

Sri Krishna-Tattva of Bengal Vaishnavism.

BY AKSHAYA KUMAR BANERJEE, M. A.

The Bengal school of Vaishnavism, founded by Mahāprabhu Śrī Chaitanya and systematized and put on a philosophical basis by his illustrious disciples, is one of the Vedantic schools of philosophical thought and the Bhakti schools of spiritual *Sādhana*, acknowledging the supreme authority of the Upaniṣads as embodying the eternal truths about Reality and Duty revealed to the spiritual experiences of the purest-hearted Ṛṣis of old and the derivative authority of the *Gītā* and the *Brahma-Sūtras* as their most methodical and rational expositions. But it bases its philosophy and religion chiefly on the teachings of *Śrīmad Bhāgavata*, which it regards as the best, the clearest and the most elaborate interpretation of the innermost significance of the Vedantic doctrines. The chief exponents of this system are Sanātana Goswami, Rūpa Goswami, Jīva Goswami, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa, Gopāla Bhaṭṭa, Raghunatha Das, Viswanātha Chakravarty and some others. They have written many volumes on the philosophical, practical and æsthetic aspects of the system, in the light of the life and teachings of Mahāprabhu Śrī Chaitanya, whom they regard as Śrī Kṛṣṇa or God Himself incarnated as the ideal devotee. Their conception of Śrī Kṛṣṇa is regarded by them as the highest possible conception of Divinity, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa as so conceived is presented by them to the human race as the highest object of worship. It is this conception of Śrī Kṛṣṇa that we should try to explain within the short space of this paper.

Before the advent of Śrī Chaitanya and the appearance of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism there had been four

other influential Vaiṣṇava systems in the Hindu society, viz. those of Rāmānuja, Madhva, Viṣṇuswāmī and Nimbārka. Each of them claimed to give the most accurate and reasonable interpretation of the Vedantic conception of the Absolute Reality as revealed in the Upaniṣads, and each of them has been moulding the life and thought of numerous men and women to this day. Śrī Chaitanya, though originally initiated into the Bhakti cult and inspired with the Vaiṣṇava ideal by a great saint belonging to the Madhva school, developed a system of his own and gave a new philosophy and religion to the Vaiṣṇava world.

All these Vaiṣṇava schools, though differing from one another in many essential particulars with regard to their theories and practices, have this common feature that they all start from Āchārya Śankara's interpretation of the Vedantic Brahmvāda in their inquiry into the nature of the Absolute Reality and make earnest attempts to show that this interpretation only partially represents the spirit of the Upaniṣads, and is incapable of satisfying the innermost spiritual needs of the human soul, and furnishing an adequate rational explanation for the universe of experience. Śankara's conception of one differenceless, attributeless, powerless, inactive and impersonal consciousness as the Absolute Reality and of one cosmic Ignorance as the inexplicable cause of the illusory appearance of the world of diversity on the substratum of this consciousness is the target of their attack. They all seek to prove that the Absolute Reality is a supreme Personal Being with unlimited powers, perfect goodness and infinite attributes,

and is by Himself the sole self-conscious ground and support of this universe. Chaitanya's school joins hands with the other Vaiṣṇava systems in combating Śankara's view and establishing the personality of *Brahma*, the Ultimate Reality. But in its idea of the Divine Personality it claims to go ahead of the other systems and attempts to establish its position by means of elaborate cogent reasoning. In its conception of the highest spiritual ideal and the method of realizing it also, this system differs from the other *Bhakti* cults.

