry out the most tragic, the most painful act of his life—he banished the beautiful, pure, and innocent Sita from Ayodhya, forever to the forests.

In this one instance in the Ramayana, we see how the Almighty will of God chose to let the petty will of common humanity prevail.



Having examined all the above instances from the Ramayana, what are we to make of Rama’s character? Was he by temperament and outlook a democratic (benevolent) despot or a despotic democrat (with velvet-gloved iron fists)? It is a very baffling question indeed. In the first two instances in the Ayodhya ‘*kAnda*’, when it would have really behooved Rama to act in accordance with the will of the people, i.e., in a democratic way, we see that he chose to act like a self-willed despot and went against their wishes. In the other two incidents, however, where none could have faulted Rama if he had acted indeed like a dictatorial despot, he however went on to act in the true spirit of a democrat. In the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’, Rama was commander-in-chief waging a great war. There is no place and no need whatsoever for democratic niceties in war and yet Rama chose to observe the courtesy of democracy in the Vibheeshana episode. And again, in the ‘*uttara-kAnda*’, Rama would have indeed been within his rights to have acted like a stubborn despot unmindful of what people said about the character of Queen Sita. ‘As far as I am concerned’, he could have easily said, ‘she has been long ago acquitted and vindicated

by the verdict of the “*agni-pravEsam*”. To hell with the people’s stance on this matter.’ No one could have faulted Rama—legalistically speaking—if he had taken a stand such as this in the true mould of a despotic ruler. And yet Rama chose to act the other way—in the highest style of a true democrat.

So, the question remains to perplex us: *Was Rama a despot or a democrat?*

What can I say except this: It is better that we leave the question un-answered. He who claims to know the answer can only do so if he also can claim to know the will of God, the designs and workings of the divine mind. And who in the world can ever dare make such a claim? None indeed, not the greatest of dictators, nor the greatest of democrats of all the three worlds!





CHAPTER 21

MUSINGS ON THE RAMAYANA IN THE TIME OF *RAMADAAN*

Last evening a good friend and neighbour dropped in for after-‘*iftaar*’ tea and snacks with me. Since it is the holy month of Ramadan here in Kuwait, when devout Muslims observe day-long ritual fasting, all places of business shut down after 2 or 3 PM. Non-Muslim officegoers like my friend and I hence have much of the afternoons in which to do as we please. My good neighbour, who otherwise leads a pretty hectic life as a corporate executive, obviously found the opportunity to spend what he likes to call ‘quality time’ with me. He was merely flattering me, of course, but he did seem really happy to saunter into my house for a leisurely chat.

When my neighbour walked in, I was engrossed in *The Lectures on the Ramayana* by Rt. Hon’ble Srinivasa Sastri. This is one book I have never tired of reading and re-reading all my life and out here in the Gulf kingdom of Kuwait, this book has kept me good, valuable company during many Ramadan afternoons.

I was in the middle of a gripping passage of Valmiki’s ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’ when, quite by amazing coincidence, my friend walked in, sat down beside me on the sofa, and opened the conversation with the latest news from neighbouring Iraq. Fifteen American soldiers had been killed when the helicopter they’d been travelling in had been downed by guerrilla elements in Baghdad.

For over six months now in Kuwait, we have all been following the ‘low intensity warfare’ still raging in Iraq, but this latest event is a real step-up in hostilities between the Iraqi people and the occupying American forces there.

My friend took out the day’s local newspaper he’d brought with him and read out aloud a news item to me:

FORT CARSON, Colo., Nov. 3—Sgt. Ernest Bucklew was a 5-foot-3-inch coal miner’s son who got laid off from a vitamin factory, then joined the Army. For a time, he loved it. On Sunday, Sergeant Bucklew was on his way home from Iraq after a death in the family. Then, in a flash, he was gone, too.

Sergeant Bucklew was one of the 16 soldiers killed when a missile tore a troop transport helicopter out of the sky. He was 33 years old, a father of two, and a supply clerk for the Third Armored Cavalry based here and headed home for the funeral of his mother, who died suddenly on Friday. The news was almost too much to bear for a family already heartbroken and for a base that seems to be paying a steep price for the occupation in Iraq. Though not a single soldier from Fort Carson was killed during the invasion of Iraq, more than 20 have died since President Bush declared an end to major combat hostilities on May 1. Four Fort Carson soldiers were killed in Sunday’s helicopter crash alone.



‘How sad, how sad!’ bemoaned my friend. ‘Imagine a young soldier leaving the battle-front to attend his mother’s funeral, little knowing he was following her in death!’

It was a tragic story, no doubt, and I wasn't surprised that my friend, the good soul he is, was rather moved by it. War is indeed a terrible human drama and Death sometimes makes its appearance on stage in the cruellest costumes.



After a few silent moments of reflection upon this latest piece of grim news from Baghdad, my friend perceived the book in my hands. He turned to me and exclaimed, 'Oh, I can see you're reading the Ramayana! The "*yuddha-kAnda*"! How appropriate for the times we live in!'

'Yes, sir', I replied, 'the Ramayana is good company to keep in the desultory hours of Ramadan afternoons.' And by way of returning the compliment he'd paid me earlier, I courteously added, 'The Ramayana and your good self, sir, in that order, more or less, I would say.'

'Thank you, my friend', said my neighbour rather pleased that I should speak of the Ramayana and him in the same breath. 'But tell me', he continued making himself comfortable on my sofa, 'from the standpoint of our great Ramayana, what should we make of all that's happening in Iraq today?'

All this guerrilla war, death of so many young soldiers, innocent civilians, UN workers, Red Cross workers. All this bloodshed, mayhem, and tragedy, day after day, across the Kuwaiti border. How unfortunate.'

My friend's question immediately triggered a chain of sombre thoughts in both of us and we found ourselves descending together into a rather pensive mood. And soon enough, it became the main subject of our rambling but good neighbourly chat the rest of that cool, breezy evening.

Here is a gist of our joint musings on the Ramayana inspired by one quiet afternoon in Kuwait during the Muslim month of holy Ramadan circa 2003.



** The Ramayana is not a work of religious scripture alone. It can serve as a very useful manual of military ethics and political strategy too. The story of Rama, the warrior prince, is primarily a story about the military class—viz. the '*kshatriyas*' of ancient times. Rama was often called '*raNa-veera*', '*raghuveera*', '*raNa-pungava*', '*raNa-priya*'. These names all have a military ring chiefly meant to attest to Rama's military prowess, his love of martial life and the honourable traditions of the battlefield. Even setting aside all purely religious or theological themes abounding in it, the Ramayana would be a rich source of military wisdom and political insight for a military general or strategist of even the modern times.

** The '*yuddha-kAnda*' of Valmiki's Ramayana carries a simple but invaluable lesson for military victors:

'Once the battle has been won, do not delay, on any account, your withdrawal from the field.'

No sooner had the battle of Lanka ended than Rama de-mobilized his forces and pulled out completely from the scene. He did not lose a single moment. If Rama had wanted otherwise, he could indeed easily have annexed Lanka to the IkshvAku kingdom. Ayodhya's hegemony could easily have been extended to Lanka if only Rama had chosen to appoint Vibheeshana as mere regent rather than anoint him as

emperor of Lanka. ‘Ram-rAjya’—or ‘*Pax Ramana*’, we might say—could then have been extended across virtually the whole of India, from Kosala to Lanka.

** Rama’s mission in Lanka never expressly strayed beyond the one and sole principal one: To rescue Sita. Other goals such as (i) the ‘disarmament of the evil regime’ of Ravana, or (ii) ‘effecting a regime change’ by replacing Ravana with Vibheeshana, or (iii) ‘delivering the people of Lanka from the clutches of evil and into an era of peace and prosperity’, etc., were all incidental to him and never part of Rama’s main agenda.

Rama thus showed us how military means can secure only military ends, and never political goals.

A confusion of one with the other always ends in disaster (such as the one we see today in Iraq).

** We see Rama truly excelling as a military general in the diligent and uncompromising way he went about gathering incontrovertible military intelligence before waging actual war. He did not rush into a military offensive based on intelligence that probably could be even least suspected of being poor, inaccurate, or less than 100% reliable. (Contrast this with the quality of intelligence on Iraq and Saddam Hussain that we now learn the CIA had been feeding to the president of the USA just prior to the war.)

The first report (first intelligence report [FIR]) Rama got about the abduction of Sita by Ravana was from the dying statement of the old bird, Jatayu. The statement made by a dying person is absolute truth even in a modern court of law. The identity of Ravana as the guilty villain was thus proved beyond a shadow of doubt or question on the strength of Jatayu’s statement alone. No one would have faulted Rama if he had immediately decided, then and there, to march upon Lanka and launch a pre-emptive strike against Ravana—say, a ‘*brahma-astra*’ strike that might have quickly ‘decapitated’ Lanka and also have had the desired effect of ‘shock and awe’ upon the whole watching world. No one could have blamed Rama for an unwarranted and excessively aggressive attack. (The poet Valmiki might perhaps have even penned a few more excellent verses in the Ramayana hailing Rama’s valour—his ‘*parAkramam*’ or ‘*raNa-veeryam*’—in unleashing such a blazing blitzkrieg! We might add here also that, purely in terms of moral outrageousness, the abduction of Sita and the 9/11 incident of New York 2001 are close equivalents and hence, under proper circumstances, would certainly both deserve a smashing blow.) And such an attack would not have been impossible to accomplish too for Rama who had pulled off a similar feat (in the ‘*arAnyakAnda*’) against Khara, the rakshasa-chieftain of DandakAranya, and fourteen thousands of his combatants!

Tempting as we imagine it might have been thus for Rama to attack Ravana immediately, we see how self-restrained and careful he was in military calculations. The process by which (in the ‘*kishkida-kAnda*’), Rama was able to build a ‘coalition of the willing’ against Ravana, was infuriatingly slow and often frustratingly painstaking. The alliance with Sugriva, so crucial for military success, was not fashioned in a day; it took its own grindingly sweet time to form but then Rama was never impatient. In the meanwhile, we see how Rama gathered more and more valuable intelligence required for the quick and clean military success that was to follow. Much information about Ravana and Lanka was gathered from all possible intelligence sources—from the bears and monkeys of Kishkinda, from the lay of rivers and streams like the Godavari, from Vali before he had died, from Sugriva, from other agents like Angada and Jambavan—Rama spared no effort in obtaining even the minutest details about the land and landscape of Lanka.

Even after gathering so much intelligence, we see that the top-notch military general in Rama remained dissatisfied. The information Sugriva and others had furnished him was no doubt invaluable but it was still less than 100% confirmation. Rama hesitated to attack. It was only after Hanuman had been dispatched

to conduct secret reconnaissance missions in the South, including Lanka, and had returned with 100% confirmation that Sita was alive and that ground realities inside Lanka were ripe for attack, that Rama finally made up his mind about the timing of declaring war.

All this shows what a careful and calculating military strategist Rama was—he was loath to be rushing and blundering into a massive military engagement without having first examined every little detail of every possible aspect of it and being fully satisfied about it all.

(If President Bush had been a student of the Ramayana, he might have profited greatly from studying the character of its hero! And if he had also learnt any lessons from the effort, who knows, he might even have spotted the poor quality of intelligence his national security and other advisers on Iraq were feeding him!)

** After the war had been won, Rama was wise enough to leave Lanka to the '*rAkshAsa*-s'. In the name of some grand, highfalutin purpose—such as 'nation building' or 'bringing freedom and civilization to a nation that had been terrorized by a tyrant' such as Ravana, for example—Rama did not try and seek to impose benevolent '*rAm-rAjya*' on the native subjects of a '*rAkshasa*' kingdom. Each to his own ways and destiny, was Rama's principle in the politics of nationhood. There was great wisdom in what Rama did because he showed us clearly that while military generals can make war, they can never make nations.

** Rama's foresight and grasp of politics also were astute. Knowing fully well that the political repercussions of military invasion are usually very messy, he astutely chose to settle questions of statecraft first before embarking on a military campaign. (Not the other way around as we see is happening now in Iraq.) Rama made sure to first install Vibheeshana as the successor to Ravana even before the latter was ousted from power and even long before the single shot was fired in the decisive battle for Lanka.

By symbolically crowning Vibheeshana then as emperor-in-waiting of Lanka, Rama took the politically sagacious and brilliantly conceived step of pre-empting any vacuum or struggle developing in the power-corridors of Lanka in the wake of Ravana's elimination. All of Lanka knew exactly who would be taking over the reins of power once their present ruler was gone. It became settled fact and people accepted it as '*fait accompli*'. We must not forget here that regional states such as those belonging to Sugriva and others too might have secretly eyed Lankan territory, if they had wanted to, as easy picking in the spoils of war. They would have seen it as rightful recompense due to them for all the trouble they went to for the sake of Rama in the war. But Rama's action in putting Vibheeshana firmly in the saddle of power, even before the war bugles began to blow, nipped all such possible manipulations and calculations in the bud. What a master Rama was in the delicate art of political and 'regime change' management!

** All in all, we can say that the Ramayana and the story of Rama is a valuable document of military history too, besides being a work of scripture and religious philosophy. It is a wonderful treatise on martial theory, on the conduct of military campaigns, the strategy of military engagements, on how to plan and how to execute an invasion, and finally, on how to create the right political circumstances that lead to and may follow a major war of invasion.



Who amongst us can dare say that our ancient scriptures like the ‘*itihasA*-s’ or ‘*purANa*-s’ are irrelevant to our present times? Happy *Ramadaan*, happy Ramayana reading!





CHAPTER 22

LEFT FOOT AND RIGHT FOOT

A question on the Ramayana:

In the beginning of Sargam 4 of 'Sundara Kaandam' (canto 5 of the Valmiki Ramayana), it is said that Anjaneya set his left foot first when he entered Lanka. The first part of this sarga says that he entered the city not through the gate because as per Shastras the one who enters the enemy's place to win him over must not go through the city gate. It then says that Anjaneya set his left foot first, desiring victory over the Rakshasaas.

In practice we think it is good to set the right foot first whenever we make a beginning or for beneficial results in what we do. What then is the rationale behind this practice? Why did Maaruthi set his left foot first which is specifically mentioned in the Sargam? Are there any other instances in Ramayana or Mahabharatha about this setting of foot? I request the bhagavathas to shed some light on this.

My answer: Very interesting question indeed! The practice of setting the right foot forward first while embarking upon a venture is an age-old custom (some might call it superstition even?) in India. In English there is an idiomatic expression that is quite common — 'putting one's best foot forward'. The expression denotes a strong sense of purpose. One puts one's best foot forward when setting out to accomplish something specific. When you want to impress somebody, you put your best foot forward too. When you go for a job interview, you want to put your best foot forward. When the prospective groom goes to see a bride for himself, he makes sure he puts his best foot forward.

So the Indian custom of setting forth with the 'right foot' is nothing unusual. (Perhaps it is the Indian custom from which the English derived their idiom of 'putting the best foot forward'.) And Valmiki in the Ramayana was only reflecting this custom while narrating how Hanuman stepped into Lanka on his mission of reconnaissance.

The question is why put the 'left foot' forward rather than the customary 'right foot forward'. In India, there is a general preference against the 'left'. The 'left' hand is considered impolite. You do not serve food with your left hand. You do not hand over things to elderly people with the left hand. The reason is that historically and by long custom, the use of the left hand is associated with lack of social grace. Once again, this customary prejudice against the 'left' can be found reflected even in the English language. We know, for example, that when we praise someone insincerely, we are said to be giving him/her a 'left-handed compliment'. Now, there is no such thing in the English language as a 'right-handed compliment', but there can be no mistaking false or sarcastic words of praise when it is handed down 'left-handed'. 'Left-handedness' somehow always carries unsavory connotations in the human psyche as clearly evidenced in languages as old as Sanskrit and as young as English.

In Indian custom, what goes for 'left-handedness' also goes for 'left-footed-ness'. When you set out to accomplish something with a sense of good purpose, you always set out with the 'right foot' or the 'best foot' forward. That is the custom. Just as there is no such thing as a 'right-handed compliment' in the English language, there is hardly anything called 'setting out with the left foot' in Sanskrit.

And yet as the questioner has pointed out, Valmiki writes that Hanuman stepped foot on Lanka with his left foot. The question is why? Did it mean that the purpose to accomplish which Hanuman set out for

Lanka did not deserve his ‘right foot’? Are we to assume that Hanuman set out for Lanka with less than a strong sense of purpose? No. We know that Hanuman went to Lanka at the express bidding of Lord Rama. It was an extremely crucial special assignment on which he was sent. Hanuman’s mission was to accomplish a reconnaissance of Lanka, to gather intelligence of the city’s defenses and military forces and to locate, if possible, the exact place of Sita’s incarceration. It was very important that Hanuman succeed in his mission and there can be no doubt that he undertook his mission with all earnestness at his command. In other words, there was nothing ‘left-handed’ about Hanuman’s sincerity of purpose.

So why did Hanuman choose to set forth his ‘left foot’ first on Lankan soil, and why did Valmiki choose to employ poetic emphasis to underscore the point?

We can only surmise that Valmiki chose to do so to indicate what Hanuman really thought of Ravana and his whole evil empire of Lanka. By setting foot on Lanka with his left foot, Hanuman was only making an emphatic but symbolic statement about what he really thought of Lanka—he was saying rather contemptuously that the whole of Ravana’s great and powerful empire deserved nothing better than Rama’s loyal servant, Hanuman’s ‘left-handed compliment’ delivered with the ‘left foot’!

In Indian homes, when a newlywed daughter-in-law for the first time sets foot into her husband’s home, she ceremoniously sets her right foot forward. That’s ‘setting the best foot forward’. The act symbolizes her respect for the sacred soil of her future home, the place where she will spend the rest of her lifetime, the place of her destiny, the place to which she will strive to bring light, hope, cheer, and prosperity. When Hanuman set forth his ‘left foot’ in Lanka, he was doing exactly the opposite of what Indian brides do. He was the harbinger of all the dark things, all the ill-tidings that were soon to befall Lanka.

Thus, the poet Valmiki in describing Hanuman’s act of setting his ‘left foot’ first on the accursed soil of Lanka, very beautifully describes to us how dark fate announced its arrival in that land of Ravana. It was Valmiki’s way of announcing the impending doom of Lanka—that it would soon be visited by death, destruction, bloodshed, and the wailing of widows across the land.





CHAPTER 23

THE FOURTH WIDOW OF AYODHYA

Author's Note: This short story was penned by me about 30 years ago. It was mainly inspired by a handful of "*shlokas*" from Valmiki *Ramaayana* and one very famous phrase from the classic work of the 12th Century AD Tamil poet Kamban whose *Ramaavataaram* holds a special place in the hearts of all Tamilians:

*"thol kandaar thole kandaar thodu kazhal kamalam anna
thaal kandaar thaale kandaar, thadakkai kandaarum ahthe
vaal konda kannaar yaare vadivinai mudiya kandaar
voozh konda samayathu annaanan vuruvu kandaarai otthar."*

[The above verse is poetic hyperbole for the beauteous form of both Rama and Lakshmana as they strode majestically through the wide streets of Mithilapuri.... thronged on both sides by the people of the city where Rama would win the hand of Sita by dismantling the Shiva Dhanus (Shiva's bow).

Ayodhya's excited damsels having heard so much about the brothers, all came running to get a glimpse of Rama, who would be their Princess Sita's groom. But the sight of the Prince of Ayodhya was bewitching. No one could set eyes on the full figure of handsome Rama because those who saw his "*thol*"... his broad shoulders... forgot to take their eyes off the. The eyes were riveted on those "*thol*", as they enjoyed their beauty alone...

There were a few others whose eyes fell on the feet, the "*thaal*" of Rama and they were wonder struck and mesmerised by the beauty of the tender feet alone....

Some others were transfixed upon the eyes of Rama...

A many more had their eyes riveted upon the long strong arms of Rama ("aajaanubahu")... They could not take their eyes of those majestic limbs!

All were left gaping in a trance at Rama... The physical beauty of the brothers made the maidens of Mithila nearly swoon... No one saw the full form of Rama or his brother Lakshmana... yet they all agreed the brothers were indeed of matchless handsomeness....

The whole scene seemed to evoke in one's mind comparisons with a Vedantic thinker who finds himself at a loss to describe his perception and understanding of the whole reality and the fulsome beauty of the Supreme Brahman which revealed itself only in parts and fleeting glimpses.

When I read passages from the "*Aaranya*" and "*Kishkindha*" Cantos of the *Ramayana*, it struck me that while in exile in the forests of Dandakaranya, and after Sita's abduction, Lakshmana might have deeply empathized with his brother sunk in moods of utter despondency even as he might perhaps have witnessed those same powerful, handsome and sinewy shoulders of Rama sagging and drooping in grief, pain and desolation.

Did Rama's sagging "*thol*" – the fallen shoulders --- reflect his grief over separation from Sita? Or was Rama grieving over something else?

The answer to Lakshmana's unasked question is what this short story seeks to explore in an imaginary setting in the forests of Dandakaranya.

Part-1

Lakshmana woke up with a startle.

He was surprised he'd been dozing off!

He'd thought he'd finally conquered sleep these many years now in the jungles. How wrong he was!

The small campfire he'd been sitting beside was dying away; its embers smouldered weakly in the darkness of the forest. Its warmth, too, had ceased. The fierce winter wind had chosen the very moment to whip in through the woods and sting him with its icy talons. He'd shivered and woken up instantly from a state of half-sleep made feverish with half-dreams.

Lakshmana, rubbed his tired eyes, gathered himself up and hastily fed pieces of tree-bark and twigs into the fire and revived its crackling dead soul. The flames, at first meek, soon sprang to life and blazed; the warmth spread again around the campsite that Rama and he'd set up the night before in a small forest-clearing on the banks of the River Godavari.

Lakshmana leaned back on his haunches, stared into the campfire and took up sentry-watch again.

He suddenly noticed that the forest was eerily quiet. It was the hour before dawn when it was proverbially the darkest --- especially during chilly "dhanUr- mAsam".

The sounds of the previous night had died away into the murky depths of the woods; but they'd not yet been replaced by the welcoming noises of daybreak. The trill of crickets, the baying of a lone wolf and the flapping wings of giant bat-colonies had all died down in the night. The sounds of sunrise --- the chirping of koyals, the roar of a wild buffalo or the trampling of elephant-herds at a watering hole deep in the jungle -- those kinds of sounds were all still a few hours away.

All that Lakshmana could hear was the gurgling waters of the Godavari as she flowed swiftly past a narrow gorge nearby.

Then he suddenly heard Rama stir a little in his sleep.

He looked at his brother, the Lord of Ayodhya, lying supine on a bed of rough and wild forest shrubs. Strangely, his brother looked to him every bit as regal as he did when Lakshmana'd seen him in the grand retiring quarters of the Ayodhya palace.

Lakshmana thought he saw his brother shiver a bit in the biting cold. Was Rama feeling cold? Was the campfire not warm enough for him?

Lakshmana wasn't sure; so, he reached across and pulled out the deer-skin from a rucksack and spread it softly over the Lord of Ayodhya to keep him warmer.

Lakshmana looked at the deerskin spread across the handsome outlines of Rama's body. The piece of animal-skin seemed to glow like solid gold in the campfire lights dancing in the darkness.

Lakshmana smiled at himself in a mood of bitter-sweet recollection. At least the pursuit of "mArichA" back in Chitrakoota was not entirely futile, he said to himself! It's at least yielding to you now Rama, he muttered under his freezing breath, it's at least yielding you some warmth in bed on a cold night out in the middle of the jungle!

Alas, Rama! (Lakshmana thought to himself wryly) but if you turned now to ask me of what comfort the wretched warmth of "mArichA's" hide in your bed is to you when the soft and scented "warmth" of your beloved Sita has left it if you ask me that cruel, heartless question my dear brother How can I ever answer that ... ever?

The flickering flames threw weird lights and macabre shadows all around the campsite; they danced strange and ghostly whirls around the surrounding trees and bushes. In a haze of flickers Lakshmana saw Rama's handsome face seemingly lost in deep sleep.

The face looked as noble as ever.... care never seemed to wear it away...tragedy never creased its brows it was the face of the Lord of Ayodhya.... as lustrous as ever.... in sleep even... in the middle of the night in a jungle where no sense of direction or bearing was certain!

Lakshmana wondered if his brother could really be resting so peacefully in the loving arms of Sleep: that fair Maiden who bestowed her Kiss only on the truly carefree of the world.

He pondered if the Lord of Ayodhya was truly asleep or was, perhaps, only pretending to silently persuade Lakshmana himself to relax and snatch some rest!

If you're pretending Rama, thought Lakshmana, you're wasting your time! If you think by watching you sleeping restfully, I too could be persuaded to do so, then you are mistaken. For how could I ever sleep again, Rama, after all that has happened to us?

How could one rest one's uneasy head on the soft, comforting breasts of Sleep when one's mind is infested with vicious ghosts and hideous apparitions?

Lakshmana remembered how his mind and body had both lost the ability to sleep all these years in the forest.

Until the times in Chitrakoota, he'd never WANTED to go to sleep because he'd so much enjoyed standing guard all night listening to the soft sounds of affectionate conversation between the royal couple as it wafted through the misty night to him down and across the distant hillock where their little cottage stood. Sita's soft voice and Rama's gentle responses had all sounded so much like a wonderful serenade in the woods; to Lakshmana's ears it'd had the cozy, chirpy ring of the busy, bustling Raghuvamsha-household that he'd known and grown up within in much happier times in a distant past. Lakshmana had silently enjoyed those tranquil and affectionate moments of reminiscence --- moments he'd never wanted to trade for a few measly hours of sleep his body demanded.

But now in DandakAranya, Lakshmana bitterly reminded himself, the reason he couldn't sleep was because.... he just COULD NOT sleep!

Lakshmana couldn't get to close his eyes for a moment even; for they seemed to burn the moment he closed them. The moment he lay down his head he seemed to instantly arouse and awaken, in some dark, inner cranny of his mind, the hideous ghost of his dead father in Ayodhya lying helplessly on a pyre, crying out aloud for Rama and Lakshmana to come and see him take leave to the other world ...then father would vanish only to be replaced with Sita, in the next moment, wailing out in the silence of the jungle, wailing out to be saved and then Jatayu suddenly appeared, too ... his body all bloody and tattered and then all three re-appeared another moment and chorused their screams and hurled taunts at him for his moment of "weakness" back in the Dandaka-thicket where he'd deserted his post and let Ravana easily and vengefully besmirch the honour of the "IkshvAku" family they'd all howled in chorus --- the ghosts of old Dasaratha and old Jatayu --- and screamed accusingly at him till he could bear it all no more ...he could sleep a wink no more...

Lakshmana realized he'd been mistaken into thinking that the creature needs of his body and mind --- like sleep, warm food, fine clothes and plain, simple laughter --- had all been entirely extinguished out of his life like so many bitter memories of a remote past in the city of Ayodhya. Every night, as he wrestled with sleep, he realized, again and again, that while memories could be wiped out from one's mind, if one wanted to, the ghosts of the past, however, could never be exorcised completely.

They always returned, the ghosts, to ruin one's sleep

The icy winds of "dhanUr-mAsa" continued to howl through the forest and wide across the misty expanse of the River Godavari too.

Lakshmana sat beside the fire and kept vigil over his brother as The Lord of Ayodhya rested through the night that wore itself away slowly to the outbreak of yet another painful day ... another dreadful day reminding them both of a sense of grave loss ...of utter failure.... of searing despair.... of separation from Lady Sita.

Part-2

From under the ragged cover of a quilt hewn from "marichA's" hide, Lord Rama watched, with half-shut eyes, his brother brood over a blazing campfire. He looked at Lakshmana's huddled body and suppressed a sharp pang of nameless pain.

Rama realized the young Prince of Ayodhya was unforgiving towards himself; he was inflicting on himself a punishment much harsher than any that Rama could've handed out to his brother for the fatal lapse of duty back in the Chitrakoota-woods where Sita had been abducted.

For many months now Rama had taken pains to explain that it wasn't all Lakshmana's fault that things had come to such a sorry pass. And yet, he knew, his brother would never accept any commiseration; nor would Lakshmana believe, or be consoled by, any circumstance that could be shown to have extenuated the stark fact that, in the final analysis, it'd been his very own dereliction of duty in those fateful moments in Chitrakoota; and after which, one tragedy after another had continued to befall the royal pair of IkshvAku scions. Rama saw his brother's spirit being consumed in a private hell of the latter's own making.

In a merciless world of silent self-flagellation, where one is one's own prosecutor, jury, judge and hangman as well, even the highest laws of the land could hardly grant special pardon or absolution from the severe sentence of guilt one passed on oneself. Rama peered closely again through half-closed eyes at his brother sitting by the campfire. The great big shoulders of Lakshmana, sagging abjectly about him, caught Rama's attention. How handsome they looked, Rama said to himself, even though they now seemed a little like two majestic boats floundering in a pool of muddy water: so weighed down did they seem carrying, as they did, the oppressive burden of Lakshmana's bitter and unending self-reproach.

And yet.... Rama remembered.... those were the same shapely shoulders the seductress Tataka had lusted for.... And the same diligent ones which'd, too, lovingly built, for him and his dearest Sita, a pretty cottage on the Chitrakoota hillock.... They were the same mighty shoulders that'd let loose from a single bow a barrage of arrows.... raining like thick swarms of deadly locusts on Khara's doomed troops.... which'd all fallen like harvested grain-stalks in a farmer's tilled fields and they were the same humble shoulders, too, that'd helped Rama in carrying out all of guru ViswAmitra's bidding in the forests many years ago....

Suddenly tears began to gush from Rama's half-closed eyes.... eyes which couldn't bear witnessing anymore those magnificent shoulders now slumped so desolately --- like those of an unyoked beast-of-burden collapsing pitifully in the stables at the end of another cruel working day --- simply unable to bear the crushing load of Lakshmana's guilt.... Rama closed his eyes tightly, gritted his teeth.... and bit back hot, abundant tears.... and pretended to sleep ever more soundly. The campfire burned brightly in the middle of the dark forest; the bitter cold of the "dhanur"-month enveloped everything;

the jungle was quieter than a graveyard; and the not-so-distant Godavari rushed through a forest-gorge, her waters whispering elegies for all the lost and unhappy souls of the forest

With eyes tightly closed, like sluiceways slamming down swiftly on a flashflood of sad, rushing tears, Lord Rama saw another vision of those robust shoulders of Lakshmana. This time the vision was from a past even more distant than Chitrakoota or the killing-fields where Khara had met his end with fourteen thousands of his kith and kin.... The vision was from the happy, carefree days of youth many, many years ago in good old Ayodhya....

In the vision both Rama and Lakshmana go back in time ... mere boys of 10 or 11 years of age. They are both laughing aloud and splashing in water.... It's a cold wintry morning again in a "dhanur"-month.... the sun has still not risen.... They are both swimming merrily.... in the swirling currents of the Sarayu! They splash into the icy waters thrash about gleefully.... and scream in boyish delight and abandon....

Then Rama challenges Lakshmana to race him the whole length of the Sarayu straight across to the other bank.... the lad accepts the taunt sportingly.... and then both begin swimming across the expanse of the cold, crystal-clear waters of the hissing Sarayu.... Both are strong, excellent swimmers and both want to win.... but half-way down the length Rama suddenly gives up the race, falls behind and lets Lakshmana race ahead.... Rama simply floats along slowly.... watching those graceful strokes of Lakshmana.... He watches those mighty shoulders paddle by.... pummeling through the waters like some mighty fish cutting through tides with sharp, glinting and awesome fins and gills.... He simply can't take his eyes off those splendid shoulders....

How much Rama had, indeed, loved to watch his brother swimming.... it was a sight for the gods! Those powerful shoulders swam, and they swam powerfully.... and once in water it was difficult to tell, even for Rama, if those shoulders were a piece of poetic sculpture or or some sculpted Spirit of Grace pirouetting through a sequence of choreographs on the boiling waters of the Sarayu! In a vision of a distant past in Ayodhya.... in a vision that arose before his mind one cold morning in the month of "dhanur, as he lay on the bare grass in a little clearing in the middle of the wild woods of Dandakaranya..... in such a rare vision Lord Rama remembered how much he'd loved the grand sight of his little brother swim.... and watch in mute admiration those magnificent young shoulders conquering the rebellious waters of the great river gliding past the Palace of Dasaratha, his beloved father....

Part-3

By strange, mysterious coincidence unknown to Rama, his brother Lakshmana, too, at the very instant was similarly reminiscing his boyhood years in their father's palace and those happy moments Rama and he'd spent swimming in the choppy Sarayu during bitterly cold "dhanur" months.

The "dhanur" month was when the common folk of Ayodhya rushed to the banks of the Sarayu much earlier than they usually did at other times of the year for their pre-dawn ritual bath. Then followed day-long rites, penances, "nOnbu-s" and fasts which the holy "sastrA-s" especially mandated be observed during the sacred month of "mArga-sIrsa".

The women-folk of AyOdhyA, young nubile maidens, mothers and grand-ladies, were especially the first ones to flock the river-banks (so they could finish their ablutions well before the men arrived there for their own "anUshTAnam-s") almost as soon as the last vestige of the previous night had

disappeared and just as soon as early birds were climbing out of their nesting places, chirping and cooing, to herald the birth of another fresh day.

The palace protocol of Ayodhya forbade young members of the royal family to be seen too freely or frequently in public congregations of the common weal. (The Queen Kausalya was known to endlessly worry about "evil eyes" and spells being cast on her handsome princelings! And Rama, who loved mixing with plebeians, Lakshmana remembered, never tired of arguing with her that the commoner of Ayodhya would pluck his eyes out first with his own hands before casting "evil eyes" on his beloved Rama!)

The only time protocol had been relaxed was for the "ritual-bath" during the month of "dhanur".

Rama and he, Lakshmana recalled, used to be thrilled with the month-long suspension of stuffy palace-protocol. It was the only time of the year which provided them with many outlets for fun and indulgence pre-teen boys like themselves craved! They'd both wake up a full hour-and-half earlier than even Ayodhya's womenfolk did in those cold "dhanur" months! Then they'd both rush forth with from the palace straight to the Sarayu banks, take in the sights and savour the joy, the beauty of "brahma-muhurtam" --- those rare, precious and serene moments before daybreak!

They'd wallowed and splashed about in the pure and bracing waters of the Sarayu all by themselves.... Enjoying to their hearts content the experience of being unshackled from the strict codes of regimen the great Raghuvamsha-palace otherwise imposed on princelings! By the time the first of milling crowds of commoners from the city of Ayodhya reached the bathing-sites by the riverside, the royal siblings already had had their fill of a ritual-bath. Some "ritual-bath", indeed! It'd been a bath, Lakshmana recalled with amusement, with so little "ritual" and so much more pure and simple fun... frolic...and unbounded boyish glee! But now, the Rama who lay before him, is he the same exuberant lad of those happy days?

Lakshmana was thinking... is he the same Rama? ...who now lay before him across the campsite... sprawled on the bare, cold grass in the wilderness of Dandakaranya.... shivering beneath a quilt made of a "rakshasa's" hide? Is it the same Crown Prince of Ayodhya who'd sported with him in the cool waters of the Sarayu in the carefree days of youth?

Alas, no.... not anymore... it was not the same Rama of yore! The Rama who now rested before him was a completely different person... Lakshmana thought. His brother was virtually unrecognizable, it was simply impossible to say he resembled the old Rama.

This Rama now lying before him was a "dharmic" giant of such proportions that left men's imaginations utterly boggled! The playful brother of his had somehow turned over the years into a many-splendored creature of magnificence! Rama's life, since the days spent swimming the Sarayu-rapids, had all been nothing but one long unceasing and awesome record of human rectitude and righteousness which seemed inhuman sometimes, and always godly ...

This Rama who lay before him in the middle of a jungle.... a Prince... who'd thrown away a kingdom, without a moment's hesitation, for the sake of a father's misplaced sense of honour! This Rama who lay shivering before him in the middle of a jungle... under a deer-skin rag.... had been able to look Kaikeyi, his stepmother, in the eye and forgive her wholeheartedly for the perfidy she'd heaped on him!!

This Rama, the first-born scion of the Ikshvaku-s, who pretended to be sleeping soundly... lying amongst the bushes like some savage of the jungle... this "savage" had firmly refused a Kingdom again when it was sought to be returned to him on a platter... refused on a matter of some high and "dharmic" principle again!!!

Lakshmana abruptly realized, with a mixed sense of wonder and absurdity, that after all the years, he'd yet to understand the essence of this man... of this brother... the Lord of Ayodhya... who once had been a bonny good Prince who liked nothing better than a "jala-kreeda" in the Sarayu in the days of old....

Who was this, Rama? What really was he? Lakshmana found himself asking. He'd heard some people secretly say Rama was a fool! A royal fool! A fool who held a mysterious abstraction called "dharma" to be dearer than the cold reality of self-interest! A pure, good-hearted creature of "krta-yuga" tragically trapped in the moral morass of the present "trEta-yuga"! A moral anachronism! A misfit in the royal house of the "IkshvAku-s", one who embraces scruples when he ought to be showing the ruthlessness of a master state-craftsman! A wimp! A lamb of a man that sought to hide the meekness of its will through what it believed was a roaring bleat of high-sounding morals!

Lakshmana had overheard all those muffled taunts being thrown behind his brother's back by many people --- subjects, common-folk, pandits... why, by Sage Jabali even, who'd hinted as much, and more, when he came accompanying Bharatha to parley with and persuade Rama to return to the kingdom.

Lakshmana had heard all those sneers... and sometimes caught himself sneakily wondering if they weren't right after all!

If Rama hadn't been all that they jeeringly said he indeed was... then perhaps the Raghuvamsha family could have escaped the tragedy and ignominy that'd befallen it, couldn't it? If only Rama had remained firm in his resolve to ascend the throne of Ayodhya.... everything would've been in its place, after all, wouldn't it! Sita would've now been gracing the Court of Ayodhya?

Instead, she was now a pathetic hostage held, perhaps, in some dank dungeon deep in some Lankan fortress. And he, Lakshmana, wouldn't be sitting here in the middle of a jungle on a cold "dhanur" morning... stoking smoke out of a belching campfire fueled by the damp twigs he'd foraged on the banks of the Godavari..... far away from home.... so far from the sweet waters of the blessed Sarayu?

Perhaps Rama was, indeed, a royal fool!

But then Lakshmana asked himself:

Why'd he felt so compelled to follow Rama, the fool, into exile?

Why'd dear Sita follow her husband if he was nothing but a fool?

Why'd the people of Ayodhya, *en masse*, pursued and begged him not to leave them?

Why'd Guha, the jungle-aborigine, opened his hearth and heart to him?

Why'd poor Bharatha beseeched, again and again, for his return to Ayodhya? And yet had left quite happily, almost empty-handed, with nothing but Rama's pair of sandals to serve as a surrogate presence?

Why'd Sage Jabali trembled like a thoroughly admonished school-boy when Rama cut short his clever-sounding but "a-sAstrA-ic" diatribe and, in return, had himself delivered a withering but sterling discourse on what true "dharma" was?

Why'd Sage AgastyA or Lady Anusuya showered him with their overwhelming love and kindness?

Why'd the venerable Sage Bharadwaja shown them so much solicitude?

Why'd the grand old lady of the forest, Sabari, why'd she waited so many long years just to have him visit her humble hut, and partake of her paltry hospitality, before she gave up the ghost?

Why'd a decrepit bird, Jatayu, chosen to give its life for him?

Why ?. Why indeed?

Why did all those people do all that they did ... for a moral anachronism of the '*trEta-yuga*' named Rama?

Lakshmana knew he simply had no answers to such questions! He continued staring at the inert figure of Rama as it lay in the darkness of the jungle --- a figure that never ceased to inspire awe in him... awe, attraction, fear, respect, devotion, humility, love.... all of them... a mix of feelings in him which he'd never been able to fully measure since they were all feelings that ran deep, strong and silent... like the placid waters of the River Godavari... as she swiftly meandered through the dense, green groves that ringed the campsite

Part-4

Rama heard the sound in the same instant as he saw Lakshmana pick it up himself.

The strange sound was a feeble, yet clear, guttural animal grunt. It came from about a furlong away and from a bank of wild bushes behind the spot Lakshmana was seated.

It lasted for barely a second. But it was long and loud enough for both Rama and Lakshmana to pick it up instantly!

In the jungle one's ability to listen to the faintest sounds of the wild often determined the difference between survival and death. The slightest of sounds --- a rustling of the bushes, the cracking of a twig, the snapping of a tree-branch or the barely audible grunt under an animal's breath --- these slightest sounds that one picked up in the moments before some stalking predator attacked, were verily those that protected man. It was not ability to hunt; or ability to wield weapons; or sheer physical strength that guaranteed man his safety in the wild jungle; instead, it was the ability to "listen" and listen sharply, the ability to "pick-up" instantly a whole "range of sounds" that filled the unique and savage reality of the forest. It was, indeed, that very special skill to "detect and understand jungle sounds" that ensured a man's survival... which usually meant either pre-empting the predator's attack or quickly retreating from it!

In a strange sort of way, Rama had often said to himself, in the jungle one learnt to be "worshipful" towards its many natural sounds in a very Vedic sort of way! After all it was these "sounds" that revealed to him the many "hidden truths" of the deep wilds; hence one always tried to be

ever ready, ever prepared or be ever "all keyed-up" to receive them – so that when the "sounds" did come, one welcomed them as an invaluable blessing of forewarning and protection!

Rama had felt this "worshipful" response was akin really to that of a Vedic student, who in order to "survive" another day to learn another "truth", remains ever reverential towards the "holy sounds of the ancient smriti-s"!

It also perhaps explained, Rama often thought to himself, why the "rshi-s", the "tapasvins" and other practitioners of pure Vedic-sound all felt naturally drawn to spending their lives amidst the elements surrounding the silent, inscrutable and great "aranyA-s"!!

Rama saw Lakshmana swivel on his haunches and, in the next instant, scoop up his bow and fit a shaft into it in one swift, fluid movement. The deadly weapon was drawn in a taut arch until the gut-string groaned in protest the severe tension exerted on it by Lakshmana's powerful arms pulling bow and

string wide apart. Lakshmana was down on one knee, in the classical pose of an expert marksman, pointing his weapon at an unseen target, his eyes keen and blazing, fixed in the direction from where he'd heard the faint and hostile sounds of a wild beast a moment ago. Lakshmana looked fierce and terrible! He looked, Rama thought in that instant, as aroused and as deadly as a magnificent king cobra, with its massive hood flaring menacingly, its hideous, hissing head raised and arched like a giant bow, its forbidding fangs bare, poised to sink its furious venom in one vicious stroke of rage uncontrolled.... He looked, indeed, like a ferocious serpent that'd just been deprived of a moment of coital tenderness by an unfriendly intruder!

For a brief second, his brother, Lakshmana, resembled some dark and archetypal spirit of death... macabre....

In the instant before Lakshmana released the missile from his bow Rama bellowed out to him, "Stop, Lakshmana, stop! Don't shoot!"

Lakshmana's fingers, which were about to uncurl around the feathered root of the shaft, froze instantly!

The bow quivered in his hands; the muscles of his shoulders back writhed in a paroxysm of pent-up power and high-tension. The power that'd just been summoned within his body to let fly, in the next instant, a speeding arrow along a blinding trajectory, straight and unerringly, to its target, --- that power had been, at the very last moment before its launch, throttled by a mere command from Rama!

"What're you saying, Rama!", Lakshmana hissed back, "There is a beast out there stalking us! I'll bring it down this instant!"

"I know, Lakshmana, it's a beast! But don't shoot, please! Stop!" cried Rama laying a restraining arm on his brother's shoulders. In a moment the blazing eyes of the archer dimmed a little; the muscles relaxed; the bow slackened.

"What do you mean, Rama? This beast out there could attack us any moment now!"

"Back off, Lakshmana, now! Don't shoot, please!" Rama commanded sternly. Lakshmana's great bow fell limply by his side. The menacing cobra folded up its hood and fangs and seemed to retire.

He stood up and faced Rama squarely. "What's the meaning of this, Rama?"

Rama smiled and spoke calmly, "Lakshmana, you've our father's instincts with the bow! A very keen one, indeed! But hold it! Rein it in, boy!"

Lakshmana looked at Rama quizzically. The Lord of Ayodhya smiled again and spoke softly to his brother.

"My dear Lakshmana, do you remember our father, Dasaratha, too, had the same ability? The same one you were just about to exercise now! Father, too, could shoot by sound as well as he did by sight! A mere sound in the distance was enough for him to send an arrow after it; he hit his targets unfailingly! I know you can do it too, my dear brother! It's a skill any warrior is proud of! But it's a skill that's already wrought many a tragedy in the House of the IkshvAku-s! Once is enough, Lakshmana! Once is often enough!"

Lakshmana remained puzzled by his brother's strange outburst.

Rama then turned on his heel and quickly strode away towards the direction from where the animal sounds had first emanated.

"Follow me now, Lakshmana," he said, "and you'll see what I'm talking about!"

They ran a few hundred yards into the wilderness until they came into the dense bank of bushes. After searching through the dense foliage for a few minutes Rama finally stopped and raised his arms as if to say, "*Sshh....quiet!*"

Lakshmana, who'd followed behind him, too, stopped in his tracks and asked, "What's the matter, Rama, it must be some wild beast?"

"Look, Lakshmana!", whispered Rama, "Look at the great danger you were about to slaughter.... with that blind arrow of yours! *Look at it! Here it is!*" Lakshmana peered from behind Rama's shoulders.

The sight he saw seemed to hit him with a force that momentarily took his breath away.

In a muddy burrow on the ground, amidst the bushes under a great log of forest timber, Rama and Lakshmana saw a mother, a wild she-boar, who'd just delivered half-a-dozen young ones! She was still in some sort of discomfort after what must have been a few painful hours of labour. Yet the suckling mother-boar seemed to look ecstatic; the just-born cute little-ones greedily cuddled her teats heavy with the warm and fresh milk of new promise, new life!

Rama and Lakshmana gazed for a long moment at the picture of mother and infant... and felt their heart-strings tug. And then the brothers quietly withdrew, leaving the she-boar to her moments of quiet eternity with the just-born ones.

Part-5

As they made their way slowly back to their campsite, Rama spoke softly, pensively, more to himself, it seemed, than to the thoroughly shaken Lakshmana.

"This is the holy month of "*dhanur*", my dear Lakshmana. This is the time when one waits for the early hours of pre-dawn, the "*brahma-mUhUrta*". It's the hour when the "*devatA-s*", the gods and manes themselves visit us in this world. They beseech us to observe the 'sAstra-ic' injunctions ---- the ritual-bath, the offering of oblations, the fasts, the offering of worship, other "*samskArA-s*"... It's the special moment of our lives....

"It's a special moment when the gods protect us unasked even, Lakshmana. They protect us from evil, the sins, our lapses and endless transgressions in life. They protect us from the "*karma-s*" of our lives and that of our forebears too... from all that is untoward or inauspicious...

"It's the hour that every man should look forward to in his life... for it's the hour when he can easily seek release, pardon or protection from powers much larger than human... more than godly... from a Power which is All-Compassion....

"If you think about it, Lakshmana, it's perhaps that great, Compassionate Power that rules the "*dhanur*" month which, without our seeking It even, has just saved us both from committing an act of heinous "*pApa-karmA*", the wages of which would've haunted us as surely as those that afflicted our father, Dasaratha, when, many ages ago, he did something exactly the same as what you were about to do: dealing death to innocent beings in the forests ...callously, irresponsibly... and unthinkingly....

"Think of the protection that you and I've just received and been blessed with, Lakshmana, and thank that All-Compassionate Power of the "*dhanur*" months. It has just granted us protection from a grim fate that befell our own father, a great warrior, who shot with skill, but alas, without wisdom and reaped the consequences, terrible consequences both for himself and his progeny of which you and I,

here and now, are part of... and all that we know our great family, our great lineage, suffers today... all that, too, is part.....

"Think of what's just happened, Lakshmana... and rejoice that in this holy moment in "dhanur" we have been spared of a deed.... which would've surely resulted in the same "karmA" our unfortunate and dear father fell victim to ... the same "karmA" repeating itself in our own lives as well ..."

Lakshmana heard Rama in stunned and absolute silence. He deeply understood what Rama was saying. Then he heard Rama say in a quiet voice: "Let's go forthwith to the River Godavari, my dear Lashkhmana, for it's the time for the "ritual-bath" of the "dhanur-month". It's time for the "*anushtAnam-s*" of thanksgiving to the "*dEvatA-s*!"

Lakshmana replied, "I suppose, it is indeed. Let's go". They both strode quickly towards the riverside.

Part-6

When the two scions of the Ayodhya dynasty reached the steep banks of the River Godavari a large herd of spotted deer was already at the watering sites. The sky had suddenly turned to a dull-bluish hue, the first faint sign of daybreak approaching. The air was fresh with the scent of neem and sandal groves rimming the hills rising above the gorge. Creepers, vines and exotic herbs were sprouting all around the spot where Rama and Lakshmana arrived. It was a scene of vibrant greenery blurred by wild floral splendor and by the silvery cascade of waters rolling down grey, glinting cliffs. Morning birds, the bees and butterflies, too, were all readying themselves to welcome the first rays of the great, fiery orb.

The spot Rama and Lakshmana arrived to perform their "dharnur-mAsa" oblations was also roughly the precise area where the River Godavari exited from the difficult upper terrain of the Deccan-ranges to begin her gradual descent into the broad plains on the eastern seaboard of the Ghats. She wound her way along an estuarine journey and finally entered the sea many hundreds of fertile miles away.

"How beautiful they look, Lakshmana, the deer!", exclaimed Rama as they stopped at the water-edge and watched the graceful creatures wading in the cool waters.

"Pity, they'll become aware of our presence any moment now and they'll all scamper away in a trice", said the Lord of Ayodhya a little wistfully.

Surely enough a doe perked up its pretty head and looked at them with large, frightened eyes. And then instantly the entire herd climbed out of the river and vanished amidst the muffled trampling of wet, slender and grace-filled hoofs. The forest was silent again... but for a busy colony of bees, up in the trees somewhere, humming away.

Rama felt a stab of pain plunge his heart: a numbing sense of nameless loss....

"This place brings back memories of boyhood days at the Sarayu, Lakshmana," he said in a voice Lakshmana thought trembled a little.

Lakshmana wasn't so sure if Rama was really speaking the truth about the memories of the Sarayu. More than the idyllic Godavari reminding Rama of the Sarayu, Lakshmana thought, it may well be the vanished herd of lovelyspotted deer which may have aroused in his brother's mind a flood of bitter-sweet memories, of a spouse lost... of beloved Sita more graceful and more lovely than even the forest does....

Lakshmana possessed an instinct that unerringly fathomed his dear brother's heart; and now he felt a part of the burden of grief inside Rama's heart overwhelm his own. And it seemed to crush him with its unbearable weight.

"I'm going into the water first, Rama," he said hurriedly as if wanting to change the subject of unpleasant memories and moods.

"Alright, brother, you go further upstream and finish washing. I'll bathe here. But be quick about it. We must finish the ritual-bath before sunrise," said Rama.

Lakshmana scurried away up-stream and retired to his ablutions on the river- side.

He sank into the cool waters of the Godavari and gasped. The clear stream enveloped his body in a tight embrace of maternal intensity. He felt the strong current wash his hair, his chest, his strong legs.... he felt a thrill of sanctity run through his body.... a sensation that seemed to instantly lift his dispirited soul, like a wave, a leaf, a cloud... and point it towards the hope of a new day... to a shining light at the end of a tunnel of despair.... a light as radiant, cheerful and welcome as the rays of ascendant sun....

After the ritual-bath, Lakshmana offered worship to the Sun-God and to the Spirit of Gayatri and felt immediately lightened in spirit! It was as if the mysterious Power of Compassion, -- that Spirit Rama had said presided over the holy month of "dhanur" -- that spirit had entered the river waters and washed away the grim, guilt-worn cares of his soul as completely as flashfloods of the Godavari, in a fierce monsoon, were known to deluge bunds without a trace! Lakshmana felt a strange cheerfulness bubbling up rapidly in his heart! It was the cheer of good hope of promise and faith within... that whatever failure and pain filled his life... they'd all soon vanish... it was all going to be over somehow and soon, too!

He rushed towards Rama, his beloved brother, to share with him his mood of new-found optimism!

Part-7

Lakshmana ran downstream along a narrow ledge on the stony banks of the River Godavari to meet Rama and share with him a new-found mood of optimism. There was the same cheerful spring in his steps as there was in his heart.

The stroke of dawn drew very nearby. The sky was cloudless and seemed to have descended down to earth covering the forest, as it were, with a blue blanket. Mist dissipated over the river-waters and the Godavari... she looked blue too! The mountain-cliffs with their granite-tips, too, looked blue! The grass, the foliage, the birds and the moths ---- everything had taken on a coat of soft blue.... the colour of dawn... the colour of hope.... the colour of Ayodhya's "*neela-mEga-shyAmalan*" himself... the colour of what Lakshmana believed was.... Good omen!

He felt, in that moment, the tide of fate turning in favour of the IshvAku family! The misery of the past few years was now on the wane! Things were only going to get better from thereon. Sita would be rescued; Rama and he would surely and triumphantly return to Ayodhya; "*Ram-rajya*" would be firmly established in Saketha! Yes, indeed, something deep within himself told him all this would happen soon! Yes, he could sense the good foreboding in his bones! Everything was going to be alright! He wanted to rush to Rama and share with him the joy he felt now... the joy of hope! He ran down the ledge and turned a corner.... *and stopped dead in his tracks!*

The sight he witnessed froze him. He couldn't believe his eyes! He turned cold, his knees shook, and he felt his bubbly spirits evaporating quickly... like so much muddy froth on Godavari's banks.

He saw Rama, desolate and weeping!

He saw his brother, the valiant Raghuveeran of Ayodhya, weeping unconsolably! Rama was seated on a stony reef by the Godavari banks, the cool waters thrashing around his feet... He was weeping, his head buried in his arms, his body shaking with the emotion of some unbearable, unspeakable sadness....

Lakshmana paused in his tracks. He was struck by a welter of emotions. His heart rushed out to his brother and yet he wondered if he should intrude on Rama at all that moment.... a moment of private agony... those occasional moments in the life of even men of stout hearts and brave will... when inhibitions are cast aside and men resort to a feminine expedient – the shedding of pent-up emotions and succumbing to the soothing relief that unabashed weeping brings to a troubled mind.

The river abruptly began to shimmer like a sheet of copper as the first orange rays of the sun, a dazzling tiara on the surrounding hillcrests began bouncing off the water-surface. Lakshmana softly approached his brother. Then he stood beside him and gently placed a hand on those mighty, weeping shoulders. Rama didn't move.

They remained silent.

After a long while, Lakshmana spoke pensively... as if he were engaged in a monologue with the Godavari.

"Rama, my dear brother, you talked of *"dhanur-mAsa nitya-karmAnUshtanA"* a while ago and its great importance in a man's life. I just realized the truth of your words, my brother. I've just completed my *"sNana"* and *"nityAnUshtAnam-s"* in the Godavari. And don't you know how I feel? I feel uplifted! It suddenly feels like I've been living all these years under an imaginary burden of mental agony! It suddenly feels as though that all the misery and misfortune that's befallen the House of Raghuvamsha is but a chimera in the desert-sand!

"Suddenly I feel, Rama, that we're not victims of fate anymore and that we can re-write the script of our lives from this moment onward! We will triumph, Rama! Yes, you and I WILL overcome everything! This moment will pass, this darkest moment when you sit here alone on the banks of the Godavari, in the middle of the forest, weeping and when there is no one to console you... no one who'd realize the great losses you've suffered these many years.... the loss of a kingdom, the loss of a father whose deathbed you couldn't visit... the loss of our mother, KaikEyi's love... the loss of beloved Sita... the loss of dearest *"bandhU-s"* like Bharata and Jatayu....

"Oh! Rama! My brother, *Enough!* ... enough is enough... how many more losses can your noble heart bear! It is close to breaking now, I know... *which is why you sit here and weep...* Lakshmana gently stroked Rama's buried head. "Enough, my dearest brother, enough of weeping! Rise now and wipe away the tears from your handsome face! Perform the holy *"dhanur-mAsa"* oblations you have held up to me yourself! This river here will wash away your despair! That Great Spirit of Compassion that presides *"dhanur-mAsa"*, you described to me back at the campsite, that Spirit of Compassion, Oh Rama believe me, permeates the sweet waters of this river here! Plunge into it! Bathe in it, now! And let it wash away your gloom and fill your heart, instead, with the same fresh resolve and robust hope that have just entered mine own!

"I swear to you, my dearest brother, I swear to you on the souls of those little ones just born to that wild she-boar, that mother with her little ones, whose life you saved a while ago back at the campsite... I swear to you, Rama... this is *"satyam!"* ... on the souls of those of little new-born creatures... I swear we WILL triumph.... We will find and rescue Sita! We will return to the throne of Ayodhya...

and something tells me, too, O Rama, that from this moment onwards there shall be no more loss in our lives... we shall only gain... we shall soon gain the affection and support of ... new friends and allies...who shall come into our lives ... and these friends will never let us down ... they shall aid us in our mission... in a reliable way our own kith and kin back in Ayodhya never knew....

"Don't weep, my dearest brother, arise and conquer... for you are the Lord of Ayodhya, you are Raghuveeran!"

Part-8

Rama reached out and clasped his brother's hand warmly. He rose. He raised his head slowly and gazed at the gushing waters of the Godavari for a long moment with tear-stained eyes. Lakshmana couldn't help noticing that his brother's large, sparkling eyes, red and rimmed with sadness, as they were, looked even more arresting and attractive than usual. Rama held Lakshmana's hand and spoke almost in a soliloquy.

"My brother, I grieve... I do, yes. But I grieve not for the reasons you presume.

"You speak of the losses I've suffered... a kingdom, wife, friends and family... these are but familiar milestones along the oft-travelled journey in life men of this world undertake. Everyone... and not only the Lord of Ayodhya.... suffers such fate... such losses wrought by "karma". It's all in this "samsara", my brother... what's so unique about my plight? What is there to grieve about it? The misery of any human in this wide world is no less distressful than mine! And it's futile to be distressed about a stark fact of existence, Lakshmana!

"In any case, Lakshmana, did you think I'd any doubts about reclaiming Sita and the Kingdom of Ayodhya and all that you say has been lost? Did I ever doubt it? You're wrong, Lakshmana! Believe me, now, when I say this! If you, my dear and brave brother, are by my side, I can win back this whole world if I were to lose it that moment!! Yes, if I have you at my side, Lakshmana, there's nothing that's impossible for me! Nay, brother, you mistake me! I grieve not for the reasons you speak about! My grief springs from elsewhere... and for reasons more painful than I can bear to explain!"

Lakshmana heard and was astounded by his brother's remark. He turned to Rama, grabbed both his hands, looked into his eyes and said intensely: "If you grieve not for what I think you do, Rama, then there's nothing you should really grieve for! Tell me now, what is it that distresses you? Nothing is beyond repair and nothing is beyond me! I'll remove the cause of your despair! Tell me, my brother, what is it that's painful to you?"

"No, there's nothing you can do about it, Lakshmana", said Rama sadly, his face melting into a wan smile. Lakshmana didn't understand. After a while Rama began to speak again in a mellow, tremulous voice: "In the great palace of Ayodhya today, dear Lakshmana, there are 3 widows who grieve! Who're they?"

Lakshmana looked dumbfounded.

"Answer me, Lakshmana, who are the 3 widows? And whence the sorrow in their hearts?"

"*Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi*" murmured Lakshmana.

"And what is their sorrow?"

"All three grieve for a departed husband. Two grieve for sons they shall never see for 14 long years. And one... one grieves for a son she sees every day but whose love and esteem she knows she's lost forever."

Then Rama continued, "Lakshmana, my dear brother, there's a fourth widow in Ayodhya for whom I grieve! I grieve for a poor soul whose pain and sorrow are greater than that of the 3 widows you speak! My heart breaks, O Lakshmana, whenever I think of the suffering that daily visits the fourth!"

Lakshmana looked utterly puzzled. "*Who is this fourth widow, Rama? Tell me about her! What's her sorrow?* If I can alleviate it, I'll go immediately to Ayodhya! If that will ease your own pain Rama, tell me, command me now, this moment, and I'll go forth to meet this 4th widow? Who is she? Please tell me!" beseeched Lakshmana.

"The misery of the 4th widow, my dear Lakshmana, is unending... that tragedy is unspeakable!"

"But you have to tell me about it first, dear Rama, please!" begged Lakshmana.

"I'd surely tell you Lakshmana and share my burden with you... if only I were sure you're strong enough to bear it! I know your heart, my dear Lakshmana! Your heart is that of a simple warrior. It can deal and deal with death on the battlefield; but I doubt it can cope with the agony, the pathos some men of this world put up with...."

Part-9

"Lakshmana, my dear brother, you insist on sharing my distress. So be it, then! Listen, if you must, to my grief." The Lord of Ayodhya, in a voice turned gravelly and choking with emotion, continued, "D'you remember the 'dhanur' months you and I spent swimming in the Sarayu?"

Lakshmana looked very surprised. What a coincidence that Rama should ask him the question about a boyhood memory that he'd himself been thinking about just a while ago back at the campsite!

"Yes, I do, Rama, and very vividly, too" he replied.

"Those mornings used to be bitterly cold, weren't they?"

"Yes, indeed... colder than these currents of the Godavari."

"And yet we used to rush to the bathing-ghats before anyone else got there!" Lakshmana chuckled softly at the memory.

"That's because we'd wanted, Rama, to have the place all to ourselves! We'd wanted our fun --- all that diving, snorkeling, splashing we did! We'd wanted to have the Sarayu all to ourselves, remember? ...before even the womenfolk from the city got there", said Lakshmana recalling again those halcyon days.

"Yes, indeed! So you do remember, eh," said Rama, "But tell me, Lakshmana, whom did we usually meet first on the banks of the Sarayu as we returned to the palace *after* the ritual-bath?"

"The city's womenfolk. I remember them hurrying to the bathing-ghats before the men arrived there", said Lakshmana.

"Can you recall meeting anyone else? Someone trying to beat even the womenfolk first to the riverside?" asked Rama. Lakshmana thought hard for a moment.

"I can't remember, Rama, it was all so long ago.... Why do you ask?"

"*Widows!* Can you recall the *widows of Ayodhya*, Lakshmana? D'you remember them?"

A wave of nostalgia suddenly swept Lakshmana! An old, erased memory from the deepest cranny of his mind suddenly surfaced. He remembered exactly what Rama was trying to recall!

"Oh, yes, Rama, I remember! I do, I do now!" he exclaimed. "You mean those poor widows of Ayodhya, don't you?! Yes, I remember them! We passed them by, the poor wretched souls! They used to furtively scamper towards the bathing-ghats to finish their ablutions... before anyone else saw them there on the Sarayu banks, right?"

"Yes, exactly, I'm talking about them, my dear Lakshmana," said Rama, "D'you remember how the poor creatures wrapped themselves in shrouds and sneaked across like furtive thieves through the shadows.... in the streets of Ayodhya, in those earliest hours of the day! The poor women used to be desperate to avoid being seen by anyone else on the street!"

"Yes, I remember the widows, Rama," Lakshmana exclaimed, "But I'd always wondered why they were so scared to be seen going to the Sarayu for the "dhanur" month ritual-bath. Is it taboo, or something, for widows to be seen out on the Sarayu during the holy month?"

"No taboo, brother," replied Rama, "After all, that great Compassionate One who presides over the month of "mArga-srAsA", d'you think, the Spirit of Compassion, that "dEvatA" would grudge compassion to widows?! Is there anyone in this wide world who needs compassion more than a hapless widow, Lakshmana! *None!*"

"For young maidens, Lakshmana, a ritual-bath in the months of "dhanur" is believed to fetch them good husbands. So ordinary folk cannot understand why widows should want to secretly have a ritual-bath in the Sarayu!! Hard hearts cannot understand, Lakshmana, that a widow, who has lost a husband in this world, alas, also pines for another good, eternal husband in the other world! She has been cruelly denied the love of a husband in this world... what wrong is there if she yearns for the Love of that Supreme Lord in Heaven as her only Eternal Husband in life hereafter! And if a mere ritual bath in the Sarayu is believed to help a widow secure that goal ... what harm is there in it, Lakshmana?

"And yet, Lakshmana, those widows dreaded being discovered on their way to the ritual-bath! They dreaded the ordinary folk of Ayodhya city! D'you know why? Because the folks of Ayodhya on the streets would jeer at them loudly! They'd humiliate them openly. They'd sneer at them.... I've heard them yell: *"Oh Ho! Behold, there goes a widow to her ritual-bath! My... my.... me! What a pretty sight we've here, don't we!"* they'd jeer loudly.... *"A "ritual-bath", indeed! For a widow! To please the gods, eh? Or maybe it's a "beauty-bath"! A seductive show put up for the sake of a secret paramour on the riverside?! Ah, who can tell! A widow's mind is a wicked mystery, indeed! See off a husband to the other world and get on with a merry dalliance on the Sarayu, eh? On the pretext of a "dhanur-mAsa" rite!"* *"Shame on these widows! Look at the devils! Look at them stealing away, at the unearthly hour, to their appointment with sin!"*

Rama continued, "That's how they'd heckle them all mercilessly, Lakshmana, I'd seen it happen many times while we returned from the Sarayu after own bath... on the streets! I knew it then; I know it now.... Lakshmana, believe me, there's nothing more wretched on earth than the plight of a young widow cowering in the shadows trying to slink away through the dark the streets of Ayodhya lest she be seen!"

Part-10

Lakshmana listened quietly. After a while he asked, "Rama, *which one of those widows of Ayodhya are you grieving for now?! My brother, what's wrong with you? I do not understand you at all! Pray tell me what's really the matter with you?!?"*

"I grieve for the 4th widow -- a young widow -- from the palace of the IkshvAku, Lakshmana! I can see now, in my mind's eye, that poor soul running to the banks of the Sarayu.... surreptitiously... for a ritual-bath in this icy month of "dhanur"! This poor widow, too, covers herself in a tattered shroud! This widow, too, wants to evade discovery by the jeering, sneering, hooting folks on the streets of Ayodhya.... My heart bursts with grief for this 4th widow, Lakshmana!"

Lakshmana remained silent.

Rama continued in a voice that was quieter than a painful whisper: *"You won't understand it, my brother, but I tell you, our dearest Bharath.... our dear Bharatha is verily that forlorn fourth widow...."*

Lakshmana turned to Rama and looked aghast. *"What do you mean, Rama? What're you saying!"*

"I mean our dearest brother, Bharatha, ...he's the fourth widow of Ayodhya ..and I grieve for him!"

Lakshmana listened in stunned silence.

"I can see what's exactly happening in the Ayodhya this very moment now, Lakshmana. And it fills me with grief! I can see the hard-hearted people of Ayodhya, the same stony hearts that'd hurled insults on poor young widows on a cold morning of a "dhanur" month.... I tell you... I can see the same jeering folks silently heaping insults... on Bharatha behind his back! They're the overzealous ones of Ayodhya... Lakshmana... who profess their great love and loyalty to me! I'm sure they're strutting around right now wearing their "great love for Rama" on their insincere sleeves! In fact, those folk have no love for me but only pretend it! I know very well that sort of people in Ayodhya, Lakshmana... and they are not few! They're the sort who will jeer at and mock poor, unprotected widows.... and destroy a widow's dignity and self-worth even more completely than would be possible if she was disrobed or otherwise dishonored! They're the same sort of people, Lakshmana, who now speak ill of Bharatha, too, behind his back.... They're silently calling him a traitor to the House of Raghuvamsha... they're calling him a usurper... a "Rama-drOhi"... and much worse.

"Mark my words, today, Lakshmana, that's the same sort of people who will, one day many years from now, when Sita and I rule Ayodhya... they will speak ill of me and dear Sita, too... even when I'm their King and... their Lord. I grieve now because I see, at this very moment, in my mind's eye, I see my poor Bharatha arise in the wee hours of the morning and sneak away from the palace to the Sarayu-banks for his "dhanur" ritual-bath! I see him scurrying through the dark streets of Ayodhya like one of those wretched widows! He covers his royal self with a tattered shroud, Lakshmana, lest someone from the street-houses of Ayodhya should recognize him... and should learn about where he was headed!

"I can see, Oh Lakhmana, the mongrel dogs, foraging in the gutters in the by-lane of Ayodhya, look up and bark furiously at my beloved Bharatha... as if he were a street-side beggar.... My heart breaks, Oh Laskhmana, I'm not able to bear the pain of that scene.... I see the look of fear on Bharatha's face! It's the same look of fear that'd I'd seen on the faces of those poor widows on their way to the riverside! If he were to be discovered, Lakshmana, do you know what the carping commoners of Ayodhya

would say of Bharatha? The same horrible, humiliating things they hurled at young widows! *"Ah, there goes Bharatha"*, they'd say with venomous sarcasm, *"there goes the junior scion of the House of IkshvAku on his way to a holy dip in the Sarayu in the holy month of "mArga-sIrsa"!* His mother and he usurp the throne! He sends his father Dasaratha to the grave! And he packed his brother Rama off into the forest and damned him into exile! And after all that treachery, yet here he is! Our great and pious Bharatha! Rushing to the Sarayu to offer holy oblations to the gods of the "dhanur"! Ah! What wonderful piety, indeed! What a great noble soul our Bharatha is!"

"And that, dear Lakshmana is *the sorrow of the 4th widow of Ayodhya!* Now that you know about it.... Can you and I do anything about it, Lakshmana? And if you ask me why I grieve for that forlorn soul, what am I to say, my dear brother, to make you understand? How can anyone know the wretchedness of how I feel?"

Rama fell deeply silent. Lakshmana, too. Only the waters of the Godavari gurgled noisily. In a moment, soon, the glorious sun rose across the hill-tops and the world was swathed in the golden brilliance of a new day. The forest birds filled the DandakaranyA-s with a symphony of sweet chirping and tweeting.

(CONCLUDED)

BOOK 5
The Mahabharata and Srimadh Bhaagavatham



CHAPTER 24

DRAUPADI'S VENGEANCE?

It was the last day of the Kurukshetra War. It was dusk. Duryodhana lay mortally wounded on the battleground called Samantapanchaka. His thigh had been shattered by Bhima's blows and life was rapidly ebbing away from the Kaurava monarch. It was only a matter of time before Duryodhana would be no more.

It was at that moment that Aswatthaama, the illustrious son of DrOnAchArya, appeared on the scene. When he saw Duryodhana's state, Aswatthaama's grief and fury knew no bounds. He wept for his friend, patron, and mentor. Blinded by a mad rage, he then swore vengeance on the whole Pandava clan for what they had done unto DuryOdhana.

That night, under cover of darkness, AswatthAma crept into the Pandava camp looking for the five Pandava princes. But instead, he saw only the five stripling young sons of Draupadi and a few other nobles like Dhristadhyumna and Draupadi's other brothers too. In a moment, Aswatthaama simply slaughtered them all in sleep.

When Aswatthaama left the Pandava camp that night, he left behind a massacre. Five of Draupadi's sons were dead. Draupadi's brothers were killed. And the whole camp was left burning in a terrible blaze.

At dawn when the Pandavas came upon their camp and saw the carnage, they were shocked dumb into silent grief. Draupadi let out a wail at the horrific sight of her five sons and began lamenting. Her heart bled with a mother's anguish. It was against the 'dharma' of warfare in those days to kill an enemy while he was asleep and Aswatthama's heinous deed was beyond pardon.

Arjuna, already weary and worn after the War of Kurukshetra, became even more grief-stricken. But watching Draupadi collapse into a heap of grief, he went up to her to offer consolation. He said, 'You won't weep for long, my Draupadi. I will avenge the death of these children. I will bring the head of the villain who did this and place it at your feet. There is no escape for Aswatthaama. Have no doubt about it, my dear Draupadi!'



Arjuna and Krishna at once set out in their chariot in pursuit of Aswatthaama. It was certain that a bloody Armageddon was soon to follow.

When Aswatthaama saw Arjuna approaching, his own fury soared. He took out the ultimate weapon, the dreaded '*brahmAstra*', invoked its most cataclysmic powers, and launched it with the vicious intent of destroying every Pandava that walked on earth. The deadly '*astra*' appeared in the skies spewing fire and thunder, leaving behind a trail of utter, sweeping destruction wherever it went. The whole world trembled on the brink of an apocalypse.

An alarmed Arjuna turned to Krishna and asked what should be done. Krishna replied in a cold, steely voice, 'Arjuna, the son of your guru Drona, has crossed all limits of the dharma of war. He has invoked the terrible "*brahmAstra*" and hurled it without a thought for the consequences. The world at large is

now on the brink of annihilation. The dastardly Aswatthaama has become mad with rage. Make up your mind now. Unleash your own ultimate weapon, the “*brahmAstra*” and let it simply return havoc for havoc. There is no other choice!’

Arjuna hesitated for no more than a moment. He did as Krishna bade him. And in the next moment the fate of the whole wide world hung in a frail, treacherous balance.



When the wise men of Kurukshetra, the ‘rishis’, witnessed the scene, they were left aghast. Panic seized them. However, gathering up their wits they rushed to Arjuna and Aswatthama and remonstrated, ‘O Arjuna, O Aswatthaama! What have you both done! Blinded by your own rage, you have both acted irresponsibly! It’s the end of the world now!’

The ‘rishis’ then beseeched the two warriors, ‘Withdraw the “*astra*” please, immediately, while there is still time! Do it now! If the two “*astra*-s” collide it will spell the doom of everything on earth! Tarry not! Withdraw your “*brahmAstra*-s” and save the world from a “*mahA-praLaya*”!’

When Arjuna heard the ‘rishis’ words, he knew he had acted in haste and there would be no such thing as leisure left in the world in which he could repent. Hence without losing a moment, using his ‘*mantra-shakti*’ he instantly aborted the ‘*astra*’ and rendered it harmless in mid-air.

Ashwatthaama, however, could not retract the missile he had already launched since the requisite ‘mantra’ had not been properly mastered by him. However, to salvage the situation, he used a mantra that changed the target and trajectory of the ‘*astra*’, re-directing it not at living Pandavas, but at all un-born Pandavas. Just in the nick of time, Aswatthaama’s missile veered off course and vanished aimlessly into deep, endless space. A global disaster stood averted at the very last moment!



Arjuna forthwith subdued Aswatthaama. He turned to Krishna and asked what may be done to the villain. Krishna said blandly, ‘Show no mercy, and kill him without a qualm. Arjuna, do not hesitate. Have you forgotten your vow taken in Draupadi’s presence? That you would lay at her feet the head of the man who killed her sons? You have sworn to do it, so kill this man at once!’

Despite Krishna’s clear instructions, Arjuna hesitated. ‘Aswatthaama is the son of my guru, Sri Dronacharya’, thought Arjuna, ‘and my guru loved me as much as this son of his. How can I slay my guru’s son?’

Overcome by emotion and qualm, Arjuna shrank from taking Aswatthaama’s life. Instead, he dragged him into Draupadi’s presence and in the presence of a large assembly said to her: ‘Look, my queen, look at this sinner that stands humbled before you! Tell me what I should do with him, and I will carry out your wishes immediately!’

The assembled people then watched with bated breath. They looked at Draupadi and knew that for the mother of five dead, beloved children, all of whom had tragically been slaughtered even as they slept in bed, the moment of vengeance had arrived.

Draupadi's '*prArabdha karma*' seemed to have pursued her relentlessly in life and caught up again with her. Her destiny appeared to lie only in violence, bloodshed, and vengeance. It looked as though the baleful spirit of vengeance would never cease following her wherever Draupadi went and whatever the circumstance of life.

For anyone watching the scene on that day at Kurukshetra, there could have been no doubt what Queen Draupadi would do. She had vowed terrible vengeance once before—she had said she'd dye her hair in Kaurava blood for the shame they brought upon her in the Court of Hastinapur—and no doubt she'd now not hesitate a moment to ask for vengeance once more. Draupadi would surely ask Arjuna to proceed with his own vow and behead Aswatthaama, the killer of her five young sons.

The crowd of onlookers waited and watched for Draupadi's sentence to be pronounced and Arjuna's axe to fall upon Aswatthaama's neck.



What happened next in the Mahabharata is the tale of Draupadi's moment of supreme glory. It is the tale of how one who has performed '*saraNagati*' eventually attains such an extraordinary strength of will—an aspect, one may even venture to say, of divine will—that one is ready to effectively deal with '*prArabdha*' rather than fatalistically succumb to it. It is a beautiful tale of how Draupadi dealt with her destiny.

Draupadi's loss of her sons was an unmitigated tragedy indeed. Her pain was insufferable. It was the sort of pain in life that no mother ever wishes upon her worst enemy even. Her anger at Aswatthaama too was unbounded and the way it seethed inside her she was tempted indeed to command Arjuna to lop off Aswatthaama's head without much ado, exactly as Krishna Himself had suggested before. None would or could have faulted Draupadi that day if she had taken that course of action just as none could ever say a word against her earlier vow—the vow, taken after the shame heaped upon her in the royal court, to wash her hair in Kaurava blood before she ever groomed it again.

And yet at the very last moment, as the Mahabharata records, when Draupadi spoke on that last day of the Kurukshetra war, when Aswatthaama's fate lay in her hands, she spoke words that simply stunned everyone by their human nobility and divine compassion. She said, 'Arjuna, please release Aswatthaama forthwith. Dronacharya was your guru. He taught you everything you have known in archery. He loved you as a father might love a son. Aswatthaama thus is like a brother to you. When Drona died, his wife Kripa, did not join her lord in the funeral pyre because her son, this Aswatthaama who stands now before us, was still alive. If you kill him now in this moment, Kripa will suffer the pain too of losing her only child. I do not wish upon Kripa the pain I as a mother have myself suffered in the loss of my children. Let this pain remain with me and let Aswatthaama go . . . let him go his way, for he has suffered both retribution and humiliation enough. Please release him!'



The above scene, one of the last ones in the Mahabharata, is a gripping one, indeed, full of emotional charge and ethical nuance. It is also a scene in which the true character of Draupadi shines forth

brightly. In a sort of spiritual way far deeper than one might come across even in other ‘*pUrANAs*’ or ‘*itihasas*’ of India, it is a scene that affirms and celebrates the spirit of ‘*saraNagati*’.



Two significant incidents in the Mahabharatha reveal to us thus two different and contrasting facets of Draupadi’s character. They throw up interesting questions too.

In the first instance she swore vengeance against the Kauravas for a wrong done unto her by them. In the second, surprisingly, she forsook vengeance against Aswatthaama, who again did great wrong unto her on behalf of the Kauravas. It was the same person, Draupadi, however, who acted one way at one point of time and in a diametrically opposite way at another. We should ask why.

Mahabharatha further tells us that the cause for vengeance in one case was morally no less compelling than in the other. So, if Draupadi was acting out of a certain vicious self-interest in the first situation, what was her real motive for action in the second? Was it not entirely self-less? If it was, in fact, selfless, how to explain the wide difference in her responses? It seems almost magical, is it not, that Draupadi could act so differently?

These are helpful questions to ponder about, long and hard. It is in the pondering indeed that one really profits from and enjoys studying the Mahabharatha, not by being impatient for pat, off-the-shelf answers and slick, ready-to-eat explanations.

What do the two incidents really convey to us?

Firstly, Draupadi’s character is by no means a static one in the Mahabharatha. Like all human beings, and like all great epic characters, Draupadi too was evolving as a personality through all the ups and downs, highs and lows, agony and ecstasy, griefs and joys of her pretty turbulent life throughout the Mahabharatha. From swearing vengeance to completely forsaking it, Draupadi travelled a great distance indeed in the journey of life. How was that long and arduous journey enabled? Surely, it was her act of ‘*saraNagati*’.

Secondly, the act of ‘*sharaNagati*’ in Hastinapur did leave a lasting if not immediate impact upon Draupadi’s character. It took its time indeed to work its magic but magic it certainly did work upon her soul. From a rather baleful personality she might once have been when she undertook the first terrible vow, we see how she went on eventually to transform herself into a benign, saintly soul by the time the Kurukshetra War ended and when she chose, in that moment of climactic glory, to grant absolute pardon to the killer of her sons, the dreaded Aswatthaama.

Thirdly, ‘*saraNagathi*’ is not so much God’s magic wand as it is His garden tool. Through it, God brings about gradual but everlasting change—call it the flowering of personality and the ripening of wisdom—God brings about such a change within a devotee’s heart. Such personality change can begin manifesting in outward behaviour in a relatively short period of time, as say, in the case of the ‘*rAkshasa*’, Vibheeshana in the Ramayana, or else it can be that the pace of change is plodding but sure, as in the case of Draupadi.



‘The quality of mercy, wrote an old poet, is twice blest. It blesses him that gives and him that takes.’

Draupadi’s ‘*saraNagati*’ in the Mahabharatha is a unique illustration of the above adage.

All of us, without exception, yearn hard and long indeed to ‘receive’ the divine compassion of God. But how many of us would, if the earthly situation or circumstance were to so arise, be ready to gladly ‘give’ unconditional compassion to those around us, especially to those whom we might have good reason to regard inimically?

We go to a temple, stand before the deity, and ask, ‘O Lord, I have completely surrendered to you! But you have not yet showered the blessing of compassion upon me! When shall that day come?’ To that question the Almighty, we might well imagine, may respond smilingly with a telling counter- question, ‘You shall “receive” my own compassion one day, of course, but only when I see that you are ready and capable of wholeheartedly “giving” such compassion yourself! Until then you must wait.’

In the moment when Draupadi was faced with a choice—either to ‘take’ rightful vengeance in seeking Aswatthaama’s death or to ‘give’ him the compassion of her whole heart and grant the killer of her children eternal pardon—in that precise moment indeed did Draupadi’s earlier act of ‘*saraNagati*’, we should say, get consummated and finally bear fruit. It was in that latter moment indeed, and not so much in the earlier and more popular scene of her ‘disrobement’ at the royal court of Hastinapur, that the grace of the Almighty fell in full and ultimate measure upon Draupadi.

It is such moments indeed as Draupadi’s, such glorious scenes in our *itihAsas* and ‘*purAnAs*’, which reveal to us the hallmark of genuine ‘*saraNagati*’.





CHAPTER 25

BHISHMA'S ATONEMENT

(This short story is a fictional reinterpretation of a Mahabharatha episode. Draupadi met Bhishma while he was lying on his deathbed (the bed of arrows) during the War of Kurukshetra. During this visit, Draupadi confronted Bhishma about his silence during her humiliation in the Kaurava court, questioning his adherence to Dharma at that crucial moment. Bhishma acknowledged his mistake, explained that his judgment was clouded due to his sense of obligation to the Throne of Hastinapur and expressed remorse for his inaction. Draupadi's questioning led to a moment of realization and repentance for Bhishma, and she ultimately forgave him after his apology. This meeting is a significant moment in the Mahabharata, highlighting themes of personal Dharma, accountability, and forgiveness. However, in this short-story, Bhishma offers an explanation which is however less a personal apology and more an exposition of Raja Dharma, Fate and Karma, and of Atonement).

Part-1

On the eighteenth day after it began, the great War of Kurukshetra finally ended...

Draupadi at the end did have the revenge she had vowed to have on the Kauravas. The death of Duryodhana at the hands of Bheema avenged the shame and humiliation brought upon her at Hastinapur --- when she was assaulted, disrobed in the open and dishonoured while palace-elders, nobles, warlords, royal courtiers, and minions all looked on aghast and silent. Not one had lifted then a finger to save her womanhood and honour...

Despite that, neither the war's end nor the death of Duryodhana did douse the fire of fury and grief that still burned like an inferno inside Draupadi's heart.

Along with thousands of other mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters in the land, she too had lost sons, and so many beloved kith, kin, and loyal friends... all slaughtered on the killing-fields of Kurukshetra. The war was won, of course, by the Pandavas and, yes, she too had had her revenge on Duryodhana... But to her this victory was a meaningless one since none could distinguish between victor and vanquished. Everyone in Hastinapur and Indraprastha had lost sons, husbands, brothers, fathers, and gurus.... Draupadi's grief was not merely her own; it was the weight of the entire pain, grief and pent-up fury that oppressed the heart of every single bereaved mother and mother-in-law that kept wailing aloud now across the land....

Grimly, she asked herself, repeatedly: *"What real gain from this victory? What for all the bloodshed and bloodlust? Why did this calamity befall our people? Who should be responsible?"*

As Draupadi's heart thus kept burning and burning with fury and woe, she could just find no answers at all in which she might find solace or consolation. A searing question repeated itself in her mind constantly: *"Isn't my husband, the new King Yudhishtira alone responsible? It was he who had wagered me away to the Kauravas... and along with me everything rightfully belonging to the*

Pandava family too. Hadn't the conflict really started from there? Yet people even today were hailing Yudhishtira as a 'Dharma-raja' as a paragon of all Dharmic virtues! How ironic! How absurd! It was Dharmaraja's Dharma that had brought ruin upon the entire kingdom today... "

In the immediate aftermath of the Kurukshetra War, Yudhishtira, the new King, began to take stock of the post-war state of the kingdom.

What he witnessed all around him were endless scenes of mass devastation, mayhem, untold pain, death and ruin. The sights plunged him into deep fear and much perplexity. In fact, what he began to dwell upon and kept agonizing over in sleepless nights, were much the same as those questions that Draupadi was agitated over.

"Has all this disaster, this tragedy come about only because I may have been delinquent in abiding by Dharma? Have I lost all sense and understanding of righteousness? Why and were did I misplace my moral compass? Was I the sole cause for the war? Should I alone be answerable to the wailing mothers, breast-beating wives, and orphans in this land of mine?"

It was then that Krishna, sensed Yudhishtira's unhinged mind. It was rapidly sinking into acute despair, confusion, and moral fear. So, Krishna decided swift, prompt action was needed.

Realizing that the new King had to be resuscitated from a depressive state of mind into which he had fallen, Krishan calmed him down. He told Yudhishtira not to lose heart.

"Hasten now at once, Yudhishtira" said Krishna, "approach the dying Bhishmacharya, the Grandsire of all Hastinapur, and seek the old warrior's guidance and counsel on all questions of Dharma trouble and confound you now. Beseech him to help you steady your unhinged spirit. The old warrior is a repository of all great dharmic truth and wisdom, He has been serving Hastinapur for so long as it's wise paterfamilias. So, ask him to clear all doubts and fears in your heart. Learn from him ... I am sure you will come away with your mind and spirit renewed with vigour. You will be able to face all challenges of kingship".

It was thus that, in the ensuing forty days after the end of the War, that Yudhishtira, heeding Krishna's advice, went daily to the spot where the mortally wounded Bhishma-pitamahan lay outstretched upon a bed of arrows.

Bhishma's life and vital air were seeping away slowly from his ravaged body. Still, the old warrior held himself together as he awaited the day of "*uttaraayana*" ... spring equinox ... to arrive before giving up his last breath.

Bhisma and Yudhishtira thus spent hours conversing with each other on many matters related to Dharma. The disconsolate King was enabled to learn, re-learn and unlearn much from the Grandsire about Dharma and *Dharma-sookshma* ... its finer, rarer nuances....

The "*Bhishma-Yudhishtira samvada*" dealt on matters of great significance to the Dharmic way of life. Yudhishtira's eyes were opened by the Grandsire to the great truths: of such things as *Duty and Sacrifice* symbolized in a king's ultimate sacrifice for the greater good and as fulfilment of his vows; of the many *complexities of Dharma* and how a ruler's duty can involve much personal suffering and difficult moral choices; of the *inevitability of Fate and Karma* and the inescapable consequences of past actions and the cyclical nature of karma; of what *Acceptance and Humility in a King meant*: acceptance of divine will and humility before fate; and of the *robust emotion and steadfast moral state of mind* that a sovereign must always strive to cultivate in life... *so on and so forth*.

Fifty-seven days passed thus after the end of the Kurukshetra War.

Part-2

News of the Bhishma-Yudhishthira '*samvada*' reached Draupadi too. Many of the lofty lessons on Dharma and Wisdom imparted by the Grandsire to her husband he had himself, in fact, shared with her in confidence.

It was so comforting to Draupadi that the counsel and lessons he'd received from Bhishmacharya had quite dramatically lifted his spirits up, cleared away the moral qualms and self-doubt that had been gnawing inside him. She saw that he was now, day by day, getting better prepared, mentally, to meet the great challenges of kingship that loomed ahead of him.

However, within Draupadi's own mind, she found no peace.

The fires of pent-up anger and personal anguish had not waned. She still carried within her the memories of past personal shame... It rankled. It was a deep, suppurating scar in the soul refusing to heal. Within the depths of her tortured mind, she was still unable to forgive those responsible for her shame. She carried her wound within herself although outwardly she acted as though she had put the past behind her. She knew she that she had new roles and new duties to fulfil now in Hastinapur. She was the gracious new Queen of the Kingdom. She would have to be seen by all subjects as the loyal Consort of King Yudhishthira. Although she did find it difficult, she knew she still had to find a way to forgive him ... even if it had to be less than half-heartedly.

While Draupadi found a little space inside her heart for forgiveness towards so-called '*Dharma-Raja*' Yudhishthira, there was however one other person against whom the flame of her rage and rancour still burned unabatedly.

That person was the Grandsire, *Bhishmacharya*...!

Suddenly, on the fifty-seventh day after the Kurukshetra War, and on the eve of '*uttaraayana*', Draupadi suddenly realised that the old warrior had only a day left to live before he by himself betook to the high heavens alongside the sun as it journeyed forth on its northward ascent across the firmament.

A sudden impulse then overtook her.

Draupadi decided that she too, like Yudhishthira, must meet the Grandsire before he departed. Like *Dharmaraja*, she too had much to ask the '*pitamahana*' and seek dharmic resolution or closure to many of the painful questions and doubts assailing her....

Rather ruefully, she said to herself, "As far as I know, in their lofty '*samvada*', these two great men of Dharma never bothered about ... did not condescend to address the questions that weigh down and oppress my own spirit, and much less perhaps gave it a moment's thought even..."

Soon after nightfall on the fifty-seventh day after the War, Draupadi just could not stop herself from slipping out after midnight from the palace-chambers to make her way unobserved towards where she had heard Bhishma-*pitamahana* had been made to gently lie and rest upon a bed of arrows. Wrapping a warm shawl tightly around her, the Queen stealthily stumbled forward... towards what she believed was going to be her very own '*samvada*' with *Bhishmacharya*... her own dialogue with the wise old Grandsire.

Part-3

When the Queen arrived at the spot where Bhishma lay, nearly impaled upon a bed of arrows, she stood stunned and transfixed by the sight of the Grandsire, all maimed, crushed and dying.

A cry of anguish rose up in her throat... She stifled it. Hot tears erupted at once down her cheeks. She shuddered and the shawl fell off her shoulders to the ground. The cold, stinging wind whipped her tearful face.

The sound of the slight, gentle of rustle of the Queen's silk raiment near him ... and the faint but familiar fragrance of a royal perfume he knew Draupadi often wore ... brought Bhishma at once to consciousness. He immediately sensed that someone was standing beside him, and it must be Draupadi.

Opening his bloodshot eyes, struggling to see who it was. Draupadi stood mute, paralysed.

The Grandsire stared long at her through rheumy eyes. After a long while a flicker of recognition crossed his face. His parched lips slowly parted in a wan smile. He tried to greet the Queen but then a sudden bout of coughing began racking his breast... In a feeble, incoherent voice Bhishmacharya stuttered: "*My little girl... A queen must stay away from here... This is a place of death and suffering. Why are you here, my dear child...?*", he began coughing again.... "*And why too at this hour?*"

Shock and grief throttled Draupadi. Not a word nor a cry could she voice. She just stood there silently, simply staring at the dying Grandsire. All on a sudden, the purpose that had brought her there vanished altogether from her mind. With hot tears still running down her cheeks, Draupadi turned on her heels, and tore herself away from the spot, deciding to flee back to the palace....

No sooner than she had taken a few paces, she suddenly heard the Grandsire address her in a feeble yet coherent voice: "Your King, Yudhishtira is left now with only ruins to rule over... But you, my Queen, you need fear not! He will rule well, for he is a man of steadfast Dharma... The land and its peoples will rise again and prosper. *Never doubt it, my child.*"

It was in that very moment when involuntarily, Draupadi blurted out:

"Grandsire, I have come here seeking answers from you to a few questions that are a burden on my soul! My burdens aren't anything like those of the Dharmaraja and about which I learnt you and he have conversed long in the last fifty odd days."

Draupadi saw the massive, leonine, bearded and majestic head of the Grandsire, with its long, flowing silver-white manes, tilt gently to the side to face her. Even though he was fatally wounded and was dying, not one telltale sign of morbidity could be seen on his mien. His lustrous, patrician looks still shone as imperiously as they had always been. To her eyes, the tall, hefty old warrior looked every inch the same handsome, youthful, majestic and wise "*naishthika brahmachari kshatriya*" that he had always been.

The Grandsire looked directly into her eyes and began speaking in halting words:

"Draupadi my dear child, before you start asking me any questions, promise me first one thing, will you?"

"Grandsire, what is it?" asked Draupadi, utterly surprised.

"Promise me that long after I have departed, you will tell your grandchildren that *Ganga Putra* Bhishma remained as true and faithful as ever to his duty to the great state of Hastinapur. And that too, even in the last days on earth, right until he breathed his last. Tell them that even my last day had

been spent in harness... faithfully serving the new King, the *Pandava* Yudhishtira. And that many an important lesson on *Dharma* was then imparted to the King who himself had desired to learn from me... Will you promise me that?"

The '*pitamahan*' lifted his hand and stretched out to Draupadi. She gently held it and said solemnly: "*Grandsire, I promise*".

And thus, did begin the Bhishma-Draupadi '*samvada*'... an unusual and complex dialogue on *Dharma* between a *celibate man* and a *polyandrous woman*.

It was a bit tactless of Bhishmacharya to make mention to Draupadi of her grandchildren... When she heard it, the Queen who was still grieving the death of her sons, felt a flash of rage. Bhishma's reference to "grandchildren" chafed at some raw nerve inside her. Her temper snapped.

Draupadi's questions to the '*pitamahan*' then flew out, fast and furious in a steaming torrent of words, all coming straight from her grieving heart...

