

## THE VAIṢṆAVA MYSTIC: A STUDY OF ANDROGYNY AND LIMINALITY

*Dr. Carl Olson*

Representing a cross section of the caste system and human sexuality, the Āṭvārs travelled the Tamil country singing the praises of their god. The poetess Āṅṭāl considered herself to be the spouse of Kṛṣṇa and also one of his Gopīs. Other Āṭvārs went beyond the attitude expressed by Āṅṭāl which was confined to that of a Gopī seeking her lost loved one. Pēriyāṭvār would wear women's clothing while imitating the Gopīs. The donning of female clothing is instructive. If clothing is understood as an appendage of the person or an extension of the self, the wearing of women's clothing symbolically indicates a substantial transformation in the nature of the devotee.<sup>2</sup> The Rādhā-Vallabhis<sup>3</sup> and the Sakhi Bhavas,<sup>4</sup> are also reported to have assumed feminine garb in their rites. Nammāṭvār imagines himself to be a woman impatient for her lover's return. The soul is conceived by Nammāṭvār to be feminine which seeks union with the male deity.<sup>5</sup> The Purāṇic legend of Kṛṣṇa's love making, for Nammāṭvār, takes place within the soul.<sup>6</sup> This is also true for Tirumankai.<sup>7</sup> Thus the unitive state for these mystical poets is androgynous. The motivation for this type of religious attitude and behavior is to be founded in the mythology and nature of Kṛṣṇa.

It is against this mythological background that Caitanya and the subsequent Sahajīyā Cult must be understood, if one is to comprehend the significance of becoming androgynous. The emergence in the Indian religious tradition of an androgynous god has important implications for the Vaiṣṇava mystic's comprehension of himself and his path to liberation. Divine androgyny serves as an exemplary model for human behavior.<sup>8</sup> It will be shown that the goal of some Vaiṣṇava mystics is the attainment of an androgynous condition. The phenomenon of androgyny is evidence of the mystic's ability to transform a mythical motif, by means of the mystic path and unitive experience, thereby giving this mythical element a new meaning. On the one hand, I want to view the mystic as an androgynous being. On the other hand, I also want to determine the significance of the mystic's androgynous condition.

### **Mythological Background**

Many mystics of the Vaiṣṇava tradition were influenced by the amorous dalliances of Kṛṣṇa. The melodious sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute affects even the celestial damsels who become impatient with their divine husbands.

Kṛṣṇa's music also excites the Gopīs of Vṛndāvana. They run impetuously to play with Kṛṣṇa neglecting their domestic chores.<sup>9</sup> Kṛṣṇa's flute is a summons to his devotees to come to him. His flute is an extension of his beauty; it imparts the essence of his intoxicating nature. Moreover, the call of the flute is anarchical; it breaks down the moral and social laws.<sup>10</sup> The Gopīs would sometimes surreptitiously leave their families, stealing into the forest to dance with the dark-blue deity. Edward Dimock writes, "The Gopīs were risking home, family, reputation, everything, for their love of Kṛṣṇa".<sup>11</sup> The dark-blue god would station himself between every two Gopīs through his *māyā*. Each Gopī imagining that Kṛṣṇa was near her. Their husbands were not jealous of Kṛṣṇa because due to the god's *māyā* power they thought that their wives were at their sides.<sup>12</sup>

When Kṛṣṇa would suddenly disappear the Gopīs became profoundly distressed. They could not bear to be separated from the dark-blue god for even half a twinkle of an eye.<sup>13</sup> The love of the Gopīs was so profuse that it was without limits. Not only were the Gopīs abysmally distressed at the loss of Kṛṣṇa, they attempted to compensate for his absence by imitating him. The Gopīs would re-enact episodes of his childhood and relive some of his heroic acts.<sup>14</sup> At times, they would completely identify themselves with Kṛṣṇa. They often wandered through the forest in search of him singing his praises being caught in a state of mad frenzy.<sup>15</sup> The legends of Kṛṣṇa's amorous sports with the Gopīs were re-enacted by Vaiṣṇava devotees.

Another important development is the evolving of Kṛṣṇa as an androgynous god, as, for example, in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purāna*.<sup>16</sup> With the ascension of Rādhā as Kṛṣṇa's primary Gopī consort,<sup>17</sup> the feminine aspect of the godhead is present. Rādhā is the left side of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>18</sup> She is identical to women and Kṛṣṇa is the counterpart of men.<sup>19</sup> Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are the macrocosm which corresponds to the microcosmic human being.

