

## THE CONCEPT OF *BHAKTI* IN BENGAL VAIṢṆAVISM

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The genesis and development of Bengal School of Vaiṣṇavism, otherwise known as *Gauḍīya* Vaiṣṇavism, is a religious movement initiated by ŚrīCaitanyaMahāprabhu (February 18, 1486 – June 14, 1534 A.D.) and his followers in the 15th and the 16th centuries A. D. ŚrīJīvaGosvāmī (1513-1598 A. D.) has given the philosophical foundation of *Gauḍīya* Vaiṣṇavism in its articulation of *Acintyabhedābheda-vāda*, a school of Vedānta representing the philosophy of inconceivable one-ness and difference. Both Rūpa Gosvāmī (1489 – 1564 A. D.) and SanātanaGosvāmī (1488 - 1558 A. D.) were his paternal uncles. Etymological derivation suggests that Vaiṣṇavism centres round Viṣṇu though He is designated by different names by different devotees hailing from different regions of India but the path of devotion and pure love (*prema- bhakti*) is common to all of them and Kṛṣṇa of the *BhāgavataPurāṇa* is said to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu in human form with human qualities and sentiments. Viṣṇu, who is appeared to be more appealing and attractive, is adequately portrayed and delineated in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* through His *līlā* (sportive joy) with parents, friends, *gopīs* and other devotees professing unconditioned love and devotion. In course of time, Rādhā came to be recognized as the consort, an ideal devotee and lover of Kṛṣṇa. This divine, pure and super sensuous relation between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā is difficult to comprehend and its true significance cannot be fully realized by any ordinary being with human sensibilities.

The most outstanding feature of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism in its religious aspect is its theory of *Rasa* (Relish). Etymologically, the word *rasa* means a thing that may be tasted or enjoyed. Bengal Vaiṣṇavism is an area of fascinating study, unique in its articulation of *Acintyabhedābheda-vāda*, as a philosophy according to which the only way to God realization is *bhakti*. It establishes the superiority of *bhakti* over *Karma* and *Jñāna*. The Absolute is the eternal embodiment of all *rasas* (relish) (*nikhilarasāmṛta-mūrti*). The teachers of the Bengal school declare that Kṛṣṇa-*rati* appears as five different kinds of dominant moods, viz *Śānta*, *Dāsya*, *Sakhya*, *Vātsalya* and *Madhura*. The *rasas* (relish) are realized differently by the different class of devotees. Among these different modes of God-realization the worshipping God as one's own child is unique. It is called *Vātsalya-bhāva* and the *rasa* (relish) that the *bhakta*

experience is called *Vātsalya-rasa*. It is an extension of one's love for one's child to the 'other' and through this gradually to God.

How can human beings realize God through Divine Love (*bhakti*) in and through the consideration of God as one's own child? This is based on *ahetukī bhakti*, according to *Gauḍīya* Vaiṣṇavism. The word 'love' is very familiar to everybody, from the growing child to the God-intoxicated man. Love does not depend on anything; it may exist and be expressed without of the word. Man loves or tries to love, though their love is self-centered, pleasure-oriented, problematic and brittle, but ideal love and common human love thus seem to be poles apart. It seems that the motive of self-enhancement ultimately controls all human affiliations. Yet the ideals are not something imaginary or unrealistic. People look up to these ideals and pursue them. For example, the ideals of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *prema*, love of Hanumāna for Rāmacandra, the *gopīs* of *Vṛindāvana* for Kṛṣṇa, filial love of Yośodā for Kṛṣṇa etc. provided wonderful example of extraordinary love (*prema*). In this context, what is called 'love of God' may appear to hold some hope. By the word 'love' God (Kṛṣṇa) is conceived as both *rasa* (relish) and *rasarāja*. The Vaiṣṇavas of the Bengal school do not only worship the Lord as their 'swamī' (controller) through *Madhura-bhāva*, but also worship through unconditional self-surrender to the Lord. It is practiced through all kinds of human relationship which expresses His *līlā*. Sometimes the devotees (*bhaktas*) realize this *līlā* through understanding the relationship of love of a servant for his master (*Dāśya-bhāva*), a friend for a friend (*Sakhya-bhāva*), parents for their child (*Vātsalya*; filial attitude) and lastly *kāntā-bhāva* or love of a lady-love for her lover<sup>1</sup> (*Mdhura-bhāva*) and all these form of devotion have to be motiveless, i.e., it would not have any cause or reason.

