



Newsletter Archives

**Awakening the Inner Woman
Bhakti and the Doctrine of Love**

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Awakening the Inner Woman - Bhakti and the Doctrine of Love

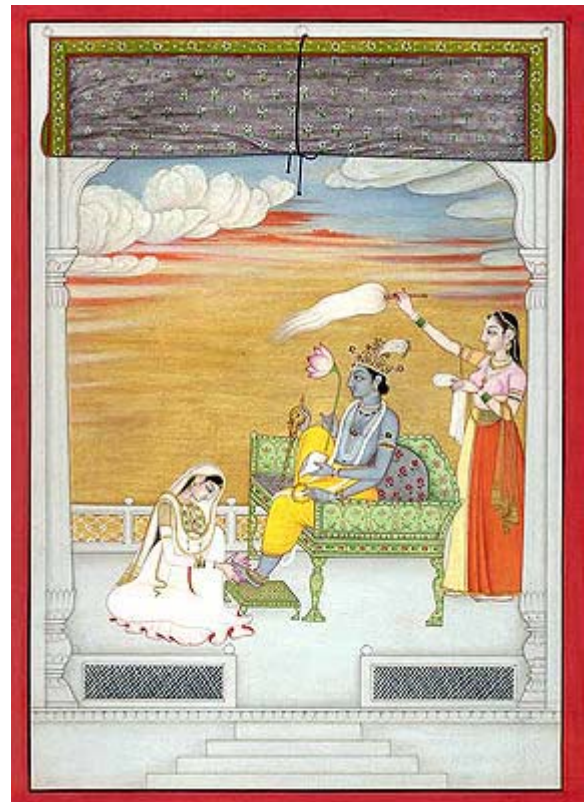
Article of the Month - December 2004



In Union with Krishna

It was the early sixteenth century. A distinguished scholar named Jiva Gosain was head of the Vaishnavas in Vrindavana. At the same time Mirabai, the great woman saint of medieval India, too resided in the holy city. Once, the pious lady sent forth a message to Jiva Gosain that she wanted to meet him and have his darshan. He declined, saying that he would not allow any woman in his presence. Mira retorted: "O virtuous one, every one in Vrindavana is a woman. Only Krishna is Purusha (Male). Today only have I come to know that there is another Purusha besides Krishna in Vrindavana" Jiva Gosain, jolted into accepting the profundity of her statement immediately rushed to Mira's side and paid her due respects.

The intense passion of Mirabai, which sought to model itself on the fervent ardor of the gopis of Vrindavana, suggests that the lord can be worshipped very effectively if the devotee imagines himself to be a woman.



Radha Washes Krishna's Feet



Saints of India - Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

This unusual approach finds an influential expression in the fact that the great saint Chaitanya was considered by his followers to be an incarnation of Radha (Krishna's favorite girl-friend). Indeed, Chaitanya's mystic-ecstatic form of worship openly encouraged male devotees to imagine themselves in the role of gopis and it is in Radha's mood of madhurya-bhava, (the sentiment of love), that Chaitanya is most frequently portrayed. His golden complexion is often compared to that of Radha's, and in general his beauty is praised as unsurpassable.

His followers drenched and sharing in the same intense experience, often spoke of the great bhakta being transformed into Radha before their very eyes:

"The Lord danced on till it was afternoon. And all the four batches (of devotees) sang till they were tired. And in this way the Lord's frenzy of love grew. It grew to such a height that all of a sudden the Lord was seen there as Radha."

It seems as if Chaitanya's personality as a sannyasin, and as a male, was incapable of channeling his deepest feelings. Only as Radha could they be fully expressed. There is no indication however that Chaitanya consciously and laboriously imitated the gopis generally or Radha particularly. His frequent possessions by Radha's moods and the sudden transformations in his appearance are not linked to any militant regime of role-playing consisting of remembrance, imagination or imitation. For Chaitanya the assumption of Radha's mood was coincidental with his most intense and complete expression of devotion. It was in no way an aspect of spiritual discipline and technique, but the ultimate goal of all devotional activity - the pure and complete love for the lord.

Chaitanya's identification with Radha, in context of his highly emotional personality (as suggested by his biographers), is in keeping with the fact that the female of the species is the more emotional of the two sexes, and bhakti being a necessarily emotional experience, Chaitanya's 'hyper-sentimentality' found adequate expression in the personality of Radha whose intensity of passion can be said to have paralleled Chaitanya's own frenzied devotion to the Lord. Chaitanya's easy and spontaneous participation in Radha's moods suggests she was a facet of his personality which enabled him to express his devotion most completely. His emotional capacity was said to be limitless, and his emotional expression was extraordinary. He was completely awash in a sea of sentiment, feeling and emotion, and he often behaved like a love-sick girl, restless, moody and excitable. In addition, Chaitanya was said to be of a highly temperamental and unpredictable disposition and he is often portrayed as experiencing several different moods in rapid succession, or all at the same time (a decidedly feminine trait):

"And the Lord passed his days in dancing as the various feelings moved him. For now it was remorse, now sorrow, now humility and now impatience, now pleasure and now patience and now again anger, that moved the Lord thus. And in all these he passed his days."

