International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Sacred Freedom: Reimagining Existentialism Through Bhakti

Ms. Sayantika Sen[1], Dr. Debraj Chakraborty[2]

[1]Assistant Professor Department of English, Chunaram Gobinda Memorial Govt. College
[2]Assistant Professor Department of Philosophy, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University

Abstract
This study looks at how Bhakti and existential philosophy interact, suggesting that in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, Bhakti represents both deep love and complete freedom which could be an existential choice that is basically contradictory but ultimately transformative. Bengal Vaiṣṇavism gives an alternative answer to existential questions: surrender as freedom and love as transcendence. This contrasts with Western existentialism, which emphasizes autonomy, anguish, and authenticity, and its resultant anxiety, alienation and despairespecially as expressed by Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus. This essay advocates the case that Bhakti could be a poignant and fruitful alternative tothese existential crises because, contrary commonplace idea, this paper argue that bhaktiis an active reclamation of identity through a divine relationship rather than a passive act. This research reconstructs Bhakti as an existential commitment to meaning, integrity, and profound freedom by interpreting important texts like the BhāgavataPurāṇa, Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu, and Chaitanya Charitāmṛta through the prism of widely overlapping philosophies.

Keywords: freedom, bhakti, existential meaning, absurd, līlā, rupa-swarupa, alienation

Western existentialists, such as Sartre and Camus, contend that human life is meaningless by nature and that meaning must be derived from unregulated freedom and unwarranted personal responsibility. On the other hand,bhakti presents a different viewpoint: the devotee finds great meaning in divine love rather than creating meaning on their own. Sartre views commitment as an affirmation of selfhood, while Vashinava Bhakti views commitment as the surrender of egocentric selfhood to divine grace. By arguing that love is the most profound existential act and that surrender is the ultimate form of freedom, this study examines Bhakti as an existential choice, challenging many traditional existentialist ideas.
It is unquestionably true that existential philosophy and Gaudiya Vaishnavism offer two different, but possibly related, perspectives on meaning and human existence. Gaudiya Vaishnavism emphasizes the transformational power of divine love and experiential devotion. On the flip side, existential philosophy, which is typified by thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre, emphasizes personal autonomy, free will, and the intrinsic meaninglessness of existence. The review of the literature looks at existentialism, devotion, and spiritual practices in a variety of philosophical and cultural contexts. Bengal-Vaishnavism's use of place and experience is examined by Sarbadhikary (2015)[i], who focuses on how devotional practices are experienced and situated within particular geographic and cultural contexts. This piece sheds light on the real and physical aspects of religious devotion. Bayan and Deb[ii] (2025) while examining how mantra chanting affects power spectral density, provide a scientific viewpoint on

the neurophysiological effects of this religious activity. Their study adds to the increasing amount of data that shows a connection between quantifiable physiological changes and traditional spiritual practices. Schnell[iii] (2010) introduces the concept of existential indifference as another dimension in the search for meaning in life. This perspective adds nuance to existential philosophy by considering not only the presence or absence of meaning but also the potential for indifference towards existential questions. The synthesis of these works suggests a complex interplay between physical location, spiritual practices, and existential concerns. While Sarbadhikary's work emphasizes the importance of place in religious experience, Bayan and Deb's research points to the internal, physiological effects of spiritual practices. Schnell's exploration of existential indifference offers a counterpoint to traditional existential thought, potentially bridging the gap between intense spiritual engagement and philosophical detachment. This review highlights the multifaceted nature of spiritual and existential experiences, spanning from concrete, place-based devotional practices to abstract philosophical concepts and measurable physiological effects. I make a similar attempt in this study to explore the intersections between Vaishnavite approaches to understanding human spirituality and the search for meaning. S. Sarbadhikary hints at the fact that Gaudiya Vaishnavism's doctrine of bhakti, or loving devotion, provides a framework for addressing existential questions by positing a divine relationship that offers eternal bliss and purpose beyond mundane existence[iv]. The interplay between these paradigms can yield rich insights.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism and its philosophy:

Vaiṣṇavism is a Hindu religious group that worships Vishnu and his various incarnations, including Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, and Nrishimgha. The main Vaishnava sects distinguish themselves by their founders or most renowned instructors (based on the four listeners who were present when Kṛṣṇa taught Arjuna: Brahma, Sri (Lakshmi), Rudra, and the Kumaras). As a result, the groups include the Sri-sampradaya following Ramanujacharya, the Rudrasampradaya following Visnuswami (of which the Vallabha-sampradaya following Vallabhacharya is an offshoot), the Kumara-sampradaya following Nimbarka, and the Brahmasampradaya following Madhvacharya (of which the Gaudiya-sampradaya following Chaitanya is an offshoot). This article focuses on the Gaudiya-sampradaya, often known as Bengal Vaishnavism.

