

THE INNER MEANING OF THE DEVI MAHATMYA

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The remembrance of Devi pulls our hearts, draws our affections and fills us with great joy during these festival days at least once in a year, and the reason for this great enthusiasm religiously and spiritually felt by people throughout the country can be regarded as explicable only by the great importance that is associated with this novel occasion.

We have been reading the holy Sri Devi Mahatmya and also listening to messages during the past few days, touching upon the importance of these worships conducted for nine or ten days during this time of year. We are familiar with the names Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Shakti, Prakriti, etc. These are divine appellations with which everyone is familiar, and it appears that we are offering our obeisance and worship to these divinities named in this manner. But we have also been told again and again that the divine Shakti is also the Supreme Shakti, the power which is unsurpassed. The power of the whole universe, the energy of the cosmos can only be considered as unsurpassed, because beyond that nothing is conceivable.

The stories about these battles between the Devi and the Asuras are interesting, but it is difficult to make out much meaning in them concerning the other aspect of the teaching that the Shakti is all-in-all. *Ekaivāhaṁ jagatyatra dvitīyā kā mamāparā* (Devi Mahatmya 10.4). This is what Devi says to Sumba: “I am alone here. How do you say there are many with me?” If she, or however we may try to name this power, is single, it becomes difficult for us to understand the location of these Asuras. From where have they come, and with whom is she fighting?

The supernal, indivisible, all-pervasive Shakti is one whole completeness. Therefore, the Asuras have no place to stay, yet they seem to be fighting. This is something difficult for us to understand. Wherefrom do they emerge? Where are they situated? Are they outside this dominion of Devi, or are they also within the jurisdiction of the operation of this power? *Dvau bhūtasargau loke’smindaiva āsura eva ca* (Gita 16.6) says the Bhagavadgita: From Being’s nature, two energies manifest themselves in two opposite directions, as it were, called the divine and the undivine. This is something akin to the Mahabharata war that took place between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, both of whom were descendants of Kuru, and so both the Pandavas and the Kauravas were called Kurus. The celestials and the demoniacal elements were both children of Kashyapa, a single parent. Through Aditi, Kashyapa had all the Devas, or angels and celestials as their children; but through Diti, the very same Kashyapa had all the demoniacal elements. So one father had two opposite types of children. Kuru produced the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

A similar situation seems to be here before us when we read the inner meaning of the Devi Mahatmya. With whom is Devi fighting? Devi is fighting the Rakshasas, the demoniacal elements. Where are they seated? They are seated within the universe. But the whole universe is pervaded by Devi. So it would appear as if a dramatic picture is presented before us of an inscrutable occurrence within the bosom of the cosmos, and it is not actually a battle between the Allies and the Axis powers or any other war that we can think of in this world. It is not an outer fight, though it can take an outer form when it descends into the lower planes of physical perception and pure material operations. The wars that are described in the Devi Mahatmya, at least from the point of view of the intentions of a spiritual seeker, are deeper in their content and significance than what would occur on the surface.

The whole universe is doubly manifest in two forces, the positive and negative powers. A reference to this is also made in the Bhagavadgita when Bhagavan Sri Krishna says, "My Prakriti is higher and also lower." So there is what is called the higher Prakriti and the lower Prakriti. Though the Asuras with whom a war has to be waged cannot be considered as outside the area of the operation of the universal power, yet there is a circumstance under which such a battle takes place, like the constructive and the destructive forces working together in our own physiological organism, which doctors call the anabolic and the catabolic powers. They are both inside us only. It does not mean that the constructive forces are inside us and the destructive forces are outside. Both the health forces and the disease forces are working in a very mysterious manner

inside us. So just as both disease and health can be inside us—not merely inside us, but inseparable from us—the divine operative Shakti, called the Devi, and these elements which are opposing divine influence can be within the cosmos itself. They cannot be discovered separately by observation through a microscope, just as disease and health cannot be separated by any kind of observation. They are impossible of perception by any means. The urges or impulses towards contact—desire, anger, greed, grasping, enjoyment, possession—constitute the demoniacal urges which are also within the universe itself. And there is another force which moves towards the centre of being: God-oriented impulse.

The higher power referred to in the Bhagavadgita as Paraprakriti is the Devi Shakti, and the lower Prakriti is what we see with our eyes—the five elements and everything that is constituted of them. The physical body of ours and the sense organs, with their impulses towards contact and enjoyment materially, physically, are one side of the matter. But there is an impulse within us to move towards God, to integrate things and work for the unity of purpose. Two operations take place simultaneously in the world. The ocean can madly operate within itself and dash powerful waves causing destruction, devastation and cataclysm everywhere, yet it maintains its oceanhood at the same time. The ocean has never ceased to be the ocean together with its devastating activity and ebullient waves rising up to heights of several feet. In a similar manner, there seems to be a secret operation within the universe, including within our own bodies, a double action taking place simultaneously, one moving towards the outer

contacts of things, which is the catabolic action of universal powers, and another moving towards the centre of Reality, God-oriented impulse, aspiration for moksha or liberation of the spirit, which is the anabolic activity of the cosmos.

