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**Persons in Relationship: Some Śrīvaiṣṇava Arguments for the Real  
Communion of God and Humans according to Veṅkaṭanātha's  
*Rahasyatrayasāra***

In the Viśiṣṭādvaita/Srīvaiṣṇava tradition (*sampradāya*) of Rāmānuja, self is recognized to be a relational reality; there is no question of a non-relational self existing entirely by itself, alone. Rāmānuja offers a definition of *śeṣa* that is used in defining the self's relation to *bhagavan* (the lord): “He is the *śeṣa* whose proper-form is such as is chosen on account of the desire to promote the abundance of an other — an other who is the *śeṣi*.” (*Vedārthasaṃgraha*). All beings, conscious and non-conscious, are *śeṣa* to *bhagavan* (the lord), dependent in essence and in experience.

Accepting this notion of self, Vedānta Deśika, in his *Śrīmadrahasyatrayasāra*, and particularly in its 16<sup>th</sup> chapter (*Puruṣārthakastha*), explores further the relationships among *bhagavatas* (the members of the community as the lord's people), in order to argue that the essential relationship of each *bhagavata* to *bhagavan* likewise implies a deep — innate and acquired — bond among *bhagavatas* who are *śeṣa* to one another. Deśika cites Rāmānuja's *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, quoted above, as his base assumption; but by exploring the communal implications he also builds on it significantly.

The consequently deeper grounding of the *śeṣa-śeṣi* relationship, in its existential reality in community, is developed by Deśika through an exposition of the *bhagavan-bhagavata* relationship as purposeful and performative (enacted in orientation to goals), and affirmed in divine and human experience. In the course of the chapter, Deśika argues that this deeper interrelationship is both innate and acquired, and that it is mediated through community of *bhagavatas*, while still directly for the sake of *bhagavan*; love and service of *bhagavan* are enacted and enjoyed more intensely in the community. *Bhagavan* takes pleasure in the *bhagavatas*, and in what pleases them; his own pleasure and self-appropriation as *bhagavan* — as *śeṣi* — eventually depend on the mutual pleasure of the *bhagavatas* in one another.

*Śeṣatva* implies *kaiṃkārya* (service), since the theoretically affirmed and ontologically grounded *śeṣa-śeṣi* relationship among selves is insufficient — just as, in a ritual context, a theoretical grasp of *yajña* does not replace actual performance. The mutual *śeṣa-śeṣi* relationship among *bhagavatas* also implies the choice to serve one another; mutual service in community does not detract from one's personal obligation to *bhagavan*; service in the community may be conceived of as the flourishing (*vṛddhi*) that occurs when one has done one's duty (*kārya*) for the sake of *bhagavan*.

Deśika and his commentators support these and other points through many Sanskrit and Tamil quotations that provide intellectual grounding and communicate the spirit of the relationships; through ritual parallels drawn from Mīmāṃsā (particularly Prabhākara) positions; and through the experiential, affective joy that characterizes lived communal relationships.

In all of this, Deśika is addressing objections voiced in the community itself — largely having to do with fears related to diluting relationship to *bhagavan* by relationships to others; this is a *sampradāyika* and not a public issue. It is notable that, as far as I can see, the topic of RTS 16 is peculiar to Deśika’s maṇipravāla writings, and is not discussed in his Sanskrit treatises. The “in-house” nature of the deliberations on community raises issues that are not, need not, be explored in the more public domain of Sanskrit, sastric discourse.)

An important theological corollary — introduced into RTS 16 by the citation of *Bhagavad Gītā* 7.18 (“All these are, indeed, noble; among them the wise person is My very self — his self integrated, he is committed to Me alone as the highest goal.”) — is an intensification of the *bhagavan-bhagavata* relationship by the insistence that the *bhagavata* is the self of *bhagavan*. This further claim grounds more deeply the interconnection of *bhagavan* and *bhagavatas*, as fostering the connection of *bhagavatas* in relation to one another. That the *bhagavata* is the self of *bhagavan* is further supported by two alvar texts that (while not quoted in RTS 16) fill out the meaning of *Gītā* 7.18: Śatakopan’s *Tiruvaymoli* 4.3.8 (“You are in my spirit, your form is knowledge, light abiding as everything, filling the lovely seven worlds, *your life’s breath is mine, my life’s breath is yours*: how can I explain the way you abide?”) and Tirumalisai Piran’s *Nanmukan Tiruvantati* 7 (“Now and tomorrow and even this very minute, your grace abides as my portion, and surely, *I do not exist without you — but see, Nārāyaṇa, without me you are not.*”) (It is interesting to note that Rāmānuja seems to be paraphrasing this *Nanmukan Tiruvantati* verse at the conclusion of his *Gītā Bhaṣya* interpretation of *Gītā* 7.18, and so too Deśika’s *Tātparyacandrikā* comment thereupon.)

A final element in this intensified web of relations is noted but not accentuated (in RTS 16) by Deśika: the paradigmatic relationship that most firmly models divine and human obligations and commitments is the relationship to the *ācārya* who makes known the truth of human nature. In learning the full meaning of *śeṣatva* from the *ācāryas*, whom one serves with utmost dedication, one grows in understanding and pleasure, and is motivated and enabled to act accordingly. Those who study the RTS are, by learning from Deśika as *ācārya*, also drawn into the web of relationships that is both divine and human.

Interesting in itself — and rich in parallels with Christian discussions of the relationship of love of God and love of neighbor — Deśika’s elaboration here of the relationality of persons in community is illuminating also because it maps out rather clearly the methods by which a theologian takes an established principle — such as the *śeṣa-śeṣi* relationship — and uses it to amplify a richer, broader, multi-dimensional world of relationships that rely also on conscious intent, active service, and position human experience.

“Person,” grounded theologically on ritual/philosophical bases, and richly imagined as experienced in community relationships, thus stands at the center of the community’s thinking about itself as “person/s in relationship;” this intersubjectivity, divine and human, is a distinctive features of the Srīvaiṣṇava *sampradāyas* self-understanding.