

Book Review: *O My Friend! O My Friend!*

Dhanurdhara Swami

When I first saw Babhru Dāsa's *O My Friend! O My Friend!*, I was impressed with his overall scholarship and accommodating mood. Considering the sensitive nature of this matter, I appreciated the effort he made to respectfully acknowledge those points of view different from his own.

Yet after a more careful reading, I found myself having a more mixed reaction to his presentation. Although he did make a sincere attempt to be inclusive, I found arguments that I felt should have been tempered. For example, how could Babhru Prabhu – or anyone – argue that interest in the core sentiment of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism – following in the footsteps of the *gopīs* in *mādhurya-rasa* – comes from outside Śrīla Prabhupāda's line, and then strongly imply, in contrast, that only those who aspire for *sakhya-bhāva* have gleaned their mood directly from Śrīla Prabhupāda? I know of substantial, dedicated Vaiṣṇavas who sincerely aspire to follow the internal mood of Śrī Rūpa solely as a result of their service to Śrīla Prabhupāda. How can any of us speak for everyone?

Still, upon reading Babhru Prabhu's paper thoroughly, I realized that he has a strong case. At the very least, the ideological basis of his paper seems indisputable: he has successfully refuted the contention that the *only* internal mood Śrīla Prabhupāda could have been in is *mādhurya-rasa*.

However, I found myself not quite convinced of the conclusion he draws. I would like to discuss some of my concerns here and question the standards one should use to judge arguments on such topics. Especially, I would like to ask what the benefits of these discussions are and where they should be held.

First, some of the weaker arguments, which don't seem to serve the cause of Babhru Prabhu's otherwise good presentation:

The contention that Śrīla Prabhupāda's aggressive mood in preaching is a sign of *sakhya-rasa* is a non-starter. Aggressiveness is not a sign of *sakhya-rasa* any more than it is a sign of *mādhurya-rasa*. All of Śrīla Prabhupāda's predecessors are members of the assembly of Lalitā-sakhī, and their spiritual disposition in *mādhurya* is known as "harsh".¹ If, as Babhru Prabhu writes, "An *ācārya*'s inner life motivates his outreach," and thus exceptionally forceful preaching indicates that one is in *sakhya-rasa*, then how to reconcile Śrīla Bhakṣiddhānta's inner life in *mādhurya-rasa* with his preaching style? His mode of outreach was so spirited and forceful that he was well known as the *nṛsimha-guru*, a lion in his presentation.

As "disciple" generally means one who takes the mood of his guru, if anything, Śrīla Prabhupāda's exceptionally strong mood in preaching simply reflects the temperament

of his guru. If we insist that an *ācārya*'s outreach reflects his inner life, then as Śrīla Prabhupāda shares the same mode of outreach as his teacher, it seems likely that he shares the same internal mood of devotion as well.

Another argument in the book focuses on Śrīla Prabhupāda's family connection. Babhru Prabhu describes how Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja asked the devotees to consider Śrīla Prabhupāda's family connection to Uddhāraṇa Ṭhākura, one of the twelve *gopas* in *gaura-līlā*, as an argument in support of *sakhya-rasa*. I didn't, however, see the merit of extending Mahārāja's argument, especially when other significant family connections were ignored: Śrīla Prabhupāda's father's ardent desire that his son become a servant of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī, and Śrīla Prabhupāda's ancestral worship of Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Govinda, a deity he personally brought to Māyāpur to serve (Māyāpur is the *dhāma* he considered his place of worship).

If we argue for Śrīla Prabhupāda's inner mood on the basis of family connection, the evidence would seem stronger that he was inwardly the servant of Śrī Rādhā, since at a young age he was lured, perhaps by that sentiment, to perform the Jagannātha Ratha-yātrā. Ratha-yātrā not only exemplifies the mood of Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī but is a pastime Śrī Caitanya specifically dwelled on to imbibe that mood.

In my personal opinion, neither an appeal to Śrīla Prabhupāda's preaching mood nor to his family lineage is a persuasive argument in support of deciphering his inner life as particularly one of *sakhya-bhāva*.