The philosophers of this school base their arguments partly on spiritual experience and partly on logical principles. They assert that neither the conception of *Brahma* as impersonal and attributeless nor the conception of Personal *Brahma* as held by the other Vaiṣṇava and theistic schools gives true expression to the highest order of spiritual experience of the human soul. It is maintained that so long as the human soul moves within the domain of the individual ego subject to various kinds of limitations, so long as it cannot transcend the limitations of time and space, desire and aversion, ego-consciousness and world-consciousness, etc., it cannot attain the highest spiritual plane and its conception of the Ultimate Reality must necessarily be relative and partial. On the other hand, it is further maintained that, if individuality of the self is completely merged in the Absolute, if the consciousness of the finite spirit is wholly immersed in the ocean of the universal consciousness of the Absolute, then also there can be no direct experience of the true character of the Absolute Reality. When the finite spirit is in touch with the world of phenomenal diversities, it must necessarily conceive the Ultimate Reality in terms of its relation to this world and hence the highest conception it can attain of *Brahma* is that He is omnipotent and omniscient, infinite and

eternal, perfectly good and benevolent, creating, preserving, regulating, developing and destroying this world. But this is a relative idea and does not represent the true essential character of *Brahma*. On the other hand, if having transcended in *Samādhi* the planes of worldly experience, the finite spirit loses itself by being overwhelmed with the consciousness of the Absolute Spirit, one homogeneous impersonal differenceless consciousness only remains, and this is regarded by the spirit, on its return to the plane of *Buddhi* (reason), as the true character of *Brahma*. This also is a one-sided conception. The finite spirit, if it develops sufficient spiritual power and insight through systematic self-discipline and the culture of loving devotion, can transcend the domain of the individual ego and the worldly limitations and can at the same time retain its spiritual individuality as a self-conscious participator in the supramundane infinite life of the Absolute Spirit. It then becomes endowed with the power and privilege to enter into the innermost compartments in the highest spiritual plane and to be intimately acquainted with the special spiritual features of the supreme transcendent character of *Brahma*. When it is blessed with this spiritual experience, it finds Śankara's conception of Impersonal *Brahma* as abstracting only the aspect of undifferentiated spiritual unity of the divine nature, and the rival Vaiṣṇava schools' conceptions about the divine personality as representing only His outward relative aspects.

While logically criticizing Śankara's conception, these philosophers contend that the absolutely changeless, actionless, differenceless, attributeless and powerless Impersonal *Brahma* cannot furnish any rational ground for explaining the undeniable realities of the lower planes of experience. The analogy of the Illusion that we experience in our life is of no avail; for not only does every

illusion presuppose the existence of independent conscious beings that are deluded, but it is altogether inadequate to account for this magnificent world of mental and physical phenomena with such wonderful order and adaptation, plan and design, beauty and grandeur. The examples of rope and snake, the sun and its reflection upon water, the sky and its blueness, etc. have all been thoroughly examined by these critics, and they are shown to bear no conclusive analogy with the supposed relation between *Brahma* and the world, since the points of difference far outweigh the points of resemblance. Moreover, *Brahma* is conceived as the sole Reality without any elements of difference, either within or outside itself, whereas each of the instances cited implies more than one reality of the same order and also implies extraneous reasons for the production of the error or illusion. Thus, according to these philosophers, Śankara's school fails to explain the world-process by reference to its conception of Impersonal *Brahma*.

They argue that as *Brahma* is admittedly the one Absolute Reality without a second, and as it is *Brahma* that is regarded as appearing in the forms of innumerable finite minds and material entities—various centres of experience, planes of knowledge, diversities of feelings and desires, differences of outlook, etc., and the different orders of objective existences related to them—the power and tendency for such self-manifestation must logically be conceived as inherent in the nature of *Brahma*, and the very conception of *Brahma* must involve the presence of such power and tendency. Accordingly, they hold that *Māyā*, which is assumed by Vedānta to account for these appearances of *Brahma*, cannot be conceived as an inexplicable and unreal source of the so-called cosmic illusion, but this *Māyā* ought reasonably to be conceived as the real power and tendency (*Śakti*) pertaining to the nature of *Brahma*. Thus, from

the standpoint of the worldly experience, *Brahma* must be conceived as eternally and inherently in possession of the *Māyā-Śakti* and as naturally and freely revealing Himself through the operation of this *Śakti* in the form of the world of finite minds and matters and enjoying the inexhaustible glories and beauties of His infinite nature under limitations of time and space, individualism and particularization, relativity and finitude. The world as the expression of the Divine Power cannot be regarded as altogether unreal, though its nature is to be continually in a process of change. *Brahma* as the *Śaktimat* or the true Self of *Śakti* must be conceived as the real Self of all the objects of the world, which are His self-expressions.

