

Raasleela, the Divine Dalliance of the Human Krishna & Assam

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Summary :

The Hindus believe that God reincarnates on Earth to defeat the bad. Krishna is the human reincarnation of the Hindu deity, Vishnu. After being born as Krishna, the lord did many deeds to uphold peace in the world. These deeds of the lord are called as 'Leela'. Raasleela is a type of dance between Krishna and the Gopis. Through this dance, the lord has tried to destroy pride from the minds of the gopis.

Key Word:

God, Raasleela, Ras, Krishna, gopi, desire, sensual

Field of study :

Along with the position of devotion in Hindu philosophy, and describing various parts of devotion, this study also includes as to how Krishna got rid of desire and pride through Raasleela.

Purpose and aim of study :

This discussion has been created to show how 'Raasleela' like catharsis, destroys desire and pride, despite its erotic or sensual outer layer.

Research method :

This discussion paper has been prepared in descriptive method.

Sources of study :

The main source of the research is field study, help has been taken from various books related to the topic.

1.00 Introduction: The word 'Raas' has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Ras'. 'Leela' means deeds or actions of divine beings. The word 'Ras' has been used since the age of Vedas and Upanishadas. According to Taittiriya Upanishad –

আনন্দং প্ৰত্যভসিম্বশিন্তি ইতি

..... বসো বৈ সঃ।।

'Ras' is not the expression of happiness of a single individual. It is the excess of happiness of all, or the happiness of finding God. 'Raasleela' is mainly the act of dalliance of the God, SriKrishna with the Gopis. Moreover, the human exploits of Krishna, the reincarnation of Vishnu, are also shown in 'Raas' Thus, because this leela can give common people 'brahmananda' or 'bhumananda' or the ultimate happiness, this leela has been named as 'Raasleela'.

1.01. Raasleela and characterization of Radha in Puranas: There are descriptions of the Raasleela of Krishna and the gopinis in Harivansh Puran, Padma Puran, Bhagawat Puran, Bramavaibarta Puran and Vishnu Puran, Even though in 'Shiv Puran', there is mention of 'Raasleela' of 'Har-Gauri' by making 'Raasmandal', the word 'Raasleela' usually brings to mind the image of SriKrishna sporting with the gopis. Radha Charitra has been mentioned in Padmapuran, Vishnupuran and Brahmabaivarta Puran. In Bhagawat Puran, there is only one instance where the name of Radha is used. The word 'Anaradhita', found in Bhahawat Puran, might be a mention of Radha.

1.02. Mention of Radha Charitra and Raas leela from Sanskrit literature to Assamese literature: Apart from puranas, descriptions of the love story of Radha-Krishna can be found in Sanskrit poetry like- 'Subhasita Ratnakosh', Prakrit literature like – 'Gahasattasayi; by Haal, and in later generation's Jaydev's 'Geet Govinda', 'SriKrishna Kirtan', etc. The one act play, 'Raas Jhumura' and some Bargeets by Madhavdeva have mentions of the name of Radha in them –

ক) বাধা ভূষণ চুৰি কৰিয়ে কহু পুছত বাত হামাৰাি (মাধৱদেৱৰ বৰগীত)

In the post-Sankardeva era, songs by Gopaldeva, Jadumanideva, Sanatandeva, the poem 'Radha Charit' by Dwij Kalapchandra, son of Ramsaraswati, in all these the name of Radha can be found. However, these instances in Assamese literature can be a result of the influence of Bengali literature and also the preference of erotic literature by the Ahom kings, like - Sivasingha. Sankardeva has not mentioned the name of Radha in his works but he has described Krishna's dalliance with the gopinis. In the 'Dasham Skandha' (tenth Canto) of Bhagawat, chapter 'Raasleela' of Kirtana, and in the play 'Keligopal' or 'Raaskrira', Sankardeva has described Raasleela between Krishna and the gopinis.

1.03 The history and legend of Raas festival: According to astrological accounts, Krishna was born before 3000 BC¹. People believe that he was born in the Dwapar Yuga. He was born in a prison cell of Kangsa, and grew up in Vrindavan. It is said that Krishna did the raaslela with the gopinis in Vrindavan, on the banks of the river Yamuna, during the season of Autumn. Based on this myth, even in the 21st century, Raasleela, is observed a festival in Mathura, Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, etc. It is to be noted that Raas leela has been officially celebrated in Vrindavan since 15th century. Even today the people of Vrindavan believe that Radha Krishna come to 'Nidhibhan' temple every midnight to do raasleela². On the foundation of religious belief, raas leela is celebrated as a festival in Assam. Around the year 1840 A.D., Raas was celebrated for the first time as a festival in Dakshinpat Sattras, Majuli. After that, along with Garhmur, Auniati, Bengenaati Sattras, many other sattras and naamghars of Assam celebrate Raas in the season of Autumn. In the 21st century, in various places of Assam 'Raas' is observed with different methods. In Upper and middle Assam, the common people take part in 'Raasleela' by acting as Krishna, gopis and other characters, though, in lower Assam figurines are used in stead, Nalbari, Sualkuchi, Hauli, Palasbari, Tihu, etc. places in Lower Assam, clay figurines are used to act as Krishna, gopis and the other characters to observe the raasleela. In Palashbari, Raas with alive figurines is also celebrated. Presently, in the 21st Century many changes have come to the way of celebrating Raas. Before, people used to observe Raas only in naamghars of sattras, Gradually this celebration entered stages. Pitambar Devagoswami of Garhmur Sattras, first introduced Raas on stage.

