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The Flying Squad

Everybody knows the celebrated story of *Gajendra Moksham*. The episode has been recounted with relish in *Srimad Bhagavatam* and *Sri Vishnudharmam*, and sung with elation by *Azhwars*. It is a story, which we are supposed to recollect first thing every morning, immediately after waking-up. The morals of the story are many and continue to inspire us millennia after its enactment. It is a simple enough tale--that of an elephant who stepped into a pond for slaking its thirst, to have a bath, and to gather flowers for the Lord's worship, when its leg was suddenly grasped underwater by a crocodile. Despite a thousand years of struggle, the elephant could not free itself from the crocodile's tenacious teeth and appeals to the Lord, who arrives on the scene with His usual expedition and saves the pachyderm

by killing the crocodile. Though the story is simple, it raises a few important questions, which our elders have thought fit to enlighten us about.

1. First and foremost, when a whole family of elephants was bathing in the pond, why did the crocodile seek out and grasp only *Gajendra*'s foot? This seems a valid question, as *Gajendra* was surrounded by a bevy of his wives, children and relatives and for the crocodile to leave everyone and to home in on *Gajendra* appears strange indeed.

The answer to this lies in a flashback, so to say. *Gajendra* in his previous birth was a *Paandian* King named *Indradyumnan*, who was an ardent *Vishnu bhakta*. While meditating on the Lord one day, he failed to perceive the arrival of Sage *Agasthya*, who mistook the king to be wantonly impervious. The offended sage cursed the King to be born as an elephant, as only that creature would stay unaffected and unconcerned by whatever was happening around it.

We come next to the crocodile, which too was a famed *Gandharva* in its previous birth. While engaged in water sport with his family in a pond, he pulled at the foot of a *maharshi* (who was performing *sandhyaavandanam*) from underwater, under the mistaken impression that it was his wife's foot. The startled *maharshi*, who discovered that it was no crocodile grasping his leg but only the *Gandharva Hoohoo* (that was his name!) cursed him with a crocodile's birth. For both the accursed *Aatmas*, salvation was to come through their mutual encounter in the pond. Hence it was but natural that the long arm of fate led the crocodile unerringly to the leg of the *Gajendra*, like a torpedo homing in on the hull of a ship.

2. The second question is equally important. We are told that *Gajendra* was battling the crocodile for a thousand long years, with



Painting by Neduntheru Sri.U. Ve. Kannan svami

the elephant gaining the upper hand at times and the crocodile at others. However, as the crocodile was in its natural element, slowly but inexorably *Gajendra* found himself being dragged into the water. This went on for a thousand years, at the end of which *Gajendra* appealed to the Lord for succour and was duly saved.

The question is, why didn't *Gajendra* seek the Lord's protection earlier? When he could do it at the end of a thousand years after fighting a losing battle, he could have done it pretty early on, avoiding all the pain and wasted effort!

We cannot blame the elephant for a failing, which we human beings find difficult to conquer. We labour under the mistaken notion that it is we who protect our kith and kin and ourselves. We realise not that it is the Lord who is the Universal Saviour and Protector, and assume credit where none is due. Only when we understand that

every movement of even our little finger is impossible without the Lord's will, do the scales fall from our eyes. "*aham mat rakshana bhara:.....na mama Sripatereva*" says Swami Desikan, pointing out that the responsibility of saving us is the Lord's and that we have absolutely no role in it, but for praying for succour. We valiantly battle against our numerous foes, external and internal, for a lifetime, without realising, like *Gajendra*, that we are doomed to failure.

We also think many a time that our parents, brothers and sisters or other relatives can save us, without grasping the plain fact that "*oru jeevanukku oru jeevan tanjam allan*". One frail mortal cannot afford refuge to another, and those whom we look up to for rescuing us from this sea of *samsara*, are themselves sailing in a leaky boat likely to capsize any moment.

Thus *Gajendra* was confident in the early years of the struggle that his own strength and the combined muscle power of all his kith and kin could pull him out of the crocodile's grasping teeth. It was only when the concerted effort failed to have any effect, that he realised the impossibility of the situation and decided to appeal to the Omnipotent Lord for succour. And the moment the pachyderm performed *Sharanaagati*, *Emperuman* descended from the heavens to save it from certain death.

Gajendra was indeed fortunate in realising the futility of self-protection, after a relatively short period of a thousand years. For us, who have been toiling in this *samsara* for innumerable millions of years, this realisation seems hard to come by, despite any amount of lessons that the Lord teaches us.

3. We are told that all the time that the devout pachyderm was struggling for his life and limb, the Lord did not bat an eyelid, till the animal's cry for succour reached Him. Then He rushed in and saved

the elephant. This is funny. If the Lord indeed has boundless affection for His devotees, should He not rush to their aid the moment they are in trouble, rather than waiting for a SOS call from the afflicted person? How can He callously witness all their suffering and then save them at the very end, like the policemen in Tamizh cinemas who rush in with a lot of bravado after the hero has successfully battled with and tied up the gangsters?

The answer to this lies in the following *Ahimbudhnya Samhitaa slokam*:

*“sarvaghyopi hi Visvesa: sadaa kaarunikopi san
samsaara tantra vaahitvat rakshaa apekshaam pratikshate”*

Though infinitely powerful, omniscient and merciful, the Lord, in His role as an impartial Arbiter, waits for a word, just a word from the devotee, seeking assistance, before rushing to his aid.