First, it is necessary to understand the Vaishnavas' philosophy of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and their everlasting love in the land of eternity, since the psychological component of Vaishnava sādhanā is mostly developed with this philosophy. Rādhā is merely the manifestation of the boundless power of love inherent in the very nature of Kṛṣṇa. The supreme Being can be thought of in three of its states: as the unqualified Brahman, as the Paramatman, the indwelling principle of all beings, or as the Bhagavan, the active and qualified God. As Bhagavan, Kṛṣṇa has three powers: the Maya-sakti, which gives rise to the material world; the Jiva-sakti, which is the power through which all beings are created (sometimes referred to as the Tatasthasakti, the accidental power); and the Svarupa-sakti, which is the power He possesses by virtue of His ultimate nature. The Lord's svarupasakti comprises three attributes: sat (existence), cit (pure consciousness), and ananda (bliss). These three qualities have the power of three forces, similar to God, which are known as Sandhini (the power of existence), Samvit (the power of consciousness), and Hladim (the power of bliss, which is in the nature of infinite love)[v]. Rādhā is the transfiguration of this force of love or bliss, and hence the very essence of Rādhā is already tied up in the very nature of Kṛṣṇa, and the two are ultimately one and the same. What accounts for the apparent split between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā? Kṛṣṇa's self-realization is the ultimate goal. God has two aspects to his

nature, the enjoyer and the enjoyed, and he cannot even comprehend his own nature as the enjoyer unless the reality of the enjoyed exists. The reality of one entails the reality of the other since Rādhā symbolizes the eternal enjoyed and Kṛṣṇa is the eternal enjoyer, and the enjoyed and the enjoyer are co-related. In other words, Rādhā as the eternal enjoyed is just as real as Kṛṣṇa the eternal enjoyer. This unbreakable bond between the two is the everlasting love affair between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, in which Rādhā is constantly understanding the value of her whole being in relation to Kṛṣṇa, the eternal enjoyer, and Kṛṣṇa is constantly enjoying Rādhā in order to understand the infinite power of love and happiness that is within him. The key to the entire drama that unfolds in the timeless realm of Vrndavana is this reciprocal love. The very essence of the ultimate reality is that this everlasting līlā (or love-dalliance) between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa does not imply any deficiency or flaws. The Vaisnava theology and literature have portrayed this relationship of everlasting affection between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa anthropomorphically via comparisons of human love. The psychological analysis of human love into all its varieties and nuances has therefore been conducted in the utmost detail in order to comprehend the nature of this divine love, and it has been discovered upon analysis that divine love can only be expressed through the analogy of the most intense, romantic, and unconventional love that can exist between a man and a woman who are united by the ideal of love for love's sake. The intensity of emotion in post-nuptial love is not the best or most ideal form of love since it has been tempered by social convention and legal coercion, and familiarity and acquaintance has eroded the unusual mystery, which is the salt of love, making it commonplace and diluted. The ultimate ideal of human love is the love that is shared most privately between couples, who are completely free in their love from any thought of loss or gain, who rebel against society and break the law, and who make love the beginning and end of their lives. This is the ideal of Parakiya love, which is the finest human analogy for divine love. As a result of this theological concept, Rādhā is not portrayed as Kṛṣṇa's wife in any of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legends; instead, she is usually depicted as the wife of a different cowherd or as a servant who is just beginning to enter her prime.

Sri-Caitanya possessed the qualities of both the enjoyed and the enjoyed, and it has been claimed that he belonged to the highest form of Kṛṣṇa, adorned with the radiance of the supreme emotion of Rādhā (rādhā-bhāva-dyuti-suvalita)[vi]. The love attitude of Rādhā toward Kṛṣṇa, known as Rādhābhava, was his dominant religious perspective, even though he himself became frequently aware of his true self as being solely Kṛṣṇa. Caitanya's religion, which is based more on his tears and recurring love-trances than on sermons and precepts, can be identified by this Rādhā-bhava, or the devotional religious attitude that resembles the most unconventional romantic love a woman can have for her beloved. The religious attitude of the Vaisnava poets of Bengal, as represented in the innumerable love-lyrics composed by them, was not, however, exactly the same as that of Caitanya. “The attitude of the Vaisnava poets was Sakhi-bhava rather than Rādhā-bhava”[vii] . Sri-Caitanya placed himself in the position of Rādhā and longed with all the tormenting pangs of heart for union with his beloved Kṛṣṇa; but the Vaisnava poets, headed by Jayadeva, Candidas and Vidyapati, placed themselves rather in the position of the Sakhis, or the female companions of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, who did never long for their union with Kṛṣṇa,— but ever longed for the opportunity of witnessing from a distance the eternal love-making of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the supra-natural land of Vrndavana. This eternal līlā is the eternal truth, and, therefore, it is this eternal līlā—the playful love-making of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, which the Vaisnava poets desired to enjoy. If we analyse the Gita-govinda of Jayadeva we shall find not even a single statement which shows the poet’s desire to have union, The exclamation—“Ha'ukabhakata-citēsukher-sañcāra/jaẏajaẏarādhā-kṛṣṇa-

nikunja-bihāra[viii] (1.1, 2) (May bliss be in the heart of the devotees/Glorious be the secret dalliances of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa) sounds the key-note of the Vaisnava attitude of Jayadeva.