I also found difficult the excessive and assailable claims made when analyzing some of the personal testimonies that mentioned Śrīla Prabhupāda's inner life (including his own testimony), such as "There is no logical reason for his concluding word 'sakhya' other than his personal preoccupation . . ." (p. 27) or "It is virtually impossible to construe Prabhupāda's responses and statements above in any other way than as an affirmation for his affinity for *sakhya-rasa*." (p. 28) Even Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja graciously offers a possible way to read these statements otherwise: "That Śrīla Prabhupāda may have held an affinity within [for *mādhurya-rasa*], and owing to his empowerment by Lord Nityānanda Prabhu, he showed an affinity for *sakhya-rasa*." (p. 34)

If one accepts the *tattva* that the guru can exhibit a variety of moods for the instruction and inspiration of disciples whose own mood may be different from their guru's proclivity, as Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja indicates and as was noted in Babhru Prabhu's use of the *Jaiva Dharma* reference, then stringing together indications of Śrīla Prabhupāda's inner mood is not conclusive in itself, especially since some of the examples given are ambiguous. For instance, Subala's recollection of Śrīla Prabhupāda saying "I am a cowherd boy" is given as Śrīla Prabhupāda's personal testimony that he is in *sakhya-rasa*. A careful reading of Subala's remembrance, however, reveals that Śrīla Prabhupāda is not speaking about himself but making a third-person comment

on how one would feel when one's relationship with Kṛṣṇa is finally revealed within the heart. Subala's recollection:

Prabhupāda said, "This is not done in our line. One must realize his relationship for himself. One cannot just jump ahead. When one is ripe and ready, it will be revealed from within ... 'I am a cowherd boy.'"

And certainly it would be very out of character for Śrīla Prabhupāda to use his own spiritual experience as an example for public understanding.

Aside from commenting on Śrīla Prabhupāda's *bhāva*, Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja writes in reference to the premature attempt to understand one's eternal identity that "we should go to that plane and then deal with these things." Of course, he is referring to the attempt by devotees to understand their own spiritual identities, but his caution can also apply to young disciples trying to understand or analyze the inner life of their spiritual master. We should be careful in how we gauge these recollections and analyses.

In light of this, I thought too much was made of Śrīla Prabhupāda's silence when his disciples made playful or simple allusions to his relationship with Kṛṣṇa, or even his response to the more serious opinions of his godbrothers. Why should he correct the innocent expression of a disciple's love, which may have reflected a budding depth in realization, even if that realization wasn't based on fact? And what necessity was there for him to object to his godbrothers' speculations that he was a *nitya-siddha sakha*? This is certainly different from his definitive responses when four of his *sannyāsī* disciples were propagating that he was God, or when his young disciples established a club to discuss intimate topics about the *gopīs*.

I wonder whether Śrīla Prabhupāda would have been equally tolerant if his disciples had begun to see him as a *gopī*, as the *mādhurya* conception has been historically misunderstood and exploited when discussed prematurely. *Sakhya-rasa* is obviously a more innocuous topic for conditioned souls.

In philosophical analysis there are main arguments and supporting ones. Supporting arguments are not meant to be the foundation of one's case. If they are weighty, however, they do lend strength to the main arguments and reinforce the conclusion. Babhru Prabhu has certainly provided a reasonable collection of supporting arguments. But the overall strength of his case must still depend on the power of his core arguments. From what I can see, there are two substantial arguments given in *O My Friend!* to prove that Śrīla Prabhupāda was a cowherd boy: Śrīla Prabhupāda's own statements, specifically the ninth stanza of his poem on the Jaladuta describing his aspiration to frolic in the forests of Vṛndāvana, and the opinion of such pure and learned Vaiṣṇavas as Śrīla Śrīdhara Swami. Both arguments are strong.

