Studies in Hinduism

Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Developments

Edited by

Amiya P. Sen

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Studies in Hinduism

Studies in Hinduism: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Developments

Editor

Amiya P. Sen

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Editor
Amiya P. Sen
Independent Researcher
India

Editorial Office
MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel, Switzerland

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About the Editor

Amiya P. Sen is a historian and independent researcher with an interest in the intellectual and cultural history of south Asian Hinduism.

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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue on "Hinduism: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Developments"

Amiya P. Sen

Independent Scholar, New Delhi 110 070, India; amiyasen1@gmail.com

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In 2002, the Government of India published a *Universities Handbook* based on a survey of 273 institutions of higher learning in India (excluding the 12,000-odd colleges that existed at the time) and of their academic programs. For the authors of this report, one of the official terms of reference was to determine just how many of these institutions offered anything resembling a course on religious studies. The *Handbook* reveals that only about 5% of the institutions so surveyed offered such courses. Of these, some dealt with the specialized study of a particular religion only. Thus, there were 13 universities offering specialized courses in the study of Islam, including both undergraduate and graduate courses and 3 graduate Buddhist study programs listed, but no supporting undergraduate courses. Quite conspicuous by its absence was a course on Hinduism on any level. Prima facie, this looks astonishing in a country where Hindus constitute an overwhelming majority. Ironically, even Oxford (UK) has an academic center for the study of Hinduism, just as it does for Islam and for Jewish and Hebrew Studies.

The common understanding of the matter was that this followed from the state policy of upholding the secular credentials of the Indian Constitution and, more generally, the underlying ecumenical spirit of the Indic civilization and culture. On one level, this is an odd explanation to offer. In the first place, given the orthopraxy characteristic of Hinduism itself, was it reasonable to keep it out of reckoning? Second, did someone naively assume that the onus of keeping inter-faith tensions in check rested on the majority community only? Third, the exclusion of Hinduism as a field of study would appear to be at fault historically since, in their quest for reformist modernization, several non-Hindu faiths and cultures have redefined their boundaries in relation to Hinduism. Reform, in this instance, postulated an inner unity of faith and praxis, whether real or imagined, within a given community. For Muslims and Sikhs in particular, Hinduism was seen to be a "corrupting" influence, and reformist ventures, therefore, implied the careful cleansing and excision of these influences. On the contrary, for the Hindus themselves, this was essentially an internal squabble with an enemy that was located deep inside and not outside itself.

Thanks partly to Nehruvian ideology that reigned in the 1960s and 1970s and the turn that the social sciences increasingly took towards left-liberal ideology, the term "religion" became almost taboo in some circles. Very few Universities had anything close to an academic study of religion. For the contemporary Indian ruling class and some supporting ideologues, the study of religion was deemed anachronistic and bred only inter-faith hostility. This followed from the gratuitous assumption that religious differences were not mischievous expressions of communalism but its underlying cause. Not surprisingly, my generation has not witnessed the birth of an Indian academic journal that specialized in religious studies in general, not to speak of Hinduism. Currently, the most widely read and respected journals related to the study of Hinduism are all located in Western academia.

When, therefore, the *Religions* office graciously invited me to edit a Special Issue on Hinduism, I was seized with elated excitement, but which soon changed into disappointment. Though happy to have been so invited, I was unsure if I would have within reach an adequate number of Indian historians who may be willing to meaningfully contribute to the project. Of the eight scholars who have contributed to this volume, three are based

outside India and of the eight again; only three are by training professional historians. On one level, surely, this only confirms the continuing global interest in Hinduism and happily throws open an enterprise such as this one to cross-fertilization from allied disciplines. On another, this also speaks for the poverty of scholarly interest within the Indian academia in the matter of considering religion as a field of serious academic study.

The eight papers that make up this Special Issue have much in common. In one form or another, they all question settled opinions, interrogate the underlying malleability of social idioms and experiences and critique simplistic and unproblematized representations of cultural praxis. Happily, some of these reveal overlaps in themes, which then makes it possible to construct broad groupings of the papers included. Jeffery Long, Arpita Mitra and Swami Medhananda engage with the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda tradition; Ravi M. Gupta and Santanu Dey bring up critical questions connected with Vaishnava history and culture; Ankur Barua, Hina Khalid and Nandini Bhattacharya raise pertinent questions regarding cross-cultural exchanges. A paper that is unique in its intellectual interest is that by Varuni Bhatia, which examines the role of the digital media in advancing popular Hinduism today.

Arpita Mitra (*From Nitya to Lila. Sri Ramakrishna and Vedanta*) critically examines an older question about whether or not Ramakrishna's preaching and parables could justly be associated with the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy. She rightly cites scholars like Zimmer and Neevel, who, contrary to hagiographers like Swami Saradananda of the *Lilaprasanaga* fame, claim that the saint was closer to the Tantric tradition than to Vedanta. She also disputes two other postulates commonly used in academic studies related to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement. The first of these is about the validity of attaching the prefix "neo" to Vedanta to indicate the hermeneutic changes produced within this school by Hindu thinkers of the colonial era. The second pertains to a critique of the position adopted by scholar Ayon Maharaj (later Swami Medhananda, a contributor to this volume) in his studies of Ramakrishna's religious ecumenism. Mitra finds Maharaj to have come up with an "over-interpretation", but fails to clinch the issue by not adding two points of substance. One is apt to agree with Mitra in doubting if Ramakrishna's words could indeed be taken at their face value and not placed within the framework of an older Hindu discourse. However, what Mitra may have more pointedly disputed is the fact that beginning with Rammohun Roy, no major Hindu thinker of the modern era has claimed innovation in religious thought. Furthermore, questionable is Maharaj's recurring use of the word "harmony"/"harmonize" in the context of Ramakrishna's religious discourse, which Mitra may have justly faulted. Here, both Maharaj and his critic overlook the fact that Ramakrishna fully respected existing boundaries between religions and did not take these to be porous or inter-penetrable. Thus, when training in Sufi Islam, he refused to visit the temple to the goddess Kali where he otherwise served as a priest. "Harmonize" seems curiously inept in describing Ramakrishna's upholding the equal validity of all religions but never suggesting that various religious traditions could be harmoniously fused. Hitherto, Maharaj's position, as I also recall, has been that Ramakrishna accepted the validity of all traditions as traditions but accepted the teachings of each only selectively. This is inconsistent with Ramakrishna's belief that religions were not the creation of men but of God. Was it pure mischief on God's part then, to introduce qualitative differences within religions, thereby deliberately leading some men and women to "false" or "unclean" paths? In Ramakrishna's own view, as I understand it, this could have been possible only with reference to the concept of *lila* or the inscrutable play of God. However, neither Mitra nor Maharaj cares to suggest as much. Mitra's own paper suffers from the reluctance to overcome the common error of using the terms Vedanta and Advaita Vedanta interchangeably. Ramakrishna's grounding in Vedanta, if this term is taken in its composite or undifferentiated form, cannot be a matter of any dispute; his association with Advaita, on the other hand, would be subject to qualifications. I have myself wondered at times if by the term "Advaita" Ramakrishna simply meant the grounding of all reality, consciousness or experiences in God and not the intricacies of non-dualist metaphysics.

Swami Medhananda's paper (*Was Swami Vivekananda a Hindu Supremacist? Revisiting a Long-standing Debate*) is similarly a recapitulation of an older debate but specifically critiques Jyotirmaya Sharma's work *A Restatement of religion. Swami Vivekananda and the making of Hindu* Nationalism (2013). In Medhananda's view, Sharma's work suffers from both methodological flaws and some specious arguments. Allegedly, Sharma only selectively uses Vivekananda's thoughts on Vedanta, placing them outside their historical and ideological contexts, leading to a degree of distortion. In suggesting that the universalism of Vivekananda lay not in privileging Advaita but in his advocating the equal validity of the four yogas, Medhananda anticipates a key argument in the paper by Jeffery Long in this collection. A problematic aspect of Medhananda's paper, though, lies in his claim that rather than feed Hindu nationalism, as Sharma alleges, Vivekananda's intention was to provide "an ethical and spiritual foundation" for Indian nationalism. Prima facie, this appears difficult to reconcile with the Swami's emphatic rejection of the political praxis, his reluctance to involve the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in active political work, subsequently leading even Sister Nivedita to sever her connection with this organization. In hindsight, the problems with "spiritualizing" politics are as evident in the case of Vivekananda as subsequently with Gandhi.

Jeffery Long's (*A Complex Ultimate Reality: The Metaphysics of the Four Yugas*) reinforces the arguments of Medhananda in two related ways. First, he argues for establishing the right context for the study of Vivekananda's evolving thoughts on Vedanta. Second, as noted above, he finds Vivekananda's plurality originating not in his advocacy of Advaita as is commonly believed, but in the spiritual freedom to choose from any of the four yogas. Long finds Vivekananda's approach comparable to the "deep religious pluralism" of the philosopher Whitehead and to the open-ended approach to Truth found in the *syadvada/anekantavada* perspective of the Jains. Vivekananda's early study of the Vedanta is well documented, and it would have been interesting to know though just where Jain philosophical influences, if any, may have been derived from. Two of Long's arguments that I found less persuasive are first, the claim that Vivekananda did not separate the yogas from religion and second, the assertion that Vivekananda was not the Kali worshipper that Ramakrishna was. Vivekananda's *Karma Yoga*, as I recall, dissociates it from any concern with God or religion in a manner reminiscent of the Hindu thinker Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who, in his work, *Dharmatattwa* concluded on the astonishing note that patriotism was the highest dharma! Admittedly, in his early life, Vivekananda resisted Kali worship, possibly on account of his Brahmo antecedents, but subsequently wrote poems to Kali and persuaded Nivedita to deliver two successive lectures on this Goddess in Kolkata, much to the consternation of Hindu rationalists and reformers.

An interrogation into the fluidity of conceptual or doctrinal boundaries between traditions quite persuasively appears in the paper by Ravi M. Gupta (*Why Sridhara Svami? The Making of a Successful Sanskrit Commentary*). The question that Gupta poses before us is why, notwithstanding the Advaitin credentials of the commentator Sridhara Svami, he was widely accepted by the Vaishnava tradition, which was otherwise quite critical of non-dualist philosophy. Gupta rightly observes the rather paradoxical play of creativity and restraint, dogmatism, but also the purposive sharing of common religious space within the Hindu philosophical tradition, a liminal playfulness that often cuts across religious and philosophical boundaries. The medieval Vaishnava mystic, Chaitanya, who strongly critiqued non-dualism, himself belonged to the Dasnami order of monks and had22 Advaitc *sanyasis* as companions. Further, the *Bhagavat Purana*, a primary sourcebook for Vaishnavas, has strong elements of Advaitic thought and in medieval India, at least three figures known for their Krishna-bhakti (Madhavendra Puri, Iswar Puri and Madhusudan Saraswati) were also Dasnami monks and prominent non-dualist thinkers.

Sanatanu Dey's paper (*Locating Vishnupriya in the tradition. Women, Devotion and Bengali Vaishnavism in Colonial times*) brings out the changing role of the woman within the movement. Medieval Vaishnavism was characterized by a strongly Brahmanical disdain for the woman and the threat from female sexuality. As with certain quotidian cults, it

was also known to use the woman instrumentally in *sadhana* or spiritual praxis. These tendencies, as Dey argues, came to be reconfigured in the colonial era, whereby eroticized feminization was channeled into more sanitized paths of domesticity and conjugality. The paper analyses how Visnupriya, the widowed second wife of Chaitanya, came to eventually acquire the status of a cult leader by the late 19th century. There was a promising case here, I felt, for Dey to examine comparable developments within the Ramakrishna Movement with the widowed Sarada Devi also assuming the status of the *Sangha Janani* (Holy Mother to members of the organization). I had reason also to disagree with Dey's conflating "Bengal (or Gaudiya) Vaishnavism", the school associated with Chaitanya, with "Bengali Vaishnavism", which was a more amorphous religious formation accommodating diverse devotional cultures within the world of Krishna bhakti.

It was left to Nandini Bhattacharya (*Behold the Human! Reading life Narratives in Times of colonial Modernity*) and the team of Ankur Barua and Hina Kahlid (*The Feminization of Love and the Indwelling of God. Theological Investigations across Indic Contexts*) to alert us to the problematic aspects of studying cross-cultural exchanges. Bhattacharya's paper is a comparative study of Seeley's revisionist characterization of Jesus and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnacharitra*. The latter was both a remarkable contribution to the emerging genre of biographies and an attempt at both historicizing and humanizing God. In her paper, Bhattacharya makes the illuminating point that Indian modernity was not constituted through a simplistic internalization of desacralized reason or an unproblematic separation of the religious and the secular. This recalls to mind Bankim's own argument that modern Western education had, in fact, only reinforced his belief in the idea of God descending on earth as a man. Rammohun, if I may further complicate this argument, rejected the concept of incarnation as irrational but rebelled against what he called the "surfeit" of reason. Apparently, contrary to what Bhattacharya suggests, the two versions of *Krishnacharitra* that Bankim himself was persuaded to compare and contrast by way of registering his changing views on the subject are not those of 1884 and 1886, but 1884 and 1892, respectively.

Barua and Khalid argue much in the same vein, pointing to the recurring dialogic exchanges between otherwise seemingly opposed religious traditions. This, they do through a deeply insightful study of love imageries in the religious lives of both Sufi mystics and Hindu devotees. Their thesis rests on two central arguments: first that in the study of religions, it is important to avoid both extremes of postulating fixed binaries and naïve homogenization and second, that modern labels cannot be reasonably extrapolated on matters belonging to the pre-modern. It would be interesting to explore, though, if Sufi love imageries were always expressed through the feminization of the male devotee. I am reliably informed that the opposite is also true whereby the macho Sufi mystic is given to display his *mardaangi* towards God, his beloved.

