

Mahalakshmi's Bhagwat Leela

Tracing the advent of the Supreme Divine Mother has been a personal passion. Much of the details can be found by painstakingly delving through massive volumes of hard-to-follow ancient texts. I, however, tend to take the easier option - hearing it directly from Sree Sree Maa herself! I have observed that Sree Sree Maa typically uses a two-step approach to provide the answer. The first is a recall of self-realized knowledge from her 'Dhruba-Smriti' (Eternal Recollection). She then provides a proof by locating the information from the scriptures. The physical search of the relevant text is intriguingly fast. I picked up the topic of my current interest and asked, "Maa, can you tell us a little more about Mahalakshmi?"

Sree Sree Maa began, "Here is what is known about the manifestation of Mahalakshmi. At the juncture of creation, from within the realms of Rasa-Mandala in the everlasting world of Golaka, emerged from the left half of Purushottam Sri Krishna, a molten-golden-hued woman of exquisite beauty, exhibiting infinite divine wealth and glory. This Goddess was of an eternally youthful age of twelve, of delightfully pleasing nature and radiated joyous bliss. Her body emanated an aura of jasmine-white light; her face was so gloriously illuminated that it would make a million autumnal full-moons look dull; and her two eyes were more brilliant than full-blown lotuses which sparkle even in a mid-autumn afternoon. By the Will of Parameshwara, this divine woman immediately separated into two forms. The two were equal in appearance, beauty, power, age, radiance, glory, adornment, quality, expression, love and look. Devi Mahalakshmi emerged from her right while Sree Radhika manifested from her left. Sree

Radhika was the first to seek the incomparable Sri Krishna for herself. Subsequently, when Mahalakshmi also prayed to have him, the Supreme Godhead, in keeping with their honour took two different forms. From the right side of Sri Krishna emerged a two-handed form while a four-armed Lord Narayana appeared from the left side. Then the two-armed Sri Krishna handed over the four-armed Narayana to Mahalakshmi. This way Sri Krishna became 'Radhakanta' or the Beloved of Radha, and Lord Narayana became 'Lakshmikanta' or the Beloved of Lakshmi. The supreme of supremes, Lord Krishna remained with Gopis and Gopikas in the everlasting divine world of Golaka, while the four-armed Lord Narayana along with Mahalakshmi moved to their own abode of Vaikuntha-dham. In this sense, Sri Krishna and Lord Narayana are equal in all aspects."

"What is the specific role of Devi Mahalakshmi?" I asked.

"Through her pure and caring eyes, Devi Mahalakshmi keeps track of the whole universe and looks after each entity therein. Being pre-eminently supreme among Goddesses who nurture the universe, she is renowned by the name of Mahalakshmi. Subsequently, through the power of Yoga, Mahalakshmi took various forms to perform Bhagwat Leela and grant pure-hearted devotees their prayer-wishes. In spite of descending in numerous ways, she always remains firmly ensconced in Vaikuntha-dham in her complete and fully expressed form", said Sree Sree Maa.

Seeing her pause I prodded on, "We are keen to know more about Mahalakshmi's Bhagwat Leela."

Sree Sree Maa restarted, "In ancient times, by the curse of the Sun-God, the whole clan

of King Vrishadhwaaja, a devotee of Lord Shiva, fell into great peril. One by one, he and his son, King Rathadhwaaja (who was Lord Brihaspati), lost their kingdom, wealth and eventually their lives. The subsequent heirs, namely Dharmadhwaaja and Kushadhwaaja, being great devotees of Lord Narayana, prayed to Devi Mahalakshmi to relieve them of their burden and performed great penance. Pleased by their tapasya the Mahadevi blessed them by saying, 'A spark of Lakshmi will descend and enter into the wombs of their respective wives, following which the two kings will regain their wealth and honour.' In due course, Kushadhwaaja's wife gave birth to a wonderful girl who was a partial-avatar of Mahalakshmi. The girl was born fully enlightened and got up reciting the Vedas spontaneously. Since this newly born child's first words were the vibrations of the eternal Vedas, the learned ones named her 'Vedavati' meaning Embodiment of the Vedas. Immediately after birth, this divine looking little girl took a bath and went into the forest for tapasya. Asking none to accompany her, she set out into the jungles to live alone, submerged in prayer of the Supreme Lord Narayana.

