

The Two Facets of Excellence

Dr. I. Panduranga Rao

[An erudite scholar, author of fifty books, Member of Governing Council Jñāna-Pravāha and above all a devotee of the Lord. He was Director of UPSC for 20 years, Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Calcutta (86-89), Bharatiya Jnanapitha, New Delhi (89-96).]

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Embodiments of Divinity in Human form

It gives me great pleasure to share with you some of my random thoughts on His Excellency *PURUṢOTTAMA*, the Lord of the Universe who transcends all forms and norms of excellence as He is far above and beyond what is perishable *kṣara* and also what is imperishable *akṣara*. Hence, He is known as *Puruṣottama* both in the material world of names and forms *loka* and also the metaphysical plane of cosmic vision *veda*.

यस्मात्क्षरमतीतोऽहं अक्षरादपिचोत्तमः ।

अतोऽस्मि लोके वेदे च प्रथितः पुरुषोत्तमः ॥

yasmātkṣaramatīto'ham akṣarādapicottamaḥ ।

ato'smi loke vede ca prathitaḥ puruṣottamaḥ ॥

[*GĪTĀ 15-18*]

The Lord, while declaring this in His Song Celestial *Bhagavad-gītā*, clarifies that He who realises this supremacy of His eternal Existence *asti*, unparalleled Excellence *bhāti* and inconceivable Endearment *priyam* is the one who knows everything about the all-pervading Lord of the Universe and the infinite variety of forms and facets of His Excellence

manifested from time to time for the benefit and betterment of the Universe He has created. *Sarasvatī rahasyopaniṣad* presents an analytical enunciation of this divine excellence by dividing the whole universe - seen and unseen - into five categories - *asti, bhāti, priyam, rūpam* and *nāma* and attributing the first three to *brahma-rūpa* and the remaining two to *jagat-rūpa*. The first three categories can conveniently be grouped under Divine Excellence. This Divine Excellence manifests itself in various forms - in almost all forms of existence as all the atoms of this Atmic or Cosmic manifestation are inter-knit.

Of all the forms of divine manifestation, *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* are the most outstanding incarnations of the Lord of the Universe. *Rāma-navamī* and *Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī* are the most important festivals celebrated as the birth-days of these deified personalities in Indian mythology. Of the ten incarnations, *matsya, kūrma* and *varāha* do not figure prominently in such celebrations and *kalki* is, of course, yet to emerge.

Of the remaining six, *Balarāma jayanthī* and *paraśurāma jayanthī* are mentioned in the Indian almanac. These two occasions fall on the third day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of *vaiśākha - vaiśākha śukla tritīyā* which is also called *akṣaya tritīyā* supposed to be very auspicious for marriages and other sacred sacraments.

In Simhachalam near Vishakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, this day is celebrated as the day of advent of Shri Lakshmi Nrisimha Swami. The yearlong sandal-paste covering the idol is refilled on this day and the paste thus removed is distributed as *prasāda*. But this is not the birth day or the day of advent of Lord *Narasimha*. The almanac presents the fourteenth day of

the bright fortnight of the lunar month of - *vaiśākha śukla caturdaśī* - as the day of celebration for the incarnation of Lord *Narasimha*.

Vāmana jayanthī falls on the twelfth day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month *bhādrapada - bhādrapada śukla dvādaśī*. This more or less synchronizes with Onam festival celebrated in Kerala with great enthusiasm as a socio-cultural and religious festival. The accent is, however, on the relative position of the sun and the moon. This festival is celebrated when the sun is in Leo *simham*, his own house and moon is with the constellation *śravaṇam* (from which the word 'onam' is derived).