Finally, we turn to the paper by Varuni Bhatia (*Shani on the Web: Virality and Vitality in Digital Popular Hinduism*). This is a highly interesting study of what may be loosely called the development of "digital religiosity" in recent times, emerging from what is clearly a revolution, perhaps the biggest and the most far-reaching since the Industrial Revolutions, and the ways in which it has impacted human life and interpersonal communication. In this paper, Bhatia examines the digital presence of the Hindu quasi-god, Shani, corresponding to the planet Saturn, generally taken to be a malefic influence in Hindu astrology and one which the Hindus have always been anxious to appease. The paper interrogates what it means to engage with a "sacred" object in a virtual realm and how technology is now increasingly constitutive of everyday Hindu religious practices. This is an interrogation which, I thought, still allows for interim observations rather than definitive conclusions. The cult of Shani is now vastly popular, making it possible to construct flourishing shrines and pilgrim towns dedicated to the god and where the devotee may actually relate to Shani as an embodied deity. This appears to be an aspect that has been visibly changing. Not long back, it was a common occurrence on Saturdays to come across visibly poor, lower caste girls, stationed at busy intersections and market places, carrying metallic cans inside

which was immersed in mustard oil, a crude representation of Shani. The association of such girls with the cult is meaningful since Shani represents menials and manual workers, and presumably, when upper class devotes patronizingly dropped a coin or two into the oil can, they drew vicarious pleasure at simultaneously mitigating Indian poverty and keeping at bay a potentially malevolent force from their otherwise successful lives! If only she looked more carefully, Bhatia might discover that here, the notion of “popular religion” may have more to do with the number of practitioners than some particular class. Shani worship is, in one sense, a classless phenomenon affecting those always in fear of losing something and averting at all costs some misfortune coming their way from the “evil eye” of this maverick god. The question to also ask here is whether digital religiosity too draws authority from some publicly respectable and acknowledged source. Does divine embodiment visible in smart phones or obtained by the click of a mouse have a value comparable to that of a conventionally consecrated deity? Finally, may we justly draw a link between the holy and the simply auspicious? Is there something truly sacred about Shani, or does it metaphorically represent the anxiety to conquer failure and recurring obstacles that most of us must negotiate in our daily lives?

I have enjoyed editing this collection of papers and trust that our readers, too, will enjoy reading them.

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Article

Ecce Homo—Behold the Human! Reading Life-Narratives in Times of Colonial Modernity

Nandini Bhattacharya

The Department of English and Culture Studies, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal 713104, India; nandinibhattacharya60@gmail.com

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Abstract: The essay explores Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Krishnacaritra*—published in 1886—the life of a humanised god, as engaged in cross cultural dialogues with John Robert Seeley's *Ecce Homo*, *Natural Religion*, and *The Expansion of England* in particular, and the broader European tendency of naturalising religions in general. It contends that the rise of historicised life writing genres in Europe was organically related to the demythologised, verifiable god-lives writing project. Bankimchandra's *Krishnacarita* is embedded within a dense matrix of nineteenth century Indian secular life writing projects and its projection of Krishna as a cultural icon within an incipient nationalist imagining. The essay while exploring such fraught writing projects in Victorian England and nineteenth century colonial Bengal, concludes that 'secularism' arrives as not as religion's Other but as its camouflaging in ethico-cultural guise. Secularism rides on the backs of such demystified god life narratives to rationalise ethico-culturally informed global empires.

Keywords: John Robert Seeley; Bankimchandra Chatterjee; natural religions; hagiography; auto/biography; Victorian Jesus; *carita* as genre; life narratives in colonial Bengal; *Krishnacaritra*; secularism

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উপসংহারে বক্তব্য কৃষ্ণ […] মানুষী শক্তির দ্বারা কর্ম নির্বাহ করেন, কিন্তু তাহার চরিত্র অমানুষ   এই প্রকার মানুষী শক্তির দ্বারা অতিমানুষ চরিত্রের বিকাশ হইতে তাহার মনুষ্যত্ব বা ঈশ্বরত্ব অনুমিত করা বিধেয় কিনা তাহা পাঠক আপন বুদ্ধি বিবেচনা অনুসারে স্থির করিবেন   (বঙ্কিম চন্দ্র চট্টোপাধ্যায়, "কৃষ্ণচরিত্র", সপ্তম খণ্ড: দ্বিতীয় পরিচ্ছেদ: উপসংহার; সম্পাদক; শ্রী ব্রজেন্দ্র নাথ বন্দোপাধ্যায়, শ্রী সজনী কান্ত দাস: কলিকাতা: বঙ্গীয়-সাহিত্য -পরিষদ, শ্রাবণ: ১৩৪৮: ৩১৬-১৭)

[The concluding statement is that Krishna […] uses human powers to perform his works but is nonhuman in nature. Whether or not a human being can draw upon his intellectual powers and thus evolve into a nonhuman, and whether or not it will indicate that person's human quality or divinity, is for readers, using of their particular intelligence, to conclude. (Chattopadhyay 1886, pp. 316–17)]

1. Introduction

Ecce Homo: Behold the Human is an ideological configuration that provides an interventionist point; it enables rereading Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnacaritra* (Chattopadhyay 1886) as the 'life-narrative' of a humanised, historicised god, Śri Krishna. It helps explore the text's[1] cross-cultural

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[1] *Krishnacaritra* had two versions, one that Bankimchandra began publishing serially in his journal *Prachar* in 1884, and later brought out as book in 1886. It is the 1886 edition of *Krishnacaritra* that I refer to—this is the one that Bankim differentiated from the earlier 1884 version as being distinct as light is from darkness, and the one he authorised as being closest to his ideological stance. All references to *Krishnacaritra* are from the Banerjee and Das edited *Krishnacaritra* of *Bankim Satabarshiki Sangshkaran* (Bankim Centennial edition).

transactions with contemporary European god 'lives', particularly those that narrate the Christ figure[2]. Conceptually, it facilitates a perceiving of *Krishnacaritra*'s dialogic relation with the emergent life narratives—*carit*—genres in modern Indian languages in colonial India.

The essay is entitled *Ecce Homo* following Pontius Pilate's use of the phrase in the Latin Vulgate translation of the *Bible* in John 19.5, as the Roman governor presents a scourged, lacerated, thorn-crowned Jesus Christ to a hostile crowd minutes before his crucifixion. The King James Version of the *Bible* translates the Latin phrase *Ecce Homo* as "Behold the Man". A more gender inclusive translation reads as "Behold the Human". The phrase (and the icon of a bleeding physically lacerated Christ) meant to mock Christ's claims to divinity in the presence of an angry Judea is transformed into a symbol of profound piety, and a wonderment when faced with the paradox of Passion. *Ecce Homo* encapsulates the mystery and contradiction at the heart of Christian divinity that can participate in human forms and its sufferings while exceeding and glorifying them. It also encapsulates the mystery and glory of the human being, capable of a heroic ethicality that is, for all intents and purposes, divine.

That the German philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche would deploy this phrase to conceptually frame his biography, *Ecce Homo*: *Wie man wird*, *was man ist* (Behold the Man: How One Becomes What One Is, 1888), given the complex ideological configuration, is apposite. In this text, which contains his essays and poems, Nietzsche composes a strangely unfitted autobiography to describe his incredible intellectual achievements that render him dauntingly 'divine', even while admitting to his imminently decaying body and unhinged mind[3].

John Robert Seeley's highly controversial biography of Jesus Christ published in 1866, in Victorian England, demystifies the Christ figure, and celebrates him instead as a man who created a religious order. This conceptual paradox of a man who is regarded as god (or should it be the other way round?) is embraced in the name of Seeley's book, *Ecce Homo: A Survey of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ.* Seeley's text was left tantalizingly anonymous by its publisher, Robert Macmillan, as a marketing ploy. However, such a strategy was also intended to shield the author from the calumny that would inevitably issue from his intellectual and familial quarters for a harbouring of such unorthodox, Broad Church-like portrayals of a god[4].

Bankimchandra's reception of Seeley is a densely layered one, and its textured ramifications have hardly been addressed by scholars who call out Bankim's 'debts' to Seeley. Bankim's polemical works, *Krishnacaritra*, *Dharmatatwa*, his *Letters to The Statesman* (under the pseudonym of Ram Chandra) debating Reverend Hastie's attack on Hinduism[5], his *Letters on Hinduism*, and his late novels, especially *Debi Chaudhurānī* (Chattopadhyay [1884] 1938) and *Sītārām* (Chattopadhyay [1886] 1941), constitute that dense matrix within which his transactions with Seeley, and the Romantic naturalisation of majoritarian religions, would be worked out. While Bankim repeatedly refers to Seeley's *Natural Religion*—a sequel to *Ecce Homo*—in his *Letters on Hinduism*[6], and quotes from the same ("The substance of religion is culture") to underscore his argumentative thrust, he seldom refers to *Ecce Homo* directly. Bankim's *Letters on Hinduism* abounds in direct quotations but also paraphrases Seeley's ideas such as the "lofty instinct of Hinduism [. . .] is pre-eminently the religion of culture" (Chattopadhyay 1953, p. 246).

Letters to Hinduism is found unfinished in the third volume of Bankim's works, and the volume's editor, Jogeshchandra Bagal, situates the author's unfinished English translation of his

2 Seeley's influence on Bankimchandra and especially that of *Ecce Homo* on *Krishnacaritra* has been mentioned by Eschmann (Eschmann 1974), Das (Das 1974), and King (King 2011), but these connections have not been worked out with any degree of detail or complexity.

3 *Ecce Homo* was produced in 1844 and after which Nietzsche slid into debilitating conditions of paralysis and insanity.

4 'Broad Church' refers to a more liberal, moderate movement within the Anglican Church, as compared to the high church and low church groups in the nineteenth century. It was also defined as 'broad' as it was thought to be above partisan politics. Seeley, along with Thomas Arnold, Benjamin Jowett, S.T. Coleridge were associated with this movement.

5 October 1886.

6 *Bankim Rachanavali*, vol. iii, pp. 237–38.

novel, *Debi Chaudhurānī*, after this work. Such an editorial decision is appropriate for the Bankim novel that describes Hindu *anuśilan*, or Hinduism in everyday practice, in an avatar-like figure that assumes the female shape of Prafulla. That *Debi Chaudhurānī* quotes Seeley—"The substance of religion is culture"—epigraphically to frame its novelistic contents, is only apposite. The reason for Bankimchandra never directly referring to *Ecce Homo* was possibly because he would use the conceptual density of Seeley's frame—Ecce Homo: behold the human—to recast the life of a man that was god, Śri Krishna. Neither does Bankim ever refer directly to Seeley's philosophy of history in support of a proud British Empire—*The Expansion of England*: *Two Courses of Lectures*, published in 1886 (Seeley 1886)—even though its contents would radically influence his *Krishnacaritra* and his last novel, *Sītārām*.

2. Writing God Lives: From Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* to the Victorian Jesus

Germane to a rereading of *Krishnacaritra* (and Bankimchandra admits to the same) is its situatedness within a veritable explosion of historicised 'life-narratives' of gods in the nineteenth century, and especially the 'lives' of the Victorian Jesus[7]. A 'naturalised,' historically verifiable Christ figure proliferates the nineteenth century European print world. The texts range from the highly controversial *Das Leben Jesu, Kritisch Bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, 1835)[8] by David Strauss (Strauss 1892), to Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jesus* (*Life of Jesus*, Renan 1863), John Robert Seeley's *Ecce Homo*: *A Survey of the Life and Works of Jesus Christ* (1865), Frederic William Farrar's *The Life of Christ* (Farrar 1893), and Reverend William Hanna's *Life of Christ* (Hanna 1876)[9]. All the above-mentioned books were best sellers and attracted public attention in critique or admiration. For example, William Ewart Gladstone admired *Ecce Homo* enough to collate his essays on Seeley's work, initially published in the journal *Good Words*, into a book entitled *On Ecce Homo* (Gladstone 1868). However, what has been somewhat less discussed is the generic form that these books assumed and the close connections between the rise of historiography as a scientific discipline and the life-writing genres in a Victorian world[10].

Bankim's *Krishnacaritra,* the 'life' of a man who is godlike, is also informed by the European Enlightenment obsession with the self and the emergence and popularity of auto/biographical genres. The British Romantic tradition of naturalizing religions and the scienticisation of Protestant Christianity is evident in the emergence of a flurry of studies such as William Paley's *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Essence and Attributes of the* Deity (Paley 1809), George Wilson's *Religio Chemici* (Wilson 1862), and T.B. Gallaudet's *The Youth's Book on Natural Theology* (Gallaudet 1883). Such a tradition (scienticising Christianity) coincided with the rise of biographical genres and the historicising of hagiographies. European life narratives, like other generic forms emerging at the juncture of modernity, were not culturally conceived entirely in terms of unprecedented rupture and newness, but in terms of recasting and carrying traces of one of the oldest and most respectable of European cultural forms—the narration of eminent or sacred 'lives'. The narrators of such 'lives' that I could mention at this point are Hesiod, Thucydides and Plutarch. The modern auto/biography retains, even in a secular world, this fascination with heroic worthy lives to a substantial degree, with lives devoted to public service that are exemplary, and therefore near divine. I contend that the auto/biography as a distinct genre evolves in modern Europe at a juncture when older forms of life narratives imbued with frankly hagiographical/adulatory

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[7] Refer to Ian Hesketh's work entitled *The Victorian Jesus*: *Religion and the Cultural Significance of Anonymity* (Hesketh 2017), and its racy commentary on Macmillan's publication strategies of occluding the author's name (Hesketh 2012), and to Daniel Pals' "The Reception of *Ecce Homo*" (Pals 1877).

