

Ashutosh Vardhana: Yamuna's Year

Seven Hindu stories
as told in a Hindu family
in a northern English town.

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Events **not** covered but considered for future editions of this book:

For North India: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buddha Purnima: May • Guru Purnima: July • Ganesh Chaturthi: August • Satyanarayan Puja: Any day 	For South India: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pongal: January • Thaipusam: February • Ugadi: March • Onam: September
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DETAILS OF EACH EVENT
(Title, Length and Summary)

Event 1: Diwali (Oct, 31 2024)(including New Year)

Text 1 (of Event 1):

Lord Rama and the Demons: The story of Diwali

Length: 5,800 words = 30,900 characters, approx 14 pp A4

Summary: Lord Vishnu is born on earth as Rama, a human hero, to fight evil demons which have taken control of the earth. The demons kidnap his wife Sita and abduct her to Sri Lanka. Rama tracks her down with an army of bears and monkeys. A fierce battle ensues. Rama eventually wins, frees his abducted wife Sita and they return in triumph to Rama's capital Ayodhya, to celebrate his victory and his reunion with Sita.

This story is told by an uncle, a pandit (Hindu priest) in Northern England. Discussions about the deeper meaning of the story occur as the pandit explains these to the children. Thus this, and the other stories of this collection, serve also as an introduction to Hindu theology to Hindu and non-Hindu adults and children alike.

The narrator often incorporates English locations (e.g. mountains near Blackburn, Blackpool tower, &c) and modern technology (e.g. TV, planes, &c) into his story to make it more alive and real to the children.

This is an elaborate version of the story as told to Yamuna, an bright and plucky ten-year-old Hindu girl in England.

Four of the seven stories in this collection are written in this elaborate style when the pandit acts as a teacher of Hindu tradition. The other texts are more simple in structure.

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Font: In this text, **two fonts** are being used:

Plain pica (like this: Plain Pica) for the passages in which the narrator interacts with Yamuna's family and explains the traditional plot,

A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi,

Text 2 (of Event 1):

Osama Bin Laden's Salvation, or: Why we celebrate Diwali

Length: 1,736 words = 9,860 characters, approx 4 pp A4.

Summary: This text was written four weeks after the 9/11 attacks on Manhattan and therefore also constitutes a historical document. It discusses the role and fate of apparently evil people, the demons of the Diwali story.

Text 3 (of Event 1):
Diwali and Sal Mubarak

Length: 559 words = 3,298 characters, approx 3 pp A4

Summary: This text describes Diwali and the celebrations of Hindu New Year, which fall on the day after Diwali.

Event 2: Maha-Shivaratri (Feb 26, 2025)

Text 1 (of Event 2):
Parvati wins her husband: The story of Maha-Shivaratri

Length: 10,560 words = 56,844 characters, approx 25 pp

Summary: Text 1 (of Event 2) is written in the same elaborate style, with intensive interaction between the narrator and the Hindu family (children and adults), as Text 1 of Event 1 (the Diwali story).

This is the story of a young girl who falls in love with the god Lord Siva and pursues him through several life times to be united with him. No obstacle can stop her. Eventually she wins him, and Maha-Shivaratri is the celebration of their wedding. Again much Hindu theology is explained in the course of this story in a style intelligible to children, but also useful for adults who want to gain a deeper understanding of their religion.

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A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi,

Text 2 (of Event 2):
Why we celebrate Maha-Shivaratri, or: The wedding of the gods

Length: 1,740 words = 9,800 characters, approx 5 pp A4

Summary: On 13 March this year (2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Maha-Shivaratri, the great night of Lord Shiva, his wedding to Goddess Parvati, and how she managed to win him for a husband. Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story behind this great festival.

Text 3 (of Event 2):

When Yasin scorned, Naresh asked silly questions

Length: 155 lines = 4 pp A4

Summary: This is a didactic poem by Ashutosh Vardhana. A young Muslim tries to convince his Hindu friend that worshipping more than one god is silly or downright wrong.

Event 3: Holi (March 14, 2025)**Text 1** (of Event 3):

Prahlada, the invincible boy: The story of Holi

Length: 16,600 words = 91,500 characters, approx 35 pp A4

Summary: A demon king, who hates God Vishnu with all his heart, has a son Prahlada who is a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. The king orders his son to stop worshipping and praising Lord Vishnu, but the son refuses to obey. The king therefore orders the boy to be killed but all attempts to do so fail because Lord Vishnu protects him. Weapons fail to pierce him, he survives a fall from Blackpool tower, he cannot be drowned. He has an aunt called Holika who has a boon that fire cannot hurt her and agrees to hold the boy in the vice-like grip of her arms while sitting on top of a bonfire. Her boon, because it is being used for an evil purpose, fails, Holika is turned to ashes but Prahlada survives unhurt. The demon king eventually has his come-uppance when Lord Vishnu in the shape of a man-lion comes out of a pillar and devours the demon king.

Text 2 (of Event 3):

Why we celebrate Holi, or: The invincible boy

Length: 1,536 words = 8,665 characters, approx 4 pp A4

Summary: On 28 March this year (2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Holi. It is a boisterous occasion. Bonfires are lit and on this day the rules of respect are dropped and people are allowed to let rip. Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story that gave rise to the festival.

Event 4: Ram Naumi (April 6, 2025)**Text 1** (of Event 4):

The story of Ram Naumi: Lord Rama's Birthday

Length: 1,300 words = 7,296 characters, approx 5 pp A4

Summary: The king of Ayodhya, King Dasaratha, had been childless for ages in spite of having three wives. In despair he organised a big sacrifice imploring the god, Lord Vishnu, to grant him children. His prayer was heard, and Lord Vishnu, who had to incarnate in order to rectify evil which yet again had become too strong in our world, gave him a bowl of divine broth which his three queens were to share. All would become pregnant and their children would contain Vishnu's divinity in different proportions.

Text 2 (of Event 4):

Devil worship in Ayodhya

Length: 3,475 words = 20,070 characters, approx 11 pp A4

Summary: In 1992 religious riots in India and Bangladesh were sparked which left several thousand dead, when a group of politically motivated Hindus tried to right a wrong committed by Muslims 500 years earlier and demolished an ancient but unused mosque that had been erected by Muslim conquerors of the time in place of a temple which marked the birthplace of Lord Rama. The government imposed a stand-off and put the matter into the hands of a court which in ten years was unable to produce an equitable decision. The Hindu faction then announced that, on 15 March this year, they would go ahead with the building regardless of consequences. On 28 February 2002 a train with Hindu devotees coming from the disputed site was set alight by a gang of Muslim youths. 58 Hindus were burnt alive. This sparked off Hindu reprisals against Muslims in which more than six hundred people died on both sides. In this article, Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer from England, argues that the temple project offended against the spirit of Hinduism and is in fact blasphemy.

Event 5: Raksha Bandhan (Aug 9, 2025)**Text 1** (of Event 5)

Raksha Bandan, the Hindu festival of brothers and sisters

Length: 492 words = 2877 characters, approx 2 pp A4

Summary: On a full moon day in July/August (22 August 2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Raksha Bandhan which celebrates the love and loyalty which brothers owe to their sisters. Ashutosh Vardhana describes the customs of the festival and the philosophy underlying it.

Event 6: Krishna Janmashtami (Aug 16, 2025)**Text 1** (of Event 6):

The birth of Lord Krishna (Krishna Janmashtami)

Length: 1,410 words = 7,944 characters, approx 7 pp A4

Summary: On 31 August this year (2002), Hindus celebrate the festival of Krishna Janmashtami, the birth of Lord Krishna. Ashutosh Vardhana explains the significance of this festival. There are some striking parallels between this story and Christian stories of the childhood of Jesus.

Event 7: Navaratri (starts Oct 13, 2025)**Text 1** (of Event 7):

The Battle of the Devi: The story of Navaratri
(Inspired by the Devi Mahatmyam)

Length: 9,962 words = 55,286 characters, approx 26 pp A4

Summary: The world is never totally good or totally evil. Good and evil are in continuous struggle with each other, in the world and in our hearts. Sometimes, when evil has become too strong, God, in an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, intervenes and reduces the power of evil. The stories of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, two male incarnations of Lord Vishnu on earth, describe such occasions. Now, on one occasion, the powers of evil (demons) had become so strong that none of the male gods on his own could have overpowered them. They therefore got together and created a female god, The Devi, The Goddess, by merging all their powers and weapons. The Devi then took on the demons and subdued them for a long time. Her battle with the demons is commemorated during Navaratri, the festival of Nine (Nava) Nights (Ratri).

Text 2:

Celebrating the Divinity in Woman
(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)

Length: 1,170 words = 6,760 characters, approx 3 pp A4

Summary: On 14 October this year (2002), Hindus celebrate the festival of Durgashtami, the worship of Goddess Durga. From 7 to 15 October they celebrate Navaratri, the Nine-Day-Festival, during which the great battles of the Goddess against the forces of evil are commemorated. Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer who lives in England, explains what the festival means to Hindus.

**APPROXIMATE TOTALS
OF WORD COUNTS AND PAGE COUNTS**

Event	Text	Words	Characters	Pages	
1	1	5,800 words	30,900 chars	14 pp	
1	2	1,736 words	9,860 chars	4 pp	
1	3	559 words	3,298 chars	3 pp	
2	1	10,560 words	56,844 chars	25 pp	
2	2	1,740 words	9,800 chars	5 pp	
2	3	155 lines	n/a	4 pp	
3	1	16,600 words	91,500 chars	35 pp	
3	2	1,536 words	8,665 chars	4 pp	
4	1	1,300 words	7,296 chars	5 pp	
4	2	3,475 words	20,070 chars	11 pp	
5	1	492 words	2877 chars	2 pp	
6	1	1,410 words	7,944 chars	7 pp	
7	1	9,962 words	55,286 chars	26 pp	
7	2	1,170 words	6,760 chars	3 pp	
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		56,340 words plus 155 lines	200,398 chars	148 pages A4	

FORMATS AVAILABLE

The author can supply the text in the following formats:

1. The complete book as one pdf file, or one Word file (.doc), or one Linux-Ubuntu file (.odt)
2. Each Event separately as pdf, doc (Word) or odt (Linux Ubuntu)

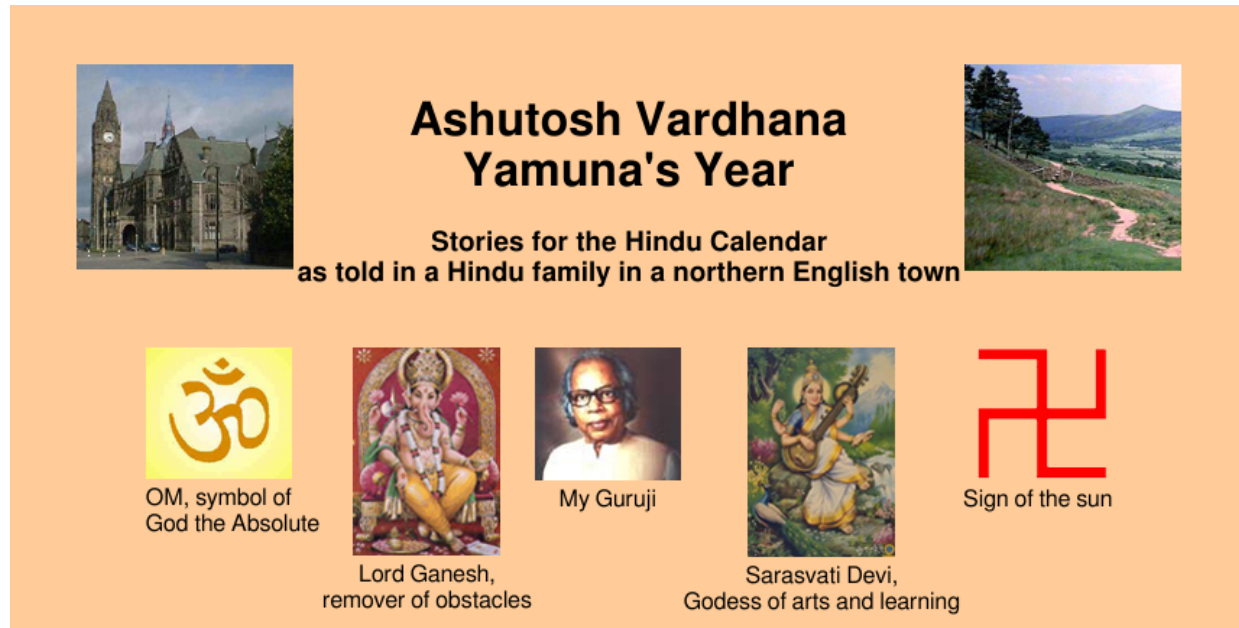
MARKETS

1. General readers (non-Hindu) interested in Hinduism, Hindu mythology, Hindu theology, "exotic" religions
2. Hindu readers in the UK who want to learn more about their own religion and enjoy seeing its stories retold in a modern way.
3. Hindu parents who want to offer an entertaining approach to their own children, who often, as smart teenagers eager to fit in with British culture, tend to fall away from their ancestral religion.
4. Hindu temples and Hindu organisations up and down this country for re-sale to their members and visitors. Bulk sales can be expected there, especially during Hindu festivals.
5. Schools in this country: For their Hindu pupils, and for non-Hindu pupils who have to study one religion other than their own to satisfy current education regulations. Teachers often struggle with this situation when they are well informed, if at all, only about their own religion, if any.
6. A similar list could be made for other countries in which a substantial number of Hindus reside, e.g. for the USA, for Trinidad (where 33% of the population is of Indian origin), for Guyana, and for Asian countries with a strong Hindu-based culture.
7. Offer foreign rights to foreign publishers, e.g. in India (Motilal Banarsidass)
<https://www.motilalbanarsidass.com/>
8. Offer translation rights to European publishers

SOCIETY OF AUTHORS

The author is a long-standing member of the Society of Authors (since 1965).

^Diwali starts here



Impressum

Title: Ashutosh Vardhana:

Lord Rama and the Demons: The story of Diwali

Length: see Technical Note below, for the three versions

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Date: 2001-11-14, Mk3.1

TECHNICAL NOTE

This file contains three versions of the Diwali story:

- Text 1: An elaborate version as told to an eight-year-old Hindu girl in England:
Title: Lord Rama and the Demons: The story of Diwali
Length: 5,800 words = 30,900 characters

Font: In this text, two fonts are being used:

Plain pica (like this: Plain Pica) for the passages in which the narrator interacts with Yamuna's family and explains the traditional plot,

A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi,

- Text 2: A version for adults relating it to a well-known modern "demon":
Title: Osama Bin Laden's Salvation, or: Why we celebrate Diwali
Length: 1,736 words = 9,860 characters
- Text 3: A version which covers the customs of Diwali and New Year, which are celebrated on adjacent days:
Title: Diwali and Sal Mubarak
Length: 559 words = 3,298 characters

Ashutosh Vardhana

Lord Rama and the Demons: The story of Diwali

A Hindu story
as told in a Hindu family
in a northern English town.

CONTENTS

- Introduction
- The wicked demons
- The demons have to be killed
- Shri Rama is born
- Rama fights the demons in the forest
- Rama gets married
- Rama is to become King
- Rama is banished to the forest
- Rama lives in the forest
- Ravana kidnaps Sita
- Ravana kills Jatayu
- Rama searches for Sita
- The stories of Hanuman

- The battle of Lanka
- Ravana's ten heads
- Ravana is killed
- Rama and Sita return to Ayodhya
- Why we celebrate Diwali

INTRODUCTION

"Uncle-ji", said little Yamuna, who lives in Blackburn, to the Pandit who had come to visit her family to celebrate the festival of Diwali, the great festival of lights, with them, "when you have eaten and rested, will you tell me the story of Shri Rama and his battle against the demon Ravana?"

"Of course, I will, but surely you know that story, you must have heard it dozens of times already", said the Pandit.

"I have," cried Yamuna and I know it well, but I like it so much that I cannot hear it often enough."

"And, anyway," butted in her pious Grandfather, it is such an important story for our religion that each year at Diwali time it should be told again in every Hindu family."

When it got dark, the family sat down for Diwali dinner. Yamuna and her mother had drawn a beautiful rangóli pattern with coloured chalk on the pavement outside the house, and they had lit díyas, cotton wicks soaked in ghee (which is clarified butter) and sitting in little earthenware pots, on every window sill and in all the rooms of the house. All the electric lights were on and the curtains had been drawn so that Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Good Fortune, might come in and the burglars, who are particularly keen to steal something at Diwali, don't dare come near the house.

When dinner was over and Pandit-ji was sitting on the settee, Yamuna sat down cross-legged on the floor, looked up at him and asked: "Will you now tell me the story?"

THE WICKED DEMONS

And the Pandit began:

"Once upon a time, there lived on the island of Lanka, a Rakshasa, or a demon as the English would say. His name was Ravana. He was a king, the ruler of the island, and he commanded millions of smaller demons, who flew all over the world in order to do mischief and commit crimes. They looked so ugly that people fainted when they only saw them, they never washed", (Yamuna was aghast when she heard this, for she had never come across anyone who never washed), "they did not brush their yellow rotting teeth, they did not only have stinky feet but they stank all over the

body and when they opened their mouth, such a filthy wind came out of it that it spread disease not only all over this world but on the moon and the stars as well."

"Why were they so ugly, and why did they stink so much?" asked Yamuna.

"Because they were so wicked. They never went to temple to pray, but they hated God with all their hearts.

Unfortunately you could not easily recognise them because they used a magic perfume to cover up their stench and they could change their shape at will.

They could make themselves big or small, turn themselves into a deer or a tiger or an eagle or a sparrow. An ugly old demon could look like a beautiful damsel, and an ugly witch could look like a handsome young prince. Ravana's agents roamed all over the world and where there was mischief to be done, it was probably a Rakshasa who did it. Hitler was one of them, I am sure, he made himself look charming and talked nicely to little children, people trusted him and then he went and killed millions of innocent Jews. Other Rakshasas were ordinary murderers. Others made bombs, blew up houses and killed innocent people, others again became ministers and started wars, others abducted little children, others ... but I must get on with the story. You look horrified, Yamuna, are you frightened?"

"No, I am never frightened," brave Yamuna beamed at her Uncle.
"I'm enjoying your story."

THE DEMONS HAVE TO BE KILLED

"All right. The gods decided that enough was enough and the demons had to be brought under control. The only way to do this was to kill their king and appoint a good king who would ensure that they behaved themselves and became god-fearing monsters. But Ravana was incredibly strong and had magic powers, so that no human being could kill him."

"Did he have many many body-guards like Saddam Hussein?", asked Yamuna, and her eyes gleamed in expectation.

"Ten times as many", said Panditji.

"Not a million times?", said Yamuna.

"Yes, you are right, I remember now, it was a million and one times".

Yamuna was content.

"No woman was strong enough to kill Ravana, to say nothing of men, who, as you know, are even more useless. The gods decided that one of them would have to be born as a human being, fight Ravana, and kill him to put an end to evil in this world."

"Once and for all?" asked Yamuna.

"No, not quite, you are right. God does not get rid of evil altogether, he just makes sure there is not too much of it. We

always need a little, of course, otherwise there is no work for glaziers, locksmiths, policemen, judges and prison officers, and their wives and children would starve, and that would be most unfair. We need a few crooks, but not too many, and they must not be too bad.

When evil has been subdued, people can live more happily for a long time. After a while evil increases again. God watches it, and when he has had enough, he comes down to earth again, 'to help the good and punish the wicked', as the Gita, our holy book, says.

So the gods decided that Lord Vishnu should be born as the son of a king and get rid of Ravana and his evil cohorts."

Now Yamuna's big brother came and wanted to watch television, but he was not allowed to do this as long as the holy story was being told. He sat there in a corner and sulked, but while he was waiting he had to listen to the story as well. This was a good thing because some of it would rub off on him, and while he was listening he could not do any mischief.

SHRI RAMA IS BORN

"Now there was a king in the Indian city of Ayodhya, and his name was Dasaratha. He had three wives, as kings were allowed to have in those days, and of course they were all queens. Ayodhya was a beautiful city, full of the most splendid buildings, the king was an ideal king, and there was justice, there were no crimes (or hardly any), and everybody had enough to eat. But he had no children, in spite of having three queens. So they all prayed very hard and held some big sacrifices. One day, each of the three queens had a son (or several), all on the same day. Queen Kaushalya had Rama, and Lord Vishnu was completely present in him, but part of Lord Vishnu was also in his brothers Bharata (Queen Kaikeyi's son) and in Lakshmana and Shatrugna (Queen Sumitra's twins).

Rama was an incarnation of God, God in human form, and the perfect man, he behaved like ordinary people, seemed to suffer like all of us, but deep in his heart he was aware all the time that life with all its joys and sorrows was an illusion compared to the reality of God. He had to behave like an ordinary human being to set an example

Rama grew up much as other children in those days, but being the son of a warrior and a king, he had to learn to distinguish right from wrong and he had to do a lot of sport to develop a strong and healthy body and become skilful in the use of weapons, especially archery. He was beautiful to look at, respectful to his teachers and parents and friendly and kind to everyone around him. Therefore everybody loved him."

"Does everybody love ME?" asked Yamuna.

"How could anyone not love you!" said Uncle Panditji.

"But Betty at school hates me, I think."

"No, she doesn't, she only is upset because she isn't as good at school as you because her parents do not help her as much as we do. But if you help her to get better, she will love you," said Grandfather-ji.

RAMA FIGHTS THE DEMONS IN THE FOREST

"When Rama was 18 he was very strong and the best archer in the country. One day, a holy man, Sage Vishvamitra, came from the forest and asked the king to let Rama and Lakshmana come to the Dandaka forest with him, be his disciples and clear the demons (Rakshasas) out of the forest because they were attacking the Rishis (holy men) who were living and praying there and they threw filthy things, such as rotten meat, into their sacrificial fires, which had to be kept absolutely pure to be effective.

So Rama and Lakshmana took Vishvamitra as their Guru, went with him into the forest, killed the worst of the demons, especially the giantess Taraka, who was bigger than a mountain, and the others fled out of the forest in terror of this mighty hero.

RAMA GETS MARRIED

One day the Guru said to Rama: 'Tomorrow we will go to Janakpuri, where the beautiful Princess Sita (Seeta) is going to select a husband. Her father has decided that he will give her only to the man who is strong enough to string the famous bow of Lord Shiva, which is so big and heavy that no elephant, and not even a whole army of men can even lift it, to say nothing of bending it to put on its string.'

Rama happily agreed. In Janakpuri there were one thousand kings assembled who wanted to marry Sita. In those days, in royal families, the bride was entitled to choose her husband. They all approached the bow and none of them could as much as lift it. But when Rama came forward, everybody shouted Oh and Ah, because he was so lovely to look at. He lifted the bow, which was ten times as heavy as Tower Bridge in London, and swung it in the air. He took its two ends and bent them so hard that the bow broke into two pieces. All the gods, who had come to witness the spectacle and were floating in the sky, applauded him loudly. They, of course, knew that Rama was one of them, no other than Lord Vishnu himself.

Sita was the most beautiful woman in the world and, as everybody knows, also the best and most faithful wife there could be, the ideal Indian woman. She and Rama loved each other very very much. Rama, of course was really Lord Vishnu in human form (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, as we say). And now, Yamuna, I will let you into a secret. Sita was Lord Vishnu's faithful heavenly wife, the Goddess Lakshmi. She loved him so much and was so lonely in heaven that she decided to become an ordinary woman, and suffer and suffer, as ordinary women do, in order to be with her husband. We do not know how she was born, but one day King Janaka, who was ploughing a field in person in order to bring rain and prosperity to his country, found her in a furrow, adopted her and called her Sita, which means "furrow", because that's where she had been found.

Now you know why Rama and Sita loved each other so much the moment they met again. They did not recognise each other's body but somehow they recognised each other's soul and instantly knew that they belonged together for eternity.

"Will I be like Sita when I grow up and will a Rama come and marry me?" asked Yamuna.

"I am sure you will be like Sita, and we will try to find somebody for you who loves Rama as much as you love Sita," said Grandfather-ji.

"Rama and Sita celebrated their wedding and returned to Ayodhya in a big procession. All the people of Ayodhya loved their crown prince dearly and looked forward to the day when he would become their king, even though Dasaratha was the best of kings already.

RAMA IS TO BECOME KING

Dasaratha was tired of being king. He was getting old. He saw how well his people loved Rama and that Rama had acquired all the virtues and skills needed for being a good king. He called Rama and told him that he would resign his throne next week and Rama would become king. Rama, who was an obedient son, immediately agreed.

The people of Ayodhya were jubilant when they heard the news, and so was Rama's mother Kaushalya and the other two queens, the mothers of Rama's brothers. They all knew that Rama was superior in every respect to his brothers, even though they too were models of virtue and achievement.

But there was one wicked woman in the town. She was Manthara, the hump-backed servant of Queen Kaikeyi. When Kaikeyi told her how happy she was that Rama should become king, Manthara argued: 'How can you be so unfair to Bharata, your own son! What has he done to be deprived of the chance of being king? What about his children? Is it right for them to be cheated of their rights? Once Rama is king, he will chase you out of the kingdom because he is afraid of his brother and he will make him his slave. You must stop Rama's coronation and demand that your son Bharata is crowned king instead. Then you will be the first lady in the country.'

At first Kaikeyi did not believe her servant. But the wicked woman persisted and repeated her warnings incessantly. In the end Kaikeyi called the king and accused him of doing a great injustice. She reminded him that a long time ago she had saved his life on the battlefield and that he had granted her a boon: he had promised to fulfil her one wish, to give her whatever she would ask for. She had saved the boon for a later date. Now her time had come.

She demanded that the king should banish Rama from the kingdom and force him to live in the forest for fourteen years, and that his brother Bharata, her son, should be crowned king.

The king resisted with all his might, but Kaikeyi was adamant. A king must keep his promises and give a good example to his people. If the king is unjust, then soon crime and wickedness will enter his land, unhappiness will spread and ultimately the kingdom will perish, as we have seen with so many countries and empires.

RAMA IS BANISHED TO THE FOREST

The king called Rama and told him about his dilemma. Rama agreed immediately: 'Father', he said, 'you have given me my life, therefore my life belongs to you and you can do with it what you like. If you have promised Mother Kaikeyi to fulfil her wish, then you must keep your promise and I will go to the forest immediately. Bharata is a good man. He will be as good a king as I.'

Sita followed Rama voluntarily into the forest because she knew that a wife's place is by the side of her husband, even though life in the forest is much harder than in the city, because in the forest there are no soft beds, there is no central heating, there are no cinemas and no supermarkets, there

is no television, no electricity, no cars, you cannot buy any smarties, and there are not even any hot-water bottles, and who would like to live without hot-water bottles!"

"I could", said Yamuna, "no, you couldn't" said her brother to annoy her, "yes, I could", she insisted.

"But there are elephants, and tigers, and snakes in the jungle", said her Uncle, the Pandit.

"I don't mind them," said Yamuna, "because I like elephants and I will ride on them, and I will talk nicely to the tiger, perhaps then I can ride on him like Goddess Amba Mata does, and I will give milk to the snakes and offer them my arm so that they can warm themselves, and they will be my living bracelets. Then they will be content and they will not bite me."

"Well, it's a good thing we don't have any tigers and snakes here in Blackburn", said Panditji and continued his story.

"Bharata refused to be crowned king because he did not want to be king at the expense of Rama. But Rama convinced him that he had to go to the forest and in the end Bharata agreed to rule the country as a temporary king, for fourteen years, on Rama's behalf.

RAMA LIVES IN THE FOREST

Rama and Sita lived in the forest contentedly for many years. Rama's brother Lakshmana also stayed with him to keep him company. They ate wild fruit, like mangoes which we only see in the supermarket and which cost a lot of money. But in the Indian forest they were free. Their only company were holy men, who were there to pray and to meditate in peace and quiet, but since Rama came from a family of kings and warriors, he was allowed to go hunting, which the holy men were not allowed to do because like us they must not kill any living creature.

RAVANA KIDNAPS SITA

One day Ravana's demon sister came to the forest and saw how beautiful Sita was. She told her brother Ravana about her and went on about her for so long that Ravana wanted to have her for himself. Of course, Sita, the perfect wife, would not go with him voluntarily, so Ravana had to abduct her.

That was difficult because Rama and Lakshmana were suspicious of the demons and guarded her carefully. Sita loved beautiful things and the Rakshasas knew that.

Ravana's uncle took on the shape of a golden deer and ran past Sita's hut in the forest. Sita immediately wanted the beautiful deer and asked Rama to go and catch it for her. Rama guessed that the deer was really a demon in disguise and did not want to leave her unprotected, but Sita started crying and begging: 'If you do not catch the deer for me, I know that you do not love me.' Rama had no choice, he loved Sita more than anything else in the world. He did not want to see her sad and did not want her to think badly of him. Therefore he told his brother Lakshmana to guard Sita, stay with her inside the hut, and on no account, yes, he said 'on no account', leave her before Rama's return.

The golden deer lured Rama far away from the cottage but after a long chase Rama managed to shoot it with his arrow. This did not really kill the demon but only made him return to his original shape. The demon then imitated Rama's voice and shouted, as if Rama were in danger: "Lakshmana! Lakshmana! Come and help me!"

When Lakshmana heard his beloved brother's voice, he forgot his earlier command not to leave Sita and followed the voice, which lured him further and further away from the hut.

Ravana now came to the cottage in which Sita was alone. Nobody could see that he was a demon. He was dressed like a Brahmin, that means he looked very respectable, and all Hindus are obliged to respect a Brahmin and to be hospitable to him. So Sita touched the Brahmin's feet to show her respect for him. But when she refused to follow him, he grabbed her and dragged her into his chariot Pushpaka which was like an aeroplane and could fly.

Sita cried and lamented but Ravana had no mercy on her. They were flying from the North of India to the South faster than British Airways and ultimately to the island of Lanka. On the way, Sita from time to time dropped some of her jewellery out of the aerial chariot so that Rama should be able to follow and find her.

RAVANA KILLS JATAYU

The king of vultures, Jatayu, heard Sita's lament and attacked Ravana in the air in order to rescue her. But Ravana was stronger and killed him. Jatayu was a good friend of Sita's father-in-law, King Dasaratha, and she cried terribly when she saw that he had sacrificed his life for her.

Vultures are wonderful birds, they do not only keep themselves meticulously clean, as we are taught to do, but they also keep the environment tidy and give a decent burial to men and animals who have been killed on the road and have no-one to conduct their funeral rites. That's why we all love Jatayu, that valiant bird who tried to defend Sita against the demon who was so much stronger than him. But he did his duty even though he must have known that he could not win.

When Ravana reached his kingdom of Lanka, he installed Sita in a beautiful grove, the Ashoka Grove, which means "The Grove of Happiness", and did what he could to spoil Sita and please her, because he wanted her to marry him. She, however, would not listen to him and demanded that he should return her to her beloved husband, Rama. That must have gone on for a year or two at least.

RAMA SEARCHES FOR SITA

When Rama returned to the forest hut, he knew immediately that Sita had been abducted and he cried bitterly. Even though he was a god, and did know that everything would work out all right and that this life is really only an illusion, he cried like an ordinary human being and called on the birds and the animals, on the trees and the plants and on the whole of nature to weep with him. He had to express his pain to show to the world that he really cared about his wife. For him as a King it was not enough to act right, he also had to be seen to be acting right.

Rama now searched for Sita for a long long time. He found the jewels she had dropped. He found allies in a tribe of monkeys, who also were not really ordinary monkeys but something special, and one of them was definitely a god. Do you know his name, Dinesh?" the Pandit asked Yamuna's brother.

THE STORIES OF HANUMAN

"I know," shouted Yamuna excitedly, "it was Hanuman-ji, and we pray to him on Saturdays and we chant the Hanuman Chalisa, and he loves oil and urhad dhal (black lentils), that's why we eat urhad on Saturdays, and he is the son of the Wind-god Vayu and he is Lord Shiva himself, and he is the perfect servant because he loved Rama so much, and he can make himself very small and very big, and he can jump very very far, and when he was still a baby monkey and saw the sun, he thought it was only an apple and jumped into the sky and swallowed it whole and the earth became pitch-dark, and when Lakshmana was wounded in battle and needed a magic herb from a special mountain, he did not know which was the right herb, so he brought the whole mountain, and he searched for Sita everywhere, all over India and couldn't find her and he jumped from India to Lanka in one big leap and he found her, and he told her Rama loved her and would come for her, and she was happy, and he gave her Rama's ring, and the Rakshasas caught him and thought he was a stupid monkey but he wasn't, he was a god, and I like him, because he is strong and nice and cuddly, and when Sita asked him: 'Where is Rama?', he tore open his chest and showed his heart, and Rama and Sita and Lakshmana were right there, but he didn't die and he could close his chest again and everything healed, and the Rakshasas laughed at him and tied a torch to his tail and set fire to it, and Hanuman got away and made himself as big as a mountain and ran over the rooftops of Lanka and waved his burning tail and all the houses of the demons were burnt down, and he went back to Rama and told him where Sita was and that she was waiting for him, hhhhhhhh!"

And Yamuna took a deep breath and her brother looked to the ceiling and her Grandfather smiled and said: "What a performance!", and her Uncle, the Pandit, said: "Who do you mean, Yamuna or Hanuman?" And everybody laughed.

"Sorry, Uncle-ji," said Yamuna, I didn't want to show off but I like this story sooooo much. Please, you tell me the rest of it."

"Well, there is not much left to tell. You have done most of the telling, and I like that, because everybody who tells the story of Rama or of Hanuman or listens to it will be blessed by God.

THE BATTLE OF LANKA

Rama by now had a whole army of monkeys and bears and there were some mighty warriors among them. Hanuman led them to the southernmost tip of India but how could they get across the wide wide sea? No other monkey could jump like Hanuman.

So they took rocks from the shore and threw them into the sea and built a causeway on which they could march to Lanka. Ravana was furious now, and he still refused to return Sita to her husband Rama.

Now a terrible battle ensued. It was one of the big battles of good against evil. It lasted for several days. Almost all of Ravana's ministers and brothers were killed. He had a huge army and millions of his soldiers died, even though they fought bravely.

In the end Ravana himself had to fight in the battle since there was nobody left he could send to fight for him.

He hated Rama with all his might. Day and night he had thought of nothing but how to destroy Rama. And Rama rather liked that because he likes people who think of him, and he does not care much whether they love him or hate him or make fun of him - as long as they think of him intensively.

So Rama was rather fond of Ravana, his great enemy, the demon whom he had been born to kill. It was his duty to kill him, but he was still fond of him because Ravana did not forget him for a single second. You see, God does not think and behave like human beings.

RAVANA'S TEN HEADS

Now this Ravana had ten heads. Do you know what he did with these heads?"

"I haven't got a clue," said Yamuna, "well, I suppose he ate with them and he thought with them."

