

# NAVRATRI – THE WORSHIP OF MAHADEVI

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by

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The worship of Mahadevi—Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati—which is prevalent in India, is a religious festival, an occasion for great enthusiasm socially, and people revel in the freedom to express their feelings for the divine superintending power which is regarded as the source of this universe.

Every aspiration that originates from the mind of a human being has several facets and interpretations. When something happens, does anyone pause to think why anything happens at all? Why should anything occur? We generally attribute events in the world to some cause that is visible to our eyes or is calculable intellectually. To that extent we can find out why things happen in the way that they happen.

We have great scientists in this world who are proficient in finding the causes of things; and as science advances, the meaning of 'cause' receives newer and newer interpretations. When it poured rain, religious observers thought that a divinity called Indra was lashing forth his Vajra (thunderbolt), a

weapon which he wields in his hand; he whirls the forces around, and there is the downpour of rain. The rainbow was considered as Indradhanush, a bow wielded by Indra after the rainfall. We attributed divine causative factors behind visible phenomena: a bow wielded by Indra after the rainfall appears as the rainbow. But science has nothing to do with religion. It believes only what it sees. As we cannot see Indra in the skies, science cannot agree that he is the cause of rain.

What do we see with our scientific eye? Here, also, observations started advancing gradually from crude perceptions to finer and finer subtleties. There were philosophers both in the West and the East who thought that originally God created cosmic waters, and He brooded on these waters at the beginning of creation. A poem in Sanskrit says that God created waters, and everything emanated from the waters.

There are others who think that this Earth itself is a chip, a block shot off from the orb of the Sun, and evolution took place gradually on this planet over the course of endless time. But why all these things happen was also a question of the scientific mind. They happen because there are causes behind causes. There are minute molecules which are the causes of solid objects such as a rock, for instance. Everything that is solid in appearance is molecular in its structure; and there scientific observation during the medieval period ceased. But then it advanced and discovered finer and finer potentials behind the molecules. Forces seemed to be whirling like eddies in a vast sea of energy everywhere, and it was thought and believed, by mathematical calculation as

well as observation and experiment, that the whole world of solid matter is some sort of condensed energy. Energy, even in its gross form like electricity, has such power that it can break solid objects to pieces. If an adequately powerful voltage of electric current is passed through a mountain, the solid mountain will crumble to pieces and be reduced to smithereens. Such is the power of even electricity.

These causative energies which are supposed to be at the back of all occurrences were further analysed by more and more concentrated observational processes, and it was not easy to understand why such a variety should be there in this creation, even taking for granted that the cosmic sea of force is manifesting itself as material substances. The variety of individuality was inexplicable. This was a further advance in modern techniques of scientific observation, whereby it was observed that I differ from you and you differ from me—everything differs from everything else, nothing is equal to another—because of a mysterious activity taking place in the various centres of this cosmic sea of force, though we cannot imagine differentiations in a vast sea of equilibrated energy.

For instance, we do not see difference in the water of an ocean. However far we may travel on the surface of this water, everywhere it is the same water. We do not have one kind of water in one place in the ocean and another kind of water in another place. It is a variety of a uniformly distributed nature. But it appears that the world is not made up of a sea of this kind because there is a dramatic differentiation of everything from everything else. Why do you differ

from me in every manner and in every way? Even the RNA and DNA principles of medical science, which are supposed to be the determining factors of the cells of an individual's body, do not produce identical individuals.

Why are we born in different psychophysical states or conditions? Modern scientific inward analysis is based on what is called the quantum mechanics of observation, whereby it is seen that there is an action and interaction taking place between centres of force in this vast energy ocean. There is a central pressure exerted at one spot, and that pressure will be of that character, that intensity, that specification, that form and significance as is its relation to other such centres in this vast sea of energy. It is very difficult to understand what all this means. A particular action of a particularised centre of energy is not an offhand action of that location independently by itself, but is universally determined by its connections through tentacles that it manifests through millions and millions of centres of that kind, so that the world of centres is more a bundle of relations of one with another than a heap of individual solid centres of activity.