That the Lord protects only those who apply to Him is further confirmed by the *Lakshmi Tantram* –

*“apraarthitho na gopaayet iti tat praarthanaa mati:
gopaayita bhavet evam goptrutva varanam smritam”*

The specific request to the Lord to save us, known as “*goptrutva varanam*”, is one of the important elements of *Sharanaagati* or Absolute Surrender, without which the Lord protects us not.

4. Now we come to another interesting question. It is said that when *Gajendra*’s impassioned plea for succour reached the Lord’s ears, He rushed to the elephant’s rescue in a tearing hurry, without even realising that His upper cloth had fallen off--“*arai kulaya nilai kulaya*”. The Lord felt dissatisfied with *Garuda*’s speed and spurred him on so much that the Divine Bird’s sides developed a permanent scar—

“tvat anghri sammarddha kinaanka sobhinaa”. In His tearing hurry to be at *Gajendra*’s side, the Lord snatched away His delicate feet being gently massaged by the Divine Consort, spurned the courteously proffered hand of *Sri Vishvakshena*, did not even put on His diamond-studded sandals and was totally impervious to anything but rushing to the elephant’s aid. *Sri Bhattacharya* is so moved by this extraordinary speed the Lord displayed on this occasion, that he salutes not the Lord Himself, but His hurry and haste, which the *Acharya* feels worthy of praise—“*Bhagavata: tvaraayai nama:*”



Gajendra’s impassioned plea

The question is, having waited a thousand years idly, why was the Lord in a tearing hurry to save *Gajendra*? Would an hour or two have made any further difference?

The fact of the matter is that the Lord cannot bear the suffering of a true devotee for even a second more than necessary. The pain of the thousand years was necessary to make the elephant understand that one is totally incapable of saving oneself, and that others too of our race are incompetent for the task. Once the pachyderm learnt the lesson and appealed to the Lord for succour, *Emperuman* could not bear even a second’s delay in rushing to the aid of the *Sharanaagata* (Surrendered Soul).

Sri Paraasara Bhattar wonders at the constant battle-ready posture of the Lord, sporting all His weapons all the time, obviously ever ready for the distress call He might receive from devotees and fully equipped to rush to their aid at a moment's notice -

*“paathu pranata rakshaayaam vilambam asahan iva
sadaa panchayudhi bhibhrat sa na: Sriranga naayaka:”*

5. Another question troubles us at times-- having decided to help *Gajendra*, why did the Lord personally rush to the scene to do it? Could He not have done it sitting at *Sri Vaikuntam* itself and by merely willing the crocodile dead, thereby liberating the elephant? Equally, He could have sent His *Sudarsana Chakra* to attend to the chore. What was the need for Him to indulge in overkill, as it were, by coming down all the way from His abode to destroy a mere crocodile?

Vaikuntavasi Mukkur Sri Lakshminrsimhachar Swamy used to recount the story of a rich man who kept asking the aforesaid question and was unsatisfied with all reasonable answers. To teach him a lesson, his friend came running to him one day and announced that the man's son had fallen into a well. Dismayed at the news and in a panic, the rich man dropped whatever he was doing and rushed out to the well, only to find the news to be false. When he remonstrated with the friend for having misled him, the friend retorted, “ Even though you have a lot of servants, did you think of sending any of them for rescuing the boy? If this is the depth of your attachment for your boy, just consider the urgency the Lord, who is the Universal Father, might have felt for freeing *Gajendra*!”.

Stories apart, the fact of the matter is that while the crocodile could have very well been destroyed by proxy, *Gajendra*'s happiness at the Lord's appearance on the scene and his joy in feasting his eyes on

the divine form, could not have been achieved without *Emperuman*'s personal presence. One of the important purposes of the Lord's *avataaras* is “*Parithraanaaya sadhunaam*”. While mere “*thraanam*” or protection can be afforded even without the Lord being present, “*parithraanam*” or comprehensive protection includes affording the devotee the immeasurable bliss of seeing the Lord, and could not be carried out without *Emperuman* materializing in person. And since the elephant's devotion knew no bounds (“*tozhum kaadal kaliru*”—*Sri Nammazhwar*), the Lord **had** to appear in person. Sri Nampillai offers another explanation for the Lord presenting Himself in person to save an elephant from a mere crocodile—that, overwhelmed by concern for the suffering elephant, the Lord forgot about the availability of the extremely competent *Sudarsana Azhwan*, who could do the job in a trice (“*kaiyyil tiru Aazhi irundadu arindilan*”)—just as the rich man in the aforesaid tale.

The beautiful parable of *Gajendra Moksham* indicates to us that what the Lord is concerned about is the depth of love the devotees have for Him, and not their social, economic or other status. We are told by *Sri Tondaradippodi Azhwar* that while exalted souls like Shiva and Brahmaa languish without a sight of the Supreme Lord despite unrelenting penance for ages, a mere elephant could make Him come running to its rescue, by the sheer strength of its devotion -

*“pennulaam sadayinaanum piramanum unnai kaanbaan
ennilaa oozhi oozhi tavam seidaar velgi nirpa
vinnulaar viyappa vandu aanaikku andru arulai eenda
Kannaraa! unnai andro kalaikanaa karudumaare”.*