Now we are left with the two incarnations - *Daśarathānandana Rāma* and *Devakī-nandana Kṛṣṇa*. *Rāma* was born on the ninth day (*navamī*) of the bright fortnight of the lunar month *caitra* when the sun was in Aries *meṣa* and the moon was in *punarvasu* while *Kṛṣṇa* was born on the eighth day *aṣṭamī* of the dark fortnight of the lunar month, *śrāvaṇa* (*bhādrapada* in the north) when the sun was in Leo *simham* and moon was with *Rohiṇī*. *Rāma-navamī* and *Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī* are household names for these two festive celebrations in any Hindu family. In many places *Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī* is known as *janmāṣṭamī*. They do not feel the need to name the deity and take it for granted that the word *janma* refers to the birth of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*. This event is also referred to as *gokulāṣṭamī* in some places. Vaishnavites refer to this event as *Śrī jayantī*. But *Rāma-navamī* is known by the same name throughout the land. In Bhadrachalam, in Andhra pradesh, the wedding ceremony of *Rāma* and *Sītā* is also celebrated on this day with great devotion.

If we carefully study the two personalities from the point of view of the time of their advent, the purpose of their incarnation, the path they followed to achieve the desired end, their personal and private life promoting the general welfare of the people and restoration of the basic norms of law, justice, love, compassion, truth and righteousness and the impact of their missionary vision and the mode of its realisation, we find lot of things common and comparable though in certain things there seems to be some difference or variation. This perhaps reflects the clarion call of the age which they chose to attend to. Whatever it is, there is a striking similarity in both supplemented by complementary traits and trends as if it was all a pre-determined and well-programmed line of action to meet the specific needs of the age of their advent.

The source material for an analytical and comparative study of the characteristic features of these two fascinating and fantastic facets of divine excellence is fortunately provided by two unique personalities - *Vālmīki* and *Vyāsa*. While *Vālmīki* presented *Rāma*, the man of his epic vision as *Satyaparākrama*, one whose strength lies in truth, *Vyāsa* depicted *Kṛṣṇa*, the mysterious master of the multifaceted divine diplomacy as *dharma samsthāpaka*, one whose sole and ultimate objective is to establish *dharma* and restore order. The main thrust of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the march of *Rāma* in search of truth, is to demonstrate that Truth alone can and should succeed in the ultimate analysis. *Kṛṣṇa* was mainly concerned with the establishment and restoration of *dharma*, the righteousness. But the most interesting feature about the line of action followed by both is that *Rāma*'s truth never deviated from *dharma* as He Himself was *dharma* personified and so was *Kṛṣṇa* in respect of

truth. He never made any compromise in matters concerned with truth - even while fighting against the ruthless behavior of reckless people.

The only difference appears to be that *Rāma* was always straight-forward acting according to the dictates of His inner voice while *Kṛṣṇa* had to use His mystic and mysterious powers and spiritual strategy to correct the incorrigible evil. *Rāma* believed in direct action with an open mind as transparent as the crystal clear water of the river *tamasā* while *Kṛṣṇa* managed things with unmanageable persons with divine dexterity like a determined diplomat. This type of approach perhaps became inevitable towards the end of *dvāpara* standing at the threshold of *kaliyuga*. But *Rāma*'s simplicity, sophistication, spirit of sacrifice and magnanimity even at the cost of personal discomfort and dreadful disasters was understandable and commendable in *tretā*.

Another striking difference between the two is that *Rāma* was personally involved in all the problems He had to face and solve all by Himself. Even when He had to mobilize external support, he gave priority to benefit his supporters as a mark of gratitude and upheld human values. But *Kṛṣṇa* had absolutely no problem of His own and He had only to fight for others as an outsider. But He was always an insider for all the outsiders. He made His presence felt both physically and emotionally wherever and whenever it was needed for the right minded people facing gross injustice. In fact He never fought, never killed anybody in the battle field with a few exceptions like *Kamsa* and *Śiśupāla*. He always acted as a powerful force behind all crises which the right-minded people had to face.

Rāmāyaṇa was a family epic with global implications and impact while *Mahābhārata* was a chronicle of national, cultural and ethical values. There is a fine blend of humanity and divinity in both. But there is a slight difference in degree. *Kṛṣṇa* is born divine while the divinity in *Rāma* manifests itself in due course at appropriate time through the supernatural element found in some of His actions. Even though the advent of *Rāma* was a result of a religious ritual - *putrakāmeṣṭi* - performed by king *Daśaratha* who was craving for sons to succeed him, nobody notices any mark of divinity at the time of his birth. It was only when *Viśvāmitra* tried to convince King *Daśaratha* about the potential divinity latent in *Rāma* and describes him as *Mahātmā* and *Satyaparākrama* and also clarifies that even sages like *Vasiṣṭha* are fully aware of this greatness of his son that *Rāma*'s divinity gets focussed and that too not to the satisfaction of *Daśaratha*.