[8] This was translated into English by Marian Evans or George Eliot in 1846 and created an intellectual furor, not unlike what happened after the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

[9] Hanna's work is publicized in a Positivist, historicist fashion as "Written after William Hanna's own personal visit to Palestine".

[10] The idea of a seamless, ever expanding Victorian empire is peculiarly Seeley, and his historiographical ideology is informed by the same. Refer to the Duncan Bell edited *Victorian Visions of Global Order.*

intent are also being translated, recast, and read with unprecedented vigour. It is a juncture when distinctive national imaginaries are being forged, and life narratives are being founded within the same. This process is best appreciated in tracing the reception history of perhaps the most well-known of European life narratives, Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Greeks and* Romans, also popularly known as *Parallel Lives* because of Plutarch's narrating of eminent Greco-Roman lives in pairs[11]. The European interest in *Lives* from the seventeenth century onwards was predominantly ethical rather than historical as such fascination was predicated upon the book's ability to build character, reinforce a putative national imaginary, and strengthen the ethico-moral fabric of impressionable minds.

John Dryden introduced the word 'biography' for the first time in the English lexicon while lending his name as editor and translator in chief to *Plutarch's Lives: Translated from Greek by Several Hands* (Dryden 1683)[12]. That one as culturally preeminent as John Dryden was lending his name to the translation of *Lives* is indicative of a larger cultural desire to appropriate such genres—and their classical respectability—to inform the English national imaginary. The enormous influence that Plutarch's *Lives* wielded in Europe[13] in times of print modernity is borne out by the fact that the book was severally translated in the nineteenth century at the height of English imperial glory, and by academics as culturally central as Arthur Hugh Clough in 1859 (Clough 1859). Clough belonged to a revered circle of high culture gurus such as Benjamin Jowett and Mathew Arnold. English translations of Plutarch's *Lives* was included in reading/pedagogic courses of premier institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Arthur Quiller-Couch testifies that the reading of "a simple translation of a Greek book, Plutarch's *Lives*", swayed European minds and shaped ideologies to such an extent that it "made the French Revolution" possible and that "anyone who cares may assure himself by reading memoirs of that time" (Quiller-Couch 1922). The cultural belief that the reading of great lives serves a talismanic function, that such reading practices shape character (national and individual), and humanise (literally) societal beings, is best exemplified in Mary Shelley's narrative *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* (Shelley [1818] 1831). The Victor Frankenstein-created creature discovers within "a leathern portmanteau" three books, of which the second is Plutarch's *Lives*[14]. The contemporary reader is offered an acute insight into the influence of Plutarch's life-narratives on the best of European minds, given that Mary Shelley was the child of the finest of European intellectuals, literally and figuratively. A reading of *Frankenstein* offers an equally acute insight into the 'powers' of life-narratives to structure unformed minds, especially those of pre-human creatures, women and children! Victor Frankenstein's creature admits that, "Plutarch taught [him] high thoughts; he elevated [him] above the wretched sphere of [his] own reflections to admire and love heroes of past ages" and that "[he] felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within [him]; and abhorrence for vice (Shelley [1818] 1831).

The creature recognizes that with the reading of Plutarch "perhaps [his] first introduction to humanity had been made" (Shelley [1818] 1831). The point about a new form of life narratives in enlightenment Europe being recast in terms of older assumptions alongside the retelling of secularised god lives need not be overemphasised. Exemplary secular life narratives are popular as they serve as cultural milestones and mark out the ethico-aesthetic directions of a national imaginary.

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[11] Originally belonging to the second century AD, the first edition came out in 1517 in Florence in Italy. Plutarch's *Lives* was translated in several European vernaculars, including French, German and English, and Thomas North's translation of *Lives* became the basis of many of Shakespeare's plays. The first English edition was printed by Jacob Tonson in 1688.

[12] Refer to Rebecca Nesvet's essay "Parallel Histories: Dryden's Plutarch and Religious Toleration" (Nesvet 2005, pp. 424–37) for more on this.

[13] Refer to Simon Goldhill's chapter on the reception of Plutarch in Europe in *Who Needs Greek: Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism*.

[14] The two other books that Dr. Frankenstein's creature reads, to humanize itself, are Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

3. Life Writing in Nineteenth Century Bengal: The Mutation of the *Carita* Genre

Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1993) and Tanika Sarkar (Sarkar 2014) are among some of the historians who seriously explore the emergence of life narrative genres in colonial Bengal. That life stories, variously described as *carit*, *jībancarit*, *ātmajībani*, were developing into distinctive public genres in the modern Indian languages from about the middle of the nineteenth century in colonial India, and that the depiction of such lives was "obvious material for studying the emergence of the 'modern' forms of self-representation" and indicative of "the emergence of a new concept of the 'individual' among the educated elite" is something that Partha Chatterjee testifies ("The Woman and the Nation" in *The Nation and its Fragments*: *Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*). Almost every great personage of this 'educated elite' class, wrote their *ātmacarit*s, *jībancarit*s, or autobiographies. A few of the *ātmacarits* that one immediately recalls are those composed by Rajnarayan Basu (Basu 1909), Debendranath Tagore (Tagore 1928), Shibnath Shastri (Shastri 1915), Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (Vidyasagar 1891), Nabinchandra Sen (Sen 1902), and Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray[15]. Nabinchandra Sen's *Āmār Jīban* in five volumes is perhaps the most elaborate of elite Bengali lives, and it is not coincidental that Sen also wrote lives of Buddha (*Amitābha*), Christ (*Khrister Jīban*), and a life of the Egyptian queen *Cleopatra.* Sen's *Amitabha* published on 29th Ashad (Sen 1895) is particularly fascinating as Amitabha or Buddha's life is—like Krishna's *caritra*—examined in verse, as psychologically convincing as well as divinely potent. Some great men such as Madhusudan Dutt and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar also had contemporaries or followers penning their *carit* or life-narratives. Brajendranath Bandopadhyaya and Sajanikanta Das's collection entitled *Sāhitya Sādhak Caritmālā* (Bandopadhyay and Das 1968) (*A Garland of Lives of Those Devoted to the Cause of Literature* in 17 volumes, 1957)[16] outlining a map of cultural milestones of an imagined *jāti* (nation), served the same cultural-revivalist function that Leslie Stephen's *Dictionary of National Biographies* (1885–1891) had done for England.

Partha Chatterjee complicates the question of individuality, noting that the new colonial modernity-informed patriarchal structures retained traces of older hagiographical adulation towards the male subject, and this is especially evident in modern Indian language genres such as the *carit*s and *gāthā*s. It is in the intimate, fallible, hesitant and deferred subjectivity formation, contra structures of Bengali women's *smritikathā*s and *jībans* (recollections and lives), that such subjectivities were achieved. Chatterjee's finest example is Rassunadari Devi's *Āmār Jīban* (Devi 1876). It is in this intimate *andar* (inner domestic space) of real women writers and the feminized, indigenized *kathā* forms they assumed that the real differentiation between the older hagiography and the newer biography took place.

I would also direct my readers' attention to Rabindranath Tagore's naming of his anthology of exemplary life narratives, *Caritrapūjā* (Tagore 1907). Such a naming collapses the critical distinction between suprahuman deity worship as 'ritual practice' (puja) and 'reading' of exemplary human lives as 'worship'. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar is first on Tagore's list of *carit*s, given that Vidyasagar's life was truly exemplary, but also because he had understood the pedagogic value of the *carit*-reading exercise for an emergent *jāti*, and had recast Robert Chambers' *Exemplary and Instructive Biography* (Chambers 1836) as *Jībancarit* (Vidyasagar 1858) as a necessary primer for Bengali children. Vidyasagar's *Jībancarit* was incidentally critiqued by the orthodox thinkers such as Amritalal Basu[17] for its inclusion of secular, foreign, and culturally dissonant 'lives' such as those of Charles Duval (in imitation of Chambers' *Eminent Lives*) and its complete occlusion of indigenous 'lives'. Basu grieved the replacing of *Śiśubodh*, an older prescribed primer for Bengali children in *pathshalas* (village schools usually not divided into several classrooms or teachers), which had the 'life' of god Vishnu as its constituent, with Vidyasagar's 'godless' and 'strange' *Jībancharit* in Bengali school curriculum.

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[15] Prafullachandra Ray's book is named after the great nationalist scientist's profession, the *Autobiography of an Indian Chemist* (Ray 1958).

[16] Brajendranath Banerjee composed more than 96 lives as part of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat's (the Council for/of Bengali Literature) plan of publishing authentic 'lives' of litterateurs.

[17] Refer to Basu's *Purātanī Kathā* for more on this.

Incidentally, James Long voiced the general European critique regarding extant indigenous primers noting that “the *Shishubodh*, however, still holds its ground in village schools with its absurdities and obscenities” (Long 1850). I refer to this not quite connected piece of information because it is these same set of accusations of “absurdity and obscenity” that would be levelled against the Vishnu/Krishna figure and which Bankim would be obliged to defend in his *Krishnacaritra*.

Bankimchandra’s use of the *carit* genre, which had by the mid-nineteenth century become synonymous with psychologically convincing, historicised, life writing of great public figures, was part of a complex cultural process and numerous scholarly studies have enriched our understanding of its complex genealogy.[18] *Carit* as a genre was deployed variously, as narratives about ten princes (as in Dandin’s *Daśakuāracarita*), as eulogizing and recording kings’ lives (as in Banabhatta’s *Harshacarita*), as celebrating saints (Syed Sultan’s *Rasoolcarit*, Krishnadas Kaviraj’s *Caitanyacaritāmrita*) and praising godly personages (Tulsidas’ *Rāmcaritmānas).* Modern Indian languages such as Bengali have often used the *carit* form in a mock-heroic manner, exploiting the critical gap between the gravity of the genre and the inconsequentiality/venality of the subject described. Troilokyanath Mukherjee’s *Damarūcarit* (Mukherjee 1923), Jogendrachandra Basu’s *Cinibās Caritāmrita* and *Bāngāli carit* (1885–1886) are cases in point.

The relation between life writing and history writing—given that Indians were ‘othered’ by British colonialism as contra-historically inclined—is acute because history writing in Bengal in its inception often assumed the *carit* form. A reference to Ram Ram Basu’s *Rājā Pratāpāditya Caritra* (Basu 1801), Mrityunjay Vidyalankar’s *Rajabali*, and Rajiblochan Mukherjee’s *Krishnachandra Rayasya Caritram* will suffice. Then of course Rajendralal Mitra (1822–91), one of Bankim’s closest ideological partners, and known as the inceptor of proper history writing in India, also contributed two *carits*, *Śivāji Caritra* (Mitra 1860) and *Mewārer Rājeitibritta* (Mitra 1861) as dedicated to the Hindu revivalist cause.

Bankim’s recasting of *carit* forms in modern times had the weighted support of a venerable Sanskrit aesthetic tradition, given that great aesthetician Bhamaha chose Bana’s *Harshacarita* to explicate the difference between the *ākhāyikā* or historicised narrative that is the auto/biography, and the *kathā* or imaginative narratives[19]. It also had the weighted support of endeavours such as Basu’s *Rājā Pratāpāditya Caritra*, critically embracing as it did the *carit* genre in its attempts to write one of the earliest histories of Bengal.

Bankim’s other *carit* exercise, *Muchirām Gurer Jīban Carit* (Chattopadhyay [1880] 1953), published not too long before *Krishnacaritra*, deploys the *carit* form in a comic-satiric manner to portray the fictitious life of a rogue called Muchirām. Bankim writes under the pseudonym Darpanarayan Putatunda of the Gur (of a ‘low caste Koibarta origins) who is also born of a mother Jashodā (a name inevitably associated with god Krishna’s foster mother) and has his playful *līlās* (manifestations) in a parodic inversion of Krishna’s childhood exploits. This illiterate rogue, Muchirām Gur, is elevated through the mysterious operations of the colonial state, and its essential misunderstanding of the Bengali language, to the state of a titled *Rāibāhādur* (landlord-zamindar), and whose *carit* then becomes worthy of study! I mention this because if negation is the motor of history, then the obverse of any such Muchirām is that great god who assumed a human avatar, Śri Krishna.

4. Seeley’s *Ecce Homo* and Its Demythologising Strategies

Seeley’s *Ecce Homo* and Bankim’s *Krishnacarit* are comparable in the sense that both deploy generic forms of ‘lives’ and ‘*carits*’ respectively. These are forms that can accommodate semiotic slippages, and within which transactional dialogues between god ‘life’ and human ‘life’ may be conducted. The authorial intentions of historicising gods, naturalising such divine figures for ‘secular times’, and

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[18] Refer to Georg Buhler’s English annotation and introduction of Dandin’s Sanskrit, *Daśakumāracarita* (Buhler 1873), and pshita Chanda’s *Tracing Charit as a Genre* for more on this (Chanda 2003).