- "*I have lost my son Abhimanyu. Ashwatthama slaughtered my other little children too... Widows and orphans are so many now in my family...*"
- "*You Grandsire, being a brahmacharin, how can you know anything about the pain of losing an offspring? There is no such thing as "putra-shoka" known to you...! You have no family. It is not possible for you to know what pain is ... the pain caused by family bereavement. You are incapable of even imagining it, Grandsire!*"
- "*So, what then, tell me, is the real gain this victory in war has really brought us now?!*"
- "*What was all the bloodshed and the bloodlust for?!*"
- "*It is all your handiwork, Grandsire! All this calamity that's befallen us and our people.*"
- "*Who should be held responsible?!*"

Draupadi paused. Her head held high and proudly, striking a strident pose, she spoke harshly again to the dying hero:

"Who is responsible for all this? I say, Grandsire, it's you and none but you! You're solely to be held to account! You alone must bear the blame for the 'kula naashanam' of Kauravas and Pandavas... So, beware...! The blood of our slain sons, husbands and brothers shall ever remain on your hands and conscience...! That stain on your soul will never be erased ...! Not while you are still here in this world! And not in the hereafter to which you will go when the sun rises tomorrow!"

Draupadi's breast heaved as she breathed fire. Her rage was overpowering. All the old pent-up memories of trauma she had undergone in the Court of Hastinapur now seemed to spew forth... and as torrid, baleful words erupting like fiery molten volcanic lava.

"D'you remember that day... or have you erased it from your mind? That day in the Court of Hastinapur when you, Grandsire, stood silently by without a murmur of protest, indignation? You saw me helpless and distraught. I was being disrobed. I was jeered, hooted, whistled at while they were unclothing me! My womanhood and modesty were being torn to shreds right under the eyes of the King, before you and all the ministers, nobility assembled there...! And yet, you 'pitamahan', d'you remember?"

You just stood there then in stony, inscrutable silence. As though you had nothing to do with it at all! As if it was none of your business...!"

“Why, grandsire? O Why?! Was it fear of Duryodhana and his henchmen? Was it that you didn’t care for me? Or was it that you possess no sense at all of what it is about a woman’s modesty? After all, yes, you are a brahmachari! How could anyone like you feel empathy at all for a woman’s distress?”

“If only that day in the Court of Hastinapur, you had had instead shown your wonted courage, Grandsire, the destiny of the Pandavas and Kauravas would’ve been different. If you had stepped in at that moment and nipped in the bud the atrocity about to happen... if only you’d made your displeasure and condemnation known! If only you’d been brave enough to openly chide, castigate Duryodhana, Karna in open court... If only you’d yourself stopped, then and there, that heinous, dastardly act of the villain, Dussasana...! The War of Kurukshetra itself would then never have been thrust upon us! My son Abimanyu would still be living today... and so would my other beloved children and nephews!”

As she spoke, more abundant tears burst forth and began flowing down Draupadi’s cheeks. Her lithe body shuddered as a welter of emotions overwhelmed her. Inside her mind, the ghastly, miasmic scenes, of years gone by, began replaying. She was now reliving every moment of it again. She bowed, held her head in hands and wept uncontrollably...

The Grandsire’s limp, almost lifeless body remained still upon the bed of arrows... Not a word did come out of his lips. Not a flicker of emotion crossed his impassive face. The only sound heard was that of Draupadi’s heart-wrenching weeping.

In a little while, collecting her herself again, regaining composure after her outburst, Draupadi slowly wiped the tears. She spoke again in strident, fearless, outraged tones:

“You claim now that you are proud to be doing your duty to the Kingdom and Yudhishtira even as you breathe your last. So, tomorrow you die, you say, but you shall die happy, with a clear and clean conscience. Because the ‘dharma samvada’ with Yudhishtira shall be said to be hailed by people to be your last bow, your last glorious swansong! You have imparted such lofty, profound lessons on Dharma and Dharma-sookshma to the King that he believes now he received enlightenment from you!

“I however say now, grandsire, Fie upon your Dharma! Fie upon the Dharma of yours that knew not how to protect the honour of womanhood! What use is such Dharma to the world! Nothing but sanctimonious pablum!

“So, what I shall promise you now, ‘pitamahan’ is this: I will not fail or forget to tell my grandchildren exactly that!”

Part-4

Draupadi, overcome by emotions, fell to the ground and collapsed at the feet of Bhishmacharya.

An uneasy, tense silence hung in the air...

Slowly and calmly, in the soothing, baritone voice that was distinctly his, and choosing, measuring words carefully, the ‘pitamahan’ began to speak. There was not a trace of ire, rancour or offense in his voice.

“Women think and speak of *Womanhood* in ways very differently from how men do. Women rarely if ever look beyond *Womanhood* in their understanding of *Dharma*; while, on the other hand, men in search of *Dharmic* understanding pay so little attention to *Womanhood* that it wholly escapes their mind’s attention.

“In the case of a ‘*naishthika brahmacharin*’ like me, facing the hour of imminent death, when I look back upon my own long life, I should say, it proves beyond doubt the guilt of men in this regard.

“There is however one other clear and certain truth: Man or Woman, in either case, their respective understanding of *Dharma* is always incomplete, always mistaken”.

Draupadi’s lifted her tear-stained face towards the ‘*pitamahan*’ and began listening to him with rapt attention.

“When I was a young man, as you might already know, dear Draupadi, I took it upon myself the duty of a godfather and as regent to go looking for a bride for my young half-brother Prince Vichitravirya before he ascended the throne as King. On his behalf, I went to the court of the King of Kashi and there in an archery competition I bested all other royal suitors for the hand of the king’s three beautiful daughters, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. From the ‘*svayamvara*’ competition held in Kashi then, I triumphantly brought back with me three young princesses to get them duly wedded to my dear brother Vichitravirya.

“That was a grave error on my part. I had not learnt the lessons from the *Ramayana*... Dasaratha married three queens, and woe befell him through one. Rama remained monogamous in “*eka Patni-vrata*”. He became glorious for his resolve.

“Just as one of the three queens of King Dasaratha became the reason for his downfall, it was one of the three princesses I brought home to brother Vichitravirya to wed who became the cause of my own downfall.... She was Amba, the eldest of the three princesses.

“While Ambika and Ambalika were both happy to be betrothed to my brother, the king, the eldest one, Amba, refused to marry him since she confessed, she was already in love with her old paramour, King Salva of the Saubala kingdom. Amba impaled me between the horns of a great moral dilemma... Indeed, it was the very first one of so many that has littered my life since then! I can tell you now, my child Draupadi, that I had to confront for the very first time the moral challenge of having to understand

Womanhood and Dharma and try reconciling both at once too.

“For the *woman* in Amba, the *dharma* of fidelity to the man she already loved was supreme. For the *man in me*, the *dharma* of protecting and ensuring the welfare of my State and the King, my brother, was paramount. The woman in Amba didn’t want to appreciate the primacy of “*Raja-Dharma*” ... and I, for my part as man, and as the regent for Prince Vichitravirya... and as ‘*brahmacharin*’, to boot... was utterly blind to “*sthree-dharma*” which for all women simply overrode and overarched all other *Dharma*.

“My child Draupadi, I am sure you know what happened to Amba thereafter. I tried to persuade King Salva to accept her. He refused. So, I beseeched brother Vichitravirya again to take her as his third wife. He refused. Poor Amba then beseeched me to take her as my own spouse... which I could not... again for reasons of the welfare of the kingdom ... I was sworn to lifelong celibacy.

Amba left the kingdom heartbroken and derelict. She wandered like a mad, pitiable woman all over the land, seeking justice in revenge against me who she thought had wronged her wilfully. For a woman spurned or scorned, my dear Draupadi, there is no *Dharma* higher than revenge... You would know that yourself extremely well, wouldn’t you? ... Ages ago, we all know, again extremely well, the story of how Sita wreaked revenge on Rama for having wronged her when she had been pregnant with his own twin children”...

Bhishma continued...

“It was always my earnest desire to atone and make amends for the part which I knew I must hold myself responsible for in Amba’s plight in life.

Atonement, however, only serves to delay *Karma* or Fate... Atonement can postpone as far as possible their unravelling. But Atonement, my child Draupadi, know this well... atonement alone can never negate, thwart, or extinguish *Karma*...

Bhishmacharya paused a while as a sudden fit of coughing racked his body... A little trickle of blood, bile, spittle, and rheum leaked from out of his throat, stained his lips and the long, white, wispy beard.

Draupadi sat motionless and waited patiently for the Grandsire to continue. The ‘*samvada*’, in fact, had now turned into more an elegiac soliloquy the dying ‘*piramahan*’ was delivering for her benefit.

“Amba died a sad, desolate, and bitter soul... but not before she had prayed to the gods to grant her an afterlife whose sole purpose would be to avenge herself against me... On the tenth day of the war at Kurukshetra, Amba’s soul reborn as the fierce, transgender warrior, Shikhandi, collaborated with Arjuna, combined as one force to fatally maim me and reduced me to this moribund condition now...

“Atoning for the wrong I unwittingly did ... unto Amba ... served me real no purpose at all. Yes, of course, it served to delay, postpone my karmic comeuppance... but in the end, Fate still did its unmistakable work...

“And so here do I lie before you now... you see, Draupadi: A man whose own understanding of Dharma was flawless, yes, but yet so very incomplete ...”

Draupadi found her voice again. She clasped the hand of the Grandsire and asked plaintively: “*Dear ‘pitamahan’, all these recollections of yours tell me nothing at all... I cannot find answers in them for the questions I asked you... What happened between you and Amba so, so long ago... What has it got to do with me?!’*”

Bhishmacharya turned his head and looked quizzically at Draupadi. A faint, playful and indulgent smile played upon his parched lips.

“My child, I recounted the story of Amba’s life only to illustrate to you two truths about Dharma. But then I really should not be surprised you have grasped neither.... After all, you are a woman...”.

The undertone of gentle sarcasm and chiding in Bhishmacharya’s words did not escape Draupadi’s attention. But she let it pass. She knew no real offence was meant... the grandsire was merely teasing her for being inattentive.

“What truths? I do not understand, Grandsire...”

“Alright, let me repeat for your sake...”, said Bhishma.

“Women think and speak of *Womanhood* in ways very differently from how men do. Women rarely if ever look beyond *Womanhood* itself in trying to understand *Dharma*; while, on the other hand, men searching for Dharmic understanding pay so little attention to *Womanhood* that it wholly escapes their mind’s attention. *Man or Woman*, in either case, their respective understanding of *Dharma* is always incomplete, always mistaken.... *That is the first lesson....*

“And the other?” queried Draupadi.

“*Atonement* only serves to delay *Karma* or *Fate*... or else, let’s say, it postpones as far as possible, their unravelling.... Atonement alone, however, can never negate, thwart, or extinguish *Fate*...”, the Grandsire replied.

Draupadi said candidly:

“Grandsire, *you speak in riddles*... I still don’t understand anything. Pray, do make the two lessons clearer and easier to understand”.

Bhishmacharya spoke, again in calm, gentle and soothing tones.

“My child Draupadi, I’m going to ask you to do now what will be very painful for you. Nonetheless, you must do what I say.

“Try and transport your mind back to that fateful day in Hastinapur when you were dishonoured in the open assembly of the king and princes. If you relive that ghastly trauma in your mind again... it will help you realise the truths, I’m telling you about...”

“After the vile deed of Dussasana was done that day, and you’d been rescued by Krishna just in time, King Dhritarashtra did something immediately thereafter that was rather out of character. The King was blind but not unwise.

Dhritarashtra realised that the sordid incident in his Royal Court would become known to the entire world and scandalize the people. It would result in the destruction of the entire Kaurava race. So, Dhritarashtra gathered courage and defied Duryodhana.

Do you remember how he rose from his throne and called you to him, Draupadi? He took you to his side and spoke soothing words of consolation and affection to you, didn’t he?

After that, to make quick amends, the King also turned to Yudhishtira and told him:

"You are so blameless. You have been wronged, my son! But forgive your other brothers here in your magnanimity. Evil has been done by Duryodhana. But please, I beseech you, dismiss all memory of it from your mind.

Dhritarashtra, you will remember, also told Yudhishtira to take back everything that had been lost to wagering in the game of the Kauravas... kingdom, riches and everything else... He blessed all you Pandavas and declared you to be set free. “*Return to Indraprastha and be prosperous*”, the King had said then, remember?”

Bhishmacharya paused and asked Draupadi: “Do you recall those moments?”

“*Yes, grandsire*...” replied Draupadi, her downcast eyes reddening even as painful memories began flooding her mind.

“My child, what happened thereafter? Try and recall what ensued...” said the Grandsire gently.

Draupadi then began speaking. Her words spilled out from the state of deep shock she was in. She was in a virtual trance as she spoke.

“We all then left that accursed hall, bewildered and stunned! But we did think that King Dhritarashtra’s intervention was truly a miracle! The evil deed done to me was not something that could be erased from my memory... but at least, thanks to the king, our wagering debt in the board-game had all been cancelled. We were fortunate. But little did we realise in that moment that it was all too good to last...”

Bhishma interjected: "So, now let me tell you what happened next in the Court of Hastinapur after you Pandavas left."

"After you had all departed, Duryodhana and all his Kaurava allies flew into a terrible rage! They heaped invectives upon the hapless Dhritarashtra for his unexpected and unwarranted intervention. *"By your thoughtless action, you have brought to nought all our well-laid plans to bring about the destruction of our formidable enemy, the Pandavas!"* they screamed! The King, taken aback by rage of Duryodhana fell silent. So fearful was the father of the son that he was willing to do anything to pacify his son, Duryodhana.

Duryodhana hit upon the idea of luring the Pandavas back to play another session of the gambling game in the palace. It was a ruse.

The idea was to invoke that hallowed sentiment of *Kshatriya* honour. It involved appealing to Yudhishtira's own sense of *kshatriya* fair-play and gamesmanship according to which no self-respecting *kshatriya* --- least of all a Pandava prince --- could decline an invitation to a game of dice extended by another royal *kshatriya*! It was however pure guile and treachery.

Duryodhana secured his doting father's reluctant approval for the idea and a plan was hatched there and then to entice Yudhishtira to return and try his hand at a game of dice.

"D'you remember, Draupadi, what happened next?"

"Yes, *Grandsire*", replied Draupadi in a pained, dazed, and sombre voice.

"Tell me then about it?"

"A messenger from the palace came rushing behind us just as we had entered Indraprastha. He conveyed the Kaurava Prince's invitation on behalf of king Dhritarashtra to go back and play another game. On hearing this, Yudhishtira turned to all of us and said something that I can recall clearly even today— *"Good and evil come from destiny and cannot be avoided"* he said, and *"If we must play again—we must, that is all. A challenge to dice cannot in honour be refused. I must accept it."*

Draupadi memories overwhelmed her then, after she'd spoken.

Her voice choked; she could speak no more... Tears welled up in her eyes and she broke down again in grief.

The Grandsire said: "The lessons from the *Ramayana* were again lost on us then.... Weren't they, my dear Draupadi?"

"Who had ever heard of a deer with golden skin!! And yet, Rama went in vain in pursuit of what looked like one! Why? Because his beloved wife, Sita wanted one as a pet!

"So, what happened thereafter, my dear child, is history. It's too painful to recollect....

Dharmaputra returned to Hastinapura and sat again for a game with Shakuni, though everyone in the assembly tried to dissuade him. He was defeated again. And this time not only did you Pandavas lose kingdom but all of you as family were banished to exile

in the forests. You lived there for twelve years as near fugitives....

"So, dear Draupadi, tell me what lesson may be learnt from those events?

"King Dhritarashtra's intervention in Hastinapur that day was motivated by very good intentions. But the kingly intervention was also his way of *atonement* for the evil done to you by his sons.

“What purpose did such *atonement* serve? It did *delay or postpone Fate* for a few hours... That’s about it. Ask yourself, could it have *reversed or cancelled* the Fate that was lurking just around the corner? Your first escapade, it delayed Fate.... but did it absolve *Karma*?

Part-5

The Grandsire then continued speaking.

“My child Draupadi, you threw at me a volley of furious, uncharitable, why, even almost revengeful questions.

“If only that day in the Court of Hastinapur, you’d shown courage, the destiny of the Pandavas and Kauravas would’ve been different. If you’d stepped in at that moment and nipped in the bud the atrocity about to be done unto me, the War of Kurukshetra would never have been thrust upon us... My son Abimanyu wouldn’t be dead now; nor would my other boys who all were slaughtered by the murderous Aswathaama... my nephews and cousins too....””

“Well.... I’m aware, my dear child, you live in perpetual pain and suffering. If it does ease the pain and help you find peace to demand answers from me, I shall not grudge you your right. After all, I am your ‘*pitamahan*’ and I owe you a truthful explanation. But it is not to be taken as a defence of myself or as my apology.... You should know that I acted, as I did, all in good faith and adherence to my ‘*svadharma*’.

“Firstly, let me tell you that although the Kauravas kept calling me ‘*pitamahan*’, and despite showing me perfunctory or token deference, my influence over them was always very limited. The real decision makers were always Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana. Make no mistake about that.

“Secondly, my primary duty and loyalty have always been to protect the Kingdom. That has been my avowed life mission. So, as a loyal member of the Kaurava Court, I always respected all proceedings of the royal assembly, especially when presided over by King Dhritarashtra. Now, on that fateful day, my dear Draupadi, you will remember that it was the King Dhritarashtra who intervened in the proceedings... indeed, in the way any good King must do. So, it was beyond my remit there in the royal assembly to act in any way that would seem I was upstaging him or his authority ...

“Thirdly, dear Draupadi, you ask me, in what way by remaining silent, in that moment, did I think I was adhering to ‘*svadharma*’ ... or, in what way did I think I was really fulfilling my primary duty to protect the Kingdom of Hastinapur? In what way was I justifying to myself that I was acting indeed in accordance with Dharma?

“It’s reasonable that you ask it... dear Draupadi but would it be churlish of me to ask you this in turn: You had not one but all five of your husbands present there in Hastinapur on that day. All of them remained silent and watched you being outraged... Tell me was my silence and my ‘*svadharma*’ more blameworthy than theirs?”

Draupadi hung her head in shame and remained silent.

The Grandsire paused to catch his breath. Then went on...

“It will always be difficult for you to understand what I’ve already said: “*Women tend to think and speak of Womanhood in ways very differently from how men do. Women rarely if ever look beyond Womanhood in trying to understand Dharma...*” You must believe me when I tell you also that this was true of even that noble daughter of the wise and great King Janaka, Janaki of the *Ramayana*.

“On that fateful day in the Hastinapur, when I witnessed your modesty being outraged, I knew that the complete destruction of the Kaurava dynasty was already upon us in that very instant...

“It wasn’t just a woman who’d been dishonoured. The very foundations of Dharma in the kingdom, I knew, had just been uprooted... The fall of Hastinapur – with all its great palace, riches, armies, its princes, nobles and vassals – became imminent at once to me in that moment! I knew for certain that it was not about **‘If’** Hastinapur would be annihilated; the real question was **‘When’**...! The wheels of Karma, as it were, cranked into motion... Nothing could ever impede or stop it.

“My ‘svadharma’ then told me this: *“Your duty to protect Hastinapur still remains. It cannot be abandoned. You must do your utmost to postpone the terrible Fate surely to befall the Kingdom. Fate will in time certainly do its duty but Bhishma, you in your time, must do yours. Do what you must in your power to delay Fate’s progress... to keep it bay... to postpone Hastinapur’s fated destiny”*.

The Grandsire paused gathering his thoughts. The old warrior then said:

“O Draupadi, you ask me now why I remained silent? Why was I unmoved? Why did I sit watching mutely a woman of nobility, a true *Arya Putri* like you being shamed in public? What can I say?

“In the end, my child, this is really all I can offer you as answers to all your questions:

“I was doing my duty, my *Dharma*... I was *delaying Fate* in atonement... I was holding it back just so I could keep Fate at bay and postpone the inevitability of war as long as possible. I did succeed... Instead of withdrawing silently, I’d intervened that day, it might have only ended up advancing Fate’s havoc. The *Great War of Kurukshetra* would’ve been declared, then and there, that very day, by both Kauravas and Pandavas! A War that was always fated to happen, mercifully got delayed! Both the Pandavas and Kauravas at least enjoyed a little peace during the intervening years, didn’t they? Between then and now?”.

“Did I act wrongly? Was my conduct adharmic? How can you, my child Draupadi, accuse me of being the chief cause of the Kurukshetra War when it was really I who had managed to keep it bay all these long years?”

Part-6

Before Draupadi left the Grandsire that night to return to her palace after her long dialogue with him ended, she put to him one final question -- a rather philosophical one.

“Grandsire, you’ve told me that *Atonement* can only delay Fate and *Karma* unravelling, but nothing can thwart it for too long or ever negate it”.

“Yes, that’s the truth, and I’ve told you why”.

“So then, wouldn’t it mean the *act of atoning* itself is meaningless? If Fate alone shall prevail always in the end, then what purpose will be atoning for one’s sins in life ever serve? So, are you saying there’s no hope for redemption of the soul?”

Bhishmacharya suddenly reached across and held Draupadi’s hands and smiled at her. He said: “My dear Draupadi, in Hastinapur that day when everyone abandoned you to your Fate ... me included... *did you give up all hope of redemption?*”

“No... at the end I clung to Krishna”.

“So, there you have the answer yourself, my child!”

“There lies only one way to conquer Fate and *Karma*. It is the way of absolute surrender, the Way of *Saranagathi* to Bhagavan Krishna... You’ve walked it already once and you were saved. Cling again to Krishna, and He will again deliver you from

all evil, as he himself promised us all from Kurukshetra:

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।

अहं त्वां सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥

*sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śharaṇaṁ vraja
aham tvām sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣhayiṣhyāmi mā śhuchaḥ*

“Renounce all and simply surrender unto Me alone. I shall liberate you from all fates and fall; do not grieve”.

“Tomorrow when the great Sun God, Surya rises and sets out on his northward journey in the sky, he will lead me into the heavens... but not before I too have sought and gained the Grace of Sri Krishna. My *atonement* shall then cease forever; I shall have bested *Fate*!”

EPILOGUE

It is said that it is always darkest before dawn.... And as Bhismacharya waited for dawn to break and herald the commencement of the hour of “*uttaraayana*” -- when he could see, for the very last time on earth, the rise and ascent of the glorious Sun-God into the skies, he began to sense a heavy and disturbing pall of darkness suddenly enveloping his spirit. His mind swirled; he was beset by self-doubt. When the moment after sunrise came, would he really be fully prepared and fit to shed his mortal coils and ascend to the heavens on his own terms?

The long, intense and, at times, very bitter dialogue with Draupadi had left Bhishma exhausted -- physically, emotionally and morally. It was more than an hour since she had left him to return to the palace and yet, in the darkest hour before dawn, he now began feeling a strange mood of brooding remorse creeping upon him....

He began to wonder if he did truly right by Draupadi.... Whether instead of giving her an unconditional apology and asking for straight forgiveness, he had launched upon an unnecessary long-winded defence of his own actions and ‘*svadharma*’.

The final minutes before daybreak seemed to stretch endlessly... He had expected that as the hour of his departure neared, his mind would grow serene. To his consternation now, instead, he realized that it was rather troubled.... He felt very uneasy.

At that moment, the Grandsire suddenly felt another silent presence beside him... It stood at a distance away from the bed of arrows. In the dim light of the sky just before impending daybreak, Bhishmacharya felt the figure draw slowly near him...

At once he recognized who it was! It was Sri Krishna!

The Grandsire’s eyes opened wide, and he could see clearly the beautiful form of Krishna holding his flute in one hand, while with the other, he gently clasped Bhishma’s own firmly. The dying old warrior had tears welling up. His voice choked and his chest heaved in a spasm of emotion. He clutched at Krishna’s hand and raised it to his eyes in solemn worship. Bhishma then wept ... but they were tears of pure joy.

Krishna then spoke in a whisper to the Grandsire:

“All your life, I know, has been spent indeed in atonement for deeds that Fate and Karma conspired to thrust you into doing --- Amba’s tragic life being the very first of them. Ask yourself ‘*pitamahan*’, whether atonement now has at last reached the end...? Is there nothing more to atone for? When the moment of “*uttaraayana*” arrives, and very soon it will, will you leave with your soul free of the faintest taint of guilt over the slightest of lapses in the Dharma that all your life, so firmly, so proudly and so bravely you abided in?”

Krishna stood unmoving; his hand still grasped by the Grandsire’s own. A long moment of silence ensued when neither he nor Bhishmacharya spoke.

Then the dying warrior, in a hoarse whisper, said:

“Yes Krishna, before I leave, perhaps I should have beseeched Draupadi her forgiveness. As the ‘*pitamahan*’ of both the Pandavas and Kauravas, I ought not to have stood by mutely, watching the ignominy as it unfolded on the fateful day she was dishonoured...

“Draupadi’s understanding of Dharma is perhaps limited... it’s womanlike and maybe far less all-comprehending than mine – and I realise how haughtily I did tell her that... an hour ago. But then, Krishna, I realise that with all my vaunted awareness of Dharma, I acted in a way that did not behove me. I should have acted differently in defence of her womanhood in that dire moment at the Royal Court of Hastinapur....

“Be that all as it may, Krishna, if there is one truth that has revealed itself to me in the very last moment of my life on earth, it is this:

“If a man does claim, like I have done all my life, that he possesses superior awareness of Dharma, then he ought to express and assert himself through far greater, far braver deeds than lesser men or women with incomplete understanding of the same Dharma, might otherwise do. If men of superior Dharmic nature fail in their timely duties, then it is only men of inferior Dharmic nature who will always prevail in this world. I did not fail Draupadi then on that terrible day so much as I failed a higher Dharma to which I thought I had a claim... And I failed her again an hour ago when the poor child came running to meet me in the middle of the night to unburden her grieving, broken heart”.

Krishna smiled.

Dawn broke. Over the far horizon, the first rays of sunshine of the first day of spring equinox came streaming and bathed the fallen body of ‘*pitamahan*’ in iridescent hues....

--The END--

Post-Script:

In the ***Shrimad Bhagavatham***, the departure of Sri Bhishmacharya from the mortal realms at the hour of the Sun's "uttaraayana" ascent is described by the Puranic raconteur, *Sri Suta*. Krishna graced Bhishma with His presence as the old warrior was passing away on the battlefield. The "pitamahan's" last words were these:

तमिममहमजं शरीरभाजां हृदिहृदि

धिष्ठितमात्मकल्पितानाम् ।

प्रतिदृशमिव नैकधाऽर्कमेकं समधिगतोऽस्मि विधूतभेदमोहः ॥

(Now I can meditate with full concentration on Bhagavan Krishna, who is present before me in this moment, because now I have crossed these mortal shores and journey forth towards Him who resides everywhere and is seen in different forms... Like the Sun he is One... even though its reflections and manifestations are many.

श्री सूत उवाच -

कृष्ण एवं भगवति मनोवाग्दृष्टिवृत्तिभिः ।

आत्मन्यात्मानमावेश्य सोऽन्तः श्वासमुपारमत् ॥

At the end, he said to himself, "O Krishna, I seek refuge in you, after having left all the worldly attachments. I am tired of the continuous circle of life and death. Let me rest at your divine feet."

"Thereafter," said Suta the Pauranika, "the Grandsire concentrated his senses and mind into Shri Krishna, united with Shri Krishna and left the mortal body at the auspicious time of Uttarayana."

END



CHAPTER 26

NARASIMHA: VISHNU'S AVATAR AND SIGNIFICANCE

Every month, on the day the asterism of 'swAti' in the Hindu almanac falls, it is the habit in every Sri Vaishnava household to remember the fourth avatAra of Vishnu, the glorious Lakshmi-nrsimhan, the man-lion form in which NaaraayaNa, the Almighty, appeared before his beloved devotee, the child PrahlAda, and rescued him from the tyranny of the evil 'asura', Hiranyakasipu.

The story of the Nrsimha-avatAra is related in the ancient purAnA of our land, the Srimad BhAgavatam, in the seventh '*skanda*'. The Nrsimha-avatara is fourth in the line of Vishnu's 'dasAvatAra' and the first in a form akin to humankind. The 'avatAra' of half-lion half-man was necessitated because the evil force of Hiranyakasipu was so overpowering that it could be destroyed by neither human nor animal agency alone. It required a divine force combining within itself the awesome ferocity of feral animality (*ugram* ') and the marvellous capacity of human genius (*agatita-ghaTana-sAmarthyam* ', i.e., the power to make the impossible happen) to outwit and root out the scourge of evil from earth.

Hiranyakasipu, the personification of evil, and the Lord's child-devotee, Prahlada, were father and son. The father, by dint of years of penance and effort had attained extraordinary, even supernatural, powers and had become the lord of all the world. So powerful he became that he came very near claiming immortality and omnipotence. Pride and hubris soon made him arrogate to himself the status of God Almighty. He saw all the world to be but his own creation, and he saw nothing beyond the world of which he had become undisputed ruler.

Prahlada, though born of his 'asura' father's demonic flesh, was of an entirely different character. Even as a child his soul tended toward utter devotion to NaaraayaNa, Lord Almighty. And as he grew in years, Prahlada became more and more immersed in the consciousness and worship of his chosen deity.

This infuriated the father who could not tolerate his son bowing to any being other than himself. When neither fatherly persuasion nor threats could succeed in turning Prahlada away from contemplation of God, Hiranyakasipu subjected his son to untold misery. He had his courtiers throw the boy into a pit of serpents, they fed him to the lions, they tried drowning him in the sea, they tried setting him on fire, they hurled him from a steep cliff, and they tried poisoning him.

However hard they tried, no one could do harm to Prahlada who came out utterly unscathed by miracle, as it were, from every ordeal. The Lord's unseen but constant protection was upon him in full measure.

Finally, Hiranyakasipu could stand it no more. In a terrible rage one evening, he confronted his little son and challenged him to reveal the whereabouts of the God he worshipped. 'Show me where your Vishnu is and I shall show you who I am! Why doesn't he show himself, if he is real?' he thundered.

'PrahlAda, I am the Lord of the World, I am unmatched. I am invincible. No man or being on earth can overpower me. Death cowers in my presence. Day and night, the earth and the skies shudder in my presence. No weapon on earth, sword, mace, sickle, or axe, can smite me. Who is this Supreme Being Narayana you are talking about?! Show him to me! And you shall know who is truly supreme!'

Prahlada quietly retorted, 'My father! You ask me to show you where Lord Almighty Vishnu is. How can I? He resides and prevails everywhere! He is omniscient, omnipotent. He is eternal, unborn, undying.

He resides in my heart as much as He does in yours and everyone else's! Look within yourself and you shall surely find him. There is no place in all His Creation where his Presence is absent, every nook, every cranny bears his witness! He is 'sarva-vyApi'. He is witness to everything, and everything is witness to Him, "avyaya purusha-sAkshi"!

When he heard this almost laconic reply of his son uttered with such innocent but firm conviction, Hiranyakasipu became incensed. In a paroxysm of mad temper, he gathered his great mace and roared, 'If your great Vishnu resides everywhere, let him show himself up then in this pillar here! I shall shatter it now with this mace of mine, and if your Vishnu is for real and brave enough to stand up to Hiranyakasipu, he should show up here and now!'

So saying, the emperor of evil took up his massive mace and brought it down on one of the great pillars in the palace hall. The earth trembled. The walls crumbled. The wind suddenly howled. The day passed suddenly into night, and a strange, macabre event then unfolded itself!

From within the pillar rent asunder by Hiranyakasipu's blow, emerged a strange, awesome form that was half-man and half-lion, a blood-curdling sight to behold! It had long manes, blazing, and fiery eyes, massive leonine jaws and gaping fangs. It dwarfed everything around the palace. It emerged out of the debris with a spine-chilling roar. It strode menacingly towards Hiranyakasipu, towering over him like a colossus, casting its eerie shadow of death upon him like a malevolent predator lurking in the darkness of the night ('bheekara-bheekara kareendra').

NammAzhwAr, one of the greatest among Azhwars and Acharyas of the Sri Vaishnava fold, in his famous 1,000-versed book of hymns called 'tiruvoimOzhi', sang of this marvellous yet terrible scene in brilliant Tamil images:

*pozthuthu melintha pun sekkaril vaan thisai
sUzhum ezhunthu uthirap-punala malai
kizhthu-piLantha singam othathAl appan
aazh thuyar seydu asurarai kollumArE! (7.4.6)*

The above verse has been very beautifully translated into English in the book *Hymns for the Drowning* as follows:

**At the red hour of sunset, there was blood
on the heavens and the eight directions.**

**Our Lord
plunged the demon into despair and slaughtered him:
a lion tearing open
a mountain under his claws.**

It was a ghastly sight indeed, and it is also described very vividly in Sanskrit by another great Sri Vaishnava poet-philosopher, Swami Vedanta Desika (fourteenth CE) too in his famous 'stOtra' 'kAmAsikAshtakam' in praise of Lord Nrisimha:

*saTa-paTala bheeshanE sarabha-sAtta hAsotbhaTe
spurat-krudhi parisphutat brukuti-vaktre krutE, etc.*

Vishnu emerged instantly in such a strange and marvellous avatar ('nArasimha-vapu:') and picking up Hiranyakasipu, He laid him upon His lap and snapped his spine like a twig. The fury of the Lord was

unbounded. Nrsimha cracked open the mighty chest of the evil emperor as if it were a mere nut-fruit; and with His nails (*'nakAgrE'*) gouged out the entrails of His devotee's tormentor and wound it around his neck like a garland.

It was a gory spectacle that the *purAna* describes. It all happened in the flash of an instant. The avatar that could be described as neither human nor animal, occurred and ended in that nether hour of twilight when day is not far gone and night too is not far away. And it happened right on the doorsteps of the emperor's palace, neither inside or outside. The death of one, who had arrogantly claimed lordship over the entire world and absolute invincibility against man, animal, or any earthly denizen, was annihilated by a weapon nothing more ordinary than a pair of feline claws! The impossible had been made to happen . . . *'agatita-ghaTana-sAmarthyam'*!

Lord Nrisimha's fury did not however abate. The man-lion continued his mayhem, roaring, gnashing his teeth, eyes spewing fire and sheer terror. The *'purAna'* tells us that such was the terrible, irrepressible mien of this avatArA, even the presence of His consort, Goddess Lakshmi, who hurriedly appeared on the scene, could not douse the mighty fires of wild cosmic rage emanating from *'jwAla-narasimhan'*! The goddess gave up trying to pacify Her Lord saying, could this terrifying Presence here be that of My Lord?!

Finally, the *'devAs'* and gods who had gathered there pleaded with PrahLAda to himself approach the raging form of the man-lion and somehow mollify it. The child boldly strode forth and sang a paean to the Lord, *'prahlAda-stuthi'* recorded in the Srimadh Bhagavatham, on hearing which Nrisimhan's *'ugram'* gradually waned. Goddess Lakshmi once again seated herself on Her Lord's lap and together with the assembled deities and celestials there, gave an audience to the devotees in the auspicious form of *'sri.mAlOla nrsimhan'*.

The world was rid of evil, the devotee Prahlada was rescued, and peace once again reigned in all the worlds.

The *purAni*-c lore of Lord Lakshmi-narasimha lives on eternally in the hearts of millions of people in India. There are many temples in the states of Andhra Pradesh and T. Nadu where this deity is worshipped ardently to this day.

Ahobilam near Kurnool is the most famous where *'nava-nrsimhan'* or the nine different forms of the Lord are found in nine shrines at various spots on the great, verdant hills of Ahobilam. This Ahobilam is a great place of pilgrimage for millions of devotees from all over the country. According to the *'hari-vamsha purAna'* Lord Rama Himself worshipped the deity in Ahobilam through the hymn titled *'narasimha-panchAmruta stOtra'*.

There are beautiful temples of Lakshmi-nrsimhan also in Vishakapatnam (*simhAchalam*), Yadagirigutta (near Hyderabad), Mangalagiri, SingaperumAl koil (near Madras), Chola Simhapuram (or Sholinghur, near Madras), Velukkai (near Kanchipuram), Namakkal (T. Nadu), VedAdri, Wadapalli, and Mattapalli (all on Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh).

The devotees of Ahobilam by and large also belong to the famous Ahobila Mutt headed by the holy pontiff, Srimad Azhagiyasingar Jeer.

The worship of Lakshmi-narasimha is popular amongst all sects of Saivites, Vaishnavites, and MadhvAs since all the great AchAryas of the Vedic tradition have worshipped this deity. In the *'ahirbudhnya-samhita'* it is written that Lord Siva himself worshipped Narasimhan through the famous *'stOtra'* called *'mantra-rAja-pada-stOtra'*. Adi Sankara sang the famous *'lakshmi-nrsimha-karAvalamba-stOtra'* in praise of this deity. The Sankara Mutt also has a special shrine for this deity

in Sringeri. Many MAdhvAs worship this deity in their homes as ‘*kula-deivam*’. For millions of Sri Vaishnavas who belong to the tutelage of the fifteenth century saint Sri.Adivan Satakopa Muni, Lakshmi-nrisimhan is the foremost deity in their traditional pantheon.

One will find the avatar of Nrsimhan is a constant leitmotif in the sculptures of many an archaeological site in India. In the classical forms of music, dance, drama, and folk arts in many traditions of India, this avatar of Vishnu is evoked widely and creatively.



Lord Nrsimhan is thus a universally acknowledged God celebrated as the Mighty One who rushes instantly to the succour of His dear devotees just as He rushed to save His beloved PrahlAda.

The great Sri Vaishnava preceptor, Vedanta Desika, composed this poignant Sanskrit paeon to this deity:

*tvayi rakshati rakshakai: kimanyaihi
tvayi chaAraskhati rakshakai kimanyaihi
iti nishchita dhe: srayAmi nityam
nruharE vegavati tatAshrayam tvAm*

(Verse 8 of ‘*kAmAsikAshtakam*’ of Swami Vedanta Desika)

If You deign to protect me, O Lord, Do I need to appeal to any other deity? But if You should turn me away, alas,

What use then is it beseeching any other?



Every Sri Vaishnavan who has grown up listening to the story of this strange but wonderful puranic tale of Prahlada and Narasimha knows well that there is much more to this simple, almost bedtime story for children than what meets the eye. The endearing story of Bhakthi no doubt has deep theological significance. It also holds lessons, however, for the secular world of the modern day too. And finally, it conveys, through allegory, some of the most profound tenets of Vedantic philosophy underpinning the Sri Vaishnava faith.

That the Prahlada story is laced with traditional Vaishnava theology is well-known to every Sri Vaishnava if he is familiar with the doctrines of (i) Bhakthi as a pathway to God, (ii) the compassion of God ('vaatsalya') for even the lowliest of his creations, (iii) the inevitable triumph of justice over oppression on earth and that of good over evil in human affairs, and (iv) the power of individual faith prevailing ultimately over every shade of atheistic skepticism or unbelief.



One might possibly also go beyond the above familiar themes in the storyline to appreciate a few allusions to matters and issues of contemporary and secular nature.

The puranaa, for example, relates how the venerable Sage Narada discoursed with the infant Prahlada even while the latter was a mere fetus inside the womb of his pregnant, slumbering mother. Modern genetics and pediatrics reveal to us that the psychological growth or the mental development of an infant is not only a post-partum but a pre-natal process too. It starts even when it is but a mere fetus and the ancient puranas already knew that fact well.

Another example in the *puraanic* narrative can be described as an allusion to matters of public or state policy imposed by all rulers and all governments everywhere in the world including modern democratic dispensations. Such state policy impinges often brazenly on education and, most subtly, upon the right to freedom of individual expression, public censorship, etc.

Sensing that his young son Prahlada is naturally, even congenitally disposed towards reverence and worship of his arch-adversary Lord Hari, Hiranyakasipu commands his courtiers (Bhagavatham Book 7 Discourse 5. Verse 6 and 7) to design and commence for the boy a curriculum of 'proper education' which turns out to be nothing but a program of 'brainwashing' or state indoctrination in the same sense in which we know it in modern times.

'Let the child be properly guarded', commands Hiranyakasipu, 'so that his intellect may not be perverted by insidious Brahmins living amongst us as traitors *incognito* in my land.' The courtiers do as they are told. They do their best to 'indoctrinate' Prahlada into expressing loyalty and total submission to the king of the land rather than to God. They try again and again, but do not succeed until at last they give up and express helplessness to their king.

The king is extremely displeased at the results and with the way in which his 'education policy' is carried out by his courtiers (Bk. 7. Disc. 5 Verse 25). 'Oh, vile Brahmins!' he yells at his state educators. 'You dare fail in implementing my bidding? What is this nonsense that the child has been taught by your wicked selves?! Every time he speaks the child breaks out into song in praise of Hari?!'

'This son of yours, O King', the tutors remonstrate in plaintive tones, 'possesses a mind that has been neither taught nor trained by us; but it possesses an unbending, firm persuasion of its very own and it submits to none but NaaraayaNa. O King, please do not lay the blame on us who have tried so hard to educate your son properly, but have failed. Do not be enraged at us!' (Bk. 7 Disc. 5. Verse 28).

It is then that King Hiranyakasipu decrees with all imperious power at his command as head of state: A son like this though begotten by one's own body, should be shunned as a disease! One should amputate him as a diseased limb that is injurious to the rest of the body, otherwise the whole body cannot be saved. The boy should therefore be got rid of by all possible means. This boy of corrupt mind is my enemy though he masquerades as my son' (Bk. 7. Disc. 5. Verse 37 and 38).

While reading the above narrative in the Srimad Bhaagavatam, we cannot help immediately drawing parallels with modern trends in societies and times in history and our own age even, where we know how aggressively the state intervenes in education policy and educational institutions while in pursuit of what it alone defines, and dictates is public interest. And how, when it meets with resistance of any sort to such interventions or else is confronted with dissenting views or expression, immediately and ruthlessly clamps down censorship, not unlike Hiranyakasipu of the purana.



If the secular sub-themes of the Prahlada story mentioned above are, if ever at all, appreciated by students of the purana, much rarer still is it to see many people grasping the deeper, more profound abstruse tenet of Vedanta philosophy which, in fact, lies embedded in this ancient tale. Little is it realised by even keen students of the Srimad Bhagavatham that the Prahlada story contains within itself the whole essence of the Sankhya Yoga expounded in the second chapter of the Bhagavad-Gita.

Hiranyakasipu thunders, 'Show me Narayana, I don't see him! Where is he?' Prahlada calmly replies, Narayana is everywhere, omnipresent, omniscient, all-pervading, eternal, unborn, and undying. He resides within you, O Father, as much as he resides within me. *There is nowhere that He is not*; and there is no time when he never existed nor *will non-exist*. You do not see him, while I do. But if only you cast off your sense of "I-ness" and "Mine-ness"—"*ahamkaara*" and "*mamakaara*"—the veil of delusion that blinds you now to a higher reality would be lifted and you would indeed witness the truth that all this universe, all this existence you perceive is nothing but Vishnu . . . "*sarvam Vishnu mayam*".'

Hiranyakasipu is unable to understand what his son is talking about. He flies into an irrepressible rage.

Rage is nothing but a form of delusion too, as the Bhagavad Gita says. He thus orders his son Prahlada to be got rid of: '*Slay this boy; smite him; throw him to the lions; burn him; drown him in the deep sea; have the elephants trample him to death; or throw him off the highest cliff to meet certain death!*'

Out of every such ordeal to which the father condemns the son, Prahlada miraculously emerges utterly unscathed. This happens again and again in the story. It is truly incredible. All Hiranyakasipu's courtiers are as astonished as they are mystified.

How does the boy escape the perils? Why does he remain unharmed, fearless, and unhurt? What has possessed him that seems to help him prevail over every attempt to annihilate him?

Now, when one reflects on the events of the story above, and if one asks oneself the very same questions as the characters do in the story, one suddenly realises that these are in fact all fundamental questions of philosophy posed by Vedanta.

'When I shed my mortal coils, do I become annihilated? Is my individual-self rendered non-existent? Where do I go then? What happens to my existence? Do I merely return to ashes and dust and be subsumed into the five gross elements? Am I really nothing but a fleeting entity composed of mere terrestrial elements? Or is my sense of "I-ness" different from the elements?'

In the story, such existential questions, i.e., whether the individual self is defined and identified with the gross elements of creation, we see gets portrayed in dramatic terms.

The minions of Hiranyakasipu threw young Pahlada into the sea intending to drown him. Water does not destroy the boy. Then they build a pit of fire and throw the lad into it. The boy comes out unscathed from the fire. They then have him trampled to earth by a herd of elephants. Again, nothing happens to Pahlada. Then they bind him with ropes and hurl him through space down a steep and mountainous windswept precipice. Again, the little boy emerges unhurt. Thus, through dramatic imagery, the story subtly conveys the Vedantic truth that the five great elements viz. earth, ether, water, fire, and wind do not hold any power whatsoever over the individual self, which is but the Atman and which enlivens the body too.

In the middle of the narrative, thus, one immediately gets to grasp that the Pahlada story is, in fact, more than the story of divine avatara. It could well be read as an allegorical contrivance intended by Sage Vyasa to convey Vedantic tenets of Sankhya Yoga as pronounced by Lord Krishna in the second chapter of the Bhagavath-Gita found in the following verses:

‘The self cannot be pierced by weapons or burned by fire; water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it. The self cannot be pierced or burned, made wet or dry. It is everlasting and infinite, on the motionless foundations of eternity. The self is unmanifest, beyond all thought, beyond all change’ (Verse 24 and 25 **Bhagavath-Gita**).

Again, in **verses 29 and 30** are the words: ‘the glory of the self is beheld by a few, and only a few can describe it; a few listen; but many without true understanding. The self of all beings, living within the body, is eternal and cannot be harmed.’

The above words of the Bhagavad-Gita, uttered by Lord Krishna in the context of explicating profound Vedanta, we are thus able to clearly see and appreciate, might perhaps just as well have been spoken by Pahlada to his deluded father, Hiranyakasipu, in the great purana—the marvellous story of Narasimha in the Srimad Bhaagavatham.

The genius of the ancient sages who authored the Vedantic ‘puranas’ and fables lay indeed in their ability to use even abstruse philosophical ideas as raw material that could be weaved into endearing little stories that leave strong and lasting impressions on even a child’s mind and intellect.



BOOK 6
Sri Vishnu Sahasranaamam



CHAPTER 27

THE GLORY OF “SRI VISHNU SAHASRANAAMA”

The “Vishnu Sahasranaama” is one of the most celebrated and important passages in the great Sanskrit epic, The Mahabharata. It is a sacred litany of the 1000 names or “naama” of Vishnu, the Supreme Brahman. Each of the “naama-s” constitutes a Vedic mantra by itself containing as it does primordial phonemes or “beejaakshara”. The sounds of the “naama” are very euphonious to anyone who has familiarity with the literary cadence of the Sanskrit language.

In many Hindu families even today across India, it is customary to chant the “1000 names of Vishnu” as a daily form of household worship. The regular chanting of these “naamaa-s” is regarded as a intense spiritual exercise that is believed to be an unfailing source of meditative tranquillity of mind, physical well-being and purification of the indwelling spirit in man.

Chanting the “naamaa-s” is also believed to enable one to also gain deep insights into philosophical and religious knowledge extant in the ancient Vedantic scriptures. All the three principal schools of Vedanta viz. Dvaita, Advaita and Visishtadvaita, hold the “1000 Names of Vishnu” in great reverence as a fundamental text in Vedantic scripture. Adi Sankara, Ramanujacharya and Madhwacharya have all written elaborate commentaries on the Vishnu Sahasranaama, each elucidating the deep import of the various “naamaa-s” and celebrating their beauty and glory.

Although the traditional commentaries of the great Vedantic Acharyas do provide us profound understanding of each of the thousand “naamaa-s”, the Vishnu Sahasranama gives enough scope and liberty too for every devotee to give free rein to privately contemplate on them, letting his or her own imagination and creativity bring awareness and understanding of a “naama” on the basis of individual experience and creative propensity.

The essays in this section are the author’s selection of a few “naamaa-s” from the Vishnu Sahasranaama and they seek to weave his own imaginative appreciation of them with the help of not only the traditional commentaries of the Vedantic gurus but also contemporary science and social realities.



The Dramatic Setting

The Pāṇḍava brothers, Yudhisthira and Arjuna, were both birds of a feather.

Moments before the great Kurukshetra war began, the younger one, Arjuna, was consumed by a profound sense of moral despair. It took the great Gītōpadeśam of seven hundred verses delivered by Lord Krishna to dispel Arjuna’s mood of world-weariness, to bring him back to his senses and to make him resolve again to do his duty in war.

When the Kurukshetra War ended, it was the elder scion of the Pandava dynasty, Yudhisthira’s turn to plunge headlong into deep moral dejection, perhaps not as dramatically as his younger brother, but no less distressingly. Arjuna’s grief had been caused by anticipation of the tragedies of a war wherein

Dharma would be the first and worst casualty. *Yudhishtira*'s despair was caused in the aftermath of the same war wherein the worst fears of *Arjuna*, sadly, all came true.

At the end of the gruesome, fratricidal eighteen-day *Kurukshetra* War, there were very few victors left to blow trumpets in triumph. On both the *Kaurava* and *Pāndava* sides, the grim task of grieving for the dead took precedence over everything else. Those who survived the devastation were left only to survey the mayhem and mourn the dead. In the *Pāndava* camp, as in the *Kaurava*'s, instead of bugles blaring out victory, only the piteous wailing of bereaved mothers and widows was heard.

For *Yudhishtira*, the victory at *Kurukshetra* seemed an utterly pyrrhic one. It had been nothing but a mindless bloodbath in which brother had savaged brother, father and son, *guru* and *śiṣya* had gone for each other's throat, in a no-holds-barred orgy of unmitigated violence. Heinous acts had been committed; humane norms had been forgotten and all laws of *dharma* thrown with impunity to the winds. In terms of human life, pain, and suffering, and in terms of lost values and cherished beliefs, the cost of the Eighteen-Day War, as *Yudhishtira* saw it, was indescribably, staggeringly irreparable.

As he watched the ghostly battlefields of *Kurukshetra* fall silent, *Yudhishtira* felt an immense pall of perplexity descend upon him. 'The war is over', he thought, and victory is won but is it worth all this? Is this how it all should have ended? Is this the true purpose of life? Is this the happiness one seeks in life? Is this what we must leave behind for our children and future progeny? This war they say is *dharma-yuddha*! Is this the final reward of *dharma*? What is this so-called *Dharma*?'

Eighteen days back, at the very beginning of the war, his brother *Arjuna* had sought solace in Lord *Krishna*'s profound *Gītopadeśam*. That had been eighteen long days back. Rivers of blood had flown since then and many a *Pāndava* hero slain senselessly. The pain and woe *Yudhishtira* now felt in his heart derived no comfort from the forgotten wisdom and lessons of the *Bhagavadgītā*. There was a dark storm beginning to gather inside *Yudhishtira*'s sinking heart; it grew unbearably heavy and troubled.

In his hour of crisis, the younger *Arjuna* had turned to Lord *Krishna*, his friend, philosopher, and mentor, for consolation and encouragement. Who was *Yudhishtira* to turn to now in his own moment of crisis and confusion, and receive similar wisdom of counsel? His *guru*, *Dronācārya*, was long dead in battle. And wise, eminent elders on either side of the *Kaurava* and *Pāndava* family, to whom *Yudhishtira* might have otherwise gone for comfort, had all been killed in battle, one by one.

'To whom can I now go to for comfort? In this moment of pain and isolation,' *Yudhishtira* bitterly cried to himself, I see nothing but darkness and confusion in the world around me! Who will share the burden of my soul and relieve it of its grief?'

The *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* tells us that Sage *Vyāsa*, sensing the great pall of gloom that had enveloped *Yudhishtira*, advised him as follows:

nate sarva-rahasyeshu samśayān manasi sthitān I
chettā bhāgīrathī: putra sarvagnya: sarvadharmavit II
(*Mahābhārata*, *Śānti Parva*, 12.38.7)

'O *Yudhishtira*! Do not give way to grief! Go now and quickly to your Grand Sire, *Bhīshma*! He knows everything there is to be known in this world. He is replete with all knowledge of *Dharma*. The son of the pious and pure *Gangā* will dispel all your doubts.'

śrotum icchasi ced dharmān akhileṇa yudhishtira I
praihi bhīṣma mahābāho vrddham kuru pitāmaha II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.38.6)

‘My dear *Yudhishtira*, arise from this state of depression, tarry not, go forthwith to your grand sire!
To know all *dharmas*, resort to the eldest of the *Kuru* clan, *Bhīṣma*, the Great Warrior.’
Vyāsa further urged the eldest of the *Pāṇḍava* brothers:

sākshād dadarśa yo devān sarvān śakrapurogamān II yasya
brahmarsayah punyā nityamāsa sabhāsadah I
yasya nāviditam kinchit gnyānam jneyeshu vidyate II
sa te vakshyati dharmagṇyo dharman sukshsmarta tattvavit I
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 37)

‘Did you know, O *Yudhishtira*, he who has directly seen the great lords *Indra* and others, in whose court great sages daily assembled and held forth on lofty matters, he whose knowledge is complete and without anything left unknown, he is the great seer, *Bhīṣma*! He will clear all your doubts, being fully conversant with *Dharma* in its minutest detail.’

‘Go now’, said *Vyāsa* to *Yudhishtira*, ‘go now to *Bhīṣma* and unburden yourself of all despair and moral quandary.’ Upon hearing *Vyāsa*’s words, *Yudhishtira* began to recall how during the first nine days of the *Kurukshetra* War, when the venerable *Bhīṣmācārya* had been their commander-in- chief, the *Kaurava* forces had seemed virtually invincible. So terrible had been the havoc *Bhīṣma* caused, that for a while, it had even looked as though the war was all but over for the *Pāṇḍavas*. So valiantly and skilfully had the *Pitāmaha* fought and led his forces.

Yudhishtira also recalled how the *Pāṇḍavas* had to finally resort to a strategy of subtle subterfuge to put an end to *Bhīṣma*. On day 10 of the war, when it became clear that unless *Bhīṣma* was stopped the *Pāṇḍavas* would be simply routed, they had asked Śikhandi, a lesser prince in their camp who was known to be of doubtful gender, to take the battle into *Bhīṣma*’s camp. When *Bhīṣma* faced Śikhandi, a mere eunuch, the venerable sire was overcome by severe misgivings about having to battle a warrior who was not a man. Taking advantage of *Bhīṣma*’s momentary hesitation and distraction, Śikhandi had quickly felled the great *Pitāmaha*. And when *Arjuna* also joined forces with Śikhandi, their combined onslaught overpowered *Bhīṣma*.

Succumbing to *Arjuna*’s barrage of arrows, the great *Bhīṣma* became grievously wounded. His whole body had been ravaged by arrows, his limbs and torso shot through and through to pieces. Crippled thus, bloodied and totally immobilised, the great *Bhīṣma* had been laid upon a makeshift bed of arrows (*śaratalpa*), which *Arjuna* had fashioned, and there it was, on the battlefield, that the great warrior now lay, waiting for the inevitable, imminent end.



Recalling the sad and moribund state in which they had all left *Bhīshmācārya*—on a rough bed of arrows, a *śaratalpa*, *Yudhishtira* was rather skeptical of what sort of counsel or solace the *Pitāmaha* could possibly offer him at that point in time. The Great Warrior was grappling with death; it was hardly the appropriate time to approach him for answers to the great questions and issues of life.

Yudhishtira was therefore not very impressed with *Vyāsa*'s suggestion.

Sensing *Yudhishtira*'s hesitation, Lord *Krishna* Himself joined *Vyāsa* in persuading the eldest *Pāndava* to hurry to *Bhīshma*'s side. *Krishna* urged *Yudhishtira*:

śaratalpagato bhīshma' śāmyann iva hutāśana'I
 mām dhyāti purushavyāghras tato me tadgatam manah' II
 divyāstrāṇi mahātejā yo dhārayati buddhimān I
 sāṅgāmśca catwaro vedān s tam asti i manasā gata: II
 sa hi bhūtam bhaviśhyaccha bhavaccha bharatarsabha I
 vetti dharmabhṛutām śresthah tato me tadgatam manah II
 tasminnastamite bhīshme pāṇḍavānām dhurandhare I
 jñānānyalpī bhaviśhyanti tasmāt tvām bodhayāmyaham II
 yacca tvam vakśhyase bhīshma pāṇḍavāyānuprucchate I
 veda pravādā itite sthāsyanti vasudhātale II

(*Mahābhārata*, *Śānti Parva*)

'O *Yudhistira*! The great *Bhīshma*, lying on the bed of arrows, resembles fire calmed after being suppressed. He is mentally worshipping Me even in this state. My mind hence has hastened to him. Radiant is his whole personality. Not only has he mastered all there is in the art of warfare, he has also mastered the *Vedas* and all allied scriptures. If he departs now from this world, dear *Yudhishtira*, the *jñāna mārga* itself will be dealt a great loss. I therefore entreat you, O heir to the *Pāndava* crown, to repair to

him and gain his high wisdom. And *Bhīshma*, whatever that he may teach now to these *Pāṇdavas*, those lessons will indeed become famous as the very *Veda*-s of this world!’

ayam prānān utsishkrtsrustam sarve ’bhyetya prucchata I
krtsnān hi vividhān dharmāmś cāturvarṇayasya vettyayam II (
Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva, 12.54.9)

esha vrddhah purā lokān samprāpnoti tanutyajām I
tam śīghram anuyunjadhvam samśayān manasi sthitān II
(Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva, 12.54.10)

‘*Bhīshma* is fully conversant with the prescribed *Dharma* of all *varṇa*-s. Go to him quickly, O *Pāṇdava*, and get all your doubts and misgivings (*samśaya*) of life and living resolved.’

The account above is of an extremely heart-rending scene in the *Mahābhārata*. In it we witness two *avatāra puruṣa*-s paying their farewell tribute to a giant of a *jnāni* in the person of *Bhīshmācārya*. One is *Krishna Paramātmā*, the last *avatāra* on earth of *sākshāt Srīman Nārāyaṇa*; and the other is *vyāsāya vishnu rūpāya vyāsa rūpāya vishnave*.

The words used by both to describe *Bhīshma* are indeed poignant and significant. They are emphatic confirmation of the respect and affection which God, the Supreme *Brahman*, is said to reserve for the true *jnāni*-s of this world. *Krishna*’s tribute to *Bhīshma* here is, in fact, verily an echo of what earlier in the *Bhagavadgītā* He had told *Arjuna*:

caturvidhā bhajante mām janāh sukrino ’rjuna I
ārto jignyāsur arthārthī gnyyaani ca bharatartsabha II
tetshām jnānī nityayukta ekabhaktirviśishyate I
priyo hi gnānino ’tyarthamaham sa ca mama priyah II
(Bhagavadgītā VII. 16—17)

‘O *Arjuna*, there are four kinds of souls in this world who profess devotion to me—he who is distressed, he who seeks wealth, he who is inquisitive and he who is in quest of the Absolute—the supreme *jnāni*. Of these, the *jnāni* whose devotion springs out of his knowledge of me, is the best. For I am very dear to him; and he is very dear to Me.’

Krishna tells *Yudhishtira*, ‘As he lies upon the painful *śaratalpa*, the great *Bhīshma*’s mind, even at this very moment, is firmly transfixed in Me. This is why I must hasten to him. He is the foremost *jnāni* among *jnāni*-s and this is why I reside in *Bhīshma*’s mind at this moment even as we speak. And so you too, O *Yudhishtira*, delay not and follow Me! Let us rush to *Bhīshmācārya*’s side now.’

The element of urgency in *Krishna*’s statement above is amply clear from the expression *tam śīghra manuyui jadvam*. Clearly *Krishna* was telling *Yudhishtira*, ‘Hurry up, go to the dying *Bhīshma*’s side! You may yet get to hear words of wisdom and *dharma* from the *Pitāmaha*! I too am hastening to be with him in his last moments on earth, he who is a *parama jnāni* and a soul very dear to Me!’

Together with *Vyāsa* and Lord *Krishna*, *Yudhishtira* went along to the spot where *Bhīshmācārya* lay limp and lifeless upon the *śaratalpa*.

Looking at the mangled body of the aged warrior, gasping his last, *Yudhishtira* became once again unconvinced that it was possible to elicit answers to the great questions of life vexing him, from

someone who, obviously, was in the painful throes of death. So it took *Yudhishtira* quite by surprise when he heard *Krishna* address *Bhīshma* with the following words:

na te glānirna
te mūrchā na dāho na ca te rujā I prabhavishyanti gāngeya
kshutpipāse na cāpyuta II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.52.16)

sattvastham ca mano nityam tava bhīshma bhavishyati I
rajas tamobhyām rahitam ghanairmukta ivodurāt II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.52.18)

‘O *Bhīshma*, there is no weariness in you even after all the great exertions and pain of war. That is because you are a votary of the Supreme Truth [*Sat*]. You are free of *rajo tamo guna*. You are as pure and serene as the moon uncovered by clouds.’

Bhīshma slowly opened his blood-shot eyes and looked around. He saw the entire *Kuru* clan, or whatever was left of it, as it stood grieving around his śaratalpa. Then with eyes fixed firmly on *Krishna*, and palms folded in prostration, the old warrior replied. The words *Bhīshma* now spoke simply amazed *Yudhishtira*!

In a clear and strong voice, *Bhīshma* said:

dāho mohah śramaścaiva klamo glānistathā rujā I
tava prasādāt govinda sadyo vyapagatānagha II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.54.17)

‘Due to your kindness, O *Krishna*, all the infirmities of life have drained away from me completely—covetousness, desire, fatigue, pain, senility. I am free from all these.’

yacca bhūtam bhavishyacca bhavacca paramadyute tat sarvam
anupaśyāmi pānau phalamivāhitam II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.54.18)

‘O *Krishna*! My Lord! I am now able to visualise fully the past, the present and the future, as easily and lucidly as one can see a fruit held in the palm of one’s hand!’

vedoktāścaiva ye dharmā vedāntanihitāśca ye I
tān sarvān samprapaśyāmi varadānāt tavācyuta II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.54.19)

‘The eternal truths enshrined in the *Veda-s* and *Vedānta* now stand visible and absolutely transparent to me, thanks to your infinite grace, my dearest *Acyuta*!’

yuveva cāsmi samvrttastvadanudhyāna brmhita’JI vaktum śreyah
samartho’smi tvatprasādājjanārdana II
(*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 12.54.23)

‘My Lord, my *Janārdana*! I have always worshipped You deep within my mind. Though I am now an old and utterly ravaged man, I feel as fresh and vigorous as a mere youth! By your grace alone, O *Krishna*, I feel I am fit enough, even in this state of body and mind, to explain the greatest lessons of

dharma to be learnt in this world! This *dharma* is the only true means to attain eternal good fortune [śreyas] and moral merit!’

The above scene is graphically portrayed in the *Mahābhārata* and is a thrilling and magnificent one indeed! It is about an encounter that is truly far more historic than the one that took place between *Krishna* and *Arjuna* when the *Bhagavadgītā* was delivered. It takes place at a meeting of the minds of four of the mightiest, loftiest characters in the entire *Mahābhārata* viz. *Vyāsa*, *Yudhishtira*, *Bhīshma*, and *Paramātmā Vāsudeva* Himself.

This encounter has many significant moral lessons to offer us, and we shall discuss the most significant of them in the following pages. But by far the most outstanding fact to emerge from it is that the *Vishnu Sahasranāma*, which ensued from the lips of *Bhīshma* a little later in the encounter, was undoubtedly and unmistakably, pre-ordained and inspired by Divine Will.

While *Krishna* had been obliged to deliver the *Bhagavadgītā* at the behest of *Arjuna*, a mortal after all, *Vishnu Sahasranāma* was delivered at the behest of Lord *Krishna*, God Almighty Himself! While the Gita had been intended in the main for *Arjuna* only, the *Sahasranāma* was meant for a larger and far more august audience that included, not only *Arjuna*, but *Yudhishtira* as well, not to speak of the great *Vyāsa* and Lord *Krishna* Himself, who, more than anybody else, there that day in *Kurukshetra*, was very eager to listen to what *Bhīshma* had to say!

There are indeed very many subtle (*sūkshma*) lessons we can learn from a close study of the events that occurred immediately prior to *Bhīshma* delivering the *Vishnu Sahasranāma*. Let us now examine a few of them:

- (1) Military victors in a war are not always necessarily the moral victors. The reason why *Krishna* and Sage *Vyāsa* urged *Yudhishtira*, the leader of the triumphant *Pāndavas*, to go to *Bhīshma*, the leader of the defeated *Kauravas*, for moral counsel was to make *Yudhishtira* realise that often the conqueror might have much to learn from the vanquished. It is no disgrace; in fact, it is often good policy for the victorious to show humility in the presence of the defeated, especially one so exalted as *Bhīshma*.
- (2) Never dismiss an old person as being senile even if he/she happens to be on the deathbed. It is easy for all of us to regard the old and dying as useless, as a burden on the family and on society as a whole. It is tempting to ask, ‘What is there left for this old man, who is counting his days to the grave, to offer me in terms of living wisdom and counsel? His senses are taking leave of him; his faculties are fading one by one; his memory is weak, speech slurred and judgment faulty. Of what possible use anymore is this old, dying man to me?’ The reason why *Krishna* and *Vyāsa* urged *Yudhishtira* to approach the dying *Bhīshma* for moral counsel was to dispel precisely such common but mistaken notions everywhere in the world about old, decrepit persons having really nothing to offer to the living ones who survive them.

If *Yudhishtira* too, like common humanity, had been similarly dismissive of the dying *Bhīshma* on that fateful day in *Kurukshetra*, the *Vishnu Sahasranāma* might never have probably seen the light of day. The fact that *Krishna*, together with *Vyāsa*, made sure not to allow it, and instead strongly urged *Yudhishtira* to seek the venerable *Pitāmaha*’s grace in the very last moments of his life on earth, clearly shows that the *Vishnu Sahasranāma*, no less than the *Bhagavadgītā*, was truly intended to be the Almighty’s own message to mankind! Which is why *Krishna* refers to it, as we saw above, as:

yacca tvam vakshyase bhīshma pāndavaavāyānuprucchate I
veda pravādā iva te sthāsyanti vasudhātale II

Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva, 12.54.29)

i.e., ‘Whatever that *Bhīshma* may teach now to these *Pāndavas*, those lessons will indeed become famous as the very *Veda-s* of this world!’

- (3) The third important lesson to be learnt by us is that which, in the parlance of Vedānta, is called *antima smṛiti*, the act of recollecting or remembering God—in form, image or name—in the terminal moments of one’s life, even as one is preparing to shed one’s mortal coils and depart to the spiritual realms.

Antima smṛiti is a sublime and ineffably blissful experience gifted to man by God. It is described by Lord *Krishna* Himself in the *Bhagavadgītā* as follows:

antakāle ca māmeva smaranmuktṛvā kalevaram I
yah prayāti sa madbhāvam yāti nāstyatra saṁśayah II

(Bhagavadgītā VIII. 5)

‘Whoever, at the time of death, quits his body, remembering Me alone, at once attains My nature.

Of this let there be not even a shadow of doubt.’

It is the prospect of *antima smṛiti* as a real, positive, and blissful experience that makes it possible for man to rid himself of the morbid fear of physical death.

The common experience of death in the normal world is what we witness when we see someone dying. Usually, it is someone very old in our own family who has been ill with some disease for a long time, has suffered the indignity of gradually losing all sense and control over bodily functions. He or she then turns, for everyone around, into an object of pity and faint disgust too. This abject state was perhaps exactly the one in which *Bhīshma* too was seemingly found as he lay there stretched, wounded and forlorn, upon a śaratalpa on the silent battlefields of *Kurukshetra*.

The external appearance and physical symptoms of dying are indeed very morbid and ugly. But the internal experience is, in marked contrast, if we are to go by *Bhīshma*’s first-person account of *antima smṛiti* in the *Mahābhārata*, truly and unmistakably beatific. Look at what the *Pitāmaha* tells *Krishna*:

dāho mohah śramaścaiva klamo glānistathā rujā I tava prasādād

govinda sadyo vyapagatānagha II

(Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva, 12.54.17)

‘O *Krishna*, all the infirmities of life have drained away from me completely—covetousness, desire, fatigue, pain, senility. I am free from all this.’

Furthermore, *Bhīshma* also gives *Krishna* (and us, too) a vivid idea of the cheerful and robust frame of mind he is experiencing in the terminal moments of dying. In his own words:

yuveva cāsmisamvrttastvadanudhyāna brmhita II

‘Though I am now an old and utterly ravaged man, I feel as fresh and vigorous as a mere youth!’

We see furthermore that *Krishna* is Himself eyewitness to *Bhīshma*’s utterly buoyant experience of *antima smṛiti*. Upon seeing the old warrior on the śaratalpa we hear Him exclaim:

na te glānirna te mūrchā na dāho na ca te rujā I
prabhavishyanti gāngeya kshutpipāse na cāpyuta II
(**Mahābhārata**, Śānti Parva, 12.52.16)

sattvastham ca mano nityam tava bhīshma bhavishyati I
rajas tamobhyām rahitam ghanairmukta ivodurāt II
(**Mahābhārata**, Śānti Parva, 12.52.18)

‘O *Bhīshma*, there is no weariness in you even after all the great exertions and pain of war. You are free of *rajo tamo guna*. You seem as pure and serene as the moon uncovered by clouds.’

And we see *Bhīshma* too conceding the same rather exultantly:

yacca bhūtam bhavitjyacca bhavacca paramadyute I tat sarvam
anupaśyāmi pānau phalamivāhitam II
(**Mahābhārata**, Śānti Parva, 12.54.18)

vedoktāścaiva ye dharmā vedāntanihitāśca ye I
tān sarvān samprapaśyāmi varadānāt tavācyuta II
(**Mahābhārata**, Śānti Parva, 12.54.19)

‘O *Krishna*! My Lord! I am now able to visualize fully the past, the present and the future as easily and lucidly as one can see a fruit held in the palm of one’s hand! The eternal truths enshrined in the *Veda-s* and *Vedānta* now stand visible and transparent to me. Thanks to your infinite grace, my dearest Achyuta!’

If there is one thing the above exchange between *Bhīshma* and Lord *Krishna* makes exceedingly clear to us, it is certainly this:

- (1) *antima smriti* is a unique and blissful experience gifted by God to man. It is a foretaste of the greater ānanda that lies in store for a soul on its ascent unto *Brahman*.
- (2) *Bhīshma*, lying supine on the śaratalpa, far from being an object of morbidity was immersed in a deep state of supreme and serene enjoyment. It was a state in which there was no place, not even an iota, for either *rajas* (self-centered activity) or *tamas* (self-centered inertia). Instead *Bhīshma* felt pure *sattva* alone—exhilarating joy that is beyond compare with anything in the world! The only joy perhaps nearest to it is the unalloyed gaiety of youth and *Bhīshma* refers to it as *yuveva cāsmi samv!ttastvadanudhyāna brmhita*’.

It is interesting to note why *Bhīshma*, the old, battered warrior that he was and on the absolute verge of death, uses the phrase ‘*yuveva cāsmi*’ to compare his feelings with those of a mere youth?

When we are youthful, we have no thought of death at all. None whatsoever, isn’t it? We live in utter innocence; and we are forever bubbling with hope and good cheer. At ages 7 and 17, we are unafraid to mock at death even! When we are young, we are actually god-like—we believe ourselves to be immortal and perfect! *Bhīshma* says that the same sense of supreme elevation felt in youth is also felt in the moment of *antima smriti*! It is so heady and wonderful that the nearest comparable human experience we can find is only in the recollection of the joy of one’s bygone youthful days.

In *Vedāntic* philosophy a very interesting question is posed in this context: To what does the experience of *antima smṛiti* owe its blissful nature? Where is the seat or source of such joy? Wherefrom does it spring from? And why?

We find the answer in *Bhīṣhmācārya*'s own admission:

tava prasādādgovinda sadyo vyapagatānagha

When the soul undergoes the experience of *antima smṛiti*, it re-experiences or re-visits the joy of youthfulness because of the direct vision it enjoys of Lord *Krishna*, the *avatāra* that was the very embodiment of youthful charm and glory! Which is why *Bhīṣhma* turns to *Krishna* and tells Him in clear terms, 'It is due to your grace alone, O *Govind*, you who now stand before me, as enchantingly youthful as ever, it is by Your grace alone that I'm now experiencing this feeling of youthful bliss!'

It is *Krishna*'s youthfulness (*yauvanam*), therefore, which rubs off on *Bhīṣhma* and induces the bliss of *antima smṛiti*.

- (a) The vision of *Krishna*, (b) the concept of *antima smṛiti*, and (c) the unbridled joy of youthfulness—all these three elements are salient to the lofty doctrine of *Vedānta* since time immemorial.

Apart from the *Mahābhārata*, the finest poetic exposition of this beautiful doctrine that one can ever find anywhere in the religious literature of India is in the famous Sanskrit *stotra* of *Svāmi Venkatanāthan* (a.k.a. *Vedanta Desika*) called *Gopāla Vimśati*. In that work there are two hauntingly lovely verses which recreate in our minds *Bhīṣhma*'s glorious experience of *antima smṛiti*:

adharāhita cāru vamsa nālāh makutālambi mayūra pincha mālāh I harinīla

śilā vibhanga nālāh pratibhāh santu mama antima prayāne II

(***Gopāla Vimśati***—Verse 12)

(As I lie on my deathbed nearing the end of my life's journey, may my eyes feast upon nothing else but the graceful form of my *Krishna*—holding a slender flute to his lips, peacock feathers framing his lush hair locks, curly and cute. Bathed in colours is iridescent true. Bright, vivid, and sapphire blue!)

ityananya manasā vinirmitām venkateśa kavinā stutim pathan I

divya venu rasikam samīkshate daivatam kimapī yauvata priyam II

(***Gopāla Vimśati*** - *phala śruti*)

(He who reads this hymn of the devoted poet *Venkateśan*, shall surely obtain that unique vision [*pratibhā*] of young *Krishna* playing the divine flute; of He who is the darling of the ever-youthful belles of this world!)

The two verses above powerfully convey the idea of that mystic vision which unites the individual with God in the moment of salvation. It is the vision of youthful *Krishna* in the moment of one's physical death and spiritual release—the moment of intense bliss called *antima smṛiti*—and the power it possesses to turn even black death into a 'thing of beauty, a joy forever'.

Through *Svāmi Venkatanāthan*'s three simple but evocative phrases, *antima prayāne* (the end of my life's journey), *pratibhā* (the vision of *Krishna*'s blessed form), and *yauvata priyam* (the enchantment of youth), we are thus enabled to re-live every moment of *Bhīṣhma*'s blessed final hours on earth during which the *Vishnu Sahasranāma* came to be delivered.

To conclude, *antima smṛiti* is a state of pure *sattva*, sheer spiritual consciousness, a state where there is complete lucidity and illumination: when all things come to be known to a soul, and knowing which,

nothing else remains left to be known. It is the moment of Truth. It is a state that is likened to what the *Upanishad* describes for us in those immortal words:

brahmavidāpnoti param I tadeshā'bhyuktā I
satyam jñānamanantam brahma I
yo veda nihitam guhāyām parame vyoman I
(Taittirīya Ānandavallī)

‘Truth, knowledge, and infinitude—these constitute the nature of *Brahman*! He who attains *Brahman* attains them too!’

It was in such a supreme state of exaltation, joy, and truth that *Bhīshmācārya* delivered the Śrī Vishnu Sahasranāma. The *Sahasranāma* is thus, without a speck of doubt, Absolute *Satyam*.

vedoktāścaiva ye dharmā vedāntanihitāśca ye I
tān sarvān samprapaśyāmi varadānāt tavācyuta II
(Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva, 12.54.19)

‘The eternal truths enshrined in the Veda-s and Vedānta now stand visible and transparent to me, thanks to your infinite grace, my dearest Acyuta!’

With *Bhīshma* declaring firmly his supreme fitness to expound upon the *Veda-Vedāntic* principles of *Dharma*, the entire *Pāndava* clan, along with *Yudhishtira* and Lord *Krishna*, stood by reverentially to listen to the great *Pitāmaha*. It is a measure of *Bhīshma*’s greatness indeed that when he spoke, both God and man listened.

The twelfth *parva* or book of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Śānti Parva*, contains a comprehensive and detailed account of *Bhīshma*’s great exposition. Many of them are in the form of instructive fables, didactic tales, sermons, homilies, and sage counsel. The whole of the *Śānti Parva* constitutes a veritable encyclopedia of *Vedic* principles and values relating to virtually every aspect of human life, both individual and social. It covers ethics, social justice, jurisprudence, etc. It also offers guidelines for securing well-being both in this life and the hereafter.





CHAPTER 28

VISHNU: LORD ZERO

One of the ‘nAmA-s’ in the Sahasranaamam that I’m always intrigued by is the name ‘*shoonyah*’ given to Vishnu and as it appears in shloka 79:

suvarna-varno hEmAngO varAngas-chandanAngadI veeraha vishamah shoonyO grutAchI-rachala-chalah

The Sanskrit word ‘*shoonya*’ means ‘zero’, nullity’, cipher’, ‘emptiness’.

It would strike anyone as extremely odd that the Sahasranaamam should choose to call Lord Vishnu as ‘Zero’! You can understand God being called ‘*ekah*’, the One Supreme Being. The essence of all monistic theisms lies in the belief that God is One (the Upanishad says, ‘*ekam eva brahma, adviteeyam*’).

You can understand too God being addressed as ‘*anantah*’, the Infinite, as in the Sahasranaamam stanza:

kAma devah kAmapAlah kaamI kAntah krutAgamah anirdEshyavapu-vishnur-vIrO’ anantah dhananjayah (stanza 70)

Since God is immeasurable it seems plainly all right to name Him ‘*anantah*’, the infinite. But how is one to explain hailing the Almighty as ‘*shoonyah*’, the cipher?

There is a view that ‘If infinity is immeasurable, so is zero’. Mathematically speaking, one could define ‘zero’ to be ‘anti-infinity’. If ‘infinity’ is immeasurable plenitude, zero’ is immeasurable emptiness. If you were to imagine, say, an interminable series of values, from zero to infinity, floating somewhere out there in endless space, then, surely, zero would be at one end of it while Infinity would be found at the other end, wherever, that is, the two ends may be found, if at all. And if you reflect upon it deeply, that will make ‘zero’ and ‘infinity’ two sides of the same un-graspable coin.

By the same logic, you might say the Sanskrit ‘*anantah*’ and ‘*shoonya*’ might seem antonymous but in reality, they mean the same thing. Hailing God Almighty as ‘Lord Infinity is hence no different from hailing Him ‘Lord Zero.

Incredible logic notwithstanding, we know for a fact however that the ‘infinite’ and the ‘cipher’ are never really the same thing. None of us would be willing to exchange one for the other if it came to a real choice between the two. If I go up, for instance, to a venerable ‘achArya’ or ‘guru’ and prostrate at his feet, I expect him to shower his benediction upon me saying, ‘May you be blessed in life, my son, with God’s infinite grace!’ If instead the seer were to say, ‘May God’s zero grace be thine in life!’ the blessing would stand transformed into a vicious curse, wouldn’t it?



So then, why is God, who is an Infinite Being, being called ‘*shoonya*’, a zero—the very opposite of infinity? The traditional commentators of the Vishnu-Sahasranaamam offer us some explanation in their respective ‘*bhAshya*-s’.

Let’s take up Adi Sankara’s ‘*sahasranama bhAshya*’ first.

In his commentary, Sri Sankara (sixth CE) explains ‘*shoonya*’ as an apt ‘*nAma*’ for God, the Supreme Brahman, who is ‘*nirguNa*’—i.e., the being who is totally devoid of any qualities or attributes. In other words, according to Sankara’s school of metaphysics, God is ‘*guNa shoonyan*’.

According to this explanation, God transcends all attributes. His qualities like omnipotence, omniscience, etc., only serve to help us in ascertaining His reality but they do not ‘*per se*’ define Him. The truth of God’s existence is irreconcilable with any qualities or ‘*guNa*’, says Sankara. Brahman is to be apprehended as an absolute being or principle without qualities—i.e., He is ‘*nirguNa-brahman*’, a being with ‘zero’ qualities. Hence it is fit to call Him ‘*shoonyah*’.

Let’s turn to the other explanation found in the commentary of Sri Parashara Bhattar (eleventh century CE) on the Vishnu Sahasranaamam titled ‘*bhagavad-guNa-darpaNam*’.

Bhattar explains ‘*shoonyah*’ in the typical way of the school of VisishtAdvaita theology. According to this school, God is the Supreme Abode of all auspicious attributes. The Almighty is full of innumerable good qualities like ‘*gnyAna*’, ‘*bala*’, ‘*aiswarya*’, ‘*vIrya*’, ‘*shakti*’, and ‘*tejas*’. In VisishtAdvaita, God is ‘*ananta-kalyANa-guna-gaNa*’ (to use a famous expression of Sri RamanujAchArya)—i.e., Brahman is a Being with an infinite number of happy and wholesome attributes. The theology next states that God, by corollary, is also totally devoid of inauspicious, un-wholesome or negative qualities.

According to Bhattar, in so far as, Brahman is replete with infinitely good attributes, He is to be known as ‘*anantah*’. And in so far as He is bereft of defective qualities, He is to be known as the God of ‘zero-defects’—in other words, He is ‘*shoonyah*’.

From a purely theological standpoint both explanations above are equally valid and wholly satisfying (depending, of course, upon which school of Vedanta—Sankara’s or Ramanuja’s—one is predisposed towards). All the same, for one who is not steeped in the various nuances and niceties of Vedantic theology (especially for one who cannot really appreciate the technical difference between the metaphysical ‘*nirguNa*-’ and ‘*savishesha*-’ Brahman), the explanations of AdiSankara and Parashara Bhattar for ‘*shoonya*’ might only seem to resemble the case of the proverbial bottle that got described as ‘half-empty’ by one and ‘half-full’ by another.



Even leaving theological considerations aside, one can still regard zero to be a remarkably apt ‘*nAma*’ for the Almighty. Common knowledge of the world around us reveals how all-powerful the concept of zero, ‘*shoonya*’, truly is. When we look at the history of zero, we realise why ‘*shoonya*’ is almighty indeed!

Until about 1,500 years ago nobody in the world outside India could count numbers beyond nine without enormous difficulty. The entire Graeco-Roman Western world knew nothing about the Hindu-Arabic system of numerals that prevails in the entire world today. The Romans depended upon alphabets to denote numbers—such as I, X, and C or with V, L, and D. In their system the number 32 had to be written, for example, as XXXII but writing a number like 3200 or 32000 for the Greeks and Romans presented a huge, often insurmountable problem! For several centuries the Graeco-Roman

civilization struggled with this cumbersome system of numbering. It was the principal reason why for almost a thousand years, Western mathematics hardly advanced beyond being a method of elementary counting and mensuration using crude devices like the abacus. The Greeks and Romans had no knowledge of how to deal with large numbers, ratios, series, complex algebraic functions and calculations—all child’s play for any high-school student today. Western thought simply stagnated for ages since it could just not grapple with the mathematical problem of large numbers and calculations.

Somewhere between AD 1000 and 1200, the Western world encountered the Arab world and that was when the Hindu-Arabic system of numerals opened the eyes of the Europeans to a whole new world of mathematical thought.

The Arabs had for long borrowed and been using the Hindu system of numerals that had been in use in ancient India for more than a thousand years earlier. The Hindu system did not use alphabets but a simple but versatile scheme of numeric symbols starting from ‘zero’—the famous ‘*shoonya*’—and ending with nine. These symbolic numerals made it so easy to represent and calculate numerate values anywhere from zero to infinite in quick time. They enabled complex functions and calculations. They made it possible to represent the most formidable series of values by a mere formula which in turn facilitated further complex mathematical functions! The Western world realized—for the first time ever—the power of the Hindu numeral system: a power that became the inspiration for all the mathematical advancements to later come out of Europe: algebra, ratios, surds, functions such as squares, cube and root, series and progressions, logarithmic tables, quadratic equations, and so on and so forth.

It was the power of zero, ‘*shoonya*’, indeed that made the European Renaissance possible—the Renaissance that eventually gave birth to all the wonderful discoveries of modern mathematics such as the Fibonacci series, Pascal’s probability theory, and even Newton’s calculus! ‘The concept zero unleashed something more profound than just an enhanced method of counting and calculating.’ Zero revolutionized the old modes of human thought. It meant firstly people could use only ten digits, from 0 to 9, to perform every conceivable calculation and to write any conceivable number. Secondly, it opened up a whole new world of possibilities for abstract human thinking that had been simply unthinkable before!



How did the ancient Hindus discover such a powerful concept as ‘*shoonya*’ while the rest of the world remained ignorant of ‘zero’ for ages?

To grasp the concept of ‘*shoonya*’ required a very high level of intellectual and spiritual advancement as what prevailed in India during and after the Vedic period. As the English philosopher, A. N. Whitehead wrote, ‘The point about zero is that we do not need to use it in the operations of daily life. No one goes out to buy zero fish or eggs. [But] it is in a way the most civilized of all the cardinals, and its use is only forced on us by the needs of cultivated modes of thought.’ Vedic mathematics and astronomy of those ancient times clearly bear evidence to the highly sophisticated conceptual and ideological skills that our Indian forbears possessed. There was no doubt at all that the ancient Vedic Indians who gave to the whole world the idea of ‘*shoonya*’ were indeed masters of the most civilized and ‘*cultivated modes of thought*’.



There was a great mathematician in India who lived in the tenth century CE, He was BhAskarAchArya. He wrote several pioneering treatises (Sanskrit) on Vedic mathematics. In one of the treatises, it is said, he wrote a small dedication: ‘To the Supreme Brahman, who is Infinity, I offer my salutation.’ BhAskarAchArya used the Sanskrit word ‘*khAhara*’ to denote God as ‘infinity’ in the dedication. It is derived from ‘*kham*’ which means ‘zero’ and ‘*hara*’ meaning ‘divided’. The word ‘*khAhara*’ was meant to indicate that God who is Infinity is related to zero.

BhAskarAchArya was the first mathematician to reveal to the world the intimate relationship between ‘*shoonya*’ and ‘*anantah*’, between zero and infinity. Any quantity divided by ‘*shoonya*’ is equal to infinity, he said. Take a value like 16 and divide it (*harah*’) with progressively decreasing divisors. What happens? The quotient progressively enlarges. For example, 16 divided by 4 = 4; and 16 divided by 2 = 8; and eventually when 16 is divided by 0 it equals ‘infinity’! Every quantity, every value in the world, when divided by ‘*shoonya*’, results in the same quotient or result viz. infinity, *anantah*’.

Such is the mighty power of zero that it can raise and relate all values on earth to the exalted state of infinity—that very same state in which God Almighty, the Vishnu of the sacred ‘*Sahasranaama*’, is said to eternally reside and rule!





CHAPTER 29

VISHNU: LORD ‘WHAT?’

The 735th ‘*nAmA*’ of Vishnu in the ‘*Vishnu-Sahasranaamam*’ is the one-syllabled Sanskrit name—‘*kim*’. It appears in the seventy-eighth ‘*shlOkA*’:

*ekah naikah sah vah kah kim yat tat padama~nuttamam lOkA bandhur lokA natha: mAdhavO
bhaktavatsalah*

It’s a rather unusual name indeed for anyone to have. Even God Almighty, one might say.

In native India it is common for mothers and fathers to select a name for their new-born from the one-thousand hallowed ‘*nAmA*-s’ of God found in the ‘*SahasranAmA*’. Yet I doubt you will find a single soul anywhere in the country having ‘*kim*’ as either first name or surname.

I learn, on the other hand, that ‘*Kim*’ is a common feminine first name in America and Europe. In Korea I understand every fourth man you pass on the street bears the name ‘*Kim*’. My 13-year-old daughter tells me there is a famous Hollywood actress by the name of ‘*Kim Bassinger*’; and my 15-year-old son enlightens me about ‘*Kim*’ being the title of a lesser-known novel written by an English author of colonial fame, Rudyard Kipling.

God bless children these days! How profoundly worldwide their knowledge of trivia is and how well they educate their ignorant parents indeed. Thanks to my two children, I have now made the important discovery that the Western first name ‘*Kim*’ is short for ‘*Kimberly*’. And since then, believe me, I have lived in secret dread of the day when ‘*Kim*’ might catch on fast amongst NRIs everywhere in the world, all clamoring to christen their new-born with a ‘*tirunAmA*’ found at last to be both hallowed by the ‘*Sahasranaamam*’ and glamorized by Hollywood!

The Sanskrit ‘*kim*’, however, is actually a very common, very ordinary interrogatory. The Sanskrit word for ‘Question’ or ‘Query’ is ‘*prashna*’. A ‘*prashna*’ cannot be framed without using an interrogatory like ‘*kim*’. The whole of the Vishnu-Sahasranaamam, if you have carefully noticed, is actually a response to Yudhishtara’s ‘*prashna*’ beginning with two simple but profound ‘*kim*’?

kim Ekam daivatam lOkE? kim vApyEkam parAyaNam?

‘Whither God? What is the path to Him?’

The Sanskrit ‘*kim*’ literally means ‘what?’ or ‘which?’ In a limited context, it can also be used as the English equivalent of ‘wherefore?’ or ‘whither?’ Most questions, most ‘*prashna*-s’ hence usually begin with this interrogatory.

It is because the Sanskrit ‘*kim*’ is an interrogatory that in India it is considered unfit, despite being sacred ‘*nAmA*’, to christen one’s child with it. Otherwise, one can easily imagine how endless the embarrassments in life would be for a child named ‘*kim*’ who when asked, ‘What’s your name?’ must respond saying, ‘What?’ And the questioner who, then thinking he hadn’t been heard well, repeats, ‘I asked you for your name?’ And the child, poor thing, insisting, ‘I already told you—what?’ And to this the bewildered questioner asking again, ‘Excuse me, what do you mean?’ And the poor child having to retort, ‘I heard you. It’s really, what?’

And on and on, so forth thus, would it all probably go --- farcical chain in a theatre of the absurd called 'kim'!



Our ancient Vedic forebears (the great Sage Vyasa, for instance, the author of the 'Vishnu-Sahasranaama') however had no compunction at all in giving Lord Almighty the unusual '*nAmA*' of '*kim*', i.e., 'What?' 'Which?' and 'Whither?' Even if one knew nothing whatsoever that is certain about God, the Vedic masters said, one thing at least should be beyond man's doubt: God remains and shall ever remain an eternally unanswered question. Hence, it is quite to call him, simply, '*kim*'?

There is a widespread feeling in the world, even and especially amongst young Indians today, that the religion of the Vedas is one founded on blind, mechanical, and credulous faith. It is thought that there is really nothing more to this religion called Hinduism than ritual, pilgrimage, purificatory bath, breath control, and chanting Sanskrit litanies called '*stOtrA*-s' that few understand and few still appreciate. Nothing could be further from the truth. The piety of the Vedantic religion does not lie in parroting. It has its springs deep in an age-old tradition of unceasing, relentless questioning about and after Truth.

This tradition is called '*pari-prashna*' and it has been around in India for centuries. The word '*prashna*' means (as already explained) 'questioning' and the adjective '*pari*' means 'deep', 'unrelenting'. This Vedantic tradition of '*pari-prashna*' is perhaps even more rigorous, uncompromising, and single-minded in its Socratic search for Truth than we know modern sciences to be. It is this tradition precisely that Krishna recommends Arjuna as a solution to the oppressive problems of life:

tat viddhi praNipAtEna pari-prashnEna sEvayA
upadEshyanti tE gnyAnam gnyAninas-tattva-darshinah:
(B.Gita IV.34)

'Seek out the wise men of knowledge', says Krishna in the Bhagavath-Gita, 'they will surely show you the way if only they see you to be truly humble, devoted, and unrelentingly questful.'

Although he embraced Krishna's prescription quickly enough, Arjuna seems to have lagged a bit in acting upon it. The suggestion of '*pari-prashna*' was made by Krishna towards the end of the fourth chapter

in the Bhagavad-Gita but not very late thereafter, and not until the opening of the eighth chapter, do we see Arjuna really acting upon the Lord's cue and counsel. But when Arjuna did indeed frame his first serious questions on the problems of life, it is all put, and quite predictably so, with the inevitable "*kim*?"!

kim tadh brahma? kim adhyAtmam? kim karma pUrUshOtama?
adhibhutham cha kim? prOktam~adhidaivam kim achyutha?
(*Bhagavad-Gita* VIII.1)

'What is Brahman? What is soul? What is this world of ceaseless strife, O PurushOttama? What perishes? And what lives eternally, O Achyutha!'

It is the answers to Arjuna's four profound '*kim-s*' above that the rest of the 'Bhagavath-Gita'—chapter 8 all through chapter 18—is essentially all about.



The religion of the Vedas has no age. It has survived time. It endures not simply because it is pre-historic, but more importantly, because it is seen to provide hard answers for the even harder questions of human existence. If there had been really nothing more to this religion than Sanskrit- chants and waving incense sticks in front of idols, it would have perished by the wayside of history long ago. This religion survives and thrives today only because it is a product, an invaluable distillate, of a long process of sublime human thought. The truths that this religion uncovers for us are universal and eternal. They are the fruit of centuries of honest, painstaking labour of mind, intellect, and spirit. The sages of yore—'*rshi-s*' and '*muni-s*'—dedicated their whole lives to asking (as Arjuna did above) '*kim*', '*kim*', '*kim*', again and again, solely to understand first and then finally intuit the Truth of God revealed in this ancient religion as '*Brahman*'.

It is precisely this hard and relentless 'spiritual labour' of the '*rshi-s*' that merits mention by Sri Parashara Bhattar (tenth century CE) while commenting upon the 735th '*divya-nAmA*' of '*kim*'—in his famous '*bhAshya*' (commentary) on the 'Vishnu-Sahasranaama' titled '*bhagavadh- guNa-darpaNam*'. Bhattar alludes to a fine expression from the Chandogya Upanishad which says that one is obliged to seek and pursue Brahman before it can be known. And how is one to 'seek and pursue' Brahman? With ceaseless questions, '*pari-prashna*', of course, beginning with '*kim*':

so 'nvEshtavyah sa vijnyAsitavyah (**chAndOgya upanishad**—8-7-1)

'One must set out in search of Brahman before He can be found and known.'

It is precisely this point, this theme of going about in life actively 'looking for Brahman'—in other words, by tirelessly asking '*kim*', '*kim*', and '*kim*' in order to get to the final truth about Brahman—it is precisely the same leitmotif that we come across underlying several scriptural passages that are familiar to us and found in both other Upanishads as well as in the Vedantic '*purAnA-s*'.

In the story of Srimadh Bhagavatham, we see for example, the child Dhruva going away into the forest only to 'look for *nArAyaNa*'. We see the child Nachiketas in the '**Katopanishad**' travelling all the way to the kingdom of death to engage Yama, the God of Death himself, in a gruelling session of '*pari-prashna*' (intense 'Q&A' dialogue) on matters very similar to the ones we saw Arjuna raise with Krishna in the 'Bhagavad-Gita' above. We see that the whole of a rather lengthy Upanishad, called 'PrashnOpanishad', is devoted to an account of the wide-ranging 'pari-prashna' to which the Sage PippalAda was subjected to by six of his keenest students. On reading this Upanishad today we see that their probing questions to the master were as formidable as their names: (1) Kabandhi Katyayana, (2) Bhargava Vaidarbhi, (3) Kausalya Asvalayana, (4) SouryAyani Gargya, (5) Shaibhya Satyakama, and (6) Sukesha Bharadhwaja!

