

# Response to David Buchta's Review of *First Steps in Vedānta*: Was Baladeva a Vaiśya?

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In formulating a response to David Buchta's recent review of *First Steps in Vedānta* in this journal (vol. 13, no. 1, Fall 2004), I would like first to thank him for the careful and thorough job he did in reviewing the book. I found his review fair and balanced and believe that the faults in the work that he pointed out and his suggestions for improvements are valuable and will certainly be useful to me if I have an opportunity to bring out a second edition. Certainly, many of the points he made will be on my mind as I work on the next three installments of the series, the second of which, pairing Baladeva's *Siddhānta-ratna* with Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra's *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*, is already underway. There is really only one major issue that I think merits more discussion and that is the issue of Baladeva's caste. The question of Baladeva's caste blends into a larger question about the nature of castism in the Caitanya tradition. It may be true that my arguments in favor of Baladeva's being a *brāhmaṇa*, borrowed largely from A. K. Sharma's introduction to his edition of the text, were not entirely convincing taken by themselves, but I find it nevertheless almost inconceivable that Baladeva as a *vaiśya* would have been able to achieve what he did. Buchta is correct in pointing out that *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas* are allowed by Hindu codes to study the Vedas, but he is wrong if he means to imply by that that they are allowed to teach them. Teaching the Vedas is the sole privilege of the *brāhmaṇas* as every *smṛti* authority (beginning from the older *sūtra* texts down to Manu and others) attests.<sup>1</sup> Writing a commentary is the same as teach-

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<sup>1</sup>Take for instance the *Āpastamba-dharma-sūtra* (2.4.24-6): "Tradition says that only a Brahmin can be a teacher. In times of adversity a Brahmin may study under a Kṣatriya or a Vaiśya and walk behind him. But after that time the Brahmin should walk ahead." Again later in the same text (*Āds*) it is said (2.10.4-7): "The occupations specific to a Brahmin are studying, teaching, sacrificing, officiating at sacrifices, giving gifts, receiving gifts, inheriting, and gleaning, as well as appropriating things that do not belong to anybody. The occupations specific to a Kṣatriya are the same, with the exception of teaching, officiating at sacrifices, and receiving gifts, and the addition of meting out punishment and warfare. The occupations specific to a Vaiśya are the same as those of a Kṣatriya, with the exception of meting out punishment and warfare, and the addition of agriculture, cattle herding, and trade." (trans. by Olivelle, Oxford, 1999.) The rest of the *smṛti* tradition has pretty much echoed this position.

ing and writing a commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtras* is the same as teaching the Vedas (ie. the Upaniṣads) because the *sūtras*, though themselves often in dire need of interpretation, are interpretations and reconciliations of difficult, obscure, and contradictory passages of the Upaniṣads. If Baladeva were a *vaiśya* writing on *śruti*, he would be the only known example in the history of Vedic interpretation of a non-brāhmaṇa teaching Veda. Is there any other example? Certainly, the law texts allow for *brāhmaṇas* to study with non-brāhmaṇas in times of adversity, but that does not apply to Baladeva's case. Now it is true that beginning in the 19th century under the influences of the British critique of Hindu culture and of the British style of education many non-brāhmaṇas began to teach and comment on the Vedas. In the earlier period of Baladeva, however, and in the religiously conservative communities in which he moved, it would have been unthinkable. This is one reason why I think Baladeva was a *brāhmaṇa*.