Śakti means the self-sustaining and self-manifesting power or attribute of a substance. The existence of any particular *Śakti* in any particular substance cannot be known by perception, but can be inferred from its expressions in the forms of the phenomena of experience. Thus substance, *Śakti* and phenomena are correlative terms, and none of them can be conceived apart from the others. Substance is as good as nothing apart from its *Śakti*, and *Śakti* is meaningless apart from the substance in which it inheres. Substance and *Śakti*, again, can be conceived only as the substratum and cause and regulator of the phenomena in which they find expression. No question can arise as to why any self-existent substance has by nature this and not that kind of *Śakti*, and why it manifests itself in this and not that kind of phenomena. They must be conceived together, and each in relation to the other two. But, though they are inseparable, they are certainly distinguishable from one another.

Śakti, being in, for and by the substance to which it belongs, must be regarded as identical with it, and for the same reason the phenomena also

in which the Śakti is manifested are to be regarded as identical with the Śakti and its substance. But this identity does not exclude difference. Śakti as such is transformed into the phenomena, while the substance transcends the Śakti and its modifications and remains unchanged in itself. In the absence of the unity of the substance, the transformation of its Śakti would be meaningless. The phenomena in which the Śakti manifests itself are many and perceptible, while the Śakti which is their source is one and invisible. Thus substance, Śakti and phenomena must be distinguished from one another. Hence the relation between them is one of difference and non-difference (*Bhedābheda*)—identity in difference and difference in identity.

Now, *Māyā* being the unique Śakti of *Brahma*, and the world of phenomena being the product of this *Māyā*, *Brahma*, *Māyā* and the world must be conceived as identical. In this sense it can be reasonably asserted that *Brahma* alone exists and nothing else exists. It is this aspect of identity which is emphasized by Śankara's interpretation of Vedānta, and the logical consequence of this emphasis is the conception of the differenceless, attributeless Impersonal *Brahma*. But this is a partial view. The aspect of the difference of *Māyā* from *Brahma*,—of the Śakti from its substance— is no less real. *Māyā* exists in, for and by *Brahma* and manifests *Brahma* in the innumerable finite forms of existence; but the substance, *Brahma*, always transcends *Māyā* and its productions. Thus the difference of the world from the Divine *Māyā-Śakti* and that of the *Māyā-Śakti* from *Brahma* must also be recognized. There is no ground for regarding this aspect as false. The Rāmānuja and the Madhva schools emphasize this aspect of difference and regard it as the essential aspect. The Chaitanya school, however, in general agreement with the Nimbārka and the Bhāskara schools, accepts both the aspects of

identity and difference as equally real. The category of difference and the category of non-difference are regarded as equally incapable of expressing the relation between *Brahma*, *Māyā* and the world, and hence recourse is had to the extra-logical category of difference-non-difference (*Bhedābheda*) to express it. From the standpoint of Formal Logic this may appear to involve self-contradiction, but nevertheless it represents the true character of the relation. To avoid confusion, it is termed *Achintya-bhedābheda*—inscrutable difference-non-difference.

Thus the Absolute Reality is conceived as the one self-existent, self-conscious and blissful Personality, eternally possessed of the unique and inscrutable *Māyā-Śakti*, through which He manifests Himself in the world of plurality without any essential change in His transcendent nature. Hence with reference to the world of our experience, the Absolute Reality has a twofold character,—His one aspect being transcendent, changeless, *nirguṇa* and *nirviśeṣa*, and the other aspect being creative, regulative, immanent, self-manifesting, *saḡuṇa* and *saviśeṣa*. The latter aspect is due to the presence of *Māyā-Śakti* in Him, and the former aspect is due to His being the substance or substratum of *Māyā*. Intense spiritual practice is necessary for transcending the influence of *Māyā* and being in touch with the transcendent nature of the Absolute Reality. This Absolute Reality is the Śrī Kṛṣṇa of Bengal Vaishnavism.

