

Gerald T. Carney

Boston College

THE EROTIC MYSTICISM OF CAITANYA

Caitanya (1486-1533) was the focal point for a revitalization of Vaiṣṇavism which produced sweeping religious, devotional and theological changes in medieval Bengal. His own religious experience¹ was preserved in the movement which elaborated his simple devotion into a fully-articulated religious system. Caitanya's devotional activity does not stand on its own but is the intersect of vaiṣṇava religious development, especially the figures of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, with the erotico-religious vocabulary of aesthetic sentiment. To understand this mystical path, we must look first at Caitanya's life and religious experience, then at Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and then at the pattern of devotional feeling that became paradigmatic for Bengal Vaiṣṇavism.

As a young teacher, Viśvambhara (as Caitanya was then known) had first shown himself hostile to the emotionalism and appaarent lack of intellectual sophistication of the Vaiṣṇava community in his town of Navadvīpa. However, in 1508, in the course of performing the prescribed religious ceremonies for his deceased father at Gayā, the young scholar underwent a total religious transformation. His classes suddenly became ecstatic responses to the name of Kṛṣṇa; Viśvambhara quickly found himself without pupils and the object of suspicious derision by the respectable sectors of the population. Nevertheless, he was quickly

1. Among the studies of Caitanya's life, see S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal from Sanskrit and Bengali Sources*, (second ed.; Calcutta: Forma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961); A.K. Majumdar, *Caitanya: His Life and Doctrine*, (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969); Walther Eidlitz, *Kṛṣṇa-Caitanya: Sein Leben und Seine Lehre*, (Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis: Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion, 7; Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1968); Norvin J. Hein, "Caitanya's Ecstasies and the Theology of the Name," in Bardwell Smith ed., *Hinduism—New Essays in the History of Religions*, (Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to *Numen*, 33; Leiden: Brill, 1976), 15-32.

accepted by the Vaiṣṇava circle and soon became acknowledged as its leader due to the intensity of his personal devotion and the visions which he shared with his earliest disciples.

It seemed that any religious stimulus could push him into extreme ecstatic expressions: "On hearing the name of Hari or songs about him, he falls on the ground, some times in a perturbed state, sometimes like a log of wood. Sometimes with great devotion he sings songs of Kṛṣṇa or Govinda. Sometimes his voice is choked and his body shivers and horripilates again and again."² These emotional outbursts took place during the communal chanting of Kṛṣṇa's names and deeds, *kīrtana*, celebrated at night in various courtyards of the town. Caitanya began to lead his followers through the streets, transforming a private Vaiṣṇava devotion into a vehicle of religious expression and propaganda open to all classes and capitalizing on the emotional power of the chanting and dancing. The *saṅkīrtana* was responsible for "creating an atmosphere of emotion from which there was no escape. As the tireless exertions of *kīrtana* grew higher and higher, they worked upon the emotions as well as the senses and produced ecstatic thrills and copious perspiration, wild fits, trembling and weeping, [an] hysterical orgy of dancing, stupefaction or dementia, until they brought on exhaustion and unconsciousness, ending in mystic trances."³ Caitanya's own devotional feelings, "a violent onslaught of ecstatic happiness evidenced by his hair standing on end, paralysis, free-flowing tears and perspiration,"⁴ provided both model and impetus for his followers.

However, conversions and cures, but especially revelatory visions showed Caitanya as more than a simple devotee. He converted the notorious town drunkards, Jāgai and Mādhāi,⁵ and then profoundly affected an arrogant Muslim tailor.⁶ He appointed Rūpa and Sanātana theological leaders of his movement despite their loss of caste status through service of the Muslim authorities. Public chanting or *nagara-saṅkīrtana* opened a form of religious practice to all. In all of these cases, Caitanya appeared as the mani-

