

Acintyabhedābheda Darśana: The Oxymoronic Theosophy of Bhakti

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Abstract: Hailing as the latest school of the Vedānta tradition, the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* stands at the crossroad of its predecessors. Not only it merges the traits and domains of the previous schools, it also acts as a compass for thinkers to navigate in those prospects. However, in doing so, it often appears to be oxymoronic in nature. Mostly relying on a qualitative study and embarking upon the textual analysis method, this research paper investigates the oxymoronic nature of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* in terms of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and soteriology—endeavouring to justify its essence in the Vedānta philosophy.

Keywords: Śrī Caitanya, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, oxymoron.

Introduction

Teachings of theosophy, be it in the *Veda*, the *Purāṇas*, or the *Bhagavad Gītā*, are ebulliently loaded with oxymoronic principles. For instance, the *Īśa Upaniṣad* (5) asserts:

तदेजति तन्नैजति तदूरे तद्वन्तिके ।

तदन्तरस्य सर्वस्य तदु सर्वस्यास्य बाह्यतः ॥

[It moves, and it moves not. It is far, and it is near. It is within everything, and it is outside of everything.]

Not just a single text, very often two texts also posit contrasting views. The *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* (6), for example, says that the *brahma* is omniscient:

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एष सर्वेश्वरः एष सर्वज्ञ एषोऽन्तर्याम्येष योनिः सर्वस्य प्रभवाप्ययौ हि भूतानाम् ॥

[This is the lord of all; this is the knower of all; this is the controller within; this is the source of all; and this is that from which all things originate and in which they finally disappear.]

And yet, the ‘Nāsadiya Sūkta’ in the *R̥g Veda* (10.129.7) raises doubt over the creator’s omniscient conceivability:

इयं विसृष्टिर्यत आबभूव यदि वा दधे यदि वा न ।

यो अस्याध्यक्षः परमे व्योमन्तसो अङ्ग वेद यदि वा न वेद ॥

[Whence all creation had its origin, the creator, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not, the creator, who surveys it all from the highest heaven, he knows— or maybe even he does not know.]

So, the reader is not expected to be surprised if there are oxymoronic statements in the theosophy of *bhakti* in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava school. However, it becomes striking since the doctrine of *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, espoused by the school, is not merely a theological domain, but it is a fundamental philosophical school of Vedānta as well. Oxymoron in the philosophical statements is often loathed in the Western canons, but, here in Bhārata (India), it is celebrated to and fro. In this paper, I explore the primordial dicta of *bhakti* and attempt to establish how its oxymoronic principles deem fit in philosophical arguments.

The doctrine of *acintyabhedābheda darśana* was promulgated by Śrī Caitanya in response to the existing traditions of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s *advaita darśana*, Śrī Rāmānujācārya’s *viśiṣṭādvaita darśana*, Śrī Vallabhācārya’s *śuddhādvaita darśana*, Śrī Madhvācārya’s *dvaita darśana*, and Śrī Nimbārkaācārya’s *dvaitādvaita darśana*. However, it is to be noted that the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* is essentially a staunch negation of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s *advaita darśana* and a critique of the rest of the schools. Although it accepts the concept of *advaita* which had always been present in the *Upaniṣads*, it direly rescinds Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s interpretation of the term as we shall see in later in this discourse. Despite being so, the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* has always been pivotal in harmonizing the rest of the schools and understanding them objectively. It relies on the existing schools for its own construction and yet metamorphoses into something utterly unique. Śrī Caitanya churns up Śrī Vallabhācārya’s metaphysics and

dives into a very different dimension of it. He took Śrī Rāmānujācārya's epistemology and added other prospects to it. He partially accepted Śrī Madhvācārya's ontology and came up with a refined version of it. He took the torch of soteriology from where Śrī Nimbārkācārya left and carried it forward to the finish line. Thus, Śrī Caitanya is the greatest unifier of the other Vaiṣṇava masters and, at present, all other Vaiṣṇava schools pay homage to him.