We are reminded here of what Buddha said long ago in a similar strain. There is movement only, relativity only, fluxation only, process only, and nothing is stable and located in one place continuously. Even a burning flame in a lamp is not a solid flame. It is an emanation which is jetting forth with rapidity, forces impinging one on the other, so that it is like the flow of the river which looks like a continuous mass of water. Such is a flame, a burning

fire. “The world is burning fire,” said Buddha. From this statement one can discover any meaning.

Why does this happen? The scientist has his own answer. There was an original action of the universe, and that original action is the motivation for every other subsequent action. This original action is called by many types of descriptive epithets. Some call it the Big Bang; a large sound was produced. What would be that sound which became the cosmos? We cannot imagine what it is. They posit some such thing as the original cause, which broke the universe into two parts—half this way, half that way. This is corroborated by the Upanishads, the Manu Smriti and the Mahabharata. So what they are saying is not a fairytale. There seems to be some truth behind it because we have it said even before scientists were born. The Manu Smriti says a big *anda* was there, a cosmic egg which split, as it were, into two parts. We may call one part gold and the other part silver. Who broke it? Scientists cannot answer this question. Who split the universe into two parts? “He became the All. He was the All, is the All, and shall be the All in the future. He, being All, created Himself through Himself,” says the Purusha Sukta. *Tasmādivrāḍajāyata virājo adhipūruṣaḥ, sa jāto atyaricyata paścādbhūmimatho puraḥ*: From Him arose the cosmos; from that arose the presiding principle of the cosmos; from that also arose that which decides what is to happen in this universe after this split took place.

The beginning of the concept of power, or *shakti*, seems to be hidden here when we are told that one part was cut off from the other part. This is also the

concept of Ardhanarishvara, in our religious parlance. Lord Siva is half man and half woman, but not half in the sense of two differentiated irreconcilable parts. It is an androgynous totality. Lord Siva is not a half-man, and the other part is not segregated from him. It is his energy, which cannot be dissociated from himself.

Descriptions of this are attempted in scriptures like the Yoga Vasishtha, the Vishnu Purana, etc. where we are told that the relationship between one part and the other part—Siva and Shakti, and Ishvara and Nari in this Ardhanarishvara concept—is something like the relationship of sesame to the oil which is immanent in it. Water which has liquidity imbedded in it, fire which has heat inseparable from it, sugar which has sweetness that cannot be separated from it, and so on, are examples given in such scriptures as the Yoga Vasishtha. In the Vishnu Purana, the relationship between Narayana and Lakshmi is described in this fashion. Sesame is Narayana, oil is Lakshmi; water is Narayana, liquidity is Lakshmi; fire is Narayana, heat is Lakshmi; and so on.

All these are intriguing descriptions of certain mysteries which seem to be the cause of everything, and the cause of even our own selves. The person who speaks and the people who are listening and this very building, this very Earth—all these are included in the activity of this comprehensive occurrence that took place originally as, in the language of the Purusha Sukta, a *yajna* or a sacrifice. God sacrificed Himself, as it were, in becoming the universe. Why is it called a sacrifice? He became other than what He is. The alienation of Himself in the form of another than

what He Himself is, is the act of His sacrifice. When I cease to be what I am and give away part of me to somebody else—a share of me goes to another—I am supposed to be doing a sacrifice. If nothing goes from me, it is not a sacrifice. If you give charity but lose nothing by giving that charity, it is not charity. You have not shared a joy of your personality. A millionaire's donation of one dollar is not to be regarded as a great sacrifice on his part, because he has not shared his joy. He has a joy in possessing the dollars, and he has not lost that joy even in a modicum by parting with one dollar. But if half of it has gone and he has given it voluntarily, he has shared a large part of his joy also, and he has done a sacrifice.