-
2. Murāri Gupta, *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, II. 1. 25-6; cited in Majumdar, *Caitanya: Life and Doctrine*, p. 135. See Hein, "Caitanya's Ecstasies," p. 18; S.K. De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement*, p. 77.
 3. S.K. De, *op. cit.*, p. 80; see Hein, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
 4. Kavikarṇapūra, *Caitanyacandrodaya*, II. 17.
 5. Vṛndāvana-dāsa, *Caitanya-bhāgavata*, II. 13.
 6. Kavikarṇapūra, *Caitanyacandrodaya*, prose following II. 18.

festation of "the grace of Hari [which] is not dependent upon [privilege of] birth, conduct, the stage of life, [fulfilment of] religious duties, knowledge, family and all such things. Oh no! His grace is absolutely spontaneous. He perceives no difference between those worthy and those unworthy of receiving his favour."⁷

In addition, Caitanya made present to these devotees the very object of their religious belief. During a long nocturnal session of devotional ecstasy, he revealed the form of Balarāma together with other traditional *avatāras* and finally showed Nityānanda, the six-armed form of Viṣṇu. The Navadvīpa devotees felt that he not only made these forms appear for them but seemed to transform himself into them, revealing his true self in these visionary experiences. This first period of Caitanya's devotional activity was characterized by his nearness to Kṛṣṇa in *kīrtana*, devotional outpourings and visions, a proximity to the Lord felt by Caitanya and through him by the devotees as well.

The second half of Caitanya's life, spent as a *sañnyāsīn* at Puri in Orissa, was distinct because of the new emotional tone taken on by his devotion. No more was he overpowered by the presence of the Lord; instead, Caitanya assumed more and more the emotions of Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa's beloved, who yearns incessantly for her absent lover. In these ecstatic trances, he experienced all the love emotions and yet all the pangs of separation.⁸ It became increasingly difficult to rouse him from the moods of Rādhā; these extreme devotions certainly hastened Caitanya's death in 1533.

Caitanya was able to transmit an experience of Kṛṣṇa as divine lover in a living form through the power of his devotion and the ecstatic experiences shared with his followers. Kṛṣṇa, the object of devotion, was not a single character but the result of many shadings and the mingling of many motifs. The development of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is the most complex of all the Vaiṣṇava figures, resulting from joining characteristics of Vedic Viṣṇu with popular legends of the Vṛṣṇi prince who also figured as the patron god of a local tribe.⁹ These early notions of Kṛṣṇa found more de-

7. Kavikarṇapūra, *Caitanyacandrodaya*, II. 19; see also Kṛṣṇadāsakavirāja: *Caitanya-caritāṃṣa*, Ādi 9, 29.

8. Majumdar, *Caitanya: Life and Doctrine*, p. 242; S.K. De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement*, pp. 101-2.

9. Hamchandra Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Sect*, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1920). pp. 24-29. Raychaudhuri treats these associations and the problems raised by them.

tail in the *Mahābhārata* where, through the doctrine of *avatāra*, Viṣṇu was understood as Kṛṣṇa descending to take an active part in the world of man; Kṛṣṇa showed himself as a powerful warrior without moral scruple. However, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* section, Kṛṣṇa spoke as Viṣṇu himself, one with the Brahman of the *Upaniṣads*, the Absolute One. The personal aspect of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation as the divine teacher of devotion became emphasized: Kṛṣṇa was recognized as a full incarnation of Viṣṇu, not just a partial manifestation; in Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu acted as a person and the ally of the human race, revealing the path of devotion as religious practice open to all.

The Purāṇic tradition presupposed this image of a warrior-prince, the son of Vāsudeva and Devakī, born at Mathurā to kill Kāṁśa and other demons. The *Harivaṁśa* went beyond the cunning warrior-figure of the *Mahābhārata* and the teacher-image of the *Bhagavad Gītā* to include the developing popular legends of Kṛṣṇa's divine pre-history, his birth, childhood, heroic deeds and loves. Kṛṣṇa's sports with the cowherd women in the forest of Vṛndāvana received an emphasis unknown before. These aspects of Kṛṣṇa's divine loves assumed mounting importance until they became *the* identity of Kṛṣṇa. The erotic tone introduced in the *Harivaṁśa* became more pronounced in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*; here also the attractiveness of Kṛṣṇa began to overshadow his warrior-image.

