

9. The name that redeems

THERE is no Bharatiya who has not heard the story of Rama, nor is there a village in Bharat without a Rama temple. From time immemorial, every individual in Bharat has regarded Sri Rama's life as an ideal and has sought to sanctify every moment of his life by living up to it. Bharat has always considered the life of anyone devoid of spirituality as utterly valueless.

Sri Ramachandra was born on a day when the planet *Sukra* (Venus) enters *Meena* (Pisces). The month of His advent marks the beginning of *Vasantha ritu* (Spring). It is the time when the sun enters *Mesha Rasi* (Aries). Sri Rama's incarnation as a human being was for the purpose of promoting peace and happiness in the world. "*Ramo vigrahavaan Dharmah*" ("Rama is the very embodiment of Righteousness"). It was as if Righteousness itself had incarnated on earth. *Dharma* and Rama are inseparable.

Rama's life falls in two parts: the earlier and the later. In the earlier part, Rama figures as the heroic warrior who vanquished powerful persons like Parasurama, Vali and Ravana. Rama excelled not only in physical strength but also in intelligence and character. It is impossible to describe all the virtues of Rama.

Every *Avatar* has six types of powers: all-encompassing Prosperity, Righteousness, Fame, Wealth, Wisdom and Renunciation (or non-attachment). God is the possessor of these six attributes. Sri Rama had all these six attributes in equal measure. Every *Avatar* of God in every age and every place has these six attributes.

Importance of Truth and Righteousness

In the Ramayana *Sathya* (Truth) and *Dharma* (Righteousness) are the most important concepts. The *Vedas*, which are regarded as their very life-breath by Bharatiyas, have proclaimed: "*Sathyam Vada; Dharmam Chara*" ("Speak the Truth; Act Righteously"). In order to honour the plighted word of his father, Rama elected to go to the forest leaving Ayodhya. Truth is the foundation for all righteousness. There is no greater religion than truth. Rama stood out as an upholder of Truth to fulfil the promise of his father, to maintain the traditions of his *Ikshvaku* dynasty, to protect his country and for the sake of the welfare of the world. Everyone who calls himself a human being should stand up for truth in the same manner. It is said of *Mahatmas* (high-souled men) that what they speak, what they think and what they do are in perfect accord. In the case of the wicked, their thoughts, words and deeds are at a variance with each other. By these definitions Rama was a *Mahatma* (a high-souled one) and Ravana was a *Duraatma* (an evil-souled being).

Three women symbolising the three *gunas*

In the first twelve years of Rama's life, He encountered three types of women. When he went with the sage Vishwamitra to protect his sacrifice, he encountered the ogress Thataki. He put an end to her without any *compunction* or aversion. After Vishwamitra's sacrifice was completed, Rama went with the sage to Mithila. On the way, he came across Ahalya, who had been transformed into a stone. He gave her life, absolved her of sin through penitence and restored her to her husband. At Mithila, he encountered Sita. He accepted Sita without any hesitation. What is the inner meaning of these three incidents? They show that even from his boyhood Rama displayed extraordinary qualities and stood out as an example to the world. Thataki, the first woman he encountered symbolises the *Tamas* quality. He destroyed the *Tamasic* quality. Ahalya

represents the *Rajo guna*. He taught the right lesson to Ahalya, purified her and sent her safely to her place. He took to himself Sita who represented the *Satwic* quality. Bhagavan approves of and accepts only that which is *Satwic*. He values the *Satwic* quality. He protects and fosters it.

Today all the three gunas---Tamas, *Rajas* and *Satwa*--are present in man in varying proportions. What does the presence of the *Tamo guna* signify? It is natural for the *Tamasic* person to regard untruth as truth, wrong as right, evil as good. Although the phenomenal world is impermanent and illusory, the *Tamasic* minded person regards it as permanent and real.

