

The Boodhi-lila of Braj: Its Background and Present Performance

CHHEDILAL KANSYAKAR

During the resurgence of Vaishnavism in the sixteenth century, Brajamandal—the area around Mathura and Vrindavan—became by happy fortune chance a very important centre of the faith. Due to the widespread influence of the Bhagavat religion and the popularity of Jayadeva's *Geetagovindam*, many holy men and scholars travelled to the Braj region with the purpose of settling down in the land where Krishna was believed to be born, and where all his lilas had taken place. Among the scholars and visionary artists who made the Braj country the centre of their devotional activities were Shankaradeva from Assam (who was here some time between 1490 and 1531), Madhavendra Puri (disciple and son of Chaitanya, at the end of the fifteenth century) from Orissa, Mahaprabhu Vallabhacharya from the Godavari plains in Andhra, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu himself from Gauda, i.e., Bengal (around 1520), Mahaprabhu Hitaharivansha of the Radhavallabh sect (in 1532), Shri Hariram Vyas from Orchha (around 1534), and Shri Narayanabhatta from the Telengana region of Andhra (around 1545). In the next twenty-five years, six of Chaitanya's disciples also travelled to Braj. The mingling of so many great souls in the Braj region took place within a short span of sixty to seventy years. Their collective faith gave Vaishnavism a great boost, and their artistic achievements made a critical and momentous contribution to the cultural heritage of the Braj region, as well as to the medieval literature associated with it.

The Raslila tradition of Braj has not been free from sectarian claims. Whereas the followers of the Nimbarka sect give Ghamandadeva (or Ghamandideva) the credit for starting the Raslila, the followers of the Gaudiya tradition regard Narayanacharya or Narayanabhatta as its originator. According to a popular belief among the practitioners of Ras,

The proposal to start Ras was initially mooted by Shri Vallabhacharya and Swami Haridas at the Vishrant Ghat of Mathura. They chose four boys from among their Mathur Chaturvedi Brahmin devotees, and Ras was performed by them right then and there. It is said that a crown descended from the heavens when Acharyaji expressed his desire to present Ras. This crown was placed on the head of the actor playing Lord Krishna. But because this actor disappeared in the course of the performance, the Raslila could not be completed. Shri Vallabhacharya and Swami Haridas then gave Ghamandadevaji the responsibility of reconstituting a new Ras group. Ghamandadevaji went to Karhala village and started the Ras there with the help of two Brahmins, Udayakaran and Khemkaran. The Mormukut temple and the samadhi of Ghamandadevaji exist in Karhala even today.¹

Because of this common belief, the claim of the followers of Ghamandadevaji cannot be fully

disregarded. At the same time, one cannot ignore the contribution of Narayanabhatta to the evolution of the Raslila. Under the circumstances, it will be reasonable to state that while Mahaprabhu Vallabhacharya can be credited with starting the Raslila and Ghamandadevaji with developing it, its transformation into a rich theatrical form of the Braj region, complete with histrionics, dialogue, dance, music, and songs in the local Brajabhasha is largely the contribution of Narayanabhatta.

Narayanabhatta was born in 1531 into a family of Tailang Brahmins belonging to Madurai. His father Bhaskarabhatta had been initiated into the Madhva sect. Because of his passionate love for Brajamandal, Narayanabhatta was drawn to the region while still in his teens. Here, while living at Radhakund, he was initiated into Sri Chaitanya's faith by Krishnadutt Brahmachari and thereafter became a follower of Sri Chaitanya². Narayanabhatta was a great Sanskrit scholar, and he wrote altogether twenty-four books. After leaving Radhakund, Goswami Narayanabhatta stayed at Unchagaon near Barsana. He established the temple of Baldev in Unchagaon, and of Shriji in Barsana in 1569. The seat of Brajapithadhis (head of the Braj order) established by him at Unchagaon is still in existence and is occupied by Shri Deepakraj Bhatt, who is a descendent of Narayanabhatta himself.³

