

Jaiṡa Dharma

by Śrīla Saccidānanda
Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura

Chapter Ten

The Age and History of Nitya-dharma

Śrī Harihara Bhaṭṭācārya of Agradvīpa, by profession a teacher, some time back had been suddenly assailed by a nagging doubt, which had persisted even after he had approached and discussed with many persons, so the frustration he felt in his heart had grown considerably.

Finally, he came to the village of Arkatīlā and questioned the learned scholar of logic, Śrī Caturbhuja Nyāyaratna.

“Dear Bhaṭṭācārya Mahāśaya, please could you kindly tell me the age of vaiṣṇava-dharma?”

Śrī Harihara Bhaṭṭācārya had been initiated into the Vaiṣṇava order and daily had worshiped Kṛṣṇa in his home.

Whereas Śrī Caturbhuja had been assiduously studying the nyāya-śāstra of logic and philosophy for twenty years.

At the end of all this study, he had developed an attitude of aloofness towards dharma.

Apathetic to religious wranglings and debates, only during his śakti worship did he sometimes show signs of bhakti.

Therefore, his first reaction to Harihara's question was the thought, "Harihara is already partial to vaiṣṇava-dharma, now he wants to drag me into a philosophical labyrinth. It is better to avoid this argument."

Therefore he said, “Dear Harihara, your question surprises me.

You have already studied up to the level of the muktipāda section of the nyāya-śāstra, so you should be well aware that in the rhetoric of the nyāya scriptures the vaiṣṇava-dharma is never mentioned.

So, I ask you: Why do you harass me with your question?”

Harihara said, “Sir, I have received vaiṣṇava-mantra dīkṣā in accordance with the age-old traditions of our family.

Never, have I had any doubts about vaiṣṇava-dharma, but recently I heard that the famous debater from Vikramapura, Śrī Tarka-cūḍāmaṇi, has apparently set out on a mission to uproot vaiṣṇava-dharma.

He travels extensively and preaches strongly against the Vaiṣṇava ethics, filling his coffers along the way.

In one such gathering, predominantly visited by a śakta audience, he remarked that vaiṣṇava-dharma was very new and also lacking in philosophical depth, and that only people from the lower castes become Vaiṣṇavas, the high-class gentry turning up their noses and looking down on vaiṣṇava-dharma.

“Initially upset to hear a scholar of his stature uttering such banalities, I pondered nevertheless over what he had said and came to certain realizations.

Before the advent of Śrī Caitanya, vaiṣṇava-dharma had never been practiced in Bengal to any great extent.

The majority of the people were followers of the śakti cult.

Although a few persons like me also took initiation into vaiṣṇava-mantra, still, of this few most aspired after Brahman realization and were engaged in attaining mokṣa.

The śakti worshippers, also known as pañcopāsaka, the worshipers of the five Deities, mostly adopted this standard of vaiṣṇava-dharma.

“The vaiṣṇava-dharma has definitely undergone changes and taken a new form since the appearance of Śrī Caitanya.

The Vaiṣṇavas now close their mind and ears to words and thoughts like Brahman and mukti.

Now, I cannot even fathom the structure of the philosophy of bhakti.

These modern Vaiṣṇavas prove the proverb that the blind have to find another support for they rarely stay on the right path.

Thus, I have come to you with my question: Has the vaisnava-dharma that we find today existed since the dawn of civilization, or did it arise after the advent of Srī Caitanya?"

Upon realizing that Harihara's standpoint was not that of a fanatic Vaiṣṇava,
the face of Śrī Caturbhuja immediately lit up.

He said, "Harihara, I support your views."

The present rise of this fledgling vaiṣṇava-dharma is intimidating and one
cannot even speak out against it openly.

Remember, this is Kali-yuga, one must be very cautious.

Many rich gentlemen have been highly influenced by the philosophy of
Caitanya and have joined His ranks.

They disrespect us greatly and even consider us as their enemies. I dare say they will soon eliminate us.

Traders and members of other business communities have started to hold dissertations and discussions upon the scriptures, certainly a cause of consternation for the brāhmaṇa caste.