And again, in the Mahabharatha, we come across another popular example: the '*yaksha-prashna*', the famous 'Q&A' engagement between Yudhishtara and a visitor from the celestial realms (the '*yaksha*').



He who asks unending questions about the reality of ‘Brahman’, he who is seen to have the word ‘*kim*’ ever ready upon his lips, is said therefore to be eminently fit to remain and rejoice in the presence and company of those whom the Upanishad calls— ‘*brahmavAdin*’, i.e., those Vedic seers and sages of yore. ‘*Kim*’ is verily the trademark of such noble ‘*brahmavAdins*’. Which is why the famous Svetasvatara Upanishad’s very first, grand opening verse begins with the dramatic line— ‘*kim kAraNam brahma? brahmavAdinO vadanti*’:

*kim kAraNam brahma kutha: sma jAthA: jeevAma kEna kva cha
sampratIshtAh I*

adhishTitAh: kEna sukhEtaREshu vartAmahE brahmavidO vyavasthAm II

‘Sages who seek Brahman ask: O knowers of Brahman, of what form is Brahman, the cause of this universe? Because of which are we born and by which do we live? In which are we placed in the end? Being presided over by which do we function in acts of joy and sorrow following the prescribed order?’

The word ‘*kim*’, we thus gradually realise after reading all the above, is a supremely sacred word indeed. It is a ‘*mantra-shabdha*’ in itself and that is why a simple syllable like it finds pride of place in the holy rollcall of God’s 1,000 ‘*nAmA*-s’ in the ‘Vishnu-Sahasranamam’. ‘*Kim*’ can therefore be rightly said to be the ‘magic word’ that can throw open the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven for us. It is the all-important ‘password’ to be uttered by any truth-seeker. Without it his admission and welcome into the presence of ‘*brahmavAdins*’ or ‘*gnyAni*-s’ is unlikely; without it his journey in quest of the Almighty too might well never begin.



‘*SamsArE kim sAram?*’ Adi Sankara bhagavathpAdA is said to have once asked. ‘What is the meaning of worldly existence?’

They say that the ‘AchArya’ himself provided a pithy but cryptic answer:

‘bahusah: abhi vichintyamAnam idam eva’

The inner meaning of which is, ‘You have asked the question. Keep asking it. And that is in itself the answer’. The message of Sankara’s ‘prashna’ and his own answer to it is this:

‘Do not duck but squarely face the difficult questions of existence such as “*Who am I? Why was I born? Where do I come from? Where am I going? How can I be free? How can I be fearless? Can I rid myself of desire and anger? Can I conquer myself?*”’

Sankara urges us to ceaselessly confront such questions at every phase in our lives even if we do not immediately find answers for them. If the answers are not found in this lifetime, they will be found in the next one. And if not in the next, then perhaps in the following one. But never relent, Sankara advises, never give up the unending enquiry— ‘*samsArE kim sAram?*’ The indefatigable quest for the Truth about God and us will one day surely meet with success.

‘The journey of a thousand miles’, it is said, begins with the first step.’ The first step on the pathway of the great Vedantic journey unto Brahman begins with this simple question— ‘*kim?*’





CHAPTER 30

VISHNU: THE UNSEEN HEALER

In the ‘Sri Vishnu Sahasranaamam’ there are Sanskrit ‘nAmAs’ for the Almighty so euphonious, merely listening to their beautiful sounds is feast enough for both the ear and the soul. When you hear them, you don’t even want to know their meaning. Their mere sound is enough. (My own favourites ones are ‘pradAna-purushEshwarah:’, ‘pushpa-hAsah:’, and ‘devaki-nandana’).

There are some ‘nAmAs’ whose sounds are rather intriguing to the ear and the mind. They make you wonder what they really mean. They are fascinating to contemplate. They make you want to reach immediately for a commentary, either traditional or contemporary, on the Sahasranaama. The ‘nAmAs’ soon enough become ‘earworms’, i.e., they keep ringing in the ears and just won’t go away until you have whetted your curiosity about what Sri Sankara BhagavathpAda may have had to say about the ‘nAmA’ or how Sri Parashara Bhattar interpreted it in his famous Sahasranaama ‘bhAshya’, the treatise titled ‘*bhagavath-guna-darpana*’.

Due to poor grounding in the Sanskrit language or inadequate scriptural understanding, you may not entirely comprehend the full significance of a ‘nAmA’ through mere study of the various commentaries—the ‘vyAkhyAna’ or ‘bhAshya-granthA-s’—on the Sahasranaama. Yet the sweet ‘nAmA’ itself will go on haunting you even as you go about your daily life and routine. Such is its power of attraction that it can make part of your mind go ‘offline’ to silently work away, seeking at least some sort of intuitive if not intellectual understanding of the real intent of the particular ‘nAmA’. Not just the superficial, dictionary sense of the term (which Sanskrit grammar text such as the ‘*amarakOsam*’ could provide), but more importantly, its underlying truth and substance, without grasping which, one may never relate the beauty of the Vishnu Sahasranaama with one’s own personal experience and appreciation in life (‘*svAnubhava*’).



A couple of months ago I met with a rather strange but nasty accident. I fractured a small bone in my back. I was changing seats inside my car when I plonked down very heavily on the hard metal buckle of the seat-belt contraption.

For weeks thereafter I became a semi-invalid. Waves and waves of stabbing pain, like some malevolent tsunami, kept lashing my back. Unable to move normally, sit or sleep in normal postures, I found myself virtually crawling about the house like some giant amoeba in distress. The doctor, a specialist called an orthopedist, looked closely at my condition. After studying test-reports (which consisted principally of a ‘digitally created high-resolution X-ray image’ of my posterior), he diagnosed my problem to be a fractured ‘coccyx bone’. I had such little medical knowledge about human anatomy that it came as a bit of surprise to me that a bone in my body possessed such a distinguished sounding name! And so I asked the ‘ortho’ what “coccyx” really was.

‘You should consider yourself lucky’, he said to me gravely, that you did not damage your sacrum or your spinal column. The coccyx is only a small “tail bone” at the southern extremity of the column. It’s

what you may call a “biological left-over”, a bony remnant of man’s evolution, a tiny reminder of his earliest biological origins’, he said.

I do not generally care much for or comprehend medical mumbo-jumbo, but I quickly understood the specialist’s words to mean that I should not forget I had evolved from the monkey and my ‘coccyx’ was irrefutable proof of the Darwinian fact.

‘Don’t worry’, the doctor went on to reassure me, In a few weeks the fracture will heal by itself and the coccyx will reset. There is no clinical cure for fractures of this kind. Only complete rest, complete absence of strain or stress for a few straight weeks can set things right. Go home now and rest. Trust your body and its own self-healing powers.’

I left the doctor’s clinic that evening with deep misgivings—not to mention a duly stamped receipt for a hefty sum of money paid towards ‘doctor consulting fees. First, the bone specialist had added insult to my injury by reminding me of my simian ancestry. Next, he had also left me clinically high and dry: abandoned me to the mercy of such airy, mysterious things in life that he called ‘self-healing powers of the body’.

I went home that afternoon severely distressed in body and mind. I was in abject pain; I had no idea of the cure; I had no reasonable basis on which to expect I’d be all right again. I feared I’d just been made victim of an elaborate fraud by modern medicine: instead of clinically treating me, my pain, my misery, my whole medical case instead had all just been turned over to some great, invisible, and anonymous ‘faith healer’, said to be residing within me and with curative powers far greater, far more miraculous than any known to man or medical science.



Physical illness is a frustrating life experience especially when it lays you low, down, and bed-ridden for prolonged periods of time. But the abject passivity it imposes upon you can at times be a disguised blessing. It urges the patient’s mind, even if only very briefly, to turn to spiritual or religious contemplation. In this narrow respect, illness can indeed be said to be a sort of ‘tapas’, a very special and Vedantic form of meditative penance. The inertia of lying in bed with a broken back—a broken ‘coccyx’ to be accurate—and being unable to do anything for a whole fortnight, made me reach for my favourite bedside scriptural book, the Sri Vishnu-Sahasranaamam.

Desperate to ward off boredom and creeping depression, I kept silently repeating in bed the sacred ‘sahasranAmAs’ when, suddenly out of the blue, four specific ‘nAmAs’ that seemed particularly appropriate to my distraught physical condition, caught my attention. As I kept repeating them over and over again, I became truly fascinated by them. I could not then wait to learn what exactly the four enchanting names of the Lord truly signified.

Picking up the standard commentaries of Sankara and Parashara Bhattar, I reflected long and hard upon the four divine names, savouring both their sound and substance, again and yet again, in my mind until, finally, I thought I had perhaps intuited, even if it was in the foggiest sort of way, the essential crux of the four ‘nAmA-s’, and had gleaned some deeper nuance of their truth.

The four delightful ‘nAmAs’ in the Vishnu-Sahasranamam, the sacred 4 that kept me constant, soothing company all through my painful illness, were the following:

‘vaidyah:’
‘oushadham’
‘bhEshajam’
‘bhishak’



The 166th ‘nAma’ in the Vishnu-Sahasranaama is: vaidyah:’. It is a very significant name given to the Almighty whom the Vedic scriptures hail as ‘vaidyO nArAyaNO harih:’He who cures afflictions not curable by any known medicine’.

In my broken condition—a broken back and worse, a terribly broken spirit, the Lord’s ‘nAmA’ of ‘vaidyah’ immediately brought me cheer and solace. The ‘orthopedist’, the bone specialist, by his own admission, had really nothing in his medicine chest with which to heal me. But he had clearly told me to have firm faith in the invisible ‘self-healing powers of the body’, hadn’t he? And here was the Vishnu-Sahasranaama saying pretty much the same thing!

According to the Sahasranaamam, there is an Un-seen ‘Ortho’ somewhere, an Unseen Healer with the great ‘nAma’ of ‘vaidyah’ who has cures and medicines for the most incurable of human afflictions.



There are human afflictions in this world that are far less common and infinitely more painful than a fractured ‘coccyx’. Many of them, as we know, are indeed beyond any known or sure means of clinical cure. This is a stark medical fact which we see around us all over the world.

Many years ago, viruses like HIV/AIDS or Ebola first made their appearance in the world. Since then, great attempts have been made by modern medical science and research to come up with a definitive cure for them. Success has been elusive. Similarly, rare strains of the old killer disease, cancer, still abound and till date no one has sure-fire cures for them. Then there are diseases like TB, malaria, typhoid, and pox which once had been thought to be completely eradicated from the face of the earth thanks to some great ‘wonder drugs’ formulated by man. Decades later, the same ‘wonderful’ drugs however are being reported to be totally ineffective against newer and ever more virulent strains of the same diseases now invading several parts of the world. It appears for every new wonder drug, formulation or medical breakthrough invented, a dozen hitherto unknown forms of the disease/virus break out to afflict successive generations of mankind. It was this grim fact that led Winston Churchill to once wryly observe that the history of man was in fact a history of epidemic and disease: ‘*Pox Romana, Pox Brittanica, and Pox Americana!*’ is how he summed it all up!

When one thinks about the matter deeply, it is indeed a daily miracle that one is alive, hale, hearty, and continuing to survive the onslaughts (or threatened onslaughts) of a thousand known and unknown diseases abounding in this world against which even mighty twenty-first-century medical science, with all its spectacular discoveries and advancement, finds itself relatively powerless. Given that perspective, no intelligent person should really have trouble believing that were it not for the sacred presence of the Unseen Healer within us—the ‘RMO’, the ‘Resident Medical Officer’, the divine ‘vaidyah’ who hath set up His dispensary or hospice within each of us—if it were not for that silent and unseen,

unfailing silent Healer, we would all indeed be hapless victims of violent, incurable afflictions every moment of our lives.



The 288th ‘nAma’ of Vishnu as described in the Sahasranaamam is ‘*oushadham*’. It is another beautiful name indeed. It hails the Lord as the divine ‘medicine’. The Almighty Narayana is not only the doctor who prescribes; He is the prescriptive drug or medicament too.

I could really appreciate the deep truth of this ‘nAma’ in that moment I recalled my orthopedist admitting to me that he had but one medicine to prescribe for my broken tailbone: no medicine at all’. None! ‘Give your back complete rest’, the doctor had told me, ‘That’s all you need. There is no other cure. The more you rest, the faster the bone will heal, and the sooner you will be up on your feet.’



One of the great attributes of the Almighty, as revealed by the Vedic scriptures, is His state of being one of eternal repose and rest.

Symbolically, Narayana is portrayed as everlastingly rested with His consort upon a serpent-bed afloat the milky waves of the great celestial ocean called ‘*ksheerAbdi*’ (in Sanskrit) or ‘*tiru-paarkadal*’ (Tamil). While all of Creation (‘*prakruti*’) is embroiled in a state of ceaseless flux, strife, endless churning and transformation, the Supreme Creator, the great ‘Brahman’ as perceived by the Upanishads, however, remains unmoved, unaffected, unattached, unchanging, and eternal. He is ‘narAyaNa’, the Supreme Lord of Creation, who rests supine and eternally reposeful. The very name Narayana signifies such a state: *ayana*, as in ‘*sayana*’ or ‘*anantha-sayana*’, meaning ‘to rest’, to be supine, at peace and eternally tranquil. This state of restfulness should not be confused with physical sloth, mental inertia, or with human attitudes that one may describe as ‘laid-back’ or lackadaisical. ‘*Anantha-sayanam*’ is a state of rest, of course, but it is to be conceived by us as the locus of all cosmic energy—a metaphysical resting place that is both the primal source as well as the terminal for all dynamic forces of life.

It has often been said by many wise men of the world (as for example, Thomas Kempis in the famous Christian scriptural work ‘The Imitation of Christ’) that man’s true hope and purpose in life lies in the faithful imitation upon earth of the glorious attributes of God in heaven. Of all the great attributes (*kalyANa-guNa*) that adorn the Almighty, the most wonderful is said to be His eternal restfulness and peace (‘*anantha-sayana*’). It is given to only a few blessed souls on earth, such as saints, yogis, mystics and poets to have personally and directly apprehended such divine restfulness and to have imitated or emulated it in their own lives. Those rare and chosen few have had really no adequate words to describe their experience of such peace except to say perhaps, as the poet once did, that it is a ‘peace that passeth understanding’.

Little do ordinary people like us realise that the secret to enduring health and happiness in our individual lives lies verily in imitating or emulating that attribute of divine repose called ‘*anantha-sayana*’. If we all knew the secret of how to keep our body and soul really rested, of how to both conserve and exploit the vibrant life-energy flowing in our veins, our life would be quite free of afflictions. In fact, if only doctors and scientists knew how to uncover the great mystery of restfulness,

of its marvellous capacity to heal and cure, to help in recovery and restoration, to relieve pain and suffering, there would be no more need for man to search for (or research into) ‘wonder drugs’ on earth.

Rest, indeed, is the ultimate healer, the ultimate medicine. It is the ‘*oushadham*’ that is spoken of by the Vishnu-Sahasranaamam. Restfulness is truly the universal prescription of every doctor for every patient for every known or unknown ailment in the world. Be it common flu or carcinoma of the brain, a broken coccyx or coronary thrombosis, whatever else the physician, surgeon or specialist may clinically administer to a patient through prescription, procedure or treatment, at the end of it all, he must finally counsel only one thing. ‘Follow the prescription, he will say, but to get really cured, be sure to rest and rest well.’

Restfulness—what we may thus describe as the imitation of God’s divine attribute of ‘*anantha-sayana*’—indeed, it is the only true healer, the most efficacious medicine or ‘*oushadham*’, ever known to man. Without rest there can really be no effective cure or recuperation. If one thinks about it deeply, everything that modern medicine may offer man is but means of cure, not the cure itself. Even the most brilliant surgeon after performing his artistry must have his patient, after all, wheeled into the ICU and left entirely at the mercy of the body’s unseen powers of recovery and healing— ‘powers’ that, as we all know, can begin to work their magic only under conditions of complete and intensive restfulness. Any physician can prescribe drugs and ointments that one may simply walk across to the street-corner and buy from the neighborhood pharmacy. But where in the world can one go and buy the ultimate medicine—the ‘*oushadham*’ which is the substance of the bliss called restfulness? Who else but God can dispense it? Who else but the serenely rested Almighty (hailed in the ‘purAnic’ pantheon as ‘*vaidyanAtha*’, ‘*vaitheeswara*’, ‘*dhanvantri*’, etc.) can administer health-restoring rest without which no man-made medicine or cure ever works?



Next in the Vishnu-Sahasranaama, there are two more beautiful ‘nAmA-s’ revealing the nature of the Almighty as Healer of last resort. These two names are full of deep Vedantic significance. When the Sahasranaama is recited these two ‘nAma’ are usually chanted together to sound as though they are one and the same: ‘*bhEshajam-bhishak*’. Their meaning too seems to reveal itself as single although nuanced strands of truth. Hence, it is all right to study the two together at once.

The traditional commentary of Parashara Bhattar explains the 585th and 586th ‘nAma’ as follows:

- (a) ‘*bhEshajam*’—the final remedy for the affliction of unlimited sufferings of ‘samsara’.
- (b) ‘*bhishak*’—one who is adept in the diagnosis and treatment of the disease ‘*bhAva rOga*’ the disease of worldly existence and sorrow.

To understand the significance of these two ‘nAmAs’, it would be helpful first to enquire into what exactly is meant by health.

The easiest way to define health is to say it is the absence of illness. In Sanskrit, the word for health is ‘*aarOgya*’: ‘*rOga*’ means ‘disease’ or ‘affliction’; the pre-fix ‘a-’ means ‘anti-’. So ‘health’ in the Sanskrit lexicon may be translated accurately as ‘anti-disease’—i.e., the ‘absence of disease’; a state of human existence that is unaffected, untroubled by the pain of any affliction or injury.

Why should 'health' in the Sanskrit language be defined in such a negative way? Because it is the absence of illness in life that most of us seek far more than, in fact, we really pursue health. There is a world of difference between the two that we must discern. While the former is rooted in morbid fear or worry the latter, on the other hand, is impelled by positive desire. We hardly ever embrace the things in life that are said to actively promote health. But the instant we come to know of its onset we will go to any lengths and, at any cost, to rid ourselves of disease or illness. It is precisely the reason why none of us ever voluntarily takes to daily regular physical exercise, or moderation in dietary habits, until the moment arrives when we suddenly discover that either arthritis or diabetes has quietly possessed us and threatens to bring us down. 'Prevention is better than cure' is a very old adage but its wisdom has never yet quite dawned on men through the ages.

The world these days worries greatly about 'health' in precisely the same negative sense of the term as revealed to us in Sanskrit. The UN's biggest worry today, for example, is the spread of raging HIV across half the continents in the world. National governments all over the world worry about 'health-care' allocations in their budgets. Wall Street pension funds worry about future health costs for an ever-ageing population in America, Western Europe, and Japan. At the individual level, again, we see practically everyone around us worried sick about 'health': Mothers worrying about their children's 'health'; children about their parents; fat people worrying about weight-loss; lean people worrying about anorexia; young wives worrying about bulging waist-lines, and husbands worrying about job stress wearing away either their heart or their prostate or both. Worry, worry, worry!

The most dreaded illness of all is however the disease called 'indignity of old age'. 'Old age' used to be, once upon a time, a certain stage in a man's time on earth called the 'evening of Life'. No more. 'Old age' is now looked upon as an ailment. People cringe with fear at the very mention of this 'ailment'. Its classic symptoms are failing eyesight, impaired hearing, rasping breath, wobbling teeth, brittle bones, shriveled skin, slurred speech, and fading memory. In the modern era, even if you are untouched by any other clinical ailment, if you have contracted this virus of 'old age' or senility, so to say, you can expect you will be pronounced as having an irreversibly pathological condition and hence marked out for social quarantine if not personal sequestration. No wonder, people fear 'old age' like the plague! They dread it more than they dread Alzheimer's or Parkinson's.

Most people we meet these days, thus, seem to be living on the edge of some silent yet oppressive pent-up panic. They are on some kind of constant alert against the disease, the condition or the malady which they fear is lurking around the corner and is going to ambush and strike them down sooner or later in life. Diabetes, cardiac malfunction, breast cancer, sclerosis, bulimia, anorexia, dementia, Parkinson, Alzheimer, HIV, cirrhosis, pneumonia. The list is long and lethal! The risk of contracting any one or more such diseases either from the food they eat, water they drink, and the air they breathe or from the people they rub shoulders with, is for them ever present and real. It hangs perpetually above them like a Damocles sword. It is a very sad and beleaguered state of mind indeed that people are in and today's powerful media—popular TV talk shows, tabloids, magazines, and the internet—they do their best to keep it that way. They keep feeding and stoking public paranoia through so-called 'researched features' euphemistically titled 'Health Watch', 'Healthy Living' or 'Stay Fit' programs.

Beyond doubt, fear of disease now inspires more dread in people's minds than the disease itself. It's a kind of universal angst, a hypochondria that has mankind seized in deep, collective melancholia. Far from enabling us to remain healthy, cheerful, and carefree, this nagging anxiety to escape from illness and injury in life, this morbid, cankerous obsession with 'health', gradually but surely, has turned into

a dreaded, fatal disease. It is precisely such mortal dread, such acute fear which in Vedanta philosophy is said to be the mother of all diseases: It is the affliction called '*samsara*'.



Where is this fear and anxiety surrounding 'health' rooted? '*Samsara*,' says Vedanta.

The reason why 'health' is a cause for constant human worry, fear, or anxiety is because it relates to '*sareera*'—the fundamental reality of the body. From the moment we are born as humans until the day we shed our mortal coils, whether we like it or not, all of us have to deal with and come to terms with the reality of our '*sareera*'. Over the years during our lifetime, we all come to look upon the body's state, form and condition as our very own. When the '*sareera*' enjoys pleasurable experiences, we believe we are rejoicing; and when it undergoes pain, we too suffer its agonies much in sympathy. Eventually, we all come to believe that who we are is really defined by what our respective '*sareera*' becomes. When the body grows, we believe we are growing too. When it gains beauty or strength, we believe we too have become strong and beautiful in person. If our teeth dazzle as we smile, we sense our inner self within sparkling too; on the other hand, when we watch our head balding away rapidly, we cannot help feeling a deep sense of personal loss. And so on and so forth. Invariably we all grow into believing, nay, in fact we become quite convinced that the sum of all that happens to the body, our '*sareera*', is about all that also really happens to us in life. We live *in* our bodies; we live *with* it; we live *by* it; and as we perhaps might realise towards the very end of our mortal days, we discover that, all through life, we live wholly and solely *for* the sake and benefit of '*sareera*', the body alone.

In Vedanta this complete and inescapable identification with '*sareera*' is known variously as '*prakruti*-', '*sareera*-', or '*samsAra-sambandham*'. It is also '*bhava rOga*', Parashara Bhattar's term for it in his commentary. It is the cause of much human misery. It is certainly the cause of all the anxiety over bodily 'health' which, as we have seen, consumes us bit by bit in life. It is the principal reason too why the prospect of illness and injury, not to mention the specter of 'old age' and decrepitude, fills the human heart with so much foreboding and terror.

If only our identification with '*sareera*' were to be somehow diminished or withered down, or else, otherwise made less absolute than it is so strongly conditioned to be; if only there was a way out in life by which it became possible for us to easily and completely dissociate our inner selves from the reality and paradigm so severely imposed upon us by the body, if only we could somehow cut asunder such human bondage, and break out free from such '*samsAric*' chains, then neither anxiety nor fear about the state and condition of our 'health' would ever trouble us, would it? There would be no 'health' to worry about because there simply would be no illness, injury, or disease to worry about! And there would be no afflictions to fear for there would be no more identification with the body! In other words, the mother of all diseases, '*samsAra*', would no longer hold us in her oppressive embrace!



Is the diminution of intense identification with the '*sareera*' ever possible at all? Can we really dissociate ourselves from the oppressive anxiety of our '*samsAric*' pre-occupation with the body and its 'health'? Is freedom from '*sareera-bandham*', with all its attendant worries and anxiety holding us

captive in their stranglehold all our lives, a practicable idea or is it merely an unattainable Vedantic ideal?

Vedanta says such freedom arising from the cessation of our absolute identification with the reality of the '*sareera*' is very much in the realm of human possibility. To realise such freedom is in fact the very purpose of human existence. It ought to be man's highest aspiration, his '*summum bonum*' in life, or as Vedanta itself calls it, it is his '*parama-pUrUshArtha*'.

Vedanta categorically states that freedom from '*samsAra*', that sure and permanent cure from the great affliction called '*sareera-sambandham*', is not some other-worldly pipedream. It is very attainable in this world itself with the aid of three important tools: (a) discriminative intelligence ('*vivEka*'), (b) spiritual ardour ('*shraddha*'), and (c) sincere application of effort ('*upAsana*'). Many men in the world in all ages—men who eventually came to be called saints, mystics, wise-men, yogis, 'gnyAni-s', 'rshi-s'—they have clearly shown this Vedantic way through their personal example in life.

The first is Sri Parashara Bhattar himself, our own renowned Sahasranaamam commentator (eleventh century AD) of SriRangam who a disciple was and protégé of Sri Ramanujacharya (tenth century AD). Bhattar was the chief '*purOhit*' (priestly administrator) of the SriRangam temple; he was also a Sri Vaishnava theologian and scholar. Although he was not generally given to outward expression of mystical fervour, an incident in Bhattar's life does lead us to infer his ability to easily withdraw bodily association or identification. Bhattar died young at the age of 32. He was diagnosed to be suffering from a malignant tumour that grew so painful that attending doctors of those days ventured to perform surgery on him. Knowing the procedure would be excruciatingly painful, they advised Bhattar to consume a crude concoction (probably a heavy sedative) that would serve as general anesthesia. Bhattar is reported to have replied: 'I do not need anesthesia. Just let me recite the blessed verses of the *tiruppAvai* [the sacred Tamil hymns of the saint AndAL]. You can then perform any surgery on me you want.' To Bhattar, reciting the sacred verses of the '*tiruppAvai*' possessed power far greater than that of any medicine or anesthesia, and enough to simply convey him away from the realms of '*samsAra*', away from all the distress, pain and indignities of affliction.

He could leave the confines of his '*sareera*' at will and into the deep regions of the spirit where no mortal pain could ever touch him.

The second example is a similar one and it is an incident in the life of the sage of Tiruvannamalai, South India, and Sri Ramana Maharishi (nineteenth century AD). In his advanced years, Ramana was afflicted with a virulent form of cancer that in an ordinary man would have caused unbearable pain and distress. Doctors wanted him to undergo surgery, but the sage would have none of it. 'The cancer is in my body,' he is reported to have said calmly. 'The pain is the body's problem. I am not the body, and the pain is not mine.' (This event has even been reported with wonder in a published clinical dissertation of the world-renowned neurosurgeon from Madras, Dr B. Ramamurthy.) Once again, we see here a living example of a yogi shrugging off bodily pain by remaining oblivious to the ordinary conditions of '*samsAric*' reality. It is only complete dissociation from the '*sareera*' state (in which lesser mortals like us are irretrievably mired) that could have made it possible for Sage Ramana.



The question that we are now faced with is: How to cultivate the three Vedantic qualities of '*vivEka*', '*shraddha*', and '*upAsana*' in our personal lives? The answer is simple: When you know you are afflicted with the disease of '*samsAra*', there is no point going to ordinary doctors and medicine men.

You need ‘specialist attention’ and the best possible ‘expert advice’. The Vishnu-Sahasranaamam says that the best doctor in this field of illness is none other than the great ‘Dr **Bheshajam- bhishak**’. He is the only ‘specialist’ who can put us on the path of recovery from the deadly disease called ‘*samsAra*’, the mother of all Diseases, who has us gripped in her tentacles. Go to Him, approach the Unseen Doctor, the Sahasranaamam says, offer prayers unto Him, and implore Him to cure you once and for all time.

This was what the great Vaishnavite saints of Tamil Nadu, Sri NammAzhwAr, and Sri Peria-AzhwAr too had sung in their famously mystical hymns the ‘*naalayira divya-prabhandham*’ (‘The 4,000 sacred verses’). Lovers of the Tamil devotional classic will not fail to recall the verses of these two saints who hailed the great Unseen Healer, the Almighty, our great ‘Dr **Bheshajam-bhishak**’ in these wonderful words:

arindana vEda porUL noolgaL
arindana kOLga arum porUL aadhal
arindanar ellAm ariyai vaNanggi
arindanar nOygaL arUkkUm marUndhE

(tiruvoimozhi 9.3.3)

The Vedic texts, one and all,
Reveal Him, Hari, as the substance
Of all Consciousness—
So good men of the world
Who know what it is to suffer
The disease of knowing
And unknowing— They pray to Him:
The ultimate Cure of all ills.

eruttuk-kOdi uDayanUm piramanUm indiranUm marrUm
oruttarUm ip-piravi ennUm nOykku marUndhu arivarUm illai:
maruttuvanaay nindra maa maNivannA! maru piravi tavirath
tirutthi un kOvir kadaip-pugap-pEyy tirumAlirunchOlai enthaay!

(peri-azhwAr tirumOzhi’ 5.3.6)

Neither Siva nor Brahma nor anyone anywhere knows of a medicine to cure the sickness of rebirth. O dark gem- hued lord! You that appeared as the divine healer Dhanvantari! Pray cut asunder my rebirth! Lead me to the portals of your grand temple, O lord of Tirumalirumcholai, my master!



It is about eight weeks now since I accidentally suffered a broken tailbone, my ‘coccyx’. Thanks to ‘Dr **Bheshajam-bhishak**’, I am now relieved of my bodily distress, and more importantly, I think I have

become wiser after the event since I have known and experienced the magical wonders of the healing powers of the Unseen Healer.

It was eight weeks ago that my neighborhood orthopedist had the wisdom in him not to administer his own brand of medicines and drugs to me but to refer me and my case to the only true Specialist Healer that I have come to now realise lives and works in this world—‘Dr **Bheshajam-bhishak**’! Thank you, good doctor!





CHAPTER 31

VISHNU: GRACIOUS GIVER OF TIME

Let us take up for discussion the word ‘*kAla:*’ which is Sanskrit for Time.

One more of the wonderful ‘*nAmA-s*’ of God that Sri Vishnu-Sahasranaamam reveals to us is: ‘*kAla:*’ It is found in the forty-fourth stanza, and it says that Time is Vishnu and Vishnu is Time:

*rituh sudarshanah kAla: paramEshti parigraha
ugrah samvatsarah dakshah visrAmah viswadakshinah:*

(stanza 44)

When I was a young man, my elders were never tired of reminding me of the inestimable value and nature of Time. They were never tired of repeating ad infinitum, sometimes *ad nauseum*, age-old proverbs such as ‘Time and tide wait for no man’, ‘Time is money’, ‘Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today’, and so on and so forth. They were all intent on driving home the truth into me that of all the gifts God gave man, the most precious is Time. He has given us each a lifespan that is a lifetime of endless opportunities. The best and noblest things that a human being can achieve in this world can all be ours if only we knew how to put Time to wise use. Equally so, we could all too easily fritter away the opportunity if we allow Time to slip through our hands and pass away forever.

Time, symbolized by those awesome fingers of the unceasing clock, keeps ticking away. Time does not wait for anyone. It is no respecter of people, either high or low, rich or poor. If you are late for an interview, you don’t get the job. If you don’t reach the station on time, the train leaves. If you don’t pass the examination at the right age, you don’t enter university. If you are not ready to get married at the right time, all the beautiful girls of the neighbourhood will be taken by the time you decide.

Those great ticking hands of ‘*kAla:*’ just keep ruthlessly moving on. Time waits for none; it gives no second chances, not to anyone, and not for any reason:

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: not all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it*

—Omar Khayyam

Now, if Time is what it really is—inexorable, severe and merciless—and if Time is also God’s gift, then we are tempted to feel that God must be a very hard-hearted person indeed to have given us a gift that, in the manner of a double-edged knife, turns out cuts both ways. If Time is such a severe gift of life, can the donor be any less severe?



Before we seek an answer for the above question let us first ask: Why does the Sahasranaamam hail Vishnu as '*kAla*'.

I looked in the religious writer, Sri. Eknath Eswaran's delightful little book *Thousand Names of Vishnu* but surprisingly found no commentary upon this particular '*nAma*' of '*kAla*'. So, I returned to the good old commentary of Sri. Parashara Bhattar, that all-time classic called '*bhagavath-guna- darpana*' written in the eleventh century CE, and sure enough, I found the '*nAma*' of '*kAla*:' very neatly explained and amply illumined.

We all know Time, *kAla*', best by its three basic dimensions viz. Past, Present, and Future. We know the past and the present through actual experience. The future, on the other hand, is like God: It is unknown and unknowable. The future is much like God's avatar: The fact is never in doubt, but the advent is never certain.

The avatar of God on earth in either a near or distant future is fact; but the descent of an avatar is uncertain. While no one can say when an avatar will exactly take place, scriptural authority, like the '*sruti*' or '*smriti*', tells us with certainty that an avatar will take place sometime in the future.

The God of the Future is known as '*Kalki*', the avatar that is yet to advent upon earth and '*samvatsarah*' is the name the Sahasranaama gives it in the above stanza. Awaiting the arrival of the right moment to descend upon earth to make His appearance as *Kalki*, our Lord Vishnu is said to be patiently reclining upon the eternal Coil of Time called '*anantha*'—symbolized as Vishnu's serpent- bed ('*anantha-sayanam*'''). Bhattar also points us to the significance of the immediately succeeding '*nAmA*', i.e., *daksha*', which in fact is alias for *Kalki*, the avatar of the future.



We know Time by various units of its measurement also—such as seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, millennia. The word '*samvatsara*' in Sanskrit generally means 'year', but in a much larger, Upanishadic sense, it refers to all conceivable but indeterminate units of time ('*samvatsaro'sAvA'dityO*'). Units of time measurement used in scientific or digital disciplines, like 'nanoseconds or 'light-years', while they are clearly conceivable are indeterminable. '*Samvatsara*:' or '*kAla*' both denote Time in its vast, indeterminable form—the concept of infinity, for example, eternity, agelessness, or continuum. Since God Almighty Vishnu is also similarly conceivable but indeterminable, He is said to be '*kAla*' or '*samvatsarah*'.

Another reason why God, according to the Sahasranaamam stanza above, is '*kAla*':

The most common index of Time we know is the calendar year (*samvatsara*:') the period in which planet Earth revolves once around the sun in 365 days. The calendar year is identified with the sun because changes brought about in nature in the form of the four seasons are through the influence of the sun. This is why God is referred to (in the Sahasranaamam stanza above) as '*rituh*', meaning that Vishnu manifests Himself as the four ageless seasonal time zones of the year.

The four seasons, if one reflects upon them, are measures of Time too. They are not, however, quantitative measures in the same way as 'hours', days', or 'minutes' are. The seasons are rather measures of Time that are 'qualitative' in nature. It is the four seasons of the year which tell us that Time possesses 'quality' as much as 'quantity'. Through the experience of the four seasons, we can realise that Time is not altogether a vast, cold, completely neutral, immeasurable, and impersonal entity.

In olden days villagers in India used to refer to their age not in number of years but in terms of the number of summers they had witnessed in life. There was a reason for it. You could hear a villager say, for example, ‘Raman is twenty summers older than I. He has reaped twenty more harvests, and he must hence surely be twenty times wealthier, indeed.’ Such a statement conveyed a sense of Time far beyond its measurable dimension. It was meant to convey, more profoundly, the experience of Time and its ‘quality’ aspects.

Similarly, while the ‘*nAma*’ of God such as ‘*samvatsara:*’ or ‘*kAla*’ gives us a measure of the sheer timelessness of God, the ‘*namA*’ of ‘*rituh*’ gives us a sense of the quality of the same timeless Almighty. ‘*Vasanta-Rituh*’, for example, is spring, ‘*Shisira-Rituh*’ is winter, and God is ‘*rituh*’ Himself because He possesses some rare and wonderful qualities associated with the seasons. The Lord is pleasanter than the spring breeze, more bountiful than a summer harvest; He is as mellow as the fall and as invigorating as the tropical winter.



Although the Time of allotted lifespan (‘*kAla*’) gifted to everyone by God is indeed severely limited in years, i.e., in units of ‘*samvatsarah*’, there is however plenty of time in it to fill a lifetime with the rich qualities of ‘*rituh*’. Our whole life can be indeed like the four rolling seasons—pleasant, bountiful, varied, and zestful.

When we look at the lives of great souls like Vyasa, Sankara, Buddha, Ramanuja, Desika, or Ramakrishna Paramahansa, we realise why our Time in this world (‘*kAla*’) is not to be measured in terms of quantity or in terms of ‘*samvatsarah:*’ alone. It must be weighed, more importantly, on the basis of its quality or ‘*rituh*’.

*Lives of great men all remind us We can make our lives sublime; And departing leave behind us
Footprints across the sands of Time.*

(H. W. Longfellow)



Very important persons (VIPs) we see around us in life are extremely conscious of personal Time. Presidents, kings, generals, and CEOs—the most powerful persons of the world—lead such hectic lives that they cannot afford to spare much time for ordinary folks like us. VIPs are business-like, very frugal in giving their Time. (Like George Bush, they are quick to make grave statements such as ‘Time is up; game is over’ and really mean it too.) Such great ones of the world have not much Time for anyone who does not fall in line with their own purpose, thinking or work. VIPs cannot wait. They give you no second chances.

God in the form of ‘*kAla*’, the greatest VIP of them all, is on the other hand extremely generous with Time. The Lord is utterly unlike the most powerful VIP in the world. He is ever willing to ladle out any amount of Time man needs. The Lord is willing to wait endlessly—not one lifetime but any number of lifetimes—for man to redeem himself, perfect himself and finally come around to Him and ascend the Kingdom of God. We might say, ‘I live a kind of life that really gives me no Time for God or godly

matters, but the Lord does not return that sentiment. He does not say, ‘Sorry, friend, if you have no time for me, neither do I. So, when Time’s up for you, it’s game over too!’

Our Vishnu is ever willing to give us as many second chances, a third and then a fourth even—as many lifetimes, in fact, as it takes, and as many as our respective karma dictates.

It is because God is so lavishly generous with Time— ‘*kAla*’—that Vishnu in the Sahasranaamam is hailed as ‘*paramEshti parigraha*:’



The most telling and poignant example of God’s generosity with His ‘*kAla*’ is in the story of the Ramayana, in the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’.

In the great battle with Ravana, Rama smashes the king’s chariot, armoury, weapons, coat-of-mail, flagstaff, and crown. A hush of silence descends on the battlefield. Ravana stands utterly beaten, humiliated, and defenceless. Everyone watches and waits with bated breath to see what Rama will do next. Only a single arrow from Rama’s bow is needed to finish off Ravana once and for all, and rid the world of evil, for all times to come.

What does Rama do then?

Eyes blazing, the prince of Ayodhya looks down the shaft of a deadly arrow aimed straight at Ravana’s heart. And Rama says,

gacchAnu-jAnAmi raNArdi-tastvam pravishya rAtrImchara-rAja lankAm I aashvAsya niryaAhi rathI cha dhanvi tadA balam drakshyasi mE rathasthah: II (Valmiki Ramayanam VI.59.143)

‘I can finish you now, Ravana! But I forbear to send down another arrow. You have done well today but not well enough. You need a new chariot, new arms, plenty of rest, and refreshment. Go now and return tomorrow with renewed vigour. I will then show you who I am!’

It is one of the most poignantly gripping scenes of the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’!

Even amid a raging war the Lord is gracious and compassionate enough to grant Time. He tells the beaten Ravana to go away from battle and return in better shape the following day. It was the second chance, the opportunity of ‘*kAla*’ the Almighty gives Ravana. It is not so much an opportunity for Ravana to go back and return with a new chariot or new weapons. The Time granted was really for Ravana to introspect and reflect upon the folly of his ways. Even in the heat of pitched battle, the Lord made sure to allow the ‘*rAkshasa*’ benefit of Time, of ‘*kAla*’, so that it might work its magic of a probable change-of heart, of genuine repentance, of a spiritual course-correction and turn around.

Not for nothing therefore does the Sahasranaamam hail the Lord as ‘*kAla*’—the Gracious Giver of Time.





CHAPTER 32

VISHNU: WIELDER OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

Kuwait City, March 2003: In a few days from now, we will probably witness the first war of the new millennium, the first of the twenty-first century. One country will employ ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in order to disarm another of its own stockpiles of the same possession of which the latter denies again and again. On the sands of the desolate Kuwaiti desert, on the lonely road to Baghdad, a war will be fought to bring everlasting peace upon earth. So at least, it is believed.

In these days of ours filled as they are constantly with fearful stories and scenarios of the imminent war, let us for a moment give our anxious minds some rest and recreation. Although it is only altogether natural for our minds to keep returning to dwell upon the prospects of a war—a war that will be fought virtually upon our doorsteps—still I think we should make a conscious effort to divert our minds away from the grim portents surrounding us.

Therefore, let us take up a rather unusual ‘*nAmA*’ from the Vishnu-Sahasranaamam today for discussion. It is a ‘*nAmA*’ that may sound very warlike to us. In fact, this particular ‘*nAmA*’ is a very potent mantra designed to drive away even the darkest war-phobia lurking in our hearts.



One of the rarest but most beautiful names of God we find in the ‘Sri Vishnu-Sahasranaamam’ is the ‘*nAmA*’ ‘*raNa-priyah*:’ The word ‘*raNa*’ in Sanskrit means ‘war’, ‘battle’, ‘engagement’, ‘confrontation’. In Indian history, as we all know, the great Rajput warrior-kings of Rajasthan, liked to prefix their names with this very word ‘*rANA*’ (‘Rana’ Pratap Singh, for example) just to distinguish themselves as extraordinary men of arms.

Our great lord, EmperumAn, is more than a mere ‘Rana’. He is a ‘*raNa-priyah*:’—a great warrior who not only just goes to war but One who looks forward to it with a great deal of relish. He loves to lead in battle. He likes to stand first, and ahead of the rank and file of all the greatest armies in the world.

Our Lord Vishnu sometimes is pleased to mirror human frailty and vanity: he feigns pride in being a warrior and is extremely pleased when someone lavishes praise on Him for his warrior qualities. Like some nostalgic old, retired, battle-scarred ex-army general, the Lord too beams with pleasure whenever someone recognises Him for his martial eminence. And He feels very flattered when somebody sings paeans to the daring military exploits for which He became famous on many an avataric battlefield. Which is why in the ‘Vishnu-sahasranaamam’, in the same breath in which Vishnu is hailed as ‘*stavapriyah*:’, i.e., as the Lord who is praise-worthy and who values praise greatly too—in the very same breath God is also said to be a ‘*raNa-priyah*:’, i.e., He who loves to battle:

stavyah stavapriyah stOtram stUtah stOtA raNapriyah:.

(Sahasranaamam stanza 73)

It is precisely for the reason that that God is at once both ‘*raNa-priyan*’ and ‘*stava-priyan*’ that the great Sri Vaishnava ‘*achAryA*’, Swami Venkatanathan (Vedanta Desika) composed a short but bewitchingly beautiful ‘*stOtrA*’ in praise of the qualities of the Lord as Supreme Warrior—the Lord

as He stands today in beauteous ‘*archA*’ form as ‘*Vijayaraghava-perUmAl*’ in the famous temple at Tirupputtkuzhi, a village near Kanchipuram, India. In this ‘*stOtra*’ or hymn of praise known to us as ‘*paramArtha-stUthi*’, the Lord is hailed as ‘*raNa-pungavah*:’ the Valorous and Victorious One in War! It is hence small wonder then that the God of the ‘Sahasranaamam’, He that is said to be a ‘*raNa-priyah*:’ is very fond of always going about armed to the teeth! Our Lord carries on his person arms and weapons (*aayudha*) of every conceivable (and inconceivable) variety and calibre! Which is why the 108-versed ‘Sahasranaamam’ too, after giving out all of the 1,000 names of Vishnu, finally concludes the litany with the crowning catch-all, omnibus ‘*nAma*’: ‘*sarva-praharaNa-ayudhah*:’



Sometimes our Lord bears His weapons openly for all the worlds to see; at other times, when He knows it would be inappropriate to bear arms, He carries them fully concealed. Little is known to man as to where the Lord conceals His great weapons. None can hope to carry out a U.N. weapons inspection on our Lord; nor can one hundred George Bush Jrs. seek to disarm Him.

Sometimes these weapons seem to appear in the form of the great and inscrutable forces of the Cosmos—gravity, time, and endless space, for example. At other times, they seem concealed inside the unconquerable forces of nature—the distant oceans and storms, for example, or the forest fires, the volcanoes, the earthquakes, and the virulent epidemics of this world, every one of them more destructive than any weapon known to man. No one knows for sure really where the Lord conceals His ‘*Ayudhas*’. Nevertheless, this warrior, this ‘*raNa-priyan*’, is known to make sure that His armoury is always at hand, ever ready and never beyond an instant away from drawing, deploying, and striking.

The arsenals at the command of our Lord are, we might say, both ‘conventional’ as well as ‘non-conventional’. While everyone has a fair estimate of the potency of the former as they manifest themselves openly as the great forces of nature, it is the latter type of weaponry that very often completely defies and overwhelms man’s imagination. For example, once upon a time, the Lord forsook all the wonted inventory in His armoury and, instead, took everyone in the world by awe and surprise by using His fingernails—a hideous, rampaging weapon-system that dealt out death, terror, and sheer mayhem.



So adept is our Lord with the use of conventional arms that the Lord and His weapons have become virtually eponymous. In fact, often it appears as though it is the weapons He bears upon His person which give the Lord his unmistakable personality we know him to possess, and the unique identity of His that all our scriptures commemorate. Without those weapons, we would know Him not. Without them God could pass by us on the street, perhaps, and we would give him no more attention than we would any stranger.

The Lord’s weapons are His business cards. It is they that announce His existence as the absolute sovereign of all things and all beings in this world.



NammAzhwAr, the greatest of mystic-saints who ever set foot upon this earth, once witnessed through his inner eye (*yOga-drushti*) the splendour of the Lord bearing all glorious weapons. The saint described that rare vision of his in unforgettable words of Tamil poetry found in the immortal ‘*tiruvoimOzhi*’:

aazhi ezha-changUm villUm ezha disai
vaazhi ezha-thandUm vALUm ezha-andam
mOzhiai ezha mudi paadam ezha appan
oozhi ezha ulagam kondavaarE!
(tiruvoimozhi—7.4.1)

First the discus
rose to view.

then the conch
the long bow,
the mace,
and the sword;

with blessings
from the eight quarters,

he broke through
the egg-shell of heaven,
making the waters bubble;

giant head and giant feet
growing away from each other,

time itself rose to view:

how the lord
paced and measured
all three worlds!

(translation by A. K. Ramanujam)



Unlike weapons of the world fashioned by man, meant solely and utterly for destructive (and sometimes self-destructive) purposes, the great weapons of our Lord Vishnu are used by Him primarily for good and creative ends. The weapons are as NammAzhwAr enlists them above—the discus (‘aazhi’), conch (‘changu’), long bow (‘villu’), the mace (‘dandam’), and the sword (‘vAL’).

In the Vishnu-Sahasranaamam, we find the Lord has been named after each of the weapons exactly as the five enumerated by NammAzhwAr. In the penultimate and 107th stanza, the Sahasranaamam hails our Lord as,

*sankhabhrit nandaki chakrI sArngadhanvA gadhAdharah:
rathAngapAnih akshObhyah sarva-praharaNa-ayUdhah II*

Our Lord is ‘sankhabhrit’—the blower of cosmic sound that echoes eternally through space. To the evil-hearted, this is the primeval sound of the death-knell, a sound that is more terrible than the trumpeting wail of pipes on battlefields, the clash of swords and steel as it cuts through bloody flesh or the roar of battle-crazed elephants.

Our Lord is also ‘chakrI’, the one who wields the discus, the deadly wheel that can set everything in this world to naught in the inexorable course of Time.

Next, the Lord is called ‘nandakI’, the wielder of the great sword called ‘nandaki’. Just as the legendary King Arthur was known to carry a sword called the Excalibur, which was said to give magical powers of invincibility on earth, the ‘Nandaki’ of our Lord gives Him absolute sovereignty over all existence, both here and everywhere, now and forever.

Next, our Lord is a ‘sArngadhanvah’, the wielder of the great longbow that NammAzhwAr calls ‘vill’. This is the mighty bow of Rama who felled the fourteen thousand armies of Khara and the many more hordes that belonged to Ravana. It is also the mighty bow that inspired Swami Venkatanathan to hail the Lord as ‘raNa-pungavah’ in the ‘paramArtha-stuti’.

Finally, the Lord is also the wielder of the mighty battle mace or club called *KaumOdaki*—hence He is hailed as ‘gadhAdharah’. Through this formidable weapon, Vishnu, our Lord, gently reminds us of His power as a lawgiver and law-enforcer; and that He rules us all from within. The law of karma, for instance, is one such God-enforced law that none can escape. It is the club with which He tames all creation.

The sight of the Lord bearing all these wonderful weapons upon His person is a sight full of majesty and grandeur. These weapons do not make us cringe in fear. They do not chill our bones. Instead, the sight of these weapons is a feast for the eyes and upliftment for the soul. It is the spectacle of the Lord bearing these weapons that made Swami Venkatanathan cry out in the ‘paramArtha-stuti’:

*bhuvanAssraya-bhUshanAsstra-vargam
manasi tvannmayatAm mamAtu-nOtu I
vapUrAhava-pungava tvadheeyam
mahIksheenAm-animEsha-darshanIyam II (Stanza 5)*

*My valorous One! My Warrior!
The arms you bear
are the eternal ‘tattvas’ of all Life—
How beauteous they make you look!*

Did you know, my Lord, your consorts even can't bear to shift their gaze away from Thee, Not for a moment, not for eternity.



When the Lord really wants it, all these great weapons of His serve Him as irrepressible weapons of mass destruction. They are of such awesome, unimaginable power and fury that they quite easily make the most diabolic of man's weapon systems ever designed seem toy-like in comparison.

It is far too easy for us to see how Man's might measure up against the vast and untamed forces of nature. What indeed is the puny strength of man compared to that of a typhoon on the high seas? What man-made weapon can stand up to an earthquake that tips the scale of a Richter seismograph at 10 or 12? What is the plight of man in the face of a raging fire that goes devouring tract after tract of forest land in a matter of mere days? How puny is the power of man's weapons of mass destruction compared to the power of such awesome agents of God?

Howsoever formidable the weapons of God may seem, in their destructive potential, they are still not '*weapons of mass destruction*' in the vile and horrible sense in which man fashions his own. The weapons of God are not meant to destroy but to resurrect and redeem. They are not meant for the annihilation of man but for his emancipation.

God's weapons of mass destruction are so named not because they are capable of wreaking physical destruction or havoc. The mass that God's weapons destroy are not physical mass. The real targets of God's weapons are within our hearts: the masses of sin, '*pApa*', lust, greed, selfishness, and hatred that we all accumulate and keep concealed all the time. It is those masses of destructive potential hidden away within our minds that God seeks to disarm and destroy.



Let us now savour what the religious writer Sri. Eknath Easwaran in his book *Thousand Names of Vishnu* has to say too about these 'weapons of mass destruction' that God possesses: '*sarva-praharana-ayudha*':

The name is quite a mouthful, but well worth the effort when understood. When we love the Lord with all our heart, he gives us every weapon— '*sarva-praharana-ayudha*' we need to fight the war within.

Our enemies in this war, the Bhagavad Gita tells us, are ultimately three: anger, fear, and selfish desire. And the most basic of the three is selfish desire which stands for all compulsive craving. This is essentially an expression of self-will, the compulsive drive to get what we want (be it as individuals, as a society or as a nation as a whole) whatever it may cost others. Nothing stands between us and the Lord, the mystics say, except selfish desires and self-will.

The battlefield is each individual heart. In every one of us two forces are at work. One flows towards love, selflessness, happiness, and spiritual fulfilment. The other pulls us back toward our evolutionary past: toward anger, violence, lust, greed, and selfishness.

The force of goodness can never be eradicated; the scriptures tell us; it is the underlying reality of life. So, this battle is unavoidable as long as there is selfishness in the mind of man. We may not be aware of

it, but the conflict cannot help going on below the conscious level. Nothing can free us from its stress and turmoil except to face our selfishness squarely and put it to an end.

Whether as individuals, societies, or nations, we must realise Life is not given to us for grabbing what we can; it is meant for giving what we can. When we appreciate that this precious human birth has been given to us for making a lasting contribution to the rest of life, we get continuing motivation. Nothing then can provide a better shield against every weapon that may be used against us in life.

All life is part of us. This deepest of convictions can turn the most ordinary human being (or society or nation) into a powerful force or weapon for the unity that is God's world and the unity that God Himself stands for.





CHAPTER 33

VISHNU: GIVER OF WEALTH

Kuwait City, February 2003: These are tense and grim days that we are all going through in Kuwait. With war clouds gathering around us, the rumour mills around are working overtime. We hear stories and see pictures being painted that make us more anxious about a situation than we ought to really be.

Let us not give way to unnecessary anxiety or ‘*bheeti*’. Let us be alert; but let us not get unduly alarmed. Let us put our faith in the care of the Almighty and stay calm.

Let me tell you about an effective way to remain calm which works for me. I’m not afraid or ashamed to readily recommend it to you. I recite the Sri Vishnu Sahasranaamam, twice daily before meals, regularly for the past several days and I find it really soothing on frayed nerves. There is nothing like ‘*divya-nAma*’ to put a lid upon the fear of the unknown that lurks within us and keeping it firmly, tightly sealed.

Yesterday, after I had finished reciting the Sahasranaamam, for some strange reason, the ‘*nAma*’ of ‘*dhanya*’ in stanza 80 stayed stuck in my mind. Throughout the day I found myself mentally repeating it:

‘*sumEdhAh mEdhajah dhanyah satyamEdhAh dharAdharah*’

The ‘*nAma*’ ‘*dhanya*’ means wealth, amongst whose several synonyms, the one I personally like, is ‘Treasure’. The Almighty is a ‘treasure’,” says the Sahasranaamam that one should go doggedly in search of throughout one’s lifetime.

Most of us left our homes way back in India to go away to far-off lands like the US, Europe, Dubai, or Kuwait in search of a different kind of ‘*dana*’—the treasure of material wealth. We continue to pursue it faithfully even now and, for sure, without any let we will continue until almost to the end of our lives. There is nothing wrong with such a pursuit if we know for sure what will be the outcome of it all. The question many of us find difficult to answer, even to ourselves, is this:

Do we really know what kind of ‘*dhanya*’ lies at the end of the road as ultimate reward for the lifelong trouble we took? Do we know?

To find some answers I picked up, once again, my current favourite book, *Thousand Names of Vishnu*, by Sri. Eknath Easwaran and turned to see what the author has to say on the Lord’s ‘*nAma*’ of ‘*dhanyah*’ and was delighted to read the following excerpt. I hope you will all also share in my delight:

What pollutes the mind is not enjoying life but living for enjoyment, making pleasure a major personal goal. Pleasure pollutes because it focuses us on ourselves. If we had a drug that could extract pleasure and numb us to any pain, which of us would ever grow? Nothing I can imagine could make a person more selfish, less able to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of life and of other people.

I don’t think any sensitive person can be satisfied with having fun, no matter how much of it we may cram into our lives. Our need is not for pleasure but for joy, a deep sense of fulfilment that not only never leaves us but increases with the passage of time. Fun is living for ourselves; joy comes from living for others, giving our time and love to a purpose greater than ourselves. ‘This is the true joy in life’, “

George Bernard Shaw proclaims, 'the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one . . . the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.'



CHAPTER 34

VISHNU: THE PERFECT ALLY

Kuwait City, March 2003: If there is one great truth we learned from international events of the past few weeks, it is that relations amongst nations can be as brittle as and no more durable than those between man and man.

Watching CNN and BBC here in Kuwait, and reading columns of leading newspapers in the world, it was a sad sight indeed to witness nations once priding themselves as ‘natural allies’ or ‘special friends’, suddenly turning coat at the crucial moment and letting each other down badly. France and Germany let down the USA, Russia let down UK, Eastern Europe let down ‘old Europe’, NATO let down Turkey, Turkey might let down USA, the Arabs let down Iraq, the Lebanese let down Kuwait, and so on and so forth. It is all a merry-go-around of one betrayal after another. And it was all happening in a couple of fortnights!

To a serious student of world history this moment must seem at once both fascinating and horrific. *O tempora! O mores!* Old and honourable military alliances, military pacts, treaties, and so-called trusting relationships are all being turned upside-down. They have all been shown to be fragile and unreliable. To the world’s acute embarrassment, a cynical but age-old maxim stands once again confirmed: ‘There are no permanent friends or enemies in this world; there is only permanent self-interest.’



Any serious student of the Mahabharatha will tell you that the ‘*itihAsa*’ is one of the earliest and most comprehensive compendia of human betrayal and loyalty shifts—at both state and person- to-person levels. One has to merely recall at random a few vivid tales from the ‘*sabhA-parva*’, ‘*bhishma-parva*’, ‘*drOna-parva*’, ‘*karna-parva*’, or the ‘*souptika-parva*’ to remind oneself of the treachery, double-dealing, conspiracy, and intrigue that characterised political intercourse between kings, noblemen, and allies in the days of the Mahabharatha. Evidently, the trend continues to this very day.

The Hastinapur Crown was never really one large, monolithic empire ruled, so to say, by one all-powerful sovereign. It was a ‘*Coalition of the Willing*’—i.e., local chieftains, aristocrats, warlords, and noblemen, perennially at odds with each other, who willingly chose one amongst themselves—the least unacceptable to everyone and grudgingly elected him nominal sovereign to preside over the throne at Hastinapur.

The regional warlords wielded enormous power in their respective fiefdoms but had little all-India (or all-*bhArath*) stature or clout. They were frequently feuding with each other when they were not otherwise plotting against or placating each other. The king of the Kauravas, thus, ruled over this unruly pack through diplomatic ruse and manipulative politics. The sovereign enjoyed his sway only so long as he could command their loyalty and support. This he did through subterfuge, matrimonial alliances (marriages of convenience bordering on incest even sometimes), military pacts, and through

special tax treaties that were really a conspiracy against the common man and based firmly on the principle that there is honour among thieves.

In short, the quality of politics during the time of the Mahabharatha (when ‘*kali-yuga*’ was not very distant) was not very different from the state of international politics we see prevailing today among nation-states.



During the time of the Mahabharatha no one, hence, really trusted a political ally. The word ‘ally’ was generally taken to be euphemism for a ‘fair-weather friend’, a ‘mutual-interest society’, or a ‘partner-in-crime’. An ‘ally’ was someone who was either a ‘friend in need’ (i.e., either someone who temporarily needed you or who, for the time being, was needed by you) or someone else who was your ‘enemy’s worst enemy’ and therefore your friend. A debtor-state, i.e., a vassal-state mired in national debt up to its nose also occasionally came to be enlisted as a ‘faithful ally’. Or else, an ‘ally’ could be someone who had been sufficiently frightened into believing that if he was not seen to be ‘for you’, he might well be regarded as being against you’.

During the times of the Mahabharatha, allies and alliances were just as unreliable and shift as they are today.



The Vishnu-Sahasranaamam, which is a part of the Mahabharatha, tells us that there is only one ally in the world who can be trusted—at all times, under all circumstances. He is the Almighty Himself.

Now, we ask: Who is a true ally? What may be expected of him? What are his qualities?

The Sahasranaamam tells us categorically that the Lord alone possesses all requisite qualities of an ever-reliable ally. They are set out clearly in the twelfth stanza:

*vasuh vasumanAh satyah samAtma sammitah samah amOghah pUndarIkAkshah vrisha karma
vrishAkritih*



- (1) The first quality an ally must possess is truthfulness, credibility, integrity—‘*satyah*’. An ally does not say one thing in private and posture differently in public; nor does he say one thing at one time and then turn around to say the very opposite at another time. In the Mahabharata, Krishna proclaimed firmly to both warring parties, the Pandavas and the Kauravas that no matter what happens, He would not Himself directly engage in combat. To the very end, our Lord stuck to His stand. Even in the face of the gravest provocation to take up arms against the Kauravas at various points of time during the fratricidal Kurukshetra War, Krishna was steadfast in his resolve to remain on the side-lines.
- (2) The second quality of a true ally is denoted by the ‘*nAma*’: *vasuh*’. He who resides within His devotees, and alongside them, shoulder-to-shoulder, as it were, is known as ‘*vasuh*’. It is from this

term, ‘*vasuh*’, that we get the Tamil word ‘*vAsi*’ meaning ‘resident’. The Lord of Tiruvengadam is called ‘*SrinivAsa*’ since Lakshmi resides in Him. A resident of Madras would be a ‘*chennai-vAsi*’ these days and it would not be a misnomer to call a non-resident Indian like me an ‘*agnyAtha-vAsi*’ (one who is clueless about his own domicile).

A true ally resides and breathes with us. He shares our problems, helps on a day-to-day basis, and is always at hand to give counsel, support, and guidance. An ally is not one who will appear in the neighbourhood when it’s either election or re-election time, or else, when it is time to set up his military or naval base in your own backyard. Lord Krishna, in the Mahabharatha showed Himself as true ‘*vasuh*’: by always being physically there for the Pandavas—even, and especially during the twelve long years they languished in exile away from Hastinapur.

- (3) A true ally should also be a ‘*vasumanAh*’. An ally must befriend us not out of self-interest alone or for the sake of expediency of the hour. An ally must have abiding respect for us, our dignity, for what we are and for our ways of life. The ally may be high and mighty, and we may be very lowly in comparison, but that is not the basis on which the ally extends his hand of friendship. Such an ally does not go around announcing to the world that his God, his countrymen and their way of life is the best. The Lord—the ‘*vasumanAh*’ who is Lord almighty—regards the lowliest devotee with deep, abiding respect and reverence. Krishna calls them ‘*sa mahatma sudurlabhah*’. He considers them ‘rare’; He tends to them carefully as if they were some rare treasure chests to be safely secreted inside some deep, underground vault! He calls them ‘*mahAtmA*’! Rama, a royal prince, befriended a tribal chief, Guha. The Lord also befriended the leader of a monkey nation, Sugriva. The Lord did not ever once deign to lecture them on the virtues of democracy, free-market economy, or monogamy (not to mention the ‘American way of life’).
- (4) Next, a true ally is a ‘*samAtma*’ and ‘*samah*’, i.e., the ally treats all members of the alliance on an equal footing. There are no ‘old Europe’ and ‘new Europe’ members in God’s alliance. God makes no distinction amongst members of His alliance, ‘*samA atmA—samOham sarva bhUtEshu*’, He said in the Bhagavath-Gita. Nor does God threaten any member with expulsion from or non-admittance into the alliance in case the member, for one reason or other, does not exactly toe His line. When it became clear that war between the Kauravas and Pandavas was unavoidable, Krishna, like the true ally He was, made it clear to both Arjuna and Duryodhana that He would deny neither aid nor support they expected from Him! The fatuous Duryodhana chose to requisition all of Krishna’s armed forces, which the Lord promptly put at the Kaurava’s disposal. Arjuna wisely asked for the services of Krishna as charioteer and chief war strategist. The Lord readily obliged.

In the Ramayana, the Lord proved He was a ‘*samAtmA*’. Rama said, anyone who comes to Me and says, ‘Please, sir, I have no support other than Thee!’ anyone, without reserve or discrimination, who simply comes up and says, ‘Please’, will never be denied My allegiance and protection:

sakrudEva prapannAya tavAsmIti cha yAchatE I
abhayam sarva-bhUtEbhyO dadAmyEtadvratam mama II

To show the world that the above were not merely empty words, the Lord followed it up saying He would implement what was said:

aana-yainam harisrEshTa dattamasyAbhayam mayA I
vibhIshaNO va sugreva yadi vA rAvaNa svayam II

‘Be it Vibeeshana or Sugreeva or anyone else, I am the ally of everyone who seeks my protection.

Why, I’d give Ravana himself the same courtesy, if he were to ask me for it!’

- (5) The next important quality possessed by an ally, who is both true and reliable, is denoted through the ‘*nAma*’, ‘*vrishakarma*’, and ‘*vrishAkritih*’. The Lord is ‘*vrishakarmA*’—the safe ally who will act first and talk later. He is an ally who will never hesitate to act (karma). Time and again the Lord has shown that he prefers to act first and then talk. In the Ramayana, Rama first sorted out His ally, Sugriva’s problems with Vali; it was only after Sugreeva was safely restored to his throne that Rama sought his help for the march to Lanka. True allies always strive to put their own interest second. It is not subservience on their part; it is the ethic expected of all true allies (‘*saKhA*’) that they ought to consider themselves as each other’s ‘*dAsa*’—servant. In the ‘*yuddha-kAnda*’ of the Ramayana, we hear Sugreeva voicing this very noble sentiment to Ravana:

lOkanAthasya rAmasya saKhA dAsOsmi rAkshasa I (VI.40.10)

‘Do you know who I am, Ravana? Rama and I are allies [“*saKhA*”]. I have come here to assist Him in his cause. He regards me as an ally, as if I was an equal partner to His. But really, I am His “*dAsa*”. Though in His judgment I am an ally, truly speaking, in my heart I am his “*dAsa*”.’

The Lord, the Ally Supreme, promises to deliver’ and ‘delivers on the promise’. Most allies of this world are rather long on words and short on deed. (An ally will make a grand speech on Monday about the unity and brotherhood of the alliance, say, like the NATO; and then on Wednesday will use the veto to shoot down an alliance proposal for sending troops to defend a member-state at a time of dire need. And there are also allies who will demand a price and more than a pound of flesh for the grant of rights to station troops on their soil!) Such allies of the world cannot be relied upon to ‘walk the talk’, to use the popular expression! Our Lord, however, is not like that. As seen clearly in the example of Sugreeva above, the Lord is a Supreme Ally whose acts of loyalty (*vrishakarma* / ‘*vrishAkritih*’) speak louder than His words. He acts exactly as bidden by His devotees and unfailingly too. In Tamil, therefore, they call Him ‘*sonna vaNNam seida perUmAl*’—the God that ‘walks the talk’!

- (6) Finally, we come to the last great quality of the Perfect Ally. We get a good idea of this particular quality through that extraordinary ‘*nAma*’ the Sahasranaamam has shown us: *amOghah pundarikAksha*.

Parashara Bhattar (twelfth century CE), in his commentary called ‘*bhagavath-guna-darpana*’, explains this ‘*nAma*’ succinctly but very movingly. He alludes to the Valmiki Ramayana where Rama is hailed using this very same word:

amOghah darsanam rAma naca mOghastavastavah

amOghastE bhavishyanti bhaktimantascha yE narAh (VI.1 20—29)

‘Rama! Seeking your “*darsana*” and singing your praise [“*stOtra*”] always yield returns [*amOghah*]! Never can it be said that a devotee looked to you for succour and You failed him!’

The word ‘*amOghah*’ means in Sanskrit ‘useful’, ‘fruitful’, ‘successful’, ‘profitable’ The opposite of ‘*amOghah*’ is (in English) ‘wasteful’, ‘useless’, ‘unprofitable’, ‘fruitless’, or ‘futile’.

The word ‘*pundarika*’ refers to ‘*paramapada*’, the eternal and imperishable abode of God in Vaikuntah. The Lord residing in ‘*pundarika*’ is hence called ‘*pundarikAksha*’.

Now what does the ‘*nAma*’, *amOghah pundarikAksha*’ mean and how does it characterize a perfect ally? When anyone wants to make a financial investment there are two things he considers first and foremost: (a) security, and (b) return, isn’t it? Anyone who makes an investment wants it to be both secure and profitable.

Life is like an investment. In life we are constantly investing ourselves into various relationships all the time—as a son, brother, wife, mother, teacher, and employee. All our life, if you reflect on it deeply, we are doing nothing but making a series of investments into relationships with other people. And what are we investing in these relationships? The answer: our Trust. Trust is the currency with which the investments of our lives are made into the portfolio of relationships we seek to build in this world.

A child and its mother, for example, invest enormous amounts of trust into their relationship over the years. And what is the expectation: security and return, of course! Security is in the form of the deep, lasting bonding that develops between mother and child. The return derived is in the abiding love, understanding, and support they know they will get from each other all their lives. When mother and child succeed in getting security and return they each desire from their relationship, it is said to be ‘*amOghah*’.

God as our ally is ‘*amOghah pundarikAksha*’. When we ‘invest’ our trust in Him, we may regard it as ‘investing’ spiritually in a relationship that is both secure and profitable. Every dollar of spiritual trust or faith that we ‘invest’ in God goes into a security house called ‘*pundarikam*’. And every dollar of trust invested in ‘*pundarikam*’ returns to us enriched a million times over as ‘*amOghah*’.

In both the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, we see innumerable examples of the profit that people reaped when they invested in a relationship of trust with God. He became their abiding ally, the Perfect Ally, and secured for them bliss of both this world and the other. Bharatha, Ahalya, Sabari, Sugreeva, Vibhishana, and Hanuman in the Ramayana; Arjuna, Draupadi, Kunti, and Kuchela in the Srimad Bhagavatham; they are only a few notable examples in God’s Fortune 500 list of successful investors. Draupadi, in her gravest moment of crisis, called out to the Supreme Ally by the name of ‘*pundarikAksha*’. It is significant that she behaved in the same manner as one, who in the grave hour of a financial crisis, turns to the most secure and profitable of investments made for rescue:

shanka chakra gadhApANE dwAraka nilayA’chyuta
gOvinda pundarikAksha rakshamAm saraNagatam!



The ‘investment’ we make in a relationship with God is immeasurable. Trust in God defies valuation. The only stock exchange on which we can see our investment in God listed is inside our own individual hearts. The value of our relationship with Him, the value of our alliance with the Almighty, is a matter that God wants always to remain intensely private and confidential. It is a sacred but secret alliance. None can get a true measure of the worth of this special relationship except our own very selves.

And that is the reason, finally, that is why in the fourteenth stanza, the Vishnu-Sahasranaamam calls the Lord, our Perfect Ally, as ‘*sammitah*’, the Immeasurable One!





CHAPTER 35

VISHNU: HIS DEEPAVALI GIFT FOR ME

Deepavali is the time for new clothes and new goods! It is an occasion that long tradition has turned into a custom for our families to go on a merry, unrestrained shopping spree. In India especially, Deepavali is when a whole nation goes to market on a buying binge! Building up slowly throughout the year like a gathering storm, the pent-up desires of people—for cars, silks, jewelry, home appliances, real estate, or whatever—their desire for all these new things or what is called ‘goodies’ of the world finally boils over in a virtual riot of shopping during the weeks leading to and following Deepavali!

Once the shops announce their ‘sale’, ‘festival offers, and ‘festival bonanzas, the cash registers begin whirring overtime and business swings into high gear. Jostling crowds of womenfolk go hither and thither, from shop to shop, from bargain to bargain, clamoring for this thing and that, flashing their dazzling credit cards and wallets as if there were no tomorrow!

Come hell or high tide, whatever the cost, and no matter how many shops they must climb up or down to, the ladyfolk will go to the very ends of downtown Madras, Dubai, or LA if that’s where on earth they can buy that new piece of jewelry just out in the market this season! Before the ‘*mAmi*’ next-door beats them to it, they must somehow buy that ravishing new brand of ‘*churidar*’ just out in the market.

And while the wives busy themselves in the souk, all that the poor, harried husbands can do meanwhile (after having been comprehensively relieved of their salary and Deepavali bonuses) is tag behind in the mall’s parking lots, driving round and round in endless circles, looking for a slot in a roiling sea of honking vehicles, billowing exhaust and angry policemen blowing their whistles to shoo them all away.

For most of us, be it in India or abroad, this is what ‘Happy Deepavali’ has become: an annual orgy of frenzied consumerism. The Festival of Light is half observed at home these days; the other half, the more important half of Deepavali, is celebrated over the ‘bargain-sale’ counters of Spencer Plaza at Chennai, the city center in Dubai or at Wal-Mart in LA perhaps.



A new personal wardrobe, however, ought never to be the only reason for celebrating Deepavali or the sole highlight of the festival.

Deepavali is nothing if not a festival of annual renewal, renewal both without and within. There is an urge within each one of us that we can all easily recognise—it is the urge for a periodic renewal of the inner spirit. It is a far more powerful urge than the need for mere new apparel. The annual change-out of garments during Deepavali is only an outward expression of such a deeper inner need. It would be a big mistake on our part to think that life renewal is easily attained by a mere change of clothes or designer jewelry.

In Tamil there is an old proverb:

aaL pAdhi aadai paadhi

If clothes maketh half the man, the qualities he possesses maketh the rest of him. The test of good taste in a man lies not only in how smartly he is turned out but also in his manners and the personal qualities he carries within him. Both sartorial elegance and sterling character must combine in equal measure to make anyone a man of substance.

So if Deepavali is an occasion to add to a man's wardrobe, it is an equally good occasion to expand the wardrobe of one's inner being too. One therefore needs to renew the apparel of the soul too by clothing it with at least one brand-new quality every year. Patience, for instance, could be the quality to wear one year. Courage, next, could be the garment to acquire the following Deepavali. Kindness or courteousness could be next, and so on and so forth.

When our soul too gets thus annually renewed, with one new quality being added each year as new clothes for it ('*aaL pAdhi aadai paadhi*'), the festival of Deepavali then becomes not only joyous but also truly meaningful.



This Deepavali I feel I would really love to acquire, if at all I could by any means, a brand-new human quality for myself. It is the quality called 'Detachment'.

Detachment is a very rare quality and a very difficult one to attain for the noblest of men in this world. If detachment were to be an automobile, it would surely rank as, say, a 'Rolls Royce Limited Edition'; if it were diamond jewelry, it would surely be a DeBeers piece; and if it were the richest woven silk, it would surely be the finest variety ever to come out of the looms of Kanchipuram. Of all the human qualities known to man, detachment, without doubt, is the most outstanding and the most priceless one. Oh, how I would love to buy this quality!

I am not ashamed to say that I now covet detachment as greedily as I know (in my college days many years ago) I once used to yearn for a new pair of Levi-Strauss jeans on Deepavali day. My desire for detachment, I find, is becoming more and more intense as the years go by, and more so after I found it being hailed in the 'Bhagavad-Gita' where Lord Krishna Himself endorses it as:

*yadrucchha lAbha santushtO
dvandhAtheethO vimatsarah I
samah-siddhAvasiddhow cha
krutvApi na nibhadhyantE II (IV.22)*

*Nothing in the world perturbs the man
Who remains content with whatever comes his way, Envy, success, failure, strife—
Nothing moves or unmoves the Man of Detachment.*

Whenever I read this verse of the Gita, I cannot help thinking, ‘How wonderful, oh how wonderful it would be, indeed, if only I could go to a clothes store and purchase *detachment* off the shelf as easily as I might pick up a beautiful Lacoste T-shirt at Debenhams on a Deepavali day.’



Detachment is a god-like quality. Indeed, it is an adornment for God Almighty and is even one of the several attributes of excellence and auspiciousness (*kalyANa-gUNa*’) said to define Him.

In the ‘Vishnu Sahasranaamam’ there is a beautiful stanza describing the Almighty Vishnu as the very embodiment of that rare quality of detachment. It reads as follows:

rAmah virAmah viratah: mArgO nEyO nayOnayah
veera: shaktimatAm srEshtO dharmO-dharma-viduttamah
(Stanza 43)

The 398th ‘*nAma*’ of the Sahasranaamam is ‘*viratah*:’ meaning, ‘the One who is ever Un-attached or Detached’.

Explaining this quality of detachment as it is to be found in God Himself, Sri Parashara Bhattar, in the magnificent commentary he wrote on the ‘Vishnu-Sahasranaamam’, draws our attention to a poignant incident from the ‘*sundara-kAndam*’ (the fourth of the seven ‘*kAndA*-s’ or Parts of the ‘Valmiki Ramayana’):

When Hanuman met Sita in the Ashokavana, the prison-grove in which Ravana incarcerated her in Lanka, she was briefed of Rama’s whereabouts and condition. Sita listened to Hanuman’s briefing with joy tinged with pain. She could not suppress a wave of memory that suddenly swept her mind. With hot tears filling her eyes and emotion choking her heart, she recollected to Hanuman in meltingly beautiful words her memories of the early days she’d spent as the young bride of Rama.

While speaking in that nostalgic vein, Sita began to extol the lofty and noble character of Rama. She spoke of the many good qualities Rama possessed, of both the heart and head, but she paused to make special mention to Hanuman of one quality her husband had that was unparalleled by anyone in the world in her own estimate:

dharmApadE satyajatascha rAjyam
mAmchapyaranyam nayatah padAtim.
(V.36—29 Va. Ram)

He gave up a throne and a vast kingdom and walked away into the wilderness with me solely on a matter of dhArmic principle!

After many months of painful separation from her husband Rama, a period during which she often wondered whether she would ever remain alive to see him again, when the moment arrived when Sita was to recollect her Lord, there was only one towering quality of his by which she could instantly recall him—it was Rama’s great quality of detachment—‘*viratah*’! It was the quality of supreme and serene detachment with which Rama had accepted the fact, at the very last moment, that he was not going to be crowned emperor of Ayodhya, that he must make way for his brother Bharatha instead, and furthermore, he must leave the kingdom for fourteen long years of exile in the wilderness.

Who else, Sita herself marveled to Hanuman, who else but a man of such supreme ‘*virati*’ her beloved Rama possessed, could ever pass up a throne, a kingdom, wealth, pomp, and all as nothing but mere trifles, and walk away just like that!



Now, we may ask, what exactly is the nature of this rare and wonderful quality, detachment?

One of my favourite religious authors, Sri Eknath Eswaran, has a splendid explanation. I reproduce it below:

Epictetus has an excellent metaphor for teaching detachment, perhaps the most important skill to acquire for living in a world of change. ‘Remember’, he says, ‘To behave in life as you would make sure to behave at a banquet. When something is being passed around, as it comes to you, stretch out your hand and take a portion of it gently. When it passes on, do not try to hold on to it; when it has not yet come to you, do not reach out for it with your desire but wait until it presents itself. So, act toward children, toward spouse, toward office, toward wealth.

Epictetus would have been at home at a Hindu banquet, for we have three unwritten rules (of detachment):

One is that there is a regular apportionment of space on the piece of banana leaf that serves as a plate. You don’t pile things on top of each other. Each delicacy is served in a particular order in its appropriate place.

Second, when something delicious is put in front of you, you don’t start gobbling it immediately; you wait until everybody has been served. Children get so impatient that a mother sometimes must train her little one by slapping his wrist gently; but by the age of 5 or so all are able to sit patiently waiting until the serving is done and everyone observes a few moments’ repetition of the ‘mantra’ (‘parishes Hana mantra’). After that, as Sri Ramakrishna says, conversation stops; the only sounds you hear are of eating and drinking.

The third rule is that when you are done, you must wait until the last person has finished the last bite before you get up. This unwritten code of banana-plate manners makes even the largest family feast go smoothly.

In personal relationships, Epictetus suggests we should observe the same kind of restraint. Don’t try to cling to people, to hold people to you; everything changes and if you try to arrest relationships and hold on to others (or to things), making them conform to your own needs, you will lose all the magic of life. William Blake says it beautifully:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity’s sunrise.*



How right is Elnath Eswaran indeed! And how admirably he says it!

Many people think that detachment means withdrawal from the world! This is utter rubbish. The man of detachment is not some world-weary soul who rejects everything around him. Nor is he some severe ascetic who shuts everything and everyone out of his life. Detachment from the world does not mean derailment from it.

Detachment means exactly what Krishna explains it as in the ‘Gita’ verse we saw above— ‘*yadrucchha lAbha santushtO*’—i.e., detachment means never yearning for the unwanted, unnecessary things of the world. Detachment means knowing exactly what is essential for one in this life and world and being perfectly content with it, *santushti*. It means cheerfully accepting whatever comes one’s way in the natural course of things and events. Detachment means never scrambling after or grasping desperately at all the petty things of this world we see around us, the things by which we really shall gain nothing except perhaps whet some whim or vanity of ours.

True detachment lies in the ability to let go of things and people, willingly, gracefully, without a tinge of regret and self-pity in us.



Amid all the frantic shopping now going on around me on the eve of Deepavali this week, I find myself saying this deep within my heart: ‘Detachment is what I want. It is one of the best gifts I know I could ever give myself! Can somebody please tell me if there is a store somewhere in the world where I could go and purchase some detachment in a bargain sale?’





CHAPTER 36

Whither *VAIKUNTAM*?

Late last evening, a friend of mine dropped by at home for a cup of tea and some desultory conversation which began with office politics, meandered into Indian politics, veered to international and finally began to head, as always, towards matters spiritual and religious.

During the conversation he asked me a very interesting question about how ‘*SriVaikuntam*’, the abode of the Supreme Brahman hailed as ‘*parama-padam*’, got its name and why. I ventured to give a serious answer to the best of my knowledge which I share below with the rest of you just in the hope that it may be of some interest to you also.

‘*Vaikunta*.’ the Sahasranaamam tells us, happens to be one of the names of the Brahman called Vishnu or Narayana (‘*nAma*’ 407).

Parashara Bhattar explains that one who joins or unites everyone is ‘*Vaikuntah*’. The etymological root of the word is ‘*kuthi gati pratighAtE*’.

‘*Kunth*’ is the opposite of ‘union’. ‘*Vikunta*’ is the absence of ‘*kuntha*’, meaning union. One who unites is thus called ‘*Vaikunta*’. The word ‘*Sri*’ is added to describe the Brahman in his ontological state as being one with His consort, Mahalakshmi who is known as ‘*Sri*’, the fount of all auspiciousness and felicity.

Hence, *SriVaikuntam* is the place from which there is never any separation, no ‘*kuntha*’, something which can never be said of this world, this ‘*bhulOka*’, in which there is nothing, but misery caused by all manner of painful separation. When we are born, we are separated from the warmth of our mother’s womb. We arrive in this world with a sensation of separation. We journey through life in a series of separations, as young men we leave homes in search of our destiny, we separate from our native homes, our parents. Similarly, our own children too in their time separate from us to lead their own lives. When our parents depart from this world, we experience the separation of bereavement. And when it is time for our own departure, we dread separation from this world.

Thus, ‘*separation*’, ‘*kuntah*’ is the cause of all misery and bondage in this world. Which is why the wise ones amongst us always pursue a state of being in which there is no separation, no ‘*kuntah*’. Such a state exists only in eternal communion with God. And that state of communion is called ‘*vikuntah*’. Such a communion is made possible by Almighty who is therefore described as ‘*Vaikuntah*’. The place He resides in is also called ‘*Vaikuntam*’, because once it is reached, there is no question of either departure therefrom or separation from it. There are only arrivals in *SriVaikuntam*, no departures.

Even while living in this world, some can achieve a state of communion with God, in thought, word and deed. For such great souls ‘*Sri-Vaikuntam*’ is experienced in this world itself, they don’t have to wait until they leave mortal shores. Which is the real reason for the Tamil saying: ‘*irruppidam-vaikuntam*’.



BOOK 7
The Bhagavath-Gita



CHAPTER 37

THE WAY OF THE ‘JIGNYAASU’: THE WONDER OF WONDERING

Have you paused at any time in life to wonder why you offer worship unto God?

Have you sometimes found yourself asking, ‘What makes me pray?’ What impels me to go to a temple? Why do I go on long pilgrimages to worship at far-off shrines? Why do I observe rites and sacraments? Why do I read Holy Scriptures? Why do I perform “*hOma*” or “*yagnya*”? Why prostrate and genuflect? Why do fasts and similar other austerities?

Clear and honest answers to such searching personal questions are never very easy. It is often hard to fathom the inner intentions or motives for our many acts of worship, both spontaneous and ceremonial. Why I worship, and the reasons why I turn to God, is a complex question indeed and the answers can vary widely with time, circumstance, and self-awareness.



The ‘Bhagavath-Gita’ is an unfailing source of answers for many such difficult questions in life. In the eighteen blessed chapters of the ‘Gita’, there is one particular gem of a verse that reveals to us four principal reasons behind the human impulse to worship:

chatur-vidha bhajantE mAm janAh: sukritnOr’juna
ArthO jignyAsur’arthArthi gnyAnI cha bharatar-shabha

(Bhagavath-Gita: 7:16)

‘There are four principal motives, O Arjuna, why men of this world turn to me in worship,’ said the GitAchAryA.

There is the (1) ‘ArthA’, the man motivated by fear; (2) the ‘arthArthi’, the man driven by desire; (3) there is the ‘jIgnyAsu’, the man inspired by wonder; (4) and finally, there is the ‘gnyAni’, the man of complete wisdom. These clearly defined four motives for human worship— ‘fear’, ‘desire’, ‘wonder’, and ‘wisdom’—each in turn typify what is generally known in the philosophy of Vedanta as ‘tri-gUNa’—the three-fold Quintessence, the three intrinsic qualities, inherent in everything that exists in the world viz. ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’, and ‘tamas’.



- (1) The first motive of worship, fear, is said to be characteristic of men seized by ‘tamOgUNa’—the quality of negativity. Fear is a truly negative (‘tAmas’-ic) emotion indeed that makes all men cringe. Such men are called ‘ArthA’.

- (2) The second ‘gUNa’, called ‘rajas’, also impels men towards worship. It is Quintessence, which arouses within them all manner of ceaseless, restless, and countless desires. Such men are called ‘arthArthi’. Their desires drive them to a lifetime of endless, frenetic, and self-acquisitive activity.
- (3) The third motive, wonder, is a rather special one (and it is the main theme of this essay). The sense of wonder that in some special moments overwhelms the human mind is said to be inspired by a Quintessence (gUNa) within called ‘sattva’. It is the quality that propels men to look at the world around them with a sense of deep awe, inquisitiveness, disquiet, and quest. It makes us mentally probe the reality of existence. The ‘sattvA-guNA’ drives them to constantly seek answers for ‘What?’, ‘Why?’, ‘How?’, ‘Wherefore?’, and ‘Whither?’ Such men the Gita calls ‘jignyAsu’. We will have more to say about the ‘jignyAsu’ later in this essay.
- (4) The fourth motive for human worship is rarely at all, if ever, found amongst men. But it is Krishna’s most favorite and, strangely, Vedanta does not give it any name at all. It is said to be the ‘gnyAnI’s’ motive, the Wise One’s motive. The ‘gnyAnI’s’ impulse to worship is not ignited by any ‘gUNa’ or Quintessence within. It is simply motiveless Worship. The Wise One worships for no reason other than that he regards worship as reward. In a way that is beyond the comprehension of ordinary humanity, the ‘gnyAnI’s’ worship transcends the three ‘guNA-s’ of ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’, and ‘tamas’. He worships not because he wants to, or because he must. He worships because worship is simply second nature to him. It is his very ‘*raison d’etre*’—he worships to live, and he lives to worship.

Of such extraordinary men, Krishna in the Bhagavath-Gita said, ‘mAmevAnUthamAm gatim’ (7:18), i.e., such men are possessed of only one aspiration in life: ‘To attain me . . . They know of no other way leading to me other than the path of worship’.

Sometime around the seventh century AD (according to some historian-hagiographers), in a small village in South India called ‘Tirukkurugur’, there lived a great saint called ‘NammAzhwAr’. This saint is remembered and revered today as the foremost among the twelve ‘AzhwArs’—twelve great mystic saints in the long Sri Vaishnavite lineage of Vedantic preceptors. NammAzhwAr was a natural-born ‘gnyAni’. For him worship of God was as involuntary as bodily breathing. This AzhwAr’s time on earth was quite short, but he chose to spend it full-time in constant contemplative worship of the Almighty. Living like a hermit, he resided under a great tamarind tree within the temple precincts of the village of Alwar-Tirunagari. In that rather remarkable living quarters of his, he spent his days like a true yogi—lost in meditation, unmindful of everything in the world except the inner object of his worship. The saint’s waking hours were few, brief, and far between but it was during those lucid moments that the saint sang the 1,000 verses of a Tamil poem, the ‘tiruvoimOzhi’—a hymn of such great mystic power and revelation it came to be regarded in history as the equal of the Vedas in much of the Tamil-speaking country of India. To return to the four primal motivations for human worship, as explained above, the one the Almighty favours most is ‘gnyAna’. Sri Krishna calls the ‘gnyAni’ a ‘mahAtmA’, a Great Soul, one who has broken free from the clutches of earthly ‘tri-gUNa’. Having expressed such clear preference amongst worshippers, Krishna however quickly admits such men are an extreme rarity:

sa mahAtma sudurlabhah: (7:19)

The ‘gnyAni-s’ of the world do not come by a dime a dozen. It is unlikely we would come across a ‘gnyAni’ (like NammAzhwAr) under casual, daily circumstances, say, while crossing the street on the way to the marketplace or at the local train station. Even if we did encounter a true ‘gnyAni’ on the street, ordinary mortals like us would hardly know how to recognise one. The true ‘gnyAni’ comes into

this world silently, lives amongst us unseen, unknown, and unsung, and then simply and graciously disappears from this world. In the beautiful expression of the Gita, the ‘gnyAni’ is ‘sudurlabha’. In his own time, none knew of the greatness of NammAzhwAr as a ‘gnyAni’. The world realised the fact only a couple of centuries later when the memory of the great saint was resurrected, as it were, from the mists of history thanks to the immortal ‘tiruvoimOzhi’ being unearthed.

For the limited purpose of this essay let us leave the rarest of God-worshippers, the ‘gnyAni’, alone. We do not quite know him well enough and perhaps shall never know too. It’s only fit that we speak less of the ‘gnyAni’ or about his unique ways of worship.



In sharp contrast to the scant knowledge, we have of the ‘gnyAni’, what is known about the ways of worship of the ‘ArthA’ and the ‘arthArthi’, however, would fill volumes indeed.

Most of us who offer worship to God fall in either one or both of two common types. One is driven by ‘desire’ and the other by ‘fear’. Unlike the ‘gnyAni’, it is very easy to spot or recognise these types in day-to-day life. They abound around us; they are reflections of our own very selves; and they are unimpeachable proof of the definition which says that the human species is but a ‘bundle of desires and fears’.

Let us briefly study the ‘ArthA’ and the ‘arthArthi’ in their respective moments of worship. The ‘ArthA’ turns to the worship of God out of acute distress caused by fear. Fear (bheeti’, ‘bhaya’) is one of the most primal reasons for worship and ‘fear of the unknown’ is the most terrifying of all. It is the ‘Mother of All Fears’ spawning a myriad of other terrifying ‘unknowns’ in life.

It takes only a few common examples to help understand well, the nature of this fear.

- Death is a certainty, of course, but life after death, we know, is a dark and terrible ‘unknown’, isn’t it? It fills us with a strange unease if not dread to even speculate about the fate awaiting us all after we have shed our moral coils.
- The thought of an uncertain ‘tomorrow’—i.e., the future with all its surprises, twists, and imponderables lying in wait to ambush us— ‘tomorrow’ is yet another great ‘unknown’ fear for all men.
- The probability of unforeseen events is another terrifying ‘unknown’ indeed. A fatal disease suddenly striking us, a nasty mishap on the road disabling us permanently, the loss of a job or a spouse, sudden bankruptcy, the uncertain future of our beloved children, all these ‘unknowns’ are deep-seated fears and anxieties that torment most of us all through our lives.

The list of ‘unknown’ fears lurking within and haunting man, if one were to recount them, would simply go on endlessly. The tragedy of the human condition is that it is generally helpless in coping with this distress. In the constant struggle we wage to overcome our deep anxieties, it often seems to us we can never emerge outright victors. Fear paralyses men. It makes us all cringe. Vedanta describes such a state of abjectness as the ‘tamas’ that afflicts the ‘ArthA’.

Even fearful men, however, do have hope. The hope of worship. Such men, the ‘ArthA’, turn to pious worship, according to the Gita, and seek relief from the distress of fear. Just as a child, fearing unknown ghosts in the dark, instinctively grabs the hand of anyone—even totally ‘unknown’ strangers—who may happen to be beside and clings dearly to him or her, so too does the terrified

‘ArthA’ reach out in worship to grasp and cling to the solace that lies in the unseen, unknown Hand of God.

Just as unconquered fear drives the ‘ArthA’ into seeking God through worship, so does unfulfilled desire lead the ‘arthArthi’ to the doorsteps of the Almighty.

For most men, it is their numerous desires that give meaning and substance to life. To them the relentless pursuit of material, sensual, emotional, and soulful self-gratification is what existence is all truly about. There is an old saying that characterizes such men quite well: ‘Where there is hope, there is life’. That proverb can be best understood when paraphrased into: ‘Where there is yet hope of desires being fulfilled, there will be life’.

For most men in this world, life ceases when desire ceases. Such men hence see good reason to go on desiring more and more in life. ‘After all,’ they say, ‘what better way to stay alive and prolong the experience of life itself?’

It is very, very common to see such men and women amidst us. At the great Sri Venkateshwara temple, for example, at Tirumala-Tirupati (my native town in India), it is quite common to see worshippers of the ‘arthArthi’ variety publicly petitioning the presiding deity there (‘yEdukondaluvAdA gOvinda!’) to please grant them their life desires—a home, a car, a son’s success in examinations, a daughter’s marriage, profits from a business venture, the birth of a grandchild, and so on and so forth.

Another common sight in every part of India, are the countless little roadside shrines of gods like Ganesha, Hanuman, Devi, and others. These local deities are very dear to the community. Men and women of the neighborhood will petition these deities and shrines to fulfil ordinary desires of even an average workaday life. The busy officegoer, for example, hurrying to work will often be seen pausing a few moments at the doorsteps of the shrine just to mutter a fervent, silent prayer, O Ganesha, please let this day at work go smoothly for me. Save me from my boss, the big, bad bully’, or, ‘O Anjaneya, won’t you please help me get that promotion I was promised last year?’

No more, thus, really need be said about the nature of worship of the ‘arthArthi’. It is without doubt quite business-like in form and character, but then it’s the sort of business Almighty does not mind regularly doing with his devotees. Going by the Bhagavath-Gita, God finds it pleasurable to do business with such devotees. It is His own way of contributing to the continued economic well-being of the one paramount thing that is all important to mankind—Gross Domestic Product, GDP.

The third of the four kinds of worship the Bhagavath-Gita has described is a very special one indeed. It belongs to the one who is called the ‘jignyAsu’. His form of worship is truly ‘sAttvic’ inspired as it were neither by fear nor desire but by an overwhelming sense of wonder and inquisitiveness.