Gaudiya (Bengal) Vaishnavism and Existentialism of Søren Kierkegaard:

The particular form of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism under consideration exhibits notable parallels with existentialism. Existentialism rejects the notion that the universe provides guidance on how one should live. Paradoxically, upon reflection, it becomes apparent that Vaiṣṇavism satisfies the criteria for existential freedom. Existentialists value personal freedom and self-actualization more than rules that apply to everyone or abstract theories, even if they are logical or scientific. They say that freedom is important for people to live, but personal responsibility and determinism make it hard to achieve. Existentialists all agree that people are free, but they also know that people are limited by many things, such as their own nature and the way society works. These limits are a natural part of being human and can only be understood by actively dealing with life's choices and problems. So, the main question is how one can gain freedom. This question divides existentialists. Kierkegaard asserts that being at reconciliation with God is the highest form of freedom. Sartre, conversely, says that freedom is the ability to make your own identity, even in a world that seems uncertain and meaningless. In his essay "Faith and Freedom in Existentialism," D.E. Roberts examines Kierkegaard's theory of freedom, which unfolds through three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. During the aesthetic stage, people live without any responsibilities, seeing life as a game and giving in to fantasy and sensuality.However, this independence ultimately subjects individuals to external forces such as impulse and fate, bypassing genuine decision-making and thereby negating it. In contrast, the ethical stage involves a sense of moral responsibility, where individuals begin to perceive life's significance as contingent upon their own thoughts rather than external events. This marks a transition from irresponsibility to ethical seriousness, yet the moral path remains incomplete. It prepares individuals for the religious stage, where true liberty is achieved[ix] (473–474).In Kierkegaard's words,

"when the ethical individual has finished his task, has fought the good fight, he has then reached the point where he has become the one man, that is to say, that there is no other man altogether like him; and at the same time he has become the universal man. To be the one man is not in itself anything so great, for that everybody has in common with every product of nature; but to be that man such a way that he is also the universal man is the true art of living"[x].

Because of this, Kierkegaard holds that the religious stage is the zenith of freedom. This sort of liberty goes above moral norms rather than being immoral. It involves accepting oneself, but not in a way that is assertive. Instead, it is predicated on the notion that God's grace provides atonement for one's own sinfulness. The only way to achieve this self-acceptance is through faith, which involves a personal relationship with God and a strong recognition of one's shortcomings. Thus, freedom is about embracing God's grace and forgiveness rather than seeking moral independence. Kierkegaard says that "the passion of freedom is aroused in him (and it is aroused by the choice, as also it is presupposed in the choice) he chooses himself and fights for the possession of this object as he would for his eternal blessedness; and it is his eternal blessedness"[xi]. He uses the term "repentance" to describe this conflict and acquisition, but he is unable to give up anything, including the hardest or most painful aspect of it. He repents his way back into himself, back into his family, back into his race, until he finds himself in God (Either/Or, 181–2).

Therefore, there appears to be a paradox. Kierkegaard maintains that genuine liberty originates from divine grace, while also highlighting the value of human autonomy. He thinks that humans are free to make choices and create their own destiny, but this freedom also causes worry since people are aware of their capacity for sin and failure. The need for divine intervention is demonstrated by the inability of moral effort or philosophical reasoning to resolve these existential problems. Freedom may only be fully realized through God's grace and the regeneration of the person. Kierkegaard's contradictory views are now clear in his idea of the essence of faith. He makes the distinction between subjective experience and objective reality in relation to faith. According to Kierkegaard, it takes a person's own decision to interact with God's message because intellect can only partially comprehend the significance of Christ's life and death. To fully comprehend God's endless love, which can only be partially understood through reason or doctrine, you have to take a leap of faith. Before accepting God's grace, it's hard and humble to admit your flaws and weaknesses. People who try to set their own standards instead of asking God for help, give in to pride and spiritual despair. In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard uses the idea of the rebellious man to show this. This man is free, but he doesn't have a spiritual foundation and can't really find peace until he gives himself over to God's mercy.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Kierkegaard's existential philosophy come together in a unique way to look at deep existential problems and the idea of faith. Through practices like Śaraṇāgati (surrender to God) and kirtan (devotional singing), Gaudiya Vaishnavism offers an experiential way of thinking that is similar to Kierkegaard's ideas. Kierkegaard said that faith is a "venture" that needs a strong belief even when things are “objective uncertainty”[xii]. This idea of faith is similar to the Gaudiya Vaishnava practice of Śaraṇāgati, where followers give themselves completely to Kṛṣṇa and see faith as a total devotion that goes beyond doubt. Śaraṇāgati is a dynamic faith that involves giving up control and trusting in God's plan. This is similar to Kierkegaard's idea that faith means making a commitment that goes beyond rational evidence. Existentialism, conceived by Kierkegaard, addresses the individual's experience of anxiety and the quest for genuine existence in an absurd world. On the other hand, Kirtan being a communal practice in Gaudiya Vaishnavism unites followers and fosters a sense of joy,meaning, and transcendence[xiii]. By creating a sense of belonging and purpose, this group experience can directly affect a person's emotions and spirituality, thereby reducing existential angst. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's idea of "repetition," which involves reaffirming faith through repeated acts, is analogous to the rhythmic and repetitive nature of kirtan. The same way that kirtan strengthens devotion through cyclical chanting, producing a meditative state that modifies cognitive processes, this repetition is crucial for reaffirming one's faith in the face of existential difficulties[xiv]. Through Śaraṇāgati and kirtan, Gaudiya Vaishnavism offers resolutions to existential dilemmas by placing the individual within a supportive community. This communal experience provides existential solace and reinforces a meaningful connection with the divine. This approach can thus, offer a more pragmatic solution to Kierkegaard’s view of faith as inherently tied to personal struggle, where true belief emerges from maintaining faith amid uncertainty[xv].