The *Rajasic* person lacks the power of discrimination and yielding to likes and dislikes behaves without restraint. Impulsive action is characteristic of persons in whom the *Rajo guna* is predominant. Because of hasty and impulsive action, they are subject to all kinds of difficulties. In the process, they waste their lives. People should try to avoid acting in haste. "Haste makes waste, waste makes worry. So do not be in a hurry." In the quest for the Divine, there should be no hurry. Purity and serenity are required for God-realisation. There can be no happiness for the man who lacks peace.

Saint Thyagaraja said in one of his songs: "Without peace, there is no happiness." Thyagaraja was a great devotee of Rama. As a devotee, he had numerous experiences which he conveyed for the world through his songs.

Triple power of the name Rama

What are the inner meanings of the name Rama? The three syllables 'R', 'A' and 'Ma' indicate the three causes for human birth, namely *Papamu* (the sins one has committed), *Thapamu* (the troubles one experiences) and *Ajnanamu* (one's ignorance). "Ra" represents the root letter for *Agni*. "Aa" represents the letter for the moon. "Ma" represents the root letter for the sun. What does *Agni* signify? It destroys everything and reduces it to ashes. The letter "R" has the power to destroy all the sins committed by man. The letter "Aa" (symbolising the moon) has the powers of cooling the fevers man suffers from and conferring peace on him. "Ma" represents the sun who dispels the darkness of ignorance and confers illumination of wisdom. Hence, the word Rama has the right triple power of destroying sins, conferring peace and dispelling ignorance.

When you utter the word "Ram", you first open the mouth with the sound "Ra." All your sins go out when your mouth is open. When you utter "M" by closing the mouth, the entry is barred against the sins that have gone out. Everyone should recognise the sweetness, the sacredness and the divinity enshrined in the name "Rama." It was for this reason that Thyagaraja sang: "Oh mind! Contemplate on the name of Rama with full awareness of its power." It is good to utter the name Rama with full understanding of all that it signifies. But even without that understanding the chanting of the name has the power to destroy all sins.

The glory of spring

We must learn to chant the sweet name of Rama with a pure, unsullied heart, in a spirit of selfless devotion. In the mind of man dwell the deities representing the moon and the sun. Intelligence is endowed by the sun. However two kinds of birds have got into the mind. One bird fosters the sense "I" and "Mine" and fills the mind with ego. This is a destructive force. The second bird fosters the feeling of freedom from attachment and hatred. It signifies the power of the sun in the mind. Rama who belongs to the solar race, adhered to the latter path.

There is a significant connection between the Rama principle and the *Vasantha Ritu* (season of spring). In the spring, the trees put forth new leaves and flowers and fill the world with gladness.

When the sun's rays fall on the fresh leaves, they acquire a golden hue. The whole world puts on a glorious new look in spring. The beginning of the new year is celebrated in various regions by preparation of special edibles from a mixture of flowers and fruits of the neem and mango trees. In consuming these edibles, people are reminded that life is a mixture of pleasure and pain, profit and loss and both are to be treated with equal-mindedness.

In the Spring season, the air is redolent with the fragrance of the mango blossoms and the song of the *kokila* (cuckoo). There is joy in the air you breathe. The cuckoo calls are never so sweet as in the *Vasantha* (Spring). The *kokila's* song is sweet to the ears. If a crow sits on our roof, we wish to drive it away, but we welcome the *kokila's* song. Why this difference? The crow seeks nothing from us. The *kokila* has not given us a crown. The difference lies in their voice. The crow's cawing jars on the ears. The *kokila's* song is music to the ears. When the speech is sweet, the speaker becomes endearing.

God resides in the heart of all devotees

Hence men should learn to speak sweetly and pleasingly. Sweet speech confers peace. It is the means to Self-realisation. It is in the heart of the man who is sweet-spoken that Sri Rama loves to dwell.

Once the sage Narada appeared before Lord Vishnu and said: "Oh Lord! I move about in the three worlds and I know the past, the present and the future. If I want to convey to you any special information, to what address should I send it? I do not want your temporary address. What is your permanent address?" Vishnu replied: "Narada! Take down my permanent address: *Madbhaktaah yathra gaayanthi thathra thhishtaami*, Narada (Wherever my devotees sing my glories, I reside there)." People ascribe various abodes for the Lord: Vaikunta, Kailasa, Badrinath, Kedarnath and so on. All these are only "care of" addresses. The direct address is only the heart of the devotee. As the Gita says: "The Lord dwells in the heart region of all beings." As the Lord is omnipresent, He is equally in the heart of everyone. Hence the heart is described as "Atma-Rama"--one who delights the *Atma* (the heart) by His presence.

