

Baladeva Vidyabhushana Prabhu, also known as Govinda Dasa, - a great Vaishnava scholar and philosopher of Odisha

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I. Introduction

The exact time and place of Sri Baladeva Vidyabhushana's birth are unknown. Perhaps one day historians will be able to establish these facts beyond any doubt. From the little information that we do have about his life, we can conjecture that he was born in the 17th century of the modern era. Though we do not know the name of the exact village where he took birth, it was likely in the Balasore district of Orissa, somewhere near Remuna. From the date given in his commentary on Rupa Goswami's Stavamala, it is clear that Baladeva was still living after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. In Jagannatha Puri, he learned the superexcellent philosophy of Sri Krishna Caitanya from Sri Radha-Damodara Goswami, and took initiation after converting to Gaudiya Vaisnavism. In Vrndavana, he studied Srimad Bhagavatam under Srila Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura and worshipped Radha-Syamasundara.

He learned grammar, poetics and logic, achieving expertise in all these subjects. He began his studies of Vedanta, but in order to study the commentaries in greater depth, he went to Mysore. He was there particularly impressed by the logical consistency of the Madhva shuddha-dvaita commentary on the Vedanta sutras and became a disciple of that school and began living in a Tattvavadi monastery. After taking sannyas, he moved to Purushottam Kshetra where he engaged many of the local scholars in debate, demonstrating the depth of his scholarship. His fame soon spread throughout the area.

Later, however, he met Radha Damodar Goswami, a scholar from Kanyakubja, under whose direction he studied Jiva Goswami's Nat-sandarbha in great detail. When he was convinced of the supremacy of the Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy, he took initiation from Radha Damodar Goswami. He was thus initiated in Nityananda Prabhu's line. The following is his disciplic succession: (1) Gauri Das Pandit, (2) Hriday Chaitanya Prabhu, (3) Shyamananda Prabhu, (4) Rasikananda Deva Goswami, (5) Nayananda Goswami, (6) Radha Damodar Goswami, (7) Baladeva Vidyabhushana.

Baladeva then continued his studies of the Gaudiya literature under Pitambara Das and later studied the Bhagavata Purana under Vishvanath Chakravarti. He also took the Vaishnava vairagi's dress, at which time he was given the name Ekanti Govinda Das.

He was ordered by Vishvanath Chakravarti Thakur to go to Jaipur where he prayed to Rupa Goswami's Govindaji murti for the authorization to write a commentary on the Vedanta-sutra. He then composed the Govinda-bhashya and took it to Galta where he defeated the other sampradayas in debate, preserving the reputation of the Gaudiya school. After this episode, he was given the title Vidyabhushana. This story has been told in greater detail in this volume in the chapter on Vishvanath Chakravarti Thakur.

Sri Baladeva Vidyabhushana was a niskincana-parama bhagavata, fully-renounced topmost Devotee of Lord Krishna. His more than twenty-four books and commentaries have helped thousands of Vaishnavas understand the sublime philosophy of Krishna consciousness and the intimate writings of the six Goswamis. Since he was devoid of false prestige, he never wrote about his birth, parents, lineage, personal life. According to Sri Bhaktivinoda Thakura in Navadvipa-dhama mahatyam, in Chaitanya lila Baladeva Vidyabhushana is Sri Gopinatha Acarya, the brother-in-law of Sri Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya. In Vraja he serves as Sri Radha's eternal maidservant Ratnavali Devi.

The following is a list of Baladeva Vidyabhushana's written works:

- (1) A commentary on the Brahma Sutras, Govinda-bhashya;
- (2) Siddhanta-ratnam,
- (3) Vedanta-syamantaka,
- (4) Prameya-ratnavali,

- (5) Siddhanta-darpana,
- (6) Sahitya-kaumudi,
- (7) Kavya-kaustubha,
- (8) Vyakarana-kaumudi (which appears to have been lost);
- (9) Pada-kaustubha,
- (10) Vaishnava-nandini, a commentary on the Tenth Canto,
- (11) A commentary on Gopal-tapani Upanishad;
- (12) Commentaries on the Isha and nine other upanishads;
- (13) Gitabhushana-bhashya, a commentary on Bhagavad-gita;
- (14) Namarthasudha, a commentary on the Vishnusahasranama;
- (15) Saranga-rangada, a commentary on the Laghubhagavatamrita;
- (16) Stavamala-vibhushana, a commentary on Stavamala;
- (17) a commentary on Rupa Goswami's Natika-candrika;
- (18) Chandah-kaustubha-bhashya;
- (20) A commentary on Rasikananda's Shyamananda-shataka;
- (21) A commentary on Candraloka (which appears to have been lost);
- (22) Krishnanandini, a commentary on Sahitya-kaumudi;
- (23) Govindabhashya-tika, a commentary on his own Govinda-bhashya;
- (24) Sukshma, a further clarification of his own Siddhanta-ratnam;