With this prerequisite let us discuss *Vātsalya-bhāva*. The parents of Kṛṣṇa are illustrations of the *Vātsalya* mood of devotion through love; in its pure and simple form that ignores power and majesty. Here God is being loved as their own child. *Vātsalya-bhāva* can be regarded as the highest state of ecstatic joy, for it can lay its calm on the whole of devotee's time and attention on account of the restrictions of time and circumstances imposed on it. Here the Lord Kṛṣṇa is conceived as loving 'Gopāla' of Mother Yośodā and the force of the sense of Kṛṣṇa's lordship is minimized to a great extent by the devotee's filial affection for the Lord. In the stage

of *Vātsalya*, the devotee has the conceit of parents or parent-like ones and looks upon the *Bhagavān* as his/her child. It flows spontaneously, regardless of any injunction, sanction or stimulus from without. It is eternal and ever-growing. *Vātsalya* involves *mamatā*; belief and the feeling that ‘Kṛṣṇa is my child’. Kṛṣṇa is regarded as the supreme deity owing to filial love of an extreme nature which makes devotee blind to the absoluteness of Kṛṣṇa. Even if Kṛṣṇa Himself manifests His lordship to a devotee like Yośodā, she is awe-struck only for the moment and soon manages to react to it as one does to an illusion or an evil omen. It has been said in the *Bhāgavata* that while being suckled by His mother Yośodā, Kṛṣṇa showed her His universal form. But Yośodā could not fix her mind on it for long. Her motherly love made her forget the lordship of Kṛṣṇa, and being afraid and anxious like an ordinary mother, she hurriedly took all steps to ward off any evil that might befall her child Kṛṣṇa.

According to Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, the Knower and the known get united only after getting final deliverance, i.e., achieving *bhakti*. The teachers of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism hold that the relation of ‘difference-in non-difference’ though undeniable, yet not intelligible to logical understanding.<sup>2</sup> It attempts at exhibiting the genesis and development of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism providing us with a probable solution to this unfathomable gap between the knower and the object of knowledge. The word *Bhakti* has been derived from the root *bhaj*, which is used to mean complete servitude or *sevā* (i.e., entire submission to Him in body, mind and words). It is complete self-surrender or *ātmanivedana* to the Lord. The path of *bhakti* is open to all without distinction of race, sex, colour, intelligent or caste and creed. *Bhakti* is manifested in *prapattī* which means the complete surrender of one-self to God. In the final stage of *bhakti*<sup>3</sup> the devotee realizes the unity of all existences, even God Vāsudeva and he, himself, are one.

It is indeed true that Bengal Vaiṣṇavism gives importance to the theory of *rasa* - ‘*rasa vaisah, rasamhyevāyāmlabdhvānandībhavati*’ (*Taittirīya*: 2.6.1). In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* it has been mentioned of Brahman as *rasa* (relish), and individual soul becomes full of bliss (*ānanda*) identified extension of love, which infinitely surpasses the charm of the bliss aspect of Brahman.<sup>4</sup> The intrinsic nature of Kṛṣṇa and power of His bliss (*Hlādinī*) in the highest plane of His transcendental abode with which He makes human beings to realize this. This way of realizing reality resembles

the human intellectual method of enjoying dalliance (*līlā*). According to Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, *Kṛṣṇa-rati* appears as five different kinds of dominant moods, viz *Śānta*, *Dāsyā*, *Sakhya*, *Vātsalya* and *Madhura* - these are relished differently by five different kinds of devotees. Man is by nature a seeker of joy, life-long and persistent desire for joy can be attended only on the realization of the bliss (*rasa*) of Kṛṣṇa. Let us now discuss *Vātsalya-rati*. How can man be united with God as their own child based on *ahetukībhakti*.<sup>5</sup>

