

Vasantotsava

The Spring Festival (Holi)

A rendering of chapter fourteen of Kavi Karnapura's Ānanda Vṛndāvana Campūh'

The Holi-festival is celebrated in Vraja from the Vasanta Pañcamī-day (the fifth day of the light lunar quarter of the Vedic month of Māgha, January-February) until a few days after Phālguna Purnimā (the full moon of Phālguna, February-March, also known as Gaura Purnimā). During this time Nanda bābā gives Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma leave from cowherding to play Holī, so that They can throw colored dyes and water at Each other and at all the other Vrajavāsīs (inhabitants of Vraja).

On that Vasanta Pancamī-day Śrīmatī Rādhikā and Her *sakhīs* (girlfriends) are attacked with colored powder by the *gopas* (cowherd boys) as they are on their way to Nandīśvara (Kṛṣṇa's abode, now known as Nandgaon) to cook for Kṛṣṇa in the morning. In the haze of *ābir* and *gulāl* (the colored powders) that flies up during this colorful attack, Śrī Kṛṣṇa secretly kisses and embraces Śrī Rādhikā, but Lalitā proudly pulls Her away from Him and brings Her safely to Nandīśvara where they can peacefully go to their daily duty of cooking Kṛṣṇa's breakfast.

Days later Paurṇamāsī devī (Yogamāyā personified) announces: "Tomorrow is Māghī purṇimā (the full moon day of Māgha) and the husband of any *gopī* who worships Vasanta Madana (the vernal love-god, who is actually none other than Śrī Kṛṣṇa) at the foot of the Aśoka tree (a red-flowering tree) on that day will gain a lot of wealth and many cows!" Hearing this, the older *gopīs* allowed their daughters-in-law to do the *pūjā*.

On Purṇimā day Śrī Rādhikā sat in the Mādhavī *maṇḍapa* (pavillion) to meet Kṛṣṇa on the pretext of doing Vasanta Madana *pūjā*, wearing a crimson *sārī*. Vṛndādevī, the forest guardian, told Her: "Hey Rādhī! Mātāṅgī-devī, a Kinnarī-goddess, has come! She is a teacher in song and all her helpsters are expert in playing the Vīṇā. Listen to how they will sing and play on this festival!"

While Śrī Rādhikā listened to the performance of these angelic girls, Śrī Kṛṣṇa appeared on the scene, holding His flute in His left hand and a flowerball with vermilion in His right hand. He was surrounded by His dear friends like Subala that were loudly singing vernal tunes. His eyes were rolling of erotic intoxication and one friend stood on each of His sides, serving Him golden betel leaves that He accepted with His pleasing reddish playful lips. Reddish powder flew here and there so light that it didn't touch Him, but it fell down on Him from the sky, very beautifully coloring and scenting His head, *tilaka*, hair and eyelids. The wind moved the vines' restless sprout-like hands and cluster-like breasts to obstruct Hari and the vines' restless eyebrows looked at Him as if telling Him: "No, no!" Another vine shyly smiled at Kṛṣṇa with her flowers as if calling Him: "Come, come!"

Madhumaṅgala said: "Hey Kṛṣṇa! Is this sound I hear the echo of our singing, or is it the sound of someone else's song festival, challenging ours?" Kṛṣṇa said: "O abode of lustre! It must be someone else's song festival! Go and see where these songs and rhythms come from!" Madhumaṅgala went and saw the *gopīs* singing, so He said: "O Impudent Lalite! Why are you so proud to make such grave offenses? We cowherd boys did not pick any flowers from the Mādhavī garden because our friend Kṛṣṇa wants to perform His spring pastimes there, but why are you so rude to pick all the flowers there? Don't you know the proud, snake-like arms of my friend? You will come to know them now! I will just go and tell Him now!" (Goes to Kṛṣṇa and says:) "O friend! Now Your spring play has become a success! The Vasanta Lakṣmī (the goddess of vernal beauty) came personally with all of her opulence, playing flutes, Vīṇās, Mṛdaṅgas, Karatalas etc. like nowhere else in the three worlds! They sing even better than the singers in heaven, what to speak of others! There are more festival paraphernalia there than anywhere else in Lord Brahmā's creation, more even than in Your own festival, although You are the prince of Vraja!"

The cowherd boys protested, saying: "Hey Baṭo (Madhumaṅgala, the *brāhmaṇa* boy)! It is not proper of you to praise the camp of the enemy like that! You should praise Your own camp! You must have gotten drunk!" Baṭo said: "The Madhumaṅgala (auspicious wine, or spring) makes everyone drunk and becomes drunk even of itself!" Kṛṣṇa said: "Very well, mate! Check out the *gopīs*' activities with an undisturbed mind, we will come later!"