"Not bad, but it was worse. With the first head he cursed, with the second head he told lies, with third head he was rude to his mother and his father, with the fourth head he ate filthy things, like rotten meat, and maggots, and, well I cannot really say this word in your Grandfather's house, but it was AWWWWful!"

Yamuna begged: "Please tell me, I want to know, I don't mind, please tell me."

But Panditji did not say it, and therefore neither can I. But that other stuff that he ate, it was TERRRRRRible.

"With the fifth head he belched, with the sixth head he puked, with the seventh head he spat at his brothers and sisters, with the eighth head he did not brush his teeth, with the ninth head he did not wash his face, and with the tenth head, well, it does not matter."

"Please, please, I want to know," whimpered Yamuna, her beautiful brown eyes beaming with joy. But her uncle did not continue, perhaps he did not know it himself, and Yamuna could not think of anything naughty for his tenth head - then she had it: "And with the tenth head, he got drunk - or he smoked I am sure he did - or he ate drugs and became terribly ill."

"Now Ravana fought with Rama for many hours. But it was not easy to kill Ravana. When you cut off one of his heads, another one would immediately grow. Rama knew how to kill Ravana immediately, the only way to kill him. But he enjoyed the sport, like English people enjoy themselves at a dartboard and therefore he was happy to have such a valiant opponent. For Ravana may have been a bad demon, but he also was very brave. (Nobody is completely bad.) He kept shouting (with whatever head was in working order at the time): "Kill Rama, kill Rama" - and some worse things I think.

Rama had a weapon which was called Agnivana, Fire-Arrow, it was like a machine gun and could fire ten arrows per second, and each of them was like a knife and cut off one of Ravana's heads.

Rama fired his Agnivana so fast and cut off so many heads that they did not have time to fall to the ground and the sun was darkened because there were so many of Ravana's heads floating in the sky.

Every second Rama fired his Agnivana ten times, ten heads were chopped off, joined those already in the sky and were instantly replaced by new ones on Ravana's ten throats.

RAVANA IS KILLED

In the end Rama had had enough, he shot Ravana in the stomach because that's where the demon's soul resided. Ravana had known that all along, and I also know a few people here in Blackburn whose soul is in their stomach, but I won't tell you their names. I will only say that much: They go to restaurants more often than most other people, they sit at table longer, they eat more chocolates than other people. That is because their soul is in their stomach and makes them do that.

Ravana died instantly, and people saw his soul come out of his stomach. Rama opened his mouth and breathed it in, and forgave his great enemy. In this way Ravana was united with God, forever, he had been given moksha, liberation, which is better than paradise because it lasts forever and is the end of all suffering.

But, of course, it is better to join God not by being a demon but by being a good girl, and then you do not have to be shot before you are forgiven. All right?"

"Yes, I will be good," said Yamuna. "I do not want to be a monster with ten heads, one is enough for me and I will use it only for good things. What happened then?"

RAMA AND SITA RETURN TO AYODHYA

"The great battle of Lanka was over, Rama had Sita fetched from her Ashoka Grove, Sita cried and cried and cried, with happiness. Rama appointed a new king for Lanka, Vibhishana (stress: Vibhishana), a Rakshasa, Ravana's brother, but he was a goodie and had fought on Rama's side.

Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman got into Pushpaka, Ravana's aerial chariot, and flew back to Ayodhya. Bharata gave Rama back his kingdom, Rama was crowned king, at long last, after fourteen years, and all the people were terribly, terribly happy.

The trees started bearing fruit, even though it was not the season, people washed the streets and cleaned their houses and painted them. The painters, decorators and cleaning contractors earned a lot of money.

The people put on their best clothes, especially beautiful saris, and new ones if they could afford them. They gave each other presents, money, toys, books and sweets which are made of milk, flour and sugar. They went to visit their relatives and friends and had lunch and dinner with them to enjoy the tasty food together.

They knew that their king Rama, who was God, and his wife Sita, who was a Goddess and who was the same as Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu, and goddess of wealth and good fortune, had come with him. Just as we hope both will come to us today.

He had come to bring justice and peace, and she had come to bring money and happiness. The people did not want the day to end, therefore they put diyas, little lights in earthenware pots, into their windows. The whole city was brightly illuminated.

WHY WE CELEBRATE DIWALI

That is the reason why every year on a new moon day in October or November, on the darkest day of the month, we celebrate Diwali, the Festival of Lights, just as the people of Ayodhya did so many thousands of years ago. We open our houses and our hearts so that Rama and Lakshmi can enter.

Ayodhya is really our heart, and that has to be clean and open to receive them. On each Diwali day we tell the story so that the great battle of good against evil is not forgotten and will be remembered for another five thousand years. You must learn it now so that, when you are big, you can tell it to your children.

The battleground is not really Lanka but our heart. That's where the battle between good and evil is fought, when we have to decide whether to do good things or bad things, and sometimes it is difficult to know which is which.

Thank you, Yamuna, for listening to the story, and for helping me to tell it to make it faster and shorter, and may Rama and Sita bless your heart and that of your brothers and sisters and everybody in this house, in your family, in Blackburn and in the whole world (which is almost the same), and not forgetting the animals, the birds and insects, the trees and plants, the fields, the mountains and the stars. Good night, happy Diwali and Happy New Year.

**Victory to Shri Rama:
Jay Shri Ram!"**

*** * ***

Text 2

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Osama Bin Laden's Salvation, or: Why we celebrate Diwali

Length: 1,736 words = 9,860 characters

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Date: 2001-10-11, Mk2.1

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 15 November 2001, Hindus all over the world celebrated the festival of Diwali, the festival of lights. It is not only one of the most popular Hindu festivals but also one of the few that non-Hindus are aware of. Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer living in England, writing on 11 October 2001, four weeks after "the 9/11 Manhattan attacks", puts the ancient festival into a topical context.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Osama Bin Laden's Salvation or: Why we celebrate Diwali

This year we celebrate Diwali (15 November 2001) in troubled times. Diwali is a celebration of victory, but we have not achieved victory yet, we do not know the enemy. The struggle, like the struggle between good and evil in our hearts, will continue forever. In the story there is victory: in reality, as long as we live there will always be battle.

All Hindus know the story of Lord Rama. Lord Vishnu, God, was born on this earth as Rama, son of a king, grew up as a prince, fought with demons as a young man, showed his valour, married Sita, the most beautiful and loyal woman on earth and was about to be made king when his father wanted to retire. Then because of an unwise unconditional promise the king had made to one of his wives, Rama's brother had to become king, and Rama and Sita, without batting an eyelid, went into exile for fourteen years so that their father could keep his promise and his honour.

While in exile, Sita was abducted by the demon Ravana and hidden in a grove in Lanka. Rama formed alliances, pursued the monster, found Sita, fought a battle with Ravana and killed him. Rama and Sita returned to their capital Ayodhya.

On Diwali, the festival of lights, we, with the people of Ayodhya, celebrate that triumphant return and welcome Rama and Sita into our hearts.

These are the plain facts as written down (with many more details, adventures and teachings) a few thousand years ago and remembered from even long before that.

Now we can run through the story a second time since everything repeats itself.

On Diwali we celebrate the return of a beloved from exile. In the olden days it was a king. A king who was also God: Lord Rama and his wife Sita, the Goddess, an incarnation of Lakshmi Devi, goddess of wealth.

Rama had proved his strength and military skill when, still a boy, he defeated the demons in the Dandaka forest. He proved his humility, obedience, love for his parents and unselfish sense of honour, when he, without a murmur of protest, went into a fourteen-year exile and gave his kingdom to his brother, so that a promise made unwisely by his father could be honoured.

This sense of honour is one which is more concerned with one's duties than one's rights. When we admire Rama's military prowess, it is an incentive for us today to be exemplary in the pursuit of our professions, be it as window cleaners and factory workers, or as engineers, computer programmers, doctors, lawyers, teachers &c.

Rama showed his love for his wife Sita when she had been abducted by the Ten-headed Monster Ravana. Some of our politicians are convinced that that's what Bin Laden looks like and it was him who took Sita away and hid her in a cave in Afghanistan. So that's how we will continue the modern version of the story.

'I'll smoke the bastard out,' said Rama, 'even if it's the last thing I do on earth.' He was fully human, so he not only sobbed about the loss of his beloved Sita, but he also had to show that he knew how to be angry. A good soldier swears, even if he is a former American president, a king or a god.

A skilled diplomat, Lord Rama knew the value of loyal friends, he made alliances with many nations including a tribe of monkeys and their Prime Minister Sugriva, who spoke English with a British accent and offered to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with Lord Rama in this conflict.

General Hanuman with his bears and monkeys (a.k.a. paratroopers, special forces, and SAS [shoot-assess-shoot] troops) set out to

find the monster in jungles and caves. The pigeons (a.k.a. Stealth Bombers) and other birds (a.k.a. spy planes) supported him as well, especially the valiant king of the vultures, Jatayu, who died when trying to rescue Sita from Ravana.

Eventually Rama's secret agents (CIA and FBI) tracked her down to Lanka (a.k.a. Afghanistan). A terrible battle ensued, in which there were many civilian casualties, apart from the many soldiers who died.

When Hanuman was on a scouting mission in the holy city of Mazar-I-Sharif (a.k.a. Lanka), the demons arrested him as a spy (which he was), dipped his tail into tar and set it on fire. They thought that was a good joke. But it backfired on them. Hanuman freed himself and raced over the rooftops of the city vigorously wagging his tail, thus causing a firestorm (he was the son of the Windgod Vayu), which destroyed the beautiful city. This was called 'collateral damage'.

Well, we all have known the story from childhood. But today we can see it on our television screens, and it is not even called Ramayana as it used to be, it is called 'THE TEN O'CLOCK EVENING NEWS'. God is everywhere!

The story is ancient, and it is as modern as can be!

When Rama had had enough of fighting, he killed Ravana by shooting an Exocet Missile into his gigantic stomach because that is where, as in many of us, Ravana's soul resided.

But Ravana was a noble demon. He was obsessed with hatred of God (like some people are obsessed with hatred of America). He worshipped God as an enemy. Our scripture, the Shrimad Bhagavatam, says repeatedly that this is one of the accepted forms of worship.

We can worship God as our child (Bala Krishna), as our lover, as our friend, as our mother, as our father, and as our enemy: (S)HE is so great that (S)HE accepts us whichever way we approach him/her.

But worshipping God as an enemy is not for ordinary people. It is not the same as being lazy, selfish, greedy or criminal. So don't choose that road to God if you are nothing but a stupid lout! It'll get you straight to hell!

Worshipping God as an enemy is hard and implies a lot of effort and suffering for the person who takes it. The righteous and the self-righteous will punish him for what he does in his battle against God. That is **their** duty. The enemy of God has a duty of his own. He has to out-manoeuvre God. He has to put up with (and try to catch and counter, of course) the weapons God throws at him. And they are awful, as can be seen right now over Afghanistan.

Therefore we normal people (we ain't all saints or heroes) had better chose a simpler way of worshipping God, e.g. as mother, father, lover, friend - by being 'good' rather than by being 'bad'.

However, Lord Rama respected Ravana's devotion to the battle. He considered Ravana a noble foe. As HE shot him in the stomach, Ravana's soul came out, Lord Rama breathed it in, Ravana was instantly united with God, he had obtained moksha, liberation. This is what Christians call 'salvation' or 'heaven' and Muslims call 'paradise'.

We celebrated the defeat of Ravana on the festival of Dashera (or Vijaya Dashmi; 26 October this year) on the day after the end of Navaratri.

Lord Rama needed nineteen days (in Afghanistan it will take much longer) to tidy up the battle field, bury the dead, pay compensation to widows and orphans, distribute humanitarian aid, and install a 'broadly based democratic government' in Lanka. Ravana's brother, a good demon, was made king.

Then Rama returned to his own capital, Ayodhya, where his people were eagerly waiting for him. His exile was over, after fourteen years the people were reunited with their beloved king.

This was the beginning of the golden age in the kingdom of Ayodhya, a reign of justice and freedom, of love and prosperity.

When we argue about politics, when we make our political decisions, even when we vote, which is as close to politics as most of us ever get, then these are some of the ideals we are trying to bring about. We never do it quite as perfectly as Lord Rama did in that golden age, but at least that is something to aim for.

When we see someone who is consumed with hatred for what we consider good, e.g. God (or 'God's Own Country'), then we can always think of Ravana and remember that **nobody** is purely bad, not even if he hurts us badly. On the contrary, all that hatred will have had a cause (nothing, except God, is without cause), and even extreme hatred may well be driven by a noble soul.

This does not mean that Ravana did not have to be killed. Sometimes even noble souls have to be killed, if they are too noble for this world. We may have to kill Ravana and his cohorts, dismantle his terrorist networks, but we can do so with compassion, and there is no need to be outraged or self-righteous when we do so.

NOTE

The story of Lord Rama was written down in Valmiki's Sanskrit epic 'Ramayana' and in the 15th century Hindi epic Ramayana by Tulsidas. Lengthy summaries (re-tellings) of these epics have been published in many western languages.

*** * ***

Text 3

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Diwali and Sal Mubarak

Length: 559 words = 3,298 characters

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Date: 2002-11-04, Mk2.2

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 4 November this year (2002), Hindus celebrate Diwali, the 'Festival of Lights'. They also worship Lakshmi Devi, the goddess of wealth, and business people have their new accounts books blessed. The day after Diwali is New Year's Day. Gujarati Hindus greet each other with the Muslim phrase "Sal Mubarak" (for "Happy New Year"), a charming tradition which purists, sadly, discourage. Ashutosh Vardhana explains the origins and meaning of this festival.

Ashutosh Vardhana: Diwali and Sal Mubarak

STORY

When evil had once again become too strong on earth, God, so the story goes, took on a human body and became Rama, son of the king of Ayodhya. He grew up in every respect like a human being of his class and as a model of honourable behaviour.

In order to be true to a promise unwisely made by his father, he, his wife Sita and his brother went into exile for fourteen years. At the end of this time, he fought and won a battle with the valiant demon king Ravana. Then he and Sita returned in triumph to his capital Ayodhya, his loyal subjects rejoiced, adorned the city and filled it with lights. That's why Hindu families light up their houses on this day.

CUSTOMS**Making rangooli patterns**

© Kerena Marchant,
Hodder Wayland 1996

Diwali is celebrated at home rather than in temple. For this day Hindus thoroughly clean their houses, paint rangoli patterns in front of them and in their court yards. They put diyas (ghee lamps made of clay) on their window sills and at their doors. We want God in his various manifestations, especially Rama, Sita and Lakshmi, to enter our houses, and keep burglars and bad people out. People also let off fireworks.

**Lakshmi Devi**

On Diwali night prayers to Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and health, are said (Lakshmi puja), and business people have their accounts books for the next year blessed.

Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth



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Annakut in temple on New Year's Day



© Kerena Marchant, Hodder Mayland 1996

Annakut - Food offerings in temple

On the next day, in many parts of India, we celebrate New Year. We offer a large number of traditional varieties of food (annakut) in the temple. These are later shared by the devotees as prasad (food offered to, and blessed by, God). People then visit one another and wish each other Happy New Year.

In Gujarati 'Happy New Year' is 'Sal Mubarak', an Arabic expression, which Gujarati Hindus have adopted from their Muslim neighbours. This is a sign of ancient togetherness and harmony, and we all hope that such harmony between all good and peace-loving people (as most are) can soon be re-established and the Muslim and Hindu communities wish each other 'Sal Mubarak'.


Sikhs also celebrate Diwali: their religion grew out of Hinduism. Diwali is a landmark for their religious freedom, for the sixth Sikh Guru Hargobind Sahib and 52 Hindu kings were released from prison on Diwali day in 1619.

MEANING

The deeper meaning of this festival is that Ayodhya is our heart. We should purify it so that God can enter and live there. We should worship God in our hearts. An old Sanskrit proverb says:


A thousand Ramas born in Ayodhya will do
No good if He's not born in you.


^Maha Shivaratri starts here




Ashutosh Vardhana Yamuna's Year

Stories for the Hindu Calendar
as told in a Hindu family in a northern English town







OM, symbol of
God the Absolute




Lord Ganesh,
remover of obstacles



My Gurujji



Sarasvati Devi,
Goddess of arts and learning



Sign of the sun

Impressum

Title: Ashutosh Vardhana:
Parvati wins her husband: The story of Maha-Shivaratri

Length: see Technical Note below, for the two versions

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Date: 2002-03-11, Mk3.1

TECHNICAL NOTE

This file contains two versions of the Maha-Shivaratri story and a poem:

- Text 1: An elaborate version as told to a ten-year-old Hindu girl in England:

Title: Parvati wins her husband: The story of Maha-Shivaratri

Length: 10,560 words = 56,844 characters

Font: In this text, two fonts are being used:

Plain pica (like this: Plain Pica) for the passages in which the narrator interacts with Yamuna's family and explains the traditional plot,

A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi,

- Text 2: A shorter version of this story

Title: Why we celebrate Maha-Shivaratri, or: The wedding of the gods

Length: 1,740 words = 9,800 characters

- Text 3: The poem by Ashutosh Vardhana:

Title: When Yasin scorned, Naresh asked silly questions

Length: 155 lines

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Parvati wins her husband: The story of Maha-Shivaratri

A Hindu story as told in a Hindu family
in a northern English town.

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The bride's choice
The great sacrifice
Shiva takes revenge on Daksha
The four aims of life

Second Watch: Dvitiya Prahar: 9 p.m. to midnight

Parvati is born and grows up
Parvati tries to win Shiva through her beauty
Kama aims his arrow and is reduced to ashes
When to fall in love

Third watch: Tritiya prahar: Midnight to 3 a.m.

What are tapas (penances)?
Parvati does tapas
Parvati's devotion is tested
Shiva reveals himself to Parvati

Fourth Watch: Caturtha prahar: 3 to 6 a.m. = Brahma vela: The Hour of Brahma

The wedding guests
The meaning of Maha-Shivaratri
May we meditate on the Supreme Light

**First Watch:
Pratham Prahar: 6 to 9 p.m.
Before Dinner**

INTRODUCTION

For the whole of January and half of February, Yamuna had been looking forward to the next visit of her uncle, the Pandit. This afternoon he had arrived because it was festival time again. Today was the festival of Maha-Shivaratri, the Great Night of Lord Shiva and his wedding with Goddess Parvati. "Please, Uncle-ji", Yamuna asked, "will you tell me the story of Shiva and Parvati?"

"Of course, I will," said the Pandit, as he always said, "we have half an hour to go before dinner. That's enough for the first part, the story of Sati, and I'll tell you the rest after dinner and during the night. You would like to stay up during the night, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, if Mata-ji lets me", Yamuna said.

So Pandit-ji sat down on the settee, and Yamuna sat down cross-legged on the floor, looked up at him and said: "I am ready."

"Then I'll begin", said Pandit-ji.

LITTLE SATI LOVES LORD SHIVA

"Sati was a beautiful princess, the youngest daughter of King Daksha Prajapati, the "ruler of the world". She was also a goddess, an incarnation of Goddess Durga, and Durga, as you know well, is the wife of Lord Shiva. Sati was a beautiful girl and very pious too. When she was young, her mother took her to temple, and she loved to come with her and have darshan of the gods, that means she visited the gods, looked at their statues and prayed to them. There was one god of whom she was particularly fond, that was Lord Shiva. In the temple was his stone image, the lingam, a symbol of his creative power, and there were also pictures of him sitting in meditation on Mount

Kailasha in the Himalayas or looking kindly and mysteriously at his visitors and devotees, and one in which he was dancing vigorously.

Nobody quite understood why young Sati was so much drawn to Lord Shiva, but it was a force stronger than anything even she could understand at that time. After all, she was still very little.

Sati liked dancing herself and sometimes she thought how nice it would be to dance with Lord Shiva. Sati knew many stories about Lord Shiva, and what she liked most about him was that he was so kind. That's what his name, Shiva, means: "blissful, auspicious, kind".

Shiva was also unpretentious and a bit of a rebel, just like Sati. He did not bother to dress up and often ran around like a tramp or a hippie. People who met him (or still meet him today!) often do not know that he is a god. They think he is just a tramp. But in fact he is a god and just does not care much for clothes, riches, possessions and the things ordinary people like to show off with. He likes to hide his identity. He is much more than he seems to be."

"I saw a tramp when I went to Manchester last year," said Yamuna, "he was sitting in the station, he was wearing a thick dirty coat, and his face was blotchy and he stank. He didn't have a half-moon in his hair like Shiva."

"Well, there are many tramps in big cities, like Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow or London. They are poor people and have nowhere to live, and have to sleep in the street and the rain, and one of them might be Lord Shiva, you can never know, so you had better be kind to any tramp or any poor person you meet. You can never know who he really is.

Little Sati became ever more fond of Shiva and when her parents started talking about her future husband, who would surely be a handsome young prince or even a powerful king, she used to say with a blush: 'I want to be Lord Shiva's wife. He is the greatest, and nobody else will do for me.' Everybody laughed and thought it was just a crush or a childish joke: who would ever think of marrying God? Wasn't the Prime Minister or the Pope good enough?

And perhaps it was like a childish dream at the beginning, but as time went by, Sati's wish to become Lord Shiva's wife became very earnest. She could not say how and when it had started and now felt that for thousands of lives in the past she had always wanted to be Shiva's loving companion.

Her father Daksha had once had a quarrel with Shiva and therefore did not like him at all. Apart from that, in his eyes, Shiva was just not respectable enough to be his son-in-law. He would bring shame on the family. If only he had been a real tramp, well, that would have been bad enough, unthinkable, really, come to think of it. But to be a God and behave in so ungodlike a way! 'This Shiva should know better', father Daksha thought. So he said a firm No to Sati's wish to marry Shiva.

THE BRIDE'S CHOICE

Then the day came, a big festival arranged by her father, called 'swayamvara', during which royal brides could choose their husbands. While most ordinary girls would enter arranged marriages, where the parents present the girl with a few 'suitable boys' to choose from, the kings would invite thousands of suitable partners, assemble them all in an arena on the same day, the daughter would come out of the palace, which was always made of gold, silver, gems and sandalwood, she would

have a garland in her hands, look at each of her suitors, and when she had found the one she liked best, she would hang the garland over his shoulders. Then they were engaged and had to be married and there was nothing the girl's parents could do about it. It was her choice, her decision and it was final.

There were thousands of kings, princes, and even gods, at Sati's swayamvara, but King Daksha had taken great care not to invite Shiva and had stationed Security Guards from Securicor and from Group Four (oh yes, it is a very old company) all around the arena and given them whips, fierce Rottweiler dogs and machine guns to keep Lord Shiva out, just in case he should come uninvited, be it dressed as a tramp, with matted hair and his body smeared with ashes, or in all his glory as a God.

So Lord Shiva, who surely knew by now that Sati loved him dearly, that no other living soul loved him as dearly as Sati, did not come to the swayamvara. Or did he?

Sati, on the other hand, was sure that her beloved Shiva would be there, and with a radiant smile she came out of the palace, garland in both hands, and started walking around the arena, filled with kings and gods, their ornaments and weapons glistening in the sunshine of an early Indian morning when it is still cool. She looked at each suitor in turn and could not see her beloved Shiva. How could he let her down? She walked around the arena three times and became more and more sad each time. She almost started sobbing. Where was the God whom she loved with all her heart? How could he let her down, her who felt so infinitely close to him as if they had always been lovers?

Then she made up her mind. She stepped into the middle of the arena, threw the garland into the air and cried: 'Lord Shiva, I choose you for my husband.' Suddenly everybody could see him, just three yards above the ground, Sati's garland around his neck, there was Lord Shiva, the god who is everywhere, whose dance maintains the whole universe, who vibrates in every atom, every molecule, in every sound, in every ray of sunlight, in every emotion. Here he stood in front of his beloved Sati, looking like a tramp, showing that he did not care for outward appearance, and rewarding Sati who had proved that she could detect and love what is godly or divine even in creatures who do not look like it at all.

Her father, King Daksha, was very angry: 'How can you be so stupid and marry that dirty stinking beggar? Just say one word and I will call my bodyguards to evict him. What right did he have to come here uninvited, and through the air at that. Who does he think he is? Batman? I think, he is a bloody sorcerer. Send him back to Pendle Hill where he belongs! Of course, you are entitled to marry whom you like, but if you marry that filthy scoundrel I never want to see you again, not together with him anyway. You can have him as your husband, stupid goose that you are, but I will never accept him as my son-in-law, just go away and live with him in misery - a beggar's wife!'

But Daksha could not persuade his daughter to change her mind, and so Sati and Shiva were married, her sari was tied to his úttariya vástra (uttariya vastra), his scarf, they took the seven steps round the sacred fire, she put a morsel of sweet into his mouth and he did the same to her, they promised to always take care of each other and then returned to his abode in the Himalayas on top of Mount Kailasha. There they lived happily for many years.

THE GREAT SACRIFICE

One day Sati noticed a startling increase in the air traffic passing over Mount Kailasha. There used to be just one aerial chariot once every two hundred years or so, but now they came in aerial fleets, as many as fifty a day. Were the gods going to war against some superhuman dictator? But why were they taking their wives along? For the chariots were brimful with gods and goddesses in their most splendid attire and the ends of their saris were flapping merrily in the icy wind of those high altitudes.

Sati made enquiries on what was going on.

Sage Nárada (Narada), the prophet and great teller of all divine stories, told her that King Daksha was planning to hold a big yájña (yajnya), a fire sacrifice, and had invited all the kings and nobles of all the worlds and all the gods to it. But he had not invited Mahadéva, the Great God Shiva, his son-in-law, nor, of course, his daughter Sati, whom he had cast out. Shiva did not care much about the invitation either way, but Sati was much upset that her husband should have been slighted in this manner and decided to attend the festival anyway. As a daughter, she did not need an invitation.

So she went to her father's house, dressed like a beggar's wife and accompanied by Nandi, the bull, her husband's loyal servant. She arrived in the arena prepared for the yájña (yajnya). The sacrificial fire had already been lit, and all the splendidly dressed guests were sitting there watching the start of the ceremony. The women wore silk saris in red and gold and other bright colours, and the men wore their armour or their military uniforms. Sati walked up to her father to greet him respectfully by touching his feet, but he started insulting the husband she had chosen and called him a beggar, a scoundrel, a thief, a good-for-nothing, and even a ..., but, no, I must not use such words, they are too disgusting."

"What did he call Shiva, Uncle-ji?" insisted Yamuna.

"No, I wouldn't repeat that word, only boys use such bad language, and they shouldn't," said Pandit-ji.

"Sati flushed with anger. No longer was she the picture of a subservient, timid, obedient daughter - for a wife must honour her husband even more than her father and must not tolerate that he is insulted. 'How dare you talk like this about my husband. No wife should ever hear such words about her husband. I cannot stop you from talking like this, for you are my father. But I can make sure that I never again hear such insulting language.' And with those words she jumped into the sacrificial fire and was instantly burned to death.

SHIVA TAKES REVENGE ON DAKSHA

Nandi, the faithful servant, returned to Shiva to tell him what had happened. Lord Shiva now was furious - not so much because he had been insulted: he cares little about insults and knows his own greatness. No words or deeds can make him less great than he is. But he was angry because his beloved Sati had been hurt by Daksha and because she, whom he loved more than anything else, had been taken away from him. Every god needs a wife, she is his creative energy, and without her a god, however great, can do nothing. Lord Shiva therefore pulled a hair from his head and threw it on the ground and out of it sprang the great hero Virabhádra (Virabhadra), who had 1000 heads, 1000 feet and 1000 eyes, which is interesting because it gave him only one eye and one foot per

head; but it was just right for Virabhádra (Virabhadra) for he could not multiply by two and that made him a better fighter.

Then Lord Shiva shook his head and his matted hair, and out of it fell a whole army. I am sure your tramp in Manchester did not have so much hair, but Lord Shiva had so much that a million soldiers could hide in it and stay warm and sometimes play war-games. After all, he was a god: therefore he had lots of hair. He then made Virabhádra (Virabhadra) general of this army and sent him to upset King Daksha's sacrifice (the one to which he had not been invited) and to get rid of the bad King himself.

There was an almighty battle in which many people were killed and all the cities of Daksha's kingdom destroyed. The general cut off Daksha's head. When the battle was over, Sati's mother, who had never done any wrong, asked Shiva to restore her husband to life. Without her husband she would have been as unhappy as Shiva without his wife. Lord Shiva could not possibly say No to the mother of his beloved Sati and brought Daksha back to life. However, since Daksha's head could not be found, he needed an organ donor for a head transplant operation. The only donor available was a goat who had just broken his neck in a mountaineering accident. This goat wanted to prove to his friends that he was not superstitious and had therefore jumped out of the window of an office on the 13th floor of Daksha's Ministry for Religious Affairs. This, Yamuna, is something you should never do. It is dangerous. So King Daksha was given a goat's head, which served him right, don't you agree?

Why? Well, for being so stupid.

When Lord Shiva's anger had settled, he went back to the Himalayas to devote himself to meditation. It lasted for sixty thousand years.

THE FOUR AIMS OF LIFE

Sati, of course, was not really dead. Like all of us she never dies. The worst that can happen to us is that we lose our body. That's what many people call death. The soul lives on and goes to a happier world. There it lives without a body for a while. In due course it comes back to this world and is given another body as a baby, grows up again and can have new experiences. With that new body we can continue to try to achieve our aims of life."

"What are the aims of life, Uncle-ji?" asked Yamuna.

"There are four aims of life," said the Pandit. "Dharma, that is to live like a good person, ártha (artha), that is to earn the money you need to live and to help other people, Kama, that is to find pleasure, and, ..., well, what do you think, Yamuna?"

"moksha?", said Yamuna after some hesitation.

"Right, and what does moksha mean?"

"Liberation."

"You are right, our last and highest aim in life is to know ourselves better and to know God better. Ultimately we realise that our soul and God are really the same, then we will be

liberated from rebirth and suffering on this earth. We will have bliss for ever and ever. That's why we celebrate festivals, pray and do rituals - in order to know God better and achieve moksha, the last and greatest aim in life."

Just at this moment Yamuna's mother called for dinner, and they all sat down to eat - rōti (unleavened bread), rice, subjí (vegetable), dhal (lentil soup), yoghurt and a glass of water for each.

Second Watch: Dvitiya Prahar: 9 p.m. to midnight

After dinner, Pandit-ji, with Yamuna sitting at his feet, continued the story of Maha-Shivaratri.

"When a few thousand years had passed, Sati (that is her soul), also came back to this earth and could again pursue her aim to be united with her husband, the eternally beloved Lord Shiva. To start with she had to be born and to grow up.

PARVATI IS BORN AND GROWS UP

Sati chose as her parents the mountain king Himaláya (Himalaya) (who is also called Himacál [Himacal] or Himavát [Himavat]) and his wife Mena.

"That is nice," said Yamuna, "Sati could choose her parents. My friends say that parents choose their children. Did I choose my parents, Uncle-ji?"

"You sure did," said Pandit-ji, "we all choose our parents long before we are born. It depends on what interests, likes and dislikes we had in our last lives and how we want to continue. You are a very clever girl, and you are interested in books, and in God, and in religion and in our stories. You must have had the same interest in your last life. Therefore you wanted to continue them in the next life and chose a Hindu family of priests and scholars in which you would be able to do that. Well done, my sweet little girl! I love talking to you and telling you stories.

Himacál (Himacal) and Mena were great devotees of Lord Shiva. This time Sati had three names. She was called Parvati, Úma and Gauri.

Parvati means "Daughter of the Mountain". As Parvati grew up, she became increasingly attached to Lord Shiva. She prayed to him every day. On Mondays, she visited him in the mándir (mandir), the temple, and brought him the things he likes, flowers, water, milk and bílva leaves. Often she sat in front of his image and repeated the "Om namá Shiváya" (Om nama Shivaya), the mantra he likes and which helps people to focus their minds on him when they meditate. When she grew older, she fasted on Mondays and during the month of Shravana, which is sacred to Lord Shiva.

Gradually she remembered that in her last life she had been Sati, how she had loved Shiva then and that she had been re-born to win him again as a husband.

PARVATI TRIES TO WIN SHIVA THROUGH HER BEAUTY

But how could she attract Shiva's attention? He was deep in meditation and took no notice of anything that was going on around him. Now the gods decided to help her. They wanted her to marry Shiva because there was a powerful and evil demon, Taraka, who was threatening the gods themselves and the order of the world. There was an ancient prophesy which said that nobody could kill Taraka except a son of Lord Shiva. So the gods had to help to bring Shiva and Parvati together so that they could get married and have children, well, at least one child.

Two things had to be done. First Shiva had to be woken from his deep meditation. He had to be induced to pay attention to the things around him, including Parvati. Then he had to be made to fall in love with Parvati's beauty, or so the gods thought.

Shiva was sitting in a grove on an icy pass high in the mountains, as he had been sitting for sixty thousand years, in deep concentration, quite undisturbed. He did not think about anything, he did not observe anything, he simply WAS, he existed, as is God's eternal nature. Up there in the icy mountains, the seasons never changed, there were no birds singing and no wild animals roaring. The trees were covered in eternal ice and snow, and Shiva was all alone, one without a second, motionless, always and completely unmoved.

KAMA AIMS HIS ARROW AND IS REDUCED TO ASHES

Now the gods brought Vasánta (Vasanta), the god of spring, who always comes together with love. Warm winds arrived. The sun rose earlier and set later. Vasánta (Vasanta) made the snow melt, the bushes and trees started sprouting green leaves and blossoms. First came the female cuckoo. Then the other birds and bees arrived and started singing, playing and making love. Shiva was still deep in meditation, his eyes were closed, but somehow he felt that something was changing around him. The gods observed him, beautiful Parvati was hidden somewhere in the bushes, waiting for Kama (also called Mádana [Madana]), the god of love, to do his work. Now Kama took up his bow, which is made of sugar cane and very sweet, and aimed his arrow at Lord Shiva. The arrow was made of the tip of a gentle mango twig and once it pierces your heart you fall in love with the person you see at that moment. Normal archers pull the bow-string with their fingers, but Kama has a hundred and one bees to do this for him, and his bow and arrow is therefore called an "organic weapon". Only very gentle force is needed to make a person fall in love. Kama's arrow never misses its target. It is more reliable than an American cruise missile and only strikes at civilians.

As Kama was ready to release his arrow, Shiva opened his eyes and saw what was about to happen, that he was to be seduced away from his meditation, as had happened in the past to other would-be monks and meditators. He decided to protect all future saints and ascetics and rid the world once and for all of love. In a flash of anger he opened his third eye, and out of it came a ray more powerful than 303 laser guns. In an instant Kama and his bow and arrow were in flames. In the next instant only his skeleton was to be seen, and in the next instant only a heap of ashes was left of him. It all happened within a fraction of a second. Ever since then, little children know that they must not disturb their parents or their brothers and sisters when they are studying. They won't burn them to ashes, because they aren't a god. But it is still a stupid thing to do: when people want to be alone and think their own thoughts, let them be.

