

॥ गंगाष्टकम् २ ॥

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GANGASHTAKAM by Shri Shridharavenkatesa of
Tiruvisanallur respectfully called as Ayyaval.

॥ श्री अय्यावाल् इति प्रसिद्धैः श्रीघरवेङ्कटेशाभिधैः विरचितम् ॥

Introduction:- Once, the author Shridhara had to perform the shrAddha ceremony wherein his ancestors are propitiated. In this ceremony three pious brahmins who are well versed in the vedas and are of exemplary character are invited. The Manusmriti gives details about the qualifications of the brahmins to be invited on this occasion. The forefathers are invoked in them. Then these brahmins are honoured, as one would do his ancestors with food, clothes and dakShina. In Shridhara's case the ceremony fell on an Amavasya day in the month of Kartika (8th month of the solar calendar). He had made all arrangements to conduct the ceremony as ordained in the shastras, including inviting the three brahmins. The food items to be served to the brahmins (who represent his ancestors) were being cooked. As the preparations were in progress, he heard the plaintive cry of a beggar. The beggar was an outcaste. He said he had not eaten for hours, and so is famished and distressed. Shridhara, who was a very pious person, saw in this outcaste the image of Lord Siva and was immensely moved. He immediately gave the food items prepared for the shrAddha ceremony to the beggar and ensured his hunger was appeased. He beggar ate heartily and went away after invoking Lord's blessings on Shridhara and his family members. Shridhara came to himself some time after the beggar went away and realised his "folly" One is not expected to serve the food prepared specifically for serving to the ancestors (invoked in the brahmins) to anyone else till the ceremony was over. He was very upset and asked the brahmins as to how he should expiate for his act. They said that the only way to atone is to take a bath in the sacred Ganges. But Shridhara felt that this was impossible to be done as the trip to Ganges will take many weeks. This implied that he will not be able to perform the shrAddha ceremony on that day. So it will be an act of ommission and will invite serious sin. Shridhara felt that the only thing to do in such a predicament is

to surrender to the Lord. So, in the following verses he explained his predicament to Lord Siva and prayed to Him to release Ganga from His matted locks as He did on an earlier occasion in response to the prayers of sage Bhagirata. The kindly Lord could not bear to see His devotee upset. So He released Ganga from His locks. The well in Shridhara's house started to overflow. Many animals like fish, tortoises came out along with the gushing waters. The villagers were astounded at the sight and were wonderstruck at the intensity of Shridhara's piety. They realised his greatness. They requested him to control the flow of the water which was threatening to flood the village. Shridhara prayed and the flow from Ganges subsided. All, including the brahmins who had been invited specially for the ceremony were only too willing to accept that if Shridhara took bath in the waters of the well it will be equal to a bath in the Ganges. Shridhara was very happy at the decision of the brahmins. He took bath in the water drawn from the well and completed the shrAddha ceremony.

This incident is celebrated every year on the Amavasya day in the month of Krittika at the village. The faithful throng in large number at the house in Tiruvisanallur village where Shridhara lived on that day every year and take bath in the water drawn from the well. They believe that the bath gives the same benefit as a bath in the Ganges.

COMMENTS. The scriptures assure that a true devotee will not encounter misfortune or problems in life. न वासुदेवभक्तानां अशुभं विद्यते क्वचित्। says Vishnusahasranama in the phalashruti. Lord Krishna gives an assurance to this effect in Gita (9-31). कौन्तेय प्रतिजानीहि न मे भक्तः प्रणश्यति। The question, then, is why should devotees like Shridhara and many others like Prahladha face problems? The answer is that the problems they face may be attributed to prArabdhham or deeds they might have committed in their past births. But, though the problem appears to be of serious nature to us, it does not appear to be so to the devotees themselves. They do not lose their serenity in the face of adversity, nor is there least change in their devotion.