Hence, the higher reason that is operating within us is the controlling agency both within our personality as well as in the universe. The battles we speak of are against these outward-oriented urges descending into matter in the form of the five elements of earth, water, fire, air, ether, and all the embodiments constituted of these elements. Our bodies, as well as animals, plants, and even inanimate matter, are all lower Prakriti urging for self-preservation and struggling for survival even at the cost of others. The lion jumping on weaker animals, the tiger attacking cows, the more powerful attacking the weaker, the larger fish swallowing the smaller fish, the law of the mighty as superior to the weaker—these are all catabolic activities of the lower Prakriti, the Rakshasas operating. All the drama of human life today is the lower Prakriti operating. That is why we are restless. We do not have one moment of peace in this world because the divine power has escaped our attention and we are caught in the mesh of these downward movements of impulses rushing outwardly into contact with physical objects for selfish sense enjoyment, even at the cost and destruction of other people. To overcome this outward impulse the higher, superior reason—the Mahatattva-shakti, Hiranyagarbha-shakti, Ishvara-shakti, Brahma-shakti, Vishnu-shakti, Siva-shakti, whatever it may be called—may have to act.

Thus is the internal significance of the wars described in the chapters of the Devi Mahatmya. It is a spiritual drama,

and not a bloody war as it would appear on a mere literary reading. It is a highly esoteric technique of spiritual ascent that is described in these chapters. It is not a novel, it is not a story, it is not a narration for cajoling us during the few hours of the worship of the Divine Mother. It is a secret technique of spiritual ascendance from the lower to the higher, both inwardly as well as outwardly, and this is the purpose of these narrations in the Devi Mahatmya and the meaning behind the worship of Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, the power which dominates our *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. The material universe which is *tamasic*, the subtler higher levels of the planes of being which are *rajasic*, and the highest *sattva* which is Brahmaloka all come under the purview of Prakriti herself. *Ābrahmabhuvanālokāḥ punarāvartina* (Gita 8.16): Everything, even up to Brahmaloka, is within the purview of Prakriti, the only distinction being that the higher ones are *sattvic*, the middling ones are *rajasic*, and the lower ones are *tamasic*.

But there is something transcendent which operates this Shakti. When we say Brahma-shakti, Vishnu-shakti, Siva-shakti, and so on, we imply that there is something called Brahma, Vishnu, Siva wielding this force of Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, or Shakti, as fire wields heat, the sun wields brilliance, and we wield our own energy when we lift a heavy object, for instance. The Shakti of Brahma, the Shakti of Vishnu, the Shakti of Siva are not like three women sitting beside them like husband and wife; they are inseparables like fire and heat, sun and light, and our own self and our strength. We have got Shakti. With our Shakti, with our strength, we can lift things. We cannot say our Shakti is sitting outside somewhere and we cannot see it. It

is inseparable from us. It is our capacity to operate that is called Shakti. So the capacity of Brahma to operate, the capacity of Vishnu to operate, the capacity of Siva to operate is the Shakti operating in the creative, the preservative and the destructive levels.

Thus, the distinction that we make in our days of worship between Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and the final victorious worship on Vijayadasami, and the narrations in the Devi Mahatmya all point to the same fact that there is a divine purpose operating in the cosmos, a divine purpose operating within each one of us and within even a little atom, tending towards the coming together of all things in a fraternal embrace in Godhood. That is the Vijaya, the victory finally won, the great cessation of battle, the entering of all the rivers into the ocean. The tumult and noise and activity of the river ceases when it reaches its parent, the ocean. Likewise, all activity ceases when the purpose of the universe is served, when the opposing Rakshasa *vrittis*, the downward and outward movements, are turned backwards by a reversal process, by a recession of the effects into their causes so that the effects merge into their causes.

Thus the Supreme Cause operates, and the final victory of the Ultimate Cause is celebrated on Vijayadasami wherein all the truant and intractable elements, which are the lower effects and which extend themselves outwardly in space and time towards the enjoyment of sense objects and battle one another, are reversed, turned back into the centre of Being. That is the overcoming of the lower elements called the Rakshasas, or the demons, by the higher power of supreme spiritual integration demonstrated in the

ascending series of the activities of Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, culminating in final victory which is the union of all the souls in the Supreme Soul, Paramatman.

So here we have a spiritual drama enacted in a most beautiful ritualistic fashion of worship and the epic grandeur of the Devi Mahatmya, and also in the form of a deep sadhana that we ourselves are expected to perform inwardly through *japa*, prayer and meditation during these days of Navaratri, which fulfils itself in a *purnavati puja* during the holy Vijayadasami.