However, while being the unifier of contrasting views, it appears to be oxymoronic on the surface. Unlike the other schools, it does not have a singularity in which everything merges, in spite of its advocacy of the unity of the part and the whole. But, the first difficulty that a scholar of *acintyabhedābheda darśana* faces is that, unlike the other Vaiṣṇava masters, Śrī Caitanya never explicitly encoded his theosophy in the form of *bhāṣya*. Therefore, the best interpretation of this school of thought is only possible by examining the philosophy of Śrī Caitanya as presented in his hagiographies. I have chosen six major hagiographies to justify my claims. They are Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Murāri Gupta's *Kṛṣṇacaitanya Caritāmṛtam*, Kavi Kaṇṇapūra's *Caitanya Caritāmṛtam Mahākāvya* and *Caitanya Candrodayam Nāṭakam*, Vṛndāvanadāsa's *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, and Locanadāsa's *Caitanya Maṅgala*. Apart from these, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa's *Govinda Bhāṣyam* and Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* are also taken into consideration. This paper furnishes the five philosophical domains where it expresses oxymoronic standpoints and, yet, emerges out to be a delicate and comprehensive field of thought.

The Oxymoronic Metaphysics of Acintyabhedābheda Darśana

As a school of the Vedānta tradition, the metaphysical orchestration of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* depends overtly on the *Upaniṣads*. The omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent status of the *brahma* is maintained, but the very *brahma* has been portrayed as a synonym for Kṛṣṇa. This metaphysical claim is derived from the oxymoronic nature of the *brahma* as prescribed in the theosophical literatures of the Sanātana Dharma. For instance:

द्वे वाव ब्रह्मणो रूपे मूर्तं चैवामूर्तं च मर्त्यं चामूर्तं च
स्थितं च यच्च सच्च त्यच्च ॥

(*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 2.3.1)

[The *brahma* has two forms: *mūrta* (concrete) and *amūrta* (abstract), *martya* (mortal) and *amṛta* (immortal), *sthita* (stagnant) and *yat* (dynamic), *sat* (eternal) and *tyat* (transitory).]

Kṛṣṇa, in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava school founded by Śrī Caitanya, represents the concrete form of the *brahma* despite the fact that he is abstract in essence. Although they are equated, the followers of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava school prefer to view the *brahma* as the abstraction of Kṛṣṇa rather than to see Kṛṣṇa as the *brahma* incarnate. Therefore, the metaphysics of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* is utterly ‘Kṛṣṇa-centric’, the root of which can be traced back to the wise words of Brahmā, the creator of the universe:

ईश्वरः परमः कृष्णः सच्चिदानन्द विग्रहः ।

अनादिरादि गोविन्दः सर्वकारण कारणम् ॥

(*Brahma Saṃhitā* 5.1)

[Kṛṣṇa is the *īśvara* (lord of all) and he is the *saccidānanda vigraha* (incarnation of eternal bliss). He is the root of all roots and the reason of all reasons.]

Kṛṣṇa is the causal effect and the creation of the cosmos is the spatial effect (where Brahmā acts merely as the creative tool). Creation takes place in a perpetually cyclical order as per the will of Kṛṣṇa. The need for creation is very similar to the description of the *prima causa* accepted by all the schools of Vedānta tradition:

ब्रह्म वा इदमग्र आसीदेकमेव । तदेक सन्न व्यभवत् तच्छ्रेयो

रूपमत्यसृजत क्षत्रं यान्येतानि देवत्रा क्षत्राणीन्द्रो वरुणः सोमो

रुद्रः पर्जन्यो यमो मृत्युरीशान इति ।

(*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.11)

[In the beginning, it (*brahma*) was one. But alone it could not function or perform deeds. So, it decided to create everything out of itself.]

However, the interpretation of the doctrine of causation differs significantly in the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* as compared to other schools. The sole purpose of creation, in the metaphysics of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, is the expansion of the *līlā* of Kṛṣṇa. In this case, the term ‘*līlā*’ can loosely be translated to ‘a frolic dalliance’ (in a divine sense). This is, more or

less, the broader or all-pervading aspect of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā* but, in a more specific sense of the term, the *līlā* between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa has to be understood in an altogether different dimension of hermeneutics. The *līlā* between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa which takes places in Vṛndāvana is mundane (since it happens on a terrestrial plane) and supernatural (as two divine agencies take part in it) at the same time. Moreover, in the metaphysics of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, the *līlā* between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is not at all the copulation of two heterosexual beings (as they are often misunderstood to be), but rather a symbolic interpretation of the origin and the dissolution of the cosmos. Though their *līlā* can be termed symbolic from the theological perspectives, it is also metaphysically real as their union justifies the cause and the effect of all cosmic functionalities.