My second reason is related to the first reason. According to the tradition, and there are various versions of this story,<sup>2</sup> Baladeva presented his commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtras* for the first time at a meeting held in Galta, Rajasthan,<sup>3</sup> that was convened, apparently by Maharaja Jaisingh II, as the result of a challenge to the authenticity of the Caitanya tradition. At stake, according to one account, was whether the Caitanya tradition would maintain control over the worship of one of its central images, Śrī Govindaji, Rūpa Gosvāmin's own deity, which had been moved to Jaipur towards the end of the 17th century to protect it from desecration at the hands of Aurangzeb's army. The claim was that since the Caitanya tradition had no commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtras*, since it claimed the *Bhāgavata* itself was the only commentary it accepted, it was not an authentic community or *sampradāya* and had no right to carry out the worship of the Govindaji. According to some accounts Caitanyite priests had actually been removed from the service. Baladeva was sent from Vṛndāvana to defend the tradition and was thus facing from the start a hostile crowd at the meeting. Not only was it a hostile crowd, but it was obviously a conservative crowd as well. If he had not been a *brāhmaṇa*, considering the restriction on non-brāhmaṇas teaching the Veda, he would have been immediately disqualified and sent away. Since he wasn't and since he successfully defended the tradition by composing and defending his commentary, the *Govinda-bhāṣya*, he must have met the basic requirements for participation in such a *vidvat-sabhā*,

<sup>2</sup>See Stuart Elkman's discussion of the variations of this story in his *Jīva Gosvāmin's Tatva-sandarbhā*, pp. 26-29. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986)

<sup>3</sup>When this meeting took place is uncertain. There is no record of it. Buchta has criticized my acceptance of the 1704 C.E. date given by Gopinath Kaviraj. Perhaps this is justified. The date he favors, 1739 C.E., based on an article of Padmashri P. Acharya, seems a bit farfetched, too. If Baladeva were born in 1720 C.E. as Buchta thinks, he would have been 19 at the time of the meeting. That seems a bit young for someone to be dissertating on the *Vedānta-sūtras*. The dates I have accepted (1680 and 1704 C.E.) do not improve on that much, however, making him only 24 at the time. Elkman's reasoning makes a certain amount of sense. He thinks Baladeva was born around 1700 C.E. and suggests that Baladeva arrived in Vṛndāvana around 1720 C.E.. The meeting near Jaipur he feels had to have taken place before 1723 C.E. for a variety of reasons. See his discussion, *ibid.*, pp. 42-47.

assembly of the learned.

My final reason for claiming that Baladeva was not a *vaiśya*, but a *brāhmaṇa* is that if he were a *vaiśya* it would violate an unspoken (as far as I know), but strictly adhered to rule about who can write on what topics in the Caitanya tradition. It appears that in the Caitanya tradition only *brāhmaṇas* can write on Veda and Vedānta. Non-*brāhmaṇas* can write on everything but Veda and Vedānta. Included in the category of Vedānta is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* because it is considered a commentary on the *Vedānta-sūtras* and the *Bhagavad-gītā* because it is one of the three “points of departure,” (*prasthāna-traya*) accepted as authoritative by all schools of Vedānta. Naturally, *brāhmaṇas* in the Caitanya tradition can write on more than just the Vedas and Vedānta. They can essentially write on any topic. Thus, all of the discussion involving Veda and Vedānta and all of the commentaries on Upaniṣads, the *Bhāgavata*, the *Bhagavad-gītā* are done by *brāhmaṇas* (Sanātana, Rūpa, Jīva, Śrīnātha Cakravartin, Viśvanātha Cakravartin, Prabodhānanda Sarasvatī, Śrīnivāsācārya, Rādhāmohana Ṭhākura, and ... Baladeva). To the works considered the domain of *brāhmaṇa* writers might be added works on *smṛti* (Sanātana, Gopāla Bhaṭṭa, Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, and so on). Works of poetry and drama, hymns of praise, works on aesthetics, hagiographies and such can be written by non-*brāhmaṇas* (Murāri Gupta, Kavikarṇapūra, Raghunātha Dāsa, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja) and *brāhmaṇas* alike.