“Mind you, for a long time we brāhmaṇas had expertly arranged society so that we were exclusively favoured in the study and teaching of the śāstras and every other caste was barred from such practice.

Even the caste just below us, the kāyasthas, was afraid to chant the Vedic mantras—even beginning with the primal sound, aum.

Everyone was simply accepting our authority and following our instructions.

However, now many people are converting to vaiṣṇava-dharma, and furthermore, even as such neophytes they are debating and analysing philosophy.

Indeed, ever since Nimāi Paṇḍita entered the scene, our image and position have been tarnished and the brahminical religion has gradually become obsolete.

My dear Harihara, the paṇḍita you have just mentioned, Tarka-cūḍāmaṇi, has definitely said the right thing, whether out of greed for money or for whatever other reason.

“These rascal Vaiṣṇavas! Their words really irk me.

They are now propagating this garbage that Śaṅkarācārya—on the Supreme Lord’s direct orders—compiled the māyāvāda literature, which according to them is a totally false concept.

They, on the other hand, say that the vaiṣṇava-dharma is eternal and has existed since time immemorial.

Not even a century has gone by since this dharma took birth and now, suddenly, it is said to be without a beginning!

What is that old saying? ... 'The shoe is now on the wrong foot.'

“Well, let them scream as much as they want. Regrettably, however, Navadvīpa is now not such a nice place as it was. It has certainly deteriorated, especially in the area of Gādigāchā.

Some Vaiṣṇavas are living there and they act as if the world belonged to them.

A few of them are very learned scholars and their preaching is causing chaos amongst the common folk.

They are destroying our land and discouraging people from believing in the eternal māyāvādī philosophy and the worship of devas and devīs, demigoddesses.

Soon this religious culture and practice will disappear. Have you not seen the definite decline in the elaborate performance of śrāddha, oblations to departed souls, and other brahminical observances?

How will the officiating priests maintain their families without the income from these observances?"

Harihara replied, "Well, mahātmājī! Is there no solution or reprisal for this situation?"

There are still a few famous learned paṇḍitas in Māyāpura.

In addition, across the Gaṅgā in Kuliya village there are several scholars of smṛti and nyāya.

What about if we were to band together and collectively lay siege upon the Vaiṣṇavas of Gādigāchā?”

Reflecting upon this, Nyāyaratna thought out loud, “Yes that is possible, yet only if there is unity amongst us. In general, we are divided and distrust one another considerably.

Recently, I heard that a small group of brāhmaṇas took Kṛṣṇa Cūḍāmaṇi to Gādigāchā and challenged the Vaiṣṇavas to a philosophical debate.

They were vanquished and returned to their individual tolās, private Sanskrit schools, inventing stories to tell the people in order to save their reputations.”

Harihara said, “Respected Bhaṭṭācārya Mahāśaya, you are our teacher and an instructor of numerous other teachers.

Many people have learned the art of rhetoric and argumentation from reading your commentaries on nyāya.

You must go and once and for all defeat those Vaiṣṇava paṇḍitas.

Prove to them that their vaisnava-dharma is just a new fashion and lacks Vedic authorization.

Only then will our flag of pañcopāsanā, which has received widespread patronage for such a long time, keep on waving proudly.”

Externally, Śrī Caturbhuja Nyāyaratna did not display the nagging fear in his mind, namely that perhaps a place where Kṛṣṇa Cūḍāmaṇi and others had been humbled might also become his own place of devastation.

He said, “Harihara, I will go disguised and you will taken the position of being a leading teacher.”

You will start the debate and set the assembly ablaze with blistering arguments, then I shall take over.”

Harihara, bristling with confidence, exulted, “I am fully prepared to follow your instructions.”

Next Monday, we will cross the Gaṅgā in the name of Mahādeva and lay siege there in Gādigāchā.”

The days passed by until that fateful Monday arrived. Harihara, Kamalākānta, and Sadāśiva—a trio of brāhmaṇa teachers—collected Śrī Caturbhuja from his home in Arkatīlā and crossed the Gaṅgā.

It was three-thirty when they stomped into Pradyumna-kuñja grove, much like the famed Durvāsā Muni and his followers, and seating themselves on the Śrī Mādhavī-mālatī Maṇḍapa platform, announced their arrival by loudly uttering, “Haribol! Haribol!”

