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GOD IN 'EARLY HINDI' *BHAKTI*: MALE AND FEMALE?

In calculated contrast with the traditional Christian image of God as the bearded father, the first American astronauts replied to journalists who asked them whether they had seen God and how he looked : *she is black*. The image of a male God remains predominant in Christian culture for reasons which have their origin long before the beginning of the Christian era.¹ In the present article I examine the experience of God described by the *bhakti* poets of the 'Early Hindi' period. The term Early Hindi, although misleading is used for lack of a better one; it refers to the literature comprising both the *sagun bhakti* trends of the devotees of Krishna and of Rām and the *nirgun bhakti* reform movements of the Santas in North-India between the 12th and the 17th c. A.D.

During the period under discussion the term *bhakti* usually refers to the unconditional surrender in love of a devotee to God or to the *ista-devatā*. In Sanskrit literature *bhakti* has a wide meaning, ranging from the secular love between persons, between parents and children, between the sexes, between masters and servants and towards a guru, to the religious meaning of love of men for God and of God for men.² "The religious attitude of *bhakti* connotes the notion of a personal God to whom love and devotion are shown. Linguistically the term, as we have seen, expresses inter-personal relationships of loyalty, service, reverence, devotion, and love; and this meaning occurs also in the expression of relationship between God and the religious person."³ From this etymological analysis, it would appear that the term *bhakti* (like love in our common language) does not necessarily refer to the relation of a devotee to a male God only.

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1. See e.g., E. Wurz, *Das Mütterliche in Gott*, in *Una Sancta*, 32 (1977), 4, pp. 261 ff.
 2. M. Dhavamony, *Love of God according to Śaiva Siddhānta* (Oxford : 1971), pp. 13 ff.
 3. *Ibidem*, p. 43.

1. Krishna-bhakti

Having its roots in the Bhagavad Gītā and the later Bhāgavat Purāna, the popular devotion to Krishna (and Rādhā) reached a climax in the Braj area, around Vrindāban (south of Delhi) in the 15-16th c. A.D. The theology of this mystical trend is very complex and all short descriptions fail to do justice to its richness. Only a few main points are mentioned here, in view of the topic under discussion.

(i) The duality in the devotion to Krishna and Rādhā cannot be understood without a reference to the Vaishnava Sahajīya cult (in Bengal) and to the earlier Sahajīya Buddhists.⁴ Sahajīya Buddhism is a particular development of later Buddhism, which has its origin not exclusively in the theories of Buddhism. The real origin lies in the esoteric yogic cults which have been the undercurrent present in all religious activities in Northern India, since the first millenium A.D.

(a) The first principle held in the yogic cults is that the absolute reality possesses in its nature the potency of two aspects, the static and the dynamic, the pure consciousness and the principle of activity. In the Absolute Being these two aspects lie unified in a state of absolute non-duality; but in the process of becoming there comes separation and duality. In Hindu Tantricism these two aspects have been conceived as Shiva and Shakti or as the primordial male and the female.

(b) The human body is like a micro-cosm, with the male force (Shiva) residing in the Sahasrāra (or the lotus of thousand petals situated in the cerebral (region) and the female force (Shakti) residing in the other pole in the form of a coiled serpent. The union of these two forces produces the state of the Absolute.

(c) There are principles of masculinity and femininity, contained in every man and woman—a man is a man because of the predominance in him of the principle of masculinity, whereas a woman is a woman because of the predominance of the principle of femininity in her.

(d) It has been held, particularly in the Tantric and the Sahajīya Schools, that the division of the creatures of the world into the male and the female has an ontological reason behind it. The male and

4. In writing this section I have drawn freely upon S. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta : 1946, 2nd ed.), 1962.

female represent in the visible world the division which is present in the nature of the absolute as Shiva and Shakti, and the perfect union of Shiva and the Shakti is the highest reality. Within the physical body of man and woman reside the ontological principles of Shiva and Shakti; therefore to realize the absolute truth, or in other words, to obtain the highest spiritual experience, man and woman must first of all realize themselves as manifestations of Shiva and Shakti and unite together physically, mentally and spiritually, and the supreme bliss that proceeds from such union is the highest religious gain. This principle is helpful to understand the (divine) relationship between Sītā-Rām and Rādhā-Krishna.