Subsequently, the episodes of *Mārīca* and *Subāhu*, *Ahalyā*, bending the bow of *Śiva*, defeating *Paraśurāma* encounters with demons like *Virādha*, *Kabandha*, having a bridge erected across the sea by threatening the ocean and finally killing *Rāvaṇa* and testing the chastity of *Sītā* through fire-ordeal are all various instances which testify the potential divinity of *Rāma* who, for himself, prefers being treated as an average human being. When several celestial deities glorify Him as the incarnation of Lord *Viṣṇu* and worship Him accordingly at the time of the fire-ordeal of *Sītā*, *Rāma* tells them in all humility that He considers himself an ordinary human being.

But this does not mean that *Rāma* was totally ignorant of His potential divinity and some of his divine powers. When the

two sages *Śarabhaṅga* and *Sutīkṣṇa* offer the fruit of all their penance, the prince *Rāma* replies with a significant smile that he would himself manage to bag the fruit of such penance and secure a place in any of the celestial spheres accessible through penance. But He presents his immediate problem of finding a suitable shelter for a peaceful stay in the forest for the time-being. This shows how innocent He looks at times which is also a part of His divinity.

Another instance which shows that He was not ignorant of his divinity is that when He finds *Indra* near the hermitage of the sage *Śarabhaṅga*, he shows his eagerness to meet him and asks *Lakṣmaṇa* to stay back for some time. But *Indra* himself vanishes for the reason that *Rāma* should not be aware of His divinity till He kills *Rāvaṇa* who can be killed only by a man or a monkey. Even after killing *Rāvaṇa*, *Rāma* preferred maintaining His status as a human being and not a celestial deity. He loved humanity so much that divinity fails to attract Him. That is why most of the admirers and devotees of *Rāma* glorify Him as *maryādā puruṣottama*, the Supreme Soul within the limits of modesty.

But Lord *Kṛṣṇa* was somewhat different in this respect. He was *līlā mānuṣa vighraha*, an idol looking like a man just for fancy. He was always charming and enchanting in His looks, talks, movements, adventures and achievements. He revealed His divinity even at the time of his birth. His mother *Devakī* and father *Vasudeva* glorify and worship Him even in the prison where He chose to be born. He asked His father to shift him to *Yaśodā* and paved the way for the safe transportation and transplantation at the residence of *Nanda* and *Yaśodā*. His

sportive life as a child and his killing *Kamsa* literally as a child's play, provide ample evidence for His divine powers right from the beginning. This divine excellence of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* finds an elaborate illustration in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. He was, however, presented in the *Mahābhārata* as a seasoned statesman, a diplomatic messenger of peace, an expert in warfare, an impartial promoter of justice, a friend and foe combined in one in discharging His role as an incarnation of the Supreme Soul with an objective vision and magnanimous mission and above all a practical preceptor for the entire world - *Jagadguru* - who preached the highest philosophy in the battlefield to a person who refused to fight the battle at the last moment.

The objectivity of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* finds a glorious expression in His relationship with *Ācārya Bhīṣma* who, from his side, was also all admiration for the wonderful character, *Kṛṣṇa*. Even on the first occasion when he meets *Kṛṣṇa* in the *rājasūya yajña* performed by the King *Dharmarāja*, he was so delighted to find the divine radiance in His face that he strongly recommends that *Kṛṣṇa* and *Kṛṣṇa* alone deserves to be honoured first in the august assembly. The actual wording in which *Bhīṣma* extols *Kṛṣṇa* is worth remembering to understand the real excellence of the Lord. He says :

