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After having returned the clothes of the unclad maidens bathing in the sacred waters of river Yamuna, Krishna congratulated them for their unflinching devotion towards him and promised that he would sport with them during the forthcoming autumn nights.

True to his word, when he observed the blooming jasmines, and the moon smearing the eastern sky a brilliant crimson red (like a lover returning after a long absence makes his beloved blush with his touch), all being conducive, Krishna let forth from his flute a breathtaking symphony, which stole the hearts of the beautiful women of Vraja (modern day Mathura and Vrindavana).
In the enchanting process, he made them so excited to join him that they did not even bother to finish whatever chore they were performing at the moment. Thus, for example, the milking of cows; suckling of infants; serving of food to the family (or themselves) or waiting upon husbands, all such businesses were left unfinished as they rushed out to meet Krishna.

In their eagerness, the gopis did not, as much as take a second look at their outward appearances. Some, for example, were cleansing or painting their bodies, a few were applying collyrium (anjan) to their eyes, these cosmetic attempts at adorning themselves were left in between, and in their anxiety, some even put the lower clothes on their upper bodies and vice versa.
This vivid description from the Bhagavata Purana (29.10.1-7) makes it obvious that in their enthusiasm to meet their beloved lord, the gopis gave no thought to their physical appearance, however awkward, nor did they think twice before giving up their worldly duties. The revered guru Shankaracharya says in his philosophical poem, Viveka Chudamani:

'There is no liberation for the being attached to the body, and the liberated being has no attachment to the body. One who is asleep is not awake, and one who is awake does not dream, for these refer to two different states.' (Verse: 338)

An Inspiring Instance of Women's Liberation:

The gopis' escape from the shackles of worldly life was not however without event. Their husbands, fathers and brothers, all tried to restrain them but to no avail. As per the Manu Smriti, the ancient text laying down a model code of conduct:

"A female should be under the control of her father during childhood, the husband in youth, and her children after the husband dies." (Manu 5.148)

"A woman should follow life-long a husband whom she is given to by her father, or her brother in consultation with the father." (5.151)

By disobeying every enumerated male relative, paying no heed to their supposed authority, the women of Vraja successfully unburdened themselves of each link of the chain binding them. Thus says the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (4.3.22)
'(In such a state) the father is not a father, mother not a mother, the world not the world, the gods not the gods and the Vedas not the Vedas. At that time, such a being, has no relation to either virtue or sin.'

Truly, Krishna is the ultimate attraction, much like a magnet draws iron files towards it, so does he attract his devotees, who care two hoots for their worldly duties, however pressing they may be. Indeed, some have imagined the first letter in his name, rendered in Sanskrit as symbolic of his 'grip' over his devotees, because of the hook-like shape in its lower half.

**Transcending Karma:**

Some of the women however, were physically detained from leaving their houses, being locked up inside. These closed their eyes and imbibed Krishna in their hearts. The intense suffering produced by the unbearable agony of separation was sufficient enough to wipe over the negative residue accumulated due to unfavorable karma over all their previous lives (and the present one). No sooner had they meditated upon their lord than they felt themselves embracing him and the ecstatic bliss thus generated similarly washed off the positive effects of all their meritorious karma. Thus united with the Supreme Soul, who is the self of all (param-atma), even as a beloved would do with her paramour, they were completely relieved of all karmic bonds.

Ancient commentators have believed that the Bhagavata Purana, on which the above narrative is based, is actually a commentary on the most exalted text of Indian philosophy, the Brahma Sutras. Consider what the latter has to say on the destruction of karmic residue:

"On attaining the highest reality (Brahman), the earlier and later sins are destroyed, which do not originate again." (4.1.13)

"The good deeds also do not cling to the one who has attained Brahman." (4.1.14)

Indeed, authoritative texts are unanimous on the point that one who has attained union with the Supreme Soul is free from the effects of karma. The Chandogya Upanishad says:

"As water does not cling to a lotus leaf, so will future sins not cling to him." (4.14.3)
"The accumulated sins of the past will be destroyed, as the fibers at the tip of a reed are burnt up when laid on fire." (5.24.3)

The Mundaka Upanishad puts it clearly:

"All the actions of a such a soul are destroyed." (2.2.8)

Here, it is interesting to observe that, even though the innocent ladies of Vraja did not recognize Krishna as the Supreme Soul, the very fact that they had intense desire for him led to their emancipation and release from the bondage of karma. It is said:

"Persons who continuously cherish love, anger, fear, affection, identity and friendliness unto the lord, ultimately attain one-ness with him." (Bhagavata Purana 10.29.15)

The idea being that whatever emotion is directed towards god, it should be intense and continuous. Sage Vyasa has the following to say in his commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras:

'Virtuous deeds ripen quickly when brought to completion with intense force (tivra sam-vega). Evil deeds too come to a speedy fruition when repeatedly performed due to intense afflictions (tivra klesha).’ (2.12)

**The Gopis Meet Krishna:**

For those of the gopis who managed to get away, Krishna’s reaction on seeing them was a far cry from what they had expected. He welcomed them in extremely formal terms calling them "Highly blessed ladies," and then enquired of what service he could be to them.
The women felt dejected at his words. Formality is not for those intimate with each other, where being taken for granted is the usual norm. Krishna however, by making himself dearer, was only aiming to intensify the gopis' desire. In shringar rasa (aesthetics of love and beauty), it is most often the female who acts pricey. Here, the situation is reversed.

In either case, the fulfillment of any intimate situation is naturally heightened when one partner feigns restraint, kindling the other's desire to an elevated, aggressive pitch.
He, further on, explicitly discouraged them, even mildly chiding them for the negligence of their duty:

"It is the supreme duty of women to render service to their husbands with sincerity of heart, and to look after the well-being of relatives and nourish children." (Bhagavata Purana 10.29.24)

"Resorting to illicit intercourse with a paramour by women of noble families is fraught with miseries and dangers." (10.26)

The Gopis' Reaction:

Hearing Krishna's unfavorable words, the cowherd women grew despondent, as their expectations were frustrated. With downcast faces they started scratching the ground, as if imploring mother earth to gobble them up to save them from shame. Their breath, heated due to distress, dried up their otherwise juicy, red lips.

The perfumed saffron they had lovingly applied on their breasts, so that the offending sweat from their bodies would not bother their beloved Krishna, was washed off by a torrent from the eyes. The tears became black on account of the collyrium (kajal). It was befitting that they attained this color, since they were weeping for Krishna, who is himself dark. Indeed, in true love, we have to forgo our own hues, and instead get drenched in the colors of our beloved. Thus did the gopis wash off the soothing red (their own) from their chest and instead rendered it black (Shyama-ranga), the color of Krishna (also known as Shyama), loudly proclaiming that they had wiped off their own egoistic identities, establishing the one Universal Soul into their hearts.

Or perhaps, frustrated by his refusal to make love to them, the gopis thus symbolically smeared off the ornamentation on their bosoms and instead blackened them. However, the tears dried up as soon as they reached the breasts, due to the excessive inflammation generated in their hearts. The two
black lines, from the eyes to the breasts, seemed to trace a carpenter's saw, out to hack them into two, such intense was their emotion at the rejection. Tormented, restless and shivering with affectionate wrath, the gopis wiped their tears and urged Krishna:

"Dear lord, we have taken the refuge of your feet only after renouncing the material world and its desires. True indeed are your words that we women should perform our duties towards our families. But O Supreme Person, do tell us what, when your eternal presence is available to us, are we to gain by serving our husbands or sons who are nothing but a source of misery (due to their mortality)?"

"Our hearts, which were lodged happily in our households and the hands, engaged in serving them, have all been enchanted by your magic and leaving your lotus feet we do not wish to move one step. Dear friend, do defuse the fire in our hearts by the torrential flood of nectar flowing from your lips (since the blaze is enormous it requires a flood rather than a mere sprinkle to quench it)."