[19] Refer to Sushil Kumar De’s essay “The Akhyayika and the Katha in Classical Sanskrit” for more on this (De 1924).

authenticating their cultural relevance and iconicity in times of national resurgence is made possible within the specificity of these generic contexts. The mutating life-writing, *carit*-writing narrative forms, along with their evolving-expanding reading-interpretative community in times of subjectivity formation, is vital to the understanding of *Ecce Homo* and *Krishnacaritra*[20]. To these one must add Bankim's special burden as the representative of a subjected, culturally beleaguered people, obliged to repeatedly defend his culture/religion's gods and texts from charges of "absurdity", "obscenity" and cultural irrelevance[21]. The essay addresses these four distinct but interconnected issues in some detail with suitable textual references.

Consider Seeley's use of the biography form in *Ecce Homo* to make true his intent to historicise and demystify the Christ figure;

> those who feel dissatisfied with the current conceptions of Christ might be obliged to reconsider the whole subject from the beginning, and placing themselves in imagination at the time when he whom we call Christ bore no such name, but was simply, as St. Luke describes him, a young man of promise, popular with those who knew him and appearing to enjoy the Divine favor, *to trace his biography from point to point*, and accept those conclusions about him, not which church doctors or even apostles have sealed with their authority, but which the facts themselves, critically weighed, appear to warrant (Seeley [1865] 1912, "Preface" 3, *emphases mine*).

The conflation of biography with history and empirical historical tools as intrinsic to biography writing is apparent when Seeley admits that, he "undertook to" write *Ecce Homo* "because, after reading a good many books on Christ" he discovered that "there was no *historical character* whose motives, objects, and feelings remained so incomprehensible to" modern readers like him. Seeley's interpretation of the miracles that Jesus wrought is again worth considering, also because of the generic point that he makes at the end;

> Miracles are, in themselves, extremely improbable things, and cannot be admitted unless supported by a great concurrence of evidence. For some of the Evangelical miracles there is a concurrence of evidence which, when fairly considered, is very great indeed; for example, for the Resurrection, for the appearance of Christ to St. Paul, for the general fact that Christ was a miraculous healer of disease. The evidence by which these facts are supported cannot be tolerably accounted for by any hypothesis except that of their being true. And if they are once admitted, the antecedent improbability of many miracles less strongly attested is much diminished. *Nevertheless nothing is more natural than that exaggerations and even inventions should be mixed in our biographies with genuine facts* (Seeley [1865] 1912), Chapter two, 16, *emphases mine*).

Seeley proceeded to express his definitive view of history in *The Expansions of England: Two Courses of Lectures* when he was the Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge, and had established History as an independent discipline and organized its Tripos examination format. Seeley defines connections between England and India as organic-enduring, and not as the strained-tenuous to be expected in a relationship between the possessor and possessed. Noting that the Indian empire was as precious, if not more, than the acquisition of a European one, Seeley hints at India "choosing" British rule over Muslim anarchy. Strangely this is the view expressed by Satyananda, the leader of virile Hindu sannyasis of *Ānandamath* at the end of this novel by Bankim. This is also the explanation that the omniscient author of *Debi Chaudhurānī* advances for Bhabani Pathak, the leader of

[20] The Darwinian analogy is deliberate as both Seeley and Bankim were influenced by Darwinian ideas of evolution.

[21] Bankim was also egged on to define and defend Hinduism as a contemporary and viable religion by Reverend Hastie and the epistolary battle between them is recorded in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper, *The Statesman* from October of 1886, and in the Jogesh Bagal edited, *Bankim Rachanavali* volume 3.

a robust nationalist army of Barendrabhum or North Bengal, for the latter's willing surrender to the British order at the end of the narrative.

Seeley opines that India might, in the future, evolve into a mature polity, and derive autonomy by retaining an organically symbiotic relation with England. The hints of an emergent, independent Indian/Hindu empire with Krishna's ideals as its guiding force are apparent in *Krishnacaritra*. The actual operations of a Hindu kingdom (albeit defeated at the end) is to be seen in a less read novel, *Sītārām*. Bankim's historiographical worldview owes some debts to Seeley's writings, cleverly calibrating as Seeley does, the ideas of a historicised Christ. The naturalized Christian ideals are now camouflaged as cultural mileposts, and such mileposts serve to direct the expansion of a just ethical (Christian?) empire. The connections between history writing and biography writing, while masking majoritarian religions as ethico-political positions, could not have been better established. A closer examination of the intellectual trajectory of Seeley's oeuvre, and not just *Ecce Homo*, is vital for a surer understanding of Bankim's *Krishnacaritra*.

5. *Krishnacaritra* as Refuting Indological Allegations against *The Mahābhārata* and the Krishna Figure

Krishnacaritra begins as a kind of dialogue, like most of Bankim's novels, where the reader is imagined as an intelligent, thinking entity who, like the author, is produced by Enlightenment-informed epistemic structures. Bankim proposes an acceptable methodology regarding the inscription of such an empirically verifiable *carita* (historical narrative) of a god;

> [. . .] *Āmār nijēr jāhā biswās, pāthak kē tāhā grahan karitē boli nā, ēbang Krishnēr iśwaratwa sangsthāpan karāō āmār uddēśya nahē. Ēi granthē āmi kēbal mānab caritrēri samālōconā kariba. Tabē ēkhan Hindu dharmēr āndōlan kichu prabalatā lābh kariāchē. Dharmāndōlonēr prabalatār ēi samaye Krishna caritrēr sabistārē samālōconā prayōjonīō.*
>
> [It is not my intention to make my readers accept my beliefs, and nor do I intend to establish the godliness (divine essence) of Krishna. I will only explore some human characteristics in this book. However, of late, the Hindu codes of behavior has gathered considerable strength. There is a need to narrate Krishna's life in the utmost detail, in times of such revivalist movements (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part one, "Chapter One", p. 10).

Like the Romantic propagators of 'natural religion', Bankim debunks the miraculous dimensions of a Jarāsandha *vadha*, a Śiśupāla *vadha* or the creating of *māyā* darkness to assist Ārjunā's killing of Jayadratha at the appointed hour in *Mahābhārata*. He translates each of these acts of Krishna as strategies of a highly skilled general of an armed force deployed to win a war. Bankim also quotes from John Muir's retelling of Lassen's *Indian Antiquities* in support of his position, "these heroes [Ram and Krishna] are for the most part exhibited in no other light than other highly gifted men [. . .]". (Muir 1868, in Chattopadhyay 1892)[22]. Bankim defines miracles in a Deist fashion, as happenings within a world which the creator has made according to certain rules and which will run independent of his presence or intervention. Events often do not appear so miraculous once their causes have been discovered (Chattopadhyay 1886).

Bankim scienticises the incarnation of Krishna by deploying Darwinian evolutionary logic to explain *avatāra tatwa*, tracing progression from the lower forms of life to its godly perfection, from Matsya, Kurma, Varāha, Vāmana, Nrisingha, Paraśurām, Rām, Balarām to the ultimate manifestation of evolutionary splendour—Krishna. *Avatārvād* is of course the most popular Hindu way of explaining

[22] The reference is to John Muir's *Original Sanskrit texts on the Origin and History of the People of India* in which he translates Lassen's German *Indische Altertumskuunde* into English, as *Indian Antiquities.* Parts of Lassen's *Indian Antiquities* is to be found anthologised in the 4th volume of Muir's book.

gods who assume a natural form, but Bankim's melding of such ideologies with Darwinian theories of evolutionary progression, as well as with Indological theories of racial evolution, is significant[23].

Bankim must, however, wield generic *gāndīva* (Arjuna's weapon) far more adroitly than Seeley ever had to do when the latter wrote a 'biography' of Christ, the moment he proceeds to establish Krishna's historical authenticity and primacy:

> *Krishnacaritrēr maulikatā ki*? *Krishna nāmē kōnō byakti prithībi tē kakhanō ki bidyamān chilēn tāhār pramān ki*? *Jadi chilēn, tabē tāhār caritra jathārtha ki prakār chilo, tāhā jānibār kōnō upāye āche ki*? [What is the authenticity of a Krishna figure? What is the proof that there ever existed an actual person named Krishna in this world? And if he did exist, then what are the means by which, one could determine his true nature?] (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part one, Chapter two, p. 11).

Bankim cites his sources, of which the most historically authentic, he claims, is the *Mahābhārata*. He also mentions *Harivansha*, and nine out of a total of eighteen extant *Purāna*s. However, if the *Mahābhārata* is defined as an epic poem or a *kāvya*, it cannot be, by generic definition, called a historical document. Establishing the human authenticity of a figure called Krishna is fraught with risks, not because he, Bankim, will be condemned by the orthodox (as in the case of Seeley's life of Christ) but because the very European scholars, Christian Lassen, Albrecht Weber, Theodor Goldstuecker, and a host of Indologists that Bankim refers to in his Preface to *Krishnacaritra*, had also used the generic weapon of *kāvya* or imaginative writing to dehistoricise the *Mahābhārata* in its present state.

In their reading of the *Mahābhārata*, German Indologists, who were also primarily philologists by training, had begun positing a critical distinction between the original *Mahābhārata* as 'authentic history' and *Mahābhārata* in its present state as a corrupted 'epic poem.' Central to this generic distinction is Christian Lassen, the formidable Indological scholar and author of *Indidische Amarkunde* (Indian Antiquities). Lassen affirms that the *Mahābhārata* tale is valuable as a historical document, as it represents the historical conflict between the lighter-skinned Aryan races and the darker-skin Dravidian races. It is "unavoidable" in its present (corrupted?) state however, that the *Mahābhārata* can be regarded as anything but "as a collection of old epic poems."[24] The problem with such typological labelling of *Mahābhārata* as an epic poem or collection of epic poems is that the text as found in its present form is a clear case of generic takeover. Nothing of the original heroic poem (*heldensage, heldengedichte*)—matters of an undivided Indo European *ur epos* that the *Iliad* and the *Nibelungenlied* had shared with the original *Mahābhārata*—now remains in the *Mahābhārata*'s present and corrupted form. The present *Mahābhārata* "in the course of oral transmission unconsciously fused other legends into itself". The entire *Ādīparvan* matter is described by Lassen as an accretion from a later period. He, and Adolf Holtzmann Jr. who enriches this idea, accuses the "priestly class" or the Brahmans of taking over of a heroic epic and deliberately corrupting and reducing its *ur epos* matter. The *heldensage* that "actually constitute the literature of the *ksatrija*" is now overlaid with didactic, philosophy, theosophy laden, pseudo epical matter.[25] The *Mahābhārata* in its present form is thus "not a collection of the historical songs in the genuine sense." In other words, the *Mahābhārata* in its present state, though having many commendable qualities, fails both the generic tests, that of being either authentic 'history' or a pure heroic 'epic'.

Bankim's *Krishnacaritra*, then, must fight a pitched battle to establish the very existence of Krishna in the original narrative. It must debunk the theory of the Krishna figure as a *prakshēp*, an interpolation

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23 Refer to Adliuri and Bagchee's *The Nay Science* for more on relations between Indological studies and theories of Aryan evolution into a superrace.

24 Cited from the English translation by Adluri and Joydeep (2014) of Lassen's essay "Beitrage zur kunde des Indichen Alterthums aus dem Mahābhārata I, from *Zeitschrift fur die Kunde des Morgenlandes,* I, 1837, in *The Nay Science* p. 61.

25 Cited in "The Search for an Urepos" in *The Nay Science* and is Adluri and Bagchee's English translation of Lassen's essay "Beitrage zur kunde des Indichen Alterthums aus ddem Mahābhārata I, in *Zeitschrift fur die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, I, 1837, p. 85.

into the original historical matter at the behest of a cunning priestly class. The task of Bankim's *Krishnacaritra* is thus multifarious—to reinstitute the Indologically-informed 'absent or minor Krishna' to a position of ethical centrality, to re-establish Krishna within an 'original recounting of a historic conflict', and within an 'ur-record of astounding heroism by warrior- raconteurs like Sanjaya'. Such a *caritra* or life narrative must contest the imputation of *Mahābhārata* as having degenerated, at the behest of the Indian priestly classes, into a dull, theologico-philosophical discussion laden, low grade epic poem. The Krishna of Bankim's biography—the heroic leader of men, the sage administrator, and an icon of a triumphant Hindu empire—answers every such imputation and more.

Krishnacaritra must also prove that the Krishna figure is neither obscene nor absurd; he is a historically authenticated top class military mind, a general who leads the virtuous, and is not the cunning ally of the undeserving, interloping, and thieving tribal group from the hills called the Pāndavas[26] to their legitimate victory.

Even if such nineteenth century German Indological interpretations have little purchase today, Lassen's 'genealogical reading[27]' gained considerable support among later generations of Indologists such as Albrecht Weber, Theodore Goldstuecker, and especially Adolf Hortzmann junior who developed Lassen's suggestions ideas into a full-fledged theory of Krishna's venal and cunning essence. Great Indian scholars of the *Mahābhārata* such as Romesh Chandra Dutt (Dutt 1898), and V.B. Sukthankar were left to repeat these charges and restitute the Krishna figure, even when they continued to agree with many of the readings of Lassen[28]. Rabindranath Tagore's charge of Krishna as lacking in ethics, is often construed as having been conceived to debate Bankim's argument in *Krishnacaritra*, but is more like an eager reception and repetition of the Indological position.

It is this generic interpretation of *Mahābhārata* as a corrupted epic poem and the debunking of Krishna as cunning and unheroic that leads Bankim to constitute his defence in generic terms. *Mahābhārata* had to be defined as *itihāsa*, or more specifically a *purānāitihāsa*, or a culturally specific, untranslatable in European languages kind of 'history' that was both empirically verifiable, as well as central to a culture's belief system. It is here that a reiteration of Bhamaha's description of *Harshacarita* as an example of the *ākhyāikā*, or truthful record, as a constituent of the *carita* genre might be useful.