Shiva got up, turned his back, strode over the mountain tops (he made himself so big that he could step over seven summits in one stride), and settled down in an even more lonely part of the Himalayas to continue his meditation without being molested.

The gods and Parvati couldn't believe their eyes when they saw what had happened, but especially Rati, Kama's wife, wept uncontrollably at the death of her husband. Many streams which come down from the mountains are in fact not ordinary water but Rati's tears. There is one of these coming down the hill just above the lower road from Blackburn to Haslingdon. The water of these streams looks like ordinary water, but when you taste it, it is slightly salty. That's because these are Rati's tears. I will take you there one day when it is summer. You see how terribly sad she was to have lost her beautiful, cheerful and powerful husband, Kama, the god of love himself.

WHEN TO FALL IN LOVE

Some time later, at her request, Shiva, who does not like to say No to people who pray to him, brought Kama back to life. That's why people still fall in love today. But he did not give him his body back. You therefore cannot see him, and poor sweet Rati cannot touch him, and continues to cry and lament for him. Therefore the god of love is everywhere, as busy as ever, especially here in Blackburn. He makes people fall in love with each other, often stupidly, and that's why Shiva wanted to get rid of him in the first place."

"What are people who fall stupidly in love with each other?" asked Yamuna. "Are there people who fall cleverly in love with each other, Uncle-ji?"

"Yes, Yamuna," the Pandit said earnestly, with a frown on his forehead and a roguish smile round his lips.

"People who fall stupidly in love with each other are those who only pay attention to the body and the pretty or handsome face, who are impressed by smart talkers, flashy dressers and big spenders. Then they do not really suit each other ****in character**** and for spending a life-time together in harmony. Such children should listen more to the advice of their parents and maternal aunts and paternal uncles, and paternal aunts and maternal uncles, to say nothing of their grandparents, both maternal and paternal, and fall in love ****after**** they have chosen the suitable boy or girl.

But when they have been wounded by Kama's arrow, they are really a bit mad, we call it "they have fallen in love", and cannot think straight any more and often choose the wrong person. After a few months or years there is trouble, the marriage breaks down and they have to leave each other - unlike Sati and Shiva who were husband and wife for many life-times. Because Lord Kama can make sane people behave like lunatics, he is also called Mánmatha (Manmatha), that is "the one who churns (mátha [matha]) the mind (mána [mana])", the mind-churner.

That's why Lord Shiva rejected Parvati when she showed him only the beauty of her body. He wanted to see also the beauty and perfection of her soul, and that's what she showed him in the next part of the story when she started doing tapas. In our culture, we want marriages which last for at least a life-time. Therefore our families, who are not smitten by Kama, first find so and so many boys or girls who are all suitable for our children, and our children then choose ****among them**** the one they can fall in love with.

But that's enough about falling in love, you still have plenty of time before you start thinking about that, and meanwhile I must

get on with my story because it is already after midnight and soon you will fall asleep, rather than 'in love'.

"I won't fall asleep," said Yamuna, "this is a special night, and I want to stay up all night for Lord Shiva. Father says I am too young to meditate all night long as the saints and sages do, but at least I can listen to your story. That's what I want to do."

"All right," said Uncle-ji, "you can stay up until I finish the story, but we both need a break now, and you can make me a cup of Indian tea and for yourself a cup of milk with honey." While Yamuna went off to prepare the drinks, Uncle-ji nodded off for a few minutes. Then she returned and served the drinks on a small coffee table and sat down on the carpet again.

Third watch: Tritiya prahar: Midnight to 3 a.m.

WHAT ARE TAPAS (PENANCES)?

The Pandit continued:

"Since Parvati could not win Shiva through the attractions of her beautiful body, she had to try and win him through the beauty of her soul, which is much more important to any good husband. Parvati decided to show Shiva her devotion by doing tapas, as she had done already as a child but she determined to do them more intensively now."

"What are tapas?" asked Yamuna.

"Oh dear," thought the Pandit, "will this girl never stop asking questions? How do I answer this one now?"

"My dear," said the Pandit, "tapas are exercises which help people to think more of God and less of the body and less of having fun in other ways. God loves people who do tapas and rewards them, or, to put it differently, they do not need rewarding because tapas are also useful in many practical ways."

"Do people still do tapas today?"

"Yes, many people fast regularly on one day every week, depending on which is their favourite god. For example, on Monday for Lord Shiva, on Wednesday for Lord Vishnu, Krishna and Rama, or on Saturdays for Parvati, whose story I am telling you now."

"How do people fast?" asked Yamuna.

"That is different in every family. In our religion everybody can fast as much or as little as he likes. Sensible fasting is good for us. Therefore we do not have to be forced or ordered to do it. In our family, as you have seen from your mother and father, they fast on Mondays, for Lord Shiva. On those days they have only one full meal a day, usually in the evening. During the day, they allow themselves to eat a fruit and drink milk or water, if

hunger or thirst become too strong to bear. Children should not really fast because their bodies are still too weak, but if you really wanted to take part, you could just eat a little less on those days, or have no sweets or not eat your favourite food."

"Are there are other ways of doing tapas, apart from fasting?"

"Now, little Yamuna, you are behaving exactly as Parvati did when she was together with Lord Shiva. She kept asking him questions and passed on the answers he gave, and that way we know many things which would otherwise have remained Lord Shiva's secret. It is very important to ask questions.

Right, in the olden days people did more tapas than they do today and they were harder. I will give you as many examples as possible, from the past and from our time, so that you understand the idea.

When children want to do tapas, they must not be too strict, otherwise their health will suffer. Children (or adults who want to do easy tapas, or light tapas), might abstain from eating their favourite food or taking their favourite drink, but they must eat or drink something less tasty instead, of course. It is important, especially for children, that they get their proper nourishment. But it is not necessary for that nourishment to be tasty. Children might give up eating sweets, chocolates and ice cream, for example, or drink less Coca Cola or other fizzy drinks, or take no sugar in their tea or coffee, or no spices in their food, and learn to still smile and be happy with what they get. Or when a person is older and the body is stronger, she might give up one meal in the day, perhaps have nothing for breakfast (provided school, studies or other work do not suffer, of course)."

"Why is it useful to make do with food that is not tasty or to miss out on certain meals altogether?"

"There are several reasons. Firstly you teach the body to obey the commands of your mind. YOU decide what and when you eat. That is a matter of practice. Your body is not allowed to make you restless because it demands certain foods. It is your mind and your will which decides. As a result when you meditate or pray, your body cannot come and say: 'I demand my food and drink now.' You can simply tell the body: 'Shut up, I am meditating now, and you have to wait for your food and drink until I have finished or until the appointed time is over.' If you learn to meditate and pray in peace and without being distracted, you come closer to God and closer to moksha.

If you have chosen a day of fasting, perhaps one day a week, or on the day of a big festival, for example Janmāshtami (Janmashtami), the birthday of Lord Krishna, then each time your stomach says: 'I want food', and you reply 'Be quiet, you won't get it, you have to wait', you are reminded of the reason why you are saying No, why you are fasting, and therefore you are

reminded of God. Your stomach reminds you of God. So all that day you are very much aware of God, of the special nature of the day, of the nature of the festival. The more you think of God, the closer you come to him. And one day you will be united with him. That's why fasting is useful from the religious point of view.

But fasting, and other tapas, are useful even in everyday life, even for people who are not religious as yet. If they have learnt to do without food, or without their favourite food, they will be less upset, they will suffer less, if this food is not available for a time. If they are in another house or another country where they cannot have these foods, if the food has been spoilt, if dinner is late, if they are travelling and the train or plane is delayed. Instead of being upset and moaning and complaining, as so many people do who are not used to fasting, they will just shrug their shoulders and think: 'I can do without that meal. I have seen worse, and I will still be alive tomorrow, even if my body is not fed tonight.' "

Yamuna said: "What other forms of tapas are there, apart from fasting?"

"Not complaining about heat and cold, sleeping on the floor instead of a bed, walking barefoot, not listening to music, not watching TV, not doing other things that people like to do - and concentrating on God instead. Not wearing pretty garments, jewellery, make-up, not using perfumes or face creams. Taking cold baths (which is very good for your health too) instead of warm. Working harder at whatever you are doing. Doing the unpleasant chores at home with a smile and making your mother happy as a result. Doing your homework on the day it is set rather than at the last minute on the day you have to hand it in. Fighting less with your little sister even if she makes a nuisance of herself.

The example of the cold baths is a useful one. It not only teaches you to make do with less, it also means that you won't be upset if you are in a house where perhaps there is no hot water or when your water heater breaks down. You will still be as happy as ever, if you do not need a warm bath or shower anyway.

All these things do, of course, have to be done with common sense. Whatever you do, you must not do harm to your health and you must also get on with your friends, your classmates or your employer. They must not think that you are mad or peculiar. It is best if nobody knows that you are doing tapas. tapas are a secret between you and God.

In our religion people can chose to do any tapas they like, and it is best to chose tapas which do not make you an outcast. In order to get a job and to keep it, you have to dress neatly and more or less the same as other people. It is therefore wrong to go to work in rags and in a dress made of tree barks (like Parvati) and say that you are doing tapas. Nobody will appreciate that, and Lord Shiva, I am sure, does not approve of it either.

There are other ways of doing tapas, which are more useful and cause you and other people less trouble. You are not alone in this world and have to consider the feelings of other people. But, on the other hand, you need not allow other people to dictate to you what you do. Just keep their feelings in mind. What was right for Parvati is not necessarily right for you. You do not have to imitate every detail of her actions but understand the spirit from which she acted and make it your own. Then apply it with common sense to your life in our time."

Suddenly the Pandit burst into chant and chanted three shlókas, or stanzas, from the holy book, the Gita:

Verily, yoga is
not for him who eats too much
or abstains too much from eating.
It is not for him, O Arjuna,
who sleeps too much
or keeps awake too much.

For the man who is temperate
in food and recreation,
who is restrained in his actions,
whose sleep and waking are regulated,
there ensues discipline (yoga)
which destroys all sorrow.

When the disciplined mind
is established in the Self alone,
liberated from all desires,
then is he said to be harmonized (in yoga).

(Gita 6:16-18)

But now let's get on with our story."

"Could I have a little break now?" asked Yamuna. "I want to hear the rest of the story and stay up during the night but I would like to rest for just a few minutes." She climbed up on the settee, curled up next to her uncle and was asleep in no time at all.

After half an hour Yamuna woke up and wondered where she was. Her uncle sat there meditating, or was he sleeping?

"I am awake again, Uncle-ji," she said, "can you continue, please?"

"Would you like to make us something cool to drink?" said Panditji. Yamuna went and prepared some rose-water with ice-cubes for both of them.

When they had drunk, Uncle-ji went on.

PARVATI DOES TAPAS

"So Parvati sat in a lonely grove in the Himalayas, doing her tapas, not worrying about her body and its comforts but only thinking about God. She did not know where Shiva was, but she knew that he would notice her dedication and that, when the time was ripe, he would reward her with his love. Had she not been his wife in all eternity in the past, and would she not be his wife in all eternity in future!

She tried to show him that she did not care for her body and for its beauty. She was only interested in her soul and in God, and she was rejecting all demands the body made on her. She deliberately made herself uncomfortable in order to learn 'not to mind', not to be upset by it, to ignore heat and cold, hunger and thirst, pleasure and pain. She did all this more intensively than any normal human being could possibly do.

She was wearing clothes made of bark, which were rough on her tender skin. She was sitting there in summer in the scorching sun next to the sacred fire which she kept going in honour of Lord Shiva. In winter she sat there in the rain, and then in ice and snow. She ate very little food, a little less every year. In the end she had learnt to live on dry leaves falling from the trees, imagine that!, and for the last thousand years of her great fast, she ate nothing at all, apart from a little moonlight. That made her really famous, because no human being had ever managed to do that. But she was a goddess, and that, of course, made her much better at living on very little. Since during these years she ate "not even leaves", she was then called Apárna (Aparna), which means "no leaf".

After a while, people began to notice the beautiful and so infinitely earnest and dedicated woman doing tapas in that lonely spot. The animals came and admired her devotion, and she fed some of them and made friends with them. Some of the animals who had been wild before became very peaceful when they saw her example. Some non-vegetarian birds and animals stopped killing and eating meat and become vegetarians and remain so to this day. Just ask your biology teacher about vegetarian animals. Now you know how they became vegetarian. The holy men, of whom there are many doing tapas in the mountains, came and admired her beauty and goodness. They had, of course, not seen many women up there in the mountains, to say nothing of so divinely beautiful and pious ones, more devoted even than themselves.

Once, when Parvati was beginning her tapas, her Mother Mena came to visit her to find out how her daughter was doing. She was horrified when she saw the hardships Parvati had imposed on herself. 'O Parvati, úmaa!' she cried, which means: "O Parvati, don't do that!" When people realised that Parvati was the Mother of the Universe, they called her Ámma, Mother, and over the years that name turned into Úma. Now you have learnt two possible explanations of the name Úma, all right?

Some people also call her Gauri, the fair one, or the golden one, and every day when we say arti, our morning and evening prayers, we address her and her husband Lord Shiva by that name.

For three thousand years, Parvati sat there and meditated. For how long can you sit still, Yamuna?"

"For ten minutes, but sometimes for half an hour, and for even longer in front of the television!"

"But Parvati did not have any television up there in the Himalayas. As part of her tapas she had given up television. So she had really learnt to sit still and concentrate. You know, of course, that Parvati was a goddess. She was Goddess Durga herself, the Mother of the Universe, Lord Shiva's eternal wife, who had assumed human form for the benefit of mankind. She was to become the mother of a great hero, Karttikeya, who is also known as Subramanya. Later on it was he who had to rid mankind and the world-of-the-gods of the evil demon Taraka.

PARVATI'S DEVOTION IS TESTED

Shiva then sent the Seven Sages, or Ríshis, to test Parvati's determination. Before he accepted her as his wife, he wanted to be sure that she had become perfectly godly, in accordance with her true nature. She passed this test, but Shiva wanted to give her yet another and try her knowledge and wisdom as well. As it turned out, she could not only ask questions, as she often did throughout her life, but also debate and argue. Even people with titles and degrees did not impress her if they talked rubbish. She thought for herself and made up her own mind about what was right and wrong and what was true and false. She had been very well educated by her parents, just like you, and it is important that you continue to study, to read, be curious and ask questions for as long as you live, even after you leave school and college. You don't want to become stupid when you grow up, as some people do."

"I am sure, I won't," said Yamuna, "I love reading and learning."

"One day a young Brahmin looking much like a sádhu (sadhu), a wandering monk, with his begging bowl and staff, came to Parvati's grove and asked her what she was doing. She explained why she was doing tapas. The Brahmin started running down Shiva. He called Parvati a fool for wanting Shiva for a husband. 'This Shiva of yours is filthy, sleeps in cemeteries, keeps the company of ghosts and goblins, dances like a madman, eats filthy things, doesn't wash and comb his hair, is ugly, is a real monster because he has three eyes when respectable people only have two, he is stupid, he doesn't care for women, his only hobby is meditation (why doesn't he go in for car maintenance, motor racing, mountaineering or football like a real man? He does not even support Blackburn Rovers, imagine!). Do you want to be married to a wimp? This Shiva is a murderer, for he killed the God of Love, Kama, he runs around naked (has he no shame!), his throat is blue, and his pets are snakes which writhe around his arms and chest, he wears a garland of skulls instead of flowers round his neck. Surely there wouldn't be much fun in being married to such a madman! You are a beautiful lady, a princess, the daughter of a great king, and you want him for husband? Get a life!"

When Parvati heard this, 'Have you quite finished?' she said full of contempt, and then her fury increased: 'Get out of my sight! How dare you speak like this about the Great God I love, him who maintains the whole universe. You don't even know what you are talking about and are only showing your ignorance. Some of the things you say about Lord Shiva are true but only superficially. You have to understand the meaning of what Lord Shiva is doing. In reality he is neither pretty or ugly, neither dirty nor clean. He is simply the great spirit which pervades the world. But he displays these attributes in order to teach us certain lessons. When he is dirty or goes

around naked or in rags, he is teaching us that the appearance of the body and our garments are not the only and not the most important thing in life. When he meditates for thousands of years, he shows us that God does not have to be involved in this world of illusion. God simply IS. One does not argue whether he exists, how he is or who he is. He simply IS.

The only thing I am not sure about is why he wears that garland of skulls, but I am sure there is a good reason, and I will ask him that, when he agrees to marry me. Now get out of my sight, you stupid and miserable man! I am sure you are not a real Brahmin, because no real Brahmin would be as ignorant and wicked as you have shown yourself.'

SHIVA REVEALS HIMSELF TO PARVATI

Suddenly the Brahmin's appearance changed. His body started to glow, the sickle of the moon appeared on his forehead, the river Gánga (Ganga) started flowing into his thick hair, and a shimmer of divine love came from his eyes. In his hand he held a trident and on his forehead appeared the three white horizontal lines by which you recognise Lord Shiva and all his devotees. 'Oh Lady, oh my dear Parvati, oh Mother of the Universe! You are not only beautiful, you are also infinitely loving and wise. How well you understand my strange and off-putting appearance. You have reached the highest pinnacle of wisdom, ...' "

"What is pinnacle?" asked Yamuna.

"A pinnacle is the top of a spire or the highest point any one can reach. So Shiva said to Parvati: 'You have reached the highest point of wisdom, and you have passed all the tests I set for you. You are worthy to be united with me, you, the Goddess, with me, the Great God, because that's who I really am.'

Parvati embraced him: 'I knew that all along and I am so so so very very happy, that at long last I am together with you again. Never again will you be without me, or I without you. For three thousand years I have waited and worked for this moment. You have not made it easy for me, have you?' "

Yamuna's grandmother entered and brought a cup of tea for her son, the Pandit, and a glass of orange juice for Yamuna. They talked for a while and then Pandit-ji continued his story.

Fourth Watch:
Caturtha prahar: 3 to 6 a.m.
=
Brahma vela:
The Hour of Brahma

THE WEDDING GUESTS

"Shiva now sent messengers to Himacál (Himacal) and Mena, Parvati's parents, to ask their permission for the marriage, which they readily gave.

The wedding was so big, there were so many guests, so many celebrations, so many jokes and so much laughter, so many bells ringing, so many fireworks, such delicious food and drink and so much of it, so many beautiful dresses, so many presents, so many sweets and toys and so many hugs and kisses for the children, and so much happiness for everybody, that the book from which I have this story needed over a hundred pages to describe it all. You can read all that when you are big.

But I must tell you now about some of the wedding guests. There were gods, and kings and princes, and animals and plants, and rivers and lakes, and, of course, lots and lots of ordinary people who had been invited, or who came anyway without invitation, as is the custom, because everybody was so happy and wanted to be present at this great wedding.

Now, who, you will ask, were these ordinary people? Since the wedding was arranged by the bride's father and he was the King of Mountains, the ordinary people were mountains.

Can you imagine how he had to widen the city gates to let them all in, and the huge hotels he had to build to accommodate them all, and how the carpenters were busy making oversized beds for them all, or at least sleeping bags. And imagine the enormous traffic jams in Himacál (Himacal)'s capital.

The Alps came from Austria, the Pyrenees from Spain, the Caucasus from Asia, the Atlas from Morocco and from the Sahara, the Andes from South America, the Pennines from England, Ben Nevis from Scotland, Mount Snowdon from Wales, Vesuvius from Italy, Etna from Sicily, and Mount Athos (with 1,472 monks) from Greece, yes, Yamuna, they were all there.

Nobody wanted to miss this wedding. All the earth was suddenly flat like a chapati, or pancake, because all the mountains had gone to Parvati's wedding.

And since there were neither trains, nor ships, nor planes nor lorries big enough to hold them, they all came on foot. Some of them had grown rather fat for lack of exercise over the last few millions of years and thought the walk to India would help them to slim a little and get fit again. How many feet do you think they walked on?"

"A hundred?" ventured Yamuna.

"Slightly more," said Pandit-ji, "most of them had thousands of feet. They needed so many in order to remain steady and not to shake off the many creatures that lived in and on them and willy nilly had to come along on the big journey. Anyway it was a great chance for them, because they got to know many new countries and they did not need to pay for train or plane tickets."

Yamuna chipped in again: "Was there a mountain from Blackburn as well?"

"Not quite, since there is no real mountain in Blackburn, and if we ever had one, perhaps it remained in India, yes, that must be the reason. But there was a mountain from Lancashire, and you can see it when you look out of your bedroom window. That was Pendle Hill. Pendle Hill was a bit of a show-off and he wanted to give the witches which lived on him a hard time. So Pendle Hill decided to walk on only two legs like you and I, and that made him rather wobbly."

"I am not wobbly," said Yamuna.

"No, you aren't, but you are not as big and heavy as a mountain. Therefore you need only two legs. But if a mountain tries to walk on only two legs, and he is not even used to walking at all, because most mountains don't walk a lot, or do they?, their walking becomes very shaky.

Pendle Hill on his way to India carried lots of Indians from Blackburn (and some from Preston and Bolton as well). They came from all religions and communities. They loved going to weddings, any wedding, but especially this one, and they did not want to miss the chance of a free ride to India. Afterwards they went off to visit their relatives there.

Now, Pendle Hill did not only wobble, he also swaggered deliberately, and took several tons of Thwaites Ale for the road, and you know what that does to people who are stupid enough to drink. It is quite as bad as taking other forbidden drugs.

The Hill swung like a pendulum (or a wedding bell), and all the witches fell off and broke their necks. But the Blackburn Indians, both Muslims and Hindus, did not fall off, for they are good people and helped each other to hang on, and therefore nothing can shake them. That's why the Hill is called "Pendle" Hill and why there are no more witches on it.

THE MEANING OF MAHA-SHIVARATRI

Perhaps there has never been a greater and more important wedding in the history of the world. This was the wedding of all weddings. It showed all of us what really great love is, love that continues not only during one lifetime but over innumerable lifetimes, love that overcomes even the greatest obstacles, as Parvati did overcome them. She was determined to get her man, and she did get him. But more than that. People realised that this was a wedding of Gods, that both were equal, even identical, if you look at it in the right way. Just as all of us are really God, if we look at ourselves in the right way.

People realised that loving God is, or should be, much the same way as when a husband loves his wife, and the other way round, that is to say: husband and wife should treat and love each other as if the other were God. It should not be words only but it should be real, and can be real: it should be felt in the heart, as it was for Parvati. People admired the example that Parvati had set to all of us. That's why we love her so much and why Parvati is such a beautiful name."

"I have two friends whose name is Parvati," said Yamuna, "and my best friend's mother is called Parvati as well."

"Aren't they lucky to have such a beautiful name! But Yamuna is beautiful as well. We have so many beautiful and meaningful names in our culture. Do you like these Parvatis of yours?"

"Yes, they are always very nice to me."

Yamuna's uncle, the Pandit, continued:

"At one point during the wedding ceremony, Parvati had to hang a garland of flowers round Lord Shiva's neck. Then she noticed again that garland of skulls that he always wore and that she had already got used to. 'Tell me, dearest God', she whispered so that the priest could not hear it, 'tell me, dearest God, why are you always wearing that garland of skulls? Isn't that rather ghoulish?'

'Oh, my dear,' he replied, 'I am sure you know the answer already, you just like to hear it from my own lips, just like you can't hear often enough I love you, I love you, I love you, even though you know very well that I do. I wear that garland of skulls out of love for you.

For you have been my wife in every birth, and you have loved me with infinite tenderness each time, and I have loved you as only God can love. I am wearing your skull from each of your lives to remind me of that love.

I also wear it to remind myself and my devotees that bodies do not last for ever, and that real love, I mean real-real-real love, is not love between bodies but love between souls. Bodies cannot merge entirely, they always remain a little bit separate. But souls can merge entirely. And all souls are really God, if we look at them properly, as you do, my dearest Parvati. If souls love as fully as you have loved and do love, then they can merge and become one.

That is the reason why our devotees will stay up to celebrate the night of our wedding, Maha-Shivaratri, the great night of Shiva for many thousands and millions of years to come, the great festival of love between man and woman, and human beings and God. And we bless all those who listen to this story or who tell it, especially during this holy night, especially little children who ask about it and listen to it and learn during this night the great lesson of divine love.'

Thus spoke Shiva Mahadéva, the Great God, to his Parvati and to all of us."

MAY WE MEDITATE ON THE SUPREME LIGHT

"Every marriage ceremony is preceded by Gauri puja, prayers to Goddess Gauri. Unmarried girls are particularly fond of Gauri since, it is said, she grants all their wishes. But they must be sensible wishes, wishes for things that are good for them: otherwise they are not granted. Often we do not know what is good for us and we utter stupid wishes and pray for these wishes to be fulfilled, perhaps for money, or a certain job, or a toy or a book or a new computer. Some of these wishes are granted, others not, but you can be sure that whatever is given or denied to us, it is better for us in the long run.

We may think that we need money badly. Perhaps we have not got enough even to pay the rent, or the electricity bill or even the next meal. We have to work hard to earn and find that money. But if nevertheless we are not given it, there must be a good reason.

That is what is meant when we say that Gauri, or some other God or Goddess, grants all our wishes. Whatever comes to us, no matter whether it appears to be good or bad, comes from God and if we accept it with gratitude we will be happy - even without money... ; if we grumble, we make ourselves unhappy.

That's why we do Gauri puja, prayers to Gauri, before every wedding. Even Goddess Sita did this puja before her marriage to Lord Rama.

Another custom that can be explained by this story is this: In many parts of India, as part of the wedding celebrations, which take several days, people make fun of the bridegroom and his family. They ask the bride why she does not marry somebody who is younger, (not 60,000 years like Lord Shiva), who is cleaner, or richer, or more good-looking than the man she has chosen. Why does she marry a madman who rides on a bull, etc? All this, of course, is done in jest and has to be rebutted with jokes. All these jokes are made in memory of Lord Shiva who appeared so outlandish to the people who saw him and yet, as Parvati knew, was The Great God himself.

Here Pandit-ji had almost ended his story. Little Yamuna had fallen asleep because the night had far progressed. But his brother and his wife were still awake and Pandit-ji went on to tell the remarkable story of how Karttikeya or Subramanya was conceived and born. Some say that he started out as six little babies born in a pond and Parvati picked them up, and hugged them all together and loved them so much and hugged them so tightly that all became one baby with six heads and later on a hero with six heads who rides on a peacock and went on to defeat the demon Taraka.

Other people say that Agni, the God of Fire, disturbed Shiva and Parvati when they were making love because he entered the room without knocking, and how passionate and strong they were, and how Shiva's son was therefore conceived not in Parvati's body but by Kritika, a woman who lives in the sky in the form of a cluster of stars (which English astronomers call "The Pleiades"), and that's why he was so powerful and was called Karttikeya, the son of Kritika.

Karttikeya defeated the demon Taraka, and that was the reason why Shiva and Parvati had to be married and have a son, but little Yamuna was fast asleep when Pandit-ji had reached this part of the story, and she will read it when she is grown up.

At this moment the sun rose in the east, over Pendle Hill, and cast a bright ray into Yamuna's living room. Pandit-ji, and Yamuna's parents and grandparents, stood up. They faced the window, closed their eyes, folded their hands and chanted three times the Gayatri Mantra:

OM, Bhur, Bhuvah, Swah.

Tat savitur varenyam

Bhargo devasya dhimahi

Dhiyo yo naha pracodayat

May we meditate on the supreme light. From it the whole universe has issued. It exists in the hearts of all, and unto it will all go back. It is the intelligence in all beings, it is the guide of all intelligence. In it do we take refuge. May he inspire us with noble thoughts.

* * *

Text 2

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Why we celebrate Maha-Shivaratri, or: The wedding of the gods

Length: 1,740 words = 9,800 characters

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Date: 2002-03-11, Mk3.2

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 13 March this year (2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Maha-Shivaratri, the great night of Lord Shiva, his wedding to Goddess Parvati, and how she managed to win him for a husband. Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story behind this great festival.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Why we celebrate Maha-Shivaratri, or: The wedding of the gods

A little girl, Sati, falls in love with God, God in his manifestation as Lord Shiva. She does not only say so because religion or good manners require it but she means it, cannot help loving him and does not even know why. But Shiva is not a respectable God, he is poor, he has matted hair like a Rastafarian, he looks like a tramp and likes talking to illegal immigrants (like Pope Francis, who died in April 2025). Sati's father, King Daksha, is not happy with his daughter's choice, but she is stubborn, and in royal families the girls can choose their husband as they wish. When she is old enough for the big ceremony of the Bridal Choice (Swayamvára), she chooses Shiva and there is nothing her father can do about it.

'You have chosen a beggar, so now go and live with your beggar. If you get tired of him, you can return here but I do not want to see him in my house,' says the King.

Sati lives happily with her husband for many years. One day she hears that her father is about to hold a big fire sacrifice, a religious ceremony, in those days as big and important as the Olympic Games today. Every important person in the world will be there (even US president Trump in 2025, and presidents don't come more important and "more worse" than this, but that's the way he talks), but her husband Shiva has not been invited. So Sati goes on her own. She is the daughter, she needs no invitation.

When she arrived, her father started abusing her husband, Lord Shiva, in such vile terms that Sati said: 'I cannot stop you from saying what you are saying, for you are my father, and I owe you respect, but no loyal wife must ever listen to such things being said about her husband, and there is a sure way of stopping it.' With that she jumped into the sacrificial fire and was instantly consumed. It is because of this Sati, Lord Shiva's wife, that the old, now illegal, custom, that loyal widows burnt themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, in order to be united with him in death, is called 'Sati'.



Lord Shiva meditating in the Himalayas

When Shiva heard that King Daksha had driven his beloved wife to her untimely death, he made war on King Daksha and killed him. Then he withdrew into the Himalayas to meditate, and remained there completely absorbed and unmoved for thousands of years.

Meanwhile Sati was reborn with a new body as Parvati, daughter of King Himavat, the King of the Mountains. She still loved Lord Shiva and her only desire was to be reunited with him, her husband from all eternity and in all eternity.

The other gods wanted her to get married again and have Lord Shiva's son, who they knew would be a great hero (Karttikeya), needed to fight an evil demon. So they tried to help her to find Lord Shiva and then wake him from his state of deep meditation. Their allies were Vasanta, the god of spring, and Kama, the god of love.

They went to the icy mountains where Lord Shiva was meditating, Vasanta brought the warm winds, made the trees sprout, the flowers blossom and the birds sing, Parvati was hiding behind a bush, and Kama was waiting with his arrow to shoot at Shiva's heart the moment Shiva set eyes on Parvati. If he had succeeded, Shiva would instantly have fallen in love with Parvati. But Shiva was very angry when he realised that he was to be disturbed and seduced, shot one glance from his third eye at Kama, and Kama was turned to ashes. Shiva never saw Parvati and returned to his meditation.

Having failed to win Shiva through the beauty of her body, Parvati decided to win him through the beauty of her soul. So she started doing tapas (fasting and other penances), imposing hardships on her body in order to become independent from the pleasure and pain that a body can yield and concentrate her mind on God. She did this for three thousand years.

Shiva heard about her saintly reputation and came in the shape of a young Brahmin to give Parvati a last test. He called her a fool for wanting Shiva as a husband, called Shiva a beggar and ridiculed his appearance. Parvati defended Shiva with great fire and showed that she was not only beautiful and devoted but also learned. She is the epitome of the learned woman, capable of holding her ground, even against a Brahmin. She is an example we should all emulate.

Then Shiva revealed himself to her, and they prepared for their great wedding in the capital of King Himavat. All his subjects were invited, and since he was the king of the mountains, his subjects were the mountains.

The Alps came from Austria, the Pyrenees from Spain, the Caucasus from Asia, the Atlas from Morocco and from the Sahara, the Andes from South America, the Pennines from England, Ben Nevis from Scotland, Mount Snowdon from Wales, Vesuvius from Italy, Etna from Sicily, and Mount Athos (with 1,472 monks) from Greece.

Nobody wanted to miss this wedding. All the earth was suddenly flat like a chapati because all the mountains had gone to Parvati's wedding.

Even Pendle Hill from Lancashire attended the wedding. He was a bit of a show-off and he wanted to give the witches which lived on him a hard time. So Pendle Hill decided to walk on only two legs (instead of a thousand, like the other mountains) and that made him rather wobbly.

Pendle Hill on his way to India (passing through Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan) carried lots of Indians and Pakistanis from Blackburn (and some from Preston and Bolton as well). They came from all religions and communities. They loved going to weddings, any wedding, but especially this one, and they did not want to miss the chance of a free ride to India and Pakistan. Afterwards they went off to visit their relatives there.



Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati reunited at last

Now, Pendle Hill did not only wobble, he also swaggered deliberately, and took several tons of Thwaites Ale for the road, and they are not paying me for mentioning the fact. (Anyway, drinking is bad even for Hindus.)

The Hill swung like a pendulum (or a wedding bell), and all the witches fell off and broke their necks. That's why the Hill is called "Pendle" Hill and why there are no more witches on it. But the Lancashire Indians and Pakistanis, both Muslims and Hindus, did not fall off, for they are good people and helped each other to hang on, and therefore nothing can shake them. They know, life is hard enough as it is, and we don't have to make it worse by fighting our neighbours and kinsmen, whatever their religion. If we love each other, we will be so much happier.

Perhaps there has never been a greater and more important wedding in the history of the world. This was the wedding of all weddings. It showed all of us what really great love is, love that continues not only during one lifetime but over innumerable lifetimes, love that overcomes even the greatest obstacles, as Parvati did overcome them. She was determined to get her man, and she did get him. She showed us that it is perfectly respectable for a woman to take the initiative, not only in matters of marriage of course, and our youngsters are beginning to learn that.

This was a wedding of Gods, and people realised that both were equal, even identical, if you look at it in the right way. Just as all of us are really God, if we look at ourselves in the right way. Trying to become aware of that is the highest aim in our religion.

People realised that loving God is, or should be, much the same way as when a husband loves his wife, and the other way round, that is to say: husband and wife should treat and love each other as if the other were God. It should not be words only but it should be real, and can be real: it should be felt in the heart, as it was for Parvati. People admired the example that Parvati had set to all of us.

From the union of Lord Shiva and Parvati a great hero, Karttikeya, was born. He is also a god and, like Shiva, is especially worshipped in South India.

During the night of Maha-Shivaratri, devotees should ideally stay up and pray and meditate. South Indian temples stay open all night for this festival.

NOTE FOR READERS UNFAMILIAR WITH HINDUISM

Contrary to common perception, we Hindus believe in one God, who is neither man nor woman, who is **absolute**, unchangeable and universal, who is 'existence-consciousness-bliss' (sat-chit-ananda), and about whom we can say nothing else that is really valid. Unlike God-the-Absolute, the **many** gods that our stories talk about and that our pictures depict are changeable. Their purpose is to aid the different inclinations of each devotee and help him/her to move from the visible towards the invisible, concentrate his affection on god and to lead a life that brings him closer to the experience of god. Since God, in whatever religion, is everywhere, the Jewish, Christian and Muslim God, being one with our absolute God, resides also in our images. All of us therefore have good reason to be friends, worship God wherever we find him, and to support each other in our different ways of worshipping God, be it in mosque or mandir, for God is one by whatever name we call him and whether we 'depict' him or not.

