

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

Religious Harmony in India : Its History, Politics, Aesthetics and Logic—A Caitanyaite Perspective

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Krishnàya Vàsudevàya Haraye Paramàtmane
Pranatah kleshanàshàya Govindàya namo namah

When last evening, the vicàra-goshthi began, Professor Mohanty rightly characterized it, defined it and directed us to treat it as a samvàda-goshthi. It is an occasion that conveys that we will have to have an exercise of understanding—first, of ourselves. And, when we understand ourselves properly, we can move to understand others with whom we are going to converse. I am very thankful to my mentor and my friend, a great thinker, Jacques Dupont. I begin with him. He says, ‘The personal identity of a human group is built up from a concrete historic past that in any case cannot be annulled. Even if they were. . . purification of memory is not at all easy.

Peoples and religious communities cannot be asked to forget how much they have suffered even at the hand of Christianity (he himself is a Christian), if not in extermination of their populations, often in any case, to the point of destruction of their cultural and religious heritage. For them, forgetting would be tantamount to betrayal, but even while not forgetting, memory can be healed and purified through a sheer determination to begin new constructive mutual relations of dialogue and collaboration of encounter.’ Guided with these words and with Professor Mohanty’s words, last evening, I begin or I take you for the next thirty minutes or so, to join me in my samvàda-lilà, where the main character is a physical space, a space where Thakur Ramakrishna had prayed for his enlightenment. He specifically asked Ma Sarada, ‘When I leave this world, you go to the space, and pray there. You stay there and pray there.’ And, he also asked Narendra to go and pray and meditate and get realized in that space.

We now go back to the 16th century. We are looking at a non-resident Bengalee, living in Jagannàtha Puri, because of the religious persecution at Navadvipa of the political forces. He cannot sustain himself in Bengal. He moves on in his own search for his Ishtadeva and for his searching of the dhàma of the Lord, Vrindàvana. In 1515, he landed in that area where he strolled in the physical Vrindàvana of today. The prelude was very interesting. The Lodhis were struggling for power and Caitanyadeva almost lost his life twice by the marauding armies. He did not reconcile to the situation. He put his finger on the eye of the storm, a small piece of land where the Lodhis used to hunt for wild boars. He said, ‘This is Vrindàvana’, right on the highway between Agra and Delhi. Madhva, Vallabha, Yogi Krishna Prem and Bhakti Vedanta—they all have their safer Vrindàvana, not on the eye of the storm. But, why was this madness in the God-intoxicated mad man? Because, he realized that the Muslim power cannot be washed away, so better have an interaction with it.

There are two ways—either diabolically you interact with the power, or dialogically. Caitanya chose the other, the dialoging. He made use of the conflicting situation, because if there is no conflict, there is no creation. Now, this sacred man, encountering profane existential processes chose to dialogue with the others. He was also aware of the problems in dialogue, because unless there is a sàmyavàda, unless there is a level talking plane or field, the dialogue is meaningless. The Hindu tradition in that time was losing its seat of power and politics. Hence, he started a project called ‘Resurrection of Krishna and His land’, in the physical sense.

For six years, he travelled for the recruitment and training of his project managers, called the six Goswàmis. Out of these six, three were half-Muslims serving as the high masters in Hussain Shah’s court in Ràmakeli; two were ràjagurus; one was the son of Venkata Bhatta and the other, Raghunàtha Bhatta—the ràjaguru of the Ajmer rulers of Rajasthan. And, the sixth one was a shudra, Raghunàtha

Dàsa. He was a filthy rich man. He knew what power is. What was the plan that the six Goswàmis were trained by Caitanya? Whom they dialogued with? In 1570s, noble Akbar made it a safe trade route to the seaport. He asked the Rajputs to ensure, because trade cannot survive without it. The Himalayan route was very temporary. Man Singh was put in charge of securing the safe route. The interesting thing is, the document of Man Singh, Māncarita was Sanskritized by Muràri Dàsa. It is a diary of Man Singh—he says that he goes to raise his column not in Ajmer, not in Agra, not in Delhi—but in Vrindàvana, where only 8 to 10 ascetics are living, his guru Raghunàtha Bhatta is living. He seeks for the blessings for the dialogue and transaction and says, 'I will build the grand temple in sakarant-akarant chakre.' To show his good will, he made Vrindàvana and Mathurà tax-free haven. In return, he got the blessings of his guru, and the rest is history.

