Newsletter Archives

Lifting Mount Govardhana – The Crowning of Krishna as Govinda
In preparation for the impending battle with Ravana, Rama, the hero of the epic Ramayana, was building a bridge of stones to the city of the demon situated at the other end of the ocean. For this purpose Hanuman, Rama’s favorite devotee was searching around for mountains. He soon came to the mountain known as Govardhana. The mountain agreed to go with him only on the condition that Lord Rama’s feet should pass over him. Hanuman readily agreed. However, when they reached the seashore, the bridge was already complete and there was no space left for Govardhana. Knowing of Govardhana’s desire, Lord Rama promised that in the future when He would incarnate as Krishna, He would definitely fulfill Govardhana’s wish. He then instructed Hanuman to establish the mountain near the banks of the river Yamuna at Vrindavana, where in His Krishna avatara He would play with his bare feet.

How the supreme God Krishna came to lift the mountain Govardhana is an instructive incident which sheds much light on how God goes about playfully accomplishing His objectives, known popularly as Lila.

It all happened when Krishna was merely seven years old. He saw His parents along with all the villagers involved in hectic efforts for a sacrificial ritual (yagya) to propitiate and worship the demigod Indra. On asking why they intended to propitiate Indra, His father replied: "Indra is the patron deity of clouds and rain. He is the one who provides us with our cherished life-giving water. The very items which are used in worshipping him are sustained by rain. Whatever remains after we have..."
propitiated him with offerings is used as food by us. It is Indra who makes our efforts at agriculture and cultivation successful. This practice has continued since generations and whosoever wishes to do away with these traditional ritual practices either due to desire, greed, fear or hostility, can never hope for well-being in his life."

To this Krishna replied, "Father, all living beings are born according to their respective karmas, and die because of it. It is according to their karma that they experience pleasure, pain, fear or well-being. God distributes the fruits of actions to those who perform actions. He does not rule over those who don’t perform karma. Whenever everyone here is experiencing the fruit of their own actions only, what possible use can Indra be to us? People are but bound to their nature and follow their own natural disposition and proclivities. The whole world, whether it be humans or demigods (devatas), all are but established in their own nature. It is as the result of past actions that a being acquires various 'high' or 'low' bodies and leaves them. It is nothing but one's own karma that assumes the role of an enemy, friend or an indifferent person. What more can I say, karma is guru and karma is God. Therefore father, one should follow one's natural disposition, as reflected in the caste and stage of life (varna-ashram) granted to us, and performing actions in tune with it, and respect one's prescribed karma. That by which a man can easily sustain his life through prescribed actions, that is his worshippable deity. Like the woman who leaves her husband and serves a paramour can never hope to gain peace, likewise the one who ignores the deity directly responsible for his livelihood and instead worships another god, he can never hope to get happiness."

"Brahmins maintain their livelihood by studying and teaching the Vedas, Kshatriyas (warrior class) by protecting the earth; Vaishyas (businessmen) by agriculture, trade, protection of cows and by lending money against interest; Shudras (servant class) by serving these three classes. We are Vaishyas, and we have been engaged in the protection of cows since time immemorial. Father, it is the three modes of nature (guna) which are responsible for the creation (rajoguna), maintenance (sattvaguna) and dissolution of this world (tamoguna). This varied world is created through rajoguna by the mutual union of man and woman. It is due to being impelled by rajoguna that clouds shower water all around. By means of this water is obtained food on which everybody lives. What has Indra got to do with it?"

"Father, we have no towns, countries, territories, villages or houses to call our homes. We are forest-dwellers, living in jungles or on mountains. It is the mountain Govardhana that gives us fruits and food. It’s on its slopes that our cattle graze; therefore, why don’t you worship Govardhana instead? Let us now initiate a ritual sacrifice for the propitiation of cows, Brahmins and Mount Govardhana. It can be accomplished with the very materials for Indra’s sacrifice. Let milk collected from all cows be brought together and various sweet dishes, rice, pulses and various puddings be made for the worship. Let the food be offered to Govardhana. Let the sacrificial fires be properly fed with oblations by the Brahmins who are well-versed in the Vedas, and then let these Brahmins be suitably respected with lavish offerings of food and sacrificial fees. Then may food also be distributed to chandalas (the lowest of the lowest) and also dogs. Cows should be supplied with lush green grass. After that, take your own meals and then, adorning yourself with sandal paste, ornaments and putting on beautiful clothes, circumambulate the Mount Govardhana."