To illustrate this point, I have added here a poem I wrote a few years ago about a dialogue between two friends, a Muslim and a Hindu, about their respective concepts of God.

* * *

Text 3: A poem

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:

When Yasin scorned, Naresh asked silly questions

Length: 155 lines

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Date: 1998-07-18, Mk1.4

Ashutosh Vardhana:

When Yasin Scorned, Naresh Asked Silly Questions

A Didactic Poem

Yasin: Idolater, you pray to lifeless
statues, to elephants and monkeys, have you
no better sense? Why do you
follow this primitive religion?
Is not God greater
than your animals and artefacts,
is not God greater
than all human beings,
is He not spirit
as our Holy Scripture says,
and that of Jesus and of Abraham?

Naresh: Forgive
my simple-minded loving ignorance,
which I have inherited from
my mother. I've always felt very close
to God. I like
to see her, touch him, pamper him
and love her that way.

But you say,
all this is sinful aberration and idolatry,
and I'll be punished
on the day of doom? You make me
much afraid.

Now you tell me, I should
no longer worship
Ganesh and Hanuman, beloved friends,
no longer keep close company
of Rama and of Krishna,
of Shiva and of Devi, our mother,
of Amba Mata, of Sita and of Sati,
of Uma, Lakshmi and Saraswati,
who accompany me everywhere,
in spirit,
and give me strength
in all my enterprises.
I should forsake them all?
You tell me, righteousness requires
that I miss all these comforts?

Will I not be lonely if
I must pray only to Allah,
who is spirit, who is infinitely great and who is
so far away.
I'll find it hard to bear.

I find it hard to give up MY god
if you do not help me
to find YOURS.
Therefore, Friend, tell me
where is Allah?
Is he above me
in the sky, below me
in the earth, does he stand
on my right hand?
Or on my left hand (which God forbid)?
Does he float behind me (which God forbid),
or do I search for Him in front of me?

Yasin: Allah is everywhere, my Friend.

Naresh: But where is Allah, outside me or inside me?

Yasin: Allah is everywhere, my Friend.

- Naresh: Look at the dustbin there across the road.
I know now Allah is outside it.
Surely he is not inside
that thing, that vessel
of wrath and filth.
- Yasin: Oh no, my Friend, Allah is everywhere,
even in
that filthy bin,
and He will sanctify it, as He sanctifies
all things.
- Naresh: Friend, now you perplex me. Your omnipresent
Allah causes me unease. I have another
question. Forgive me if it seems
offensive. But I have
to ask it, to be sure
and really get your meaning.
The matter is important.
As you say
eternal bliss
or infinite damnation
of my soul depends on it. I must
get it right. So please forgive
and answer.
Surely there are three places
where Allah is not found,
firstly not in this bowl of excrement and second not
in all that is contained
within the covers of
The Satanic Verses
and thirdly not in Salman Rushdie's heart.
Admit that Allah is not there.
- Yasin: You press me hard, my Friend.
We do not really like to think and talk about
extreme examples, constructed
and displeasing as they are. But
since you press me thus,
I must admit, Allah is everywhere, even
in all those places, which you named.
They are
disgusting only for our simple
human minds, but Allah far
transcends such petty feelings
of disgust and does not truly

like a petty tyrant care
if his subjects indulge in pretty
poetic mockery, provided they
mock well and with esprit.
He likes a good laugh, and he
more than we
is capable of laughing at himself.
If He is angry, He's not really angry, He
only pretends to be
and plays with us.


Naresh: Thank you, my Friend, for being honest.
I think you are close to converting me.
I like this Illat or Allah of yours.
Take off your shoes,
Allah is in the room
we are about to enter,
and in the carpet we will step upon.
Here is my Ganesh,
my dearest loving friend.
We are agreed, Allah is in this room.
But surely He is not
within this statue, to which
I pray and which
I worship and which
you have so often
mocked.

Surely not.

Yasin: You're a tease, my Friend, but I'm at ease
with you - and Allah
is everywhere.


Naresh: I rest my case.
Let's go and worship Him together.


^Holi starts here




Ashutosh Vardhana Yamuna's Year

Stories for the Hindu Calendar
as told in a Hindu family in a northern English town







OM, symbol of
God the Absolute




Lord Ganesh,
remover of obstacles



My Gurujji



Sarasvati Devi,
Goddess of arts and learning



Sign of the sun

Impressum

Title: Ashutosh Vardhana:
Pahlada, the invincible boy: The story of Holi

Length: see Technical Note below, for the two versions

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Date: 2002-03-29, Mk3.2

TECHNICAL NOTE

This file contains two versions of the Holi story:

- Text 1: An elaborate version as told to an ten-year-old Hindu girl in England:

Title: Pahlada, the invincible boy: The story of Holi

Length: 16,600 words = 91,500 characters

Font: In this text two fonts are being used:

Plain pica (like this: Plain Pica) for the passages in which the narrator interacts with Yamuna's family and explains the traditional plot,

A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi,

SB = Shrimad Bhagavatam, one of the sources of this story

- Text` 2: A shorter version of this story

Title: Why we celebrate Holi, or: The invincible boy

Length: 1,740 words = 9,800 characters

Ashutosh Vardhana: Prahlada, the invincible boy The story of Holi

A Hindu story as told in a Hindu family
in a northern English town.

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INTRODUCTION

It was the 27th of February, when Yamuna's uncle came for his next visit. "Uncle-ji," said Yamuna, "if you have come for Holi, you have come one week early. It is six more days to go."

"So it is, Béti (little girl)," said the Pandit, "I thought a few days' rest with you would do me good, and the story of Holi is so long and astonishing that I can't tell it all in one go. We had better divide it over several days. Are you looking forward to the festival?"

"Of course, I do," said Yamuna. "I like the colours and I like pouring coloured water on other people and frightening them."

"And what about your brother Dinésh?"

"I'll call him."

"Do you look forward to Holi, Dinésh?"

"Yes, I like the bonfire and throwing coconuts into it and then trying to get them out again when the ashes are very hot and cracking and eating them. Coconuts from a bonfire are very tasty. There is nothing to beat it."

"Do you know, why we are celebrating Holi, and why we have a bonfire on that day?"

"Not a clue," said Dinésh, "but I'd like to know."

"I think there was something about a boy being burnt and about a lion eating his father to punish him because he hated God," said Yamuna.

"That's a good start," said her Uncle, "and I can tell you more during the next few days, if we find the time. Do you know why that man hated God so much?"

"No."

"All right, that then is the first thing we have to explain. Let's have dinner first and hope there is nothing important on television tonight. Then we'll sit down and I tell you the first part of the story."

When dinner was over, the Pandit settled in his armchair as usual, Yamuna sat on the floor in front of him, and her brother, who was really interested this time, sat on the floor leaning against a wall. The Pandit began his story.

THE FALL FROM HEAVEN

"There were once two celestial gatekeepers standing on Mount Vaikúnta, the heavenly residence of Lord Vishnu. They were Jaya and Vijaya, and both names mean 'victory'.

Now, there are two kinds of gatekeepers, there are the gate-shut and people-out keepers, and there are the gate-open keepers who also tell visitors the shortest way to God (or to the boss). Many gatekeepers are, or think they are, gate-shut keepers and take pleasure in making life difficult for visitors, sunning themselves in the importance and power of their masters. They love to say 'No', or 'He is out', or 'He is in a meeting', or 'He does not speak to a poor uneducated person like you. How dare you bother an important person like my boss!'

God does not employ any gate-shut keepers, since he has no enemies and is enemy to no-one, admits everybody, is in no danger, needs no protection and doesn't care about insults. So when Jaya and Vijaya had been employed as gatekeepers and had been given their job description and their mission statement it had been made clear to them that being God's gatekeeper means being 'gate-open keepers'. But they had been so long in the job that they did not know their duties better but had turned them upside down. They were puffed up about their importance in being allowed to be so close to God. So they gradually started showing off their power to ordinary people by denying them access to God, using whatever excuse they could think of: 'You are too filthy', 'You are not well enough dressed - dinner jacket and tie only!', 'You are too young: over eighteens only', 'You stink', 'You are too old', 'You are too ugly', 'You belong to the wrong religion', 'You swear too much', 'You are too poor', and so on and on - there was not end of excuses, and God started wondering why there were fewer and fewer visitors coming to see him. Jaya and Vijaya had become 'gate-shut keepers'.

However, one day when a group of naked múnis (saints or sages in a divine trance) arrived, the gatekeepers displayed their arrogance and stupidity by trying to stop them from visiting the Lord. They thought the naked múnis were not well enough dressed and they wanted to show off how important they were. They behaved like 'puny-minded ordinary servants on earth who think their master is in danger or has to be protected against disrespect' (SB 3.15, p 200).

Now, múnis are silent by profession. They do not talk (that's what the word 'muni' means), except on very rare and important occasions. But when they do speak, their words have an enormous power and tend to come true.

The múnis pronounced a curse on the gatekeepers. They condemned them to be born on earth and to live there again and again until they had been purified. Jaya and Vijaya recognised their fault

immediately but were horrified at the punishment. To have to live on earth! What a dreadful fate! For them, heavenly beings as they were, this was just as bad as if earthlings like you or I were sentenced to prison in hell **for life**, not only for one life but for several lives in succession.

If I had been given such a sentence and wanted to escape from it as quickly as possible, I would plead with the judge to make each life as short as possible (i.e. to let me die soon) and to make the number lives as small as possible so that I could return to God sooner rather than later.

Lord Vishnu who loved his gatekeepers and had sympathy with their foolishness offered them a choice:

"You can spend your time on earth by being a goodie, worshipping me as a friend, i.e. by praying to me, loving me and following my commands. If you do this you can be released after seven lives on earth. Or you can spend your time by worshipping me as your implacable enemy, by hating me with all your might, by fighting me, and doing everything against me and ultimately, in each life, being killed by me. If you do this, you can be released after three lives. Now, do you want to be born as my friends or as my enemies?"

'As your enemies.'

And so it happened."

"That's funny," said Dinésh, "does that mean it is better to be bad than to be good? Will I be rewarded if I am bad?"

"Not at all," said the Pandit, "this story has a much deeper meaning. It is not a permit for stupid children and adults to behave like bad children or like big criminals. People can have one of three attitudes towards God, they can love him, they can hate him or they can be indifferent towards him.

The worst thing for a person is to be indifferent towards God, to ignore him, not to care about him, to think he does not exist or he does not matter. Nobody of that kind can ever make the slightest spiritual progress. Most bad people, including bad dictators, are of this kind. There is no hope for them until, in one of their lives, they start changing.

People who love God, or who say they love God, often do not love him all that much. Their mind is not continuously focussed on God. They love him a little, which is better than not to love him at all, but their progress will be very slow.

People who positively hate God and who commit their crimes not out of greed, or laziness, but **because they hate God** are very rare. You certainly are not one of them. But those people who hate him with all their heart, who are obsessed with their hatred of God, are usually focussed on him much more than those who love him. Loving God is easy. Therefore people do it half-heartedly. Hating God is hard work. Therefore people who do that do it with all their might. God is so great that he does not give a hoot whether a person loves him or hates him. He rewards those who

have him constantly in their minds, who are constantly aware of him, by allowing them to unite with him, to become one with him.

There are people, aggressive atheists, who spend their entire lives trying to prove in books and speeches that God does not exist, people who blaspheme and try to provoke God and make him angry. They are the ones who are really close to God. They are persecuted by the respectable half-hearted lovers of God, but God has a soft spot for them and protects them so that they can go on hating him. He enjoys their spiteful books as much as they do."

Dinésht stared at his uncle.

"Yes, it must be a shock to you. But our scriptures (for example the great book about Lord Krishna, the Shrímád Bhágavatam) repeat again and again that you may worship God in six ways, as a friend, as an enemy, as a father, as a mother, as a lover or as a child. Keep thinking about it each time you hear the story of Holi or of Ravana, and sooner or later you will understand. This is a great philosophy which makes our religion and its view of good and evil in this world so different from any other. God does not behave in the way in which stupid or smart human beings think he ought to behave, and he does not have to justify his actions. The truth is always shocking and surprising.

Vishnu bade a sweet farewell to his gatekeepers: 'Leave this heavenly place. Do not be afraid. You will achieve good in future. I could have lifted the curse of the múnis from you but will not do it. Because the curse itself has been willed by me. Your anger will help you to become united with me after only a few lives.'

Jaya and Vájaya now fell headlong down from heaven (Vaikúntha) and entered the womb of Dítí, who was just then waiting for twins, and they entirely forgot (as we all do when we are born) their identity in their past existence. (SB 3.16, p 207) They did not even know any more why they had been condemned to be born on earth.

When the babies were born many evil omens occurred. There were earthquakes everywhere, volcanoes erupted, meteors burst, the sun and the stars were thrown out of their tracks, the earth was wrapped in darkness at midday. Jackals vomitted flames. Animals discharged urine and excrement at the same time, cows gave blood instead of milk and the clouds showered pus instead of flowers. It was utterly disgusting. It shows how nature was terrified at the birth of these two demons and the havock which they would wreak on this earth.

One of the two new-born demons was born with golden eyes and was therefore called Hiránýa-Áksha. His twin-brother, even more miraculously, was born with golden robes, and was named accordingly Hiránýa-Kashípu, The Golden-Robed.

THE LOSS OF A BROTHER

The two brothers loved each other dearly. They were the best mates you could imagine. When one of them got into a scrape, the other one would help him out. But not everything they did was good. As they grew up they became very strong. They were very keen on power, and they wanted to own the earth.

At that time the earth was still young and was lying at the bottom of the ocean, like a baby in its mother's womb. Some people wonder how that was possible since the ocean is on top of the earth. But now we know that that ocean was not a real ocean, but a symbolic ocean, it was an ocean of sin. In other words, people on earth had become so wicked, that it felt as if the whole earth had been drowned in an ocean of filth, sin and unhappiness.

Lord Vishnu, in his third avatár (incarnation) came down in the form of a boar, dived to the bottom of the ocean and brought the earth up on one of his tusks. In this way he freed it from the evil and misery that was smothering it.

As he was doing so, the demon Hiránya-Áksha tried to wrest the earth away from him. There was a big fight between the demon and Lord Vishnu. In the end Vishnu killed the demon.

The dead demon's brother Hiránya-Kashípu was terribly upset because he loved his brother dearly (even demons love and have friends!) and he decided to make himself very powerful and to avenge his brother's death. He swore to be Lord Vishnu's enemy for ever and ever.

He never prayed to Lord Vishnu, and he punished anybody who did. Especially he did not want any of his servants or any members of his family to worship Lord Vishnu. Through his Minister of Education he instructed all the schools never to mention Lord Vishnu's name.

You remember, of course, that Lord Vishnu was his former employer and that he had agreed with him that he would spend his time on earth hating and fighting him. Lord Vishnu and King Hiránya-Kashípu were two noble opponents, one on the side of good, the other on the side of evil, each playing his part.

HIRÁNYA-KASHÍPU WINS POWER BY TAPAS

First King Hiránya-Kashípu had to get enough power so that he could fight the gods. Strangely enough he had to get this power from the gods themselves. He had to deceive them by being pious, praying, fasting, meditating and undergoing many voluntary hardships (tapas). Then they would be pleased with him and give him the power he asked for. Once he had the power, he would turn it against them. Wicked dictators on this earth (like Hitler, but also some living ones) often behave similarly. First they pretend to be peaceful, smile a lot, have their photographs taken with little children, while secretly stockpiling terrible weapons (deadly chemicals, atomic bombs, armies, fleets, fighter planes, rockets, and chemical weapons like cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs). Once they are strong enough, they bare their teeth (which are made of stainless steel) and try to conquer other countries or the rest of the world.

Since Hiránya-Kashípu wanted a lot of power, he had to do a lot of tapas and very hard ones. He went into a cave and pretended to be a tree. He stood permanently on tiptoes, had his hands stretched out towards the sky and his eyes turned upwards. This is how he started.

Nobody knows how he continued, but we know that he did it for 96,000 years and that for the last two thousand years of his tapas he did not even drink water. His will-power must have been superhuman: He concentrated on God so much, so intensively, that fire and smoke started coming out of his head. The fire was so huge that all the trees on earth were scorched, the rivers, lakes and oceans dried up and even the sun and the stars started exploding from this heat and were pushed

out of their course. The gods became frightened and sent Lord Bráhma to give Hiránya-Kashípu whatever he wanted in order to stop him doing his terrible tapas.

Bráhma could not find Hiránya-Kashípu because the world was covered with smoke. He could not even see his hand in front of his eyes. The smog and fog which we have today, especially in big cities, is what is left over from that pious demon so many millions of years later. You can imagine how bad it must have been then!

First Bráhma started eating raw carrots to be able to see in the dark. Then he asked all the animals to help him, the owl because she could see in the dark, even without eating carrots, and the monkeys because he wanted to give them training for another search operation a few million years later. But they could not find the demon. Then he contacted the Pentagon, the headquarters of the American Armed Forces, and asked for a heat-sensitive radar.

That device led him to Hiránya-Kashípu's cave. Bráhma saw the demon sitting in his meditative pose, totally immobile, his eyes closed, quite indifferent to anything happening around him. He did not only ignore the weather, or the insects crawling in and out of whatever orifices (openings of the body) he had left, no, he was much tougher or much more concentrated than that. Ants had built an ant-hill around him and had eaten up most of his body. Grass and reeds and wild flowers had started growing on it. He was a skeleton sitting in meditation, a skeleton held upright and held together by the power of concentration.

Lord Bráhma sprinkled some holy water on King Hiránya-Kashípu. The King was instantly rejuvenated, had his former athletic body back and jumped out of the anthill, grass and reeds that had grown on him.

'What boon do you want me to bestow on you?' asked Bráhma.

'O Lord,' said the King full of reverence,
'let me not be killed by any created being,
let me be killed neither by human beings nor by animals,
neither by demons nor by reptiles,
neither by animate nor by inanimate beings.

Let me die neither indoors nor outdoors,
neither during the night nor during the day,
not by any weapon,
neither on earth nor in the skies.
Give me undisputed power over all beings in this world,
give me everything that you possess
and all imaginable luxuries.

In brief:
Let there be no death for me
neither in heaven nor on earth,
neither during the day nor during the night,
neither from above nor from below.'

This was obviously not a very logical list, for the King asked for some things twice, in different words, which is unnecessary and confusing. But the faults in the list show how greedy and confused

the King was. He wanted to be immortal and wanted to make sure of that by asking for everything that came into his mind, not realising that even a small omission in that list might lead to his death."

"Was it wrong of the King to want to be immortal?" said Yamuna, "Mother chants a prayer for immortality every night."

The Pandit replied: "The King's mistake was that he was seeking immortality of his body. When we pray for immortality, we mean immortality of the soul, which we already have. Can you chant your mother's prayer 'Asato ma sad gamaya'?"

"I half know it. If you help me, Uncle-ji, I will try it."

So they chanted together:

asato mā sad gamaya tamaso mā jyotir gamaya mr̥tyor mā amṛtaṁ gamaya	From ignorance lead me to truth From darkness lead me to light From death lead me to immortality.'
asato ma sad gamaya tamaso ma jyotir gamaya mr̥tyor ma amṛtam gamaya	From ignorance lead me to truth From darkness lead me to light From death lead me to immortality.'

(Note: The Sanskrit version WITH diacritical marks is to be preferred.)

Pandit-ji continued: "Let's return to King Hirányā-Kashípu.

Bráhma gave him what he had asked for and hoped that he would now be a good King, and that gods and men and the world would be in safe hands. But he had his doubts. He knew that power corrupts, especially if that power is so great that a person has nothing to fear any more - except God, whom we all have to fear, all of us, because everything we do may one day go wrong, and we all have to die sooner or later. What happens to us then depends on how we have behaved during our last life.

If King Hirányā-Kashípu had not only asked for an invincible body but also asked for wisdom, justice, kindness, compassion, to balance his power, he could perhaps have become a good king. But with power alone? What hope was there for his subjects!

We will see later that King Hirányā-Kashípu and Holiká (Holika), in spite of their boons (God's promises, on which they relied), were not invincible, but the King's son, Prahlada, armed with his intensive trust in God's grace, was.

What would you ask for, Dinésh and Yamuna, if you had exactly three wishes, however great, but no more?"

Now there followed a long discussion about the best way of using three wishes between Pandit-ji and the three children, and what would be the results of each wish, what could go wrong with each of them, and what better wish to utter in order to lead a happy life. It was a very long discussion, with many arguments and counter-arguments, enough to fill a whole book, therefore I will not even start to write it down here.

Day 2

Hiránya-Kashípu abuses his power

Now King Hiránya-Kashípu had all the power he needed to unseat Lord Vishnu, or so he thought. He set out systematically to build an empire for himself and become the greatest dictator the world had ever seen. He conquered the earth, the heaven, made himself master of all kings, presidents, prime-ministers, of all priests and all popes, of all gods, that is to say of all smaller gods, of all demons and monsters, of all ghosts, goblins and spirits, of all animals, birds, snakes, insects, of all dead people, and of all the inhabitants of the sun and the stars. Many innocent people were killed or wounded in his wars. He evicted the gods from their palaces by brute force without first obtaining a court order, and he evicted all poor people if they prayed to Lord Vishnu. He burnt down all his mándir (mandir)s (temples) and destroyed all his statues and pictures. He declared that in his empire it was a capital crime to praise, or to pray to, his great enemy, Lord Vishnu, or to mention his name or to teach anybody about him.

Even though there were many poor people in his country, which was in fact the whole world and all the heavens and the underworld, he started living in incredible luxury. He built presidential palaces everywhere and used only gold, silver and gems as building material. Even his beds were made of pure gold."

"Wasn't that rather hard for him?" asked Yamuna.

"You are right," said Pandit-ji, "perhaps I remember that wrongly. It was such a long time ago. Come to think of it, I think, only the bed frame and the legs were made of gold, but he mattress was made of sheep wool from Lancashire and covered with silk from Madras. If I remember rightly, once a little boy who was a practical joker put a diamond as big as a fist into the mattress, and the King, who had absolutely no sense of humour, cut off his head. So remember, Dinésh, when you enter the bedroom of a king, never put a diamond as big as a fist under his mattress. That would be a very stupid and dangerous thing to do. But you can do it to me or to Yamuna or your parents. We wouldn't mind, provided we can keep the diamond.

The King had a thousand wives and three million girlfriends and said he didn't give a toss about Henry VIII with his six wives, Henry IV with three wives and Henry II with one and a half wife.

How many wives did Henry I have, Dinésh?"

"If Henry II had 1.5, then Henry I had 0.75 wives, that is three-quarters of a wife."

Yamuna looked doubtful.

"Sound's plausible to me," said Uncle-ji, "but you had better ask your history teacher to confirm, just in case I am wrong."

"Do you have to teach the children such nonsense?" interrupted Yamuna's mother. "Don't believe him, that's his sense of humour. And you, Brother-ji, had better hurry up with your story, we

don't want to be late for the bonfire next week, and we are nowhere near the bonfire in your story. You haven't got all year."

The Pandit continued:

"Being a smart dictator, Hiránya-Kashípu put up big expensive sports stadiums in all towns in order to attract the youngsters, even though poor people were still starving. He owned ninety-nine Rolls Royces, and people are still wondering why it was only ninety-nine. He created thousands of royal parks but not for ordinary people. Only he and his wives and girlfriends were allowed to walk in them, and yet they were overcrowded if all decided to come out at the same time.

His main residence was in the Palace of God Indra, the former King of the gods, whom Hiránya-Kashípu had ousted. When he was sitting on his throne or lying on his bed, the gods and goddesses had to massage his feet and his back or sing and dance for him. It was an utter disgrace.

Then he forced people to build mándir (mandir)s in his honour, to pray only to him and to make sacrifices only to him, while the gods were starving and were limping through the world as emaciated as beggars.

His power and prosperity had made him very arrogant.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

After he had ruled the world for a few hundred years, gods and human beings could bear it no longer. King Hiránya-Kashípu had to be killed, and yet, as they knew very well, he could not be killed by any ordinary means. Even though they did not have a clue what to propose or what to ask for (or because they did not have a clue), they all came to Lord Vishnu who was living in hiding (in a cave in Northern Afghanistan, where nobody normally thought of looking for him) and whom Hiránya-Kashípu therefore had been unable to attack and to make homeless.

Where does Lord Vishnu live, what do you think Yamuna? Does he live in the mándir (mandir), or in heaven?"

"In our heart, that's where we can pray to him, and that's why he is always with us."

"Well said, Béti (little girl)", said Uncle-ji. God lives in the hearts of all living beings and even in every non-living thing. He lives in every plant or tree, in every stone, grain of sand, drop of water, in every piece of gold or steel," and he chanted:

aham ātmā guḍākeśa sarvabhūtāśayasthitah	I, O Arjuna, am the Self seated in the hearts of all creatures. (Gīta 10:20)
aham atma gudakesha sarvabhutashayasthitah	I, O Arjuna, am the Self seated in the hearts of all creatures. (Gīta 10:20)

Note: The Sanskrit version WITH diacritical marks is to be preferred.

"Does God live in my computer or my football?" asked Dinésh.

"Of course he does, and isn't it nice of him to allow you to kick him around," said Pandit-ji with a smile. "Now you see that you must treat even your football with respect."

King Hirānya-Kashīpu only remembered Lord Vishnu as a boar who had killed his beloved brother, but he had never taken much interest in religion and philosophy when he was young. Otherwise he would have known that God can manifest himself in many forms and that you cannot conquer him by attacking one of his manifestations. Especially he did not know that Lord Vishnu lived in everybody's heart, even in his own heart, that God made that heart beat, that God gave him all his strength, even if he cursed him or hated him or tried to fight him.

Vishnu agreed that something had to be done to get rid of this fellow. God tolerates a little evil. Some people say evil is the spice of life and keeps the good people on their toes. It gives work to policemen, lawyers, prison officers, locksmiths, glaziers, crimer writers and film makers. But too much evil is too much of a good thing, and when evil becomes too strong, God comes down to earth like a ton of bricks to stop it. He is then called an avatār, or an incarnation."

The Pandit chanted:

yadā-yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata abhyutthānam adharmasya tadā 'tmānam sṛjāmy aham	Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, then I incarnate Myself.
paritrāṇāya sādḥūnam vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge-yuge	For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age. (Gīta 4:7-8)

yada-yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata abhyutthanam adharmasya tada 'tmanam srjamy aham	Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, then I incarnate Myself.
paritranaya sadhanam vinashaya ca dushkrtam dharmasamsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge-yuge	For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age. (Gīta 4:7-8)

Note: The Sanskrit version WITH diacritical marks is to be preferred.

"So Lord Vishnu told the assembled gods that he would 'in due course' help them and free the world of this awful dictator. 'I'll give him five more years and see whether his son Prahlada can convert him. If that fails, I'll show him something he won't forget as long as he lives,' he said. The gods were contented and went home.

A PRECOCIOUS BOY

In those days a boy when he was eight would be sent to live in an āshram. It was a kind of very small boarding school, really just the house of the guru (teacher) where a small number of boys (and today, of course, it would be girls as well) lived together with the guru's family and learnt absolutely everything from table manners and cleanliness to prayers, philosophy, languages, science, mathematics, arts, sports and fighting and the customs and traditions of their community. This kind of learning was very practical and intimate, a kind of on-the-job training, learning by participation and observation, learning by doing in a small group. There are many famous stories

about occasions when the boy comes home and the father asks him what he has learnt while he was away.

Prahlada also had been in such an áshram. When he came to the court of his father during the summer vacation, the father asked him what was the most important thing he had learnt. Prahlada answered: 'I have learnt to admire Lord Vishnu. He is without beginning, middle or end. He never increases or decreases. He is imperishable and the cause of all causes.'

When the king heard this, he grew furious and turned to the teacher. 'How could you dare to teach my son this criminal nonsense?'

The teacher said: 'I never taught him anything about Vishnu. I do not know where he got these ideas from. If you allow him to come back to my áshram, I will make sure that he learns only respectable things like communism, atheism and science and forgets all this nonsense about God. Trust me, Mr King, watch my lips, it won't happen again.'

The King asked his counsellors for advice. They said: 'Don't trust this teacher. Send the boy to France. That is a country somewhere in a jungle called Europe. Nobody can go there without being corrupted. The people there are a terrible lot. They eat nothing but fat frogs, slimy snails, slugs and cheese which smells worse than chimp shit. They drink grape juice which has gone bad. They have just made a revolution, have killed their king and their bishop and have recently started bathing in blood. They say that will make them beautiful in spite of their sickly pink skin. Send him there for six months, and when he comes back, he will be cured of his Vishnu nonsense.'

After six months, when Prahlada came home for his long vacation, the King asked him to recite some poetry. Prahlada recited three mysterious and prophetic poems, two in French and one in Sanskrit.

This was the first:

<p>La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles; L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.</p> <p>Baudelaire: Correspondances</p>	<p>Nature is a temple where living pillars sometimes let out confused words; man passes there through forests of symbols which observe him with familiar looks.</p> <p>Translated by Klaus Bung</p>
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And this the second:

Crains, dans le mur aveugle, un regard qui t'épie:
A la matière même un verbe est attaché. ...
Ne la fais pas servir à quelque usage impie!

Fear, in the blind wall, a look which watches you:
To matter itself a verb is attached.
Do not submit it to any unholy use.

Souvent dans l'être obscure habite un Dieu caché;

In an obscure being often lives a hidden god;

Et comme un oeil naissant couvert par ses paupières,

and like an eye that is being born is covered by its pupils,

Un pur esprit s'accroît sous l'écorce des pierres!

a pure spirit grows under the crust of the stones.

Gérard Nerval: Vers dorés

Gérard Nerval: Golden Verses
Translated by Klaus Bung

"I don't understand that," said Yamuna. "Neither do I," said her brother.

"Nor did the King", said the Pandit, "for he had never been to a good English school and therefore did not understand French. But you will understand (and so will the King!) when we come to the very end of this story. The French poems say that God lives even in stones, walls or pillars.

The Sanskrit poem was the Vishnu Sahásra Náma, the Thousand Names of Vishnu. The King spoke Sanskrit fluently. He could even curse in Sanskrit, and he understood those hated names only too well! When he heard them, he was furious. How dare his son sing the praises of Lord Vishnu, his greatest enemy. 'This is not my son,' he shouted to his body guard, 'Kill the bastard!'

FIRST TEST: WEAPONS

Seven hundred soldiers rushed at Prahlada with their lances and swords and stabbed him and tried to cut or pierce him. But Prahlada was not afraid for one minute. He knew that Lord Vishnu was his ally. As long as he was aware that Lord Vishnu always resided in his heart and in the weapons of his enemies, he, Prahlada, could not come to any harm. So he concentrated his mind on Vishnu and prayed silently: 'Lord Vishnu protect me!' That was enough. His skin became as strong as the shell of seven tortoises covered with stainless steel or platinum. The swords and lances could not even scratch him, to say nothing of piercing his skin or cutting off his head or his arms and legs."

"What about his nose and his ears? Couldn't they cut off those?" asked Dinésh.

"They tried that, but they couldn't, however much the King encouraged them. 'Cut off his bloody tongue,' cried the King, 'that will stop him talking treacherous and unscientific nonsense.' But Prahlada's body was more scientific than the King thought, Prahlada wisely kept his mouth shut and now talked like a ventriloquist. The soldiers could not open his mouth to get at his tongue, however hard they tried."

"Could they have cut off his tongue if he had opened his mouth and put out his tongue?" asked Yamuna.

"I am sure they couldn't have," replied Pandit-ji. "Lord Vishnu lives in every cell of his body and of our body and on that occasion he would have strengthened every part of it.

The soldiers' swords bent and their lances splintered under the force of their blows, but they could not harm Pahlada in the slightest.

When the King realised how strong his son was while he was protected by Lord Vishnu, he begged Pahlada to stop praising Vishnu, but Pahlada refused to do that. 'I know I owe respect to you because you are my father,' he said. 'But I owe even more respect to God and must tell people about him. It will also be better for you, Father, if you worship him.'

But the King was addicted to his hatred of Vishnu, so that he could not accept his son's advice. His hatred against Vishnu drove him on, willy nilly, to do what he did and to his own destruction.

SECOND TEST: SNAKES

He put his son into a basin filled with snakes. These were very poisonous and also well trained. On one side of the basin stood Pahlada, thinking of Lord Vishnu who he knew lived in his heart and praying only one sentence: 'Lord, protect me!'. On the other side stood the serpents, waiting for the King to give the order to attack."

"Did the serpents really stand in the basin?" asked Dinésh.

"Well, not quite. First they were lying there like sardines in a tin, all neatly arranged side by side, watching the King with their right eyes and waiting for his command. But when he gave the order to bite, they all stood on their tails and then they shot forward, all at the same time, and tried to bury their fangs in Pahlada's body."

"What are fangs?" asked Yamuna.

"Very long and strong teeth which sometimes stick out of the mouth. Snakes need them to bite their victims and to inject their poison into them.

So the snakes, all at the same time, opened their mouths, put out their fangs, shot at Pahlada, closed their mouths and bit him with all their might. There was one almighty crash. All the fangs had broken, their splinters were flying in all directions. The whole basin was covered with white particles as if it were sand or snow. Scattered among them were the jewels which had fallen out of the serpents' crests; so violent had been their onslaught.

The serpents were shrieking in pain and said to the King: 'Why did you make us attack this invincible boy? Didn't you know how hard his body is? If it was too hard for your swords and lances, surely it was too hard for our fangs? Now we need dental treatment and that is not covered by the national health service. Please get us a dentist quickly.' But there were no experienced snake dentists around, and the human dentists were too scared to come near the snakes. Then the snakes promised not bite a dentist, ever, neither now nor in future - provided they repaired their fangs or

gave them fang implants where required. The dentists agreed and the snakes kept their promise. That's why dentists are not afraid of snakes.

The dentists did not find it difficult to repair the fangs because up to that day they themselves had fangs, collapsible fangs, the only humans to have this useful equipment. They used their fangs to inject painkillers into their patients before they started drilling. This system was then called 'organic dentistry'."

"Do dentists still have fangs?", asked Yamuna.

"No, they gave them to the snakes. Therefore today dentists have to use needles."

"Vampires also have fangs," said Dinésh.

"Very true, and they are the children of dentists who did not help the poor snakes at that time and were therefore sent away to Transylvania.

But most of the dentists agreed to treat the snakes, free of charge, and therefore the grateful snakes taught them how to give injections to their patients with a needle so that they do not feel pain.