घृष्टं घृष्टं पुनरपि पुनश्चन्दनं चारु गन्धं
छिन्नं छिन्नं पुनरपि पुनः स्वादु चै-वेक्षुखण्डम् ।
दग्धं दग्धं पुनरपि पुनः काञ्चनं कान्तवर्णं
न प्राणान्ते प्रकृतिविकृतिः जायते सज्जनानाम् ॥

This says that a piece of sandal wood, when repeatedly rubbed against a stone emits only a pleasant flavour. Even when the sugarcane is cut into many pieces it will continue to taste sweet only. A chunk of gold when heated in the fire again and again will give out its natural shine only. So also, the qualities of the great people will not undergo the least change even at the end of their lives. To repeat, a devotee of the Lord will certainly encounter problems. They are designed by the Lord to bring out the devotee's unshakeable faith in the Lord so that others may understand his greatness. The devotee himself never complains that he is undergoing immense suffering. But he thinks of the Lord as usual for help. He gets it and is happy that his problem is solved. In fact, Kunti-the mother of Pandavas, cleverly converted the problems into advantage. She found from experience that she thought of the Lord whenever she faced a problem. Krishna promptly appeared on the scene and helped her. So, she prayed to Krishna that she should face problems every now and then so that she can have His darshan often. She said:
विपदः सन्तु नः शश्वत्तत्र तत्र जगद्गुरो।

भवतो दर्शनं यस्मादपुनर्भव-दर्शनम्॥ Shri Bhagavatam (1-8-25).

The verses of Gangashtakam are given below. The translations of the verses given here are not exact.

शंभो भवन्नाम निरन्तरानुसन्धान भाग्येन भवन्तमेव ।

यद्येव सर्वत्र तथाऽन्त्यजेऽद्य पश्यत्यहो कोऽत्र कृतोऽपराधः ॥ १ ॥

O Lord Shambhu! I am used to repeating Your name all the time. As a result I am blessed to see You only every where. So, today I saw You only in this outcaste also. Is there anything wrong in this?

अस्त्वेष मन्तुः पितृयज्ञ निष्ठे गङ्गाप्लवो यो विहितोऽपचित्यै ।

दूरात्तु तन्नामजपेन शुद्धिः न स्यात् कथं मे स्मृतिरर्थवादः ॥ २ ॥

Let me agree that a bath

in the Ganges is the proper atonement for my transgression of the

rules pertaining to the shrAddha ceremony. But the Smriti texts say that even if one just repeats the name “Ganga few times he becomes pure. Can not I take recourse to this expediency in this situation?

त्वन्नामनिष्ठा न हि तावतो मे श्रद्धा यतः कर्मसु न प्रदग्धा ।
त्रैशङ्कवं मे पसुपान्तरायः मुच्येय तस्मात्कथं आर्तबन्धो ॥ ३ ॥

O Lord, I accept that I have not got that intense faith in Your name that I can give up performance of duties like shrAddha. Thus I am in an awkward situation, like king Trishanku. How do I get relieved from this situation?

यद्यद्य ते श्राद्धविनिष्ठिरिष्ठा कोऽहं ततोऽन्यच्चरितुं समर्थः ।
श्राद्धे वृताः पूर्वदिनोपवासाः नान्यत्र भुञ्जीयुः इदं तु खिद्ये ॥ ४ ॥

If it is Your wish that the shrAddha should be missed let it be lost. I cannot go against Your will. But, what about the brahmins who have been specially invited for the occasion? They have been fasting since yesterday and will not take food at any other place.

श्रद्धालवः श्राद्धविघातभीत्या स्वात्मोपरोधं विघणय्य धीराः ।
यत्प्रोचुरत्रापचितिं महान्तः तत्रोचितं यद्दयया विधेहि ॥ ५ ॥

These brahmins are noble souls. They have prescribed the expiation, not with any selfish motive but only to make sure that the shrAddha should not become deficient in any manner. They have not taken into account the inconvenience that they will face in the process.

