

Chapter 35. Gopala, Gopas, and gopis

Sage Suka was keen on King Parikshith's seeing the Lord's divine sports in their proper prospective. "*Maharaja!* Parikshith! Who can describe the supreme super-world charm of Krishna, whose lovely form was the very embodiment of sweetness? How can anyone describe it in words? You want me to tell you stories of Krishna, but they belong to a realm that is beyond the reach of human vocabulary. God incarnated often and demonstrated, during each advent, many superworldly miracles, but in this Krishna incarnation, He exhibited a unique attraction.

"Did He smile but once, revealing the pearly line of teeth? Those who had the spring of love in their hearts, those who had the spell of devotion in their hearts, and even those who had mastered their senses and overcome their inner reactions felt an upsurge of emotion rising in them, an upsurge of affectionate adoration! Did He but touch them softly with His tender Hand? They lost all consciousness of their bodies; they were so immersed in bliss that thenceforth they lived in tune with Him!

"Now and then, He made fun and told humorous tales. The listeners felt that few were more fortunate than they, few were superior in the entire world!

Only the pure in heart understand Krishna's sports

"The herdsmen and maids (*gopas* and *gopis*) and the people of Vraja might be engaged in their daily avocations, but let them but see Krishna once while so engaged, and they stood entranced by His loveliness, rooted to the spot, like images carved in stone. The women of Vraja had surrendered their minds, their very breath, to Krishna, whom they recognised as love and compassion personified. No scholar, however high his attainments, can find language adequate to describe their nature and experience. In fact, language has to be dumb; it can only fail.

"The devotion and dedication of the herdsmen and maids, filled with elevated emotions, knew no limit. No less a person than Uddhava exclaimed on seeing them, 'Alas! I wasted all these years of my life! Having been in the cool comforting presence of Krishna-chandra so long, so near Him, I haven't gained access to His love and His glory. My heart is not yet illumined by even a fraction of the devotion and love that these maids have for the Lord. Truly, if one has to take birth, one must be born as a herdsman or maid (*gopa* or *gopi*)! Why be born otherwise and live a life without meaning, without significance? If I have no luck to be born as a herdsman or maid, let me become a green floral bower in Brindavan, or a jasmine creeper there, or, if I don't merit that fortune, let me at least grow as a blade of grass on the lawns frequented by the herdsmen, maids, and Krishna.' Uddhava yearned in devoted anguish, and his heart was filled with yearning. In fact, he was saved by that very anguish.

"Therefore, the statement that this relationship between Krishna and the cowherd maids was low and lascivious just reveals that the person is too easily led into wrong conclusions. Such statements are not worth attention.

"*Maharaja!* None but the pure in heart can understand Krishna's sport."

Parikshith was very happy when he heard this. He asked the sage with a smile on his lips, "Master! When did Uddhava go to Brindavan? Why did he go there? What prompted him to leave Krishna's presence and go? Please describe the incident to me."

The living appeared lifeless; the lifeless, living

Suka began the description. “O King! Uddhava could never be away from Krishna, even for a moment. He could never leave His presence. But Krishna sent him to Brindavan in order to give a message to the cowherd maids, so he had no option. He had to go; separation became inevitable. However, Krishna gave him just one day to fulfil his mission. He told him to stay no longer than a day. In spite of this, that one day of separation seemed an age for Uddhava, when he went to Brindavan.

“However, on reaching Brindavan, Uddhava was sorry that the hours were flying fast and that he had to leave the place so soon. ‘Alas, that I have to go away from these people so quickly! How happy I would be to spend my life in their company. Unfortunately, I haven’t acquired that merit’—these sad thoughts worried Uddhava.

“*Maharaja*, did you note that there is really no difference between the Lord and the devotee? Uddhava felt more anguish when he had to leave the cowherd maids’ presence than when he had to leave Krishna’s presence! His spiritual bliss (*ananda*) was the same in both places.

There is no distinction between cowherd maid (*gopi*) and Gopala, the devotee and *Bhagavan*. The hearts of the maids had been transformed into altars wherein He was installed. Their inner cravings were satiated by drinking the nectar of the essence of Krishna. Uddhava was able to realise their agony at separation from Krishna, the sincerity of their affectionate attachment to Him, their eagerness to hear about Him, their anxiety about Him, their earnestness to hear and obey His message.

