

30. Inner Significance Of Festivals

Bharathiya festivals and holy days are designed to reveal the greatness and integrity of Indian culture. Failing to recognise the inner significance and power of this immemorial culture, the nation has drifted into a purposeless existence. All these festivals have a profound meaning and purpose. But no earnest effort is made to understand their inner meaning and deeper objectives.

These holy days and festivals are intended to celebrate the birthdays of *Avatars* and saints and to mark the destruction of evil and wicked forces. The ancients observed these occasions to honour the memory of the great souls and to remember how the demoniac forces were vanquished. The advent of Sri Rama, the embodiment of *Dharma*, occurred on the Shuddha Navami in the Chaitra month. That day is observed as the sacred birthday of Rama. The Bahula Ashtami in the month of Sravana is observed as the sacred day on which Sri Krishna made his advent for the establishment of *Dharma* and propagating *Dharma* as the Gitacharya (the teacher of the *Bhagavad Gita*).

Festivals mark the destruction of demonic forces

The Navaratri festival, Shivarathri and Sankaranthi (festival dedicated to Sun God) are observed as memorable days marking the destruction of demonic forces by the Divine. Vijayadasami is the day when the evil-minded Ravana, who was well versed in all the sciences and was very powerful, was destroyed. The Suddha Paadyami in the Aasayuja month was the day in which the combined powers of the three goddesses, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi, (*Ichcha Shakthi*, *Kriya Sahkthi* and *Jnana Shakth*) put an end to the evil forces represented by Mahishasura (the buffalo-headed demon). Vijayadasami is also the day when the Asura King, Ravana, was destroyed and Sri Rama was crowned at Ayodhya. It is the day on which the great Emperor Vikramaditya ascended his bejewelled throne acquired as a boon. It is also the anniversary of the passing of the founder of Jainism, Mahavira.

Bharathiyas have been observing, in this manner, the birthdays of the *Avatars* and the days marking the destruction of the wicked. When Sri Krishna installed a king in Mathura after destroying the wicked, evil-minded Kamsa, Narakasura invaded the city several times. When the residents of the city were apprehensive about their safety and security, Krishna founded a city at Dwaraka to provide a place of refuge for them.

The city in which the demon Narakasura had his capital was known as Praagjyotishapuram. The name consists of four syllables: *Praag*, *jyothi*, *sha* and *puram*. *Praag* means former; *jyothi* means light; *sha* means forgetting and *puram* means the body. Together the term refers to the heart. The inner meaning of the term is that the man in his body is forgetting the light, the *Atmajyothi*, in him. *Nara* has various meanings. One is *Atma*. Another meaning is that which is not permanent. As *Nara*, man has forgotten his true spiritual state. When bad qualities enter the city of *nara*, man becomes Narakasura (a demonic being). The term Narakasura also means one who carries people to Naraka (hell).

Meaning of Naraka Chaturdasi

The life-story of Narakasura reveals the magnitude of his wickedness. His entire realm was plunged in darkness. No lights burn in the homes or in streets. No woman could be seen anywhere in the open. He imprisoned thousands of princesses and tortured innumerable women. Unable to bear these indignities, the women appealed to Krishna for succour. As Narakasura had

inflicted sufferings on women, he had to be punished by a woman. For this reason, Krishna took Sathyabhama with Him and destroyed him in battle. Vijayadasami celebrates the victory of Krishna over Narakasura. It is also known as Naraka Chaturdasi.

The following day is Amavasya (New Moon Day). Krishna freed from prison 16,000 women and asked them to go back to their respective homes. But all the *Gopikas* fell at Krishna's feet and pleaded that it would not be possible for them to live in dignity in their old homes after having been prisoners of Narakasura, and they would prefer to end their lives at His feet rather than to go back. "You are the Protector of the Universe, can't you protect us?" they pleaded. Krishna agreed to protect them. Because of the pledge He gave to them that He would bear the responsibility for protecting them, He was called their *Bhartha* (Supporter). This has been wrongly interpreted as meaning that He was their husband. It is a libel on Krishna to say that He married 16,000 *Gopikas*.

Why the lamps are lit on Deepavali day

This Amavasya day is the day of liberation for the *Gopikas*. It is a moonless day when the night is utterly dark. *The Gopikas* prayed that as on that day they had got the light of freedom it should be marked by illuminations which would make everyone rejoice as on a full moon night. It is for this reason that the day, which is a New Moon Day, is illumined by lamps and fireworks and turned into a Full Moon Night.

There is a scientific reason also for this celebration. With the end of the rainy season water stagnates in many places and the surrounding areas teem with mosquitoes and other insects. The smoke from the crackers and fireworks destroys these insects and disinfects the atmosphere.

The inner meaning underlying the Bharathiya festivals should be rightly understood. Note, for instance, the fact that the whole array of lamps are lit by the light from one lamp. That one lamp symbolises the Supreme Effulgent Lord. The others symbolise the light in individual selves. The truth of the *Vedic* saying, "The One willed to become the Many" is exemplified by the lighting of lamps by the flame of one. The Deepavali festival thus bears out the profoundest spiritual truth.

The lamp points to another significant fact. Wherever it may be placed, the flame goes upwards only and never moves down. Likewise, the flame of *Jnana* (Spiritual Wisdom) leads one to a sublime level through the path of Righteousness.

Four elements required to light the inner lamp

If you want to light a lamp, you need four things. First a container, second oil, third a wick and fourth a match box. If any one of these is lacking, you cannot light the lamp. This lamp can, however, remove only the outside darkness. How is the darkness in the heart to be removed? It can be removed only by *Jnana Jyothi* (the Light of Wisdom) and by nothing else. How is this Light of Wisdom, this spiritual light, to be lit? This also needs four elements. *Vairagya* (detachment) is the container. *Bhakti* (devotion) is the oil. *Ekagrata* (one-pointed concentration) is the wick. *Jnana* (Knowledge of the Supreme Truth) is the match stick. Without all the four, the Light of Spiritual Wisdom cannot be got.

Of the four, the primary requisite is the spirit of *vairagya* (renunciation). Without this detachment, all knowledge of scriptures is of no avail. What is this detachment? It is the absence of attachment to the body. The ego-feeling, which makes one think of the "I" all the time, should be given up. The sense of *mamakara* (possessiveness) and the ego-feeling are the causes of *raga* (attachment). How is this disease of attachment to be eradicated? By the process of self-enquiry.

When you realise the impermanence of the body and all the sensory experiences, you acquire the sense of *vairagya* (detachment). It only means you should discharge your duties, treating the body as a God-given instrument for this purpose. "*Paropakaartham idam sareeram*" (This body is for the purpose of helping others). It should not be used solely for selfish ends.

Deepavali has to be observed as a day for getting rid of all the bad qualities in us, symbolised by the demon Narakasura. *The Gopikas* who were freed on that day represent the imprisoned good qualities in us. They should be manifested effulgently. This is the inner significance of the festival. As long as the demonic qualities remain in man, he will be immersed in darkness. Bad qualities and thoughts have to be got rid of altogether.

I desire that our festivals and the holy days should be observed in the fight spirit, with an understanding of their inner significance. The destruction of the Narakasura symbolises the destruction of evil and the restoration of what is good.

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