

in order to remain with Him, they reject Kṛṣṇa's direct instruction to return home to perform their dharmas—in contrast with the wives of the brāhmaṇas in the previous section. Just as, in the Abrahamic tradition, God tests Abraham to see if he will obey Him even by the performance of an abhorrent deed—the killing of his own son, Isaac—so the gopīs' devotion informs us that there is a higher principle than mere dharma. By ignoring their husbands, children, and other duties and risking social ruination by openly going to the forest at night to be with Kṛṣṇa without even giving a thought to the possible repercussions, the gopīs demonstrate that love of God trumps all social, cultural, or any other mundane considerations. Hence they are considered the greatest of all bhaktas. Thus the illiterate females born in a cowherding caste are the greatest of all yogīs in the Bhāgavata, thereby trumping the brāhmaṇa male dominance of normative Vedic culture. Once again, the text points to bhakti as transcendent to caste, gender, social status, and any and all other material considerations.

Book X, Chapter 29

1. Śrī Śuka, the son of Bādarāyaṇa, said:
 "Even *Bhagavān*, God Himself, beholding those nights, with autumnal jasmine [*mallikā*] flowers blossoming, called upon His divine power of *yogamāyā*, and turned His thoughts toward enjoying love.
2. At that time, the moon, king of the constellations, arose in the east, covering the face of the heavens with its copper-colored soothing rays. It wiped away the cares of the onlookers, like a lover who has been absent for a long time wipes away the cares of his beloved.
3. Seeing that full disk, herald of the white night-lilies, reddened with fresh vermilion powder, its splendor like the face of Lakṣmī, the Goddess of Fortune, and seeing the forest colored by its silky rays, Kṛṣṇa played [His flute] softly, capturing the hearts of the beautiful-eyed women.
4. The music aroused Kāma.⁴⁴ When they heard it, the women of Vraj, enchanted by Kṛṣṇa, came to their lover, their earrings swinging in their haste, and unknown to one another.
5. Some, who were milking cows, abandoned the milking and approached eagerly. Others had put milk on the fire, but then came without even removing [the milk or] the cakes [from the oven].
- 6.-7. Others interrupted serving food, feeding their babies milk, and attending to their husbands. Still others were eating but left their food.

Others were putting on makeup, washing, or applying mascara to their eyes. They all went to be near Kṛṣṇa, their clothes and ornaments in disarray.

8. Their hearts had been stolen by Govinda, so they did not turn back when husbands, fathers, brothers, and relatives tried to prevent them. They were in a state of rapture.

9. Some *gopīs*, not being able to find a way to leave, remained at home and thought of Kṛṣṇa with eyes closed, completely absorbed in meditation.

10.–11. [The *karma*] from their impious deeds was destroyed by the intense and intolerable pain of separation from their lover, and their auspicious deeds were diminished by the complete fulfillment resulting from the intimate contact with Acyuta that they obtained through meditation.⁴⁵ Their bondage was destroyed, and they immediately left their bodies made of the *guṇas*.⁴⁶ Uniting with the Supreme Soul, they considered Him their lover.”

12. Śrī Parīkṣit said:

“O sage, they related to Kṛṣṇa as their supreme lover, not as *Brahman*, the Absolute Truth. So how did the flow of the *guṇas*, in which their minds were absorbed, cease for the *gopīs*?”

13. Śrī Śuka said:

“This was explained to you previously: in the same way as the king of the Cedis, Śiśupāla, attained perfection despite hating Hṛṣīkeśa.⁴⁷ What, then, of those dear to Adhokṣaja [Kṛṣṇa]?”

14. God appears for the supreme good of humanity, O king. He is immeasurable and eternal. As the controller of the *guṇas*, He is beyond the *guṇas*.

15. Those who always dedicate their desire, anger, fear, affection, sense of identity, and friendship to Hari enter for certain into His state of being.

16. You should not show such surprise at Lord Kṛṣṇa. He is unborn and the master of all masters of *yoga*. From Him the whole universe attains liberation.

17. The Lord saw that the women of Vraj had arrived in His presence. Being the best of speakers, He addressed them, captivating them with the charm of His words:

18. ‘Welcome—you are most fortunate. What can I do to please you? Is everything well in Vraj? Tell me the purpose of your coming.

19. This fearsome dark night is frequented by ferocious creatures. Go back to Vraj, O slender-waisted ones; this place is not fit for women.

20. Your mothers, fathers, sons, brothers, and husbands are worried because they cannot find you. Do not cause your relatives concern.

21.–22. You have seen the forest, adorned with flowers, colored by the rays of the full moon, and made beautiful by the blossoms of the trees quivering playfully in the breeze of the *Yamunā* river. Therefore hurry now to the cowpen and serve your husbands—you are chaste ladies. The babies and calves are crying; suckle them and milk them.