A crucial development of Kṛṣṇa's character occurred in the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. The youthful dalliances of Kṛṣṇa in Vṛndāvana eclipsed in vividness and emphasis his later life; his relations with the cowherd women found an increasingly important and passionate place in the tradition. Most important was the compelling sense of erotico-religious emotion that animated the devotion of the cowherd women. It revealed a new dimension to Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* and to Kṛṣṇa as the Lord's own self: this was a new model for devotion, a new standard of religious experience a "surging emotion that chokes the speech, makes tears flow and the hair thrill with pleasurable excitement and often leads to hysterical laughing and crying by turns, to sudden fainting fits and to long trances of unconsciousness."¹⁰

After a long flirtation in which the attractiveness of Kṛṣṇa and the passionate yearning of the cowherd women were explored,

10. J. N. Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 230.

Kṛṣṇa joined them for the circular dance of love under the full moon. In the dance, formed by a circle of women in pairs, Kṛṣṇa reproduced himself so that he stood between each pair; indeed each woman seemed to have Kṛṣṇa for herself. He satisfied all desires in a way appropriate for each.¹¹ But Kṛṣṇa avoided the grasping of the women; even in the case of an unnamed favourite, Kṛṣṇa disappeared when she rejoiced in her possession of him: his love-play was *līlā*, transcending the mutual yearning of human passion. However, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa has become a clearly-drawn personality, central to the Vaiṣṇava tradition, almost independent of Viṣṇu. Kṛṣṇa's role as lover and his passionate love-play with the cowherd women, introduced an image of Kṛṣṇa and poetic language that would determine the future course of the Kṛṣṇa tradition. Devotion was characterized as fervent, selfless abandonment of Kṛṣṇa in erotic terms: love-themes now penetrated to the heart of the tradition. Kṛṣṇa is the Lord before whom people could be moved to dance and sing. The way was opened for further development of Kṛṣṇa's character as lover and especially for the description of Kṛṣṇa's love-partner.

The *Gītagovinda* exemplified the changed image of Kṛṣṇa which aroused Caitanya's devotion.¹² Once the impassive lover, sensitive to the needs of his lovers but without a corresponding need for them, he was now transformed into a romantic hero whose love for his beloved is matched only by her passion for him.¹³ He was now spontaneous, free, almost irresponsible, capable of all erotic emotions and subject to all the pain and strife linked with romantic love.

The object of Kṛṣṇa's affection, Rādhā, achieved a true identity as well in this process.¹⁴ While criticizing the possessive love of all the cowherd women, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*¹⁵ spoke

11. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 10. 29-33.

12. See W. G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957), pp. 72-7; Farquhar, *Religious Literature of India*, pp. 237-8; Kanubar Lal, *The Religion of Love*, (Delhi: Arts and Letters, 1971), pp. 64-79.

13. Lal, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

14. See Barbara Stoler Miller, "Rādhā: Consort of Kṛṣṇa's Vernal Passion," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975), 655-71; *ibid.*, *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 26-37; Charlotte Vaudeville, "Evolution of Love-Symbolism in Bhāgavatism," *Journal of the Oriental Society* 82 (1962), pp. 31-40.

15. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 10.30.