In existentialism, the person is "alone" in his/her freedom. As the person deals with the outcomes of their actions, s/he is confronted with a sense of existential torment. Thus, Kierkegaard stresses that only when the person yields to God in a leap of faith may real freedom be attained. This concept aligns with Vaishnava concept of Śaraṇāgatiwhich calls for total will surrender to God. Vaiṣṇava philosophy views this surrender as the most genuine kind of freedom. But unlike Kierkegaard's vision, which highlights the struggle of freedom in solitude, Śaraṇāgati entails giving up one's own freedom and welcoming God's will as the guiding force. This surrender is seen as a path to true freedom rather than a loss of it for

the devotee who is released from the chains of ego, desire, and attachment. Yet there lies a contrast. While faith is implied to be an inward, existential act by Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity,Śaraṇāgati emphasizes a loving and secure relationship with God, typically in the form of Kṛṣṇa. Surrender is a devotional habit founded on a relationship with the divine as well as a personal, existential act. Freedom is a gift acquired through surrender. Instead of having to earn it, the follower receives it as a divine gift.The meditative state can also be induced by the chanted or sung prayers that are a part of the kirtan practice. Increased emotional stability and inner peace are frequently linked to this meditation-like experience. Meaning-centered coping relies heavily on positive reframing of experiences and existential courage, both of which can be acquired through meaningful activities like kirtan. This coping mechanism has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, especially during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic[xvi]. Furthermore, particularly in the context of Christian belief, Kierkegaard's leap of faith demands complete devotion to something that transcends reason and social norms. The leap requires total faith in God and is a commitment that transcends social norms and traditional ethics. The defiance of traditional socio-ethical norm is one of the features of Rādhā's love for Kṛṣṇa. She does not have any earthly reward or obligation to love Kṛṣṇa. Her love is a passionate and unconditional commitment to the divine, one that transcends cultural norms, an absolute surrender. Love is frequently shaped by obligation, accountability, and social contracts like a wife's obligation to her husband, a mother's duty, etc. in conventional morality. Rādhā's affection goes beyond these traditional limits. She loves Kṛṣṇa not because it is her duty as a woman or part of a social role—she is nowhere depicted as his wife—but rather because her heart is irrepressibly drawn to the divine. The ultimate expression of freedom, Rādhā's love is the ability to choose the divine over all worldly attachments and obligations. In the existentialist sense, then freedom is not only a political or societal state but also a highly personal experience of self-authenticity.

Gaudiya (Bengal) Vaishnavism and Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre:

Jean-Paul Sartre contends that human beings are "condemned to be free," quite unlike Søren Kierkegaard's theistic existentialism. People are forced into existence without heavenly providence or an innate core and must develop their own values and identity. Sartre's atheistic existentialism argues that people are born without direction and only by means of free, responsible action can they create purpose in life. But this independence comes with worry and suffering since no outside authority—be it religious, moral, or social—can provide clear direction. Sartre argues that everyone has to accept total accountability for their actions and that any rejection of this accountability—what he refers to as "bad faith"—is a kind of self-deception[xvii]. For Sartre, real moral action results only when one's decisions completely reflect one's freedom and when one sees that others also need that freedom. This can take many forms, such as blaming our circumstances, following social norms blindly, or seeking validation from external sources. Overcoming bad faith requires acknowledging our freedom and taking ownership of our choices.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism posits that each individual has an eternal spiritual identity (svarupa) that is a specific expression of the divine love between Radha and Kṛṣṇa.. This svarupa is not something we create, but something we discover through spiritual practice. The physical body (rupa) is not seen as an illusion, but as a potential vehicle for expressing the divine essence. Through spiritual practices like chanting, devotional service, and studying scriptures, the rupa can be infused with the divine essence (aropa), allowing the svarupa to manifest. Unlike Sartre's view of an absurd existence, Vaishnavism

believes in a pre-existent spiritual reality that is the source of all meaning and purpose. The goal of life is to realize our connection to this reality and live in accordance with it. The concept of intentionality, which is central to both Husserl's phenomenology and Sartre's existentialism, provides a fascinating lens through which to examine consciousness and its relationship to the world, and, potentially, to the divine as conceived in Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

Husserl argued that consciousness is always intentional; it is always directed at something[xviii]. Consciousness is not an empty container but is inherently relational, actively engaged with objects, ideas, and experience. This "aboutness" is intrinsic to consciousness itself[xix]. Sartre adopted Husserl's concept of intentionality but gave it his own existentialist twist[xx]. For Sartre, consciousness is not just directed at objects, but it nihilates them, bringing them into being as objects of our awareness. Consciousness, for Sartre, is a lack, a "hole in being," that is constantly reaching out to fill itself with the world. Furthermore, Sartre believed that existentia precedes essentia[xxi]. Consciousness is what creates meaning in a meaningless world. We are condemned to be free and must define our own essence through our choices and actions.