The general tenor of the poem, especially its ninth stanza, does sound like an expression of the desire to be a cowherd boy. I am not sure, however, that the poem cannot be interpreted according to other meanings and moods. For example, the first stanza of that same poem says:

*kṛṣṇa taba puṇya habe bhāi
e-puṇya koribe jabe rādhārāṇī khusī
habe dhruva ati boli tomā tāi*

“I emphatically say to you, O brothers: You will obtain your good fortune from the Supreme Lord Kṛṣṇa only when Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī becomes pleased with you.”

This certainly doesn't sound like *sakhya-rasa*. This stanza is especially significant in determining the sentiment of the poem as the above verse is repeated as the refrain and thus emphasized as the heart of what the author wants to say. Babhru Prabhu has translated the refrain differently. The scholars I consulted have confirmed that his translation (which follows) is more accurate than the standard one that has been used by the BBT, and presumably the one used during Śrīla Prabhupāda's time. His translation states: “O Brother Kṛṣṇa, you will attain all auspiciousness when Rādhārāṇī is pleased.”

Although more accurate, still the verse remains puzzling. Why is Śrīla Prabhupāda telling Kṛṣṇa to seek Rādhā's blessings and placing Her in such a prominent position? Is that the mood of a cowherd boy, even a *priyanarmā-sakha*? If we wish to see through this verse Śrīla Prabhupāda's internal mood, the mood being expressed seems much more suited to the select group of *gopīs* who favor Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī over Kṛṣṇa. It's worth noting that this mood is the special internal mood of Śrīla Prabhupāda's spiritual lineage. The epithet “Brother” is an appropriate address for Kṛṣṇa both for the cowherd boys and the *gopīs*.

Babhru Prabhu's paper tries to reconcile Śrīla Prabhupāda's many direct statements about his special affinity for Śrī Rādhā by describing Śrīla Prabhupāda's inner disposition as a *priyanarmā-sakha*; that is, he is in the mood of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's most intimate friends – those who restrain their masculine natures and adopt the mood of *sakhīs* as they try to unite the Divine Couple. I presume that even if the refrain could be irrefutably established as an expression of *mādhurya-rasa*, Babhru Prabhu would reconcile the refrain with the rest of the poem by using this *priyanarmā-sakha* idea. It is certainly an interesting concept and a feasible reconciliation of the variant expressions of Śrīla Prabhupāda's inner devotion found throughout Śrīla Prabhupāda's writings and conversations.ⁱⁱ But there are other ways to explain the apparent dichotomies. I personally feel a more sound settlement would be to acknowledge that *guru-tattva* was working through Śrīla Prabhupāda in his broad mission to accommodate and fully encourage souls of varying inner moods who came to the lotus feet of Śrī Chaitanya.

It is very difficult to argue with the opinion of Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja, especially since his ideas were brought to Śrīla Bhakti Pramod Purī Mahārāja for confirmation. It should be noted, however, that Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja presented his view as an opinion and not as infallible testimony. He even suggested that there were other opinions worth considering. That said, Śrīla Śrīdhara Mahārāja is an exalted Vaiṣṇava, and his opinion, even if graciously accommodating alternative interpretations, is a product of exceptional philosophical understanding and years of personal association with Śrīla Prabhupāda. His judgment alone is thus a strong argument that Śrīla Prabhupāda is in *sakhya-rasa*.

Of course, there are other Vaiṣṇavas, such as Śrīla Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja, who think otherwise. Because of the unfortunate and sometimes bitter conflict between Śrīla Nārāyaṇa Mahārāja's group and ISKCON and perhaps even other Gauḍīya camps, his opinion often invokes strong or even polarizing reactions. The many who revere him accept as authoritative his statement that Śrīla Prabhupāda followed the inner mood of Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta. Those embroiled in the conflict, or those who hold him responsible for at least part of it, tend to judge his opinion otherwise. I think that his full life of service, deep study, and intense practice should be respected.