The abundance of the joy of God's universal existence is supposed to be overflowing in the form of this creation. This is how mystics sometimes exuberantly describe the act of creation: He becomes His own power. "I am death and immortality," says the Lord in the Bhagavadgita. The Nasadiya Sukta says, "Death and immortality are shadows cast by this Absolute Being." Immortality also is a shadow; so, what is the original of it? There cannot be anything called immortal unless there is something called death. They are correlative factors, and there is no such thing as independent immortality minus its relationship with the concept of dying. Hence, even immortality is considered as a secondary factor. God transcends death and immortality, life and annihilation, because He Himself is this process.

"One who contemplates this mystery," says the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, "he himself becomes

death.” Death cannot kill that person, because death becomes his very existence. Death itself, which is so frightening, seeming to be totally outside us, controlling us in every way, is the very self of that person who knows this truth. So if the self itself is death, and death is your own self, who will kill it? That is not possible.

Thus, in the act of sacrifice of the Almighty in the form of this creation, He has become Himself in another form, as it were. Siva has become Shakti, Narayana has become Lakshmi, Brahma has become Saraswati, meaning thereby the power of transformation, the power of sustenance and the power of illumination are three phases of one great activity interconnectedly taking place in this sea of energy I mentioned—which, according to modern scientists, is the beginning of all creation.

*Namo viśvasrje pūrvam viśvaṃ tadanu bibhrate, atha viśvasya saṃhartre tubhyaṃ tredhāsthītātmane.* This is the commencement of a prayer in Kalidas’ *Raghuvamsha Kavya* made by the gods when they went to the abode of Narayana and prayed to him for redress from the sorrows inflicted upon them by Ravana. What is the beginning of this prayer? *Namo viśvasrje pūrvam*: Prostration to Thee who appearest as the Creator of all things. *Viśvaṃ tadanu bibhrate*: Prostration to Thee who appearest as the Sustainer of all things. *Atha viśvasya saṃhartre*: Prostration to Thee who appearest as the Transformer and Destroyer of all things. *Tubhyaṃ tredhāsthītātmane*: Prostration to Thee who appearest as all these three things. He does not become these three things; He Himself is the judge and the executive and the

legislature, if we can imagine such a thing. The legislature, the executive and the judiciary are not identical. They are three facets of the administrative principle. But what if one thing is all three? Previously, the king was all three. He was the judge, he was the executive, and he was also the legislative authority. He could do anything. Such seems to be the manner in which the origin of things operates in this world, and our religious interpretation of this cosmic activity is in the form of the worship of Siva or the worship of Shakti. In whatever manner we may try to understand this mystery, this mystery indeed is what lies at the back of our irresistible urge to worship Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati every year, whether or not we understand what we are doing.

Calcutta, where the Durga Puja is very famous and people begin to prepare for it a month before, is also the place of Marxists. The Marxists say, "What is there; let the Puja go on." They have all heart and soul for this performance of Durga Puja in the centre of Calcutta, and outside the premises where the worship is going on, they sell the works of Karl Marx. Whatever it is, let Karl Marx be there, but inside him there is something operating, transcending him. And so, finally, what man thinks is not the final judgement of things. All political and administrative dogmas and pronouncements have something behind them which compels them to think in that manner. We have democracies, plutocracies, aristocracies, tyrannies, monarchies. We have peace and war. We have everything in this historical process of the universe. But all this is not finally an original thought contemplated by the human being. He is forced to

move in this direction by the requirement of cosmic forces. History is a movement of forces in the cosmic structure, which manifests itself as human, political and historical procession.