This aspect of bringing out the inner woman has also been referred to in the scriptures, and there are several passages in the ancient Purana texts which aver that the gopis themselves were men in their former births and were reborn as women because of their desire for a more intimate relationship with the lord. The Padma Purana says that when the great lord Rama entered the forest named Dandaka, the virtuous sages residing in its wild surroundings desired to engage in lila with the lord. Hence they were all reborn as gopis in Vrindavana, and through physical passion they found liberation from the ocean of existence.



Sensuous Immortals

Several eminent saints too speak of losing their manhood in moments of deepest communions with the lord. The Gujarati saint, Narsi Mehta, born a century before Mirabai wrote:



Saints of India - Narsi Mehta

"I took the hand of that lover of the gopis in loving converse. I forgot all else. Even my manhood left me. I began to sing and dance like a woman. My body seemed to change and I became one of the gopis. At such moments I experienced incomparable sweetness and joy."

In south India, the eminent Vaishnava exponent Vedanta Desika used to wear the clothes of a woman while worshipping Krishna. An annual festival is still held in Madras in memory of the saint in which his image, dressed as a woman, is taken out in procession. Swami Ramakrishna, the towering modern Bengali saint also strongly believed that he could best achieve a vision of Krishna only if he approached him as a woman. As an adult, Ramakrishna undertook a systematic discipline of devotion as a woman of Krishna. For about six months he wore women's clothes and ornaments (sari, gauze, scarf, bodice, artificial hair) and mimicked the movements, speech, smile, glance, and gestures of women.

Similar descriptions of divine romanticism are found in the mystical literature of other traditions: the Kabbalah speaks of approaching the Absolute with the divine passion of a lover, and St. John of the Cross and other Christian mystics write of becoming a "Bride of Christ," reserving one's love and passion only for the lord. For St. Teresa of Avila, Jesus was the bridegroom, the spouse, her partner in the spiritual life. Teresa stresses the need to please the divine spouse; do not even ordinary women try to please their human spouses? Consider the following verse from one of her song's entitled "I am Thine, and born for Thee":

Take, O Lord, my loving heart:
See, I yield it to Thee whole,
With my body, life and soul
And my nature's every part.
Sweetest Spouse, my life Thou art;
I have given myself to Thee
What wilt Thou have done with me?

Teresa expresses the Christian idea of obedience to the spouse and her poetry speaks of total surrender to Jesus. Contrast the above with the stark erotic sentiment of saint Andal of south India (eighth century), who emphasizes the bride's longing for the beloved:

Desire for the Lord consumes me
the Lord who measured the worlds
his power I cannot resist
his slave I have become-
the moon and the southern breeze
make me restless and full of sorrow
Do not add to my heartache, O koyil
Do not remain in this grove
Go to Narayana today
Bring him here
Or else I shall drive you away.

Andal's longing intensifies and in despair she addresses a song to the dark rain clouds:

O cool clouds
Go to him who churned the ocean deep
Fall at the sacred feet
Of the lotus-eyed Lord
And make this request on my behalf:
Tell him that my life will be spared
Only if he will come
To stay with me for one day
If he will enter me So as to leave
The mark of his saffron paste Upon my breasts.

When in my heart I discover my beloved
When he comes to unite with me
Holding me in close embrace
Will then you rain upon us?

She appeals even to the deep blue sea:

O deep great ocean
Did not the lord enter you
Mixing, churning and tormenting you



**Andal with parrot in
hand,
Melakkarivalankulam.
16th century. Courtesy:
French Institute of
Indology, Pondicherry.**

Depriving you of the nectar of your body?
So also has he entered into me
Taken away my very essence-
Go to the Lord whose couch is the serpent
Tell him of my deep distress.

Indeed since ancient times have saints used the lover beloved mode of address when they approach their chosen deity. Sringara (the way of the lover) was an accepted mode of approaching god, and is listed in several texts as one of the nine ways of bhakti (e.g. the Bhakti sutras of Narada).