कृष्ण एव हि लोकानामुत्पत्तिरपिचाप्ययः ।
 कृष्णस्य हि कृते विश्वमिदं भूतं चराचरम् ॥
 एष प्रकृतिरव्यक्ता कर्ता चैव सनातनः ।
 परश्च सर्वभूतेभ्यस्तस्मात् पूज्यतमो हरिः ॥

krṣṇa eva hi lokānāmutpattirapicāpyayaḥ ।
krṣṇasya hi kṛte viśvamidaṁ bhūtaṁ carācaram ॥
eṣa prakṛtiravyaktā kartā caiva sanātanaḥ ।
paraśca sarvabhūtebhyastasmāt pūjyatamo hariḥ ॥

Kṛṣṇa alone is both the creative and destructive force in the world. The whole world belongs to Him and is created for Him. He is the *prakṛti* unmanifest in the world and also the eternal creator. He is above all the living beings and hence deserves to be honoured first.

It is worth recollecting in this context what *Kṛṣṇa* said about *Bhīṣma* when the latter was almost in the last moments of his life. He leads a spiritual delegation of all the five *pāṇḍavas* to *Bhīṣma* the most outstanding *ācārya* of his times to receive his message and blessings. He says to *Dharmarāja*:

स हि भूतं भविष्यच्च भवच्च भरतर्षभ ।
वेत्ति धर्मविदां श्रेष्ठः तमस्मि शरणं गतः ॥

sa hi bhūtaṁ bhaviśyacca bhavacca bharatarṣabha ।
vetti dharmavidāṁ śreṣṭhaḥ tamasmi śaraṇaṁ gataḥ ॥

He knows what is over, what is going to happen and what is going on. He excels all in the knowledge of *dharma* - the eternal law of nature. I, therefore, seek refuge in him.

This highest tribute paid by the Supreme Soul Lord *Kṛṣṇa* reveals the greatness of the *ācārya* and the nobility of the Lord. But the same Lord rushed towards *Bhīṣma* with a wheel in his hand to attack him in the battlefield. This did not, however, cause any distress or discomfort to the *ācārya*. On the other hand, he was all admiration for the generosity of the Lord who has chosen to come personally to grant salvation to him. He remembers the facial complexion of the Lord at that time and ventilates his feelings when the Lord comes to him with his delegation just to hear his last words. It is worth recollecting this picturesque presentation of the Lord's complexion by his

ardent admirer *Bhīṣma*. The wording is:

त्रिभुवन कमनं तमाल वर्णं रविकर गौर वरांबरं दधाने ।
वपुरलक कुलावृताननाब्ज विजय सखे रतिरस्तु मेऽनवद्या ॥
tribhuvana kamanam tamāla varṇam
ravikara gaura varāmbaram dadhāne ।
vapuralaka kulāvṛtānanābja
vijaya sakhe ratirastu me'navadyā ॥

May I relish and cherish forever the radiant face of the Lord resplendent with the curling hair covering the forehead shining like a lotus and his garments as white and bright as the rays of the sun and his complexion enchanting and engrossing all the three worlds.

If we understand the feelings behind these words, we can understand *Kṛṣṇa*. *Bhīṣma* was to *Kṛṣṇa* what *Hanumān* was to *Rāma* and vice-versa. Like *Hanumān*, *Bhīṣma* was also deathless in the real sense of the term. The flag adorning the chariot of *Arjuna* driven by *Kṛṣṇa* carried the portrait of *Hanumān*. Though it looked like a symbol, it was not really so. *Kṛṣṇa* managed to install real *Hanumān* on the flag who was protecting the chariot from the powerful arrows that came from *Bhīṣma* and *Droṇa*. The divine charioteer *Kṛṣṇa* discloses this fact to *Arjuna* when the latter finds the chariot burnt in a moment when *Kṛṣṇa* lays down His office relieving *Hanumān* too from his charge.