While we are discussing the opinions of influential Vaiṣṇavas, it is interesting to note that our godbrother Śrīla Svarūpa Dāmodara Mahārāja had a wonderful personal revelation of *gopī-bhāva* in the last days of his life. As far I know, his inspiration came exclusively from his service and association with Śrīla Prabhupāda. I recommend that those who have not visited his *samādhi* at Rādhā-kunḍa do so. Posted there is the wonderful story of the inner mood of devotion he manifested before he left this world.

If we want to establish Śrīla Prabhupāda's internal life on the basis of the opinions of revered Vaiṣṇavas, I think the opinion of Śrīla Gaura Govinda Mahārāja, a highly esteemed Vaiṣṇava, must also be respected. His extraordinary preoccupation in the last moments of his life on the intimate pastimes of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa seem to reflect his own inner mood. He has expressed unquestionably that Śrīla Prabhupāda was in *mādhurya-rasa*.

So appealing to recognized Vaiṣṇavas alone does not settle the issue. Their opinions often differ, and one's acceptance of a particular conclusion in this matter will naturally tend to lie simply with the Vaiṣṇava in whom one has reposed one's allegiance and faith.

And perhaps this is why one should be cautious about making discussions like this public: they deal too closely with the sentiments of sincere devotees who have performed years of dedicated service and exemplary practice and who represent all sides of the issue. These devotees have apparently been inspired to see Śrīla Prabhupāda in various ways. That their inspiration is not wrong Babhru Prabhu himself shows by citing the *Jaiva Dharma*. Worse than dealing publicly with private sentiments, such discussions easily become grounds for further disagreements among

both individuals and groups, especially as followers will or are inclined to vigorously support the viewpoints of their teachers.

As far as I know, discussions about Śrīla Bhaktisiddhānta's inner mood were held in private among his disciples. With the exception of his indirect encouragement of a few innocent disciples on several occasions, Śrīla Prabhupāda also tended to view such deliberations as basically unimportant – as merely intellectual and somewhat affected until his disciples had reached any substantial level of realization. It is this deeper spiritual realization that creates within a disciple the burning need to know his or her guru's spiritual position. Before that, the information is academic.

I very much appreciate that Babhru Prabhu took such pains to present the issue in a careful way. I also appreciate his reason for bringing the matter to a public forum: he perceives, somewhat accurately, that the opinion that Śrīla Prabhupāda is in *sakhya-rasa* has historically been oppressed and those with that mood discouraged. Still, I doubt the benefit of continued discussions of this topic in a public forum. I even have mixed feelings about writing this response to his paper because it may help to perpetuate the discussion.

Since reading Babhru Prabhu's paper, I have read and thought of other arguments for Śrīla Prabhupāda in both *sakhya-rasa* and *mādhurya-rasa*. His Holiness Jayādvaīta Swami recently passed a comment to a friend noting that in Śrīla Prabhupāda's last days, he was specifically fond of gazing at the picture of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma in his room. I have similar recollections. That Śrīla Prabhupāda gravitated toward a particular meditation near the end of his life is certainly a strong argument for the nature of his inner life – as strong as any argument given so far.

So how to resolve the different contentions?

In a court of law two standards of evidence are generally recognized, preponderance of evidence and evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. I heard one esteemed godbrother propose that the evidence in Babhru Prabhu's paper takes us beyond a reasonable doubt – the higher standard of evidence. Given what I have indicated above, I would be hesitant to agree, especially because of the nature of spiritual reality, particularly *guru-tattva*, and how it manifests in this world. How many of us can make sense of the incident in *Jaiva Dharma* where the guru informs two disciples of their spiritual identities, telling one he is a follower of Subala and the other he is a follower of Lalitā, and then manifesting to both of them accordingly? I suppose that the guru in that instance did not bother to resolve for his disciples the dichotomy of who he *actually* was – at least Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura doesn't indicate that he did.

So there is certainly room to assume that Śrīla Prabhupāda may have followed the inner mood of *mādhurya-rasa* that flows through our *guru-paramparā*, especially because his whole lineage shared a *mādhurya* temperament. This lineage point alone is a good reason to doubt that Śrīla Prabhupāda was in *sakhya-rasa*.