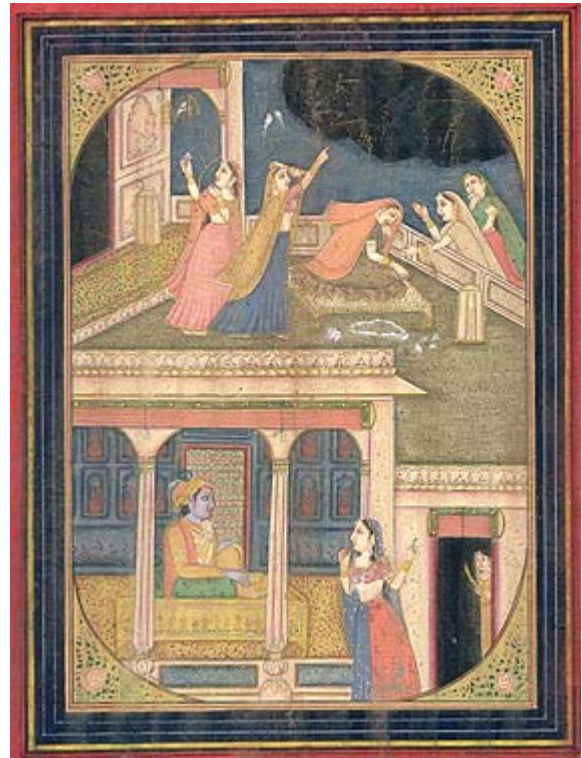
Andal's lover beloved mood found expression in explicitly erotic imagery. Experts have speculated on the possible reason for her choice of phrases. As a young girl, on the threshold of womanhood and marriage, it was perhaps natural for her to express her longing for god in terms of sexual fulfillment. From Vedic times the Hindu tradition considers marriage as sacrament and lays down that a young girl be given in holy marriage anytime suitable after puberty. Andal refused to face marriage with a human bridegroom. As she saw it, she was betrothed to Vishnu; she was waiting for him, longing passionately for him, desirous of fulfillment. When the soul begins to seek god and yearns for him, the physical and emotional phase of life and its external circumstances will naturally influence the choice of language and imagery. In Andal's case an intense inner experience was expressed in terms of physical passion.

Here it is relevant to note that the followers of Mahaprabhu Chaitanya often visualize themselves as female companions of Radha, known as 'manjaris.' A manjari is a beautiful young gopi who is resplendent with all charming qualities. She is always pre-pubescent and on the verge of womanhood, or at the most she is thirteen years old. This is so because, according to the Vaishnava canon, this age is one of innocence and emotional intensity.

All over the world, the achievement of sainthood involves not only the saint's effort to ascend to god but also god's responding descent into the soul, "entering" it and taking possession. In the text 'Chaitanya Charitamrita,' the lord says: "According to the transcendent emotion (bhava) in which my devotees worship me, I reciprocate with him. That is my natural behavior. "Andal's desire that Vishnu "enter her so as to leave the mark of his saffron paste upon her breasts," expressed with unabashed emotion, is yet appropriate; it cannot be denied that erotic imagery ideally expresses the attitude of utter surrender to the godhead. In the spiritual journey to divine bliss, it has been said that each individual has his or her own special kind of "romance" with god. Andal's romance took the form of an anguished cry to her beloved Vishnu to come and possess her.

Breaking through the Karmic Bondage of Samsara by Loving God:

The ancient text Vishnu Purana asserts that in such a committed affection (for e.g. that of Andal above), the two chains of merit and demerit, both of which are said to be the fetters for the soul, are broken. The intense pleasure the devotee derives from meditating on her amours with god (her chosen lord) takes away the bonding effects of her good deeds, and the inner misery which her soul is subjected to when she pines in the absence of her lord cleanses her of the residual effect of any sinful karma and she becomes free.



Radha Pines for Krishna while Her Sakhi Informs Him of Her State (Narrative Painting)

The Symbolic Significance of Krishna's Circular Dance:



Rasa Leela

Once, while dancing with his many girlfriends, Krishna attempted to make them form a circle. He failed since each gopi wanted to be near him. He then took each girl by the hand and the result of the physical contact was such that each of the gopis lost her faculty of perception and happily took the hand of the girl next to her, thinking it to be Krishna's.

As the dance progressed, the gopis acted and moved in different ways: one sang on a high and another on a lower pitch; a third reclined on the shoulder of Krishna and the fourth received from him his half chewed betel; one kissed the flowers that adorned him and another pressed her bosom with the palms of his hands.

This diversity of movement points to a significant fact in spiritual life: no two devotees have the same identical journey. God draws different people in different ways. He is not the commander

of an army giving one single command to all. He is the great lover and for him every human being is precious. He multi-locates himself, leading each devotee according to his individual disposition. This seems to be the idea behind the belief that Krishna had sixteen thousand wives and lived with them separately at the same time. In one palace he could be seen being fanned by his wife, in another he played dice with his queen, in third he was fondling his son, while in the fourth palace he entertained his wife with light stories and so on.

The truth of the above assertion is expressed for example in the lives of Mirabai (who pined for union with her lord, though without explicitly emphasizing an erotic intent); Andal (who longed to be physically penetrated by the lord) and St. Teresa (who sought a spiritual surrender at the feet of Jesus). They were all mystics, seeking to unite with the Supreme Being, each in her own unique way.

Conclusion:

In the golden words of Swami Vivekananda:

"What love shakes the whole nature of man, what love runs through every atom of his being, makes him mad, makes him forget his own nature, transforms him, makes him a god as the love between man and woman? In this sweet representation of divine love God is our husband. We are all women; there are no men in this world; there is but One man - Hari and he is our beloved. All that love which man gives to a woman, or woman to man, is here given up to the Lord."

Indeed, since between lovers there are no secrets, by approaching divinity as a lover we enter into the mystery of god. There is an inner innocent girl waiting within each of us, desiring to emerge and play with our friendly cowherd in an exchange of love.

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This article by Nitin Kumar.

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