To the ‘ArthA’ the worship of God is but a desperate search for the means of escape or relief from fear. To the ‘arthArthi’, the worship of God is a search for means of realising life’s many desires, great and small. The true ‘jignyAsu’ however is said to approach God out of a sense of pure curiosity and platonic enquiry. There is never any tinge of ‘tamas’ or ‘rajas’ in his ways of worship.

The ‘jignyAsu’ seeks knowledge of God because he finds the allurement of God—even as idea, entity, or presence—simply irresistible. It would not be wrong to say the ‘jignyAsu’ pursues God for the same reason why an entrepreneur, for example, is perennially in pursuit of his ‘next big business project’; why a scientist doggedly pursues a research project; or even why a philanderer cannot help chasing one romantic affair after another. The ‘jignyAsu’s’ search for God is motivated by an all-powerful, all-consuming urge. For reasons he cannot himself quite fathom fully, the very idea of God and its pursuit provides him with some deep sense of purpose, adventure, accomplishment, or conquest in life. The

Almighty is a puzzle he must solve, an enigma he must unravel and an eternal mystery he must somehow uncover in time.

There is thus never any rest for the 'jignyAsu' until he has finally found answers for the searing questions of life he poses to himself. Mercilessly, relentlessly he asks, 'What is this world?', 'What are these infinite spaces surrounding the cosmos?', 'Who caused it? Who thought it all up? Who conceived it? Who made it?' And then 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', 'Who is my creator?', 'Where can I reach him?', 'What is the cause of all that I see, feel, and experience in any given moment frozen in time?' and so on and so forth.

The 'jignyAsu's' mission in life is a perennial one. It is an unending quest which at times seems hopeless. But he is quite content to go on persevering. One may ask why. It is simply because the 'jignyAsu's' credo or motivation in life is akin to the old biblical counsel: 'Cease not from search until ye find; finding ye shall wonder; wondering ye shall enter the kingdom and in the kingdom ye shall find peace.'

The ancient religion of India, the inspiration for which sprang from the timeless Vedas, is essentially a religion of, by, and for the 'jignyAsu'. It is a religion that encourages worship through wonder.

Though it is true that the large mass of common people—the 'ArthA-s' and 'arthArthi-s'—of our land do embrace and practise this religion out of motives rooted variously in 'tamas' and 'rajas', i.e., out of fear and/or desire, if one were asked, however, to single out one predominant reason, or identify one fundamental basis for the Vedic approach or attitude to worship, it is clearly and wholly 'sAttvic', and simply, it is this: 'God is true wonderment. To wonder is to worship. In wonder indeed do we worship Him, both truly and well.'

Whether it is sacred Vedic utterances we go to, or the Vedantic scriptures or the 'purAnic' literature of India we delve into, if we understood them truly, we will not fail to appreciate that there is a certain inquisitive mood, a rather special tenor of deep, abiding wonder that is characteristic.

The 'purusha-sUktam' is a classic example.

This 'sUktam' ('sUktam' in Sanskrit means 'holy panegyric') is a passage of great pre-eminence in the Vedas. Appearing in all the four Vedas—the Rk, Yajur, Sama, and Atharvana—it is a mystical and revelatory account of the process of cosmic Creation. It celebrates the first few primordial moments at the dawn of time—those epochal moments during which all existence first came to be conceived and brought forth into being.

Speaking in tones of joyous wonder the 'sooktam' describes the 'pUrUsha'—that Supreme Unity from which everything emanated forth, all else was conceived and brought forth as the Cosmos, all reality and all things great and small issued out. It is a magnificent, exuberant Vedic hymn that when solemnly chanted with intense feeling never fails to arouse genuine wonder in the human heart.

The 'purusha-sUktam's' very opening lines arouse sentiments of marvel and awe in the heart of the worshipper. It is known to elevate a chanteur's mind to a contemplation of that great moment of cosmic birth, Cause and Creation—the dawn of time, the birth of matter, the issuing forth of suns, moons, the dazzling stars spinning around the celestial spaces enveloping the universal chasm, the advent of the natural orders and laws, the first gush of water, the first leap of flaming fire, the first gust of wind, and the very first spark of life upon earth. All this the 'sUktam' begins describing with an unforgettable opening line of poetic and eloquent wonder:

sahasra-sheershA purushah:

sahasrAksha sahasra-pAth

sa bhUmim vishwatO vruttvA.

‘All this Creation the Supreme Purusha beheld and transcended. Verily, a thousand wonders, a thousand spectacles, a thousand things.’



In the Srimadh Bhagavath-Gita we find another clear affirmation of the way of worship practised by the ‘jignyAsu’. Sri Krishna clearly extols and encourages the spirit and inspiration behind the ‘jignyAsu’s’ quest for God:

tadvidhi praNipAtEna

pari-prashnEna sEvayA

upadEshyanti tE gnyAnam

gnyAninas-tattva-darshinah:’

(B. Gita IV.34)

‘Seek and serve those wise men of knowledge’, says Krishna in the Bhagavath-Gita, ‘who shall show you the way once they see you are worthy of it—humble, devoted, and unrelentingly questful.’

The expression ‘pari-prashnEna sEvaya’ is a very significant one indeed in the above verse.

‘Pari-prashna’ in Sanskrit means ‘unrelentingly quest’. The God-seeker is one who ceaselessly engages in enquiry. The true ‘jignyAsu’ is he, who driven by wonder, goes on asking ‘What?’, ‘Who?’, ‘Why?’ ‘Wherefore?’ i.e., pari-prashna’. But the more interesting term in Krishna’s phrase is the qualifying word—‘sEvayA’. It underscores the fact that the ‘jignyAsu’s’ attitude to ‘pari-prashna’ is genuinely humble and worshipful.

To worship without a sense of deep wonder is blind, barren ritual. And to wonder, i.e., to otherwise engage in enquiry or ‘pari-prashna’, with an attitude other than true worship is equally futile and fruitless.



The ancient religious literature of India, known collectively as the ‘itihAsA-s’ and ‘purANAs’, derives its principal inspiration from the Vedic ‘sruti’ (e.g., ‘purusha-sUktam’) and the Vedantic ‘smriti’ (e.g., Bhagavath-Gita). It should be no surprise hence that ‘purANAs’ too, in their grand and dramatic portrayals, their epic themes, vast characterisations, and their theological essaying, essentially encourage and promote the spirit of the ‘jignyAsu’.

Although the ‘purANAs’ might appear to the undiscerning or un-initiated mind as being nothing more than colourful and fantastic mythology, full of fanciful tales and exaggerated lores, the real fact of the matter is that the ‘purANAs’ have but one central and all-important purpose: To preserve, uphold, and affirm the ‘culture of wonder’ that has always pervaded and remained integral to the religious life of

India. It is through the epic themes and grand tales of the ‘purANa’ that a ‘jigNyAsu’s’ wonder is aroused and sustained—the sense of wonder so very essential to his pursuit of God.

The ‘pUrAnic’ concept of ‘avatAra’ (God’s descent unto earth), for example, is an esoteric and mystifying theme (so mystifying that in Vedanta it is referred to as ‘avatAra rahasya’). Now, contemplation of the mysteries of ‘avatAra’ as recounted by the ‘purANa’ serves as continuous inspiration for the ‘jigNyAsu’s’ enquiry into the nature and reality of Godhead. Similarly, there are splendid accounts in the ‘purANa’ of the glorious exploits of God’s avatara. These are known as ‘bhagavath-leelA-vaibhavam’. To ordinary minds, these may appear to be little more than entertaining stories. But the main purpose of such ‘paurAnic’ narratives is to kindle, arouse, and whet the ‘jigNyAsu’s’ basic instinct and passion for serious, intense enquiry into Godhead.

So is the case too with many other ‘purAnic’ accounts and narratives—e.g., the fabulous descriptions of the process of Creation, the churning of the Elixir of Life (‘amruta’), the recital of long genealogies of rishis and mythological kings, the description of heavenly spheres and planes inhabited by gods and manes, the ‘devas’ and ‘asuras’, the episodes of divine avatars, the stupendous wars of heroes and mighty warriors, and so forth. All such ‘purAnic’ drama, strange and fantastic as they well might otherwise seem, serve however an important purpose: they are an unfailing and inexhaustible source of sustenance for the ‘jigNyAsu’. It keeps his sense of unending Wonder intact and provides fuel for his undying spirit for enquiry, for ‘pari-prashna’.

That the accounts and narratives found in the ‘purANa’ do inspire and sustain the ‘jigNyAsu’s’ faculty of wonder, and that they form an essential part too of his way of worship, is clearly evidenced in the lives of the great saints of India, and especially those of the Sri Vaishnavite tradition—those mystics known as the ‘AzhwAr-s’.

NammAzhwAr was the foremost among the twelve AzhwArs. He was a ‘gnyAni’, a ‘yogi’, a realised soul. For most part of his life, he spent time in solitude, penance and spiritual meditation. But now and then, for brief spells of time, he did come out of seclusion and mingle with the ordinary world. It was in those brief but lucid moments that he sang his famous mystical outpouring of God-devotion, called in Tamil as the ‘tiruvoimOzhi’.

In the songs of the ‘tiruvoimOzhi’ one easily finds unmistakable proof that a ‘jigNyAsu’ indeed draws much of his capacity for wonder through constant recollection and contemplation of the ‘purANa’.

In the following verses of NammAzhwAr, we find some truly illuminating examples of the ‘jigNyAsu’s’ mode of enquiry into God and the wonderment derived therefrom. Engaging in ceaseless questioning, in ‘pari-prashna’, NammAzhwAr’s verses speak the typical language of the ‘jigNyAsu’ indeed. The sample of verses is a very beautiful one indeed and they are all based on allusions to one ‘purAnic’ event or the other (English translation, A. K. Ramanujam’s ‘Hymns for the Drowning’):

- (1) *maayaa! vaamanaNnE!* madhuchoothaa! neeyaruLaay,**
theeyaay neeraay nilanaay vichumpaayk kaalaay,**
thaayaay thandhaiyaay makkaLaay maRRumaay muRRumaay,**
neeyaay neenNinRavaaRu ivai enna niyaayangaLE! 7.8.1*

*Worker of miracles,
magical dwarf,
and killer of the demon
named Honey,
only you can tell us:
becoming father, mother,
and the children too
and all others
and all things unnamed,
the way you stand there,
being yourself—
what's it all about?*

++++++

(2) *angaN malarththaN thuzaaymudi**
*achchuthaNnE!aruLaay,**
thingaLum NyaayiRumaaych chezumpal chudaraay*
*iruLaay,**
pongu pozimazaiyaayp pukazaay paziyaayp pinnumNee,*
vengaN veNGkooRRamumaam ivai enna vichiththiramE! 7.8.2*

*O lord unending
wearing honey flowers and basil leaf
in your hair
tell us this:
as moon as sun
as the amazing numberless stars
as darkness
and as torrents of rain as honour
as shame and as death
with his cruel eyes how fantastic
can you get?*

++++++

- (3) *chiththirath thErvavavaa!*
thiruchchakkaraththaay!aruLaay,*
eththanaiyOrukamum* avaiyaay avaRRuL iyalum,*
oththavoN palporuLkaL* ulappillana vaayviyavaay,*
viththagaththaay nNiRRi nee* ivai enna vitamangaLE! 7.8.3*

*You do stunts with your chariots
the discus your weapon:
tell us how
managing every one of the four ages becoming every little thing in them harmonious now
now quite contrary
you stand there a marvel
of contradictions!*

++++++

- (4) *mayakkaa! vaamanaNnE!* mathiyaam vaNNam
onRaruLaay,*
ayarppaayth thERRamumaay*azalaayk kuLiraayviyavaay,*
viyappaay venRikaLaay*vinaiyaayp payaNnaayp
pinnumNee,*
thuyakkaay neenNinRavaaRu* ivai enna thuyarangaLE! 7.8.6*

*Dwarf,
you confuse everyone. But make me understand:
becoming oblivion, memory, heat, cold,
all things wonderful, and wonder itself,
becoming every act of success, every act of good and evil,
and every consequence, becoming even the weariness of lives,
you stand there—
and what misery you bring!*

++++++

(5) *viNmeedhiruppaay! malaimEl niRpaay!**
*kadalsErppaay,**
maNmeedhuzhalvaay! ivaRRuLengum maRaindhu uRaivaay,**
eNMeedhiyanRa puRavandaththaay! enadhaavi,**
uNmeedhaadi urukkaattaathE oLippaayO? 6.9.5*

*You dwell in heaven
stand on the sacred mountain sleep on the ocean
roll around in the earth yet hidden everywhere you grow
invisibly:
moving within numberless outer worlds playing within my heart
yet not showing your body
will you always play hide and seek?*



The child is perhaps the best specimen of a ‘jignyAsu’ that we can find in the world.

Every child is born with an innate capacity for wonder. The child looks at the whole world around it in a fresh, open, innocent, and wondrous light—in a light that is wholly different from the way in which adults see things around them. And it is in that unique perception of the child that there are many truths gleaned of which we know little, and many special insights gained too that perhaps are quite beyond our comprehension or imagination. It is because the child possesses this extraordinary faculty of wonder that it is always seen to be very curious, very inquisitive, and very enquiring. We all know how difficult it is to keep up with the incessant questioning of an intelligent child.

As we grow from childhood to manhood, however, we all gradually seem to lose that magical capacity for child-like wonder. It is the progressive loss of that wonderful capacity that actually ages us, that transforms the world around us from what, as a child seemed rich and vibrant, into a drab and joyless place. That loss robs us of all the life that there is in living. We then sadly ask ourselves, ‘Why is it that the same things that once used to arouse my wonder or fascination as a child, now leave me utterly cold?’ It’s a very important and very uncomfortable question that few of us ever figure out in life.

It was the same question which the English poet, William Wordsworth, asked too in a famous poem (‘Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’):

*There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth, and every common sight, To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream. It is not now as it hath been of yore:
Turn wheresoe’er I may,*

*By night or day,
 The things which I have seen, I now can see no more.
 The rainbow comes and goes, And lovely is the rose;
 The moon doth with delight
 Look around her when the heavens are bare;
 Waters on a starry night Are beautiful and fair;
 The sunshine is a glorious birth;
 But yet I know, where'er I go,
 That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth.
 Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting; The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar; Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our own home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

—William Wordsworth



'Heaven lies about us in our infancy,' wrote Wordsworth and how profoundly true indeed is the poet's discovery. Ages ago, the timeless Upanishads and 'purANA' too had already spoken the very same truth.

In much of the Vedantic scriptures of India, it is the child indeed who is held up as the best example of the true seeker of God, the true 'jignyAsu' who, with the keenest sense of wonder, is capable of genuine spiritual curiosity, and is willing to go to any lengths in search of God.

The Srimadh BhAgavatham, for example, tells the famous tale of the child Dhruva who departed to the forests in search of the Almighty. Then there is the story of Prahlada, a mere child, who saw God in all places, in every nook and cranny of the world where his father saw none. The Katopanishad tells the story of Nachiketas, a mere boy, whose quest for God engaged him in a dialogue with the god of death. In the ChandOgya Upanishad there is a gripping narration of how Svetaketu, a true 'jignyAsu', posed questions to his wise father, Uddalaka, on the nature of God. In the same Upanishad, there is the account of the boy Satyakama Jabala. In the Taittiriya Upanishad it is young Bhrighu who poses both wondrous and wise questions to his father, Sage Varuni, about God and existence.

To all these eminent child-heroes of the Vedantic scriptures, to all these youthful 'jignyAsu-s', heaven did indeed 'lie about in their infancy'!



A disciple of Adi Sankara bhagavathpAdA is said to have once posed to him the question ‘samsArE kim sAram?’ ‘What is the meaning of existence?’ It was the typical question of a serious and wondering ‘jignyAsu’. They say the ‘AchArya’ provided a pithy but enlightening answer: ***bahusah: abhi vichintyamAnam idam eva***

Meaning, ‘You have asked the question. Keep wondering about it. And in the enquiry itself shall you find the answer.’

Sankara thus urged the disciple to ceaselessly confront such questions. Never relent, Sankara advised, never give up the unending enquiry— ‘samsArE kim sAram?’ The ‘jignyAsu’s’ quest and his way of worship will one day surely meet with success.





CHAPTER 38

BHEESHMA-STUTHI: “AVATAARA RAHASYA”

The “bhishma-stuthi” is an 11-verse offering in praise of Lord Krishna uttered by Bhishma in his last moments on earth. The event of the valiant warrior’s final release from mortal coils is described in the 9th “*adhyAya*” of the first “*skandam*” of the Mahabharata.

If you go to the epic Mahabharatha itself, you can see it graphically recounting the scene of Bhishma, the venerable commander of the Kaurava armies, lying mortally wounded on the Kurukshetra battlefield, his life-breath draining away little by little. By a supreme effort of sheer willpower, the “*uttama-brahmhachAri*”, the “*agrEsarar*” among “*gnyAni-s*” and the foremost of “*dharmAdhikAri-s*” of his times, is said to have held on to life waiting for the outbreak of “*uttarAyana*” (the beginning of the summer solstice) and for an auspicious moment to finally depart into the other world.

It is in those last few moments of his life that Bhishma is said to have had the precious “*antima-smriti*” of Lord Krishna, the Supreme Brahman, and the Almighty Himself.

By his own account in the “*bhishma-stuthi*”, Bhishma had a grand vision of Truth and an experience rarely granted, if ever at all, to ordinary humans in the mortal world. And it happened in a crowning, climactic moment when Spirit takes leave of its tenancy in the material state and regains its natural home in a place of eternal bliss . . . in the embrace of the Lord . . . an experience called “*mOksha*”.

In all of “*vEdic*” literature, “*pUrANA-s*” and “*itihasA-s*”, there are only two great souls who have had the privilege of experiencing “*mOksha*” in the temporal world. One was *AnjanEya* who is reported to have been “*embraced*” by Lord Rama on the former’s return to Kishkinda with news of Sita’s whereabouts in Lanka. The other one was Bhishma who experienced “*antima-smriti*” and ineffable “*mOkshAnandam*” which Lord Krishna blessed him with on his deathbed.

Indeed, for the wise and wizened “*pitAmaha*”, it was a moment of terminal consummation. It was the moment he’d looked forward to all his life as the culmination of all that he’d struggled and worked for in life as elder-statesman of Hastinapura and as the foremost well-wisher of its subjects ruled by the Kaurava-dynasty. It was the moment when the many “*dharmA-s*” that Bhishma had stood for, fought for . . . and eventually died for . . . were all affirmed by the “*para-brahman*” Himself.

The ‘*stuthi*’ itself is a very simple one in terms of poetic construction or substance. The eleven endearing stanzas in it appear fractional by comparison to Bhishma’s other magnificent offering—the immortal 1000-versed “*Sri Vishnu SahasranAma*”. The reason, however, why “*bhishma-stuthi*” has traditionally been held in extremely high esteem by SriVaishnava “*AchAryA-s*”—as highly as the “*sahasranAnama*”, in fact—is because it contains, within its deep kernel, the very quintessence of many ‘*vEdAntic*’ themes of a distinctly *VisishtAdvaitic* flavour. Every phrase in the “*bhishma-stuthi*”, scholars have commented, seems to be shorthand for the vast saga of lofty wisdom that is Vyasa’s “*Mahabharatha*”.

A unique feature of the 11 verses of this “*stUthi*” is the way they sound to one’s ears. Vowel and consonants, rhyme and syntax in this Sanskrit poem are sweetly evocative of the distant echoes of many subtle themes, scenes and plots in the Mahabharatha. The “*stuthi*” when recited, therefore, creates a mood of grave reflection and repose in the mind of the reader/reciter even if he/she were to

possess only a smattering of the Sanskrit language and/or the skimpiest acquaintance with the great message of the Mahabharatha. Listening to the soft sounds of this “stuthi” is, indeed, like listening to a philharmonic representation of a simple folk tune. It sounds like a simple, uncomplicated composition but you sense, as you read or recite it repeatedly, that many grand operas lie latent between its lines.

Given below is the hymn in transliteration:

Sri-Bhisma-stuthi



(1)

*iti matirupakalpita vitrishna
Bhagavati sAtvata-pUngavE viBhUmni I
svasuKha-mupagatE Kachi-dvihartum
prakriti-mupEyushi yatBhava-pravAha-ha II*

(**Meaning:** In Him, the Yadava-*shrE*sta, who is limitless splendour and bliss, for whom All Creation is mere play-field, in that Lord do I surrender my entire being!)

(2)

*triBhuvana-kamanam tamAla-varNam
ravikara-goura-varAmbaram daDhAnE I
vapuralaka-kulA-vrtAna-nAbjam
vijayasaKhE ratirastu mEnavadya II*

(**Meaning:** He is Arjuna’s bosom-companion, but He is One whom the three-worlds search for; the One of Beauteous Form clothed in finery, its colour that of sunrise; the One of lustrous looks—He is the One I beckon here and now before me!)

(3)

*yuDhi turagara-jOviDhUmra-vishvak
kacha-lulita-sramavArya-lamkrtAsyE I
mama nishita-sharai-hi viBhi~dhya-mAna-
tvachi vila-satkavachEstu krishna atmA II*

(**Meaning:** My fading mind resides now in Him—the Charioteer with a body all smeared with battle-grime and dust kicked up by hoofs of war-horses; He whose lovely locks now drenched with sweat-beads of battle-fatigue; whose shining armour bore the shattering brunt of my sharp arrows!)

(4)

*sapadi saKhivachO nishamya maDhyE
nijaparayOr~balayO raTham nivEshya I
stitha~vathi parasai~nikA~yurakshNA
hritavati pArTha-saKhE ratir~ma-mAstu II*

(**Meaning:** He is my dearest . . . the One who, at Arjuna’s bidding, rode his chariot into Kurukshetra, stood between the two mighty forces and, by a mere glance of His, sealed the fate, one by one, of those whom Arjuna would battle!)

(5)

*vyava~hita-prita-nAmuKham nirIkshya
svajana-vaDhAdvi-muKhasya dhOsha-buDhyA I
kumathi-mahara~dAtma-vidyA yaha
charaNa-rati-hi paramasya tasya mEstu II*

(**Meaning:** My heart must lose itself unto Him—the One who dispelled the fears and confusion that beset Arjuna on the eve of battle and taught him the lofty secrets of “*atma-vidyA*”!)

(6)

*svanigama-mapahAya mat~pratignyAm
krta-maDhikama-vaplutO raThas-Tha-ha I
Dhrata-raTha-charaNO~Bhya~yAcchalat-gu-hu
hari-riva hantumi~Bham gatO~tharIya-ha II*

(**Meaning:** He is the One—who alighted from His chariot and strode towards me in blazing anger . . . like a lion attacking an elephant . . . His mighty Weapon drawn! He broke His own resolve to abjure personal involvement in the Kurukshetra war only so that mine own . . . that he would draw weapons in war . . . would be upheld!)

(7)

*shita~vishiKha~hatO vishIrNa-damsha-ha
kshata-japa~ripluta Atha~thAyinO mE I
prasaBha~maBhisa-sAra madva-DhArTham
sa Bhavatu mE BhagavAn gati-mukunda-ha II*

(**Meaning:** He is my Refuge! The One who stood between me, my weapons and the bloodied Arjuna; He is the One, too, who put up an appearance of charging to assault a grievous sinner (“*Atha-thA-yI*”) like me!)

(8)

*vijaya-raTha-kutum-ba At~tha~tO~trE
Dhrta-haya-rashmini tachri~yEkshaNI-yE I
Bhagavati ratirastu mE mumUrshO-ho
yamiha nirIkshya hata gata-hA svarupam II*

(**Meaning:** May He remain forever before my eyes in the same form in which He shows Himself now . . . as Charioteer protecting Arjuna’s vehicle, as if it were His family . . . standing gracefully with whip and reins gripped firmly in His hands . . . Ah! May this Glorious Sight never fade from my eyes!)

(9)

*lalita-gati-vilAsa-valgu~hAsa-
praNaya~nirIkshaNa-kalpitO~rUmAnA-ha I
krta-manu-krta-vatya Unma-dAnDhA-
ha prakriti-magan kila yasya gOpa~vaDhva-ha II*

(**Meaning:** It is He, the One of charming gait, of ever-playful mien and of loving looks whose pranks endeared Him to the “gopikA-s! They showered Him with love and devotion and how He too returned them in greater measure!”)

(10)

*muni-gaNa-nrupa-varya-samkulEn~ta-ha
sadasi yuDhishtira-rAja-sUya EshAm I
arhaNam~mupa~pEda IkshaNIyO
mama dhrishi gOchara Esha AvirAtmA II*

(**Meaning:** He who stands before me here and now . . . ! He is the One who received the honours and obeisance of sages and seers at Yudhistara’s “*raja-suya*” sacrifice!)

(11)

*tami~mamaha~majam sharIra-BhAjAm
hrdi hrdi Dhishtitam~Atma~kalpitAnAm I
prati-dhrishAmiva naika~DhArkam-Ekam
samaDhi-gatOsmi viDhUta-BhEda-mOha-ha II*

(**Meaning:** Ah! I see Him clearly now within my heart that has all its delusions purged and desires quelled—I see Him now in this moment, indeed, as the One who shows Himself as the many!)

sri sUta-UvAcha



*krishna Evam Bhagavati
manOvAg~dhristi-vrthi~Bhi-hi I
Atman~yAtmAna-mAvEshya
sOnta-ha svAsa~mUpAra-math II*

(**Meaning: Thus spoke Suta:** With these words on his lips, the venerable BhishmAchArya, surrendered his mind, speech, sight, breath and all vital faculties at the Feet of the Lord and attained eternal Bliss!”)



A proper appreciation of Bhishma's hymn is virtually impossible without each of us first vividly recollecting our respective brush with death or with the "act of dying". At some point or other in our lives, each of us comes face to face with Death even before the time arrives when we have to be ready to face it on our own.

Usually, our most intimate encounters with death involve the passing away of somebody very dear to us . . . an old parent, a close relative or a bosom friend. At other times we encounter death in impersonal but no less impactful ways as, for instance, when we witness it in a fatal accident on a highway or, in a hospital we're visiting, when we suddenly find a corpse being wheeled past us into a mortuary.

While we become familiar with dying, Death itself, nevertheless, remains an abstraction and an experience well beyond our mortal reach.

Which is perhaps the reason why our encounters with Death . . . or the physical act of dying . . . produces in us a lot of mixed feelings. While sadness and shock are the most common feelings that readily surface in our minds, we become aware, too, of much more complex emotions simmering within the depths of our hearts . . . and long after sadness or shock vanish from it.

When we are relatively young, we are usually indifferent to such feelings. As we grow older, however, we usually find that it has become very necessary to unravel or define those complex feelings to ourselves in any possible way. We then begin to feel, with a growing sense of urgency, that such definitions of death—vague and incomplete as they may well be—have, indeed, become central to a real understanding of our own selves and of everything else in the world about us. It's that gnawing need to unravel such complex feelings which is at the root of man's religious urges and endeavour.

Little do we realize then, that, even as adults, most of us remain no less ignorant or mystified of Death than we were as children when we'd happily been led to believe "dying" meant simply "*flying away somewhere deep into the skies*". As the years roll on, our feelings remain as complex as ever . . . they remain a strange mix of fear, awe, wonder, curiosity, resentment and . . . and utter powerlessness. As we grow older in age, we feel the pain of personal bereavement in a more real sense than we did as children, perhaps . . . but the mystery of death continues to remain as baffling as ever.

Without being stirred by one's own complex feelings about Death, it will be impossible to truly appreciate the underlying message of the "*bhishma-stUthi*".



The scene in the Mahabharata of the "*pitAmaha*" lying on a bed of arrows— "*sara-tarpa*"—is an extremely painful one, indeed, to imagine. It certainly could not have been a pleasant sight to see an old, venerable, valiant and royal warrior spend the last moments of his life in the world laid out awkwardly on a make-shift deathbed of arrows.

Bhishma's body was riven, having been shot through and through, like a desk-top pincushion, with the ferocious missiles Arjuna had pumped into him. The shafts, more than a dozen of them, piercing through leather and metal armour, had crushed flesh and bone alike. On any battleground the sight of thick blood spurting from a dying soldier's wounds and drying up with grime and dust across his brows is a heart-rending one, indeed. In Kurukshetra, the sight of Bhishma's utterly crippled and bloodied frame, too, was a painful reminder of such typical horrors of war.

Bhishma's dear kin, the Kauravas and Pandavas, all stood around him ruining the day when a fratricidal urge had overtaken them all . . . and led them all to mutual hatred . . . to war, to bloodshed. And now, to the

death of their most venerated family-elder . . . the most honourable one of all, the great and mighty BhismAcharya.

As life ebbed away from the frail body of Bhishma, his kith and kin, the scores of royal scions from both the Kaurava and Pandava families, began leaving his deathbed one by one. They were all sad, no doubt, but also restless. They realized the end was inevitable and there was nothing anyone could do about it. They had to leave and rest for the night since, in the morning, there was more urgent business at hand: a brutal battle still left to be waged.

Many days passed.

The last to depart from Bhishma's side was Yudhishtara who was loath to leave the "*pitAmaha*" unattended in the final moments. It is written in the Mahabharatha that Yudhishtara sat beside Bhishma's deathbed for many days and listened to the venerable old soul recount some of his memories and explain his experience of a great many truths or "*dharmA*" realized in life . . . much like Arjuna had sat listening to the exposition of the Lord's 'Gita' earlier during the battle at Kurukshetra.

Finally, Yudhishtara, too, had to leave the "bed-of-arrows" and return to the call of duty on the battle-field. In the end Bhishma lay alone . . . Much like any mortal in the throes of death; Bhishma died alone . . . like all humans do. It was precisely at that moment that Lord Krishna gently appeared before him.

Bhishma turned his bruised and battered face to look at the approaching Vasudeva . . . and behold! There was Krishna's splendorous form—the Lord of the Yadavas! In that precise moment of glory, the first majestic lines of the "*bhishma-stuthi*" poured forth like torrential spring from the mouth of the dying warrior:

iti matirupakalpita vitrishnA
Bhagavati sAtvata-pUngavE viBhUmni!



The opening verse of the "bhishma-stuthi" is as follows:

iti matirupakalpita vitrishnA
Bhagavati sAtvata-pUngavE viBhUmni I
svasuKha-mupagatE Kachi-dvihartum
prakriti-mupEyushi yatBhava-pravAha-ha II

The dying BhishmAchArya says in the above verse that he is surrendering his mind ("*buddhi*") entirely to Lord Krishna Who has appeared before him at his death-bed in much the same manner as the Lord's "*appearances*" ("*yatBhava- pravAha-ha*") in His many "*avatarA-s*" of the past! The Lord "*descends*" into the World of Creation which is but a "*playground*" on which is played His many "*sporting exploits*" ("*avatara-leelA-s*")!!

A deep reading of this particular verse in the "*bhishma-stuthi*" will not fail to arouse some questions about the theological reality of "*avatarA-s*" in the minds of the readers/reciters.

The Lord Krishna who appeared before BhishmAchArya, we know, was but a local Yadava-clan leader. According to the Mahabharatha, and to all appearances, Krishna was like any other ordinary person of those "*dvA-para yuga*" times. He was born in captivity, whisked off clandestinely to foster-

parents in Nandagopa's hamlet at Gokulam; he grew up in the wild woods of Brindavan; he frolicked and gambolled with the cow-girls. Then growing up to be a youth, he avenged his parents' humiliation at the hands of the tyrant, Kamsa. Then he grew up to be a skillful state-craftsman, steeped in the palace politics of Hastinapur; he was a bit of a "powerbroker" and "lobbyist"; he was also a gallant paramour who wedded his two spouses, Rukmini and Satyabama, through rather adventurous means. He became a trusted mentor and steadfast friend to the Pandava family; single-handedly, he master-minded their rehabilitation as rulers of Hastinapur, through a long and bloody fratricidal war in Kurukshetra; he was known to be a diplomat, envoy, war-strategist and battle-commander of the highest order. He was a master of "double-speak" or the spread of "misinformation", meant to sow confusion in the enemy-camp; he was also well-versed in the sleight-of-hand tactics of armed combat. Krishna was ever ruthless in the pursuit of what he felt were his interests or of those whom he held dear.

Now, when we recall all the above seemingly "mortal facts" of Sri Krishna's life, we might begin to wonder why BhishmAchArya chose to describe them all in terms of being the "*playful exploits*" ("*leela*") of a divine "*avatara*" having descended into the world—i.e. "*svasuKha-mupagatE Kachidvihartum; prakriti-mupEyushi yatBhava- pravAha-ha*"!

It is never so difficult to see why Arjuna acknowledged Krishna as the "*para-brahman*" since we know the Lord "*revealed*" Himself to him during delivering the '*Gita-shAstra*'. But in the case of BhishmAchArya we know there is no record of the Lord similarly "*revealing*" Himself; Krishna simply appeared in an "*as-is-where-is*" state and stood by the "*pita-maha's*" deathbed when there was none around at that time.

So, the question cropping up is this: when the Lord did not "*reveal*" Himself to BhishmA, how was the wise "*pitaamaha*", with his feeble mind rapidly losing its vital moorings in the painful hour of death, be so sure that He, Krishna, Lord of Dwaaraka, was indeed that Supreme Soul, the "*para-brahman*" of all Creation?

The answer to that question lies in one of the most esoteric sciences of "*god-realization*" that SriVaishnava thought propounds: it's a technique called "*avatAra-rahasya-dhyAna*" i.e. the "*realization of the nature and truth of the Lord's 'avatara' or descent into the world of creation*". It is a technique referred to as a "*rahasya*" (a secret passageway to Godhead) by some "*achAryA-s*".

Now, we may ask ourselves, if this so-called "*science*" were to be regarded as a "*margA*" in itself, would it then also qualify to be called as a "*yoga*" or "*upAya*" in the sense in which "*bhakti*", "*prapatthi*" or "*gnyAna*" or "*karma yoga*" are also known in Vedanta?

"*AchAryA-s*" have clarified that "*avatara-rahasya-chintana*" is not a separate "*yoga*" by itself. But it is a powerful and highly effective tool, which if used well by men, unfailingly creates mental states conducive to the growth of "*bhakti*" and/or "*prapatthi*". They emphasise that if a soul were to truly realize the nature and purpose of the "Lord's *avatara-s*" then the next step is but a very short and easy one to "*bhakti*" / "*para-gnyAna*" / "*parama-bhakti*" / "*prapatthi*".



How did the dying Bhishma conclude that Krishna, who appeared him before him beside the "*sara-tarpa*", was an avatar of the "*para-brahman*" who blesses those dear to him with the glorious vision of "*antima-smriti*" of God in the terminal moments of Death?

If you peruse the ancient "*Rk-s*" of the famous "*purusha-sUktam*" you will come across a very

meaningful stanza in Verse 3 of the “*uttara-anUvAkam*”. It will read as follows:

prajApatischarati garBhE~antha-ha ajAya-mAnO bahuDhA vijAyathE I
tasya DhIrA-ha parijAnanti yOnim~im marIchInAm padamiChhanti vEdhasa-ha II

(Translation: Amid this huge conception and projection of the cosmic Universe, the formless One moves about in the shape of all. Although birth-less (“*ajAya-mAnO*”) He is born as the Many (“*bahuDha vijAyathE*”). The wise and high-souled persons (“*DhIrA*”), through sheer dint of self-control, worship and Yogic discipline understand (“*parijAnanti*”) this; they become aware of how God indeed the source of all is (“*tasya yOnim*”)! And desiring (“*ichanti*”) such exalted states of awareness, which seers like Marichi and the original PrajApatis before them attained, the Wise ones (“*dhIrA*”), too, attain it and become creators themselves!)

When we examine the substance of this majestic verse of the “*purusha-suktam*” above, we are momentarily tempted to believe it may have been intuited by the **Rk** keeping BhishmAchArya in mind. The expressions used in this “*rk*” fits the “*pitAmaha*” so aptly!

The epithet “*DhIrA*” admirably suits Bhishma who, as per the “*itihasA*”, was undoubtedly a great-souled, wise and worshipful one. He was known as the foremost amongst “*gnyAni-s*” of those times—the “*agrEsara*” amongst “*gnyAni-s*”! He was also known as a formidable exponent of many lofty “*dharmA-s*”—a venerable “*dharmAdhikAri*”! He was also a devout “*upAsaka*” of Lord Krishna.

It is therefore no wonder that Bhishma, in his final moments in life, truly understood (as much as Sage Marichi or the Prajapati-s of the “*purusha-suktam*” had done before him) the esotericism of “*avatara-rahasya-mArga*”! It is no wonder then that he attained the Lord’s “*antima-smriti*” and experienced thereby the bliss of “*mOkshA*” even before extricating himself from mortal coils and, finally, also achieved “*uttama-gathi*” (most exalted state of Being) described in the “*sukta*” as “*vedhasa-padam*”!!

But the question that remains facing us is this: What did Sri BhishmachArya understand?



Bhishma understood that the “*avatara*” of Krishna, who stood beside him in the moment of his final departure, was identical to the One described by the “*purusha-suktam*” as “*ajAya-mAnO bahuDhA vijAyathE*!” i.e. the One who conceived and projected all the Universe; and the One, too, who being ever ‘*unborn*’, nevertheless, is ‘*born*’ (“*avatara*”), again and again, in and through all forms of Creation.

Now, there is an apparent contradiction between the phrase “*ajAya-mAnO*” (unborn) and “*bahuDhA vijAyathE*!” (born repeatedly) which makes us ask how BhishmAchArya could make any sense out of a seeming paradox. How could the one who has been “*born*” as Krishna, the Yadava-offspring of Devaki, and standing in person before Bhishma by his deathbed, yet be the One who is ‘*unborn*’? What absurdity!

Such a thought which occurs today to even lay students of Vedanta like us was echoed many centuries ago. Adi Sankara, for instance, is said to have commented extensively on this very matter and phrased by the great Gaudapada too in “*advaitic*” terms of “*mAyA*” as follows:

nEha nAnEti chAmrAyAth indro mAyABhurityapi I
ajAya-mAnO bahuDhA jAyathE mAyayA tu saha II

(**Meaning:** “There is no plurality in the Universe; but the One assumes numerous forms through “*mAyA*” (Energy). Hence though ‘*unborn*’, He assumes many ‘*births*’ (forms).”)

SriVaishnava tradition, too, explains the seeming anomaly between “*ajAya-mAnO*” and “*bahuDhA jAyathE*” by alluding to scriptural texts. While explaining how Bhishma perceived the truth of Lord Krishna’s “birth” and “un-birth” (and reflected it in his “*stuthi*” through the term “*yatBhava-pravAha-ha*”) our “*AchAryA-s*” emphasize the route of VisishtAdvaita thinking. The most incontrovertible basis for reconciling the seeming anomaly between “*ajAya-mAnO*” (unborn) and “*bahuDhA vijAyathE!*” (Born repeatedly) is available in the Lord’s own utterances in the immortal ‘*Bhagavath-GitA*’!



In 5 simple verses of the Bhagavath Gita, the Lord revealed 6 salient features of his “*avatAra-rahasya*” in unequivocal terms. The underlying message of those verses in **Ch IV.5 to IV.9** (both inclusive) very clearly reveal what Sri BhishmAchArya had in mind when he exclaimed in the first verse of the

“bhishma-stuthi”: “*vasuKha-mupagatE Kachi-dvihartum; prakriti-mupEyushi yatBhava-pravAha-ha!*”

First let us reproduce below those **5 verses from Chapter IV of the ‘GitA’** and cull out the **6 features of the Lord’s “avatAra”** realizing which, in the Lord’s own words, a soul gains “*utthama-gati*” through “*antima-smriti*” as Bhishma did attain on his deathbed:

Verse IV.5

Sri BhagavAnUvAcha: (Thus Spoke Sri Krishna to Arjuna)

bahUni mE vyAtItAni janmAni tava chArjuna I
tAnyaham vEda sarvAni na tvamvEttha paramtapa II

(**Meaning:** Many births have both you and I undergone, O Arjuna. I can remember mine and yours too—every single one of them. But you, my valiant one, can and will recollect none!)

Verse IV.6

ajOpi sann-avya-yAtmA BhUtAnAm-IsvarOpi san I
prakritim svAm-aDhishtAya sambhavAmi-Atma-mAya-yA II

(**Meaning:** I am *un-born* and My Transcendental body is never sullied although I make my appearance in every millennium in my True form!)

Verse IV.7

yada yada hi dharmasya glAnir-Bhavati BhAratha I
abhyutthAnAm-adharmasya tadAtmAnam srjAmyaham II

(**Meaning:** “I make My appearance in the world of creation, Arjuna, at those times when irreligion waxes and righteousness wanes.”)

Verse IV.8

paritRaNaya sAdhUnAm vinAshAya cha dUshkrtAm I
dharma-samstthApanArThAya sambhavAmi yugE yugE II

(**Meaning:** “I appear, every now and then, in each millennium, and when I do, I protect My faithful

subjects and annihilate their tormentors. And thus do I re-establish Dharma!)

Verse IV.9

*janma karma cha mE divyam Evam yO vEthi tattvata-ha I
tyaktvA dEham punar janma naiti mAmEti sO-arjUna II*

(**Meaning:** He who has fully grasped this Transcendent nature of My appearances and activities, O Arjuna, takes leave of the earthly abode of his body; but he is never re-born, he never returns; for he has entered into Mine Own Abode!)



In the light of the above utterances of the Lord in the ‘**GitA**’, we can conclude that Sri BhishmAchArya’s phrase in his “*stuthi*”, viz. “*yatBhava-pravAha-ha*”, is an unequivocal reference to the 6 “*avatAra-rahasyAs*” which a true devotee must learn to experience in his life and which, indeed, gradually pave the way ultimately for the Lord’s “*smriti*” at the time of “*prayANa-kAlE*”, the final journey.

Let us try and examine the 6 “*rahasyA-s*” in a brief way, one by one.

(A) The first “*rahasya*” states that the Descent of God into the world of Creation is Absolute Truth. It is neither fancy nor myth.

Now, if you look at the matter closely, we can say the “*para-brahman*” is “*born*” and we as “*jivAtmA-s*”, too, are born! The truth of our birth is self-evident. The truth of the Lord’s “*avatAra*” however is not so self-evident to our feeble perception.

That difference of perception, our “*AchAryA-s*” explain to us, arises because there is an essential difference between His “*birth*” and our birth. And what is the difference?

His “*appearance*” is un-caused. Our “*appearance*” on earth, on the contrary, is merely a by-product of the inevitable and inexorable operation of “*pApa-pUnya- vinai*”—the endless cyclic operation of “*cause-effect*” or Karma. Our life is but a cog in the great cosmic wheel of “*birth-sustenance- decay-death-regeneration*”; it is but an insignificant footnote to the greater history of the Universe being written by an Unseen Hand; it is an inconsequential “*side-show*” whose repeated encores are needed only as a trivial diversion from the larger “*cosmic-opera*” being performed in the vast theatre of the “*time-space continuum*”.

Vedantic “*pUrvA-chAryA-s*” use the analogy of the sun to illustrate the nature of the Lord’s “*birth*” or “*avatAra*” and contrast it perfectly with our own:

When we sight the morning sun, we say “*the sun has risen*”; similarly, at dusk, we say “*the sun is setting*”. Now, we make such statements about the sun even though we are all fully aware that, in truth, the sun neither “*rises*” nor “*sets*”; the sun just “*is*”! The sun just remains fixed, ever-eternal and blazing in all its glory in the endless firmament! But to our limited perception it appears (or rather, we find it convenient to make it appear) as though the sun rises and sets at dawn and dusk every day! But, it is we mortals who “*rise*” and “*set*”! It is we who are the ones who take “*birth*”, it is we who “*live*” and “*die*”, and it is we who experience “*day*” and “*night*”! Such distinctions of “*plurality*” in human perception, however, has really nothing to do with the “*actuality*” of the sun. Long before we were born and long after we die, the great “*ball of fire*” in the sky was already there and will continue to be there too.

Similarly, the “*AchAryA*-s” explain to us, when we talk of the Lord’s “*birth*” and compare it with our own, we should learn to appreciate or “*experience*” that “*difference in truth*” between the fundamental natures of the two. This is brought out clearly in Krishna’s pronouncement in the ‘Gita’ verse Ch.IV.5 which we translated as follows: “*Many births have both you and I undergone, O Arjuna. I can remember mine and every single one of them. But you, my valiant one, can and will recollect none!*”

The second salient feature of His “*avatAra*-s” the Lord implied in the above verse has been pointed out to us by “*pUrvAchAryA*-s” and it is as follows:

Krishna proclaims that while He can precisely remember and foretell every single one of His own ‘past’ and ‘future’ “appearances”, the same ‘gnyAna’ or “knowledge” is simply beyond the reach or capacity of mere mortals like Arjuna or us.

This statement of the Lord is a reminder to us of the nature of “*para-brahman*” being different from that of “*jivA*” and whereby the point is underscored that “*para-brahman*” is “*sarvagnyan*”—“Omniscient and Self-Illumined”. The “*jIva*”, on the other hand, is “*anagnyan*” and “*gnyaana-sankocha-prANi*”—Ignorant and one “*in dire need of the Grace of illumination*”.

The Supreme One is “*Knowledge itself*” and there is nothing that remains to be “*known*” by Him. Without Him, nothing in the World of Creation stands “*known*” or “*apprehended*”; only dark Ignorance (“*a-vidyA*”) prevails. In His Presence, on the other hand, everything extant stands “*illuminated and revealed*”. What must further be noted here, most importantly, is that “*para-brahman*” by Himself does not need any part of the “*knowledge*” which He bestows! That is why He is said to be “*different*”—in the sense of “*darshanam-bhEdamEvacha*”!

Vedantic “*pUrvAchAryA*-s” illustrate this esoteric aspect of the Lord’s “*avatAra*” by using the example of a candle-lamp. A room enveloped in darkness requires a candle to be lit to have its interior illumined. Now, when the candle is lit, “*illumination arrives*” by itself—we use the phrase “*switched-on*”! However, the candle-flame itself does not require any illumination, does it?! No, indeed, and that’s because, as we know, the candle-flame is “*self-luminous*” in nature: while it “*illuminates*” its surroundings it is really in no need of “*illuminating itself*”! By its own intrinsic nature, IT IS ILLUMINATION. If it did not “*illumine*” it would not fit the definition of a candle-flame.



Now, in ancient days, it is said a certain “*tArkika*”, a dialectician, during a debate on the question of God’s omniscience and of his being fully knowledgeable of past and future “*births*”, once cavilled over the axiom that “*para-brahman*” is “*sarvagnyan*”—the All-Knowing One. He posed a tricky question countering that statement from the ‘Gita’ and it is worthwhile pausing a bit to study it in earnest. The “*tArkika*” raised a very valid question:

If you say Bhagavan is “*sarvagnyan*”—He who “*Knows*” everything and illumines everything—then surely, He must “*know*” the fact of His own Death?

We as mortals are called “*agnyAni*-s” because we cannot know or experience our own respective deaths. (We can only “*know*” the death of persons other than ourselves, when we watch them “*dying*”). But Bhagavan, who is supposed to be “*sarvagnyan*” or omniscient, surely ought to “*know*” or be able to “*experience*” His Death? But if God’s “*sarvagnyatvam*” did admit of “*knowledge*” of his Death, then would God not be trapped into admitting mortality?

The “*tArkika*”, thus, cleverly sought to challenge the logical validity of the famous Upanishadic statement that defined God or “*para-brahman*” as possessing “*satyam, gnyAnam*” and “*anantham*”: *Self-Existent, Omniscient and Eternal*.

If “*brahman*” is said to possess “*sarvagnyatvam*”, the dialectician argued, then He ought to certainly “*know*” his own Death. If He “*knew*” Death, then, logically, God cannot be said to be “*anantham*” i.e. eternal! On the other hand, if He was truly “*anantham*”, Eternal or Deathless, then Brahman could never be “*sarvagnyan*”, because then, God could not, logically speaking, be in possession of the “*knowledge*” of Death?

Now, as per the rules of dialectics (“*tarka-sAstra*”), the above argument seems faultless. But if you look closely at the argument, a fallacy in its logic will emerge. It is as below:

Consider a statement such as: “*I know*” a thing; or “*I don’t know*” a thing. In both cases, the statement pre-supposes a thing to be in existence, does it not? One cannot “*know*” or “*be ignorant*” of a thing that exists not or which has no pre-existence. “*Knowledge*” or “*Lack of knowledge*” both always relate to a thing “*in existence*” only. “*Knowledge*” or “*Lack of Knowledge*” can never relate to a thing “*in non-existence*” or to a “*thing*” which owes its “*existence*” only to pure figment of cerebral projection or imagination, pure fantasy.

In the ‘Gita’, Krishna proclaims His ‘*sarvagnyatvam*’ of His past, present and future “*births*” on the ground that He is “*ajOpi sann-avya-yAtmA*” i.e. *He is Un-born*. We also saw that the “*rk*” in the “*purusha-suktam*” uses the phrase “*ajAya-mAna-ha*” to categorically state that He is “*un-born*”. In fact, if one looks closely, neither in the “*sruti*” nor in the Gita is the Lord referred to as the “*deathless One*”! He is always referred to only as the “*birth-less One*” or the “*unborn One*”!

Now, if God is “*unborn*”, then it is easy to conclude that his “*death*” must be “*non-existent*”! For, how can that which is “*unborn*” ever experience Death? Death simply cannot “*exist*” for such an Unborn

Being. It is therefore proved (Q.E.D) that in the case of “*para-brahman*” who is “*unborn*”, there is no question of Death at all. And since “*gnyAnam*” (knowledge) can only relate to a thing that “*exists*”, the logical conclusion must be that the question of the Lord’s “*knowledge*” of Death that does not pre-exist at all does not ever arise too at all. Hence, there is nothing in the “*tArkika*’s” argument to invalidate the Vedantic statement: “*satyam gnyAnam anantham brahmha*”. Which is why the Upanishad describes the inherent nature of “*para-brahman*” to be not only “*gnyAna*” (Self-luminous knowledge) but also “*satyam*” (Self-existential) and eternal (“*anantham*”).



In the next Verse #6 of Chapter 1V in the Gita, we hear Krishna saying:

ajOpi sann-avya-yAtmA BhUtAnAm-IsvarOpi san I
prakritim svAm-aDhishtAya sambhavAmi-Atma-mAya-yA II

“I am un-born and My Transcendental body is never sullied although I make my appearance in every millennium in any form I choose!”

This is the third “*rahasya*” (C) He revealed about the nature of His “*birth*” or “*avatara*”.

When we recollect from the “*purANA*-s” the account of his “*avatarA*-s” as “*matsya*” (fish), “*kUrma*” (tortoise) or “*varaha*” (boar) etc. we cannot help sometimes wondering if the Lord, having been “*born*”

into such “*bodily forms*”, also, partook of the intrinsic character of those forms. The “*pUrvAcharyA-s*” take pains to lucidly explain this statement of the Lord.

The form in which the Lord “*descends*” is not a form composed of the elements of nature; the form is not a species of, what is called, “*prAkriti*” . . . primordial or evolved matter. While the bodily form of mortal beings is determined by the inexorable operation of “*punya-pApa-vinai*” or “*karmA*”, that of the Lord’s “*avatAra*” is determined by his own Pleasure, Will or prerogative Choice “*ichchai*” or “*bhagavath-sankalpa*”. Although He takes mortal form, His essential nature of “*suddha-satva*” (Pure Being) remains untainted, unblemished and suffers no deterioration. His Transcendent essence loses none of its pristinity and He is therefore said to possess “*aprAkrita divya mangala vigraha*” . . . a body uniquely divine.

The “*AchAryA-s*” also explain that when God assumes a certain form in His “*avatAra*” He does so to “*act out a part*” as in a play. In the Valmiki Ramayana, we have Lord Rama state this categorically as, for example, “*AtmAnam mAnusham manyE rAmam dasarathAt-mayam*”—“I play the role of the son of DasarathA!” The Lord, it may be noticed, does NOT refer to himself as the “*son of Dasaratha*”. The “*AchAryA-s*” also further explain that the various “*forms*” the Lord assumes in his “*avatarA-s*” do not by themselves define Him. The “*forms*” only aid our own understanding or realization of the true nature of Brahman but, in themselves, they bear no relation whatsoever to the reality of the Supreme Being.

The above concept of an *avatAra*’s Form is a fine and abstruse yet very significant one in Vedantic philosophy. It is illustrated by the Sri Vaishnava “*AchAryA-s*” in the following easy-to-follow manner explained below.



It was considered an auspicious ritual in ancient days for a person to look up into the night-sky on the third dusk after new-moon day (“*moonrAm-pirai*, in Tamil) to try and discover its waxing crescent.

There once lived a lady who’d been following this custom scrupulously for many years. The years rolled on and she grew into ripe old age, but she faithfully held on to the habit despite rapidly failing eyesight.

When her eyesight began to fail, the old lady used to seek the help of her little 8-year-old granddaughter who would point her skyward in the general direction of where the crescent appeared. The grandmother would then follow the little girl’s gesticulations and, with some difficulty, be able to eventually spot and perceive the outlines of the moon and thus complete her personal rite.

On one such evening, the grandmother was having exceptional trouble locating the moon in the sky. Her eyesight had grown so poor that despite her granddaughter’s signals and directions she still could not succeed in locating the lunar crescent. The little granddaughter grew exasperated. Finally, she hit upon an idea to make her grandmother spot the moon.

“Grandma, follow my instructions now carefully and I will help you sight the moon in the sky,” she said. “First, follow the path of my finger as I move it through the air”, she said stretching out her arm. The grandmother gazed at the tip of her outstretched finger.

“Now, grandma, my finger is pointing towards the end of our street-corner. Can you see the street-corner?” “Yes, I can”, said the old lady.

“Now, I’m pointing my finger at the neem-tree that stands in the garden of our neighbour’s house on the street-corner. Can you see the tree-branch sticking to the end of my finger?” The grandmother peered. She said then, “Ah yes, I can see the neem-tree and its branch at the tip of your finger, my dear.”

“Good”, said the grand-daughter and continued, “Now, I’m pointing my finger at a bunch of leaves at the very end of the tree-branch. Do you see it?” The old lady concentrated on the fingertip and after a moment she said, “Yes, of course, my dear, I now see the tree-leaves on that branch sticking to your fingertip!”

The grand-daughter then said, “Okay, grandma, if you can see the leaves at the end of that tree-branch, then, look even more closely at the same spot. You will be able to see the crescent moon dangling from the leaf-tip”. The grandmother did exactly as she was told.

After a few minutes of intense peering with those old, cataract-blinded eyes, the old lady finally jumped with joy and beamed a wide toothless grin to exclaim, “*Ah-ha! Now I see it!* I see it clearly! I see the crescent dangling from the tip of the leaf!”

Now, at this point, our “AchAryA-s” pause to draw our attention to the grand-mother’s statement: “*The moon dangles from the tip of a tree-branch in a neighbour’s garden!*” and then they pose to us a question: “What relation does the actual moon have to the tree-branch or to the leaf-tip?”

The answer, we know, is, of course, none! We all know that the actual location of the moon has really nothing to do with a “leaf-tip”, a “tree-branch”, a “neem-tree”, a “neighbour’s garden”, a “street-side corner” or a “grand-daughter’s fingertip”!

But as far as the grandmother is concerned those are the only valid means (“*upaaya*”) with which she could sight the moon (“*upEya*”, in this case); they are invaluable “*co-ordinates*” that help pinpoint the moon’s exact location in the sky. In themselves, however, they bear no relation to the moon . . . certainly, they neither define nor characterize the moon; they only help lead “grandma” to ultimately recognize the moon’s identity and location.

Similarly, the Vedantic “AchAryA-s” point out, God’s true and transcendent nature is to His avatAra-forms, what the moon was to the grand-mother’s set of locational “*co-ordinates*”. The “*co-ordinates*”, no doubt, “*relate*” to the object they seek to locate or “*realize*”; but the nature of the two—i.e. the moon and the tip of the tree-branch—are completely different from and wholly unrelated to each other. The upshot of all the above is that a true “*gnyAni*” of the world like a BhishmAcharya lying on the “*sara-tarpa*” in Kurukshetra, therefore, perceives Godhead clearly not in the plurality of worldly bodies/forms or configurations but in the singular Transcendent and Immanent Being—“*ajOpi sann-avya-yAtmA BhUtAnAm-IsvarOpi san*”: the “*para-brahman*” that perhaps ‘*Forms and Bodies*’ might only denote but which they do not, and cannot in fact, define.



Next, in the **verses IV.7 and IV.8**, the Lord reveals two more “**rahasyA-s**” viz. **(D) the expected timing of His “appearance” and also (E) the primary “purpose” of such “appearances”**. These are extremely popular verses from the “GitA” and everyone who has even a passing familiarity with the text would already be aware of its significance. There is no need, hence, for me to belabor it.

But **Verse IV.9, containing the sixth and last ‘rahasya’ (F)** is a very interesting one from the view-point of our subject-matter i.e. “*antima-smriti*”. It requires a bit of explication.

janma karma cha mE divyam Evam yO vEthi tattvata-ha I
tyaktvA dEham punar janma naiti mAmEti sO-arjUna II

(Meaning: He who fully grasps this Transcendent nature of My appearances (*avatara*) and activities, O ArjUna, takes leave of the earthly abode of his own mortal body; but he is never reborn, he never returns; for he has entered My Abode!)

In the first verse of the '*bhisma-stuthi*', BhishmAchAryA ends with a reference to "*yat-Bhava-pravAha-ha*" (i.e. the Lord's many descents into the world of Creation) after opening with the words "*iti matirupakalpita vitrishnA . . . etc*" ("I surrender my mind to the Lord"). In other words, Bhishma, in effect, says "*After having grasped the nature of your many "descents" . . . your avatars . . . O Krishna, my mind surrenders in the terminal moments of my life, completely unto You!*" This is exactly the "*tattvA*", the sacred Truth, which Krishna pointedly refers to in **IV.9**. This "*grasping*" of the "*tattva*" is what makes Bhishma belong in the rare but august company of the true "*gnyAni-s*" of the world, who, Krishna declares elsewhere in the Gita, verily constitute His own "*AtmA*"!



It is very important to understand there are two critical elements that go to make up the climactic moment of "*antima-smriti*":

- (i) "*grasping*" of the "*avatAra-tattva*" and
- (ii) "*Atma-nivEdanam*"

The first leads to the other and then both elements together pave the way for a "*jIvA*" to attain what Krishna refers to as "*tyaktvA dEham punar janma naiti mAmEti sO-arjUna*". The Vedantic "*AchAryA-s*" illustrate how the twin elements operate in tandem to result in the final beatitude of "*antima-smriti*" with the aid of an imaginary but endearing fable.

The Deity of Tirupati, Sri Venkateshwara, sets out in a royal procession one day, being carried aloft on a festive palanquin, together with His Consorts, through the streets of the holy town. As the procession passes through the streets of Tirupati, the Divine Procession pauses at the door-steps of each house, to receive from devotees, their worship and humble offerings . . . dry-fruits, a few bananas, lumps of sugar-candy, cool sandal-paste, rose-water, incense and camphor. After accepting the offerings at one household, the Deity in procession then moves to the next household, to receive the worship and offerings of another household . . . And so on, so forth.

Suddenly, the Deity commands the procession to take a surprise and unscheduled detour to enter a by-lane. Since they were not expecting the Deity's Procession to pass their households that day, the residents are taken by surprise to witness the Deity marching towards their homes. Everybody in the lane goes into a tizzy! They are unprepared for the Lord's visit to their homesteads. They have nothing to offer to the Lord! They tremble! They are disappointed, too, that the Deity would pass them by and they would be unable to confer Sri Venkateshwara with due honours and worship.

One devotee, however, comes out onto the street, stands empty-handed and so confidently too before the Deity. The Deity, together with his divine Consorts, queries him, "And what have you to offer Us?"

The devotee folds his hands humbly, looks into the lustrous faces of the Lord and the Consorts, and speaks: "Oh Govinda, if You ask me what I have to offer You now, my answer is Nothing!" To this

the Deity answers gravely, “And you believe we are pleased to hear you say so? Are you pleased to say so?” The devotee remains silent and penitent before the presence of the Lord.

Venkateshwara continues to tease the devotee, “Why don’t you speak up? Are you pleased or not with the honours and worship, you have to offer Us now?” The devotee remains silent again.

“Speak!” commands the Lord. The devotee begins at last to speak: “Govinda, it is said that it pleases him, who offers it and it pleases him too, who receives a thing which the receiver does not possess.”

The Lord looks quizzically at the devotee and says sternly, “What are you saying? Speak not to Us in riddles!” The devotee continues, “No riddle, my Lord. But surely You will agree that the pleasure of a thing given to you doubles when it happens to be a thing you do not possess. Can you deny it? Does greater joy lie in receiving from your devotee mere offerings of coconut, banana and camphor than if he were to offer You a thing you do not possess?”

The Deity is taken aback at the impertinence of the devotee. “So are you suggesting We are wanting in certain things of the world?!”

The devotee stunned the Lord with his response, “That I do, My Lord! You do lack a certain thing which I possess and which, if I were to offer it to you now, would give you, I am sure, far greater pleasure than mere coconuts, bananas or the camphor you expect!”

The Lord was enraged by the devotee’s insolence. “How dare you! How dare you say We are in want of things in this world when all the world itself is what I own?”

“Indeed, My Lord,” retorted the devotee calmly. “Then, you mere Mortal, explain yourself!” thundered the Deity.

The devotee was unperturbed and replied calmly: “Oh Govinda, I shall tell you now of a thing that you do not possess and which if given to you would give you the greatest pleasure. You do not surely possess your own Heart! Yes, it is true, you have no possession of a Heart! And I know the reason why . . . In your last ‘avatara’ in the world, as Krishna the cowherd, you stole butter from the lovely damsels of Brindavan but they in turn, having fallen in love with You, quickly relieved you of your own Heart and ran away with it! They stole your heart from you without you knowing it!”

“Therefore, my Lord, you need a new one now. Yes, that’s one thing you don’t possess, a heart. And I know you are certainly in dire need of that. And so, my Lord, here and now I do offer you a gift more precious and more pleasurable to you than coconuts, banana or camphor . . . I offer You my loving heart to replace that which you once owned but never knew the lovelorn Gopikas had long ago stolen from You.”

The story goes that after hearing what the devotee had to say, the Lord became so very pleased and bade the devotee climb up onto His palanquin so he could clasp him in a warm, divine embrace.



In the above fable the “AchAryA-s” recount, we see the twin elements of (i) “*grasping*” of the “*avatAra-tattva*” and (ii) “*Atma-nivEdanam*” both very well illustrated: of a devotee who had “*grasped*” and internalized the “*bhakti*” (divine love for God) the Gopikas long ago had experienced during the Krishna-*avatara*” and how he used it contextually, cleverly and very poignantly too, to perform his own “surrender” (“*atma nivedana*”) to the Lord and eventually earned salvation.

The same twin elements are indeed at the very crux of the first soul-stirring verse of BhishmA's great "*stuthi*":

iti matirupakalpita vitrishna
Bhagavati sAtvata-pUngavE viBhUmni I
svasuKha-mupagatE Kachi-dvihartum
prakriti-mupEyushi yatBhava-pravAha-ha II

The first verse of the "*bhishma-stuthi*" shows us that a departing soul is not so much concerned about Death itself as about "*entering the Lord's Abode*" which is really a state of being "*unborn*" like the Lord Himself. The whole focus of "*antima-smriti*" , therefore, is not so much on "*dying*" as it is on attaining what the "*purusha-suktam*" describes as "*birthless-ness*" or "*ajAya-mAna-ha*". If there is only one lesson the "*Bhishma-stuthi*" can teach us, it is this and this alone: Immortality is not Deathless-ness . . .it is really "Birthless-ness".





CHAPTER 39

SATTVA AND THE REALITY OF THE ‘TRI-GUNAS’

Many well-read friends of mine, on several occasions, have come up to me and asked challengingly, whether I believed in the principle or reality of the three ‘gUNa’— ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’, and ‘tamas’. ‘If yes’, they then go on to demand, what is the objective basis of your belief?’

I often respond to such questions half with amusement and half with good-natured mischief. I usually say to them, tongue-in-cheek, yes, I believe in the reality of the ‘tri-guNAs’. The basis of my belief is the ‘Bhagavath-Gita’. There are approximately fifty stanzas in the Gita which are devoted to describing ‘sattva’, ‘rajas’, and ‘tamas’ and how they operate in the world. I have read those stanzas. I find them to be sound and objective on a basis . . . at least, objective’ enough on which I can confidently find my belief in the reality of ‘tri-guNA’. Have you by any chance read them?’

Often my response not only counters but also silences my interrogators. They await and expect me to launch into some long-winded (and thoroughly un-convincing) explanation of how and why I have come to believe in the concept of ‘tri-guNA’. But the moment they hear me say blandly that the ‘Gita’ is the fundamental grounding for my belief, the sheer simplicity of the response stops them dead in their tracks. It is not what they anticipate, and it effectively takes the wind out of their sails. They are also silenced by the response since few amongst them have even a nodding acquaintance with the fifty-odd ‘shlOkA-s’ of the Gita I am talking about. Stymied thus by their own ignorance and realizing the futility of engaging me in further discussion, they usually decide it is far better to leave me alone.

Thus, I have I, on many an occasion, managed to maneuver and escape being dragged, against my wish, into discussions on probably one of the most talked about but little understood (I speak for myself here) principles of Vedantic philosophy—the ‘tattva’ of ‘tri-guNA’.

If my arithmetic is not wrong, there are about sixty-five ‘shlOkA-s’ in all in the Gita devoted to examining in detail the subject of ‘tri-guNA’:

(1) In chapter 7, Krishna while explaining the nature of the material world (prakruti’) brings up the subject for the first time. He does it quite suddenly in stanzas 12 and 13 almost springing a surprise on Arjuna (throughout the Gita, we see this as a common occurrence, Krishna taking poor Arjuna by surprise by introducing a new idea or new strand of thought suddenly in the middle of a long exposition on another theme):

*tribhir-gUNa-mayyair-bhAvair-
abhi sarvamidam jagath
mOhitam nAbhi-jAnAti
mAmEbhyah param-avyayam.*

*The nature of all the world and all this universe
Mired as they are in the three ‘gUNa-s’, is caused by them;
They veil the world from Me—*

*I am beyond them
Eternal and unchanged!*



Then in chapter 14, beginning with stanza 5 through 18, Krishna introduces Arjuna to the concepts of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. He provides us their definitions, explains their properties and even constructs a cause-effect matrix to help open Arjuna's eyes to the reality of the 'tri-gUNa-s'. Arjuna then beholds and recognizes the world in a wholly new light. Slowly he begins to understand it all in terms of the threefold elements of 'tri-gUNas'.

Reading these stanzas carefully and reflecting deeply upon them we too begin to understand that Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas are great powerful Forces indeed acting upon and, in this world, in much the same way perhaps as we know, say, gravity, magnetic fields, or radio activity, rule this world.

None can ever grasp or clutch at a handful of gravity but everyone and everything in this world is bound by it ('*badhnAti*'). Similarly, you cannot hold a magnetic field within the palm of the hand but just go near a source of magnetism and see what happens, it will envelop you like an octopus embraces its prey. Again, you never actually get to see X-rays, radio waves, alpha, gamma, or infra- red rays in the air around you, but nonetheless they are all out there all the time—in every single breath you take in and out, every blessed moment of your life.

There is no way that the 'tri-guNA-s' can be avoided, no more than one can avoid gravity in this world. But, quite like gravity itself, the 'tri-guNA-s' can be overcome and made to work to our advantage or to even serve our chief purposes in life. If you climb to a height and are careless enough to slip, gravity will surely ensure your painful fall. But if you know and master the art of sky-gliding, you can use the same force of gravity to your advantage and take to the great skies. In pretty much the same way, although we have no power whatsoever over Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas, we can nonetheless learn to use and exploit them wisely and profitably, to further our own true purposes in life.



Next, in chapter 17, Krishna adopts a very scientific approach in explaining the operation of the 'tri-gUNa-s' in the world. Starting with stanzas 7, 8, 9, and 10 and proceeding step-by-step—beginning with stanza 20 all the way through stanza 40—Krishna expounds the way Sattvas, Rajas, and Tamas function in this world (and within the body-mind-soul complex of man). Like a cold, clinical, and methodical professor, Krishna gives Arjuna a wonderful lesson, full of elegance, profundity, and penetrative insight into the working of the 'tri-gUNa-s'.

You cannot study the great forces of the world or understand how they work through mere conceptual constructs or speculation alone. You must instead learn to see them as they operate or function in the real world. Now how to do that?

Newton studied gravity and motion through serious enquiry into why, as simple an object as an apple, falls from a tree to the ground. Faraday studied magnetism by carefully studying how iron- filings react when brought within the proximity of a magnetic field. Nuclear scientists study wave radiation by watching how radio-active substances (like say, uranium isotopes) react under process.

The same method and approach may be used to study ‘tri-gUNa-s’ too—i.e., we may study it by studying the behaviour of objects and entities upon which the forces of ‘tri-gUNa’ operate. To study Rajas and to understand how it operates, you simply turn your attention to objects/entities/persons upon whom Rajas is acting. To study Tamas, all you must do is to study the behaviour of objects/entities/persons that are recognized to be under the powerful influence of Tamas.

To help us readily and easily recognize the many categories of objects/entities in the world upon which the ‘tri-gUNa-s’ are acting, Krishna provides in the Gita many useful illustrations and typical case studies. These, in effect, provide us (as well as they did Arjuna at Kurukshetra) great psychological insight into the phenomenon of ‘tri-gUNa’. Krishna in effect tells Arjuna:



‘You can understand “tri-gUNa-s” by simply taking up the careful study of the behaviour of one who is under the grip of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Watch what he worships most in life [shraddha]. Watch how he goes about “worshipping” in life [“yajantE”]. Enquire into the kinds of food he eats, and keep a tag on his eating-habits [aahAra-niyamam]. Observe too how he gives away gifts/ charity in life [“dAna”]. Keenly take note of the extent and quality of sacrifices [“yagnya”, “tapas”] he makes in life. Watch too how he speaks [“vAkyam”] and the quality of his utterances. Focus too on the many ways his mind [“mana-prasAdah:”] works and manifests itself in his actions. All these, O Arjuna, are clear and categorical pointers to the operation of the “tri-gUNas” . . . Study them and you shall unlock the mystery of the “tri-gUNa-s” and by doing so shall you be enabled to conquer them, go beyond them, become fit for Bhakti and ultimately reach to my own State of Brahman!’:

mAm cha yO’avya abhichArENa

bhakti-yOgEna sEvatE;

sa gUNAn samateet-tyaitAn

brahma-bhUyAya kalpatE (14.26)

*He who serves Me with Bhakti
By crossing beyond the GunAs
Becomes fit and ready
For the state of Brahman!*



In the final chapter 18 of the Gita, in stanzas 7 through 10 and later in stanzas 20 through 40, Krishna explains to Arjuna how actually the ‘tri-gUNa-s’ may be overcome by man and how such conquest paves the way for attaining the State of Brahman.

In the course of a thrilling and final peroration in the Srimadh Bhagavath-Gita, Krishna explains how even the most precious possessions of man, his Buddhi (intellect), and Manas (mind) are subject to the influence of the ‘tri-gUNa-s’ and how even the knowledge (GnyAna) that we gain and come to possess in our earthly existence is conditioned and coloured by the three-fold characters of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas.

To go beyond the ‘tri-gUNa-s’ is to conquer them. It is possible for man and that is one of the principal themes of the eighteenth chapter of the Gita. It is possible to overcome the ‘tri-gUNa-s’ just as it is possible to conquer gravity, magnetism, or radioactivity in this world.

Man’s conquest of ‘tri-gUNa-s’ involves ‘nyAsa’—renunciation or surrender (‘parityadja’). This too, says Krishna, is of three types: Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic and then urges us to make sure, as much as possible, to adhere in life to the ‘Sattvic mode of Renunciation’. And that mode lies in performing your duties in a spirit of complete and absolute ‘nyAsa’—acting without expectation of returns, fruit, or reward, or else surrendering them all to the Almighty, *sarvam sri KrishnArpaNam*’.



Thus, in very brief sketch, ends the Gita’s magnificent treatment of the subject of ‘tri-gUNa-s’.

A deep understanding of the concept and reality of ‘tri-gUNa-s’ is very essential to the practice of the Vedantic faith. Those few who succeed in that understanding attain the state of Brahman. Those many who fail, fall short of understanding Brahman, but still achieve something very valuable out of all their effort—a fuller understanding of the larger world around them and of their own inner true selves.





CHAPTER 40

IS IGNORANCE REALLY BLISS?

(Verse 15 Chapter 7 of the Bhagavath-Gita)

A few years ago there was a report in an Indian newspaper about how a majority of candidates taking an All-India Civil Services examination, failed to give correct answers to questions like, ‘Who was the author of the *Vishnu-Sahasranaama*?’ ‘What is *ashva~mEdha-yagnya*?’ ‘Name the six chapters of the *Ramayana*’.

I was once watching a quiz show on popular TV. The brightest pair of students from a prestigious school in New Delhi was competing and they had ready answers to posers like, ‘Who is the author of *Canterbury Tales* but were stumped when asked who wrote the *vivEka-choodAmani*’.

It is a general fact that amongst the youth of India today, whether at home or abroad, there is little awareness of nativity and roots, or of religion, traditions, customs, manners, history, or literature.

Sadly, the ignorance of adult Indians exceeds even that of their young brethren. One day, some years ago I ventured to conduct my own version of a lunch-hour Gallup poll amongst a dozen colleagues of mine at office (all highly educated, worldly wise, and hailing from different parts of India). Seated around a table in the cafeteria, I casually put to them a question, ‘What is Vedanta?’ Their answers were amazingly varied, beginning with the rather rude, ‘I don’t know, I don’t really care’ to the vague and uncomfortable, ‘I don’t really know, but I guess it’s the stuff Vivekananda—or Chinamayananda and the like—deal with’. The polled responses revealed to me the varying degrees of ignorance prevailing amongst modern-day ordinary Indians about Vedanta. Not one came up with the simple, direct answer I was expecting viz. ‘Vedanta is Indian philosophy’.



Ever since I did the poll, I have often found myself wondering why at the very mention of the word ‘Vedanta’, ordinary Indians today (like my friendly office co-workers, for example), become embarrassed or discomfited. Why do they respond with feelings that one can only characterize as uneasy, lukewarm, or callous feelings such as apathy, disinterest, derision, and ignorance? To me the answer seems to be this:

The average Indian today prefers to pursue the practical to the virtual exclusion of the profound. ‘Philosophy bakes no bread; so why waste time on it?’ is the argument. I have heard many close friends and colleagues similarly saying to me, our religion, philosophy, Vedanta, *pUrANa*, and all that . . . of what practical use really are to me in the present day? What relevance do they have in the world we live in? A world plagued by terrorism, war, job losses, HIV and ozone depletion. I find I’m better off just concentrating on my work, profession, or career. I’d rather put my faith in the motto, *Work is Worship*. As for religion, Vedanta and all that . . . well, my mantra has always been *Ignorance is bliss*.’

The oft-quoted mantra of ‘Ignorance is bliss’ is a clever but specious quip. It has raised the status of ignorance to a modern pseudo-virtue. Many Indians (especially the ‘young and upwardly mobile’ ones) are fond of quoting it to justify their general indifference to all things religious or scriptural. But they do so rather unthinkingly. What they believe to be some kind of wise maxim is a statement of sad and profound irony. They have no idea of its original source. The line appears at the end of a poem by the English poet Thomas Grey (1716—1771) titled ‘Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College’:

*Alas, regardless of their doom
the little victims play!
No sense have they of ills to come
nor care beyond today: . . .
Yet ah! Why should they know their fate . . .
Thought would destroy their paradise . . .
where Ignorance is bliss,
Tis folly to be wise.*

The ‘Ode’ by Thomas Grey is a poem of great moral despair and it ends with those famous lines on a deeply ironical note. It was written at a time when England was in the throes of great economic and social turmoil caused by the advent of the industrial revolution. The poet was reflecting upon the many ills and injustices that were bedeviling his country but of which his countrymen, the silent and thoughtless majority, seemed utterly ignorant. The line ‘*Where ignorance is bliss, ’Tis folly to be wise*’ was meant to describe the young but ignorant English masses of those times. They had *really* ‘no sense of ills to come’; they didn’t seem to know ‘*their fate*’. They busied themselves only with the humdrum, day-to-day care of personal life and livelihood. They did not seem to ‘*care beyond today*’, believing that any thought of the Beyond would only ‘*destroy their [petty, private] paradise*’.

No one who really knew the context or significance of Grey’s famous line would ever really wish to quote it to make a moral case for ignorance.



Vedanta is generally acclaimed to be India’s highest contribution to human thought and civilization. The first Western philosopher to come across Vedanta literature (the Upanishads) was the great Arthur Schopenhauer. After reading the Upanishads, he made a famous statement about it:

‘From every sentence deep, original and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit. In the whole world . . . there is no study . . . so beneficial and as elevating as that of the Upanishads. They are destined sooner or later to become the faith of the people.’

Schopenhauer’s statement is to Vedanta what the astronaut, Neil Armstrong’s statement was to man’s historic landing on the moon: ‘*One small step for man; a giant leap for mankind.*’ It is therefore one of the saddest stories of the times that India’s Vedantic ‘step’, representing one of the most historic ‘leaps’ of human thought in the history of mankind, did not, alas, become the ‘faith of the people’ as Sri. Schopenhauer had predicted. Not even 1 in a 1,000 people in India today—not even those who might regard themselves as ‘religious-minded’ or ‘God-fearing’—might be able to correctly name, if asked, the ten principal Upanishads! Vedanta does not anymore cause (as once it did) Indian hearts to flutter, as proudly as the glorious tri-colour. The average Indian, instead, finds far greater reason to gloat that his

great country today contributes to, say, making some odd new suite of Microsoft software run successfully in America.

Young India today represents the complete triumph of the practical over the profound. And the general consequence: young India prides itself on its roller-coaster romance with mundane-ness, a romance in which Ignorance rules bliss as surely as the heart rules the head.

To Know the Unknown

One of the fundamental problems of life to bedevil man, according to Vedanta, is ignorance. In Sanskrit, ignorance goes by several names— ‘*agnyAna*’ and ‘*avidya*’ are the most heard ones and they are opposites of ‘*gnyAna*’ and ‘*vidya*’ both denoting ‘knowledge’.

Ignorance is such a daunting philosophical problem that even defining it presents difficulties. Vedanta cannot describe it adequately in any terms other than as the ‘opposite of knowledge’. The only effective way to define Ignorance is to say it is ‘lack of knowledge’, ‘absence of knowledge’ or the ‘anti-thesis of knowledge’. There is no stand-alone word in the Sanskrit language for ‘ignorance’—it is always either ‘*a-gnyAna*’ or ‘*a-vidya*’.

Now, whatever be the school of Vedanta—Advaita, Dvaita, or VisishtAdvaita—to which we may owe allegiance, we should know there is no escape in life from the problem of ignorance. Before the light of ‘*gnyAna*’ can shine upon him, first the darkness of ‘*avidya*’ must be dispelled in the Ignorant Man. So, who then is this Ignorant Man conceived in Vedanta?

In the ordinary sense, ignorance is defined as ‘lack of knowledge’. The dictionary meaning is a little more specific: ignorance is ‘lack of knowledge of truth’.

In Vedanta the meaning becomes even more specific: knowledge of truth’ ordinarily relates to ‘truth of fact’, but Vedantic knowledge refers to ‘knowledge of causes’. And more particularly, to knowledge of ultimate cause (*para-tattva*) enshrined in Godhead. Such Vedantic knowledge of ‘ultimate cause’ is not so much to be learnt as it is to be realized in life, which is why it is differentiated as ‘wisdom’—the nearest English equivalent for ‘*gnyAna*’ or ‘*vidya*’.

The Ignorant Man is hence, according to Vedanta, the man of ‘*un-realised wisdom*’. He is unaware, therefore unmindful of ultimate cause.



Next question: What is the nature of this ‘*gnyAna*’, the Wisdom of Vedanta?

The Chandogya Upanishad tells an endearingly simple tale, explaining the nature of this special knowledge that Vedanta calls ‘wisdom’. It is the story of a bright young man, Shvetaketu, returning home to his father, Uddalaka, after twelve years of Vedic study. He was puffed up with every kind of lofty and varied knowledge:

*‘You seem to be proud of all this learning,’
Said Uddalaka, ‘but did you ask
your teacher for that spiritual wisdom
which enables you to hear from the unheard,
Think the un-thought, and know the unknown?’*

(Chandogya: 6-1-2/3)

Faced with the startling query, the young and conceited Shvetaketu was utterly dumbfounded.

‘What is that wisdom, father?’ asked the son.

Uddalaka said to Shvetaketu:

*As by knowing one lump of clay, dear one,
We come to know all things made out of clay:
That they differ only in name and form,
While the stuff of which all are made is only
clay . . .*

*So, through that spiritual wisdom, dear one,
We come to know that all life is one. (6-1-6)*

When he heard his father say this, Shvetaketu, the sensitive and noble soul that he was, in a sudden flash, realised that with all his Vedic learning, and after twelve full years spent in acquiring various knowledge, he was still very Ignorant. He was an ‘a-gnyAni’, in other words, education had merely stuffed knowledge into him; no real wisdom however had been drawn out of him.

‘My teachers must not have known this wisdom,’

*Said Shvetaketu, for if they had known,
How could they have failed to teach it to me?
Father, please instruct me in this wisdom.’*

‘Yes, dear one, I will,’ replied his father. (6-1-7)

And thus, the ChandOgya Upanishad goes on to recount to us, how Shvetaketu’s real education began and Uddalaka’s teachings enabled his ignorant son to realise wisdom.

The Four Types of Ignorance

In the Bhagavath-Gita, there is an extraordinary verse 15 of chapter 7—which brilliantly sums up the Vedantic problem of ignorance in entirety:

Na mAm dush-krutinO mUdAh: prapadyantE narAdhamAh:

mAyayA-apahruta-gnyAnA aasuram bhAvamAsritAh: (VII.15)

Ignorance is evil (*dush-krutam*), declares the Gita at the very outset. And those who are ignorant— by choice, accident or fate—they are verily ‘evil-doers’ (*dushkrutina*). In the works of the great Vedantic ‘AchAryAs’ of the past, such as Sri RamanujAchArya, as well as in the mystical outpourings of saints like the AzhwArs of South India, one will find frequent entreaties to God for forgiveness for their ignorance and for grant of that grace that will remove it forever from their minds. In his famous and heart-rending Sanskrit devotional hymn, the ‘saraNaagati-gadyam’, Ramanuja cried:

anAdi-kAla-pravrutti-vipareeta-gnyAna . . . kshamasva!

(Lord, please forgive me for the ignorance in which I’ve been swirling all these years; cleanse me of the perversions of thought and feeling [*vipareeta-gnyANa*] it has led me to in this world!)

And again, in the immortal Tamil devotional classic, the ‘*TiruppAvai*’, the mystic AndAl ends her outpouring of thirty stanzas with a poignant admission of ignorance, ‘*arivonrUm illAda aaykulatthu*’ (stanza 28); and then a ringing prayer goes out to the Almighty, on behalf of all mankind, to pardon the ignorant of the world and grant grace to man: ‘*ariyAda pillaigaLOm anbinAl . . . unnai azhaitannam . . . seeri arulAdE!*’

The Bhagavath-Gita, in the verse above, tells us that the Ignorant of the world are of four distinct types— (1) the ‘*mUDa*’, (2) the ‘*narAdhamA*’, (3) the ‘*mAyayA-apahruta-gnyAni*’, and (4) the ‘*aasuram-bhAvam-aasritAh*’. None of these four types accepts, let alone embrace, the principle or reality of God; they do not surrender unto Him— ‘*na mAm prapadyantE*’, says Lord Krishna.

It is one of the most valuable lessons Vedantic scripture has handed down to us in profiling each type of Ignorant Man. It enables us to discover, if we introspect deeply enough into what we are and how we behave, that each of us conforms to these four archetypes indeed—if not one way, then certainly in the other; and if not at one time, then at another in our lives.

Type 1: The ‘*mUDa*’

The ‘*mUDa*’ is the spiritual illiterate. He attained a near-celebrity image in the world, thanks to Adi-Sankara, who in his world-famous hymn, the ‘*bhaja-gOvindam*’, first gave a legendary, anti-heroic status to this illiterate with the lines:

*bhaja gOvindam, bhaja gOvindam gOvindam
bhaja mUdamatE! samprAptE sannihitE maraNE
nahi nahi rakshati dukrngkaraNE!*

During his travels across India, Adi-SankarAchArya once came upon an old man totally engrossed in the study of a Vedic, but arcane grammatical treatise called ‘*dukrngkaraNa*’ (Vedic ‘*vyAkarana*’). The man became so lost in the pursuit; he was utterly unmindful of everything else in life. He was what we might call, a real votary of the ‘*Work is worship*’ mantra of the modern times. He genuinely believed that life became meaningful only because of the work one chose to do, which, in his case, was mastering the ‘*dukrngkaraNa*’. Nothing else mattered.

Sankara dedicated the ‘*bhaja-gOvindam*’ to the man, calling him a ‘*mUdamata*’, a man who makes a religion out of ignorance. In the rest of the thirty-two stanzas of the ‘*bhaja-gOvindam*’, AdiSankara proceeded to demonstrate to the man the pathetic folly of his ways. ‘Give up this folly, you ignoramus’, admonished Sankara, ‘when death is round the corner, it is not the *dukrngkaraNa* that is salvation! Instead, rise, awaken! Awaken and sing with devotion in your heart, sing the Lord’s name of “Govinda, Govinda!”’

If Sankara were to meet present-day ‘*mUDa*’s—i.e., those that swear by the same ‘*Work is worship*’ principle and declare there is nothing greater or more meaningful in life than a job, profession, or vocation—the *AchArya* perhaps may well be moved to sing again for their benefit a contemporary version of the same ‘*bhaja-gOvindam*’.

From a modern perspective, the faith in ‘*work-is-worship*’ may seem to us ‘practical’ and good to adopt. But people who swear by the motto generally do not have a clue as to what is true work or worship. Much of the world’s secular work is well-known to all of us. It is plain and simple contractual work. The underlying reason for most of the world’s work is primarily to serve ‘the marketplace’. The purpose of such work therefore never rises higher than (a) earning a livelihood,

(b) improving standard of living, (c) creating wealth, and (d) beating the inflation rate. And of course, there are many too who, if they don't work out of need, do so simply because life provides them nothing more profitable.

A donkey or ass, or some such beast of burden, is also, like man, put to do the world's work. Looking at such beasts we normally say, 'Poor creature! It is working like a bull.' An ass carries heaps of dirty laundry all its life. A bull pulls enormous loads; or else, it is made to work the farmer's plough all day under the sweltering sun. These beasts have a contract to perform. And in return for all its labour, the bull or ass is rewarded with a wage—fodder and hay to chew upon. Now, just imagine an ass or a bull philosophizing to us, 'How wonderful life is! I worship my work. I earn my fodder, and I'm left alone to munch and enjoy it all! I am successful, I'm happy. This is life indeed!'

For work to become really worship, it must not only enrich man but also ennoble him. Our work can ennoble us only when we learn how to offer it at the altar of a purpose that is higher and more sacred than our own selfish selves. This is called '*bhagavath-arpaNam*' or '*bhagavath-preetyartham*' in Vedanta. It is never easy to accomplish but it is indeed one of the cornerstones of Vedanta.

The breed of men known as '*mUda-dushkrutina*' undertakes work in the world without reflection upon its real, deeper purpose. Such men do not really know for whose benefit all work is being carried out other than petty self-interest. Such work is not work. It is '*workaholicism*' and there is nothing worshipful in it. Hence, such work is termed '*dushkrutam*' by the Bhagavath-Gita. Only the ignorant—the '*mUda dushkrutina*'—would ever sanctify such work and elevate its status to worship.

Type 2: '*narAdhama*'

The second type of Ignorant Man is the '*narAdhama*'. He is the spiritual 'drop-out'.

In his magnificent commentary titled '*gitAbhAshya*', on the Bhagavath-Gita, Sri RamanujAchArya describes for us the second type of Ignorant Man in a single line:

narAdhamAh: sAmAnyEna gnyAtE api mathsvaUpE madhown~mUkhyAnarhAh:I

(''*gitAbhAshya*' of Sri RamanujachArya)

'The lowest class of men in this world are those "*narAdhamA*-s" who are incapable of turning towards God, even though they are generally aware of who He is and what is His essential nature.'

The Sanskrit '*nara*' means Man and '*AdhamA*' means 'lowest' or 'worst'. The '*narAdhamA*' is the worst species of man to be found on earth because he is irresponsible: he condones his own Ignorance.

Many years ago, when I was a graduate student at Loyola College, Madras (India), I knew an interesting fellow student. He hailed from one of the high-class families of the city, many of whose members were scholars and academicians of excellence in their respective generation. When this fellow enrolled in Loyola College, the whole campus, faculty and student fraternity alike, were naturally proud to welcome him. Great things were expected of this scion of one of the best families in town. He was intelligent, handsome, of an aristocratic background, and he knew only too well the pre-eminence of his social standing. But the fellow turned out to be a disaster.

At the end of four long semesters, it was discovered that this student simply had not turned up for lectures, had not taken a single exam, and had failed to make the grade in any subject. When the family investigated the matter, they found to their horror that their illustrious ward had found his spiritual haunt elsewhere than in the corridors of Loyola. He, along with many a female companion, was spotted regularly on the 'royal box' high above the lush lawns of the Madras Race Club placing huge bets on horses!

Now, the ‘*narAdhamA*’ of the Bhagavath-Gita is not unlike this fellow student of mine at Loyola. In a university classroom, the worst students are those who fail to make the grade because they are intellectually deficient. These failed students often opt to ‘drop out’ and then return to delinquent ways. But there is another kind of student who is even worse than the dumb ‘drop-out’. He is the ‘privileged drop-out’. Like my famous fellow student, he has all the necessary requisites to achieve academic excellence, has every privilege of family and society at his disposal, and everyone expects he is a distinguished scholar-in-the-making, and he knows it all too very well. And yet such a man will choose to ‘drop out’! He will choose to be irresponsible and willingly descend down the path to moral seed and moral destruction.

This is exactly the behaviour of the spiritual ‘drop-out’, the ‘*narAdhama*’ of the Bhagavath-Gita.

Endowed with human birth, that rare gift of evolution; blessed with reason and intelligence, the precious gifts of nature; and possessed with moral sense and instinct, the gifts civilised society gives unto every man, if, in spite of having all these God-given privileges showered upon him, a man chooses to turn his back on the Almighty, studiously ignores Him and remains stubbornly indifferent to His presence; if such a man is not once curious to know about God or unravel His ‘unseen, unheard, un-thought’ presence (revealed as it was to young Shvetaketu in the Chandogya); if such a man is not even once in his lifetime moved by the urge to pick up a sacred scripture or holy text and study it to enquire about God, then what is to be said of such a one except that he is the lowest possible class of ‘privileged drop-out’—the ‘*narAdhama*’?

A beautiful and thought-provoking verse in the ‘*Srimadh-Bhagavatham*’, the Vedantic ‘*purANa*’ written by Sage Vyasa, makes precisely such a point contrasting the ‘*gnyAni*’ (the man of wisdom) with the ‘*narAdhama*’ of the ‘Gita’:

*labdhvA sudurlabhamidam bahusambhavAntE
mAnushyam arthadam anityamapi iha dhIrAh;
tUrnam yatEta na patet anumrthyu yAvat
nihshrEyasAya vishayah khalu sarvatah syAt—
(srimadh bhAgavatham—XI.ix.29)*

*The human form is a perishable one, and is hard to obtain;
Man attains it at the end of several births—It is capable of conferring on man, in this very life, The
highest spiritual freedom.
Before death overtakes him, a man of wisdom, Instead of delighting in the sensual
As lesser bodies are wont to do,
He strives earnestly for the highest excellence Which such Freedom is indeed!*

Type 3: ‘*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAna*’

The third type of Ignorant Man is ‘*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAni*’. He is worse than the ‘*mUda*’ or the ‘*narAdhama*’. If ignorance is evil, as the Gita tells us, and the ‘*mUda*’ and ‘*narAdhama*’ are victims of such evil, then the ‘*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAna*’ is a perpetrator of the same evil.

The ‘*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAni*’ (for convenience, let us refer to him as ‘*mpg*’) is a knowing man indeed—often he is a deep thinker, an erudite intellectual, an inspired ideologue, a gifted orator. Though the ‘*mpg*’ is a knowing man, the knowledge he possesses is of a grievously flawed, even

perverted kind. It is knowledge that may be said to have been abducted by (*apahruta*) or held hostage by the power of delusion (*mAya*). Sri Ramanuja calls it '*vipareeta-gnyAna*'—the product of a mind clouded by delusion, a mind that has metamorphosed into a freak.



What is delusion? When ignorance goes around masquerading as truth, it is said to be delusion. The Deluded Man is very often successful in leading the world at large into believing that his nescience is great science.

History is full of instances of Deluded Man appearing to be inspired, gifted, and even prophetic. The ideas he espoused seemed so original, so different and electrifying! The masses were simply swayed, and the young especially were totally mesmerized by it all. The Deluded Man, the '*mpg*', indeed, often entered upon the stage of the world as some new messiah with a new message that soon became a great new '*-ism*' taking the world by storm.

When Karl Marx first propounded his great new ideology of 'Communism', it took more than half the world entirely by storm. For the next 100 odd years or so—the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth century—millions of people in the world willingly replaced, inside the shrine of their hearts, the Bible, Koran, Torah, or the Gita with a copy of *The Communist Manifesto*! Marxism became a universal creed of the masses, the last word on truth ever spoken on earth. Communism became the new faith of the people. Its system of philosophy was infallible and all comprehensive; its doctrines were so humane and profound. At the core of this faith was the clear conviction: '*There is no God; God withers away, and it is the state that substitutes Him*'.

It appears in Communism the world had finally found a credo with answers to all the questions and problems of life! It was the heady new 'religion'—the new '*vEda-sAstrA*'! And so deeply indoctrinated into this new 'religion' had the masses become that, for well over a century after Marx passed away, generations of young men all across Europe, Russia, Asia, and Latin America, were easily led into believing that all revealed religion was nothing but the 'opium of the masses'; the church, the synagogue, the temple, and the mosque were all to be consigned to the dustbin of history and forgotten forever.

Thereafter, there was much Marxian revolution in the affairs of twentieth-century man, much more in number, and far more socially convulsive, than any other ever caused by older traditional religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism. It took more than a century of revolutions, strife, bloodshed, and a terrible cold war fought over three generations, before Prophet Marx was found to have had feet of clay and that the Communist God had failed . . . and failed badly too!