Day 3

THIRD TEST: ELEPHANTS

King Hirányá-Kashípu felt there was no point in arguing with his extraordinary son, 'Boy Wonder', as he called him. He ordered an elephant to crush him. But the elephant refused to obey orders, because elephants are very kind and nimble creatures and they never step on a human being if they can help it.

Do you like elephants?"

"Yes, I do," cried Yamuna, "and especially I love our elephant-headed God Ganésha because he is so very kind, and before I start doing anything, I pray to him, and when I am faced with any difficulty, he removes it."

"Yes, he is the remover of all obstacles," said the Pandit, "and because his trunk looks somewhat like the shape of the holy syllable OM in Sanskrit, he symbolises God-The-Absolute, and that's why we start every enterprise by praying to him. He teaches us that we can do nothing without God's help."

The King's elephants refused to step on Prahlada. They just walked up to him and then knelt down in front of him and started praying because they knew that Lord Vishnu was in his heart.

Therefore the King put an elephant on the moon in order to drop him from there on his son and crush him. The elephant was as big as a mountain."

"Which mountain, Uncle-ji?" asked Yamuna.

The Pandit was embarrassed and did not know how to answer. "Which mountain, please, Uncle-ji?" insisted Yamuna.

"Mount Méru," said the Pandit resolutely, "that is a big holy mountain in India, and it is the most venerable mountain in the world, for us anyway. The mountain of all mountains. 'Of mountains, I am mount Méru,' says Lord Kríshna in the Gita."

"How did they get the elephant on the moon?" asked Dinésh. "Did they use a spacecraft?"

"They tried that.

First they contacted the European space agency and asked if they could use the Ariane rocket, but it was too small. Then they sent a telegram to the American President and asked if they could use an American space rocket. But that was too expensive, just to kill a boy, even for King Hirányá-Kashípu. Then they had a clever idea. They took the elephant to the horizon.

Now, as you know, the moon sits on an escalator made of transparent plastic. That's why it rises so slowly and steadily and goes down again just as slowly and majestically after it has reached the escalator's highest point in the sky. When it got dark and the moon was just creeping up at the horizon, they prodded the elephant with a stick. He took one step forward and, hey presto, there he was on the moon. He stood and played a trumpet concerto (which was later on copied down by

Joseph Haydn) and all the world heard it and rejoiced. The elephant kept trumpeting and the moon kept rising and when the night was half over and the moon was just overhead, they fired a cannon shot at the moon, just beside the elephant, and the elephant got frightened and jumped forward and fell off the moon towards earth.

The longer he fell, the faster he went and in the end he reached the speed of light, and he could not really go much faster, or could he?"

"No, he could not go any faster at all," said Yamuna, "nothing can go faster than the speed of light, not even the sun."

"All right, in the end he fell at the speed of light, right to the spot where the King and his henchmen had tied down poor Prahlada. But Prahlada wasn't so poor at all. He simply thought intensively of Lord Vishnu and said: 'Lord, help me!' and thought: 'These people really are trying very hard to test God's power.'

At this moment, the elephant came down on Prahlada like a ton of bricks and then rolled away for 5 miles because he had practised jumbo judo when he was young and had learnt how to fall without hurting himself (or anybody else).

The King and his soldiers looked at Prahlada, thinking he would now be as flat as a chapati. But he was still standing there, quite unharmed, and said: 'You see, Lord Vishnu is the one who preserves the whole universe and looks after the welfare of all beings. Anyone who trusts in him cannot come to any real harm. Just look at me! And even that poor elephant is unharmed, because he only did his duty. I wished I could have gone to the moon with him.'

'Bloody hell,' said the King. 'Is there no way of killing this stubborn boy?' "

"Did he really swear?" asked Yamuna.

"Yes, he did, because he was very angry. I don't really like swearing, but that's the way it was, and I cannot deny it. I have to tell you the story as it was.

So the King ordered Prahlada to be burnt.

FOURTH TEST: FIRE

The soldiers tied Prahlada to a stake. They piled up dry wood all around him, ten times as high as the boy himself. The King ordered the god of wind himself to blow from all eight directions. The fire was so hot that it scorched an area of seven miles around it. It dried up a lake and a river. But it could not hurt Prahlada, who knew that Lord Vishnu was in the fire, nay, that Lord Vishnu was the fire. For twelve hours, while the fire was burning, Prahlada tirelessly and faultlessly chanted the thousand names of Lord Vishnu. When the fire had died down, the soldiers, many of them with singed hair and making an awful stench, untied Prahlada. Not a single hair of his had been burnt. He felt fresh and cool as if he had just taken a dip in a lake.

'You see how Lord Vishnu has protected me! Why don't you too pray to him?' he said to his father.

Prahlada was sent back to his teachers, who promised to drive the Vishnu nonsense out of the boy or else devise a foolproof way of killing him. But they did not succeed. On the contrary, Prahlada

not only persisted in his faith in Lord Vishnu, but he also started teaching it to the little demons who were his fellow students.

He had always been popular with them because he was a first-class football player, a good boxer and swimmer. The little demons admired the strength and agility he had acquired by practising hatha yoga for half an hour every morning and evening. He was also a good mechanic and helped them when their bicycles were broken or when something went wrong with their computers."

"Did they have footballs, bicycles and computers in those days?" Dinésh asked excitedly.

"They must have had," replied Pandit-ji, "otherwise Prahlada couldn't have fixed them! And they must have had computers and television, otherwise how could they have learned to be proper little demons!"

Dinésh was content because he loved sport, bikes and computers and thought it would be nice to have this Prahlada for a friend. Yamuna wasn't so sure whether her uncle's arguments were really valid but she said nothing because she thought it didn't matter.

"Prahlada became even more popular," the Pandit continued, "when his fellow pupils heard that soldiers, poisonous snakes, a moon elephant and a big fire had been unable to kill him. They would have loved to be in his place."

"Would they also have been invincible like Prahlada if they had just thought of Lord Vishnu? Could you teach me to do the same tricks?" asked Dinésh.

"I would not try it if I were you," said the Uncle. "You see, Prahlada had a heart purified by God and full of love for all creatures. He thought of Vishnu with such intensity, with such concentration. He was not distracted for a single second. He did not have the slightest, not the tiniest, doubt that Vishnu was present in everything. He was not wondering if Vishnu would protect him, he was not testing it out, he absolutely knew it. That's the problem with taking this story literally or trying to imitate it. You are not yet so single-minded about God. And once you are, you will no longer be interested in performing feats of survival. You will just be happy in being united with God. Remembering this story can lead you just a little bit along the way.

So, now Prahlada told his fellow pupils all about Lord Vishnu, and, unlike many modern children, they listened eagerly - perhaps because what Prahlada said was forbidden knowledge. 'There is more pain than pleasure in this world,' he preached, 'all pleasure and fun ends far too soon. If you want everlasting happiness which nobody can take away from you, then you must meditate on Lord Vishnu and learn the wisdom which leads to true happiness. This whole world is only a manifestation of Vishnu.'"

"But how did Prahlada know all this stuff about Lord Vishnu if neither his parents nor his teachers had taught him?" asked Dinésh.

HOW PRAHLADA LEARNT THE WISDOM OF GOD

"During the battle with the gods, the asuras (demons) were so selfish and cowardly that they only saved themselves and abandoned their wives. At that time Queen Hiránya-Kashípu, Hiránya-Kashípu's wife, who was a good woman and was at that time carrying her son Prahlada in her womb, took refuge in the áshram (hermitage) of Sage Nárada (Narada). From then on she looked after the Saint's every need and often had long conversations with him."

"Why did the Queen serve the Saint?" asked Yamuna. "Was she not too noble for that?"

"No, it is a sign of her wisdom and common sense. Even though she was a Queen, she knew that wisdom is more important than social rank. She also knew that the soul in each human being is one with God and that therefore the soul of a queen is not worth more than the soul of a saint, of a beggar or even of a criminal.

She had four reasons for serving Sage Nárada (Narada):

1. She was grateful for having been given shelter and protection.
2. She was naturally kind and knew that Nárada (Narada), who was by then a very old man (many hundreds of years old if not more), needed her help as much as she needed his.
3. She wanted to learn from his wisdom and knew that one of the best ways of learning a lot is by being close to your teacher, being friends with him or living with him, and especially doing things for him. Then you can pick up many things in passing, he will repeat them without noticing and you will understand and remember them better.
4. She also knew that if you serve and help any frail person who needs help, you gain merit. The Queen wanted to gain merit for the benefit of her unborn son, Prahlada.

But there was one thing the Queen did not know, namely that her unborn son, still in her womb, could hear every word spoken by her and by Sage Nárada (Narada). Therefore by the time Prahlada was born, today it would be after nine months but I do not know how many months or years it took in those days when people and especially heros and saints lived much longer, - anyway, when Prahlada was born, all the wisdom of God was already instilled in his mind. He only needed the experience of enlightenment, the personal experience of being one with God, and then he would be ready for moksha (final liberation from rebirth and death).

It was very lucky that all this time his mother lived in the house of Nárada (Narada) and conversed with him. It therefore is very important that mothers who are expecting a baby keep only good company, eat only good food, do not smoke and do not drink. Of course, they should not do that at other times either, because it is a very silly and harmful thing to do at any time of your life, but when a baby is expected it is even worse."

"I like that," said Yamuna. "When I am big and am expecting a baby, I will go to classes and talk to clever people or watch good programmes on television. Then my baby will know foreign languages or philosophy or be able to recite poetry or shlokas (verses from the scriptures) from the day it is born. It will, won't it?" asked Yamuna.

"I cannot promise you that. It worked at the time when Prahlada was born. But that was many millions of years ago. I am not sure if it still works. Perhaps it does, and perhaps it doesn't. But if you keep good company at such a time (and at any time), it cannot do you any harm, and it may do you and the baby some good. Therefore you might as well assume that it still works today. But don't be disappointed if your baby, when the time comes, does not speak Sanskrit fluently (like the Buddha did) when it is born. All right?"

Yamuna was satisfied. "Thank God!" thought her Uncle.

**FIFTH, SIXTH AND SEVENTH TEST:
WIND, POISONED FOOD AND THE FIERY FEMALE**

When King Hirányá-Kashípu heard that his son was now corrupting the innocent demon children, the sons and daughters of his ministers and cronies, with his religion, he ordered his son to be stripped of all his clothes and to be stood, naked, on top of Mount Everest. He then ordered a fierce icy cutting wind to blow incessantly from all ten directions. The wind obeyed and blew and blew. It entered Prahlada's nostrils, his ears, his mouth. It entered all pores of his skin. It filled his lungs, his stomach, his kidneys, the space between his ribs, the hollow spaces in his bones, his very heart. But Prahlada fixed his mind on Lord Vishnu, who lives in the hearts of all and exists in everything that is. Vishnu drank up the fearful wind. The wind was destroyed but Prahlada lived.

So the King told the cooks of the royal palace to lace Prahlada's food with the deadliest poison that could be found. Instead of using spices, they put in poisons by the fistful. But Prahlada swallowed it all happily and even seemed to enjoy the novel flavours created by the poisons.

The King's magicians then created 'the fiery female', a woman that was enveloped in fire and tried to pierce his breast with a magic trident. But when the weapon touched Prahlada, it broke into a hundred and eight pieces.

Day 4

EIGHTH TEST: THE BIG DROP

Hiránya-Kashípu was a high-spirited demon. He was beginning to enjoy his contest with Lord Vishnu and decided to make a meal of it. His poor son, Pahlada, of course, was the football in this match or the rope in this tug-of-war. Would you like to be a football, Dinésh?"

"No, I wouldn't. I don't mind kicking a ball, but I don't want to be kicked around."

"And you, Yamuna? Shall we play tug-of-war with you? Dinésh takes your feet and I take your plaits, and then we pull as hard as we can and see who wins. Would you like that?"

"No," said Yamuna, "I would scream."

"Well, Pahlada did not have to scream because Vishnu made him very strong."

King Hiránya-Kashípu decided that the next round of his match with Lord Vishnu should take place in Blackburn-with-Darwen, of which he had heard so much because of its famous football team, which had just been relegated. So the King bundled his son into a suitcase and with all his retinue took a flight to Manchester, a coach to Darwen, climbed up to Darwen Tower and threw Pahlada down from the top of the Tower. But, protected by Lord Vishnu, Pahlada fell on his feet, like a cat, and did not even receive a bruise.

'Darwen Tower is not high enough', said a wicked politician from Blackpool who had come to watch. 'Why don't you come to Blackpool; we have a much bigger tower there and many people will be there to watch and cheer. We'll advertise the event for a week, and then the whole of England will be there. Meanwhile you can stay at a nice bed-and-breakfast at the Council's expense.' King Hiránya-Kashípu accepted that proposal but did not want to spend a whole week in a bed-sitter watching English television.

He therefore entertained himself during the intervening week by showing his prodigy off in Paris and New York by flinging him down from the Eiffel Tower and from the Empire State Building. As you can well imagine, no harm came to Pahlada. In Paris Lord Vishnu made a strong wind to slow down his fall, and in New York when Pahlada, the great friend of Lord Vishnu, came near the ground, Mother Earth herself opened her arms to soften the impact and receive him like a baby. King Hiránya-Kashípu was duly impressed by the power of Lord Vishnu, but he continued to hate him as ever.

'Let's see, what he thinks of when we tease him at Blackpool!' said the King.

In Blackpool virtually the whole population of the British Isles had assembled, all the parking lots were full, the motorways were clogged all the way from Blackpool to Birmingham, all the television stations of the world had their reporters and cameras stationed around Blackpool Tower, when Prince Pahlada was taken to the top of the tower thinking of nothing but Lord Vishnu who he knew would protect him. As his father's henchwomen and henchmen pushed him off the platform on top of the tower, a miracle occurred. Suddenly Pahlada turned into a giant football - with the

world cup logo and the logo of Blackburn Rovers. The football bounced up and down for four minutes and a half and then came to a halt and turned back into the shape of Prahlada.

NINETH TEST: DROWNING

King Hiránya-Kashípu now took his son to the southernmost tip of India, the spot where it is close to the Island of Sri Lanka and where you can almost see it if you have very very good eye-sight or a good telescope. He bound him with ropes, tied him to an alliterated lorry loaded with lead and threw it into the sea. But, as you both would have expected by now, Prahlada did not sink. He was floating on top of the waves, as if he had been tied to a load of cork, his eyes closed, a smile on his face, and as peaceful as a baby in a basket.

Since Prahlada refused to drown, the King tied him to a drilling platform and sank it to the bottom of the sea. He then piled twenty more drilling platforms on top of that and threw all the rubbish of India on top of this to fill in the spaces.

He organised an airlift from America to India. For six months 903 military transport planes flew to and fro, day and night, and ferried all the rubbish of America to the spot and dumped it on top of Prahlada. The King went on piling up the rubble until it was ten miles high above the water, to say nothing of the many miles below the surface which he had filled. The friends of the earth became hopping mad, but they could not stop the powerful king. They started praying to Lord Vishnu and begged him to take all the rubbish out of the sea again. They became devotees of Lord Vishnu and called it New Age. So, in a round-about way, by refusing to drown, Prahlada had converted them too.

Prahlada himself sat below all that rubbish, at the bottom of the ocean, where he continued chanting and praising Lord Vishnu. The King could not hear him there and thought he was winning the battle and he had shut up his rebellious son for good. Only the whales, who have got underwater ears, could hear him over long distances and, since they are very curious and God-fearing by nature, they approached from all oceans of the earth in order to gape at the miracle.

Prahlada went on chanting for a long time, and I am not sure whether it was for hours, years, or millennia.

While buried under this mountain of rubble, Prahlada meditated on Lord Vishnu for so long and with such concentration that he realised that Vishnu was not only resident in his heart but that he and Vishnu were one. In this whole wide world, there was nothing but Vishnu."

"What about Shiva?" asked Yamuna.

"Vishnu and Shiva are one," replied her uncle. "People who worship Shiva say, rightly: 'In this whole world there is nothing but Shiva.' Both are right. Or you might say, rightly: 'In this whole world there is nothing but Yamuna.' "

Yamuna gasped. The Pandit was silent for a while.

"When Prahlada had at last fully realised that he was one with Vishnu, the ropes which held him fell apart and the oceans started moving in their depths as if they were boiling. Never before had the world seen such an uproar. A thousand underwater volcanoes erupted. The waves flew into the

sky and raced around the world as if they were clouds in a storm. The sea threatened to submerge the earth. It threw the rubble which was lying on top of Prahlada back on the shore.

The sea monsters took fright at this commotion and swam away from the Indian Ocean as fast as they could. They ended up in Scotland, were granted refugee status and given a council flat in Loch Ness.

The Prince swam back to the beach with a smile on his face and a chant in honour of Lord Vishnu on his lips.

Then Vishnu himself appeared before him. He wore a yellow robe, had four arms, and held his conch, discus (chakra), mace and lotus in his hands.

Vishnu offered Prahlada a boon, a favour. Prahlada requested: 'Let me always love you and always be devoted to you. Let me never lose my faith in you.'

Vishnu said: 'You are devoted to me already and will never lose your devotion. You may ask me another boon.'

Prahlada said: 'Please forgive my father for all the sins he has ever committed against you and me, for example by hating you or by trying to kill me.'

Lord Vishnu said: 'I have forgiven your father. He will have to serve his three life sentences on earth. But he is a valiant enemy of mine and I am very fond of him. Therefore I will shorten each of his life sentences by killing him with my own hand when he is still young and strong.'

Do you see the island over there? That is Lanka. In his next life, your father will live on that island as the ten-headed monster Ravana, together with his brother Kumbhakarna. He will spend his life worshipping me by hating and fighting me. Then I will be on earth as Rama and kill him in battle. He will be born once more, as Dantavakra, brother of King Shishupala. Again I will shorten his life by killing him in battle' ".

"That's funny," said Yamuna. "If Lord Vishnu loves the King, why does he kill him?"

"You got that wrong, Béti," said the Pandit. "You are looking at life and death like people who do not know that we have many lives and want to be liberated from the cycle of birth and death. King Hiranya-Kashipu's punishment did not consist in being killed; it was not what Christians call a 'death penalty'. Death is not a penalty. The king's punishment consisted in being born. Each birth was like being thrown into a prison cell, and each death was like being released from prison. Being killed early means early release. Birth is punishment, death is liberation. But living on earth as human beings is also our great chance to try to learn about our nature and about God's. Once we have understood the truth, we will become one with God."

"Did King Hiranya-Kashipu become one with God when he had died for the third time?" asked Yamuna.

"He did. When that happened, he was on earth as the demon Dantavákra and Lord Vishnu was on earth as Kríshna. Kríshna killed Dantavákra in a ferocious battle. When Dantavákra fell down dead, our scripture says (Shrímád Bhágavatam 10.78, p 306), a 'wonderfully subtle light came out of Dantavákra's body and entered the body of Kríshna and all the people watching the battle could see it'. That's how the soul of the gatekeeper Vijaya and later King Hiránya-Kashípu, then to become Ravana and then Dantavákra became finally one with God. That's what we all live and work for, each of us in his own way, to be liberated from birth and death and to become one with God."

There was a long pause. Then the Pandit resumed the story.

Lord Vishnu said: 'You may ask me yet another boon.'

Prahlada answered: 'I need nothing else. You have given me faith. I therefore have dharma (righteousness) and all the ártha (artha) (wealth) and Kama (pleasure) I desire, and I know that moksha (liberation) will surely follow.'

Lord Vishnu responded: 'I promise that you will be liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth when you come to the end of your life.'

With those words the great Being disappeared. The demon soldiers, however, who had been stunned by the apparition, dragged Prahlada to the palace of his father.

TENTH TEST: BAD COMPANY CANNOT CORRUPT HIM

King Hiránya-Kashípu now offered his son a free exclusive holiday on Pleasure Island with some of the nicest people he could think of: Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Augusto Pinochet, Idi Amin, Slobodan Milosevic, Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Strumpet, Elon Musketeer, and James David Advance. They were all family butchers by profession. In their company, the King hoped, his son would experience the joys of bloodlust, of godlessness and of unlimited power and would want to follow their glorious example. Bad company, he knew, is one of the most effective ways of corrupting a person.

The King was utterly dismayed when he learnt after two weeks that Slobodan Milosevic had become a monk on Mount Athos and Hitler a church painter.

Saddam Hussein had withdrawn into the desert to live as a hermit. There he was sitting crosslegged, in the middle of an interminable desert storm, from morning to night, meditating on the Lord, and people were coming from far and wide to ask him, the reformed sinner, for spiritual advice. From time to time he was visited by his guru, Vishvamitra, whose footsteps he had followed in the sand.

Vishvamitra had once been a powerful king. During a visit to the áshram of the great sage Vasíshta, Vishvamitra had started craving for Shabalá, the cow of plenty (Kamadhúk), who provided Vasíshta with all his material wants without limits. At a simple request from her owner, Shabalá would, for example, instantly produce food for a whole army of visitors. King Vishvamitra thought such a cow was far too good for a hermit with few wants and would be much more useful

for a king. He first tried to buy Shabalá and offered twenty pounds. Then a million dollars. They were refused. He offered a million billion euros, but Vishvamitra would not part with Shabalá at any price, not even for euros. Vishvamitra therefore tried to take Shabalá by force. Shabalá cried her eyes out, because she did not want to be parted from her beloved master. Vasíshta told Shabalá to produce an army to fight off Vishvamitra's soldiers. Shabalá's army was, of course, bigger and stronger and won. Vishvamitra realised that a king is weaker than a holy man and decided to become a saint. He did so with a vengeance. He resigned his kingdom and meditated and practised tapas (austerities) for thousands of years until he had become the greatest saint on earth. Later he became the guru of God Rama, who was also a warrior on earth, apart from being God. Vishvamitra is the prototype of the powerhungry king turned sage. Some people say that Kamadhúk was Kuwait, a tiny but infinitely rich country which Saddam Hussein once tried to take by force after having tried persuasion in vain. This is possible, but we cannot be quite sure. But one thing is certain, like Vishvamitra, his guru, Saddam Hussein was now trying to turn from warrior into saint.

Augusto Pinochet had decided to become Pope or Grand Inquisitor since there was no vacancy for God. Idi Amin had become a vegetarian like Hitler because he did not want to hurt innocent animals and he no longer fancied human flesh. Joseph Stalin had become a television evangelist.

Prahlada with his divine eloquence had converted them all.

Day 5

ELEVENTH TEST: HOLIKÁ'S (HOLIKA'S) BONFIRE CANNOT BURN HIM

King Hirányá-Kashípu was president of an exclusive club in New Delhi, the Boon Club. Only people who had been granted some magical favour, a boon, by the gods were allowed to be members. A boon (supernatural reward) is the opposite of a curse (punishment). King Hirányá-Kashípu phoned the Boon Club to help him with his next project. That's how he found Holiká (Holika), who turned out to be his long-lost sister and Prahlada's aunt. She was not beautiful and therefore looked trustworthy and very motherly. She had a boon which said she could not be destroyed even by the fiercest fire.

Holiká (Holika) lived on Mars, a planet not far from Hirányá-Kashípu's capital, and was known the world over as an eccentric, or pyromaniac. For Holiká (Holika) loved to play with fire. As a result she had often been badly burnt. When she was a little girl, she played with matches and fire-lighters, even though her parents had strictly told her not to do so. Once she set fire to the curtains, once she burnt her hands because she had gone up to the gas-cooker and tried to take away the flame, which she wanted to put in her pocket. She loved to play with diyas (lights made of clarified butter) and candles. Once she joined her brothers who had made a big fire in the backyard. They all jumped over it to prove how brave they were. Poor Holi slipped, fell into the fire and burnt her bum. Anyway that's how her poetic brothers put it when they gleefully told the story to her parents. But her parents thought 'bum' was a vulgar word, and when the incident was reported in the Royal Gazette, it read: 'Holiká (Holika), the Princess Royal, fell into a fire and burnt her posterior.'

After that incident, Princess Holiká (Holika) started praying and fasting. One day a god appeared and asked her what she wanted. In other words, he offered her a boon. I do not know the name of the god but some people say his name was Christopher Fry. That's a funny name for an Indian god to have and sounds much more like an English dramatist. But that's what I have been told, and it doesn't really matter anyway. Holiká (Holika) said that she wanted not to be hurt or destroyed by fire, however hot, even if it were more than a million degrees centigrade. Her request was granted, and the words 'The Lady's not for Burning' appeared in letters of fire on her forehead. People came from miles around in order to admire the miracle.

Holiká (Holika) was immeasurably happy. Now she could play with fire as much as she liked, she could admire its purity, its heat, its beautiful colours, its flickering lights. She set out to test whether the boon was working or not.

First she helped her mother flame chapatis on the gas fire and it never hurt her hands. That shows what a nice girl Holiká (Holika) was when she was young (nobody is entirely bad), even though she came to a sticky end when she was big.

Then she joined the Preston fire brigade. Not only was she unafraid of fire, she actually loved it and walked right into it whenever she could and rescued many people who would otherwise had died. Therefore in no time at all she was promoted to Captain of the Preston Fire Brigade, and she was the first woman to reach that exalted position. A few years later she became England's first woman Fire Minister.

For a while she worked in a circus as a fire-eater. The nice thing about fire-eating is that it does not make you fat, but after a while it makes you hot and transparent. People started noticing that

Holiká's (Holika's) skin became red, then it started emitting a glow as if it were made of glass and a fire were burning inside. People passing her in the street could feel the heat coming out of her. When she entered a house, people switched off the central heating, because she heated any room she entered. Her hands were so hot that when you put an uncooked chapati onto it, it would cook in no time at all. Finally she became so hot that flames were flickering all around her body, and even her hair was on fire. As a result, Holiká (Holika) could no longer enter any houses, because she would have set them on fire. She could not sit down on a chair, she could not sit in a car (because the cars started burning and exploded), and she could not travel by plane. Life became quite boring for her, and she saw that she had to stop eating fire and cool down as quickly as possible.

She dived into a lake at the border of Egypt, which started boiling and turned red immediately because she was so hot. When she came out, she was cool again, but the lake never lost its red colour and that's why it is still called The Red Sea today.

Now Holiká (Holika) became ambitious, and perhaps that is the time when she started to become bad because she no longer used her boon for good purposes. But I am not sure what it really was that made her bad except for the last thing when she tried to deceive her nephew Prahlada.

Holiká (Holika) decided to put her boon to the test. 'If it works,' she thought, 'I am really unburnable. And if it doesn't, I'll be dead, but I will sue god Christopher Fry under the trade descriptions act, for giving me a boon which does not keep what it promises.'

Holiká (Holika) booked a flight to the sun, which is the hottest thing you can possibly imagine. Even stones would melt on the sun as if they were made of wax. She landed safely on the sun, she did not melt and did not feel any pain. The surface of the sun consists of hot gasses and below it are molten metals and minerals. Holiká (Holika) took one big dive and swum to the centre of the sun. That's where the sun is hottest. There she sat for a thousand years waiting to see if she would melt or not.

Well, she didn't, and she was therefore well satisfied with her boon. It was a high-quality boon, probably Made-in-Germany by Vorsprung durch Technik.

So Holiká (Holika) came to the surface of the sun again and started splashing around in the ocean of molten rocks as if she were swimming and frolicking in water. As a result of her splashing about, some waves cooled down slightly and became black and made spots on the surface of the sun, the so-called sunspots, which astronomers can still observe today.

After this most demanding test of her boon, Holiká (Holika) had complete confidence in it and returned to her planet. This was just two months before her fortieth birthday.

At just this time King Hirányá-Kashípu had failed in his latest attempt to kill his son Prahlada. When he heard of his sister's exploits on the sun, he had a marvellous idea for his next attempt. He went to visit his sister. They plotted for one week and then the King returned to his capital.

He sent for his god-fearing and recalcitrant son and said: 'My dear Prahlada, on the first of March, your Phua Holiká (Holika), a.k.a. Miss Pyrex, will celebrate her birthday with a big fireworks display. Would you like us to go there and attend the celebrations? You know how fond she is of you and I am sure you will have a seat of honour by her side from which you can see everything.'

Young Prahlada also loved fireworks and was very happy about the proposal. He also looked forward to the idea of going to another planet and to travel through space, which he had not done very often in the past.

Therefore a few weeks later Father and Son went to Cape Canaveral and mounted a space rocket, that is to say, the father went inside the rocket but his son, who enjoyed fresh air and the feeling of freedom, and who at home had been a great lover of powerful motorbikes (he even admired the Hell's Angels, but his parents had never allowed him to join them), well Prahlada decided to travel by sitting on the rocket, as if he were on horseback.

He enjoyed the ride enormously and saw the earth and the planets and the stars from many unusual angles. He saw many strange animals, such as space squirrels, space dragons, celestial elephants and sky monkeys. Perhaps you, Yamuna, can think of a few more examples.

After one week, they arrived on Mars, Aunt Holiká's (Holika's) planet. She was waiting for them at the rocket-port, touched her brother's feet respectfully and hugged her nephew affectionately. She hugged him so tight, even though only for a few seconds, that Prahlada was surprised that a woman should have such strong arms, and it took his breath away, just for a moment. He touched her feet, and then they went to her palace. Outside the palace a huge pyramid-shaped structure had been erected with just one throne on top. 'From there you and I will watch the fireworks on my birthday,' said Aunt Holiká, 'and you will have the best view of anyone on this planet'.

'I look forward to that, Phua-ji,' said Prahlada gratefully.

Now I must explain to you how the viewing pyramid had been prepared. In those days there was a celestial railway, a heavenly railway, on which only gods were allowed to travel. This connected the earth, the planets and all the stars to each other. The trains travelled at an enormous speed, at a time when ordinary people on earth still had to walk or ride on donkeys, camels, elephants, parents or uncles. It was like a roller coaster on a fun fair, but shooting down much lower and racing up much higher and with the trains moving as fast as shooting stars. It was breath-taking and divine.

King Hiránya-Kashípu did all he could to make life difficult for the gods. Whenever he conquered a planet, he demolished the divine railway connecting it with the rest of the world. He sent the rails to the sun for smelting and for making into superguns. The railway sleepers (that is the wooden logs on which the rails rest), however, went to Holiká (Holika) so that she could make them into fires. Since there are incredibly many stars in the universe and at least one god residing on each of them, and Hiránya-Kashípu conquered them one after another, Holiká (Holika) always had a large supply of railway sleepers on her planet.

After she had agreed her little surprise with her brother, she started preparing these sleepers, or logs. They were thousands of years old, since they belonged to a very ancient railway system, and had been thoroughly dried by the hot stars during this time.

First she soaked them in paraffin for four weeks. Then she dipped them in liquid asphalt. That made them even more burnable but they now looked black and ugly, and everyone could see that they were dangerous. When the asphalt had solidified, Holiká (Holika) had to disguise it and make the sleepers look pretty and festive. She therefore dipped them into barrels with coloured wax, red, blue, green, yellow, orange, white and brown.

Then her servants built a huge pyramid in front of her palace. The base was one mile long on each side. The logs were put one foot apart so that plenty of air could circulate between them, and each layer of logs was at right angles with the previous one. When the pyramid was half a mile high and its peak had been constructed, they built a glorious throne on top of it. From here Holiká (Holika) was going to watch the fireworks to be held in her honour.

When Hirányá-Kashípu and his son Prahlada arrived on Mars and passed that pyramid on their way into Aunt Holi's palace, it was almost ready: 'Tomorrow the two of us, just the two of us, will sit on that pyramid to watch my birthday fireworks, I always call it my hot-seat - that's my sense of humour, you know. We will have a better view than any of my subjects. Never in your life will you have seen such fireworks and never again will you see them,' Holiká (Holika) promised.

The following morning, the birthday celebrations for Princess Holiká (Holika) started. At four o'clock, the Bráhma Vela, the sacred hour of Lord Bráhma, which is the best time to get up to bathe, meditate and pray, one hundred and eight cannon stationed on the mountain tops and on the highest stars and planets fired a salute. Then an army of trumpeters started to play: 'Happy birthday to you, ..., happy birthday, happy Holi, happy birthday to you'. They played so loud that Holiká's (Holika's) palace shook in its foundations. Fairy tale palaces always do. Even the people in far-off Blackburn fell out of their beds. If you see anyone with a bruised face today, then you know how it happened, because those bruises never disappeared. The neighbours complained and wrote angry letters to the Council. Sometimes even today, so many millions of years later, you can still hear a loud bang or a rumbling noise arriving from outer space. These are the echoes of the salute which they then shot for Princess Holiká on Mars. People who don't know any better call it 'thunder'.

They spent the day getting drunk and stuffing themselves with food, something we should never do, but that's what demons do. That's why they are called demons and when we are angry and tell somebody to 'get stuffed', we are in effect saying that she is a demon and that she might as well go and join them. We shouldn't really say this, but you know what people are like when they get angry.

When it got dark, the people assembled in front of the palace to watch the fireworks, 'the biggest in recorded history', Holiká had claimed. They had been advertised on all the television stations of the universe and people had come from all the stars and planets, and even from earth and from Blackburn to watch it. I can swear to it because I was there myself when I was your age."

Yamuna cast a doubtful look at her uncle.

"Well, not quite," said the Pandit quickly, "but my grandfather when he was a boy knew someone who had a brother who knew somebody who was there and told him all about it. So it must be true. Trust me!

To entertain the huge crowd, a jumbo band was playing outside the palace and since it was music from Mars they called it 'martial music'.

Now Princess Holiká and her nephew Prahlada stepped out of the palace, dressed in glorious garments of gold and silver and covered with gems, especially amber, which was Aunt Holi's favourite.

Can you imagine why, Yamuna?"

"Because of its pretty colour?"

"Perhaps," said Pandit-ji, "but there is another reason. Remember that she loved fire. What is the connection between amber and fire?"

"I think it burns easily because it is really resin from fir trees that has hardened over millions of years," said Dinésh proudly.

"Right you are," said Uncle-ji. "If you put a lighted match to anything made of amber, it will burn very hotly, you will destroy a beautiful and expensive ornament, the amber will melt and when drops of molten amber fall on your hands, you will get badly burnt."

Holiká and Pahlada now slowly ascended the pyramid, one step after another, a total of 333 steps, until they reached the throne. There was only one throne, obviously for the Princess, but not even a simple chair for Pahlada. He, of course, was used to sitting on the floor, lower than his elders, as is right and proper, so he sat down on one of the sleepers while his aunt sat down on her throne. 'Come up here, my dear boy,' she said with a false smile, 'this is my birthday, and I want you to sit on my lap so that I can hug you and kiss you, for my own children are all big now and have left home to become generals in their uncle's army, and I miss them soooo much.'

Pahlada, who trusted his aunt and did not know how wicked she could be when she put her mind to it, did not hesitate to accept her invitation, and happily sat down on her lap. Immediately she clasped her two arms around him so tightly that even a professional wrestler would have found it impossible to free himself from her vice-like grip, to say nothing of a little boy, who is much weaker. German engineers were in the crowd and saw what happened and Holiká gave them the idea of designing the first vice. Today there is no engineering workshop which does not have one.