In relation to the subject matter of this paper, it is important to note that Kṛṣṇa is an ascetic and the Lord of asceticism.<sup>20</sup> He can be attained only by the practice of yoga.<sup>21</sup> The implication is that the yogin by attaining Kṛṣṇa becomes like the god. In short, the yogin reaches a condition of androgyny.

### Caitanya and His Movement

The first Āḷvār had appeared on the scene by the seventh century. At another time and location, a similar scenario was re-enacted by Caitanya in Bengal. Caitanya was the moving spirit of a new religious movement which constantly sang the praises of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. Some of

Caitanya's followers conceived of him as an *avatāra* of Kṛṣṇa, while others viewed him as an embodiment of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

Caitanya initially reveals his dual — Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa — divine nature to Rāmānanda; he is both in a single body.<sup>22</sup> In order to experience the same bliss felt by Rādhā, when united with him, Kṛṣṇa became incarnated in Caitanya.<sup>23</sup> In the body of Caitanya, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa have become one to enjoy the fruits of supreme love.<sup>24</sup> Caitanya not only embodied the divine pair inwardly, he also exhibited outwardly the passion of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa.

Caitanya offered his followers a model on which to erect their own behavior and religious attitude. All *bhaktas* should exhibit a feminine attitude toward the divine.<sup>25</sup> The *bhakta* should assume the behavior and attitude of a Gopī. This is the only way to gain the pleasure of divine love.<sup>26</sup> The belief that Kṛṣṇa is the sole male in the universe forms the foundation of the emphasis on assuming the role of a Gopī.<sup>27</sup> It is only as a female that the *bhakta* can hope to fully experience passionate devotion. Thus man is an androgynous being. This makes it possible for him to realize unity entirely within himself. Although the ultimate state of union can be considered static, the path to this realization is dynamic.<sup>28</sup> Caitanya was an inspiration to his disciples; he was not an organizer. The task of organization and scholarly contribution was left to his followers. The most significant thinker of the movement was Jīva Gosvāmin.

According to Jīva Gosvāmin, the *jīva* (self) is both the same and different (*bhedābheda*) from Kṛṣṇa. The *jīva* is the same as the Bhagavat because it forms a part (*amśa*) of the Divine. The difference between the two relates to a difference in attributes and characteristics. God's relation to his devotees is characterized by *hlādinī* which is of the nature of pure bliss. The essence of *hlādinī* is *bhakti*.<sup>29</sup> Thus *bhakti* is present in both God and man.

Devotion is action, knowledge, and ultimately realization. There are two kinds of *bhakti*: *vaidhī* and *rāgānuga*. The former type arises from scriptural sources. It also entails seeking the protection (*śaraṅgati*) of God. *Rāgānuga bhakti*, which is superior to *vaidhī*, is the deep love of God. It is a natural excess of desire by which the devotee becomes attached to God.<sup>30</sup> Thus this type of *bhakti* arises spontaneously by following the emotions.

The life of the *bhakta* is characterized by five forms of *rasa* (pure *bhakti*): *sānta*, *dāśya*, *sākhya*, *vātsālyā*, and *mādhuryā*. In the *sānta* state one concentrates his mind on Kṛṣṇa and considers himself as insignificant in comparison to God. In the next three stages the devotee considers himself to be a slave or servant (*dāśya*), a friend (*sākhya*), and a

parent (*vātsālya*) of Kṛṣṇa. In the *mādhurya* state one understands Kṛṣṇa as a lover, similar to Rādhā and the Gopīs. This is a state of pure erotic love.<sup>31</sup> De observes:

This attitude is a kind of erotic mysticism, which seeks to express religious ideas in the intimate language of earthly passion, for it conceives divine love as a reflex of the human emotion. The Saktimat in his infinite bliss sports with his own Saktis; in other words, the godhead realizes himself in his own bliss. The Saktis are accordingly represented, in terms of human relationship considered in its emotional aspect, as his consorts or wives; and this devout yet sensuous attitude entirely humanises the deity and his consorts and presents them in a lovable human relation to their Associates and Devotees.<sup>32</sup>

The *mādhurya* state leads to joy (*prīti*) in God. This is aptly expressed in a passage from the *Bilvamaṅgalastava*, a work quoted by Rūpa Gosvāmin in the sixteenth century.