Radha of Barsana was regarded as a daughter by Narayanabhatta, and was worshipped by him as such. Meerabai wanted Narayanabhatta to accept her as his disciple and pleaded with him to do so. But Narayanabhatta felt that since Meera regarded Krishna as her husband in the conjugal sense, giving her *diksha* would amount to a father accepting a rival for his daughter (i.e., for Radha). Therefore Narayanabhatta, the worshipper of Radha in her form as the Beloved of Krishna, instructed his disciple Mathuradas to initiate Meerabai. At the same time, he also decreed that both Mathuradas and Meerabai must leave the Braj region, and must worship Krishna only in his form as Dwarikadhish. Thereafter, Mathuradas established the Prempith in Tijara—a small town in the Alwar district of Rajasthan—in 1555; here, the idol of Bankebihari which was worshipped by Meera herself is still present. The resanctification of the place of Meera's initiation, the reconsecration of the idols, and the anointing of Lalit Mohan Ojha, a descendent of Mathuradas, as the Pithadhis of the Prempith temple took place on 1 June 2002.⁴

The resurrection of the cultural heritage of Braj is the singular contribution of Narayanabhatta. Before his arrival in Brajamandal, the art and culture surrounding Radha-Krishna lore were on the wane. All evidence of Krishnalila had been lost. With the help of some remnants of records and his subsequent study, Acharya Narayanabhatta was able to reconstruct and re-establish the cultural geography of Braj. Thus he rediscovered Barsana, Nandgaon, the pilgrim's path, etc. He then fixed the places where Raslila could be held, and established the norms governing its performance. The sequence of Krishnalilas is set down in his book *Brajotsavachandrika*. The book declares that these lilas should be played at the same place and on the same day as they were originally performed. For the performance of the lilas, he took the help of Ramrai and Kalyanrai, two Brahmin residents of Karhala village. He also sought the help of the dancer Vallabh, who had retired from the emperor's court. The

Acharya was himself an accomplished Veena-player⁵. With this kind of collaborative effort, Narayanacharya was able to give a classically structured form to the Raslila. In the following shlokas excerpted in the work *Raslilanukaran aur Shri Narayanabhakta* ('Shri Narayanabhakta and the Process of Raslila'), written by Baba Krishnadas, the way to start a Raslila is described thus:

अयं नारायणचर्यः श्री कृष्णज्ञाप्रणोदिताः ।
 ब्राह्मणम् सुन्दरम् बालम् कृष्णवेषं विधाय च ।
 राधावेषं तथा चैकम् गोपीवेषं तथापरान् ।
 रासलीलां स सर्वत्र कारयामास दीक्षितः ॥

(Narayanacharya, inspired by the directions of Shri Krishna, made one good-looking Brahmin boy Krishna, another Radha, and the rest Gopis. Thus he initiated everyone and started the Raslila everywhere.)

यस्मिन् दिने यदृक्षे वा कृष्णो लीलां चकार ह ।
 तस्मिन् दिने स्थले तस्मिन् भट्ट भास्कर संभवः ।
 कारयामास ताम् लीलां बालैः कृष्णादिवेशिभिः ॥
 तथा प्रभृति सर्वत्र वनेषु पर्वतेषु च ।
 ब्रजलीयेषु कुञ्जेषु रासलीला बभूव ह ॥⁶

