

### 23. The significance of Vinaayaka worship

*With your elephant's trunk  
And single tusk, and benign looks,  
With the tingling of your anklets,  
And your prodigious belly,  
Looking like a dwarf,  
But capable of bestowing all knowledge,  
Oh Son of Paarvathi!  
Hail! Lord of the Ganas.*

BHARATHEEYAS' festivals are pregnant with spiritual significance. Unfortunately Bhaaratheeyas today give importance only to external rituals and observance, ignoring their inner meaning and eternal values.

*"Paarvathi thanaya Ganaadhipa!"* (Oh son of Paarvathi! Lord of the *ganas*). In these terms the *Vedhas* extolled Ganapathi. Who is this Paarvathi? Who is her son? What is the relationship between mother and son? Few Bhaaratheeyas care to enquire into these questions. The *Vedhas* proclaimed' *"Oh Ganaadhipa!"* Who are these *ganas*? Are they celestial hosts or *Asuras* (demonic beings)? They are celestial beings. Where are they? Are they wandering in the external world or are they present subtly in human beings? He (Vighneshvara) is called Ganaadhipathi because he is the Supreme Lord of the *ganas*. The *ganas* are the embodiments of the *Jnaanedhriyas* (organs of perception) and of *Karmendhriyas* (organs of action). The mind is the master of these ten senses. The presiding deity of the mind is called Indra as he is the Lord of the *Indhriyas* (the senses). The master over the mind is *the Buddhi* (intellect).

#### **The meaning of "Ganapathi"**

What does the name 'Ganapathi' signify? '*Ga*' means *Buddhi* (or intellect), '*Na*' means *Vijnaana* (wisdom). As Vighneshvara is the Lord of the intellect and Wisdom, He is called Ganapathi.

It follows from this that what are called *ganas* are parts of the human body. The *vyakthi* (individual) is a part of *shrishti* (creation). Hence, Divinity, of which the cosmos is a projection, is immanent in the human being. *"Vigatho naayakah Vinaayakah"* (Vinaayaka has no master over him). This means that Vinaayaka is a totally autonomous and independent deity. He has no lord above him. In the world, any individual or authority has someone superior above him. But Vinaayaka has no overlord.

The worship of Vinaayaka has been in existence from times immemorial in Bhaarath. The *Rig Vedha*, the *Naarayanopanishath* and the *Thaitheeriya Upanishath* have passages referring to Vinaayaka. It is embedded also in a Gaayathri *manthra*.

*Thathpurushaaya Vidmahe  
Vakrathundaaya dheemahi  
Thanno Danthi Prachodayaath*

*This manthra* indicates that Vinaayaka's divinity is glorified in this Gaayathri *manthra*. Hence, Ganapathi signifies an all-pervading divine potency.

In everyday parlance, Ganapathi is described as the son of Paarvathi. Paarvathi represents *Prakrithi* (Nature). Man is a child of Nature. Hence every human being is a Vinaayaka. He is a spark of the Divine Shiva-Shakthi, the union of the Lord and Nature. Everything in the world has emanated from *Prakrithi* (Nature). All things are aspects of Nature. It is to reveal this sacred truth that holy festivals are observed.

### **Elephant head and *Muushika***

How does it happen that Vinaayaka has the head of an elephant and has a mouse as his vehicle? The mouse is called *Muushika* in Sanskrit. It is a sign of night, which signifies darkness. The mouse is a symbol of darkness. Because Vinaayaka has control over darkness, He is described as the rider on a *Muushika*. He is the one who dispels darkness and sheds light on the world.

*The Muushika* (mouse) is also a symbol of the sense of smell. The mouse moves about following the direction of the *vaasana* (smell). Vinaayaka is the one who has mastery over *vaasanas*, that is, desires and ignorance (represented by *Muushika*).

What is meant by describing the *Muushika* (mouse) as 'the vehicle of Vinaayaka? It means that Vinaayaka rides on the *Muushika*, representing *vaasanas* (desires) and ignorance (darkness). Vinaayaka is one who drives away all sorrows, difficulties and miseries. He is the enemy of all obstacles. He will not allow any obstacles to come in the way. He is the destroyer of obstacles. He confers happiness and peace (on his devotees). He is the master of all these *powers--Buddhi and Siddhi*. What is *this Siddhi* (fulfillment)? When there is purity of mind you achieve peace which is *Siddhi*. Vinaayaka is thus the Lord of *Buddhi and Siddhi* (the Intellect and Self-Realisation). Hence, every human being should acquire control over the mind.