of an unidentified woman who walked alone with Kṛṣṇa and received his special favours but who lost him because of her pride and presumption. In Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* and the later poetic tradition, especially Vidyāpati and Candīdās "Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa both suffer the pain of separation and Kṛṣṇa's love for her is as intense as hers for him."¹⁶ Rādhā became the representation of the longing of the soul for God and an expression of the romantic feeling in the hearts of the people. The moods, emotions and the deepest passion of the lovers became the centre of the story. The *Gītagovinda* touched on all the moods of love, its anticipation and absence before describing the triumph of Rādhā's passion and her complete satisfaction in union with Kṛṣṇa. The full vocabulary of physical and interpersonal love was employed to set out the stages of attraction, separation and union of the Supreme Lord and his beloved Rādhā. Jayadeva called upon the hearer to meditate on the loving union of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, recognizing in the Lord's love the complete satisfaction to be attained in total surrender to him. This exaltation of the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa avoided facile allegorization as well as the temptation to their loving sports in orgies. Instead, both the object and the erotico-religious feelings characteristic of Caitanya's devotion became current in Bengal through the *Gītagovinda* and other later poetic works. Caitanya's devotion was directed to Kṛṣṇa as lover, full of sweetness to the exclusion of majesty;¹⁷ Rādhā's relation to Kṛṣṇa, especially her yearning for him in his absence, became the model or Caitanya's later devotion and the pattern prescribed for the devotee; together, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa represented both divine love and the ontological basis of all reality.

These religious developments, culminating in the images of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, occurred in tandem with an aesthetical language which provided the literary models for the love-play of the *Gītagovinda*. These religious and literary precedents were invoked to understand and justify the extreme character of Caitanya's personal devotion and that practised by his followers.

Yet the theme of love had been dominant in Sanskrit poetry from the beginning;¹⁸ references to love, even outside specifically erotic works like the *Kāma Sūtra of Vātsyāyana*, created an eloquent

16. Miller, "Rādhā," p. 668; see also pp. 657-68.

17. Kavikarṇapūra, *Caitanyacandrodaya*, II. 21.

18. S. K. De, *Treatment of Love in Sanskrit Literature*, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1929).

vocabulary to elaborate on the characters and setting of love-making and on the erotic feelings involved. In the light of this tradition, Kṛṣṇa could be depicted as the hero-lover of the *Gītagovinda*; Jayadeva explored every emotion and relationship of love, every descriptive detail and symbolic decoration and, especially, the vivid and luxurious picture of the nocturnal surroundings of Rādhā's love with Kṛṣṇa. These by-then conventional emotional expressions received further amplification in the popular poems who preceded Caitanya and animated his devotional sensibility. This aesthetic vocabulary of loving feelings, applied to the love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītagovinda*, became central to Caitanya's own devotion and the *rasa-śāstra* of the Vṛndāvana theologians of this school.

The analogy of divine and human love was found in the poetry of early Tamil Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints: often they emphasized "the utilization of a popular romance to symbolize a mystical love-affair between God and the human soul."¹⁹ The painful yearning of the wife for her absent husband, of the beloved for her wayward lover, came to symbolize the highest aspects of divine love—the soul's anguished yearning for the Lord. The *Bhakti-sūtras* described a feeling-centred notion of devotional love associating the love of Kṛṣṇa with aesthetic categories of erotic yearning, exalting *viraha* (love-in-separation) over the experience of union. The highest state of devotion is attained not in the enjoyment of the Lord but in the experience of separation from him even in the most profound union.

If this be the highest love, then Caitanya's extreme emotional outpourings, verbal and physical, can be understood as the highest development of Rādhā's *viraha* sentiment as she yearns for Kṛṣṇa, becomes frenzied at the sound of his name and despondent at reminders of his presence and absence in her life. Caitanya's devotion, then, was the embodiment not only of the aesthetic tradition of amatory feelings but the incarnation of the very objects of religious devotion themselves.

The Bengal Vaiṣṇava devotees were to imitate the devotion of Caitanya according to the *rasa-śāstra* elaborated by the theological leaders of the school, the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs.²⁰ The

19. Vaudeville, "Evolution of Love-Symbolism," p. 35.

20. See especially Jīya Gosvāmī's *Bhakti-sandarbhā* and Rupa Gosvāmī's *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* and *Ujjvalanīlāmani*; see also S. K. De, *Vaiṣṇava*

emotional basis of divine love was explored to explain in full detail the progression of the devotee from the more external practices of preparatory devotion (*sādhana-bhakti*) to a more emotional devotion (*bhāva-bhakti*) and, finally, to divine love itself (*prema-bhakti*). Moreover, the emotions of passionate, erotic love were placed at the highest point of the devotional system; its erotic character was qualified by the fact that the *viraha* sentiment is preferred to union.²¹ Meditation, service, friendship and parental feeling all contributed to leading the devotee toward increasingly intense emotional feelings for Kṛṣṇa on the model of the cowherd women and especially of Rādhā. All of these intense erotico-religious feelings were understood not as invitations to play the role of Kṛṣṇa in orgiastic enjoyment but rather as emotional participation in all the feelings of Rādhā who, together with all the devotees, passionately yearns for the one Kṛṣṇa.