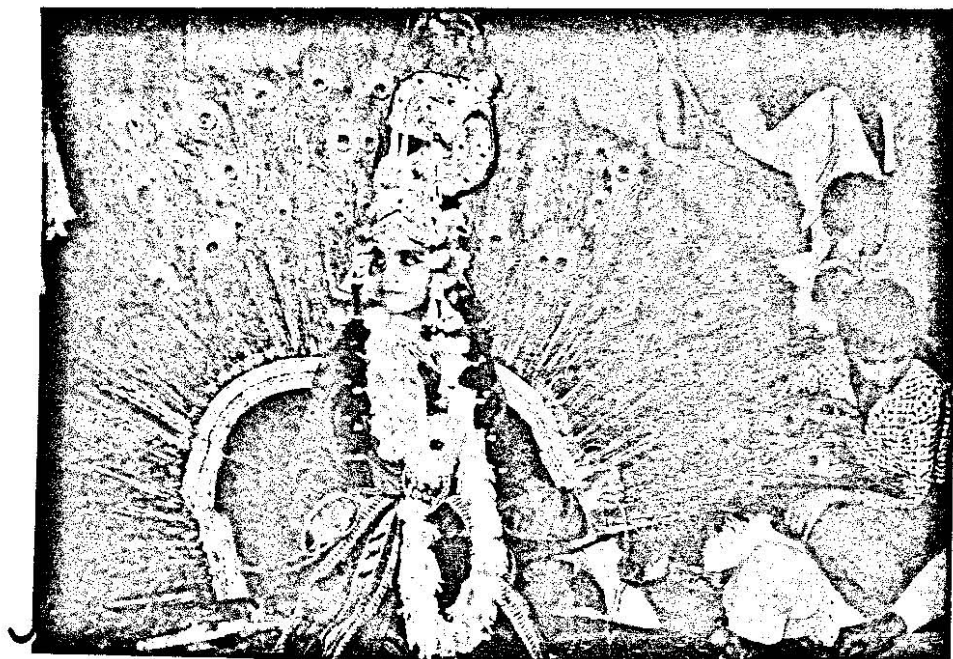
(On the day Krishna had done his lila, on that very day and at the same place the son of Bhaskarabhakta started the lila with boys dressed as Krishna and others. And thenceforth, in the forests and gardens and groves and rivers of Braj, Raslila has been held.)

While in Braj, the land of Krishna the Supreme Rasika, the Raslila was gaining a classical form, in Benaras, the land of the Supreme Dancer Nataraja, the tableaux of Ramlila were coming up. The initiator of one was Narayanabhakta and of the other, Narayanadas⁷. It was as if Lord Narayana himself had set in motion the lilas of His two major avatars at the same time by two persons with the same name! It was an extraordinary coincidence, but it was also a reflection of a time of wonderful intermingling of art with emotion, love with devotion, and passion with compassion.

*

There is still a symbolic adherence to the rules set by Narayanabhakta in today's lilas. Every year, from the eighth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Bhadrapada to the first day of the waning moon in the Ashvin month, i.e., for nine days, the rasa-soaked earth of Barsana becomes the centre of a drama of devotion, and the Raslila, along with scenes from the Krishnalila, is performed in Nature's own open-air theatre, with the woods, gardens, groves and hills serving the stage, and with a blazing Sun God looking down upon the performance. Because this particular chain of lilas is very old, and the chances of its changing or being modernized are very remote, it is known as the Boodhi-lila, i.e., the Aged Lila.

For centuries, this tradition set by the Brajapithadhis was kept alive by the Rasdharis (Ras performers) of Karhala village. According to Swami Brajabhushan of Chiksauli village, who is at present the organizer of the Boodhi-lila, he had heard from his elders that earlier, the Boodhi-lila was organized by the forefathers of Haridwari Baba of Karhala. Because of differ-



The peacock dance

ences among three Raslila parties in the modern period, it was decided that one of them would perform every year by turns. But when their differences still could not be resolved, the matter was taken to court. As per the court's direction, the responsibility of staging the Boodhi-lila was given to Rasdhari Fatehramji of Chiksauli village. Moolchand, Fatehramji's son, carried on the tradition, and at present Brajabhushan, who has inherited the responsibility, holds the charge⁸. The present writer had a chance to witness the Boodhi-lila in 2001, and this article is a record of what he then saw.

Boodhi-lila begins daily at about nine in the morning and continues till two in the afternoon. It is performed without elaborate arrangements or security. The first performance is held on the day of Radhashtami in the month of Bhadrapada (which fell on 26 August 2001). On that day, which marks the birth of Radharani, a grand function is held at the temple of Shriji in Barsana. Barsana is filled with devotees, not only from Braj, but from all over the country. The big fair and large crowds on this occasion are reminiscent of the days of the Lathmar Holi. In spite of the large crowds and the fair, the first sequence of the Boodhi-lila sequence is held in Gopalkuti located in the Gahwar wood, which falls on the traditional pilgrims' path of Braj.

