BOOK REVIEW

KRISHNA’S PLAY – AN ENACTMENT FOR THE MANIFESTATION OF LOVE


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It is a sheer joy to behold the book, Celebrating Krishna, brought out by the Harvard returned scholar, Head of the Vaishnava Sect in Vindavan, Shrivatsa Goswami and the accomplished photographer Robyn Beeche. The book celebrates Vraja, and the way of life of the inhabitants of Vraja, the devotees of Krishna and Radha in whose hearts Radha Raman resides and through whom he continues to play his lila and enchant the world.

Stretching 240 km between Delhi and Agra, the Vraja of which the book writes about is not just a physical entity, but Vraja that Krishna chose as his playground. He came to Vraja ‘to play and play and play’ ‘fully with his creation, and humanity...’ and ‘in the centre of that creation’ to forge a ‘complete relationship with humanity.’ The author poses the question, ‘Why did Krishna select Vraja?’ and provides the answer, ‘Krishna’s incarnation in Vindavan is a fulfilment, in which the divine enjoys himself without the restraints of divinity...’

In the year 1515 Shri Chaitanya rediscovers Vraja and recreats the Vindavan. Of this visitor from Jagannath Puri and of this act of rediscovery the author writes that ‘a peculiar lila, since for Shri Chaitanya it was a journey into his own past as Radha and Krishna.’ The book traces historically the sojourn of Shri Chaitanya and his team and later effects of Vallabhacharya, Hit Harivansha, Swami Haridas and othe Acharayas and Vaishanava saints. It narrates various episodes, events and happenings that were responsible for transforming the Vraja into a sacred place; making it the epitone of spiritual movement in the sixteenth century; and establishing it as the fountain head of universal love. Here even a single speck of dust becomes manifestation of Krishna. The Author details the processes that transform physicality of Vraja into a vibrating, throbbing energy centre of divinity. The act of recreation of Vraja and re-enactment of Krishna’s lila forever transforms the Vraja into the abode of Lord Krishna, where he dwells and plays eternally. Thus, the Celebrating Krishna is not about sacred geography alone. Told in the distinct Indian style of katha vachana, it combines myth and history, geography and pilgrimage, ritual and festival, dance-drama and poetry, temple and icon. In fact, it combines all the tangible and intangible aspects of culture to weave a narrative that guides the reader through the lanes and by lanes of Vraja, allowing him to explore its inner and outer landscape and the rhythms of the ‘Ras’ in the lives of the Vrajvasis.

The history of the establishment of Vaishnava Sect in the region and its gradual transformation into a sacred centre is told in a manner that captures aspects of shruti and darshan through telling the tales of Krishna’s escapades with the skilfulness of a katha vachak. Beautifully translated poetry and the sheer magnificent and stunning quality of the photographs instantly transport the reader to Vindavan, where Krishna’s life and the lives of devotees intermingle and merge into each other. There is no space for doubt here; faith, devotion and love alone guarantee an entrance into this enchanting realm of the Lord.

Krishna manifests himself as Govind Dev, Gopinath and Madan Mohan, but as the author puts it “For the absolute manifestation of the Absolute, the world had to wait for the year 1542 for the self manifestation of Radha Raman, when not only did the dark Lord manifest as he is but carried his beloved Radha inside his heart. This darling of Radha again became manifest in the place of a shaligram, to give ecstasy to every one in Vindavan.” (p.28). This joy, this ecstasy of beholding the Lord in all his beauty and splendour is recaptured for the connoisseur by Robyn Beeche’s discerning eye for beauty and detail. The play of light and shade bring imparting a translucent glow, the riotous colours of Holi and the frenzied joy of the players leaves the viewer spellbound and speechless.

The book is also about the people of Vraja, the Vrajvasis and their life. In their memory and act, in their body and heart Krishna resides forever. They play the lila of the Lord for the Lord himself. While tracing the path of the Lord through the pilgrimage circuit or vanagatra, the devotees demonstrate that ‘the dweller and the dwelling are one and something. The entire darshan is Krishna darshan, because the Vraja mandal, with its forests, is the body of Krishna himself’ and ‘he lives in the temples and he dances in the Rasillas.’ Vrajavasis not only visit the various houses of Krishna, but also lovingly serve him and celebrate him on ‘eternal and daily basis.’ This unique theatre of Vraja, enacted in daily life of the Vrajvasis, in their in lalas, prayers, worship, rituals, songs, dances, ornamentation and decoration, in their festivals and yatras, obliterate all distinctions between the divine and the human, between the actor and the audience, between man and nature by the overpowering presence of ‘Prem’ love sustained through the process of seva bhakti service.

Finally, as put by the author himself, “[t]hese pages narrate those stories. These pages unveil that face of the Dark Handsome Lord. For those in love, seeing the beloved and hearing about him is the greatest celebration. It is an attempt to narrate his Katha as heard and as seen. This story shall continue...” (p.237). The story that is told is full of rasa, aesthetic ecstasy, bhava, emotional identification with the deity, and prema – overpowering love for the deity and is rendered as an offering, encapsulating the intensity of Vaishnava bhakti towards the deity.