23. Or perhaps your hearts are captivated, and you have come out of love for Me. This is commendable of you—living beings delight in Me.

24. The highest *dharma* [duty] of a woman is to serve her husband faithfully, to ensure the well-being of her relatives, and to nourish her children.

25. A husband who is not a sinner, even though he be of bad character, ill-fated, old, dull-headed, sick, or poor, should not be abandoned by women who desire to attain heaven.

26. Without exception, the adultery of a woman of good birth does not lead to heaven. It is scandalous, fear-laden, worthless, fraught with difficulty, and abhorrent.

27. Love for Me comes from hearing about Me, seeing Me, meditating on Me and reciting My glories—not in this way, by physical proximity. Therefore, return to your homes.’

28. Hearing Govinda speak these unwelcome words, the dejected *gopīs* had their aspirations dashed and were inconsolable in their distress.

29. They stood silently, their red *bimba* fruit-colored lips faded by their sighs, and the vermilion powder on their breasts smeared by the mascara carried by their tears. Casting down their faces out of sorrow and scratching the ground with their feet, they were weighed down by extreme unhappiness.

30. Wiping their eyes, and having checked their tears somewhat, the *gopīs* spoke to Kṛṣṇa, their beloved, with voices faltering with agitation. They were utterly devoted, and had sacrificed all desires for His sake, but He had replied to them as if He were anything but their beloved:

31. "You should not speak to us in such a heartless fashion, O Lord. Renouncing all enjoyments of the senses, we are devoted to the soles of Your feet. Reciprocate, you obstinate one, just as the Lord, the original being, reciprocates with those who desire liberation. Do not reject us.

32. You, the knower of *dharma*, have declared that the occupational *dharma* of women consists of attending to friends, husbands, and children. Then let this be our *dharma* when it comes to You, the source of this advice, O Lord—after all, You are the soul within all relatives. Indeed, You are the most dear of all embodied beings.

33. You are the eternal beloved, O soul of all, and so the learned place their affection in You. What is the use of husbands and children who simply cause problems? Therefore, O Supreme Lord, be pleased with us. Do not dash our hopes. They have been sustained by You for such a long time, O lotus-eyed one.

34. Our hearts, which were absorbed in our households, have been stolen away with ease by You, as have our hands from domestic chores. Our feet cannot move one step from the soles of Your lotus feet. How can we go to Vraj? And besides, what would we do there?

35. O beloved, pour the nectar of your lips on the fire dwelling in our hearts, which has been kindled by Your musical harmonies, Your glances, and Your smiles. If you do not, we will traverse the path to Your feet through meditation, our bodies consumed by the fire born of separation.

36. Lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa; You are dear to the forest-dwelling hermits. Somewhere or other, for a moment, we providentially touched the soles of Your feet, which belong to the Goddess of Fortune. Alas, from that moment, instantly enamored of You, we became incapable of remaining in the presence of any other man.

37. The Goddess of Fortune aspires to the dust of those lotus feet, which is worshipped by Your servants, even though She has obtained a place on Your chest along with Tulasī.⁴⁸ Other gods, even, strive to attract Her personal glance. In the same way, we solicit the dust of Your feet.

38. It is You who banish distress—therefore be compassionate to us. In the desire to worship You, we have given up our homes and arrived at the soles of Your feet. Allow us, whose hearts are burning with

intense desire born from Your beautiful smiles and glances, to be Your servants, O ornament of men.

39. We have gazed on Your face covered with curls, with its smiles and glances, and on Your honeyed lips placed between Your cheeks made beautiful with earrings. And we have beheld Your two strong arms, which bestow fearlessness, and Your chest, which is the exclusive delight of the Goddess of Fortune. After this we have become Your servants.

40. Dear Kṛṣṇa, what women in the three worlds would not stray from the behavior proper to Āryans, when thrown into turmoil by the melodies of Your flute, which vibrates harmoniously? And what woman would not stray after seeing this, Your form, which brings good fortune to the three worlds and causes the hair of cows, birds, trees, and deer to stand on end with bliss?

41. It is clear that You have accepted birth to remove the tribulations and fears of Vraj just as the Lord, the primeval person, protects the denizens of heaven. Therefore, since You are the friend of the afflicted, place Your lotus hands on the burning breasts and heads of Your servants.'"

42. Śrī Śuka said:

"The Master of the masters of *yoga*, hearing their despairing words, laughed and engaged in amorous pleasures with them from kindness, even though His satisfaction is self-contained.

43. Kṛṣṇa, the infallible one, whose conduct is upright, shone forth with the assembled *gopīs*, who were dazzling with jasmine teeth and broad smiles. As the *gopīs*' faces blossomed from the glances of their beloved, Kṛṣṇa appeared like the moon surrounded by stars.

44. Praised in song, and singing loudly Himself, the Lord of hundreds of women, wearing a garland of *vaijayantī* flowers, frolicked in the forest, making it beautiful.

