

## Reflection

# KRISHNA RASALILA FOR ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION

Acharya Shrivatsa Goswami<sup>♦</sup>

## Introduction

*Krsnaya Vasudevaya Haraye Paramatmane*

*Pranata Klesanasaya, Govindaya Namonamah*

We just pray for our needs. My prayer is for *Kleshanasaya*, for the removal of difficulties; I need help, the grace and the *kripa* to get over the *klesa*, the affliction and the problems in my life. Suffering, deprivation, and pain have many colours, many forms and many manifestations. Ecology and our environment is one such major concern for the whole of humanity and my attempt is to address the issue of environment from a Hindu religious point of view.

Apparently, environment is all about the natural physical world, so natural sciences can better handle its problems than religion. Humanity seriously thought so and believed in this, that a natural problem should be handled by natural sciences. Especially in the last couple of centuries we have tried the scientific route but the result is more of environmental disasters than resolution of the problems. When we mortgaged our concerns about the environment to sciences the result was not sufficient to answer our concerns. We need to pursue once again the religious route. I shall share with you a Hindu story. What I shall offer you is not the Hindu viewpoint on environment; there are many other Hindu stories and perspectives on environment.

---

<sup>♦</sup>**Dr Acharya Shrivatsa Goswami** comes from the family of eminent scholars and spiritual leaders at Sri Radharamana Mandir of Vrindavan. He is a leading figure in the Vaishnava tradition, representing the leadership of the Bhakti (devotional) movement, in a school dating back to the 16c. figure of Chaitanya. He has lectured at major universities worldwide, and toured extensively to participate in conferences on philosophy and religion. One of the focuses of his present work is the alliance of religion and conservation. This Reflection was first presented at the Hindu-Christian Meeting on the theme “Enhancing Hindu-Christian Relations and Collaboration for Justice, Peace and Harmony,” organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, held at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, India, 6-9 November 2011.

I come from the holy town of Vrindavan, which was the gift of a Muslim King. The modern Vrindavan did not exist as a separate revenue entity or a habitat until Akbar issued a Firman for that purpose and he gifted that to my ancestors in 1598. Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century a Roman Catholic, British Civil Servant, became the District Magistrate of Mathura. He not only restored the city from the political and economic chaos after the first war of independence of 1857 but he also restored and developed the place scholarly and religiously, though he was not a Hindu. Majority of my family including my wife and two sons were born in Christian Missionary hospitals of Vrindavan. I subscribe to Vaisnava faith in the tradition of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) coming from Bengal. He had many followers but most known are the six Gosvamis as immediate successors. Three Goswamis which were later known as Rupa Goswami, Sanatan Goswami and Jiv Goswami had Muslim backgrounds.

Hinduism is a faith where you could agree to disagree on almost any principle, doctrine etc. Hinduism is a *weltanschauung*, a worldview based upon the doctrine of karma and the consequent rebirth, with faith in *paramtatva*, a transcendent reality. That is a generic definition of Hinduism, apart from that I am not able to have a working definition of Hinduism. Interestingly, even the four Vedas are not subscribed by all Hindus as the *pramana* (normative). For example, Saiva Siddhanta accepts the Tamil verses of Siva Jnana Bodum as their Vedas par excellence. Yet they are legitimate Hindus. There is a complete incapacity in defining Hinduism in a particular ritual, authority, language, place, book or anything apart from the belief in *karma*, *punarjanma* and belief in *paramtatva* of your own liking. Here it should also be noted that the transcendent reality or the God is in essence *sat*, *cit* and *ananda* only. *Satyam-jnanam-anantam brahma* – truth-knowledge-bliss is God. Here, God is not a creator. The creation belongs to God only as *tatasthalaksana*, only by implication, not essentially or *svarupalaksana*; it belongs to divine action not to divine substance.

Now from this point of Hindu view, we ask about the role of religion especially Hindu Dharma in environment. Instead of the term religion I shall prefer to use *dharma* – meaning life sustaining values and the processes unfolding those values. The question is: what can we do to sustain ourselves because for us as humans, we are the ultimate concern.

There is a difficulty. As humans we cannot do anything on our own apart as we come out of the womb of the mother unconsciously and crying. If you pause and think for a few seconds, what have you done in your life

without learning, without being taught by someone. You would not find anything. The human predicament, therefore, is to have a teacher. Again that teacher’s predicament is to have his own teacher and so on. Not to fall in the fallacy of infinite regress, we have to have a first teacher, as a person, a knowledge system. According to *Bhagavata Purana* (10.24), God is the first teacher of all the arts of living. God or *Ishvara* comes as a teacher in Hinduism. That is the uniqueness of Hinduism per se and that’s where we get the signature tune of Hinduism:

*gurur brahma gururvisnohgururdevomahesvarah,  
gurusaksatparabrahmatasmaisriguruvenamah.*

No Hindu sect will have any problem with this signature tune. *Ishvara*, the first teacher, is not a one time job. God intervenes in human history seeing our plight time and again.