"Having seen your face covered with curling locks of hair, cheeks shining with refulgent earrings and lips brimming with nectar, your charming smile, sidelong glances and mighty arms reassuring protection, we have become your committed servants. Which woman in the three worlds could resist the ravishing melodies of your flute and not deviate from the noble path of the ancients (arya-maryada). O friend of the distressed, do place your lotus hands on the love-fired breasts of your humble servants (you will not be scorched by the heat in our bosoms, just like the burning sun does not hurt a lotus) and keep your hands on our heads (blessing us that you will never ever reject us again)."

Listening to their distressed voices, even though he is self-contended and revels solely in his own self (atman-ram), Krishna smiled and mercifully began to sport with them.

**Krishna's Love Games (Initial Installment):**

With their faces now blooming, the gopis gathered around Krishna, whose magnificent smile radiated the splendor of his jasmine-like teeth. He looked like a full moon surrounded with stars. The gopis sang of his glory, and sometimes Krishna reciprocated with his own compositions praising them. The lord next embraced them by spreading out his arms wide. He then excited the women by pressing their arms, hair, thighs, waists, breasts, and indulged in light jokes, pricking them gently with his nails.
**Pride Emerges in the Gopis:**

Receiving such enormous honor from Lord Krishna, the gopis puffed up with pride and each regarded herself as special, superior to all women on earth. Perceiving their conceit at having betrothed the lord and their misplaced pride at their beauty, Krishna, for curing them of their malady, immediately vanished from their midst.

**The Search for Krishna:**

When the lord suddenly disappeared, the damsels of Vraja were filled with a pain similar to the she-elephant who has lost her mate. Overwhelmed by his remembrance, obsessed with the glorious actions he had performed, the gopis then, in his absence, began to emulate his various acts and sports. Due to their total absorption in his personality, their bodies started imitating his manner of movement, smile and speech. Maddened with desire they declared to each other: "I am Krishna" (Bhagavata Purana 10.30.3), much like the great Upanishad sentence (Mahavakya): "I am the Supreme Soul" (Aham Brhamsami) (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10).

Singing aloud his glory in a chorus, the gopis sought him out, wandering distraught in the forests. They enquired of the various trees and plants regarding the whereabouts of Krishna (the Supreme Soul) who like ether (akasha), pervades all creatures from within and without.

Receiving no reply from the vegetation, they then turned to the earth:

"O Mother Earth, what austere penances have you performed that due to the thrill experienced at the touch of the lord’s feet, your bodily hair is standing on its end (in the form of grass and trees)?"

Finally the gopis, due to their intense exasperation and desperation, became one with the Supreme Soul (tat-atmika), and began to emulate the divine sports of the lord. Totally engrossed in him, the damsels of Vraja first recreated the episode where the infant Krishna had killed the ogress Putana who had attempted to feed him her poisoned breast. Thus one gopi, acting the demoness, suckled another, who played the role of Krishna.
A second group replayed the instance of a demon who had tried to carry away the baby Krishna, even as some visualized themselves to be the latter playing upon an imaginary flute, or walking on all fours, like Krishna did in his infancy or held up a part of their garment, imitating his lifting of mount Goverdhana.

One ecstatic gopi climbed on the head of another and declared herself to be Krishna subjugating the serpent Kaliya.
While thus engaged, they noticed, in a certain part of the forest, a pair of footprints, definitely those of Krishna, since they were inscribed with various auspicious symbols including a flag, thunderbolt and the lotus.