At the same time, the literatures composed by the followers of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava and other adherents of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* contain exuberant depictions of the amorous encounters between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and they are all erotic and sensual. It is to be noted that sensuality and sexuality both are accepted and normalized in the Sanātana Dharma, without associating shame or taboo to them, unlike the faith-driven religions of the West and the Middle East. On a separate note, in the great land of Bhārata (India), weird it may sound, a lifelong *brahmacārī* (pious celibate) named Vātsyāyana authored the greatest treatise on sexuality, the *Kāmasūtra*. Even if divine beings do indulge in these acts, they are acceptable and celebrated. The *Gītagovinda* by Jayadeva, the *Ujjvala Nīlamaṇī* by Rūpa Gosvāmī, the *Padāvalī* by Vidyāpati, the *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Kīrtana* by Caṇḍīdāsa are prime instances that blend sexuality and spirituality in one cup. Sexuality has often been described in a spiritual way and spirituality has often been expressed in sexual terms. Therefore, if one considers the erotic episodes of the *līlās* as mere mundane acts of sensuality, one would be baffled at the esoteric and philosophical epithets used to depict them. On the other hand, a susceptible mind is also bound to be stunned by the instances where the creation of the cosmos has been depicted in sexual connotations (e.g. the penetration of the conscious *puruṣa* into the mundane *prakṛti*). This harmony may seem oxymoronic at a glance, but they are to be found in perfect balance once the lens is magnified. Let us take, for instance, the two distinctive reception of the role of the *māyā* in creation and sustenance of the universe. Whereas Ādi Śaṅkarācārya shuns it as mere illusion void of any ontological quality, Śrī Caitanya attributes it as functional in the mechanism of the creation itself.

The concept of the *māyā* and its interpretation in the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* also vary greatly. Unlike Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana*, the attribute of the *māyā* is not direly vitriolic and it also serves the purpose of *sr̥ṣṭi* (creation), according to Śrī Caitanya's philosophy. He regards the words of Balarāma in high merit:

केयं वा कुत आयाता दैवी वा नारयुतासुरी ।

प्रायो मायासुतु मे भरतुः नान्या मेऽपविमोहनि ॥

(*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.13.14)

[What is this *māyā* (illusion)? Where is it coming from? Is it divine or humane or demonic? This *māyā* must have originated from Kṛṣṇa else it would not have enthralled me.]

Therefore, the *māyā* originates from Kṛṣṇa and acts as his agency. Whereas Śrī Caitanya does not vilify the role of the *māyā*, he also warns his followers not to fall in its trap. Thus, to understand the nature of the *māyā* in the metaphysics of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, it can be imagined as a game or a test (designed by none other than Kṛṣṇa himself) in which the *jīva* must win or pass in order to find the grace of the lord. Here, *bhakti* is the guide of the *jīva*. Thus, the nature of the *māyā* is agathokakological as it stems from the *avidyā* (ignorance), but serves the purpose of Kṛṣṇa's *līlā*. As Kavi Karṇapūra pens down:

ईशोऽपि स्यात् प्रकृतिविधुरः स्वीयया माययैव

स्वच्छन्दोऽपि स्फटिकमणीवत् सन्निकृष्टेन योगात् ।

इत्थं कोचिद्वयमिह किल ब्रूमहे बाल खेला-

प्रायं लीलाविलसतिमहो सर्वमीशस्य सत्यम् ॥

(*Caitanya Candrodāyam Nāṭakam* 5.20)

[Some say that the almighty indulges into the material world like an elixir touches the ordinary objects, turning them into gold without being affected by them. The *īśvara* (the omnipotent lord) appears to be infatuated by the material world when it takes *avatāra*, but that certain state is the *līlā* (sport) like a child's play, although it is done by its own *māyā* (illusion).]

The Oxymoronic Ontology of Acintyabhedābheda Darśana

The relationship between the *jīva*, the *īśvara*, and the *māyā* construes the ontological model of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana*. The quintessence of Ādi

Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana* posits that there is no difference between the *jīva* (sentient beings) and the *īśvara* (supreme being), while the *jaḍa* (insentient beings or material objects) is illusory and non-existent. Śrī Rāmānujācārya's *viśiṣṭādvaita darśana* maintains that there is distinction between the qualitative nature of the *jīva* and the *īśvara*. The former is a part whereas the latter is the whole. He also rejected Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's concoction of the nature of the *māyā* and assigns existence to the *jaḍa*. Śrī Vallabhācārya's *śuddhādvaita darśana* also holds that there is qualitative difference between the *jīva* and the *īśvara*, suggesting that the *māyā* affects the former and not the latter. He also negates the free-will of the *jīva* and describes *bhakti* as something that can only be attained by the grace of Kṛṣṇa. Śrī Madhvācārya's *dvaita darśana* observes a set of five ontological differences: (a) between the *brahma* and the *jīva*, (b) between the *brahma* and the matter, (c) between the *jīva* and the matter, (d) between one *jīva* and another *jīva*, and (e) between one matter and another matter. These all are qualitative differentiations. Śrī Nimbārkaācārya's *dvaitādvaita darśana* affirms both qualitative and quantitative differences between the *jīva*, the *īśvara*, and the *jaḍa*.

