

## Chapter XII. Temples

The ancients considered temples not only as temples of God (*deva-mandirs*) but also as temples of spiritual wisdom (*vijnana-mandirs*).

They knew that God can be attained by service done consciously and with full knowledge of meaning. They felt that temples are academies of higher learning, where man develops the real culture of the mind. They knew that the house of God in the hearts of people would be as clean and holy as the house of God was in the hamlet where they lived. You could guess the nature of the inhabitants of a village simply by observing the village temple and its environs. “If the temple is kept clean and pure, with holiness in the atmosphere, you can infer that the villagers are full of the fear of sin, that they walk along the path of goodness” — so thought the ancients.

Today, such institutions of spiritual inspiration (*divyajnana-mandirs* or *Atmopadesalayas*) have degenerated into places where “offerings” are distributed and picnic parties revel. Idlers gather in the precincts and play cards or dice or such other games. The evil spirit of Kali (*Kali-purusha*) sports in glee when such groups gather in the temples. This is contrary to *dharma*.

### The temple is the heart of the village

The temple is the heart of the village; it should therefore be preserved, nourished, and nursed as befits the heart. Believe that God walks about in the temple; it is His residence. All have a responsibility to preserve the holiness of that atmosphere, which confers the joy of serving the Lord. Believe that the temple is the heart of all. The day this is done, the God principle (*Madhavathwa*) in man will shine forth as a jewel. This is the truth; this is the reason for all the cost and pain incurred in the construction of temples.

Village authorities, government agencies, or devotees themselves must make all arrangements needed to develop spiritual discipline and wisdom. Then only can people shine forth in divine splendour.

This is not all. Some ultra-modern critics condemn the decorated gate of the temple (*gopuras*), etc. as so much waste of money. This reveals a total absence of farsightedness; no one with a high ideal or an upward vision would make such a remark. If you dwell upon the significance of the entrance gate to the temple, you can realize how holy, how mysterious, how revealing its purpose is. The entry gate beckons to wayfarers who have lost their way and who wander away from truth,

“O ye mortals! Blinded by the fog of physical attachments and self-aggrandizing urges, overcome by the miasma of worldly desires, which are fleeting and false, you have forgotten Me, the source and sustenance of you all. Look up to this eternal, ever-pure, ever-full tower of joy. Forgetting Me, you are wallowing in grief; you are pursuing the mirage in the desert sands. Come; have faith in the everlasting Me. Struggle out of the darkness, enter the realm of light, and come to the royal road of peace (*santhi*). That is the path of *dharma*. Come, come, O come.”

Thus does Gopala call on all, with raised hands, from above the line of house tops in every village.

So, when seen through this more elevated insight, entry gates to the temples can be respected as conducive to the raising of human ideals and conduct. This is the principle underlying the construction of decorated gates to

the temples. Such high ideals inspire these structures. This is the true meaning, a meaning that can be experienced and felt. The light on top of the gate is the symbol of the light that is the refuge of all, it is the representative of the unflickering inner lamp, lit at the self-same flame; it is the inner illumination gained by merging in God (Hari).

Temples are oases in desert wastes. For those who have lost their way in the hot sands of grief and greed, they are peace temples (*prasanthi mandirs*), welcoming you to cool joyous peace. The entry gates are guides to stricken wanderers; they hold aloft the flag of the name of God; all should be thankful to them for the service.

### **The reason for the misery**

Many dull-witted moderns are puzzled at the purpose of all the constructions and conditions, conventions and customs that revolve around the temple. They cannot grasp the significance of any reply that is beyond their limited understanding. A patient suffering from high fever will find even sweet things bitter; so too, those afflicted with the high fever of worldliness can never taste the real sweetness of truth. The fever must subside; then, they can appreciate the value of the things of the spirit.

What is the goal of human life? What is the objective that one must realize? Is it just eating, drinking, sleeping, tasting a little joy and grief, and finally dying, like any bird or beast? No, certainly not. A little thought will reveal that it is not so. The goal is the realization of the Absolute, of Brahman (*Brahma-sakshatkara*)! Without that, no one can attain peace (*santhi*). One must win that bliss of divine grace. However much one strives to extract happiness from the multiplicity of worldly things, the quantum of satisfaction is very little; as for peace, one finds it impossible to get it through things of the world. The mind can have peace only when it merges in the Absolute Consciousness, the Primal Cause, the Unchanging Existence.

Even the most comfortable house, equipped with all the luxuries people crave, even heaps of treasure, are helpless to endow one with peace. Peace can be won only by surrender to God, who is the very core of one's being, the very source of all life and living. Consider this: Do those lucky enough to possess wealth, gold, property, and comfort have peace? Nor is this all. Are highly learned people, people of extraordinary beauty, people of super-human physical strength—are they at least at peace with themselves and the world? What is the reason for the misery of even these?

The reason is that they have forgotten the divine basis of creation; they have ignored the one absolute underlying principle. All lives lived without faith and devotion to the one supreme Overlord are despicable lives spent without tasting the nectar of the divine Principle; they are all wasted chances.

It is really a strange turn of events! Your genuine basis, the fountain of your joy, your ultimate fundamental (*paramaartha*) principle has become for you something outside and beyond, unnecessary, unsought for. The world, with its tinsel tawdriness, has become near and native, necessary and desirable.

Denying themselves the bliss derivable from surrender to the Lord, people run about madly in the name of devotion, pursuing sacred spots, sages, and sacred rivers. A modicum of devotion will awaken them from this delusion. It will teach them that one can attain peace only by returning to one's native home, viz., God. Until then, homesickness will haunt one.