Now, considering Vaishnavism, we can explore how consciousness, directed towards the divine, shapes an individual's experience and understanding of their svarupa (spiritual essence). In Vaishnavism, consciousness is not primarily seen as creating meaning but as uncovering a pre-existing reality. The divine is not an object to be nihilated but a source of being and meaning to be realized. The practice of bhakti (devotion) involves consciously directing one's consciousness towards Kṛṣṇa, cultivating profound love and an will to surrender. This continuous and conscious focus shapes the devotee's experience, gradually revealing their svarupa as an eternal consort of Kṛṣṇa. Thus, Bengal Vaishnavism asserts a spiritual essence (Svarupa) in every person whereas Sartre rejects any intrinsic human nature. Every man, according to this custom, carries the inner nature of Kṛṣṇa; every woman bears Rādhā. The physical form (Rupa) is not therefore, a false or pointless shell but isregarded as something that can be infused with divine essence via spiritual awakening (Aropa). This spiritual enlightenment transforms rather than negates the body or worldly life, letting the everlasting spiritual essence to emerge.

Thus, Sartre's existentialism and Bengal Vaishnavis provide diametrically opposed metaphysical solutions to the riddle of human nature and meaning—one founded in freedom and negation, the other in essence and divine play. Still, both aim to define a route toward authenticity, pleading human beings to live thoughtfully, responsibly, and in alignment with their innermost truths—however differently those truths may be viewed.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Camus' Absurd

This leads us to another philosophical conflict: does Bengal Vaiṣṇavism address or negate the condition that Camus describes as "the absurd"? For Albert Camus, the absurd results from the conflict between the human need for clarity, unity, and meaning and a universe that stays icy still. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world"[xxii]. Unlike Sartre, who suggests a model of radical freedom and responsibility in an atheistic framework, Camus resists both religious consolation and existential construction of meaning. He instead promotes clear-eyed rebellion—a sharp awareness of the ridiculous and a rejection of searching escape in delusions, whether metaphysical or nihilistic. Camus suggests that instead of searching for meaning in the traditional sense, we should embrace life fully, even in the face of meaninglessness. Much like Sisyphus, the absurd hero, we should accept our fate and continue our struggles, knowing we are free and unyielding. It's not about

reaching a destination; it's about being aware and present in our own consciousness. The famous line, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" [xxiii], perfectly encapsulates this spirit of defiance: true happiness comes from recognizing our situation and rebelling against futility, rather than from achieving victory or clinging to hope. In contrast to metaphysical beliefs, Camus presents a vision of human dignity. We continue even if the universe doesn't care. Rejecting unrealistic expectations or turning inward toward faith gives the ludicrous person a sense of honesty and purity. There is no ultimate resolution, no sacred texts, and no higher power. According to this perspective, freedom entails persistently refusing to compromise, lie, or turn to illusions for solace. It's more important to take a brave stand toward a silent universe than it is to succeed. Camus contends that meaning is only a human invention, in contrast to Sartre, who holds that our capacity to generate meaning is the source of our independence. There is no way out of absurdity; we can only decide to live with it, without running away or denying it.The absurd life is not dismissive in its despair, but heroic in its clarity. In contrast to religious traditions that promise salvation or liberation, Camus gives us the freedom to continue without hope but also without giving up.

An alternative viewpoint that specifically addresses Camus's definition of situations leading to the absurd is provided by Bengal Vaishnavism. It suggests a universe filled with divine love and purpose, where cultivating prema, or pure love for Kṛṣṇa—which is considered the highest form of fulfilment and the essence of existence—is the ultimate goal of life. The human need for purpose is effectively addressed by this framework, which offers a thorough sense of meaning. Bengal Vaishnavism maintains that everything is ultimately connected through its relationship to Kṛṣṇa, the omnipresent being of Godhead, despite the material world's apparent fragmentation and chaos.The "unreasonable silence of the world" is seen as a result of our limited perception rather than an innate condition, and this interconnectedness provides a sense of unity that surpasses the apparent divisions of the material world. People can awaken their spiritual senses and experience the divine presence that permeates everything by engaging in devotional practice, or sadhana.

Essentially, the fundamental assumption that underpins Camus's notion of the absurd is rejected by Bengal Vaishnavism. It sees the universe as full of divine love and purpose and not as quiet or meaningless. As a result, the Vaishnava worldview resolves the conflict between human longing and the nature of reality, which gives rise to the absurd. Though it might admit existential pain, it rejects nonsense as definitive. In other words, while Bengal Vaishnavism offers a framework for meaning and purpose, it does not deny the existence of suffering in the world. Nonetheless, suffering is often viewed as a consequence of karma or as a test of faith, and not as evidence of an inherently absurd existence.According to Vaiṣṇava, the universe is not silent but rather misunderstood. Separation is a sign of the soul's disconnection from its divine source. Camus exhorts us to live free from erroneous beliefs. Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, on the other hand, maintains that love, not rebellion, is the answer to our greatest suffering and that what appears to be illusion (māyā) is actually the result of spiritual forgetting.