And further substantial doubt is raised when we consider the following: that Śrīla Prabhupāda’s father repeatedly professed his desire for his son to be blessed to become a maidservant of Śrī Rādhā; that Śrīla Prabhupāda worshiped Śrī Śrī Rādhā-Govinda in childhood and subsequently established Their worship in Māyāpur; that he was initiated into the *gopī-bhāva sannyāsa* mantra by Śrīla Bhakti Prajña Keśava Mahārāja,ⁱⁱⁱ that he had a special relationship with the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*^{iv} both in the how he found solace in its pages while aboard the Jaladuta and his later decision to translate it; that he established his eternal residence at the Rādhā-Dāmodara temple at the feet of Śrī Rūpa – and the seat of the *rāsa* dance; that he made many personal expressions that might have indicated something other than *sakhya-rasa*, including the following:

There is no harm in taking birth again and again. Our only desire should be to take birth under the care of a Vaiṣṇava. Fortunately we had the opportunity to be born of a Vaiṣṇava father who took care of us very nicely. He prayed to Śrīmatī Rādhārāṇī that in the future we would become a servant of the eternal consort of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Thus somehow or other we are now engaged in that service.” (Cc., *Antya* 1.24)

Babhru Prabhu is not only a scholar but a gentleman. His paper is thus clearly in the mood of service to the Vaiṣṇava community and written sensitively in the tenor of accommodation. In talking to several devotees, I see the encouragement they feel for thinking of Śrīla Prabhupāda in these deeper ways; they appreciate the impetus the paper has given them for a richer inner awareness in their relationship with Śrīla Prabhupāda. I pray that Babhru Prabhu and others see my response to his paper in that same mood of service.

Perhaps the best way to proceed in a discussion on this topic, now that Babhru Prabhu’s well-reasoned paper has been made publicly available, is to follow the example of Vrajanātha and Vijaya Kumāra from *Jaiva Dharma*, cited in his paper. Their story parallels ours in many ways, especially in terms of trying to establish Śrīla Prabhupāda’s spiritual identity and in giving freedom to his mature disciples’ inner mood toward him. Like Śrīla Prabhupāda, Vrajanātha’s and Vijaya Kumāra’s spiritual master did not overtly reveal his inner mood of devotion to his disciples. From their years of exemplary practice, however, Vrajanātha and Vijaya Kumāra were individually and directly inspired by their spiritual master both in their respective inner moods of devotion and in their perception of him, just as some of Śrīla Prabhupāda’s mature followers apparently have been. Most importantly, Vijaya Kumāra and Vrajanātha lived together harmoniously despite the differences in their inner moods of devotion and their variant views of their spiritual master’s identity. And they saw no need to either convince one another or establish their beliefs publicly.

ⁱ The mood of Lalitā is contrary and aggressive in conjugal love; it is called *pragalbha*, or “harsh.”

ⁱⁱ There is obviously some scope for projecting a devotee's inner ontological status externally onto his or her behavior, but there are also cautions about doing so. Rūpa Kavirāja was specifically shunned by our predecessor *ācāryas* for insisting that one's inner life should be overtly exhibited.

ⁱⁱⁱ When Śrīla Prabhupāda took *sannyāsa* he received the traditional *sannyāsa* “*gopī-bhāva*” mantra. I was there in Vṛndāvana when a box of Śrīla Prabhupāda's personal belongings was uncovered at Rādhā-Dāmodara temple, and I personally saw the handwritten “*gopī-bhāva*” *sannyāsa* mantra that Śrīla Prabhupāda had received from his *sannyāsa* guru. There are interesting interpretations about how those with the inner mood of *sakhya* can interpret this mantra.

^{iv} The *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* is almost exclusively an expression of the inner life of *mādhurya-rasa*. It is noteworthy in this discussion, therefore, that Śrīla Prabhupāda both brought it with him on the Jaladuta and later translated it into English rather than the *Caitanya-bhāgavata*, which more strongly promotes the mood and life of Nityānanda-Balarāma and *sakhya-rasa*.