

Jaiṅva Dharma

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Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura

Chapter Eleven

Nitya-dharma and Deity Worship

On the western bank of the Gaṅgā, the peaceful hamlet of Kuliya Pāhārpura
basked in its recently acquired glory.

This pastoral community of Navadvīpa-dhāma is situated within the
transcendental island of Koladvīpa, where the renowned Śrī Mādhava dāsa
Caṭṭopādhyāya—also known as Chakaurī Caṭṭopādhyāya—resided during the
era of Śrī Caitanya.

His son, Śrīla Vaṁśīvadanānanda Ṭhākura—thus named because he was the
incarnation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's vaṁśī, flute—became an eminent personality of
immense influence.

All this was possible by the grace of Śrī Caitanya.

Śrīla Vaṁśīvadanānanda was also highly honoured for another reason.

He was greatly favoured by Śrīmatī Viṣṇupriyā devī, the wife of Śrī Caitanya.

After the disappearance of Śrīmatī Viṣṇupriyā devī, Vaṁśīvadanānanda transferred the Deities she had personally worshiped from Śrī Māyāpura to Kuliyā Pāhārpura, and he and his descendants continued to worship the Deities there.

Although Vamśivadanānanda and family later moved from Kuliya Pāhārpura to Śrīpāt Bāghanāpārā—being fortunate enough to receive the blessings and association of Śrī Jāhnavā Mātā, the wife of Śrī Nityānanda Prabhu—

the family arranged for Vaiṣṇavas from Mālañcha to continue worship of the Deities of Śrīmatī Viṣṇupriyā devī in the temple at Kuliya Pāhārpura.

In the time of Śrī Caitanya, the original town of Navadvīpa was on the eastern bank of the Gaṅgā.

Kuliya was across on the western bank and now consisted of several notable hamlets, among them Cinādāṅgā.

Once a certain devotee from the Cinādāṅgā merchant community organized a spiritual fair on the premises of the celebrated Kuliya Pāhārpura temple to which many brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas and all Vaiṣṇavas from within a thirty-two mile radius were invited.

The festival day saw a teeming mass of Vaiṣṇavas pouring into Kuliya from all around.

Ananta dāsa Bābājī and others came from Nṛsimhapallī;

Gorācānda dāsa Bābājī and his group came from Māyāpura; Nārāyaṇa dāsa Bābājī with his associates from Bilva-puṣkarinī; the famous Narahari dāsa led his group from Śrī Modadruma; Śrī Paramahaṁsa Premadāsa Bābājī, Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī, and so on, came from Śrī Godruma; and Śrī Śacīnandana dāsa with his group arrived from Samudragadh.

They and many hundreds more of other Vaiṣṇavas began to arrive for the festival, resplendent with ūrdhva-puṇḍra, vertical tilaka markings, upon their foreheads indicating that their bodies were temples of Śrī Hari.

Strands of tulasī beads were around the necks of the Vaiṣṇavas and the names of Śrī Caitanya and Śrī Nityānanda were finger-painted in luminescent tilaka paste upon different parts of their upper limbs and foreheads.

They all carried a japa-mālā beadbag with their right hand or slung down from their necks.

Many were loudly chanting the mahā-mantra:

hare kṛṣṇa hare Kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa hare hare
hare rāma hare rama rāma rāma hare hare

Groups of Vaiṣṇavas mingled in the crowd singing gaily and marking time with mṛdaṅga and karatālas to sweet bhajans describing the pastimes of Śrī Gaurāṅga.

Some devotees were lifting up their arms while dancing and chanting:

śrī-kṛṣṇa-Caitanya prabhu-nityānanda
śrī-advaita gadādhara śrīvāsādi-gaura-bhakta-vṛnda

Many Vaiṣṇavas spontaneously expressed their overwhelming, indescribable joy with silent unrestrained tears, while all the hairs of their bodies stood upon end.

The exhilarating rhythms of the mrdāṅgas pulsed like volcanic shock waves throughout the rapturous throng.