To sum up, Camus gives us a brave but lonesome picture of the human spirit. Setting aside all metaphysical solace, he confronts the emptiness in a direct but somehow respectable manner. Vaiṣṇavism, on the other hand, sees the emptiness as something full—not a silence, but the unheard melody of divine play. While Vaiṣṇavism tells a different story—one of an eternal love that develops in the intimate dance of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa—Camus finds beauty in Sisyphus's unrelenting struggle. The soul suffers because it misdirects its love as kāma (self-centered desire) instead of prema (other-regarding love) because it has forgotten its connection to Kṛṣṇa. While Camus sees theatre as a metaphor for absurdity, where man acts in a play without script or purpose, for Vaiṣṇavas, there is a script, and it is

the rasa-laden līlā of Kṛṣṇa, in which each jīva is a potential actor. Again, when for Camus, the absurd world is silent--the absurd hero must live without illusion, without hope, and without metaphysical comfort [xxiv], GaudiyaVaiṣṇavism, by contrast, assures us that God is not only present but intimately available—as friend, lover, child, or companion. The divine is not distant, but near, involved, and realized in loving relationship.

Thus, we can see how every major existential theme—freedom, authenticity, alienation, meaning, emotion, and the character of the self—finds a particular resonance, albeit greatly reoriented, inside the bhakti framework of GaudiyaVaiṣṇavism. The following is a brief summary of these points of intersection:

1. Freedom and Responsibility: Self-Rule to Relational Discipline

Thinkers like Sartre who believe in existentialism see freedom as a weight. They think we must create meaning without help from God's laws or human nature. Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism, on the other hand, sees freedom not in isolation. It's not about being alone. Instead, it's about choosing to have a relationship with the divine. In this view, freedom isn't about escaping from something. It's about having the chance to love, to give in, and to join in Kṛṣṇa'slīlā.

Rupa Gosvamin describes bhakti as "anusilana," which means a constant and intentional practice [xxv](Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu, 1.1.11). This definition emphasizes that devotion is an active pursuit, not a passive state. Whether one practices Vaidhi Bhakti, which is rule-based, or Raganuga Bhakti, which is inspired imitation, the devotee exercises their agency not by creating new values but by embracing the values that the divine lovers of Vraja embody. This disciplined approach resonates with the theology of Svarupa-śakti, which highlights the innate power of bliss, love, and connection found in Kṛṣṇa's essence. Rādhā, as the personification of hlādinī-śakti, embodies this force of love. In this understanding, true freedom isn't about creating something from nothing; it's about realigning oneself with one's divine relational nature.

2. Authenticity: Not Self-Creation, but Imitation of Exemplars

While Kierkegaard and Sartre see authenticity as something rooted in self-realization or self-invention, GaudiyaVaiṣṇavism takes a different approach by finding authenticity in emulation—not of lofty ideals, but of real individuals who truly embody divine love. The Vrajalokas, who are the eternal companions of Kṛṣṇa, serve as living examples of emotional and ethical authenticity. In this context, being "authentic" means being true to love rather than adhering to a self-determined will. This perspective shifts the ethical focus from Sartre's idea of the self-creating individual to that of the selfless lover. The devotee becomes authentic by aligning their desires with those of Rādhā or her companions—the sakhīs—who find fulfilment not in union with Kṛṣṇa, but in facilitating his union with Rādhā. As the Vaisnava poets exemplify, especially in Sakhi-bhāva, the highest love is not possessive but self-effacing: the joy of witnessing and serving a love greater than oneself.

3. Alienation and Love: Overcoming Isolation with Prema

Feeling alienated happens when we face a world that seems empty of meaning. Camus talked about this absurdity that comes from our longing for purpose mixed with the universe's silence. Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism recognizes this alienation but sees it in a spiritual way: we feel distant from our true connection with Kṛṣṇa, often because we forget about it due to māyā (illusion). The answer isn't to fight against this feeling but to find prema—selfless, loving connection. Unlike kāma (selfish desire), prema is about giving and helps to heal that sense of isolation by building relationships. It draws a sharp line between kama and prema:

"Ataeva kame-premabahutaantara / kamaandha-tamah, prema-nirmalabhaskara."[xxvi]
("Therefore, there is a vast difference between lust and love; /lust is blind darkness, love is pure sunshine.")
Where kama is egoistic and therefore isolating, prema is other-oriented—a radiant, untainted power of relatedness. This other-oriented love is that which spans the existential gap between self and other, human and God. The relational self of bhakti never feels alone in the world; instead, the self is already inextricably situated in divine līlā (play), in which isolation is substituted with belonging. So, the spiritual self (svarūpa) is inherently relational, and its fulfilment lies in communion, not assertion. And Rādhā's love for Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate illustration of this overcoming. Her identity is inseparable from her function as the "eternal enjoyed," not in weakness but in divine necessity—her longing completes Kṛṣṇa's joy.