One such intervention happened in my own town in the body of Krishna, as the son of Nanda and Yasoda. Born in Vraja (modern district of Mathura), when he came to this human arena, he realized that everything was upside down, his own uncle is after his life, the family and social structures are completely broken, nature is completely devastated and ecological, political, religious – every system is totally based on exploitation. What did Krishna do and what could Krishna do?

Krishna reviewed the situation and realised that environment is not just environment, it is also the *dharma* for humanity. As *dharma*, the natural environment sustains human existence, same way the body houses and sustains our souls. The relationship of soul and body defines life. Any disturbance between the relations is illness and the snapping of that relation is death. Quickly Krishna realized that. He saw that the material for human body is provided by nature comprised of the five gross elements of earth, water, fire, space and air. For a happy and enjoying life, the humanity as a masculine *purusa* should relate with nature which is *prakriti*, the feminine. However a mere relation between masculine-humanity and the feminine-nature is not enough. The relationship needs to be sustained. Darling nature be served and decorated with love and service. Thus, when Krishna realized that the human body and nature are made of the same matter then he said, ‘the elements of nature need to be restored.’

Without elaborating on the well known pastimes of Krishna I must remind you that he was the first to have organized environmental force. For recruitment he placed the notice “kids more than 5 years need not apply.” When the recruits came, the four year old commander-in-chief ordered them to go and eat the mud from their own courtyard. Next day

everybody came with distorted and beaten faces and said: “we all resign from you Krishna, we are not going to work with you. Our parents gave us a thrashing for eating mud.” Any parent will do that. Krishna said “Don’t worry as a fighter for the environment you have to take all this pain. Look, my mother Yashoda beat me with a stick. Keep on eating mud.” When the kids kept on eating mud the parents realized that better make the earth eating quality clean. The trick delivered.

Krishna cleaned the water by killing the polluting serpent Kaliya and set up effluent treatment plants to clean polluted waters. He drank forest fire, not once twice. He planted trees to choke the life out of twisters and tornadoes. And to prevent space from the sound pollution he took out his flute and filled it with melodies. Sound pollution is the deadliest of all.

When the natural ecology was restored, he took on the economic system through his danlilas where he took a lesson from the Gandhian school of economics. Krishna is the first Gandhian scholar in economy where he propagated the need based economic system and believed that the produce should be utilized by the producer first and only the surplus should go to the market. He had an economic revolution. With the economic strength people took the political tyrant head on. A democratic ruler was placed in the place of Kansa. The administration and establishment under the authority of Uddhava worked with service with love as its motto.

Krishna did not stop there. For him the biggest and largest exploitation of humanity is in the name of religion. The main coup of Krishna came when he replaced Indra and all the Vedic Gods with the environmental gods. People wanted water for their cattle and fields. Under the Vedic belief, they used to serve Indra for water. Krishna said this is the most stupid idea. *Jnanamparamguhyam me yadvijnanasamanvitam*. Any knowledge which is not understood and applied scientifically is useless for humanity. Indra will not give you water. The trees and mountains will bring water. So do not worship Indra; instead worship mountain, Govardhan – the only available mountain in the desert like situation of Vrindavan. Any knowledge system where the conclusions are universally applicable and empirically verifiable is scientific and for that matter the Hindu mentality or Hindu ethos is totally scientific even on the religious and spiritual matters. What is called mysticism in the West is a yogic science in India. If one follows Patanjali, for example, then mystic experience becomes a scientific product. To that extent the scientific mentality can be seen in the Hindu *darsan*.

How did Krishna do what he did? That is a very relevant question. He did not pass the buck. He took the responsibility and did it with bhakti. Bhakti means to serve. He served. Bhakti was the handle and the clue. The service should not be for showing off. Neither be it a hypocritical exercise nor under pressure should one serve. Krishna served out of love. He cared out of love. At the same time he constantly reviewed the tradition of customs, ritual practices, etc. For that he required a tremendous scientific temperament. He told not to subscribe to the tradition blindly. Then, he served nature as God, he served family as a son, a brother and a husband. He fulfilled his social obligations as teacher by giving the *Bhagavat Gita*. He served humanity as a king of justice and peace. Let Mahabharata be the process but the result was justice and peace. The war was his service to humanity.

He believed in the process of dialogue but not dialogue alone. It should come with an alliance. The path of *bhakti* (service) culminates in *maharasalila* – the great dalliance where the dialogue and the alliance come together. In the dalliance of Maharasa it is not just Krishna, but others too. There is variety, infinite variety of the *gopis*, the women, the lovers and they are all unique. The others don't lose their identity in that dalliance of dialogue and anyone could join and dance with Krishna.