The parents of Kṛṣṇa are illustrations of the *Vātsalya* mode of devotion. Here God is being loved as one's own child. In this stage, Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Lord, is worshiped as one's own son. He receives parental love and care from the concerned devotee. They should feed Him, dress Him, administer Him medicines when he is ill, put Him sleep and then watch Him over when asleep. The mind of the devotee in *Vātsalya-bhāva* is wholly occupied with thoughts for their beloved Lord whom they perceive as their child. *Vātsalya-bhāva* can be regarded as the highest state of ecstatic joy, for it can lay its calm on the whole of devotee's time and earnest attention on account of the restrictions of time and circumstances imposed on it. The *Vātsalya* consciousness of Vāsudeva and Devakī, who were the parents of Kṛṣṇa, was disturbed by the sense of Kṛṣṇa's power and majesty. But the Lord Kṛṣṇa is conceived as loving 'Gopāla' of Mother Yaśodā and the force of the sense of Kṛṣṇa's lordship is minimized to a great extent by the devotee's filial affection for the Lord. In the stage of *Vātsalya*, the devotee has the conceit of parents or parent-like ones and looks upon the *Bhagavān* as one's own child. It flows spontaneously, regardless of any injunction, sanction or stimulus from without. It is eternal and ever-growing. *Vātsalya*, involves *mamatā*, belief and the feeling that 'Kṛṣṇa is my child'. Kṛṣṇa is regarded as the supreme deity owing to filial love of an extreme nature which makes devotee blind to the absoluteness of Kṛṣṇa.

*Vātsalya* or paternal sentiment is still superior, since in this stage the devotee regards the Lord as her/his affectionate child deserving anxious parental care and kindness, and on account of the loving sense of superiority goes so far as to chastise and punish Him, if such measures appear to him necessary for His correction. The sense of 'mine'<sup>6</sup> (*madīya-bhāva*) involved in the parental love is much more intense than that involved in friendly love. The loving service of a friend even at its highest

stage does not involve the sense of superiority and the intense feeling of care and anxiety for the object displayed in parental love. The highest stage of *Vātsalya* leads to self-realization which consists in the loving service of Kṛṣṇa alone as the dearest and nearest one. *Vātsalya* is to restore the tranquil state of the devotees, so that they may realize His intrinsic nature. *Rasa* (relish) and *Ānanda* (bliss) have no meaning except as enjoyment which implies the duality of subject and object. The true nature of the ultimate reality is conceived as consisting of perfect self-enjoyment which finds its fullest and highest expression in the eternal communion of Yaśodā and Gopāla. As *rasa* (relish) the supreme reality is not only the object relished as bliss but also the subject that relishes. Actually *rasa*(relish) is emotional sublimation of intimate human sentiments to-wards Kṛṣṇa. The devotee voluntarily submits her/his own self to God and experiences a sweet, personal, intimate relation of love and comradeship with Him. The Vaiṣṇavas of the Bengal school cannot only worship the Lord as their *Swamī* through *Madhura-bhāva*, they worship and surrender unconditionally to the Lord through all kinds of human relationship which expresses His *līlā*. It is the understanding of relationship of love of a servant for his master (*Dāsyā*), love of a friend for a friend (*Sakhya*), parents-child, filial attitude (*Vātsalya*) and Lady-love for the beloved (*Mādhurya*).

