

PRIYA-NARMA-SAKHAS are NOT in MADHURA-RASA (part 1):

In the wake of differences of opinion regarding the spiritual identity of Srila Prabhupada, another issue has arisen that has become a source of confusion. Some devotees are claiming that whenever Srila Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaja says that Srila Prabhupada is a rupanuga-vaishnava in gopi-bhava, manjari-bhava or madhura-rasa, he actually means that Srila Prabhupada is a priya-narma-sakha because priya-narma-sakhas are also in manjari-bhava and madhura-rasa. This claim is based on a number of direct statements of Srila Rupa Gosvami, which, at first glance, seem to lend support to their position. However, the commentaries of Srila Jiva Gosvami and Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura reveal entirely different intentions behind Srila Rupa Gosvami's statements. Now we shall examine the relevant verses along with their commentaries.

When the glories of the priya-narma-sakhas are discussed, inevitably a famous verse spoken by Sri Rupa Manjari extolling the virtues of Subala is presented as evidence of the remarkable extent to which the priya-narma-sakhas are involved in Sri Krsna's madhurya-lila with the vraja-gopis.

pratyāvartayati prasādyā lalanām kridā-kali-prasthitām sayyām kunjā-grhe karoty agha-bhidah
kandarpa-lilocitām || svinnam bijayati priyā-hrdi parisrastāngam uccair amum kva srimān
adhikāritām na subalah sevā-vidhau vindati || Ujjvala-nilamani 2.14||

“What service is fortunate Subala not qualified to perform? After Sri Krsna has quarreled with his lover and she leaves the cottage in a huff, Subala appeases her and brings her back. Subala makes beds in the forest pavilion suitable for Sri Krsna's pastimes of Cupid. Subala even fans Krsna, whose limbs are fatigued and perspiring as he lies on the heart of his beloved.”

Especially astonishing in this verse is Sri Rupa Manjari's claim that Subala can fan Sri Krsna as he perspires in the embrace of his mistress. Such services are typically aspired for by the sadhakas of manjari-bhava. So can it be said that Subala is in madhura-rasa or even in manjari-bhava? Srila Jiva Gosvami flatly denies the possibility in his Locana-rocani commentary:

Locana-rocani: svinnam bijayatity udattalankara evayam. Sa ca vacyarthasambhava'pi
vastvatisayamatra vyanjakah kvacid drsyate. Yatha 'tad asruni nadi jata' ityadau (2.14)

“He fans the perspiring limbs of exhausted Krsna.” This is certainly an example of the literary ornament called udatta-alankāra, in which the speaker employs hyperbole of astronomical proportions. Although the direct meaning of Sri Rupa Manjari's statement is impossible (asambhava), such a figure of speech is sometimes employed just to indicate the pre-eminence of the subject. For example, one might use an expression such as, “His tears became a river.” (Locana-rocani 2.14)

Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura also agrees that it is impossible for Subala to be present in the kunjā while Sri Krsna shares tender moments with his beloved.

Ananda-candrika: rupa manjaryah subala visayaka bhakti janika sva sakhim pratyuktih – svinnam
bijayatiti. Bahih sthitva yantra vyajaneneti jneyam

“Sri Rupa Manjari speaks to a friend some words meant to inspire devotion for Subala. “He fans Krsna who is perspiring.” It should be understood that Subala does this with a mechanical fan, which he operates while standing outside the kunjā.” (Ananda-candrika 2.14)

If, as Srila Jiva Gosvami points out, it is impossible for the priya-narma-sakhas to serve the divine couple inside the kunjā, then what is the question of their being followers of Sri Rupa Manjari? As wonderful as they are in their own unique way, the particular relationship of the priya-narma-sakhas with Sri Krsna precludes the possibility of their ever being eligible to follow in the footsteps of Sri Rupa Manjari in terms of opportunities for service.

Another important verse that has led to misconstruing the bhava of the priya-narma-sakhas as some type of madhura-rati is Ujjvala-nilamani 2.13:

atha priya-narma-sakhah—

ätyantika-rahasya-jnah sakhi-bhāva-samāsritah.
sarvebhyaḥ pranayibhyo'sau priya-narma-sakho varah
sa gokule tu subalas tathā syād arjunādayah.

