

Hita Harivansha and The Spiritual Reign of Shri Radha

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Abstract

Shri Radha is revered as the divine counterpart of Sri Krishna. This Hindu goddess incarnated in the village of Barsana. It is believed that those known as Sita and Ram in the Treta Yuga are known as Radha and Krishna in the Dwapara Yuga. The Vedas explain that Radha is the soul of Krishna, hence her name often precedes Krishna's as Radha-Krishna. Puranic literature mentions her name with the indirect reference anayaradhitah, indicating that she is "the one who worships Krishna best."

However, the question arises: when did Shri Radha begin to be worshipped as a primary deity in place of Lord Krishna? Who started this ideology and where did it start from? This paper provides significant insights into the development of Shri Radha as a principal goddess and Hita Harivansha, the founder of the Radhavallabh cult in Vrindavan. While she incarnated thousands of years ago as Krishna's beloved counterpart, it was in the 16th century that she became the principal goddess of the Vaishnavas, and her popularity has grown ever since. Hita Harivansha, also known as Hitacharya, is considered an incarnation of Lord Krishna's flute. He played a significant role in the development of Vaishnavism in Vrindavan. His father, Shri Vyas Mishra, who held a mansab of 4,000, lived in Dev Vana (present-day Deoband, Saharanpur district, Uttar Pradesh). At the age of thirty-two, Hitacharya arrived in Vrindavan from there and established the Radhavallabh cult. He was the first to prioritize the worship of Shri Radha before Lord Krishna.

Keywords

Shri Radha, Lord Krishna, Hita Harivansha, Vrindavan, Radhavallabh.

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Hita Harivansha and his advent in Vrindavan

Shri Harivansha, also known as Hita Harivansha or Hitacharya, is the founder of the Radhavallabh Cult of Vrindavan. His father, Shri Vyas Mishra, lived in Dev Vana (Devband, Saharanpur district, Uttar Pradesh), had a mansab of 4,000, and was knowledgeable about Ayurveda, Astrology, Smritis, and Puranas. His wife was Shri Harivansha's mother, Tara Rani. She experienced labor pains during the trip to Braj, forcing them to remain at Badgrama.

In 1502 A.D. (Vaishakha Shukla Ekadashi, Monday), Shri Harivansha was born in Badgrama, located 12 km southeast of Mathura, with historical evidence of his descendants in Vrindavan.¹ It is possible that Growse and Grierson misread the year of the Vikram Samvat for 1559 A.D. rather than 1559 Samvat, as other sources claim. The Gazetteer of Mattura, 1911, states that Shri Hari Vansha was born around 1559 A.D., which is based on Growse's narrative.

*'The founder of the Radha Vallabhis was by name Hari Vans. His father, Yyisa, was a Gaur Brahman of Deva-ban in the Saharanpur district, who had long been childless. He was in the service of the Emperor and on one occasion was attending him on the march from Agra, when at last his wife, Tara, gave birth to a son at the little village of Bad, near Mathura, in the Sambat year 1559. In grateful recognition of their answered prayers, the parents named the child after the god they had invoked, and called him Hari Vans, i.e., Hari's issue.'*²

Hita Harivansh is said to be an incarnation of Lord Krishna's flute. Gulbadan Begum's book, 'Humayunnama,' and Zauhar Aftabchi's book, 'Tazkiraat-ul-Wakiat,' both chronicle the celebration that marked the manifestation of the Lord's sacred flute. Gifts and greetings were conveyed to Pt. Vyas Mishra, and alms were distributed to beggars and courtiers. The outward indicator of Hita Harivansh's birth is 'Harivansha Chah' in Dev Vana, the well from where Shri Harivansha got the idol of God Ranglal ji in Samvat 1566 (1509 A.D.) when he was seven years old. In addition to this well, one can see the ruins of a large, massive pond (sarovara) at Badgrama, which Todar Mal later restored.³