“The herdsmen and maids never allowed their attention to wander from stories of Krishna, descriptions of His sports, and tales of His activities and achievements, even for a moment. The splendour of Krishna’s sweetness cast such powerful influence on Vraja that the living appeared lifeless and the lifeless appeared living! Uddhava saw with his own eyes the boulders of Govardhana Mountain melt in tears of joy. He saw the maids transfixed like stone images when their hearts were filled with divine joy. His experiences as wonderful and illuminating.”

While describing these characteristics of the devotion of the cowherd maids, Suka was so overcome with joy that teardrops fell from his eye. He lost awareness of all external things and entered super-consciousness (*samadhi*) so often that the holy men and sages who were listening to and watching him were filled with ecstasy and an irrepressible yearning to visualise the Krishna moon (*chandra*) who thrilled Suka so deeply.

The gopis’ agony of separation from Krishna

Finally, Suka opened his eyes. He said, “*Maharaja*! How lucky Uddhava was! While showing him the places where they sported with Krishna, the maids also showed him Govardhana Mountain. His wonder increased even more, for he could see on the rocks and the hard ground the footprints of Krishna, the herdsmen, and the maids as clear as when they walked long ago in that area. Nearing the Govardhana Mountain, the maids felt the agony of separation from Krishna so poignantly that they broke into sobs. They were aware only of Him; they merged in thoughts only of Him. When they called out ‘Krishna!’ in one voice, the nearby trees were so thrilled that they got goose pimples. They swayed their arms and began to moan in sadness. Uddhava observed with his own eyes how separation from Krishna had affected and afflicted not only the cowherd men and women of Brindavan but even its hills and trees. *Maharaja*! What more can I say? Uddhava saw scenes that transcend belief. He was overwhelmed with amazement, and he was humbled.”

The king was eager to know more. “Master! How did that happen? If there is no objection, please enlighten

me on that point also.”

Suka answered, “King! the awareness of the cowherd maids had become one with the consciousness of Krishna, so they noticed nothing else and none else. They saw every stone and tree as Krishna; they held on to it, calling out Krishna, Krishna. That made the stones and trees feel the agony of separation from Krishna, and they also melted in the heat of that grief, so that teardrops fell from the points of the leaves. The stones softened with the tears they exuded. How amazing these scenes must have been! The axiom, ‘All is alive’ (*sarvam sajivam*) was proved true to Uddhava. The stones and trees of Brindavan demonstrated that nothing is devoid of consciousness and life.

“Those unable to grasp the glory of the cowherd maids and the spiritual devotion (*bhakti*) that melted stone and drew sobs of grief from the trees have no right to judge and pronounce a verdict. If they do, they reveal only that their intelligence is more inert than rocks and boulders. Inert minds can never grasp the splendours of the moon Krishna (Krishna-chandra), who is the sovereign of the universe, who captivates the universe by His beauty and power. Only the clearest and purest intelligence can grasp it.

A gopi experiences Krishna in a flame

“Uddhava noticed a novel feature at Brindavan that evening. As *brahmins* and other twice-born people engaged at sunset in the worship of fire through ceremonial ritual, the cowherd maids lit the hearths in their homes, bringing cinders or live flames from neighbouring houses in shells or plates of clay. He saw that the first house to light the lamp and hearth was Nanda’s, the house where Krishna grew and played. He saw that as soon as the light shone in Nanda’s house, the maids went there, one after the other, with lamps in their hands, in order to have them lit auspiciously therefrom. They carried the lighted lamps to their own homes. Uddhava sat on the step of the village hall and watched the lamps go by.

“One maiden took too long to light her lamp at Krishna’s house, and the others who waited behind her got impatient. Yasoda, who was in the inner apartments, came out and, seeing her, cried out, ‘O, what a calamity this is!’ and tried to awaken her with a pat on the back. But the maiden didn’t open her eyes. Those around her dragged her gently away from the lamp and laid her down so that she could rest a while. Her fingers had got badly burnt and charred. With great effort, she was brought back into consciousness. On inquiry, she revealed that she saw Krishna in the flame of the lamp, and in that joyful experience, she didn’t know that her fingers were in the flame and were being burnt; she had felt no pain at all.

“Uddhava was astounded at this incident, which was another wonderful instance of the devotion of the cowherd maids (*gopis*).”