Sometimes it takes that long, and it takes that heavy and tragic toll on the world, before people even begin to realise that some new '*-ism*', a so-called 'religion', is nothing but an ideology of the deluded, for the deluded, and by the deluded. It is nothing but empty, God-less religion. In other words, it is nothing but '*vipareeta-gnyAna*'—the remarkable phrase of Sri Ramanujacharya describing the real nature of '*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAna*'.



During the times of both Adi Sankara and even Sri. RamanujAchArya, there prevailed a brand of '*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAna*' which, in terms of both popularity and sophistry, rivalled that of modern-day Communism. It was the school of philosophy known as '*chAruvaka*'—the 'philosophy of

hedonistic materialism’. It was an outright anti-Vedic philosophy but many people, even very educated ones in those days, easily fell prey to its allure.

These ‘*chAruvaka-s*’ were outright hedonists for whom the only purpose of human existence was pursuit of sensual pleasure. Their philosophy was utterly crude but was very cleverly represented. In Sankara’s times, when moral decadence had set in deeply amongst some privileged and intellectual classes of society, it appealed to a lot of people.

Once Adi-Sankara was invited to a dialogue by a ‘*chAruvaka*’ scholar. In the course of their conversation (which ‘*vaikunta-vAsi*’ [late] U. Ve. Sri. Mukkur Lakshminarasimhachariar used to narrate very well in his public discourses) AdiSankara thoroughly exposed the moral and intellectual poverty of the ‘*chArvaka*’ philosophy.

‘You invite me to engage in a philosophical debate, but why?’ the *bhagavathpAdA* asked, ‘The tenets of my philosophy are grounded in the *pramANa* of Vedic first principles. You, on the contrary, have neither an intellectual tradition nor philosophical outlook. What then are you and I to debate about?!’

‘Who says our school has no *pramANa*?’ the ‘*chAruvAka*’ countered. ‘Of course, we have a philosophical tradition! It is called *chAruvAka-darsanam* [the atheistic manifesto] and it is more than a match for your Vedas.’

‘Oh, really!’ asked Sankara sarcastically, ‘I was not aware your school was rooted in philosophy! Perhaps you would deign to expound this great *chAruvAka-darsanam* to me!’

The anti-Vedantin, insensitive to Sankara’s half-serious and half-mocking tone, gravely began tutoring the *bhagavatpAdA* in the mysteries of the ‘*chAruvAka-darsanam*’. The venerable Sankara played along, just to humour the poor, ridiculous fellow who was unaware his leg was being not only pulled but quietly yanked too.

‘Our great philosophy can be summed up in one epigram,’ boasted the anti-Vedantin and recited to Sankara the following lines:

yAvad jeevate sukham jeevate; RNam kritvA ghritam pibate; Bhasmee-bhutasya dehasya punarAgamanam kutaha-

Sankara heard the verse in thoughtful silence for a moment, shook his head and then pretending as though the profundity of the verse was thoroughly lost on him, he queried the ‘*chAruvAka*’, ‘Sir, the verse you quote no doubt sounds brilliant. But please enlighten me as to what it purports to truly convey.’

‘The verse states what according to our *chAruvAka-darsana* is the ultimate purpose of existence,’ replied the anti-Vedantin.

‘And, sire, what is the great purpose of existence?’

‘The sole purpose of all life is to satisfy human desire. To seek purpose in life is the passion of all living beings; and pleasure is surely that purpose.’

Sankara *bhagavatpAdA* patiently listened to this nugget of philosophical wisdom, and for a moment, he could hardly conceal a chuckle. ‘If this man’s absurd philosophy were true indeed’, the *bhagavathpAdA* said to himself, what a monumental impostor I as a Vedantin must seem to people everywhere!’

‘Sire, how wonderfully you state your philosophical case!’ said the *bhagavatpAdA* continuing the rather absurd dialogue. ‘Do you mean each man must seek out his respective desire in life and devote himself entirely to its complete satiation?’

‘Indeed, that is the sole and true purpose of all existence,’ replied the ‘*chAruvAka*’. ‘Take away the pleasure of passion from life and what is there in it? Deduct the passion from the aggregate of living . . . what remains? Nothing . . . nothing but endless null, infinite void. A world without pleasure is of no use to us. It negates our very existence. Pleasure, on the other hand, fulfils it. Hence, it is pleasure that is the principle of life. If one is alive, one must seek out pleasure *yAvad jeevate sukham jeevate!*’

‘How insightful!’ Sankara roundly applauded. ‘Sir, pray tell me now, if eating is the sole pleasure of a certain man, what then shall be his earthly goal?’

‘Eating and evermore eating is such a man’s goal!’ was the reply from the anti-Vedantin.

‘And if his spirit is satisfied by endless eating, what might he do then with the rest of his life?’

To this question from Sankara, the anti-Vedantin replied simply, ‘*ghritam pibate!* Let him who by mere eating has finished satisfying his spirit, let him then look to satisfying his body. Let him in the days he remains on earth take to gorging down quantities of pure *ghee*.’ (In Sanskrit ‘*ghritam*’ means ‘clarified butter’).

Now it must be remembered that in South India the people are predominantly rice eaters. When they sit down at a meal, rice is served first. Then a few teaspoons of ‘ghee’ are generally served to lace the rice. This is done firstly, to lend a mild but delicious aroma to the steamed rice, and secondly, to add a bit of the vital nutrient of fat to the otherwise utterly fat-free diet of South Indians. The culinary custom is to usually add nothing more than a few dollops (or splashes) of this ‘ghee’ to the meal; anything more would only be adding an unhealthy amount of fat to the diet. Nowadays those who are diet-conscious, in fact, often completely decline it if ‘ghee’ is served with their meal.

In the Tamil language, it is all referred to as ‘*neyy-kutthikaNam*’, i.e., ‘ghee’ is to be ‘sprinkled’, not ‘poured’ or ‘dished out’, over the rice served. But we find here instead, in the Sankara episode, the ‘*chAruvAka*’ advocating not just ‘sprinkling’ of ‘ghee’ but shamelessly ‘gorging’ it! He specifically uses the Sanskrit phrase ‘*ghritam pibate*’. Literally, it means ‘quaffing down ghee’ as if it were so much lemonade from a large pitcher which an awfully thirsty man (or very greedy child) might empty in a few massive gulps!

What the anti-Vedantin, of course, meant to tell Sankara bhagavatpAdA was this: that there were no limits to seeking earthly pleasure. If man’s appetite were to become jaded by indulgence, it could continue to be whetted by excess. So, for them who had exhausted the gourmet delights in life, there was still the promised land of unbridled gluttony!

Sankara, with the feigned innocence of a monastic apprentice, carried on querying the ‘*chAruvAka*’.

‘Sire, but you know well that in this world, to desire a thing is one thing and to satisfy it is another matter. There is a cost attached to everything. It takes a lot of money these days to buy ghee. It’s not cheap. So, what does the man to whom quaffing down ghee has become a ruling passion of life . . . what is the poor fellow to do if he finds he cannot afford ghee?’

‘*RNam kritvA!*’ retorted the unflappable ‘*chAruvAka*’. ‘Let such a man as you describe him to be, let him go about borrowing money any which way and by any means he can, and from any quarter in the world, but *ghritam* he must obtain and should consume to his heart’s content!’

This was the ‘*chAruvAka*’ way of saying, ‘The end justifies the means . . . any means whatsoever!’

‘Sire, but is it not imprudent’, Sankara continued, ‘for a man to borrow money? Debt [*Rnam*] enslaves one’s soul to another. Surely you know that don’t you? And how can an enslaved soul be free to pursue the true ends of existence?’ asked Sankara.

‘Debt may be the bane of the soul in your matrix of Vedic values, O Sankara, but it is not so in the lofty manifesto of our *chAruvAka-darsanam*’, was the laconic reply of the anti-Vedantin.

Sankara next tried a slightly different line of questioning.

‘Sire, are you saying that in the lofty scheme of your wondrous *darsana* there is no such thing as soul?’

‘*Bhasmee-bhutasya dehasya!*’ was the emphatic reply of the ‘*chAruvAka*’. ‘What is this thing called soul you Vedantins are so fond of talking about?’ he counter queried the *bhagavatpAdA*. ‘It is nothing but a fanciful figment of overwrought Vedic imagination! For us *chAruvAkA*-s the soul and the body are one and the same. When the body lives and breathes, the soul you speak of lives and breathes too. When the body dies and turns to ashes, your soul turns to ashes with it.’

‘Sire, in that case, does the soul enliven the body or the body enliven the soul? Which enlivens what?’ asked the relentless Sankara.

‘*Pah!*’ exclaimed the anti-Vedantin, What kind of ridiculous questions you Vedantins pose! Tell me this, O Sankara! When you munch *tAmboolam* [betel leaves laced with slaked lime] your mouth and tongue turn scarlet in colour, don’t they? Now, I ask you, what makes your mouth go red? The betel leaves? The areca nut? The scented lime-paste? Or is it the warm flesh of your salivating tongue? *Eh?* Which amongst them makes your mouth go red? Can you tell me?’

The ‘*chAruvAka*’ paused a moment to let his dramatic question hang in the air for dramatic effect. Then he answered it himself, The answer obviously is: none of them individually can cause redness in your mouth; but all three . . . betel leaf, nut, and lime . . . when chewed together as *tAmboolam* in the mouth will certainly redden your tongue, isn’t it? Likewise, neither body nor soul [if there is such a thing at all] can singly constitute the material cause for the effect of life. But when the body as one element and soul as another, cohere . . . they enliven each other to form a third element called life. As long as the constituent elements remain coherent, the resultant element of life too is sustained. When the constituents dissipate on death and devolve to their elemental state, the phenomenon of life too simply ceases to be.

‘And that’s all there really is to life and earthly existence, O Sankara! But you Vedantins will never leave it all at that! You must concoct all your complex and fanciful metaphysics about the *jiva*, the *brahmham*, and the *sarIra* or body . . . Your Vedanta, O Sankara, if it amounts to anything at all, is nothing indeed but a conspiracy against the common man! You and your entourage, after all, must somehow make a livelihood, right?’

Sankara was amazed at the ingenious arguments of the anti-Vedantin! Crude ideas at the hands of these ‘*chAruvAkas*’ were very nearly made to seem like high philosophy!

‘If, as you say, there is no purpose to earthly existence other than seeking its temporal pleasures, then, I suppose, there is nothing like *svargA* [paradise] or *naraka* [perdition] in the *chAruvAka- darsana*? Is there no system of moral reward and punishment? There is no ethical system under which man must account for his deeds?’

To this the anti-Vedantin replied, ‘*punarAgamanam kutaha-?*’

‘O Sankara, we do have *svargA* and *naraka* in our system. But it is not along the ridiculous lines of your ‘karma’ theory where the so-called ‘soul’ of man casts off one body after another in a cycle of birth and death, journeying relentlessly, back and forth, from this world to the ones beyond, and along the way liquidating its outstanding account of sin and virtue. Oh, no, we don’t subscribe to that humbug you Vedantins have invented and retail!’

‘What then is your idea of *svarga* and *naraka*, heaven and hell?’ asked Sankara.

‘Heaven and hell, O Sankara, reside on this very earth. One does not have to look into the empty skies for them. If a man should find ample means in this world to satisfy his every desire for pleasure, indeed that verily is the heavenly state. And if he, on the contrary, suffers deprivation and cannot indulge or fulfil his passions . . . there indeed is the state of hell,’ replied the ‘*chAruvAka*’.

‘Sire’, Sankara *bhagavatpAdA* finally asked, ‘do you have the concept of *mokshA* . . . eternal liberation . . . in your *darsana*?’

‘Of course,’ replied the ‘*chAruvAka*’, ‘in our system of thought we consider death to be *mOkshA* . . . *Bhasmee-bhutasya dehasya* . . . Death grants us the eternal liberation you speak of!’



In Sankara’s times, corruption and bankruptcy, in thought and morals, had seeped so deeply into the society of India, that masses of men actually believed in the system of ‘*chAruvAka-darsana*’—by far the most classic example of the fungus of ‘*mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAna*’ spoken about in the Bhagavath-Gita (Ch.7.15).

Type 4: ‘Asuram-bhAvam-AsritAh’

The fourth type of Ignorant Man the Gita describes as ‘*Asuram-bhAvam-AsritAh*’:

na mAm dush-krutinO mUdAh: prapadyantE narAdhamAh:

mAyaya-apahruta-gnyAna aasuram bhAvamAsritAh: (VII.15)

The phrase ‘*Asuram-bhAvam-AsritAh*’ is pregnant with deep meaning and fine nuance. In most translations of the Gita, the word ‘*Asura*’ is translated as either ‘godless’ or ‘atheist’. Both terms are correct but too mild and too bare. It would be more appropriate to say the English equivalent of ‘*Asura*’ is ‘antagonist of God’—(‘*bhagavath-dvEshi*’)—and this expression has, as we shall soon see below, very many colourful shades and deep layers of meaning.



In the holy town of Kanchipuram, South India, if you happen to pay a visit to the Sankara-Mutt (religious monastery, an ‘ashram’) you will see that it is adjacent to a mosque. You will also see across the street from the doorway of the Kanchi Mutt statuette of an elderly person. The statuette was erected in honoured memory of a famous atheistic leader who used to live in the region in the few decades before and after Indian independence from British rule. You will not fail to notice then the statuette glaring down rather disapprovingly at all ‘believers and worshippers’ going in and coming out the place of God—the very God whom all atheists vehemently deny in life. Just underneath the statuette there is also a little stone plaque on which are inscribed the famous atheistic credo:

*There is no God.
He who believes in God is a fool.*

The above words stare down at every visitor to the Kanchi Sankara Mutt or the neighbouring ‘masjid’.



Coming as it does from atheists who avowedly swear by rationality, the message in the strident credo would strike one as not being very logical. It is in fact a bit self-contradictory.

Let’s take the first statement, ‘*There is no God.*’ By itself, this is a statement of subjective conviction rather than objective truth. It implies this: ‘*I have used my rational powers to the best of my ability in order to investigate if there is God, and reason tells me there is none.*’ If an atheist confines himself to this first statement alone, he should be regarded as a true philosopher of rationality. (In the Western world there were in fact many similar philosophers of the rationalist school who were eminent thinkers—the name of Bertrand Russel, for instance, comes to mind instantly; he is the author of the famously atheistic but nonetheless thought-provoking book, *Why I Am Not a Christian*).

The atheist of Kanchipuram however went on to make the second statement ‘*He who believes in God is a fool*’, which was rather unbecoming of a true philosopher. This is because the second statement is what logicians would call a ‘*non-sequitur*’—an untenable conclusion drawn from a flimsy premise. It is this second statement that exposes the Ignorance (‘*agnyana*’) of the atheist’s position about God. If the argument, as it stands articulated in the stone inscription, were to be reconstructed in strictly syllogistic terms, it would read as absurdly as follows:

*All men have reason.
God cannot be known through reason; Some men say they know God; Therefore, all such men have no reason. (And therefore, they’re all fools.)*

The illogicality of the above argument must be contrasted with a great passage from the Upanishad:

*asannEva sa bhavati asad-brahmEti vEda chEth;
asti brahmEti chEdh vEda santamEnam tathO viduriti.*

(Taittiriya Upanishad: ‘anandavalli’)

*If a person takes Brahman for unreal, truly he becomes himself unreal;
If he understands Brahman is existent and real,
In consequence thereof, the truly wise ones
of this world Consider him right and good.*

Atheists certainly would never of course want to appreciate the profundity of the Upanishad ‘*vAkya*’ above. ‘In denying God’s existence’, says the Taittiriya, ‘we must beware we will be denying our own. If we are keen to cancel all that is divine within us, and denounce every trace of spirituality latent in us, then what will be left in us? Who shall we then be? If divinity shall not reside within us what shall we replace it with? Mere earthly dust? Rotten flesh? If I am not to be of the same divine nature as God, then what shall I aspire to be?’

The same lofty sentiments of the Upanishad were echoed too by the mystical call of the great Tamil saint and yogi, NammAzhwAr:

uLarUm illai allaraay uLaraay illai aagiyE
uLar em oruvar; avar vandu en uLLatthULley uraiginraar; (tiruvoimOzhi': 8.8.10)

He is;
for he cannot not not be for his men;
for others, he is as if he is not our lord;
he is here
He lives here in me.

(Translation: A. K. Ramanujan's 'Hymns for the Drowning')

To say that every man on earth who believes in God is a fool implies that the atheist himself is somehow 'all-knowing' or omniscient. In effect, one could say the atheist begins to himself 'play God Almighty'. He knows everything going on inside the minds of all God-believers of the world, past, present, and future?! And out of such God-like 'omniscience', he can conclude 'all who believe in God are fools'!

What most atheists fail to realise is that in going about denying God's existence the way they do, they are in a way acknowledging, even affirming Him. Atheists, in a way, are aspiring to be 'little God' in as much as claims to 'omniscience', in part, is a bit of a religious aspiration of all God-seekers too!

Exactly as the Upanishad 'vAkya' in the Taittiriyam implies, when man seeks to deny God, he often ends up unwittingly, and in some way or the other, actually affirming Him. Or as NammAzhwAr put it, 'uLarUm illai allaraay, uLaraay illai aagiyE'.

Let us now turn to the expression 'Asuram-bhAvam-AsritAh' in the Gita. It is useful to study it as if it were composed of three elements:

- (1) 'asura'
- (2) 'asura-bhAva'
- (3) 'Asuram-bhavam-asritAh'

- (1) In the 'pUrAnA-s' of our ancient tradition, we come across many archetypes of the 'asura'—e.g., Hiranyakasipu, the pre-eminent one amongst all 'God-antagonists' or 'bhagavath-dvEshi-s'. What distinguishes the 'asura' is that not only does he deny the idea and reality of the Almighty (Ultimate Cause, 'para-tattva'), he is also openly antagonistic to Him. This makes the 'asurA' both ignorant and foolish: Firstly, he states God does not exist—which is an admission of personal ignorance (as the Taittiriyam reveals above) and not revealed truth. And secondly, for some absurd, irrational reason, he goes on to then despise the God he says does not exist! Now, why hate something if it does not exist? Why should the non-existent arouse any feelings of hostility or otherwise? The answer is: Foolishness (another form of 'mUdamata'!).

- (2) '*bhAva*' means 'nature', 'character', or 'likeness'. He who is not an archetypical '*asura*', but who is by nature almost one, i.e., he has strong likeness to an '*asura*', such a man is said to have '*asura bhAva*'.

Such men do not generally deny the existence of an Almighty but are terribly antagonistic to Him. In the '*purANa*' once again, we find many revealing portraits of '*asura-bhAvam*' as might be found amongst the men of this world too.

DuryOdhana, for instance, was not an '*asura*' but a '*manushya*' (man) in the mould of an '*asura*'. The '*asura-bhava*' in him did not really come in the way of his tacitly accepting Krishna's presence as God incarnate. But on the other hand, it made DuryOdhana deeply and violently hostile towards God.

The man of '*asura-bhava*', while not outright denying God's existence, nevertheless openly defies God's purpose. DuryOdhana's overbearing selfishness knew no bounds. He wanted to achieve his worldly ends at any cost—and would not let God Almighty even get in the way!

Such unmitigated hostility to God ('*asura-bhAva*') arises because of Ignorance again. As long as man cannot realise that God's purpose and man's own ends in life are not at variance; but that, in fact, man's principal goal in life—'*purushArtha*', is the Vedantic word for it—is verily to realise God's purpose, and as long as man remains blind to such knowledge, ignorance combining with all-consuming human selfishness—as in DuryOdhana's case—it will always render him a man of '*asura-bhAva*' who is at deep odds with the reality of God.

- (3) Finally, '*asritah*'. This means 'he who aids or abets'; it also means 'a sympathiser' or 'one who encourages' God-antagonism. The man who is a 'sympathiser' of '*asura-bhAva*' thus becomes '*asura-bhAvam-Asritah*', i.e., 'he who—directly or indirectly, willingly or otherwise, for good reason or bad—abets or encourages anti-godliness', '*bhagavath-dvEsha*'.

This man neither denies God's reality (like a true '*asura*'); nor does he openly defy God's purpose (like a man of '*asura-bhAva*'). But this man indeed does far worse! He sympathises, aids, abets, endorses, and vigorously promotes '*asura-bhAva*'. He therefore ends up perpetrating not only ignorance (i.e., '*agnyAna*'/'*avidya*') but foolishness and unrestrained human selfishness too in all others around him—the same foolishness which earlier we saw the Gita describe as '*mUda-mata*', and the same vileness of human selfishness as found in a '*narAdhama*'.

In the Mahabharata, the best example of the '*Asuram-bhAvam-asritAh*' is found in the character of King DhritarAshtra.

He was no '*asura*'. Nor was he a man of '*asura-bhAva*'. DhritarAshtra and Krishna were never open antagonists. But alas, DhritarAshtra remained until the very end, a hapless but *active* '*Asuram-bhAvam-asrita*'! As king of Hastinapur, he aided, abetted, and sympathised with all kinds of '*mudAmata-s*', '*naradhAma-s*', and '*mayaya-apahruta-gnyAni-s*' in his royal court, Karnan, DussAsanan, Dronar, et al.! And above all, DhritarAshtra kept encouraging his son, the prince of '*asura-bhAva*', DuryOdhanan, all through his reign of misdeeds and '*dhvEsha*'.

Indeed, DhritarAshtra was the king of ignorance, the emperor amongst '*asuram-bhAvam-asrtita-s*'! That is the reason why, in recognition of his great ignorance ('*agnyAna*'), the Mahabharatha thought it most fit to portray DhritarAshtra's character as an '*andham-Atma*'—a monumentally blinded soul—symbolising the Blindness of Dark Nescience into which man ever risks sinking in life.

The blind, ignorant souls of the fourth (or the '*dhritarAshtra*') type are verily 'born to bring ruin to the world', says the Gita in a later chapter (XVI.9). They are 'lost souls'—'*nashta-AtmAna*':. Writing in his '*gita-bhAshya*', Sri RamanujAchArya also said:

‘jagatha: kshyAya prabhavanti’.

A blinded soul like DhritarAshtra—the Mahabharata’s metaphor for supreme ignorance—brings epic ruin upon himself and the ruination of everyone and everything around him as well.

From Ignorance to Knowledge

What is ignorance? Does ignorance really bliss? What is the nature of ignorance? Who are the ignorant of the world? How may we recognise an Ignorant Man when we see him?

It was answers to such questions that were sought to be explored in this essay so far. The works of the ancient Vedantic masters—such as the sampling of quotes of AzhwArs, AdiSankara, and Sri RamanujAchArya alluded to in this essay—all helped us to an extent in grasping the theme of ‘agnyAna’ or ‘avidya’. But above all, it was the fifteenth verse of chapter 7 of the Bhagavath-Gita—one of the most insightful and illumining passages in the Gita—that came to our aid in understanding the Vedantic flavour and underpinnings of a rather abstruse subject matter.



It is far less difficult to gain knowledge than to dispel ignorance. The Vedantic ‘achAryA-s’ often remind us of that knowledge simply floods our mind once ignorance departs from it—just as light comes in and instantly fills a room even as darkness flees from it. It would not be wrong to say that, often ‘gnyAna’—particularly the ‘gnyAna’ of Vedantic or Upanishadic kind (described above in this essay)—is nothing but the absence of ‘a-gnyAna’. Knowledge is what we shall find has always been with us, in our possession after all, but only clouded by our own un-knowing. All it needed was Ignorance to be erased from our mind for us to re-discover our ‘gnyAna’. It is this re-discovery that we see being voiced by Sri Peria-AzhwAr in those exultant lines he sang in the Tamil hymn ‘seniyOngu’:

iRavu seyyum paavakkaadu theekkoLee i vEhinRadhaal*
aRivai ennum amudhavaaRu* thalaippaRRi vaayk koNdadhE.*

(verse 2 of ‘senniyOngu’: Peria-azhwAr tirumozhi)

*The forest of sins burned away,
The night of un-knowing has fled,
The flood of Knowledge now comes
And washes me away
Upon Truth’s nectarine wave.*

(Translation: mine)



Vedantic ‘gnyAna’ is never gained by remaining ignorant of ignorance all our lives. We cannot say ‘Ignorance is bliss’ and hope to sound very wise in life. If ignorance were truly bliss, imbeciles would be prime candidates for sainthood! Socrates, the greatest of Greek philosophers, once said, ‘All that I know is that I know nothing.’ He, however, did not sit back and enjoy the rest of his life in glib, self-professed ignorance. His ignorance became his inspiration in life. It became the springboard from

which he vaulted himself to lofty wisdom—the wisdom for which Socrates of Athens is to this day celebrated in all the world.

As Uddalaka taught his son, ShvEtaketu, in the Chandogya Upanishad, the search for ‘gnyAna’ in life should commence sooner rather than later in life, with first a deep and humble enquiry into the nature of ‘agnyAna’—ignorance. And there is no better place in the world to begin that search than in the pages of the Bhagavath-Gita. All of us should therefore be urged, whatever the present degree of our ignorance—to tarry no further! We should take up the Gita and embark upon its study seriously. It is this scripture that shall at once remove our ignorance and fill us with light.

Those who are well acquainted with the works of Swami Venkatanathan (Vedanta Desika, one of the greatest Vedanta ‘achAryA-s’ after Sri Ramanuja) will recollect what he said of the ‘Gita’ in famous lines in the many-splendoured ‘daya-satakam’, the immortal one-hundred-stanza Sanskrit poem composed in praise of the deity at Holy Tiruvenkatam:

*nirA-krita-vatee dayE! nigama-sowdha-deepa-sriyA
vipaschidavi-geetayA jagati geetayA andham tamaha
(daya-satakam: 89)*

*Hold ‘Gita’ steady in your hand, the Vedic lamp— To lead you safely out the world’s dark’nd halls
Where shadows of un-knowing lurk and dance, And blind ruler, ignorance calls.*

BOOK 8
The Mystic “*Azhwars*” and their “*Divya Prabhandham*”



CHAPTER 41

“*TONDARARADI PODI AZHWAAR: RELIGIOUS EXTREMIST?*”

A most intriguing question was raised during a conversation I recently had with a Sri Vaishnava friend about a certain ‘Tirumaalai paasuram’ (stanza 8) in the “prabhandham” of Sri Tondaradipodi Azhwaar quoted below:

*veruppoDu samaNar muNDar, vidi il SaakkiyargaL, nin paal
poruppariyanagaL pEsil, pOvadE nOyadaagi
kurippenk kaDaiymaagil, KooDumEl talaiyai aangE
aruppadE karumam kaNDaai, arangamaa nagarLaanE!*

*O Ranga, the unbelievers all,
Heretic Mundas and atheist Sakhyars,
Spread nothing but untruth and calumny about Thee:
They know not they fashion by it their doom!
If left to me, I'd have their heads chopped right here
If such were my righteous duty of karma!*

The question posed is whether the sentiment expressed by the Azhwaar above is rather unbecoming of Sri Vaishnava ethos which is widely known to be utterly ‘pacifist’, non-violent’, and to use the usual characterization of the true Sri Vaishnava spirit, being highly ‘*intolerant of intolerance*’.



My submission is that nothing said by the Azhwaar in the quoted paasuram in any way goes against the natural grain of the Sri Vaishnava ‘DNA’, character, or spirit.

While the Sri Vaishnava is truly ‘*intolerant of intolerance*’, he is also a firm believer in the fact that ‘*tolerance has limits of tolerance too*’ in pretty much the same manner as what the famous English dramatist and essayist Oscar Wilde once said, ‘*I do not carry moderation to extremes.*’

In the paasuram one must appreciate how profoundly and carefully the Azhwaar prefaces using the word ‘*koodumel*’ -- his expression of so-called ‘vitriol’ that immediately follows, i.e., ‘*talaiyai aangE aruppadE*’. Equally profound is the placement of the word which then follows viz. ‘*karumam kaNDaai*’ as a sort of prologue.

The Tamil word ‘*koodumel*’ is difficult to render exactly into English. In ordinary daily parlance, we use the variant ‘*koodumaanya varilUmm*’, which is approximate to saying, ‘to the extent possible as the

circumstances allow'. But according to the context in which one uses this word, '*koodumel*' can also convey meanings close to English idiomatic usage such as 'should the need or opportunity arise', 'should other things being equal', 'in the likelihood of such eventuality', or 'under the circumstance that comes to pass', etc.

Now, in the 'paasuram' by stressing on the word '*koodumel*', the Azhwaar clearly conveys the message that 'beheading of heretics' is conditional upon a certain event happening in the first place; that he would endorse committing such 'violence' should, in case, if and when, certain circumstance or circumstances arise. It is clear from the use of the word '*koodumel*' that the Azhwaar is not calling for 'beheading' in a brazen, indiscriminate, or one might venture to add, in the modern '*jihaadist*' manner.

Now, what is the 'conditional circumstance', we may then well ask, that is being contemplated here by the Azhwaar?

The answer is found in the phrase which he employs immediately after viz. '*karumam kandaai*'. The invoking of '*karmumam*' or '*karma*', in Sanskrit, is very eloquent and truly significant here. Under what 'circumstance' or 'condition' does the Azhwaar envisage the 'beheading of heretics'? The answer is: Only, and strictly only, under what may be termed as 'kaarmic' conditions, i.e., when such a deed becomes ineluctable, inevitable, unavoidable, fateful, when there is absolutely no other alternative course of action, and when such an act becomes an act of transcendent, overarching moral duty.

To understand the true context in which the Azhwaar uses the word '*karumam*' in this 'paasuram', and how he intended it to be really read in conjunction with the preceding word, '*koodumel*', we must seek the help of the wisdom that everlastingly resides in the Bhagavat-Gita as contained in the 'upadesa' (advice) Lord Krishna gives Arjuna.

Krishna urges Arjuna not to shirk from the act of beheading'—in the war of Kurukshetra. But then he urges him to do so only because he is able to clearly point out to Arjuna that it is his bounden 'karma' to do so; Krishna clearly explains to Arjuna why the war has become the inalienable script of his life, a moral imperative of fate, a definitive moment of existential truth, a human duty ordained by supra-human dictate, as it were, characterized in Vedanta philosophy through that special term, '*vidhi-vihitam*'.

In chapter III. 8. Krishna says to Arjuna: 'Fulfill all your duties; action is better than inaction. Even to maintain your body, Arjuna, you are obliged to act. Selfish action imprisons the world. Act selflessly, without any thought of personal profit.' The Azhwaar too in the 'paasuram' employs the phrase '*karumam kandaai*' in precisely the same sense. If it comes to a situation, a condition or combination of circumstance in life, when it becomes 'kaarmic' duty—i.e., a duty unmotivated by personal (or communal or other) considerations of gain, desire, fear or other such agenda—to act and even act with extreme violence, then under such conditions only—or '*koodumel*'—the Azhwaar proclaims he, unlike Arjuna at Kurukshetra, would not shirk from that duty.

In the grand finale of the Gita, in chapter XVIII. 59.60, Krishna affirms the above duty as follows:

If you egotistically say, 'I will not fight this battle' (or to use the Azhwaar's stark language, will not 'behead the heretic'), your resolve will be useless; your own nature will rebel against you and will drive you into it. Your own karma, born of your own nature, will drive you to do even that which you do not wish to do, because of your delusion.

In the Sanskrit poem, the '**Abhithi-stavam**' Acharya '*saarvabhowmann*', the great Acharya, Swami Vedanta Desika expressed sentiments in stanza 22 not dissimilar to the one conveyed by the Azhwaar but with a slightly different slant:

*kalipraNidhi-lakshanaih: kalita-shaakya-Iokaayathaih:
turushka-yavanadhibhir-jagati jhrumbhamaaNam bhayam I
prakrushta-nija-shaktibhihi; prasabha-aayudhaihi: panchabhi:
kshiti-tridasha- rakshakaihi: kshpaya ranganaatha khaNaath II*

‘O Ranganath, the heretics [extremists] have brought on great terrible fears and misery upon this world! Only you can protect us! Mere earthly weapons are of no avail [they are not “nija-shakthi”]! Only your divine five weapons [pancha-ayudhaihi] can offer mankind true protection.’

What are those five weapons of divine nature that must come to the aid of man? They are: the great cycle of life called ‘time’ (symbolized by the Chakra), the power of the word of truth (symbolised in the sound of the Shanka), the strength of faith in morality (symbolized by the divine mace, the ‘*gadhaa*’), the wisdom of sharp discrimination (i.e., the symbolic sword of ‘*khadga*’), and finally the flame of eternal hope burning bright in the human heart (metaphorized as the divine ‘bow and arrow’).

Swami Desikan regards the duty of ‘beheading heretics’ not as any individual imperative but as divine retribution delivered through the agency of righteous men on earth (‘*saadhu*’). Armed with the five weapons in the arsenal of every man of Sri Vaishnava faith, one must indeed wage constant war against the forces of extremism and intolerance in the world today.

When we realize that it has become our ultimate and defining ‘*karma*’ to take up arms if only to rid the world of inhumanity and unreason, then, and only then, does the ‘beheading the heretics’ or ‘*talaiyai aange aruppade*’ become the culminating moral imperative of our lives as described in the words of both the AZhwaar and the Srimadh Bhagavath-Gita.



CHAPTER 42

THE FIRST THREE VERSES OF THE *TIRUPPAAVAI*:

The Essence of Vedanta

The Tiruppavai sung by the only female in the pantheon of the Tamil mystic saints, Sri Andal (c. seventh century CE) is '*vedaanta saaram*', the quintessence of Vedanta philosophy. The quintessence of Vedanta hinges around the three-fold truth called '*tattva*', '*hita*', and '*purushaarth*'. The Bhagavath-Gita deals with the same '*saaram*' in eighteen long chapters in Sanskrit. The first six are devoted to explaining '*tattva*', the next six describe '*hita*', and the last six expand upon the '*purushaarth*'.

The Tiruppaavai too is all about this same subject of Vedanta, but it accomplishes the task in thirty pithy but beautiful sounding Tamil verses. In fact, the hymn wastes no time at all in launching into the subject matter in the opening three stanzas, making Andaal's intentions so clear about what her Tiruppaavai is all about. Using imaginative metaphors and evocative imagery of rich '*sanga-tamizh*', she introduces the three '*tattvas*', one each in the first three verses as prologue to ensuing elaboration of the same themes in later verses.

Let us now take up each of the three Vedantic truths and discuss it one by one.

TATTVA

Those who are familiar with Vedantic thought would know that '*tattva*' refers to '*tattva-trayam*' which is the concept of '*cit*', '*acit*', and '*Isvara*' viz. the individual soul ('*jivaatma*'), matter ('*prakruti*'), and Supreme Soul ('*paramaatma*'). Now, Isvara is conceived in five ways viz. '*para*' (as an impersonal absolute principle); '*vyuha*' (as cosmic force); '*antaryaami*' (as immanent life force); '*vibhavaataara*' (descent into earthly realms); and '*archaa*' (earth-bound consecration).

Now, out of all the above five conceptions of Isvara, the most endearing and least formidable to human understanding, and one which ordinary men and women of the world find easy to appreciate and love, is the concept of '*vibhavaataara*'. Isvara's descent into the human world, from time to time through the ages, and in the form of divine '*avataaras*', as well as the accounts of Isvara's divine exploits and deeds are all greatly celebrated and worshipped in the world. These '*avataaraas*' of Isvara serve not only the cosmic purpose of maintaining divine design and equilibrium in the natural order; they also serve and support those dynamic forces on earth which cause and impel the natural and moral evolution of earthly life-forms to move forward into ever higher levels of existence and consciousness.

There are ten such '*avataaraas*' of Isvara in Vedantic scripture called the '*dasaavataara*'. It is those ten '*avataaraas*' of **Isvara-tattva** (first and foremost of the metaphysical '*tattva-trayam*' or 3 Ultimate Realities, and which, in Sri Vaishnava tradition, is personified as '*Srimann Naaraayana*'), which are alluded to here in the opening verse of the Tiruppaavai. The allusion is not directly done but suggestively through creatively conceived metaphors, which blend imperceptibly into the general storyline narrative of the whole hymn.

Read the first verse of the Tiruppaavai. There are nine simple Tamil words one can identify in it, each of which, when read separately or independently of the narrative flow or context of the hymn, reveals the ten '*avataaraas*' of Isvara (or Srimann Naraayana) as described in the great Vedantic scriptures.

Here they are:

- (1) The word '*neerAda*' in Tamil means 'a vigorous dip in water', 'reveling in a bath'. This word immediately evokes in our mind images of churning water, a roiling sea, the deep ocean or a gurgling stream. What lives in the 'sea' or 'streams'? Great big whales, sharks, giant fish, and tortoises. So, we can associate the '*matsyA*' and '*koorma*' avataara with this word.
- (2) Take next the word '*koorvEl*'. This word conveys 'sharpness', 'pointedness', 'spearhead, cutting-edge, etc. What is it that is generally associated with 'sharpness' or 'pointedness'? Animal claws? Bird beak? Bull's horns? Or a great boar's tusk? So, we can certainly associate this word with the '*varAha*' avataara.
- (3) The next word to examine is '*singam*'. This is a simple one to decipher! It means 'lion', so we easily conclude this must mean '*narasimha*' avataara.
- (4) The next word to pick up is '*kumaran*'. This Tamil word generally is applied to 'boys', 'lads', so we can say this is a veiled reference to a 'brahmachaari'. So this is reference to the '*vAmana*' avataara.
- (5) Up comes the next word '*kodun*'. This Tamil adjective (derived from 'kodUram') means one who is 'furious', 'severe', 'terrible'. Clearly this expression can be easily associated with the '*parasurAma*' avataara.
- (6) Then we come to the most beautiful expression in this whole stanza— '*kadir mathiyam pOl mugatthAn*'. In Tamil this means 'one with a face as radiant as the orb'. Now, even a child can tell that this expression describes no one else but Rama!
- (7) Next, we see the word '*tozhilan*' which in Tamil means 'one who toils', 'one who assiduously works', etc. Krishna's brother Balarama, we know, is always associated with the implement called the 'plough'. The 'plough' is a tool again associated with rugged farmers who toil in the fields— '*tozhilan*'. Hence this word we can surely associate with the '*balarama*' avataara.
- (8) The next expression is '*kAr mEni chEngan*'. This is a very extraordinary description for the 'krishna' avatara for it means 'one whose form is ever pleasing; an enchanting personality'. This epithet fits Krishna to perfection and hence no doubt that this word must be associated with the '*krishnAvatAra*'.
- (9) Finally, there is the expression '*pArOr pugazha . . . parai taruvAn*'. Literally, in Tamil, this means 'one who to the praises of all the world, causes its deliverance!' We must note that the expression conveys future tense (*parai taruvaan*) and speaks of one who is going to cause 'deliverance of the whole world' at some point of time in the future. The '*kalki*' avataara is an avataara of the future and one that is believed shall bring about the deliverance of the whole world from evil. Thus, surely this expression can be associated with the tenth and last avataara of 'kalki'.

If we take all the above words and their associated 'avatArs' in seriatim we get— '*matsya*', '*koorma*', '*varAha*', '*narasimha*', '*vAmana*', '*rama*', '*parasurAma*', '*balarama*', '*krishna*', and finally '*kalki*'. Thus, here in this first verse of the Tiruppaavai, we see constructed the entire '*dasAvatAra*' of Srīman Narayanan and in the bargain also acquire an insight into the first of the '*tattva-traya*': the '*tattva*' of Isvara.



HITA and PURUSHAARTHA

Andaal speaks of the other two ‘*tattvas*’: ‘*Hita*’ and ‘*purushaartha*’ in the second and third verses again by employing metaphoric or symbolic language—phrases and expressions that may mean one thing in the narrative context but which in and through allusion are meant to hint at and kindle Vedantic thought in the mind of the reader.

HITA

‘*Hita*’ means the pathway on which the ‘*jivatma*’ must tread to realise Isvara. It is ‘*maargam*’ or ‘*upaayam*’. It is five-fold in nature. When an individual acquires a full and intuitive realisation of these five pathways, spiritual evolution begins as a process unfolds and matures.

The first is called ‘*jivAtma-svarupa*’ or knowledge of the true nature of the individual self. The second is ‘*paramAtma-svarUpa*’ or knowledge of the nature of the Supreme Isvara. The third is ‘*upaaya-svarUpa*’ or getting to know to understand fully the various methods of approaching the Supreme Soul, the methods being ‘*gnyana*’, ‘*karma*’, ‘*bhakti-yoga*’, and ‘*prapatthi*’. These methods or ‘*maarga*’, though various in nature, finally do all end up in the call for one outcome only viz. complete renunciation—such renunciation being described in the scriptures (Upanishads, Bhagavath-Gita) variously as ‘*atma-nivEdanam*’; ‘*atma-samarpaNam*’: ‘*saraNaagati*’; ‘*prapatthi*’; etc.

The fourth is ‘*virodhi-svarUpa*’ or the awareness of forces and actions in the world of ‘*prakruti*’ that impede progress of the individual soul in its efforts to advance towards Isvara.

And finally, there is the fifth called ‘*purushaartha-svarUpa*’ which means acquiring that special wisdom that helps the individual soul to realise what true fulfilment is in spatio-temporal life—in terms of ‘*dharma*’ (ethical living), ‘*artha*’ (materialistic fulfilment), ‘*kaama*’ (sensual fulfilment) and ‘*moksha*’ (spiritual emancipation).

The mother of all ‘*purushaarthas*’, however, is the one last-mentioned. It is also called ‘*parama purushaartha*’. It is the ‘*summum bonum*’, the highest and all-transcending Goodness from which all other ‘*purushaarthas*’ are derived. This is not fully realised in the limited spatio-temporal world (of ‘*acit*’ or ‘*prakruti*’). It is realised and experienced by the ‘*jivAtma*’ (or ‘*cit*’) in the realms that lie within the proximity of, or in the presence of Isvara (‘*saalokyam*’, ‘*saameeipyam*’, ‘*saarupyam*’); and ultimately, in complete and everlasting merger with Isvara (‘*saayujyam*’).

In the second verse of the Tiruppaavai, there are words and expressions which hint at all the above aspects of the Vedantic concept of ‘*hita*’:

Firstly, the verse is addressed clearly to all denizens of ‘*prakruti*’: *vaiyatthu-vaazhveergaaL*’.

Secondly, the ‘*hita-upaaya*’ or ‘*maarga*’ of Renunciation is alluded to in suggestive phrases like ‘*neyunnOm, paalunnOm . . . Mayittu ezhudhOm, Malarittu naam udayyOm*’ (we renounce milk, ghee, collyrium, and flowers).

Thirdly, the ‘*virodhi-svarUpa*’ aspect receives special emphasis through the suggestive expression ‘*seyyaathana seyyOm*’ . . . ‘*theekuRalaichendrOdham*’ (we shall abjure all that obstructs our progress towards Thee).

PURUSHAARTHA

In the third ‘paasuram’, ‘ongi ullagallandha’, Andaal beautifully evokes the concept of the four and ultimate ‘purushaarthaas’. Lovers of the Tamil language can indeed never cease to marvel at the choice of her words, phrases, metaphors, and symbolism in this ‘paasuram’.

The word ‘uttaman’ in this verse personifies ‘dharma’, the first of the four great ‘purushaarthaas’. The word ‘utthaman’ is a veiled reference to the ‘dharmaatmas’ of the world, i.e., those who uphold the values of ‘sanaatana dharma’, the eternal values of universal truth and goodness. (In this, they follow the example of the *Varaaha-avataara*.) And what exactly does this mean and why does the word ‘uttaman’ signify and personify ‘dharma’?

Now, it is said that human character falls into four principal behavioral constitutions:

- (1) The first type is called ‘*atamatthamann*’. This human type lives and works in the world in a spirit of ‘*tit-for-tat*’—that is living amongst society in a selfish, mean-spirited sort of way, thinking nothing of returning evil for good too, if it does not receive any good from society.
- (2) The second category is ‘*atthamann*’. These folks may be described as the parasites of the world. They eke out a living by simply living off others in society. They take everything from other people and society but give no thought whatsoever of giving something back to society.
- (3) The third species of men in this world is called ‘*maddhimann*’. These are basically good-natured but very, very self-centered folks who live by the rule of ‘*Live and let live*’. They want to live happily and wish others also the same happiness—no more, no less. They will not exert themselves for the sake of the common good unless they see their own self-interest being gained.
- (4) There is however a fourth variety of men called ‘*utthamann*’. These are rare human beings. They live and work for the happiness and well-being of larger humanity. Their chief concern in life is the well-being of others around them—even if it is at their own cost. Their value in life is ‘put the well-being of others before their own’.

The ‘*uttamans*’ of the world are true seekers of the great ‘*purushaartha*’ called ‘*dharma*’. Their fulfilment in life is to realise their inner ‘*dharmaatimika*’ self.

The next phrase is ‘*perum sen Nel*’ and it evokes in the reader’s mind a picture of miles and miles of lush brown farmer’s fields where rows and rows of tall and rich grain-stalks sway in the wind. It is the perfect picture of the earth’s wealth—the real and true ‘*artha*’ which all humanity pursues and wholly depends upon for sustainability. In a world of endless strife, wars, scarcity, and greed, the true wealth of a people is food.

The next ‘*purushaartha*’ is ‘*kaama*’, the ‘*pleasure principle*’ that rules powerfully all human motivation from infancy to old age. This motive of human behavior is beautifully summed up in this ‘*paasuram*’ through a single symbol that eloquently conveys every aspect of the pleasure principle: the sensuous, the emotive, the instinctual, the subliminal, the sublimated, and the sublime. The word with all its powerful connotations used here is ‘*seertha mulai*’ . . . ‘*of copious bovine breasts*’.

The last of the Vedantic ‘*purushaarthaas*’—‘*mOksha*’ or spiritual emancipation—is referred to in this ‘*paasuram*’ through the magnificent metaphor ‘*neengaadha selvam*’. The everlasting, never-diminishing wealth of ‘*bhagavath-samslesham*’, the individual soul’s complete surrender unto Isvara and merger thereof.



CHAPTER 43

THE THIRD VERSE OF THE *TIRUPPAVAI*

The third ‘pAsuram’ in the ‘tiruppAvai prabhandham’ (celebrated today on the third day of the Tamil month of ‘mArgazhi’) is an all-time classic in the history of Tamil devotional literature. It is a poetic gem, a scintilla of Upanishadic wisdom. It is simply incomparable.

A galaxy of scholars and Sri Vaishnava exponents have analyzed this stanza thread bare. But the verse itself has lost none of its original appeal. Neither time nor custom (nor the unrelenting scrutiny of ‘vyAkhyAna-kArtA-s’ [traditional commentators], past and present) has rendered this ‘pAsuram’ stale. The stanza continues to excite and delight without abate, everyone who recites it and/or listens to it—year after year, mArgazhi’ after ‘mArgazhi’, again, again, and again:

Ongi ullagaLandha uttaman pEr pAdi . . .
nAngal nam pavaikku sAtri neeradinAl
teenginri nAdellAm tingaL mummAri peyydu
Ongu perun sennaloodu kazhayUgaLa
poongu vaLai pOdhil pori vandu kan paduppa
tEngadhey pukkirunthu seeترا mullai patri vAnga
kudam niraikkum vallal perum passukkal
neengAtha selvam niraindu elor embAvAy!

This stanza is a rich poetic document by itself. It conjures up a vision of a lush, picturesque countryside blessed with copious rains, where healthy cows graze upon rich pasture. It is a land filled with proverbial milk and honey. And the phrase ‘pEr pAdi’ refers to the heightened joy of ‘singing the glory of God’s names’ in a land of such serene and universal prosperity. The Tamil phrase ‘neengAtha selvam’, meaning ‘undiminishing wealth’, is AndAl’s magnificent metaphor for the goal of life—‘parama-nissrEyasam’, ‘parama-purushArtham’, or ‘parama-aiswaryam’ viz. the limitless wealth awaiting man in the province of God.

The substance of this verse is the truth that the ‘divya-nAmA-s’ of God, His divine names, are a sure means of securing for us not only material well-being on this earth that AndAl calls ‘kudam niraikkum perum-passukkaL’, but also ‘neengAtha-selvam’, her term for the unfading riches of the world beyond.



The expression ‘uttaman pEr pAdi’ is a particularly beautiful one in this ‘pAsuram’. Great commentators like PeriaVachAn Pillai have analysed and commented upon this phrase with elan and eloquence. Let us, too, partake and savour a bit of the immense delight they derived.

The word ‘utthaman’ is a reference to ‘utthama-purusha’ or ‘purushOttaman’ which is a special name of Vishnu, the Supreme ‘purusha’ or Being, in His avatar as Lord Narasimha: ‘nArasimha-vapuH srImAn kEsavah: purushOtamah:’, says the Vishnu Sahasranamam.

Now, what does ‘uttaman’ mean? (This question has been, rather briefly, in Chapter 42 above “*The First Three Verses of the Tiruppaavai: The Essence of Vedanta*”).

It is said human characters fall into four principal categories:

- (1) The first is called ‘*atamatthamann*’. These folks are thankfully a minority, but they are a terrible and dangerous variety. These people return not only ‘evil for evil’ (in the spirit of ‘tit-for-tat’) but think nothing of returning evil for good too.
- (2) The second category is ‘*atthamann*’. These folks may be described as the parasites of the world. They eke out a living by simply living off others in society. They take everything from other people but give no thought whatsoever of giving something back to society.
- (3) The third species of men in this world is called ‘*maddhimann*’. These are basically good-natured but very, very self-centered folks who live by the rule of ‘Live and let live’. They want to live happily and wish others also the same happiness—no more, no less.
- (4) There is however a fourth variety of men called ‘*utthamann*’. These are rare human beings. They live and work for the happiness and well-being of larger humanity. Their chief concern in life is the well-being of others around them—even if at their own cost.

One or more of the first three categories would characterize almost all of mankind. But it is God Almighty alone who fits the fourth viz. ‘*utthamann*’.

Although God is indeed an ‘utthaman’, the fact is not easily realised by many. One needs to be blessed with rare insight into the nature and many auspicious attributes of the Almighty to realise He is ‘utthaman’. And how is one to be so blessed? Lord Krishna has an answer.

In the Mahabharatha, Krishna said:

‘*guNAni mama nAmAni kIrti-tAnicha kanichit*’.

(Santi Parva, 342— 10)

‘*My divine Names are born of My qualities and activities.*’

Anyone who acquires knowledge of the divine ‘nAmA-s’, the sacred names of God, said Krishna, he easily acquires knowledge, firstly, of My divine activities and exploits. Such knowledge then, slowly but surely, begets the realisation of God’s true nature, his unique quality as an ‘utthamann’.

In the ‘*trivikrama avataara*’ (to which Andal refers with the phrase ‘*Ongi ulagaLandha uttaman*’) God went to all the trouble of striding across the world, placing His feet upon all beings and things without exception. Every prince and peasant, every rich and poor soul, every sage or fool, every sinner and saint received in that one moment the absolute grace of God.

Similarly, in the ‘*narasimha*’ avatAr, He gladly donned a hideous form solely for the sake of a child. Again, in the Krishna avatar, He stooped to do all kinds of menial errands in the service of the Pandavas—He acted as charioteer in war and bore the brunt of arrows flung at him by Bhishma and Drona; He went to the court of Duryodhana as a mere emissary of the Pandavas; He patiently bore the invectives of SisupAlan; He broke His word in order to enable Bhishma to keep his; He spoke a hundred ‘lies’; He twisted a hundred ‘truths’ and ‘half-truths’; He even went to the extent of turning day into dusk and then nightfall back into day; He really was a ‘wheeler-dealer’, our dear Lord Krishna!

The ‘itiAsAs’ tell us that God did all such things and more in various avatars. It makes us ask, ‘*For whose sake and why?*’ ‘*For what purpose?*’ For the sake of the welfare of all humanity, of course—The Almighty had ‘*yOga kshEma*’ in mind all the time, isn’t it? So, is it any wonder he is called ‘utthaman’?

Since it is thanks to the divine ‘nAmA-s’, and through them alone, that one is enabled to realise the nature, attributes, and greatness of the Supreme Brahman—who is indeed, first and foremost, an ‘utthamann’—it is exactly why the ‘tiruppAvai’ goes a step further in hailing God as ‘utthamann’: it goes on to hail His ‘pEr’ too . . . His divine names!



The ‘pEr’ or ‘divya-nAmA-s’ of God were not given to Him by anyone other than Himself. The various ‘pEr’ or ‘nAmA’ of God, singly and collectively, were all coined by the ‘utthaman’ Himself. In other words, He who had been given names, was Himself the author of such names! The named one who had been given ‘names’ was the namer Himself! Hence AndAl’s phrase, utthamann pEr pAdi’. This might sound to the un-initiated like some conundrum or tautology, but AndAl certainly knew what she was talking about because the significance of her poetic phrase is based on the great Vedic saying:

vEdAhamEtam pUruUsham mahAntam Adityavarnam tamasastu pArE I
sarvAni rupANi vichitya dheera: nAmAni krutvA bhivadan yadAstE II

(‘purusha-suktam’, 16)

‘The Great Purusha, after having been created, gave Creation all its form; and then He caused them all to be designated by name too! After naming thus all existence, the Purusha moved about indeed ruling everything through name and speech!’

All Creation in the beginning was nameless, impersonal, inchoate, disorderly, and characterless. It was only after God, the ‘pUrUsha’, gave Creation its many forms and names that everything— all existence—could be even begun to be conceived, and only then did cosmic order evolve out of cosmic chaos.

Since the ‘pEr’ or name of everything in the vast cosmos was first given by that great ‘utthamann’, that mighty ‘purushOttaman’ spoken of by the Veda, His own ‘nAmA-s’ that go to denote His nature are also hence fit to be hailed (‘pAdi’) as ‘utthamann pEr’.

There is yet another reason why ANDAl used the beautiful phrase ‘uttaman pEr pAdi’.

The many ‘nAmA-s’ or ‘pEr’ of God coined by the ‘veda-pUrUsha’ Himself were furthermore discovered by great and noble minds of the world who were ‘uttamAn-s’ too. It is great ‘mahAtmA-s’ and ‘rshi-s’ indeed who have conveyed and handed down to us the many stirring and beautiful ‘pEr-s’ of God.

This fact about the sacred Names of God is attested indeed by the grand old sire of the Mahabharatha, Sri BhishmachArya, in that singularly meaningful line in the Vishnu-SahasranAmam:

yAni nAmAni gauNani vikhyAtAni mahAtmanA:
rshibih: parigeetAni tAni vakshyAmi bhutayE

Bhishma tells Yudhishtara: ‘I am sharing with you these well-known nAmA-s of God which reveal His exquisite qualities and nature, and which ancient rshi-s, seers and sages of yore—i.e., uttamAn-s of the world—have celebrated throughout the ages.’

Since it was ‘uttamAn-s’, like ‘rshi-s’, ‘mahAtmA-s’, and Bhishma himself, who discovered the divine ‘nAmA-s’ of God, AndAl’s choice of the expression, ‘uttaman pEr pAdi’, could not have been more apt.



Vedantic philosophy states that the qualities of God (Brahman) are inexhaustible excellence and immeasurable auspiciousness ('kalyANa-gunA'). These qualities are as powerful and irresistible as to arrest man's attention (*aakarshanam*) and command his adoration and utmost devotion (bhakti). Such divine qualities of God are collectively known as '*bhagavath-svarUpa-rupa-guNa-vibhava-aiswaryam*'.

The great Vedantic 'AchAryA' of the tenth century CE, Sri RamanujA, in a passage of extraordinary, extemporaneous beauty recounted the qualities of Supreme Brahman as follows:

'svABhAvikA-navaDhikAtishaya gnyAna-balaishwarya virya-shakti tEjas-shousheelya vAtsalya mArDava aarjava sowhArda sAmya kAruNya mAdhurya gaambheerya owdArya chAturya sthairyam dhairyam shourya parAkrama satyakAma satya-sankalpa krittiva kritagnyatAt-samkhyEya kalyANa-gUNa-gaNOwGha-mahArNava!' ('**saraNagati-gadyam**')

'The attributes of God [kalyANa guNAs] are naturally endowed; they are unlimited, stupendous, excellent; they are GnyAnam, Bhalam, Aishwaryam, Veeryam, sakthi, tEjas ["shad-gunA", six qualities], sowseelyam [pleasantness]; vAtsalyam [affectionate]; mArDhavam [intimate]; Arjavam [honest]; sowhArtham [good-natured]; sAmyam [equitable]; kAruNyam [compassionate]; MAdhuryam [tenderness]; ghAmbeeryam [majesty]; audhAryam [generosity]; chAturyam [endearing]; sthairyam [steadfastness], dhairyam [fearless]; sowryam [single-handed valour]; parAkramam [ever victorious]; sathyakAma [one who is ever resident in truth]; sathyasankalpa [one who is of right resolve]; kruthitva [reliable, unfailing]; kruthagnathai [grateful; never forgetful of good deeds done unto Him]; such exquisite qualities abound and reside in our Lord!'

Any being in whom all the above 'gUNA' are to be found can be best described by a single epithet— and that is by the word 'utthaman' again. And the genius of AndAl, once again, revealed this through the immortal phrase: '*Ongi ullagaLandha uttaman pEr pAdi.*'



The word 'aiswarya' means wealth, a fund of riches, a source of prosperity and happiness. The many excellences of God's attributes are hence to be imagined by us as being a great, inexhaustible 'fund of riches'. Our securing this fund, this '*aishwaryam*', is the attaining of life's purpose—the ultimate purpose which AndAl celebrates as '*neenggAda selvam*':

'Ongi ullagaLandha uttaman pEr pAdi.'

....

*'kudam niraikkum vallal perum passukkal
neengAtha selvam niraindu elor embAvAy!'*

Let us pray to the Almighty that we may ever seek and never rest until we attain that fund in both here and the hereafter!

CHAPTER 44

‘PARAMAN ADI PAADI’

In the second stanza of the ‘tiruppAvai’ (beginning with ‘vaiyattu vAzhvIr’), Andal speaks of ‘mArgazhi vrata’.

She deals with the subject of various vows (‘vrata’) that God seekers undertake. They are vows of fasting, ablution, self-denial, and charity. These are to be strictly observed throughout the course of ‘mArgazhi’ by the spiritual seeker, who like the ‘aaypAdi’ girls, is keen to pursue God.



The phrase ‘neyyunnOm, pAlunnOm’ signifies abjuring ‘ghee and milk’ which are metaphors for renunciation and self-denial. These are otherwise known in Vedanta as ‘virakti’/‘vairAgya’.



Next, the expression ‘nAt kAlE neerAdi’ means ritual bathing undertaken in the chilly hours before daybreak. Waking up in the wee hours of a cold wintry ‘mArgazhi’ is an ordeal by itself. One of the reasons why the Tamil month of ‘mArgazhi’ is known also as ‘dhanur mAsam’ is because it is the part of the year when in the mornings everyone loves to remain curled up like a bow (‘dhanus’) inside their cozy beds. Greater still is the ordeal of having to get up from a warm bed and go out, as the ‘aaypAdi’ girls did in the ‘tiruppAvai’, for a ritual bath in a wild and icy stream in the woods.

‘NAt kAlE neerAdi’ is ANDAL’s special metaphor for the many vows of purification a God-seeker puts his soul through. It signifies the periodical cleansing one’s soul must be subjected to rid it of the taint of sins, both knowing and unwitting.



The expression ‘*mai-it-ezhudOm malarittu mudiyOm*’ literally means abjuring from the use of beauty enhancing cosmetics and aids. The term ‘*mai*’ refers to collyrium or what perhaps is called ‘*kAjal*’ these days but generically, it probably includes the entire array of products we know rules the ‘beauty industry’ today—from lipstick and skin toners to eye mascaras and hair cream. The term ‘*malarittu nAm mudiyOm*’ signifies the resolve of the ‘*aaypAdi*’ girls to desist from even the grooming they normally give their tresses. To a lady of good upbringing, the care of her hair is very important. The vow then to leave it uncared and unkempt for a whole month in ‘*mArgazhi*’ is certainly the harshest, the most terrible one inflicted upon her.

The vow of ‘*mai-it-ezhudOm malarittu nAm mudiyOm*’ should not however be mistaken to mean that the true God-seeker must go all out to make himself/herself physically most disagreeable. The ‘*tiruppAvai*’ is not out to make a virtue of slovenliness and lack of hygiene. What is being encouraged here is the hard and constant struggle needed by the seeker of God to shed personal ego and vanity (‘*mamakAram*’ and ‘*ahankAram*’), which creeps into every aspect of our lives in whatever we do—in the form of our possessiveness, selfishness, and mighty self-conceit.



The next vow of ‘*mArgazhi*’ AndAl reveals to us is ‘*aiyamUm pichaiyUm*’. This refers to ‘charity’, ‘almsgiving’, and philanthropy. The vow of ‘*dAna*’—charity—is a great one indeed in this world. It is hailed by the Upanishad even—

dAnam iti sarvANi bhUtAni prashagUm santi;
dAnaan nAti duscharam; tasmAd dAnE ramantE

—**mahAnArAyaNOpanishad**

‘All living beings praise the act of giving as supreme good; there is nothing more difficult to practise than charity; and so good people delight when they can give *dAna*, when they can gift.’

One may wonder why AndAl includes charity in her list of ‘things-to-do’ in ‘*mArgazhi*’. It strikes us as rather strange that a certain season should be set apart for ‘*dAna*’? Why should charity be time-bound? There ought to be no reason for giving, should there? One must be willing to always give, right?

The reason why ‘*tiruppAvai*’ singles out ‘*dAna*’ as a special ‘*mArgazhi*’ vow is this: Deeds of charity are not all truly ‘charitable’. The charity we engage in is often indeed deeply tainted by ego, ulterior motive, pride, and high-handedness. Such charity is not real charity as its underlying sentiment is anything but charitable. This is the reason why in the **Taitireeya Upanishad** it is cautioned:

‘*shraddhaya dEyam, asraddhayA dEyam, sriyA dEyam, hriyA dEyam, bhiyA dEyam.*’ i.e., ‘Let your charity be faithful; let it not be insincere or with ulterior motives; let your charity be wholehearted; let it be given with good grace; may you always be extremely mindful of how, in what manner and for what purpose you give in charity.’

In life when acts of charity are undertaken without heed to the above Upanishadic caution it all quite often ends up in a less than wholesome result. Here is a little parable to illustrate the point: Once there lived a rich man whose charity earned him fame far and wide. People flocked daily to his house to receive his benefaction.

One day seeing a beggar at his doorstep, the rich man resolved to donate him a handsome gift. He went to his personal stable, picked the largest and most magnificent animal, a great elephant!— and gave the big tusker away to the beggar. The onlookers who watched felt nothing but scorn and ridicule for the

rich man's whim but, since they were themselves expecting to benefit from his generosity, they roundly applauded the rich man's munificence with effusive 'oohs' and 'ahaas'.

The rich man began to gloat and bask. But the beggar himself, poor man, was reduced to a trembling wreck at the very sight of the gargantuan gift. 'Here I'm scrounging around to feed myself! How shall I feed another mouth? And an elephant's mouth, to boot? It's not generosity this rich man is offering. It is an insult he is heaping on a beggar with everyone around watching!'

The elephant wasn't too pleased either. 'This rich man is giving me away to a beggar who is himself unsure where his next meal will come from', the pachyderm thought to itself, 'All these years I have been fed well at the rich man's house. Now I'm being thrown to the beggars and shall starve to death like them . . . and for no fault of mine. And all because of this fool's fancy.'

All that the rich man's charity earned for himself that day was nothing but ill-will from both the recipient and the object of charity, not to mention the all-round but secret ridicule everyone who stood witness harboured for him. This was a clear case of '*asradhayA'dEyam*'.

The moral of the story therefore is that true acts of charity, described in the 'tiruppAvai' as '*aiyamUm pichaiyUm*', are those gifts and alms that (a) behove both the giver and the receiver, and (b) are given wisely, even if not too well.



Next, in this 'pAsuram', we see ANdal speaking of '*paraman adi pAdi*'. This expression means 'singing the praises of God'.

This phrase leaves us in a bit of doubt as to the exact intent of the verse. Is Andai saying here that the act of 'singing the praise of God' is another of the harsh and severe 'mArgazhi' vows? Is '*paraman adi pAdi*' like the other vows of '*aiyamUm pichaiyUm*' or '*neyyunnOm, pAlunnOm*'?

No, never! Nothing could be farther from ANdAL's true intent in bringing up the beautiful expression '*paraman adi pAdi*'. The act of singing the praises of God is not a vow but a 'vow-softner'. Now what do we mean by 'vow-softner'?

When a vow like '*neyyunnOm, pAlunnOm*' or '*nAt kAlE neerAdi*' is undertaken it is the cause of a great deal of personal discomfort. In taking such vows, one goes through a lot of '*sramam*' (as it is called in Sanskrit or '*siramam*' which is the Tamil equivalent). The human resolve to carry out a vow unmindful of discomfort can be strong in the beginning. But very often such resolve weakens rapidly once it begins to encounter '*siramam*'. Vows then will easily break midway and aborted resolutions will fall by the wayside.

To maintain strength of resolve, to be able to stay the steady course of any '*vrata*' or vow, the God-seeker who is wise will resort to '*paraman adi pAdi*', i.e., he will be found to be constantly 'singing the praises of God' while carrying out the vow. It is the only way he finds he can 'soften' the rigours and hardship of observing vows.

The success of the various other 'mArgazhi vrata' like '*neyyunnOm, pAlunnOm*' or '*nAt kAlE neerAdi*', ANdAL seems to be telling us through this wonderful little phrase of '*paraman adi pAdi*' (in this second 'tiruppAvai' stanza), the success of those other vows verily depends upon how well and wisely one resorts to the good old reliable expedient of '*paraman adi pAdi*'—singing the praises of God!





CHAPTER 45

TIRUPPAAVAI 'PAASURAM' IN PRAISE OF THE 'PITRU' **(ANCESTORS)**

A few months ago, in October 2013, my father passed away at the ripe old age of 87. Although I had been mentally prepared for his departure in recent years due to his failing health, when the end came it still left a painful void in life just as I suppose it does in everyone else's life when a beloved parent passes away. Today, being the blessed Tamil month of '*maargazhi*', as I began the customary morning recital of the Tiruppaavai, as I have done it with faith all these last twenty-five years of my life, the beautiful '*paasuram*' of the day (10 January 2014)—'*maale mani vanna*', the particular phrase in it: '*melaiyaar seyyvanagaL*', for some mysterious and disturbing reason, continued to linger long and hauntingly in my mind, bringing back memories of my departed father.

Andaal's graceful expression '*melaiyaar seyyvanagaL*' in this '*paasuram*' refers to the myriad sacrifices, vows, and '*vratham*' undertaken by generations of her forebears in bygone years. She and her band of cow-maidens, Andaal says in this stanza, have faithfully followed the example of ancestors (*melaiyaar*) in the observance of their month-long '*maargazhi vratham*'; and hence, she beseeches the Almighty to bless her and her companions with everlasting grace—the grace described in her own unique metaphor as '*saalap~perum~parai*'.

In my case, however, reciting the *paasuram* only brought about a grace of a mundane but nonetheless intense kind. It suddenly aroused a flood of fond memories, some distant and some near as well, of my departed father but, strangely enough, of my grand- and great-grandparents too, both paternal and maternal. Events and incidents I had thought long erased and gone from my memory, suddenly and vividly reappeared before my eyes. The mind, as we all know, does play tricks now and then on us; so, I asked myself what the reasons might be for a single phrase as '*melaiyaar seyyvanagaL*' triggering the onset of a powerful mood filled with somber sentimentality. I seemed to find none, except maybe that I have been lately engaged in ritual Vedic ceremonies of '*shrAddha*' mandated upon a son to perform during each of the twelve months immediately following the demise of the father.

Ritual, especially the Vedic ritual, is not only liberation for the departing soul; for the surviving souls it is a kind of revival too.



The phrase in the twenty-sixth stanza '*mElaiyaar seyyvanaggal vEnduvena kettiyEl*' is a beautiful poetic phrase but is rendered ever more beautiful when read in conjunction with another phrase in the second stanza: '*seyyum kirissaiggal . . . seyyadana seyyOm teekurallai sendrOthOme*'. Between these two simple phrases at the two ends, as it were, of the Tiruppaavai, there are indeed several gems of truth that we can reflect upon about human life on earth, its ancestry, and its destiny.

'*Melaiyaar seyyvanaggal*' is a tacit tribute to our forefathers or ancestors (called '*pitru-s*' in our land). In India, we venerate our forebears out of deep gratitude for the countless individual sacrifices they each made selflessly in their respective lives with no other selfish motive than the well-being and happiness

of their future progeny. The personal sacrifices that my father, grandfather, great-grandfather made in their lives are now perhaps only vague recollections or otherwise stuff of private family legend. But what about the sacrifices of forebears and ancestors who went even before them? Indeed, their personal sacrifices—unacknowledged, forgotten, and vanished into the mists of time—were no less too! The pains, trials, and tribulations they each endured in their respective lifetimes were undertaken for my sake too, weren't they? Their collective sacrifices, in the aggregate or *culminate* sense, have led to my own present state of well-being, comfort, and civilization in life?

It makes me think that it is through this phrase in the Tiruppaavai that Andaal proudly affirms the exalted status of the '*pitrus*', the ancestors, in our life. Therefore, in my reading of the Tiruppaavai, the twenty-sixth stanza truly deserves a very special status as '*pitrु-paasuram*'.



Even outside the context of the Tiruppaavai, I now ask myself the question, 'What were my ancestors' acts and examples of selfless sacrifice?' The search for the answer however leads me back again to Andaal's Tiruppaavai.

In the second stanza there is the expression '*seyyum kirissaiggal kElliro! . . . seyyadana seyyOm teekurallai sendrOthOme . . . Aiyyammum pichhaiyyum aanthannayum kaikaati . . . uyyumaaru enni*'. The ancestors of the twenty-sixth stanza, it seems to me, observed the sacrifices described in the spirit of the second stanza.

Our ancestors indeed did make several sacrifices for our sakes during their lifetimes: they treaded ever so carefully on the long, narrow and straight path of righteousness: through several deeds of virtuous commission and omission, through self-discipline, self-restraint, and self-denial; and much above all, through charity and wisdom. They did this because they recognized sacrifice (or '*yagnya*') to be the overarching law of life by which all the world is built and sustained: *jeevO jeevasya jeevanam*'.

The '*melaiyaars*' truly realised the import of the words in the Bhagavath-Gita:

'naayam lOkO~sthya~yagnyasya kuthOnyah: kurusathamma' (BG IV.31).

*'If there is no place here in this world for him who cannot sacrifice nor knows he what it is,
what prospects then for him in the worlds beyond?'*



In the purely scriptural sense of ancient Vedic lifestyle, the sacrifices of the ancestors meant lifelong commitment to performance of '*yagnyas*': e.g., the five '*maha-yagnyas*' of '*brahma-yagnya*', '*deva-yagnya*', '*pitr-yagnya*', '*bhuta-yagnya*', and '*manushya-yagnya*'. Then there were other sacrifices too: the seven '*paaka-yagnyas*', the fourteen '*srauta-yagnyas*', etc. These were all highly formalized and elaborate Vedic rites and rituals involving great personal effort in life, the exercise of severe mental disciplines and the arduous cultivation of great spiritual qualities.

However, beyond the literal sense of the word '*yagnya*' is the more important '*meta-sense*' of the term the Bhagavath-Gita enlightens us about:

*srEyaan dravyamayaad yagnyaad gnyaana-yagnya parantapa . . . na hi gnyaanEna sadrusham
pavitramiha vidhyatE. (BG IV. 33, 38)*

‘Better than all these sacrificial offerings of mere objects and oblation is the sacrifice of one’s inner awareness or wisdom, Arjuna, for there is no greater sanctifier of the world [no greater sustenance to the world] than wisdom.’



I ask then, ‘What is this “wisdom or inner awareness”?’

Our ancestors, the ‘*melaiyaars*’ of the Tiruppaavai, seem to have understood the words of the Gita not merely in an abstract or philosophical way. They grasped the significance in a very practical and realistic sense too, and we find that very significance expressed in the pages of the great epic Mahabharatha:

*sarva yagnyEshu vaa daanam sarva theerthEshu chaaplutham!
sarva daana phalam chaapi naitatthu tulya ahimsayaa I
ahimsrassya tapO~kshaya~ahimsrO yajatE sadaa II
(Anusaasana Parva 116.40—1)*

‘Gifts and oblations made in all sacrifices; ablutions performed with all sacred waters; and the merit acquired by making all possible kinds of alms-giving—all these do not ever equal the virtue of abstaining from cruelty. The penances of a man in life who abjures violence and cruelty of any sort—‘ahimsrassya’—that special penance indeed is the noblest of all. He who desists from inflicting cruelty on the world or fellow beings (in thought, word and deed) is regarded always as engaged in the continuous performance of sacrifices.’



‘*Melaiyaar seyyvangaL*’ is a phrase therefore that implicitly refers to the highest ever form of sacrifice man can perform in life viz. shunning all forms of cruelty—the ideal of ‘*ahimsa*’.

Three expressions in the third stanza of the Tiruppaavai help in our understanding of the true ‘*ahimsa*’ our ‘*melaiyaars*’ practiced. And that understanding is so very relevant and instructive even for the times we all live in today.

- (1) ‘*neyyunnOm paalunnOm*’: ‘ahimsa’ towards Food and all sources of natural sustenance for humankind
- (2) ‘*seyyadana seyyOm teekurallai sendrOthOme*’: ‘ahimsa’ towards every natural wealth or resource of the Land upon which mankind lives

- (3) '*Aiyyammum pichhaiyyum aanthannayum kaikaati . . . uyyumaaru enni . . .*': '*ahimsa*' shown to one and all—i.e., in other words, 'Malice towards none and charity towards all'.



What is meant by '*ahimsa*' towards food? It simply means self-restraint in matters of personal diet . . . '*neyy UnnOm, paal UnnOm*'. Such self-restraint is a form of showing *ahimsa* towards oneself. It is also '*vrata*'.

The key to good healthy human existence is food. The modern world eats either too much or too little and, in both cases, with too little wisdom. It is the reason why every government of the world today is gravely concerned over 'food security' in the decades ahead. We are told that a third of the population in the rich nations of the world suffer from a disease called obesity and that almost half the population in poorer countries from another disease called malnutrition. If you think about them deeply, both are forms of man's self-inflicted self-cruelty. Mankind today is no longer merely 'eats-to-live' as it should; but has instead been brainwashed into believing that part of living the so-called 'good life' is actually being able to 'live-to-eat' . . . that too in hundreds of different commercial and self-indulgent ways: glitzy restaurants, fast-food chains, and food fads. This is the very opposite of '*ahimsa*'; it is simply the abuse of food.

If only one half of the world that today shamelessly overeats were to find wise and generous ways of sharing food equally with the other deprived half, both sides would become so much healthier and happier populations, wouldn't they? It is to such universal 'sharing' and 'giving' of food as practiced by the '*melaiyaars*' that Andaal alludes in the beautiful line: '*Aiyyammum pichhaiyyum aanthannayum kaikaati . . . uyyumaaru enni*'.



Then there is, in today's world, yet another act of extreme cruelty or '*himsa*'. It is the rampant 'cruelty' shown towards the world's environment and natural resources.

Our ancestors left us the legacy of a world clean in air, rich in land and pure in water. Our ancestors had great pride in, and the deepest respect and love for the land they considered themselves privileged to have been born in, lived and died. Ever mindful and respectful of the unwritten yet sacred border separating the realm of nature and the world of man, they were wise enough to leave the planet's forest lands, rivers and streams, oceans, and hills alone. They scrupulously maintained that delicate balance which exists on earth between the competing demands of human selfishness and the fragile bounteousness of nature. And it was through sacrifice indeed (*yagnya*', '*vrata*', and '*ahimsa*')—at both the personal and the communal levels—that such balance was sought to be sustained throughout the centuries and millennia by our ancestors.

Andaal describes in glorious Tamil poetry the land of her ancient ancestors as she found it: verdant, pristine, and fertile, fed by copious rains and by rivers that flowed perennial and unsullied, where flora and fauna flourished, where the natural habitats of birds and bees (the '*aanaichaathan*', the '*illankiLi*', for example) and the pasture lands of healthy livestock ('*maatradha paal soriyum vallal perum passukal*') all remained un-touched, un-polluted, and utterly productive.

*teenginnri naadellaam tinggaL mummaari peyydu
Ongu perun~senelludu kayalugaLa;
poongu vaLai pOdhil poru vandu kann~paduppa
tEngadE pukk~irundu sItra~mullaipatri vaanga
kudam niraikkum vallal perum passukkal
neengaatha selvan niraindhu.*

In contrast, we see the world in which we live today as tragically different. The savagery with which the modern world exploits and pollutes the ecology of the world was simply unknown to our gentle ancestors. We live in a world of bizarre phenomena: climate-change', 'vanishing tropical rainforests', 'dwindling marine life in over-fished oceans', 'rapid desertification of river basins', 'deadly virus and contagions from industrialized dairy and poultry farming', 'receding coastlines'. Mankind has lost all sense of self-sacrifice, self-restraint, and self-discipline. In the name of economic progress and human development, modern man today unleashes nothing but immoral 'cruelty' upon the very same land from which he draws sustenance.

It is the saddest and supreme irony of the existential condition today is that the plight and role of nature and man indeed have been reversed. In the days of our '*mellaiyaars*', man's condition was generally one of dependence on nature; and hence it was man who had to beseech nature for her gifts of generosity and charity. Today, however, it is nature who is at the abject mercy of man and his rapacity. Everywhere in the world, it is she who now seems to beg man plaintively borrowing the words of the Tirupaavaai: '*Aiyyammum pichhaiyyum aanthannayum kaikaati . . . uyyumaaru enni . . .*'



'*Aiyyammum pichhaiyyum aanthannayum kaikaati . . . uyyumaaru enni*' was indeed the mantra, the life principle of our ancient '*mellaiyaars*', our wise and gentle ancestors. 'Through sharing and charity in full and generous measure with all beings on earth, shall we seek our own enrichment in life', was their guiding motto and abiding belief all their lives.

This is again the very same mantra which I have heard within my own family, and it was the philosophy embraced by my beloved father and mother, my grand- and great-parents on both maternal and paternal sides. I have heard it being told to me, through family narratives and anecdotes handed down from one generation to another in our homes, throughout the passing of years, that all their lives my own '*mellaiyaars*' had sacrificed much indeed, each in his or her own way, big and little, at once both humble yet proudly, just in order to remain faithful and cling steadfastly to this one glorious principle of Sri Vaishnavism expounded in a single expression in the Tiruppaavai: '*Aiyyammum pichhaiyyum aanthannayum kaikaati . . . uyyumaaru enni*'.





CHAPTER 46

‘SALVATION IN NUMBERS’: CELEBRATION OF ‘BHAAGAVATHA-SATSANGHAM’

Part 1: The Theme of ‘Satsangh’ in the Tiruppavai

One very valuable lesson to be learnt from a study of AndAl’s famous Tamil song of ‘tiruppAvai’ is that spiritual effort is more likely to be fruitful when undertaken collectively than individually.

The pathway to God is not necessarily a lonely one. When we think of religious or spiritual men, our immediate impression is of ascetics and hermits living alone in forests or caves, doing practically nothing all day but sitting and meditating upon their navels. AndAl’s ‘tiruppAvai’ paints a contrasting picture. If there is one clear message the simple maidens of the TiruppAvai have for us, it is that religion need not always be a reclusive pre-occupation.

Worship can be and is indeed an essentially democratic or communal endeavour. The pilgrim need not fear that his progress might only come through ploughing a lonely furrow in life. He must know that the pursuit of God is quite easily accomplished in the pleasant and plentiful company of like-minded souls. Spiritual activity is intense and rigorous, no doubt, but it can be a sporting and companionable effort too. Hence take heart, says AndAl to the spiritual aspirant, take heart for there is not only safety in numbers but salvation too!



Collective worship is called ‘satsangh’. Members of an Indian household, even in this day and times, can be observed to assemble daily at a pre-determined hour in the prayer room to offer ‘pujA’ to a family deity. They are said to constitute a household ‘satsangh’.

In village communities in India, it is usual for many such households to get together for what is often known as the weekly ‘bhajana-sammiti’. Here they sing religious songs, dance, clap their hands, and happily recount stories from ‘pUrANa’ and ‘itihAsa’. This is also a ‘satsangh’.

In the large temples of India, it is custom to celebrate annual ‘brahmOtsava’ or ‘mahOtsavams’. These are grand religious affairs celebrated in the spirit of mega-carnivals to which thousands of devotees throng. These congregations are also large-scale ‘satsanghs’.

The principle and practice of collective worship is a timeless one in India. ‘Satsangh’ is as old as the very idea of Bhakti and the two are, in fact, inseparable. If Bhakti is seed, satsangh’ is soil. If God is the destination and Bhakti is the journey, then ‘satsangh’ is the ticket. If Bhakti were regarded as a holy game of life that God-seekers engage in, then ‘satsangh’ would be the field on which it is played.

And as in most games of the world, in this one where Almighty is the goal, it is team effort that accomplishes what is beyond individual capacity.

Mahatma Gandhi once echoed this very principle of ‘satsangh’ in truly stirring words:

‘I want to find God, and because I want to find God, I must find God along with other people. I don’t believe I can find God alone. If I did, I would be running to the Himalayas to find God in some cave there. But since I believe that nobody can find God alone, I must work with people. I must take them with me. Alone I can’t come to Him.’

The preponderant theme of AndAl’s Tiruppavai is a celebration of the ‘satsangh’ tradition. Implicit in her song is the affirmation of what I call the all-embracing ‘collectivism’ of the Vedantic faith best expressed in the words of the Mahatma— ‘Nobody can find God alone, I have to work with people. I must take them with me. Alone I can’t come to Him.’

In the final thirtieth stanza of her song, AndAl refers to the ‘tiruppAvai’ as ‘sangha-tamizh-mAlai’ (a garland of the finest Tamil verses). The word ‘sangha’, if we reflect on it deep enough, is a significant pun: It refers, on the one hand, to the marvellous classicism of Tamil employed in the song. But on the other hand, and at a deeper, more meaningful level perhaps, it is always ANDAL’S own tribute to ‘satsangh’—the mode of worship most preferred by common people across India.



Part 2

In the classic Sanskrit hymn of Bhakti, ‘bhaja-gOvindam’, composed by Adi Sankara (eighth century AD), there is a crisp but eloquent verse hailing the efficacy of collective worship through ‘satsangh’:

*satsangh-gatvE nis-sangatvam
nis-sangatvE nirmOhatvam I
nirmOhatvE nishchala-chittam
nishchala-chitthE jivan-mUkti: II*

(Verse 9: **bhaja-gOvindam**)

The company of good men rids one of attachments; When attachments are rid, delusion dissipates; When delusion is rid, the mind attains steadiness; When the mind is steady, salvation is near.

The great statesman and freedom fighter of India, Rajaji (Sri C. Rajagopalachari), being an ardent admirer of this hymn of Sankara, was once moved to write a personal commentary on it. Many years later it was serialized and published in a popular Tamil magazine (‘Kalki’). In his very insightful note on the above verse of Sankara, Rajaji highlighted the enormous power and utility ‘satsangh’ possesses as a spiritual tool in the hands of the traveller on the road of Bhakti. Man’s final destiny lies in individual salvation—i.e., ‘jivan-mUkti’—says Sankara, but the means to such an end lies in common and collective endeavour— ‘satsangh’.

Rajaji went on to explain the use of ‘satsangh’:

‘Association with good and enlightened men [‘satsangh’] provides the easiest occasion for the practice of withdrawal from desire and attachment. Everyone is aware of the effects of good company. It is more effective than mere precept. Calmness and equanimity are the results of good company. As desires and attachments become fewer and fewer, Man’s delusion which preys upon his life too diminishes.’

Ancient hymns like the ‘bhaja-gOvindam’ help us understand that throughout the history of religious life in India, it was through the ‘collectivism’ of ‘satsangh’ that individual love of God, or Bhakti found its best and most enduring expression.



Given ‘satsangh’s’ generally exalted position as a popular mode of worship, it should hardly surprise us to see the protagonists of the TiruppAvai, those comely maidens of AndAL’s famous idyll, seeking out each other’s ‘satsangh’ or company first even before they go forth seeking their tryst with God.

In the cold and misty pre-dawn hours of the month of holy ‘mArgazhi’ (Dec-Jan) in the Tamil calendar we see the milkmaids of the TiruppAvai going from house to house virtually pulling each other out of bed. They cajole and browbeat one another, crying out ‘ElOr-empAvaay!’ They entreat each other to rise, shine, and go out together for a ritual bath of purification (neerAda’) in the icy but sacred waters of the village stream. They beckon everyone in the community to join in a ritual procession (‘vrata’) that should convey them to the very doorsteps of God (‘manikadhavu’). There they would beseech His grace, they say, and succeed in securing the goal of human life (the ‘parai’ or ‘parama-purushArtha’) viz. everlasting servitude to God. (In the parlance of Sri Vaishnava theology this is called ‘nitya-kainkarya-prApti’).

The many curious and charming ways in which the simple-minded girls of the ‘aayarpAdi’ village go about gathering a ‘satsangh’, serve as a perfect narrative backdrop against which AndAl wonderfully expounds for us the theme of Bhakti in the TiruppAvai.

And how AndAl tells the tale indeed! In thirty verses of dazzling poetry that has remained to this day unsurpassed in all the annals of Tamil religious literature or scripture, AndAL beautifully and seamlessly blends the fervor of Bhakti with the flavour of Vedanta.

Part 3

The statement that ‘satsangh’ enables and nourishes Bhakti (and that there truly is ‘salvation in numbers’) is not mere theological speculation. It has been clearly and amply vouched for in the philosophy of Vedanta.

Authoritative confirmation of the efficacy of ‘satsangh’ is available in no less a scriptural source than that fountainhead of all Vedantic truth—the ‘Srimadh Bhagavath-Gita’. In two splendid verses the Almighty, Lord Krishna himself underscored the pre-eminence of ‘satsangh’ as a form of worship:

*macchitthA matgatha-prANA
bOdha-yanta: parasparam I
kathayantascha mAm nityam
tUshyanti cha ramanti cha II*

*tEshAm satata yUktAnAm
bhajatAm preeti-pUrvakam I
dadAmi buddhi-yOgam tam
yEna mAmupayAnti tE II*

(B. Gita: X.9 and 10)

‘They [i.e., the members of the “satsangh”], said Krishna, ‘they inspire one another [“bOdha- yanta: parasparam”] by constantly exchanging and sharing with each other their thoughts and feelings [“macchitthA matgatha-prANA”] about Me and My attributes which they themselves are ever experiencing. By narrating to each other about my divine deeds born of my adorable nature [“kathayantascha mAm nityam”], they always live in contentment. The speakers are delighted by their own speech, because it is so spontaneous! And the listeners too feel their speech to be of unsurpassed beauty! They live thus in bliss!’ (‘tUshyanti cha ramanti cha’).

‘To such an assembly of my beloved devotees, I lovingly grant [“preeti-pUrvakam”] that rare but supreme mental disposition [“buddhi-yOgam”] by which they come to Me’ (‘dadAmi buddhi-yOgam tam yEna mAmupayAnti tE’).

The essence of ‘satsangh’, as the Gita reveals to us, is ‘bOdha-yanta: parasparam’—the unique spirit of collaboration that rules amongst ‘bhaktA-s’.



The word ‘parasparam’ may be variously translated as ‘mutuality’, inter-dependence’, symbioses, etc. Quite simply, it means sharing things with one another in a spirit of empathy. With an all-abiding attitude in daily life of ‘all for each, each for all’, parasparam’ is power of spiritual synergy at work.

The other word ‘bOdha-yantah’ is ordinarily translated as ‘enlightenment’, ‘spiritual illumination’, or ‘awakening consciousnesses.

Thus, in the best possible translation into Sanskrit, the term ‘bOdha-yanta: parasparam’ would roughly mean ‘collective enlightenment through mutual collaboration’.

Worship of God through means other than ‘satsangh’ is often a severely solitary experience. The seeker of God engaged in purely meditative exercises of Bhakti (such as ‘dhyAna’, ‘manana’, or ‘japa’) is alone in his state of immersion. No one else can recognize, let alone partake of his inner ecstasy or illumination; nor is the person really keen to share such experience with anyone else.

Worship through ‘satsangh’, in stark contrast, spreads the benevolence of Bhakti with the force of a contagion. The enlightenment it bestows on devotees is infectious and transparent. Even they who lack meditative capacity nevertheless get to experience God through sheer collaborative inspiration. The reason why Bhakti through ‘satsangh’ is naturally filled with so much wholesome contentment (tUshyanti cha ramanti cha) is precisely because of this all-important element of ‘collectivity’. And the Gita calls it: bOdhayanta: parasparam’.



Part 4

To the discerning reader of the TiruppAvai, whose appreciation of the Tamil language is no less than his grasp of Vedantic fundamentals, all the song will present itself as truly a wonderful allegory on Bhakti rooted as it is in the principle of ‘bOdhayanta: parasparam’. He will observe that in every single verse, through a certain phrase here and a particular expression there, AndAL refers, subtly at times and explicitly at others, to the precept and practice of ‘parasparam’ in ‘satsangh’.

As we read the TiruppAvai, we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that in all the thirty stanzas there is rarely any use of the Tamil first-person singular— ‘nAn’ or ‘ennudaiyathu’— ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘mine’. It is a deliberate and significant choice of the poetess, and we should pause and ask ourselves why?

Within a true ‘satsangh’ there is really no place for the sense of individual ego—of ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘mine’. A true ‘satsangh’ is entirely ego-less because everyone within it abides by the selfless rule of ‘parasparam’—the ‘all for each’ and ‘each for all’ attitude in life. Evidently AndAL wanted to make the point overwhelmingly clear in her song. To that end she ensured that even poetic grammar in the TiruppAvai was appropriate and abundantly reflected the fact. She studiously avoided using the Tamil first person singular.

In verse after verse of the song, we see AndAL however stressing, emphasizing and reiterating— again and yet again—the element of ‘collectivity’ (while avoiding individuality or personal ego) through profuse, even plethoric, employment of the Tamil first-person plural—i.e., ‘nAnggal’, ‘nAm’, ‘nammudaya’, ‘namakkE’, ‘enggaL’, ‘ellArUm’, ‘yAm’, i.e., ‘we’, ‘ours’, ‘us’, ‘our own’, ‘we alone’, ‘altogether’? Anyone who carefully examines the thirty stanzas of the TiruppAvai will not miss noticing this grammatical but purposeful overuse of the Tamil first-person plural.

AndAL resorted to another method too, to effectively evoke, maintain, and underscore the predominant mood of joyous ‘satsangh’ right throughout the TiruppAvai. It was using Tamil metaphor and imagery that is at once apt and sparkling.

If we carefully study the thirty verses of the TiruppAvai, one by one, we can surely appreciate how AndAL’s grammar and metaphor both combine with and alternate each other to conjure up for us a grand vision of the true nature of ‘satsangh’ and the ‘collectivism’ that is at its very core—the core of ‘bOdhayanta: parasparam’.

Let us now proceed with the study, stanza by stanza.



Part 5

‘nArAyaNanE namakkE parai taruvAn?’

In the very opening verse, AndAL begins with ‘namakkE’. It is meant to denote, at the very outset, the sense of distinct identity possessed by a ‘satsangh’.

A ‘satsangh’ is not any motley group, party or association of people. A band of devotees in sole pursuit of Narayana, the Supreme One, alone qualifies to be called ‘satsangh’. It is not therefore without significance that AndAL chose to insert the term ‘nArAyaNanE’ immediately ahead of ‘namakkE’ in the line ‘nArAyaNanE namakkE parai taruvAn’. It leaves no question in our minds about the definitive identity of a ‘satsangh’—they are ‘NArAyaNA’s people, His very own!’ Make no mistakes about it.

‘neyy-unnOm paI unnOm nAtkAlE neerAdi?myittu ezhudOm malarittu nAmmudiyyOm.’

Flowing naturally from the strong sense of identity is the ‘satsangh’s’ single-mindedness of purpose. The ‘satsangh’ will do all that it takes and go to any lengths to realise its purpose. To this end the ‘satsangh’ will subject itself to the severest of tests, austerities, and self-denial in life. This idea is conveyed through the expressions of ‘neyy-unnOm, pAl-unnOm? seyyAdana-seyyOm’, meaning, ‘we shall deny ourselves milk, we shall give up ghee? We shall desist from everything that is to be rightly desisted?’

These expressions contain yet another message for the seekers of God. One that is greatly reassuring.

Spiritual vows and austerities are by nature extremely arduous. But ‘satsangh’ can help take away much of the pain involved. This is the reason why the ancient scripture or ‘sAstrA’ of India enjoins us all to jointly undertake ritual fasting on certain pre-designated days of the calendar (such as ‘ekAdasi’, ‘sravanam’, etc.).

Fasting undertaken alone, either by individual choice or initiative, is often filled with martyred misery (anyone who is on a self-imposed dieting regime will attest to this). The will to stay the course often wavers and completely collapses along the way. When vows fail, a sense of defeat and despair grips the vow-taker.

Not so, however, when fasting is undertaken as a matter of holy ritual and collectively in the company of a ‘satsangh’. For reasons the human mind has never yet been able to fathom, hunger pangs somehow seem less acute when it is seen that many around too are equally suffering it.

There is no penance in the world without some degree of pain. It is one of the wonders of ‘satsangh’, however, that it greatly mitigates such pain by syndicating it amongst the members.

‘nAnggal nam-pAvaikku sAtri-neerAdinAl?’

‘Satsangh’ derives both identity and sense of purpose from the firm resolve it makes.

The phrase ‘sAtri neerAdi’ denotes resolution. Taking a resolution is known as committing oneself irrevocably to a ‘sankalpa’. The expression here means ‘If we all together resolve to take the ritual bath?’

Worship through ‘satsangh’ derives its enormous potency from the joint resolve (sankalpa’) taken by its members. Even in the secular world, as we all know only too well, a resolution passed by a group of people carries far greater force and credibility than individual resolve. Is it the same with a ‘satsangh’? And hence AndAl’s expression of ‘nAnggal nam-pAvaikku sAtri-neerAdinAl?’



PART 6

‘nAnggaLUm mArgazhi neerAda maguzhndhu.’

The (first-person plural) expression ‘nAngalLUm’ in this verse, literally means ‘even we?’ It is suggestive of the essentially democratic character that the ‘satsangh’ of milkmaids in the TiruppAvai possessed.

