

19. Sanctified by three Avatars

*Heaven is not some remote place,
Where people are virtuous and of good character
You will find Paradise.*

BHARAT'S culture is rooted in the *Vedas*. Music and literature have come from the *Vedas*. *The Sama Veda* is the primal source of music. *Rig Veda* is the source of all literature.

Devotion, filled with music, is the form of the Divine. Hence, Lord Narayana declared: "I do not dwell in Vaikunta or in the hearts of yogis.. I am present wherever my devotees sing my praise, Oh Narada!"

The Lord resides not only in the hearts of devotees, but also in the hearts of the evil-minded. Once, the child Prahlada approached his mother, Lilavati, and told her, "Mother, there is only one difference between me, who is a devotee of Hari and my father, who hates Hari. Ever contemplating on the nectarine sweetness of the Lord, repeating His name, and constantly remembering Him, I am immersed in the bliss of love of the Lord, like one intoxicated. My father, in his hatred of Narayana, has turned his heart into stone and installed Him in it."

Live in faith to experience happiness

The Lord, who dwelt in the heart of Prahlada, who loved Narayana, and the Lord who was in the heart of Hiranyakasipu, who hated Narayana, was one and the same. Drinking deep the nectar of Divine Love, Prahlada quenched his heart's thirst and found bliss. Installing the Lord in his stony heart, Hiranyakasipu was unable to allay his burning thirst and experienced endless worries.

Man has to live in faith to experience happiness. Where there is happiness there is peace. Realising that the Divine is omnipresent, the devotees make their lives sublime by singing the glories of the Lord and ever dwelling on His name.

The Divine is present everywhere and in everything. Prahlada declared in the Bhagavatha: "There is no room for the suspicion that the Lord is here and not there. He can be found wherever He is sought, because He is immanent in everything in the universe. Saint Tyagaraja said the same thing when he sang: "Where is your dwelling place, Oh Lord? Wherever I turn I behold you. You are present everywhere. You are omnipotent and all-knowing."

The Divine is present not only in human beings. He dwells in birds and beasts and in all living things. So Tyagaraja sang: "Did not a woman devotee (Aparanji) teach a parrot to recite the name of Rama and enjoy your glory?"

The knower of *Brahman* becomes *Brahman* Himself. Valmiki, who wrote the Ramayana, was so much immersed in the Rama principle that the inmates of his *ashram* noticed an effulgence in his face reflective of the splendour of Rama Himself. The face is a reflection of the inner being. Whatever thoughts and emotions fill a man, they are reflected, in his face. Moses, who was ever dwelling on the glories of God, reflected in his face the radiance and splendour of the Divine. This is revealed in the Bible. Darwin, who was a devoted student of Henslow, followed his teacher's exemplary life and became, in later years, a great scientist recognizing the inextricable relationship between man and God.

The three *Danava* Devotees

The devotee is inseparable from God. When he is filled with the love of God and is totally forgetful of himself, he experiences oneness with God. Prahlada was such a supreme devotee. He was a *Rakshasa* by birth. His form was human. His heart was centered on God. Prahlada combined in himself these three elements. He adhered to the culture of Bharat and shone as an ideal to his people. In following the four *Purusharthas*--*Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha*--Prahlada combined the pursuit of *Artha* (worldly interest) with *Dharma* and linked them to *Kama* (desire) for the attainment of *Moksha*. Because of this, *Moksha* itself sought Prahlada.

Though born among *Danavas* (*Asuras* or *Rakshasas*), there are three notable figures who have achieved distinction in the pursuit of the *Purusharthas* and sanctified their lives. They are Prahlada, Bali and Vibhishana. As against these, there are countless persons, who, born as human beings, have forgotten *Dharma* and *Moksha* and, submerged in *Artha* and *Kama*, have wasted their lives.

Emperor Bali was the soul of goodness

Virochana was the son of the great devotee Prahlada. He was, however, different from his father. He was a staunch materialist. He followed the hedonistic philosophy of Charvaka. Emperor Bali, who was the soul of goodness and purity, was Virochana's son. He looked after the welfare of his people as if they were his own children. He earned the love and esteem of his citizens, whom he regarded as limbs of his own body. The people enshrined Bali in their hearts. There was complete harmony between the people and the ruler.