His deities are not any Gods or Goddesses of the high tradition. His deities are Natural. His god is mount Govardhan. His presiding goddess is Vrinda, tulasi plant. This most fragile, economically quite useless and aesthetically unappreciated plant becomes the presiding deity of his own spiritual realm, the dhams Vrindavan. In addition of Govardhana mountain Krishna worships the Sun, when he takes Samb from Dwaraka for cure of disease to Konark in Orissa. Krishna worships the Sun, trees, mountains and a small plant. That's it. He does not need any other idols in his life to worship.

Who is Krishna's friend? Cows. He is a servant of cows. He is a cowherd boy, Gopala *par excellence*. He is a great husband. Krishna had 16,108 legitimately wed wives. According to Bhagavata Purana (10<sup>th</sup> canto, 59<sup>th</sup> chapter), a petition came from a huge number of women to Krishna through his queen Satyabhama. It read: please request your husband to deliver us from the suffering of this maniac King Bhaumasura who on seeing any beautiful woman – whether a mother or a wife, a daughter or a sister, used to bring her to the harem and violate her dignity. Krishna resolved to help them as he could not allow the women to suffer. He goes to the King and requests him to stop exploiting women. The king,

however, brushed him aside saying that it is a matter of his personal life. Krishna made it clear that if the king wanted to have a relationship with 16,100 women he should marry them, and give the women the honour and the dignity which are due to them. Bhaumasura did not take the advice. In the battle that followed, Krishna killed the maniac. When the women were released, they faced another problem. Women said: “What will happen to us now? Which of our husbands will take us back? Which brother will accept a rakhi from us? Which father will accept us as chaste daughters? We are at best a social waste. In captivity at least we had food and shelter.” Krishna replied: “I don’t believe in waste. Look at my crown, it is animal waste. A feather which a peacock discards is my crown. I decorate myself with waste. Nothing is waste in this creation. From hereafter you are all my legal Queens!”

That is why Krishna got 16,108 wives. Is there a man in the human history with that kind of commitment to the feminine? Anyway, Yamuna is his consort. When he is in Vrindavan, Mathura or Dwaraka, Krishna keeps only Yamuna the river, as the consort because he knows water is life. The humanity can survive only with water, nothing else.

These stories may help substantially for the environment protection as we can be inspired by these stories and have practices and rituals even in the religious life. For example, in our temple of Sri Radharamanaji, ritually pure water is always water from open water bodies like the river, a well and a lake. The chemically purified water from an impure water source, our temple will never accept. The water coming from a mechanical sucking from the earth is unfit for the temple rituals. The implications are tremendous. When you take water from the open water source you never take more than what is required. But when you press the button of your submersible pump and when you wake up in the morning how many thousands of gallons of water have been wasted in overflow, we do not know.

Actually when there is a thoughtful review of the tradition and when applied for a lifestyle ritual or custom, then only it becomes meaningful. Sociologically, in our religious tradition, the unmarried priest, Bramachari, can be ordained into priesthood but the full priesthood will come only when he is married. It is an absolute rule. If the priest becomes a sannyasi, he loses all his rights to perform the ritual duty. You will be surprised how the sensitivity of the social ecology grows. In priestly Gosvami families for any auspicious beginning whether it is the time of the birth of a child or a tonsure or a *yagyopavita* or a marriage or a coming of the bride, there is an installation and invocation of the deities. It is the eldest widow in the

family who has the authority to perform auspicious installation of the deities; whereas in many Indian communities a widow has to be away from the auspicious moments. Look one inspiration of the religious leadership and the courage can do all these kind of revolutions.

Finally, is interfaith dalliance practical and beneficial? I will again say yes. Violence on the name of religion is a phenomenon. When there is religious strife in India, and the politicians and bureaucrats usually fail in restoring peace, they convene a peace committee of the bishops, the maulavis, the goswamis and other religious leadership and then they request the committees to help bringing peace and harmony. The religious leadership usually delivers.

Religion and dialogue are reality. We are citizens of this country and we have obligations for our country. Why do we have to wait for the call from administration or politicians to make and form a peace committee? Why are there not interfaith committees living and functioning in every town and locality of this country? That should be the model and practice. That would be a preventive medicine for violence on the name of religion. This will require understanding and mutual trust. The committees will be very superficial if there is no understanding and trust of the other. For example, in Vrindavan more than a century old Christian mission hospital has been shut down. I say this with pain. There were flourishing missionary hospitals in Vrindavan and both of them are defunct. Unfortunately the mission that the church had developed on the defunct properties is real estate. When the whole India is fascinated with the real estate business, the Church also falls prey to the temptation and the missionary hospitals in Vrindavan now a real estate. We should pause and ask why a popular hospital has to close? People out of misunderstanding and mistrust took them to be a religious conversion centre, factories for conversion. In any case the loss is mine, not of the church. I am wondering where would my grandchildren will be born and cared for? I hope and I believe that trust is the foundation of dialogue and alliance and if that trust comes back then Vrindavan will again have an enriching dalliance between the Christian Missionaries and Vaisnavas and other communities.

Thank you very much. Radhe! Radhe!