"The priya-narma-sakhas are aware of Sri Kṛṣṇa's most confidential pastimes, having taken complete shelter of sakhi-bhava. They are the best among all the dear friends of Kṛṣṇa. In Gokula, Subala and Arjuna are among the priya-narma-sakhas." (Ujjvala-nilamāni 2.13)

Obviously, the reference to the priya-narma-sakhas being in "sakhi-bhava" has caused some confusion. We tend to think of "sakhi-bhava" as a synonym for gopi-bhava in the sense that every gopi is a sakhi (friend) to every other gopi within her own group. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī has defined the sthāyi-bhava of the priya-narma-sakhas as sakhyarati, which can only form the basis of sakhya-rasa.

sthāyi-bhāvo vibhāvādyaiḥ sakhyam ātmocitair iha
nitas citte satām puṣṭim rasah preyān udiryate

"When the foundational emotion of "friendship" (sakhyarati) is fully developed in the heart of the devotee by means of the appropriate excitants (vibhavas) and other aesthetic components, it becomes preya-bhakti-rasa (sakhya-rasa)."
(Śrī Bhaktirasamṛta-sindhu 3.3.1)

Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī's presentation of rasa-tattva is impeccably consistent. So it behooves the reader of his works to understand later statements in the light of previous ones. Thus, one need not become overly excited on seeing the words "sakhi-bhava" in relation to the priya-narma-sakhas and speculate that they are in madhura-rasa. To do so would strongly suggest that one has prematurely ventured into Śrī Ujjvala-nilamāni without first becoming grounded in the rudiments of Śrī Bhaktirasamṛta-sindhu.

So if "sakhi-bhava" does not indicate that the priya-narma sakhas are in madhura-rasa, then, what exactly does it mean? Again, Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī comes to the rescue:

Locana-rocaṇi: sakhi-bhavaḥ śrī kṛṣṇa-tat-preyasyoḥ paraśpara-melaneccha tam samasrita iti tena
tasya puruṣa-bhavaścavṛta iti bhavaḥ. tad-anumodanam eva na tu tat sphrha sakhibhavad eva
(Locana-rocaṇi 2.13/15)

"The term 'samasrita' indicates that the priya-narma-sakhas' male sentiment remains concealed by 'sakhi-bhava.' Here 'sakhi-bhava' means 'the desire for Śrī Kṛṣṇa and his beloved to meet.' The cause of this 'sakhi-bhava' is only approval of, or sympathy for, the gopis' sentiments. It is not that the priya-narma-sakhas personally desire such sentiments for themselves." (Locana-rocaṇi 2.13 / 15)

As you can see, Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī has expertly clarified the meaning to ensure that we do not misconstrue 'sakhi-bhava', when used in the context of the priya-narma-sakhas, to be a reference to madhura-rasa. Thereby, he has carefully preserved the overall coherence of Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī's thesis in accordance with earlier statements such as:

sā sambandhānugā bhaktiḥ procyate sadbhīr ātmani |
yā pīṭṛvādi-sambandha-mananāropanātmikā ||
lubdhair vātsalya-sakhyādaḥ bhaktiḥ kāryātra sādhakaiḥ |
vrajendra-subalādinām bhāva-cestita-mudrayā ||

"Sambandhanuga is declared by the sages to be the form of devotion that consists of meditating on a relationship with Kṛṣṇa, such as father-hood, and ascribing that relationship to one's own self. This form of devotion is to be enacted by practitioners desirous of such emotional states as parental affection and friendship by means of the emotions, actions, and postures of Nanda the king of Vraja, Subala, and other appropriate exemplary figures." (Bhaktirasamṛta-sindhu 1.2.305-306)

Here we find that Śrīla Rūpa Gosvāmī has categorized bhakti following in the wake of Subala, a priya-narma-sakha, as sambandhanuga-bhakti, thus distinguishing it from kamanuga-bhakti, which

has for its objective the attainment of madhura-rasa.
(TO BE CONTINUED)