Advaita dāsa Bābājī quietly appeared, welcomed them graciously, and seated them upon comfortable straw mats. He enquired, “Kindly, How may we help you?”

Haridāsa spoke up, saying, “We have come to discuss certain subjects with the Vaiṣṇavas.”

Advaita dāsa Bābājī quickly said, “The Vaiṣṇavas here shy away from arguments, but if you have sincere queries that would be nice.”

The other day a few scholars came pretending to be genuine seekers, but only bombarded us with a barrage of verbiage.

In the end, they had to retreat, crest-fallen and nursing their battered pride.

Therefore, let me ask the permission of Śrī Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī.”
He disappeared into the cottage of Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī Mahārāja.

Shortly afterwards, Advaita dāsa Bābājī returned and went around spreading more sitting mats.

Soon, Śrī Paramahansa Premadāsa Bābājī arrived, offered his prostrated obeisances first to the tulasī plant, then to the visitors, and finally took a seat.

Hands folded, he asked his guests, “Kindly say, how may we serve you?”

Paṇḍita Caturbhuja said, “We have a couple of questions we would like to have answered.”

Immediately, Śrī Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī called for Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī. The latter came and taking stock of the situation sat down quietly.

When everyone was properly settled, Caturbhuja asked, “Is the vaiṣṇava-dharma modern, or is it primordial?”

Śrī Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī’s imperceptible, urging nod gave Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī the signal, so he said, “The all-auspicious vaiṣṇava-dharma is sanātana, ever-existent, and nitya, eternal.”

Caturbhuja Nyāyaratna, “I see that the vaiṣṇava-dharma is of two kinds.

One kind professes that Brahman, the Supreme Truth, is nirākāra, formless.

However, as the nirākāra cannot be worshiped therefore an imaginary form is constructed, and by worship of this imaginary form the consciousness is purified.

The mythical image of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, of Rāma, or Nṛsiṃha, is worshipped and thereby one gradually becomes enlightened with the knowledge of nirākāra-brahman, the formless Supreme.

When one's consciousness is thus purified, then the impersonal nature of Brahman is realized.

Amongst the pañcopāsanās, those who worship the mūrti of Viṣṇu and meditate on a specific viṣṇu-mantra with this understanding introduce themselves as Vaiṣṇavas.

“The other kind of vaiṣṇava-dharma asserts that Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, and so on, possess eternal personal forms.”

According to this understanding, worship and meditation upon the individual mantras and śrī-mūrtis of their Lordships leads to absolute, eternal knowledge and the acquisition of divine mercy by the sādhaka, practitioner.

In this view, the philosophy of impersonalism is called māyāvāda and is considered an illusory misconception distributed by the propounder of impersonalism, Śrī Śaṅkarācārya.

Which of these two is the sanātana and nitya vaiṣṇava-dharma?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “The latter is the real vaiṣṇava-dharma, and it is
certainly sanātana.

The former kind you spoke of is vaiṣṇava-dharma in name only; in actual
reality, it is the opposite of the true vaiṣṇava-dharma.

It is a non-permanent philosophy, borrowing greatly from the monistic
concepts of the māyāvāda school.”

Caturbhuja, “Everything is now quite clear to me. You say that the real vaiṣṇava-dharma is the philosophy of Śrī Caitanya deva, and that the real and true vaiṣṇava-dharma does not simply consist of worshiping Śrī Śrī Rādhā Kṛṣṇa, or Śrī Rāma, or Śrī Nṛsimha, and so on, but insist that this vaiṣṇava-dharma has to be performed as prescribed by Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu.”

All right, but how can you claim that this brand of vaiṣṇava-dharma is sanātana, given that Śrī Caitanya appeared only recently?”

Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, “Actually vaiṣṇava-dharma has existed since the creation of the jīva.”

The jīvas are designated as anādi, beginningless, having not come into being within the purview of mundane history and creation—their manifestation is from the Supreme Lord and thus above the linear strictures of material time.

Thus, it is fair to conclude that the intrinsic constitutional function of the jīva known as jaiva-dharma—or vaiṣṇava-dharma—is also beginningless, primordial, and eternal.