With the Govinda Bhashya commentary in hand, Baladeva Vidyabhushana arrived at the assembly hall of the king, where the pandits were waiting for him. When he showed them his commentary, they were speechless. The Gaudiya sampradaya was proclaimed victorious. The king and all the Gaudiya Vaishnavas were supremely happy. At that time the pandits gave Sri Baladeva the name 'Vidyabhushana' or one whose ornament is knowledge, in honor of his great scholarship. The year was 1628, Shaka era. From the day forward, the king of Jaipur decreed, everyone would attend the aroti of Sri Govinda, the Deity beloved by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, who was ultimately responsible for such a wonderful commentary on Vedanta. The Ramanuja pandits, falling under the influence of Sri Baladeva Vidyabhushana, accepted him as their acharya and wanted to become his disciples. With great humility, Baladeva Vidyabhushana refused, explaining that there are four sampradayas, among which the Sri Sampradaya is a genuine school that preaches servitude to God as the best religious process. By advancing the views of the Gaudiya sampradaya, he meant no disrespect to the Sri sampradaya. To insult the Sri sampradaya would be a great offense, he said. Sripad Baladeva Vidyabhushana returned from Jaipur to Vrindavana carrying the message of his victory. Upon returning, he submitted to the lotus feet of Sri Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura and told him the news. All the visiting Vaishnavas and the residents of Vrindavana were delighted and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura bestowed his blessings upon Baladeva Vidyabhushana. After this, Baladeva Vidyabhushana began writing a commentary on the Sat Sandarbha. Soon Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura passed away, and the Vaishnava community felt as if a great beacon of divine light had been extinguished. At that time, Sri Baladeva Vidyabhushana became regarded among the Vaishnava community as the keeper of the flame, the leader among those who understood the teachings of Sri Chaitanya.

"The one absolute truth has two categories: the named (Krishna) and the name (Om). Parameshvara, Sri Krishna, the absolute person is the named; pranava, or omkara (Om) is the name. The named, or Parameshvara Sri Krishna, reveals himself in different forms as Matsya, Kurma, and many other forms. In the same way the name of the Supreme Lord expands into many different forms; such as the transcendental syllable Om, the gayatri mantram, and the Vedas themselves. There is no limit to the Supreme Personality of Godhead; he has no beginning and no end. As a consequence, his glorification is also eternal. He appears within this material world, stays for some time, and again disappears according to his own sweet will." Baladev explains the potency of Godhead in his Siddhanta-darpana: "The Lord has three potencies thinking (jnana) feeling (kriya) and willing (bala). Through these three potencies he causes the material creation to come into being. The rays of consciousness emanating from him the jiva souls are his separated parts and parcels. By his thinking, feeling, and willing, they too come into being. The Vedas are spoken by the Lord, who is all-perfect. The Vedas are therefore free from the four defects of material existence: error, cheating, illusion, and imperfect perception. And so, the Vedas are the perfect form of evidence for understanding the Supreme Truth. The Vedas glorify Krishna as the absolute truth. The Puranas and Itihasas are as good as the Vedas. They too glorify Krishna as the absolute truth."

"There are different ways of knowing what is truth: pratyaksha (direct perception), anumana (inference, hypothesis, and deduction), shabda (the words of the authorities), arthapati (interpretation), anupalabdhi (negative inference), sambhava (the laws of probability) and aitihiya (history). Of all these methods of arriving at truth, shabda, hearing from authorities, is best. The best source of knowledge about the absolute is the shruti:

revealed truth received from Vedic authority. Different scholars always entertain different opinions about reality, but the Vedic shastras are eternal and transcendental, moreover they are free from the four defects of material existence, having sprung directly from the Supreme Lord Himself. Therefore they are the best evidence for knowing the absolute truth." (Vedanta Samantaka 1/51) What has been proved on the basis of solid evidence, pramana, is called prameya. Baladeva has written a book called Prameya Ratnavali, in which he states nine principles that he has established are facts, proven by the incontrovertible evidence of the Vedas. The teachings of Madhva-Gaudiya Vaishnavism as it has descended from Madhvacharya to Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu have been summarised in the Prameya Ratnavali. His nine principles are stated in the following verse (PR 8): According to Baladeva there are five categories of tattvas or truths which constitute reality: ishvara, God; jiva, soul; prakriti, matter; kala, time; and karma, action. Ishvara or God, is the greatest. He is all-knowing, he is the utmost realization of transcendental bliss, and his very nature is ecstasy. He is full in all qualities and is the absolute person. He is the master of everything and is eternally free from birth and death. He is the master of all the gods headed by Brahma and Shiva. He is the supreme husband, the Lord of lords, and the Supreme Person, the worthiest of receiving prayers. He alone remains as the absolute truth even after this material world (which is his separated material energy) is destroyed along with all the demigods such as Brahma, Shiva, and Indra. Baladeva further explains that Krishna has three energies, parashakti, kshetrajna-shakti, and maya-shakti. Parashakti means svarupa-shakti or the Lord's internal potency. Kshetrajna-shakti means jiva-shakti or the living beings, and maya-shakti means the Lord's external potency, his potency for keeping the souls in illusion. This explanation is on the basis of the Vishnu Purana. He goes on to explain that there is no difference between the body and soul of God. They are one and the same. As Krishna, the Supreme Lord has two hands, he plays a flute, he has a transcendental form of eternity, knowledge and bliss, and he is known by the names Govinda and Gopal.

akshmidēvi is nondifferent from Him, in that he is the Supreme Energetic and She is His Supreme Energy. (sei jaganmata lakshmi vishnur anapayini shakti) This confirmed throughout the shastra. Whatever form the lord appears in, there is a corresponding Lakshmi form who acts as his eternal consort. When the Lord appears as a god, Lakshmi appears as a goddess. When the Lord advents as an ordinary human being, Lakshmi also descends upon this earth as an ordinary human being. Baladeva cites Shaunaka Muni who says in Srimad-Bhagavatam that of all the avatars, expansions of Godhead and Personalities of Godhead, Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The worship of Krishna, must therefore be regarded as the highest form of worship. According to Baladeva, the jiva souls are the atomic spiritual energy of the Lord. The souls are eternal and can never be destroyed by any means. The soul's true eternal nature is to be filled with transcendental knowledge: By surrender to the lotus feet of a spiritual master who is a Devotee of Krishna, one attain Krishna-bhakti by the guru's mercy. Upon attaining Krishna-bhakti one gets Krishna Himself In His Vedanta-samantaka, Sri Baladeva Vidyabhushana offers the following prayer to the lotus feet of his gurudeva, Sri Radha-Damodara Goswami:

"Having been deputed to do so by my gurudeva, the brahmana named Sri Radha-Damodara Goswami, I have compiled this commentary on the Vedanta known as Vedanta-syamantaka for the sake of Srimati Radharani's pleasure. This commentary is a summary of the important points of Vedanta. May it be pleasing to Sri Radhika." Another myth is that Baladeva received the title "Vidyabhushana" from the King or from the Ramanandis. Both are baseless claims, for in all his earlier manuscripts he signed "Vidyabhushana," including the Brahma-sutra-karika-bhasya, which, as mentioned above, was his first known work and was written under the order of the King. He may have received this title before joining the Gaudiyas, probably in days when he was a Tattvavadi debater. Some misinformed individuals also claim that the Govinda-bhasya was written at Galta, to which there is not the slightest evidence and which makes no sense at all, as according to documentary evidence, even during Sawai Jai Singh II Vidyabhushana was the Mahant of the New Govinda-deva Temple in Vrindavan as well as of his own temple in Jaipur, and leaving his duties in both places to sit down in a temple of another sampradaya to write a commentary is nothing but absurd. The earliest documents that mention Baladeva Vidyabhushana belong to the 1740s, therefore it is most unlikely that he had any participation in the Amer/Jaipur debates before the 1730s.