Bali once embarked upon the performance of a great sacrifice known as *Viswajit* (conquest of the Universe). This provoked the apprehension of Indra and the *Devas*. There have always been in all ages men who are envious of or antagonistic to those who are prosperous, eminent or extremely good. The latter have had to face troubles from such envious persons. Rama was subject to many hardships from evil-minded persons. Harischandra suffered many ordeals from a *Rishi*. The Pandavas, who were the very embodiment of *dharma*, had to endure numerous troubles caused by the envious Kauravas. Jesus, who was the personification of self-sacrifice, was a victim of the hatred of those who were envious of his popularity and resented his teachings. The Prophet Mohammed had to flee from Mecca because of the enmity of some people who were opposed to his message.

The *Devas* propose: The Lord disposes

Bali wanted to ensure peace and prosperity for the entire world under his beneficent reign and commenced the *Viswajit Yaga* for this purpose. The *Devas* became apprehensive and jealous when Bali was performing this *yaga*. They approached Lord Narayana and prayed to Him: "Bali, who is *Rakshasa* by birth, is attempting to bring the whole Universe under his sway by performing the *Viswajit Yaga*. You must save the world from this danger (of the whole world coming under the rule of *Rakshasas*), by diverting his mind from this course.

Man proposes, but God disposes. The Lord, who knew the greatness of Bali, his noble qualities and his devotion to God, formally acceded to the *Devas*' prayers but decided to confer the highest blessings on Bali. For this purpose He incarnated in Siddhasrama as Vamana and went to Bali's *yajnasala* to ask for a gift. Pure-hearted as he was, Bali could instantly recognise the radiance on the face of the young Vamana. He asked Vamana: "Swami, what is it you seek at this *Yajna*? I have decided to renounce everything I possess to redeem my life." Vamanamurthi was short in

stature, but the whole universe was immanent in Him. He asked for an apparently small gift from Bali-nothing more than three lengths of ground measured by his feet. Bali felt that for a ruler of the vast earth, this was too small a gift and he agreed. That very moment, Vamana assumed the immeasurable form of Trivikrama, the Supreme Lord of the three worlds. With one step, He covered the entire earth. With the second step, He covered the whole of space and asked Bali where He should place his foot for the third step. Bali knelt before the Lord and said: "Oh Lord! What can I offer you except the body and heart which you have given to me? I pray to you to place your foot on my head." Bali was thus the supreme embodiment of self-sacrifice, who did not hesitate to offer everything he had to the Lord.

Vamana's boon to Emperor Bali

Seeing the anguish of his loving people at this turn of events at the *Yajna*, Bali made one request to the Lord before he was sent to his heavenly abode by the Lord's third step. He said: "Oh Lord! I am indeed happy that I have been sanctified- by your divine feet and achieved the bliss of liberation. I do not, however, wish to leave my loving people in the agony that they are feeling. Please allow me once a year, in the month of *Sravan*, during the consolation of *Sravana*, to visit my people." He asked for this boon out of his boundless love for his people. The Lord granted this boon.

The Onam festival signifies the enormous love Bali had for the people of his realm. On Onam day, all the people of Kerala rise early in the morning, take a purifactory bath, put on new clothes, prepare a variety of delicious dishes, spread them on a plantain leaf and offer them first to Emperor Bali as a pious oblation.

Then they celebrate the Onam festival in the company of their kith and kin and friends with great rejoicing. The new clothes worn on Onam day are known as "Onakkodi." This name has a special significance. It refers not merely to the new clothes worn by Keralites, but to the new body which Emperor Bali acquired on that day. Bali, who appears on that day from the netherworld, is considered as appearing in the new garb of love of the people for whose sake he was coming.