4. Meaning and the Aesthetic of līlā: Life as Divine Drama

Life for most existentialists is not already meaningful but one to be created, frequently within an indifferent or even absurd world. Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism engages with meaning otherwise—not as a creation by the will but as one of experience through aesthetic-emotional engagement in divine līlā. Rasa theory takes centre stage here. Rupa Gosvamin, based on Bharata's Natya Shastra and perhaps Abhinavagupta, formulates a theology of aesthetics where bhakti is the singular and only rasa. The bhakta is not a witness but a player in Kṛṣṇa's divine drama. As S.K. De states, "The devotee by his ardent meditation not only seeks to visualise and make the whole Vrndavana-lila of Krsna live before him, but he enters into it imaginatively, and by playing the part of a beloved of Krsna, he experiences vicariously the passionate feelings which arc so vividly pictured in the literature"[xxvii]. Here, life finds meaning not in individual revolt but in loving engagement. The world is not absurd, but a theatre for divine play, where one's part is both singularly particular and eternally divine. Meaning is not created by the ego, but found in letting go and loving imagination.

5. Feeling as Knowledge and Ethics: Love as Understanding and Freedom

In existentialism, particularly in Kierkegaard, feeling—like fear or despair—has epistemological bearing. In GaudiyaVaiṣṇavism, emotion does not merely become a means of knowledge but also the door to mokṣa. The bhakta is in search of Kṛṣṇa not with intellect only, but with bhava and rasa—feelings that are purified and blessed by devotional discipline. As per Bharata's theory of rasa (as transmitted into bhakti traditions), human sentiments such as love, wonder, or compassion become sthayi bhavas—stable affective temperaments that, intensified by vibhava, anubhava, and vyabhicaribhava, give rise to the sensation of rasa. Prema, the supreme rasa, is not something one feels but a way of being—a transmutation of the self into love itself. Therefore, emotional cultivation is both epistemically (it discloses Kṛṣṇa) and morally (it reconstitutes the self) effective. As one Vaishnava philosopher describes it, "Trace the essence of existence from the lowest to the highest and you come to the fountainhead as rasa"[xxviii].

6. Self and Other: Shared Realization in Divine Love

One last and deep existential topic is the nature of selfhood. In Sartre, the self comes to be established in opposition to the Other, and frequently the two are in conflict. In bhakti, on the contrary, self and other actualize themselves through love. As S.K. De remarks, "...in the blissful love of the devotee the divine being eternally realises his own intrinsic potency of blissful love, which forms the essence of his divine self."[xxix]. It is a shared self-realization: the devotee not only discovers significance in Kṛṣṇa, but Kṛṣṇa discovers his reality in loving relation with the devotee. It hints at a metaphysics radically non-dual but

non-absorptive—expressed through the doctrine of acintya-bheda-abheda: inconceivable oneness and difference. Here, ethics is not based on self-possession but on self-transcendence in terms of love. The ideal is not autonomy, but closeness, and the ultimate freedom (mukti) is not disengagement but relatedness—exemplified in priti, the ultimate bhakti.

Finally, GaudiyaVaiṣṇavism resolves existential issues by surround them in a vision of relational being. Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard among existentialist thinkers struggle with alienation, absurdity, and the quest for genuine existence. Emphasizing personal autonomy in a world stripped of inherent meaning, their reactions—revolt, radical freedom, being-toward-death, and the leap of faith—stress individual agency. Through the practice of bhakti, GaudiyaVaiṣṇavism provides a relational reframing rather than a rejection of these issues. The existential pain of isolation transforms to become the delight of heavenly intimacy. The joy of surrender into a relationship that gives depth, consistency, and beauty to human existence, not the burden of total choice, is freedom. Meaning comes not from declaration of self but from aesthetic involvement in Kṛṣṇa's everlasting līlā. bhakti, like Kierkegaard's leap, demands surrender—but rather into emotional and relational plenitude than into contradiction. Grounded in the transforming, emotional, and relational dynamics of love, it shows itself as a whole existential ethics. It views freedom, authenticity, and meaning not as products of independent will but as gifts of close relationship with God, others, and the beautiful universe. To quote Ananda Coomaraswamy, " “The best and most God-like way of living is to ‘play’ the game” (līlā)[xxx]. Bhakti is the most profound form of existential play—where to love is to exist, and to exist is to love.