### **Temples are invitations to and reminders of God**

Temples are invitations to that home, signboards directing people there. On one occasion, Sri Ramachandra

spoke thus to those assembled to hear Him on the Chitrakuta Hill: “Dawn breaks and dusk falls. With dawn, greed awakes in people; with dusk, lust gets hold of them. Is this to be your way of life? Is this to be your goal? With the passing of every single day, people have wasted one more precious chance. They have taken one more step towards the cave of death. But do they ever bewail their lot? Do they sorrow over the wasted day?” Note how worthy of remembrance this message is!

It is because of such reminders that the culture of India (*Bharatha-varsha*) has God as its central theme. “*Bha-ra-tha*” means the land that has attachment (*rathi*) to Bhagavan or God. If westerners renounced everything, in their single-minded devotion to the discovery of the laws that govern the objective world, here in India (*Bharatha-varsha*), people renounced everything for the discovery and experience of the Absolute, which is the Prime Cause of the universe and which, if known, confers unshakeable peace.

Westerners renounce for the evanescent; here, the renunciation is for the eternal. This is for wisdom (*vi-jnana*); theirs is for ignorance (*a-jnana*). This is austerity (*tapas*); theirs is ignorance (*thamas*). That is why even today, the splendour of the sages (*rishis*) and yogis shines through the corridors of centuries on the faces of people; if sometimes the shadows of despair, despondency and discontent flit across those faces in this land, it is forewarning of the decline of faith in *dharma* itself.

Temples are intended to instruct people in the art of removing the veil of attachment that lies over their heart. That is why Thyagaraja cried in the temple at Tirupathi, “Remove the veil within me, the veil of pride and hate.” The fog of illusion (*maya*) melted away before the rays of grace, so he could discern and describe the image of divine charm in the song “*Sivudavo Maadhavudavo*” and drink deep the sweetness of that form. The churning of his heart by the divine formula produced the spark of wisdom (*jnana*), and it grew into the flame of realization.

Not only in this present age of *Kali-yuga* but even in the earlier ages (*yugas*), the *Kritha*, the *Thretha*, and the *Dwapara*, remembrance of the name (*namasmarana*) was the secret of liberation from bondage. The temple is the place where remembrance of the name is natural, automatic, and undisturbed. Therefore, going to it is imperative, especially in the *Kali* age, when the air is full of wicked and ungodly thoughts.

That is why Krishna, in the *Gita*, declared that “Among sacrifices (*yajnas*), I am the repetition of the name (*namayajna*), the sacrifice that has the sacrificial beast offered in the sacred fire, the animal ignorance (*a-jnana*) itself.” For the cure of grief, for the earning of joy, temples where the name of God can be remembered are very essential. “For bliss, remembrance of the name (*smarana*); for remembrance of the name, temples.” That is the series. There is nothing more fruitful than this, nothing more blissful or more charming. “

Having the greatly simple name, the ever available tongue, and the temple where His enchanting image is installed so people can sing His glory in an exalted voice ... why should people hasten toward the gates of hell?” wondered Vyasa. His wonder was born out of his own experience of the efficacy of the name and its remembrance. So too, Tulsidas, who lived constantly in the temple and sang of the joy he tasted. “Alas!” he lamented, “When people give up the name and the temple and seek peace and joy in other places, I am reminded of the foolishness of those who forsake the rich and tasty fare on their plates and beg with outstretched hands for the leavings on the plates of others.”

Even in *Vedic* discipline, the name and the need to make the mind stay on it are emphasized as of utmost importance:

*Om — that One Word is Brahman*

declare the Aryan sages.

Examine, if you like, whether any saint was saved without the name of the Lord or the house of the Lord! For Gouranga, the Vishnu temple (*Jagannatha mandir*) was the inspiration and refuge. For Jayadeva, it was the Radhakrishna temple. For Nandanar, the temple at Chidambaram provided the source of realization. Vallabhacharya, Kabir, Nanak, Meera, Radha, Ramanuja, Madhwacharya, Sankaracharya, Namadev, Tulsidas, Thyagaraja —all attained divine vision and, what is more, divine wisdom itself in and through temples. What need is there to dilate more? Even in recent times, was it not in the Kali temple built by Rani Rasmani that Ramakrishna Paramahansa tasted divine bliss and discovered his identity?

### **Seekers find temples indispensable**

To misuse such temples, to spoil the sacred atmosphere of their precincts, to forget their holy mission, to decry the conventions and customs prevalent there, and to pave the way for their decline and desecration —undoubtedly, this is not *dharma*. Those who do these things have neither inner nor outer light; they are in utter darkness. Temple worship, the company of sages, recital of the name, adoration of the image or symbol —these are external sources of light. Meditation, austerity, reflection (*dhyana, tapas, manana*) —these are the sources of inner illumination. Devoid of both, how can men experience the vision of divine glory?

No wonder Tulsidas Goswami once declared, “Do you require light inside the house as well as outside? Then place the lamp on the doorstep! So too, do you desire to spread the illumination of peace (*santhi*) outside yourself as well as inside? Then place the name of the Lord on the tongue, which is the doorstep of your personality! The lamp on the tongue will not flicker, fade, or be put out by any storm. It will confer peace on you as well as on all whom you meet, the entire world.”

Therefore, for the salvation of the individual, evoke the vision of the form. The very memory of the name will evoke the vision of the form. That form, in all its enchantment and glory, is depicted in temples for the inspiration of the aspirant. Whether the ordinary eye sees it or not, the seekers of the *Atmic* truth find temples indispensable.