Following them, they were sorely distressed to find that further on, another pair accompanied Krishna's. The perplexed women wondered: "Certainly these new feet belong to a gopi who has devoutly worshipped (aradhita) the lord, who was so pleased with her that he abandoned the rest of us and took her to a secluded spot. These footprints distress us, inasmuch as only she (out of all of us) has stolen away Krishna and is now enjoying his lips in their secret rendezvous. Look, this is probably the place where that lusty Krishna sat down and then dressed the hair of his ladylove, braiding her tresses with flowers." (Bhagavata Purana 10.30.24 - 33)

Meanwhile, the lucky girl who had accompanied Krishna, reflecting on her exclusive status,
too became infected with pride, and thought herself to be superior to the other gopis since Krishna had chosen to be with her over all of them. This is how the vain damsel addressed him (who is the ruler of all):

"I am not able to walk any further. Therefore (lift me and) take me wherever you want to."

When requested thus, the lord said: "Mount my shoulder." No sooner had she done so than he vanished, leaving her hanging as it is, to fall on the ground. This is perhaps the destiny of those prone to pride. The girl, realizing her folly, lamented Krishna's absence, but to no avail. In the meantime, her friends, tracing the path of the duo, noticed the distressed gopi and listened to her tale with astonishment. All of them together then probed the forest, searching for their beloved as long as the moonlight aided them, retreating when the darkness set in.

With their minds, speech, and actions, all absorbed completely in him, the gopis became one with Krishna, negating their individual personalities.

**The Gopis' Song of Separation:**

Wandering maddened, the female cowherds now collectively sang:
"O Bull among men (Rishabha), you have saved us again and again, protecting us from the poisoned waters of Yamuna, from the demon who disguised himself as a venomous serpent, from torrential rains; stormy winds and lightening. Indeed, you are not merely the son of a cowherd woman, but the innermost seer and self (atman) of all embodied beings."

"Be pleased to accept us, who are but your bonded servants, show unto us your charming lotus-like countenance. Place your lotus like feet (pad ambuja), which follow the cows and dissipate the sins of your devotees, on our breasts, and pacify the fire in our hearts. We assure you that our bosoms are infinitely softer than the serpent Kaliya, whose deadly hoods you once graced with your feet."

"Revive us with the nectar of your lips which enhances amorous pleasure, destroys all grief and is enjoyed in full measure by the flute kissing them (chumbitah), making people forget all other passions and attachments."

"Beloved darling, in the mornings, when you go out to graze the cattle, our hearts get agitated thinking that your delicate feet will be pricked and pained by the gravel and stubs of grass. Indeed, they are so soft that we are afraid that you may even injure them when you place them on our hard breasts."
"At the end of the day, when you return from the forests, your face, overhung as it is with dark-blue curly locks, soiled with the dust raised by the hoofs of the cows, resembling a lotus surrounded by black bees and over strewn with pollen, provokes passion in our hearts. At that moment, we curse even Lord Brahma, who gave us eyelashes, which, while falling over our eyes, deprive us of the constant pleasure of viewing you."

"Enchanted by your melody, we have left behind our husbands, sons, relatives and clans. O crafty deceiver, who would abandon women like us in middle of the night. Do impart to our hearts, over brimming with desire for you, the soothing balm of your company, which will forever remove our anguish."

**The Return of Krishna:**

Satisfied that the gopis were now fully absorbed in him, and there was left in them no trace of ego or pride, a smiling Lord Krishna, wearing his trademark yellow (pitambara) again manifested himself in their midst, sporting a garland of
flowers. His countenance was charming enough to enchant even Kamadeva, the god of love who himself is the enchanter of the world.

Though emaciated, the gopis, on seeing their most beloved darling, at once sprang to their feet, just like limbs, which start moving as soon as the life-principle (prana) is infused into an otherwise lifeless body. One of them affectionately took hold of his hand; another placed one of his arms on her shoulder; a third received a betel leaf already chewed by the lord even as he placed his feet on the feverish bosom of a fourth gopi.

One virtuous lady, beside herself with the agitation of unrequited love, knitted her brows and continued to view him with sharp side-glances. Another gazed at him unblinkingly, drinking his nectar-like countenance with her eyes. She did not feel consummated however, much like the saints who are never satiated worshipping the lord's feet. A seventh girl established him in her heart through the path of the eyes, and closed them to prevent his exit. The thrill of embracing him (mentally) enabled her to enter the spiritual bliss experienced only by the highest of yogis.