But, when he returned after vanquishing Rana Pratap from the scene, he did not report to Rana Pratap but he came straight to Vrindàvana to lay the foundation stone of the biggest Hindu structure, ever built in history, in 1576. The blood of Haldighàti went into the making of a Hindu cathedral. It is a paradox of history.

The king chose the site and Man Singh, as we know, was the donor and builder. It took fifteen years to complete the temple and thirteen lakhs of rupees, towards the end of the 16th century. Govinda was the baby of the twofold dialogical process. First, it was a religious dialogue between the Goswàmis of Vrindàvana and the grand Mughal, because this temple was dedicated to Lord Krishna. Jiva Goswàmi, in 1590, writes and gives the first verse to Lord Krishna and the second and third verses were dedicated to Akbar: Shrimàn ākbaro mahàn. It was Jiva Goswàmi who calls Akbar the Great, why? Tasmai sadaiva āshisah—why? Because svayam svayam dharmairucherbham. In his rule everybody had the freedom to practise his own religion openly.

The second dialogue was a political dialogue between the Rajputs and Akbar, between the Hindus and the Muslims in power. So, all these players had some commonalities because they were equally and intensely passionate for power. The Goswàmis, on the one hand, and the Mughals, on the other, were looking for power, but power of their own liking. And, they were intelligent enough to dialogue (samvāda), determined to reconcile and not resigned to the conflict or vivāda situation. So, they turned the situation into a samvāda situation.

The ground was recreated, but it was not there yet (a 17th century fresco of Vrindàvana in Ajmer palace). What did they wait for? They waited for the arrival of a formal and official process, a dialogical process between the Goswàmis and the great Mughals. In 1568, Akbar donated 200 bighas of land with full revenue rights. In 1576, he declared Vrindàvana to be a tax-free haven. In 1590, when the dialogue was strong, not only the Govinda temple was strong, not only the Govinda temple was created but the history of harmony became stronger. In 1598, the decree of the grand Mughals recreated Vrindàvana by amalgamating the maujās and the most powerful and most popular Hindu centre was created and gifted to the Hindu tradition by a Mughal sitting in Lahore.

But, in 1667, there was an operation blue star. The king was Aurangzeb. Shivaji had just escaped from his captivity and to give lessons to the Rajputs, Aurangzeb desecrated the same temple which his great grandfather had built. Dr Irfan Habib Maikali, a great historian says that the Govinda temple was desecrated by Aurangzeb and with it, the Indian history was desecrated. It is coming from a Marxist historian, for whom religion does not play a part, but now it concerns him, too.

Dialogue is an interesting game of sensitivity. Mamud of Gazni visited the Mathurà-Vrindàvana complex. In Tarife-yanumi al-utti, there is the mention of the ninth invasion. Mamud appreciated the birthplace of Krishna and the temple. He said, given all the artisans, all the time and all the art of the world, nobody can create such a beautiful edifice. In his own writing he says, 'I gave the orders: Blaze it to ground. And it took forty five days to burn.' It is one sense of sensitivity. He appreciated the beauty and the effort but his sensitivity was hurt with that edifice and he could not reconcile.

Akbar had a full partnership—he paid for the stone; it was given free from the royal exchequer. Man Singh paid thirteen lakhs only for the labour cost. So, Akbar had a full participation, but despite the repeated invitation of Man Singh, he refused to visit Vrindàvana. He refused because he was a faithful Muslim. But, he had a full appreciation and friendship towards the other. His son Jahangir came and visited the temple and was very sad. He said: ‘My elders built the temple but the Hindus have no capacity even to maintain it. It is a house of bats.’ Then, Sahajahan ascended the throne.

In Dr Samten’s words, Sahajahan was insensitive and was not trained in Islam, he did not have the core of Islam. He removed all the exemptions, 372 Hindu edifices were desecrated on his accession to the throne. He had a hostile kind of attitude. But, his son usurped the throne vanquishing his father. Aurangzeb reinstated all the grants. Although, because of the Shivaji fiasco, he desecrated the Govinda temple, he did not make a mosque there. The Govinda temple was the only structure that Aurangzeb desecrated. But he did not turn that into a mosque, because he knew Akbar was involved in it. It is an amazing fact of history! And, towards the very end of his life, he travelled from Golkunda to Chitrakoot, stayed there for seven months and personally supervised the construction of a Ràma temple. The temple still exists. He gave profuse grants to the temple and returned back to South and died in a battle, later on.