Thereafter, for more than one divine Manwantara (about 300 million years) she performed severe penance in a mountain cavern in the sacred pilgrimage of Pushkar. However, this did not cause her any physical distress. Rather, her body remained well nourished and she remained there in a physically perfected body, unaffected by the ravages of nature. During this period, Vedavati

heard a divine pronouncement - 'O Beautiful one, you will surely attain Lord Sri Hari as your husband in every life, and by getting whom even Brahma and the Gods are unable to reach to, you will live in great joy.' Hearing this divine proclamation, Vedavati's mind was filled with immense happiness and she moved on to an even more secluded location in the Gandhamadan hills to continue her sadhana. After staying there for some time and ensuring that the place was conducive for her tapasya, she planned to stay there permanently. Through her sublime presence, the place and its surroundings turned into a beautiful, blissful environment.



Mata Vedavati performing penance
Painting by: Sree Sree Maa

Time passed as Vedavati steadfastly pursued her tapasya. All of a sudden one day she found Ravana, the King of Lanka, at the doorstep of her hut. As per tradition, she received him as an honoured guest, washed his feet and offered him tasteful fruits and cool water. Ravana consumed all that was served to him. Thereafter he came closer to Vedavati and asked, 'O benevolent one! Who are you?

What is your background? Whose daughter are you?' Vedavati gave details of her antecedents. But Ravana still did not leave. Vedavati's sadhana-powered radiance, incredible beauty, divine appearance and pleasant personality completely captivated Ravana and aroused cravings within him. Losing his mental control and overcome with irresistible desire he tried to use physical force to coerce his will on Vedavati. But the wicked-hearted Ravana was not aware of the spiritual powers of Vedavati. Incensed at this disgusting behaviour, the pious Vedavati stu-

pefied Ravana with the power of her hypnotic glare. With every part of his body in a state of stony immobility, the lowly Ravana was left stranded, unable to move or speak. In order to free himself from this bondage, he began to mentally pray to the divine Vedavati seeking deliverance and chanted sacred hymns asking forgiveness. Ravana's prayers placated Vedavati to some extent and she had mercy on him. She restored him to normalcy but cursed him saying, 'For my sake you will be destroyed with all your kith and kin'. After delivering the curse, she said, 'You have touched this body in a state of desire, now behold my yogic powers'. Saying this she produced a holy fire from within her and entered into the flames of this celestial blaze. The astounded Ravana took the lifeless body and flung it into the middle of the Ganga exclaiming, 'O my goodness! What an extraordinary incident did I witness and what a dreadful sin did I commit!!' With many such remorseful thoughts in his mind and with great fear of what the future holds for him, Ravana hastily left the spot.

With the passage of time, Sadhvi Vedavati again took birth as the daughter of King Janaka and was revered by one and all as 'Devi Sita'. It was because of Sita's kidnapping that the imperiously evil Ravana and his clan met with ultimate destruction. As a result of her earlier penance, Sita automatically gained the state of a great tapaswini. Through the strength of her sadhana, this veritable embodiment of Mahalakshmi - Devi Sita - attained her Godhead Sri Ramachandra as her husband and began to spend her life with him. Though a 'yatiswara' (one who remembered her past life), she did not relive the hardships of the tapasya of her previous incarnation. Amidst happiness and joy of having a fully enlightened, sagacious king as father and

Lord Narayana as husband, memories of the difficult penance that gave her the blissful moments of the present, were wiped away. However, by the queer twist of destiny, Sri Ramachandra went to the forest to uphold the promise of his father. Devi Sita and his younger brother Lakshman also accompanied him. One day, during this period of stay in the forest with Sita and Lakshman near the ocean coast, Sri Rama beheld Agni-dev, Lord of the Divine Fire, standing before him in the guise of a Brahmin. The Brahmin began to tell the righteous Sri Rama on the impending events of the near future. The Fire-God spoke, 'Bhagwan, I would like to apprise you of what is going to happen in due course. Kindly listen. The time of kidnapping of your beloved Sita is approaching. What is divinely ordained is inevitable. I therefore request you to kindly hand over Mother Sita to me for safekeeping. Retain with you her identical shadow-like form. When Sita Devi is again regained from the clutches of evil, then during the Fire-Test, I will return to you the original Sita. That is why the Gods have sent me to you. I am not a Brahmin, I am Agni-dev.' Saying this, Agni-dev presented himself in his true form and Sri Rama, with a heavy heart and without informing Lakshman, agreed as requested. Through his yogic powers Agni-dev took away Devi Sita into the Divine Fire and manifested a replica Sita - an equally beautiful and talented 'Maya-Sita' - and handed her over to Sri Rama. He then asked Sri Rama not to divulge this secret to anyone else and taking the older Sita Devi along with him, left. No one, not even his beloved and devoted Lakshman, were aware of this.