Some of his life incidents are as follows. At a very early age, he finished his studies of grammar, poetry, rhetoric and logic and then went on pilgrimage. During this time he spent some time with the Tattvavadis in South India and thus became conversant with the Vaishnava Theology of Sri Madhva. He became a powerful exponent of this system throughout India. During his travels he again came to Utkaladesa (Odisha) and met with a grand-disciple of Sri Rasikananda Deva, Sri Radha-Damodara Deva by name, with whom he discussed philosophy. Sri Radha-Damodara Deva explained the conclusions of Gaudiya Vaishnava Theology as expounded by Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. These talks penetrated his heart and awakened divine love within. Thus, after a few days he was initiated with the Radha-Krsna mantra and began to study the Sat-sandarbhās of Sri Jiva Gosvami.

In a very short time he became very expert in Gaudiya Vaisnava philosophy. With the permission and blessings of his guru, he moved to Sri Vrindavana (Vrindavan) to further study these teachings under Sri Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura. Baladeva fully accepted the Gaudiya Vaisnava philosophy and began to preach it with great vigor. Shrimad Baladev Vidyabhushan Prabhu was a pure devotee of the highest order, who cared for nothing but the service of the Lord. He didn't have a spot of desire for name and fame. He was the composer of many scriptures which are as priceless as precious gems, for the ultimate benefit of all those who have taken human birth. The exact location of his birth, the names of his mother and father, and their family tree is not known. The exact circumstances of his birth and childhood are, therefore, unknown. Still, some are of the opinion that that he took birth in a place called Baleshvara, a village neighboring Remuna, in the early part of the 18th century A.D, as the son of a vaisya, an agriculturist. At an early age he became learned in Sanskrit grammar, poetry, rhetoric, and logic. After becoming expert in all these subjects, he began wandering to different places of pilgrimage. After wandering about in this way for some time, and after visiting many holy places, he happened to stay at a temple of the Tattvavadi followers of Shri Madhvacharya. There, he became fluent in his understanding of the tattvavada-siddhanta, that is, the philosophical and theological conclusions of the followers of Madhva. After this, he took sannyasa, and preached the tattvavada-siddhanta very vigorously throughout the length and breadth of India.

As he wandered from one place to the next, he gradually came to Jagannatha Puri. There he remained and preached for a few days. At that time, he chanced to meet one of the foremost disciples of Shri Rasikananda Deva, Pandit Shri Radha-Damodara, with whom he discussed devotional principles. At that time, Shrimad Radha-Damodara dev Goswami instructed Baladev on the subject of Shri Gourasundara's pastimes of mercy and His teachings on Gaudiya Vaishnava siddhanta to Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya. After hearing the divine wisdom spoken by Shri Radha-Damodara Goswami, Baladeva's heart was deeply moved. After a few days of hearing from him, he accepted initiation into the Radha-Krishna mantra, and began studying the Sat-Sandarbhās of Jiva Goswami at the holy feet of his gurudeva, Radha-Damodara Goswami.

In an addendum appended to the Govinda Bhashya, after it was published, Shri Baladeva has written, vidyārūpam bhūṣaṇam ye pradaḥ, khatim nitye teno yo mamudarah, Shri govinda-svapna-nirdishtha bhashye, radhabandhurangah sa jiyat. "May Shri Govinda be all glorious. By his mercy, he revealed this commentary to me in a dream. The commentary revealed by him is especially appreciated by the highly learned, and as a result of this I have been given the name Vidyabhushan, but it is Shri Govinda who deserves all credit. May that Shri Govinda who is the most dear life and soul of Shri Radhika, be all-victorious." With the Govinda Bhashya commentary in hand, Baladeva Vidyabhushan arrived at the assembly hall of the king, where the pandits were waiting for him. When he showed them his commentary, they were speechless. The Gaudiya sampradaya was proclaimed victorious. The king and all the Gaudiya Vaishnavas were supremely happy. At that time the pandits gave Shri Baladeva the name "Vidyabhushana," or one whose ornament is knowledge, in honor of his great scholarship. The year was 1628, Shaka era. From the day forward, the king of Jaipur decreed, everyone would attend the arōti of Shri Govinda, the deity beloved by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas, who was ultimately responsible for such a wonderful commentary on Vedānta. The Ramanuja pandits, falling under the influence of Shri Baladeva Vidyabhushana, accepted him as their acharya and wanted to become his disciples. With great humility, Baladeva Vidyabhushana refused, explaining that there are four sampradayas, among which the Shri Sampradaya is a genuine school that preaches servitude to God as the best religious process. By advancing the views of the Gaudiya sampradaya, he meant no disrespect to the Shri sampradaya. To insult the Shri sampradaya would be a great offense, he said. Shripad Baladeva Vidyabhushan returned from Jaipur to Vrindavan carrying the message of his victory. Upon returning, he submitted to the lotus feet of Shri Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura and told him the news. All the visiting Vaishnavas and the residents of Vrindavan were delighted, and Vishvanatha Chakravarti Thakura bestowed his blessings upon Baladeva Vidyabhushana.