Offer your heart to the Divine

Whatever you do, do it not for pleasing others, but for pleasing the Indweller in your heart, for your inner satisfaction. This means acting according to the dictates of your conscience. Every such act will please the Divine. To derive self-satisfaction from your actions, you have

to cultivate faith. When there is satisfaction, there is readiness for sacrifice. Through sacrifice, the Divine is realised. Your faith should be unwavering like that of the Pandavas in Sri Krishna.

All spiritual aspirants and devotees like Thyagaraja have had to experience many trials and tribulations. Even Pothana, the author of the Telugu Bhagvatham, was subjected to many pressures and ordeals to compel him to dedicate his work to a local chieftain. Pothana stood firm because of his strong faith in Sri Rama. Rather than dedicate his works to a mere mortal, he was prepared to offer his heart and soul to Rama. Pothana totally surrendered to Sri Rama. He declared: "All that I have is yours. Whatever I receive or offer comes from you. I cannot claim anything that is mine own."

Men go on pilgrimages to various holy places. When they are in Benares they offer the Ganga water to the Ganga uttering the names of the Lord. What is the special value of such an offering? You must offer the Lord the heart that He has given you. This is true surrender. Lakshmana is the supreme exemplar of the doctrine of *saranaagathi* (surrender). "I offer my wealth, family and

everything to you, Oh Rama! Protect me, who has taken refuge in you." It was this total surrender which impelled Rama to observe, when Lakshmana lay stricken in the battlefield in Lanka: "Wives and kinsmen can be got in any country. But where can one get a brother born from the same loins?" Rama thus exemplified the depth of fraternal attachment. The mutual love between Rama and Lakshmana was of the highest order.

After the fall of Ravana, Sugriva, Vibhishana and others approached Rama and appealed to him to rule over Lanka, which was a richly endowed land. Rama turned down the request saying that he could not give up his mother or his Motherland. Rama serves as an example to humanity.

Face troubles with faith in God

Today everybody utters "Ram," "Ram." But very few follow the example set by Rama. They are not true devotees of Rama. At best they may be described as "part-time devotees." True devotion means perpetual remembrance of the name of the Lord and constant meditation on that name, cherishing the figure of Rama in the heart.

You should be prepared to face the vicissitudes of life with firm faith in God. It is during times of difficulties that God is remembered. To confront difficulties with faith is itself a spiritual discipline. Although Rama was the son of the Emperor Dasaratha and son-in-law of King Janaka, he had to face many ordeals in life for the sake of upholding *Dharma*. The Pandavas went through many difficulties for the sake of adhering to righteousness and hence their name and fame remain forever. You should pray to the Lord to give you the strength to bear all troubles and face all difficulties. If you have even an atom of Grace of the Lord, a mountain of troubles can be overcome. Chaitanya declared: "If a fraction of the time that is spent in worrying about wealth, provisions, wife, children, friends and business is devoted to contemplation on the feet of the Divine, one can face the messengers of death without fear and cross the Ocean of *Samsara*!"

It is not necessary to devote many hours to prayer. It is enough if one thinks of God with all his heart and offers himself even for a few moments. A single match stick when it is struck can dispel the darkness in a room that has remained closed for years. Mountains of cotton can be burnt down by a single spark. Likewise, wholehearted chanting of the name of Rama even once can destroy mountains of sins. But the chanting should not be done mechanically like playing a gramophone record. It should emanate from the depths of the heart. Having been born in this sacred land of Bharat, having before you the ideal example of Rama *avatar*, you must seek to redeem your lives, by living up to Rama's ideals and proclaiming them to the world. Remember the name of Rama with love. God can be realised only through love and by no other means.

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