“Within the material universe, Lord Brahmā is the first manifested jīva.

As soon as Lord Brahmā appears, the first Vedic hymns of knowledge, the basis of vaiṣṇava-dharma, also become manifest.

This momentous occurrence is recorded in the famous four essential verses of the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam known as the catuḥ-ślokī.

“In addition, this is corroborated in the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, 1.1.1:

brahmā devānām prathamam sambabhūva
viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā
sa brahma-vidyām sarva-vidyā-pratiṣṭhām
atharvāya jyeṣṭha-putrāya prāha

“Lord Brahmā, the creator and protector of this universe, appeared prior to
any other creature, from the lotus sprouting from the navel of Supreme Lord.
He initiated his eldest son, Atharvā, into the science of the Absolute Truth
known as parama-vidyā, which is the repository of all branches of
knowledge.’

“The R̥g Veda Sam̥hitā, 1.22.20, states:

tad viṣṇoḥ paramam padam
sadā paśyanti sūrayaḥ
divīva cakśur ātatam

“The supreme destination, the spiritual abode of Śrī Viṣṇu, is resplendently
self-manifest as brightly as the sun. It is seen and worshiped since time
immemorial by the devas and Vaiṣṇava saints.’”

“In addition, the Kaṭhopanīṣad, 1.3.9, declares:

tad viṣṇoḥ paramam padam
viṣṇor yat paramam padam

“The lotus feet of Śrī Viṣṇu are the ultimate and greatest shelter.’”

“Further, in the Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 5.4, the following is found:

sarvā-diśa ūrddhvam adhaś ca tiryak
prakāśayan bhrājate yad vanadvān
evam sa devo bhagavān vareṇyo
yoni-svabhāvān adhiṣṭhaty ekaḥ

“There is but one Supreme Lord, the Absolute Godhead, who is the primal
cause of all causes. Like the sun that disperses brilliant rays to drive away the
darkness, but ever remains so resplendent, the Supreme Godhead also
maintains His supreme divinity in all circumstances.”

“The Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 2.1.2, states:

satyaṁ jñānam anantaṁ brahma
yo veda nihitaṁ guhāyāṁ parame vyoman
so ‘śnute sarvān kāman saha brahmaṇā vipaścitā

“The Supreme Absolute Brahman is the embodiment of truth, knowledge
and eternity. He is transcendental to the purview of material time, place and
senses.

One who has realized that the Supreme Brahman is simultaneously situated both in the spiritual sky and in the hearts of the jīvas becomes sublimely connected with this omniscient Śrī Hari in a loving relationship, which completely fulfils all the spiritual desires of the jīva.'

“This devotional mood of eternal surrender is totally absent in the pseudo-Vaiṣṇavism, which is the result of the influence of the mayavada philosophy.

In terms of attaining knowledge, by this pseudo-Vaiṣṇava philosophy one cannot become enlightened about one's true spiritual identity as an eternal servant of the Supreme Lord, because this philosophy proposes that when one attains knowledge of Brahman one becomes Brahman.

If one considers oneself Brahman, why should one serve Brahman?

“In contrast, the Kāthopanīṣad, 1.2.23, instructs:

nāyam ātmā pravacanena labhyo
na medhayā na bahunā śrutena
yam evaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyas
tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanum svām

“The knowledge of the Supreme Absolute Truth, the Supersoul, cannot be
acquired through endless debates, sharp intellect, or erudition. However,
when the jīva soul turns to the Supreme Lord Śrī Hari in a serving mood and
begs for His mercy, the Lord within the heart reciprocates and reveals
Himself to the jīva.’”

“Factually, the process of devotional surrender is the only true dharma.”

When the Supreme Brahman, Bhagavān, is satisfied and showers His mercy upon the devotee, the eternal transcendental form of the Supreme Lord can be directly seen.

Knowledge of just the impersonal aspect, Brahman, cannot bestow perception of this divine transcendental form.

These unequivocal declarations from the Vedas establish the pure vaiṣṇava-dharma.

Thus, the brand of vaiṣṇava-dharma propagated by Śrī Caitanya is fully supported by the entire Vedic literature. There can be no doubt regarding this.”