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from the Supreme Lord Himself. therefore they are the best evidence for knowing the absolute truth. " (*Vedanta Samantaka* 1/51) According to Baladeva there are five categories of tattvas or truths which constitute reality: *ishvara*, God; *jiva*, soul; *prakriti*, matter; *kala*, time; and *karma*, action. *Ishvara*, or God, is the greatest. He is all-knowing, he is the utmost realization of transcendental bliss, and his very nature is ecstasy. He is full in all qualities and is the absolute person. He is the master of everything, and is eternally free from birth and death. He is the master of all the gods headed by Brahma and Shiva. He is the supreme husband, the Lord of lords, and the Supreme Person, the worthiest of receiving prayers. He alone remains as the absolute truth even after this material world (which is his separated material energy) is destroyed along with all the demigods such as Brahma, Shiva, and Indra. Baladeva further explains that Krishna has three energies, *parashakti*, *kshetrajna-shakti*, and *maya-shakti*. Parashakti means svarupa-shakti, or the Lord's internal potency. *Kshetrajna-shakti* means *jiva-shakti*, or the living beings, and *maya-shakti* means the Lord's external potency, his potency for keeping the souls in illusion. This explanation is on the basis of the *Vishnu Purana*. He goes on to explain that there is no difference between the body and soul of God. They are one and the same. As Krishna, the Supreme Lord has two hands, he plays a flute, he has a transcendental form of eternity, knowledge, and bliss, and he is known by the names Govinda and Gopal. Lakshmidēvi is nondifferent from him, in that he is the Supreme Energetic and She is His Supreme Energy. (sei jaganmata lakshmi vishnur anapayini shakti) This confirmed throughout the *shastra*. Whatever form the lord appears in, there is a corresponding Lakshmi form who acts as his eternal consort. When the Lord appears as a god, Lakshmi appears as a goddess. When the Lord advents as an ordinary human being, Lakshmi also descends upon this earth as an ordinary human being. Baladeva Vidyabhushan says: *teshu sarveshu lakshmi-rupeshu radhayah svayam laksmitvam mantavyam sarveshu bhagavad-rupeshu krishnasya svayam bhagavatvavat: (Vedanta-samantaka 2.37)* Of all the manifestations of Lakshmidēvi, Shrimati Radharani is the Supreme Goddess, just as amongst so many avatars of Godhead, Krishna is the supreme Personality of Godhead. This is confirmed in the *Brihad-Gautamiya Tantra*, which states, "Shri Radhika is the Supreme Goddess. Her very nature is Krishna, for her very existence is permeated by Krishna. Therefore she is known as Krishnamayi, or one who is full of Krishna. She is known as Paradevata, for she is the Supreme Goddess. All other goddesses are subordinate to her. She is the Supreme Lakshmi and her transcendental effulgence surpasses all conceptions of brilliance. She is the supreme enchantress, for she enchants Krishna Himself, who is capable of charming millions of cupids." Baladev cites Shaunaka Muni who says in *Shrimad-Bhagavatam* that of all the avatars, expansions of Godhead, and Personalities of Godhead, Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The worship of Krishna, must therefore be regarded as the highest form of worship. According to Baladeva, the *jiva* souls are the atomic spiritual energy of the Lord. The souls are eternal and can never be destroyed by any means. The soul's true eternal nature is to be filled with transcendental knowledge: *sa ca jivo bhagavadaso mantavyah dasabhuto harereva nanyasyaive kadacaneti padmat (Vedanta-samantaka 3.11)* "It is the constitutional nature of the soul to be a servant of Bhagavan Shri Krishna. It is the version of the Padma-Purana that the soul is an eternal servant of Hari, and has no other genuine position." By surrender to the lotus feet of a spiritual master who is a devotee of Krishna, one attain Krishna-bhakti by the guru's mercy. Upon attaining Krishna-bhakti one gets Krishna Himself.

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