But when Pahlada felt his aunt's steely grip around his waist, he was beginning to get worried: 'Was this the pressure of love or of hatred?'

Do you know what Aunt Holiká was up to?"

"She wanted to stop Pahlada from running away," said Dinésh.

"But Lord Vishnu was protecting him and had never let him down before. So he had no reason to run away from any danger," said Yamuna.

"No, he didn't. But Holiká didn't know that. She knew that she could not be burnt but was sure that he could, like most ordinary people, and that therefore he would try to escape from the fire that she had prepared. She wanted to sit together with him in the fire, hold him like a vice made of iron, then he would burn but the vice, that is Holiká, would survive because of the boon she had. Let us see if it turned out that way.

Holiká gave the signal for the fireworks to start and her band struck up music by her court composer Handel composed especially for the occasion. But there were no rockets and no catherine's wheels as in ordinary fireworks. The fireworks she had planned were a bonfire, and she and her nephew were sitting right in the middle of it. A hundred of her servants came with blazing torches and lit the pyramid of railway sleepers, wax, tar, tyres and petrol which she had prepared, and in an instant the whole pyramid was ablaze.

Prahlada thought of Lord Vishnu as he always did when he was in danger, and also when he was not in danger, and the flames and the heat and the tremendous smoke from the car tyres did not harm him in the slightest. Strangely enough, Holiká did not think of God, not even of the god who had given her the boon that she would not be hurt by fire. She was so sure of her boon. It had been given once and for all, unconditionally, and it would always work, whatever she was thinking at the time. Or so she thought.

For this time was the one exception. She had been trying to use her boon for decidedly evil purposes - to kill an innocent child, after having misled that child who trusted in the love of his aunt, and to make it worse, all this was part of a plot to kill a devotee of Lord Vishnu. On this occasion the boon did not work. Seconds after the bonfire had been lit, Holiká let out shrieks of pain as the fire was burning her hair, and the heat was singeing her skin and the smoke of the car tyres was suffocating her. The fire was so tremendous that its flames reached into outer space and scorched the sun and some of them even touched the earth, somewhere in North Africa, and where its flames burnt away the plants and destroyed all seeds we now have a desert in which there is only sand and in which nothing grows. That desert is called the Sahara.

The fire on Mars burnt for a whole week. Holiká was burnt to ashes, but Prahlada did not come to any harm at all. His trust in God had been stronger than any boon or promise from God.

The smoke from Holiká's (Holika's) fire drifted across the whole of the universe and some remnants of it are still around today, especially in the smog that hangs over big cities and which makes it hard to see or to breathe, especially for asthmatics.

The ashes which remained on Mars were red because the fire had been so terribly hot, and they were scattered over the whole planet and coloured it red. Mars is therefore called "the red planet". You can see its red colour even with your bare eyes if you look at it in the sky during a cloudless night.

In memory of this big fire we have our own bonfire tonight on the eve of Holi, and the festival is named after Holiká who unsuccessfully tried to kill Prahlada by fire but died in it herself.

The coloured powders which we throw at each other in fun on the day of Holi remind us of the red ashes of Holiká's (Holika's) big bonfire."

BONFIRE NIGHT

Yamuna's mother had appeared in the doorway and was pointing at her watch. It was twenty to seven and time to go to temple for arti, the evening prayers.

The temple was more crowded than usual, lots of cars were parked in the street outside, and after arti everyone went to the parking lot behind the temple where a big fire was burning. People had brought grains, coconuts and water which they threw as offerings into the fire, they walked around it clockwise to show their respect while saying their prayers. Mothers carried their babies in their arms. The children gazed with joy and amazement.

At the same time children and adults alike were joking and playing with each other and were taking liberties which are not allowed on normal days when the rules of respect have to be observed. They had brought coloured powders, especially red and green, and were throwing them at each other. Some had brought syringes or bicycle pumps with which they were squirting coloured water at each other. Wisely, most people had not put on their best clothes. Some people looked more and more like punks or tramps. There was now an inextricable mixture between sacredness and profanity, everybody doing what he pleased, be it by praying or spraying. For us everything is sacred, nothing is profane.

The bigger boys and the more cheeky girls were now trying to toss the half-burnt coconuts out of the fire with big poles. Roasted like this they are the most delicious food that can be imagined. But they have to be retrieved before they are entirely burnt. A little girl of eight with a charred coconut between the blackened palms of her hand and the sweetest and cheekiest smile imaginable came up to Pandit-ji because he was a stranger in this small assembly, looked rather dignified and had aroused her curiosity.

"May I do it to you?" she said.

"Go ahead."

And deftly she smeared his face with her blackened fingers while a look of glee transfigured her face.



Day 6

THE COME-UPPANCE

On the next day, the Pandit resumed his story:

"Never in all the history of the world had a dictator been provoked and humiliated as much as King Hiránya-Kashípu. He had been frustrated at every step. It was like running against a brick wall. The King was furious beyond measure. His eyes turned red like tomatoes and started spinning like CD ROMs."

"Quadruple speed, or faster?" asked Dinésh.

His uncle, who was also a computer buff, did not hesitate for a second: "Quadruple-speed my foot", he said. "This was a state of the art fury. 64-speed at least."

"Did they spin clockwise or anti-clockwise?"

"Both. His right eye spun clockwise and his left eye anti-clockwise. Every few seconds they popped out of his head and then popped back in again and then changed direction. That was one of the King's party tricks. It sounded like an infernal champagne party.

The King summoned his son into the main hall of his palace. Its vault was supported by a huge pillar.

'Who is this flipping Vishnu, to whom you keep praying and who, as you say, is everywhere? I am sure he is not in this pillar. Let him come out if he dare to face me. I am invincible.'

The King screamed: 'Hey there, Vishnu boy! Where are you hiding? If you are in this pillar, why don't you bloody come out and show your effing face!'

He drew his sword, spat a mouthful of royal gob on the pillar and kicked it. A tremendous roar was heard. The pillar trembled and the palace seemed to be swaying. The pillar burst open and Vishnu jumped out of it. Above the hips he was a lion (símha) with a wild mane, a huge mouth, sharp teeth and angry rolling eyes. Below the hips he was formed like a man (nára). This form of Vishnu is therefore called Nára-Símha, the Man-Lion. He had huge arms and paws with claws as long as daggers. He grabbed the terrified King and took him to the threshold of the palace. It was about 6 p.m., the hour of dusk, which is neither day nor night. Nára-Símha was standing on the threshold of the building, which is neither inside nor out, he held the King one yard above the ground, which is neither on earth nor in the heavens. Nára-Símha was neither human nor animal, and he tore the King to pieces with his claws, which means he did not kill him with any weapons.

Nára-Símha then gave a bear-hug to Prahlada and tenderly put his hand on Prahlada's head. He installed him on his father's throne. Justice and goodness were once again restored to the world. The gods returned to their former dominions, good people were rewarded and bad people were punished. The world was not perfect (thank God), but it was a better place for a long time to come. Not forever, of course - but that is another story."



Text 2

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Why we celebrate Holi, or: The invincible boy

Length: 1,536 words = 8,665 characters

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Date: 2002-03-28, Mk2.3

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 28 March this year (2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Holi. It is a boisterous occasion. Bonfires are lit and on this day the rules of respect are dropped and people are allowed to let rip. Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story that gave rise to the festival.



Ashutosh Vardhana:

Why we celebrate Holi, or: The invincible boy

Holi (28 March 2002)

The story of Holi starts with an evil king, Hiranya-Kashipu. He was very powerful, ruled the whole world, but very badly. He rewarded criminals and persecuted good people. Most people on earth were terribly unhappy. The king hated God (Vishnu) with all his heart and did everything to spite him.

However, he had a son, Prahlada, who was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. The king tried in vain to stop his son from praying and meditating. Since all his threats and punishments were of no avail, he decided to kill the boy. But the boy was so single-minded in his devotion to Lord Vishnu, that none of the normal ways of killing people worked on him. Weapons and poisonous snakes could not kill him. Elephants refused to step on him. He was to be burnt at the stake, but the fire did not harm him.

Meanwhile more and more people, seeing how Lord Vishnu protected his devotee, turned to Lord Vishnu - so the king's attempts to kill his son had the very opposite effect - almost as if a religious leader bans a book or a film because of blasphemy but thereby makes it really popular. It is better to behave like God, who regards blasphemy as a trifle, ignores it and treats it with the contempt it deserves. Then the blasphemers and mockers get bored with it and invent better pastimes.

The king exposed Prahlada to icy winds on top of a mountain and gave him poisoned food. A fiery woman with magic powers tried to pierce his heart (i.e. tried to seduce him) but could not harm him. The king dropped him from Blackpool Tower, tried to drown him, put him into bad company, but all this could neither kill the boy nor destroy his devotion to Lord Vishnu. He had already survived ten attempts to kill or to corrupt him.

Prahlada had an aunt called Holika (stress: Holiká). The festival of Holi is named after her. She had obtained a boon that she could not be harmed by fire. At the instigation of the king, she sat down on top of a huge pile of wood (railway sleepers pinched from Railtrack), with Prahlada on her lap, holding him tight so that he could not run away, and had the bonfire lit. She trusted in her boon (God's promise), but Prahlada trusted in God just like that, promise or no promise. Because Holika was using her boon for evil purposes, it did not work; but Prahlada's unconditional trust in God worked, even without a boon. Holika was burnt to ashes, but Prahlada remained unharmed.

Eventually the king got his come-uppance. Prahlada had told him that everything is Vishnu and Vishnu is everywhere, in every human being, every animal, insect, microbe, in every tree, every rock, even in every sinner.

In the king's hall, there was a huge pillar. The king shouted: 'If your Vishnu is in this pillar, why doesn't he come out and show himself?', and he kicked the pillar, spat at it and struck it with his sword. The pillar burst open and Lord Vishnu came out, his lower body shaped like a man (nara), and his upper body shaped like a lion (simha). This form of Vishnu is called Nara-Simha, the man-lion. Nara-Simha grabbed the king, tore him to pieces, and installed pious Prahlada on his throne.



Lord Vishnu as Nara-Simha and his wife Goddess Lákshmi on royal throne



Nara-Simha tearing King Hiranya-Kashipu to shreds

In his next life king Hiranya-Kashipu was reborn as the monster Ravana, the great enemy of Lord Rama.

To commemorate these events, we light bonfires, and on this day the rules of respect are dropped and people are allowed to let

rip - much like Christians in Catholic countries or cities (e.g. Germany [Cologne, Munich], Trinidad, Brazil) at carnival time, on the four days before the beginning of Lent. We throw coloured powders and squirt coloured water at each other, revel in the mess (as we all like to do from time to time, being little pigs at heart). We worship God who is present everywhere and who is represented by the fire, its purity and its warmth. There are many explanations for these customs and many variants of the story, and presumably all are true to some extent. The bonfire may be a reminder of the bonfire on which Prahlada was meant to be burnt, and the powders and mess we throw at each other may be a reminder of the ashes of that bonfire. Apart from that it is a good opportunity to have fun, and we all need much more of that than we normally get.



The joy of Holi

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS STORY?


1. If you try to ban something (good or bad), stamp it out, like going to mandir, church or mosque, drugs, books and films, even blasphemy and mocking a religion, you advertise it, make it desirable and popular and people do it out of spite if not out of conviction. Since God smiles about blasphemy and does not strike the blasphemer dead instantly, why should we! When we are so touchy, are we really defending God's honour, or merely our personal vanity? Does our vanity deserve special protection? Can God's honour be affected by blasphemy? Can God not defend his own honour - when the time is ripe? In this story he did. Mercifully the scriptures of Jews, Christians and Muslims agree with us on this point:

- 'To me belongs vengeance and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand.' (Bible: Deuteronomy 32:35)
 - 'Whether We (Allah) let you (the Holy Prophet) witness the punishment with which We threaten them, or cause you to die before it is fulfilled, your mission is only to give warning: it is for Us to do the reckoning.' (Surah 13:40)
 - 'The apostle says: "Lord, these men are unbelievers." Bear with them and wish them peace. They shall before long know their error.' (Surah 43:88-89)
2. We will feel better in adversity if we trust in God's help and let him guide our behaviour and do not behave like cowards or criminals, especially if we live under evil regimes (Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia). Our main principle should always be not to harm any other people, especially not in the name of God (who knows better than we what each of us deserves). Instead we should help our neighbours and persecuted strangers as best we can, especially members of other communities.
3. We have to use our common sense. We are not Houdinis (escape artists). We may be destined to die or to suffer whatever we do and however righteous we are, and we are sure to perish if we behave like fools, take unnecessary risks, do not protect our houses against burglars or step out in front of a moving lorry. God will surely fail us if we are trying to put him to the test. Prahlada was an exceptional case. He was completely intoxicated with God, he was not, like most of us, half-hearted about God and thought: 'If you exist, you must now display your power.'

NOTE FOR READERS UNFAMILIAR WITH HINDUISM:


Contrary to common perception we Hindus believe in one God, who is neither man nor woman, who is absolute, unchangeable and universal, who is 'existence - consciousness - bliss' (sat, chit, ananda), and about whom we can say nothing else that is really valid. Unlike God-the-Absolute, the many gods that our stories talk about and that our pictures depict are changeable. Their purpose is to aid the different inclinations of each devotee and help him/her to move from the visible towards the invisible, concentrate his affection on god and to lead a life that brings him closer to the experience of god. Since God, in whatever religion, is everywhere, the Jewish, Christian and Muslim God, being one with our absolute God, resides also in our images. All of us therefore have good reason to be friends, worship God wherever we find him, and to support each other in our different ways of worshipping God, be it in mosque or mandir, for God is one by whatever name we call him and whether we 'depict' him or not.


^Ram Naumi starts here




Ashutosh Vardhana Yamuna's Year

**Stories for the Hindu Calendar
as told in a Hindu family in a northern English town**







OM, symbol of
God the Absolute




Lord Ganesh,
remover of obstacles



My Gurujji



Sarasvati Devi,
Goddess of arts and learning



Sign of the sun

Impressum

Title: Ashutosh Vardhana:
The story of Ram Naumi: Lord Rama's Birthday

Length: See Technical Note below

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Date: 2002-04-21, Mk3.2

TECHNICAL NOTE

This section contains two essays related to this festival:

- Text 1, "The story of Ram Naumi: Lord Rama's Birthday" describes the events leading the birth of Lord Rama in Ayodhya.

Length: 1,300 words = 7,296 characters

- Text 2, "Devil Worship in Ayodhya" discusses (and condemns) the insistence of religious fanatics to tear down a disused mosque, said to have been built in 1528/1529 on the exact spot on which Lord Rama was born, and to build Hindu temple in its place. Thousands of people were killed in inter-communal violence as a result of this insistence. After

decades of legal wrangling, a splendid temple was built on this site and was actually inaugurated in January 2024.

Length: 3,475 words = 20,070 characters

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The king of Ayodhya, King Dasaratha, had been childless for ages in spite of having three wives. In despair he organised a big sacrifice imploring the god, Lord Vishnu, to grant him children. His prayer was heard, and Lord Vishnu, who had to incarnate in order to rectify evil which yet again had become too strong in our world, gave him a bowl of divine broth which his three queens were to share. All would become pregnant and their children would contain Vishnu's divinity in different proportions. Ashutosh Vardhana relates the details.

Ashutosh Vardhana: Ram Naumi: Lord Rama's Birthday:

On Ram Naumi, or Rama Navami, on the ninth (navami) day of the month of Chaitra, we celebrate the birth of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who from time to time appears on this earth in many different forms and restores order whenever evil gains the upper hand.

In the Indian city of Ayodhya, which still stands today, there ruled, during the Golden Age, a famous king, Dasaratha, who was a model of virtue and an ideal ruler. He had three wives, which was not uncommon in Royal Families, and sometimes essential, to ensure male offspring for the continuance of the royal line. These were Queen Kaushalya, Queen Sumitra and Queen Kaikeyi. For several thousand years (Adhyatma Ramayana 1.4:9-10, p 21), King Dasaratha had been wishing and praying for a son, but not even a single child had been born to him. Therefore he performed a famous, rare and elaborate ceremony which only Kings are allowed to perform, the Great Horse Sacrifice. It took many years to prepare, the most eminent priests from all over the world were put in charge to ensure that no mistakes were made. When the sacrifice was held, people came from all over the world to receive its blessings.



Ten-headed demon Ravana

Much of the rest of the world was in a terrible state. There was a demon king, Ravana, who ruled in Sri Lanka. He had ten heads, and he used them all to think up evil deeds, to use foul language, tell lies, take drugs, eat filthy food, and not to brush his teeth. His demonic allies (called Rakshasas) were causing trouble all over the world, especially to religious people who wanted to serve God by doing honest jobs and by praying and meditating in peace and quiet.

The Rakshasas were not merely motivated by greed, as many crooks and criminals are today, but they positively hated God, hated goodness, were malicious and power-hungry, and wanted to cause as much trouble as they possibly could. They also had magic powers. They could assume any shape they wished, e.g. appear as a golden deer, or as a beautiful woman, or as a trust-worthy Brahmin entitled to respect. That made them very dangerous because, as even today, it was then not easy to tell who was good and who was bad. Eventually they ruled much of our world. Even the gods in heaven and in the underworld, and even the Americans, were frightened of them. A long time ago, when he was not yet as bad as now, Ravana had been given a boon (promise) by God Brahma, namely that he could never be defeated by any god. Ravana had forgotten to ask that he should be safe from men as well because he thought men were so puny that he could defeat them without a boon.

The Gods called on Lord Brahma for help. Brahma, as usual, turned to Lord Vishnu and asked him to become a human being, since only as such would he be able to defeat Ravana. Vishnu knew that King Dasaratha was just offering the Great Sacrifice to support his prayer for a son and how virtuous he and his Queens were. So he decided to help the world by being born into the King's family.

Suddenly a celestial messenger arose out of the sacrificial fire, casting about him a light as bright as an atomic explosion. He carried in his hands a golden chalice filled with payasa broth (milk and rice), but this payasa was divine. He told the king to give it to his wives and promised him sons. The King tasted a little immediately, then went to his wives and gave half to Kaushalya, one third to Sumitra, one eighth to Kaikeyi, and, "after reflection" (Valmiki), the remainder to Sumitra. So **in effect** Kaushalya received 4/8, Sumitra 3/8 and poor Kaikeyi only 1/8, and she was destined to cause a lot of trouble later in the

story. The three queens soon became pregnant, and a divine light radiated from their wombs.

Ramayana Arithmetic

King Dasaratha gave half of the divine payasa broth to Queen Kaushalya, one third to Queen Sumitra and one eighth to Kaikeyi and then, after some thought, the remainder to Sumitra. So what proportion did each get in the end?

$$\begin{array}{r}
 1/2 \text{ (Kaushalya)} \\
 + 1/3 \text{ (Sumitra)} \\
 + 1/8 \text{ (Kaikeyi) (first round)} \\
 \hline
 = 12/24 \text{ (Kaushalya)} \\
 + 8/24 \text{ (Sumitra)} \\
 + 3/24 \text{ (Kaikeyi) (first round)} \\
 \hline
 = 23/24
 \end{array}$$

Left over for Sumitra therefore: $1/24$

So Sumitra received in toto:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 1/3 + 1/24 \\
 = 8/24 + 1/24 \\
 \hline
 = 9/24 = 3/8
 \end{array}$$

Therefore the final distribution was as follows:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 1/2 + 3/8 + 1/8 = 4/8 \text{ (Kaushalya)} \\
 + 3/8 \text{ (Sumitra)} \\
 + 1/8 \text{ (Kaikeyi)} \\
 \hline
 = 8/8 \\
 = 1 \\
 = 1
 \end{array}$$

At the same time many of the other major and minor gods, in fact thousands of them, incarnated in both humans and animals (e.g. monkeys, bears, birds), were born and even had off-spring, became a multitude of warriors, all to be on stand-by to help Lord Rama in his task of subduing evil.

Two of these incarnations were particularly important:

- Lord Hanuman, an incarnation of Lord Shiva in the form of a monkey, was Rama's most loyal and loving servant, much beloved by all of us, and for us the role-model of a loyal servant, employee and ally.
- Sita, an incarnation of Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu's heavenly wife, went on to marry Lord Rama in his human existence and is our model of the ideal wife.

In due course, the three Queens, one after another, gave birth to four divine children:

- Kaushalya to Rama, who was formed from half of Lord Vishnu
- Kaikeyi to Bharata (after whom India is named 'Bharat'), a quarter of Lord Vishnu
- Sumitra to the twins Lakshmana and Shatrughna, one eighth of Lord Vishnu each



On the eleventh day after their birth they were named. Lakshmana became closely attached to Rama, and the two were inseparable. Similarly Shatrughna and Bharata became very close.



Marriage of Rama and Sita

The subsequent life of Lord Rama is a big story, the Ramayana, and has been written down in several epics by different authors in different Indian languages, e.g. Valmiki (Sanskrit), Tulsidas (Hindi), Kambar (Tamil), Krittivasa (Bengali), and they have become literary and devotional classics in their languages. They describe Rama's childhood, adolescence, life with his guru, marriage to Sita, his 14-year exile, the abduction and rescue of Sita, the battle with, and death of, Ravana, Rama's triumphant return to his capital Ayodhya (which we celebrate at Diwali).

Some unholy and unscrupulous politicians have tried to make a religious issue of the question whether it is more meritorious to worship Rama on **the exact spot where he is said to have been born** rather than doing so a few hundred yards away, and thousands have died in the resulting communal violence. The people participating in this violence have forgotten the ancient proverb from one of the great epics:

**"A thousand Ramas born in Ayodhya will do
No good if he's not born in you."**



When Hanuman was asked: "Where is your beloved Rama?", he tore open his chest and revealed the image of Rama in all his divine glory residing in his heart.

Ayodhya is our heart. Ayodhya is here in Blackburn. Wherever we are, Ayodhya is always HERE. We invite Rama to be born in us, and we worship him, not by public clamour, aggression or revenge, but by studying his life and following his example, as the ideal son, brother, disciple, loving and respectful husband, soldier and king.

'Soldier and King' in our case means being honest and reliable when doing our own job. This goes for men and women and for Rama, Sita and Hanuman alike, each picking the lessons from which he can benefit. If we do this, if we concern ourselves with our own duties rather than with those of others, and with our duties more than with our rights, then truly a million Ramas will be born on this earth, we will be Rama's servants in his battle against evil, and Vishnu will be incarnate even today and win the Battle of Lanka, for Lanka, too, is in our heart. Each moral and **COMPASSIONATE** decision in our daily life is an arrow fired against Ravana. We fight this Holy War (jihad!) each time we have to decide whether to do right or wrong - and whether or not to follow the example of Rama, Sita and Hanuman.

Jay Shri Ram



Text 2: Devil Worship in Ayhodhya

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Devil worship in Ayodhya

Length: 3,475 words = 20,070 characters

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Date: 2002-03-06, Mk2.3

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

© BBC News
Ancient Babri Mosque in Ayodhya destroyed by Hindu agitators in 1992. Thousands killed in subsequent religious rioting.

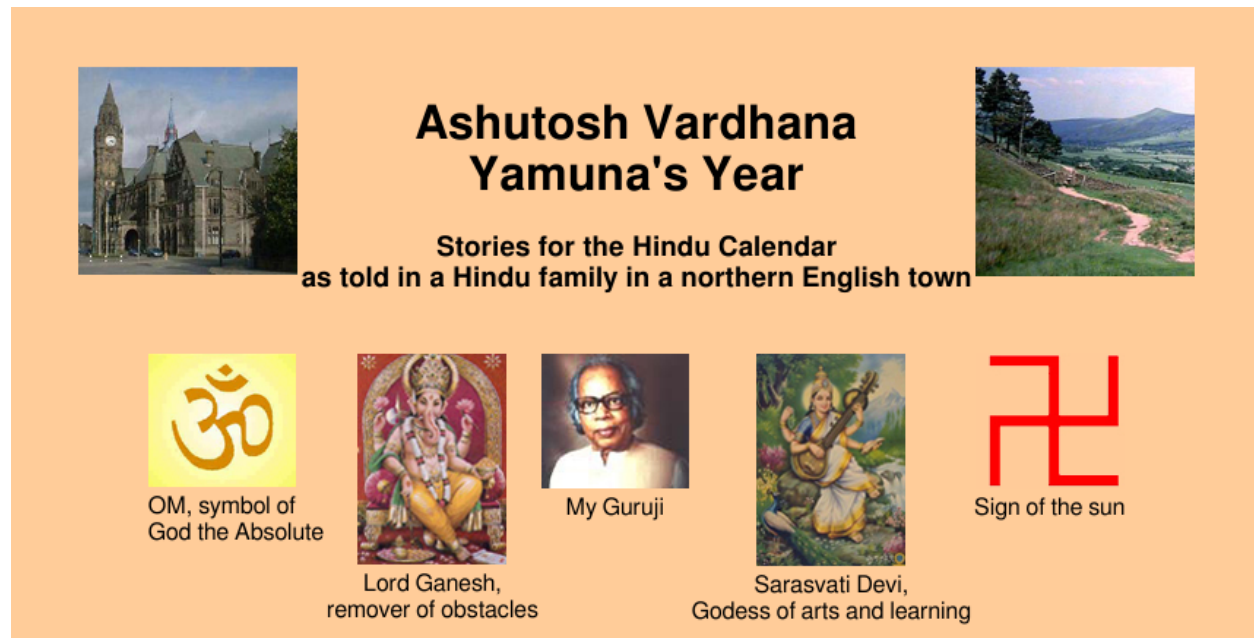
In 1992 religious riots in India and Bangladesh were sparked which left several thousand dead, when a group of politically motivated Hindus tried to right a wrong committed by Muslims 500 years earlier and demolished an ancient but unused mosque that had been erected by Muslim conquerors of the time in place of a temple which marked the birthplace of Lord Rama. The government imposed a stand-off and put the matter into the hands of a court which in ten years was unable to produce an equitable decision. The Hindu faction then announced that, on 15 March this year, they would go ahead with the building regardless of consequences.



© BBC News
60 Hindus burned alive on this train. 700 killed in subsequent reprisals.

On 28 February 2002 a train with Hindu devotees coming from the disputed site was set alight by a gang of Muslim youths. 58 Hindus were burnt alive. This sparked off Hindu reprisals against Muslims in which more than six hundred people died on both sides.

In this article, Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer from England, argues that the temple project offended against the spirit of Hinduism and is in fact blasphemy.



Ashutosh Vardhana:

Devil Worship in Ayodhya or: Mara Worship in Ayodhya

CARING FOR THE OTHERS

In Manchester in January 2002, a white youth (Gavin Hopley, 19) was attacked and beaten up by a gang of Asians. A young Muslim (Mohammed Umar, 23) heard his cries for help, chased away the attackers, took him into his house and called an ambulance.

On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Palestine) a Jewish traveller was mugged, beaten up and left for dead. Two high cast Jewish businessmen walked past him, ignored his cries for help for they had important appointments. Then a Samaritan (considered untouchable by high-class Jews) came, gave him first aid, put him up in a private hospital, paid for his treatment, and gave him money to continue his journey. That happened 1982 years ago, when Jesus had just turned 20. (Luke 10: 25-37)

Most of the reports about the atrocities committed in Gujarat on either side in the name of false gods forget to mention the many, and much more important, examples of Muslims giving shelter to Hindu friends and neighbours, and vice versa. These are the stories that should be searched out, told and emulated.

MY ISHTA DEVATA

Lord Rama is my Ishta Devata. I therefore do not speak lightly about him and his worship.

Ayodhya is raising its ugly head again. Hundreds of Hindus and Muslims have been killed in the name of God and of revenge, and worse, their blood weighs on the karma of the perpetrators. Does this Rama demand human sacrifice?

Not every priest, saint, guru or politician who claims to know the will of God and speak in his name does so.

Our brothers, Muslims and Hindus, have died because of an idle project pursued by impostors and ignoramuses in the name of their deadly dog Mara. Our rejection of their home-made god has to be disrespectful and unmistakable.

If the messenger of Rama, or my Guruji (PBUH) or even Rama himself were to appear to me and ordered me to kill a Muslim, or to demolish an ancient mosque, used or unused, I would curse him. That false Rama will not strike me dead as he has struck dead so many innocent Muslims and Hindus. The true Rama preaches ahimsa (non-violence) and compassion. He is Vishnu and (as the story of Holi and Nara-Simha reminds us) lives in every stone, in every pillar, in every mosque and in every mandir, and especially in every heart, Muslim or Hindu:

'aham atma gudakesha sarvabhutashayasthitah'

(I, O Arjuna, am the self, seated in the hearts of all creatures).

(Gita 10:20)

My curses are not aimed at the true Rama but at the satanic egos for whose glorification a sham temple is to be erected at Ayodhya. That project that has now cost nearly 3000 lives is devil worship. The prana pratishtha will fail. There will only be dead stone. We cannot force the spirit of Ishvara into an unholy place that is polluted by blood.

HIGHEST COMMANDMENT

Our highest commandment is not to 'honour God' (as for Jews, Christians and Muslims) but ahimsa (nonviolence), and we dishonour our religion and 'our' God if we disobey it, however great the provocation (if any) from another community.

It does not matter who started it all, be it now, 10 years ago or 500 years ago under the mughals. In working for peace we have to eliminate our own shortcomings and not those of other communities. They will work on theirs, provided they are not

afraid of us and our criticism. We have to put them at ease. Each community is best qualified and has enough people of goodwill to combat its own faults. Such an attitude in itself reduces or eliminates intercommunal violence and killing.

There is no justification for Ashok killing innocent Yusuf only because Usama has killed innocent Dinesh.

ORDINARY MUSLIMS

Muslims and their turbulent priests have their faults, but so have Hindus and their leaders. Ordinary Muslims are lovable and kind, as pleasant to be with as ordinary Hindus. Unfortunately, most of us do not know it, for we have never tried to befriend one another. We have never had a meal together.

We must not confuse 'THE Muslim' and 'Muslims' (as such) with the specific human being next to us, who is like us in every respect and only happens to be a Muslim, and worship God in his particular way. That human being next to us may be as fearful and suspicious of us as we are of him. He may not be able to smile at us and respond to our smiles because he has never received any smiles from us.

The first thing we have to learn is to like, love one another and genuinely smile at one another, to see each other as individuals, not as members of a group. My neighbour is not 'a Muslim' but 'Aisha' or 'Shafiq'.

KNOW MUSLIMS PERSONALLY

My friend Dr Misra (66) prides himself, like all Hindus, on his tolerance: 'We respect all religions,' he recently pontificated at his family's dinner table. His daughter Aruna (26, accountant, born and bred in England) just laughed: 'You are so prejudiced and narrow-minded, Dad, and you don't even realise it' she said. 'You do not even have a single Muslim friend.'

'I do,' he said, 'several. Like Dr Zakria.'

'Dr Zakria,' she scoffed, 'that's not a friend, that's a colleague. You don't fight with him, you don't insult him, but that's not enough.'

'I play golf with him, he is my friend.'

'That does not make him a friend! Have you ever invited him to dinner? Have you ever gone out with him? Have you ever gone to see him when you needed to relax and just wanted to kill some time?! Have you ever asked him for help or advice when you were in trouble?'

Dr Misra was confused by his daughter's frontal attack and said nothing.

Most of us do not know Muslims, we only know the pronouncements of their leaders and what our newspapers write about them, and that tends to be negative. Therefore we fear Muslims (needlessly) while they, flattered by their comparatively simple religion, despise us. Most Hindus feel a shadow rush over their face when they hear the word 'Muslim'. That is sad, and bad for Muslims and Hindus alike. Why can we not manage a smile? That is just as sad as physical violence. As the Buddhists teach us: thoughts are the causes of actions. Muslims are human beings (like us) before they are Muslims and (in India) they are (like us) Indians before they are Muslims. Their parents and grandparents loved India enough not to move to Pakistan at the time of partition (1948). We Hindus are human beings and Indians before we are Hindus.

Ordinary Muslims want peace as much as Hindus do. And that is all they want: they want to live in peace and worship God as sincerely as we do. Very few have political aspirations. They weep for their dead wives, husbands and children as much as we do. If uneducated emotional irrational Muslims are led astray by their priests and politicians, then we too have uneducated emotional irrational people who are led astray by our priests, gurus and politicians in the name of a man-made God.

If we are to enjoy peace, then we must greet and cherish every Muslim we meet as a fellow Indian and a fellow human being.

Unlike many Hindus, I have enjoyed the friendship, hospitality and extreme kindness of Muslims, and no Hindu could have met me with greater warmth and generosity.

My Guruji never said an unkind word about Muslims and he said many in warmest praise of their human qualities for he knew real Muslims and not only the speeches and political aspirations of some of their leaders. My personal and intimate experience has born out everything good he ever said about Muslims.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR LORD RAMA

© Asian Woman, London, Summer 2002, p 101

Modern Sitas? Do such faces LOVE Rama?

Vishnu and Rama are everywhere: Therefore why demolish the mosque in which Rama resides? If Rama was there, it wasn't 'unused'. Allah is everywhere and he is worshipped not only in mosques but also in every mandir, whatever its official name. 'As men approach me, so do I accept them. Men on all sides follow my path.' (Gita 4:11)

Does Lord Rama insist on being worshipped on the exact spot where he was born, even at the expense of 2500 Muslim and Hindu lives?

Will Lord Rama not be happy with us if we worship him half a mile down the road, where no Muslim will be offended, and no Muslim and no Hindu be killed?

There is an irony in the fact that most Hindus cannot go to Ayodhya anyway and therefore have to make do with second-best and, like Hanuman, worship him in their heart.



Hanuman showing Rama and Sita
residing in his heart

There is an ancient saying:

A thousand Ramas in Ayodhya will do
No good if he's not born in you.

Or as a famous Sufi saint one said:

You won't find Allah in Mecca,
Unless you smuggle him in.
Best method: hide him
in your heart,
where the mutaw'a
cannot find him.

(mutaw'a = religious police in Saudi Arabia)

Then carry him with you wherever you go. That is better than
going on pilgrimage or building temples of stone.

Do Vaishnavas reject animal sacrifice but promote human
sacrifice? Does sacrifice not mean dedicating all our ordinary
daily actions to God rather than doing something special in his
honour?

'Knowledge as a sacrifice
is greater than any material sacrifice, O Arjuna,
for all works without any exception
culminate in wisdom'
(Gita 4:33).

DON'T TOUCH MY MATE!

It is necessary for Hindus to speak up for Muslims, and for Muslims to speak up for Hindus: 'Don't touch my mate!' Criticism of the other community, however real its faults, is counter-productive, especially now. Let each community try hard to draw on its best traditions and set its own house in order. Let us make a start.

In 1992, Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin (novel: 'Lajja' ['Shame']) stood up for Hindus, condemning Muslim violence. No doubt now too, somewhere or other, a Muslim writer will reciprocate the peaceful and self-critical message of this article.