### **Nature of food offered to Vinaayaka**

Every festival is celebrated by various culinary preparations. For Vinaayaka Chaturthi, these preparations are of a special kind. The edible offerings to Vinaayaka are totally free from oily substances. Vinaayaka is offered only items cooked through steam. What is the reason? According to the science of Ayurvedha (the ancient Indian system of medicine), food cooked through steam is easily digested.

Moreover, the Vinaayaka festival, which is celebrated in the month of Bhaadhrapadha, falls in a month when sesame and jaggery come to the market after the harvest. The sesame seeds are powdered and mixed with rice flour and jaggery and cooked in balls which are offered as *Naivedhyam* to Vinaayaka. Jaggery is a cure for several ailments relating to phlegm and bile. The sesame seeds have the power to cleanse 'the lungs and improve the vision. These balls of sesame and jaggery are thus noted for their medicinal properties for curing both external and internal ailments.

The ancient Bhaaratheeyas never indulged in meaningless practices. Every festival has an inner spiritual significance. Every word they spoke, every step they moved, every food they consumed had spiritual significance.

### **The Lord of learning**

Vinaayaka is the Lord of all *Vidhya* (learning). Does learning mean bookish scholarship? No. Everything pertaining to the cosmos is included in the term *Vidhya* (learning). Walking, talking, laughing, sitting, eating, strolling, thinking every kind of activity is related to learning. Vinaayaka is the master of every kind of learning.

Today learning is identified with 'acquisition of information. But apart from knowledge of the physical world, we have many other kinds of knowledge relating to chemistry; the fine arts and other skills.

Vinaayaka is the master of every kind of knowledge. Learning is related to *Buddhi* (intellect). It is not mere scholarship. Familiarity with books is not knowledge. One's entire life is a continuous process, of learning. Any process of enquiry is related to learning. But basically our enquiry should be concerned with finding out what is transient and what is permanent. This is true knowledge.

Hence, today students worship Vinaayaka with zeal. Vinaayaka is not the one who merely comes to the aid of those who read their books. He helps everyone at every step in life's journey. He is readily accessible. He is pleased with an offering of flowers of no value ("Jilledy" flowers). It is said that any one who eats these flowers will become insane. Such flowers are 'offered to Vinaayaka. Vinaayaka is also worshipped with an offering of green grass.

What is the inner meaning of these kinds of offerings? It means that earlier Vinaayaka used to be worshipped even by animals. His face is that of an elephant. His vehicle is a mouse. These are symbols from the animal kingdom. They indicate that Vinaayaka is worshipped even by birds and beasts. Vinaayaka is thus worshipped by all beings and is Lord over all beings. He does not belong to one country or one nation or one period of time. He is related to all places and all times.

### **Puraanik stories to testify Vinaayaka's greatness**

There are scriptural texts which testify to all this. But some of them are quite fanciful. For instance, in one *puraanik* story, it is stated that once Shiva and His consort Paarvathi were playing a game of dice. For any game there has to be an umpire, who has to declare who is the winner. Shiva and Paarvathi agreed to have Nandhi (the divine bull) as the umpire. Nandhi is a favourite of Shiva, as he is Shiva's vehicle. Although Shiva lost the game, Nandhi declared Him the winner. It is stated that Paarvathi was indignant over Nandhi's partiality for Shiva and cursed him that he should die from an incurable disease. Thereupon Nandhi fell at the feet of Paarvathi and pleaded for forgiveness. "Mother! forgive me. Should I not show at least this amount of gratitude to one who is my master? Is it not humiliating for me to declare that my master has lost the game? To uphold his honour I no doubt uttered a lie. But am I to be punished with such severity for so small an offence?" Nandhi prayed for forgiveness in this manner. Paarvathi forgave Nandhi and taught him the means to atone for his lapse. She told him, "The Chathurdhasi day in the month of Bhadhra-padha is the day when my son's birthday is celebrated. On that day you have to offer to my son what pleases you most (green grass)." This means that one atones for one's sins when One offers to the Lord what is most pleasing and enjoyable to him. For Nandhi the most enjoyable and relishing food is green grass. As directed by Paarvathi Nandhi worshipped Ganapathi by offering green grass. Nandhi was then relieved of his dreaded disease. His health improved and by the grace of Paarvathi he was redeemed.

This incident is the basis for the practice recommended for pilgrims to Gaya, Benares and other places that they should give up something they love most as an offering to the Divine. This means that they should give up something which they like most and not something which they do not like. Whether it be a fruit or a vegetable, what you should choose to give up as an offering to God is what you like most. This means that you give up consuming thereafter that vegetable or fruit. This practice has been prevailing from ancient times among pilgrims to Benares, Prayaag or other sacred places for a holy bath in the Ganga or Yamuna.