Śrī Caitanya's *acintyabhedābheda darśana* amalgamates all the existing models, but with particular distinctions. The very term '*acintyabhedābheda*' is etymologically derived from the adjunction of '*acintya*' (inconceivable), '*bheda*' (difference) and '*abheda*' (non-difference). Thus, not only it acknowledges the dualistic and non-dualistic features, but it also states that the real nature of the *jīva* and the *brahma* cannot be fathomed by human cognition. To denote both sameness and difference between the *jīva* and the *brahma*, Vṛndāvanadāsa's *Caitanya Bhāgavata* (3.3.44-54) very cleverly cites the words of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya:

सत्यपि भेदापगमे नाथ तवाहं न मामकीनस्त्वम् ।

सामुद्रो हि तरङ्गः क्वचन समुद्रो न तारङ्गः ॥

(*Viṣṇu Śaṭpadī Stotram* 3)

[O lord! Even when the difference between you and me is shunned, I belong to your but you do not belong to me! The waves rise from the ocean and they are inseparable from it, but the ocean does not originate from those waves nor does it belong to them.]

The role of the *māyā* in context to the ontological status of the *jīva* and the *brahma* remains largely similar to Śrī Vallabhācārya, but the

acintyabhedābheda darśana advocates the use of the *māyā* as an agency. Moreover, as earlier stated, Śrī Caitanya does not utterly debase the *māyā* because:

एवं हि विश्वमखिलं वितथं यदेत-
 निष्पाद्यते सततमीश्वरसेवनाय ।
 तत् सार्थकं भवति सम्यगसत्यमेतत्
 सत्यं भवेदशुचि यत्तदिदं शुचिस्स्यात् ॥

(*Caitanya Caritāmṛtam Mahākāvyam* 6.33)

[If this entirely false world serves the will of the *īśvara*, even its falsehood is sanctified for even the impurity that serves the purpose of the *īśvara* gets purified by itself.]

In other words, Śrī Caitanya uplifts the qualitative non-difference and the quantitative difference between the *jīva* and the *brahma*. Unlike Śrī Vallabhācārya, he heeds on the importance of the free-will. He almost thoroughly agrees with Śrī Madhvācārya's ontological positions, but lays distinction even in them. Running in concurrence, Śrī Caitanya partly shapes his ontological model on Śrī Nimbārkaācārya's path, but extends his line further by juxtaposing the clause of inconceivability to it. In this way, the merging of the diverse and multifarious ontological notions has made the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* a commixture nonpareil.

Śrī Caitanya advocates for the validity of the binary conceptualizations of the nature of the *brahma* (the supreme being). As per his exegesis, the *brahma* assumes the *nirguṇa nirākāra* (inactive and formless) state when it remains in its absolute oneness. However, the same *brahma* assumes the *saguṇa sākāra* (active and corporeal) state by dividing itself for the purpose of creation, preservation, and destruction of the sentient beings and the insentient objects. Thus, Śrī Caitanya's *acintyabhedābheda darśana* synthesizes the nature of the *puruṣa* (primordial psyche) and the *prakṛti* (primordial matter). He also dilates upon the nature of the *māyā* (illusion) which stems from the *avidyā* (ignorance). He verily differs from the notion of the *māyā* in relation to the *brahma* as espoused by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana*. Justifying with references to the *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahmasūtra*, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Śrī Caitanya lays out the three forms of potency of the supreme being: the *antaraṅgā śakti* (also called the *cit śakti* or the *svarūpa*