The kidnapping event of Sita occurred. Sri Rama defeated and annihilated Lanka's monarch, Ravana, and regained her. He immediately proceeded to perform the Agni-

Pariksha or Fire-Test of Sita. During this event, Agni-dev appeared from the holy fire and presented Sita back to Lord Rama - he returned the one whom he had taken away earlier. Maya-Sita now beseeched Sri Rama and Agni-dev, 'Bhagwan! What is to become of me now? Tell me my path of deliverance.' Sri Rama and Agni-dev together told her, 'Devi! Please proceed towards the holy land of Pushkar for tapasya. Through this, you will become Swargalakshmi.' Following this advice, this 'Shadow-Sita' performed severe penance in Pushkar for a period of three million divine years and finally attained Heavenly Lakshmi-hood. It is she who later, after several turns of the wheel of Time, reappeared from the holy sacrificial fire of King Drupada, and was subsequently known to everyone as the Draupadi, the Pandava Queen."

"But Draupadi did not get the Lord as her husband. Is it not an aberration?" I queried. Sree Sree Maa replied, "Eventually she did, but not in the birth of Draupadi, where she played a special role in the Bhagwat Leela. Later they were rejoined as a couple when she was born as Goddess Padmavati, foster daughter of Akasha Raja and the Lord descended as Lord Srinivasa in the Divine Play of Lord Sri Venkateshwara. That, of course, is another story." She returned to her earlier thread and continued, "It is Mahalakshmi who in Treta Yuga descended as Rajarshi Janaka's daughter and became the wife of Lord Rama. Her Shadow-like form reincarnated in Dwapara Yuga as the daughter of King Drupada, the consort of the mighty Pandavas and most importantly as the peer-

less devotee of Purushottam Sri Krishna. Again we see that earlier, in Satya Yuga, Mahalakshmi was present in the form of Vedavati, the daughter of King Kushadhwaja. It is for her presence in Bhagwat Leela spanning three ages, that the learned call Vedavati 'Trihayani'."

Unable to control myself, I interrupted saying, "What about Kali Yuga?" Sree Sree Maa ignored the pointed question and continued, "Vedavati exhibited



Mata Draupadi offering paramanna to Sri Krishna. Painting by: Smt Sibarati Nandi

the supernatural from her very birth and immediately went into tapasya. We see a similar situation in other cases like that of Sri Krishna Dwaipayana Veda Vyasa, who behaved similarly. Beings of the Eternal Divine World - having embodiments created out of everlastingly pure Mahaprana (Divine Life-force) - who descend into creation, are all considered Bhagwat Sattas or Embodiments of the Supreme Divine. Each such personality is an example of unborn, everlasting, divine creation. These Bhagwat-shakti empowered beings are eternally enlightened, retaining their Dhruba-Smriti and are untouched by the trappings of Maya. They are governed by Divine Will. This is their basic nature. They come for the divine upliftment and evolution of creation and do not behave like ordinary mortals. Sadhvi Vedavati also descended from Bhagwati and that is why everything about her was so extraordinary. She was Mahalakshmi's embodiment and a principal form of Sree Radhika. That is why she was anointed to play such central roles of 'Bhagwat-Leela heroine' in the Ramayana and Mahabharata."

"Maa, we have seen that Devi Shanta, the elder sister of Lord Rama was also an incar-

nation of Mahalakshmi, isn't it?" I asked. Maa replied saying, "Yes, that's true. Mahalakshmi has taken many forms. In some cases, especially in Avatar Leela, she may take multiple forms. Devi Shanta, wife of Sage Rishyashringa, was one of her partial embodiments. They sometimes come as harbingers of later forms. Mahalakshmi descended even earlier in the Ikshvaku dynasty (into which Lord Rama came) as 'Srimati', the daughter of King Ambarisha. The tale of her marriage culminated in the sudden appearance of a divine form of Lord Vishnu holding a bow and arrow in her Swayamvara - thereby heralding the future descent of Lord Sri Rama in a similar form in the same clan. The story also has a hilarious episode on how Sages Narada and Parvat competed between themselves for the hand of Srimati. Both prayed to Lord Vishnu to make the other look like a monkey at the Swayamvara. The Lord granted both of them their wishes and naturally both were rejected by Srimati, who was waiting for her Lord. Finally Sri Maha-Vishnu himself came to take his consort back to their abode."

We all laughed heartily. I reverted to the generic issue and asked, "Maa - Parameshwari, the Supreme Divine Mother, is known by many names other than Mahalakshmi. Can you please provide a little bit of insight into the roots of this?"