There are a couple of possible exceptions to the pattern. One is found in Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja who occasionally cites the *Vedānta-sūtra* in his *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*. In those cases, however, he is summarizing the works of the *brāhmaṇa* Gosvāmins. Another possible exception is found in Narahari Sarkar, an intimate follower of Śrī Caitanya who was from a *vaidya* (*vaiśya*) family. In his work the *Kṛṣṇa-bhajanāmṛta* he cites verses from the *Bhāgavata* and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. There are no citations, however, from the Vedas or Vedānta. Finally, there are a couple of counter-positive examples. Kavikarṇapūra according to B. B. Majumdar<sup>4</sup> wrote a commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, but it was never published. His theory is that Kavikarṇapūra’s works never achieved the level of authority that the works of the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmins did because he promoted Śrī Caitanya as the highest deity, not Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Kavikarṇapūra’s other works, however, did receive a high degree of acceptance and authority in the Caitanya tradition. Why was only the *Bhāgavata* commentary squashed? I suggest it was because he broke the rule. I have also been informed that the king of Rajasthan, Maharaj Jaisingh II, wrote commentaries on all of Jīva’s sandarbhas. Those, too, have never been published and most Caitanyites don’t even know they exist. They sit languishing away in the royal library in Jaipur. If this pattern indeed points to a genuine etiquette in the composition and promulgation of texts in the Caitanya tradition, it would appear that there was a strong awareness of caste and caste privilege in the Caitanya tradition from the very beginning. That should come as no surprise. The Caitanya tradition after all grew out of and was embedded within the caste-oriented society of medieval

<sup>4</sup>B.B. Majumdar, *Śrīcāitanyacariter Upādān*, p. 111.

India until British times (19th century). Caitanya may have himself picked up the dead body of the former Muslim outcaste Haridāsa Ṭhākura and filled in his grave near the sea in Purī, breaking numerous caste rules and taboos, and he may have himself composed the verse: "I am not a *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, or *śūdra* ... I am but the servant of the servant of the husband of the cowherd women [Kṛṣṇa],"<sup>5</sup> but his followers were educated and socialized in 16th century Bengal. Moreover, Caitanya himself argued on several occasions, according to his biographers, for the strict observation of social etiquette.<sup>6</sup>

So why do many think that Baladeva was a *vaiśya*? Because Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura said he was. In an article in his journal, *Sajjanatoṣaṇī*, vol. 9, no.10, pages 1-8, entitled "Gauḍīya Vedāntācārya Śrīla Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa" he makes the claim for the first time. That essay was followed years later by another written by his son, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, entitled "Bhāṣyakāreṇ Vivaraṇ" which forms part of his introduction to the third edition of the Gauḍīya Maṭh's edition of *Bhagavad-gītā* with Baladeva's commentary. Finally, there is another essay by Bhaktiprajna Kesava Maharaj, founder of the Gauḍīya Vedānta Samiti and disciple of Bhaktisiddhānta, in the *Śrī Gauḍīya Patrikā*, year 1, no. 1, pages 10-17, entitled "Gauḍīya Vedāntācārya Śrī Baladeva." The second two essays probably just reiterate the claim made by Bhaktivinoda, though perhaps they have new evidence to add as well. What evidence does Bhaktivinoda present in his ground-breaking essay? Unfortunately, I have not been able to lay my hands on a copy. I was hoping that Buchta would discuss the evidence presented there, but he seems satisfied with accepting Bhaktivinoda's opinion. Considering that the preponderance of evidence is in favor of Baladeva's having been a *brāhmaṇa* and that he would not have been able to achieve what he did if he were not, I think it is more reasonable to think of Baladeva as a *brāhmaṇa* until Bhaktivinoda's evidence is examined and evaluated. If Bhaktivinoda has strong or irrefutable evidence to support his claim, I am willing to accept it. Until then, however, Baladeva's *brāhmaṇa*-hood makes more sense.

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<sup>5</sup>Cited in Rūpa Gosvāmin's *Padyāvalī*, verse 74.

<sup>6</sup>See the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Antya-līlā, chapter 4, verses 124-127, for instance.