True ‘satsangh’ is an ‘open society’. It is a conclave open to all God-seekers irrespective of individual qualification or worth. Everyone is welcome to join ‘satsangh’. Even poor, ‘spiritually naïve’ and unschooled souls such as humble cowgirls from the ‘aayarpAdi’. The TiruppAvai calls them ‘ariyAda-pillaigAL’.

The lesson here is: Even the lowest of the world must be allowed admission into and embraced by a ‘satsangh’. (There is no such thing in the world as an ‘elite’ ‘satsangh’. There are no ‘country club retreats’ to which VIP devotees may wish to leisurely retire over the weekend to indulge their pious airs or righteous pretension.)

‘tUyOmaay vandu-nAm?’

This expression is very suggestive of the inner purity of the soul of a ‘satsangh’. A true ‘satsangh’ possesses power to render even the grossest of men into pure and tranquil souls. ‘tUyOmaay nAm.’

The purity of the serene mind is what is hailed as ‘nishchala-chitta’—the exalted state of Bhakti that the verse from Sankara’s ‘bhaja-gOvindam’ we saw earlier spoke about. All God-seekers yearn for ‘tUymai’ all their lives. They long to rid themselves of the dirt of delusion and the grime of earthly bondage which the human spirit naturally and effortlessly collects in simply going through the business of daily living in this world (nirmOhatvam’ and ‘nissangatvam’, Sankara calls it). And ‘satsangh’ is the best means they can find to wash and cast it all off.

Just as pieces of soiled clothes, when soaked, slaked, rinsed, tumble-washed, thrashed, washed, speed-spun, and tumble-dried inside an automatic washing machine, finally eject out altogether as spotlessly white and clean pieces, so do men with soiled minds and defiled spirits who willingly go into ‘satsangh’ and choose to live amidst it and throw in their fate with it, they too emerge pure and serene—‘tUyOmAy vandu nAm’.

The statement about purity in the soul of a ‘satsangh’ is also found in stanza 16 of the TiruppAvai in the phrase ‘tUyOmaay vandOm?’

*ullathukkondun munivargALum yOgigALum
mella-ezhundhu ariyenra pEr-aravam ullam pUgUndhu?*

This is one of AndAL’s finest and most imaginative expressions indeed!

The phrase immediately evokes impressions in our minds of a large ‘satsangh’ of ascetics and hermits—‘munivargALum yOgigALum’, i.e., yogis and ‘muni-s’ immersed in the private bliss of deep, meditative slumber.

Without meaning any disrespect to them, ‘munis’ and ‘yOgis’ are what one may call ‘lone wolves’ of the spiritual world. They like to hunt for God all on their own. They shun human company and even when they are compelled to live amongst ordinary men, they prefer not to interact too much with their fellowmen. They prefer solitude to company and ‘mowna’ (silence) to the ceaseless ‘small talk’ of common humanity. (That’s why one finds, even in this day and times, that there is no dearth of ‘mowna-muni-s’ or ‘mum-monks’ of all hue and denomination amidst the crowded metros and cities of India!)

Yet as this expression seeks to gently convey, even such severe ascetics and monks, do awaken now and then from the bliss of yogic sleep or silence, and shedding their natural reserve and reticence, begin to behave in the manner of a merry ‘satsangh’—ecstatically crying out the names of God: ‘Hari! Hari!’, as in ‘ari-yenra pEr aravam?’

If the sternest of yogis and the severest of ascetics cannot resist the temptation of fraternizing with a ‘satsangh’, why should we ordinary souls shy away? Such is the meaning we may derive from this verse.



Part 7

‘kalandhu pEsina pEccharavam kEttu?’

‘kalandhu pEsina pEcchU’ is a beautiful Tamil expression rich in its poetic suggestion of the Gita phraseology we saw earlier—i.e., ‘kathayantascha mAm nityam’ and ‘bOdhyanta: parasparam’.

AndAl’s expression ‘pEsina pEccharavam’ is an amazingly creative use of words in Tamil. It seems like tautology and sounds like alliteration. (As tautology it is akin to that familiar cyber world term, ‘chatroom chatter’, but it alliteratively conveys the idea that the ‘chatter’ of milkmaids in the TiruppAvai is no ‘empty chatter’ but ‘eloquent, euphonious speech’—it is ‘pEsina pEcchu’).

‘pEccharavam’ immediately strikes us as being the ‘earnest and intimate conversation’ carried on constantly by members of a ‘satsangh’. They meet, they talk, they freely share thoughts and feelings and experiences of God; they ask and tell each other stories from the ‘pUrAna’; they recollect scriptural passages; they compare notes on the sayings of wise men, of preceptors and their holy books?

In the true ‘satsangh’ people make as much effort to listen as they wish to speak (kalandhu pEsi?’ and ‘kalandhu kEttu?’ is how AndAl’s expression of this idea in this verse may be read by us). There can be no ‘satsangh’ if everyone within it wants center-stage space for himself. A true ‘satsangh’ delights more in listening than in being heard; it is far keener to learn than to preach; and more eager to freely give and share than to grasp or hoard.

The first ever ‘satsangh’ of such ideal devotees occurred in a distant period in ‘purAnic’ pre-history.

The members gathered in the deep and sylvan forests of ancient ‘naimishAranya’ (India) around the great storyteller, Sri Soota PaurAnika, and engaged him in long, earnest conversations (‘pEccharavam’). The interactive and animated discourses of ‘naimishAranya’ eventually became sacred and exalted copy for that classic ‘pUrANa’ of the Vedantic tradition viz. the ‘Srimadh BhAgavatham’.

Even today, the truly devout ones that go on pilgrimage to ‘naimishAranya’ swear that when they went into the deep woods and listened intently (‘kalandhu kettu’), they thought they could hear within their hearts, faintly but clearly, Soota and his august ‘satsangh’ conversing—or ‘chattering’—away happily (‘kalandhu pEsi?’).

That ancient ‘pEccharavam’, that ‘holy chat’ of ‘naimishAranyam’ has never indeed stopped echoing, the pilgrims of today’s ‘satsangh’ keep insisting, and never will it stop echoing across the endless expanse of time.



Part 8

‘dEvAdi devanai senru nAm sEvitthAl ‘ah, ah’ enru aaraaindhu arUL.’

‘If we approach Him *en masse* we shall delight the “God of gods” with our worship’—is the literal translation of the expression ‘dEvAdi devanai senru nAm sEvitthAl?’

A moment of deep reflection upon this phrase transports us at once into contemplation upon the supreme Bliss of Heaven the Vedic ‘sruti’ speaks about. It is the Bliss of Pure Grace—known as ‘arUL’—that is known to descend upon worshippers of a ‘satsangh’. (AndAl ends her song in fact with the promise of precisely this ‘arUL’ for all lovers of the TiruppAvai—‘engUm tiruv-arUL petru inburu-var’). This is the Bliss of God Himself. It is limitless and immeasurable joy called ‘brahmAnandam’.

The phrase ‘dEvAdi devan’ and ‘ah, ah’ are both extremely significant in this verse as they are reminiscent of the great message of the Taittiriya Upanishad contained in the famous sections known as ‘Ananda-valli’ and ‘brghu-valli’.

The ‘ah, ah’ is an exclamation of ineffable joy. The joy ‘that passes understanding’. The nearest anyone can come to measuring or explaining the experience of God’s joy is simply to exclaim ‘ah, ah’. The Joy of Brahman is of such nature that no mortal words can convey or depict it. The Upanishad—in two magnificent sections called the ‘Anandavalli’ and ‘Brghu-valli’—however set out to try and objectively measure the delight of God, the Supreme Brahman. It eventually admitted failure.

The ‘anandavalli’ attempted measuring the Bliss of God mathematically on a graded scale of ‘Ananda’. Firstly, it took the highest bliss on earth a man could possibly experience and designated it as ‘one unit of joy’. It then went on to extrapolate the joy of beings higher than man, i.e., the lesser gods or ‘dEvas’. It did so by progressively raising man’s ‘unit of joy’, step by step, to the next higher power using a factor of 100. The bliss of the god known as ‘gandharva’ was said to be 100 times that of man. The ‘ananda’ of a ‘dEva’ was 100 times that of a ‘gandharva’. ‘Brhaspati’s’ joy was 100 times greater than that of any other ‘dEva’ and ‘prajapati’s’ ‘ananda’ was 100 times more than that of ‘brhaspati’. And so on and so forth, until finally, through a calculus of values, the Upanishad arrived at what it called a very rough estimate of ‘one unit of the Bliss of Brahman’—the ‘devAdi dEvan’, i.e., the God who is the God of all gods. This ‘unit of Bliss’ of the ‘dEvAdi-dEvan’ was conceived as being many million-fold that of man’s unit of joy!

Next, the ‘brghu-valli’ passage in the Upanishad asked itself the question, ‘How may such Ananda of Brahman, God of gods or ‘dEvadi-dEvan’, be described?’ The Upanishad became speechless with awe and ecstasy and could say little more than this:

‘Haa!ooh-aah! Ooh-hA, ooh!’

AndAl, our great poetess of SriVilliputthur, gleefully drew from the Upanishad’s own inspiration above and promptly used it all in the TiruppAvai through the delightful poetic expression ‘dEvAdi devanai senru nAm sEvitthAl, ‘ah, ah’ enru aaraaindhu arUL’!



God’s ‘arUL’ is the reward for man’s labour of love (i.e., ‘sEvitthal’). But the reward carries a condition, one that is subtly conveyed through the phrase ‘nAm sEvitthAl’. Like the proverbial ‘legal fine print’, this is a crucial term quite often easily glossed over or overlooked. It is a condition of the ‘If and only if’ variety and its implication is that expressions of love for God, and petitions for His grace, if they are

to truly arouse God's delight or 'brahmAnanda' within our souls, they are better represented collectively i.e., through 'satsangh' rather than through individual plea.



Part 9

'mA mAyan mAdhavan vaikuntam en enru nAmam palavUm navinnru?'

There are several modes of worship in which a 'satsangh' engages but nothing gives it more enjoyment than the singing of 'bhagavan-nAmA', the sacred names of God such as 'mAmAyan', 'mAdhavan', 'vaikuntan'.

The 'nAmAs' of God are many—there are 1,000 in the Vishnu-Sahasranaama, another 1,000 in the 'garuda-purAna'. And many more in other texts and passages of the scriptures like the 'sruti', 'smriti', and 'purANA'. The word 'palavUm' refers to those innumerable names of God.

The word 'navinnru' means 'delectation', 'to whet one's appetite', 'to ravish'. There is sheer delectation in singing the 'nAmA' of God. The question is, hence, whose 'delectation'? Whose 'delight'? God's or the 'satsangh's'? The answer is both, i.e., parasparam'.

In the stillness of the night a mother, lovingly cradling her infant in her arms, sings a soft lullaby to put it to sleep. Whose delight is greater—the mother's or the baby's? Difficult to say, isn't it? The 'namA' of God too is similarly 'twice-blessed'—for it blesses them that sing it and blesses Him for the sake of whom it is sung. And it is never ascertainable whose blessedness is greater.

(The foremost among the mystic AzhwArs, Peria-AzhwAr has sung a mother's lullabies to put the child Krishna, lord of the worlds, to bed. The lullabies, wherein the 'nAmA' of God are plentifully interspersed, form an exceptionally endearing collection of songs in the sacred four thousand Divya-Prabhandham known as 'tAlAttu'. Reading those wonderful lyrics, we are often left imagining who really derived more delight out of them—the AzhwAr himself or the Lord?)

There is thus, if we notice it, the suggestion of a strong element of 'parasparam' or strong mutuality here between God and 'satsangh' whenever and wherever 'bhagavan-nAma' is sung or recited.

'nAtra tUzhaay mudi nArAyaNan nammAl pOtra parai tarUm punniyanAL.'

What is the purpose behind singing the 'nAmA' of NarAyAna? The members of AndAl's 'satsangh'—the girls of the 'aayarpAdi' village—give their answer by saying 'nammAl pOtra' in this verse.

(Later in stanza 21 too, through another expression 'pOtri-yAm vandhu pUgUzhndhu', they reiterate the same idea of 'pOtri, pOtri' and in stanza 24 the girls all break out ecstatically into a full-fledged, full-throated song of 'pOtri, pOtri'.)

The Tamil 'pOtri' is the equivalent of 'Hail to Thee! Victory to Thee!' The term, in one part, is a blessing wished upon God and, in the other, an ardent prayer that His will should ever prevail.

A 'satsangh' is wholly made up of 'pure-minded' souls (as explained earlier in stanzas 5 and 16 vide 'tUyOmaay vandOm' above) and the pure-minded are otherwise also known as 'sAdhu-s'. The blessing of victory upon God— 'pOtri', 'pOtri'—serves to keep the Almighty constantly reminded of his sworn and primary duty towards the 'sAdhu-s' of the world and which He proclaimed Himself in the Bhagavath-Gita:

*paritrANaya sAdhUnaam vinAshAya cha dushkrutAm
dharma-samstApAna-arthAya sambhavama yUgE yUgE!*

In every age, from time to time,

I descend upon the world of men To defeat evil—

But, more importantly— For the sake of protecting the ‘sAdhu-s’ of the world!

In the ‘satsangh’s’ collective cry of ‘pOtri, pOtri’, thus, there is the individual ‘sAdhu’s’ expression of faith. The unshakeable and all-abiding faith that the Will of God shall ever prevail upon earth, that good shall win over evil and that it is the ‘sAdhu-s’ of the world who shall ultimately inherit the world.



Part 10

Let us take up for study two phrases from two different stanzas in the TiruppAvai each underlining however the same aspect of ‘satsangh’:

*‘suttratthu tOzhimAr ellArUm vandhu . . . nin muttram pUgUndhu mugil vannan pEr pAda?’
‘anaitthu illatthArUm arindhu?’*

In the above verses there are wonderful expressions that reveal the essential familial character of ‘satsangh’. They are ‘suttratthu tOzhimAr ellArUm vandhu’ and ‘anaitthu illatthArUm?’

Just as ‘Charity begins at home’, so may it be said that home and family serve as virtual nursery for the growth and nourishment of a ‘satsangh’.

The phrase ‘anaitthu illam’ means ‘every household’ or ‘an entire family’; and ‘suttratthu’ means ‘all around’. That ‘satsangh’ is a true one indeed, which, goes ‘all around’ as ‘one large extended family’, singing the sacred names of God (‘mugilvannan pEr pAda’). It comprises all the kith and kin of a household (anaitthu illam) and everyone near and dear of every age in the family (‘anaitthu illatthArUm’)? Such is the meaning of the expression ‘anaitthu illatthArUm?’ and ‘suttratthu tOzhimAr ellArUm vandhu? mugil vannan pEr pAda?’

The deeper message embedded in these expressions of AndAL is a very profound one and so very relevant for our times:

It is a belief quite common in societies of most countries that the ‘family that eats together stays together’. In India it is customary for the head of a family to insist upon every member of the household promptly being home for dinner. Nothing binds a family together more firmly than sharing meal time. It is a nice sight indeed to see a happy family seated in a large circle around a table (or on the floor as in India with banana leaves spread before them) enjoying both the warmth of a hot meal as well as that of close-knit family ties.

In modern times, however, it is becoming virtually impossible for families to sit and dine together except on rare festive or formal occasions—say, ‘deepavali’, a wedding or else some other family ‘get-together’. The reasons are many.

For one, the average family size has shrunk. ‘Nuclear’ families have proliferated to become the general rule while ‘extended families’ have become history.

Secondly, even in small families, the hectic pulls and pressures of modern economic life have forced household members to adopt lifestyles and habits away from each other even while living under the same

roof. The father holds a nine-to-five job; the brother works the nightshift at a factory; the son attends evening college; the daughter is off for private dancing lessons in the evening just when it is usual dinnertime; and the wife, above all, must watch prime-time serials on cable TV? No family can ever dine together, let alone bond effectively under such turbulent circumstances. (In fact, in many families, its members dread dinner table meetings since that's when, for some strange reason, household tempers easily flare and family conflicts lying dormant suddenly surface and erupt!)

Under such hectic living conditions as we face today, it is AndAl's expression (anaithu illatthArUm?' 'suttratthu tOzhimAr ellArUm vandhu?' 'Mugil vannan pEr pAda?') that indeed holds out hope for the family.

A family or household might not be able to dine together to stay together, but then perhaps, it can still bond together if only it tries to 'satsangh' together? If all members of a family resolve to spend time together ('anaith-illatthArUm vandhu') in happy 'satsangh'—say, an hour at least each week—collective worship might really succeed where 'eating together', alas, no more works.

It is family 'satsangh', indeed, more than family dinner that can help homes meld and regain the warm sense of cementing kinship that certainly appears lost in the lifestyles of modern living today.



Part 11

'nann-nAllAL kallaN tavirndhu kalandhu?'

The word 'kalandhu', meaning 'jointly' or 'together', is the key operative word indeed underscoring the theme of 'satsangh' in this verse.

'Setting aside all the wicked and vicious ways and all the wonted folly of our lives we must come together in holy "satsangh" even if it is for but a brief, redeeming moment.' Such is the sentiment that we may read behind the expression 'kallan tavirndhu? nann-nAllAL kalandhu'.

Individual Man is a grievously imperfect creature, and it is what the word 'kallan' too may be taken to mean. As individuals we are all nothing but bundles of crassness and corruption, ignorance, and ignominy. Swami NammAzhwAr, the great Vedantic saint of Vaishnavism, described the human condition as 'unholy amalgam of delusion, decadence and decay':

poi-ninra gnyAnamUm, pollA-ozhukkUm, azhukk-udambammUm?

('tiru-viruttam' Verse 2)

Every moment in life spent mingling with a 'satsangh', however, promises to redeem man from his rather sad, sorry individual state. We may ask, 'How is this possible?'

When a whole choir sings, it is the overall orchestrated effect that comes through stridently. Off-key or discordant notes of individual singers in the choir escape unnoticed. Even if they do get noticed, they tend to be quickly overlooked or easily pardoned. The deficiencies or blemishes of the individual voice simply submerge into the larger sea of soothing symphony without a trace.

Similarly, 'kallan' or the wickedness of Individual Man gets entirely drowned out by the wave of goodness ('nann-nAllAL') on the crest of which the 'satsangh' rides in quest of eternal redemption.



Part 12

‘engallai munnam ezhuppuvAn?’

This expression is one of the profoundest in the TiruppAvai. It is redolent of the most glorious ‘satsangh’ ever to have occurred in history—the ‘satsangh’ of the holy AzhwArs.

The literal meaning of this expression is, *‘We that are the first awoken ones?’* The term ‘engallai’ is first-person plural ‘us’; ‘munnam’ means ‘first’ and ‘ezhuppu’ means ‘awakened’.

The word ‘ezhuppu’ in Tamil is an extraordinary one indeed. It means literally ‘to awaken’ but signifies three distinctive states of perception combined in one—i.e., ‘awakening’, ‘arising’, and ‘super cognition’.

At first glance, the distinction may seem like needless hairsplitting. But it is quite important if only we realize that one may ‘awaken’ from sleep but not necessarily have ‘arisen’ (from bed); and that one may have both ‘awoken and arisen’ and still not be Conscious (remaining, so to say, in a nether state of deep stupor or somnolence).

The word ‘ezhuppu’, however, signifies the state of super-consciousness where all three spiritual states of ‘awakening’, ‘arising’, and ‘super-cognition’ combined. Such a state of supreme alertness in human consciousness is what is called ‘spiritual awakening’—‘ezhuppu’.

The idea of ‘spiritual awakening’ is a dominant theme in the TiruppAvai. It is expatiated in stanzas 5 through 16 of the song, where AndAl’s milkmaids, going from door to door in the ‘aayarpAdi’ village, raise the cry of ‘ElOr empAvaay!’ to tell slumbering humanity—‘Awaken! Arise! And behold! Behold God in the clear light of your own spiritual consciousness!’

A ‘satsangh’ is a collection of people who have shaken off the slumber and sloth of their spirit. They have ‘awoken’ from the plane of the mundane, ‘arisen’ to the spiritual realm and become ‘conscious’ of the divine reality. They have begun to see everything in the clear light of divine knowledge and understanding.

Many, many centuries ago, a lonely traveler, who’d been journeying for days and miles, wearily reached the temple town of Tirukovalur (South India). As he entered the town looking for a place to rest his tired body and mind, night fell. It also began to rain. He could find no proper shelter. Finally perceiving a dinghy, dilapidated shanty shed outside a temple, he scurried into it. Wet, tired and shivering, he lay down there.

Shortly thereafter, another traveler arrived at the same spot and asked if he could take shelter with the first one. To which the first person replied, there’s a place here sufficient for only one to lie down. But there’s enough for two if they can sit huddled together. Come right in, if you please.’

After a short while, a third traveler arrived at the same spot and asked to be accommodated. The two inside replied, ‘There’s space only for two to sit huddled here but there’s enough for three to stand around together. So come in, if you please!’

And so there they stood, all three, in blinding darkness, three weary travelers, squeezed and wedged together in the cold space of a temple shed, wet, uncomfortable, half-awake, and half-asleep.

After a little while, they began to feel terrible suffocation. Suddenly they felt the presence of a fourth person lurking amongst them. This fourth person could not be seen but his presence was undeniable. The ‘presence’ began exerting so much pressure against each of them, it became impossible for the three to budge even an inch. They wriggled, struggled, heaved this way and that but in the end, it only made things worse.

Unable to bear the discomfiture anymore, the three at last cried out, ‘Hello! Is anyone else here amongst us? If so, please show yourself! Why do you make it difficult for us? We can hardly breathe. Show yourself, whoever you are, O stranger!’ No sooner had they said this than the ‘stranger’ revealed himself to them! The ‘presence’ made itself known to all three of them who became wide- awake! It was none other than the Almighty!

As soon as the revelation occurred, the first traveler broke out into a rapturous song:

vaiyam thakaLiyaa vaar_kadalE neyyaaga,*
veyya kathirOn viLakkaaka,*
seyya- sudaraazhi yaanatikkE*
soottinEn_sol maalai, * idaraazhi neengukavE enRu.*

*The Earth is my Lamp, the Ocean is Oil,
And the radiant Sun the Flame!
I offer this garland of songs at the Lord’s feet— May we cross life’s Sea of misery!*

A torrent of a hundred verses ensued thereafter—in a paroxysm of mystical delight! Later they came to be called the ‘mudal tiruvandAdi’! The singer was Poigai-AzhwAr, the first amongst the holy AzhwArs!

Then it was the turn of the second traveller to break out into ecstatic song:

amber thakaLiyaa aarvamE neyyaaka,*
inpuruku sinthai iduthiriyaa,*
nanburugi NYaanac sudarviLakku ERRinEn*
naaraNaRku* NYaanath thamizhpurintha naan.*

*Love is my Lamp, Eagerness the Oil, My Heart is Wick;
Melting myself, Lighting the lamp of my soul
I offer in worship this garland of Tamil verses!*

Another outpouring of hundred verses of soul-stirring fervor followed! It was the ‘irandAm tiruvandAdi’! The singer was Bhutadh AzhwAr, the second amongst the pantheon of ten AzhwArs!

Next, came the turn of the third traveller and he began to sing in all-consuming ecstasy:

thirukkaNdEn ponmEni kaNdEn,*
thikazum arukkan aNin^iRamum kaNdEn,*
serukkiLarum ponnaazi kaNdEn*
puri sangam kaikkaNdEn,*
ennaazi vaNNanpaal inRu.*

*Behold! I have seen today my Lord of ocean-hue! And his consort the Lotus-dame!
He wields the fiery discus and conch, Behold! He shines like the radiant sun!*

Thus began another song of a hundred celestial verses. It was the ‘mUnrAm tiruvandAdi’ of the third AzhwAr, PeyyAzhwAr!

The mystic travelers were the first three among ten AzhwArs; hence they came to be known as ‘mudal’ (or ‘munnam’) AzhwArs! The songs they sang—the first three hundred verses of the four thousand songs of the ‘Divya-Prabhandham’—were songs to celebrate ‘man’s spiritual awakening’ (‘ezhuppu’). Poigai Azhwar symbolised the state of ‘awakening’; Bhutadh AzhwAr symbolised ‘arising’ and Peyy-AzhwAr (who sang ‘kandEn, tirukandEn’) symbolised the third state of ‘super-cognition’!

Together the three ‘mudal AzhwArs’ represented true ‘spiritual awakening’ in the complete and Vedantic sense of the term. They were the ‘first awoken ones’ indeed alluded to in the phrase of the TiruppAvai: ‘engallai munnam ezhuppuvAn?’!

Without fear of contradiction, it may be claimed too that the sacred hymns of the ‘nAlAyira divya-prabhandham’ owe their very origin and inspiration to a ‘satsangh’—the mystic ‘satsangh’ of the ‘mudal AzhwArs’ who found themselves brought together by divine pre-ordain at Tirukovalur!



Part 13

‘ellArUm pOndArO pOndAr pOndheNikOL?’

This expression is one of AndAl’s humorous ones in the TiruppAvai and we must not hesitate to take some good-natured liberties with it. We must use it as a bit of comic interlude in the middle of what probably thus far in this series of postings has been a rather serious and solemn narrative on the theme of ‘satsangh’ in the TiruppAvai.



It is far easier to put together a cricketing team of eleven players than to assemble a ‘satsangh’ of one-half dozen devotees. Ready and willing volunteers to a ‘satsangh’ are as rare to find in the world as rainbow in the sky.

Even in one’s very own home, we know what a terribly uphill task it is to enlist the enthusiasm and commitment of members to participate in household ‘satsangh-s’—say, for instance, weekly chanting of ‘Vishnu-Sahasranamam’. Reciting all the thousand ‘nAmA-s’ of the Sahasranama takes usually less than one half of one hour in all. And if one takes a pocket-calculator out and does a bit of simple arithmetic, it amounts to no more than 0.3% of the total time available to anyone in a whole week. But our kith and kin—be it brother or son, uncle, or cousin—everyone will generally grudge the time asked of them for the Sahasranaamam in favour of some other ‘urgent’ or ‘unavoidable’ engagement. ‘Dad, d’you know how much school homework I have to do?’ your child would say. And from your brother or uncle

this too might be heard: ‘I’d love to join in the SahasranAmam, but you know I’m always late coming home from office.’

Getting our good neighbours to join us for the annual reading of the ‘sundara-kAnda’ of Srimadh Valmiki Ramayana or group recitation of TiruppAvai during the holy month of ‘mArgazhi’ (December to January) is often a task next to impossible. ‘I’d love to attend’, the comely housewife next door will say, ‘but I’m awfully sorry I won’t be able to. My mother-in-law has an appointment with the dentist. And well, er, you know how it is with the mother-in-law?’

Dentists’ appointments and blaming poor mother-in-law are probably two of the most creative but common pretexts the whole world uses to avoid a ‘satsangh’.

AndAl probably foresaw all the great difficulties one would encounter in gathering a ‘satsangh’ of God’s devotees in this world. But she had a simple but effective solution. She conveyed it in a single phrase in the TiruppAvai:

‘ellArUm pOndArO pOndAr pOndheNikOL?’

Should the ‘satsangh’ ask itself ‘Has everyone come? Is everyone accounted for?’ and finds itself short of numbers, it should not get unduly anxious. ‘Never mind, never bother,’ advises the TiruppAvai.

All that the ‘satsangh’ must do is to deem every single one of its members to be already in attendance! (‘ellArUm? pOndAr pOndheNikOL?’) If not, everyone has turned up, ‘So be it!’ the ‘satsangh’ should be able to say to itself and simply proceed forthwith in its task. In other words, the ‘satsangh’ should be unmindful of how many of its members turn up and how many remain absent.

The important meaning to be grasped from this line of the TiruppAvai is this:

If we must wait for adequate numbers of persons to join us in our ‘satsangh’, we might as well consider our spiritual journey to end even before it begun. It is always going to be difficult to find persons with God-devotion in this world. You can cast your net as far and as wide as you can, but you should never expect to catch a sizeable haul. In the Bhagavath-Gita, the Almighty Himself confirmed the rarity of the breed called ‘Bhakta’ in this vast world:

bahUnAm janma-nAmanthE gnyAnavAn mAm prapadyatE I

vAsudEva: sarvamiti sa mahAtmA sudurlabha: II

*It takes many, many births for the soul of a man to know Me as Vasudeva and come to me in Love
Such souls are rare indeed in this world!*

It would be the height of foolishness on our part to await ‘many, many births’ before gathering a ‘satsangh’ of desired number. There is no point in going around soliciting large membership for our ‘satsangh’. It is enough if a handful of good people gets together and begins a ‘satsangh’. Which is why in another verse later in the TiruppAvai (stanza 20) there is the expression ‘ippOthey emmai neerada?’ that AndAl uses to emphasize ‘satsangh’ must begin at once and that it is pointless tarrying waiting for numbers to gather. The moment for a ‘satsangh’ is ‘Now’, ippOthey?'

Even if there is waiting to be done, it should not be for long? For those large numbers of people—as many of them as do materialize at all—might be so fickle in their resolve and commitment, they may never remain in the ‘satsangh’ for very long. Hence, it is very important that the handful that gathers as genuine ‘satsangh’ should get on with its mission and task without delay? Whoever comes and has gathered, they must be deemed themselves to constitute the ‘satsangh’ of requisite plentiful numbers—‘ellArUm? pOndAr pOndheNikOL?’

The TiruppAvai promises salvation in numbers, but nowhere does it specify any particular number. For a true ‘satsangh’ does it not really matter? Any number more than one will do, since after all, as none could have said it better than AndAl, ‘ellArUm pOndArO pOndAr pOndheNikOL?’



Part 15

‘kOmbanArk-ellAm kOzhundhEy kulavillakke?’

This is yet another exquisite expression in the TiruppAvai. It suggests that if a ‘satsangh’ has gender it must be feminine indeed.

A country or nation is referred to in the feminine—we say ‘motherland’, for example, and we always say, ‘her flag’ or ‘her great people’. ‘Bharath-mAtA’ or Mother India, symbolizes India and again, ‘Our Lady of Liberty’ at Manhattan is the most outstanding symbol of the USA. Similarly, the gender of great ships (like the luxury cruises, *Queen Elizabeth* or *Queen Mary II*) is always feminine.

Likewise, if ‘satsangh’ were to be attributed any gender at all, without a doubt it would be feminine? It is a fact that stands attested by scriptural tradition:

In the Ramayana, it is said, the ‘satsangh’ of ‘rshi-s’ of DandakAranya when they first set eyes on Rama, was swept off its feet. The sages were completely ‘bowled over’ with love for Him. They were rare and fortunate souls indeed in being able to witness divine grace and beauty stand embodied on earth and having a living avatar moving about amongst them at such close quarters. (Just imagine having the Almighty living so close amongst us that His very breath was upon us!)

It is a wonder of ‘itihasic’ all wonders that the mind of a whole Vedic community—of abstinent, forest dwelling hermits—however turned suddenly, head-over-heels as it were, to romantic thoughts. Each ‘rshi’ in DandakAranya, after watching Rama, found himself secretly wishing he could turn himself into a woman and behold the Supreme Person (‘parama-purusha’) through lovelorn eyes and a heart besotted with feminine passion.

The secret yearning of the ‘satsangh’ at DandakAranya did not go unfulfilled. ‘Puranic’ legend has it that the ‘rshi-s’ were reborn in the time of Krishna as the lovely ‘gOpikA-s’ of Brindavan. These damsels, as we know, happily courted and frolicked with their beloved Krishna to hearts’ content and feasted their eyes all day long upon the majestic form of the Almighty!

Somewhere in this tale there is a cautionary lesson for the male chauvinist: A male-dominated ‘satsangh’ of Vedic sages switched gender in rebirth from ‘rshis’ to lovely ‘gOpikA-s’ to truly behold and experience the beauty of the Almighty! One also wonders if it might not have also been the very same ‘rshi-s’ who perhaps, not having quite whetted their appetite as ‘gOpikAs’ at Brindavan, took rebirth again in the ‘aayarpAdi’ of Srivilliputtur as a ‘satsangh’ of milkmaids of the TiruppAvai!

Ages later, one AzhwAr took the same happy cue of the ‘rshi-s’ of DandakAranya. He was Swami NammAzhwAr who turned himself into a ‘nAyaki’—a lovelorn heroine pining for her elusive Lord—and poured his heart out in Tamil hymns brimming with God-love. He too showed the world that Bhakti is best expressed through the feminine frame of the human mind—what in the idiom of the Bhakti tradition is called ‘nAyaki-bhAva’.

There was another AzhwAr who went a further step beyond NammAzhwAr or the ‘rshis’ of DandakAranya. He was none other than AndAl’s father—Sri Vishnu-chittan, also known famously as ‘Peria-AzhwAr’. This AzhwAr extended the feminine character of ‘Bhakti-bhAva’ to its very extreme but logical end-form. He betook himself to be Krishna’s mother, Yasoda, and poured his heart out in glorious songs which spoke of God Almighty seen and experienced through the melting moods of maternal tenderness. While the AzhwAr’s songs revealed the great potential maternity possessed for mystic fulfillment, the God-passion of the ‘gOpikA’s’ found its perfect counterpart in its sublimation into Yasoda’s motherhood.

It is as tribute to Yasoda epitomizing the feminine soul of a ‘satsangh’ that we must regard the TiruppAvai expression— *‘kOmbanArk-ellAm kOzhundhEy kulavillakkE? emperumAtti yasOdAi?’*

To be like Yasoda—why, to become Yasoda herself—is the chief aim of all Bhakti? The maidens of TiruppAvai looked unto her as role model, as an exemplary of Bhakti in its essentially feminine mould. The ‘satsangh’ of ancient ‘rshis’ were inspired by it. It was what the AzhwArs too aimed at? What is Bhakti indeed if not a human soul aching for God as a mother’s heart aches for her child? If the soul of womanhood had a name, it surely would be Yasoda. And who but loving mothers alone would grasp the enormity of the truth that a ‘satsangh’ and its Bhakti are female in gender?



Part 16

‘vandhu enggUm? kUyil-innanggal koovinagaan?’ ‘kOttalar poo?’

If we searched the TiruppAvai for metaphors that instantly evoke in our mind vivid images of a ‘satsangh’, they would surely be the above two indeed.

The first metaphor is about singing birds— ‘kuyilinnangal’. The second metaphor is about a clutch of flowers in full bloom— ‘kOttalar poo?’ These two metaphors leave us reflecting keenly on two strands of thought:

- (a) The very ‘sight’ of a ‘satsangh’ is auspicious—as auspicious as it is to gaze upon a crowd of fresh flowers that blooms forth at the first break of dawn. In the ‘**tirupalliyEchi**’ of Tondaradipodi AzhwAr there is a lovely line about precisely such an auspicious sight of flowers:

‘madhu virindhu ozhigina mA malar ellAm?’ (verse 1)

In the sacred month of ‘mArgazhi’, in the early hours of the day, it is customary (especially in the rural districts of south India) for little bands of men, women, and children to go in ‘satsangh’ around the village or town chanting the ‘tiruppAvai’ and singing ‘nAma-sankirtan’. They go around from street to street, from house to house in small batches. They sling a ‘tambura’ or a harmonium around their shoulder. Some carry pipes and others percussion such as the ‘dolak’ or ‘mridanga’. The rest carry cymbals or castanets to keep rhythm?

It is a wonderful sight indeed to watch these little ‘satsanghs’ as they perambulate the neighbourhood and AndAl’s metaphor of ‘kOttalar poo?’ would describe them perfectly. It is a sight for the gods indeed to see these ‘satsanghs’ going around with songs of God and Bhakti upon their lips! They merrily clap hands, and they sway gently to the sounds and beats of the mystic mood that envelops them soon enough and the streets they roam as well.

(It is interesting that in the same stanza of the TiruppAvai, God is described as ‘malar mArbA’ to convey the sense that the Almighty’s ‘infatuation’ with ‘blossoms’ adorning his breast are no less deep than his infatuation with the divine consort, ‘sridevi-nAcchiAr’, i.e., His love for his devotees is no less than love for his consort.)

- (b) Equally as the ‘sight’ of these ‘satsanghs’, the ‘sounds’ they make in ‘satsangh’ too are wholly auspicious. Their singing and ‘nAma-sankirtan’ is as melodious as the music of a brood of ‘kuyilinnangal’?

Birds are staples and favorite diet for poetic imaginations all over the world. The ‘kuyil’ or cuckoo, the ‘koyal’, the skylark, the nightingale, the hummingbird? All these winged creatures for ages have held endless fascination for the poetic eye. Our poetess of SriVilliputtur was no exception. (The image of AndAl commonly portrayed everywhere, be it in sculpture or painting, is always shown with a winged creature, a little parakeet, perched upon her slender shoulders.)

To get some but by no means adequate idea of the beauty of the metaphor, ‘kuyillinangal’ in the TiruppAvai, it would not be out of place here for us to sample and savor a few comparative verses in English poetry which too speak of singing birds:

William Wordsworth once wrote beautiful lines in his poem ‘**To the Cuckoo**’:

O blithe newcomer! I have heard, I hear thee and rejoice,

O cuckoo! Shall I call thee Bird

Or but a wandering Voice?

While I am lying on the grass Thy two-fold shout I hear; From hill to hill it seems to pass At once far off and near.

Though babbling only to the vale

Of sunshine and of flowers Thou bringest unto me a tale Of visionary hours.

The sounds of the cuckoo, the poet says, might sound like ‘babble’ to the rest of the world (i.e., ‘to the vale of sunshine and flowers’) but to him there is something about the ‘wandering Voice’ that is deeply moving and vastly mystic? It sounds like some ‘tale of visionary hours.’

What is so deeply moving, we might wonder and ask ourselves, what is in the sounds of the ‘kuyil’, the metaphoric equal of singing ‘satsanghs’, which moves poets to speak of it in terms of almost religious and near-mystic awe—as a ‘tale of visionary hours’ or as a ‘wandering voice’?

Another great poet, **P. B. Shelley**, gave vent to that deep sense of poetic and mystic wonder very beautifully indeed. In a poem in praise of another of the winged angels of God, ‘**The Skylark**’, he wrote,

What art thou we know not; What is most like thee?

From rainbow clouds there flow not

Drops so bright to see

As from thy presence showers a rain of melody!

Teach us, sprite or bird,

What sweet thoughts are thine:

I have never heard Praise of love or wine

*That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine!
Teach me half the gladness That thy mind must know, Such harmonious madness From my lips would
flow
The world should listen then, as I am listening now!*



Part 17

In stanza 22 of the TiruppAvai there is an explicit reference to ‘satsangh’ in the expression:

‘angan mAlatth-arasar? un paLLi-kattil keezhE sangam irrupAr?’

The phrase ‘sangam irrupAr’ refers to the ‘mightiest kings of the worlds’ (‘arasar’) who gather in strength in a royal ‘satsangh’ as it were (i.e., ‘sangam irrupAr’) to line up with folded arms and humbly supplicate at not the Almighty’s feet (!) but at the feet of His bedstead (‘palli-kattil keezhE’)!

Even the mightiest of powers of the worlds like ‘kings and dEvas’ (gods) when they need to petition God have no choice but to go to Him in humble ‘satsangh’. Such is the meaning of this expression, ‘sangam irrupAr’.

The Ramayana speaks of how otherwise very powerful ‘devAs’ went as a group to Sriman Narayana in humble prayer for protection against the tyranny of Ravana. It was in response indeed to the prayer of the ‘satsangh’ of ‘dEvas’— ‘arasar sangam irrupAr’—that the avatar of Rama was undertaken.



There is another expression here in this stanza which though not quite as explicit as ‘sangam irrupAr’ is however quite rich in its suggestive implication of the ‘satsangh’ theme. It is this:

‘enggaL mEl nOkkudhiyEl, enggal mEr sApamm-eezhndhu?’

The expression in this stanza beginning with (the first-person plural ‘enggaL’) literally means:

*‘Cast Thine eyes upon us that we may be rid of the
curse our sins have wrought upon us!’*

Sometimes there is no need for the whole ‘satsangh’ to go in one large body to the Almighty—like the delegation of ‘angan mAlatthu arasar-s’. It is sometimes enough if just one member from a ‘satsangh’ goes as representative for the rest. The representative becomes the recipient of divine grace (‘nOkkudhal’) and, by virtue of it, those whom he represents get rid of all sins and trespasses (‘sApamm-eezhndhu’).

The story of Sudama from the Srimadh Bhagavatham comes to mind immediately and although it is well-known to everyone it is worth recounting it here.

Sudama and Krishna were schoolmates who strolled together every day all the way from Gokulam to the village of their master Maharishi Sandipini to learn lessons. One day after class the two lads were returning home when it began to rain torrentially. The two quickly climbed a large tree and took shelter under its great branches. The rain poured unrelentingly for hours and darkness descended. The boys became extremely hungry.

Sudama took out his little cloth bag and untied a lunchbox full of delicious snacks his mother had packed for him that morning on his way to school. ‘Sudama, I’ve packed enough lunch for both you and Krishna’, he remembered his mother telling him, ‘Make sure you give Krishna his share and both of you can enjoy the meal together.’

Sudama being very hungry, however, was overtaken by childish greed. He silently gobbled the whole meal himself without sparing a morsel even for his mate. Krishna, however, acted as if he was entirely unaware of his friend’s deed of selfishness.

Sudama’s committed three acts of sin that day. The first was breach of his mother’s trust. The second was deceit and thievery—he quietly deprived Krishna of his rightful share of the meal. Thirdly, in appropriating the meal all to himself knowing fully well that his friend was as hungry as he, Sudama committed a grievously selfish deed. Sudama was accursed to lead a life of acute poverty and adversity from that very moment onwards.

For years thereafter Sudama lived a life of misery in grinding poverty. He had a very loving and devoted wife, and he had twenty-seven affectionate children! They lived in fact a simple but virtuous life as good Brahmins. They were God-fearing, living constantly in contemplation of their old friend, the Almighty Vasudeva. Sudama’s was as good a household ‘satsangh’ as could be found anywhere. But the curse of Sudama’s sins was upon the family ‘satsangh’ and it brought them untold hardship in the form of deprivation.

After years of misery, one day on the urging of his good wife, Sudama finally swallowed his Brahminical pride (‘abimAna bangamaay vandhu’) and traveled to Dwaraka to seek the help of his friend of old times, Sri Krishna, and beseech him for a way out of the dire straits.

Krishna received Sudama and showered him with all the affection and hospitality that is due to an old friend. They talked of old times and of this and that, but Sudama could not, however, bring up the subject of his family’s dire condition. So overwhelmed was Sudama by Krishna’s warmth, graciousness, and kindness that he was ashamed to reveal the true purpose of his visit. But he was content, why more than content and immensely happy to merely spend precious moments in the company of Krishna, happy to have once again set eyes upon that handsome face, those luminous eyes and those playful lips of his old friend of yore?

When he finally took leave of Krishna that day, Sudama left with absolutely nothing to show of Krishna’s largesse for which principally the visit to Dwaarakā was undertaken. He left with nothing to take back home to his destitute wife and children except fond memories of Krishna’s own delightful presence, memories he hoped would linger in the mind for long. Sudama left with nothing but God’s ‘darshan’—or as the TiruppAvai phrase has it, the Almighty’s ‘nOkkudhiyEl’?

Before he left, Sudama felt however that for the sake of old times he must give Krishna at least a token of affection. Alas, the poor Brahmin had nothing of any value whatsoever to gift to Krishna. Except a little bag of rice bran—bran that Sudama remembered used to be a favorite snack of Krishna back in the good old school days. ‘I have nothing to give thee, Krishna, except this handful of grain I brought with me from home as my humble gift to you,’ said Sudama shamefaced.

‘Sudama, how kind of you to remember’, said the Almighty graciously, give it to me for it’s still my favourite snack!’



The story of Sudama is one of the finest ‘human-interest stories’ in the Srimadh Bhavagavatam. It relates how in the very moment Sudama gifted a handful of rice bran to Krishna, the sins accrued by the poor Brahmin in a distant past were immediately expiated and atoned for! And the terrible curse of those sins, hanging like millstone around Sudama’s neck all the years, was at once rid completely! The curse lifted (‘sApamm-eezhndhu’) not only off Sudama’s soul but off his entire family too—his entire household ‘satsangh’, so to say. As if by some wonderful magic, the Bhagavatam tells us, their poor hovel turned into a large luxurious mansion, with liveried servants and with granary loads of food and wardrobes full of riches and fineries!

Sudama and his little family ‘satsangh’ lived happily ever after. No other ‘satsangh’ in the world of ‘purAna’ or ‘itihAsa’ would probably have better realised the true significance of the TiruppAvai line — ‘enggaL mEl nOkkudhiyEl, enggal mEr sApamm-eezhndhu?’

Part 18

‘yAm vandha kAriyam araaindhu arUL?’

This expression literally means ‘Enquiry into the purpose of our visit’.

As human beings, none of us has a clear idea of the true purpose of our sojourn on earth. We don’t know why, whence or whither we came visiting into this world. Nor do we know why, whence or whither we shall exit it. Not knowing our real purpose in life, often we lay to waste our existence in pursuit of trifles and the evanescent things of life—pelf, power, vanity, wine, women? It is a sad predicament indeed and as the poet Shelley mused on it:

*We look before and after
And pine for what is not?
Our sweetest songs are those
That tell of saddest thought.*

Vedanta, the way of the Veda, illumines our path in life. It uncovers for Man the true purpose of existence and counsels him on the right choices he must make in life to advance towards his goals.

Firstly, one must choose wisely between the three sources of joy that the world has to offer. The first is ‘aihiKam’—all the enchanting and glamorous things of life that offer quick but transient gratification. The second is ‘amushmikam’—the things in this world like wealth, family, work, and knowledge—that are worthy of strife and effort since they are sources of enduring and long-term value and joy to us. But man must never lose sight of the third source of joy in life— ‘nissrEyas’—since it is the one and only source of joy that is everlasting in nature. It is a joy the human soul truly craves more than any other, but it is available only in the realm of the divine.

Secondly, man must carefully balance, too, the four principal goals of life. These are what are called the four ‘purushArthA-s’ in Vedanta—‘dharma’, ‘artha’, ‘kAma’, and ‘mOksha’. (In Tamil, these four

‘purushArthA-s’ are commonly translated as ‘aram’, ‘poruL’, ‘inbam’, and ‘veedu’). The art of living consists in striking perfect balance and harmony between these four drivers of human life. ‘Dharma’ is right conduct. It is everything that a man must do within his lifespan by way of answering calls of duty—duty to himself, to those around him and to society at large. ‘Artha’ is all of man’s productive and gainful effort. It is what enables man to give back to the world whatever he may have taken away from it for his own benefit. It is the unwritten ‘social contract’ through which man settles account with the material world. ‘Kama’ is the sum of all of man’s desires and aspirations in life. Extreme care is to be exercised in cultivating the right kind of desires. Equal care and circumspection are required of man to control and direct these desires along right channels of living. In the conquest of ‘kAma’ lies the key to man securing the fourth and goal of life—‘mOksha’, the deliverance from re-birth and man’s ascent unto God.

Life in the world poses man the third and yet another tremendous challenge of purpose. It lies in the perennial moral dilemma he must encounter throughout his living days. It is the dilemma that is best described in the ‘Katopanishad’, in the famous dialogue between the child Nachiketas and the god of death, Yama. In the Upanishad Yama asks Nachiketas to make up his mind about his true aspiration in life, is it going to be ‘shrEyas’ or ‘prEyas’? The latter represents the promise of bliss in the mundane world. The joys of worldly existence are countless and the avenues for human self-gratification almost infinite.

The former, ‘shrEyas’, in contrast, has none of the allure of ‘prEyas’ but it is pursuit of a far higher order of bliss—the eternal bliss there is in ‘Atma-vichAra’ and ‘Atma-samarpaNa’. It is pursuit of riches within God’s own domain.

The phrase ‘yAm vandha kAriyam ArAindhu aruL’ in the TiruppAvai encompasses all three dimensions of the subject of man’s purpose and aspiration in life—all the dimensions of ‘aihikam’, ‘amushmikam’, ‘nissrEyasam’, ‘dharma’, ‘artha’, ‘kAma’, ‘mOksha’, ‘prEyas’, and ‘shrEyas’.

A true ‘satsangh’ is fully and deeply appreciative of its Vedantic destiny and the ‘aayarpAdi’ girls in the TiruppAvai are the best example of such a ‘satsangh’. Their extraordinary expression of ‘yAm vandha kAriyam ArAindhu?’ is ample proof.



Whether it be the mighty or the low—whether kings and gods (‘angan mAllathu arasar’) or poor men like Sudama with his hapless family—the rule is the same: everyone must approach the Almighty for succor and solace through ‘satsangh’. Such is the significance we may derive from AndAl’s beautiful phrase in the TiruppAvai, ‘sangam iruppAr?’

Salvation—the state of absolute communion (‘sAyujya’) with God in his abode of SriVaikuntam—is not narrow individual experience but an all-expansive, all-encompassing, all-overwhelming collective one. It cannot be denoted at all with reference to any sense of feeling such as ‘I’, ‘me’, or ‘myself’. It is more ‘we’, ‘ours’, and ‘all of us.’ It is never easy to realize this truth since it involves making a giant, quantum leap from the feeling of individualistic ‘I’ to the universal ‘we’. It involves moving from the ‘first-person singular’ to the ‘first-person plural’. And according to Vedanta, it is only when man has learnt to make that movement does he find God.

It is ‘satsangh’ alone that can really enable man to make the vast leap of the spirit. It is only ‘satsang’ that can help us move away from the ‘first-person singular’ towards ‘first-person plural’.

The bliss of God becomes available to the human soul when it takes up residence finally in His Kingdom of 'parama padam' eternally. But even there the bliss of God cannot be enjoyed in the selfish sense of the individual. The principle of 'koodi-irunthu-kUlrndhu' operates inexorably in God's heaven too as it operates here in man's world.

The TiruppAvai in thirty beautiful stanzas reveals this important truth to us as no other comparable text in Vedantic scripture or literature has ever done or will ever do.



BOOK 10
A Sri Vaishnava Miscellany



CHAPTER 47

THE COW AS EMBODIMENT OF *SANAATANA DHARMA*

I came across the following news item in today's the *Hindu*. It made very sad reading for me on the day when we celebrate 'pongal' and 'maatu-pongal'. It made me realize how much these animals suffer in life sacrificing everything for the well-being of humankind. They are indeed souls which know no selfishness at all. They give so much in life to man and yet take so little from him in return. It is no wonder then that in the Hindu faith the cow is venerated. Cow worship is no mere dogma or religious fetish. It is affirmation of a deeply philosophical principle, a 'tattva'—the principle of self-sacrifice, 'thyaaga', of 'atma-samarpaNa', and 'dharma'.

I believe that it is not for any empty or superficial reasons that 'maatu-pongal' is celebrated as an annual festival in the age-old customs of Tamil Nadu. If you look at the custom carefully, you will realize that in celebrating 'maattu-pongal', the underlying intention is to celebrate the lofty values of 'ahimsa', 'thyaaga', and 'dharma'. We should not forget these deeper intentions behind mere festivities and frivolities.

But first please read the harrowing news item below and then please do reflect on this sacred day of 'pongal' upon the life of pure sacrifice that cows live and then leave behind in this world. Is it any wonder that cows are blessed indeed in the Tirruppaavai when Andaal hails them as 'kudam niraikkum vallal perum passukkaL'?

Cow Electrocuted

—*Staff Reporter*

On Friday afternoon, Sripal Ranawat witnessed a horrific sight—a cow being electrocuted, opposite his shop on Vaidyanathan Street, off Walltax Road, Chennai, India. At around 1 PM, according to Mr. Ranawat, a cow began eating some food that had been dumped beneath a streetlight on the lane. An electricity junction box was also in the vicinity. Just as the food touched its mouth, a shock coursed through the cow's body. 'It started trembling and moaning feebly. We tried to rescue it, but it died,' Mr Ranawat said.



Now, it is no exaggeration to say that a cow leads a life of utter sacrifice and unselfishness:

1. When a calf is born, it begins sacrificing for the sake of man what otherwise is its own birth-right. It is allowed to suckle its mother cow for only a few minutes and draw nourishment from milk before it is torn away to allow the milkmen or maids to take the rest of the mother's milk for human consumption.
2. The mother cow with its udder swelling with rich gushing milk is ready to let its calf suckle. But what does man do? He puts a stuffed effigy of its calf in sight of the mother to let it lactate profusely and draws away all the milk leaving just a little behind in the udders for the real calf to dribble upon.

3. The cow grows up, and what is it fed by man? Mere fodder and hay. But what does the cow return? Plentiful and nutritious milk.
4. When the farmer needs to plough his farmland, what is his cheapest mode of farming? Harnessing the cows and bulls of course and working them on his fields all day, rain or shine, come wind or tide.
5. When the farmer needs to thresh the hay or ground grain with mortar and pestle, his most economical implement is again the cow or bull.
6. When the farmer or householder needs to draw water from the wells or irrigation canals, what is his cheapest means of pumping? Cows and bulls of course.
7. When man wants to travel through dusty and difficult terrain in the countryside carrying loads and loads from one end to the other end of human habitation, what serves as the cheapest and least hazardous mode of transport? Cows and bulls of course.
8. When the cow turns old, man still has plenty of use left for it. He lets it graze his fields and manure it, knowing fully well that dung is the best form of phosphate fertilizer for his fields to ensure soil nutrition.
9. Cows and bulls do not consume precious petroleum fuel like tractors or diesel generators to do the hard laborious work man demands of it.
10. Cows and bulls do not cause environmental pollution harmful to man.
11. Cows do not cause soil degradation.
12. Cows do not cause ozone depletion. No one can blame cows for climate change.
13. Cows do not leave harmful carbon footprints on earth.
14. Cows are timid but lovely playmates for children.
15. Cows act as ‘early warning signaling systems’ in our cities. They protect our children and senior citizens from being electrocuted by ill-maintained short-circuits on our city streets and from drowning accidentally in our neglected city sewers. The cows are willing to be electrocuted themselves or drown in man-made sewers for our sake.
16. And lastly, even when they die, cows remain useful to man. Their skins are tanned for fashionable leather apparel. Their bones are used to make either fertilizers or as fancy buttons, clasps, or fasteners for man-made clothes.

If cows are not the true and only embodiment of ‘sanaatana dharma’ on earth, I know of nothing else in the world that is.





CHAPTER 48

WHAT DOES HUMILITY IN A SRI VAISHNAVA MEAN?

Simplicity and humility are two virtues. The Sri Vaishnava ethos urges everyone to cultivate them always. ‘*Vinatam*’ in Sanskrit means, roughly, humility of attitude, and ‘*vineetam*’ means simplicity of dress, demeanor, and deportment. The Sri Vaishnava prescription for personal conduct is based on very logical considerations of both practicality and spirituality.

‘*Vineetam*’ can mean austere or spartan mode of dress. In the days of Sri Ramanuja and Swami Desikan, the general dress code for Sri Vaishnavites was indeed spartan: one had to sport clean shaven scalp except for the mandatory ‘*sikha*’ (the tuft), the clothing was restricted to the typical nine-yard swathe of cotton cloth known as ‘*veshti*’ and ‘*mel-uthiriyam*’, a light cotton shawl to cover one’s torso and chest. Ear-studs (*kadukkan*) and rings on the finger were allowed so long as they were not ostentatious.

The practicality of this ‘*vinata*’ dress lay in the fact that cotton fabric is perhaps the best (the ‘coolest’) clothing to wear in hot humid tropical climates such as prevails in Southern India. The spiritual aspect of such ‘*vineetam*’ dressing was that it reflected a healthy un-concern or indifference to ‘*sarira-sambandham*’: the natural love or affinity that all human beings, even all earthly creatures, naturally possess and exhibit towards their bodily upkeep and deportment. There is in every one of us an inalienable and undeniable streak of vanity, which makes us all constantly self-conscious of how we look, how we appear to others around us, and how attractively our physical personality projects itself to the rest of the world. This feeling of vanity is natural, and it is an integral part of our ego, ‘*ahamkaaram*’, or the sense of self-identity. It is this ‘*ahamkaaram*’ that is said to keep us all in captivity to bodily sensitivity or ‘*sarira-sambandham*’. When left unchecked or uncontrolled, this ‘*ahamkaaram*’ or sartorial vanity leads us to pathological obsession with our looks, our physical attractiveness, and leads us to narcissism.

Our modern world today is a consumerist society addicted heavily to the vanity of such narcissism or ‘*sarira-sambandham*’. Our global economy is driven by demands, dreams, and desires of consumerist societies whose constant need is to be assured that they ‘look and feel good. If silk can make them look better than cotton clothes, they need silk. If cosmetics can make them look glamorous instead of the plain look, then cosmetics they need. If it is fast cars that make them look stylish and prosperous rather than a drab and grubby-looking two-wheeler, then it is flashy, glitzy fast cars they need, and so on and so forth.

The net result is that our bondage to our bodily deportment—our ‘*sarira sambandham*’—gets stronger and stronger day by day, year after year until we find that we have lost complete sight or consciousness of our spiritual self. Our true self, the identity within us called ‘I’, the true self, becomes blinded and we lose our sense of soul, of who we are and what the truth of our being is. It all simply starts with the way we dress, and before we can realize it, our connection with our inner self, our inward identity as spiritual being gets irreparably disrupted. Dress is such a powerful mode of expressing our inner selves. If we let our ‘*ahamkaaram*’ project itself through our dress, then we simply blanket out our inner personality viz. our ‘*aatma*’, our inner identity.

So in the matter of dress, our Sri Vaishnava ethos prescribes for us to adorn a rather Spartan grace or simple sartorial elegance. In doing so, it is merely asking us to make a simple choice: Do you want your dress to reflect your ‘*ahankaaram*’ or your ‘*aatma*’?



Next we come to the Sri Vaishnava virtue of ‘*vinatam*’ or ‘*vinayam*’: the attitude of humility one must cultivate in our interactions and engagements with the world.

Once again, it is the practicality of the humble attitude that we must first pay attention to. Even if you do not agree that humility is a virtue, you cannot deny that it is, in fact, a very good behavioral policy.

When you are seen to be humble in the society of men, your propensity to arouse the natural ill-will of human beings is greatly reduced. Anger, envy, condescension, rivalry, one-upmanship, these are all natural reactions of men to one another in the social settings of groups, communities, organizations, or teams. Every man has to willy-nilly work in, with, and through social groups and communities to meet either personal or group goals. That is called social interaction. Social interaction means engaging with others and this engagement is always a pain-filled exercise. It means finding common purpose with others, common ground with others, and common cause with others. It largely means suppressing one’s own will and ego in the larger interest of the group. It means sacrificing one’s ‘*ahambhaavam*’: the subordination of the individual will, goal, and preference in deference to that of the common will, goal, and preference. When every member of a group or community tries to curtail or sacrifice his own individual interest to promote, progress, and consummate the common interest, there you have a truly functional society. Such a truly functional society is one where its constituents are ‘humble’ members, members with subordinated ‘*ahambhaavam*’, ‘*ahamkaaram*’, and ‘*mamakaaram*’ or in other words members with true virtues of ‘*vinatam*’ or ‘*vinayam*’.

Can you ever imagine a super successful cricket or football team of eleven individual members who have not sacrificed their individual ego, i.e., who have not ‘humbled’ themselves in and for the cause of the team?



To gain insight into the spiritual aspect of ‘*vinatam*’ or humility one has none greater than our Sri Vaishnavite Acharyas like Sri Ramanujacharya and Swami Vedanta Desikan to take lessons from. ‘*Vinatam*’ or ‘*Vinayam*’, humility, is nothing but the natural state of being of our soul, our *Aatma*. Humility naturally behoves our soul. When we find ourselves being anything less than humble in life, we are not being true then to the integrity of our souls. If sugar is not sweet, how can it be sugar?

The Sri Vaishnava Acharyas define our Atma as being but a liege of the Supreme Soul, the Paramaatma. What does to be a ‘liege’ mean? It means that our souls are loyal servants of the Almighty. We are bound by duty to serve the Almighty. This is a theological principle in Sri Vaishnavism called ‘*sesha-seshi bhaavam*’. According to this principle, men of this world are not able to realise the truth of the fact that in spirit, they are eternal liege, bound in servility (‘*seshitvam*’) to the feet of the Lord Naaraayana, the Supreme Being. We are but helpless, hapless, resource-less, resort-less, clueless, blind earthly mortals thrashing about in this world (*samsaara-saagara*) without knowing whence and why we are here. It is the Grace of God that shall ultimately redeem and save us from our

mortal condition. Until that moment of liberation and redemption is upon us, we must live our lives fully conscious of the helpless state of our soul. Such consciousness is called, in the parlance of Sri Vaishnava theology, '*aakinchinnyatvam*', a state of existential abjectness.

When we become conscious thus of our true existential abjectness, when we grow to become constantly aware of our true human condition ('*aakinchinnyam*'), we will find that our attitudes of mind, our whole outlook in life will gradually gravitate to a state of '*vinatam*' or humility. The knowledge that 'I am nothing but less than a speck in this vast endless cosmos; that my time on earth takes but as much time as it takes for a mere turn of the screw when compared to the endless ticking of the Clock of Eternity; that I have nothing called a purpose of my own other than the Purpose my Maker has designed for me' . . . once that kind of humility, that kind of feeling of '*vinatam*' creeps and slowly sinks into our minds, it is then that we shall realize that our minds have become truly Sri Vaishnava.





CHAPTER 49

THE MISFORTUNE OF LATE ‘UPANAYANA’

‘Upanayana’ is a Vedic ‘samskArA’. If we understood what ‘samskArA’ truly means in the Vedic faith, we will not fail to understand why ‘upanayana’ must be performed at the appropriate time pre-ordained by ‘sAstra’ for a young Brahmin boy. It is a rite of passage performed when the boy is about 7 years old. Equally, we will also not fail to appreciate why even those who, unfortunately, have transgressed the ‘sAstra’ in this regard, and delayed their ‘upanayana’ in life cannot be held wholly irredeemable.

The Sanskrit word ‘samskArA’ is extremely difficult to translate into any other language. Usually, ‘samskArA’ is translated by English-speaking persons as ‘rite of passage’, implying thereby that the ‘upanayana samskArA’ is something akin to the ‘baptism’ of the Christians, the ‘bar mitzvah’ of the Jews or the ‘sunnat’ (circumcision ceremony) of the Muslims. The latter are all indeed ‘rites of passage’ marking as they do solemn initiation into adulthood. When a Christian, Jew or Muslim boy ‘comes of age’, he is said to be ready to cross a major calendar milestone in the voyage of life.

A Vedic ‘samskArA’ is far, far more than mere rite of passage. For a Vedic adherent, the whole course of human life is like a flowing river of ‘samskArAs’. There is something like forty different Vedic ‘samskArAs’ beginning with the ‘seemantham’ performed for the human foetus beginning its great journey of life within a mother’s womb. On the tenth day after birth, there is the ‘samskArA’ of ‘nAma-karana’ or ‘punyAvachanam’ for the infant. Thereafter, there is the ‘chaula samskArA’, the first tonsuring for the toddler. Childhood is also marked by other ‘samskArA-s’ like ‘anna-praasanam’, ‘aksharAbhyAsam’, etc. When the child reaches the age of 7 or 8, there is the ‘upanayana samskArA’ about which we are all now discussing. The boy who has undergone ‘upanayana samskArA’, when he matures into a young man, becomes ready for the ‘vivAha samskArA’, the wedding rite which ushers him into the ‘gruhastAshrama’ (householder) phase in life. Then there are other various ‘samskArA-s’ a full-grown man undergoes in the onward voyage of life. There are the Sri Vaishnava ‘samskArA-s’ collectively called ‘pancha-samskArA’. In ripe old age, there is also the ‘samskArA’ of ‘shashtiabdapoorthi’ (sixtieth birthday) which a ‘gruhastA’ undergoes.

At the end of life too, when a man sheds his mortal coils, there is a ‘samskArA’ to which he is finally subjected. It is called ‘antima samskArA’, ‘prEta-samskArA’, etc.—the last Vedic rites by which a human soul departs into the beyond.

If it is not really a rite of passage, we may now ask, what then is Vedic ‘samskArA’?

In his book of discourses, ‘deivattin kural’ (*The Hindu Dharma*), the Sage of Kanchi, PujyaSri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati has explained it all very beautifully.

When we sit down to eat a typical south Indian meal, we should, for once, take a moment to ponder over the plentiful rice served. Before we tuck into the meal with gusto, we should ask ourselves, ‘From where does this wonderful *annam* come? And where does it go?’

No one needs to enlighten us where the rice goes. It goes right down our throat into the belly, of course. But if we reflect a little more deeply upon the fact, we realize that the ‘*annam*’ ultimately transforms itself into vital ‘prANa’ or energy. And it is mysterious, ethereal, vital Prana that sustains the life-force within us. In a metaphysical way of speaking (as indeed the Taittiriya Upanishad does in

a very famous passage), we are ourselves, body, mind, and soul, comprised of nothing but the essence of ‘*annam*’.

What then, we should hence ask, is this ‘*annam*’ made of? How did it get to become the vital source of life and the hi-octane energy that it verily is?

If we ponder upon that question, we will be led into a grave contemplation of the various processes (or ‘*samskArAs*’) through which the grain that we are about to eat had to serially undergo before arriving as steaming wholesome ‘*annam*’ upon our meal plate.

First, there is the process of ‘seeding’ which the farmer performs. Then after careful tending in the field, the paddy is ‘harvested’. Merely upon ‘harvesting’ (which we may regard as roughly analogous to a ‘rite of passage’ for paddy), paddy does not become fit for human consumption. Thereafter, the grain must undergo a few more ‘*samskArAs*’. It must be ‘de-husked’, then it must be ‘separated from the chaff’. Then the grain must be ‘bagged’ and transported before it finally arrives home. At home (the ‘*gruhashthAshrama*’, we might say!), the rice must undergo yet a few more kitchen ‘*samskArAs*’ before it can be served as a full meal on a table. The rice must be ‘cleaned’, for example, and then ‘cooked’ and placed inside a vessel.

The long and short of it all is that just as a grain of rice, travelling from the farmer’s field to the dinner table, must necessarily undergo a series of processes before it can become fit finally for human consumption, likewise, so does a human soul, according to the Vedic faith, need to undergo a series of ‘*samskArAs*’, before it can become fit to arrive at its divine destination in heaven—on God’s dinner table, so to speak. (In Vedantic theology, the Almighty is often referred to as the ultimate ‘*bhOgi*’, the ultimate enjoyer of souls!)

The Kanchi AchAryA’s metaphor of rice is a very apt one indeed, if you think about it deeply enough.

Each of the several ‘processes’ by which paddy is rendered into rice and then finally into a meal, each must be necessarily performed at the right time. None can be delayed or postponed if the final wholesome quality of the rice is to be ensured. A farmer must perform the ‘seeding’ operation, for example, at just the right season. The paddy must be ‘harvested’ at the right time. The rice cannot be ‘de-husked’ in the rainy season, so on and so forth.

So is the case indeed with Vedic ‘*samskArAs*’! Each must be performed at the appropriate time. When a young man does not get married in time, i.e., his ‘*vivAha samskArA*’, for some reason or other, gets delayed, everyone besides himself will get terribly perturbed. Again, when a person dies, his relatives make sure they lose no time whatsoever in performing his last rites, don’t they? People shudder even to think of delaying or postponing the ‘*antima prEta-samskArA*’ of a deceased, don’t they? We should now ask ourselves rather pointedly why the ‘*upanayana samskArA*’ alone should receive a different, rather cavalier treatment at our hands? Why should we be lax in performing this ‘*samskArA*’ when we will ordinarily never brook delaying others?

In the Vedic scheme of things, a ‘*samskArA*’ performed at the right time ensures that a man faithfully carries out the responsibilities appropriate to his station in life. We can say hence that a ‘*samskArA*’ is not so much a ‘rite of passage’ as it is a ‘rite of growing responsibility’.

The ‘*upanayana samskArA*’, for example, ensures that a boy between the ages of 7/8 and 18/20 diligently carries out the duties enjoined upon him by the stage in life called ‘*brahmacharyam*’. It is during this period in his life that he must apply himself to gaining knowledge and cultivating his intellectual acumen. The ‘*upanayana samskArA*’ he has undergone helps him greatly indeed in remaining deeply aware of this responsibility of his. Such awareness instils in him mental concentration, perseverance and humility. He also acquires good habits of personal hygiene, mental

alertness, gentle manners, and a pleasing personality. These ingrained habits soon turn into character and then character gradually transforms itself into his very destiny.



The ‘vivAha samskAra’ too similarly ensures that a man duly carries out his various duties as a ‘gruhashthA’—faithfully and responsibly. The marital vows he takes as part of the ‘samskAra’ include the ‘saptapadhi’—the solemn circumambulation of the ritual fire seven times—and it is meant to help him remain ever aware, at a deeply spiritual level, of the many important tasks and duties that he, as even a simple householder, owes to society.



A Vedic ‘samskAra’ is thus no mere ‘rite of passage’. It has much, much more profound significance. It is an affirmation of a certain way of life, symbolizing as it does, a commitment to a certain lofty Vedic ethos and an outlook on life and the world itself.

A ‘samskAra’ can perhaps be defined, if definition is possible at all, as a spiritual process of refinement in life, a ‘kArmic’ process meant to leave its felicitous imprint upon the human soul as it progresses through its long and eventful journey on earth—from its beginnings as an amorphous foetus in the maternal womb, through the four great ‘ashrama-s’ of ‘brahmacharya’, ‘gruhashthA’, ‘vAnaprastha’, and ‘sannyAsa’, and finally to its ultimate destination in the lap of God.



Just because ‘upanayana samskAra’ was inordinately delayed in life for a person it does not mean he has no hope. It does not mean he has missed the bus. It is a God-sent opportunity for the person to redouble his spiritual efforts and reap greater rewards of the spirit eventually. Instead of doing ‘gAyatri japa’ ten or twenty-eight times daily, perhaps he should make an extra effort, on as many occasions as possible, to perform ‘japa’ 108 or 1,008 times. The more often he does this, I would reckon, the more easily he will overcome any handicap he might have suffered because of undergoing the ‘upanayana samskAra’ very late in life.



CHAPTER 50

A HIGHER ‘ANUSHTAANAM’

Many years ago, I was once traveling from Madras to Trivandrum in an un-reserved third-class compartment with passengers all packed in like a sack of raw tamarind. There was no place to sit, no place to stand and no place to breathe even as the train sped its way through the night. As the old Tamil saying went, if you had dropped sesame seeds, they wouldn’t have hit the floor (‘eLLu yeraiccha keezhey vizhaadhu’). Or to use the English expression, we were packed in ‘like a can of sardines.

After an exhausting overnight journey, the next morning the train finally chugged into the outskirts of the city, nearing its destination. It was the hour of dawn. The first rays of the sun crept out of the thick clouds gathered in radiant clumps across the blue sky. Every co-traveler of mine in the compartment—those seated in the aisles and vestibules, those standing in the aisles crushed against each other, those perched perilously on the sleepers and those clinging to the handrails at the exits—every single one of them was weary to the bone and close to collapsing from sheer physical exhaustion. A great silence, the silence of masses seeped in collective tiredness—descended upon the travelers and hung like a mournful morning pall inside the compartment.

In that oppressed state of mute and wakeful stupor, I was suddenly awakened when I heard coming from somewhere above me the sound of tinkling metal: the sound of a tiny spoon clanking lightly but noisily against copper. It came from right above me. I looked up to see what was happening in the sleeper rack above me, and behold what I saw truly astonished me!

Perched on his haunches in a rather uncouth posture, perilously close to the edge of the sleeper berth, and sandwiched between contorted limbs of three other co-passengers all lying cooped up on the same plank they shared with him, I saw an elderly gentleman holding a little copper container brimming with water and tapping it ritually with a tiny brass spoon. I strained my neck to take a closer look and was amazed to see him engaged in silent ritual, muttering mantras between his lips and sprinkling consecrated water over his head with the tiny spoon. It was then that I realized that the gentleman was utterly absorbed in the time-honored daily morning ritual of ‘sandhya-vandanam’, which adherents of the Vedic faith are obliged to perform every day without fail at the first crack of dawn (‘brahma-muhurtam’).

Unmindful of his chaotic, cramped, and congested surroundings inside a dirty, dinghy Indian Railway third-class compartment as it journeyed forth; unmindful of his own physical discomfort and that caused to his fellow-passengers around him who clung to a sleeper berth he shared with them like desperate trapeze artists in a circus, this gentleman managed to perform ‘sandhya-vandanam’ with the supreme un-concern and self-absorption of a yogi in the wilderness. His fellow passengers—all weary, bleary-eyed, and half-asleep—could merely stare at him bemused and incredulous. And so, did I.



Many, many years later I recounted the above incident to the master one day when he was in a particularly relaxed mood. He listened to my narration and then chuckled heartily. ‘Bless him! That

gentleman, you could say, was truly wedded to his *vaideeka anushtaanam*! We need more like him amidst our community. May his tribe increase!’ said the master more to himself than to me.

I continued to speak, ‘Master, amongst the Muslims too there is a duty enjoined on them to pray five times during daytime. The Christians too dutifully go to church on Sunday for mass communion. And we, of course, have our *trikaala sandhya-vandanam*. Are these all *anushtaanam*?’ I asked.

With a mischievous and sarcastic twinkle in his eye, the master replied, ‘It is so wonderful that you recall the example of your Muslim friends, recalling such *theevra anushtaanam* amongst the Muslim devout in the Arab lands you have lived in and worked so many years, haven’t you? You are reminded of their *namaaz*, their *qibla*, their five-time prayer! You are reminded of them because you have seen them so many times do it without fail wherever they are and whatever their surroundings, unmindful of who they are with, including a pure *vaideekan* like you in their midst? Hehe-heh.’ The master laughed at me a tad wickedly.

The master knew well I had spent many years in a job in the Arabian Gulf, and had lived amongst the Muslim peoples, and so he never missed an opportunity, now and then, to poke a bit of good-natured fun at me on that very score. ‘You have left our shores and you have chosen to live so long amongst the *turushkaas* and *yavanaas* . . . How dare you then keep up all these Vedic pretensions now with us, my good friend?’ he would say to me in stinging, reprimanding tones, and yet pulling my leg playfully and gently at the same time.

Both discomfited and amused by his playful barb, I changed the subject and asked, ‘Master, please tell me now a little about *anushtaanam*. What is the idea behind it? What is true *anushtaanam* of which the Vedic seers have talked so much about? What is the real purpose of *anushtaanam* and why do our elders always make such a big fuss about it?’

The master smiled kindly at me and then began to speak.



‘Anushtaanam’ in the Vedic faith means a lot many more things than is commonly thought. At a very elementary level, it simply means ‘personal hygiene’. In an expanded sense, it means a certain regimen by which one conducts one’s spiritual life day-to-day. In a much larger sense, it refers to a set of self-imposed codes of discipline or religious conduct.

In common understanding, a person’s ‘anushtaanam’ reflects the degree of his piety or devoutness. In that sense, you may say ‘anushtaanam’ is the ‘devoutness index’ of a person. The greater or more intense a person’s ‘anushtaanam’, the greater and more intense you say is his piety. It is a ‘badge of piety’ that a person can choose to wear and be recognised for it too amongst his community.

In our Vedic faith, a very great deal of importance is given to ‘anushtaanam’. The daily regimen or set of practices that Vedic adherents observe and follow has been handed down by ‘sastra’, i.e., written manuals of the ‘smriti’, ‘sutra’, and ‘grantha’ variety. It has also been handed down by the example of custom and tradition from one generation down to another. There are ‘gruhya-sutras’ (like the ‘aapastambha’, for example) which prescribe certain ‘anushtaanam’ to be followed. In the contemporary times, in our Sri Vaishnava community, a great deal of importance is given to ‘anushtaanam’ prescribed in books like the ‘Sri Vaishnava Dinasari’ or ‘aahneeka grantha’. There is thus a wealth of literature available with us on what constitutes the body of ‘anushtaanam’, which a ‘vaideeka’ person may embrace in life and piously perform.

The first and foremost of the prescriptions of ‘anushtaanam’ is, of course, the ‘nithya-snaanam’, i.e., the daily bath in running water. The clothing of oneself in the traditional garb of ‘pancha-kaccham’ is held to be a sign of good ‘anushtaanam’ since it reflects ‘saatvika svarupam’, an exterior demeanour of piety.

For those who belong to the ‘braahmana varnaashrama’, it behoves them to also wear the ‘shikhaa’ or the tuft of hair on a clean-shaven scalp. To wear the ‘urdhva-pundram’ or the twelve-sacred smearing of lime and vermilion on the twelve pre-designated spots on the body, that too is a mark of good ‘anushtaanam’. Then there is the ‘tri-kaala sandhyavandanam’ ritual which is an absolute must for everyone.

To perform daily ‘aupasana’ rite is ‘anushtaanam’ of a very high order indeed and so too is the conduct of ‘nithya tiruvaadanam’. All these, generations of our elders have institutionalised as one’s systemic ‘anushtaanam’.

Then there are even more advanced forms of ‘anushtaanam’. There are those who observe ‘ekadasi vratam’ or the ritual fasting on the eleventh day of the lunar calendar. The regular performance of ancestral worship on new-moon day in the form of ‘tarpaNam’ is also regarded by some as good ‘anushtaanam’. The daily worship of one’s parents—through ritual prostrating at their feet every day—this is also to be regarded as daily ‘anushtaanam’.

‘Atitthi nivedanam’ or the offering of daily hospitality to an honoured guest in the house, why, even this is sometimes regarded as ‘anushtaanam’.

The list thus can go on and on. Indeed, there is no such thing really as a single definitive description of what constitutes a code of ‘anushtaanam’ that must be followed by a person journeying upon the path of Vedic dharma. In actual practice, people perform only what it is possible to perform given the limits of their capacity. It all ultimately depends on an individual’s preference, on the circumstances and conditions of his life and lifestyle, on the intensity of his spiritual quest and on his own unique and privately held system of beliefs and values he has come to regard as useful and effective.

In our Vedic faith, there is no one set of ‘anushtaanam’ that is ever sought to be imposed down anyone’s throat. ‘To each according to his means and capacity’ is the golden rule followed here. Although ‘anushtaanam’ does imply ‘hard discipline’, it is still not looked upon as some kind of ‘top-down’ peremptory prescription or commandment in our faith. This is the fundamental difference between our Vedic faith and those others you have compared it with in the Muslim or Christian faiths.

The beauty and nobility of the concept of ‘anushtaanam’ in our Vedic tradition is that it is regarded essentially as ‘self-motivation’, wholly ‘self-inspired’, and entirely ‘self-driven’.



The beauty of ‘anushtaanam’ is that although it does serve as an external and verifiable index of individual devoutness, it really points far more to a person’s spiritual mien or luster.

The religious heads of various Vedic sects and denominations in our community (like the pontiffs or ‘aacharyaas’ of various ‘mattam-s’ or ‘ashrams’) normally will inquire of visiting devotees: ‘Are you regularly performing the *anushtaanam* of *sandhya-vandanam*?’ This is a very common question the ‘aacharya’ will ask of the disciples who come to him seeking blessings.

Although the question is usually asked in very gentle, caring, and solicitous tone and terms, it really is meant to make the disciple sit up and introspect deeply, ‘Is my *anushtaanam*, the index of my piety, rising

or falling since my last visit to the *aachaaryan*? Is my steadfast practice of *anushtaanam* not revealed in my demeanor? Is it not self-evident to *achaarya-dhristi* [my aachaaryan's insight] that the outward marks of my *anushtaanam* are subtle pointers to my inward state having grown more graceful than before?'

If you have been to the gymnasium every day and have been exercising on the treadmill faithfully, it begins to show clearly in the tone of your muscles and the colour of your complexion, isn't it? Your physical instructor can by merely looking at you tell you whether you have been working on your physical fitness or not. The 'aachaaryan' is similarly placed as your instructor vis-à-vis your spiritual state and condition. By merely looking at you, with his long-practiced eye, he can easily tell whether you have been steadfast in your 'anushtaanam'.

'Anushtaanam' makes your spiritual complexion glow just as constant physical exercise makes your bodily complexion glow. The trained eye of the 'aachaaryan' can easily spot the difference in you; from your general demeanor, from the light in your eyes, from the tenor of your voice, from the words you utter, from all these tell-tale signals, the 'aachaaryan' can easily estimate how steadfast you have

been in observing your 'anushtaanam' and how high or low your index of devoutness has either risen or fallen since he last met you. And this estimate he normally conveys to you in very subtle ways by asking you in a soft yet significant query, 'Are you regularly performing *sandhya-vandanam*?'



The question that vexes most people is this: What index of piety can I strive to achieve through my 'anushtaanam'? What mode or exercises of 'anushtaanam' can I hope to perform daily without fail or defect? I live in a world and in times when it is simply not practicable to carry out age-old Vedic injunctions of 'anushtaanam'. Yet I know that a modicum of 'anushtaanam' is necessary and essential for growth and expansion of spiritual awareness. How can I reconcile the pulls and pressures of daily livelihood issues with those of deeper spiritual aspirations?

This is very valid and real anxiety indeed amongst all ordinary people and I am afraid there are no clear answers provided to us either by Vedic literature or the 'aachaaryaas' themselves. Anything that the 'aachaaryaas' may venture to say in commiseration with our predicament would be immediately seized upon by us as a license to dilute the high standards of *Vedic* 'anushtaanam'. So, they are generally loath to say anything that might be misconstrued as a 'cop-out' on their part.

But no one can ever deny that 'any anushtaanam' is certainly better than 'no anushtaanam'. There is an ideal to which we must all certainly aspire. But we must humbly accept that we all live in a petty humdrum world. There is a vast chasm between the ideal and the real world that is well and truly impossible to bridge. Yet as we all know in our hearts, the true merit and meaning of spiritual life lies in fact in that constant and sometimes seemingly futile human bid to bridge the chasm. We have no alternative but to soldier on as best as we can; we have no option but to plough the lonely furrow upon our own little private patch as well as we possibly can on the vast but verdant fields of Vedic 'anushtaanam'.

Choosing the 'anushtaanam' that you can handle with constancy, I would therefore say, is the real secret. Be mindful of your condition and circumstance in life and select the 'anushtaanam' appropriate for you. Having selected it, practice it faithfully, unceasingly and unfailingly. In good time, such 'anushtaanam' will by itself become your hallmark, your very own 'badge of piety', your very own

‘index of devoutness’. Your effort will show up in your demeanour and it will expand surely your spiritual stature and consciousness.

There is the analogy of the devoted husband who made it a point to demonstrate his love for his wife through the simple deed of bringing home every Friday evening a small bunch of fresh jasmine flowers for her own delight. This was an endearing moment of private intimacy between the man and wife which they cherished all their life. The husband never failed, and the wife never stopped delighting in the small gesture. As they grew older, the simple gesture only further deepened the bond between them. By itself the gesture was really nothing, cost nothing. But it was conjugal trivia which had the power of expressing everlasting love. It was trivia, no doubt, but it was a sort of ‘anushtaanam’ that gave the couple a profound awareness of the depth of love they had for each other. A bunch of fresh jasmine symbolized the perfect index of mutual devotion.

Any simple ‘anushtaanam’ if practised with such constancy assumes power very much like that.



This brings me now to your last question: ‘What is the purpose of anushtaanam?’

The answer is plain: The purpose of ‘anushtaanam’ is to arouse love in the human heart. It is common to see a person begin to gloat and become puffed with hidden pride when in the assembly of the pious public, his ‘aachaaryan’ turns to him as a model of Vedic ‘anushtaanam’ and praises him thus: ‘He is so sincere and steadfast in the performance of his anushtaanam, I have to salute him myself.’

‘Anushtaanam’ therefore is the surest means of securing the love of one’s ‘guru’ or ‘aachaaryan’. You may not possess spiritual knowledge, nor attainments of a religious kind, nor even association with Vedic pundits and practitioners. Yet if it comes to the knowledge of the ‘aacharya’ that you have been ever steadfast in observing a certain ‘anushtaanam’, believe me, nothing else will please him more and he will need nothing else as reason to shower his generous blessings of grace upon you.



Finally, one must not forget that there is also such a thing as the philosophical aspect of ‘anushtaanam’.

As an aid to spiritual quest, ‘anushtaanam’ is invaluable. But if ‘anushtaanam’ simply remained ‘anushtaanam’ indeed but not in spirit, it would in the ultimate analysis be utterly futile.

There is always the danger of carrying ‘anushtaanam’ to extremes and turn it into a sort of religious fetish. It can then turn quite easily into spiritual vanity, even arrogance. You might have come across some persons in our community who are so puffed up by their ardour and excessive zeal for ‘anushtaanam’ that it makes them look down with magisterial condescension or contempt on those who are unable to measure up to the high standards they go around preaching about.

Such vainglorious people are not to be maligned. But they must be politely pointed towards the philosophical basis of ‘anushtaanam’.

Ordinary ‘anushtaanam’—the ‘anushtaanam’ spoken of in our religious texts, by ancient seers, by our pontiffs, and as all described above—must lead to a greater ‘anushtaanam’ if it is to serve one’s ultimate purpose in life.

What does one mean by a greater ‘anushtaanam’?

In the twelfth chapter of the Srimadh Bhagavath-Gita the Almighty explains in stirring verses (from ‘shloka’ 13 through 20) the various qualities of mind and heart which humans must cultivate in life to endear themselves to Him. If one must grasp the philosophical dimension of ‘anushtaanam’, one must read and reflect deeply upon each of these seven shloKas every single day. It is worth recalling those ‘shloKas’ from the Gita now:

Nos. 13 and 14: That one I love who is incapable of ill-will, who is friendly and compassionate, living beyond the reach of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ and of pleasure and pain, patient, contented, self-controlled, firm in faith, with all his heart and all his mind given to me—with such a one I am in love.

No. 15: Not agitating the world or by it agitated, he stands above the sway of elation, competition, and fear: he is my beloved.

No. 16: He is detached, pure, efficient, impartial, never anxious, self-less in all his undertakings; he is my devotee, very dear to me.

No. 17: He is dear to me who runs not after the pleasant or away from the painful, grieves not, lusts not, but let’s things come and go as they happen.

Nos. 18 and 19: That devotee who looks upon friend and foe with equal regard, who is not buoyed up by praise nor cast down by blame, alike in heat and cold, pleasure and pain, free from selfish attachments, the same in honour and dishonour, quiet, ever full, in harmony everywhere, firm in faith—such a one is dear to me.

No. 20: Those who meditate upon this immortal dharma as I have declared it, full of faith and seeking me as life’s supreme goal, are truly my devotees, and my love for them is very great.

Beyond all that we know and practice in the world as ordinary ‘anushtaanam’ there is indeed a ‘higher and greater ‘anushtaanam’ that is described in the above Gita ‘shloKas’. It is far more difficult to grasp, understand, and practice than those prescribed in the Vedic texts and treatises.

Who can deny that it is far more arduous to cultivate ‘compassion’, ‘contentment’, ‘patience, self-control, detachment, efficiency, freedom from anxiety and from fear of pain and lust for pleasure? All these constitute indeed ‘higher’ or ‘greater’ ‘anushtaanam’ that humans must strive to practice and cultivate in life. These are the true ends of human existence. One can unfailingly apply the ‘urdhva-pundhram’ daily upon one’s body and one can observe ‘ekaadasi’ fasts all one’s life. But if ordinary ‘anushtaanam’ do not gradually evolve towards the ‘higher’ standards of ‘anushtaanam’ described in the Gita, of what use then will they be and what real purpose will they serve?

The master went silent. I took his leave and retired home to dwell upon the stirring and soulful words I had heard.





CHAPTER 51

ON THE TRADITION OF “KAISIKA DWAADASI”

Today is Kaisika Dwadasi and someone asked me the subject question: What is its significance to you?

My first reaction was to direct the questioner to very scholarly and extremely eloquent *upannyaasam* (public theological discourses) delivered on the subject by renowned exponents in the city of Chennai, India, such as Sriman Karunakarachariar, Velukudi Krishnan Swami, Dushyant Sridhar, Dr. Venkatesan and Sri Aravindalochanan Swami. These pundits have delivered indeed delightful expositions of the ancient Kaisika Purana story of Namm-Paaduvaan, the lowly human who was accosted by a celestial ogre, a ‘brahma- raakshasa’, and the endearingly instructive tale of how the latter asked for the flesh and blood of the former, and how Namm-Paaduvaan eventually got the better of the ‘brahma-raakshasa’.

However, I realized the question posed to me was delicately worded: It asked me what significance the story had for me (if I had read it at all several times as I could claim) rather than asking me if I could re-tell or paraphrase the puraana’s significance as expounded in the discourse of the theological practitioners mentioned. The question was serious and hence it made me sit down and think hard about what the story of Namm-paaduvaan meant to me at a deeply personal level if as I claimed it is, a delightful morality tale with many a profound theological ethic too woven into its narrative.

Well, here is what the Kaisika Puraana story means to me at a personal level:

This story gains its special status as a ‘five-star puraana’ for two very major and principal reasons: It is narrated through the format of a dialogue—a ‘samvaadam’—between the Lord Almighty Varaahan Himself and his Consort Bhooma Devi. The puraana thus records the words of the Almighty Himself and is hence to be accorded with the same status as the words of the Bhagavath-Gita which too were uttered by the Lord. Even today, in the beautiful hill-temple of Vishnu nestled in the distant and sylvan village of Tirukkurungudi (Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu, India), a joyous religious festival is celebrated annually as part of a custom of several past centuries where the tale of the Kaisika Purana is publicly enacted by the local folks and temple priests.

Now, the Varaaha avatar of Sriman Naaraayana is the third of the ‘dasaavataaras’ (divine ten avatars) through which the Supreme Brahman descended upon earthly realms to fulfil God’s purpose: to redeem and rescue man from the dire straits he finds himself in when man-made evil becomes irrepressible, almost invincible.

In this ‘samvaada’, the Lord Varaahan delivers a stirring lesson in humanitarianism in the form of the story of Namm-paaduvaan. His consort, Bhooma-Devi, symbolises Mother Earth in the story.

The planet Earth personified by Bhooma-devi one day shares with the Lord her rather sombre, despondent thoughts about the destiny of man whose capacity for unrighteous and mindless self-destructiveness seems almost beyond repair or redemption.

When I read the ‘puraana’ carefully, I cannot but help thinking that if this planet Earth possessed a voice, it certainly would express its anguish about the sad and grim plight to which man has reduced it, and that voice would indeed be that of Bhooma-devi. Her voice would surely raise her plaintive cry about

the myriad ravages and degradation of the environment that Man inflicts upon her ceaselessly, the bloody wars he wages everywhere on earth, and the bloodshed he causes on the face of this planet, his unbounded rapacity, his unashamed greed, his thoughtlessness and cruelty. And if the earth spoke thus, it would not be speaking about man then in anger or bitterness but in profound sadness just as a mother who recounts the misdeeds of her sons would beat her breasts and pour out words of sorrow from her compassionate heart, and exactly as Bhooma-devi herself speaks.

In delivering the story of Namm-paaduvaan to His consort, Bhooma-Devi, the Lord Varaahan seemingly seeks to bring solace and hope to her heart. He seems to tell her that story of Namm-Paaduvaan and the ‘brahma-raakhsasa’ to particularly reaffirm the universal truth that both the goodness of man and his evil co-reside and co-exist in his heart; that good must however confront evil; that good must deal with evil; and good can and must overcome evil; but that ultimately, in the divine scheme of things on earth, it is not that good shall triumph over evil: rather that good shall ultimately subsume evil.

And at the end of this puraanic story—quite in contrast to the usual puraanic style whereby good slays evil in bloody battle and triumphs—here, in the Kasika puraana, the good Namm-paaduvaan simply wins over the heart of the ‘brahma-raakshasa’, who as a result, undergoes a sort of cathartic transformation of both body and mind and finally realizes that within his own heart too there is an interminable fount of goodness—the very same as Namm-paaduvaan’s own.

The greatest significance this puraanic story holds for me, in plain and simple language, is thus only this:

In this world you cannot run away from evil any more than you can run away from your own nature and your innate qualities that are an unruly amalgam of good and bad, noble and evil, human and inhuman. If you are a man, you will one day or the other have to confront and come to grips with the evil, either of the world itself or that which resides within yourself, and you will then have to fully deal with it.

But you cannot hope to conquer evil with greater evil, overcome hatred with even more hatred, suppress untruth with evermore untruth or meet violence with more bloody violence. Like Namm-paaduvan, one must necessarily learn to engage evil—i.e., the ‘brahma-raakshasha’—on its own terms at first, then gradually begin to understand the essential weakness of the nature of evil, for all evil is truly and inherently weak in moral terms and basis, and then finally through sheer moral will and righteous conduct (i.e., the force of dharma being brought to bear upon our own personal conduct and conviction) bring evil to its knees and catalyze its total transformation into goodness before assimilating and subsuming it.



In the middle of the narrative, there is a long but magnificently eloquent passage wherein Namm-paaduvan launches into a graphic recital of those misdeeds and misconduct of man which could be termed as the worst, most heinous possible sort on earth. It is a long inventory of seventeen ‘paapaam’ (cardinal sins of mortal humans), but from my personal perspective, there are two crimes that truly stand out only because they are so very relevant to and reflective of our modern times.

The first of the two is in the thirty-fourth ‘shlOka’ or verse in the puraana:

yO gacchEth para-daaraamscha kaama-mOha-prapedithaha I
tasya paapEna lipyEyam yadyaham naagamE punaha II

In this verse, the violation of the sexual modesty of good women—i.e., rape, as we know it today in our society—is condemned as one of the unpardonable sins of man.

In India today, we hear reports of incidents of rape almost daily. It is saddening to read that rapists don't spare even infant girls, school-going girl-children and elderly ladies. And what is more appalling is that these criminals are not brought to book quickly under the dilapidated justice system that prevails over the country. We all wail and beat our breasts but the crimes continue unabated and unchecked.

Now, when I read the Kaisika puraana, I wonder what kind of lessons in morality, ethical inspiration and judicial retribution might possibly be derived from the story of Namm-paaduvaan and the 'brahma-raakshasa' in the fight against rape in India?



In the thirty-fifth *shlOka*, there is an even weightier lesson for the modern times:

paaka-bhEdam tu ya: kuryaadaatmanas-chOpa-Bhunjataha: I
tasya paapEna lipyEyam yadhyaham naagamEna punaha I

For this verse, the great Sri Vaishnava theologian of the twelfth century from Sri Rangam, Sri Paraashara Bhattar, the illustrious son of KurathAzhwar and who was mentored by none other than the great Sri Ramaanujaachaarya himself, commentates as follows in Tamil:

yavan-oruvan poojikkum-iddathil thannakkum, kooda poojitthavargallakkum baaga-bhEdam paNNi
poojikkiraan . . . avan paappatthai adaiyakkadavEn.