As Bankim notes in his *Letter to the Editor of The Statesman* entitled "European Versions of Hindoo doctrines," "[y]ou can translate a word by a word, but behind that word is an idea you cannot translate, if it does not exist among people in whose languages you are translating" (Chattopadhyay [1882] 1953). He must then create new generic categories that have the weight of Sanskrit aesthetics as well as a distinct semiotic contemporaneity to engage with European scholars.

Bankimchandra posits in *Krishnacarita* a vital distinction between the genres of what he calls '*upanyās*' and '*itihāsa*.' *Upanyas* for him would be closer to *kathā,* as it is an imagined narrative, and therefore somewhat different from the *itihāsa*. Significantly, Bankim's last novel, *Sītārām*, ends with a generic discussion as well, what with the commoners Ramachand and Shyamachand speculating about the vanished Sītārām figure, and describing such speculations as *upanyas*-like, unfounded fabrication (*Sītārām* "Parishista", p. 154). In the "Preface" to *Sītārām*, the editors Banerjee and Das, also note that Bankim considered *Ānandamath*, *Debi Chaudhurānī* and *Sītārām* as a trio that were meant to function as *itihāsa* or histories, rather than as *upanyas* or imaginative works.

Bankim's description of *Mahābhārata* as *itihāsa*, in the European sense of an empirically verified series of facts, and not the original Sanskrit sense of 'what-has-happened', or 'thus-it- is', is not born out of Bankim's ignorance of Sanskrit aesthetics but out of necessity. Bankim must create new generic categories that are peculiarly Indic but whose semiotic charge may be evident to Indological scholars.

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[26] I draw this description of the Pāndavas from the claims of the Indologists.

[27] While 'genre studies' has emerged as a more popular definition, 'genealogy' was originally used in Europe to indicate study of literary types.

[28] V.S. Sukthankar's *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, acknowledges Lassen's work but defends the Pandavas as virtuous, heroic and Krishna as godlike as late as (Sukthankar 1957).

He calls such a category as a *purāneitihāsa*. This category is ancient, as the word *purāna* indicates what is ancient but true, as it is *itihāsa* or that which is recorded. This is utterly unlike what the Europeans (imbued by ecriturial cultures) had imagined the *purānas* to be, namely, unreliable simply because they were orally composed and orally handed over by many personages. Bankim notes;

> *Āmār jata dur sādhya, āmi purāneitihās ēr ālōconā kariāchi. Tāhār phal ēi pāiāchi jē, Krishna sambandhia jē sakal pāpokhyan janasamājē prachalita āche, tāhā sakali* [10] *amulak baliā jānitē pāriāchi, ēbang upanyaskarkrita. Krishna sambandhiya upanyassakal bād dilē jāhā bāki thake, tāha ati bisuddha, parampabitra, atishoye mahat, ihao jānitē pāriāchi.*
>
> [I have, to the best of my ability, attempted to read ancient texts as history. As a result of such an attempt, I have been able to identify all the sinful tales (*upakhyan*) associated with Krishna in the popular consciousness as false, fabricated and novelistic (*upanyaskrita*). What remains, after we have discarded all that is novelised about Krishna, is unadulterated, pure, and absolutely noble] (Chattopadhyay 1886, Chapter one, p. 10).

He condemns European commentators for marking out *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* as 'epics' and *kāvya* and not *purāna* or *itihāsa*:

> *Bilati bidyar ekta lakshan ei je, tahara swadeshe jaha dekhen, mone karen bideshe thik tai ache. Tahara Moor bhinna kono a-gaurabarna kono jati janiten na., ejannya edeshe asiya Hindu dig eke "Moor" balite lagilen.*
>
> *Sei rup swadeshe Epic kāvya bhinna padye rachita akhyangrantha dekhen nai, sutarang Europio panditera Mahabharat o Ramayanar sandhyan paiyai oi dui grantha ke Epic kāvya baliya siddhanta karilen. Jadi kāvya tabē uhār aitihāsikata kichu rahilō na, sab ek kathae bhāshiā gelō.* [. . .] *Greek dēr madhye Thucydides ēr granthē ēbang onayanyō itihās granthe kāvyēr moto saundarya āche] Mānabcaritra i kāvyēr shrestha upadan; ititihāsbettāō manushyacaritrer barnana karēn; bhālo kariā tini jadi āpanār kārya sādhan karitē pārēn, tabē kājēi tāhār itihāsē kābyēr soundaraya āshiyā upasthita hoibe.*
>
> [One sure sign of European learning is that they see everything in foreign lands as mirror images of things in their country. They had never seen any non-white race except the Moors, and so when they saw Hindus in this land, they began calling Hindus, Moors. Similarly, European scholars, unexposed to any narrative poem other than the epic in their own cultures, were quick to designate the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramayana* as 'epics' as soon as they located these texts. And if they were *kāvya s* then it could not have any *aitihasik* (historical) authenticity. So every other logic is washed away by this method of definition [. . .]
>
> Among the Greeks, the writings of Thucydides, and other historical writings, possess great poetic beauty. Human nature is the chief ingredient of *kāvya*-literature, the historian also describes human beings, and if the historian succeeds in his task, he may achieve the beauty of literature-kāvya in his work] (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part One, Chapter four, p. 12).

Bankim's pointing to the overlapping of generic categories is not postmodern but symptomatic of the tragic inbetweeness that the colonised subject must suffer, having to use the European language to connote Indic aesthetic categories. Bankim also militates against the facile translation of *The Mahābhārata* as an 'epic', and an equally facile translation of the epic genre by Europeans as *mahākāvya*. Firstly, in the Sanskrit aesthetical order a *mahākāvya* indicates an epyllion, or a longish poem, and the *Mahābhārata* is defined as *itihāsa in the sense of* something far more profound, something that will remain forever. Bankim rues the European scholars' lack of sensitivity when they translate ideas that are essentially untranslatable. He has to find the culture specific generic label, a conflation of the *purānas* or ancient, orally transmitted texts, and *itihāsa* in the sense of a verifiable history. Defining

Mahābhārata as *purānaitihāsa* is Bankim's way of establishing the historicity as well as aesthetic essence of the *Mahābhārata* in its present state.

Bankim collapses the ideas of historical authenticity and empirically verifiable biography—*carita*—while distinguishing between ordinary, mundane, and ahistorical lives of mere 'wolves and dogs', and record worthy lives of the great or god like lives:

> *Mahābhāratēr aitihāsikata kichu āchē ki? Mahābhārata kē itihāsa bolē, kintu itihās balilēi ki History bujhāilō? Itihās kāhākē bolē? Ekhan kār dinē śrigāl kukkurēr galpo likhiāō lōkē tāhākē 'itihās' nām diā thākē. Kintu bastuta jāhātē pūrābritta, arthāt pūrbē jāhā ghatiāchē tāhār ābbriti āchē, tāhā bhinnō ār kichui itihās bolā jāitē pārē nā.* [...] *Ekhon, Bhāratbarshēr prāchīn granthēr madhyē kēbal Mahābhārata i athabā kēbal Mahābhārata o Rāmāyana itihās nām prāpto hoiāchē* [Does *Mahābhārata* have anything like historicity? Now does defining the *Mahābhārata* as *itihāsa* mean that it connotes history in the European sense? What is *itihāsa*? These days, people also define the narratives about dogs and wolves as *itihāsa*. However, in reality, nothing apart from that is a record of ancient happenings, that has happened in the past, can be called *itihāsa*. [...] Now, among the ancient texts of Bhāratbarsha only the *Mahābhārata* or only the *Mahābhārata* and the *Ramayana* have deserved the definition of *itihāsa*. (Chattopadhyay 1886, Part One, Chapter three, pp. 14–15).

He also has to, by the same coin, prove Krishna's exceptionality as an *ādarśa* (ideal) for a new India to follow. Bankim's debt's to Seeley's *Expansions of the Empire: Two Courses of Lectures* (1886) lies in the former's projection of *Krishnacaritra* as the text for a future Hindu empire where Hindu ideals would no longer be demeaned as primitive, absurd, and obscene, but be naturalized into cultural and ethical codes of a Bhāratbarsha. The preeminent figure that would preside over such a place would be both god and human[29].

Bankim's distinct and contemporary use of the *carit* genre is central to this argument as it conceptually coalesces god 'life' writing forms with historically verifiable life writings. The *carit* allows Bankim this interpretative latitude. The evolution and growing popularity of the genre in the modern languages of nineteenth century India provides that fertile interpretative community where his *Krishcharitra* may be read.

6. Secularism and Rise of Global Empires

Let me end this essay by pointing towards the contradictions embedded in Seeley's and Bankim's greater projects. Seeley argued that such a demystified Christ's life "should provide the foundation of a new science of politics and for a Christian state governed by a universal positive morality" and that would "embrace the blessed light of science, a light [...] dispersing every day some noxious superstition, some cowardice of the human spirit" (Seeley [1865] 1912). The conflation of science, Christianity, and universal values is quite complete!

The very word 'secular' has a peculiar etymological history and Talal Asad in the *Formations of the Secular* (Asad 2003) deconstructs Charles Taylor's positing the 'secular' as 'religion's' obverse in Anglophone cultures (Taylor 2007). Asad restores the original connotation of the term 'secular' as a critical position within Christianity; "[t]he term 'secularism' and 'secularist' were introduced into English by freethinkers in the middle of the nineteenth century in order to avoid the charge of their being 'atheists' and 'infidels,' terms that carried suggestions of immorality in a still largely Christian society [...]". In endnote number six of the same page (23), Asad quotes an encyclopaedia of secularism; "the word 'secularism' was coined by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 and intended to differentiate Holyoake's anti-theistic position from Bradlaugh's atheistic pronouncements"

[29] Pitching Nabinchandra Sen's three- part verse-epic recounting stages of Krishna's life *Raibatak*, *Kurukshetra* and *Prabhas* besides *Krishnacaritra* is useful, as Sen too conjures up a lost Hindu-Indian empire that could be revived at Shri Krishna's behest.

(Asad 2003). By deploying the word secular to mean a-religious, when it connotes the 'Christian,' the majoritarian religion spirits itself away into an invisible a-religious cultural-ethico category, and identifies minority faiths by the same logic as pre-modern, non-secular, and 'religious!'

In India, the *Queen's Proclamation* (a post Mutiny manifestation) represents the culmination of developments related to the Europe's 'secularisation' project[30]. The *Proclamation* indicates Europe's coping with her increasing contact with other societies and religions within an expanding world. The 'secularisation project' is an extension of broader efforts to diffuse religious conflicts within Christianity in Europe and locating Christianity within this-worldly activities. The affirming the operations of Protestant Christianity as the 'laws of nature' was central to such a secularizing project. The English context of 'naturalising' religion, of 'humanising' Christ, and finding scientific bases for religious truths is particularly relevant for Seeley and Bankim life writings of godly figures[31].

The *Queen's Proclamation* (and Seeley refers to it severally in his *The Expansion* lecture) could be read as a companion piece to Seeley's *Natural Religion* and *The Expansion of England* for its outright condemnation of religion's hierarchisation and forcible conversions, or for any coercion in matters of religious belief.[32] The *Proclamation*'s acceptance of religions' multiplicity and their equal valence renders it as a watershed document in history of religious toleration. However, as Peter van der Veer notes, "the recognition of a multiplicity of religions, [...] in no way prevents the identification of *the essence of religion with Christianity* (emphases mine)" (Van der Veer 2001). Modern Hinduism like Protestant Christianity "is full of attempts to identify [the majoritarian religion] as the highest form or the essence of religion". Outright attacks on other religions are now replaced by "more subtle attempts at conversion by recognizing elements in them that resemble [the majoritarian religion]" (Van der Veer 2001). As in modern Europe where attempts to convert, say Catholics to Protestantism diminished, attempts to convert—say, marginal sects, such as *dalits* in India—become irrelevant, and all religions in the emergent nation of Bhāratbarsha were now seen as forms of Hinduism[33]. The choice of a religious figure and his transformation into a politico cultural epicentre in a projected empire is what *Krishnacaritra* attempts.

7. Conclusions

Within a wider Indian context, it would be quite useful to situate Bankim's *Krishnacaritra* in relation to the entire tradition of Krishna *carit* writing in the Assamese tradition, from Śankaradeva and his much admired *Rukmīni haran kāvya* and *Rukmīni haran nat*. Padmanath Gohain Baruah (1871–1946) departs from this *bhakti* tradition in his *Śri Krishna* and depicts an adult, pragmatic Krishna, who is a diplomat, often tired and dejected and very human. It is not entirely coincidental that P. Gohain Baruah

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[30] Refer to *The Proclamation by the Queen in Council to thee Princes, Chiefs, and People of India* (Victoria 1858) (Published by the Governor-General at Allahabad, 1 November 1858) and para 6 where it notes that "[...] We disclaim alike the Right and Desire to Impose our Convictions on any of Our Subjects" and that all British authority shall be enjoined "on the pain of Our highest Displeasure" to practice such tolerance and absolutely "abstain from interference with Religious Belief of any of Our Subjects [...]".

[31] Rabindranath like most Indian nineteenth-century intellectuals, was responsive to the British-Romantic tradition of naturalizing religions, thus rendering them scientific, and 'modern'. For more on this refer to my work on Tagore's *Gora* (Bhattacharya 2015) Robert Seeley's *Natural Religion* (Seeley 1882) that suggests the implicatedness of Positivist science and Protestant Christianity- is something that Rabindranath translates (partially) and deploys to strengthen his argument in the essay "Hindu Bibaha" (Tagore [1887] 1988, p. 654).