Badauni records and says, ‘God has punished me to face the strange ways of the Emperor.’ The strange ways! Now, I take you around the monument. Enjoy through the visual phenomenology. Thus, when two traditions like Hinduism and Islam dance together, a baby-like Govinda responds in the dance. It is not a religio-political dialogue. It is a dalliance of two rich architectural traditions, where fixed-slab Hindu ceilings give way to flexible intersecting Persian arches. Thus, the heart of the Hindu temple becomes spacious. For what? For what do you need of the heart, beauty, style, aesthetics? When you offer something to your beloved, what do you offer? It was in fashion that it was offered to the most beautiful couple; Ràdhà and Govinda, the original deities of the temple. This brings us also to the metaphysics of dialogue that, the reality is relational. It is not unrelated. And, it also shows a crucial epiphany in human religiosity, when Krishna celebrates the feminine, called Ràdhà. She is neither a goddess, nor the mother, nor wife, nor sister like Subhadrà; she is not Rukmini. She is nobody of Krishna in the social terminology. But, she is a pure feminine identity and the celebration of the feminine cult happened in Vrindàvana. It is also an act of pleasing the other in love where one should understand the others as they understand themselves in dialogue. That has been the current theme of everybody’s wish around the temple. One uses music for that and dance and offer him the best things—throne, sweets, dresses and ornaments. But, all these things are not possible if the Muslim artisans are not offering these to Krishna. Then, Krishna would remain undressed, unembellished if the Muslims are not making the inter-faith offerings in the temples of Vrindàvana. The dialogue is also intra-faith, intra-tradition, where the Vedic and Buddhist rituals have been engaging in dialogue.

From the dhulicitra to kalàcakra, to sanjhis and then the dialogue goes to a deeper level where the Goswàmis rejected the category of Advaita for Advaya. This mahàvākya is vedàntika tattva. . . yat jnànam advayam. So, the choice for epistemological terminology relevant to a metaphysical terminology is there. We also see the bunches of flower offered to the Lord are competing with the jharokhàs of Fatehpur Sikri. In dialogue, when politics goes beyond rituals, spiritual experience emerges and then only the rasa is translated in tune. What Professor Mohanty had said: Construct a common goal with new set of meanings. And, in the architectural space like Govinda temple, it was also an aesthetic ritualistic requirement, Vrindàvana as the Ràsa-mandala. This Ràsa theatre that you are visualizing—there the Goswàmis sent petition to the court of Akbar: Please send your dancer, the court choreographer Vallabha so that we can evolve a drama, a mode of our sàdhanà—so on and so forth. I see that the aesthetics of enjoyment of Ràsa and rasa has to be directed and guided by a logical system. The aesthetics cannot operate without logic, because the logic of binary opposites is insufficient in comprehending Reality. Neither pure difference will help, nor pure non-difference is

welcome. The meaning created by dialogue has its own logic. However illogical it may seem, Acintya, from the point of view of no binary opposites is *nà so ramana, nà hām ramani*. It is the logic of inclusive transcendence, *Acintyabhedābheda*. It is a fuzzy logic of dialogue and love. And, what happens, Bullehe Shah says again—*aisa jagi jnana palita, na mai hindu, na turakh jaruri, nam ishk di hai manjuri, ashak ne hari jita*. When Caitanya was asked about his identity, he says—*na mai vipra na mai kshatri vaishya na shudra, mai hu dāsānudāsa*.

In this dialogical dalliance or *mahārāsa* no reason, attitude or approach is discarded. The gates are open for all the state and non-state players who can play together, as the Mughals, the Rajputs played with the Goswāmīs. In fact, intra-penetration of disciplines is a welcome trend. It is mutually enriching. In this *samvāda-lilā* or dialogical *Rāsa*, the dialogical dalliance is an on-going process. It does not stop anywhere. It is a *nitya-lilā*. If no dialogue is there, then there is no relationship, and the result is divorce, destruction and partition which we saw sixty years back. Yet, dialogue, and not divorce is our predicament.

Again, I go back to Jacques Dupont. He says: ‘Today’s multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious world requires, from all parts, a qualitative lead, proportional to our situation, if we wish to have positive mutual relations between people, rather than the confrontation of past. It is now behind us. No more biased interpretation of the data, facts about others and about religious traditions of others. No more stubborn misunderstanding, due to ignorance or malice.’

Caitanya’s *Vrindāvana* is the theatre of the dialogue and Govinda is the result. He is the seed of understanding, feeling and harmony.

* From *Exploring Harmony among Religious Traditions in India* (pp. 110-17) published by the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. Rs. 150.