Rukmini Devi was the spouse of Shri Hita Harivansha. He was well-versed in Sanskrit, literature, music, and astrology. At the age of five, he started penning religious texts. His works, "Radha Sudhanidhi," "Hita Chaurasi," "Sfuta Vani," and "Shri Mukhapatri Dwaya," brought "Ras Bhakti" into religious literature and music. The engrams "Harivansh," "Hit Harivansh," "Harivansh Ali," and "Harivansh Dasi" can be found in his writings. He was subsequently referred to as Hitacharya, Hita Ju, Shri Ju, and Hita Harivansh.⁴

Hita Harivansha stayed at Dev Vana till he was 31 years old. At the age of 32, he came to Vrindavan. He married the daughters (Krishnadasi and Manohardasi) of Atma Dev, a Brahman, while going from Dev Vana to Vrindavan at Chirthawal. This marriage has a backstory that has been described in literature. Atma Dev's religious discipline gained him Lord Shiva's grace. When Atma Dev asked the Almighty for the most treasured object in his heart as a favor, he gave him the idol of Lord Radhavallabh. Shri Harivansha had a dream in which the Almighty told him to marry the daughters of a poor Brahman called Atma Dev and get Lord Radhavallabh's idol from him. He went to Atma Dev and requested the same thing, but Atma Dev made it a condition that he marry his daughters, as he was also instructed in his dream.

He brought Lord Radhavallabh's idol to Vrindavan after being married. Vrindavan was heavily wooded when Shri Harivansh Ji came. No one dared to come, not even during the day, since Narvahan, a dacoit, lived there. Through his authority, he had established his rule over the whole Braj area. His might frightened even strong kings. Not even the Delhi emperor could sway Narvahan. He built a new temple of Shri Radha Vallabh Ji in the same spot where Shri Harivansh Ji's family first settled in Vrindavan as a consequence of Hita Harivansh's influence on the life of a dreaded robber like Narvahan.

Following the completion of this new temple, Shri Harivansh Ji sat Shri Radha Vallabh Ji within it and performed a "Patotsav" ritual on the thirteenth day of the bright fortnight in the month of Kartik (October–November) in 1591.⁵ When the Brajwasi (people of Braj) saw Shri Harivansh in Vrindavan, they were overjoyed and gave him an arrow to be thrown as far as he could; the land would belong to Shri Harivansh. As soon as the arrow landed, 'Teer Ghat' became his home. Here the Bhakti tradition of Radhavallabh ji begins.⁶

The Mughal emperor Akbar granted the Radhavallabh temple 100 bighas of Madad-e-Mash land and ordered the custody of temple gifts emanating from the Emperor to be under the custody of Hita Harivansh.⁷

The spiritual reign of Shri Radha and the development of the Radhavallabh cult

Shri Radha is regarded as the celestial counterpart of Sri Krishna. This Hindu deity manifested in the village of Barsana. It is thought that Sita and Ram from the *Treta Yuga* are Radha and Krishna from the *Dwapara Yuga*. According to the scriptures, Radha is Krishna's soul, hence her name is commonly used before Krishna's as Radha-Krishna.⁸

There is a reference in the Srimad Bhagavata (10.30.25ff) to a fortunate gopi who had gone alone with Krishna just before the Rasakrida. The word used here - *anayaradhitah* (being propitiated by her) - might have provided the seeds for the later concept of Radha, as the gopi dearest to Krishna.

Sri Narad tells Srimati Radharani in the Patal-khanda of Sri Padma-Puran—

*“O Devi, You are the **source of all** that is especially pure and good. You are the source of the hladini, sandhini and samvit potencies and You are the Supreme Power and Supreme Knowledge. You give supreme bliss to Sri Bhagavan and even Brahma and Rudra (Shiva) cannot understand You. Your opulence is remarkable in every aspect...Swayam Bhagavân Sri Krishna, who is the Supreme Personality, has countless majesties, and **he is also Your part.**”⁹*

Thus, we don't find her name directly in ancient literature but in an esoteric sense. Whereas the Padma Purana verse clearly mentions her name—

*“yatha radha priya visnos-tasyah kundam priyam tatha
sarva gopisu saivaika visnor-atyanta-vallabha”*

Explains: Just as Radha is dear to Lord Krishna, so her bathing place [Radha-kundah] is dear to Him. She alone is His most beloved of all the Gopis.