The philosophers of this school think further that the Absolute Reality or Śrī Kṛṣṇa in His transcendent aspect may be regarded as perfectly changeless, differenceless, attributeless and consciousness itself, if the notions of changes, differences and attributes bring to our mind the ideas of the limitations of space, time, plurality and relativity as in the world of *Māyā*. But this indicates only imperfect acquaintance with this transcendent character. Even above these limitations

Śrī Kṛṣṇa is self-existent, self-conscious and blissful, and as such must be conceived as having the transcendent Śakti to exist by Himself in perfect consciousness and bliss. This Śakti is therefore called the *Antarangā* or essential Śakti of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and, in contrast with this, the *Māyā-Śakti* is called His *Bahirangā* or non-essential Śakti. Through the *Antarangā Śakti* His essential transcendent character is manifested, and by the *Bahirangā Śakti* His essential transcendent character is veiled and He manifests Himself as the world of plurality and change. These two Śaktis are opposed to each other. Intermediate between these two aspects of the divine nature, there is a third aspect, viz. His self-manifestation as innumerable finite spirits or Jivas or finite centres of experience, in which His essential character is not wholly veiled, but partially exhibited, and which are placed under the limitations of *Māyā* and have the potentiality to transcend these limitations and perfect themselves through self-conscious participation in His *Līlā* with the *Antarangā Śakti*. This aspect of the divine nature is His *Tatastha Śakti* or *Jiva-Śakti*. Each *Jiva* is the expression of this Śakti. All jivas or finite spirits are thus regarded as the conscious atomic parts or sparks of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, living, moving and having their being in Him, by Him and for Him, and as such essentially identical with Him, but at the same time possessing distinct individualities in relation to one another as well as to Him. He is the Spiritual Whole (*Aṃśī*) and they are His eternal spiritual parts (*Aṃśa*) or self-manifestations.

This conception of Śrī Kṛṣṇa as eternally realizing and enjoying Himself through His *Antarangā*, *Bahirangā* and *Tatastha Śaktis* is claimed by the exponents of Bengal Vaishnavism as a far deeper and fuller conception of the Absolute Reality than either the pure *Nirviśeṣavāda* of Śāṅkara or the pure *Saviśeṣavāda* of Rāmānuja, not to speak

of the dualism of Madhva. But we have not yet reached the final analysis and the fullest conception of the divine nature. The *Antarangā Śakti*, though *nirviśeṣa* and *nirguṇa* as contrasted with the mayic *saviśeṣa* aspect, is regarded as having transcendental spiritual *Viśeṣas* (particulars) and *Guṇas* (attributes).

The categories universally used by all the Vedantic schools to signify the essential nature of the Absolute Reality are *sat* (self-existence), *chit* (self-consciousness) and *ānanda* (bliss or self-fulfilment). Each of these categories, according to this school, refers to a *viśeṣa* or particular aspect of the *Antarangā Śakti* of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The attribute *Sat* indicates His *Sandhimi Śakti*, which reveals Him as existing in, by and for Himself with perfectly free, unconditioned and realized will. The attribute *chit* refers to His *Samvit Śakti*, which reveals Him as the Supreme Person perfectly conscious of Himself and the infinite glories of His nature. The attribute *Ānanda* implies His *Hlādinī Śakti*, through which He eternally enjoys the blessedness of infinite perfection of Himself and His self-manifestations.

Thus, according to this system, the Absolute Reality has a lower *saviśeṣa* aspect and a higher *saviśeṣa* aspect, the former related to the realm of *Māyā* and the latter above and beyond it. Accordingly, when we comprehend the complete nature of Divinity, the *Nirviśeṣa* Impersonal *Brahma* of Śāṅkara is found to represent Śrī Kṛṣṇa's abstract aspect, in the sense that He is wholly spiritual in substance, that there is nothing non-spiritual in or outside Him from which He can distinguish Himself, that all His characteristics are the expressions of His spiritual nature, which in itself suffers no change or transformation whatsoever and in which there is no essential distinction between self and its manifestations, soul and body, substance and attribute,

cause and effect. This homogeneous unity of the abstract aspect, however, ought not to be construed as the denial of these differences and particulars altogether within His spiritual nature.