Understanding the significance of Krishna’s words, all seniors of Vrindavana happily accepted them and set out to worship the supremely auspicious mountain Govardhana. Brahmins started chanting sacred mantras and the young cowherds, friends of Krishna started to carry water from the river Yamuna to bathe Govardhana. However, given its colossal size, no amount of effort was sufficient
enough to transfer the required quantity of water. In exasperation the boys appealed to Krishna: "O Krishna, the Yamuna is too far from here and Govardhana too big for our efforts. How will we be able to bring in the required amount of water for the worship?"

Krishna replied: "Friends, Govardhana is very compassionate. Don't worry." Krishna then started praying: "Dear Govardhana, my friends are tired. Both Ganga and Yamuna lie in your feet. Please manifest either of them." No sooner had He said so than sprung from the feet of Govardhana, the river Ganga, known as Manasi Ganga (Ganges of the mind – as it sprung from the 'mental wish’ of Lord Krishna). Devotees can still have darshan of this sacred waterbody at Govardhana today.

Then the mountain was anointed with its water and bedecked with ornaments. Finally, a lavish feast was offered to it. Remember, here is an instruction for all of us serving and worshipping deities in our homes. While anointing, bathing, dressing or offering pure food to the deity we have to realize that it is a living entity with consciousness rather than a non-living piece of sculpture. We should love the deity as much as we love our own body, and serve it similarly.

In order to reinforce this Krishna suddenly assumed another form which was huge and situated it on Mount Govardhana. Thus now it was Krishna who was making offerings from the base of the mount and it was Krishna Himself who was also consuming the offerings. In this manner did Krishna also manifest the eternal Vedic
dictum on how to perform worship of a deity: ‘Shivo bhootva Shivam yajet,’ meaning become God and then worship God. In the Govardhana-Lila of the Lord, it is Krishna worshipping Himself as Govardhana. Thus after completing the worship in the prescribed manner, all returned to Vrindavana.

However, when people get used to receiving gifts and tokens of respect, they get so habituated to it that they are distressed if it is curtailed. They get angry thinking: "Why wasn’t I given gifts and respect this time?" They do not realize that gifts and respect are a token of the reverence in the hearts of those who give them. The receiver however, has no right to expect either respect, or any gift.

Indra had begun to accept the worship of the people of Vrindavana as his due. Therefore, when he did not receive this worship he got immensely angry. A classic example of how anger blinds one whether it is a human being or a god. Demonic instincts came to the fore in Indra and he commanded the clouds to rain havoc in Vrindavana, creating as much destruction as possible. The clouds began to pour sheets of water over Vrindavana and lightning flashed all around. Large chunks of hail fell from the sky, so much so that elevations and depressions on the ground became invisible, all being submerged under water. The people were terrified and covering their heads, their children and cattle with their bodies, shivering, they surrendered themselves to the lotus feet of the Lord, saying: "O Krishna, You are our only Lord and savior, save us from Indra’s wrath."

Krishna very well realized that it was all Indra’s doing. Then, wanting to destroy the vain pride of Indra who thought of himself as the absolute lord of the world, did Krishna initiate one of the most fascinating of all His Lilas. He proceeded to uproot with ease the mighty Mount Govardhana, much as a child would pluck a mushroom, and held it aloft playfully on the tip of the small finger of His left hand and called out aloud: "O People of Vrindavana along with your cattle come under Govardhana."
With their minds thus reassured, the residents of Vrindavana entered the cavity under Mount Govardhana. Under their loving gaze did the seven-year old Krishna effortlessly hold aloft the mountain for seven days, not at all budging from His position. On the seventh day, His friends, the young cowherds of Vrindavana said: "Krishna you have not had any rest at all. Your hand must be paining. Shift the mountain to any one of us or if you don’t want to do so, at least shift it to your other hand so that we can in the meanwhile massage your left hand. Shri Krishna replied: "My brothers don’t worry about me. If you want to help just prop up the mountain with your wooden sticks that will be helpful to me."

This is how our beloved Krishna allows us to believe that we are the "doers", while the fact is we are never doing anything which could influence the outcome in any manner. Also, love and affection, like that between Krishna and His friends, does not acknowledge superiority or mastery. Later when Krishna would boast while playing with His friends that it was He who had lifted the mountain His friends would immediately remind Him not to forget that if it weren’t have been for the support of their sticks, Krishna would never have managed to hold on to the mountain single-handedly.