The plain and simple meaning of the above verse and Bhattar's commentary is this:

If you bring in 'baaga-bhEdam'—best translated in English, in my opinion, as 'divisive politics'—into religion, or the language of hatred and resentment into your places of worship, or if you seek to divide your community into sectarian or theological-faith groups, there could be no greater sin on earth that you could be held guilty of.

How wonderful that a Purana of our great land and civilization even from ancient times has held up religious tolerance and co-existence as human virtue!



I hold the Kaisika Purana in great esteem not only because Sri Parashara Bhattar chose to write a commentary upon it. Nor only for the reason of its ancient association with the great temple of Vishnu in Tirukkurungudi. I revere it for another rather personal reason too, I confess.

This *puraana* was celebrated by none other than the maternal uncle of Sri Ramanujacharya: Sri

Tirumala Nambi of Tirumala.

It became a tradition over the centuries for the descendants of the family of Sri Tirumalanambi—the ‘Thozhappacharis’ also known as ‘Tirumala Kumaarars’ in Tirumala and Tirupati—to conduct ‘paaraayanam’ (ritual reading) of this famous Puraana every year on the day of sacred Dwaadasi (twelfth day in the waxing fortnight) in the month of Kaartikai (Nov-Dec in the Hindu calendar). A devout member of the family completes a reading of the Kaisika Purana on the sacred day and is thereafter honoured by the temple authorities by arranging for him to ride in solemn and ceremonial procession, in a specially appointed ‘pallak’ or palanquin through the streets of Tirupati right up to the sanctum-sanctorum where he is received with due religious fanfare into the presence of the presiding deity.

To this day, the tradition of the Tirupati Thozhappacharis continues, and the Kaisika Purana holds a special place in the homesteads of this ancient family.

My late paternal grandmother, who lived in Tirupati all her life, came from a family of the Thozappacharis that traced its lineage all the way back to Sri Tirumala Nambi. How fascinating indeed are some of our Sri Vaishnava traditions!





CHAPTER 52

WHO IS A SWAMI?

Have you ever asked yourselves why when Hindus want to address someone respectfully, very often, they prefix the honorific ‘Swamin’ or ‘Swami-ji’, or as Sri Vaishnavas do, *Swaminah*’ to the person’s name?

This habit of addressing someone as ‘Swami So-and-So’ is an age-old one. Sri Vaishnavas always refer to their beloved ‘Acharya’, Vedanta Desika (thirteenth century AD), as ‘Swami Desikan’. The followers of the Ramakrishna Mutt always refer to their illustrious guru, Vivekananda, as ‘Swami Vivekananda’. In fact, every ordained monk of this mutt is always addressed as ‘Swami So-and-So’—Swami Vimalananda, Swami Gautamananda, Swami Paramatmananda, and so on and so forth. Swami Chinmayananda was another famous ‘Swami’ of contemporary times who established his own Vedantic order. There are today in India innumerable holy orders whose members similarly, as we can see, are all invariably revered with the common address of ‘Swami’ or ‘Swami-ji’.

‘Swami’ does not however attach itself naturally to the name of all holy men and ‘Acharyas’. For, e.g., some holy men’s names are prefixed with the word ‘Saadhu’. Near Madras, I learnt recently, there was a holy man called Saadhu Yogiram Surat Kumar who had quite a spiritual following. Among the Sindhis of Bombay, some years ago, a holy man known as ‘Saadhu’ Vaswani was well-known. This word ‘saadhu’ is the prefix holy men of North India are known to generally prefer. Some holy women in the North are also addressed as ‘Saadhvi’.

‘Saadhu’ is derived from ‘sattva’. He who is full of ‘sattva’ or ‘saattvic’ qualities like serenity, compassion, and piety is a ‘saadhu’ or ‘saadhvi’. Today, in and around the temple towns of Ayodhya of Kashi, we might see holy men sporting fierce manes and carrying even fiercer looking ‘trishul’ (tridents) and ‘tridanda’ (staves) and we begin to wonder if ‘saadhu’ is an apt form of address for them, but then that is not the subject of this essay and so let’s leave it there.

Nobody also refers, if you have noticed, to the great sage Vyasa as ‘Swami Vyasa’. He is popularly known only as ‘Vyasa bhagavan’. His son Shuka was no less venerable than the father but he is known to us today not as ‘Swami’ Shuka but as ‘*Shuka-brahmam*’. Since Shuka was known to be constantly and entirely immersed in Brahmic consciousness, he came to be addressed as ‘Shuka- brahmam’. It is from the ancient example of Shuka that today the honorific ‘brahma-sri’ is sometimes attached to the names of some exalted men. For, e.g., in Madras recently we heard of the sad demise of the renowned ‘*sangeeta-kalapshepakar*’, ‘Brahma Sri’ Balakrishna Sastrigal. While delivering his musical religious discourses to which thousands used to flock, Sastrigal was sometimes known to forget himself totally in God-consciousness. There was also another well-known Vedic scholar in Madras—‘brahma sri’ Manjakudi Rajagopala Sastrigal; and then, who can ever forget too the inimitable ‘brahma sri’ Sengalipuram Anantharama Dikshitar—the exponent par excellence of such Hindu scriptural classics like ‘*Narayananeeyam*’?

Just as Sage Vyasa was addressed as ‘bhagavan’ and not ‘swAmi’, so too we Sri Vaishnavas, who regard Sri RamanujAcharya as our foremost guru, do not ever refer to him as ‘Swami Ramanuja’. More often we refer to him as ‘Bhagavadh Sri Ramanuja’; or else, we refer to him with some other hallowed honorific such as ‘Udayavar’ or ‘Bhashyakarar’, never at all ‘Swami’. Neither do the Advaitins ever

refer to their great ‘Acharya’, Adi Sankara as ‘Swami Shankara’. He is always known only as Shankara ‘bhagavath-paadaal’.

The words ‘brahma sri’ and ‘bhagavan’ or ‘bhagavadh’ are far more laudatory and elevating than the term ‘saadhu’. The reason for this is that great souls like Vyasa, Shuka, Shankara and Ramanuja were not only ‘saadhus’, but far more importantly, they all commanded the kind of universal awe and veneration which only Bhagavan, God Almighty Himself can, and indeed does, from His flock.

Thus, when we examine all these holy honorifics such as ‘swami’, ‘bhagavan’, ‘brahmam’, ‘saadhu’, etc., we are naturally led to ask ourselves what does ‘Swami’ really connote? Is ‘bhagavan’ somehow superior to ‘Swami’? Does ‘Swami’ connote a higher degree of veneration than ‘saadhu’? Or do they all mean the same thing and may hence be freely used interchangeably? We are also led to ask ourselves: ‘Who is a ‘swami’?’ When should it really be used to address a person? When we happen to address each other as ‘swamin’, are we being appropriate? Or else, are we using the term in a rather blithe, casual, indiscriminate and even meaningless way? When we call someone

‘*swaminah* so-and-so’, do we do so merely out of the need to seem polite or obsequious? Is it really befitting one to be called ‘Swamin’ and if so, why?

‘Swamin’ truly differs from the other honorifics we mentioned above. It is rather special. It has great depth of meaning. It denotes a certain degree of exaltation that lies somewhere between ‘saadhu’ and ‘bhagavan’; and yet ‘swamin’ is one of the loftiest compliments in Sanskrit one can pay to any mortal.

In exact Vedantic parlance, when a person is recognized to be a ‘swamin’, he (or she) is said to be ‘self-possessed’, i.e., specifically, he is seen (1) to be in constant enjoyment of an extraordinary degree of freedom of spirit. This freedom is called ‘Swaaraajya’—and it is a kind not given to ordinary men of the world. Furthermore, he is also seen (2) to possess and wield an extraordinary degree of authority amongst fellowmen. It is these two specific characteristics that define ‘Swami’.

The truly free man or woman is ‘swamin’, literally ‘in full possession of self’. He or she exercises spontaneous authority over others; not the authority that debases others but that which ennobles, not the authority that distances but that draws to intimacy, not the authority of birth or social advantage but of the ability to forget oneself in the welfare of others’ (Michael N. Nagler writing in Eknath Eswaran’s *The Upanishads*, page 292, Penguin Publication, 2002).

Let us study the word ‘swami’ a little more to understand better its definition above.

The word ‘swami’ has its roots in the ancient Upanishads. It echoes straight out of two passages from the Taaittiriya Upanishad in one instance, and then, in another, from a beautiful passage in the Chandogya Upanishad.

‘Swamin’ is derived from the root ‘*sva-*’ in Sanskrit which means ‘one’s inner self’. Those of us with even scant knowledge of Sanskrit might have come across the word ‘svayam’. Some idols in our temples such as SriRangam or Tiruvenkatam are said to be ‘self-created’— ‘svayambhu’. You might also have heard of ‘sita svayamvara’—the event of Sita’s marriage in the Ramayana where she chose for herself (‘*svayam*’) her mate (‘*varah*’) from amongst a parade of suitors. All these ‘*sva-*’ words are thus derived from the root ‘*sva-*’ and it means ‘by oneself’. Whenever ‘*sva-*’ is affixed to a word in Sanskrit it denotes the ‘self’ or ‘oneself’. A person, for example, who by dint of his own hard effort (‘*sva-prayathna*’) has mastered the Vedas (‘*adhyaya*:’), he is said to be engaged in ‘*svaadhyayana*’.

Now, in the Taaittiriya Upanishad, there is an oft-quoted line that exhorts a man of education and wisdom to embrace the study of Vedic scripture as cardinal duty if he must advance in the journey of life. ‘*Svaadhyaya yaan maa pramadah*:’ says the Upanishad, ‘Do not ever fail in the personal duty to

undertake Vedic study.’ Now, the ‘*sva-*’ in ‘swamin’ is really an echo of ‘*svaadhyaya*’ as it appears in the Upanishadic sense. Hence, a person fit to be addressed as ‘swamin’ should be, first and foremost, engaged constantly in ‘svaadhyaya’—the rigour of Vedic study.

Next, in another passage (‘*anuvaaka*’) in the Taittiriya, the Upanishad deals with a lofty spiritual concept called ‘*svaa-raajyam*’— ‘*Apnoti svaaaraajyam,*’ says the Sikshavalli. This ‘svaaraajyam’ is precisely that freedom of spirit referred to above that a ‘swami’ is seen to be enjoying constantly. A true ‘swami’ is an utterly free soul, who goes about wherever he wants and does whatever he pleases in the full knowledge of God, the ‘paramatma’.

The best example of a true ‘swami’s’ ‘svaaraajya’ is seen in an event in the life of Swami Venkatanathan. He was once invited to serve as poet laureate at the royal court at Vijayanagaram under enticement of a princely salary. He spurned it without a moment’s hesitation in the true manner of an utterly free soul (‘svaaraajya’), saying that a servant of God does not stoop to singing paeans to earthly sovereigns. It was really the ‘Swamin’ within Venkatanathan which also declared, ‘The wealth that is rightly mine to covet resides here on the Hill of Hastigiri [meaning the deity of the Kanchi temple] and it surpasses all the royal riches of Vijayanagaram.’ Venkatanathan chose ‘svaaraajyam’ over ‘raajyam’ and came thus to be celebrated as ‘Swami’.

The true ‘swami’ also wields a natural but powerful authority over his fellowmen. It is almost magical how such Swamis command the awe and affection of those who come under their spell. As already quoted above, it is the exercise of ‘spontaneous authority over others; not the authority that debases others but that which ennobles, not the authority that distances but that draws to intimacy, not the authority of birth or social advantage but of the ability to forget oneself in the welfare of others.

Vivekananda was the perfect example of a ‘Swami’ who wielded the sort of authority over fellowmen that the ideal of Upanishadic ‘swaaraajya’ holds up to us. He strode like a spiritual colossus amongst the Congress of Religions in Chicago in which he participated in 1888. Everyone across USA who met Vivekananda went into a spell. None that had met him, for as much as a few moments even, could come away without feeling, ‘Here indeed is a fearless and free soul. Here indeed is a true Swami’.



In the Chandogya Upanishad in the last and eighth chapter, we come across a passage of rare insight into the character of a ‘swamin’:

‘Ordinary mortals do what they are told, and get attached to anything: their country, or piece of land. Everything they work for, secular or religious, comes to nothing. Only those who find out who they are, and what they want, find freedom, here and in all the world’s (chandOgya VIII.1.5—6).

Here again, the Upanishads hold up to us the ideal of freedom as the chief characteristic of the true ‘Swami’—the man who has ‘found out who he is and what he wants’ and hence enjoys the freedom of this world and the hereafter and enjoys authority too over both.



By the lofty standard of ‘swaaraajya’—personal freedom and authority—that the Upanishads set for a true ‘swami’, now we must ask ourselves, how many of us would qualify to be addressed as ‘swami’? And how many ‘swamiji-s’ of the world are true Swamis?





CHAPTER 53

A Letter from a father to his son:

On the Sri Vaishnava rite of “*Bhagavath Nithya Tiruvaaraadanam*”

A few days ago, my son, a young professional working in a multinational IT company in India was discussing with me how difficult he finds it to devote time amidst his hectic work and family pressures to perform the **Bhagavath Tiruvaaraadanam** rite at home. He also said that he finds the performance of the Tiruvaaraadanam a little too ritualistic and mentioned that he is unable to appreciate the significance and purpose of it.

As a father I had to then at great length explain to my young son in a language and idiom he could easily relate to . . . i.e. without resorting to unfamiliar Sri Vaishnava Sanskrit+Tamizh “*paribhaashai*” (parlance) . . . about the deep philosophy and theology that underlies the Tiruvaaraadanam rite.

After listening to my explanation my son expressed some degree of satisfaction and suggested to me then to convert my oral presentation on the subject into a form of a mini-treatise in “easy-to-read- and-relate” plain English language that would be useful to him later as reference material whenever he does try eventually to perform Tiruvaaraadanam ritual in his home.

Accepting his suggestion, I have now written down whatever I explained to my son.

I am wondering if it would also be useful to other young Sri Vaishnava persons like my son both in India and abroad for whom Tiruvaaraadanam explained in plain English might help as an aid in getting them to overcome skepticism and getting started on performing the ritual.



My dear son,

A question you posed to me recently was this: “**Why is it so necessary for a Sri Vaishnava to perform the daily ritual of “*Bhagavath Nithya-Tiruvaaraadanam*”?**”

You phrased your question in such way as to leave neither me nor anyone else in any doubt at all that you believe the performance of ***Tiruvaaraadanam (TA)*** is unnecessary and it tends to take far too much of your time. Quite understandably, you feel the rite and its sacramental routines are so elaborate or long drawn that the time it takes to complete it you can ill-afford. Amidst all the quotidian domestic preoccupations that you as a family man must attend to and the even more hectic pressures and burden I know you must be laboring under in your professional career, to try and make also time for TA is a rather cumbersome daily religious ritual.

None can deny that the rite of TA does take a bit of time. It must be performed only after one performs the daily *Pratah-Sandhyavandanam* and *Maadhyaanikam* rites. Thus the 3 rites, all to be done in the forenoon, could easily altogether take about an hour and 30 minutes of valuable time in your normal daily regimen. Therefore, I do not fault you for thinking that it puts too high a premium on the severely limited time available in the day for you, in which you must both juggle and balance domestic tasks and

professional priorities at the same time. I was myself one a family-man . . . a *gruhashthaa* . . . like you and so I must concede to you that your complaint is not unfair.

I must, however, confess that I cannot do anything in the matter and must leave the challenge of managing time all to yourself to meet and cope with as best as you think. Time management is an art by itself. At my age now, I have at last come to realize that every person must figure out how to master the art by himself or herself. There is really no one magic formula for effective Time Management. God Almighty can certainly help, of course, meet the challenge . . . but then one first must earnestly ask him!

However, now that you have posed the question to me about TA, I would like to pen a few thoughts of mine on this daily Sri Vaishnavite rite; much of it I have been able to cull and gather from my own personal experience and turn them into firm conviction of faith. After so many years of somehow managing to perform TA, I can say truthfully, that I do it with reasonable regularity today with great ease and pleasure.

Let me tell you that in the beginning it was not easy for me at all. I too did feel the strain of time then. I fumbled through the motions of the rite. I struggled with its routines and invocations. But gradually over the years, I am glad I persevered. Despite personal and professional pulls and pressures that often conspired to make me want to give up performing the ritual altogether, and settle instead for less onerous, much more easy-going daily sacraments enjoined by *saastra* and custom, I managed to plod on. Today, I find the performance of TA to be no longer difficult. I find it rather quite a pleasant spiritual experience which I very much look forward to doing as much as any other workaday secular routine of mine.

What has made the difference then after so many years?

I ask myself that question and the answers I am able to provide myself I thought I might now share with you too . . . if for no other reason but simply to give you a little insight perhaps into the significance of TA, why it commands so much importance in the Sri Vaishnava way of life and what possible spiritual benefits can be hoped will accrue from it if sincerely practiced in daily life.

Below, I am going to share for your sake and benefit some stray but carefully worded thoughts on TA in the fond hope that, at some later point in the long journey of life lying ahead of you, you will resolve to undertake to faithfully perform TA, out of your very own free will. When that happens, and these my thoughts and words are recalled by you, I hope, they will surely help you, even if only in a very small measure, in two respects: *on one hand*, it will make you better than you already are at time-management; and, *on the other hand*, you will gain a deep appreciation of the true meaning and efficacy of this *daily simple rite of God-adoration* which our Sri Vaishnava tradition, *sampradaya* and *Acharyas* all have affirmed and re-affirmed so emphatically.

I am mindful ever since you once before told me on an occasion, that you encounter great difficulty in grasping tenets of Sri Vaishnava *sampradaya* whenever they get to be explained to you with a surfeit of unfamiliar Sanskrit-Tamizh-Manipravala terminology or archaic “*Sri Vaishnava paribaashai*”. Therefore, I shall try my best to express myself below, as far as possible, only in common, simple layman English language, grammar and composition so that you do not lose patience with my labored expatiation on the subject matter of TA.

(1)

The practice of a household religious ritual can easily become empty, mechanical or meaningless ritualism when the philosophy underlying it—or the theological intent underpinning it—is unfortunately lost on us. The Sri Vaishnava TA rite is no exception.

So, first off, I must remind you therefore that TA is very much rooted in profound philosophy, more specifically Ethics which as you know is a branch of philosophy. It is found in the **Upanishad**, the fount of all Sri Vaishnava thought and faith.

You may already be acquainted with the **Sikshavalli** section of the **Taittiriya Upanishad**, and you should therefore now understand that the ethic propounded in that enlightening Upanishad is indeed what constitutes the underlying and overriding principle of the entire TA ritual.

“maatru devo bhava, pitru devo bhava, aachaarya devo bhava, athithi devo bhava . . .” Treat your mother as though she were God.

Treat your father as though he were God.

Treat your guru, the teacher, as though he or she were God.

And treat the guest arriving in your home as if he or she were God.

What does the Upanishad mean when it asks us to “*treat*” mother, father, guru and guest by likening them all to God? What is this “treatment” that is implied in that rather cryptic Sanskrit phrase, “*devO bhava*”? How am I going to “treat” my parents, teacher and houseguest?

The answer is very simple and self-evident if only we reflect a bit on the fact of the matter and remind ourselves of all the little things that we do in the normal and ordinary course of our day-to-day lives to please our mothers, fathers, *guru* and houseguests.

- To please my mother, I buy her a new saree on the occasion of her birthday. Or I buy her a copy of a favorite cooking recipe she had always wanted to read. Or buy her a box of chocolates I know she loves.
- To please my father, I know the best way to do that is simply to heed his words of advice and guidance as often and as obediently as possible. That itself pleases him to no end. It makes him feel boastful and go around saying proudly to his friends about me, “*My son is a very obedient fellow, bless him*”! And occasionally, let’s say, for his “*sathaabishekam*”, to show him how much he means to me, I please my father too perhaps by buying a Rolex wristwatch for him?
- Pleasing my guru is a lot simpler. It pleases the guru most when he/she comes to know from the grapevine, and through word-of-mouth going around amongst the community or society of followers at large, that wherever I go, and on every opportunity offered to me, I never fail to speak highly of the qualities and of the excellent work done by my guru. In other words, nothing pleases the guru more than to hear from third-party, disinterested quarters that I, his/her disciple, always extol him/her in every possible way to further my guru’s “*keerthi*” i.e. fame or reputation.
- Then there is the “*athithi*”, the houseguest. We please our guests by showering them with the utmost hospitality possible, do we not? Be it food, shelter, small favor or merely kind words and gestures . . . we always feel beholden to our houseguests for having given us an opportunity to show them how much they mean to us by their mere presence in our life.

Truly speaking, that is all there is to understand . . . and no less, no more . . . from what the Upanishad enjoins us to do with that famous “*vaakya*” of “. . . devO bhava” . . . i.e. treat your mother, father, guru and guest as though they were God: So, please, do please them!

Now, in Sri Vaishnava theology, there is a special term that has been coined to convey the same sense of the Upanishad exhortation, “. . . *devo bhava!*” It is a phrase that sums up pretty much everything we do—the sum of it in fact—as a hundred little acts to express love, adoration, thankfulness, kindness, generosity and/or goodwill to our respective mothers, fathers, teacher and guests.

That special term is “*upachaaram*”.

(2)

“*Upachaaram*” means nothing at all really if it is done as a one-off or occasional deed, performed perfunctorily, or far and between, and that too more for the sake of form and formality than out of genuine feeling and reverence.

If I were to present my mother with a new saree only once in a blue moon, or else only whenever I just happen to remember her . . . That would not be real “*upachaaram*”.

- Similarly, if I paid heed to my father wishes or advice only whenever it happened to suit my own selfish purpose or convenience . . . that too would not really amount to doing him genuine “*upachaaram*”.
- Again, if I seldom spoke words of praise of my guru to others and did so only when I thought it would in some way enhance my own personal standing amongst peers and fellow laity . . .
i.e. make me look more pious or good than I really am . . . then that would not be doing “*upachaaram*” at all to my guru or *Acharya*, would it?
- And finally, if it became known to others that the hospitality of my home extended to guests was an erratic one and it depended upon my varying moods or upon circumstances of the moment, then no guest of mine would ever look upon my ministrations as host to be “*upachaaram*”, warm and genuine, but as pretentious and fickle.

Sri Vaishnava theology therefore clearly sets out what is considered the best test of genuine “*upachaaram*”:

Repetitiveness. The act of any “*upachaaram*” we offer unto to *maatru*, *pitru*, *aachaarya* and *athithi*, to be truly meaningful, has be performed, again and again and again, with unbroken, unstinted regularity if it is to be called genuine “*upachaara*”. If that test is not met, and the “*upachaara*” is offered only in fits and starts, occasionally or far and between, then such *upachaara* cannot be said to be consistent with the Upanishad “*vaakya*” that says “. . . *devO bhavah!*” or how exactly we must “*treat*” our parents, guru and houseguest.

At this point, a pointed question may arise in your mind and which you should be able to recognize as being deeply theological rather than purely rational in nature.

“What is the purpose of “*upachaaram*”?” you might ask. “By performing “*upachaaram*” to mother, father, guru and *aachaarya*, what follows? And in doing repeated acts of “*upachaaram*”, what outcome am I to really expect?”

The answer again is stark and simple: **Bonding.**

-3-

Modern psychology has given us a very fashionable and felicitous buzzword these days— “*bonding*”— to describe the strong and deep degree of intimacy which all of us do seek in human relationship.

If we each delve into our hearts, we will have to admit that a latent but overwhelming desire lurks within to find fulfilment in the relationship that we strive to cultivate, maintain and cherish with whomsoever we love most in life. We must also admit that none of us will ever succeed in finding fulfilment in a relationship without establishing **deep bonding** . . . It is indeed *sine qua non* for developing and growing an **enduring intimacy** of relationship with our *maatha*, *pithaa*, with our *guru* and *athithi*.

The deeper the **bonding**, one could thus say, the deeper surely becomes the **intimacy**.

No “*upachaaram*”, no bonding; no bonding, *no intimacy*; no intimacy, *no relationship*; and if there is no relationship in life, there is little chance of finding any *fulfilment* in it. A fulfilled life is indeed one full of fulfilling relationships . . . with *maatru*, with *pitru*, with *aachaarya* and *atithis*.

“*Intimacy*” in the normal sense in which we know it enriches human relationships is a strange but beautiful complex of the *physical*, the *emotional* and *psychological* states of mind.

The cultivation and nurturing of my intimacy with my mother, father, guru and houseguest has to do with my bonding with them in “*flesh and blood*”, body and mind. The “*intimacy*” that is conceived in the rite of “*bhagavath upachaaram*” or TA is not, however, centered in the psychology of “*flesh and blood*” because God has no physicality, no form, no tangibility, no tactility . . . There is, in fact, no “*human touch*” known to man that can possibly reach out to “*touch God*”.

To help us overcome this difficulty, the ancient Vedic faith in its wisdom has given us the religious practice of “*bonding*” with God manifested as a “*saaligraama moorthy*” or “*archa moorthy*” “*aaraadanam*”.

The former is a rare “pebble” of assorted size, shape and hue that is obtained from the riverbed or banks of the great **River Gandaki** flowing high in the mountains of present-day Nepal. On the authority of various Vaishnava Agama scriptural texts (i.e. ancient manuals or “*smritis*” of Vedic ritual-worship such as “*paancharaatram*” or “*aapasthamba sutra*” etc.) these “pebbles”, collected and then reverentially consecrated in one’s household as icons of divine presence, are to be regarded as “*saakshaat Vishnu-svaroopi*”: verily the form in which Vishnu, the Supreme God of all Vaishnavas, deigns to reside on earth.

If a household is unable to obtain such a sacred “*saaligrama*”, the Agama lays down that a thumb- sized metallic icon (made of silver, copper or bronze) representing the image of Vishnu, or any of his many avatars, can be consecrated too as equal replacement and worshipped in the same manner as the “*saaligrama*”.

“*Archa*” in Sanskrit denotes “*archana*”: “*honoring, praising, and worshipping*” . . . It is related to the word “*archis*” which means in Sanskrit “*a ray of divine light or luster*”. And it is such luster radiating from the iconic form of Vishnu who deigns to reside in one’s home that is believed to cause a bond of deep spiritual intimacy to develop between the worshipper and the worshipped.

(Just for your information, in theological terms, such intimacy is called “*saarUpyam*” and “*saameepyam*”, both of which are profound Vedantic concepts but into which it is not necessary to delve here and now).

In the context of TA, therefore, “*Intimacy*” with Divinity is more a profound theological principle than plain human psychological condition.

To be able to understand what *Intimacy* truly means in the special sense I have tried to explain above, we have no choice but to rely upon one seemingly abstruse, but truly very valid Sri Vaishnavite theological doctrine called “*artha panchakam*”.

Without overburdening or overwhelming you with explanations about the heavily doctrinal aspects of “*artha panchakam*”, I shall briefly explain only that part of it which I believe sheds enough light on the key element of “*intimacy*” in TA that we should be concerned about.

According to Sri Vaishnava doctrine, a *relationship of intimacy* is very much possible for an individual to cultivate and realize with Divinity, even here and now in this mortal world, if only he can intuit, absorb and internalize 5 key ontological principles:

1. “*paramaatma-svaroopa gnyana praapthi*”: understanding the nature and attributes of Godhead or *Paramaatma*.
2. “*jivaatma-svaroopa gnyana praapthi*”: understanding the nature and attributes of the individual soul or *Jivaatma*.
3. “*upaaya gnyana praapthi*”: understanding the proper *ways and means* shown by the ‘*saastras*’ with the aid of which the soul (*jivaatma*) can go seeking God (*paramaatma*)
4. “*upaaya virodhi gnyana praapthi*”: being mindful of the many pitfalls and dead ends that may be encountered by the soul (*Jivaatma*) while journeying along the path in search of God (*paramaatma*)
5. “*parama purushaartha praapti*”: the final and eternal state of absolute fulfilment experienced by the individual soul after realizing the supreme *Paramaatma*.

Much about the entire conceptual framework of “*artha panchakam*” is indeed Sri Vaishnava soteriology.

A galaxy of Sri Vaishnava preceptors, past and present, have written dozens of elegant commentaries/treatises on it; and several more *Achaaryas* of the distant past many centuries ago, delivered scintillating, illuminating oral discourses on it in Sanskrit, Tamizh and Mani-Pravaalam which have been recorded and added now to the larger body of Sri Vaishnava scriptural literature for the benefit of posterity. Unfortunately, very few of us in the community today have either the time, energy or motivation to familiarize ourselves with it.

The purpose of my describing the “**artha-panchakam**” to you however is limited to simply enabling you to grasp, even if only in vague outline, what the *doctrine of intimacy with the divine* is all about. So, I am going to bravely resort to reducing all those lofty expositions of Sri Vaishnava Acharya’s to a rather crude aphorism of mine own, constructed in modern-day pedestrian idiom solely for the sake of brevity:

Intimacy with the Divine is “knowing the nature of God; knowing oneself; knowing well the nature of the relationship between the two; knowing how the relationship works . . . and does not work; and lastly, knowing how the relationship consummates itself through Divine Grace.”

I anticipate that at this point in our discussion on TA, a few perplexing questions might arise in your mind . . . In fact, they are central to the theological underpinning of the TA ritual.

You may at this point in your broad understanding of TA perhaps be able to grasp easily that pleasing one’s *mother, father, guru and guest* (i.e. the act which the Upanishad describes to us in the terse phrase “. . . *devo bhava*”) lies in performing little repetitive acts of “*upachaaram*” over time, with the genuine purpose of cultivating a relationship of intimacy with each of them, and in the expectation that, ultimately, it will fructify in fulfilment.

But then to likewise imagine, in respect of God himself, how exactly the act of “. . . *devo bhava*” becomes operative is not that easy!

In other words, while you are able to understand those forms of ordinary “*upachaara*” to one’s *maatru*, *pitru*, *aachaarya* and *athithi* explained above, you would however find yourself most likely at a loss to fathom what possible forms or modes that “*bhagavath upachaara*” should take so that the “*deva*” of the Upanishad, likewise too, becomes equally if not more pleased.

Hence the following niggling questions:

How shall I “*treat*” the God I believe in? How am I to develop the same level of intimacy with Him as I have striven to build with *mother*, *father*, *guru* and *athithi*? How am I to *treat* God who is the supreme “*deva*” . . . he who is neither of “*flesh nor blood*”, as parents, guru or houseguest are? The one who, in fact, I made use of in the first place as Upanishadic yardstick for measuring the strength, the depth and intimacy of my relationship with *parents*, *teacher* and *honored houseguest* . . . how am I to know a similarity measure? What yardstick?!

The answer to such questions is not easy to obtain through mere intellectual effort alone. They are deeply theological questions and hence we must rely again only upon scriptural authority to shed some light.

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In the Bhagavath-Gita is found the clear answer and it came out in Sri Krishna’s very own words:

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति।

तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्रमि प्रयतात्मनः॥१९.२६॥

“Whoever offers me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or a little water, that so offered devotedly by the pure-minded, I accept.”

The simplest, blandest, “bare bones” form of “*upachaaram*” God readily accepts from a genuine “*bhaktha*” is described in the above Gita *shloka*.

The scriptural authority for the whole ritual of daily “*tiruvaaraadanam*” (TA) is adduced from this one simple, self-explanatory verse of the Bhagavath-Gita!

The offering of “*a leaf, a petal, a fruit and a little water*” to God with a mental posture conveying overwhelming love and adoration is indeed all that there is to the entire rite of TA.

If this form of “*upachaaram*” is done repeatedly and with devotion, a certain kind of ineffable *bonding* and *intimacy* with God—in terms of the “*artha panchakam*”—is said to develop in good time and the relationship consummates itself finally in spiritual fulfilment . . . This fact too in one *shloka* following the above, is attested by Sri Krishna himself in the Gita:

क्षिप्रं भवति धर्मात्मा शश्वच्छान्तिं निगच्छति।

कौन्तेय प्रतिजानीहि न मे भक्तः प्रणश्यति॥१९.३१॥

“Very soon he becomes righteous and attains to eternal peace; O Arjuna, I proclaim to you for certain that my devotee never perishes”.

In our Sri Vaishnava “*sampradaaya*”, i.e. in our traditional way of life, the above 2 verses of the Bhagavath-Gita get interpreted by our Achaaryas to mean that “*upachaaram*” (more accurately termed “*bhagavath upachaaram*”) is a spiritual process rather than ritualism. It is Process—not the Ritual

itself—that helps Man build a special bonding with God, nurtures a relationship of *intimacy* with him and, finally, attains everlasting fulfillment in it.

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My dear son, I have so far taken pains explaining to you as well as I possibly could that the Sri Vaishnava daily rite of “*nithya tiruvaaraadanam*” (TA) is not “*mere ritualism*” as it is often mistaken to be by many young persons of your generation in our community today. I have tried to show you that TA has a clear and profound philosophical basis in the *Upanishad*. It is rooted firmly too in an ancient theology—“*arthapanchakam*”, “*saarupyam*”, “*saameepyam*”, **Bhagavath-Gita**. And furthermore, as I have hinted above, the ritual in fact quite remarkably anticipates concepts of contemporary clinical psychology even—“*bonding*”, “*intimacy*” in human relationships that modern psychologists say are the prime source of life fulfilment etc . . .

It is time to turn now from philosophy and theology to the actual **practice of the TA rite** itself.

- The observance of the ritual of TA is through a daily regimen in a Sri Vaishnava household where “*saaligraama*” or “*archa-moorthy*” of **Bhagavan Vishnu** is kept consecrated inside a specially made wooden or silver-plated decorative miniature figurine of a stately “*mantapam*”, or royal-court, called “*kovil-Azhwaar*”. It is here that Vishnu comes to reside in our homes. It is from here that he readily accepts—as Krishna promised he would in the **Gita**—what is offered to him by way of worshipful “*upachaara*”.
- TA is actually nothing more, or nothing less, than Vedantic philosophy plus Sri Vaishnavite theology put in motion through a small-scale but endearing ritual Ceremony.

The importance of introducing a little bit of ceremony and fanfare while expressing love, adoration and admiration to even one’s *maatha*, *pitha*, *Acharya* and *athithi* hardly needs to be stressed.

A mother or father expects nothing but only love and respect from a son or daughter, let’s say, on their wedding day; but then, even if I have to show only a token of my love on the occasion with nothing more than a mere box of chocolates, I still do ensure that it is attractively packaged and wrapped in silver foil and gets delivered to my parents with a little bit of ceremony of song and dance . . . isn’t it so?!

What makes “*upachaaram*” poignant and solemn yet so delightful to the receiver of “*upachaaram*” is just that little element of excitement getting added to it. Even a wee bit of exaggerated or lavish ceremonial flourish being infused into “*upachaaram*” does so greatly enhance the quality of “*upachaaram*” served.

The proper way to perform the solemn ceremony of “*bhagavath tiruvaaraadanam*” (TA) is called “*tiruvaaraadana kramam*” in Sri Vaishnava parlance and it has been laid down and clearly explained for the laity by past and present Achaaryas of the sect in several scriptural manuals written in both Sanskrit and Tamizh.

[One of the most popular of such manuals available is called “*Sri Vaishnava dinasari bhagavath aaradana aachara aahnika grantham*” authored by the revered **45th pontiff of Sri Ahobila Math Srimath Azhagiyasingar**. It sets out in detail the procedures and protocol for performing the ceremony of TA. It is available in many bookshops in your city.

Let me hasten to assure you that I am not going to reproduce exhaustive excerpts or dense references from elaborate Sri Vaishnava manuals on how to conduct the TA ceremony. You may, if you wish, refer to them later after you have made up your mind to make a start performing TA in your own homestead. That will depend entirely upon how quickly and deeply you wish for the *bonds of spiritual intimacy* with God to grow and develop in your life.

Today, of course, on YOUTUBE channels too, you can come across many video-presentations or practical tutorials that show you how to perform, step-by-step, the TA ritual. They might serve as handy learning tools, enough to get you started.

For the moment, however, by way of concluding this my personal letter to you on TA, I shall share with you the little steps through which I have been taking the ceremony all these years . . . and what is my own personal experience of it. Most importantly I want to introduce you to the subtle Vedantic concept of “*Bhaava*” . . . that is implicit in fact in the Upanishad phrase, “. . . *devO bhava!*”

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It is through this fine concept of “*bhaava*” that I can best explain the mental attitude I have tried to cultivate personally while performing TA . . . and to bring it to bear upon my own inner experiences of the ritual. The only purpose for sharing personal experiences with you is that it may perhaps give you some guidance on how to fashion and later adopt your very own personal attitude (i.e. as a Sri Vaishnava who has already undergone “*samaasryanam*” under the tutelage of your Achaaryan) towards offering TA “*upachaara*” to the Divinity consecrated as “*saaligraama*” or “*archa moorthy*” at home.

In TA “*upachaara*” to Vishnu, what is offered unto him is the same offerings spoken about by Sri Krishna in the **Bhagavath-Gita** viz. पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं . . . i.e. **a leaf, a flower, a fruit and pure water**.

1. “**patram**” refers to the tender leaves of the Basil plant (*Ocimum basilicum*). I take a bowlful of these leaves collected and I use them to offer “*archanai*” to the “*saaligrama*”.
2. “**पुष्प**” . . . A variety of sweet-scented flowers (*roses, jasmynes, lotus, lily* etc.) are collected, washed and cleaned (my wife helps in this, in fact) and the “*saligraama*” or “*archa-murthy*” is adorned with the soft petals.
3. “**फल**” . . . a variety of delicious fruits (apples, grapes, guava, pear or pomegranate) are offered
4. “**तोय**” . . . clear water is collected in metallic pot called in Tamil as “*vattil*” (made of silver) and using 5 different such vessels known as “*pancha paatram*”, in prescribed manner, I use them to carry out ritual routines such as “*arghyam*”, “*paadyam*”, “*aachamaneeyam*”, “*snaaneeyam*”, “*paaneeyam*” and “*shuddhodhakam*”.

You can look up the manuals to know the exact meaning of these terms but suffice to know for the moment that the ritual water is used principally to ritually “*wash the sacred feet*” of the “*saaligraamam*” and “*archa moorthy*” and then ceremonially “*bathe*” the deity too with it. Later this water is collected in a separate silver bowl and becomes what is called “*perumaal sri paada teertham*” . . . the holy and sanctified water of Vishnu a little of which we reverentially consume every day to mark our own spiritual purification.

All the above 4 ritual offerings are used and offered by me to the Deity, in fact, in a well-sequenced **series of 10 ritual steps or “upachaaram”** in the manner prescribed as proper in the TA “*kramam*”, or ceremonial routines. The 10 steps are listed below.

The performance of each step in the procedure is done to the accompaniment of several **ritual accessories** such as—“*ghantam*” (bell); “*dhoopam*” (incense); “*deepam*” (lamp); “*gandham*” (sandal-paste); “*teertha parimalam*” (water flavoring); “*chaamaram*” (ceremonial whisk); “*vastram*” (ritual vestments); “*prasaadam*” or “*bhakshya vastu*” (cooked dishes in the house kitchen especially for the Deity) etc.

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Many Sri Vaishnava *Achaaryas* in their explications on the TA have referred to the need while performing the rite for one to assume appropriate “*bhakthi bhaava*” i.e. the correct mental orientation or attitude, a certain emotional stance or posture to be taken which helps one greatly in being able to maintain the focus of the ceremony and the intensity of fervor as well.

Just as “*ghantam*”, “*deepam*”, “*dhoopam*” etc. happen to be physical accessories to aid in the performance of the rite, I say with certainty that the right “*bhaava*” too is an “*emotional accessory*” necessary for the proper conduct of TA.

There are many such attitudes or “*bhakthi bhaava*” to adopt. They are well exemplified by “*puraanic*” characters”. Some of those commonly known “*bhaava*” orientations that you may already know about are:

1. *Maadhurya bhaava*—the **attitude of the lover and beloved**—the TA rite is performed for the pleasure of the Deity with the same attitude with which a lover might take pains to please his or her beloved. E.g. the “*gopikas*” of Brindavan and Gokulam and Sri Krishna.
2. *2.Sakhi bhaava*—the **attitude that a soul mate shows towards the other**. E.g. the attitude that Radha exhibited towards her paramour Sri Krishna; or, the one Sita always showed her husband, Sri Rama.
3. *Vaatsalya bhaava*—assuming a **parental attitude towards child**. E.g. the tender motherly feelings Yashodha showed for her darling son, Sri Krishna.
4. *Daasya bhaava*—the **attitude of the servitor towards his master**. E.g. the mental attitude which Hanuman always assumed towards his Lord and master, Sri Rama.
5. *Sakhya bhaava*—the **attitude that bosom friends assume towards one another**. E.g. this was the attitude Arjuna adopted towards his *friend, guide and philosopher*, Sri Krishna.
6. *Santha-bhaava*—this **attitude is a rather neutral and natural one** assumed by a devotee who is spiritually far advanced . . . It is a very difficult attitude to adopt. Only saintly persons are capable of it and for whom “*bhakthi*” towards God flows spontaneously in the heart without having to deliberately assume any one or other kind of “*bhaava*”.

Any one or more of the above 6 “*bhakthi bhaava*” may be assumed by a Sri Vaishnava who conducts TA. Sometimes, depending on the varying mood of the TA practitioner at different points of time, alternating “*bhaavas*” by turn might get assumed by him. Sometimes, within the course of the same TA ceremony, multiple “*bhaava*” might get adopted while performing the 10 different routines listed above.

It is really all a matter of individual choice left entirely to the TA practitioner. It is up to him to decide and determine the nature of the relationship he wishes to fashion with his God, how to gain what in the “*artha-panchakam*” doctrine is said to be true knowledge of “*paramaatma-svarupa*” and “*jivaatma-svarupa*” . . . and how he wants to go about seeking, cultivating and growing *intimacy* in such a relationship.

Speaking about such “*intimacy of relationship*” between individual and divinity, let me help you recollect those beautiful words in the 28th verse of that classic Tamizh hymn “**Tiruppaavai**” of Sri Andaal, one amongst the 12 mystic saints in the Sri Vaishnava tradition:

கறவைகள் பின் சென்று கானஞ் சேர்ந்துண்போம்
 அறிவொன்றும் இல்லாத ஆய்குலத்து உன்றன்னை
 பிறவி பெறுந்தனை புண்ணியம் யாம் உடையோம்
 குறைவொன்றும் இல்லாத கோவிந்தா உன்தன்னோடு
 உறவேல் நமக்கிங்கு ஒழிக்க ஒழியாது
 அறியாத பிள்ளைகளோம் அன்பினால் உன்றன்னை
 சிறுபேர் அழைத்தனவும் சீறி அருளாதே
 இறைவாநீ தாராய் பறையேலோர் எம்பாவாய்.

*kaRavaigaL pin senRu kaanam sErndhu uNbOm **
*aRivu onRum illaadha aayk kulaththu **
*undhannaip piRavi peRum thanaip puNNiyam yaam udaiyOm **
*kuRai onRum illaadha gOvindhaa **
*undhannOdu uRavEl namakku ingu ozhikka ozhiyaadhu **
*aRiyaadha piLLaigaLOm anbinaal **
*undhannai siRu pEr azhaiththanavum seeRi aruLaadhE **
iRaivaa! nee thaaraay paRaieElOr embaavaay.

In this verse, the group of young women (whom Andal had addressed in *Tiruppavai* verses 9 to 12), appeal to the Lord to accept them as *prapannas* . . . eternal servitors.

‘We are, after all, simple folks’ they say to Krishna, the supreme lord, “we who graze cattle and frolic about in these pastoral forests. We are so fortunate to have you, the primeval Lord himself, in our midst. Yet, in our ignorance, we have thought of you as just another one amongst us; and said and done things in playfulness, taken you for granted and jested with you. But your true self and our true relationship with you is eternal and irrefutable. Forgive us our lapses and trespasses! And grant us the gift we seek,’ they plead, praying that he accept every frivolous little action of theirs as a *kainkary*, an offering in his service . . . i.e. as an “*upachaaram*”.

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As for me, if you ask me, over the years now since I began performing TA for the “*saaligrama moorthy*” in my home, I have chosen to adopt sometimes the “*daasya bhaava*”—the attitude of the servitor towards the master; it seems to suit best not only my personality but also my philosophical outlook and belief-sets in life.

Sometimes, I also find myself assuming the highly emotional “*vaatsalya bhaava*” . . . i.e. the parent-child mental orientation.

It all of course depends upon what the nature of my particular mood happens to be on the day when I commence the TA rite.

But let me confess to you that at almost all times when I perform TA, I tend to draw inspiration directly from the Taittiriya Upanishad “*vaakya*” in the “*seekshaavalli*”:

मातृदेवो भव । पितृदेवो भव । आचार्यदेवो भव । अतिथिदेवो भव ।

I generally take the pardonable liberty of taking the above “vaakya” and extract inspiration from it by reversing both its words and meaning to suit my purpose conveniently.

“devah: maatarO bhava; devah:pitharO bhava; devah: AchaaryO bhava;

and, finally,

devah: atitheeyO bhava”!

In other words, I choose to look beyond the obvious meaning of the Upanishad “vaakya” and to grasp what it seeks to convey to me by implication also, viz.:

Treat God as you know you must your mother.

Treat God as you know you should your father;

Treat God as you would your guru, the teacher.

Or treat God as though he were honored guest arriving home.

Adopting the attitudinal posture, the behavior or “bhaava” of a **son, a disciple or else, of a hospitable and solicitous host**, and reversing it to be focused more fully towards the “saaligraama moorthy” in my house, works just fine for me. In my experience I often find it adds a certain ineffable quality of intimacy to the ritual performance of the “tiruvaaraadanam” ceremony. It makes me aware—and derive enormous inward satisfaction from such awareness—that the philosophy of the ageless Upanishad, the Sri Vaishnava theological doctrine of “artha panchakam” and the religious ritualism of TA all fuse and merge seamlessly together into one spiritual experience to be savored as a blessing and a grace to both delight in and feel grateful for.

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The “bhaava”, the emotional stance adopted by one who performs the “upachaara” of TA is an essential but yet not quite sufficient prerequisite to conducting the ceremony.

“Bhaava” cannot be expressed in vacuity . . . you will need words to convey your innermost “bhaava”, your mental stance or attitude towards the God with whom you wish to strike intimacy.

All through the 10 steps listed above as “tiruvaaraadana kramam”, one also needs therefore the perfect and powerful “mantra” to be able to invoke the presence of the Deity in spirit and to consecrate it.

There are appropriate selections of such “mantra” readily provided to us in the Vedas.

Besides the chant of Vedic “mantras” ideally suited for the occasion, there is also the need for reciting beautiful words of praise, prayer, thanksgiving, love, adoration and awe without which it would be impossible to bring forth the true mood or mute, unexpressed feelings that infuse a particular “bhaava” as one experiences it even as one proceeds with the 10 different steps—one after the other in sequence—of the TA “kramam”.

Such beautiful poetry so very apt for the occasion is readily and copiously available in Sri Vaishnava scriptural literature and “sampradaaya”. A little knowledge of Sanskrit and Tamizh is more than enough to be able to learn such bhakthi-laden poems and mystic hymns and use them at the appropriate moments and stages during the 10 TA procedures described above.

For example, for “suprabaatham”, I usually recite lines from the Ramayana that Rishi Viswaamitra sang to awaken Rama at the hour of dawn:

For “*snaanaasanam*”, I chant the euphonious and majestic Vedic chant of the “*pancha sooktham-s*” but then also follow it up with the endearing, heart-rending hymn of Sri Peria Azhwaar who sang the Tamizh “*neeraatam*” verses while imagining himself to be Yashoda, the foster-mother of Sri Krishna, cajoling her rebellious beloved child to come home to her for his daily bath. This is the hymn in fact that is recited in all Vishnu temples throughout the world especially at the time of *Tirumanjanam* (ceremonial bath) to the Lord’s idol or “*archa*”.

Yashoda calls baby Krishna for an oil bath. He refuses and runs away. She entreats him saying- “*Having besmeared your body with butter and mud, I will not let you soil your bed tonight. See! For how long I have been waiting with oil, scented soap-nut powder etc. O! Lord! Naarana, who that is beyond anybody’s reach, please won’t you come to mummy and take your bath?!?*”

Next, during the “*mantra-pushpam*” step of the TA “*kramam*”, although it is mandated that 4 brief chants from each of the 4 different Vedas (*rg*, *yajur*, *saama* and *atharvana*) must be solemnly recited, thereafter, one can choose from a variety of scriptural hymns, “*stuthi*” and “*stotra*” works and elaborate “*shloka*” incantations and recitals fit for the occasion.

It is a joyful experience to recite such exquisite selections of traditional Sanskrit and Tamizh verses. When all members of the household family join in these recitations, the experience gets heightened and intensified.

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Finally, for the “*saatrumarai*” step, there is a standard prescribed litany of verses in praise of Vishnu and the Sri Vaishnava “*guru-paramparai*” lineage.

To learn all the above poetry and “*shlokas*”, it should not take you more than a little bit of effort and a few weeks of practice to patiently to finally be able to memorize them and then begin using them fluently as “*tiruvaaradana krama*” chants, mantras and hymns. You can learn all of it from a qualified Sri Vaishnava practitioner who will gladly oblige if only you approached him with genuine purpose. Once memorized and practiced regularly in doing the ritual itself, you will find that the meaning, the significance and purport of the entire TA ritual will begin to dawn on you, and fill you up with a strange and ineffable spiritual beatitude.

I now sign off this letter to you, dear son, in the hope that I have in very small measure been able to answer satisfactorily the question you posed to me: “Why is it so necessary for a Sri Vaishnava to perform the daily ritual of “*Bhagavath Nithya-Tiruvaaraadanam*”?”

It is my fond hope that I have succeeded in disabusing you of any false notion that “*tiruvaaraadanam*” is “mere empty mechanical ritual” . . . Please banish all such thoughts.

More important is my other hope that, sooner than later, at some point in your lifetime, by the Grace of God, and after having well understood all the facts about “*bhagavath tiruvaaraadanam*” ritual I have tried my very best to explain to you, you will begin perhaps feeling the urge to perform it. If you do so, I have no doubt in my mind that you will reap many auspicious blessings in life that Srimann Naaraayana will confer upon you, your children, your family and community at large!

With all my blessings and love to you,

Appa

BOOK 11
Essays in tribute to Sri Vaishnava Acharyas



CHAPTER 54

“ABHEETI STHAVAM”:

The Sum of all Fearlessness

The “**abheeti-sthavam**” is a 29-stanza hymn in Sanskrit composed by the tallest amongst Sri Vaishnava philosophers and preceptors in the post-Ramanujacharya times, Swami Vedanta Desikan (1268-1369 AD). The hymn is devotional in principal intent, but it is in fact much more. It may be even regarded as a poetic analysis of the psychology of the sum of all fears: soulful loneliness, human frailty and futility . . . and death. This essay is an attempted insight into this timeless work.

Vedanta Desika has written copiously about Fear and Fearlessness. His references to this most primal of human emotions are strewn in almost all his “*rahasya*” (doctrinal), “*stotra*” (devotional), “*gadya*” (poetic), “*kaavya*” (drama) and “*vyaakhyaana*” (exegetic) works in Sanskrit.

In the principal Sanskrit “*stotra*” works (for which Desika is very popular to this day) like “*abheeti-sthavam*”, “*dayaa-satakam*” and “*ashta-bhujaashtakam*”, the poet-philosopher-polymath seems to have approached the subject of human Fear in an amazingly modern manner. The concepts of present-day practice and methods in clinical psychiatry seem to distinctly echo between the lines of religious poetry written by this great Sri Vaishnava “*AchArya*” of the 13th-century AD.

Allusions to Fear in his *stotra* the “*abheeti-sthavam*” carry muted tones of autobiographic experiences of Fear. On reading this hymn today, 750 years after it was composed, one senses he was describing the emotion out of first-hand, intimate knowledge of raw, palpable human fear.



When the Muslim armies of Malik Kafur, the general of Alauddin Khilji, the first Mughal invader of India, attacked and sacked the temple-town of Sri Rangam around 1327 AD, the community of Sri Vaishnavas there, led by religious leaders like Pillai Lokachariar and Vedanta Desikan were forced to flee the temple for safety. They took with them the only priceless treasures and symbols of Sri Vaishnavism they could.

While Pillai Lokachariar fled with the icon of Lord Ranganatha, the Deity of Sri Rangam, Vedanta Desikan—at that time in his late fifties in age—fled along with a band of followers with the “*sruta prakaasika*”, a hallowed philosophical treatise on Sri Ramanujacharya’s original commentary on the “*brahma-sutras*”, called “*Sri Bhaashya*”.

Unfortunately, barely had Desika and his followers crossed the outskirts of Sri Rangam when a stray contingent of the invading Muslim army discovered them. History notes that Vedanta Desika himself narrowly escaped being killed.

Several decades thereafter, having stared death in the face and known Fear first-hand, Desikan lived the life of a near-exile in a tiny hamlet, Sathyaakaalam, now in the State of Karnataka very near Melkote. During that time, he perhaps confronted Fear in all its manifestations: the fear of individual loneliness, personal futility, the specter of death and frailty of faith. Here, Vedanta Desika sent years in solitude,

contemplation and deep meditation upon Sri Lakshmi Hayagreeva, an avatar of Vishnu, and a deity who conferred wisdom and enlightenment. Though he lived in isolation, and away from family and close social bonds, he did not formally embrace ‘*sannyAsa*’, a life of ascetic renunciation.

During his long years of exile, Vedanta Desika longed for Sri Rangam and wished that the Sri Vaishnava faith be restored to its pre-eminent status in the land. He yearned for the faith to be rejuvenated with the full vigor and robustness of its founders, Nathamuni, Yamunacharya and Ramanujacharya.

On reading the “*abheethi-sthavam*”, one gets an extremely clear glimpse of the history of those times, as well as of the state of mind in which Desikan composed it. In the hymn, he invokes the awesome, terrible wrath of Lord Ranganatha and directs it towards all enemies of the faith. If poetic words could ever be described as a furious fusillade, this stanza in Sanskrit literature must certainly be one:

*kali praNidhi lakshaNaihi kalita shaakya lOkaayataihi,
turushka yavanaadhibhirjagati jrimbhamaaNam bhayam|
prakrishTa nijasakthibhihi prasabhamaayudhaihi panchabhihi,
kshiti tridasha rakshakaihi kshpaya ranganaatha ksaNaat|| Stanza 22*

Although this hymn is essentially a heartfelt prayer for divine succor, it is a many-splendored classic in many other respects as well. It is an easy handbook of reference for the theological theme of “*saranaagathi*”, the Sri Vaishnavite doctrine of self-surrender, containing as it does a variant each of the famous three “*charama shloka-s*” (of Sri Varaha in the Varaaha Purana, of Sri Rama in Valmiki Ramayana and of Sri Krishna in the Bhagavath-Gita). It is also a snapshot account of a slice of the history of Sri Rangam around the 13th-14th century. But what is interesting to me is that in this hymn where Desikan speaks of Fear as an emotion, one sees poetic flashes wherein ancient theology and modern psychology seem to echo one another in very subtle ways.

In Stanza 13 of the “*abheethi-sthavam*”, Vedanta Desika states the stark fact that Fear is the most deep-seated of human behavioral drives. A man is born with it, lives with it and goes to the grave with it. The poet thus in this verse squarely faces up to the question of Fear being a driver of human psychology.

*na vaktumapi sakyate naraka garbha vaasaadikam,
vapuschabahu dhaathukam nupiNa chintane taadrisham|
trivishTapa mukham thathaa tava padasya dedeepathaha,
kimatra na bhayaaspadam bhavati ranga prithveepate|| Stanza 13*

In stating the problem in such a brutally blunt and bland way, the poet seems to have anticipated over seven centuries ago, a methodology which is common today in modern psychiatric practice viz. getting the patient to encounter his Fear or phobia as the very first step in therapy.

In Stanza 12, the poet examines the general nature and causes of Fear as a debilitating mental condition and delves into the nature of what defines happiness and the fear of losing it. “Worldly happiness is derived from the small self-centered relationships we build around and for ourselves all our lives—wife, sons, relations, neighbors, servants and other familial or social anchors—and fear arises in us whenever these relationships fail, or they are lost. Fear arises because relationships do not endure. This is also exactly what modern psychiatry too deals with.

*agishTa sukha saNgadaih svakrita karma nirvartitaihi,
kaLatra suta sOdarAnuchara bhandhu sambandhibhihi|
dhana prabhritikairapi prachura bheethi bhEdhottaraihi,
na bhibhrati dhritim prabho tvadhanubhuuthi bhogaarthinaha|| Stanza 12*

In modern psychotherapy, after the patient has learnt to squarely face up to the nature of his problem, to place trust in the therapist and to openly seek his help, the former is encouraged to carefully examine and dissect the conditions and circumstances of his life and relationships. This is the phase when an intense and prolonged phase of interpersonal engagement occurs between therapist and patient. The therapist gently prods the patient into deep and honest self-analysis and stock-taking of his relationships with everything living or material that populates his life. Together they jointly plumb the psychological depths of Fear and its psychotic symptoms, if any. This is a long process, and often the patient “regresses” and must be coaxed and sometimes firmly commanded too to help him overcome deeply suppressed memories, emotions and inhibitions. The “**abheethi-sthavam**” seems to capture and suggest such “regressive” phases too of the mental struggle to overcome Fear. In Stanza 10, the poet’s words are significant in this regard:

*bibhEti bhavabhrit prabhO tvadupadesha teevraushadaat, kadhadhva rasa durvishe baLisha
bhakshavat preeyate| apathya parihaara dheer vimukha mitthamaakasmikee, tamapyavasare
kramaadavati vatsalaa tvaddayaa|| Stanza 10*

“O Prabho! What you prescribe for me and what you make me undergo and endure are like bitter medicine to me . . . You ask me to do things now which are alien to my nature. I am accustomed to the degenerate life. I find myself drawn to it again every time you draw me away from it. I feel like a fish that finds it hard to resist devouring the bait dangling before it even when it knows it means its end!”.

In the next phase of the patient’s therapy, clinical psychiatric practice explains he is evolving into a new person. He has learnt to conquer the self-doubt and trauma that Fear induces. But intermittently, the therapist perceives, the patient is plagued by irrational anxieties; that for some unnamed reasons, he may lose the support of the therapist; be deserted by him; and that he may become unhinged again. In Stanza 17, such feelings of angst are described in very evocative words:

*vishaada bahuLaadaham vishaya vargato durjayaat,
bibhEmi vrujinottarastvad anub huuthi vicchEdataha|
mayaa niyata naathavaanayamiti tvamarthaapayan,
dayaadhana jagatpatE dayita ranga samraksha maam|| Stanza 17*

In the post-cure period a patient, as the modern practitioner of psychotherapy knows, gradually transforms himself into a completely new person, acquires a new self-image and taps into powers of regeneration, creativity and goodness deep within himself. It is an experience of self-discovery. He exults in the feeling of being “liberated”, of needing nothing else in life but to be able to stay connected constantly with a source of power felt deep within. That state of mind is described in the joyous words of Stanza 7:

*ramaadayita rangabhuramaNa krishna vishNO hare,
trivikrama janaardana triyuga naatha naaraayaNa|
iteeva shubadhaani yah paTathi naamadhEyaani te,
na tasya yama vashyataa naraka paatha bheethih kutaha|| Stanza 7*



Sanskrit scholars will attest to the “**abheeti-sthavam**” being a minor masterpiece of Sanskrit religious poetry. But when one reads and savors it through the prism of modernity, one cannot fail to discern that it is an amazingly scientific delve into human psychology. It is a subtle portrayal of all manifestations of Fear that festering inside the human mind and yet, in the end, the “**sthavam**” offers a spiritual key to their conquest through a *mantra*, the sum of all Fearlessness:

*prabuddha guru veekshaNa prathitha vEnkaTEshOdbhavam, imaambhayasiddhaye paTatha
rangabharthuh sthuthim| bhayam tyajata bhadra mityabhidhadhat sa vah kEsavaha, svayam ghana
grNaa nidhirguNagaNEna gOpAyati|| Stanza 29*





CHAPTER 55

A STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

‘Paramapada Sopaanam’ of Swami Vedanta Desika
(Principal Exponent of Sri Ramanujacharya’s Visishtadvaita Philosophy)

One of the greatest Vedantic pathways to spiritual liberation is the Acharya Sri. Vedanta Desikan (a.k.a. Venkatanathan) shows us is available in a short work of his called *‘parama-pada-sOpAnam’*. It is magnificent work wherein he set out in a cogent and easily comprehensible manner his view of the way of life of a true Sri Vaishnava.

The *‘parama-pada-sOpAnam’* is one of the many *‘rahasya-granthAm-s’*, smaller works of esotericism, that Venkatanathan wrote to communicate lofty themes of Vedanta to ordinary people of the world in a simple and easy-to-understand form. Swami Venkatanathan’s collection of works that simplify what is otherwise extremely complex or esoteric in Vedanta (*‘rahasya’*) came to be generally called his *‘chillarai-rahasyam’* (*‘chillarai’* in Tamil means, ‘simple’). Since out of kindness for the ignorant commoner Desikan strove to create works that made Vedanta easy to follow, he came to be renowned as *‘vEdAntAchArya’* or *‘vEdAnta-guru’*.

‘Parama-padam’: The Most Exalted State of Existence

The Sanskrit word *‘parama-padam’* means ‘highest state of existence’. The word *‘sOpAnam’* is a little difficult to exactly translate. It is commonly understood to mean a hymn that describes anything in slow detail from ‘start’ to ‘finish’, from ‘head to toe’. (Many will remember here Desikan’s *‘stOtrA’* called *‘bhagavath-dhyAna-sOpAnam’* which is a hymn describing the beauteous form of the deity at SriRangam from the ‘feet onto the crown’.) *‘SOpAnam’* can also mean a many-tiered stairway, a sort of structure which climbs in height by means of many tiers of steppingstones. These stepping-stones are called *‘parianka’* in Sanskrit. Swami Desikan’s *‘parama-pada-sOpAnam’* thus refers to a step-by-step ‘stairway’ having many *‘parianka-s’* that lead, slowly but surely, from the bottom-most state of existence to the ‘highest state of human existence’.



What is '*parama-padam*'? It is said to be the abode of the Supreme Brahman or Being called by the name of '*nArAyaNa*'. It is otherwise called '*SriVaikuntam*'—the Province of God. This '*parama-padam*' is, however, not so much a physical place as a spiritual one. It is a state of existence in which there is unbounded, unceasing, and inexhaustible joy. Only those who have reached this state know this bliss; and having reached it they do not return to this world ever again to describe it for us. Even the Vedas and Upanishads that recognize this bliss and speak of it become very incoherent while describing it. The Taittiriya Upanishad, for example (in the *Brghuvalli*), while speaking of this bliss is unable to say no more than this: '*haa . . . ooh-hA . . . ooh-hA . . . hoo!*'

From Swami Desikan's '*parama-pada-sOpAnam*', we learn that all beings on earth seek only one purpose—and that is joy, bliss, or '*ananda*'.

Creatures like unicellular organisms like amoeba and bacteria, or other low-level creatures like insects and vermin, have extremely short lifespans. They live from a few hours to a few days only. Within that span of time, they seek only one purpose in life, i.e., mere survival. To survive they must eat. And their greatest joy or '*ananda*' in life is feeding.

Then there are other creatures like vertebrates, mammals, and reptiles whose lifespans extend from a few years to a decade or more. For them, as in the case of rabbits, for example, the purpose in life is not merely Survival but also self-perpetuation. During their lifespans, they seek to multiply their species as much as possible and in the face of harsh odds of nature. The activity of perpetuating themselves, i.e., procreation gives them great joy or '*ananda*'.

Amongst higher forms of living creatures, there are many species that live for much longer lifespans. Elephants and large apes, for example, are known to live for almost a hundred years. These creatures not only want to perpetuate themselves, but they also seek social proliferation. They build large communities and societies. They live within and work tirelessly for such social groups wanting all the time to gain acceptance, recognition, or domination within the social milieu. It is this pursuit of social proliferation which gives them the greatest joy or '*ananda*' in life.

Man, who as a species, is right at the top of the biological heap, is a unique creature. For him, the greatest source of joy lies not merely in survival, perpetuation, or proliferation. He seeks bliss in self-

fulfillment. Through work, strife, and human accomplishment of various kinds that include wealth, power, and self-gratification, man constantly seeks the greater joy or ‘*ananda*’ of self-fulfillment.

Now, unfortunately, all sources of joy or ‘*ananda*’ in this world, whether they are survival, perpetuation, proliferation, or fulfilment, all these sources of bliss are temporal. They are there to enjoy and experience only as long as a creature remains in its state of worldly existence. Furthermore, the joys of the world are not always of the same pleasurable intensity, these joys wax and wane with the tide and vicissitudes of life. (In the heat of summer, for example, ice cream is a source of delicious pleasure whereas, one would not even touch it in the freezing temperatures of winter. Again, the pleasures of youth are not available in old age, etc.)

We learn from the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ that this state of worldly existence, with its severely limited means of affording ‘*ananda*’, is the lowest state of human existence. From this state of limited, uncertain, and erratic joy, man would gladly seek to attain another higher state of existence

where ‘*ananda*’ is unlimited, eternal, and inexhaustible. Such a state of existence is called ‘*parama-padam*’, and it is that state of existence to which Swami Desikan—the ‘*vEdAnta-guru*’—provides a simple roadmap for all and sundry in this world to follow.

This ‘roadmap’ to ‘*parama-padam*’ is described by Swami Desikan to consist of a ‘stairway’ of nine distinct stepping-stones or ‘*parianka-s*’.

The Nine Steps to ‘*Parama-padam*’

In the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’, Swami Desikan put forward a Vedantic thesis in a very scientific and modern way. It is a thesis that shows man a pathway to personal progress and development from lower to the highest state of existence and experience. It is a ‘*vEdAnta-mArga*’ which shows us how to enrich our lives in an easy-to-follow nine-step program.

The nine-step program begins at the first stepping-stone as surely as it ends with the last. There are no alternate routes on this journey—just as there are none on a stairway. The ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ is a journey which leads only one way: upwards, straight from the low plains of worldly experience towards ‘*paramapada*’, the very summit of human experience in the province of God.

The nine ‘steps’ or ‘*parianka-s*’ are as follows:

- 1) *vivekam*
- 2) *nirvedam*
- 3) *virakti*
- 4) *bheeti*
- 5) *prasAda-hetu*
- 6) *utkramanam*
- 7) *archirAdri*
- 8) *divya-desa-prApti*
- 9) *prApti*

The first four steps from ‘*vivEkam*’ to ‘*bheethi*’ are collectively termed by Swami Desikan as ‘*adhikAra-parva*’. These deal with the various processes by which a man acquires the requisite ‘*adhikAra*’, qualifications, or eligibility, that enables him to proceed along the pathway to the next five steps.

The stepping-stone described as ‘*prasAdana-hetu*’, next, is termed by Swami Desikan as ‘*upAya-parva*’. It is the program that deals with the various practical measures man takes to get further ahead on the journey to ‘*parama-padam*’.

The last four stepping-stones viz. ‘*ut-kramaNam*’, ‘*archirAdi*’, ‘*divya-dEsa-prApti*’, and ‘*prApti*’ are all collectively put together by Swami Desikan in one program called ‘*phala-parvA*’. It deals with the aftermath of the journey already undertaken up until the point of the fifth ‘*parianka*’.

It is interesting to note that out of the nine steps above, a man is expected to take the trouble to scale only the first five. Steps 6 through 9 are easily traversed by man with the aid of divine grace. While some strenuous effort is certainly required of man to climb onto step 5, none is required thereafter. God assumes the burden and responsibility of ‘lifting’ the soul of Man from step 6 through step 9. The first five ‘*parianka-s*’ in the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ are thus so many ascending steps on a stairway; but the last four are said to be a bit like a modern escalator—one merely needs to step on it to be conveyed forward effortlessly.

While steps 1 through 5 are trodden with the physical body of man, the journey through steps 6 to 9 is believed to be undertaken without it, i.e., man’s spirit alone undertakes this leg of the journey.

While sometimes one can attempt to ‘hop-step and jump’ over ordinary stairways to accelerate one’s way up, it is not possible to do so on Swami Desikan’s ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’. Here one has to scale the height in proper ‘*krama*’ (methodically) and there are no shortcuts or slip-throughs. You cannot arrive at any given ‘*parianka*’ without first having landed on the immediately preceding one.

‘*VivEkam*’: Small Step for Man; Giant Leap for Mankind

Swami Desikan describes the first stepping-stone on the way up to ‘*parama-padam*’ as being the most difficult to ascend. Everyone in the world has a problem with it. ‘*VivEkam*’ is spiritual wisdom. It is the power of discrimination. It is the first among nine steps and is said to be the steepest and most difficult to climb. It is difficult because it represents man’s struggle to triumph over the single most grievous failing in life. It is a failing that makes him, for the most part in his lifetime, unable to differentiate between:

- the nature of truth (*satyam*) and the nature of falsehood (‘*anartham*’)
- the nature of good (*sat*) and what is evil (‘*a-sat*’)
- what promotes spiritual progress and what retards it
- what is the real purpose (the *summum-bonum*) of human existence on earth and what merely appears so

Rare is the person born with innate power of discrimination—‘*vivEkam*’. A Prahlada or Dhruva are rarities of creation. For the general mass of men true discrimination is never achieved in life. Even those who attain it to some extents are, however, unable to retain it constantly until the end of their lives. It is the lack of ‘*vivEkam*’ that is the source of endless ‘*vikAram*’—the tragedies and infirmities that fill Man’s life.

True ‘*vivEkam*’ dawns on a man the day he begins to sincerely ask himself, ‘*Who am I?*’ ‘*Where do I come from?*’ and ‘*Where am I going?*’ And more importantly, he begins to ask, ‘*Who or what is it within me that is constantly nagging me with these questions?*’

True ‘vivEkam’ is what makes a man realise that if joy or ‘ananda’ is the true purpose of human existence, then that purpose is never going to be served by the evanescence of worldly means. There is a greater ‘ananda’ to be attained beyond the material realm. Such joy transcends all those of this world (viz. survival, perpetuation, social proliferation, self-fulfilment, or gratification). It transcends time and space. Such transcendent bliss (‘parama-anandam’) is not some philosopher’s *will o’ the wisp*; it is real and worthy of pursuit.

Very few in the world however want to carry the conviction of such ‘vivEkam’. Much of humanity is instead perfectly happy chasing the little pleasures of this world, which is how, in the popular sense, normal, and ‘healthy minds’ should behave. They have simply no patience for the so-called ‘bliss that is beyond’. In the famous words of H. G. Well:

“None of us start life as philosophers [i.e., vivEki-s]. We become philosophers sooner or later or else we die before we become philosophical. The realization of life’s limitation and frustration is the beginning of the wisdom of philosophy . . . and of this that healthy mind [of the common man]—which otherwise takes life as it finds it and troubles no more about it, by its innate gift for incoherence and piecemeal evasion and incredulity—never knows.”



The story of the child Dhruva told in the *Srimadh BhAgavatham* by Vyasa is a classic illustration of the choice in life a ‘vivEki’ must take if he is resolved to pursue ‘parama-padam’.

Dhruva one day saw his stepbrother little Uttama seated on the lap of their father King Uttanapada. The king and his favourite queen, Surichi, were both coddling the child. Dhruva, being a little child himself, also wanted to be seated on his father, Uttanapada’s lap and so went up to the King and asked for the same affection. But Queen Surichi, Dhruva’s stepmother, would have nothing of it. She shoved Dhruva aside saying, ‘You shall have a place on neither your father’s lap now nor on his throne later! Now get out!’ Dhruva was thus denied the simple delight every little innocent child in this world longs to experience. He ran weeping inconsolably to his mother, Queen Suniti.

Dhruva’s mother, Suniti, was a great ‘vivEki’ herself. She took Dhruva in her arms and consoled him saying, ‘Do not worry, my child! Go into the forest and begin worshipping God. He will take you upon His lap . . . It is the seat that will give you happiness a thousand times greater than your father can ever give! Go my child, go seek the love of God instead of pining for love this world can never give!’

The child Dhruva took his mother’s good advice and went away to the forest to perform ‘tapas’ (spiritual penance), to seek the Joy of God that was infinitely more rewarding than any in this world. Dhruva was a true ‘vivEki’.



With the dawn of ‘vivEkam’ come the first few streaks of bright morning light, the first few rays of ‘gnyAna’ or spiritual knowledge. Man, then slowly awakens to a dim but real awareness of the following:

- Who am I? I am not this Body. I am Soul. (‘atma-svarUpa-gnyAna’)

- This soul is not mine (*na-mama*); it does not really belong here to this temporal, terrestrial world. It belongs rightly in a larger, more universal realm ‘beyond the yonder even’ (*‘athyatIshTa-dashAngulam*’ vide: the *‘purusha-sukta*’). In Vedantic parlance, this awareness is referred to as *‘Isvara-tattva-gnyAna*’.
- The purpose of human existence is to seek and realise such a Great One and restore this soul to Him, the rightful owner. The restoration is called *‘Atma-nivEdanam*’/*‘Atma-samarpaNam*’).
- Eternal and undiminished bliss lies in union with the Great One (*‘parama-purushArtham*’).

In the *‘parama-pada-sOpAnam*’, when Swami Desikan explains all the above concepts, they seem all so facile and self-evident. However, if we deeply reflect on the matter, we will be unable to deny that our day-to-day lives are, indeed, in many ways hopelessly far removed from Desikan’s concept of *‘vivEkam*’. Our life in this world, the choices and ways we take as we go along are all examples of the perfect opposite of *‘vivEkam*’. Nonetheless, if by some design or accident of fate, we all did become true *‘vivEki-s*’ as portrayed in the *‘parama-pada-sOpAnam*’, and if we were to all become Dhruva-s in our own right, then the first ‘small step’ taken by us would qualify to be a ‘giant leap for mankind’.

Once a man has attained *‘vivEkam*’, he is ready to step onto the next plane on the stairway viz. *‘nirvEdam*’.

‘NirvEdam’: The Dark Night of the Soul

Once a man has become a *‘vivEki*’, it is not long before he is beset with an emotion called *‘nirvEdam*’. This emotion is the next stepping-stone, the next *‘parianka*’ Desikan describes in the *‘parama-pada-sOpAnam*’.

After attaining the power of wise discrimination, a *‘vivEki*’ becomes aware of what is worth pursuing and what is undeserving of pursuit in life; of what will serve his spiritual end and what will hamper it. While this knowledge is no doubt cause for great happiness and represents spiritual advancement, the *‘vivEki*’ however cannot help feeling overcome by a sense of utter regret for the fatuous ways of his past. He begins to recollect all the folly and profligacy of his youth spent chasing the trivia of the world in the mistaken belief that they were the true sources of enduring happiness.

Such a man further reflects upon the petty ways in which he used to behave, upon the cheap earthly things he had hankered after and the Herculean efforts he had exerted to attain them. When he recollects the time and effort lost in chasing such unworthy things in the past, the *‘vivEki*’ cannot help a feeling of utter self-revulsion. It is this state of mind, filled as it is with intense self-revulsion, which is described by Desikan as *‘nirvEdam*’.

In the four thousand Tamil verses of the *‘divya-prabhandham-s*’, we notice that several Azhwars had also been tossed about in the throes of strong *‘nirvEdam*’. Their hymns are full of expressions of utter regret for the many days of folly that had filled their past. Out of abject ignorance of truth and the glory of God, they wail again and again, they had pursued and embraced nothing but falsehoods in life (*‘anartham*’) and had, as a result, lost much time and opportunity.

Some of the most poignant of such *‘nirvEdam*’ verses were sung by Tirumangai-AzhwAr in the opening decad of his magnificent Tamil work called *‘peria-tirumOzhi*’:

*vAdinEn vAdi varundinEn manatthAl
perun thuyar idummpayil pirandhu
koodinEn koodi iLayavar thammodu
avar tharum kalaviyE karuthi.*

(tirumangai-AzhwAr ‘periya-tirumOzhi’ 1.1)

*aaviyE! amudE! ena ninainthu urugI
avar-avar paNai mulai thuNaiyAyp
pAvIyEn uNarAthu etthanai pagalum
pazhuthupOy Ozhinthana nAttkkal.*

(ibid. 1.2)

The expression ‘*pAvIyEn uNarAthu etthanai pagalum pazhuthupOy Ozhinthana nAttkkal*’ is a heart-rending self-indictment indeed. Such ‘*pAsuram*-s’ of immense self-revulsion give one a fair idea of the nature of the ‘*nirvEdam*’-emotion as it envelops the soul of the ‘*vivEki*’ and the self-inflicted suffering he undergoes as a result in his sincere quest of God.

None of us are ‘*AzhwArs*’ and will never get anywhere near fathoming the true extent of their ‘*nirvEdam*’. But then we too, from time to time, in moments of individual travail or tragedy, do undergo and experience what may be called ‘dark nights of the soul’, don’t we? In those moments we become acutely aware how rapidly time has slipped away from us, and we suddenly realise then how far behind we have fallen back in attaining the true and cherished purposes of our lives. In such melancholy moments, like the English poet, Longfellow, we too are moved by a mood of deep *nirvEdam* to say sadly:

*Art is long, Time is fleeting,
Our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still like muffled drums are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.*

‘Virakthi’ and ‘VairAgya’: Distaste and Renunciation

When one completes the difficult journey up the first two steps of Swami Desikan’s ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ viz. ‘*vivEkam*’ and ‘*nirvEdam*’, it is said one is ready to climb onto the stairway’s next stepping-stone: *virakthi*’ and/or ‘*vairAgyam*’.

While ‘*nirvedam*’ is described as revulsion directed against oneself, *virakthi/vairAgyam* is said to be an emotion of revulsion directed outwards.

Desikan portrays here exactly what even modern psychology confirms—that any strong or intense emotion directed inwardly towards oneself will invariably get deflected outwards, at least some of it, against the external world. For example, if one loves oneself then ‘*loving thy neighbour*’ becomes easy and natural. On the other hand, an ‘*angry young man*’ who is ever raving and ranting against the world, deep down within himself, is a man terribly enraged with himself. (In the parlance of modern behavioral psychology—this phenomenon is described by experts as ‘projection syndrome’ which, in very elementary terms, means that a person tends to view the external world through the prism of his own inner emotions).

Desikan’s ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ describes how a ‘*vivEki*’s’ inwardly directed emotion of ‘*nirvEdam*’ manifests in an outwardly directed emotion. This emotion relates the inner state of the ‘*vivEki*’s’ mind to his external environment. The ‘*vivEki*’ gradually develops two distinct but co-existent mind-states:

(a) ‘*virakthi*’—a sense of distaste for, and (b) ‘*vairAgya*’—a yearning for distance from things worldly.

Together these two mind-states help to kick-start a process of slow transformation within man. It turns his active engagement with the world into a dispassionate one. A faint disdain for the mundane begins to quickly build up within him. The riches and pleasures of the world may be his for the mere asking, or for the taking, but somehow, and for reasons not fully fathomed, they do not hold the same allure they did previously before the emotion of ‘*virakthi/vairAgyam*’ descended upon the man.

We might recall here that before Buddha became ‘the *Buddha*’, the Enlightened One, he was Prince Siddhartha who suddenly one day came to be afflicted with a great and overpowering sense of ‘*virakthi-vairAgyam*’. And quite similarly, we also get a very good picture of the depth of the ‘*virakthi*’ emotion when we read the following Tamil ‘*pAsuram*’ of another of the mystic AzhwArs, Vipranarayanan, a.k.a Tondaradi-podi, who in his famous work called ‘*tirumAlai*’, sang:

vEdanoor pirAyUm nooru manisarthAm puguvarElUm;
pAthiyUm urangipOgum; ninradhir padhinaiyANdu;
pEthai bAlagan adhu AgUm; piNi pasi mUpputh thunbam;
AdhalAl, piravi vEndEn arangamA nagaruLAnE!

(tirumAlai—3)

If I were granted a lifetime of a hundred years, the AzhwAr says, I would not look forward to it since I know half of it will be wasted in sleep, the other half frittered away in youth. The rest will all be lost in old age or disease. If I thus have no time in this world in which to attain you, O Ranga, I despise it. I have no use for it.

After a while the emotion of ‘*virakthi*’ wanes and ‘*vairAgya*’—self-denial—waxes. The ‘*vivEki*’ soon begins to willingly let go of petty earthly indulgence. He gives up pleasure, comfort, luxury, and other delights of life to concentrate more and more on the effort of spiritual quest until pre-occupation with matters spiritual eventually overtakes, and later even excludes, mundane matters.

Swami Desikan himself, as we all know from his famous poem titled ‘*vairAgya-panchakam*’, was living example of ‘*virakthi/vairAgyam*’. When invited by his friend Vidyaranya to serve the royal court of the Vijayanagar Empire as poet laureate—a plum-post that would have secured for Swami Desikan a comfortable livelihood for the rest of his career—Desikan rejected it without hesitation.

The idea of serving a king, which many might have regarded as an opportunity of rare honour and privilege, seemed to Desikan utterly distasteful.



The ‘*ubhaya-vEdAnta*’ exponent, late SrImAn Mukkur Lakshmi-narasimhachariar (1945—2001 CE) used to recount in many of his public discourses a humorous anecdote illustrative of the nature of this emotion of ‘*virakthi/vairAgyam*’. The incident was narrated to him, he said, in breezy raconteur style by the forty-fourth Jeeyar, the pontiff of Ahobila Mutt, SrImadh Azhagiyasingar.

In his ‘*pUrvAshramam*’ (period before he entered the ascetic order), the pontiff was known as Swami Rajagopalachariar, a short-term resident of Mannargudi, S. India. As a resident there, he used to frequent the great Rajagopalaśwamy ‘*sannidhi*’ (shrine) there.

It was ‘*gokulashtami*’ one day (the day of celebration over the advent of the Krishna avatar) when Swami was returning from a visit to the temple. Just as he was about to step out of the temple, Swami was met by an old, wizened friend of many years.

This friend, who had his ‘*mEl-vastram*’ (a light cotton cloak) tied into a bundle, suddenly untied it on seeing our Swami. ‘Hello, Rajagopala,’ the elderly friend said, untying his little bundle, ‘Hello, Rajagopala, how are you? Did you have a good *darshan* of the deity?’

‘Yes, sir, indeed, and what about you? Did *gokulAshtami* celebrations go off well in your house?’ enquired our Swami.

‘Oh, yes, very well, indeed, Rajagopal. And here, I have some *bakshaNam* [sweets] from home for you! Please accept these.’ So, saying, the old friend offered Rajagopala Swami some home-made sweets and delicacies like *mysore-pAk*, etc. Our Swami accepted them all with touching kindness.

Next the old friend offered Swami a very special snack called in Tamil ‘*cheedai*’. This is a famous delicacy without which no ‘*gokulAshtami*’ is consummated in Tamil homes. It is made of flour rolled into small balls the size of playing marbles and deep-fried in oil to a magnificent golden hue. After it is well done, *cheedai* serves as everyone’s favourite snack because, being cute and ball-like in appearance, they look adorable; and also, because they are good and crunchy to bite into. Believe me, one gets a strange, pleasurable experience when one lobs a ‘*cheedai*’-ball into one’s mouth and proceeds to gnash it with gusto, producing through masticating jaws peculiar grating sounds (‘*kaRRu-muRRu*’, in Tamil!) which are in themselves a sort of music to gourmet ears! All in all, eating ‘*cheedai*’-balls is a delight that only ‘*cheedai*’-eaters would truly know!

Anyway, to return to our tale of the pontiff, the forty-fourth Azhagiyasingar, the old friend of his in the Mannargudi temple, seems to have offered our Swami a lot of ‘*cheedai*’ to enjoy. Swami began munching delightedly.

In a moment, seeing his old friend not partaking of his own delight, Rajagopala Swami offered some ‘*cheedai*’ back to the older one, saying, ‘Sir, why don’t you enjoy some *cheedai* yourself?’ The old one remonstrated, ‘No, no, Rajagopala, don’t force me. You know I am indeed extremely fond of *cheedai*; I used to love them. But these days I shun them.’

‘And pray tell me why, sir?’ said our Swami, the Azhagiyasingar of ‘*pUrvAshramam*’.

‘Well, you could say, Rajagopala, I am practising a kind of *virakthi* or *vairAgyam*,’ replied the old friend.

‘Oh, I see, and what is the cause for such severe *virakthi*, sir,’ queried Swami politely.

The old friend replied sadly, “Rajagopla, you know, in the old days I would have gobbled up all the *cheedai* in the world to my heart’s content. But alas today, as you can see, I have lost every single one of my molar teeth. So, I’m unable these days to enjoy this delicacy on *gokulAshtami* day.’

The forty-fourth Pontiff Azhagiyasingar, it seems, that day learnt a very important lesson on true ‘*virakthi/vairAgyam*’ that Mukkur Lakshminarasimhachariar related as follows:

When we practice *vairAgya*, as Swami Desikan describes it in the ‘*paramapada-sOpAnam*’, and deny ourselves enjoyment of things mundane, we should ask ourselves first whether the self-denial is genuine. Do we shun it because (a) we feel genuine revulsion for it, or whether (b) because we do not have the necessary means or capacity to indulge in its pleasurable enjoyment (a sort of ‘sour grapes’)?

‘If we practice *virakthi* in the former way [a], we can be said to be following Swami Desikan’s personal example of renunciation or self-denial as in the *vairAgya-panchakam*. If we practice *virakthi* in the latter way [b], then, we may be said to be following the example of the forty-fourth Azhagiyasingar’s

old friend of Mannargudi—who had given up eating *cheedai* only because, in his advanced years, he had lost the dental means to enjoy it!’

‘If you follow Swami Desikan’s example of *virakthi/vairAgyam*, you will immediately proceed to the next higher step on the *paramapada-sOpAnam*. If you follow the *vairAgyam* of the old gentleman of the Mannargudi temple, it will mean surely that you have failed to climb the first *parianakai* [step] of *vivEkam* even!’

‘*Bheeti*’: Holy Terror

The journey up the ‘stairway’ of ‘*paramapada*’ described by Desikan, we saw, has taken us so far from ‘*vivekam*’ at the bottom to ‘*vairAgya*’ where we presently are perched. At this stage of the journey a man, a ‘*vivEki*’, is seen to be considerably more detached than before from the clutches of human bondage. He does not hanker for the sights and delights of the world. His goals are now, instead, firmly centred around the true purpose of life: *parama-padam*.

But at precisely this stage in life, when he seems to be firmly set on course, man falls suddenly victim to a strange fear known as ‘*bheeti*’, the next stop on Desikan’s ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’.

The ‘*vivEki*’ is now suddenly overcome by a ‘holy terror’ (to use a peculiar phrase of the Western philosopher William James) because while he discovers earthly existence to be empty and sterile, the heavens too seem equally void and futile. He realizes the presence of an Almighty but is beset by fear and doubt: ‘Is there a place in *parama-padam*, the “Abode of All Goodness”, for someone like me—a real bag of innumerable sins? There seems to be no way of atoning for my sins. Would God ever admit me into His presence? Can I ever stand before Him and look Him in the face without cringing? Would I be deserving of that highest state called *parama-padam*?’

It is the echo of this ‘*bheeti*’, this ‘Holy Terror’ that Tondaradipodi AzhwaR gives vent to in the ‘*tirumAlai*’:

unnai kAnUm mArgam onrUm ariyamAttA manisaril durisanAi

mUrkkEn vandhu ninrEn: mUrkkEn mUrkkEnE!

(‘*tirumAlai*’—32)

‘Is there a path for an utter sinner like me to tread, O Ranga, and any hope to attain Thee? Being the lowest of beings on earth, I stand before Thee like a wretch! Oh wretched, wretched me!’

And once again:

meyyallAm pOgavittu, virikuzhalArir pattup

poyy ellAm pOdhinthu kOnda pOzhakkanEn vandhu ninrEn;

aiyanE! aranganE! wUn arUL ennUm Asai thannAl

pOyyannEn vandhu ninrEn; pOyyanEn, pOyyanEnE!

(ibid. 33)

‘Lord! My Ranga! I’ve been a wastrel all these years filled with nothing but vice and vileness! I wallowed in the arms of sluts! Yet I stand before you now, abjectly, hoping for your grace! I have lived in falsehood and depravity all these years! I stand before you now with no shame!’

When ‘*bheeti*’ takes hold of the ‘*vivEki*’, he wakes up rudely to see how vast the chasm of expiation is that he must wade through before ‘*parama-padam*’ can be reached. The thought makes him shudder and he gives up all hope of ever crossing it. Even if he did succeed in crossing it, would God ever consider

someone as irredeemable as him as proper candidate for redemption in ‘*parama-padam*’? What then is the value of persisting in the pathway of a journey if in the end he is unfit to finish it?

Such dark and complex feelings of deep ‘*bheeti*’ are very movingly echoed by Swami Venkatanathan too in the Sanskrit work titled ‘*abhIti-stavam*’ a sample of which is given below (verse 16):

*anUkshaNa samUthithE durita-vAridhow dUstarE
yadi kvachana nishkritirbhavathi sApi dOshAvilA I
thadItha-magathow mayi pratividhAna-mAdhIyathAm
svabUddhi-parikalpitham kimapi rangadhUrya tvaya II*

Ranga! There seems to be no way I can wash my sins off. Nor atone for it! There must be some unusual and mysterious way to get it done. I don’t know it. And none but You in this world knows. I beseech You, reveal it to me please.

‘*PrasAda-hEtu*’: The Balm of Bhakti; the Promise of Prappati

‘*Bheeti*’ afflicts a true ‘*vivEki*’ but not for a very long while. Wisdom sooner or later prevails over fear.

By patient effort and persistent faith, a ‘*vivEki*’ journeying upon the ‘*vEdanta-mArga*’ shown by Swami Desikan, eventually crosses all the hurdles of the ‘*adhikAra-parvA*’—viz. ‘*vivEkam*’, ‘*nirvEdam*’, ‘*virakthi*’, ‘*bheeti*’—and gradually but surely, as flower ripens into fruit, he becomes ready to embark on the second leg of the great journey of the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’—called the ‘*upAya-parva*’.

The experiences of ‘*nirvEdam*’, ‘*virakthi*’, ‘*vairAgyam*’, and ‘*bheeti*’ have all by now profoundly stirred his soul. But they have not shaken or broken it. On the contrary, by the time he approaches the new stage in life—the stage of ‘*prasAda-hetu*’—even the emotion of fear or ‘*bheeti*’ has made him much stronger in spirit than he himself is probably even aware of. The illumination of spiritual wisdom (‘*vivEkam*’) and the long practice of renunciation (‘*vairAgyam*’) together enable him to finally seal the victory of the spiritual over the profane. He is ready now, once and for all, to leave behind the mundane. He is eager to embrace the sublime, absolutely.

How does man emerge from the dark and terrible cave of ‘*bheeti*’ into the sunlit and cheery vale of ‘*prasAdana-parva*’? How is it possible to make the magical transition from the painful and unruly feelings of ‘*virakthi*’ and ‘*bheeti*’ to the relative calm of ‘*prasAda-hEtu*’? How is one enabled to move from the holy terror of ‘*bheeti*’ to the hale self-confidence of the new phase of journey on the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’?

The answer given by Swami Venkatanathan is that it is made possible by the grace of God viz. His extreme compassion, his ‘*dayA*’.

The ‘*bheeti*’-filled ‘*vivEki*’ is by now teetering at the very edge of a deep moral precipice. A grave spiritual paralysis has seized him. He is filled with despair. It is a moment of crisis. The man is helpless and just does not know what next or else to do.

This state of mind the man of ‘*bheeti*’ has reached is called in Sanskrit ‘*naicchyAnu santAnam*’. In Tamil they call it ‘*avai-adakkam*’, meaning an acute awareness of one’s real spiritual incapacity. In the Mahabharatha, the welter of feelings that sped through Draupadi’s mind, as her modesty was being outraged in the royal court of Hastinapur, is perfect illustration of ‘*bheeti*’ and ‘*naicchyAnu santAnam*’. Desikan once wrote of precisely such a complex emotion of fear-cum-despair in the poignant ‘*stOtra*’, the ‘*abhIti-stavam*’ (stanza 3):

yadadhya mitha-buddhinA bahula-mOha-bhAjA mayA
gUNa-gratitha-kAya-vAngmanasa-vrutti-vaichithrayatha: I
atarkita-hitAhita-krama-visEsha-mAraBhyatE
tadapyuchita-marchanam parigruhANa rangEswara II

Rangeswara! I am a person of mean intellect. I am filled with ‘mOha’—ignorance and delusions. My life has been nothing but an unending stream of folly, indiscretions, and sin. My mind, senses, and speech do not obey me. Each goes its own way. There is neither rhyme nor reason in the way I lead my life today (in the language of lofty Vedanta, this is called lack of ‘karaNatraya-sArupyam’ or ‘sAmarasyam’ in life). O Ranga! My Lord! I am utterly confused and fearful, I do not know what to do, what steps or expedient, what ‘krama’ or ‘hitAhita’ to adopt to get myself out of this great moral morass into which I have sunk.

Vedanta teaches us that the mental state called ‘*naicchyAnu santAnam*’ is the first ever tell-tale sign in man that he has become an ‘*adhikAri*’, that he has graduated to a certain ripe stage in life where he is ‘qualified’ at last to receive God’s compassion or ‘*dayA*’. In the stage of ‘*vivEkam*’ man’s awareness of ‘*Isvara-tattva*’ or God is born. In the state of ‘*naicchyAnu santAnam*’ when the ‘*dayA*’ of God is at hand, man’s quest for ‘*hita*’ begins. ‘Hita’ refers to the means, the vehicles (‘*upAya*’) that one uses for conveyance unto God. A means to reach ‘*parama-padam*’. Together these constitute the triad of elements in the formulation of ‘*tattva-hita-purushArtha*’—the famous equation of life propounded by VisishtAdvaita.

In the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ the ‘*hita*’ chosen by man are two in number. He chooses one of them: (a) ‘*bhakti*’, the path of devotion, a relatively more difficult ‘*upAya*’ or vehicle than the other one, or (b) ‘*prapatthi-mArga*’, the path of absolute surrender. Both vehicles, i.e., both ‘*upAya*-s’ take man to the same destination *en route* the ‘*prasAdana-parva*’. Both have full sanctions of the Vedantic scriptures. And both are perfectly effective anti-dote against ‘*bheeti*’, the holy terror of man.