Madhumaṅgala blissfully went back and proudly told Lalitā: "O awkward Lalite! Get out of here, on the order of lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa! Don't steal our Mādhavī-flowers, otherwise you'll be punished!" Lalitā said: "O shameless, deceitful *brāhmaṇa*-boy! Why do you spoil your own aristocracy by speaking such intoxicated words? The spotless brides of Vraja will stay on the bank of the Yamunā under the red Aśoka-trees to do Vasanta Madana *pūjā* on the day of Vasantotsava with the jewel-like heroine Śrī Rādhikā, whose heart is full of friendship, who is expert in everything and who is adorned with all good qualities! Although She has many enthusiastic maidservants She gave up Her family tradition to join us personally! Why are you blubbering like mad?"

Madhumaṅgala said: "O Lalite! Who else but Kṛṣṇa is there to destroy the pride of Cupid? He can not just madden everyone with desire, He is also always intoxicated by it Himself! How can you worship the mundane Cupid and disregard this transcendental Cupid? I think you must have gone out of your minds! Listen, I will do you a favor! I can be a priest for your Madana *pūjā*! Come along with me to see Him!" Śrī Rādhikā said: "Hey Lalite! This most expert *brāhmaṇa* is worshipable! Tell Candrāvalī and Cārucandrā to worship Him nicely!" Candrāvalī and Cārucandrā then came and smeared Madhumaṅgala with fragrant dyes and waters of different colours, making him look like Bhūtarāja Śiva, the king of ghosts. Madhumaṅgala yelled: "Hey Kṛṣṇa! The *gopīs* are blinding me with *sindūra*, *kuṅkuma* and fragrant powders, being maddened by the vernal festival Vasantotsava! I am unable to go anywhere – I'm stunned by the fragrant water they threw over me! Quickly save me before they commit the sin of killing a *brāhmaṇa*!"

Hearing this from afar, Kṛṣṇa understood that His reputation was being diminished, so He quickly came there with His friends, saying: "Halā! Halā!" Then Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who was looked upon by the *gopīs* with fear, respect and bashfulness, saw Madhumaṅgala motionless and miserable, so He said: "Aho! You have abused My innocent friend, who is very dear to Me, being intoxicated by the Spring-festival! Now accept a fitting punishment!" Then He

threw an Aśoka-flowerball into the crowd of *gopīs*, thus dispersing them. Seeing this, the goddesses in heaven praised Him and a flowerball-fight broke out between the two parties. Entering the ranks of the enemy, Kṛṣṇa played His flute, making it sound like Cupid's sweet drum playing during the battle of eros.

The *gopīs* cast sharp glances at Kṛṣṇa from all sides and Kṛṣṇa shot the *samprasvāpana* (sleep-causing) missile at them with the bow of His eyebrows. The *gopīs'* bodies weakened, their eyes fell shut, their mouths yawned, their voices choked, their lips trembled and they fell asleep. Seeing this, general Candrāvalī became bewildered. With valour she then stepped forward to pierce Kṛṣṇa's heart with her arrow-like glances, enchanting the enchanter of the world and keeping Him in her snake-like arms. After some time Kṛṣṇa came back to consciousness and embraced the lotus-like *gopīs* just as an elephant in rut shakes up a forest of lotus-flowers, kissing them and breaking their necklaces and blouses. When the fog of colored powder dissipated, the battlefield caused amazement to the eyes. The red powder was scattered over the *gopīs'* bodies like blood covering an angry elephant, the bluish musk looked like blackbees surrounding that elephant and the *gopīs'* jeweled syringes looked like the elephant's teeth and bones.