---

[i]*The Place of Devotion*
[ii]Bayan, T., & Deb, N. Effect of Mantra Chanting on Power Spectral Density, 2025
[iii]Schnell, T. Existential Indifference: Another Quality of Meaning in Life, 2010
[iv]The Place of Devotion,p. 31
[v] De, *Early History, p.* 212
[vi]*Chaitanya Charitāmṛta*, Adi 1.5
[vii] Dasgupta, The Vaisnava Sahajiya Cult, 1947, p.145
[viii]Jayadeva, Gitagovinda, 1.1,2
[ix] D.E. Roberts, Faith and Freedom in Existentialism: A Study of Kierkegaard and Sartre, p. 473-474
[x] Either/Or, p. 215
[xi] Either/Or, p.181
[xii] Quanbeck, Kierkegaard on belief and credence, 2023, p.402
[xiii] Sarbadhikary, *The Place of Devotion,* 2015
[xiv] Bayan and Deb, Effect of Mantra Chanting on Power Spectral Density, 2025, p. 97-8
[xv] Quanbeck, Kierkegaard on belief and credence, 2023, p.409
[xvi] Eisenbeck et al., Meaning-Centered Coping in the Era of COVID-19: Direct and Moderating Effects on Depression, Anxiety, and Stress , 2021.
[xvii] Webber, J. *Rethinking Existentialism*.
[xviii]Sartre, J. P. Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology, 1970
[xix] Fasching, On the Intrinsic Of-ness of Consciousness from a Transcendental-Phenomenological Perspective, 2012
[xx]Sartre, J. P. Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology, 1970
[xxi] Richardson, Letter on Humanism. In: Heidegger. Phaenomenologica ,1974
[xxii] The Myth of Sisyphus, p.28
[xxiii] Ibid,p.23
[xxiv] Ibid, p.32-33
[xxv] Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu

[xxvi]*Chaitanya Charitāmṛta*, Madhya, Adi, IV, p.147
[xxvii]*Early History, p.* 131.
[xxviii] (Shastri, Bhakti Cult in Ancient India, p.146.
[xxix]Early History of Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal, p. 298
[xxx]Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. "Līlā. P.91

Works Cited

1. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda. *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam: First Canto, Part Three*. The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1976, pp. 317–18. Canto 1, Chapter 18, Verse 21.
2. Abhinavagupta. *Abhinavabhāratī: Commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra*. Ed. M. RamaKṛṣṇa Kavi, Gaekwad Oriental Series, 1934.
3. Bharata. *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Translated by Manomohan Ghosh, Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951.
4. Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien, Vintage International, 1991.
5. Cavell, Stanley. "Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy." *Daedalus*, vol. 93, no. 4, 1964, pp. 946–974.
6. Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. "Līlā." *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1957, p. 91.
7. Dasgupta, Shashibhusan. "The Vaisnava Sahajiya Cult." *Obscure Religious Cults as Background of Bengali Literature*, Calcutta University Press, 1946, p. 131-170.
8. De, S.K. *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*. Firma KLM, 1986.
9. Jayadeva. *Shri Shri Geet Gobindo*. Translated by Nagendra Nath Ghosh, Barat Press, 1894. *In Bengali*. https://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.7704/page/n9/mode/2up
10. Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*. Vol. 2, translated by Walter Lowrie, Humphrey Milford, Oxford UP, 1944. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.504967/page/n5/mode/2up
11. ---. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Walter Lowrie, Princeton UP, 1941. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.189042/page/n3/mode/2up?q=defiant+man
12. *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: A Critical Guide*. Edited by Daniel Conway, Cambridge UP, 2015. https://archive.org/details/kierkegaards-fear-and-trembling-a-critical-guide/page/n3/mode/2up
13. Kṛṣṇadasa Kaviraja. *Chaitanya Charitāmṛta*. Translated by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1975. Madhya-līlā, Adi IV.147.
14. Masson, J.L., and M.V. Patwardhan. *Aesthetic Rapture: The Rasadhyaya of the Nāṭyaśāstra*. Deccan College, 1970.
15. Roberts, David E. "Faith and Freedom in Existentialism: A Study of Kierkegaard and Sartre." *Theology Today*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1952, pp. 469–82.
16. Rūpa Gosvāmin. *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*. Translated by Bhanu Swami, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2006. Verse references: 1.1.11, 1.2.4, 1.2.271, 2.5.116.
17. Shastri, Shankarlal. *The Bhakti Cult in Ancient India*. Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970.
18. Quanbeck, Z. (2023). Kierkegaard on belief and credence. *European Journal of Philosophy*, *32*(2), 394–412. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12891
19. Sarbadhikary, S. (2015). *The Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism*. university of california. https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.2
20. Bayan, T., & Deb, N. (2025). Effect of Mantra Chanting on Power Spectral Density. *Indian Journal Of Science And Technology*, *18*(2), 95–101. https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/v18i2.3780

21. Eisenbeck, N., Pérez-Escobar, J. A., & Carreno, D. F. (2021). Meaning-Centered Coping in the Era of COVID-19: Direct and Moderating Effects on Depression, Anxiety, and Stress. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*(102271). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.648383
22. Schnell, T. (2010). Existential Indifference: Another Quality of Meaning in Life. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *50*(3), 351–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167809360259
23. Bering, J. M. (2008). Why Hell is other People: Distinctively Human Psychological Suffering. *Review of General Psychology*, *12*(1), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.12.1.1 (Original work published 2008)
24. Richardson, W.J. (1974). Letter on Humanism. In: Heidegger. Phaenomenologica, vol 13. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-1976-7_28
25. Fasching, W. Intentionality and Presence: On the Intrinsic Of-ness of Consciousness from a Transcendental-Phenomenological Perspective. *Husserl Stud* 28, 121–141 (2012). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10743-012-9106-5
26. Sartre, J. P. (1970). Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, *1*(2), 4–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.1970.11006118
27. Webber, J. (2018). *Rethinking Existentialism*. oxford university. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198735908.001.0001