Each community must criticise and reduce its own shortcomings rather than those of the other. Such gestures can help to restore trust and ultimately create love and affection. Criticism that comes from the outside will not be accepted even if valid.

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."
(W B Yeats, The Second Coming)

Speak up forcefully for peace and against bigotry, do not mince your words, curse the gods of the bigots and show how powerless they and their lackeys are.

Let us not follow in the footsteps of those who respect no religion other than their own.

The prayers at the disputed site in Ayodhya are devil worship. People flatter their own egos by putting up a blasphemous structure which promotes nothing but bloodshed and hatred and of which every true Hindu will be ashamed. It will pollute those who enter it.

The purpose of this article is not primarily to condemn the violence which has just occurred: that goes without saying. What we have to condemn is the stubborn insistence of a group of narrow-minded people and their dumb followers on building an unholy temple on a specific site, in spite of the predictable and inevitable repercussions and violence. This insistence is wrong, even if the Muslim protests and violence were unnecessary and misguided.

CAETERUM CENSEO

For centuries Germany and France were at each other's throats in numerous wars. After the worst of these, World War II, wise politicians (specifically French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, 1950) suggested that the two countries should devote themselves to prosperity instead of patriotism and pioneered the European Economic Community. Germany and France are now friends within a prosperous united Europe. Both have benefited. When will our politicians start working towards a Subcontinental Economic Community leading to a union of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Shri Lanka? I am sure Lakshmi Devi (more powerful than Mara) and Uncle Sam will give their blessing, and even Muslims would not mind receiving it.

FOOTNOTES

1. Ishta Devata: one of the many manifestations of God. Hindus respect all forms and names of God but each Hindu is particularly devoted to one particular one, his 'Ishta Devata' (chosen deity). The choice of 'Ishta Devata' often is determined by family tradition or passes from Guru to disciple.
2. Mara: Valmiki, the Sanskrit author of the Ramayana (the story of Rama) used to be a highway man. Once he attacked Saint Narada. Narada asked him: 'Why are you committing these crimes?' Valmiki replied: 'To feed my wife and children.' Narada asked: 'And will they also share with you the punishment for your crimes (your karma)?' Narada went home and asked. Neither his wife nor his children were prepared to accept their share in the punishment; they wanted only the benefits. So Valmiki decided to turn to the life of meditation and asked Narada to teach him. Narada taught him to repeat incessantly the name of God, Rama. Then God would be with him and in him, for where God's name is, there is God. Valmiki, however, was at that time so thick, that he could not remember the name Rama, short though it is. He started repeating 'Mara', which means 'death'. This is the meaning of the alternative title 'Mara Worship in Ayodhya', worshipping the false Rama. As Rama can be inverted to Mara, so 'god' can be inverted to 'dog'.

Christopher Marlowe (Dr Faustus) refers to this practice in Satanic rituals or "racking the name of god" (i.e. reading it backwards as "dog"), when Mephastophilis says:

For, when we hear one rack the name of God,
Abjure the Scriptures and his Saviour Christ,
We fly, in hope to get his glorious soul;

3. PBUH: Peace be upon him

4. Prana Pratishtha: An installation ceremony in which the spirit of God is invoked to descend into the statue.
5. Ishvara: god in his personal form
6. Mughals: The Mughals were Muslims from central Asia who began to conquer Northern India under their leader Prince Babur (reigned 1526 to 1530). Policy towards Hindus varied under different Mughal rulers. Some were tolerant, but others (before and after his grandson Emperor Akbar, contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England) forcibly converted Hindus to Islam (the ancestors of the current Muslim population in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), demolished Hindu temples and excluded Hindus from public office. The disputed mosque in Ayodhya is called the 'Babri Mosque' after Prince Babur, himself a descendant of Tamburlaine (Tamerlane, Timur) and of Ghengis Khan. Of Emperor Akbar (1555-1606) we learn that he 'fully realised that the empire could only stand on the basis of complete toleration. All religious tests and disabilities were abolished, including the hated poll-tax on unbelievers. Rajput Princes and other Hindus were given high offices of state, without conversion to Islam, and inter-communal marriages were encouraged by the example of the Emperor himself. If the policy of the greatest of India's Muslim rulers had been continued by his successors, her history might have been very different.' (A L Basham: 'The wonder that was India'. Fontana Collins, London, 1971, p 482) The Mogul empire came to an end with the death of Aurangzeb (1707).
7. Aisha, Shafiq, Yusuf and Usama are Muslim names. Ashok and Dinesh are Hindu names.
8. mandir = Hindu temple
9. Vaishnavas: Worshipers of Lord Vishnu and his incarnations, e.g. of Rama and Krishna
10. Gita: A holy book of all Hindus (esteemed like the New Testament by Christians)
11. Caeterum censeo = Apart from this, I am of the opinion. The Roman Senator Cato the Elder (234-149 BC) for years ended every speech on whatever subject with the incessant repetition of 'Apart from this, I am of the opinion that Carthage ought to be zapped' (Caeterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam). Initially the Roman senate thought his proposal was absurd. But through incessant repetition of this point he eventually won them around: Carthage was attacked and destroyed in 146 BC. Carthage was to Rome what Moscow during the cold war was to Washington. The incessant talk of the need to destroy Carthage was similar to the incessant talk from the hawk-loft of the White House (USA) that Saddam Hussein ought to be killed

if the USA were to live: 'It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.' (John 11:50).

12. Lakshmi Devi: The Hindu goddess of prosperity
13. Uncle Sam: The USA

Principles underlying 'Devil Worship in Ayodhya': A personal note written to Swami NN

In writing this article, I was guided by the following principles, not all of which may be revealed in the article itself:

1. Hindus or Muslims do not want to be lectured by Christians (or a secular-Christian press), as is often the case. Therefore, as a Hindu, I am addressing only fellow Hindus.
2. I am writing as a Hindu for my own community. I can therefore permit myself to be critical, even though I am liable to offend part of that community, namely those people whom I call 'devil worshippers'.
3. The harm that is being done by the fanatics is so great that I must be extreme (potentially blasphemous) and provocative in my rejection of their false god. (This is not a case of respecting all religions and all approaches to God: more than 3000 people have died, community relations have been soured, and many more people have been made permanently unhappy.) If the devil sets himself up as god, he has to be called dog. Hence the inversion Rama <> Mara in the alternative title.
4. I am fully and minutely aware of the awful role which the nature of Islam (identical to that of Christianity) plays in such conflicts because of Islam's eagerness and because Islam and Christianity hold all other religions in contempt. That's why I am not a Christian and not a Muslim. Christianity and Islam lend themselves to fanaticism and unfortunately gradually infect Hindus (who want to get even and see advantages in aggressive tactics), so that Hinduism is in danger of becoming somewhat like Christianity or Islam in this respect (touchy about blasphemy against Hindu deities, clamouring for its rights, &c). **However, it is not now politically opportune for me as a writer to say any of this, especially not in the present context.**
5. I have therefore tried to refrain from any criticism, however deserved, of the other side. Criticism which comes from an outsider will never be accepted by a community. On the contrary, it will harden the attitudes that are being

criticised. Therefore all I can do is to openly criticise my own side (self-criticism) and make suggestions for improvement, and hope that people on the other side will write analogous pieces addressed to their own community.

6. If I want to influence the behaviour of the other side, I must not batter them by pointing out their shortcomings (which will merely increase animosity, especially if the shortcomings are so serious, so fundamental as they are in the case of Islam). Instead, if I as an outsider want to contribute to 'improving' Muslim attitudes, I must search out all instances of 'desirable' Muslim behaviour (peacefulness, having helped non-Muslims, having respected another religion, **wise** fatwas, tolerance, &c.) and propagate and praise these and point out how very Islamic these are. If I do this, well-meaning Muslim readers may be proud of such behaviours and may follow the Muslim examples I am setting out for them.


That is the reason why I have criticised only Hindu failings and not Muslim failings.

7. I also think that it is **not** in the interest of peace that religious communities get to know each other by studying each other's scriptures (as the Archbishop of Canterbury uninspiredly suggested recently). Such an approach will not show the other community in a pleasant light. It will reveal the differences, and it has little bearing on the actual behaviour of individual Muslims, Christians &c. E.g. Christians do **not** love their neighbour, and Muslims do not do everything demanded by the Koran, &c &c. Instead I emphasise (and not only in this essay) that most human beings are likeable and loveable provided you overlook anything that has to do with religion. **It is religion that makes them spiteful, unpleasant and causes trouble.**

Please read my essay in the light of these unspoken intentions. I want to contribute to peace but can do so only if I do not say everything that I think.


eof


^Raksha Bandhan starts here




Ashutosh Vardhana Yamuna's Year

Stories for the Hindu Calendar
as told in a Hindu family in a northern English town







OM, symbol of
God the Absolute




Lord Ganesh,
remover of obstacles



My Gurujji



Sarasvati Devi,
Godess of arts and learning



Sign of the sun

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Raksha Bandan, the Hindu festival of brothers and sisters

Length: 492 words = 2877 characters

e: ashutosh.vardhana@rochdalewriters.org.uk

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Date: 2002-08-22, Mk2.2

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION:

On a full moon day in July/August (22 August 2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Raksha Bandan which celebrates the love and loyalty which brothers owe to their sisters. Ashutosh Vardhana describes the customs of the festival and the philosophy underlying it.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Raksha Bandan, the Hindu Festival of Brothers and Sisters

A festival which serves to cement family relations and to honour women is Raksha Bandan, the festival for brothers and sisters. It is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Shravana, which was 22 August this year. On this day brothers visit their sisters to bring them presents, which may be of material value or merely symbolic.



These show that they care for them and that it is their duty to protect them (raksha = protection). In exchange, the sister ties a coloured thread (bandan = band) around the right wrist of her brother while saying a prayer (mantra) which calls God's blessing upon him and thereby is to protect him from misfortunes. The thread also symbolises the tie between brother and sister.

Tying the rakhi

Nowadays brothers are admonished not to think that women are feeble and helpless. They must not see their duty to help them as a right to control them. Women can make their own decisions, and it is the duty of the men in their lives (e.g. brothers) to help them realise their ambitions.

Most festivals are related to an ancient story. In olden days, Indra, the king of the gods, had been defeated in a battle with the demons. His wife (!) Sachi tied a 'bandan' round Indra's wrist with the appropriate mantra and Indra became so strong that he defeated the demons in the next battle.


If a woman feels in need of a loyal male friend or wants to honour such a friend, she can also go to a man who is not her genetic brother and make him into her rakhi brother by tying the rakhi thread. From then on this man is no longer eligible to marry her and has the same duties as 'real' brothers. This ruse has been used by women to turn a would-be lover (suitor) into a loyal friend.

NOTE

Non-Hindus should remember that Hindus believe in one GOD, the Absolute, who has no name, cannot be depicted and about whom nothing can be said. This one GOD manifests in many different forms of greater or lesser power and some of these manifestations are the 'gods' which are depicted in temples and homes, and about which so many stories are told.


Sachi was not Indra's sister, but old stories are seldom strictly logical.


^Krishna Janmashtami starts here




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Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:
The birth of Lord Krishna (Krishna Janmashtami)

Length: 1,410 words = 7,944 characters

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© 2002 Ashutosh Vardhana

Date: 2002-08-31, Mk2.1

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION:

On 31 August this year (2002), Hindus celebrate the festival of Krishna Janmashtami, the birth of Lord Krishna. Ashutosh Vardhana explains the significance of this festival. There are some striking parallels between this story and Christian stories of the childhood of Jesus.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

The Birth of Lord Krishna

GOD BORN AS MAN

Hindus believe that the one invisible GOD THE ABSOLUTE, manifests in the shape of many personal gods and appears in material form from time to time to reduce evil, to support the good and to renew his teaching for mankind.

One of the most beloved of the Lord's ten incarnations was when he came in the form of Lord Krishna, whose birth we celebrate on the day of Krishna Janmashtami.



Kāmsa about to slay his sister Dēvaki, Vasudēva intercedes
© ISKCON

In the city of Mathura, there was an evil king, Kamsa. He was told that the eighth child of his sister Devaki would kill him. He put her and her husband into prison and killed most of her children.

Kamsa is about to slay his sister Devaki. Vasudeva intercedes. Her life is spared but she has to live in prison instead.



Vasudéva carries Baby Krishna across the Yamúna
© ISKCON

When Krishna was born at midnight, the prison warders fell asleep, the gates miraculously opened and Devaki's husband Vasudeva carried the child through the stormy night and across the river Yamuna to the village of Gokula. A many-hooded serpent protected the child like an umbrella against the rain. Vasudeva exchanged baby Krishna for a baby girl (the goddess Durga) that had just been born in Gokula and took her back into his prison.

Vasudeva carries Baby Krishna
across the river Yamuna



Durga warns King Kámsa
© ISKCON

When King Kamsa came and flung the baby Durga against the wall to kill her, she slipped out of his hands, flew up into the air and turned into a fearsome woman: 'Wicked man, you cannot escape your fate. The child that will kill you lives safely in Gokula.' With that she disappeared.

Durga warns King Kamsa

KRISHNA GROWS UP

The King was frightened to death. During the next twelve years, while Krishna grew up as a cowherd, King Kamsa sent out one demon after another to find and kill Krishna. They all failed.

Krishna was strong and intelligent beyond his years and gradually revealed to the people around him that he was God in human form. When he was twelve, he killed King Kamsa.

He later became a nobleman and took part in the great battle of Kurukshetra, a battle of good against evil. This battle is symbolic for the battle of life (jihad) which takes place within us and in which we try to overcome our lower desires.



Immediately before this battle, Krishna preached to the soldier Arjuna the wisdom that is contained in our holy book, the Gita. It teaches us how we should combine the duties of everyday life with our spiritual goals.

Krishna teaches Arjuna the wisdom of how to conduct the battle of life (written down in the Gita).

CUSTOMS

The customs of Janmashtami vary in different parts of India and outside India. Communities outside India have to adapt to different work patterns and the societies in which they live. What people do also varies greatly from one person to another.

There are many **similarities** between the stories of **Janmashtami** and of **Christmas**.

Like Jesus, Krishna was born at midnight. People fast for 24 hours preceding that auspicious moment. While working they fill their mind with the presence of the Lord by doing japa, i.e. they murmur the Sanskrit mantra (prayer) 'Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya' (Praise be to Lord Krishna), similar to the continuous repetition of the 'Jesus prayer' (Lord Jesus Christ,

Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner) which is popular in the Russian Orthodox church.

We clean and adorn our homes. We prepare delicacies, especially milk-based sweets (butter and cream were Krishna's favourites). They are taken to temple as an offering to God.

Families mark the passage from their front door to their meditation room with a child's footprints (made of flour and water), symbolising the entry of Baby Krishna.

When the work is done, we bathe and put on fresh clothes, the usual preparation for prayer and meditation. Some people read the entire Gita (18 chapters), the 'New Testament' of the Hindus, in their native language or listen to its being chanted in Sanskrit.

At sunset people assemble in temple where they sit for hours and chant bhajans (devotional songs). The image of Baby Krishna will be hidden behind a curtain. Only the priest has access.

At the stroke of midnight, the curtain will be opened, and the image of Baby Krishna be revealed sitting in a swing which is suspended from a horizontal pole and can be rocked by pulling a string. Devotees will ring bells (the size of ships' bells), blow conch shells, strike gongs and shout their welcome for the new-born saviour (cf 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise' [Psalm 98:4]). The greater the noise the better. This will continue for several minutes.

The image will be bathed in milk and honey and rinsed, a token of love and respect.

As people file out of the temple, they will each pull the cord of the swing a few times and rock the baby, thus expressing their love for the Lord in the form of a child.

They will receive from the priest prasad (food that has been offered to God and thereby been sanctified) and will now break their fast and go home for a joyful and sumptuous family meal at about one or two in the morning.

I remember an occasion about thirty years ago when I was a visitor to New Delhi and stayed in a hotel overlooking a savannah. I did not know where to find a temple. Deep in thought, I went for a walk at about 11 p.m. and heard chanting come across the dark savannah. I walked towards it and found myself outside a tiny, open-air temple, surrounded by a crowd of about 200 worshippers. A model of the town of Mathura (similar to a Christian belen/crib) had been built.

In the crowd was the hotel's manager who recognised and invited me, the lonely visitor, to share the Janmashtami meal with his family. I will never forget that.

KRISHNA AND CHRIST

The town of Mathura is to us what Bethlehem is to Christians. King Kamsa was afraid of being killed by Krishna. Therefore (like King Herod in the Christian tradition) he sent out his minions to kill all newly born children in Gokula. Krishna managed to escape.

Krishna was first worshipped by cowherds (as Jesus was worshipped by shepherds) and he grew up in their company.



Many of his youthful deeds and misdeeds are similar to those told in the gospel of St Luke and in the apocryphal gospels about infant Jesus. He was adored especially by the young women in his village and is often depicted in their company, especially that of his favourite Radha. Their tender relationship symbolises that between the human soul and God.

Krishna with his beloved
Radha, image of God and the
human soul



Krishna is often seen playing a flute (murlī), with which he breathes life, the human soul, which is one with God, into us. His worship is very much based on bhakti, devotional love, rather than rational analysis (theology or philosophy), commandments and laws, and fear of punishment. We believe that everybody will come to him in the end, in this life or another.

Krishna with his flute. He breathes the divine life into us.


Krishna taught us to see God in everything that surrounds us, especially in all living creatures, not only humans, but the earth, plants, all animals, and, of course, all human beings, however lowly, or even 'wicked'.

Respect for all life, as opposed to exploitation of nature, is inculcated into us through our worship of (respect for) the cow, who is symbolically our mother, since we drink her milk. We treat her as sacred so that she can remind us that ***all*** nature is sacred. On paintings Krishna is therefore often seen in the company of cows.

Jesus was twelve years old when he displayed his wisdom in the temple of Jerusalem. Krishna was twelve when he accomplished the first great task for which he had been born, namely when he killed King Kamsa.


The Gita, which contains his teaching to mankind, is to Hindus what the New Testament is to Christians. It teaches us to pursue happiness by doing our duty without hankering after reward, and let God take care of the reward (if any).


^Navaratri starts here




Ashutosh Vardhana Yamuna's Year

Stories for the Hindu Calendar
as told in a Hindu family in a northern English town







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Sign of the sun

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:
The Battle of the Devi: The story of Navaratri
(Inspired by the Devi Mahatmyam)

Length: 9,962 words = 55,286 characters

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Date: Starts 2002-10-07, Mk1.8
Starts 2025-10-13

TECHNICAL NOTE

This file contains two texts related to the story of Navaratri:

- Text 1: The story of Navaratri as told to a Hindu family in a Northern English town
- Text 2 discusses the implications of this festival for the status of Hindu women.

In Text 1, two fonts are being used:

- Plain pica (like this: Plain Pica) for the passages in which the narrator interacts with Yamuna's family and explains the traditional plot
- A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

The world is never totally good or totally evil. Good and evil are in continuous struggle with each other, in the world and in our hearts. Sometimes, when evil has become too strong, God, in an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, intervenes and reduces the power of evil. The stories of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna, two male incarnations of Lord Vishnu on earth, describe such occasions. Now, on one occasion, the powers of evil (demons) had become so strong that none of the male gods on his own could have overpowered them. They therefore got together and created a female god, The Devi, The Goddess, by merging all their powers and weapons. The Devi then took on the demons and subdued them for a long time. Her battle with the demons is commemorated during Navaratri, the festival of Nine (Nava) Nights (Ratri). Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

The Battle of the Devi: The Story of Navaratri

A Hindu story as told in a Hindu family
in a northern English town.

(Inspired by the Devi Mahatmyam)

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Note:

The story is intended to be read in nine daily instalments.
Each day is dedicated to one of the nine names of the Devi.

DAY 1: SHAILAPÚTRI, DAUGHTER OF THE MOUNTAIN:**INTRODUCTION**

On the first day of Navaratri, when the Pandit approached his brother's house, he was greeted by such a row that he did not bother to ring the bell but let himself in. Sobbing Yamuna threw herself into her uncle's arms.

"Go to your room instantly, Dinésh," commanded Father, "and stop bullying your little sister! Grow up, become a man, pass a few exams, get a respectable job and chuck those moronic mates of yours with whom you are hanging around wasting your time, before you think you are something better only because you are a boy! You aren't."

"I was only teasing her," argued Dinésh.

"No, you were bullying her: you keep doing it. Once in a while is a tease, but to keep at it is bullying, and you are grating on all our nerves. You ask her to make you tea and coffee. She isn't your servant. There is nothing special about you because you are a boy, and Yamuna is no less clever than you. Privileges for boys, those were the olden days, but today things are different. Whatever you can do Yamuna can do, and probably better if you continue being useless and lazy as you are now. She dedicates herself to what she does and tries to learn. Do something valuable and become a man. Then we will respect you for what you have done. You have to earn our respect; it is not your birthright. Now go to your room and study, till dinner is ready!"

Dinésh stomped away and banged the door shut. The Pandit released Yamuna and embraced his brother: "What was all that about?"

"Oh, the usual thing with boys, especially the eldest. His mother has spoilt him. He thinks he is something better even though he has achieved nothing. By contrast, Yamuna is ambitious and thinks she will be capable of anything. She has been talking of wanting to become a brain surgeon or a geneticist and create entirely new kinds of plants and animals. She has such a vivid imagination. Whenever Yamuna talks of her dreams and ambitions, Dinésh makes fun of her and tries to destroy her self-confidence. In our modern world, we no longer need women who are subservient to men; both men and women have to be strong and equal, as our goddesses are. The boy has to understand that. Only personal achievement gives him a right to be proud. To achieve something we have to work, not to hang around and waste time with those goons he calls his mates. That's it. Last year we went to the Farnborough International Air Show ..."

"Yes, and when I am big I will be a fighter pilot, but Dinésh keeps laughing at me, and today I got angry and I beat him, and he pulled my hair, and ..."

"Enough now," interrupted Father, "would you like some chai, Brother?"

"I will make it," offered Mother.

After dinner, the family went into the sitting-room where they had put up a shrine in honour of the Devi, whose great deeds and battles they would be celebrating for nine days. The pictures showed her many manifestations -- as Durga and Káli, as Parvati, Lakshmi, Saráswati and many others, one goddess in many forms, with many stories, many lives and many names.

As every year, over the next nine days the Pandit was going to tell the story that had given rise to the festival, to make sure it would not be forgotten, the children could learn it and pass it on to their friends and to future generations.

"I do not want to listen to this nonsense. It's not true anyway, it's nothing but fairy tales. Only women and old people believe such rubbish," said Dinésh, "my mates are waiting for me."

"You sit down and listen, especially today after your disgraceful behaviour. You can talk to your mates tomorrow. I think there is something this festival can teach you. First try to understand our religion properly. Then you can decide whether it is as useless as you clever youngsters say," Father said.

"Do you like science-fiction, and violence and war films?" asked the Pandit, "Today's story will come pretty close to it, I am sure you will enjoy it. You do not have to believe it, just imagine it like a film, enjoy it, and try to understand what it teaches. Perhaps it will make more sense when you grow older. But if you do not know it at all, it can never make any sense and cannot help you when perhaps you need it."

"Okay," grudged Dinésh and sat down in his sulking corner.

Yamuna sat down at the feet of her uncle and the Pandit began.

THE CREATION OF THE DEVI

"A long, long time ago, the asúra (demon) Mahísh made war on the dévatas (gods) for a hundred years. The gods lost and Mahísh became king of heaven.

He sacked all the gods from their posts, took over their ministries and gave them to his brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles, to his sons, daughters and nephews -- and even to his barber. This kind of government is called "nepotism", favouring one's relatives and one's barber, and Mahísh had invented it. His family grew rich, and everybody else was made poor.

The gods had lost all their power and wandered all over the earth like beggars, tramps or refugees. Some of them even came to England, but the Minister of Immigration called them 'economic migrants', 'bogus asylum seekers' and 'scroungers' and would not let them in. That's why some people say that England is a godless country; but I don't think that's true. It's just a bit difficult to find God, wherever you live, even in America, God's own country. We have to search for him. Sometimes he hides in a refugee or in a beggar and sometimes even in a government minister or an atheist, especially in an atheist if truth be told because he feels quite safe there and no half-hearted devotees will bother him there with silly requests. That's why atheists are God's favourites. They give him shelter.

The defeated gods went with Bráhma to the palace of Shiva and Vishnu and asked for help. They described their miserable existence in heaven which was now ruled by this evil tyrant.

Vishnu, Shiva and Bráhma and hundreds of smaller gods stood in a circle, facing each other and discussed their predicament. They were furious. What indignity! How terrible for the world to be ruled by demons! It is bad enough with the politicians we have, none of whom are saints. But to have rulers who are positively demons, wicked demons? It doesn't bear thinking of. And yet, it had actually happened.

They were gods with the bodies and minds of men, 'male gods' as we say. They had terrifying powers but none of them was strong enough to defeat the demons. Not even great Vishnu, who normally comes to the rescue when evil gains the upper hand, could match these demons. Not even Shiva with his trident, who had won so many battles, could help, nor could his son Kartikéya, the great hero.

"We must create a being," said the gods, "which has the combined strength of all of us and can make it grow by her own power.

The gods frowned. When great gods frown, each of them emits more energy than a laser gun in space wars. The shafts of radiation emanating from the foreheads of the gods intersected in the centre of the circle, and the energy concentrated in that spot was truly terrible. It was like a mountain blazing. It was worse than a nuclear explosion or the big bang. It was brighter than a thousand suns.

That terrible blaze assumed a female form.



Lord Shiva's light created her face, Lord Vishnu's light created her arms, Lord Bráhma's light created her feet, Agni's light created her three eyes, the light of Cándra, the moon, created her breasts, the light of the earth created her hips. Yáma's light created her hair. All the gods contributed to her body, to her beauty and to her power.

The gods were full of joy when they saw her: they knew that she would liberate them and restore order and happiness to the world.

One by one they stepped forward and gave her copies of their own weapons and attributes. Shiva gave her a trishul (trident), Vishnu a discus, Agni (god of fire) a spear, Indra (king of the gods) a thunderbolt, Yáma the "staff of death", Súra (sun god) gave her laser guns pointing out of every pore of her skin. Kála (time) gave her a shining sword and shield. Kubéra (god of wealth) gave her a drinking cup which was always full of sweet juice. Shésa (god of serpents), gave her necklace of serpents covered with jewels. Himávat (king of mountains), gave her the lion on which she rides.

The Devi was conscious of her power and beauty. She was the mother of the universe, she was the universe all compacted into one person. There was nothing but her. She was all the gods in one, she was all the creation in one, she was gods and creation at the same time, she was you and me, she was all there is, uncreated and eternal, she was God the Absolute, she was Bráhma -- but if Bráhma is the Absolute at rest, then she was Bráhma radiating energy and in action. She was more conscious than any of us can ever be. That consciousness radiated from her. If we feel consciousness, it is her consciousness radiating through us, for she lives within us. She is our self, our soul, the Self.

The Devi raised her thousand arms and shook her innumerable weapons, she roared triumphantly and sent out a defiant unending laughter. It filled the skies, it filled the universe, it echoed among the galaxies, the mountains shook and trembled, and the stars jumped out of their trajectories. The world was terrified at that unearthly sound.

The gods and the rishis (sages) prayed to her and praised her greatness.

The demons understood that her roar and her defiant laughter was a declaration of war and mobilised their armies. Mahish with his armies flew towards that provocative noise and saw the Devi filling the three worlds, that is the world of the gods, the world of human beings and the world of the demons, the underworld.

Where she walked, the earth bent under the weight of her body, her crown scraped the skies, and her arms reached into all corners of the universe."

"That's enough for today," said the Pandit, "tomorrow I will tell you about the Devi's great battle. It will be rather gory. I hope you won't be frightened, Yamuna."

Yamuna shook her head.

"Will you be with us tomorrow night, Dinésh?"

"I'll think about it. It could be worse, I suppose,"

DAY 2: BRAHMACARĪNI, VIRGIN:**THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

On the second day of Navaratri, after dinner, the family returned to the sitting-room. Dinésh was no longer sulking. The doorbell rang. Dinésh's friend Ashók entered: "May I join you, Panditji? Dinésh has told me about this story you are telling. Sounds rather good. I'd like to hear what happens. Couldn't do any harm to know the story, could it? At least I'll know what this festival is all about. If you don't mind."

"You are welcome, sit down," said Panditji with a smile and continued his story:

"The Devi was waiting when Mahísh, the asúra, arrived.

A terrible battle began. Mahísh sent his generals into battle with their armies, one by one, and all were defeated. These were huge armies, much bigger than those we employ today even in the biggest of wars. Much was at stake in this war. It was not only a battle of some good people against some bad people, it was a battle of good against evil.

The first army had 60,000 tanks: it was defeated. The next army had 10 million tanks: it was defeated. An army of 15 million tanks arrived: it too was defeated. The Devi could not be beaten.

Unlike Mahísh, the Devi did not send her generals into battle, but leading her armies she fought personally, from the beginning. The demons tried to kill her by hurling their weapons at her, showering her with lances, arrows, missiles, but effortlessly she intercepted or destroyed their weapons or hurled them back at those who had attacked her.



The lion on which she rode during the battle was shaking his mane and strode over the battlefield like a forest fire.

The slaughter on that battlefield was greater than anything we can imagine today: it was covered with cut off heads, arms, legs, crushed bodies, bodies sliced into two, bodies with broken necks. Heads were rolling down mountains like avalanches. There was blood gushing out of wounds, there were intestines hanging out of slashed bellies, soldiers were vomiting blood and screaming for mercy.

The soldiers fought with such passion that some of them, even after their heads had been cut off, stood up again and continued to fight. At that time, the terrible Dance Music which teenagers today use to torture their parents, that music, whose merciless beat hits your eardrums and your stomach like a sledgehammer, was invented to soften up the enemy."

The boys smiled. Panditji pulled a little book out of his pocket, the *Devi Mahātmyam*.

"Here is what the Scripture says: 'Others, though rendered headless, fell and rose again. Headless trunks fought with the Devi with powerful weapons in their hands. Some of these headless trunks danced there in the battle to the rhythm of the musical instruments. The trunks of some other great demons, with their swords, spears and lances still in the hands, shouted at the Devi with their freshly severed heads, 'Stop, Stop'" (*Devi Mahātmyam*., p. 38, 62-65)

So many demon soldiers, battle elephants and horses were killed that rivers of blood flowed across the battlefield, so deep that the armies needed boats and had to build bridges to cross them.

The gods were sitting in the clouds, which in those days were as comfortable as settees or armchairs are today, and watched the battle from above, like children watching a horror film on television or like fans watching their team in a football stadium. They were supporters of the Devi to a man. They waved their scarves and banners, applauded their champion and her armies and showered them with flowers to express their joy and admiration."

Dinés was sitting bolt-upright and looked at his uncle with blazing eyes as if he were in the midst of battle himself or, to say the least, watching his favourite horror film.

"The story is turning out better than you thought, isn't it?" asked Panditji. "Do you want to go to your mates now, or first hear it to the end?"

"It's not too bad, let's see what happens. My mates will wait. I'll shock them with the story afterwards. They don't know religion is like this. Perhaps we can turn it into a computer game."

"Fine, then I'll continue."

SINGLE COMBAT WITH CIKSHÚRA, CÁMARA AND MAHÍSH

"Now Cikshúra, one of the greatest demon generals, almost as great as Saddam Hussein, advanced with fresh armies. The Devi destroyed his army within seconds. It was as if they had been burnt up in an instant by the inconceivable heat of a nuclear explosion. So Cikshúra advanced alone against her. She killed his horses and his charioteer and broke his bow and arrows with one of her missiles.

But Cikshúra was a very brave demon. He grabbed a fresh sword and rushed against the Devi on foot. He hit the lion on the head and the Devi on her arm, but his sword broke into splinters as if it had been made of glass. The Devi intercepted the lance which he then threw at her and killed the great man.

Next General Cámara, riding a battle elephant, went on the attack. First the Devi destroyed his weapons, then her lion jumped on the elephant's head and wrestled with the general until both fell on the ground. There they continued to fight each other with the most terrible blows until the lion jumped into the sky and came back down again at such a speed that he tore off Cámara's head with a single blow from its paw.

The Devi killed several more generals in single combat, in furious fighting in which no holds were barred. She killed the first by hurling rocks and trees at him, the second by biting him, hitting him with her fists and slapping him so hard that he died. She ground the third one to powder with blows of her club, killed the next one with a dart and another two with her arrows. Mahísh was fast running out of generals.

Being an asúra, Mahísh could assume any form he liked, man, woman, old, young, bird, bee, priest, beggar. His natural form however was that of a buffalo, and that was the form in which he chose to participate in the great battle.

He was, of course, not only like an ordinary bull in rage, even though that can be terrifying enough, he was a super-dimensional bull. My grandfather says he knew someone who witnessed the battle and Mahísh was bigger than King Kong or the Tower of London."

"Why did Mahísh fight as a bull?" asked Yamuna. "The Devi rode a lion, and lions can kill all other animals, including bulls. So why did he not turn himself into a super-lion? As a bull he did not stand a chance."

"He was stupid and thought because he was strong he was better than anybody else", (the Pandit looked at his nephew). "He underestimated the Devi and her lion. It did not even occur to

him that his natural body, that of a bull, could be inferior to that of a woman or a lion. That's why he thought it best to fight in his natural body.

This part of the story does not only deal with strong animals and strong men, but also with people, big companies, organisations and countries which are rich and powerful because they have money, weapons, or big armies. Often they bully small people, sometimes they win, but usually not forever (even Hitler's and Stalin's empires eventually came to an end, and all of us have to die one day, even if we are great dictators). Small people have to use their brains to resist them. Mahísh presents the power and behaviour of brute physical force: determination to win and crush all opposition, great strength but little brain. Of course, against the Devi he did not stand a chance, because she was both clever **and** strong. I suppose that's a good combination."

"I wonder what I could do to become strong. Could I go to karate classes?" asked Yamuna.

"Well, that would certainly keep you fit, but do you think you are clever enough already?" said Father.

"Yes," beamed Yamuna.

"What a cheek!" muttered Dinésh.

"What about learning hátha yóga?" said the Pandit, "that will strengthen your body and your mind and even help you to concentrate and meditate. I will lend you a book about it and if you like the idea, you could go to classes. But now let's get back to Mahísh, the monstrous bull."

"This huge monster, then, charged about the battlefield and terrified the Devi's army. He knocked his enemies down and killed them by hitting them with his muzzle, by stamping on them with his hooves, by hitting them with his tail, and by spearing them with his horns, by charging at them, by turning around himself like a spinning top, and even by knocking them over with the force of his furious breath. He managed single-handedly to exterminate the whole of the Devi's army. He then made for the Devi herself, wanting, for a start, to kill her lion. He was, of course, in a fury and therefore did not behave quite rationally.