Bengal Vaiṣṇava theology viewed Caitanya as the incarnation—devotion personified—of this loving union of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. In Kṛṣṇadāsa-kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*,²² the meaning of Caitanya became detached from the historical figure and inserted into the religious poetic tradition concerning Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. Caitanya's constant frenzied yearning for Kṛṣṇa suggested Rādhā's *viraha* sentiment and led to a theological understanding of Kṛṣṇa's incarnation as Caitanya. Besides the desire to save belaboured devotees, Kṛṣṇa came as Caitanya because he had never experienced the devotion that Rādhā felt for him: he had always been the object of her impassioned yearning. To taste the flavour of her love, to experience himself through her eyes and to feel her devotion, Kṛṣṇa became incarnate as Rādhā, the pure devotee, in Caitanya; thus, Caitanya was the dual incarnation of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in one historical person. As Rādhā, his own most intimate power of *śakti*, non-different from his own divine nature, Kṛṣṇa yearned for union with himself and tasted the delight of loving himself alone. For Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, then, Caitanya incarnated the devotional ontology which is the highest nature of the Lord Kṛṣṇa.

Faith and Movement, pp. 166-224; A.K. Majumdar, *Caitanya Life and Doctrine*, pp. 299-337; S. C. Chakravarti, *Philosophical Foundation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism*, (Calcutta: Academic Publishers, 1969), pp. 169-264.

21. S. K. De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement*, pp. 217-9; Majumdar, *Caitanya: Life and Doctrine*, pp. 321-2; Vaudeville, "Evolution," p. 40.

22. *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Ādi 4.

Regarded from the broader standpoint of Western religious traditions, Caitanya's devotional path suggests that erotic religious works, such as the *Song of Songs*, need not be immediately allegorized to prevent misunderstanding or misapplication. Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa mysticism, in Caitanya and the Bengal Vaiṣṇava theological school, provided an ennobling vision of divine love. Moreover, this thrust encourages an exploration of the positive function of all the emotions in mystical experience; perhaps the theme of "mystical marriage" ought to be studied more fully.

In the Caitanya movement, divine sweetness overwhelmed the sense of awe and majesty largely as a result of this image of divine love-play; rarely, if at all, have Western devotional traditions so totally renounced the sense of awe at the grandeur of God. In the devotion of Caitanya and the tradition of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, this sense of majesty (*aiśvarya*) is altogether absent and an intoxicated sweetness (*mādhurya*) reigns supreme.²³

Finally, the role of Rādhā as the eternal consort of Kṛṣṇa, his own most intimate power, makes this loving couple the object of religious devotion. Rādhā is the feminine aspect of the divine which is inseparable from Kṛṣṇa's divine nature: the pure devotee, non-different from the Lord, she loves him always. These aspects, as well as the harmonious integration of Caitanya's extreme mystical emotions into the orthodox theology of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, suggest further avenues of exploration.

Caitanya's mystical experience absorbed the religious development of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā as the objects of devotion; his ecstatic emotions drew upon erotico-religious poetry already present. His extreme emotional yearning for Kṛṣṇa followed models of the *viraha* sentiment and especially the paradigm of Rādhā. Theological reflection on Caitanya and his devotion led to the dual-incarnation theology, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa together incarnate in Caitanya. In this theological synthesis, Caitanya's devotionalism is an expression of the incarnation of the highest divine reality itself and a model for all devotees.

23. Jose Pereira, *Hindu Theology: A Reader*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), p. 335.