गङ्गाधर! त्वद्भजनान्तराय भीत्या गृहे कूपकृतावगाहाः ।
जाने न तीर्थान्तरं अद्य गङ्गां आसादयेयं कथमार्तबन्धो! ॥ ६ ॥

On account of the fear that the chanting of Your name should not be interrupted even for a moment, I have been taking bath only in the well in the house itself. I do not know any other holy river or waters. This being the case, how will I go in search of Ganga?

नाहं तपस्वी सगरन्ववायः जाने न जहह्रुः चरति क्वेति ।
शंभो! जटाजूटमपावृणुष्वेत्यभ्यर्थने नालमयं वराकः ॥ ७ ॥

I am not an ascetic like Bhagiratha nor do

I know the whereabouts of the sage Jahnu. I am not qualified even to pray to You to release Ganga from Your locks.

गङ्गाधराख्या गतिरत्र नान्या तामाश्रये सङ्कट-मोचनाय ।
हन्त! प्रवाहः कथमत्र कूपे विस्पृर्जतीशः खलु ते प्रसन्नः ॥ ८ ॥

So, Your name Gangadhara is my refuge. I see no other way out. Oh! What a wonder! Even as i say this, I see the well overflowing! surely, the Lord has shown mercy.

गङ्गेति गङ्गेति हरति गृणहन् आस्रावितोहं दयया पुरारेः ।
कूपोत्तितोयं करुणाप्रवाहः गाङ्गश्चिरायात्र जनान् पुनातु ॥ ९ ॥

As I repeat the name “Ganga” the very mercy of the Lord has taken the form of a flood and submerged me. May this flow of the waters of Ganga purify the people in the days to come.

CONCLUSION. One may ask as to how it was possible for Shridhara to have a vision of Siva in a beggar. The answer is that he was convinced that every thing in this world is the Lord only and there is no second thing. Krishna says this in the Bhagavad Gita. He explains that He manifests Himself as the world using the power of maya. Though He is every thing in the world, people are deluded by the powerful maya. Their vision is veiled. They see the objects and overlook the God behind them. As an example, we see that several ornaments are made of a piece gold. They are given various names like bangle, chain etc. If we think a bit we will find that the word “bangle” is not a substance but only a name given to a particular shape of gold. Gold can exist as gold but bangle cannot exist without the gold. Similarly, a person can go to sleep and have a dream. The dream is not substantial and is dependant on the dreamer; but not the other way round. Such things as the ornament that have no separate existence but have shape and name are called unreal objects or मिथ्या वस्तु . They do not have a permanent existence. A bangle may be melted and made into another ornament any number of times. They are therefore impermanent or अनित्यम्। But the items like gold that lend substance to them are known as real or सत्यम्। . They are permanent or नित्यम् . They do not change when the ornament is changed. We may say that gold

pervades the bangle as, really speaking, there is no such thing as bangle. Krishna says He pervades the entire universe. मया ततमिदं सर्वं जगदव्यक्त-मूर्तिना। Gita(9-4). The right knowledge will, then, be to understand first that the ornament is gold. Overlooking the very existence of gold will be a major error and will have serious consequences. Extending this idea, we should be able to see that every thing in this universe विश्वम् is impermanent and changing. People and animals come and go. So do the seas and mountains. We learn that even the sun and the stars are not permanent but have limited life only. Thus, the universe is अनित्यम् only. These impermanent, changing objects are many names and forms of the Lord only. In other words God is the real thing or सत्यम्। . God gives substance to the world and is the substratum or अधिष्ठानम्। Krishna explains this to Arjuna and says the right vision is to see Him every where. But we are taken by the world and do not see the God hiding behind it. To start with, we do not see the Lord within us, but identify ourselves with the bodies. This results in numerous problems. We have to take care of the body, ensure it is fed and clothed properly. We require so many things to protect it and keep it happy and secure. To get all these things we have to work hard. The need for comfort and security makes us desire many things. We get a family and friends around ourselves. We import their joys and sorrows on to ourselves. This leads to likes and dislikes. We like things and people who add to our joy and comforts and dislike those who do not. This corrupts our minds. As we go on working hard for ourselves and our family and friends, we do many things that are right and many times compromise with values and do wrong things. The results are puNyam and pApam. We have to enjoy the fruits of the puNyam and pApam in our account and to do this we have to take one or many births. Repeated births and deaths is sorrow only. The only way out of this problem is to have the right vision that shows that God is in every thing and every where. Yama tells this to Nachiketha in Kathopanishad. (2-1-10). यदेवेह तदमुत्र यदमुत्र तदन्विह। मृत्योः स मृत्युमाप्नोति य इह नानेव पश्यति ॥ He says that one who sees plurality is