Some Vaiṣṇavas cried out in sublime anguish intermingled with ecstatic weeping, “Oh my dearest Śrī Gaurāṅga!

When will my eyes be qualified to behold Your divine pastimes that are eternally performed here in Navadvīpa?”

The women of Kuliya, all devotees of Śrī Gaurāṅga, were amazed to see the wonderful ecstatic symptoms exhibited by the pure Vaiṣṇavas and praised their great spiritual good fortune.

The moving mass of Vaiṣṇavas surged slowly forward and soon arrived at the nāṭya-maṇḍira, the kīrtana hall directly attached to the Deity altar of the Kuliyā Pāhārpura temple, where previously Śrī Gaurāṅga would perform saṅkīrtana and dance.

The businessman devotee sponsoring the festival rushed out to meet the Vaiṣṇavas.

He wore a piece of cloth around his neck as a sign of submission upon welcoming his honoured guests, and falling at their feet he rolled upon the ground to express his heartfelt gratitude and humility.

The Vaiṣṇavas were then ushered into the nāṭya-maṇḍira, where they gradually settled down.

Immediately, a group of temple sevaites came forward to garland the Vaiṣṇavas with prasādī-mālā, previously offered Deity garlands.

The lead singers began the Śrī Caitanya-maṅgala-gītā—sublime invocatory songs narrating the nectarous pastimes of Śrī Gaurāṅga, which further filled the hearts of the Vaiṣṇavas with divine exultation.

However, as the Vaiṣṇavas reached the heights of ecstasy, the temple gateman came in to make an announcement to the temple authorities.

A new group of guests, led by the chief Muslim priest, Mullah Badrud-dīn Sāhib, of Sātsāika Paraganā had just arrived unexpectedly.

Requesting an audience with a few Vaiṣṇava paṇḍitas, the group was waiting in the outer courtyard reception area of the temple.

This news spread fast, arousing a murmur of disappointment at such an untimely intrusion into the exhilarating recital.

Upon the enquiry of Śrī Kṛṣṇa dāsa Bābājī Mahāśaya of Śrī Madhyadvīpa further detail was revealed,

“The respected Mullah Sāhib—considered the most eminent religious scholar of the entire Muslim community—desires a spiritual discussion with Vaiṣṇava scholars.

The Mullah Sāhib though dedicated to disseminating his Muslim dharma nevertheless declares that he holds no antagonistic feelings towards other dharmas.

He is held in high regard even by the crown in Delhi and solicits the opportunity to have an exchange upon scriptural topics with a few Vaiṣṇavas.”

The temple authorities humbly suggested that a number of Vaiṣṇava paṇḍitas could come forward for a śāstric discussion to display the excellence of vaiṣṇava-dharma.

A number of Vaiṣṇavas responded quickly, realizing that a talk with the Mullah Sāhib provided a wonderful opportunity to broadcast vaiṣṇava-dharma.

After taking counsel, they decided to send four Vaiṣṇava paṇḍitas as representatives: Gorācānda dāsa Bābājī of Śrī Māyāpura, Vaiṣṇava dāsa Bābājī of Godruma, Prema dāsa Bābājī of Jahnu-nagara, and Kali-pāvana dāsa Bābājī of Campahaṭṭa.

This four should start the discussion with the Mullah Sāhib, while the other
Vaiṣṇavas could also join the discussion after the completion of the Śrī
Caitanya-maṅgala-gītā.

The four selected Bābājīs arose, loudly glorifying, “Jaya Śrī Gaurāṅga! Jaya
Śrī Nityānanda!” and left the assembly following the mahānta, head temple
priest, for the outer courtyard, where the Mullah Sāhib with his group was
waiting.

The outer courtyard was a large area cooled by the shade of a huge peepul
tree.

When the Mullah Sāhib saw the Vaiṣṇavas approaching, he and his followers stood up as a sign of respect and graciously welcomed them.