There had been an intense love quarrel, and they avoided each other in their coming and going. Then, Rādhā saw Kṛṣṇa coming in the guise of a woman. Thinking him a girl friend, she affectionately embraced her, and as soon as she very tenderly kissed her, she became Kṛṣṇa.<sup>33</sup>

Just as the divine couple are androgynous, Caitanya is symbolic of the union of the masculine (Kṛṣṇa) and feminine (Rādhā) in a human body. This union represents supreme love. Caitanya represents all men who possess the same nature and are in reality related as one human brotherhood. The movement of Caitanya informs one that all human beings are Gopīs of Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, all men have a potentiality not only for a loving relationship with god but also with each other.

### Sahajīyā Cult

A further development of the Caitanya movement was the growth of the Sahajīyā Cult.<sup>34</sup> The term *sahaja* refers to what one is born with; it thus implies what is natural or easy.<sup>35</sup> What is natural to man are his senses, and they should be used in religion and not denied or suppressed.

Within every human being are the male and female principles. The former (*puruṣa*) is located on the right side of the body, and the later principle (*prakṛti*) is on the left. There is also a more subtle physiology of the human body. The body is composed of four major *sarovaras* (receptacles of subtle energy): *kāma*, *prema*, *māna*, and *akṣaya*. On the left side of the body are *kāma* and *māna*, and on the right side are *akṣaya* and *prema*. *Akṣaya* is situated on the head; it is the residing place of

*paramātmā* (supreme soul).<sup>36</sup> One must renounce the *kāma* (desire) and *māna* (pride) aspects of one's nature. The path to spiritual emancipation lies in cultivating *prema* (love). It must be noted that *kāma* and *prema* are not qualitatively distinct. They are different in form but not in essence.<sup>37</sup> By a rearrangement of motive and object, *kāma* becomes *prema*.<sup>38</sup> Chandidās, the fourteenth century Vaiṣṇava poet, expresses this point:

Looking deep  
 Into the well of feelings,  
 See how  
 Bodies dissolve  
 In one single form  
 And all seeds  
 Needing to be born,  
 Unite in one  
 For one great revelation:  
 Love . . . .<sup>39</sup>

The human body was a unity at the origin of creation; it later became divided.<sup>40</sup> Thus one must strive to regain that original unity.

This can be accomplished by following the three stages of *sādhana*: *pravarta* (beginning stage), *sādhaka* (advanced stage), *siddha* (perfect stage). Each stage is characterized by certain practices or *āśrayas* (refuges). The reciting of *nāmas* (divine names) and *mantras* are common practices of the *pravarta* stage. And *bhava* (divine emotion) is cultivated in the *sādhaka* phase. The *siddha* stage is characterized by *prema* and *rasa*. The devotee can realize from each stage respectively: Caitanya, Rādhā, and Kṛṣṇa.<sup>41</sup> The final state cannot, however, be achieved without the perfection of the body and mind, which must be cleansed of *tamas* and *rajas*. When *sattva* becomes predominant a state of *śuddha-sattva* is attained. This state becomes transformed into *viśuddha-sattva* with further purification. In other words, to realize the pure love of ultimate reality the devotee must become physically, mentally, and spiritually identical with his beloved one.<sup>42</sup> Chandidās writes:

Love is the essence  
 Of all emotions,  
 Krishna and Rādhā  
 Its body and soul.  
 A lover-devotee  
 Dissolves in that love . . . .<sup>43</sup>

Thus one can come to know the truth of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa within oneself, if one can unite the right side (masculine) with the left side (feminine) of

the body.