[32] Seeley's *The Expansion* is almost comic in its repeated rejection of 'coercion' as a principle of governance, and in its insistence that the Indians 'chose to be ruled by the British', impressed by latter's superior governance abilities, and repulsed by the chaotic ruling style of Mughals and Pathans.

[33] Refer to Rabindranath's essay *Atmaparichaya* (Our Identity) that is translated as Appendix I to *Rabindranath Tagore's Gora: New Critical Interpretations*, 2015) for the definition of 'Hindu' as *jati* (nation); as inclusive of all other faiths; and as the very equivalent of 'India. Rabindranath's posing and answering a question is telling: "Can you then remain a Hindu, even though you have joined the Musalman or Christian sects? But of course! There can be no question regarding this". Citing examples of Gyanendramohan Tagore, and Krishnamohan Bandopadhaya (both of whom converted to Christianity), Rabindranath declares that they are "Hindu by *jati* (nationality) and Christian by religion. Christian happens to be their colour but Hindu is their essence". ("*Atmaparichaya*", Tagore 1912, *RR vol* 9, tr. mine, p. 597).

was also the writer of the first Assamese novel, *Bhanumoti* published in 1890 and *Lahori*, published the following year, and the editor of *Jīvani Sangraha*. His investment in realism as an ideology naturally helped him to depict a historically accessible Krishna figure. Barua's stay in Kolkata in an imagined cosmopolis of the *mess bāri*[34], also helped him to formulate a distinct Assamese identity. This cultural identity was produced in dialogue with Bengali, in dialogue with domesticity, and with regionalism. Such regionalism was paradoxically produced within a cosmopolitan public space and public field of action. The *sabhās* and *samitīs*[35] that Gohain Baruah created became metonymic of those cosmopolitan spaces and where a degree of secular literature could be produced by straddling worlds of bhakti and human culpability.

Some of the significant ways in which Indian modernity in the nineteenth century came to be constituted was not through an uncomplicated internalization of a desacralized, reason-sanctioned worldview or its outright rejection, an equally simple partitioning off of the sacred and the secular, or even a wholesale conversion to the colonial masters' religion, but through a renewed focus on Indic creedal faiths that were powerful and majoritarian. It would perhaps not be too far from the truth to assert that the colonial intervention produced Hinduism and Islam as we see them today in contemporary South Asia. In turn, the 'secular' nationalist politics—that included notions of science, technology, pedagogy—and all that is considered modern was produced by such majoritarian religions. It is these religions that are now assuming avatar(s) of 'contesting' national cultures in the Indian subcontinent. *Krishnacaritra's* relevance lies in looking towards such possibilities.

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[34] Shared apartment, usually hostel-like and occupied by professionals and students.
[35] Broadly speaking, meetings and groups.

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Article

The Feminization of Love and the Indwelling of God: Theological Investigations Across Indic Contexts

Ankur Barua * and Hina Khalid *

Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9BS, UK
* Correspondence: ab309@cam.ac.uk (A.B.); hk410@cam.ac.uk (H.K.)

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Abstract: Our essay is a thematic exploration of the malleability of idioms, imageries, and affectivities of Hindu *bhakti* across the borderlines of certain Indic worldviews. We highlight the theological motif of the feminine-feminised quest of the seeker (*virahiṇī*) for her divine beloved in some Hindu expressions shaped by the paradigmatic scriptural text *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and in some Punjabi Sufi articulations of the transcendent God's innermost presence to the pilgrim self. The leitmotif that the divine reality is the "intimate stranger" who cannot be humanly grasped and who is yet already present in the recesses of the *virahiṇī*'s self is expressed with distinctive inflections both in *bhakti*-based Vedānta and in some Indo-Muslim spiritual universes. This study is also an exploration of some of the common conceptual currencies of devotional subjectivities that cannot be straightforwardly cast into the monolithic moulds of "Hindu" or "Muslim" in pre-modern South Asia. Thus, we highlight the essentially contested nature of the categories of "Hinduism" and "*Indian* Islam" by indicating that they should be regarded as dynamic clusters of constellated concepts whose contours have been often reshaped through concrete socio-historical contestations, borrowings, and adaptations on the fissured lands of al-Hind.

Keywords: Bābā Farīd; *bhakti*; *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*; Bulleh Shāh; Caṇḍīdās; Hīr-Rāṇjhā; Ibn 'Arabī; Rabindranath Tagore; Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa; Rūmī; Sufism; Vaiṣṇavism; Vidyāpati; *virahiṇī*; Wāris Shāh; Yūsuf-Zulaikhā

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1. Introduction

The scholarly literature on Hindu socio-religious systems, produced over the last four decades or so, has directed our attention to the sheer diversity of ways of envisioning and inhabiting the world that have developed within dense networks of Vedic texts, commentarial traditions, and guru-based lineages. With respect to the study of Vedantic exegetical theology, in particular, academic discourses have moved away from monolithic essentializations such as "Hinduism = Advaita"—instead, recent work on Vedānta foregrounds multiple formations of *bhakti*-shaped Vedantic milieus and also highlights the historical crisscrossings between devotional meditation, ritual practice, and Advaitic self-knowledge (*jñāna*). From this perspective, our essay is a contribution to this developing body of literature on Vedantic theological systems and seeks to explore a relatively understudied feature—the conscious cultivation of a feminine persona by the spiritual aspirant on the pathways of devotional love. From another vantage point, we move into even more unexplored conceptual territory by developing a textually-grounded theological conversation across conceptual, experiential, and affective registers of certain Hindu and Indo-Islamic devotional universes. We begin with a sketch of the key motivations that direct our comparative research before going on to discuss the theological theme of feminine-femininised longing in some lyrical lineaments of Punjabi Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and north Indian devotional (*bhakti*) milieus. We seek to foreground certain key dialectics that suffuse these poetic streams of Indic religiosity (namely, the dialectics of separation and union, hiddenness and presence, life and death, and joy and sorrow) and that characterize the essence of the spiritual longing as an agonised questing after

an intimate but ever-elusive beloved, much like the subjectivity of a woman racked with pain in separation (*virahiṇī*).

2. The Centrality of Peripheries

As a result of the Saidian turn in the critical study of religion, it has become increasingly clear that the Indic "East" and the Christian European "West" became densely entangled, across an asymmetrical differential of colonial power, in representing "Hinduism" as one singular formation (Halbfass 1988; King 1999). The social construction of the "Hinduism" that gradually emerged in the Punjab and in Bengal, through various micro-struggles on the ground, was guided by dense intellectual engagements with an array of interlocutors such as Indian Muslims, British colonial administrators, Sanskrit-rooted traditionalists, Anglicised reformists, and others (Inden 1990; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993). We place Muslims at the top of this list because they constitute, so to speak, the elephant in the room—in the voluminous literature on how some prominent Hindu intellectuals constructed a sense of existential and collective self, across movements such as the Brahmo Samaj (established in 1828) and the Arya Samaj (established in 1875), a significant lacuna is a systematic study of their specifically *intellectual* transactions with Muslim thinkers.

To sketch with broad brush strokes some of these encounters across Bengali social universes, Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) received an education in Arabic and Persian at Patna and became familiar with the Qur'ān, Islamic jurisprudence, and theology (*kalām*), and also the poetry of Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ (Ghani 2015); Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) would often quote Ḥāfiẓ's verses (Sastri 1919, p. 148); the extensive prose writings of his son Rabindranath (1861–1941) on the "Hindu-Muslim question" have recently received some analytical discussion (Choudhury 2012); and Girish Chandra Sen (1835–1910), a disciple of the charismatic Keshub Sen (1838–1884), translated the Qur'ān into Bengali (in 1881) and also composed some treatises on Islam (De 1995, p. 24). However, because of various socioeconomic shifts and sociocultural transitions, such as the adverse impact on Muslim peasants of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the absence of state patronage for madrasas, the abolition in 1837 of Persian as the official language of the courts, the emergence of Hindu groups that began to stridently invoke Vedic templates of the Mother Goddess (*Devī*; *Bhārat Mātā*) towards a cultural nationalism, and so on, some Bengali-speaking Muslims in the mofussil became distanced from Anglicised centres in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Ali 1988; Islam 1969; Mannan 1969). Thus, histories of Bengali literature, often constructed by Hindu intellectuals, could consign texts produced by Muslims to a peripheral cultural layer called "Musalmāni Bāṃlā" or claim that they did not have sufficient literary value (Kaviraj 2003). Moving westward, while the Arya Samaj is often associated with militant attitudes towards Muslims (Thursby 1975), one of its most influential figures, Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928), significantly notes in his autobiographical reminiscences that his father studied in a Persian school where the "lofty character" of the Muslim head teacher had "influenced all his pupils and Islamised their outlook". Though he did not formally embrace Islam, at one stage of his life, he recited the *namāz* prayers and observed the *ramaḍān* fast. Rai further informs us that his mother was born to a Sikh family where the people hated Islam, and yet "by an irony of fate [she] was wedded to a man who was a lover of Islam and a friend of Mussalmans, and who renewed every day his threat to turn Muslim" (Nanda 2003, pp. 283–84). Rai, who joined the Arya Samaj in December 1882, concludes this account with these words: "The soul nurtured on Islam in infancy, and beginning adolescence by seeking shelter in the Brahmo Samaj, began to develop a love for the ancient Hindu culture in the company of Guru Datta and Hans Raj" (Nanda 2003, p. 293).

Though Rai's spiritual trajectory—from Islam to ancient India to the Aryas—is somewhat uncommon, it is not entirely idiosyncratic for individuals from his socio-religious milieus, and it highlights two points that are highly significant for our essay. On the one hand, the intellectual formations, the affective structures, and the social subjectivities of many influential figures associated with Hindu modernities were distinctly moulded or modulated by Indo-Islamic traditions. This thin red strand of South Asian cultural history that stretches from the 1820s to the 1940s remains an untold

narrative because of its abrupt scission at Partition and its subsequent engineered elision in postcolonial variations of Hindu religious nationalism. Farina Mir (Mir 2006) has argued that an examination of the Punjabi *qissā* ("story") literature, which blended Perso-Islamic and local styles, shows that Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in the late nineteenth century participated in an ethos shaped by the vocabularies and the practices of piety that cut across religiously communalised boundaries. More broadly, in the Perso-Islamic milieus of the late Mughal era, scribes (*munshīs*) were appointed to teach Persian to children of respectable Muslim as well as Hindu families. Moving deeper into the premodern centuries, a significant body of academic literature has highlighted the circulations of material culture, such as coins, dress, and sculptures, across "Hindu" and "Muslim" milieus from the early eight to the early thirteenth centuries (Flood 2009) and drawn our attention to the writings of particular figures such as Amīr Khusrau, who developed highly sympathetic accounts of the socioreligious dimensions of the people of the subcontinent (Gabbay 2010); Dārā Shukōh, who tragically tread the borderlines of heterodoxy by boldly declaring that explanations of the Qur'ān are to be found in the *Upaniṣads* and presenting the reference to a "protected book" (*kitāb maknūn*) in the Qur'ān (56: 77–80) as a pointer to the *Upaniṣads* (Friedmann 1975, p. 217); the Rajput prince Sāvant Singh (1699–1764), who wrote voluminous poetry in Braj-bhāṣā with the *nom de plume* Nāgrīdās ("devotee of sophisticated Rādhā") and also wrote poems in Urdu/Rekhta with sonorous Persian words and distinctive imageries (Pauwels 2012); and so on. From the fourteenth century onwards, the quest for dynamic translational equivalences generated a distinctive genre of Indo-Islamic texts in which Vedantic and yogic categories were hermeneutically re-located on Qur'anic landscapes (Stewart 2001; Khan 2004; Hatley 2007; Dalmia and Faruqui 2014; Ernst 2016; Irani 2018; d'Hubert 2018). Thus, regarding the first Bengali account of the life of the Prophet, the *Nabīvaṃśa* of Saiyad Sultān (c.1615–1646), Ayesha Irani has argued that its textual layers are constituted by an interweaving of Sufi, Vaiṣṇava, and Nātha Yoga motifs, so that by moving across cosmopolitan Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit and vernacular Bengali registers, we can read the *Nabīvaṃśa* as an "Islamic purāṇa", a song of praise to the Prophet resembling a Hindu *maṅgala-kāvya* or a biography of the Prophet akin to a *carita* of a Hindu figure (Irani 2016, p. 392). The *Nabīvaṃśa* was preceded by the richly symbolic *premākhyān* literature in which some Sufis from Avadh, such as Malik Muhammad Jāyasī (1477–1542), who composed an Avadhi retelling of the narrative of Kṛṣṇa (*Kanhāvat*) (Pauwels 2013), sought to rework vernacular Hindu-Hindavī idioms into Persian Sufi cosmological systems. While Jāyasī's near contemporary, Mīr Abdul Wāhid Bilgrāmī (d.1569), articulated in his *Haqā'iq-i Hindī* an elaborate array of allegorical readings with Kṛṣṇa as the reality of a human being, the cowherd women (*gopīs*) as angels, the Yamuna and the Ganges as the sea of unity (*wahdat*) and the ocean of gnosis (*ma'rifat*), and the flute of Kṛṣṇa as the production of being out of non-being (Alam 2012, p. 178), around a century later, Hindu poets with Vaiṣṇava names such as Śrī Gopāl and Brindāvan Dās would gather around the Sufi poet Mīrzā Abdul Qādir "Bīdil" (1642–1720) at Delhi, whom they took as their master (*sheikh*) and on whom they produced a memorial literature that followed Persian canons (Hawley 2015, p. 91).