*Vātsalya-bhāva* is regarded as the nearest to the stage of *Madhura-bhāvain* the series of gradual development of *rasa-realization* starting with *Śānta-bhāva* and ending with *Kāntā-bhāva*. *Vātsalya-bhāva* is superior to *Dāsyā* and *Sakhya*. In terms of intimacy each of the succeeding stage of *rasa* of *Vātsalya-bhāva* is higher than the earlier one. *Vātsalya-rasa* has the characteristic of tenderness in addition to the three characteristic of *Sakhya*, namely the senses of divinity, service and reliance arising out of unconditional love. In it a devotee regards as the patron of Kṛṣṇa who appears to him as the object of parental care. The *Vātsalya* consciousness of Vāsudeva and Devakī, who were the parents of Kṛṣṇa, was disturbed by the sense of Kṛṣṇa's power and majesty. Here the Lord Kṛṣṇa is the 'ultimate concern' conceived as affectionate loving son 'Gopāla' of Mother Yaśodā. In this stage of *Vātsalya*, a devotee (*bhakti*) has the conceit of parents and looks upon the *Bhagavān* as her/his own child. It is analogous to flowing *karuṇa rasa* spontaneously, regardless of any injunction,

sanction or stimulus from without reason and feeling of fearlessness. It is eternal and ever-growing.

Kṛṣṇa delights to sport with His closest devotees in the form in which they desire Him the most. It is said in the *Purāṇas* that Droṇa, Vāsu, and Dhārā, who were great devotees, obtained Kṛṣṇa as their son because of their parental attitude towards Him. Kṛṣṇa is reputed to be the son of Nanda and Yaśodā, who were originally Drona and Dhārā.<sup>7</sup> The story of the good fortune of Nanda and Yaśodā is only illustrative of Kṛṣṇa's extraordinary grace to His ardent devotees. The Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal holds that Nanda and Yaśodā are not ordinary mortals but eternal *parikaras* or associates of Kṛṣṇa. Though in the manifest *līlā* they have been found to obtain the special favour of being the parents of Kṛṣṇa on account of their parental feeling (*vātsalyabhāva*) for Him in the non-manifest *līlā*-s where they are eternally the parents of Kṛṣṇa. In the manifest *līlā* in *ātma-nivedana* state Kṛṣṇa is sometimes known as the son of Vāsudeva and Devakī at the prison cell in Mathurā whence He was subsequently taken to the place of Nanda and Yaśodā at Vṛṇḍāvana. Like His other acts, His birth, though resembling phenomenal acts, is non-phenomenal. It is the common belief among the followers of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism that kṛṣṇa became the son of Vāsudeva and Devakī not by entering into the womb of the latter but by taking possession of their minds. The form in which He has manifested Himself to Vāsudeva and Devakī is not the same in which He manifests Himself to Nanda and Yaśodā. As the son of Vāsudeva and Devakī, He is four-handed and awe-inspiring. While as the son of Nanda and Yaśodā He is two-handed and his transcendental form is characterized by exquisite beauty and loveliness. He is an ever-smiling playful cowherd boy, who wears a crown of wildflowers around His neck and with one hand He carries a flute and with the other, He carries a stick. The majestic feature of the Lord is now fully eclipsed by His juvenile suavity. No doubt Vāsudeva and Devakī are His *parikara*-s, but their status as devotees of Kṛṣṇa is not as that of Nanda and Yaśodā. Here Kṛṣṇa manifests Himself in His lower awe-inspiring form to Vāsudeva and Devakī and assumes the sweet intrinsic features of *rasa* (relish) and *ānanda* (bliss) which have no meaning except as enjoyment which implies the duality of subject and object. But the true nature of the ultimate reality is conceived in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism consisting of

perfect self-enjoyment which finds its fullest and highest expression in the eternal communion of Yaśodā and Gopāla.