Knowing that the all-pervading Supreme Lord Śrī Vāsudeva resides within the heart of all jīvas in the form of the Paramātmā and that all jīvas are the servitors of Sri Kṛṣṇa, the Vaiṣṇavas reciprocated their sincere greetings and gave respect to the Paramātmā within by performing daṇḍavats before the visitors.

They then sat down facing their respected Muslim guests.

The scene was indeed extraordinary.

On one side, fifty Muslim scholars were sitting finely attired with white flowing beards, several yards behind them their regally ornamented horses stood tethered to posts.

Opposite them, four self-realized Vaiṣṇava saints of divine aura were sitting with placid humility as the open space behind and around filled rapidly with inquisitive local people.

Paṇḍita Gorācānda dāsa Bābājī spoke first, addressing the Muslim scholars with a steady voice, “O great souls, why have you summoned people as insignificant as us?”

The famous Mullah Badrud-Dīn Sāhib humbly replied, “Salām! We wish to ask you a few questions.”

Paṇḍita Gorācānda replied, “As far as our knowledge allows we will attempt to answer your profound enquiries.”

The Mullah Sāhib started, “Dear brethren! History shows that Hindus have since the dawn of time worshiped many devas and devīs.

However, we read in our sacred book, the Koran-sharīf, that Allah is one, not many. He is formless, and that to sculpt His image and then to worship such an image is a grievous sin.

To eradicate this doubt, I have inquired among many brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas.

They all agree with us that Allah is nirākāra, formless, but they argue that since it is impossible to meditate upon a formless entity, so an imaginary form of Allah must be made to facilitate meditation.

Allah should then be worshiped in that form. However, we are not satisfied with this answer.

“The Koran states that an invented material image of Allah—we call it byūt, matter—is the work of Satan.

Byūt-parasta, idol worship, is absolutely forbidden. Far from pleasing Allah, it rather brings down His wrath.

We have heard that the original propagator of your religion, Śrī Caitanya deva, has pruned out the discrepancies in the Hindu religion. Yet, He, also, supports byūt-parasta.

Therefore, we have come to ask the Vaiṣṇavas why they have not given up byūt-parasta, despite having delved so deeply into the scriptures.”

The Vaiṣṇava paṇḍitas were inwardly amused by the thoughts of the Mullah Sāhib.

However, they requested Gorācānda Bābājī to reply, who quickly accepted this responsibility, “The Great One, whom you call Allah, is known to us as Bhagavān.

The Supreme Being is one and of the same absolute nature even though the sacred texts of the Koran and the Purāṇas have designated Him by different names according to their different languages and countries.

Naturally, whatever nomenclature describes the Supreme Godhead in the best and most accurate manner is to be preferred.

For this reason, we prefer the name Bhagavān to other names such as Allah, Brahman, Paramātmā, and so on.

“Allah means the One Being who is the greatest above everyone and everything.”

However, we do not consider that a name indicating the quality of unsurpassable greatness alone can be considered the ultimate name for the Absolute Supreme Personality since we do not consider greatness as the highest or most inclusive description of the Lord.

Rather, we consider that the name that indicates most comprehensively the camatkāritā, infinite wonder and uniqueness, of the Supreme Lord’s unlimited opulence should take precedence.

“A name indicating unsurpassable greatness definitely does indicate a certain amount of this uniqueness and wonder; however, the complement to greatness, ultimate minuteness, conveys a further aspect of this uniqueness and wonder.

Although the name Allah indicates ultimate greatness, it does not indicate ultimate minuteness, which is a further opulence of the Lord.

Therefore, the word Allah does not completely convey the complete camatkāritā of all the opulences of the Supreme Lord.

In contrast, the designation Bhagavān does denote the entire camatkāritā of the opulences of the Supreme Lord.

“Samagra aiśvarya, absolute unlimited opulence, which includes absolute magnitude and infinite minuteness plus unlimited further opulences, is only the first of the aspects of Godhead indicated by the name Bhagavān.