śakti) which denotes the divine body of the supreme being, the *vahiraṅgā śakti* (or the *māyā śakti*) which is the illusive power by which the creation is sustained, and the *taṭasthā śakti* or the *jīva* (the sentient beings). Śrī Caitanya establishes the *māyā śakti* as a form of potency of Viṣṇu which enthralls the *jīva*. Moreover, by exploring the three *ṛttis* (qualities) of the *antaraṅgā śakti* of the *brahma* (viz. the *hlādinī śakti* which generates the *ānanda* (bliss), the *sandhinī śakti* which makes it eternal, and the *saṁvit śakti* which holds the cognizance of the supreme consciousness), the master reaches to the nadir of the metaphysics in the Sanātana Dharma. However, he does not halt there, but rather peregrinates into exploring the ontological crux of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* by elucidating that the *saccidānanda* self of the *brahma* is empowered by the *hlādinī śakti* and the *saṁvit śakti* whereas the *jīva* is beguiled by the *avidyā śakti* (or the *māyā śakti*). This makes the *brahma* ceaselessly blissful whereas the *jīva*, despite being its part, remains haplessly miserable. Śrī Caitanya explains the nature of the relationship between the *jīva* and the *brahma* in context to the notion of the *māyā*. Whereas Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana* obliterates all distinctions between the *jīva* and the *brahma*, Śrī Caitanya refutes him by reinvigorating the qualitative and quantitative differences between the two. According to Śrī Caitanya, the *jīva* can never be identical to the *brahma* for a multitude of reasons. What makes Śrī Caitanya's *acintyabhedābheda darśana* a most unique take among the plethora of discourses in the Vedānta philosophy is that despite making such hair-splitting explanations, Śrī Caitanya humbly acknowledges that the true nature of the ontological relationship between the *jīva* and the *brahma* along with the metaphysical self of the supreme being is '*acintya*', meaning 'inconceivable' or 'unfathomable'. Śrī Caitanya encourages his followers to mull over these theosophical distinctions, but he exerts more emphasis upon nurturing the *bhakti* in the heart of the devotee by cherishing the supreme being via the acts of devotion.

The Oxymoronic Epistemology of Acintyabhedābheda Darśana

The epistemological framework of theosophy in the Sanātana Dharma consists of six major *pramāṇas*. These are: *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (analogy), *śabda* (testimony), *arthāpatti* (implication), and *anupalabdhi* (non-perception). Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana*

acknowledges all of these as valid means of attaining the real knowledge. However, *pratyakṣa*, *anumāna*, and *śabda* are the only *pramāṇas* accepted by Śrī Rāmānujācārya's *viśiṣṭādvaita darśana*, Śrī Vallabhācārya's *śuddhādvaita darśana*, Śrī Madhvācārya's *dvaita darśana*, and Śrī Nimbārkaācārya's *dvaitādvaita darśana*. According to Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa's *Govinda Bhāṣyam*, although Śrī Caitanya's *acintyabhedābheda darśana* primarily follows the three primary epistemai like other Vaiṣṇava schools, it does not negate the rest as well. Rather, the other three modes are also partially accepted. Therefore, the epistemology of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* can be projected as a unifier between Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana* with the rest of the philosophical schools in the Vedānta tradition.

However, the problem arises when one proceeds to enunciate the fundamental derivations of these two starkly contrasting outlooks despite following the equal measures of *pramāṇas*. Whereas Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana* aims to debase the nature of mundane reality using the hexa-dimensional epistemological apparatus, Śrī Caitanya's *acintyabhedābheda darśana* invigorates the nature of the world in concrete terms using the same. Moreover, this antithetical standpoint is further complicated when the latter infuses *bhakti* into the discourse:

"...यत् खलु प्रत्यक्षानुमानोपमान शब्दार्थापत्यैतिह्यादि-प्रमाण-निवहैरपि न प्रमातुं शक्यते, विना तस्यैवानुग्रहजन्य-ज्ञानविशेषम्।"

Caitanya Candrodāyam Nāṭakam (4.8)

[Without the wisdom that resulted from its (Viṣṇu's) grace and mercy, the *pramāṇas* like *pratyakṣa*, *anumāna*, *upamāna*, *śabda*, *arthāpatti*, and *anupalabdhi* are incapable of making one understand the nature of reality.]

A succinct observation of the above indicates that *bhakti* subdues the empirical assessment of the nature of reality in the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* and slackens the potential of the *pramāṇas* by clubbing them under the subjective appeal while simultaneously asserting their equal roles in formulating the valid modes of its philosophical establishment. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to state that whereas Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's *advaita darśana* only focuses on the *jñāna mārga* and the rest of the schools assume *bhakti mārga*, Śrī Caitanya's *acintyabhedābheda darśana* appears to be the bridging link between the two, attaining both their characteristics in the transfusion of their epistemological structures. This, inevitably, results

into providing an apparently oxymoronic status to the epistemology of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, but it cannot be denied that it is rendered in an eclectic harmony.