In the Gahwar wood, at Morkuti, which is situated higher than Gopalkuti, is the temple of Lord Mor-Bihari. The Mor-lila was performed here on the second day (27 August). Radha searches for the *mor* (peacock) among the groves. In response to her silent prayer, Shyamsunder (Krishna) appears as a dancing peacock:

कान्हा मोर बन आयो ।

राधा प्यारी ने बुलायो ।।

(Krishna came as a peacock

Called by the beloved Radha)

The boy playing the role of Krishna wore a special dress made of peacock feathers, and danced on his knees for a long time. Later, this dance was performed in the temple in front of the deity. In the days to follow, this peacock dance was seen also at other locations. After dancing in the temple of Mor-Bihari, Shri Krishna climbed atop the temple and threw down laddoos to the crowd of devotees standing below among the boulders. Laddoos that were not caught by the devotees broke and scattered hitting the boulders. It was a moving and beautiful sight. The sun shone down sharply, as though it wanted to enjoy the scene and partake of the laddoos. After the laddoo sequence, the lila moved on to Radhakund. Narayanabhatta, the conceptualizer of Raslila, stayed at this very place when he came to Braj, and it was here that he wrote his seven treatises in Sanskrit.

On Navami (the ninth lunar day) at Shriji's temple, on the other hand, songs of congratulation were sung one after the other. In the evening, a 'felicitation function' took place in front of the deities in the courtyard of the temple. A *dhandi* and *dhandin* danced and sang congratulatory songs, and were given money and gifts by the temple and by the devotees and spectators. Even though this sequence of dance and song by the *dhandi* and *dhandin* is not an integral

part of the Boodhi-lila, it is considered to be an invaluable part of Braj culture.

On the third day (28 August), there was a Yugal-lila in Bilasgarh. On the fourth day, the lila moved to the *kunj* or grove of Nagababa near Barsana. Sadly, the *kunj* exists only in name now. Houses have been constructed all around, and only a small rectangular patch is left for the Raslila. The Makhanchori-lila is held here. The people living in the big houses all around consider the coming of Krishna as their good fortune and help in making arrangements for the lila with sincere devotion. After this, the last part of the lila, which starts in the courtyard of Shriji temple, is held at Sankri Khor. Sankri Khor is a narrow path on the pilgrim's route near Barsana. There is a natural pass between two hillocks through which not more than one person can pass at a time. Due to the constant coming and going of pilgrims, the stones lining this path have become so smooth and slippery that a new traveller finds it difficult to walk on them. On seeing this place one cannot but think that it was perhaps at such a spot that Krishna and his friends stood guard, so that not one gopi could pass by without giving them a tribute of milk.

On one side of this narrow valley between the hillocks, there is a shady though small platform on which Shri Krishna stands with his friends. On the other side are Radha and the gopis. Then starts an argument between the two groups as to whether the contribution of cow's milk should be made. An exchange of witty repartee goes on between them for a long time. Meanwhile the gopis, seizing an opportunity, tie the braid of Mansukh (a friend of Krishna's) to a tree. Somebody on the gopis' side then recites verses in Brajabhasha. Though the verses were not audible because of the noise, it was obvious that they contained descriptions of the virtues of the gopis, and condemnation of Krishna's behaviour. The person who read the verses was not a part of the lila. On enquiry, he replied that he was a resident of Rangili Gali and that he had inherited the right to read those verses. The day's enjoyable lila, *Chutia-bandhan* ('The Tying of the Braid'), was completed here under the blazing midday sun.

The next sequence of the Boodhi-lila, the Vyahalo-lila, is held in Unchagaon. In this play, the wedding of Krishna with Radha's friend Lalita takes place. On the thirteenth lunar day, Dan-lila takes place, again at Sankri Khor. The gopis descend into the narrow valley of the Sankri Ghati with pots of curd on their heads. Krishna asks for a donation—a portion of curd or milk. The gopis are unwilling. They are fed up of always having to donate milk, and have come to Sankri Khor this day determined to give nothing. There is a heated exchange between the two sides. Eventually, Krishna and his companions break the gopis' pots with their sticks. As the curd splatters all over, the devotees rush forward to take what they regard as their *prasad*, i.e., food blessed by Lord Krishna. In *Brajotsavachandrika* written by Narayanabhatta, this pot-breaking lila is described thus:

Then, on the morning of the thirteenth lunar day of the bright fortnight of the month of Bhadra, on the top of the Sankri Khor hill, a dialogue takes place between the two groups. Next, as the gopis enter Sankri Khor with pots of *dahi* on their heads, the first part of the Bhagavat is recited from the hill named Vishnu. Then Shri Krishna, standing with a stick in his hand, asks for *dan*. The lila is done after midday, and afterwards the pots are broken and the *dahi* is eaten.⁹

On the thirteenth day itself, the residents of Chiksauli and Manpur villages play host to the players of the lila, and an offering of milk and curd is made to them in every home.