(ii) As one of the forerunners of the Krishna *bhakti* movement in the Braj area, the Vaishnava Sahajīya cult in Bengal can be called a Buddhist Sahajīya cult strongly influenced by the love-religion of Bengali Vaishnavism. The lyric poems belonging to this School are generally ascribed to Candidās, Vidyāpati, Caitanya and others. Mentioning here only those points which are relevant to our topic, I do not enter into the discussion about the degree of relationship of these poets with the actual *sahaj sādhanā* (with female companions) popular in the *sahajīya* movements. It is sufficient to know that with these Bengali Vaishnavas the love adventures of the cowherd Krishna with the milkmaid Rādhā became very popular. With the growing popularity of the Rādhā-Krishna songs, the ideal of *parakīyā* love or the unconventional love between man and woman not bound by marriage became emphasized. As a result, the two aspects of the absolute reality (see above 1.i.a) in the Vaishnava Sahajīya school, are explained as the eternal enjoyer and the enjoyed, as Krishna and Rādhā; and it is further held that all men and women are physical manifestations of the ontological principles of Krishna and Rādhā. When men and women can, therefore, realize themselves as the manifestations of Krishna and Rādhā, the love of any human couple becomes transformed into the divine love that is eternally flowing on between Krishna and Rādhā.

(iii) Against this conceptual background must be situated the vast Krishnaite literature composed in the Braj area around Vrindāban. As an *avatār* of Vishnu, Krishna is depicted as sporting with the local milkmaids, especially with Rādhā, in a love-play with changing moods of attraction and aversion, faithfulness to Rādhā and furtive affairs with the other milkmaids. The number of *gopis* who respond to the call of Krishna's flute is at one time said to be nine hundred thousand and Krishna assumes as many bodies to play with each

one of them. It should be noted that the devotee meditating on this subject or singing these songs in ecstasy has an experience of the divine in which the feminine plays an important role. In some parts of this literature there is also a continuous confrontation with erotic adventures, as when Krishna steals the clothes of Rādhā and her 29 female companions who pursue him in a state of nudity with a view to catching and punishing him.⁵

(iv) The role played by Radha and the *gopīs* in the Krishnaite *bhakti* is in strong contrast with the current opinion about women held in ancient India and also in the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa*, which is an important source-book for the Vaishnavite devotion in Northern India.⁶

There is no friendly feeling for anyone in women, their heart being akin to that of wolves.... Women are merciless, cruel, not easily forgiving (Bh. P., 9.14.36).

No affliction and no bondage results from attachments to others as does from the company of women as well as of men delighting in the company of women (Bh. P. 11.14.30).

This mentality was predominant in Northern India in mediaeval times and influenced all religious trends, one reason being the fear of sex which inhibited the Indian ascetics from early times. In the Krishnaite *bhakti* all these inhibitions seem to have vanished and sexual freedom goes along with mystical ecstasy. The devotee walks on the middle path between ascetic inhibition and liberal Tantric practices. Married milkmaids fall in love with Krishna, who touches and excites them and promises to spend the night with them. Depending on the poet, Rādhā is said not to consider whether her conduct is moral or immoral, or, she is overconscious of the adverse criticism of her relatives and co-villagers, tormented by the persecution of her husband's sister and mother. Filled with pity, she is said to have nursed Krishna when one morning he comes to her with the marks of the teeth and nails of the lady with whom he spent the night.

(v) *What is the religious meaning of these love-adventures ?*

(a) When absent from Vrindāban, Krishna instructs his friend Uddhav to exhort the milkmaids not to look for Krishna only in his

5. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, ch. XVII.

6. For details see A. Gail, *Bhakti in Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, (Münchener Ind. St. 6, Wiesbaden, 1969), pp. 96 ff.

lovely human appearance : He is omnipresent and true devotees see Him everywhere. In this way the devotee can identify himself with the milkmaids in his yearning for God (Krishna), in his suffering when God is absent or in the ecstatic feelings of bliss during the period of mystical consolation. God as Krishna transcends the Krishna of Braj and is the omnipresent Absolute.