### **Offer to God what you like most**

Today many people go to Prayaag (Allahabad). What is the real meaning of Prayaag or Kaashi? The scripture declares: "The Indweller is the Eternal Self." The body is the temple in the center of which the Ganga of *Jnaana* (Wisdom) is flowing. In this Ganga of wisdom the two rivers of *Bhakthi* and *Sraddha* (Devotion and Earnestness), represented by Yamuna and Sarasvathi--merge and the point of conjunction of the three is known as Prayaag. Hence, the Divine should be offered what is most pleasing to one.

Unfortunately today this ancient traditional practice has been reduced to a fashionable formality. Pilgrims going to Prayaag are asked by the *paandas* (priests) to give up what is most pleasing to them. Some of the pilgrims ponder over what they can easily give up and mention the names of these vegetables and fruits. They give up the bitter gourd or something else which they don't like. This is not proper. People should offer to give up what they relish most as the best offering to the Lord. But when they offer something which they don't like, the Lord seated in the heart declares: "Be it so!" As you have not offered what is most dear to you but what you dislike most, the Lord also offers to you what you dislike most. The reward for such dubious offerings to God is that instead of health you get disease. If you offered what is good, will not God give you what is good for you?

### **As is your offering so is your reward**

This is illustrated by the example of Harishchandra. He made an offering of what was most dear to him, namely, *Sathyam* (Truth). He was prepared to give up his kingdom, his wife and son and sell himself in bondage to uphold Truth. Truth is God. God is Truth. Where there is Truth there is God. Therefore adore Truth. Make all your offerings truthfully. Thereby you will reach the abode of Truth. As is your offering so is your reward. This is the truth demonstrated by Vinaayaka.

There are other examples of Vinaayaka's greatness. Vinaayaka will not inflict trouble on anyone. However, apprehending that if Vinaayaka accompanies anyone, he will cause trouble, he is given a food offering and kept in the corner of the house. But Vinaayaka is not a lover of sleep like Kumbhakarna (Raavana's younger brother). Seeing his big belly people imagine that he is slothful.

### **Gajaasura and Shiva**

There was once a demon by name Gajaasura. He was a demon King. He performed severe penance. Eshvara appeared before him. Eshvara is easily propitiated, and He gives readily whatever one prays for, without examining whether it is right or wrong to confer such a boon. He gives whatever the devotees pray for. This was what happened in the case of the demon, Bhasmaasura. He prayed to Shiva to grant a boon that whomsoever He touches by his hand should be reduced to ashes. Shiva granted the boon. Immediately Bhasmaasura wanted to test the

power he had received by trying to place his hand on Shiva Himself! Ultimately Shiva had to be saved from Bhamaasura by a stratagem of Vishnu who made the demon place his hand on his own head. He was then reduced to ashes.

Likewise, Gajaasura also performed penance and prayed to the Lord. Eeshvara appeared before him and asked him what he wanted. Gajaasura said "Lord! you must merge in my stomach." Shiva granted the boon and lodged himself in the demon's stomach. Paarvathi, not finding Eeshvara, went out in search of her Lord and could find him nowhere. She went to her brother, Vishnu, and appealed to him to trace her missing Lord.

Vishnu knew that Shiva was in the habit of granting boons indiscriminately and getting into difficulties. He told her: "Paarvathi! I know what has happened. Be calm. You go to your abode. I shall bring Eeshvara there."

Vishnu took Shiva's Nandhi and decorated it to appear like a performing bull. Assuming the role of a bull-performer, Vishnu led the bull to the city of Gajaasura, playing on a pipe all the way while the bull danced to the tune. The bull was dancing to the music of the Divine embodiment of all mysteries. Gajaasura was intensely watching the performance of the bull and its master. Pleased with their performance, Gajaasura asked the bull trainer, "What do you want?" The latter said: "You should not go back on your word. Will you grant me what I want? You are Gajaasura, a great king." "Yes," he said. Give me Eeshvara who is in your stomach," said Vishnu. Only Vishnu knew this fact, none else. Gajaasura immediately fell at the feet of Vishnu and said "Svaami! This secret is not known to anybody except yourself. I will keep my word even at the cost of my life. But there is one condition. My head should be worshipped by all and Eeshvara should wear my skin." Vishnu agreed to it. That is the reason why Eeshvara wears an elephant's skin. The head of Gajaasura is worshipped as Vinaayaka's head.