Sree Sree Maa replied, "The Eternal Divine Power exhibits two primary characteristics working in equal harmony. The principal among them is the maintenance of oneness, perfect unity, identity, pure consciousness, absolute bliss, love and peace of the Supreme Godhead. The second is a spontaneous unfolding of Divine Nature, resulting in creation, both Eternal and Transient. For example, in the Eternal Divine World (Nitya-Loka), this spontaneous unfolding occurs in

the heart of the Supreme Personality, through the unending play of unfettered love, resulting in Nitya-Rasa-Leela. This is in perfect tune with her first role of upholding the oneness of the Absolute Divine. In universal creation, this unfolding occurs through a dual process of descent and ascent resulting in eventual fulfillment. Every manifestation in the universe, from the perceivable highest to the apparent lowest is nothing but an expressed (or apparently descending) form of Divine Nature. Millions and millions of sparks of divine consciousness are continuously pouring out of the Absolute Primordial Sky like a sparkling fountain of celestial light. Each such droplet of Brahman embodies itself and exists as an individual soul (Jivatma) within the cycle of creation. God's spontaneous creative play is a fascinating mystery."

"Then what is the ascending process?" was the question that popped up in my mind. Before I could pose it, Maa continued, "The phase of ascent is a Spiritual Leela that occurs constantly within every created embodiment of consciousness and causes it to seek unification with the Universal Godhead. That is, from within creation, a human soul steadfastly pursues supernal reunion through a divinely ordained journey of self-realization and self-fulfillment. This is the natural ascending sadhana of the Shiva within the Jiva and is powered by the force of the Divine Shakti herself. Amidst this creative play of God, a special descent sometimes takes place wherein purified sparks of the Supreme Divine Personality and the Divine Mother attain embodiments in the manifested world to exhibit the Absolute Unity of Divine Reality and demonstrate the evolution of sadhana. This is called Bhagwat Leela. Parameshwara is accompanied by embodiments of the Divine Mother, manifesting various sparks of her Supreme Nature, be it Radharani,

Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati or Maheshwari or some other form. In many cases multiple forms of the Divine Power can be seen alongside an Avatara.”

“Maa, you mentioned about Radharani, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati and Maheshwari? How are they related to the characteristics of the Supreme Divine Power you indicated earlier? Also did the others take embodied forms like Mahalakshmi?” I asked.

Sree Sree Maa smiled and said, “They are of the same root, each exhibiting one important aspect of the Divine Mother, apparently a bit more than another aspect, while retaining the wholesome. One easy way for you to grasp it is to relate to the four as follows: consider Radharani as upholding the Nitya-leela or divine play of pure love within the heart of the Purushottam and maintaining the Absolute Oneness of the Supreme Divine; think about Maheshwari as protecting and upholding the power and mystery of creation through her Dasa-Mahavidya and other forms; imagine Mahasaraswati as the power that guides the Spiritual Leela through Brahma-Vidya; and finally look upon Mahalakshmi as the power that nurtures Bhagwat Leela of the Supreme Godhead, Lord Narayana. But mind you, each of them carries the force of the supreme whole, only the manifestation of one aspect appears to be more pronounced. Your interest in more tangible human forms is understandable. You are aware that a spark of Devi Radharani descended with Lord Krishna in Vrindavan. She manifested the Eternal Rasa Leela on earth. Devi Sati and subsequently Devi Uma or Parvati are embodiments of Maheshwari. That is why through the special leela of Daksha-Yagna, Mata Sati’s body has been firmly embedded in earth to protect creation and retain its science-mystery. Mother

Gayatri embodies Mahasaraswati. She too is a direct embodiment of Parabrahman. The great rishis use Gayatri to invoke and ascend into Brahman. That is why she is the power of Brahma-vidya or Spiritual Knowledge. One of her pre-eminent early forms in creation was Devi Sandhya, who later took the embodiment of Mata Arundhati. There are many others. The forms, as I mentioned, are not mutually exclusive.”

I kept quiet for a while as several thought-clouds cluttered my mind. I could easily relate Sree Sree Maa’s personality to the various characteristics that she mentioned earlier. A careful observer can make out that Sree Sree Maa is always in a state of transcendence, always in union and connected with the Supreme Godhead. Howsoever one may feel that Maa is paying a hundred percent attention to someone or something, there is another hundred percent somewhere else. She constantly exhibits the supreme oneness of divinity and that never seems to go away from her personality. Also, the Bhagwat Leela that we are so fortunate to be a part of - due to her grace - need not be elaborated upon. From the great Maha-yagnas to the singing sessions to a momentary touch, each is an unforgettable divine experience, only to be felt. Many saints have referred to her as Radharani and Maa Durga. Finally the Spiritual Leela that she unfolds within each one of us is too personal a matter for any of us to speak, other than in confidence amidst a few near ones. I was so lost in these thoughts that I forgot to ask more direct questions, especially relating to recent incarnations. I have carefully stacked them away in my memory for future opportunities, though I do have some strong guesses.

Sri Partha Pratim Chakrabarti,
Her Blessed Child