Observing the mighty power he was against, Indra was humbled, and with his design thwarted, he ordered the rain clouds to withdraw. Noticing the clear sky and rising sun, Krishna called out: "O cowherds the stormy winds and showers have stopped. The rising waters too have receded. You can all come out now." When they had all come out with their belongings, Krishna replaced Govardhana at its previous position. Overflowing with emotion, the residents of Vrindavana rushed to Him. Many of them embraced Him while the gopis overwhelmed with affection and joy worshipped Him with curd and unbroken rice (akshat). Much relived and delighted, they all then headed back to their homes, which to their surprise they found dry and totally devoid of the rainwater.

Objection: How is it possible that the houses of the inhabitants of Vrindavana became totally dry?

Resolution: For this you must remember that God’s Lila doesn’t fulfill only a single purpose. He achieves multiple objectives during the course of a single Lila. To understand how the water was removed from Vrindavana, we have to once again go back to the Ramayana.

Goddess Sita, around whom the epic is woven, was very fond of feeding auspicious Brahmins in her kitchen, making food for them with her very own hands. However many fed, she was never satisfied; given the lack of appetite in the Brahmins she cooked food for. She complained of this to her husband Rama, who teased that she had still not seen a ‘true brahmin’. "Show me one then" she replied. Lord Rama then
invited sage Agastya, who was famed for once having drunk the entire ocean to flush out the demons hiding in it.

Devi Sita was delighted that she would get a chance to offer food to such an accomplished sage. In the morning, she seated him in the room just next to the kitchen and then started serving him. He started gobbling it all up even without batting an eyelid. Soon it was evening. However, the sage continued unperturbed. Devi Sita then mobilized all the resources at her disposal and continued to ensure a regular supply of food for him. Seventeen days passed away in this way. Finally exasperated, Sita took refuge with Rama and asked him to resolve the matter. Rama then gestured to Agastya to wrap up the game now. The latter suddenly burped and asked for water. However, the couple expressed their inability to supply the requisite amount of water to quench his thirst. Then did Lord Rama promise him: "A long time later in the future I will lift Mt. Govardhana, and during that time there will be a deluge of rain in the city of Vrindavana. At that time you can come and drink away all the water accumulated there. Till then, you can withdraw yourself into samadhi." Agastya welcomed this suggestion and did as told.

It was this Agastya who drank away all of Vrindavana’s water to quench his thirst.
The Council of the Elders:

Witnessing Krishna’s marvelous feat, the residents of Vrindavana became perplexed and called a council of elders. They then addressed Nanda Baba, the father of Krishna: "The exploits of this child are truly extraordinary. How come such an exceptional child has taken birth amongst us ordinary, rustic people? Such a birth truly belittles Him." Nanda Baba, fearing that the elders doubted whether his darling Krishna was truly his son or not, replied: "O cowherds, hear from me what the best of astrologers said at the time of Krishna’s birth. It was prophesied that he would be a delight of all Vrindavana and would ensure that we cross over all difficulties with His help. Those who are extremely fortunate would cherish affection for Him, and would never be defeated by enemies. This boy is similar to the Supreme Lord Narayana in His qualities. Hence, you all should not feel any amazement at His exploits."

Hearing these words, the elders of Vrindavana were satisfied and became extremely delighted. They respectfully honored Nanda Baba and ceased to feel any surprise over Krishna’s feats. However, not far from there, Krishna’s mother Yashoda too got wind of the conversation. Consequently, there started blowing in her mind winds of doubt, and not without reason too. She called Krishna and asked Him:

Darling Krishna, people doubt who you belong to?

Krishna: To you of course mother.

Yashoda: But people are saying all sorts of things. They are pointing out that though your father and I both are extremely fair in complexion, you are dark in contrast. Why is it so?

Krishna: Mother it is because of you. When I was born I too was fair like you. However, it was pitch dark at that time. You were sleeping away merrily. I was sleeplessly turning sides the whole night. As a consequence, the darkness of the night stuck to me and I became black.