condemned to be born and die again and again. Krishna says that by intense devotion one gets an understanding of the Lord's true nature and gets such a right vision. Gita (18-55).

भक्त्या मां अभिजानाति यावान्यश्चास्मि तत्त्वतः।

Thus a true devotee is able to see the Lord in every being.

विद्याविनय-संपन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि ।

शुनि चैव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः समदर्शिनः ॥ Gita (5-18).

He says that a person endowed with wisdom sees the same brahman in a brahmin endowed with wisdom and humility, in a cow, an elephant as also in a dog, and in an outcaste who eats a dog. Sage Narada said the same in his advice to Yudishtira. Bhagavatha (7-14-9).

मृगोष्ट्र-खर-मर्कावु-सरीसृप्वगमक्षिकाः ।

आत्मनः पुत्रवत् पश्येत् तैरेषामन्तरं कियत् ॥

One should look upon a deer, camels, donkeys, monkeys, rats, reptiles, birds and flies as though they were his own children. What is it that makes them separate from these (own children)?

The vedic seers had this grand vision. The great vedic hymn Shri Rudram has

three hundred salutations to the Lord, not by His names, but as being available in various beings, both animate and inanimate. He is saluted as being the one available in the streams, shoals, clouds, lightnings, trees, grass, animals like horses, vultures and even in cheats and thieves! Because the hymn contains such a lofty idea its recitation is very inspiring. But, everyone may not be expected to study the scriptures like the upanishads, Gita and Shri Rudram. Understanding this limitation of the people in general our rishis had incorporated these valuable ideas in the popular hymns.

We see these names encountered above विश्वम्, सत्यः, and अधिष्ठानम् in the Vishnusahasranamam. One of Lalita's names in Lalitasahasranamam (No. 734) मिथ्याजगदधिष्ठाना। (i.e.) She is the substratum of this unreal universe, says this fact explicitly. As we keep on reading or reciting these prayers, the great vedantic truths contained in them will gradually enter our mind and change our concept of God. That is why we have the practice of pArAyaNam or reciting such stotras daily. By repeated reading we will understand that God is not a Being residing in remote places like Vaikuntha or

Kailasa, but He is very intimately available in any thing we see or hear about - including our bodies. This is said in the Narayana Suktam
यच्च किञ्चिज्जगत्सर्वं दृश्यते श्रूयतेऽपि वा ।

अन्तर्बहिश्च तत्सर्वं व्याप्य नारायण-स्थितः ।

Understanding and accepting the facts stated above will cause a great change in our personality and attitude. We will know that we are surrounded by God resident in all things and beings. So, we are never alone or away from Him. This idea will give us great sense of security, as we can get His help at any time or place.

Krishna says this in Gita(6-30).

यो मां पश्यति सर्वत्र सर्वं च मयि पश्यति ।

तस्याहं न प्रणश्यामि स च मे न प्रणश्यति ॥

Since He is in all things and beings we will show great respect and love for them. We will enjoy immense peace of mind and confidence. This is how the great men like the sages and saints could be calm and enjoyed happiness. Thus Shridhara's experience teaches us an important lesson to be followed in life.

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