There is, therefore, something that remains which is still not properly understood. When we say that God created the world, that ununderstood mystery is the mystery of the relationship between God and his Shakti—Rudra-Shakti, Siva-Shakti, Brahma-Shakti and Vishnu-Shakti. It cannot be understood. Actually speaking, if we dispassionately judge phenomena, one cannot understand what the relationship between a man and a woman is. Though we think that everything is clear, it is not clear. It will become more and more unclear when we probe deeper and deeper in the phenomenon called this duality of the sexes. It cannot be understood unless you transcend both these things. You have to cease to be a man and cease to be a woman; then you will know what the relationship is between you. As a man, as a woman, this relationship cannot be understood because you are one party. One party cannot judge another party. Therefore, human beings are not in a position to adequately understand this mystery, because who are human beings? They are either men or women. They think only in terms of their social relationship; and the connection between Siva and Shakti or Narayana and Vishnu, etc. is not a social connection. It is impossible to understand what connection it is. The fourth section of the first chapter of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad begins by placing a great enigma placed before us. *Ātmaivedam agra āsīt puruṣavidhaḥ*: The Cosmic Person, as it were, existed

in the beginning. This is the concept of the personality of God as is prevalent in Christianity, for instance, and also in the Vaishnava and the Saiva doctrines in India. God is a person.

But we have to carefully understand the meaning of the word 'person'. It is not a human person; it is The Person, Mahapurusha, the Purusha Sukta's great divinity, and Purushottama, in the language of the Bhagavadgita. This Original Being, which has become the Creator as well as the created, has also brought out an eternal problem between the relation of cause and effect, to the chagrin of all philosophers right from the beginning. Even today we cannot know how an effect comes from a cause. If the effect is totally outside the cause, we cannot say it has any connection with the cause. If it has a vital relationship, inseparably, with the cause, then there is no such thing as an independent effect at all; only the cause is there. Either way, we cannot know what has happened. The cause has not produced the effect if the effect is inseparable, in a sense, from itself. Clay has not produced the pot. Though we can carry water in a pot, we cannot carry water in clay. So there is a difference between the clay and the pot. Is there not a difference? Yes; but what is the difference? If we break the pot, it will become the original substance from which it came.

So we do not know whether there was a cause for this universe or whether this world has really come as an effect from this cause. Who created it and how did it come? The conclusion of the Nasadiya Sukta of the Veda is: "He Who created it may know it or not." The poet says, laughingly, as it were, "Perhaps He

Himself does not know how He created it.” *Ya va veda, ya va na veda*: He may know, or He may not know.

Such is the difficulty in understanding the facts of life. We are floating on the surface of wisdom as wiseacres, imagining that we are great philosophers and scientists—neither of which we really are. If we go into the depths of things, even a philosopher ceases to be a philosopher in his bedroom, in his kitchen and in his bathroom. He becomes a poor nothing. He forgets all of his wisdom because of the little pinpricks of real life that seem to pursue him like a creditor wherever he goes. And the scientist knows that he knows nothing finally because he landed on the conclusion that unless he knows himself as an inseparable ingredient in the process of observation, he will not know anything. So what does the scientist—who is a materialist, as they say—finally tell us? Know yourself and you will know all the universe, because you are involved in the very process of your trying to understand this universe which is the object of your perception, observation.

Thus, no one can understand who this Shakti is. In the great prayer the gods offered, as we have it in the *Devi Mahatmaya—Namo Devi, Maha Devi*—everything is told about her. I do not know whether to use the word ‘her’. It is a defect of language. It is not a woman. How can you regard God’s alienation of Himself as an other than what He is, for the purpose of this apparent creation, as a woman? As you will appreciate, there is no such thing as a woman or a man in this world. They are certain functional features manifested by the requirement of this interaction of cosmic forces, one related to the other,

as I mentioned earlier. Impersonality rules the cosmos, and this is the meaning of the so-called differentiation of Siva and Shakti. God is dancing; sometimes we say Shakti is dancing. We do not know who is dancing on whom. In some pictures or portraits we see Kali dancing on Siva's chest. Why is she dancing on Siva? How is it? It is the power of the cosmos dancing on its rootedness in the Absolute. Indescribable is this phenomenon.