45.–46. Accompanied by the *gopīs*, Kṛṣṇa approached the bank of the river. Its cool sand was swept by a wind bearing the scent of *kumuda* flowers and refreshing from its contact with the waves. Arousing *kāma* in the young women of Vraj with jokes, smiles, and glances, playfully scratching their breasts, girdles, thighs, hair, and hands with His nails, and embracing them with outstretched arms, He gave them pleasure.

47. Such attention from Kṛṣṇa, *Bhagavān*, the Supreme Soul, made

the *gopīs* proud. Indeed, they thought themselves to be the best of women on earth.

48. Keśava saw their pride, which was born from the exhilaration of their good fortune, and vanished from the spot out of kindness, in order to moderate [their pride].”

Searching for Kṛṣṇa in the Rāsa Pastime

Bhāva Blueprint

This passage contains a good example of viraha bhakti, love in separation from the beloved. The Gauḍīya tradition considers this form of love to be even more intense than that of union with the beloved. In their ramblings to the trees and plants, we gain some sense of the extent of the gopīs’ devotional madness when Kṛṣṇa disappears from their midst. Their absorption in thoughts of Kṛṣṇa is revealed in the fact that everything reminds them of their departed beloved, in their reenactment of His līlās among themselves and in their obsessive conviction that Kṛṣṇa has gone off with someone else. The divine intoxication of the gopīs is not paralleled by any other bhakta in the text, thus again underscoring their devotional preeminence in the Bhāgavata.

Book X, Chapter 30

1. Śrī Śuka said:

“When *Bhagavān* suddenly vanished, the women of Vraj were filled with remorse at His disappearance. They were like female elephants who had lost sight of the leader of the herd.

2. Intoxicated by the pleasing gestures, playfulness, and words, as well as by the quivering glances, smiles of love, and movements of Kṛṣṇa, the husband of Ramā, the Goddess of Fortune, their minds were overwhelmed. They acted out each of those behaviors, their hearts [dedicated] to Him.

3. Those beloved women were so bewildered by Kṛṣṇa’s pastimes that their bodies imitated their darling in the way they moved, smiled, glanced, spoke, and so forth. With their hearts [dedicated] to Him, the women declared: ‘I am He!’

4. Singing loudly in unison only about Him, they searched from grove to grove, like madwomen. They asked the trees about the Supreme Being who, like space, is inside and outside living creatures:

5. ‘O *aśvattha* tree! O *plakṣa* tree! O *nyagrodha* tree! Have you seen the son of Nanda at all? He has stolen our minds with his glances and smiles of love, and has gone.

6. O *kurabaka*, *aśoka*, *nāga*, *punnāga*, and *campaka* trees! Has the younger brother of Balarāma [passed] by here? His smile steals away the pride of haughty women.

7. O auspicious *tulasī* plant, you who are dear to Govinda! Have you seen your most beloved, Acyuta, wearing you [as a garland covered] with swarms of bees?

8. O *mālatī* plant! O *mallikā* plant! O *jātī* plant! O *yūthikā* plant! Has Mādhava [Kṛṣṇa] passed by, awakening your love with the touch of his hand? Have you seen him?

9. O *cūta* [mango], *priyāla*, *panasa* [breadfruit], *asana*, *kovidāra*, *jambū* [rose-apple], *arka*, *bilva* [wood-apple], *bakula*, *āmra* [mango], *kadamba*, and *nīpa* trees, and those others which grow on the shore of the *Yamunā* river and which exist to benefit others! Point us to the path [taken] by Kṛṣṇa. We have lost our hearts.

10. O earth, you are beautiful in that the hairs of your body [the trees] stand up from the bliss of the touch of the feet of Keśava [Kṛṣṇa]. What ascetic practice have you performed? Is the cause of this these very feet [of Kṛṣṇa]? Or is it because of the step of Urukrama?⁴⁹ Or rather from the embrace of the body of Varāha?⁵⁰

11. O wife of the deer, has Acyuta passed by here with his beloved, his limbs giving pleasure to your eyes? O friend, the scent from the jasmine garland of the lord of our group is wafting here—a garland colored with breast saffron contracted from the body of his lover.

12. O trees, did the younger brother of Balarāma wander here? Was he followed by swarms of bees, blinded with intoxication, on his *tulasī* [garland]? With his arm placed on the shoulder of his beloved, he [must have been] holding a lotus flower. And did he acknowledge with glances of love your bowing down?

13. Ask these creeping plants! Just see, although they are embracing the arms of the forest tree, they surely must have been touched by his fingernails, for they are bristling with ecstasy.

14. The *gopīs*, [uttering] these crazed words, became perplexed in their search for Kṛṣṇa. With their hearts [dedicated] to Him, each of them imitated the *līlā* of *Bhagavān*.