1.04 The tale of Raasleela: The context of Raasleela has been depicted in pages of Assamese literature. In the original Bhagawat Puran, SriKrishna's Raasleela has been described from the Chapter 29 to Chapter 33. These five chapter are also called as 'Raas Panchadhyayi'. The tale of the Raasleela in Bhagawat had been told by Shuk, son of Vyasa, to king Parikshit. The 'Raaskrira' in Sankardeva's Kirtan, and his play 'Keligopal' have similarities in their plots with the story in the original Bhagawat. Saknardeva wrote the chapter 'Raaskrira' of Kirtan while he was in Dhuwahat, Belguri. On a full moon, beautiful Autumn night, all the gopis and gopinis abandoned their work and went to Krishna after listening to the music of his flute. In 'Vishnupuran' it is mentioned that Radha too went to Vrindavan after hearing sounds of the flute, though Sankardeva hasn't referred to Radha. Leaving house chores and instead of caring for their children and husband, and going to Krishna, can be regarded as attraction for other men in the eyes of the ignorant, but in reality it is not true. In spiritual sense, the gopis after giving up on earthly desires went to the God only. Even then, their minds had both the worldly desire and devotion for God, together. In attempt to get close to Krishna sooner, some of the

gopis wore clothes and jewellery while on the way, it shows how they only had eyes for their destination, that is Krishna the God. By being anxious to meet God, the gopis have become Bhakta or Bhakata (devotee) of Krishna. No danger can keep devotees away from their god. That is why the gopis could make it to Vrindavan after ignoring many household problems:

ভকতৰ কৰ্ম্ম যনে নভলৈ বফিলা (কীৰ্ত্তন)

Sisupal, Hiranyaksha, Hiranyakashipu, etc. received divine blessing even after treating their Gods as enemies, likewise, the gopinis could receive Krishna's blessing even through their lust for Krishna. Sankardeva has explained this in Kirtan with example:

বষি বুলি অমৃতক পলি যটি নৰ।

নুহবিকে হনে জানো অজৰ-অমৰ।।

In 'Raaskrira' in Kirtan, the miracle of shravana (listening) and kirtana (singing) has also been discussed. Unlike the gopis worshipping Krishna by staying close to him, if someone does shraavan, kirtana of the lord even from a distance, that devotee would be able to receive the lord's blessings. Even though the gopis at first went to Vrindavan as women, thinking of Krishna as a common man, later on staying in his company made them realize that he is actually the soul of the universe:

জগতৰে বন্ধু আত্মা তুমি।

সমস্তে ধৰ্ম্মৰ আপুনি ভূমি।। (কীৰ্ত্তন)

Though the gopis were able to receive divine blessing because of their devotion, they were unable to shake the worldly desires and bounds. So, when they thought they had gotten lord Krishna through kirtan, pride and arrogance came to their minds. Such vices distance a devotee from their God. That is why, to clear out the pride from their minds, Krishna vanished from there. After that, the pain of separation from their God made them ask every living being in Vrindavan about any news of Krishna. Remembering him, the gopis all became sad. To lessen the pain and sorrow, the gopis started copying every deed of Krishna. One Gopi would play the part of Krishna, another would be Putana, and someone would act the role of Yashoda, while playing the 'Leelas' (sports) of Krishna. In the 21st Century, these characters are still shown together with Krishna in Raas festival. In this way, after memorizing the leelas of Krishna, the whole world became full of Krishna. The gopis came to understand that Krishna is the 'Jagatguru' (leader of the universe) and the husband of goddess Lakshmi. Thus, the pride along with the lust was cleared from the gopis' minds. Satisfied by the pure devotion of the devotees, the lord presented himself in front of them and then completed the raasleela. Sankardeva has mentioned in Kirtana and the play, 'Keligopal', that even the gods of heaven were present during the raaskrira. In Vishnupuran there is a description of the Gandharvas

(singers of the heaven) singing and dancing in Gandharva loka after observing the raasleela between Krishna & the gopis.