The path to union can be given impetus by an illicit love. *Parakīyā rati* (unconventional love) is a relationship between a man and a woman not bound by ordinary standards of conjugal love. Dimock aptly observes:

Parakīyā women can be of two kinds, *parodha*, married woman, and *kanyakā*, those who are unmarried. Of these *kanyakā* women are the lower variety; *parodhā* women have more to lose in giving themselves to a man other than their husbands and thus better illustrate the principle of prema.<sup>44</sup>

This ideal of love became transformed into the model of the love between man and God. Dasgupta writes, "It was a religious process of the divinisation of human love and the consequent discovery of the divine in man".<sup>45</sup>

A man could begin to associate with women at the *sādhaka* stage. If love is the only means of emancipation, it must be created in the mind. The easiest way to accomplish this is to love a woman.<sup>46</sup> This course is beset with dangers. The qualifying factor in *parakīyā* is love. Without the presence of love *parakīyā* degenerates into gross sensuality.<sup>47</sup> Thus women are not for mere sensual enjoyment. They are essential for self-realization. Once this is effected women are no longer necessary. In other words, women are a means to an end.<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that not only must one create love, one must also come to realize it within oneself by comprehending one's internal feminine nature. Therefore, it is also essential for a man to transform himself into a woman. At the final stage of purification, he then sheds his adopted female nature and re-transforms himself again into a man.<sup>49</sup>

From the perspective of the symbol of the androgynous being, ordinary human sexuality is instructive. Normally, men and women exist as fragmented beings. In the act of sexual intercourse, men and women become one, even though this state of oneness exists for but a brief moment. It is not a matter of one sex dominating or subjugating the other in the act of sexual intercourse, although women appear to be a means to an end among the adherents of the Sahajiyā Cult. The physical meeting of masculinity and femininity results in the alteration of each participant. In other words, sexual intercourse effaciously alters both sexes. Each partner assumes, although it may be for only a brief time, the qualities of the other. Thus man takes upon himself the qualities of femininity and shares his masculinity with his female companion.

In sexual intercourse the original oneness of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā is realized. Two human beings have returned in time to that primordial unity of which the myth speaks. In a very real sense, there is something

sacred about the act of sexual intercourse. This is true in the sense that the sexual partners become again the archetypical, mythical parents of mankind.

### Conclusion

At the moment of conception, one is truly androgynous, half male and half female. With the division of the cells, subsequent growth, and birth one becomes either male or female. Thereupon, one lives a life of polarity; one exists between the opposites of masculinity and femininity.

Men and women experience these opposites and others in their everyday life. Being dissatisfied with one's basic condition, one wonders if there is a way out of it. The symbol of the androgynous being is instructive. If one is to become like Kṛṣṇa or Caitanya, or if one is to achieve union with the divine, one must effect within oneself the conjunction of opposites. It must be realized that the polarities of masculinity and femininity are complementary aspects of one reality. If one can retrieve one's lost unity, if one can return to the time of completeness before creation, one can reintegrate oneself. One can achieve the human wholeness which the androgynous being symbolizes. In other words, one can attain complete personhood. The result is a new being, a new type of human being, a liberated being. How more precisely can this liberated individual be characterized?

The Vaiṣṇava mystic possesses liminality. Victor Turner writes, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial".<sup>50</sup> Thus their position in the world and their attributes are ambiguous. they elude normal classification. Liminal beings can be called, as Turner does, "threshold people". They are beings without status, possessions, and social rank or role. This is true of the Vaiṣṇava mystics on their path to salvation.

The achievement of a condition of androgyny is indicative of the mystic's liminal state. Turner observes, "Since sex distinctions are important components of structural status, in a structureless realm they do not apply".<sup>51</sup> In the state of androgyny, there is an absence of sexual polarity. The androgynous condition of the mystic symbolizes a state of unity. The mystic, once he achieves the androgynous state, unites within himself cosmic, spatial, and temporal polarities. The mystic is no longer in bondage to the cosmic rhythms of life and death, to the spatial polarities of here and there, and to the temporal polarities of past and future. The masculine and feminine biological principles, the dichotomy of human relationships, the ethical opposition between good and evil, and the ordinary distinction between body and self are overcome. The

mystic has effected within himself the conjunction of opposites. He is not one or the other; he is both at the same time.