How Kerala acquired the name Parasurama Kshetra

Kerala is a land that has won the love of the Lord in a special way. In olden days, it was noted for its devotion and godliness. Kerala is also known as Parasurama *Kshetra*---the sacred land of Parasurama. How did it acquire that name? Parasurama is one of the *avatars* of Vishnu. When Parasurama's father (Jamadagni) was beheaded by a *Kshatriya* king, his mother Renuka, cried in anguish: "Rama! Rama!" Parasurama, who was away from the *ashram*, could ethereally hear the cries of his mother from afar and rushed home. He counted that his mother had called his name twenty one times. On reaching the *ashram* he saw his father's head severed from the body. The horrible crime had been committed by Kartavirya's sons. Parasurama took a vow to wage war against the vile *kshatriya* rulers twenty one times and end their rule all over the earth. Parasurama accomplished his mission by defeating the *kshatriya* kings twenty one times and came to his *ashram* to pray to his ancestors for restoring his father's life. The sage Bharadwaja, to whose *gotra* Jamadagni belonged, appeared before Parasurama and restored Jamadagni to life by placing the head and body together.

After this, Parasurama felt that the purpose of his advent had been achieved and as he had no desire to be a ruler, he made a gift of all the territories he had conquered to the Sage Kashyapa.

He felt that having given away everything, it would not be right for him to remain on the land he had gifted. He decided to reclaim land from the sea and settle down on that territory for the rest of his life. It is this area that is known as Parasurama *Kshetra*--also known as Kerala. He performed penance on a mountain called Mahesa, which is situated in Kerala.

Kerala is uniquely blessed by Providence

Kerala is thus a land with sacred traditions. The Onam festival occurs in an auspicious period. Kerala goes through three months of heavy rains before Onam. Nature wears a sombre look. The skies are overcast and the sun is hardly visible during these months. After the rains, the sun shines in all its glory and it is green everywhere. Nature rejoices at the time of Onam. The entire population is filled with joy, sharing the glory of Nature and enjoying its fruits in abundance. The natural beauty of Kerala cannot be described in words. It has to be seen and enjoyed. Kerala has been uniquely blessed by Providence.

In such a sacred and well-endowed country, the whirligig of time has wrought some changes. The passage of time and the vicissitudes of circumstances have affected the minds of people. Differences have arisen between man and man and hatred has grown among various sections. In spite of these changes, however, the spirit of devotion among the people has remained.

Onam is celebrated with joy in Kerala

Kerala is regarded as a communist ridden country. But this is not wholly true. Even today the mass of the people are filled with deep devotion. On Onam day there is no Keralite who does not celebrate the festival with enthusiasm and joy. The temples are jam-packed with devotees on Onam day. Although political differences figure prominently on the surface, deep down there is a sense of unity in the hearts of the people.

"What is the difference between man and God?" it is asked. The answer is: the individual *jiva* is a changing entity. God is unchanging and eternal. Faith in God has remained unchanged in Kerala despite the passage of centuries. This is the unique greatness of the Onam festival.

Prahlada was a great devotee of God. Bali, his grandson, was a great emperor and devotee. In between, the father of Bali, Virochana, was a materialist and atheist. In the world, there are any number of persons who derive inspiration from Prahlada and Bali. There are also many who take the cue from Virochana. *The Jagat* (world) will not be what it is, if such variations did not exist.

All through history, the devotees of God have had to endure many ordeals and privations, but they never lost their faith in God. They have stood out as ideals and examples to mankind. Bali was one such great exemplar. Onam is celebrated as the sacred day when Bali achieved liberation. It is also the day when Vamana was born. It is also the day when each year Bali visits the earth to experience the love of the people and participate in their rejoicings. Hence, people should not be content with enjoying food and raiment but should try to experience the bliss of the Spirit.

The people of Kerala should be proud of the fact that their land is sacred in many ways. It was created by an *Avatar* of the Divine. It is the land where Prahlada and Bali were born. It witnesses the advent of the Vamana *Avatar*. Because of these sacred associations, I desire that the people of Kerala should lead pious and virtuous lives and I bless them. on this sacred occasion.

Discourse in the Purnachandra Auditorium

on Onam day, 15-9-1986.