Until the day of this great battle, the earth had always been quiet and motherly. There had never ever been an earthquake. But when Mahísh pounded the earth with his hooves, he started a violent earthquake. The earthquakes which we feel today, even the strongest and most terrible ones, are only mild aftershocks of that first earthquake of all earthquakes which happened so many millions of years ago. You can imagine how terrible it must have been then, if we can still feel it today.

In his rage Mahísh picked up mountains with his horns and tossed them into the sky, some of them so high that they took hundreds of thousands of years to fall down again. Their remnants can be found all over the earth, and, since our scientists believe that they originally come from outer space, they are called meteorites.

He lashed the oceans with his tail so that they overflowed and flooded all cities at the coast. He cut the clouds with his horns, and his angry breath was so powerful that he blew mountains into the air as if they were particles of dust.

The Devi threw a lasso at Mahísh and tied him. He changed himself into a lion. She cut off his lion's head (in memory of this great deed, some English pubs to this day are called 'The Lion's Head'). He changed into a man holding a sword. She shot him with arrows. He became a big elephant, grabbed the tail of her lion with his trunk, tried to drag him away and toss him into the air. The Devi cut off the trunk with her sword. Mahísh resumed his bull shape.

Now, at last, the Devi became angry, she drank a cup of mádhu (mead, fermented honey), her eyes became red and she let out a furious laughter. The asúra hurled mountains against her and she turned them into dust with her arrows.

'Just let me drink another cup of this mádhu', she scorned, 'and then I will finish you off.'



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She jumped on top of Mahísh, and stamped on his neck so violently that his soul jumped out of his mouth. At this moment, she rammed her tríshul (trident) into him like a fork with which to hold him and cut off his head with her sword. Without the head his soul was unable to return into his body and he was dead.

Since Mahísh and his fellow asúras had been noble demons, who hated God with all their hearts, hated him as intensively as saints love him, their death was a blessing for them, for they obtained mukti (liberation) instantly and became one with Bráhma, the ultimate reality."

"That's strange," said Yamuna, "these demons were rewarded for hating God and fighting against him?"

"It may seem strange in comparison with other religions, but we know that God does not think like human beings, she is infinitely generous and easy to please.

Our scriptures mention many different ways of worshipping God; for example as a man or as a woman, as a lover, as a mother/father, as a child (Bala Krishna), as a friend and as an enemy. The asúras worshipped him/her as an enemy.

You can worship in any form you like, and God, She or He, will accept you.

The asúras were obsessed with her. The Devi likes that.

What she does not like are people who just do not care, who are indifferent to her. They have to remain on earth for life after life, until they begin to care, one way or another.

For the asúras, being on earth was the same as being in prison or in hell.

Being united with God is like being in paradise, being infinitely happy. By fighting the asúras on the battlefield, the Devi purified them, and by killing them, she allowed them to escape from the bodies in which they were imprisoned."

END OF BATTLE SCENE 2: PRAISING THE DEVI

"The gods thanked the Devi and praised her: 'You bring good fortune to the houses of good people, bad fortune to the houses of the wicked, intelligence to the hearts of the learned, faith to the hearts of the good. May you protect the world!'

The goddess said: 'I allowed these asúras to fight me in battle. I purified them with my missiles. By killing them, I allowed them to escape from this earth and enter heaven. I have done this because they worshipped me as bitter enemies. Now this earth is a happier place, and the asúras are happier people. They have attained moksha. When anyone is in trouble, he should think of me, and I will free him from fear. I will help him to escape from poverty and pain.'

That's where I'll end for today, and tomorrow I'll tell you about the Devi's second great battle."

"I'll be back," said Ashók.

In fact, the following evening, his friends Sárvada and beautiful Haimávati joined the family.

DAY 3: CHANDRAGHĀNTA, USES THE MOON AS A BELL:**THE SECOND WORLD WAR:
THE DEMONS ARE TRAPPED BY THE DEVI'S BEAUTY**

The Pandit began:

"For a while, perhaps some thousands or millions of years, people could live in peace, ruled by the gods and fairly unmolested by the demons. But then two new demons, Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha, became powerful and gradually conquered both the world of man and the world of the gods. The gods remembered the promise of the Devi: 'When you are in trouble, think of me, and I will help you.' They went to Himávat, the King of Mountains, and there they prayed to the Devi who, as Lakshmi, is the wife (or active power) of Lord Vishnu."

"So the Devi and Lakshmi are the same goddess?" asked Yamuna.

"Yes, the Devi appears in many different forms, has different names and different tasks."

The Pandit pointed at each of the pictures in the shrine erected in honour of the Devi:

- "As Lakshmi she is the goddess of wealth and the wife of Vishnu.
- As Durga, Sati, Uma, Parvati and Káli she is the wife of Lord Shiva.
- As Saráswati, the goddess of arts and of learning, she is the wife of Bráhma.
- As Sita she is the wife of Lord Rama and the model of all Hindu wives.
- As Rádha she is the girlfriend of Lord Kríshna, and the model of all lovers.

Every God has her as his wife, his Shákti, his creative force, and without her he is powerless.

The Devi is Jagadám̐ba, the mother of the universe, she is Bhúmi, the earth. She is manifested in the cow whom we treat as our mother because she gives us her milk to drink. She is manifested in our mothers, our wives, our sisters, our girlfriends and in all women.

All the male gods are really the same, just different manifestations (forms) of the one Bráhma. In the same way all goddesses are manifestations of the supreme Devi. Ultimately the Devi and Bráhma are one absolute reality, identical with each other and identical with everything that exists."

And Panditji continued the story:

"As the gods were praying, Parvati, daughter of the Mountain King and wife of Lord Shiva, arrived to take a bath in the river Ganga. When she saw the gods praying, she asked: 'Who are you praying to?'

'We are praying to the Devi that she may help us against the asúras Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha.'

At that moment a most beautiful goddess, none other than the Devi, came out of Parvati's body. Parvati became dark blue: the Devi, Parvati, Durga, Lakshmi, Saráswati and Káli in reality are one.

She decided to trick the two demons into battle. First she took a solemn vow: 'I will not marry any man unless he has first vanquished me in battle.' Then she went to a remote part of the Himalayas in order to meditate and gain power.

Soon the news spread that a woman of unearthly beauty was living in the Himalayas. The paparazzi came from all over the world and published the Devi's picture in the glossy society magazines. The television crews arrived in order to film her and tourists descended in great hordes in this lonely region. King Himávat had to create an infrastructure for them, build a high altitude airport and many high-rise hotels to accommodate them all.

Soon the two top-demons Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha heard about this beautiful woman. They were the most powerful men on earth and already owned the greatest specimens of everything else the earth had to offer, the most beautiful jewels, the largest diamonds, the most expensive paintings, the largest palaces, the best football players, the most powerful computers, and the most exciting Nintendo games. They therefore felt that their honour and their reputation required that they should also own this most beautiful of all women.

They already had many wives, but that didn't matter because kings in those days were allowed to have as many wives as they could conquer, feed and keep happy. They were also convinced that any woman, however beautiful, would be greatly flattered to be wanted by two such important people as them. What, after all, is the worth of a beautiful and learned woman compared to that of a rich man or a great dictator! Or so they thought.

They therefore dispatched a helicopter with a messenger to the Devi.

The messenger said: 'My lord and master, Shúmbha, King of the Asúras, has sent me to give you the following message: "I am the most powerful man in the universe. Even the gods obey me. I own the most expensive jewels in the world. I own the rarest of elephants and the rarest of horses, both of which used to belong to the gods. You are the most beautiful of women. Therefore we must have you too. You can marry either me or my younger brother Ni-Shúmbha, who isn't a bad match either. If you marry me, you will be the most wealthy woman on earth. Think it over, but make it snappy, I haven't got all day.'"

This was the charming way in which powerful Shúmbha proposed to the beautiful Devi.

The Devi smiled inwardly because she saw that her plan was working; she had trapped a powerful man through her beauty.

'Tell your master this: "Everything he said is true. He is the most powerful and the richest man on earth, even richer than Bill Gates. I would love to marry him. But unfortunately I am not allowed to. I have taken a vow that I will marry only a man who is as strong as myself and who will conquer

me in battle." Therefore your master must come personally and fight with me. Once he has vanquished me, I will marry him. And don't forget to tell him that I am a fighter pilot. So he won't have an easy time.'

The messenger said: 'You overestimate your strength. There is no man in this world and not even a god who is stronger than my master. Therefore you, a woman, do not stand a cat's chance in hell. You had better go to Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha voluntarily so that you can go with dignity; because, if you don't, you will be dragged there by your hair.'

The Devi replied meekly: 'Yes, that would be terrible. Shúmbha is so strong, and Ni-Shúmbha is such a hero, isn't he. I really shouldn't have taken that vow. But now that I have taken it I have no choice.'

"I think that's enough for today", said the Pandit, "let's continue the story tomorrow. What do you think?"

Dinés had been pondering something for a long time and asked: "You said the great demons were rewarded for hating God; they were given instant moksha the moment they died. Does that mean that I will be rewarded if I am really bad, run wild, torment my sister and disobey my parents, take drugs, steal cars, break into houses, torture animals, join a gang of terrorists, shoot policemen, plant bombs in supermarkets, and make a great nuisance of myself?".

The Pandit responded: "Do you think that will make you happy? Why don't you try and see if you are up to it. Then see what will happen. To start with, you will feel sorry for your parents and your sister; for you aren't really nasty and cruel. Then your sister and your parents will stop loving you. You will be unhappy, you will go to prison, you will be in the company of unpleasant people, you will get sick and you may die. And you won't go to paradise, because all the bad things you did, you did out of laziness, stupidity, indifference, selfishness and greed, not because you were obsessed with God. Then karma will make sure that you are punished not only in this life but in the next life as well. It is not easy to hate God with all your heart.

Mahísh obtained moksha and was not reborn. But you will be reborn as an animal or a person with a very unhappy life, perhaps poor, or handicapped, or with other misfortunes, until you have paid for what you did in this life.

Worshipping God as an enemy is a very difficult thing to do. Very few people are so strong. People who are strong enough become either saints or demons. Most of us are not fit to be either. We are in the middle. We must take the easy route to God, the path of bhákti, of love, devotion, service and sacrifice, being kind and helpful to everyone around us, doing our duty, be it at school or at work or as parents, and doing that as a sacrifice to God without expectation of reward. The Gita and the Shrímad Bhágavatam explain to us how to follow that path. That is the easy path to God."

DAY 4: KUSHMÁNDA, PUMPKIN:**THE WAR STARTS**

On the fourth day of Navaratri, the Pandit's instalment of the story was very short:

"The Devi had taken a vow that she would not marry any man who could not defeat her in battle. The demon Shúmba had proposed to her through a messenger and had expected that she would immediately agree to marry him and be grateful for the chance. The messenger returned to Shúmba and told him that the beautiful woman wanted him to come personally, yes personally, and do battle with her.

When Shúmbha heard that reply, he grew very furious and said some words which a gentleman should never use: 'What a bitch! Who the ***** hell does she think she is! This shrew has to be taught a lesson. We will soon tame her. Send my general Dhumralocána with his army and kill anyone who tries to stop us.'

Dhumralocána set off with 60,000 asúras. The Devi refused to follow him unless forced. So Dhumralocána walked up to her in order to grab her hair. She just uttered a contemptuous 'Hm!', and instantly Dhumralocána was reduced to ashes. This is how instant coffee was invented.

Now the asúra army attacked the goddess but, within a few minutes, it was destroyed by the Devi's lion.

When Shúmbha heard that his army had been exterminated, he tore out his hair and sent an even bigger army commanded by Cándá and Múnda, two even better and more powerful generals."

DAY 5: SKANDAMATA, MOTHER OF KARTTIKEYA:**THE BATTLE OF THE GENERALS**

On the fifth day of Navaratri, there were seven eager youngsters in Yamuna's sitting-room, thinking that their religion wasn't so boring after all and worth finding out about.

Panditji continued his tale:

"When the new armies arrived, they saw the Devi, smiling gently, seated upon the lion on a huge golden peak of a great mountain.

When the army started attacking her, the Devi became terribly angry and her face became as dark as ink, as you can see on this picture here. She frowned, and out of her forehead Káli suddenly emerged, with a most terrifying face and armed with a sword and a noose.

She had a staff with a skull in place of its knob, a garland of skulls, her dress was a tiger's skin, she was emaciated, her mouth was wide open, her tongue lolling out. She had deep-sunk red eyes. She filled the sky with her furious roars and slaughtered and devoured the army of asúras. She picked up whole elephants and flung them into her mouth. She devoured the horses and their riders, and even the chariots, and crushed them with her teeth. She crushed the enemies with the weight of her foot or the weight of her body. She caught their weapons with her mouth and crushed the steel with her teeth as if it were sugar.

The army was destroyed, and brave Cándá and Múnda attacked Káli personally hurling thousands of discuses at her. Káli simply caught them all in her mouth and ground them to dust with her teeth. Káli was enjoying herself, she gave out a loud roar, and as she laughed, her white teeth were gleaming in her dark face.

Káli chopped off the heads of Cándá and Múnda, held them in her hands and, with loud laughter, brought them to the Devi: 'I have killed these two lowly generals on your behalf, but you yourself can kill the kings.' "

DAY 6: KATYAYANI, DAUGHTER OF KÁTYAYANA**SHÚMBA HIMSELF ARRIVES ON THE BATTLE FIELD**

On the sixth day of Navaratri, the Pandit continued:

"Now Shúmbha himself set off with all the powers he and his allies could muster. Huge armies approached. The Devi twanged her bow-string, the lion roared, the Devi clanged her bell, but Káli roared even louder than all of them together. The armies surrounded the Devi, Káli and the lion.

Then sháktis issued from the bodies of all the gods to join in the battle."

"What are sháktis?" asked Yamuna.

"Sháktis are the female companions, or wives, of the male gods. They represent the creative energies of the gods. They are female copies. So out they all came to do battle."

"They had the same weapons, the same attributes, the same powers and similar names as the gods from which they had issued. From Bráhma came Brahmáni in a chariot drawn by swans, from Mahéshvara (Shiva) came Mahéshvari riding on a bull. Vishnu's shákti came in the form of a boar. Even Vishnu's incarnations sent out their own sháktis: from Narasímha, the man-lion, came Narasímhi, the woman-lion, shaking her mane in fury. From Índra came Aíndri armed with a thunderbolt.

The Devi sent Shiva as her ambassador to Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha to make a last peace offer before the final showdown: 'Let Índra and the gods rule the world. You can go and live in the underworld in which there is plenty of space and where there are no heating bills to pay. If you do not accept this offer you will have to fight, but you will lose and be annihilated.'

The greatness and power of the Devi became obvious by the fact that she could use the great Shiva (whose very name 'Máha-Déva' means 'the great god') himself as her ambassador, i.e. as her servant, and he would go at her command. Therefore she became known as Shiva-Dúti, the one who employs Shiva as her ambassador (dúti)."

DAY 7: KÁLARATRI, TERRIBLE NIGHT**KÁLI VANQUISHES RÁKTA-BÍJA**

"The asúras did not accept the Devi's ultimatum and the battle recommenced. The Devi and all the Sháktis were fighting, each with a particular weapon. The laughter of Shiva-Duti was so terrifying that whole battalions of asúras fell down dead just by hearing it, and she devoured those asúras who had fallen. The asúra armies were largely destroyed and took to flight. But, like in a football match, when one great player has to leave because of an injury and is replaced by a substitute, so in this battle the asúras had generals and heroes with special talents in reserve. Therefore the great asúra Rákta-Bíja decided to make his entrance.

There was no asúra as dangerous as he for he was not only strong and valiant himself but his body was constructed to guarantee the survival of his family.

He was the first virus in human history, except that he was not microscopic but gigantic in size. Miniaturisation came much later in the course of evolution.

Each drop of his blood that fell on the ground immediately produced a clone of Rákta-Bíja identical in size and in valour. The blood of each of these clones was capable of producing further clones in exactly the same way. Fighting and wounding Rákta-Bíja and his 'brood' was therefore as pointless as trying to put out a fire by pouring petrol into it. Every wound inflicted on a Rákta-Bíja only made his side stronger. Antibiotics and anti-virus programs had not been invented yet. Within a few minutes there were hundreds of thousands of Rákta-Bíjas fighting on the battlefield and the number increased exponentially every minute.

The asúras fought valiantly, but really they did not have to do any fighting at all. If they had just stood still and allowed their blood to flow, soon the whole earth would have been filled by them and left no space for a single god (and how boring that would be!) or a single human.

Therefore Káli opened her mouth wide and out came a huge tongue. She drank up Rákta-Bíja's blood and that of his clones before it could hit the ground. That is the reason why pictures of Káli always show her with a bloody tongue lolling out of her mouth. She and the Devi raced over the battlefield and devoured the great heroes. None of them was a match for the Devi and Káli. While the Devi continued to inflict innumerable wounds on Rákta-Bíja, Káli went on lapping up his blood. Eventually all blood had drained out of Rákta-Bíja and he fell lifelessly to the ground. The mátris (mothers, sháktis), who had won the battle, were intoxicated with blood and danced with joy."

DAY 8: MAHAGÁURI, GREAT GÁURI**THE DEATH OF NI-SHÚMBA**

"Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha were blind with rage when they saw that their great armies had been destroyed as if theirs were tin soldiers. They now went into battle personally, the mightiest of the mighty, to attack the Devi. A wonderful 'duel' ensued, with a woman on one side and two men on the other. Both had mastered a large array of different weapons and used them one by one. But the Devi destroyed them all. When young Ni-Shúmbha had spent all his weapons, the Devi flattened him with her battle axe so that he lay unconscious on the ground.

As Shúmbha approached, the Devi blew her conch, twanged her bow-string and clanged her bell, the lion roared, and together they produced such a terrifying noise that the whole universe trembled with fear. Káli jumped into the sky, came down to earth with a thud, like a wrestler, and hit the earth with both hands so violently that their noise drowned all the other sounds.

The Devi shouted to Shúmbha: "Brave hero, surrender!" But Shúmbha said something very rude and did not give up. He was no weakling and a good match for the Devi. While she intercepted and destroyed with her arrows the missiles he threw at her, he did the same with hers. Now the Devi angrily struck Shúmbha with her trishul (trident), and he fell unconscious to the ground.

Just then, his brother Ni-Shúmbha regained consciousness and shot his arrows at the Devi, Káli and the lion. She intercepted his arrows. Ten thousand arms then grew out of his body and from each he hurled a discus at her. It was like in a snow storm, except that instead of snow flakes deadly discuses were whirling in the air. The Devi destroyed them all with her arrows.

Ni-Shúmbha, in extreme frustration, rushed at the Devi with a dart. Before he could reach her, the Devi flung her dart at him, and it pierced his heart.

Out of the hole in his heart issued another person, as big and brave as him, and, trying a last bluff, shouted 'Surrender!' at the Devi. She just laughed at his smartness and persistence even in death. He would not and would not give up until truly all was lost and there was no breath left in his body. She cut off his head with her sword, and at last Ni-Shúmbha, the great demon, was dead.

The lion devoured the demons he had killed, and Káli and the Devi devoured the others."

"This is an example to you youngsters that you should always tidy up after you have finished a job. Tidying up is as important as the job itself. The Devi, Káli and the lion left the battlefield spick and span. If you are ever on a battlefield, you must do the same: you can never know when you may need it again."

The youngsters looked at one another and tried not to smile. Was the Pandit serious with this advice? They hoped that they would never have to tidy up a battlefield, especially not in this way.

THE DEATH OF SHÚMBA

Shúmbha was desolate to see his beloved baby brother slain and cried: 'Foul!'

'What do you mean "foul"?', asked the the Devi.

Shúmbha said: 'You only win because you let all the other goddesses (sháktis) do your fighting for you. A thousand against one, what's fair in that!'

The Devi answered: 'I am all alone in the world. All these gods and goddesses are only my own powers, see how they return into me.' And all the gods and goddesses and all the other fighters on the battlefield were sucked back into her body. Suddenly the battlefield was empty: only the Devi and Shúmbha remained.

The Devi raised a hand above her head and pointed it to the sky. She moved her index finger and lo, there was a grandstand for the gods, thousands of them, tilted downwards and equipped with safety belts so that they could watch the battle comfortably without falling down.

She pointed her left hand forward, flicked her index finger, and instantly there was a grandstand for the asúras, extending in depth and length as far as the eye could see.

She stretched out her right hand, flicked her index finger, and instantly there was a grandstand for human beings, men and women, because women were tough those days and not afraid at the sight of blood."

"Couldn't she have done all this at the same time?" asked Yamuna, "she had enough arms for it."

"I'm sure she could, and probably she did, but it is more fun to tell it one after another so you can enjoy this bit of the story three times and imagine it better.

'Are you sitting comfortably?' asked the Devi with a disarming smile.

'Bhavatú' (Amen), murmured the gods with folded hands.

'Yes,' cheered the humans like one man.

'Yeah', roared the asúras and beat their hairy chests.

'Then I'll begin', said the Devi ... and turned towards Shúmbha: 'Here I am alone, now show what you can do!'

One by one Shúmbha hurled his weapons at the Devi: arrows, darts, spears, axes, boomerangs, harpoons, discuses, and high-tech missiles of all descriptions: V-2, Trident, Polaris, Poseidon, Tomahawk, Pershing, Harpoon, Exocet missiles (Shúmba had the prototypes of all of them), and many magic ones, which our generals today can only dream of. But none of Shúmbha's missiles reached the Devi: she was able to intercept and destroy them all with her weapons or sometimes just with the sound of her voice. Shúmbha was no woman's fool either. None of the Devi's weapons touched him: he was able to destroy them all with his.

In the end Shúmbha had no missile weapons left, his bow was broken, his chariot destroyed. He grabbed his mace and rushed at the Devi. She split the mace with her arrows. Shúmbha had only his body and his fists left. He launched his fist against her heart with all his might so that her body shook. She hit him on his chest with the palm of her hand and he fell down, but he jumped up in an instant, grabbed the Devi and jumped high into the sky. There they wrestled furiously without rules and without constraint, no holds were barred, the gods were flabbergasted, never had they seen such a sight. Thus they wrestled for long time until the Devi managed to grab hold of him, lifted him up even higher and hurled him down to earth. Any airplane coming down with such a speed would have been crushed to atoms.

But Shúmbha was built of sterner stuff. He ignored the earthquake that his fall had caused, got up and immediately rushed at the Devi again. She decided to put an end to the spectacle and gave him the coup de grace. She pierced his chest with a dart, he fell down and was dead."

"Enough for today, tomorrow I'll continue", said the Pandit, and the family went off to the mándir (mandir).

DAY 9: SIDDHIDÁTRI, GIVER OF PERFECTION:**GENERAL REJOICING**

"Today is Durgáshtami," said the Pandit, "the eighth day of the lunar month, on which we worship Durga, the Devi. You have now heard how she was created by combining the powers of all the gods, that all goddesses with their many different forms and names are one, and that deep down all gods and goddesses are merely, like the whole universe, like all of us, manifestations of the same Bráhma, who is neither male nor female but who simply IS."

"I thought his name was Bráhma, the creator," asked Yamuna.

"Many people get that wrong. 'Bráhma' and 'Bráhma' are two different words. 'Bráhma' is an individual god, like Vishnu and Shiva. But Bráhma is God the Absolute, and nothing exists beside him. Bráhma comprises everything, all personal gods, and even you and me. You need not believe in Bráhma, nor disbelieve, because Bráhma simply exists, whether you believe in him or not. If you do not believe in Bráhma, you do not believe in yourself, and you are welcome to that attitude. But this is not easy to understand and you have to study our religion for a few more years to get what it really means. It has taken the rishis (our saintly sages) a few thousand years to sort it all out.

Now let's return to the Devi. She had destroyed all her enemies, and celebrations could begin, just as we celebrate today."

"The world was happy again. There was perfect peace (for a while anyway). The clouds disappeared and the sun shone gently, the rivers returned to their beds and the sea became calm and retreated to its proper shores.

There was no more violence on television.

Husbands treated their wives with the greatest respect realising that they were manifestations of the Devi. Wives treated their husbands with equal respect because they knew that the Devi and all the male gods are nothing but manifestations of the same Bráhma, God the Absolute, who is neither male nor female but who simply IS.

All remembered the ancient Hindu saying, more ancient even than the laws of Manu: 'Husband and wife must treat each other like God', and this auspicious saying was painted above every front door. Marriages became happy, and there was no more domestic violence. No more, that is to say, until this truth was forgotten and people thought that the letter of an ancient law was more important than its spirit."

"I thought," interjected Mother with a twinkle in her eye, "the Laws of Mánu said that women must obey their fathers, brothers or husbands, but not the other way round. Otherwise why is it wrong for Dinésh to expect his sister to serve him?"

"That is a good question, Sister," said the Pandit, "but the ancient Scriptures were written to serve the needs of society as it was then. Just as Lord Vishnu comes to earth in different ages and different bodies when he is needed, so the Scriptures have to be interpreted in a different way when society has radically changed.

Today women are equal to men and work not only in the family. They have the same brains, the same desires and must be allowed to pursue their ambitions and develop their potential.

We, of the older generation, feel less need for that and do not feel it as strongly as the youngsters. But the future is in the hand of the youngsters, and they must have their way if our culture and religion is to be preserved: it must live in a new way. Our religion changes along with society, even though, like all religions, it always lags behind by a century or so.

We used to believe that Harijans were untouchable. Today we know that they are of equal value to all other castes.

Dharma keeps changing, so much so that a seven-volume history of dharma has been written. I am not alone in saying that our Scriptures have to be reinterpreted.

Look at this book I have been reading for the last couple of months. It is a commentary by Swámi Tyágisanánda on the 'Nárada (Narada) Bhákti Sútras'. He writes:

'Scriptures of mankind are nothing but the records of the spiritual realisations of Rishis (sages); we see many of the Scriptures woefully neglected not only by the masses, but even by the educated and so-called religious people. They have practically become dead.

The reason for this is that the experiences recorded therein have become meaningless to the later generations. The truths preached by the ancient sages **must be felt to be useful to us at the present time also ...**

the truths of the Scriptures must be re-lived before our own eyes, and **their usefulness demonstrated publicly**, before the ordinary man adopts them for guidance in his live. ...

Again, every old text is not a Shástra. **What may have been useful in the past may cease to be so in course of time under other circumstances and surroundings.** Progress in culture and civilisation also necessitates many re-adjustments in the Scriptures. ...

Only such rules and texts deserve to live as can stand those repeated tests.' (Commentary on Sutra 12, page 104-105)

There is no question therefore that today men and women have to treat each other with respect.

My own Guruji once said: 'Hinduism is not what it is or was, but what WE make it; that includes women and men, young and old.'

And now I'll continue the story.

The gods invited the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra to come and perform together with the Gandhárvas (celestial musicians). Leonard Bernstein conducted the European Anthem: "Freude, schöner Götterfunken" (Joy, wonderful spark from the gods), and the choir sang: "alle Menschen werden Brüder" (all human beings become like brothers and sisters). The Germans have always been great friends of Indian culture.

The asúras packed their bags, agreed to return to their old kingdom in the underworld, live there peacefully, introduce democracy and the rule of law. They received big loans from the Intercelestial Monetary Fund to rebuild their ruined economy, repair the war damage, modernise their industry, buy state-of-the-art computers from America, and they applied to join the European Union and to become human at last.

Delegates of the humans, the asúras and the gods held a summit conference and said:

'These great battles and their lessons must never be forgotten. We will therefore institute a great festival. On the eighth (ashtami) day of the month of Ashwin (about October) we will worship Durga (the Devi) and call her day Durgáshtami.

On the eight preceding days we will prepare ourselves for this great day by commemorating the great battles the Devi has fought (and still secretly fights) to rid the world from evil -- well, until it returns again. Together with Durgáshtami that makes nine (náva) days and nights (rátri). We will therefore call this festival Náva-Rátri, the Nine-day-Festival or rather the Festival of the Nine Nights.

During this festival we will attend the mándir (mandir), have darshan of the Devi in all her manifestations: Durga, Káli, Parvati, Saráswati, Lakshmi, Sita, Rádha, Bahúchari, Khódíar and many more. We will worship her through her pictures and murtis, bring her fruit and flowers. In her praise, we will chant the "Devi Mahátmayam" which describes her birth and her glorious deeds. Especially in Bengal she will be worshipped with great fervour.

Since the GujaRatis are so irrepressibly vigorous, they will re-enact the Devi's great battles by dancing in her honour for nine days and evenings. When they play gárba (dance) and ras (stick-dance), the clacking and beating of the sticks will remind them like a faint echo of the clanging of arms during those terrible fights, but to them it will simply be an occasion of great joy when men and women, young people and old, even toddlers, come together to enjoy themselves and to worship the Devi in dance with their bodies as well as their minds.'

Thus the humans, the gods and the asúras decided, and so it has been done ever since."

"And what would you say are the lessons of this festival?" asked Father.

"God dwells in equal measure in men and women. Women are as intelligent and talented as men. They must develop their talents. Husbands must respect their wives and brothers their sisters

because the Devi is manifested in them, just as God is manifested in all beings and in all creation. Never stop a sister from wanting to become a fighter pilot: the Devi is on her side. Never beat a woman, for the Devi will see you and revenge her. Love and respect every woman as you would love and respect the Devi. If you do, the woman will make you happy. In God, men and women are one, just as Bráhmaṇ and the Devi are one."

So spoke the Pandit, and they all set out to go to the mandir and celebrate Durgáshtami.

When they returned from the mándir (mandir), Yamuna went to bed and sent one last thought to the Devi, who was intelligent, beautiful and strong. "I'll show'em!" she said and fell asleep.

* * *

Text 2

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:
Celebrating the Divinity in Woman
(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)

Length: 1,170 words = 6,760 characters

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Date: 2002-10-14, Mk2.2

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(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashutosh Vardhana is a Hindu. He grew up in Europe and, when he is at home, lives in Yorkshire, England. He studied at London University. He is a keen student of comparative religion and now writes fiction, poetry and essays. He has produced many academic publications. His 'creative' work has been published in Dipika (London), Writers' Forum (Bournemouth, UK), Scavenger (Osage City, Kansas, USA), The World of English (Peking), Asian Image Lancashire (Blackburn, UK), Gujarat-Samachar (London), Asian Leader (Rochdale, UK), Vremya Po and The Globe, Almaty (Kazakhstan), and Pphoo Magazine (Calcutta) and on various websites. He travels extensively and is best contacted by e-mail.

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 14 October this year (2002), Hindus celebrate the festival of Durgashtami, the worship of Goddess Durga. From 7 to 15 October they celebrate Navaratri, the Nine-Day-Festival, during which the great battles of the Goddess against the forces of evil are commemorated. Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer who lives in England, explains what the festival means to Hindus.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Celebrating the Divinity in Woman (The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)

Whenever evil becomes too powerful on earth, God appears in order to 'tidy up' by punishing bad people and by teaching us how to lead good and happier lives. That is the basic meaning of those of our festivals where God goes into battle with demons, for example the festivals of Lord Rama (Ram Navami, and Diwali), of Lord Krishna (Janmashtami) and of Durga Devi (Durgashtami).

The ancient stories speak of battles with chariots, lances, arrows and magic weapons, of good kings and bad demons, but what is really meant is the battle between good and evil in our hearts. The stories are meant to encourage us to live better lives. The battle fields are within us.

There was once a demon king so powerful that none of the gods (all male), not even Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva, could oust him. Therefore all the gods came together to create a 'supergod' with the combined power of all of them. That supergod was a woman, the Devi.



The Devi went into battle against the demon armies. They despised her because she was a woman, a weak woman, as they thought. But she, who was in fact identical with Brahman, the Absolute, defeated all of them.

Navaratri, the Nine-day-Festival (nava = nine, ratri = night), commemorates the battle. During this period we worship the Devi (God in its manifestation as a woman) and invoke the nine names she has as the Devi. We also worship her in her different manifestations, e.g. as Kali and Durga (especially in Bengal), as Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva, generally as Shakti, and under any of the innumerable names used by her devotees.

Durga Devi riding into battle with the weapons of all the gods

As Shakti, the Devi is the creative power, the active power, of the male Gods. Without her they cannot do anything. Therefore every male god has his Shakti, his consort, his creative power: Brahma has Sarasvati, Vishnu has Lakshmi, Shiva has Parvati, Rama has Sita. Just as all male gods are ultimately the same, so are all the goddesses.

Navaratri is celebrated differently in different parts of India. In Bengal it is the greatest festival of the year.



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Stick dance (Ras) of Gujarati children at Navaratri

Gujaratis in Blackburn (UK) dancing ras, the stick dance

We Gujaratis dance for nine evenings round a shrine of the Devi. The noise of ras, the stick dance, where the dancers hit each other's batons, is an echo of the noise of the great battle.

On the ninth day of Navaratri we celebrate Durgashtami (ashtami = eighth day of the month), the climax of the worship of Durga. On the eve of Durgashtami, an unmarried girl under ten is worshipped as a personification of the Devi. This ceremony is called Kumari Puja: the worship of the young girl.

Apart from the personal lesson to fight evil within us, the festival also teaches us something about relations between men and women.

They gradually change over the centuries in society and in our religion, which reflects and informs that society, so much so that a great Indian scholar (P V Kane) had to write an eight volume book about the history of dharma (right and wrong), i.e. about the way in which notions of right and wrong in Hinduism have changed over the centuries.

They continue to change. That is good. Our religion grows organically (like a tree) and adjusts itself to the needs of our society.

That is the reason why for us there is not only one incarnation of God, and why for us there is no last prophet for all times, but that God appears again and again on this earth, as she is needed.

It saves us from the dangers of fundamentalism (of which we too must be wary), of sticking rigidly to the letters of ancient scriptures which were written under different circumstances. It is meant to make sure that we do not kill people, commit acts of terrorism or vandalism (Ayodhya 1992) for the sake of such dead letters.

Our highest commandment is 'ahimsa': avoidance of violence. It tells us to practise our religion with moderation and common sense.

Our youngsters do not have to turn away from our religion and our culture in order to enjoy a modern life-style. The two are not incompatible. They can do so within the context of their ancient religion and culture, and they must fight for the right of doing so rather than walk away.

Such fights are part of organic growth in a religion. For us there is no clear dividing line between the sacred and the profane.

The story of the Devi shows woman far superior to man. That is a useful message, especially in view of the fact that many other ancient texts suggest that woman is inferior. This festival helps to restore the balance.

Our ancestors had good reasons for demanding that women be obedient to their husbands, fathers and brothers, and we have good reasons, today, for renouncing that notion. The lesson we must learn from this festival is that woman is equal to man.

Therefore when an ancient Hindu scripture said, 'Treat your parents as God, treat your husband as God, treat your teacher as God, treat your guest as God,' today we have to add, with equal vigour and authority, 'treat your wife as God', which is another way of saying: 'Treat every woman as God.'

An ancient Sanskrit verse puts it quite plainly:

yatra naryastu puhyante
ramante tatra devata

Wherever women are treated with respect
the gods rejoice and bless that place.

^eof