Genuine love is not only unmotivated; it is also unconditional (*ahetuki*). In the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* it is said that the love for Kṛṣṇa (*Kṛṣṇa-prema*) is eternal; it is not something to be accomplished. What is brought about is its manifestation in heart of the *bhakta* (devotee) purified by listening to contemplation etc. The *Bhagavān-prīti* as a *rasa* (relish) is not accessible to all; only the *bhakta* can realize it through love for Kṛṣṇa which is inherent in every soul as the seed of devotion. “*sakaleramājheāchena Kṛṣṇa, kehanayakhāli| kāromājhevikaśita, kāromājhe kali||*”<sup>8</sup> The un-manifested form of the seed needs special nurturing with faith as its root. According to Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, “Kṛṣṇa can be realized only on the basis of faith, never by reasoning or argument (*viśvāsemilāyavastutarkevahudūra*)”.<sup>9</sup> But how does reverential faith arise? If faith does not arise without depending on our will, the theory of devotion will not stand. If repetition of a holy name or *mantra* is practiced on regular basis, the basic ground of reverential faith will be prepared. It is reported that *yavana* (a muslim) Haridās, a non-*hindu* devotee used to repeat in chanting the holy name one *lakh* times every day. But now a day we do not have so much time for meditation of ‘name repetition’ (*nāma-japa*) or chanting. But without doing this there would be no preparation of the field for sowing the seed of devotion. Without belief in the existence of God, devotion is impossible. God and the devotee have inseparable relationship (*aprthaka-siddhi*). In the absence of one, the other also will be absent. In the language of Rabindranath Tagore a *bhakta* may say: “*āmāyanahile, he tribhūbaneśvratomāraprema ye hatomiche*”.<sup>10</sup> So *Bhagavān*, Lord Kṛṣṇa who is conceived both as *rasa* (relish) and *rasarāja* is not only the object of relish (*rasa*) as bliss (*ānanda*) but also as the subject that relishes. The devotee voluntarily submits her/himself to God and experiences a sweet, personal, intimate relation of love and comradeship with Him.

Now the question is: Does the parental love, *Vātsalya-bhāva* have any relevance in today’s society? ‘Tolerance’ and ‘altruism’ are two main features of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. Here we see, mother Yaśodā taking Devakī’s son Kṛṣṇa as her own child. On the other hand, the boy Kṛṣṇa also accepted Yaśodā and Nanda as His parents. The example of making others as our own inspires us and we can realize our

extension to others. If we try to extend this altruistic parental love (*parakīyā-vātsalya-bhāva*) for inter-relationship in our family and society it will lead to sustainable good relation in our society. This parental love (*parakīyā-vātsalya-bhāva*) is an extension of oneself to others; others' children are as good as one's own children. This, of course, awakens a sense of interdependence through the bond of love in us, and gradually it works for value based development of our society which suffers from selfishness, meanness, greed, hatred and delusion. Pure love is the remedy for such mental illness. Hatred begets hatred and hatred can be won by love. This is the message uphold by the followers of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. If we practice this value of *Vātsalya-bhāvain* society many orphans will have the opportunity to grow up with real parental affection, love and discipline and this will certainly contribute to elevate our society to the highest level of peace and progress. For example, if the teachers take care of their students with parental affection, love and care as they do for their own children, our society will grow with elevated citizens in future. If the medical community, where the physician has a pivotal position, serves the patients with the same affection as their own children, then the solution of many problems of the society may be easily addressed and minimised. The ideal relation between a doctor and a patient is described as one of parental relation by Caraka. And it is here that we may find the relevance of *Vātsalya-bhāva* of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism to address problems of today's society in many other ways.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. S. C. Chakraborty, "*Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism*, Academic Publishers, Calcutta: 1969, p.352.
2. Ibid, p. 402.
3. Kṛṣṇadāsa Goswāmi, *Caitanya-Caritāmṛta*, Madhya Līlā, Ch-7.Vols 1-4, ed. Radhagobinda Nath, (4<sup>th</sup> edition), Tallyganj, Calcutta, 1963.
4. S. C. Chakraborty, "*Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism*, Academic Publishers, Calcutta: Pp.342-344.
5. Ibid, p. 357.
6. Ibid, Pp. 217-218.
7. Ibid, p.137.
8. See, Rashvihary Das, "Avatāravāda" in *Katipay Dārśanika Pravandha* (in Bengali), Bangiya Darśan Pariṣad, 1978, p.108.
9. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 1. 2. 28.
10. Rabindra Nath Tagore, *Gīta-vitāna*, Puja No. 294.