The man who chooses the path of ‘*bhakti*’ is attracted toward one or more of the following ‘*upAya*’:

sravanam kirtanam vishnO: smaranam pAda sevanam I
archanam vandanam dAsyam, sakyam atma-nivEdanam II
 (Srimadh-bhAgavatham)

In the above lines, nine basic aspects of ‘*bhakti*’ are spelt out which in turn characterize the typical behaviour of men who have taken to the path of devotion on the ‘*prasAdana-parva*’:

- (1) **sraVaNam**: deriving immense joy out of listening to the accounts and anecdotes of the ‘*avatAric*’ exploits of God as narrated by ‘*itiHAsA-purANa*’
- (2) **kirtanam**: singing the glories of God, e.g., ‘*sankirtanam*’, ‘*bhajanam*’
- (3) **smaraNam**: being immersed in constant contemplation of the divine, e.g., ‘*japam*’, ‘*mananam*’, ‘*bhagavath-chintanam*’
- (4) **pAda-sevanam**: employed in the service of God and godly institutions, e.g., ‘*kovil-kainkaryam*’, ‘*bhAgavata-sishrusham*’
- (5) **archanam**: offering with utmost love little tokens of devotion to God, e.g., flower, fruit, water, leaf (‘*pushpam*, *phalam*, *tOyam*, *patram*’)
- (6) **vandanam**: ceaselessly prostrating to the divine (‘*sAshtAnga-dandasamarpaNam*’, ‘*namaskaraNam*’)

(7) *dAsyam*: leading one's lifetime as if one were a mere servant of God ('*dAsatvam*', divine subservience)

(8) *sakyam*: firmly believing that God is sole and constant companion in life

(9) *atma-nivEdanam*: offering up one's soul completely unto God

The man of bhakti overcomes '*bheeti*' easily through one or more of the above '*upAya*'. As he becomes more and more immersed in the above activities, he gains more and more inner tranquility.

And this in turn makes him ever more engrossed in '*bhakti*'. In this state he wishes for nothing else in the world but to be left alone to carry on uninterrupted '*dAsyam*', '*vandanam*', '*archanam*', etc. He longs for nothing else but to stay close to sacred places of worship and pilgrimage. He seeks the company of none but fellow passengers on the path of bhakti. He has ears for nothing but the songs of God and the stories of his '*avatAra-leelas*'. He 'eats, drinks, sleeps, and dreams' of none but his chosen God, like Krishna, Rama, or Govinda.

Kulasekhara AzhwAr in one of his very famous hymns in praise of the Lord of Tiruvengadam, gives us a very graphic portrayal of the mental state of such a man of '*bhakti*' who has turned his back finally, unconditionally, and irrevocably upon the mundane view of life. Such a man does not look back ever. He has 'burnt his bridges' completely with the world. He is willing now to pay any price, go to any lengths and use any means, if only it will take him a little nearer God, and so that he can sing and dance about Him:

aanAtha selvatthu arampaiyargaL tar sUzha
vAnALUm selvamUm mann-arasUm yAn vEndane;
thEn Ar pUnjOlaith tiruvEnkata sunaiyil
meenAyp pirakkUm vidhi udaiyane aavEnE.

(4.2 'perumaltirumOzhi')

sediyAy valvinnaigaL theerkUm tirumAlE!
nediyAnE! vEngadavA! Nin kOyilin vAsal
adiyArUm vAnavarUm arampayarUm kiddanthu eyyangUm
padiyAyy kiddanthu Un pavazhavAyy kAnbEnE!

(ibid. 4.9)

'For but a fleeting glimpse of your lovely coral-hued lips, O God of Venkatam, if you ask me, what would I not gladly give up in this world, what can I say? I will give up a life of wealth, power, and glory! I will give up dancing belles decked in gold and best finery! Why, I'd give up everything, my Lord, to live as mere fish in your temple tank . . . or even as that mute slab of stone stretching across your gilded doorstep!'

As the emotion of '*bhakti*' completely overtakes the man, all previously predominant emotions of '*nirvEdam*', '*virakthi*', and '*bheeti*' gradually begin to fade away. In their place, the man of '*bhakti*' experiences nothing but tranquillity and immense peace within himself. There are no more dark nights for the soul. Constant '*bhagavath-smaraNam*' ('*para-bhakti*') brings in its wake clear knowledge ('*para-gnyAnam*'), a sense of sweet contentment in life and most important of all, an intense and overpowering sense of communion with God ('*parama-bhakti*') throughout one's living moments in the world.

Such tranquillity and contentment brought about by ‘bhakti’ is described in two extremely moving ‘pAsuram-s’ by Peria-AzhwAr in the decad titled ‘senniyOngu’:

paravai Eru param-purudA! nee ennaik kaikOnda pin
 piravi ennUm kadalUm vattrip perUmpadam aaginradAl;
 iravu seyyUm pAvakk kAdu theekkOLi vEginradAl;
 arivai ennUm amuda aaru talaipattri vAyykOndathE!

(peria-azhwAr tirumOzhi—5.4.2)

‘Ever since You took me into your service and contemplation, My God, the ocean of my earthly misery has dried up completely! It serves me now only as sacred space. The dark forests of karma, with the treacherous death traps of sin they had laid for me, are now all burning like raging forest fires. Now, pure Knowledge, like a sweet stream of amuda [ambrosia], has gripped me in a tide of bliss to ride me away on a wave unto eternity!’

ananthanpAlUm garudanpAlUm
 aiythu nOyythAga vaitthu
 en manatthUlEy vandhu vaigI vAzhacheyythAy, empirAn!
 ninnaindhu ennUlIE ninru nekkuk-kaNgaL asumbu Ozhuga
 ninnaindhu-irundhE siramam teerndhEn nEMi nEdiyavanE! (ibid. 5.4.8)

‘Now that You have entered my soul, my loving God, you have given me a new life! My throbbing heart melts at every moment that it dwells upon You! My eyes are awash with tears of joy! My Lord, I tell You, I have ended all my miseries by mere thought of You!’

Thus, cured of the terror of ‘bheeti’, the man of bhakti happily lives out his life until the very end exactly as the AzhwAr says, ‘ninnaindhu-irundhE siramam teerndhEn nEMi nEdiyavanE!’

Next, we ask, how does the man who chooses the easier path of ‘prapatthi’ overcome his fear, and begin also to live life as happily ever after as the man of ‘bhakti’?

The man who chooses ‘prapatthi’ sees himself too in a truly helpless situation. His ‘naicchyAnu santAnam’ is no less than that of the man who has chosen ‘bhakti’. But unlike the latter, this man knows he is simply incapable of the discipline of mind and body that the practice of life-long ‘bhakti’ requires. The nine articles of ‘bhakti’ viz.

sravanam kirtanam vishnO: smaranam pAda sevanam I archanam vandanam dAsyam, sakyam
 atma-nivEdanam II

The above nine ‘upAya’ of Bhakti are far too daunting for an ordinary man. They involve unceasing, unrelenting, and the most intense ‘upAsana’ (practice and perseverance) far beyond the capacity of mere mortals. So, what then does such a man that leaves the path of bhakti to take up the route of ‘prappati’ do?

He is said to perform the act of absolute self-surrender, *saranAgati*’.

Invariably, this process is hastened, or catalyzed, by the man’s encounter with a mentor, a ‘sadAchAryA’ or guru who appears in life and enlightens him about the proper way a ‘prappanna’ (he who has formally performed ‘prapatthi’ or surrender) should lead life the rest of the days destined upon earth. Madhura-kavi AzhwAr in his ‘kanninun-siru-tAmbu’ spoke of the good fortune that befalls such a man who encounters a guru or ‘achAryA’ who, like a boatman ferrying one across the river, takes upon himself

the responsibility to lead the man of ‘*bheeti*’ from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from fear to fearlessness and from the misery of ‘*samsAra*’ to the endless ‘*ananda*’ of God.

nannmayyAl mikka nAn-maraiyAlargaL
punmai aaga karuthuvar aadalin
annaiyAyy atthanAyy
ennai aandidUm thannmaiAn
sadagOpan en nambiyE. (stanza 4)

Worthy scholars full of grace
Had found me worthless in my ways . . . But father, mother both in one,
Is Sadagopan, who now rules my days.

mikka vEdiyar vEdathinn utpOrUL
nirka pAdi en nenjUkkUL niruthinnAn;
takka seer sadagOpan en nambikku
aatpukka kAdhal adimai payananrE. (stanza 9)

The deepest core of Vedic thought
He sang in song and taught it to my heart SadagOpan, my Lord and my Love—
He is my purpose, and I his slave.

Such a man who has found a guru, and thanks to whose grace he has also found the proper means to perform ‘*prapatthi*’, such man lives his life swearing eternally by five cardinal principles of *saranaagati*:

- (1) ‘*anukulasya sankalpah*’: resolve in life to do only those deeds that are pleasing to God
- (2) ‘*pratikulasya varjana*’: resolve to abjure deeds unfavourable to God
- (3) ‘*mahA visvAsam*’: be unwavering in faith in God
- (4) ‘*karpannyOkthi*’: be constantly aware of one’s spiritual helplessness
- (5) ‘*atma-nikshEpa*’: submit the burden of protecting one’s soul into the hands of God

As a ‘*prappana*’ strictly carries out in life the five ‘prescriptions’ of ‘*prapatthi*’, ‘*bheeti*’ begins to fade away. Peace, joy, and contentment descend upon the world for him in the same fashion as we saw they did in the case of the man of ‘*bhakti*’. The ‘*prapanna*’, after attaining this stage of the ‘*paramapada-sOpAnam*’, lives a carefree life merrily carrying on with the rest of his days on earth, faithfully and cheerfully. He has *absolutely nothing* to fear (*a-bheeti*)—much like Venkatanathan himself.

In a short hymn called ‘*ashtabhUjAshtakam*’, Swami Desikan, echoed this fearless state of mind of the ‘*prapanna*’ in the words:

‘bhayam kUtasyAt tvayi sAnukampE; raksha kuthasyAt tvayi jAtharOshE’!

Meaning:

Where is the need to fear when I am Your protégé, my God? And if I am not your protégé,
where is the escape from fear?

In another ‘*stOtra*’ titled ‘*nyAsa-dasakam*’, in verse 5 and verse 6, Swami Desikan, pretty much expresses the same feelings of ‘*fearless self-assurance*’ enjoyed by the man who has chosen the path of ‘*prappati*’ in life:

tvachhE-shathvE sthira-dhiyam tvatprAptyEka prayOjanam I
nishidha kAmyarahitam kUrUmAm nityakinkaram II
swAmi svashEsham sva-vasham sva-bharathvEna nirbharam I
sva-datha-svadhiyA svArtham svasmin nayas-yathi mAm svayam II

‘The Lord, of His own accord, will take me unto Him; and he will do so for His own sake; I am certain of this! I am but a willing servant under His reign; I have no responsibility even unto myself; that great burden is all His own. I have no fear!’

Thus, indeed, do both the man of ‘*bhakti*’ and the man of ‘*prapatthi*’ conquer the world-weariness of ‘*virakthi*’ and the holy terror of ‘*bheeti*’ and live out their time on earth as happy and fearless souls.



A student of human psychology might find it rather intriguing how man’s revulsion for the world in the emotion of ‘*virakthi*’ could magically turn into happy acceptance in the state of ‘*bhakti*’? He would want to probe what happens to the mind of the man of *bhakti* or *prapatthi* that deep feelings of world-weariness and fear (‘*virakthi*’ and ‘*bheeti*’ as expressed in Tondar-adipodi AzhwAr’s ‘*tirumAlai*’) turn into tranquil contentment and celebration (as seen in the verses of Kulasekara AzhwAr).

The answer to the question lies in an extraordinary anecdote from the life of a great Sri Vaishnava ‘*achArya*’ of SriRangam who lived about a century before Swami Venkatanathan. His name was Parashara Bhattar, the spiritual heir of Ramanujacharya. Bhattar served as the chief priest of the temple at SriRangam all his life and was one of the most ardent devotees of the deity there.

Bhattar one afternoon was teaching his disciples the value of ‘*virakthi/vairAgya*’, the importance of renouncing the world in one’s quest of the eternal. He gave a stirring lecture to them on the grossness of the ‘*sarira*’ (the body), its impermanent nature, its kinship with the terrestrial world and how both deserved our utmost ‘*virakthi*’ and ‘*vairAgya*’.

Bhattar’s students were all enthralled and moved by the idea of renunciation. They resolved to put it to practice immediately. Many came up to him and said, ‘Sir, thank you for your *upadEsam* [exhortation]. We have resolved that from this very moment we shall observe *vairAgyam* and *virakthi* in our personal lives. We shall renounce this world and spurn all things material. With your blessings [*anugraham*] we shall progress in our spiritual pursuit.’ Bhattar wished them Godspeed.

The morning after marked the dawn of a very auspicious day. There was an ‘Utsavam’ (a processional festival) at the SriRangam temple accompanied by great religious fanfare. Crowds milled, festoons were strung, and banners flew everywhere; there were ‘*gOshti-s*’ (chanteurs) singing the ‘*veda*’ and ‘*prabhandAm*’; pipers and drummers too; and throngs of devotees filled the streets of SriRangam eagerly awaiting the festive procession of the deity to emerge out of the sanctum- sanctorum in a gilded palanquin to grace the crowds of worshippers.

Both Bhattar and his disciples too stood in the gathering. But when they saw their guru, the disciples were astonished. They saw him dressed in the finest silk (*pattu*) raiment, his ‘*mEl-vastram*’ (loose cloak) was of even finer fabric. Bhattar had smeared his body all over with scented sandal-wood paste.

His body and forehead shone with a dozen mighty ‘*urdhvapUndra*’ marks (ceremonial marks). He had even decked his ‘*sikhA*’ (traditional coiffure) with exotic and fragrant flowers! Even more ostentatious was the way Bhattar wore diamond ear-studs (‘*kadukan*’) and kept turning his majestic head this way and that, just to draw the attention of everyone to their razzle-dazzle!

When they saw their guru bedecked in all that finery, Bhattar’s ‘*sisHyA*-s’ could not help uncharitable thoughts. ‘Ah! Here is a guru whose sermons roar and whose deeds squeak,’ they said to themselves. ‘What a sanctimonious humbug, the great Parashara Bhattar is! He teaches us renunciation and practices the very opposite!’

One disciple decided to confront the guru about the hypocrisy: ‘Sir, you gave us a stirring lecture last evening on the virtue of *virakthi* and *vairAgyam*. Looking at yourself now would you say you are a man of noble renunciation? You are dressed like a mannequin! Where has your *vairAgya* gone?’

Bhattar smiled and led the disciple down SriRangam street to a large ‘*pandal*’ (a sprawling makeshift canopy erected at street corners on festive occasions). He pointed to one of the bamboo poles supporting the structure and asked, ‘Tell me, boy, what is this?’

‘It is a bamboo pole, sir,’ replied the disciple. ‘And what is this that’s wound around the pole?’

‘It’s a streamer, sir, woven out of the bark fibre of the coconut tree.’

‘And how does it look?’ asked Bhattar.

‘It looks very pretty and colourful to me. They have painted it for the occasion, as you can see,’ remarked the disciple.

‘And what is this one here?’ continued Bhattar.

‘It is a festoon of the leaves of the banana tree [*thOraNum*].’ ‘And how does it look?’

‘Why, it looks lush and pleasing to the eye, sir,’ replied the disciple. ‘And, boy, tell me now what is this here?’ Bhattar went on.

‘A colourful banner made of leaves of the mango tree [*mAvalai-kodi*], sir.’ ‘And how does the banner look?’

‘It’s been plaited together with floral wreaths; it looks bright and festive indeed!’ said the disciple.

Sri. Parashara next drew the boy closer to him, looked him in the eye, and spoke, ‘Now, answer me, boy. The streamer, the festoon, and the banner here, which you say all look so very pretty, why have all these been strung up here on this *pandal*?’ The disciple thought hard for a moment before answering, ‘Sir, these have been put up here for the occasion of Lord Ranga’s *utsavam*.’

‘Wrong’, said Bhattar, ‘I say, the streamer, festoon and the banner have been put up here not so much for the occasion of Lord Ranga’s procession as for the purpose of making this *pandal* look pretty! What do you say to that?’ asked Bhattar.

The disciple fell silent and contemplated Bhattar’s remark for a full minute. And then in a flash of comprehension he understood what Bhattar was trying to tell him. The disciple looked up into Bhattar’s face. The tears welled up in his eyes. He fell at his guru’s feet and prostrating began beseeching him:

‘Please forgive me, O sire! Please pardon this sinner. I misunderstood your lesson on renunciation! But now I realise what true *virakthi* and *vairAgya* is, sir!’

Bhattar gathered up the young disciple, stroked his tearful cheeks, and whispered, ‘My dear one, if it were not for the Lord’s festive procession this morning would there be need for this *pandal* here?’

Similarly, if it were not for God's will [*ichcha*] would there be any need for this world [*prakriti*]? Would there be need for even you and me [*jivAtmA*'s]? Now when they decorated this *pandal*, this thatched canopy with streamers, festoons and banners, they did it, of course, to enhance its beauty. But was that the real purpose? No, not at all! This canopy was beautified only for the sake of the deity, isn't it? All for our beloved Ranga's procession, right? If Ranga didn't come this morning, would any fool take the trouble of hanging streamers and festoons around this piece of dumb, dead timber? If it were not for His *utsavam* where would these silly festoons and banners belong? In the dustbin, right? We would treat them all then with a kind of *virakthi*, wouldn't we? They would then serve no purpose other than as domestic brooms perhaps, or as firewood for the kitchen?"

Bhattar continued, 'When we talk of *vairAgyam*, we are not referring to mere acts of renunciation but to the underlying emotion of such acts. So long as we are unable to perceive this world as being occasioned by and for the sole will and pleasure of God, it deserves nothing but our *virakthi*. But once we realise that this world too—like streamers, festoons, and banners here—exists merely to serve the Almighty's purpose then we should embrace it with all our heart. We should freely rejoice in this world! This is what is meant by true *bhakti*!

'When *bhakti* begins to fill our hearts, even ordinary objects of the world that otherwise arouse our *virakthi* get suddenly invested with divine purpose. When that happens, everything in this world suddenly assumes a different form, colour, and meaning altogether! The whole world becomes one large festive occasion—an *utsavam* for God—and everything in it becomes for us valid cause or reason to celebrate His glory!

'Now, why do I wear all these fine clothes and diamond ear-studs? To my mind they serve no better purpose than these streamers, festoons, and banners here. To me this body [*sarira*] of mine is like this *pandal* erected here. I beautify it with clothes, sandalwood scent, and diamond ear-studs solely for God's occasion and pleasure.'

'Remember, my dear one, the practice of *vairAgya*, the renunciation of this world, by itself, is never virtue. It becomes virtue only if it makes you realise the *sarira-sarIri sambhandha* principle—the body-soul nexus that underlies and rules the relationship between man and God. Without such realisation *virakthi* or *vairAgyam* remains mere pretension and vain effort.'



Reading the anecdote about Parashara Bhattar one is also reminded of the wise, old Zen Master of the Orient who said, 'Before I attained enlightenment, I used to chop wood and carry water loads. After I attained enlightenment, I still chop wood and carry water loads. The difference is that what was burden before became picnic after.'

'UtkramaNam': The Right of Way

Once a man has journeyed through the happy '*prasAdana-parva*' stage of life, he becomes ready to ascend the next higher stepping-stone viz. the '*parianka*' called '*utkramanam*', the sixth milestone in Desikan's nine-tiered '*parama-pada-sOpAnam*'.

This '*utkramana*' stage is reached when a man, either as '*bhaktA*' or '*prapanna*', is ready to shed his mortal coils. When the soul of such a man is ready to leave its earthly and decrepit body, it is said to be

on the verge of the ‘*utkramana*’. Beyond this point, the journey to ‘*parama-padam*’ is undertaken by the ‘*Atma*’ as it quickly sheds its gross and physical body as so much unwanted ‘excess baggage’.

If we think about it deeply, many of us do not fear death itself so much as we fear the act of dying. We are filled with morbid anxiety whenever we think of all the gruesome motions of dying, we must all, sooner or later, surely undergo. The fear is made worse when we recollect how, at some time or the other, a family member of ours, or perhaps some friend or acquaintance, gave up the ghost’, as they say. We remember vividly having watched the slow and agonizing process through which

body and soul bade each other goodbye in the terminal moments of a person’s time on earth. We know thus from our own first-hand experience that the act of dying is never at all a pleasant sight. It is, in fact, a very ugly and unseemly sight (*vikAram*’) and hence we cannot really help feelings of great unease, if not real dread about it.

In six powerfully evocative Tamil ‘*pAsuram-s*’, the great Peria-AzhwAr in his ‘*tirumOzhi*’ graphically portrayed the deep dread that fills the heart of man as it contemplates upon the indignity of dying:

372:

*seeyinaal seRindhERiya puNmEl*seRRalERik kuzhambirundhu* eNGgum- eeyinaal arippuNdu
mayaNGgi*ellai vaay senRu sErvadhan munnam* vaayinaal n^amO n^aaraNaa
venRu*maththahaththidaik kaihaLaik kooppi* pOyinaal pinnai iththisaikku enRum*piNaik
kodukkilum pOhavottaarE.*

373:

*sOrvinaal poruL vaiththadhuNdaahil*sollu sollenRu suRRum irundhu* aarvinavilum
vaaythiRavaadhE*andhakaalam adaivadhan munnam*
maarvam enbadhOr_kOyil amaiththu*maadhavan ennum dheyvaththai n^aatti* aarvamenbadhOr
poovidavallaarkku*aravathaNdaththil uyyalumaamE.*

374:

mEl ezhundhadhOr vaayuk kiLarndhu mEl midaRRinai uLLezha vaaNGgi* kaalum kaiyum vidhir
vidhirththERik*kaNNuRakkam adhaavadhan munnam* moolamaahiya oRRaiyezhuththai*moonRu
maaththirai uLLezha vaaNGgi* vElaivaNNanai mEvudhiraahil*viNNahaththinil mEvalumaamE.*

375:

*madi vazhi vandhu n^eer pulan sOra*vaayilattiya kaNYchiyum meeNdE* kadai vazhi vaarak
kaNdamadaippa* kaNNuRakkam adhaavadhan munnam*
thodai vazhi ummai n^aayhaL kavaraa*soolaththaal ummaip paayvadhun seyyaar* idaivazhiyil
n^eer kooRaiyum izhaveer*irudeekEsan enREththavalleerE.*

376:

*aNGgam vittavai aindhun ahaRRi*aavi mookkinil sOdthitha pinnai* saNGgam vittavar_kaiyai
maRiththu*paiyavE thalai saayppadhan munnam* vaNGgam vittulavum kadaRpalli
maayanai*madhusoodhananai maarbil- thaNGga vittu vaiththu* aavadhOr karumam
saadhippaarkku* enRum saadhikkalaamE.*

379:

*vaayoru pakkam vaaNGgi valippa*vaarndha n^eerk kuzhik kaNkaL mizhaRRa**

*thaay oru pakkam thandhai oru pakkam*thaaramum oru pakkam alaRRa* thee Oru pakkam
sErvadhan munnam* seNGgaNmaalodum sikkena suRRa- maay* oru pakkam n^iRka
vallaarkku*arava thaNdaththil uyyalumaamE.*

In the above stanzas, Peria-AzhwAr describes the physical act of dying in frighteningly familiar terms indeed! He pans the gruesome picture of a dying body covered with pus-filled sores on which flies begin to forage, the limbs going into paralytic seizures. Breathing agonized, eyes rolling out of the sockets, mouth foaming. And while spouse or parent wails and beats the breasts in grief, other kith and kin stand huddled in silence around the body muttering, ‘Now that this fellow is nearly gone, wonder how much of his ill-gotten wealth he left me in his will!’



The reasonable question that now squarely faces the man of ‘bhakti’ (or ‘prapatthi’) on the journey up to ‘parama-padam’ on Swamy Venkatanathan’s ‘vEdAnta-mArga’ is this: Do I too have to undergo this painful and dreadful ‘vikAram’ of death? After all these years of ‘bhakti’ I have felt and shown God will He consign me in my last moments on earth to suffer the same indignity of death that I have seen so many others before me in this world undergo?

The answer is ‘No!’ The man who has climbed up the first five steps of the ‘parama-pada-sOpAnam’, and who has faithfully embraced either ‘bhakti-upAya’ or ‘prapatthi’, has earned the privilege to enjoy the fruits of his hard endeavour in the ‘phala-parvA’ section of ‘parama-pada-mArgam’. He has earned the ‘right of way’, so to say, on the road of ‘utkramana’. Hence there is no question of he having to suffer the various ‘vikAra-s’ and horrors of death described by Peria-AzhwAr in the ‘pAsuram-s’ we saw above. What is this ‘right of way’? What is this ‘utkramana’ which exempts and saves the ‘bhakta’ from the indignities and ignominy attendant on the act of dying? It must be explained with reference to two significant pronouncements of Sri.Krishna in the *Bhagavath-Gita*:

*anta-kAlE cha mAm Eva smaran muktvA kalEvaram I yah: prayAti sa madh-bhAvam
yAti nAst~yatra samshayah: II (Gita VIII.5)*

*‘Whoever, at the time of death, quits his body, remembering Me alone, at once attains My nature.
Of this let there be not even a shadow of doubt.’*

Krishna, the ‘avatAra’ of God, categorically stated that a man of ‘bhakti’ who is, by definition, a soul immersed in thoughts of the Almighty, exits both the world and his mortal body painlessly and easily. He easily merges into the bliss of God.

Furthermore, a little earlier in the Gita, Krishna had also explained why the ‘bhakta’ deserved such absolute ease of death:

*chatur-vidhA bhajantE mAm janAh: sukritinO’rjunA I
aartO jignyAsur arthArthi gnyAni cha bharatar-shabha II
tEshAm gnyAni nitya-yukta eka-bhaktir-visishyatE I
priyOhi gnyAni-nO-artha aham sa cha mama priya: II*

(Bhagavath-Gita VII.18)

‘O Arjuna, there are four kinds of souls in this world who profess devotion to Me—he who is distressed, he who seeks wealth, he who is inquisitive, and he who is in quest of the Absolute—the

supreme gnyAni. Of these, the gnyAni whose bhakti springs out of his knowledge of Me is the best. For I am very dear to him; and he is very dear to Me.'

We see from the above 'gitA-vAkya' that from out of the rest of humanity, the man of 'bhakti' is singled out as being very dear to Krishna—'priyOhi gnyAni-nO-artham, aham sa cha mama priya:'—and such a 'priya-bhakta' shall therefore surely be released from death, on the path of 'utkramana'—without pain, without indignity—and delivered unto God.

What Krishna promised in the Bhagavath-Gita, He made sure He also actually delivered later on upon the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

Bhishma-pitamaha, the grand old sire of Hastinapur in the Mahabharata, was a great 'bhakta'. He was mortally wounded in the battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Arjuna had shot and riddled Bhishma's body with a rain of arrows until the old warrior was bleeding and broken beyond recognition. Although Bhishma lay dying on the battlefield waiting for the imminent end, He never showed the least trace of pain or suffering. The great 'bhakta' that he was Bhishma passed away from the world with the joy of God brimming in his heart. In the Mahabharata, we see Bhishma exulting in almost the very last moments of his life:

*yaccha bhUtam bhavishyaccha bhavaccha paramachyuta tat sarvamanupasyAmi panou phala
mivAhitam vEdoktaschaiva yO dharmAh: vEdAnta niyataschayE*

tAn sarvAn samprapasyAmi varadAnAt tavA'chyutA

'O Krishna! My Lord! I am now able to visualize fully the past, the present and the future, as easily and lucidly as one can see a fruit held in the palm of one's hand! The eternal truths enshrined in the Vedas and Vedanta now stand visible and transparent to me, thanks to your infinite Grace, my dearest AchyuthA!'

Thus, it becomes very clear to us why the passage of man's soul through the 'utkramana' phase is described by Swami Desikan to be free from pain, 'vikAram', and indignity.



For a 'prapanna', the moment of physical death is made even far easier to bear than for the 'bhakta'. While the latter has to make a conscious effort to remain concentrated upon God in the dying moments, the 'prapanna' is freed from even such conditions. To the man who has surrendered wholly to God, Krishna of His own volition appears in a wonderful vision in the final moments, making the act of dying tranquil and painless.

How can the 'prapanna' be certain of God's appearance in the moment of death?

The answer lies in the famous assurance given by God to His consort, 'Bhudevi', in His 'avatAra' as *Bhu-Varahan*. In a solemn pronouncement known to us as 'varAha-charama-shlOka', Varahan guaranteed His visit upon any man that lay lifeless like a 'log upon the deathbed', provided such a man early in life, when both body and spirit had been in hale condition, had chosen to surrender ('saraNagati') to Him absolutely:

*stithE manasi susvathE sarirE sati yO nara:
dhAtusAmyE stithE smartA visvarUpam cha mAmajam
tatasta mriyamANAm tu kAshta-pAshANa-sannibham
aham smarAmi madhbhaktam
nayAmi paramAm gatim II*

(‘vAraha-charama-shlOkam’)



That the last moments on earth—i.e., ‘*antima-prayAnam*’—of a ‘*bhakta*’ or a ‘*prappana*’ is never delirious or undignified is emphatically and beautifully described by Swami Desikan in a verse in the hymn known as ‘*gOpAla-vimshati*’.

*adharAhita chAru vamsha nALAh:
makutAlambi mayUra pinchamALAh:
harInIla shilA vibhanga nILAh:
pratibhAsantu
mama antima-prayANE*

(‘gOpAla-vimshati’—Verse 12)

‘As I lie on my deathbed nearing the end of my life’s journey, may my eyes feast upon nothing else but the graceful form of my Krishna—holding a slender flute to his lips, peacock feathers framing his lush hairlocks, curly and cute, bathed in colours iridescent true, bright, vivid, and sapphire blue!’

Desikan further added at the end:

*ithya-anannya-manasA vinirmitAm
venkatEsa kavinA-stUthim paTann
divya-vENu rasikam samIkshatE
daivatam kimapi yowatha-priyam*

(‘phala-sruti’—Verse 21)

‘He who reads this hymn of the devoted poet Venkatesan, shall surely obtain that unique vision [pratibha] of young Krishna playing the divine lute; of He who is the darling of the ever-youthful belles of this world!’

The above two verses of Swami Venkatanathan powerfully convey the idea: It is the vision of youthful Krishna that the ‘*bhakta*’ and ‘*prapanna*’ experience in the moment of physical death and spiritual release. It is a moment of intense bliss called ‘*antima-smriti*’. It has the power to turn even black death into a ‘thing of beauty, a joy forever’.

‘ArchirAdi’: The Celestial Highway

In the ‘*utkramana*’ phase of the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’ Swami Desikan describes how the soul of man sheds its gross physical body (‘*sthUla-sarira*’), assumes a subtle form (‘*sukshma-sarira*’) and prepares to begin its ascent to ‘*parama-padam*’.

The soul’s exit takes place through what is called the ‘*brahma-nAdi*’ or ‘*brahma-randhra*’—an invisible aperture said to be located at the end of a nerve-terminal right on the crown of the skull. The ‘*atmA*’ pierces through this ‘*brahma-nAdi*’ and readies itself to undertake the next phase of the journey of ascent into ‘*parama-padam*’.

Towards the end of his lifetime Swami Venkatanathan wrote a work called ‘*rahasya-traya-sAram*’, regarded by many to be his *magnum opus* and most well-known swan song. In this long, monumental treatise, based on encyclopedic research, Desikan recounted in meticulous detail the journey of the ascent of the human soul. He based it all on the ‘*pramaNa*’ (authority) of the ageless Vedic ‘*sruti*’ and related texts such as the Sri Bashya of Ramanuja and on passages from the Upanishads like *Chandogya*, *Kena*, *Kata*, and *Kausitika*. He also drew material from the mystical revelations and utterances in NammAzhwAr’s ‘*tiruvoimOzhi*’.

What was extensively elaborated in the ‘*rahasya-traya-sAram*’ Desikan re-presented in abridged and distilled form in the ‘*archirAdi-parvA*’ of the ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’.



The soul’s (‘*jIvAtma*’) journey of ascent is undertaken via a celestial route said to be super-natural and super-sensuous. This supra-mundane route is called ‘*archirAdi-mArga*’. It is a pathway of celestial luminosity.

All along this route, the soul is received and welcomed by a host of lesser gods called ‘*adhi-vahika*-s’. Encounters with these celestial elements or beings are meant to give the ‘*jIva*’ a sort of orientation into or a foretaste of the supra-normal realms he is about to enter. For the ‘*jIvAtma*’ concepts of time, space, light, sound, weight, etc., become meaningless in these realms. They make no sense to it—certainly not in the same sense that the ‘*AtmA*’ previously apprehended them as they prevailed in the terrestrial world. Here in the realms of ‘*archirAdi*’, the soul learns to go beyond and transcend all known paradigms of human conception and consciousness.

Thus, as the ‘*jIva*’ steps across the doorstep of eternity, it is said to encounter the following ‘*adhi-vahikAs*’ who help guide it along the ‘*archirAdi-mArga*’; the soul gets its cosmic bearings right in a wholly new world:

1. *Archis* (fire), 2. *Ahas* (day), 3. *Suklapaksha* (bright fortnight of the month before the full moon), 4. *Uttarayana* (the six-monthly period when the sun is traversing towards the north), 5. *Varusha* or *Samvatsara* (year), and then by 6. *Vayu* (wind god), 7. *Surya* (sun god), 8. *Chandra* (moon god), and finally by 9. *Vidyut Purusha*, a.k.a. *Amaanava Purusha* or *Maanasa Purusha*, accompanied by 10. *Varuna* (rain god), 11. *Indra* (lord of devas), and 12. *Prajapathi* (the creator of lives).
2. The Gods mentioned at 9 to 12 take him to the very boundaries of the manifest world (*Prakriti mandala*). These deities are called ‘*adhi vahikas*’ (prime guides)’ (extract from a note prepared on ‘*rahasyatrayasAra*’ by Anbil Ramaswamy, a noted scholar on Vedanta Desika).

The experience of the soul's journey through the 'archirAdi' is quite simply beyond verbal description or sensory perception. None who has journeyed through the 'archirAdi' has returned to tell us of it. Only mystics, 'mahAtmA-s', yogis, 'rshi-s', and poets have so far succeeded to some limited degree in sharing with us their own glimpses of it. As the poet Omar Khayyam once wrote,

*Strange is it not? The myriad who
Before us passed the Door of Darkness thro',
Not one returns to tell us of the Road
Which to discover we must travel too.*

(‘The Rubaiyat’, Omar Khayyam)

(This poet was a Persian with leanings towards Sufi mysticism. It is remarkable that by the road' in the verse above, he too was meaning something close to what we describe as 'archirAdi-mArgam'!)

NammAzhwAr, the foremost among the mystic Tamil saints of India, sang ecstatically of the 'jivAtmA-s' sojourn through the celestial pathway of 'archirAdi'. In the final and climactic decad of his 'tiruvOimOzhi' NammAzhwAr gives us a fair idea of it even if perhaps only metaphorically or allegorically:

choozvichum paNimukil thooriyam muzakkina*
aazkadal alaithirai* kaiyetuththu aadina*
Ezpozilum* vaLamaendhiya ennappan*
vaazpukaz naaraNan* thamaraik kaNtukandhE. 10.9.1*

*The eternal skies blew bugles in welcome, The seas cheered and danced;
Celestial continents stood in ceremony To receive Narayana's devotee—
The Soul returning home in triumph!*

thozuthanar ulakargaL thoopa_nal malarmazai- pozivanar*
pooziyanRu aLandhavan thamarmunnE* ezuminenRu irumarungichaiththanar*
munivargaL* vaziyithu vaikundhaRku enRu* van^thu ethirE. 10.9.3*

*When they saw the Soul Entering their kingdom
They rained flowers, lit incense
And sang—
The celestial bards stood on either side Of the path and cried to the Soul:
'Hail! This way to Vaikuntam!'*

maathavan thamarenRu vaachalil vaanavar*
pOthumin emathidam* pukuthuka venRalum*
keethangaL paadinar* kinnarar kerudargaL*
vEtha_nal vaayavar* vELviyuL maduththE. 10.9.5*

*The gods in the kingdom came out
On terraces in raucous welcome;
Loud their offer of gift to the Soul
Of palaces and sinecures, their own!
In honour of the returning Soul*

*The Vedic seers too lit their holy fires
While 'kinnaras' and 'garudas'
took out Their harps, their pipes
To strum and blow to eternity!*

kudiyadiyaar ivar kOvindhan dhanakkenRu*
mudiyudai vaanavar* muRaimuRai ethir_koLLa*
kodiyaNi netumathiL* kOpuram kuRukinar*
vadvudai maathavan* vaikundham pukavE. 10.9.8*

*The gods and manes gathered in swarms—
They scaled the high walls,
And climbed the festooned tower,
Jostling and craning their necks to catch
A mere glimpse of the returning Soul
And shout 'There he goes, our Govinda's hero!'*

vaikundham pukuthalum vaachalil vaanavar*
vaikundhan thamar_emar* emathidam pukuthenRu*
vaikundhaththu amararum* munivarum viyandhanar*
vaikundham pukuvathu* maNNavar vithiyE. 10.9.9*

*As the Soul made his grand entry
The heavenly bards raised cries of joy—
They bowed in his path and cheered his back:
'The kingdom of Vaikuntam, it's Thy birthright!'*

vithivakai pukundhanarenru nalvEthiyar*
pathiyinil paanginil* paathangaL kazuvinar*
nithiyum naRsuNNamum* niRaikuda viLakkamum*
mathimuka madandhaiyar* Endhinar vandhE. 10.9.10.*

*Vedic seers of the heavens Washed the feet of the Soul,
And wondered what good they'd done*

*To earn such great dole!
And then came lovely nymphs Bearing lamps and scents;
And holding the sacred 'kumbha' They led our hero to the edge
Of God's own land!*



The passage through the sixth '*parianka*' or stepping-stone of Swamy Desikan's '*parama-pada-sOpAnam*' is thus, as we see above, a supremely felicitous experience for the '*jIvAtma*'.

Now, a question may arise in our minds. If the path of '*archirAdi*' is a super-natural, super-sensuous, and supra-mundane experience, and none returns from it to give a truly verifiable account of it, why should we believe the metaphorical or allegorical versions of mystical saints, poets, and metaphysicians? How much credence should we be willing to give to the revelations of '*mahAtmA-s*' and yogi-s like NammAzhwAr in his '*tiruvoimOzhi*'?

The answer is this: When we consider the lives and works of great souls like NammAzhwAr, the great '*rshi-s*' of Vedic times or of great poets like Swami Desikan, we are left with no doubt at all about one thing: Without exception all of them were engaged, all their lives, in search of truth ('*satyam*'), only the truth and nothing but the truth! What they spoke was spoken because it was truth, not because they wanted to make a great career of it nor make worldly profit out of it. All their life they were in search of truth, they were not in search of greatness. Persons like NammAzhwAr had no other ulterior motives in life, simply no other earthy 'axe to grind'.

The German scholar and indologist, Professor Max Mueller, once wrote about the absolute truthfulness of the ancient seers and sages of India:

I believe much of the excellence of the ancient Sanskrit philosophers is due to they having been undisturbed by the thought of there being a public to please and critics to appease. They thought of nothing but the work they had determined to do; their one idea was to make it as perfect as it could be made. There was no applause they valued unless it came from their equals or their betters; publishers, editors and logrollers did not yet exist. Need we wonder then if their work was done as well as it could be done, and that it has lasted for thousands of years?

Now when such high and noble people say something we must know that we *can* and *should* believe them unhesitatingly. Even if what they say might appear rather metaphorical, mystical, poetic, why even fanciful perhaps to all but our very own selves.

'Divya-dEsa-prApti': Crossing the River Viraja

After the '*jIvAtma*' has crossed the '*archirAdi*', it proceeds to ascend the penultimate tier of the nine-step '*parama-pada-sOpAnam*'. This stage of the journey in the heavenly realms is called '*divya-dEsa-prApti*'.

Here the soul is made to cross the celestial River Viraja, a.k.a. Vijara meaning (ageless). The '*jIvAtma*' wades across the expanse of this stream and when it emerges on the other bank, it is said to be thoroughly sanctified. The *jeeva* now sheds even the subtle body ('*sUkshma-sarIra*') it had used on the journey through the '*archirAdi*' and assumes a new form that is pristine ('*aprAkrita-divya-mangala-svarUpa*').

Desikan writes in the ‘*rahasya-traya-sAra*’ that ‘the *jeeva* acquires a super-sensuous divine form made of ‘*suddha satva*’ (*aprakritam*) pure spirit. It is then taken to a divine tank called ‘*airammadeeyam*’ and then to a huge ‘*aswattha*’ tree called ‘*somasavana*’. There five hundred ‘*apsaras*’ (divine nymphs) in batches of one hundred each adorn the ‘*jeeva*’ with celestial garlands, collyrium, perfumes, garments, and ornaments. Then they receive it with royal honours. Divine fragrance (*Brahma Gandha*), divine flavor (*Brahma Rasa*) and divine lustre (*Brahma Tejas*) enter the ‘*jeeva*’ (extract from *ibid.* A. Ramaswamy).



Crossing the Viraja is of great significance for the soul. It is testimonial to: (1) the soul’s absolute purity; the taint of ‘*rajas*’ and ‘*tamas*’ stands forever extinguished, and (2) eternal severance from all of God’s Creation that is temporal and terrestrial. The ‘*jIvAtmas*’ cosmic peregrination comes to an absolute end at this point.

The power and ability of river waters to cleanse and purify both the body in this world and soul in the other lies at the core of the Vedic belief system. Many are the passages in the Vedas that attest to it eloquently. In the Taittitiya Aranyaka, in the great Upanishad called ‘*mahA-nArAyaNOpanishad*’, there is beautiful passage that pays tribute to the mighty power of the River Viraja to secure the eternal sinless-ness of man in the province of God:

*sOhama pApO virajO nirmukthO mUkta-kilbisha: I
nAkasya prushTa mArUhya gacchEth brahmasa lOkatAm*’ II

*‘My sins have been extinguished; I am at last free from the taint of rajas and all earthly defects; I
pray that I may go now to the world of Brahman climbing the region of heaven!’*

The journey across the River Viraja is not only purifying to the soul but also energizing! To get some idea of the heights of delight the ‘*jIvAtma*’ experiences during this phase of the journey to ‘*parama-padam*’, we can turn once again to the mystical revelations of NammAzhwAr’s ‘*tiruvoimOzhi*’.

In the latter decad of that 1,000-stanza work NammAzhwAr sings of the ineffable glory experienced by the soul after bathing in and wading across the Viraja. These are truly some of the most stirring verses one can ever come across in Tamil poetry or, perhaps, in the history of mysticism even:

*aruLpeRuvaar adiyaar tham *adiyanERku* aaziyaan- aruLtharuvaan amaikinRaan* athu_namathu
vithivakaiyE* iruLtharumaa NYaalaththuL* inippiRavi yaanvEndEn*
maruLozi neemada_nenchE!* vaattaaRRaan adivaNangE. 10.6.1*

*All doubts and anxiety have ceased— No more recall to the dark world for us— The Lord awaits you
. . . O Soul of mine!*

vaattaaRRaan adivaNangi* maaNYaalap piRappaRuppaan* kEttaayE mada_nenchE!* kEchavan
em perumaanai* paattaaya palapaadip* pazavinaikaL paRRaRuththu* naattaarOdu iyalvozindhu*
naaraNanai naNNinamE. 10.6.2

Hear me, O Soul of Mine— Singing the praise of Kesavan now

We've cut asunder ties with the world— Karma has ceased.

naNNinam naarayaNanai* naamangaL palacholli* maNNulakil vaLammikka* vaattaaRRaan
vandhu_inRu* viNNulakam tharuvaanaay* viraikinRaen vithivakaiyE* eNNina vaaRaakaa*
ikkarumangaL ennenchE! 10.6.3

We have arrived here, you and me

In the land of God, O Soul of mine,

Thanks to the many names of Narayana upon our lips—

Vaikuntam is ours now, our eternal fortune!

vaanERa vazithandha* vaattaaRRaan paNivakaiyE* naan_ERap peRukinREn* narakaththai
naku_nenchE* thEnERu malarththuLavam* thikazpaathan* sezumpaRavai- thaanERith thirivaan_
than* thaaLiNai en_thalaimElE. 10.6.5

It's the Lord of Viraja

who led me to this path— Holding His Feet upon my crown Thumb my nose at Hell, I will!

No fear!

kuraikazalkaL kuRuginam* nam kOvindhana kudikondaan* thiraikuzuvu kadalpudaichooz*
thennaattuth thilathamanna* varaikuzuvu maNimaada* vaattaaRRaan malaradimEl* viraikuzuvu
naRundhuLavam* meyn^_ninRu kamazumE. 10.6.7

We have reached at last, You and me, O Soul of mine, The mansion of God—

Can you smell the sweet whiff of 'tulasi'

That swirls all around us?

meyn^_ninRu kamazthulava* viraiyERu thirumudiyan* kain^_ninRa sakkaraththan* karuthumidam
poruthupunal* main^_ninRa varaipOlu* thiruvuruva vaattaaRRaaRku* en^_nanRi seythEnaa*
ennenchil thikazavathuvE? 10.6.8

The Lord of Creation shall soon Be with us, O Soul of mine—

I cannot believe this is happening to us!

Do we really deserve this Bliss?

piriyaathu_aat seyyenRu* piRappaRuththu aaLaRakkondaan* ariyaaki iraNiyanaai* aagangeeNtaan
anRu*

periyaarku aatpattakkaal* peRaathapayan peRumaaRu* varivaal vaayaravaNaimEl*
vaattaaRRaan kaattinanE. 10.6.10.

*Once upon a time the Lord appeared as man-lion
And tore out Hiranyans breast— Now He's torn to shreds
And cast aside my karmic chains too forever— Now I, His eternal serf, shall surely reap
The numberless favours of Infinity!*



Once the 'jIvAtmA' has crossed the Viraja, it is finally ready to proceed to its ultimate destination on the '*parama-pada-sOpanam*'. The end of the journey that:

—began in '*vivEkam*'
—endured through '*nirvEdam*', '*virakthi*', and '*bheeti*'
—sojourned through '*prasAdana-parva*'
—sailed across '*utkramana*', '*archirAdi*', and '*divya-dEsa prApti*'

That arduous trek across the vast, immeasurable cosmic expanse finally approaches its end and consummation called '*prApti*'.

'PrApti': The Journey's End

'*PrApti*' is glorious '*parama-padam*', the terminal epicentre of the whole cosmos, the 'abode of God' known as SriVaikuntam. It is also the highest state of being, celebrated variously in the scriptures as '*mOksha*', '*mukti*', '*paramA-gati*', '*parama-purushArtam*', '*nitya-kainkarya-prApti*', '*tiru-nAdu*'. It is the crowning culmination of the long journey the '*jIvAtma*' undertook along the Vedantic path traced for us by Swami Vedanta Desikan in the '*parama-pada-sOpAnam*'.

According to Desikan's '*rahasyatrayasAra*', here in the terminal phase of the soul's progress, the '*jeeva*' is received by '*nityasuris*' (archangels) who take it to the 'portals of God's city with high walls adorned with festive banners. This city is called '*aparajita*'. Indra and Prajapati, who are the guardians of the city welcome the '*jeeva*' as if it was their master and they begin to offer it honours befitting a crown prince. They receive it with '*purnakumbha*', lamps, and other '*upachArA*' (services). All these are akin to protocol of 'state honour' duly accorded to a liberated soul. This state is called '*sAlokya*'.

After the protocol, the '*jeeva*' is led to a great assembly hall crowned by a '*gOpura*' (tower) of precious gems called variously as '*prabuvimitam*' or '*vibupramitam*'. Perhaps it is this 'hall' or '*mAmani-mantapa*' that NammAzhwAr also refers to in the '*tiruvOimOzhi*':

vandhavar ethir_koLLa maamaNi mandapaththu* andhamil pErinbatththu* adiyarOdu
irundhamai* kondhalar pozil* kurukoorchchadakOpan* chol- chandhangaLaayiraththu* ivaivallaar
munivarE. (10.9.11)*

Once it is inside this great hall, the '*jeeva*' is said to acquire another luminous and divine form known as '*divya yasas*'. This elevated state of the soul's being is called '*saroopya*'.

Then, the '*jeeva*' is ceremoniously ushered to the seat of God called '*vichakshana peetam*'. In this state in the presence of God, the soul is said to be in '*sameepya*'. In this state, the soul addresses God in the thrilling words of the Upanishad:

*Uthishta purusha hari lOhita-pingalAkshi dEhi dEhi dadApayitA mey shudhyantAm
jyOtiraham virajA vipApmA BhUyAsagam svAhA!*

(mahA-nArAyaNOpanishad)

O Purusha! O Hari! Arise!

O thou with lovely lotus-like eyes! Arise!

Protect me! Grant me knowledge to know Thee! Grant me the purity of the purest!

Raise me, O Lord, to Your own state!

God then allows the ‘jeeva’ to approach Him on His divine couch called ‘*amitoujas*’ and reveals His blissful form to the ‘*muktAtmA*’. This state is called ‘*sAyujya*’. It is in this state of absolute intimacy with God that the ‘*jIvAtmA*’ is restored to God!

After the *jIvAtma* is restored to God, the Almighty in turn restores to it its essential and original nature (‘*Atma-svarUpa*’) with eight clear and sterling qualities or ‘*guNa-visEsha*’ viz.: Being free from

- (1) sin, (2) old age, (3) death, (4) sorrow, (5) hunger, (6) thirst, (7) being endowed with all desired objects, and (8) an unhindered will.
- (2) The Lord bestows ‘*sAyujya*’, which means being united in equal enjoyment with God who places the *mukta* in the galaxy of *nityas* and other *muktas* enjoying infinitude (‘*satyam*’), infinite knowledge (‘*gnyAnam*’), and infinite bliss (‘*Anandam*’). The Lord then mingles with such a fraternity of ‘*mUktAs*’ as a ‘*nitya yuva*’ Himself (ibid. A. Ramaswamy).

The Calculus of Joy

The supreme state of ‘*sAyujya*’ in ‘*parama-padam*’ is glorified in the climax of the great ‘*mahA-nArAyaNOpanishad*’ in a ringing, rousing passage celebrating the soul’s ascension to the ultimate bliss of God. This passage is recited with great vigour and fervour at the end of the Yajur Veda:

*ya Evam vidvAn agnayanE prameeyathE dEvAnAmEva maheemAnam gaathvAdithyasya sAyUjyam
gacchatyatha.*

tasmAd brahmaNO maheemAnamApnOti tasmAd brahmaNO maheemAna mithyupanishath. II

‘Such a devotee, meditating upon God, leaves this world during ‘uttarAyana’ (the sun’s journey through the summer solstice), and attains the greatness of God through ‘sAyUjya’!

The bliss of ‘*sAyujya*’, the eternal embrace of God, can neither be expressed nor measured in words. And yet the Taittiriya Upanishad gives us some idea of it in a very famous passage of very rare poetic beauty, insight, and revelation.

In the section of the Taittiriya called ‘*anandavalli*’, the Upanishad sets out a so-called imaginary ‘calculus of joy’ with the aid of which we can measure the bliss enjoyed by a ‘*muktAtmA*’ in the state of ‘*sAyujya*’ in ‘*parama-pada*’:

The joy experienced by a human being on earth (who is perfectly healthy, wealthy, and wise) is first taken as ‘one unit of bliss. Let us designate it as ‘1-B’. The Upanishad then proceeds to describe the bliss experienced by divine beings or celestials in terms of progressive multiples of ‘1-B’.

The celestials are enumerated as ‘*gandharva*’, ‘*pitru*’, ‘*ajanadeva*’, ‘*karmadeva*’, ‘*devata*’, ‘*indra*’, ‘*brhaspati*’, and ‘*prajapati*’, respectively.

We are to thus begin multiplying ‘1-B’ first by 100, then 10,000, next 1 million, 100 million, 10,000 million, 1 billion, 100 billion, 10,000 billion, until we finally arrive at a million-billion ‘1-Bs’—which may be said to be, very approximately, the equivalent of 1 unit of the ‘*Anandam*’ the ‘*jIvAtma*’ enjoys in the state of ‘*sAyujya*’ with the ‘*para-brahman*’!

The Upanishad calls such a soul as ‘*prEtya*’, i.e., that ‘*jIva*’ which has departed from the world and finally attained ‘*brahma-gnyAna*’ by piercing through what may be called the dark sheaths (‘*kOsa*’) of consciousness that had enshrouded it for many ages. These sheaths or ‘*kOsA*-s’ are ‘food’ (*annam*), ‘vital air’ (*prAnam*), ‘mind’ (*manas*), and ‘intellect’ (*vignyanam*). In the state of ‘*sAyujya*’ there is nothing to enshroud the ‘*jIvAma*’ anymore from the presence of God and intimacy with Him. Hence it becomes eternally free to experience not only ‘*brahma-gnyAna*’ but also ‘*brahmAnanda*’—

sa EkO brahmaNa ananda: . . . sayaschAyam purushE . . . yaschAvAdityE . . . sa Eka:
sa ya Evam vith . . . asmAllOkAt prEtya . . . etam anna-mayam-AtmAnam-mupasankrAmati etam
prANa-mayam-AtmAnam-mupasankrAmati etam manO-mayam-AtmAnam-mupasankrAmati
etam vignyanam-mayam-AtmAnam-mupasankrAmati
etam Ananda-mayam-AtmAnam-mupasankrAmati (‘anandavalli’).



Such is the glory of ‘*parama-padam*’! Such is the glory of the Upanishads! Such is the glorious destiny of the human soul! And there ends the great ‘*vEdAnta-mArga*’ of Swami Venkatanathan’s ‘*parama-pada-sOpAnam*’.



CHAPTER 56

MUKKUR LAKSHMINARASIMHACHARIAR (1944—2000)



A Personal Tribute to an Exponent Extraordinaire of Sri Vaishnavite Theology

Whom God loves He beckons early.

This is an old saying the truth of which was confirmed in the sudden and untimely demise of Mukkur Lakshminarasimhachariar, one of the most illustrious ‘*upannyaasakars*’ (professional public speakers) in the ‘*ubhaya-vedanta*’ tradition (the Sri Vaishnava tradition that embraces both Sanskrit and Tamil scriptures) of the present times.

Many years from now the memory of Mukkur Swamy will continue to be fondly cherished by *vaideeka-asthikas* for his outstanding stature as a *salakshanaghanapati*, a devoted servant of the Ahobila Math lineage of acharyas and a wonderful human being full of divine qualities.

Swamy made herculean efforts as a great devotee of Lord Lakshminarasimhan to build up Mattapalli, in Andhra Pradesh, India, into an eminent ‘*Nrishmhakshetra*’ (temples dedicated to the avatar of Vishnu, Lord Narasimha). This he achieved by performing more than a hundred *Nrishmamahayagnyam* in his lifetime. Never in recent times have Vedic ‘*yagnyas*’ (large-scale ceremonial fire sacrificial rituals) on such a scale been performed with such popular participation.

Swamy’s extremely popular public discourses (*upannyaasams*) endeared him to thousands of people for well over two decades. The collection of his discourses now available in the three-volume Tamil publication titled ‘*Kurai Onrum IllaI*’ will surely endure as one of the very few religious works with enormous appeal to the commoner as much as to the pundit.

Swamy had a celebrated style of expounding upon the beauties and truth ingrained in that peerless work of Vedantic scripture—the magnificent Sri Vishnu Sahasranamam, the litany of one thousand glorious names of Bhagavan Sriman Narayanan.

Although Swamy dealt with difficult subjects in his discourses of philosophy and theology, he had an uncanny ability to present them to the general laity in an easy, intelligible way. He avoided overuse of formidably technical expressions of siddhantam (Sanskrit, Tamil, or Manipravalam). Everything he presented became an easy, almost languid essay in lucidity, simplicity and arresting cogency. He never allowed distance to develop between himself and his audience—that ‘distance of scholarship’ which lesser pundits usually like to maintain to set themselves apart from the motley crowd. Ordinary folk, completely unschooled in the scriptural texts of Vedic tradition, were somehow attracted to the lofty subjects Swamy explained and having once heard him remained riveted to every word he spoke thereafter.

When you attended Mukkur Swamy’s discourses, you never failed to notice the number of young faces that turned up amongst the audience in almost equal strength to elderly ones. Swamy had a tremendous impact on young *aasthika* minds because of his refreshingly contemporary approach to ancient scriptural subjects.

One of the ways in which Mukkur Swamy cast a spell on his audiences was through captivating little anecdotes or stories. These seeming asides of Swamy, at once utterly convincing and light-hearted, however helped to underscore the main, larger philosophical or theological themes of his discourses.

Mukkur Swamy’s memory was phenomenally prodigious. He never needed the usual props public speakers rely upon viz. handy little notes and texts carried under the arm for quick reference in case of memory or narrative lapses. He could easily recall, in torrential succession, passages from *Veda-ghana-paatam* for hours on end without as much as a pause. He could effortlessly weave intricate cross-references and allusions through a maze of scriptural material (viz. *aranyakas*, *upanishads*, *purana*, *itihasa*, *brahma-sutra*, *sri-bhashya*, *Azhwar-arulicchayal*, *purvacharya-srisookthis*) in support and illustration of the simple yet most enlightening themes he covered. While quoting from those sources he made sure they were apt and appropriate to the context. He never exaggerated anything, never overstated anything, and never for a moment appeared to be wearing his knowledge on his sleeve. Everything he discoursed upon had real meaning and substance, and more often than not, as one discovered upon deeper reflection, his exposition carried many layers of meaning within the span and context of the same discourse.

Swamy had a sparkling sense of humour too. His wit actually was an ornament to his discourse; never a distraction from it. Most public speakers use humour as a tool to enliven proceedings when they sense the audience’s attention waning. But Mukkur Swamy never had to resort to that obsequious brand of humour. His witticisms and jokes blended so well with the subject that one always wondered which deserved more admiration—the witticism itself or its underlying message.

Swamy’s upannyasam always held universal appeal to all sections of the *aasthika-samajam*. In a broad sense, he was therefore not just a pillar of Sri Vaishnava Kootam but a pillar of the much larger *Vaideeka-kutumbam*. Swamy was always able to emphasise on the fundamental unity underlying all Vedantic traditions of India even amidst their age-old and sometimes rancorous differences. He spoke a language, at once simple and utterly convincing, which the Advaitin, Visihtadvaitin, and Dvaitin alike found easy to understand and relate to. Although he was a staunch votary of Sri Ramanuja ‘*darsanam*’, Swamy was never afraid of openly acknowledging the mighty contribution of rival systems to the development of Vedantic thought through the ages.

Swamy carried himself in public impeccably. Although a strict *vaideekan* himself, he never however looked down upon poor *loukeekas* as any lesser mortals. He treated everyone equally with the utmost civility and kindness. After completion of every '*Nrisimha-mahyagnyam*' to which thousands of people from all over the country contributed generously, Swamy meticulously wrote to each one of them, whether high or low in society, reporting the completion of the yagnya and acknowledged their *kainkaryam*. Swamy must have distributed at least 100,000 sacred '*Nrsimha*' medallions to bhaktas all over the country by way of acknowledging their help in the performance of those '*mahayagnyams*'.

Over the years one suspects that Swamy's health was affected a bit during his performing the '*yagnas*'. He was seen to be in a perennial state of *deeksha*, fasting for days on end and undertook similar vows of severe penance. He was not known to take any medicines for ailments, minor or serious. He spent most of his time beside the raging fires of Vedic '*yagnya-kundams*' worshipping his beloved '*Mattapallinathan*'. Till the very end he remained engrossed in his life mission to build up Matapalli into a great *Nrismhakshetra*.

To the many admirers of Mukkur Swamy, there is no doubt he has reached the abode of Sri Vaikuntam. It is the untimeliness of his departure, however, which makes them grieve over the pain God causes when He beckons away those He loves dearly far too early.



Three examples of the stories and philosophical parables that Swamy used to recount in his public discourses in his inimitable style are recounted here below as a tribute to his memory.

In the first example Swamy explains to those who have taken up devoted study of the Vishnu-sahasranAmam, for the first time ever in their lives, not to be discouraged if they faced difficulty in properly enunciating some of the '*nAmA*-s' in difficult Sanksrit. Swamy explains that the compassion of Vishnu is such that He responds to any '*nAmA*' by which a devotee out of genuine '*bhakti*' beckons Him.

In the second story, Swamy once again puts first-time students of the '*Bhagavath-Gita*' at ease. He explains that the greatest ever Vedantic treatise delivered by Bhagavan Sri. Krishna was not designed to intimidate or befuddle mankind but to deliver it from spiritual ignorance.

In the third story, Sri Mukkur Narasimhan narrates the endearing fable of Dadhipanda and his claypot and their encounter with Lord Sri Krishna. It is tale that deals with the theological nuances of the Vedantic conception of '*moksha*', liberation.

The stories indeed illustrate Mukkur Swamy's characteristic style of discoursing where high philosophy blends easily with simple ethical lessons of life that are hard to abide by though.



‘Govinda’ or ‘Gohinda’?

Mukkur Swami once visited Tirumala kshetram. Before the ‘*suprabaatha darsanam*’ (the dawn service in the temples of Vishnu) Swami wanted to have his ritual bath in the temple ‘*pushkaraNi*’ (holy pond within a temple precinct) steps and suddenly heard someone nearby shout, ‘*gOhindA*’, ‘*gOhindA*’. It was some poor pilgrim who had just finished his own ritual-bath and who was readying himself eagerly for the ‘*suprabaatha darsanam*’.

Mukkur Swami was a little uneasy about the Lord’s name being mispronounced and that too so uninhibitedly by a common pilgrim. Nevertheless, Swami related, he ignored it and proceeded with his own ablutions. After Swami finished, he sat on the ‘*pushkarini*’ stepping-stones and prepared to don ‘*tirumaN-kAppu*’ (the chalk and vermillion mark orthodox Sri Vaishnavas wear on the forehead). Again, the pilgrim nearby began to yell hoarse, *gOhindA*, *gOhindA*, *g-O-O-OhindA*’. Swami recounted that this was taking place at around 2 AM, there were not many people around the temple tank and in the silence of the night the cry of ‘*gOhindA*, *gOhindA*’ seemed to reverberate through all the Seven Hills!

The Swami said that this time around he couldn’t tolerate the rustic pilgrim anymore continuing to mispronounce the loveliest ‘*tirU-nAmam*’ (holy name) of ‘*tiruvEngadamUdiyan*’ (the temple deity at Tirumala) and decided to do something about it. He intended to go up to the pilgrim and gently correct him in the correct pronunciation of the Lord’s name and if necessary to briefly enlighten the poor unlearned soul of the beauteous significance of ‘*govinda-nAma shabdham*’. The ‘*nAma*’ was ‘*gOvinda*’ not ‘*gOhinda*’.

Mukkur Swami then related how he was stopped dead in his tracks when he heard the pilgrim suddenly break into a wonderful, most touching personal dialogue with ‘*tirUvengamUdaiyan*’ himself. The Swami recounted:

As I rose wanting to walk up to the pilgrim to gently chide him for abuse of the Lord’s name, I suddenly saw him turn on his feet on the ‘pushkarani’ steps and face the glorious ‘vimanam’ of the Lord’s temple beyond the walls and atop the ‘garbha-griha’. And then in the stillness of the night I heard the poor pilgrim converse loudly with the Lord in the boorish Telugu dialect of deep Guntur heartland:

‘O gOhindA, my saviour, O gOhinda, I thank you very much, my gOhindA. Last year at this same time, dear gOhindA, I was at this very spot, O gOhindA, and talking to you as I do now. Remember, O gohinda, I prayed to you that my crops be good, my cows be good, my family’s health be good, my son pass his matriculation and my daughter be married. You never fail me, O gOhinda! I only have to ask you for something, O gOhindA, and when have you ever refused me, O gOhindA! So here I stand again in this spot, O gOhindA, and pray to you, O gOhinda in the sure hope that next year too, O gOhinda, I shall stand here in this very spot, O gOhinda, looking into the sky at your vimana, O gOhinda, and cry out to you, gOhinda! gOhinda! g-O-O-OhindA!’

Mukkur Swami continued, *At this point I had got up from my seat on the pushkarini steps to go to him but when I eavesdropped on this most wonderful dialogue between the poor pilgrim and the Lord of the Seven Hills I sat down again without a murmur. It struck me in that moment with the force of sastra-ic truth that I had really no business to chide or advise the pilgrim on the correct utchAraNam of bhagavan-namA. Here he was saying loudly, the poor blessed pilgrim, that he had been at the same spot the previous year and had similarly addressed the Lord and sought favours and was now reporting back to the Lord, in thanksgiving, that everything in life was just fine with him and his family—thanks to the Lord!*

‘I thought about it’, Swami continued ‘and trembled at the gravity of what I had been about to do in wanting to correct the boorish bhaktha. I might have succeeded in persuading him to switch over to

gOvinda instead of gOhinda. But then in the process I might have deprived the Lord of the Seven Hills next year around, when the pilgrim returned, of listening again to and savouring the sound of the rather unusual tiru-nama of gOhinda which obviously seemed to have given Him so much swArasyam [the kind of pleasure we too enjoy when toddlers in our homes lisp out names of family members]. In the process I would incur the displeasure of the Lord and would also have unnecessarily ventured to upset a relationship of such touching intimacy built up over the years between a simple-minded, rustic bhAgavata and the Supreme Being, the Great One addressed as gOhinda, gOhinda in such cavalier fashion.

‘It struck me’, Swami continued, that obviously the Lord wasn’t the least concerned about how the pilgrim pronounced his glorious name of GOVINDA for, if he had indeed been offended, would the pilgrim have had all his wishes, of the years gone by, granted? So what business was it of mine to go up to the pilgrim and correct him when the Lord himself apparently had happily accepted the unusual tirunAmA of gOhinda, gOhinda?’

Listening to Sri Mukkur Swami relate this amusing anecdote many in the ‘bhAgavata’ audience went into peals of laughter. Many, however, couldn’t help fighting back a tear or two because it immediately brought to their mind sweet remembrances of the sublime compassion that ‘tiruvengadamudaiyAn’ indeed shows the millions of poor pilgrims who trek to his great abode on earth atop the Venkatam Hill.



Bhagavath-Gita in a Single Phrase

A good man once approached a Wise One for advice on the art of living. He was told to start with a thorough study of the Bhagavath-Gita.

The man went home and eagerly took up the first chapter. Halfway through the chapters on the ‘Samkhya-yoga’ his mind boggled and poor man, he simply gave up.

He returned to Wise One to complain. ‘Sir, there are eighteen chapters in the Gita. If each of them is as formidable as the first couple of ones then I am afraid I must tell you I am woefully unequal to the daunting task.’

‘Can you instead direct me’, pleaded the man with the Wise One, ‘can you direct me to the heart of the Gita texts so that I can grasp the core of their sacred essence without having to traverse their entire length?’

The Wise One replied, ‘If eighteen chapters are too much for you, my friend, then you better restrict your study to the passages on the bhakti-yoga alone.’

‘Thank you, O noble sir,’ said the good man to the Wise One and departed. Back home our good friend opened the Gita text and began his arduous enquiry into the ‘bhakti- yoga’. The chapter was long and the passages seemingly interminable. Soon the man gave up the effort and returned to the Wise One.

‘Sir, the chapters on the bhakti-yoga too are beyond my powers of comprehension! Can you direct me to a single *shloka* which may be said to be nutshell of the entire Gita?’

The Wise One was by now annoyed with the man’s attitude so typical of the modern times when everyone expects to maximise rewards while expending minimum effort.

However, he patiently advised, ‘My friend, if you want the Gita in a nutshell, go to the verse called the *charama-shlOka* in the eighteenth chapter: *sarva dharmAm parityajja*, etc. You might find in it whatever you are looking for in this world.’

Our friend, the seeker of truth, returned home, delighted in the discovery that the whole of the Gita could be absorbed through the study of a single verse! He spent the rest of the day in zealous attempts to commit to memory the Lord’s famous *charama-shlOka*.

After about an hour’s effort, he gave up!

Returning to the Wise One once again, he confessed, ‘Sir, the thirty-two-syllabled *charama-shlOka* eludes my mind.’

‘So, what do you want me to do about it?’ asked the Wise One with now barely concealed exasperation.

‘Pray, direct me to a single phrase, expression, or word in the verse which epitomizes the Gita. That way I can rest content that I have ingested all the substance of the Lord’s message in but one verbal capsule.’

The Wise One thought carefully for a while and replied, ‘Leave out *sarva dharmAm parityajja*; leave out *mamEkam saranam vraja*; leave out *aham tva sarva pApEBhyo moksha~ishyAmi*.’

Then after a pause, the Wise One said, ‘Hold steadfast to the last phrase, *ma shucha*: It means “Do not worry or grieve”. Believe me it’s verily the essence of the Lord’s Gita, DO NOT WORRY. It’s the real secret of life. Hold on dearly to that phrase all your life and never let go of it!’

The good man went away absolutely delighted in the discovery of the Bhaavath-gita muttering ‘*ma shucha*:’, ‘*ma shucha*:’, but then also at the same time reflecting: ‘This the master could easily have told me at the very beginning when I first went to him, couldn’t he?! Instead, he made me do the merry-go-around and wasted my time . . . These Wise Ones are not so wise after all, are they?’



The Parable of Dhadipaandan: ‘Moksha’ freeloader

One day one of the Yasodha’s neighbours came storming into Nandagopa’s house and complained in a shrill voice to Yasodha: ‘Yasodha, your darling boy Krishna’s pranks are now intolerable. The brat has again been stealing the butter in my kitchen. One big jar of it I had just finished churning this afternoon. And when I confronted him with it he has the cheek, the little rascal, he has the cheek to lie through the skin of his teeth! You know what he says? He says he never touched it. It may have all just melted away, auntie, in the afternoon heat, says the little ruffian! I just couldn’t hold my temper anymore, Yasodha, and chased the brat. I really want to get my hands on him and drag him to you. Now where is he, Yasodha, where is that little butter-stealer of yours? He’s in there somewhere, isn’t he? Come out, you little rascal, Krishna, come out!’

Hearing this, Yasodha too lost her temper as this was the third time in three days that this neighbour was complaining about Krishna. She pacified the neighbour and told her to return home. ‘Don’t you worry, my dear, I am determined to teach that ruffian a real lesson this time. I’ll catch him myself if

I have to chase him to the end of this world. Don’t you worry? You now go back home and leave it to me,’ said Yasodha.

With grim determination in her eyes, Yasodha set out of her house with a rolling-pin in her hands, looking for Krishna in alleyways and the nooks and crannies of houses along the way. She knew that she would give him a real hiding this time for his pranks ‘which were completely getting out of hand these days’.

Krishna scented trouble coming his way long before Yasodha set out from her home. He bolted from one neighbour’s house to another, scampering and ducking for cover. He fled from one friend’s home to another avoiding his mother who pursued him with deadly seriousness.

The arm of Yasodha’s law however was too long. At last Krishna could go no further and he now became desperate as he saw that Yasodha was not giving up the chase.

As a last resort Krishna ducked into a house belonging to a potter called DadhipAndan. This potter had his workshop inside his house where he kept all the accoutrements of his trade. There were many giant-sized pots in various stages of completion stacked up in the workshop of DadhipAndan.

Krishna made his move quickly. He sneaked into DadhipAndan’s workshop, chose the biggest pot there, and climbed into it and hid himself there.

Presently, Yasodha came by and shouted, ‘Krishna, hey, you rascal Krishna! Show yourself, you brat! Come on, where are you?’

And then she saw Dadhipandan himself. He was working away at his trade in his workshop.

‘DadhipAnda, have you seen my boy, Krishna? I’m looking for him,’ said Yasodha.

DadhipAndan put down his tools for a moment and spoke to her.

‘I can’t say, madam, but if you think he’s around here somewhere, you’re welcome to look around my shop,’ said DadhipAndan and casually strolled over to the pot where Krishna was hiding and promptly sat on it to completely seal off Krishna from any danger of discovery.

Yasodha looked around the shop a bit and then gave up the search and went off muttering, ‘Krishna, you wait till I get my hands on you! Where on earth are you hiding? You can’t be at large forever, my son, you’ve got to come home to me! Then watch what I do to you, you little ruffian!’

After a few moments, Krishna spoke from inside the giant pot to DadhipAndan.

‘Oh, kind-hearted potter, thank you very much for saving me from my mother’s wrath. What a kind soul you are, Sir DadhipAnda!’

‘Oh, don’t mention it, Krishna. I am your great friend, you know that, and what are good friends for, eh!’ said DadhipAndan as smoothly as the butter that Krishna hankered after.

‘Okay, potter, now get off the pot and let me out. I can’t sit here squeezed anymore. I’m suffocating, DadhipAnda.’

‘Uh-oh, not so fast my friend, Krishna. I just saved your skin, and you won’t go without doing me a good turn in return, will you?’ said DadhipAndan.

‘What, you want instant repayment, d’you, you wretched potter?’ said Krishna. ‘I should know better. After all you’re a trader. Anyway, what do you want?’

‘Krishna, yes, I need something from you. And I know none, but you can give it. Will you promise to give me if I let you out?’ asked the wily potter.

‘For god’s sake, DadhipAnda, tell me what you want, man, I can’t breathe in here. Let me out, please,’ Krishna cried.

‘No, my little friend, I don’t believe you. First you promise me. Then I shall let you out.’

‘DadhipAnda, stop this nonsense. Stop kidding, I am suffocating here. What on earth do you want from me? Tell me quickly and I promise you I’ll give it to you,’ said Krishna panting. ‘Get me out of this clay pot, will you please, and NOW!’

‘Promise?’ asked the grinning DadhipAndan.

‘I promise, man, I promise. Tell me, quick, what is it?’

DadhipAndan then gleefully said, ‘Oh, Krishna, *sarva-loka sharanya*, my great refuge, my protector, I know who you really are, my friend. And I know you are the only one who can give me what I crave. I ask you to promise me to grant me *moksha*, salvation of life. If you do, then I’ll let you out forthwith.’

‘Phew! Dadhipanda, is that all you want! Why didn’t you say so earlier? Now get me out of here. Fast. Yes, yes, yes, I promise you *moksha*, eternal deliverance! Believe me! I promise, promise, promise! I give you and not only you. I’ll give it to this great big ugly clay pot [ghatam] of yours too! Only please get me out of this pot now, Dadhipanda, quick! Please let me out of here!’ said the Lord.

The potter smiled triumphantly at having extracted his ransom of *moksha* from the Lord of All Creation so easily and promptly jumped off the great pot. Out scampered Krishna and wishing DadhipAnda goodbye He ran home.

DadhipAndan stared after the divine boy, long and hard, for a moment. And then he smiled and slowly patted his great big clay pot and said, ‘See, my friend, how easy that was! Extracting *moksha* from the Lord of the Three Worlds [trivikraman]! Piece of cake, eh? *Moksha* for free!’

And thus ended the endearing story in the Bhagavatham where a potter and his pot too, a piece of mere insentient ‘*jada*’, managed to extract the promise of *moksha* from the God Almighty.



Many millenniums later in the great temple of Sri Rangam there was an apocryphal story of one Pillai Perumal Ayyangar who was an ardent devotee of the Lord and a great ‘*bhagavath- kainkarya-sirOmani*’ (temple servitor). He was in the habit of collecting flowers from the temple gardens (brindavanams) every day and bringing them over to Lord Ranganath’s ‘*sannidhi*’ (*sanctum*). He would seat himself in the ‘*sannidhi*’ and then weave a floral garland to adorn the Lord. He had been doing this ‘*kainkaryam*’ (service) and nothing else but this—without a break for many years.

One day this Ayyangar swamy was seated at the *sannidhi* weaving Lord Ranganatha’s floral garland.

Suddenly, he stopped midway and spoke out to the Lord:

‘Oh, Ranganatha, after all these years of service to you I have suddenly decided that it’s time I earned *moksha* from You. Will you grant me the bliss of *mOksha*, O Ranga?’

Lord Ranganatha heard this and is reported to have chuckled merrily:

‘Oh, *ayyengar-swamy*, pray tell me what this sudden desire of yours is? Whither this sudden love of *moksha*?’

‘It just struck me, Ranganatha that I have had about enough on earth. I think I need a break from all *samsAra* [worldly existence]. I think I need *moksha* now so that I shall never come back here to earth,’ said the Ayyangar.

‘Oh, ho, ho’, the Lord Ranga is known to have guffawed, ‘so *ayyengar-swamy* needs *moksha*, eh!’ said the Lord and suddenly the ‘*anantha-sayana-murthy*’ (the eternally supine NarAyaNan) got up from his eternal recline.

‘And what makes you so presumptuous, my dear Ayyangar swami, to believe that you merely must ask for *moksha* and I will give it readily to you? Is *moksha* dished out free these days?’

The ayyangar swamy was aghast at Lord Ranganatha’s remark.

‘What do you mean, Ranganatha? You think I am presumptuous in asking for *moksha*? After all these years I have slaved for You?’ he queried.

To which the Lord replied, ‘Ayyangar swamy, you think *moksha* is such an easy commodity to acquire? Do you know what it is? It is the stuff for which great souls and ‘mahAns’ dedicate their whole lives for many *janmAs* [lifetimes]. They go through severe penance and austerity for it. They pine and yearn for it. They undertake the most formidable sacrifices for it. And you! You want it just for the asking! Tell me, ayyangar swami, what have you ever done to merit *moksha*? Have you conducted a *yagnyam* [sacrifice], have you mastered the Vedas, have you sung your heart out in devotion, have you undertaken fasts for me, has your heart longed for me in the deep nights when your soul cried out for me? Tell me ayyangar swami have you done anything that would make you deserve of *moksha*?’

The ayyangar heard this outburst of Lord Ranganatha patiently. After a moment the old man retaliated with his own outburst, doubly vehement, and shrill:

‘Rangantha, you talk so big! All that bit about meriting *moksha*. The sacrifices, the penance, the devotion, the fasting, the soul-searching, and all that—Ranganatha, you tell me, truly, do you really keep all that in mind when you grant *moksha*? If so, then, how come you granted DadhipAndan’s great big ugly pot *moksha* in your Krishna avatara! Tell me, oh Ranganatha, how many great sacrifices that piece of mere insentient *jada* performed, how many vedas it had mastered, how many *ekAdasi* fasts it undertook, how many nights its soul cried out for you? Answer me, Ranganatha, answer me now, how come you so easily granted *moksha* to DadhipAndan’s pot, that piece of senseless, inert, insentient *jada*! And pray tell me, in what way am I less qualified than that big pot in which you hid from your mother, Yasodha? Don’t brag to me about how precious your gift of *moksha* is, Ranga! Not to me. I know a bit of secrets about You and your *mOksha*!’

When Pillai-perumAl AyyangAr had finished, the Lord is reported to have fallen into a contrite and contemplative silence, stunned by the old man’s rapier-sharp judicial argument. After a while Rangantha went meekly back to his ‘*anantha-sayanam*’ without a murmur of protest. ‘All right then, Ayyangar, you shall have what you seek.’

And there ends our story of DadhipAndan’s ‘*ghatam*’.



This story is funny. It is also significant. It gives ordinary souls like us some hope that God will shower on us his grace and compassion even if we, as human clay pots (‘*mAnushya-ghatam*’), are unworthy of *mOksha*. All that we perhaps need to do, like Dadhipandan’s pot, is to make sure that somehow, we are constantly proximate to (‘*bhaagavata-saameepyam*’) or associated with the person or presence of lofty souls who we know are ‘*mumukshu-s*’ (seekers of truth). Probably we too then might, by the sheer outside chance of ‘being in the right place at the right time’, be granted God’s Grace.





EPILOGUE

THE ENDURING EDIFICE AND LEGACY OF SRI RAMANUJA “DARSANA”

When we look at a building from a distance, we can see only its facade. The facade, however, is only one of the 3 principal aspects of any building, the other two being—its foundation and its internal structure (colloquially termed as ‘*structural*’).

Similarly, whenever we talk of Sri Vaishnavism as a system of philosophy, theology and religious discipline i.e. as ‘*ramAnuja-siddhAntam*’, more often than not, we tend to see only its facade, i.e., its most visible and outward aspects expressed in its many religious practices and beliefs, such as idol-worship, temple worship and rituals, devotional piety, etc., while its other two aspects viz. its deep philosophy and its comprehensive theology remain relatively obscured from view.

The *Webster’s English Dictionary* defines philosophy, theology, and religion to be as follows:

‘*Philosophy*’ (from the Greek ‘*philo*’ meaning ‘love’ and ‘*sophia*’, meaning ‘wisdom’) is ‘*science which aims at an explanation of all phenomena of the universe in terms of ultimate causes. It is the knowledge of universal phenomena as explained by and resolved into causes and reasons, powers and laws.*’ A philosopher is one who is in love with the pursuit of such knowledge.

‘*Theology*’ (from the Greek ‘*theo*’ + ‘*logia*’ where ‘*theo*’ means God and ‘*logos*’ means discourse) is ‘*science which treats of God and Man in all their known relations to each other*’.

‘*Religion*’ (from Latin ‘*relegionis*’ which means to ‘care for’ or ‘to heed’) is ‘*the recognition of a Supreme Being as an object of reverence, worship, love, and obedience*’.

Although Sri Ramanuja never expressly made the distinction between the philosophy and the theology behind the religious system of truth-seeking, he expounded, it is evident from his major works that his concerns were distinctly part-ethico-philosophical and part-religio-theological. On one

hand he concerned himself with the ‘**ultimate causes, reasons, and laws**’ of philosophy; on the other hand, he concerned himself too with theological definitions and discourse upon ‘**all the known relations between God and man**’; and finally, he was moved by deep compassion to explore the religious expression of ordinary humanity with aspirations to voice its ‘**reverence, worship, love, and obedience**’ to God.



Ramanuja founded his philosophy wholly on the ‘*brahma-sUtrA-s*’ and the Upanishads—the fountainhead of all Vedantic thought—in so far as they explained and intuited the ‘*ultimate causes of*’ and the ‘**ultimate reasons for**’ all things phenomenal—such as for example ‘What is the cause of this world?’, ‘What is the cause of man’s existence?’, ‘What are the reasons for human existence?’, ‘What is insentient matter? What is sentient spirit?’ etc.

Ramanujua’s inquiry into these questions constituted his principal philosophical work in life: (i) the

‘*Vedārtha-sangrahaṃ*’; (ii) the ‘*Sri Bhaaśhyam*’, (iii) the ‘*Gīta-bhaśhyam*’, (iv) “*Vedānta Deepikā*”, and (v) “*Vedānta sāraṃ*”. In these works he elaborated on the very cornerstone of his philosophical system: principles such as ‘*tattva-traya*’ (enquiry into matter, individual, and universal soul as causative and effective entities), ‘*sarīrī-sarīra sambhaṇḍa*’ (enquiry into the relation between ontological entities viz. the body, the spirit, and the absolute), and ‘*AdhAra-AdhEya*’ (epistemological enquiry into the cause and effect, reality and appearance, perception and realisation), “*aprthak- siddhi*” . . . all of which Ramanuja in his works (such as *Vedānta Deepikā* and *Vedānta Sāraṃ*) developed clearly and fully into irrefutable philosophical law.

Ramanuja’s theology, on the other hand—i.e., his determination of ‘*all known relations between man and God*’—was inspired wholly by the unique genius he brought to bear upon the discursive interpretations of the Sanskrit epics or ‘*itihAsAs*’ (Ramayana and Mahabharata) and the Tamil epiphanies called the ‘*naalāyira Divya Prabhaṇḍams*’, the four thousand verses of the twelve Tamil mystics, the Azhvars (seventh to ninth century AD), and most notably that of NammAzhvAr’s ‘*tiruvoimOzhi*’. Ramanuja unveiled to the world the theology of ‘*bhakti*’ and “*sāraṇāgati*” in his famous “*gadya traya*” wherein he established the most fundamental and inalienable relationship between man and God. From the philosophical principle of ‘*sarīrī-sarīra*’ flowed naturally Ramanuja’s theology which became an elaboration of ‘*bhakti*’ with its unique doctrines of ‘*sEsha-shEsi bhaava*’ (the individual soul as an entity being inseparable body of the universal absolute) and ‘*sāraNagati-tattva*’ (the doctrine of utter surrender of the soul to the Supreme Cause and Being).

Armed with a profound system of philosophy (called Visishtadvaita) and a uniquely formulated theology (called ‘*bhakti*’), Ramanuja next addressed himself to the third aspect of his ‘*siddhAntam*’ viz. religious practices, rites and rituals that were concerned solely with the ‘*recognition of a Supreme Being as an object of reverence, worship, love, and obedience*’.

From Ramanuja’s theology of ‘*bhakti*’—extreme devotion to a personal God—did flow naturally his code of religious practices and temple worship called ‘*sri-sampradAyaṃ*’ otherwise known popularly in the world today as Sri Vaishnavism. The Sri Vaishnava religious codes were founded chiefly on the practice of ‘*archA-arAdanaṃ*’—the worship of idols or icons of God both at home and in the temple, consecrated both personally and congregationally, ritually and sacramentally, but above all adoringly. This system of ritual idol-worship that Ramanuja codified drew its sanction from the ancient texts of ‘*pAncharAtra-Agama*’ (sacred manuals of idol-worship) which Ramanuja firmly institutionalized in temples of Vishnu across the length and breadth of the land with great success as the popular choice of worship to God. The manual of temple ritualistic practices called “Nithyam” and “kovil ozhuku” is the authority even today for temple rites and customs.

It is precisely because his **philosophy, theology, and religion** all so beautifully blended and fused into one seamless, holistic, and panoramic whole that Ramanuja’s ‘*siddhAntam*’ or Sri Vaishnavism has come to be called ‘*rAmAnuja-darsanam*’ meaning ‘the holistic worldview of Sri Ramanujacharya’.



Although Sri Ramanuja ‘*darsanam*’ is a holistic worldview and system, the casual or un-initiated observer of the faith from outside is often led to focus overly on its external religious practices rather than on the profound Vedantic philosophy or the elegantly formulated theology underpinning the religious practices. A Westerner is thus most likely (and erroneously) to look upon Sri Vaishnavism as an idolatrous cult, one of several sub-sectarian sub-systems of Hinduism devoted to temple- based and

temple-inspired ritualized worship. Such ill-informed observers often sometimes even dismiss Sri Vaishnavism as mere effusive, if not excessively *emotional* expression of devotion; a pious preoccupation with temples and idols; and mass obsession with idolatrous rites, congregation, festivity and ritual.

Even amongst Sri Vaishnavas of present times, not many are well schooled in the philosophy and theology of Ramanuja's holistic system of worship. The pious Sri Vaishnava laity today is seen to be—and indeed behaves as such—mostly as ardent and devout 'temple-goers'; its members are supremely happy merely (and sometimes mechanically) performing various rites and rituals of the Sri Vaishnava faith or merely celebrating the various festivities ('*utsavams*') and sacraments ('*kovil kainkaryam*') at temples in the various Vishnu temples in the land. They are quite at risk of appearing to an outsider as being smug and content with adherence to mere outward and superficial tenets of their faith, regarding them all as not only essential but also quite sufficient means in themselves to spiritual salvation. It is true to some extent that other than such external religious observances, the average Sri Vaishnavan today is not overly inspired or fired by zeal to delve deep into the other more profound aspects of '*ramanuja darsanam*'.

Be that as it may, most Sri Vaishnavas today still perceive their faith to be an integrated system of ancient lofty philosophical thought blended with endearing theological doctrines made manifest in joyous contemporary forms of individual worship addressed to an intensely personal loving God.

Deep down in his heart, every true Sri Vaishnava understands that his faith is a sophisticated complex, nay, a certain '*calculus*' of philosophy, theology, and religion, each **integrated** into the other as much as each is **differentiated** too from the other. The Sri Vaishnavan therefore can be an idol-worshipper, inveterate monist, sectarian ritualist, and liberated anti-dogmatist, all at the same time. He understands he is free to take from his faith only what is merely needed, not as much as what he might want from it—and that too just about enough to keep him inspired and sustained in his own personal spiritual quest and journey along the path of life.

The average Sri Vaishnavan knows for sure the following more intuitively than intellectually:

The super-structure of a building and its facade, which is visible to the whole world, is built **around** its 'structurals' and **upon** its foundation. Quite similarly, his religious system or religious worldview, too, can be said to be built **around** its theology and **upon** its philosophy.

A building that has foundation but neither structurals nor super-structure serves no earthly purpose. Similarly, a philosophy, no matter how profound it might be, that however has neither clear theology nor religion, remains at best a platonic but barren ideal.

A building that has both well-laid foundation and well-designed structurals but is lacking in a super-structure where people can be housed, remains forever mere unfinished masonry. A system of philosophy, similarly, that boasts of a theology but has little to offer by way of a practicable religion can, at best and always, be called little more than a cult.

A building with a magnificent facade but very faulty structurals, and much worse, with weak foundation, is a clear threat to public safety. In the same vein, a religion that appeals greatly to the popular sentiment or mass mood of the day, but which lacks deep philosophical foundation and comprehensive theological structure, at worst, rarely rises above the level of pernicious witchcraft and mumbo-jumbo, and at best, intolerant, exclusive gospel of extremism.

A building however that possesses all three features—**solid foundation, well-designed structurals and an imposing super-structure with a magnificent facade**—is exactly like the system of *Ramanuja*-

Darsanam that is built indeed upon an enduring philosophy, around an elegant theology, and with appealing religious practices.

It is in such a compact yet spiritually spacious dwelling that the Sri Vaishnava—even an ‘*unknown Sri Vaishnava*’ like me—chooses to house himself and his soul.



END

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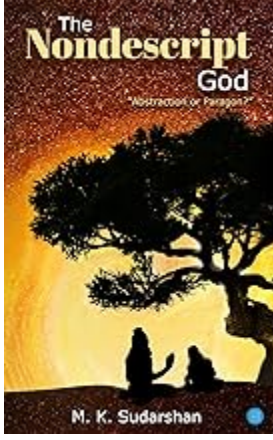
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“The Nondescript God: Abstraction or Paragon?”



“The author of this book ... has adopted a unique approach to explain the Visishtadvaita perspective of realisation Brahman, in the form of a dialogue between a student and an unknown Sri Vaishnava.... The book is a welcome addition to the learners and scholars of both Advaita and Visishtadvaita philosophies.

M.Varadarajan reviewing in THE HINDU dt. June 17, 2022

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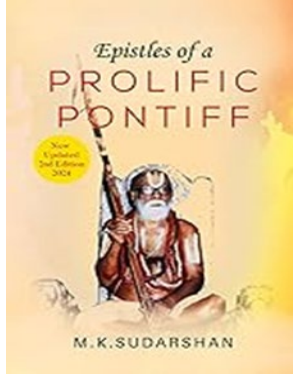
- *The Indian Express dt. August 12, 2022*

“.... A welcome addition to Visishtadvaita literature ... the book is aimed at those who thirst for ‘sampradaayic’ knowledge but are handicapped by their lack of acquaintance with Sanskrit or Manipravalam (language) in which most of the scholarly treatises (in Srivaishnavism) have been written”.

- *“Sri Nrisimha Priya”: May 2022 issue*

“The Nondescript God” is a remarkable book with descriptive analysis and intellectual clarity . I read it twice. It reminded me of Socrates's dialogue! It educates people like me who are caught between modernity and tradition while you (the author) are well-equipped in both”.

- *Indira Parthasarathy (R. Parthasarathy, or Ee. Paa., is an Indian author and playwright who writes in Tamil. He has published 16 novels, 10 plays, anthologies of short stories, and essays; the only Tamil writer to receive both the Sahitya Akademi Award (1977) and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2004). He received Padma Shri in the year 2010, given by Government of India).*



“The Epistles of a Prolific Pontiff”

“The Tamil “Arul mozhis” of Srimad Mukkur Azhagiyasingar conveyed lofty matters of Vedanta in easy-to-understand language for the layman. Now, in this book of English translations of the original by Sudarshan, the “Arul mozhis” have been made even more accessible and comprehensible to our younger English-speaking generations who are not so well versed either in Sanskrit or Tamil language.... I pray to Lord Malolan that this book should reach the homes of all those who have faith in the tenets of our Sanatana Dharma.”

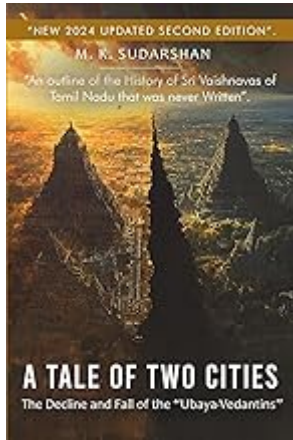
- **HH Srimathe Srivan Satagopa Sri Ranganatha Yatindra Mahadesikan (present 46th Pontiff of the Sri Ahobila Mutt)**

“Sudarshan has translated into English the Tamil “Arul mozhis” of the great Acharya Srimad Mukkur Azhagiyasingar for the benefit of those of our younger generations have relocated abroad or away from their native roots. The essays of the Acharya have been translated not just in English language... I would say rather they have been translated by him into sheer poetry...”

- **Dr.S. Padmanabhacharya, Sri Karyam of Sri Ahobila Mutt and former Head of the Department of Sanskrit and Vaishnavism Studies, Madras University, Chennai, India.**

“(Sudarshan) is able to capture the spirit of each Arulmozhi and tell the story in his own words, words which display a nice turn of phrase and make for a smooth, seamless narrative.... It is evident that this has been a labour of love for Sri Sudarshan ... to bring the wonderful words of this spiritual giant to the English-speaking readers without detracting a bit from the tone, tenor and spirit of the original”.

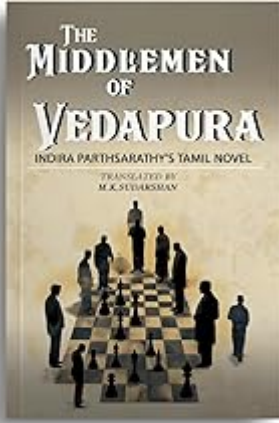
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“... the whole book is a must read for every Hindu whether he or she is a Sri Vaishnava or not. Because this is part of our history and the author has with genuine love for all Hindus, has made this the story with valuable lessons for our future as well.”

----- **Aravindan Neelakandan**



“The Middlemen of Vedapura” (fiction): *an English translation of Tamil satirical novel by Indira Parthasarathy (Sahitya and Sangitha Nataka Akademy and Padma Shree Award winning author and playwright)*

“His 90s novel “Vedhapuratthu Vyaagbaarigal”, written at a time when Tamil Nadu experienced the eccentricities of those in political power, has now been translated by M.K.Sudarshan into English as The Middlemen of Vedapura.... (The original novel) should not be viewed as a work that fictionalizes real-life incidents. It goes beyond, and the translator has captured the spirit of the work very well”.

**--- T.Ramakrishnan: *The HINDU Literary Review* –
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