It cannot be said that there aren't some differences between the 'Raaskrira' chapter in the original Bhagawat, and the raaskrira in Kirtana and the play 'Keligopal'. In the original Bhagawat, the description of Raaskrira had completed in the chapter 33 of the tenth canto. There is no mention of Asura (demon) Vadh (killing) in the chapter. There are mentions about the killing of Yaksha (mammon) named Sankhachud in the 34th chapter, Canto 10, of Bhagawat, and in the chapter 37, canto 10, about the killing of the asura of Kansa, named Keshi. Sankardeva might have thought of circulating entertainment along with devotion, that is why he included the killings of Arista and Keshi, two demons, in the raaskrira part of Kirtana. In the play 'Keligopal' too, there is a description of rescuing the gopies after killing the asura named Sankhachuda. One of the aims of this description might be to arouse devotion among the people. It means, gods saves their devotees from any kind of danger.

1.05 Various types of devotion expressed through Raasleela: Through the raasleela, described in Bhagawat Puran, Vishnupuran, Kirtana, 'Dashama' of Sankardeva, the play 'Keligopal' by Sankardeva, nine types of devotion has been gathered together – shravana (the gopies has listened to other gopies talking about Krishna), kirtana (the gopies has described Krishna to one another), smarana (by remembering Krishna after he vanished from the sight of the gopies), bandana (through the gopis worshipping Krishna in their hearts), dashya (through the gopis accepting themselves as servants of Krishna) and aatmanivedan (through the gopies expressing their vices and weaknesses freely in front of Krishna and then surrendering themselves to Krishna). Purposeful devotion turns into pure devotion in raaskrira. Sakaam bhakti or Saguna bhakti (purposeful devotion) means devotion that comes at a price, search of freedom, property-money, fame etc. Niskaam bhakti or Nirguna bhakti means selfless, pure devotion or the devotion that surrenders everything to the god. Madhavdeva also meant pure devotion when he said, 'মুক্তি নস্পৃহ যত্নে'। Though the gopies at first tried to fulfill their desires with Krishna, later it changed into pure devotion :

এহমিতং ব্ৰজৰ যুৱতী প্ৰতী নতি।

পাইলে মহোদয় কৰ্ম্ম-বন্ধ ছেদে ভলৈ।। (কীৰ্ত্তন)

A devotee has to cross through three stages to receive 'moksha' or salvation-- antarangaa, uttama and saprema. In antarangaa bhakti, a devotee accepts the existence and importance of the world, and they ask the lord for blessing to get happiness or freedom from the circle of life. In uttama bhakti, the lord is the only truth for the devotee. The world is a lie. So, one should surrender one's body, soul and senses, everything to the

god and worship him. In supreme bhakti, there is no existence of the world. Devotee automatically emerges themselves purely into thinking of God. The devotion in raaskrira is also a pure form of devotion that turns into saprema devotion. At first, the gopies had atleast a little bit of sense of the world. That is why they wanted to enhance their outer beauty before going to Krishna. After that Krishna became the only truth in their minds. So, when Krishna told them to go home, the gopis didn't. All the times doing smarana, kirtana, shravana makes a devotee neglectful and ignorant towards the outer world. The same had happened with the gopis. As though they had united with the soul of the lord. This body was created by the lord, so there is no shame or need to clothe it in front of him :

বস্ত্ৰ নসম্বৰে মহামোহ হুয়া পৰে।

স্বামীৰ কাষতে পাছে লজ্জা হোৱে বড়ো। (কীৰ্তন)

1.06 Conclusion : In Vishnupuran, Bhagawat puran, the 'Raasleela' chapter of Kirtana, the play 'Keligopal', Parikshit has asked Sage Shuk that, even after being a god, why Krishna despicably did raasleela with other's women, where is the boundary for Krishna? The souls inside the gopis, their husbands and other living beings are actually a part of the lord, as stated in Bhagawat :

গোপীনাং তপতীনাঞ্চ সৰ্বমোঞ্চয়ৈৰ দহেনিমা।

It has been mentioned in the 'Kirtana' too :

স্বভক্ষ অগ্নি সৰাকো শোৱে.....সজিন জানা মৰা যায় প্ৰাণে।

(Fire that burns everything isn't held responsible for it. If a common man tries to act like a god, the foolish man will only go down. If someone tries to drink poison because Har (Lord Shiva) did it, then they will get only death in return).

Raaskrira is a beautiful story of the dalliance of the souls of the gopis or gopinis with the supreme lord in the guise of Krishna. Sankardeva has presented the greatness of Raaskrira for the common people with saying, 'কামজয় নামে ইটো কশেৰৰ কলোঁ'

Footnote :

1. Fact gathered from field study : Auniaati Sattr, Majuli, Assam.
2. Fact gathered from field study : Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh

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