The Oxymoronic Phenomenology of Acintyabhedābheda Darśana

The very name of the great master, Śrī Caitanya, means ‘consciousness’. The phenomenological notion of consciousness is very much contested in the Vedānta tradition. Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s *advaita darśana* instils the *nirguṇa* (inactive or non-qualitative) and *nirākāra* (formless) idea of the *brahma*, negating all possibilities of a concrete and active manifestation of it. In reaction, Śrī Madhvācārya’s *dvaita darśana* delves into explaining the *saguṇa* (active) and *sākāra* (concrete) form of the *brahma*, disregarding the *nirguṇa* and *nirākāra* concept of the *brahma* completely. Śrī Caitanya acknowledges the *nirguṇa* and the *nirākāra* concept of the *brahma*, but he vehemently champions its *saguṇa* and *sākāra* form (which is none other than Kṛṣṇa). Śrī Caitanya attempts to simplify the means of *sādhana* (spiritual practice) in the Kali Yuga by initiating the *kīrtana* (chanting eulogies). He announces that the nature of consciousness is cosmic and, since Kṛṣṇa is omnipresent, he can be connected to or summoned up anywhere and anytime only by chanting his name because:

नाम चिन्तामणिः कृष्णश्चैतन्यरसविग्रहः।

पूर्णः शुद्धो नित्य मुक्तोऽभिनन्त्वान्नामनामिनोः॥

(*Haribhaktivilāsa* 11.269 & *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* 1.2.108)

[The name of Kṛṣṇa is the ornament of thought and he is the incarnation of that nectar of supreme consciousness. He is the purest and eternally liberated. There is no difference between him and his name.]

Just like the concept of the *śabda brahma* or the *nāda brahma* in the *Veda* where *śabda* or *nāda* (both meaning ‘sound’) is considered to be the representative medium of the supreme being, the very name of Kṛṣṇa acts as a medium of spiritual communication between him and his devotees. Although the name of Kṛṣṇa is a representative medium, Śrī Caitanya diminishes the arbitrariness between him and his name by banking on Kṛṣṇa’s omnipresent feature. Thus, Śrī Caitanya promulgates a different version of consciousness

altogether where even an abstract concept like consciousness assimilates with the concrete self. Svarūpa Dāmodara perspicuously captures this phenomenological attribute here:

নাম রূপে শ্রীকৃষ্ণ বিগ্রহ ভাই হন ।
নাম রূপে কৃষ্ণ নাম ব্যক্ত জগজন ॥
কৃষ্ণ নাম চিন্তামণি স্বরূপে নিশ্চয় ।
চৈতন্য রসবিগ্রহ স্বরূপেতে কয় ॥
উভয়েতে শক্তি তার প্রকাশ পাইল ।
নাম নামি এক ভাই ভিন্ন না হইল ॥

(*Āśraya Siddhānta Candrodaya* 1.33-35)

[O brother, the very name of Kṛṣṇa is his incarnation and he manifests himself whenever his name is called up! Be ascertained that the very name of Kṛṣṇa is the supreme consciousness as Kṛṣṇa is the incarnation of that *rasa* (pure essence). In both Kṛṣṇa and his name, the same supreme consciousness is present and, thus, Kṛṣṇa and his name is one and not separate.]

On a lighter note (after a prolonged philosophical discussion), may be Śrī Caitanya (1486-1534 CE) had anticipated and answered the rhetorical question well before Shakespeare (1564-1616 CE) had asked: “What’s in a name?”

The Oxymoronic Soteriology of Acintyabhedābheda Darśana

For Śrī Caitanya, the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* was merely the skeleton in the anatomy of the *bhakti mārga* and amiable devotion to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is the overall physique. Although Śrī Caitanya upholds a robust intellectual backbone to *bhakti*, his rambunctious penchant was to inculcate the hearty devotion to both the ordinary and wise. Śrī Caitanya’s soteriological teachings can be ascribed as an extension of Śrī Nimbārka-cārya’s ideas, but the former emerges to be more emphatic in the present context. Whereas Śrī Nimbārka-cārya was the first to commence the worship of the couple of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Śrī Caitanya popularized it to the grandeur that the couple presently enjoys. It is Śrī Caitanya who commingled the two names of ‘Rādhā’ and ‘Kṛṣṇa’ into an allied nomenclature of ‘Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa’ by

which the couple is mostly called today. The immense congregation of the *bhaktas* in the Vṛndāvana, especially in our time, is partly due to Śrī Caitanya's efforts as he was the one who sent the six Gosvāmīs to Vṛndāvana on a mission to revive the splendour of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa's love that had long been shadowed and mired. The followers of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava school regard Śrī Caitanya as the *yugala avatāra* (combined incarnation) of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, although the great master never claimed his identity as such.