As a practical statesman, intelligent diplomat and a judicious counsel, *Kṛṣṇa* played a significant role in the great battle of *Mahābhārata*. It is true that He always supported *pāṇḍavas*. But what attracted Him to their side is their soft temperament and positive attitude towards truth and justice

even when they were subjected to inhuman treatment and gross injustice. His main concern was to support the good and suppress the evil. He tried His best to convince the *kauravas* to agree to the bare minimum justice *pāṇḍavas* asked for. He Himself acted as an emissary to avoid war. But when He was also ill-treated inspite of His manifestation as a cosmic figure He found that there was no alternative except war and left for Dwaraka allowing the future to take its own course. When *Duryodhana* approaches him for support in the inevitable battle, He readily agreed to place his enormous army at his disposal and stand by the *pāṇḍavas* as a moral supporter according to their own free choice.

It is true that *Kṛṣṇa* had to use His diplomatic skill in handling the hard-core villains like *Jayadratha*, *Aśvatthāmā* and *Duryodhana* who had no heart. But this he adopted only as a last resort. When *Gāndhārī* complains against the most unkindest way her son *Duryodhana* was slain by hitting him below the navel, *Bhīma* gives a fitting reply and *Kṛṣṇa* agrees with him just by keeping quiet. He was not at all disturbed when *Gāndhārī* cursed Him. He accepted it as He knew that it was going to happen in any case. The purpose for which He came down to the earth was served and He returned to His eternal abode with full satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

The same attitude we find in *Rāma* too. The only difference is that *Rāma* always tried to avoid destruction but never hesitated to undertake it when absolutely necessary in the larger interests of global peace and harmony. He killed *Vālī* to restore the aggrieved *Sugrīva* to his rightful status. He killed *Tātakā* to please the sage *Viśvāmitra* and meet the requirements of peace

and justice. He welcomed *Vibhīṣaṇa* to change the mind of *Rāvaṇa* and avoid the terrible loss of life on account of a single sinful soul. When *Sugrīva* was nervous about entertaining the own brother of an avowed enemy, *Rāma* said in categorical terms that He was prepared to welcome even *Rāvaṇa* and pardon him for all that he has done if only he surrenders himself unconditionally and seeks His protection. This is the height of nobility and generosity that *Rāma* displays.

When Lord *Kṛṣṇa* manifested Himself in His cosmic form *Viśvarūpa* in the royal palace of *Duryodhana*, none but *Sañjaya* could visualise the immense potentialities of this supernatural phenomenon displayed by the Supreme Soul.

Sañjaya says in spontaneous reaction to the magnificent manifestation of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*:

यतः सत्यं यतो धर्मो यतो ह्रीरार्जवं यतः ।
ततो भवति गोविन्दो यतः कृष्णस्ततो जयः ॥

yataḥ satyaṁ yato dharmo yato hrīrārjavaṁ yataḥ ।
tato bhavati govindo yataḥ kṛṣṇastato jayaḥ ॥

Where there is truth, justice modesty and straight forwardness, there *Govinda* is. Where there is *Kṛṣṇa*, there goes the victory.

These words of *Sañjaya* remind us of *Mandodarī*'s words of wisdom despite the miserable plight she finds in for the fault of her husband *Rāvaṇa*. She says:

शुभकृत् शुभमाप्नोति पापकृत् पापमश्नुते ।
śubhakṛt śubhamāpnoti pāpakṛt pāpamaśnute ।
(Good breeds good and evil begets evil)

Rāvaṇa realised this even on the first day of his encounter with *Rāma*. He was almost collapsing; but the generosity of *Rāma* advised him to go home and take rest and if he feels like, to come back to the battle field later. *Rāvaṇa*, however, chooses to face *Rāma* in the end when all his supporters including his beloved son *Indrajit* sacrifice their lives. At one point of time *Rāvaṇa* exclaims in a mood of realization.

This mighty *Rāghava* is not an ordinary man as several demons have lost their lives in his hands. He is the invincible *Nārāyaṇa* Himself who has come down to earth.

Thus the two facets of excellence that find a glorious self-expression in the two celebrities *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* broadly stand for the two basic values of life - *satyam* (truth) and *dharma* (righteousness) which are normally interdependent. What is true is bound to be right and what is right cannot but be based on truth. They are almost like the two feet which support the whole body and keep the system moving with an inbuilt balance. There is also a spontaneous rhythm in the movement of the two feet which compliment each other. This complimentary character we find in the two incarnations

- *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa*.