On the next two days—Anant Chaturdashi and Ashvin Purnima—Raslila is held in Kadamkhandi and the Maharas in Karhala, one after the other. Karhala is regarded as the birthplace of Raslila.

In the Boodhi-lila this writer saw in 2001, apart from the beautiful settings given by nature, everything else was quite ordinary. It is possible that in earlier times the organizers were Rasdharis who had troupes of their own, but the present organizer, Brajabhushanji, is a lay householder and not a Rasdhari. In the absence of resources, he is barely able to sustain the Boodhi-lila tradition, whose responsibility he has inherited from his forefathers. In 2001, the Rasmandali brought over from Vrindavan had only four players—Radha, Krishna, and two Gopis—other than two older participants. Whenever required, some member of the chorus got up and played a small role. The dress and make-up of the players were not too elaborate, but there was no lack of liveliness and wit in the boy playing the role of Krishna. The standard of the accompanying singers was unexpectedly high. There were many accomplished singers in the group who sang songs of the Ashtachhap and other Braj poets soulfully.

Boodhi-lila starts in the morning every day and ends in the afternoon. Consequently the spectators, organizers, and participants are forced to bear the heat of the blazing sun. As per tradition, the meal of the day for the participants of the lila is arranged by the priest and caretaker of the shrine where the day's lila ends.

In the Boodhi-lila of Braj, there is a happy blending of a festival of nature and traditional theatre. It is possible that the practice of changing the venue with every scene in the Ramlila of Benaras had its beginnings here. Jagdish Chandra Mathur, the well-known authority on folk theatre, has compared this theatre with the medieval mystery plays and miracle plays of England¹⁰.

This serial lila, which embodies the charm of Braj, is an incomparable part of our culture and of the artistic heritage of Braj. But because of the neglect of the people and the absence of resources, it exists today only in its vestigial form.

The waters of the stream of our culture, which have nourished our civilization for ages, have today reduced to a trickle. Because of the pressures of our times and the spread and influence of the electronic media, our folk traditions are drying up. We need among us today a personality as brilliant as Narayanabhatta—a man who embodies joy, and who has the intellectual capacity to rebuild our now-defunct traditional culture—to stem this cultural rot.

भट्ट नारायण अति सरस ब्रजमण्डल सौ हेत ।

ठीर-ठीर रचना करी प्रकट किए संकेत ।।¹¹

(For this lovely Brajamandal, Bhatta Narayan
Created the lilas and gave the directions)

(Translated from the Hindi by Kumkum Lal)

NOTES

1. From Ramnarayan Agrawal's article titled 'Raslila ka Uday aur Vikas' (p. 881), published in the *Kanhaiyya Lal Poddar Abhinayagrantha*, p. 881.
2. *Miracle Plays of Mathura*, N. Hein (1972), p. 226.
3. From Kamaleshwar's article titled 'Madhavacharya, Mathuradas, Meerabai, aur Miratki vagairah . . .' (p. 8) published in 'Vimarsh', *Hindustan*, Patna, 7 July 2002.
4. *ibid.*
5. In Janakiprasad's book *Sri Narayanacharya*, he has been called Narada: "*Sarvalilanukaranam karayamas Narada*".
6. *Miracle Plays of Mathura*, p. 226.
7. *Traditional Indian Theatre*, Kapila Vatsayan, p. 98.
8. Based on a conversation with Swami Brajabhushan in his home in Chiksauli village on 26 August 2001.
9. *Paramparasheel Natya*, Jagdish Chandra Mathur, Rashtrabhasha Parishad, Patna, p. 28.
10. *ibid.*
11. Dhruvadas