On the other hand, however, it is precisely these Indo-Islamic and *bhakti*-structured milieus of premodern South Asia that are sometimes romanticised in an ahistorical manner as an idyllic enclave of "Hindu-Muslim" amity. Nationalist historians tended to project these milieus as the panacea for a land scarred by communal conflicts, thereby constructing the "good Muslim versus bad Muslim" binary that continues to shape various socio-political discourses in India. Nuanced historical studies, however, have interrogated these overly modularised re-presentations of, for instance, Dārā (Gandhi 2020) as the "good Muslim" and Aurangzeb (Truschke 2017) as the "bad Muslim", and have argued that we should not anachronistically apply our present-day categories such as "liberal", "secular", and "tolerant" to premodern intellectual engagements. Thus, while the stances of Sufis were indeed characterised by modes of cultural synthesis and accommodation, they usually affirmed the finality of Islamic monotheism and at times called for the exclusion of Hindus from administrative offices (Alam 1989). For instance, Abdul Rahmān Chishtī (d.1695) can strikingly mention the *Gītā* as a book in which Kṛṣṇa teaches the secrets of Islamic monotheism (*tauhīd*) and in his *Mir'āt-al-Makhlūqāt*, written

in the narrative style of a Hindu *purāṇa*, can also affirm the ultimacy of the message of Muhammad (Alam 2012). Conversely, in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, while some Pathan disciples of the Bengali Hindu saint Caitanya (1486–1534), who were given names such as "Rāma Dāsa" and "Bijuli Khān", are said to have become renowned as Pāthān-Vaiṣṇavas (Prabhupada 1975, Volume 7, pp. 232–34), the socio-ritual alterity of Muslims is clearly marked by the repeated invocation of the pejorative category of *mleccha* ("foreigners outside Vedic orthodoxy").

Therefore, although our inquiry is primarily centred on some Hindu and Indo-Islamic *theological* motifs, it has been necessary to also sketch the *socio-cultural* contours of their locations, since any such inquiry has to be alive to their contested histories and their fraught receptions. The narrative construction of premodern Hindu interactions with Muslim milieus is, as we have seen, caught in a binary trap—*either* one vehemently rends the richly synthetic Indo-Persianate tapestries that once stretched across significant swathes of the subcontinent (Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Eaton 2019; Nair 2020), as seen in the writings of V.D. Savarkar (1883–1966) and M.S. Golwalkar (1906–1973), *or* one nostalgically projects a dewy-eyed dreamworld of Hindu-Muslim "brotherhood" (Hawley 2015, pp. 292–93). In this essay, we instead gesture towards a *via media* that would highlight both the *affective* vocabularies of devotional love that continue to be translated across Indo-Islamic worlds and the *agonistic* (but not necessarily antagonistic) processes through which these circulations of theological ideas have been mediated.

Such a theoretical pathway would contribute to the ongoing attempts—from the disciplinary perspectives of social anthropology, political theory, and so on (Gottschalk 2000; Assayag 2004)—to decentre monolithic projections of "Hinduism". The claim that medieval Muslims can be placed within either "good" or "bad" categories either covertly presupposes or overtly declares that there is one normative Hinduism out there with respect to which such sweeping evaluative assessments can be readily offered. The methodology that we propose, and begin to develop, in this essay would instead point to the dense conceptual negotiations through which particular Hindu *dharmic* systems have been configured vis-à-vis spatially contiguous forms of Indian Islam, and, conversely, Islamic vernacularized visions (Karim 1959, pp. 165–75; Sharif 1969; Alam 1989; Uddin 2006; Harder 2011; Ricci 2011; Chatterji 1996, p. 17; Eaton 2009, p. 197; Bellamy 2011; Bose 2014; Rahman 2015) have been developed through exchanges—adversarial as well as hospitable—with their environing Hindu linguistic-cultural milieus. When contemporary Deobandi Muslims in Uttar Pradesh characterise their neighbouring Barelvi Muslims as "crypto-Hindus" (Gugler 2015, p. 175), because of particular practices followed by the latter such as the celebration of the death anniversary of saints, the intercession of a saint on the pathway to God, and so on, they might be deeply intrigued to learn that certain Hindu groups—such as the Arya Samaj, monastic Advaitins, and others—would denounce precisely such practices as insufficiently "Hindu". Therefore, given the formation of "Hinduism" in late colonial and postcolonial India through active contestations with some Islamic worlds, the question, "Whose Hinduism? Which Hindus?" turns out to be deeply intertwined with its mirror-inverse query, "Whose Islam? Which Muslims?". From within this dialectical conjuncture, the disciplinary field called "Hindu Studies" can be re-envisioned as "Studies of al-Hind", so that to avoid the two conceptual polarities that we indicated above—*either* a Manichean antagonism *or* an Arcadian accord between "Hindus" and "Muslims"—we would have to undertake a systematic exploration of how Hindu theological motifs that have been developed from distinctively *dharmic* roots have at times been restructured during their socio-historical passages along distinctively Islamic routes.

3. The "Eternal Feminine" in the Bowers of *Bhakti*

One of the reasons why the vocabularies of *bhakti* have been skilfully reworked several times into Islamic idioms is that their affective tones of purgation, loss, lamentation, and recovery are deeply resonant with certain styles of Sufi questing for the eternal unknown within the immediately accessible. Within the specialism of "*Bhakti* Studies", scholars have contested the monolithic projection of "the *bhakti* religion", which is said to be associated exclusively with the soteriological systems of *saguṇa*

personalism established by preceptors such as Rāmānuja (1017–1137), Madhva (1238–1317), and others, and pointed out that *bhakti* should be understood more broadly in its registers of loving attachment, embodied practices, aesthetic forms, and communitarian frameworks. Thus, we may speak of patterns of *bhakti* also in the Advaita *nirguṇa* contexts of the trans-personal absolute, where *bhakti* would characterize the attachment of the finite self towards the qualityless Self and the yearning of the former to attain the perfection of the latter (Sharma 1987, p. 44). Following this historicized understanding of the pervasion by multiple vocabularies of *bhakti* of Hindu milieus shaped by scriptural texts such as the *Bhagavad-gītā* (*c.*200 CE) and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (*c.*900 CE), the crucial term *bhakti* can be translated, reflecting its etymological roots, as "participation" or "partaking", so that, for *bhakti* pioneers, it is their "sharing" in divinity that animates their creative poetry (Prentiss 1999, p. 24). If, as John Cort (Cort 2019, p. 103) says, it is perhaps not "going too far to say that there is no such thing as bhakti. There are bhaktis", we should not be surprised to encounter exquisitely evocative expressions of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa motif produced by Bengali poets whom we could call "Musalmān *bhaktas*". These poets, whose imaginative landscapes were structured by Sufi spiritual idioms, allegorised the divine conjugal pair in terms of the relation between the human lover and the divine beloved, and in order to present their teachings in ways that would be readily intelligible to their neighbouring Hindus and to Muslims who may not be familiar with Sufism, they recast the Hindu narratives into symbolic forms (Bhattacharya 1945, p. 102).

Consider, for instance, this poem by a certain Irfān, where the first five lines do not allow us to ascertain the religious identity of the composer who re-presents him-self as feminine:

Tell me, my girl-friend, what am I to do now?

Without my friend (*bandhu*) my life has no companion,

I keep on waiting every day for my friend.

In that waiting I go about floating on sorrow,

If I were to find my friend, I would hold on to his feet.

Irfān says—My friend is the flute player,

By playing on that enchanting flute he stole my heart away. (Bhattacharya 1945, p. 48)

The stock-in-trade imageries of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* poetry, as immortalised in the demotic idioms of Vidyāpati (c.1300 CE), Caṇḍīdās (c.1400 CE), and others, can be readily discerned here—a very humanised Rādhā pining in bewilderment for the seemingly indifferent Kṛṣṇa and confiding to her girl-friend that her distraught self burns away in the agonising fires of the pain of separation (*viraha*). Thus, we hear Caṇḍīdās evoking the somatic intensities of the consuming pathos that rages through the heart of a disconsolate woman who is devastated at her desertion by the dark divinity:

Who can understand

The fire, love,

That forever burns?

I bear it as I can.

Who can say

That love is a boon?

Love is disquieting.

My ribs are charred

As I brood and brood.

Tears pour down

And my shameless heart is never at rest.

As a second fate

Love lords my life. (Bhattacharya 1967, p. 75)

This maddening pathos that disperses the feminine-femininised self riven with the pain of separation (*virahiṇī*) from the divine reality—who is always so near and yet so far away—also drives the questing of Rajjab Alī Khān, a disciple of the *bhakti* poet Dādu (1544–1603):

The virahiṇī wanders about day and night without seeing her Beloved.

Says the devotee Rajjab: she burns, for the boundless pain of viraha has arisen in her. (Schomer 1987, p. 79)

Again, in the lush landscapes of the Sufi romances (*premākhyān*) composed in Hindavī and Bengali, the Hindu theo-aesthetics of *bhakti-rasa* and the rural *bārahmāsā* songs enacting *viraha* are delicately reworked to present the gendered quest of a connoisseur who cultivates, through "detachment" (*zuhd*) and "remembrance" (*ḏhikr*), a highly refined "taste" (*ḏhawq*) for God through poetry and music. In the intricately layered Sufi cosmologies of Mir Sayyid Manjhan's *Madhumālatī* (1545), love (*prema*) is not a fleeting human emotion but is the eternal adhesive through which the tissues of the "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) are glued together, and thus the narrative frame of the text itself is an iridescent circle of love within which Manohar ("Heart-captivating") meets the heroine Madhumālatī at night, gets separated, and painfully works his way back to her through various halting places. In re-activating, through the symbolic codes of Hindavī poetry, the primordial bond (Qur'ān 7:172) between God and humanity, Manohar and Madhumālatī become the relishers of the *rasa* ("juice") of *prema*, such that the traveller (*sālik*) is the lover (*'āshiq*) who sees in his/her love for the human beloved (*'ishq-i majāzī*) a reflection of the love for the divine beloved (*'ishq-i ḥaqīqī*) (Behl and Weightman 2000). Thus, Rādhā's passionate love (*rati*) for Kṛṣṇa, the bewitchingly beautiful Lord and the truest object (*viṣaya*) of human love, becomes the cultural analogue for re-expressing in the regional (*deśī*) language of the *hinduān* ("people of Hind") the *ḥadīth*, "I [God] was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known", so that the entire world is to be envisioned as a shimmering self-disclosure of God reflecting the eternal beauty (Schimmel 1975; Chittick 1979; Schimmel 2003).

In a middle Bengali rendition of the narrative *Majnūn Laylā*, Daulat Uzir Bahrām Khān (c.1600 CE) deftly infuses the Perso-Arabic idioms of "veiling", confusion (*ḥayra*), and selfless love (*maḥabba*) with the vernacular valences of *viraha*:

[Lāylī says:]

The fire in my mind burns without respite

Strength, intellect, happiness, purity—all have I lost

In solitariness do I stay enclosed in *biraha*.

In this way the grieving *birahiṇī* suffers always

As she lies close to death (*mṛter prāẏ haiẏā*). (Sharif 1984, p. 129)

[Majnu says:]

Without the queen (*īśvarī*) of my heart, let me die!

My body is deathlike (*mṛtabaṯ*) and I give up all family honour (*lāj-mān*). (Sharif 1984, p. 131)

These medieval strains echo through some contemporary Bengali sociocultural milieus in their reworkings in the *bhakti*-inflected songs that Rabindranath Tagore composed. Tagore's religious standpoints defy any straightforward characterisation in terms of doxographical classifications such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, and so on (Sen 2014); moreover, in his songs, he does not usually *name* Kṛṣṇa as the elusive beloved of his feminine-femininised self. However, as in the following instance, his anguished lament is a modernist variation on the profound Vaiṣṇava paradox that one tends to forget the divine not because the divine is cosmically *distant* but precisely because the divine is immanently *proximate*:

The night that is passing, how do I bring it back?
Why do my eyes shed tears in vain?
Take this dress, my girl-friend (*sakhī*), this garland has become a burden—
Waiting in desolation on my bed (*biraha-śayane*), a night such as this has passed.
On a futile quest (*abhisāre*) have I come to the banks of the Yamunā,
Carrying futile (*bṛthā*) hopes, I have loved so deeply.
Finally, at the end of night—pallid face, tired feet, and indifferent mind,
What wretched home do I return to?
Better to forget then, why do I shed these tears any more?
Alas, if indeed I must go, why does the heart look back?
How long will I wait, like a fool, at the door to the bower at morning?
The springtime in my life is gone! (Tagore 1938, p. 370)

It is precisely these assonances, affectivities, and allegories of *viraha* that constitute the common currency of conceptual commerce across manifold *bhakti* and Sufi borderlines (White 1965, p. 120). These transactions were facilitated by the development in north India, between 1450 and 1700, of certain styles of trans-regional Vaiṣṇaiva *bhakti* that were significantly inflected by Sufi motifs, values, and institutions. This Hindu ethos of devotional self-*effacement* emerged through a projected opposition to tantric Śaiva-Śākta and yogic religious forms, and in didactic verses and hagiographical literatures, the Sufi-Vaiṣṇava axis represented tāntrikas and yogīs as self-*asserting* individuals (Burchett 2019, pp. 310–11).