The followers of Śrī Chaitanya do not stop here. They hold that of the three aspects of the *Antarangā Śakti* of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the *Hlādim Śakti*, or the character of self-enjoyment is the supreme; for in it the other two are included, harmonized, fulfilled and transcended. Perfect self-enjoyment involves perfect self-existence, eternally self-fulfilled will and fully realized self-consciousness as elements in it. The *Hlādim Śakti* is the ground as well as the fulfilment of *Māyā-Śakti* and *Taṭastha Śakti*, which are its imperfect manifestations. It is Śrī Kṛṣṇa's essential character of perfect self-enjoyment, which is the source of His self-revelation in countless finite spirits or particular centres of experience and His self-manifestation as innumerable objects of experience. It is the ultimate Power in which all other powers are merged and from which all other powers flow. It is therefore the highest category in terms of which the Absolute Reality can be conceived. As mirrored in His *Hlādim Śakti*, the Absolute appears truly and perfectly as He is in Himself.

Now, a *Śakti*, in order to realize itself, must manifest itself in the duality of subject and object—experiencer and experienced—which are identical with and at the same time distinguishable from each other. Accordingly, the *Hlādim Śakti* eternally realizes itself as Love and Beauty embracing each other. Love is regarded as the most perfect organ of enjoyment—the highest and most comprehensive plane of experience,—in which all experiences are merged and fulfilled. Beauty is regarded as constituting the perfection of the character of Reality to be experienced, in which all aspects of His character are completely harmonized and unified. Hence if a conception has

to be made of the highest realization of the most essential character of *Brahma* or Śrī Kṛṣṇa, *i. e.*, the Absolute Reality, He is to be thought of as perfect Beauty experienced and enjoyed by Himself as perfect Love. Perfect Beauty in the closest embrace of Perfect Love is therefore the most adequate representation of the innermost character of the ultimate Reality or the Supreme Spirit, the ground and substratum of the universe. This is Śrī Kṛṣṇa-Tattva of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism.

According to this view, the world-process also is, in ultimate analysis, found to be an imperfect manifestation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's eternal self-enjoyment. It is the phenomenal manifestation of His supra-phenomenal self-enjoyment in diverse forms and in various orders of succession and co-existence and is the reflection of the transcendental communion of Love and Beauty of His essential nature in different planes of experience under various kinds of limitations.

It is to be carefully remembered that Beauty is not conceived here as a quality among other qualities. It means the entire nature of the Person with His *Śakti* perfectly realized, fulfilled, unified and enjoyed, and it is comprehended and experienced, not by reason or understanding, but by fully developed and perfected Love. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, mirrored in His *Māyā-Śakti* and *Jiva-Śakti*, reveals Himself as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all-just, all-merciful, all-good, infinite, eternal and perfectly self-conscious and self-determined Supreme Being. But mirrored in His *Hlādim Śakti*, all His power and wisdom, justice and benevolence, greatness and goodness, infinity and eternity are merged in and revealed as perfect Beauty, which in point of intrinsic value transcends all those glorious and magnificent features of the Divine character. This conception of God or the Absolute Reality, eternally enjoying Himself as Absolute Beauty

(*Rasarāja*) through His infinite power of Love (*Prema*) is the conception of Śrī Kṛṣṇa of the Vaiṣṇava school of Chaitanya.