“Sarva-śaktimattā, omnipotence, is the second aspect of the Lord indicated by the name Bhagavān.

Impossibility, referring to limitations of consciousness and activity, is not applicable to the acintya-śakti, inconceivable potency, of the Supreme Lord.

By His acintya-śakti, the Lord is simultaneously nirākāra and sākāra, with form, and thus personal.

To say that the Lord is exclusively nirākāra impinges upon this inconceivable omnipotence.

Through the agency of His omnipotence, He simultaneously manifests His nirākāra manifestation as well as His sākāra manifestation, which is His eternal transcendental form as the very embodiment of His eternal pastimes.

Allah, Brahman, and Paramātmā are generally understood and worshiped solely as nirākāra; therefore, in this light, they are surely deficient in uniqueness and mystical wonder.

“The third aspect that the name Bhagavān indicates is that He is eternally maṅgalamaya, all-auspicious, and yaśa-purna, all-famous; thus, His pastimes are fully nectarous.

“The fourth aspect denoted by the term Bhagavān is unlimited saundarya, beauty.

The devoted living entities by acquisition of spiritually purified vision can behold this beatific form of the Supreme Personality as the reservoir of all beauty.

“The fifth aspect indicated by Bhagavān is that the Supreme Person is the embodiment of aśeṣa-jñāna, unlimited knowledge.

This implies that He is absolutely immaculate, perfect and complete, the embodiment of transcendence, the supreme spiritual object, and materially inscrutable.

His beatific eternal form as the Supreme Deity is the very embodiment of consciousness, beyond, as you say, byūt, the material time and elements.

“The sixth aspect indicated by Bhagavān is that even as the Īśvara of the entire creation, the Lord remains disentangled, aloof from everything, and fully independent by virtue of His excellence of renunciation.

Thus, I have enunciated the six primary characteristics of Bhagavān: opulence, power, fame, beauty, knowledge, and ~~renunciation.~~

“Furthermore, the Supreme Lord, Bhagavān, has two prakāśa, manifestations:
aiśvarya, opulent majesty; and mādhurya, sweetness.

The mādhurya prakāśa is the Supreme Well-wisher of the living entities; He comes to His devotees as the dearest Lord of the heart, as Śrī Kṛṣṇa, or as Śrī Caitanya.

“If we consider byūt-parasta to be a term describing the improper worship of a fictitious imaginary form of the Supreme Lord then this is certainly not contrary to our Vaiṣṇava viewpoint.

In vaiṣṇava-dharma, our practice is to worship the eternal, absolutely spiritual, fully conscious Deity form of Śrī Bhagavān.

Therefore, the Deity worship of the Vaiṣṇavas certainly cannot be defined as byūt-parasta, satanic material idol worship.

The description of byūt-parasta given in certain texts is not an absolute and all encompassing law to be applied without discrimination to bona fide Deity worship of the transcendental form of the Lord.

“Furthermore, everything depends on the intensity of faith and attachment of the worshiper.

The freer the worshiper is from the forces of byūt, the purer and more transcendental will his Deity worship be.

For example, you are the Mullah Sāhib; as a high priest and learned scholar,
your heart is free from the influence of byūt, but can your novice disciples be
characterized like that?

Are their hearts devoid of intimate contact with byūt?

And their level of their attachment to byūt reflects in their standard of
worship and meditation.

They may offer lip service to the nirākāra form, but their thoughts are
contaminated with the forms of byūt.

“The pure method of worshiping the Supreme Lord’s transcendental Deity form is certainly not possible for the general populace.”

Only those qualified persons who having overcome the influence of matter are transcendently situated and can thus conceptualise spiritual form should perform Deity worship.

I earnestly entreat you to give this subject deep thought.”

Mullah Sāhib, “I have seriously considered your points and I can say that the six primary absolute attributes possessed by He who is called Bhagavān are likewise mentioned in our Koran-sharīf in describing Allah.