Shakti worship—Devi worship, Durga Puja—is not a female deity's worship, as some people wrongly imagine. Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati are not females like women that we see in the world. We would describe this very Shakti as is portrayed to us in the Devi Mahatmya: Narasimhi, Rudrani, Kumari, and all sorts of names. She appeared as Skanda with spear in hand, as Narasimha with roaring lion's mouth, as Vishnu with Sudarshana in hand, as Rudra with Pasupata in hand. Can we call that great being a woman? Man has always counterposed before him this difficulty of having something opposed to him, and so is the case with woman also. This idea has to be shed before we become true worshippers of this great divinity. Otherwise it becomes a kind of Tantric cult and a ritual which may take us to any place, like a firecracker that bursts during Divali. It may burst in the sky, or may burst our face; anything can happen.

Tantra, which is at the back of Navratri Puja, is not a cult by itself. It is the basic explanation behind every activity that takes place in this universe. Even the littlest activity of ours is explicable only in terms of what Tantra describes as the meaning of life; but we are not supposed to understand this meaning merely

by snapping our fingers. Dynamite is a powerful force. It can burst open rocks and mountains, and it can also burst open our own heads if we do not handle it properly. It will turn upon us.

Therefore, this is a very, very meaningful and highly significant spiritual occasion provided to us, and not merely religious in the ordinary sense of the term, where we rise to the occasion of contemplating God in all His power in any form whatsoever in which it reveals itself and whatever form it takes—as beauty to the eyes, sonorous music to the ears, fragrance to the nose, sweetness to the tongue, softness to the touch, and intellectual exaltation for a literary genius; all this is Shakti operating. Therefore, during this Navratri occasion it is imperative on the part of an ardent seeker and worshipper of the divinity to be benefited by this worship and not merely pass through it as a kind of routine for nine days. “It has been done for so many years and now, this year, we will do it, and make a noise, and then the whole thing ends.” That is not so. Religious observances have their spiritual import, as we know very well. They are deeply significant as divine occasions provided for us to rise to that occasion now and then for the purpose of accelerating the progress of our soul towards its destination.

Thus, in our worship, what do we worship? God as He is, and God as He appears—God as the cause, God as the effect; God as the male principle, God as the female principle; God as the positive and the negative. Worship is many a time considered as an act of the soul, with no connection with the body. It is Shakti worship, Tantra Sadhana, that tells us that we should

not commit this mistake. There are levels of reality, degrees of expression of God Himself, and we have to rise from the lower level to the higher level. We cannot cut off our connection with the lower level, imagining that we are on the top, because everyone is conscious of one's being in the body. This bodily consciousness has to be transmuted, not severed. Otherwise, the soul will writhe in agony that it has lost a part of itself, and the result would be not yogic attainment but miserable rebirth. The body is not to be discarded; it has to be transmuted into a subtler energy. Molecule becomes atom, atom becomes electron, electron becomes electric force, and it becomes the space-time continuum, or whatever we call it. We do not reject the molecule for the sake of the finer essences, because they are the transmuted forms of the very things which we saw with our physical eyes—a solid object.

In spiritual practice, in Tantra Sadhana, there is no abandoning anything, no rejecting anything. We cannot reject Shakti and catch hold of Siva. That is not possible. It is like abandoning creation for the sake of the Creator. Not so is the case, says the Purusha Sukta. He *is* the creation. *Tasmādivirāḍajāyata*: From Him only everything comes.

Spiritual aspiration is an integrated march of the whole that we are, the body-mind-spirit complex, towards that total whole which is Siva-Shakti, Ardhanarishvara, Mahapurusha, Purushottama, Parabrahman, which is the All, the source of power and power itself, that great glory. We can call it only glory. Unable to say what it is, the poet of the Purusha Sukta says, "What can I call Thee? Thou art great

glory.” God, or whatever we call this great mystery, is great glory. Shakti, or whatever we call this mystery, is great glory. The universe, or whatever we may call it, is great glory. The whole of life is a great miracle and a wondrous glory. Its worship it is that we are engaged in during this holy occasion of blessed Navratri of Adhyashakti: Mahadurga, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati. May that grace be upon us all.