Seeing the *gopīs* in this condition, Madhumaṅgala drowned in an ocean of bliss and began to dance with raised arms, saying: "Hee hee! Kṛṣṇa, friend, well done, well done! I never felt so blissful in my whole life! Just see how their *pūjā*-paraphernalia are scattered here and there, how their ornaments are broken and how they are covered with *ābir* and *gulāl!* They have received their just dues! But alas, alas! They are more clever than anyone in Lord Brahmā's creation, let us therefore flee before they meet their supreme leader Vṛṣabhānu-nandinī (Rādhikā)!" Hearing this, the cowherdboys said: "This foul-mouthed Kusumāsava (Madhumaṅgala) is sometimes afraid, sometimes brave and sometimes angry! Console him, so that he will not feel so distressed, O Kṛṣṇa!" Kṛṣṇa said: "O Kusumāsava! Show your fearlessness to those you fear! Why should you be afraid while I am here?" Hearing this, Madhumaṅgala gave up his fear. He now became the bold leader again and said: "This way, this way!" He went to a garden of Mādhavī-flowers where he saw that Śrī Rādhikā was busy picking flowers with Lalitā and her *sakhīs*. The *sakhīs* pierced Kṛṣṇa with thousands of sharp arrow-like glances and Kṛṣṇa did the same to them, piercing the shield of bashfulness on Śrī Rādhikā's chest, while Rādhikā pierced Kṛṣṇa's heart with the arrows of Her soft smile. Seeing Kṛṣṇa's enchanted condition, Madhumaṅgala blissfully said: "Friend, don't be bewildered while Your best friend is here! Take this ball and throw it at them! What is impossible to do when You have a friend like me?"

Śrī Rādhikā contracted Her eyes, moved Her eyebrows and lifted Her arm, making Her bangles jingle while Her lotus hands threw a *sindūra*-bomb at Murāri's chest. Then, to the great bliss of the *sakhās* and *sakhīs*, Kṛṣṇa began to run after Śrī Rādhikā like an angry lion who was awoken from his slumber, carrying a powder ball with Him. Then Lalitā said: "O *rasika śiromaṇe* (crownjewel of relishers)! Who knows which *rasikā* girl has shown the passion in her heart by throwing this reddish¹ powder-ball on Your chest? It is not proper to get bewildered right now!"

Despite hearing this, Kṛṣṇa kept on running after Rādhikā. Then, with a slight smile and a squint of Her eyebrows, Rādhikā gave a clever hint to Śyāmā-*sakhī* and hid Herself

¹ Red is the colour of passion.

between Her girlfriends. Kṛṣṇa then smeared Śyāmā-*sakhī*'s forehead, chest, hairs and cheeks with fragrant water and Bakula-mālā (another *gopī*) anxiously said: "Dear Śyāmasundara, Your cleverness burns my heart! Why are You hurting My innocent friend, leaving that Girl with the shining smile whose face eclipses the autumnal moon, the splendour of whose teeth eclipses the pearls and who actually threw the ball at You?"

Hearing this, Kṛṣṇa eagerly and passionately went up to Śrī Rādhikā and told Her: "Come here and show Me Your strength by throwing these balls at Me!" Hearing this, Śrī Rādhikā told Her friends: "O *sakhīs*! Surround Him and pelt Him with Your powder-balls!" The *sakhīs* surrounded Kṛṣṇa and chanted: *ghero ghero* (surround, surround!) *māro māro* (kill! kill!) Mixed with the sounds of singing cuckoos this grew into a big noise. Being surrounded by the *gopīs* like this, *rasika tilaka* (the greatest relisher) Śrī Kṛṣṇa squirted colored water at all of them from His jeweled syringe, while the young brides pelted Him with flower-balls. The shameless *gopīs* surrounded Kṛṣṇa as the moonbeams surround the cloud, while Mātāṅgī-devī and her host of Kinnarī-angels sang sweet love-songs. The bangles on the *gopīs*' lotusstem-like arms jingled as they softly threw flower-balls at the king of lovers with their lotus-like arms. Kṛṣṇa's moon-like face showed signs of loss of strength and power, merely as a sport, but the *gopīs* snatched away His flute, and flower-balls-, bow- and arrows. When one *gopī* wanted to remove Kṛṣṇa's ornaments Śrī Rādhikā stopped Her with a hint of Her eyebrows. With Her own hands She wiped all the colours from His lotus-face and gave Him a *pān* handed to Her by Her maidservants, while Śyāmā *sakhī* began to fan Him on Her indication. Seeing the *gopīs* covered by colored dust, Madhumaṅgala laughed and danced with raised arms, exclaiming: "Hee hee! Friend, we have won! The pride of king Vṛṣabhānu's most glorious daughter has been broken today by Śrī Kṛṣṇa and She personally serves Him now as a humble maidservant! What could be more amusing? How could Kṛṣṇa, after all, not have won with a counsellor like me?"

Seeing him dancing, all the *sakhīs* and *sakhās* became most happy. Being very satisfied with Him, Śrī Rādhikā rewarded Madhumaṅgala with one of Her own pearl necklaces. After this, they all had a feast and took rest.

Translated in 1989 by Advaita dāsa.