(b) This Krishnaite *bhakti* trend gives an even more penetrating insight, when we concentrate on the aspect of love between Krishna and Rādhā. The devotee contemplating on the scenes of this love-play enters into the realm of divine love, the love in the Absolute represented through the anthropomorphic opposite poles of male and female. Due to the influence of Caitanya (in Bengal) on the later Gaudiya theology in the Braj area, Rādhā (whose first appearance is of a very early date in ancient India) attains a status similar to that of Krishna. While the Rādhā of Candidās and Vidyāpati was still afraid of the scandal-mongering among her friends, Caitanya's Rādhā is proud of her (illicit) love for Krishna and Krishna's love for her. Towards the end of the 16th c. Govindadās wrote highly artistic poems on the love of Krishna for Rādhā; Krishna tells his friends he has fallen in love with Rādhā, he has lost his sleep and spends all his days in constant meditation on her. Besides the identification of the poet (and the devotee) with Rādhā, the perfect devotee, we may perhaps see in this love relationship also the vision of the mystical tradition which emphasizes the nature of love in God, even if it is still an 'imperfect' kind of love. The definition 'God is Love' is not found only in the Johanine tradition. It is enunciated also by the sixteenth century mystic Dādū in the following verse : "Love is God's caste, love His person; Love is His body, love his colour" (Dādūvaṇī 3.143). This emphasis on the nature of love in God is perhaps an even more plausible hypothesis if we see the Krishna *bhakti* against the background of the earlier Sahajīya Buddhist movement (see above 1.1.a).

2. Rām Bhakti

During the Middle Ages Vaishnavite devotees worshipped Vishnu primarily in terms of his two incarnations as Krishna and Ram. The common ground for these movements was the belief in rebirth (*samsāra*), retribution for actions (*karma*), the divine couple (Rādhā-Krishna and Sītā-Rām) and the personal surrender to God (*bhakti*). The cult of Ram differs completely from the Krishna-*bhakti* by its

total lack of sexual-erotic connotations.⁷ The relationship between Rām and Sītā is depicted as an ideal for the married couple. Due to an external factor, Rām is absent and Sītā's reaction is one of total faithfulness.

Ontologically, Rām and Sītā are presented (for example, in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇ*) as the two poles of the classical dualism: Rām is the supreme God, Sītā is *māyā*, and for the sake of the devotees they appear on earth. Sītā is the *shakti* of Rām (see, for example, Tulasīdās, *Rāmacaritamānas*, I, 186/6); through her power the world was created; she is omnipresent and at the origin of the whole world. At the same time, in her human appearance, Sītā is exemplified as the ideal devotee of Rām, following him and obeying him. Some poets (like Agradās, of the *rasik sampradāy*) extol Sītā and in her all women above man; every woman is an incarnation of Sītā and therefore to be worshipped. According to the high moral standards set forth in the *Rāmacaritamānas*, man has to show great respect not only for his own wife but for all women; no indecent behaviour towards women can go unpunished (now or in a later birth). Even Hanumān was punished for having looked at the wives of Rāvana. Laying down one's life in order to save a woman from trouble is part of the moral injunctions set forth in the Rām-*bhakti* literature.

3. Santa Literature

(i) From the 12th c. A.D. onwards, with a flourishing climax in the 15-16th c. the Santas of Northern India appear as reformers and mystics. They are mystics whose sole purpose in life is to live and to propagate the "way," which leads to union with God and to liberation. This aim is realized through (yogic) asceticism, surrender in love and the singing of the Name. They are reformers who radically oppose the abuses of Brahmanism, the 'idolatrous' practices of the Vaishnavite movements and the ideological presumptions in Islam. Most of the Santas did not really found an order, although after their death sects developed. The *sagun* theology apparently emphasized God's incarnation to such an extent that God remained limited to temples and idols. Against this the Santas emphasized the Upanishadic idea, that God is omnipresent; His real dwelling is in the heart, not in the temple. After a visit to a thriving, ecstatic Krishna temple, one is struck by the sober atmosphere in a Santa temple, where in a shrine only the Book is kept in reverence.

7. The most important North-Indian vernacular adaptation of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa was written by Gosvāmi Tulasīdās (1532-1623).

(ii) The literature of the Santas is especially interesting in the context of our topic because these poets leave us in no doubt about their opinion of women. For them sensuality (*kām*) is the cause of the ruin of man and woman is its symbol. *Māyā*, which blinds the eyes of men and lures them like a cruel temptress, is frequently compared to a woman.⁸

Woman is like a black cobra in the midst of the three worlds : those who love Ram escape her, the sensual are devoured. Passion for a woman is evil and nothing else.