The status of the *bhakta* has been placed on a pedestal in the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* and often the potency of the *bhakta* to harness the supreme being has been glorified. Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (1.3.9) categorizes four *rasas* in which a *bhakta* can worship Kṛṣṇa, the supreme personality. These *rasas* are *dāsya* (servitude), *sakhyā* (companionship), *vātsalya* (storge) and *śṛṅgāra* (amour). Kṛṣṇa is perpetually enslaved by any *bhakta* who has been able to please him in any of these *rasas*. Just like Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Śrī Caitanya also holds the *śṛṅgāra rasa* as the greatest of all *rasas* and Rādhā as the greatest mistress of this *rasa*. Thus, she exerts her dominance over Kṛṣṇa, the superlative being. Whereas Kṛṣṇa controls the cosmos, she controls Kṛṣṇa and the latter is so engrossed in her loving devotion that even her rebukes seem to him more pleasant than the chanting of the *mantras* of the *Veda* by the wise men, as stated in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (1.4.20-23).

What differentiates the maxims of salvation in the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* is the fact that Śrī Caitanya denounces the concept of *mokṣa*— an aspect that is very fundamental and rudimentary to the discourses in the Vedānta tradition and to the entire pantheon of the Sanātana Dharma. But for a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, the very longing for *mokṣa* is an impediment to the progression of *bhakti*. As Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja pronounces:

অজ্ঞান তমের নাম কহিয়ে কৈতব।
 ধর্ম-অর্থ-কাম-মোক্ষ-বাস্তা আদি সব।।
 তার মধ্যে মোক্ষ বাস্তা কৈতব প্রধান।
 যাহা হইতে কৃষ্ণভক্তি হয় অন্তর্ধান।।

Caitanya Caritāmṛta (1.1.50-51)

[The darkness of ignorance is termed '*kaitava*' (deceit) and *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kāma* (pleasure), and *mokṣa* (liberation) are its tools. Amongst these, the desire for *mokṣa* is the chief of deceits for

it abolishes the *jīva*'s scope for *bhakti* (devotion) and deprives it from the ultimate bliss.]

Yet, the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* has, at the same time, placed importance over all these four prerequisites of the day-to-day life. Śrī Caitanya has appreciated a righteous lifestyle and the fulfilment of all these necessities, but he has also warned that all of these would be vainglorious if *bhakti* is barred from their premises. Thus, though apparently contradictory Śrī Caitanya's apothegms might seem, they fall in sync once observed minutely. Śrī Caitanya's personal life can be taken as a great example of oxymoron itself. In the prime of his youth, Śrī Caitanya was a hardcore rationalist and a fierce debater, winning laurels after laurels at scholarly symposiums. His erudite refutation of Svāmī Prakāśānanda Sarasvatī and Vāsudeva Sārvabhauma, two of the foremost pioneers of the *advaita darśana* in Kāśī during his time, can be marked as a testament of his nuanced understanding of the Vedānta. Yet, he would go on to preach *bhakti* and place it over any form of reasoning, quoting:

तर्कोऽप्रतिष्ठः श्रुतयो विभिन्ना

नैको ऋषिर्यस्य मतं प्रमाणम् ।

धर्मस्य तत्त्वं निहितं गुहायां

महाजना येन गतः सः पन्थाः ॥

(*Mahābhārata* 3.313.117)

[Rationality is not stable: even the *mantras* of the *Veda* differ from one another and so do the opinions of the *ṛṣis* (seers). The real understanding of the nature of *dharma* is utmost esoteric and mystified. Therefore, follow the footsteps of the great beings and be ascertained that their paths are right ones.]

At the same time, his profound love for the wise men and their companionship is time and again observed. Almost all his close associates like Nityānanda, Advaita, Śrīvāsa, Gadādhara, the six Gosvāmīs, and Rāmānanda Rāya were the leading figures in the Sanātana academia. But, they all were great devotees too. Wisdom, for Śrī Caitanya, is very sacred only if it leads to *bhakti*. He encourages his followers to the path of wisdom, but warns them not to dare at the cost of devotion. Thus, Śrī Caitanya's

life is an epitome of the *jñāna-miśra-bhakti* (devotion aided by wisdom). Thus, the two apparently contradictory *mārgas* are consummated by the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* in perfect balance, making its oxymoronic appeal an enchanting one.