## Notes

1. Glenn E. Yocum, "Sign and Paradigm: Myth in Tamil Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Bhakti Poetry", in *Structural Approaches to South India Studies*, ed. Harry M. Buck and Glenn E. Yocum, Wilson Books, Chambersburg, 1974, p.201.
2. Hermann Baumann, *Das doppelte Geschlecht: Ethnologische Studien zur Bisexualität in Ritus und Mythos*, E. Reimer, Berlin, 1955, p.46.
3. Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, vol.II, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1968, p.251.
4. H.H. Wilson, *Religious Sects of the Hindus*, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1972, p.101.
5. Yocum cites his *Tiruvaymoli*, 202.
6. Ch. Vaudeville, "Evolution of Love-symbolism in Bhagavatism", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol.82, 1962, 37.
7. K.D. Varadachari, *Alvars of South India*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1966, pp.189-191.
8. Mircea Eliade, *Mephistopheles and the Androgyne*, trans. J.M. Cohen, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1965, p.111.
9. *Bhāgavata Purāna*, Gorakpur, 1962, 10.29.6-8.
10. David Kinsley, "Without Kṛṣṇa There Is No Song", *History of Religions*, 12/2, November 1972, 170.
11. Edward C. Dimock Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajīya Cult of Bengal*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966, p.13.
12. *Bhāgavata Purāna*, 10.33.37.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.39.28.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.30.16-18.
15. *Ibid.*, 10.30.4.
16. *Brahma Vaivarta Puranam*, trans. Rajendra Nath Sen, Sacred Books of the Hindus, Vol.24, Allahabad, Bhuvaneshwari Ashram, 1919; reprint ed., AMS Press, New York, 1974, 1.5.25-26, 2.1.109-112, 2.34.27-30.
17. W.G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1957, p.72ff.
18. *Brahma Vaivarta Puranam*, 2.48.27-28, 2.1.42.
19. *Ibid.*, 4.67.67.
20. *Ibid.*, 4.21.208, 4.28.103.
21. *Ibid.*, 4.21.206.
22. *Caitanya-caritāmṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja. Edited with the Commentary Caurā-kṛpa-taranginī* by Radhagovinda Nath. 6 Vols, Bhakti-pracāna-bhāndan, Calcutta, 1949-1950, 7.111, 4.49-50.
23. *Ibid.*, 2.8, 2.21.
24. *Ibid.*, 1.4.

25. Ibid., 3.7.
26. Ibid., 2.9.
27. Melville T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement: A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal*, Association Press, Calcutta, 1925, pp.111-112.
28. Dimock, 160.
29. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. IV, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1966, pp.140.
30. Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1961, pp.373.
31. Ibid., p.193-200.
32. Ibid., p.281.
33. F. Wilson, trans. *The Bilvamangalastava*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1973, 2.75.
34. It is difficult to determine with any accuracy its historical origins. Maurice Winternitz traces its origin to a woman named Lakṣmīm̐kara who lived in the eighth century in *A History of Indian Literature* 2 Vols. trans. S. Ketkar and H. Kohn, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1972: II: 393, Edward Dimock traces its origin to the Tantric tradition (35). He views Nityānanda, a disciple of Caitanya, as the crucial link in the joining of the Vaiṣṇava and Sahajīyā movements (52). Shashibhusan Dasgupta agrees with Dimock on the Tantric roots of the sect, but he also adds a strong Buddhist influence. For example, he argues that instead of the unity of *Prajna* and *Upāya* of the Buddhist school or the Śiva-Sakti unity of the Tantric school, the Sahajiyas substituted the concept of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in *Obscure Religious Cults* Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1969, p.121. Consequently, this led to the belief that all males and females are physical manifestations of the principles of the divine pair. The one thing that seems certain is that this movement was a revolt against Hindu orthodoxy, according to Manindra Mohan Bose in "An Introduction to the Study of the Post-Chaitanya Sahajia Cult, *Journal of the Department of Letters, University of Calcutta*, XVI, 1927, 1.
35. Manindra Mohan Bose, *The Post-Chaitanya Sahajia Cult of Bengal*, University Press, Calcutta, 1930, p.vi.
36. Bose, "An Introduction", p.22.
37. Bose, *The Post-Chaitanya Sahajia Cult of Bengal*, p.30.
38. Dimock, p.163.
39. Chandidās, *Love Songs of Chandidas*, trans. Deben Bhattacharya, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1967, p.149.
40. Bose, *The Post-Chaitanya Sahajia Cult of Bengal*, p.91.
41. Ibid., p.8.
42. Shashibhusan Dasgupta, p.142.
43. Chandidas, p.159.
44. Dimock, p.17.
45. Shashibhusan Dasgupta, p.22.
46. Bose, *The Post-Chaitanya Sahajia Cult of Bengal*, p.39.
47. Bose, "An Introduction. . .", p.25.

48. Ibid., p.16.
49. Ibid., p.11.
50. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1970, p.95.
51. Idem, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1967, p.98.