Krishna’s simple mother could never disbelieve her son. She stretched out her hand and squeezed Him to her chest. The same question was put to Him insultingly by Duryodhyana, the villain of the epic Mahabharata. The following dialogue takes place there:

Duryodhyana: Nobody can say for sure who your parents are. If Nanda Baba and Yashoda are your parents then why are so black?
Krishna: I am black (kaala) because I have come as your end (kaal).

However, when Krishna’s beloved Radha asked Him the same question, His reply was markedly different:

Radha: My Dear, Even though you are so beautiful, why are you black?

Krishna: Dear Radhe, Actually I was extremely fair. However, I have become dark only to enhance your fair beauty, which is all the more magnified by contrast with my dark complexion.

Some bhaktas speculate that since Krishna always lives in the eyes of the gopis of Vrindavana, it is the black kohl (kaajal) of their eyes that has blackened Him. Or perhaps He is dark because He absorbs all the negativity in the hearts of His worshippers.

**Indra asks for Forgiveness and Krishna is Given a New Name:**

After Krishna had saved Vrindavana from the torrential rains, there descended from the heavens the sacred cow Kamadhenu (to congratulate Him) and Indra (to ask for forgiveness). The latter said:

"Dear Lord, blinded by rage, I set out to destroy Vrindavana with heavy showers and stormy winds. By ruining my efforts and therefore crushing my pride you have done me a great favor. You are not only my Lord, but also guru, nay my very soul."

Laughingly Krishna replied in a voice deep like the rumbling of clouds:

"O Indra, Highly intoxicated as you were with the pride of the majesty of indra-hood (which is but a post which is refilled by me at the beginning of every creation), I blessed you by interrupting your sacrifice so that you could live in the constant realization of my presence. Blinded by their wealth and power, people forget that I
am constantly holding vigil over them carrying the stick of chastisement. However, to prevent such persons from falling into deep hells I often demonstrate to them the ineffectiveness of their position and wealth against my own powers. You may now return O Indra, and rule over the heavens according to my commandments (because I am the Supreme Lord) and execute your assigned duties without being puffed up by pride or haughtiness."

Then Kamadhenu, the mother of all cows, came forward and said: "O' Krishna, it's you who protected my progeny, the cows of Vrindavana. Therefore, rather than Indra it is you who are our protector king. Hence, we cows wish to crown you as our Indra."

Then, Kamadhenu anointed Krishna with her milk and named Him "Govinda," the protector of cows, signifying that it is the Supreme Lord Himself who is the protector of cows, pointing out to the exceptional affection He has for these creatures.

**Conclusion:**

The divine and beautiful Govardhana Lila of Krishna operates at many levels and achieves many objectives at the same time:

1). Our pride is but food for God. However, even the humbling of our pride is a manifestation of His grace, since it affords us an opportunity to witness and remember His divine presence.

2). Krishna never lets down those who surrender to Him. Indeed, faith moves mountains.

3). He fulfilled the promise made to Govardhana at the time of Rama avatara.

4). He kept the promise made to sage Agastya to quench His thirst.
5). Mount Govardhana is one of the most potent places associated with Krishna. It is actually a visible form of Krishna. Not only did He play on its slope with His bare feet but also declared that Govardhana should be circumambulated (pradakshinam kurut – Shrimad Bhagavata Purana – 10.24.29). Anybody and everybody should circumambulate this divine mountain at least once in their lifetimes.

6). Krishna demonstrated the authentic Vedic way of worship (Shivo bhootva Shivam Yajet), where everybody, regardless of his caste or creed is offered prasadam.

7). Cows in Sanskrit are called ‘go’. The word ‘go’ also means the sense organs (indriyas). The ruler over these indriyas is Indra. Worship of Indra means worshipping our sense organs, in other words, living according to our desires. When one sets on the path of bhakti, Indra overwhelms us with the deluge of desires. Nobody can hope to win over desires (vaasana) by his or her mere efforts. It is only by surrendering unto Him that we can hope to save ourselves. Hence, the true Lord of our senses, their Indra, is none other than Krishna, or Govinda (Protector of our sense organs).

8). God wants us to worship out of affection and not fear.

9). Finally, God’s exceptional love for cows is made amply evident in this Lila. In fact, the very word Govardhana means the sustainer and nourisher (vardhana) of cows (go).
References and Further Reading:

- Tagare, G.V. (tr). The Bhagavata Purana (5 Volumes (Annotated)) Delhi, 2002.

This article by Nitin Kumar.

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