Conclusion

The analogy of the ‘*mārjāra-markata*’ (the cat and the monkey) can be very helpful to describe the binary of nature of the relationship between the *bhagavāna* and the *bhakta*. Whereas the mother cat carries her kitten by its neck as it dangles on air, the infant monkey buckles its mother while the mother jumps from one tree to another. If the kitten falls somehow, the fault is of the mother cat as it is her duty to ensure the kitten’s safety. But, if the infant monkey falls, it is to be blamed for the mishap and not its mother for it is the infant’s role to tightly hold its mother when she jumps. Here, in both the cases of this analogy, the *bhagavāna* is compared to the mothers and the *bhakta* to the kitten or the infant. Whereas Śrī Vallabhācārya’s *śuddhādvaita darśana* is the monkey-type of *bhakti*, Śrī Rāmānujācārya’s *viśiṣṭādvaita darśana* is the cat-type. Śrī Caitanya’s *acintyabhedābheda darśana*, once again, has both these qualities and, hence, seems oxymoronic. Because of this, may be, the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* can be seen as the crossroad of all the previous schools. It never rests assured or affixed on (almost) anything for it very humbly accepts the limitation of human conjecture, always keeping the scope for further investigation. For Śrī Caitanya, no one knows for sure in what way the supreme being (or Kṛṣṇa) acts:

भूयोऽसौ स हसतिवन्मधुद्रवैस्तेः
 प्रत्युचे प्रतिवचनैः प्रभुस्तमेनम्।
 वेदोयं ननु किमु वेत्ययं विमुग्ध
 संमोहादवचिन्युतेऽन्धवत् स नित्यम्॥
 इत्युक्ता श्रुतिगदितं निपठ्य भूयः
 सोत्प्रासं स परिहसन्नुवाच नाथः।
 वेदानामिह खलु नास्ति शक्तिरेषा
 ज्ञातुं मामिति निगदन् ययौ स्वगेहम्॥

(*Caitanya Caritāmṛtam Mahākāvya* 5.20-21)

[The great lord, Śrī Caitanya, spoke with smiling sweetness, “O Murārī, the king of medicines, *Veda* knows very little about the nth glory of the almighty and the scholars of the *Veda*, who have no *bhakti* in them, seek to realize it like a blind man seeks light. The *Veda* is incapable of knowing the ultimatum of the superlative being.]

This great doubt on the theosophical domain and the equally great devotion in Kṛṣṇa are two characteristic features of Śrī Caitanya’s thinking which indeed falls in line with the Vedānta tradition:

नाहं मन्ये सुवेदेति नो न वेदेति वेद च।
 यो नस्तद्वेद तद्वेद नो न वेदेति वेद च॥
 यस्यामतं तस्य मतं मतं यस्य न वेद सः।
 अविज्ञातं विज्ञानतां विज्ञातमविज्ञानताम्॥
 प्रतिबोधविदितं मतममृतत्वं हि विन्दते।
 आत्मना विन्दते वीर्यं विद्यया विन्दतेऽमृतम्॥

(*Kena Upaniṣad* 2.2-4)

[I do not think that I know the *brahma* entirely, I also do not think that I do not know the *brahma* at all for the *brahmavidyā* is not something that can be utterly known, as well as, not something that is not known at all. One, who thinks that the *brahma* is not a subject that can be fathomed with the mundane wisdom, has realized the truth. Those, who boast of knowing him, hold a vain conceit. Those, who humbly acknowledge that it is unfathomable, have realized the truth. From this great realization, the vim to explore the *brahma* arises and this everlasting exploration leads the wise men to immortality.]

Thus, the entire discourse of the *acintyabhedābheda darśana* may be highlighted for its unique blend of antithetical qualities of judgement that make it oxymoronic in the true sense of the term. From its metaphysics to ontology and from its epistemology to soteriology— all bear the hallmark of the aforementioned figure of speech. Now, should it concern an argumentative person who finds such philosophical discourses as irrelevant for young academicians and wonders why there is much ado about nothing, s/he might go through Dr. Kusha Tiwari’s observations: “The relevance of introducing and familiarizing young generation with the vast knowledge

tradition serves multiple purposes. The preserved knowledge of the living traditions of India defines the identity of its people, their social practices and the norms that govern their way of life” (2024).

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