Love also is not conceived as a static feeling or a particular emotion among so many diverse emotions. Love is conceived as a self-evolving dynamic spiritual experience. By deeper analysis, the followers of Śrī Chaitanya have discovered various stages, phases and forms, which cannot be elaborately dealt with here. They enumerate and explain five primary types of Love, viz. *Śānta*, *Dāsya*, *Sakhya*, *Vātsalya* and *Mādhurya*, and point out that among these *Madhura* is the highest type. *Madhura*, again, develops through various stages, such as *Sneha*, *Māna*, *Prāṇaya*, *Rāga*, *Anurāga*, *Bhāva*, and *Mahābhāva*,—each latter being deeper and higher than the former. Love reaches its highest perfection in *Mahābhāva*, which is therefore regarded as the deepest possible spiritual experience. Śrī Rādhā, as conceived by Chaitanya and His followers, is the eternal ideal of this *Mahābhāva*, all forms of love in the universe being Her imperfect manifestations, Rādhā, being the eternally realized Love in its fullest perfection, is the ideal form of the manifestation of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's *Hlāḍī* Śakti. Hence the conception of Śrī Kṛṣṇa in eternal embrace with Śrī Rādhā and eternally realizing and enjoying Himself through Her is, with the Bengal Vaiṣṇavas, the highest conception of Divinity. The highest ideal of eternal communion between Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Rādhā, i. e., the highest perfection of the Absolute's self-revelation and self-enjoyment is described as *Rāsa-Līlā*. Accordingly, their final conclusion that Śrī Kṛṣṇa as revealed to, reflected in and enjoying Himself through *Mahābhāvamayī* Śrī Rādhā, in eternal *Rāsa-Līlā*, is the true Absolute Reality.

For the finite spirits, which are the immortal spiritual manifestations

of the Absolute's *Taṭasthā* Śakti, there are two worlds,—one being the world of *Māyā* or *Bahirangā* Śakti, and the other, the world of the *Antarangā* Śakti. Every finite spirit has the capacity and right to move in these two worlds. Of these the world of *Māyā* is the domain of sorrow and bondage, because it veils the transcendent blissful character of the Absolute, confines the finite spirits within the prison of the diversities of this world, moves them hither and thither by the bonds of attachment and aversion and prevents them from participation in the infinity, eternity, beauty, goodness, freedom and enjoyment of the Divine character. The world of the *Antarangā* Śakti, on the other hand, is the realm of freedom and enjoyment (*Mukti* and *Ānanda*), because it reveals the transcendent blissful character of the Absolute, makes the finite spirits free from attachment and aversion, develops the pure love and wisdom inherent in their nature, puts them in direct touch with and enables them to participate in the infinite and eternal, good and beautiful, self-existent and self-conscious, self-complete and self-enjoying character of the Absolute. The spiritual *Sādhana* of the finite spirits consists in such courses of self-discipline as may lead them from the bondage and sorrow of this domain of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's *Māyā-Śakti* to the freedom and bliss of the realm of His *Antarangā* Śakti.

It should be noted that, according to this view, the finite spirits do not reach the ultimate goal of their spiritual life by the mere attainment of *Mukti* or deliverance from the bondage and sorrow of this mayic world, though this may be regarded as the end of this mundane life. Having attained *Mukti* from this world, they find entrance into a new world—a world of light and love, of freedom and enjoyment, of infinity and eternity,—the world of the *Antarangā* Śakti of the Absolute, in which also there is scope for further spiritual

progress. The analysis of the *Antaragā Śakti* has shown how there are so many stages in its manifestation. The highest ideal of the life of the finite spirits is the attainment of *Mahābhāva* or *Rādhābhāva* and the unification with the Absolute in the *Rāsa-Līlā*. The entire existence of the soul has to be surcharged with the deepest and purest form of Love through systematic discipline and culture; there should be no element in it except this love for the Absolute; the self should have to convert itself into absolute love. The further the progress in this direction, the more does the Absolute reveal Himself as Pure Beauty. The realization of the Absolute Reality as Absolute Beauty and the attainment of unity with Him through Absolute Love is the ultimate ideal which Chaitanya's religion puts before the humanity. The more is this ideal realized, the more does the world of *Māyā* also appear as the expression of Beauty and Love. All persons and things, all human affairs and natural phenomena appear to such loving souls as beautiful and become objects of enjoyment to them. They experience communion with the Infinite and Eternal Beauty within and without, in all they see and feel. Their life becomes full of Śrī Kṛṣṇa and the entire universe becomes to them full of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa—the Perfect Love in communion with the Perfect Beauty—is revealed as the sole Reality and the highest object of devotion.
