

Laxmi Puja: Lighting Up The Darkest Night

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From Tagore's *Ei Bharater Mahamanaber Sagortire* to Nehru's 'Unity in Diversity', we have excellent poetic expressions and vivid descriptions of the phenomenon. But we need to go a little more into depth to take a closer look into the process through which this 'unity' was actually achieved and Deepavali is a good case story.

The first mention that one gets is about the celebration of shining lights is when Ramachandra returned victorious to Ayodhya, though Lakshmi does not feature here. The *Kamasutra* of Vatsyana, whose final product also appears like the *Ramayana* in the 3rd or 4th century AD mentions Yaksha's night, when houses should be illuminated with numerous tiny earthen lamps. 'Yaksha' were usually short pot-bellied indigenous creatures who stood outside temples as *dwaar-paals*. The Jain acharyas, Hemchandra and Yashodhara, describe this 'Yaksha night of lights' and this point to the Brahmanic adoption of a popular local observance.

But we still did not have a direct link with Lakshmi, unless she too arose from India's native Yakshas like Kubera, a prime god of wealth. Lakshmi is a product of the Purans, like the Vishnu, Garuda, Linga, Padma and Skanda and soon the 'Deepavali' of the Yakshas becomes her's.

From history, let us now turn to geography. In the Hindi heartland, it begins with *Dhanteras* and ends with *Bhratri-dwitiya*, full five days. After 'Dhanteras', there is *Chhoti Deepavali*, followed by the main *Deepavali* and *Lakshmi Puja*. Krishna is also invoked with *Govardhan Puja* and cattle finds special mention, through many centuries. *Bhai-dooj* follows in most parts of India, though Bengalis do not mix up so many events.

The southern states and Maharashtra-Goa also follow this five-day worship, the focus is on the killing of the demon, *Narak-asur*, by Krishna and his wife. This fiend had tormented the whole world, somewhat like *Mahishasur*, who the Bengali *Durga* had just finished off three weeks before. *Narak* was indeed very troublesome, because he had imprisoned 16,000 daughters of gods and sages and the worried parents naturally invoked Krishna. Capturing women has always been a severe provocation, whether it be with *Helen of Troy* or *Sita*, or even the poor girls in *Nigeria*, kidnapped by the *Boko Haram*. Interestingly, the *Pitri-tarpan* or homage to ancestors that the Bengalis do on *Mahalaya*, is performed during this festival in the south. We all seem to remember our forefathers just before a tense battle begins!

There are interesting sub-plots in the south, as this asura was incidentally defeated not by Krishna, but by his wife *Satyabhama*, who retrieved the situation after poor Krishna fainted on the battlefield. Does it not have shades of our mother goddess defeating a fellow asura, with *Mahisha* in his name? There are exciting variants of this tale, as *Andhra*, *Karnataka* and *Kerala* mention

Mahabali, there is even a Bali-pratipad and in Goa, huge effigies of Narakasur are built only to be set on fire, like Ravana.

We have stressed on cleanliness and the ritual bath, which is done with lot of oil in the South and Maharashtrians use sandal paste. New clothes are a must, as is cleaning the house and even giving it a fresh coat. This must be the earliest reference we get to about Swachh Bharat and Hinduism could mandate the cleaning up of one's own body and home, but, it does not have any ceremony for the cleaning up of common places. In the Deccan people pray with equal fervor to Ganesha, Shiva and Vishnu, as they do for Lakshmi.

Telugus differ from Tamils and the last of their 5 days are called Bali- parthdbadha or Yama-dwitiya. Incidentally, Yama keeps appearing again and again in this time band, as even in Bengal Yamer Tika is essential during Bhratri- dwitiya. Let us also recall the story of Nachiketa and his encounter with Yama in the Kathopanishad and the Yama connection also comes through the ancient legend of the King Hima and his 16 year old son, whose horoscope has predicted death by snake bite after marriage. It is the same story as that of Behula in the Mansa Mangal, with the variation of how the son's new bride beat Yama by bedazzling his serpent form with shining gems and jewels. This ancient tale is believed to be the main tale behind 'Dhanteras' in so many parts of India and even the lighting of lamps is called Yama-deepdana.

Let us return to Lakshmi, who according to the Purans makes her first classic appearance before the devas and asuras, where they were churning the ocean to bring out the Amrita of the gods. It appears that the Lakshmi has strong associations with water, the lotus and elephants, all pointing out to the wet rice civilization of India that spread seriously only after the Yamuna was crossed by the so-called Aryans, and the marshes and jungles of the Ganga cleared for cultivation.

The concept of Gajalakshmi i.e, the goddess standing on a lotus with two elephants on her two sides, who bathe her, is found as early as the first century before Christ, in a coin of Azilses, the Shaka king, which indicates the antiquity of this belief. When there is agricultural bounty, there is wealth and the goddess is called by different names like Dhan Lakshmi, Dhanya Lakshmi and Gaja Lakshmi. Lakshmi is notorious for its utter fickleness or restlessness and the Hinduism has never shied away from accepting wealth and its creation to be integral parts of life, but, then why gamble with whatever little wealth one has? The justification is, comes from Mount Kailash, where Parvati is said to have beaten Shiva in the game of dice, and had declared that whoever gambles on Deepavali would have wealth throughout the year.

Gokhale had said that "what Bengal does, Indians do later" and in Lakshmi Puja, Bengal is well ahead of the Lakshmi Deepavali, as ours is worshipped on Kojagori Purnima, three weeks before. But this early start does not appear to have given any special boon to the State, and we must do something about it!

From light and wealth, let us return to the darkness of Kartik's Amavasya, which is the darkest in the whole lunar year. Stories abound in every country of ghosts, that come out and how rakshas

and pretis that dance on this dark night. Bengal also recalls the Dakinis and Yoginis with special evocation, as they accompany Ma Kali. Dakinis have rather frightening connotations as Tantrik texts say they ate raw flesh, but Yoginis have more respectable antecedents and there are some temples dedicated to 64 of them, called Chaunsat Yogini mandirs. The terrifying powers that go hand-in-hand with these deities indicate that they were probably malevolent forces, before they were deified and mollified (tushta). Kali worshippers, invoke her for maternal protection and for her Shakti.

We have travelled a long way: with Narak-asur and Mahabali; with Lakshmi and her lotus and water elephants; wealth and gambling to the dark night of Kali and her Dakinis–Yoginis. It would appear to many careful analysts that we are actually referring to several distinct events and commemorations, that arose from different regional histories. The task of Brahmanism was to weave them together into common strands of unity and persuade different regional festivals to come together into an accepted broadband. This is only a small walk through India's convoluted religious history, as we try to understand how 'unity' was actually brought among such wide 'diversity'.