Krishna, along with the gopis, now shone brilliantly, like the Supreme Person (Purusha) endowed with his Shaktis (powers). With their anguish completely dissipated by the extreme joy of seeing him, the gopis' accomplished their heart's content, just as the divine word of the Vedas (shruti), after first propounding a code of conduct (karma kanda), find their culmination only in spiritual knowledge (jnana kanda, also known as Vedanta).

The gopis then lovingly spread out as a seat for the lord, their upper garments smeared with the sandal-paste of their breasts. Making him comfortable, they then enquired of the reason why he subjected them to this tormenting ordeal. Krishna answered:

"Wishing to intensify their devotion, I do not reciprocate immediately the affection of those who worship me. You too lost me, like a poor man who gains some enormous wealth only to lose it, and thus becomes totally absorbed in his anxiety regarding it, meditating on it continuously. Now that you have you renounced for me all aspects of your worldly life – social decorum, the righteous code of the Vedas and your kith and kin, it was with the intention of intensifying the constancy of your commitment towards me that I removed myself from your sight, even though all the while listening to your expressions of affection. Thus my love for you is beyond reproach and you are my darlings as I am your beloved. Dear gopis, the debt I owe to you, who have broken the strong fetters binding you to your homes in order to serve me with devotion, cannot be repaid, even if I am given several lives of gods (one god life = 36,000 human years)."

**The Rasa Dance:**
Listening to these soft, healing words of Krishna, the gopis forgot their agony of separation (viraha), and on physical contact with him (anga sanga) felt all their desires fulfilled. Then, on the banks of the river Yamuna, Krishna inaugurated the rasa game (krida), with those jewels among women (stri-ratna), who, with their arms interlocked, were eager to do his bidding.

Splendidly beautified (mandita) by the circle (mandala) of gopis, Krishna then assumed as many forms as there were women and entered in between every two of them, placing his arm around the neck of the adjacent female. No sooner had he done so than there thronged in the sky, hundreds of heavenly chariots, carrying celestial couples eager to view the rasa dance.
Then there arose from within the ring of dancers, the din of jingling bangles and anklets, along with the tinkling of the small bells attached to the girdles of the gopis. The lord shone splendidly like a brilliant sapphire set in gold. With waists bending and breasts heaving due to the vigorousness of movement, perspiration trickling down faces, braided hair and girdles loosening in consequence of the dance, it seemed as if flashes of lightening (the gopis) were illuminating a circle of clouds (formed by the numerous Krishnas).

The gopis, their voices sweetened with melodious ragas, sang at a high pitch, the reverberations of which still resound in the world. One sang in chorus with Krishna in a higher pitch, and the latter applauded her performance with the words "Well done." When another of her friends rendered the same piece in raga Dhrupada, she too was honored by the lord.

One kissed Krishna's hand resting on her shoulders, and another fatigued gopi pressed his blissful (shivam) lotus-hand to her two breasts. Even as a child would play with his own reflection (sva pratibimba) in a mirror, so did the lord sport with the beauties of Vraja, who, beyond themselves with joy, forgot even to re-adjust their disheveled hair, or arrange their garments and brassieres in disarray.

Krishna, ever full of compassion (karuna), then proceeded to wipe off affectionately with his own comforting hands, the sweat off their exhausted faces. Becoming enraptured at the light touch of his fingernails, the gopis burst out in a song celebrating his glory. Then, to dispel their fatigue, Krishna along with the women, entered the river Yamuna. He appeared like a lordly elephant relaxing with his consorts in water. Indeed, as an elephant breaks off all barriers before entering into the waters of a river, Krishna too had broken through the layers of
worldly morality and codes of conduct, without transcending which, one can never escape the ever-recurring cycle of birth and death.

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