When a man falls in love with woman his wits and intelligence all leave him : what a waste of your human life, since nothing can be achieved.

Woman ruins everything when she come near a man.⁹

Although passion and desire are said to be the cause of man's downfall, the Santas consider women to be the embodiment of this passion and the cause of its eruption; was not Eve also responsible for Adam's downfall ? In *Rajab* we read : "If you make a man or a stallion pure (lit. free of passion), still the impurity remains with the wife or the mare." "The shouting of Hanuman turned the men into eunuchs, but with the women the passion remained; you ought to instruct only men : do not convey any knowledge to women."¹⁰

Most Santas were married and led a family life; at the same time they preached that all connections with women should be avoided. As a solution to this ambiguous situation some santas gave the following advice : consider your wife (and in fact all women) as your mother and treat them as your mother.

(iii) *God in Santa literature*

In the light of the description given above, it is not astonishing that in the Santa literature God is described mainly in male terminology. When we analyse the *Anabhay Prabodh* of the *Dādūpanthī Garībadās*

8. See C. Vaudeville, *Kabir* (Oxford : 1974), ch. 31 (p. 299 ff).

9. *Ibidem*, ch. 30, pp. 295 ff. See also G. Sharma, *Bhaktikālin Kāvya me nāri* (Hindi), (Allahabad, 1972), pp. 42 ff.

10. W. M. Callewaert, *The Sarvangi of the Dādūpanthī Rajab* (Leuven : 1978), ch. 91, p. 273.

(composed in 1608 A.D.)¹¹ we find that among the circa 300 names, epithets and qualities of God given in the verses 82-106 there is hardly one name or quality which suggests that in the mind of the mystic there was an awareness of God having motherly qualities. Many terms used by Rajab¹² have a distinctly male meaning, like *svāmi*, *prabhu*, *dhani*, *nātha*, *paramapuris*, *jagapati*, *prānapati*, *sāhib*, *prītam*, *pīv*, *mahabūb*, *bābā*, *mālik*, *khālik*, *divān*, *khān*. Not one term has a female meaning. Only the terms *miharavān*, *rahamān*¹³ (full of mercy) may be interpreted as belonging more specifically to the nature of a mother.

4. Conclusions

The term *bhakti* has a wide meaning, in Sanskrit literature, implying the relationships between men, between men and women and between God and men. For the first time, the meaning of the term is narrowed down in the 'Early Hindi' devotional literature to the surrender in love of the (female) Soul to the (male) God.

(a) In the Santa literature this appears to be the only meaning. Even if 'not qualified' (*nirgun*), God is for them a male God and the devotee or the soul is compared to a woman yearning for the Beloved or suffering the pangs of separation. Along with this view we notice the social aversion to women as causes of passion who ruin men in their search for God. The Santas definitely have a male chauvinist attitude. It remains an interesting question to what an extent a social attitude (of aversion) towards women affects the image of God the mystic has and/or *vice versa*.

(b) In the Rām *bhakti* literature there are only a few indications to support the hypothesis that God appears to the devotees of Rām as not just a male Person. The attitude towards women is much more tolerant and positive than with the Santas, and the devotion to Sītā as the incarnation of Rām's *shakti* emphasizes the element of duality in the Absolute.

(c) The love adventures of Krishna with Rādhā and the other milkmaids described in the Krishna *bhakti* literature are symbolic of

11. For more details (text and English translation), see W. M. Callewaert, *The Anabhay Prabodh of the Dādūpanthī Garībadās*, in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*, 5, 1974, pp. 163-185.

12. See note 10, *Op. Cit.* p. 283, 293 ff,

13. *Ibidem*, p. 292,

the soul-God relation found in all mystical literature. At the same time, they confront the devotee with the couple Rādhā-Krishna as a symbol for the Absolute Reality. Understood against the background of the Sahajīya Buddhism to which it owes important influences, Krishnaite devotion in the Braj area adds a novel dimension to the mystical insights of Hinduism. With a strong emphasis on the aspect of love, the couple Rādhā and Krishna are seen as symbols of the two poles in the Absolute (male and female). It would be interesting to investigate to what an extent in the mind of the devotees God now appears as having not only male but also female qualities, not only as a father but also as a mother. This insight may help to arrive at a better understanding of the basic psychology of the mystic and of his appreciation of the nature of God.