### **Significance of *Puraanik* stories**

These are some of the *puraanik* stories relating to Vinaayaka. They are only stories. But such stories have been related to turn people's minds God-ward.

If a deep enquiry is made, it will be realised that there is only one God. God is present in all. Vinaayaka is not separate from us. The indwelling principle in our hearts is the Divine *Aathmik* Principle.

What is it that you should offer to God? Is it unripe or a ripe fruit? You should offer only a good ripe fruit. Likewise, you should offer your good thoughts to the Divine. That is the supreme significance of the Vinaayaka Chaturthi festival. Without realising this, people install a mud idol, decorate it with meaningless flowers, make offerings of useless things and seek the most valuable things from Him. What kind of bargain is this? You should offer to the Lord what is most sacred. Look at the example of a cow. It is offered all kinds of grass and other fodder. But it offers in return the most nourishing milk. Even the cow offers to man something pure and holy. But what does man offer to God? He keeps the pure things for himself and offers the impure to God. This is not right. You should offer to God what will please Him. You pray to God to give you all kinds of things. How are you entitled to ask for them? Only if you offer to God what will please Him. If you do not perform acts which will please God, how do you expect God to do things that will please you?

### **Inner truth about Vinaayaka**

Therefore, at the outset you have to do things which will please God. Then God will offer what will please you. This is one of the truths to be learnt from the Vinaayaka festival.

Vinaayaka is the Lord of life. Men should learn to shed selfishness and cultivate love of the Supreme Self. This is the inner truth about Vinaayaka. Vinaayaka should not be considered as merely an elephant-headed deity riding on a mouse.

Similar mistakes are made about other deities. For instance, Sarasvathi is represented as a Goddess riding on a swan. Sarasvathi is the Goddess of Speech. Speech is based on the inhaling and exhaling of breath. In this process of respiration, the sound *So-Ham* is produced and when it is repeated regularly, you have the sound *Ham-So*, which is identified with a swan. The inhaling and exhaling process is the chariot on which the Goddess of Speech moves.

The inner meanings of the terms and symbols used in *Vedhaanthik* parlance have to be properly understood.

### **Everything is for your good**

The best way to please God is to act according to His injunctions. For instance, I advise students not to indulge in excessive talk. Carry out your duties. Contemplate on God. Is all this advice being given for God's sake? No. Whatever Svaami tells you is for your own good. Recognise that everything is for your good.

I would relate a story in this context. There was a minister to a king who was in the habit of declaring that whatever happened was for one's good. Once the king cut his finger while slicing a piece of sugarcane. Seeing the bleeding finger of the king, the minister remarked that the cut was for the king's good. The king got so angry that he committed the minister immediately to prison. Even then the minister remarked that the prison sentence was for his own good. A few days later the king went alone for hunting in a forest and was resting under a tree. The servants of the tribal chief of the forest seized the king to be offered as human sacrifice for the tribal goddess. When the king was about to be beheaded, it was noticed that the king's finger was mutilated and such a mutilated person could not be offered as sacrifice. The king was freed. He remembered the minister's words and realised that the injury to his finger had saved him from death. He went to the prison straight and asked his minister how he could declare that the prison sentence was good for him. The minister replied that but for his being confined in prison, he would have accompanied the king and the tribal would have chosen him in the place of the king for their sacrifice.

The lesson of this story is that one should learn to welcome everything that happens as for one's own good. Recognition of this truth is the means to acquire God's grace. Develop the firm conviction that whatever God says or does is for your own good.

This is what all the Bhaaratheeya festivals seek to teach. Underlying every festival is a profound spiritual message. Unfortunately present-day students, caught up in modernity, are unable to comprehend this truth. They are obsessed with trifles and do not realise that education is for the purpose of leading the good life and not for earning a living. Yearn to lead an ideal life.

Consider Vinaayaka as the Indweller in your heart. He is constantly warning you against what is bad. You ignore the warning and get into trouble. How much will you benefit if you "follow the

Master" within you. Your conscience is the Master. Above all, heed the dictates of the Divine. That will be your best safeguard.

Vinaayaka is one who has all the five elements under his control. Arjuna did penance for acquiring the *Paashupatha Asthra* from Shiva and overcame the powers of the five elements by the power of his penance. Vinaayaka is the embodiment of all potencies. He has no superior above Him.

*In our bhajans*, the first prayer is addressed to Vinaayaka. The *bhajan* starts with *Om*, the *Pranava*. It is the combination of *Pranava* with Vinaayaka which serves to redeem our lives.

*Discourse in the Sai Kulwant Mandap on 29-8-1995.*