

DEAREST TO VIṢṆU

EKĀDAŚĪ AND DVĀDAŚĪ ACCORDING
TO THE HARI-BHAKTI-VILĀSA



*Translated from the Sanskrit
by Bhr̥gumuni Dāsa Adhikārī
with an introduction and appendices to the text.*



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To my father

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGIN OF EKĀDAŚĪ

The story of the origin of Ekādaśī is told by Vyāsadeva to Jaimini in the Padma Purāṇa (7.22.7-52). At the dawn of creation, Lord Nārāyaṇa created all moving and non-moving creatures. Out of all different kinds of sins, He also created Pāpapurūṣa, the personification of sin, to punish those who do not abide by the rules of the scriptures. Seeing the horrible appearance of Pāpapurūṣa, the Lord also created Yama, the god of death, to control him. Sinful persons will after death go to Yama, who will send them on to hellish punishment in the hands of Pāpapurūṣa.

Some time later, Lord Nārāyaṇa mounted Garuḍa and flew down to the abode of Yama. Yama greeted the Lord respectfully and offered Him beautiful prayers. While listening to these prayers, the Lord could also hear loud, pitiful cries of help from all directions. When asked, Yama replied that these are the cries of sinful persons suffering in hell. Riding on Garuḍa, Lord Nārāyaṇa immediately went to see how they were suffering. When the sinners saw Him, they called out even louder for help, trying to escape their torment. Nārāyaṇa was greatly moved, thinking that these people were suffering because of His arrangement. Out of His body He then manifested Ekādaśī, the goddess of the eleventh lunar day. All the suffering sinners started following the Ekādaśī-vrata, and were immediately promoted to Vaikuṅṭha.

Satisfied with the new arrangement, Lord Viṣṇu returned to his abode. Not everyone was satisfied, however: soon Pāpapurūṣa came to meet the Lord. Crying and sobbing, he prayed to the Lord, saying that he needed His protection. After Ekādaśī came, he said, my life has been destroyed. You created me to take care of the sinners, but whatever sins they do are immediately washed away on Ekādaśī. I cannot resist her, since she was born directly from You. Please help me! The

whole world will soon be empty if this goes on! On Ekādaśī, I have no shelter anywhere.

The Lord smiled and told Pāpapurūṣa not to worry. From now on, He said, you will have a safe abode in food on Ekādaśī. On that day you can enter all kinds of eatables, and anyone who then eats you will at the same time eat all kinds of sin. In this way you will be safe on Ekādaśī, and not everyone will automatically be liberated.

Historically, it is more difficult to find the origins of the Ekādaśī-vrata. The word vrata appears already in the Ṛg Veda (e.g. 2.38.7, 10.10.5), but scholars have different ideas about its meaning. The most probable alternative seems to be that it is derived from the verbal root वृ with the suffix -ta, meaning 'that which is willed' or simply 'will', developing into 'law' and 'ordnance'. Already in the Upaniṣads one can see examples of vratas in the sense used in this book, a vow or holy observance that includes some rules and restrictions placed upon oneself for the attainment of a higher good. The classic dictionary of Amara defines a vrata as 'synonymous with regulations, consisting of fasting, etc, and leading to merit'.

Descriptions of the Ekādaśī-vrata are not found in the Mahābhārata (though Dvādaśī-vratas are mentioned in chapter 18 of the Aśvamedhika-parva, in the Vaiṣṇava-dharma part), but almost all Purāṇas have at least a few chapters devoted to some Ekādaśīs. Dating the Purāṇas is a notoriously difficult task, but it is safe to say that at least the Bodhanī Ekādaśī was known by the fifth century A.D. The popularity of Ekādaśī grew steadily, as can be seen in the Purāṇas and Upa-purāṇas, where the different Ekādaśīs are given more and more attention. The popularity of Ekādaśī is also shown by the amount of text which mediaeval writers on dharma devoted to its rules and details.

Vratas such as Ekādaśī were very much a part of popular Hinduism, since they were open to all varṇas and āśramas and offered great results with comparatively little effort. It is naturally hard to say how many people followed the rules strictly,

but at least by the eighteenth century the popularity of Ekādaśī had waned. Abbé Dubois, writing in Madras around the beginning of the nineteenth century, reported that a very small number of devotees actually followed the rules of Ekādaśī. In Bengal, Ekādaśī came to be seen as an observance meant almost exclusively for widows. A recent study (Freed & Freed: Hindu Festivals in a North Indian Village) of religious rituals in a north Indian village found that only a few brāhmaṇa ladies observe Ekādaśī.

In modern times, many Hindu reformers have tried to re-popularise the Ekādaśī-vrata. The main arguments these persons put forward are connected with astrology, health and following the ancient Indian tradition. Still, their impact has been rather limited. The efforts of A.C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda (the founder of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness) and his followers have succeeded in spreading the Ekādaśī-vrata to many people in the western countries.

THE MEANING OF EKĀDAŚĪ

The main reason why Vaiṣṇavas follow the Ekādaśī-vrata is not freeing themselves from hell (as in the story above), but pleasing Viṣṇu. On this day Vaiṣṇavas strive to minimise eating, sleeping and other worldly activities and instead increase their devotion to Viṣṇu. In the same way all great religions of the world contain holy days and festivals when the laity gets a chance to increase the intensity of its religious life. The ideal is, of course, to live a life of constant religious ecstasy, but for most people this seems impossible. For them holy days and festivals with special religious observances are very useful. They also play a great part in connecting new generations with the faith of their ancestors.

Ekādaśī means the eleventh. It is believed that on the eleventh day of the waxing and waning moon, the moon causes great agitation in the eleven senses of the human body. For this reason one should regulate his eating and drinking on this day,

so as not to get completely carried away by sensual desires. If one does not follow the rules which the sages of yore have set down for this day, one will implicate oneself in sin and gradually become degraded.

The idea is certainly not to simply fast and stay awake, but to do these things so that one can engage as much as possible in hearing and praising the glories of the Lord. One popular explanation (different from the one given in this book) of the word upavāsa or fasting is 'to be close'. This implies that fasting should be more than just refraining from food. If fasting distances us from service to the Lord, it is not real upavāsa. Fasting is a means to the end, devotion to Kṛṣṇa, and it may not work for all.

There is also another understanding of Ekādaśī. The advanced devotee no longer thinks of Lord Kṛṣṇa as the majestic supreme Lord, but as his dear master, friend, son or lover. Just as our senses are easily agitated on Ekādaśī, he thinks, so are Kṛṣṇa's. In other words, this day is a great opportunity to please Kṛṣṇa's senses! For this reason, he endeavours to worship the Lord as opulently and well as possible on this day, when the unlimited opportunities for pleasing the Lord seem to grow even further.