Narada Purana, Brahmand Purana, Skanda Purana, Matsya Purana and Shiv Purana also indicates about Shri Radha.¹⁰ Whereas Radha-Krishna devotion in the modern time, was initially begun by Nimbarkacharya. He is recognized as the most significant acharya who raised Radha to the level of divinity. But In 16th century Hita Harivansha established the notion of Shri Radha devotion as the supreme deity. He venerated Radha first, followed by Krishna. This unusual ritual, Hita Harivansha, began in the sixteenth century and was continued by various cults until some point. He broke down the boundary between obligation and dispensation; his lover was in his heart; he lived exclusively as her servant, reciting the divinity's praises night and day. He regarded Shri Radha as an autonomous entity, but other sects refer to her as *Swakiya* and *Parkiya*. Thus, he created a whole new paradigm of devotion to Shri Radha.¹¹

Shri Hith Harivansh Mahaprabhu established the lineage of worshipping 'Prem Bhakti/ Ras Bhakti', which leads to the world of *Nikunj*. 'Nikunj' is the sacred land where Shri Radha-Krishna lives with the *Sakhis* in Vrindavan. The idol of Lord Radhavallabh is a representation of Shri Radha and Lord Krishna's both, which is widely regarded as the rarest sort of "Ras Bhakti". Here the *Ras* is Shri Radha itself. One might experience the bliss of Bhakti-Rasa via unwavering devotion, dedication, and loving, intimate service to the Supreme Lord as the Divine Friend of the Divine

Consort. Whereas Shri Radha is the Predominated Counter-Whole Divinity who alone may provide the highest enjoyments to the absolute Lord.

For Radhavallabhis, the blessed feet of Sri Radha are the highest object of worship. According to Hita Harivansha, in order to achieve the spirit of *bhakti*, one must learn to adore and serve (Sewa) Lord Radha-Krishna with devotion. *Sewa* can be performed by physical means, mental means, and donation means. Physical means comprise devoting your every action to Lord Radha Krishna; mental means imagining and meditating on the name and lilas of Sri Radha Krishna; and donation means not only charity but also bowing down your emotions at the feet of Shri Radha Krishna. The worship of Shri Radha is practically accepted as *Rasopaasana*. All the cults of Vrindavan accepted this *Rasopaasana* in some way. Radhavallabhis have different worship ideologies and don't accept fasting (not even Ekadashi), believing it to be contrary to *Ras*'s worship. They accept the festivals, rituals, or service based on emotions and feelings (Bhaav) only. Some social festivals related to Vaishnavas, such as Janmashtami, Raksha-Bandhan, Goverdhan, Diwali, etc., were accepted later by the descendants of Hita Harivansha.¹²

Hita Harivansh and Rukmini Devi had two daughters and three sons, Shri Van Chandra, Shri Krishna Chandra, and Shri Gopinath. Atma Dev's daughter Krishnadasi has a son named Mohan Chandra.¹³ Shri Van Chandra, the eldest son and heir apparent, and Krishna Chandra ji were charged with spreading religion and literature. Gopinath ji was given the responsibility of the Dev Van Temple. Shri Mohan Chandra's lineage looks over the Koliya Ghaat temple. Thus, Hita Harivansh's ancestry helps shape the cult's doctrine; thus, the cult is still thriving.

In conclusion, Hita Harivansh, founder of Radhavallabh Cult, proclaimed Shri Radha devotion as the main deity. He worshiped Radha first, followed by Krishna. Shri Radha would eventually gain prominence in the Vaishnav Bhakti tradition, something we do not witness in the Puranas or Smritis. As a result, they popularized Shri Radha worship, and 'Ras Upasna' became the cult's focal point. It separates itself from other cults with its distinct approach to Bhakti. It appears that the distinctive devotional ritual procedures have impacted many other Vrindavan cults.

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