This enactment of theocentric self-surrender, sustained by the sociality of the female friend (*sakhī*), becomes a breathing osmotic tissue at the Sufi-Vaiṣṇava interfaces and is performed in some *bhakti* milieus with the symbolic form of a feminised human self (*jīva*) who undergoes a spiritual incineration in the blazing love (*prema*) for the God of supreme love.[1] While it is expressed in some highly distinctive ways by Hindu singers and by Sufi poets, the resonating wavelength across these sonic-verbal milieus is the paradox of the "intimate stranger"—for the human lover, it is precisely a developing sense of God's *presence* that generates an agonisingly painful awareness of God's *absence*. On the one hand, the devotee wants to "possess" the deity, for a lover can never have enough of the intimacy of the beloved, but, on the other hand, precisely because the beloved here is the *non*-finite eternal, the *finite* lover can never "circumscribe" its transcendental strangeness. It is this theological dialectic of absence-*in*-presence that generates the exquisitely sweet pathos that suffuses *bhakti* poetry, and it is also expressed, as we will see, through the Islamic idioms of Bābā Farīd (c.1175–1265), Bulleh Shāh (1680–1757), and others. To think that one has apodictically attained God is to be cast at once into the despair of desertion, but precisely through that "dark night of the soul", one can begin to discern God's presence even more clearly (Sanford 2008, p. 87).

In various styles of *bhakti* sensibilities, the motif of divine sport (*līlā*), which emerges from scriptural foundations such as the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (*BhP*), is employed to engage with this paradox. The supremely personal Brahman, Kṛṣṇa, who is the majestic governor of the world, is also sweetly accessible to his doting devotees—whether as a little child throwing a tantrum, a mischievous friend grazing cows, or an adorable lover (Sheridan 1986). However, human beings cannot encapsulate the non-finitude of Brahman, and thus we hear repeated reminders that the seemingly human Kṛṣṇa is

[1] We are aware of the European and the Christological roots of the English term "God". In discussing Hindu worldviews such as Advaita Vedānta or Sāṃkhya-Yoga, we would avoid using such terms. However, the Vaiṣṇava-*bhakti* sensibilities that we discuss in this essay are pivoted on the notion of the divine reality as omnipotent and omniscient and as entering into loving relationships with individual human beings. These theological principles are adequately reflected in the English term.

not just another child, friend, or lover. Thus, we arrive at the paradox that, in the case of the supreme lovers of Kṛṣṇa, such as the archetypal cowherd women (*gopīs*), the more ecstatically they experience Kṛṣṇa's presence, the more painfully they become aware of Kṛṣṇa's absence, and the more agonisingly they are torn apart by the pain of this absence, the deeper they move into the inexhaustible depths of Kṛṣṇa's presence. In the "theo-dramatic" narrative of Canto X, Chapters 29–33, the *gopīs* abruptly leave their domestic chores and rush out to meet Kṛṣṇa playing on his enthralling flute; each woman is filled with the conceit that Kṛṣṇa is dancing with her alone; Kṛṣṇa disappears, plunging them into grief; wracked with pain, they begin to look for Kṛṣṇa, and finally, they are blissfully reunited with their Lord-Lover (Schweig 2005, pp. 172–73). The leitmotif here—that runs like a golden thread through a vast body of *bhakti* materials such as the sixteenth-century songs of Mīrābāi and their contemporary trans-creations in Bollywood movies—is structured as follows: excruciatingly painful indeed is the *viraha* where the lovers single-mindedly centre their existential core solely on the (seemingly) absent God; their human lives are thus shattered by the unbearable weight of the wound of love but precisely in and through that brokenness lies their purgative healing in the heart of divine love (*BhP* X.29.10–11). Thus, paradoxically, divine strangeness is even more soteriologically charged than divine familiarity in drawing decentred devotees nearer to their regenerative centre of desire, Kṛṣṇa, who is intimately bound to them (*BhP* XI.2.55). The supremely beloved Kṛṣṇa engages in a delightfully oscillating soteriological sport (*rāsa-līlā*) of absence and presence—in moments of divine presence, he yet makes the exemplary *gopīs* acutely aware of God's non-finitude that they cannot humanly grasp (Kinsley 1995). Thus, to push the paradox to its breaking point, Kṛṣṇa's presence *is* Kṛṣṇa's absence—Kṛṣṇa is the uncanny guest in the home of the lovesick heart.

A key motif of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, centred around the *BhP*, is precisely this *rāsa-līlā* tryst, which is presented by exegetical-theological systematisers such as Rūpa (1489–1564), Jīva (1513–1598), and others as a temporal window into the "esoteric" love that animates the eternal hyphenation of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa. The *BhP* is envisioned as a theo-aesthetic drama in which the transcendental characters are Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa and their celestial attendants, such that the latter are ineffably different-and-nondifferent (*acintya bhedābheda*) from the former, and by emulating the latter, human devotees learn to situate themselves temporally within the narrative matrices of this timeless play. All the world's a stage, then, and human actors undertake the spiritual discipline of relishing the binitarian love at the heart of being by becoming inscribed into the divine script modulated by separation-*in*-union. The corporeal intensities with which this script is performed generate a devotionally restructured body that enacts the love of God by chanting and contemplating (*smaraṇa*) the divine names and exuberantly singing, weeping, and dancing. The goal is to experience, at the highest *rāgānuga-bhakti* stage, the intensely passionate *mādhurya-rasa,* which is an unadulterated non-egocentric love (*prema*) for God, and this spontaneity was paradigmatically enacted by the *gopīs* (Holdrege 2013, p. 173; Gupta 2007, p. 4; Kapoor 2008, p. 110). For the cultivation of this *rāgānuga-bhakti*, whose phenomenological intensities resonate with those of *'ishq* and *maḥabba*, a devotee vicariously participates in the mood (*bhāva*) of a particular attendant of the divine couple, by adopting the dress and the habit of that dear one (Chakravarti 1969, p. 215; De 1961, p. 177). In one such "homologised" remembrance (*līlā smaraṇa*) that meditatively follows the eightfold division of the day of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa in paradise (Vṛndāvana), devotees can project themselves humbly as a particular handmaiden (*mañjarī*) to Rādhā or as a servant of a girl-friend (*sakhī*) of Rādhā and vitalise a spiritually perfected form (*siddha-rūpa*) that is inwardly female (McDaniel 1989, p. 49; Wulff 1984, p. 29). More concretely, Bhaktivinoda Thakur (1838–1914) indicates that a devotee can have the spiritual identity of a young girl, be placed in one of the groups of *sakhīs*, receive assignments from a principal *gopī*, and so on (Dasa 1999, pp. 222–29). Through this psycho-cosmological mapping of the sacred territory of Vṛndāvana, the *mañjarī*- or the *sakhī*-attendants on earth develop a fine-tuned femininised subjectivity that "exemplifies a paradoxical status of savoring divine sensuality through heightened senses yet not desiring ego-gratification" (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 107).

Such sensuous invocations of "our Sister in heaven" can devotionally reweave the psycho-physiological textures of the practitioner's physical body (*sādhaka-rūpa*)—thus, in the early eighteenth

century, Kṛṣṇadāsa Bābā once became so absorbed in his-her service of beautifying Rādhā that it seemed to bystanders that s-he had become unconscious for around three hours (Haberman 1988, p. 92). A sub-tradition—whose view was condemned in 1727—subversively pushed this argument to the conclusion that male devotees should cross-dress and put on the clothes and ornaments of women, because their true identity is that of a *gopī* (Haberman 1988, p. 98). This spiritual reconstruction of affectivity lives on within these milieus; more recently, Charles Brooks (Brooks 1990, p. 276) reports that a devotee showed him the sari that he would wear to viscerally experience Rādhā's love, and that another spoke with a "gentle feminine voice", which was attributed by locals to his spiritual practice. Across religious matrices, these feminised sensibilities appear in the poet Bulleh Shāh, who is also said to have donned characteristically feminine attire and once danced in a paroxysm of ecstasy before his spiritual master, Shāh 'Ināyat Qādirī (1643–1728). Now, to what extent these Hindu and Indo-Islamic recalibrations of gendered spaces can be situated within the *écriture féminine* of feminist theorising is a topic that we leave aside for another day—whether en*gendering* a femininised persona or identity in a socio-ritual body into which is inscribed the androcentric ethos of *varṇa*-inflected Hindu cultural spaces is to be read as an agentially empowering project for women or as a toothless piety that leaves socio-political asymmetries unchanged on the ground is a vexed topic that has to be systematically explored through the critical lenses of theological anthropology, political theory, social anthropology, and others (Hiltebeitel and Erndl 2000; Hawley et al. 2019).

To return, then, to the *bhakti* modes of vicarious participation in divinity, the bodies of *bhaktas* become soteriological sites on which they alternately experience the searing pain and the temporary joy of the *gopīs* in an ongoing dialectic of felt separation and rediscovered union (Wulff 1984, p. 155). The temporary disjuncture is shaped by Rādhā's vigorously assertive *māna* or love-in-anger at Kṛṣṇa's seeming desertion, evocatively delineated by Paramānand, a disciple of Vallabhācārya (1479–1531 CE):

> I'll stay angry indeed, I'll stay angry.
>
> When [Kṛṣṇa] comes to the house,
>
> then I'll speak angry words to him.
>
> If he tries to make up, I won't do it . . .
>
> If Paramānand's lord throws himself at my feet,
>
> I'll still be stubborn. (Sanford 2008, p. 123)

Devotees who inhabit the contingencies of "human history" know, however, that in "transcendental time", the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa conjunction is eternally established, so that all's well that ends well:

> Having placated her, [Kṛṣṇa] came to [Rādhā].
>
> Wherever the lovely one went, stopping here and there,
>
> he followed her.
>
> She acquired much beauty from that māna . . . (Sanford 2008, p. 145)

At the intersections of Vaiṣṇava and Sufi devotion, this purgative reconfiguration of the aesthetic sensorium—through effusive patterns of art, music, poetry, architecture, and dance—points to the spiritual discipline of re-centering the human lover in the radiant heart of the divine beloved. The intricate Vaiṣṇava conceptualizations of the *re*turn, along the pathways of *prema*, of the human lover-beloved to the divine lover-beloved resonated through some of the Indo-Persianate milieus of "Bīdil", whom we encountered earlier, and are also echoed, as we will see, in the "bridal mysticism" of Bābā Farīd and Bulleh Shāh. In the Punjabi Sufi milieus of the latter, the tormented *virahiṇī* becomes consumed by love even as she herself consumes the nutrients of love, for—to reiterate our paradox of the "intimate stranger"—the lover may become temporally divorced from her beloved, but their primordial union is never severed. Thus, our exploration so far reflects, and also reinforces, the reminders of several scholars that the ethno-linguistic spheres of "Persian", "Urdu", "Punjabi", "Hindi", and "Bengali"

(Orsini 2010) should not be regarded as neatly congruent with confessional communities such as "Hindu", "Sikh", or "Muslim". While Muslim scholars such as Masīḥā Pānīpatī (d.1640) translated the *Rāmāyaṇa* into Persian, some Hindu disciples of "Bīdil" enshrined the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa motif within the stylistic canons of Persian poetry. Indeed, as Stefano Pellò notes, in the early eighteenth century, "it is not generally possible to distinguish a Persian *ghazal* written by a Muslim from another Persian *ghazal* written by a non-Muslim, as it is not generally easy to distinguish a Persian *masnawī* rendering of a Vaishnava narrative done by a Muslim from one accomplished by a non-Muslim" (Pellò 2014, p. 22). Thus, Amānat Rāy deftly transposed the pivotal Canto X of the *BhP* into the form of a *masnawī* that opens with these lines resonating with idioms ultimately traceable to the paradigmatic Sufi mystic and theologian Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240):

> In the name of the Beloved [*jānān*] of the world [*jahān*],
>
> who is hidden from the eyes of people.
>
> The world is the mirror [*āyīna*] where His beauty [*ḥusn*] appears,
>
> no place is devoid of His light [*nūr*]. (Pellò 2014, p. 34)

4. Indo-Muslim Iterations: Conceptualising the *Virahiṇī* Motif Across Punjabi Literary Landscapes

A central Qur'anic motif that undergirds certain Sufi styles of devotional praxis and poetic expressivity is the pre-eternal covenant (*mīthāq*) established between God and humankind; described in Sūrah 7:172, this primordial covenantal "moment" comes to signify the paradigmatic instantiation of human beings "bearing witness" to the reality of *tawḥīd* (oneness). As the Qur'ān narrates, in this "meta-historical" communion (Lewisohn 2015, p. 150), the whole of humankind was brought forth from the descendants of Adam to attest, in unison, to the fundamental existence and unicity of God. The Sufi poetic imagination is thus animated by a profound yearning to *re*-inhabit, in and through the particularities of worldly finitude, this pre-cosmic proximity to the divine; the human soul, in virtue of its "primordial nature" (*fiṭrah*), retains the memory of this transcendental testification and, in its realised state, strives to orient itself to the telos of divine union (Nasr 2002, p. 7). Employing the terms of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273), the human soul is like the reed-flute, which, severed from its abode of the reed bed, yearns to return to its homeland (Mojaddedi 2004, p. 4).

In concretising this dialectic of union and separation, Sufi writers often associate the Arabic word for affliction (*balā'*) with the word *balā*, "Yes", which the human souls uttered on the "Day of the Covenant" (Schimmel 1975, pp. 136–37). According to this reading, contained in the primordial "Yes", which signifies the pre-eternal delight of proximity to the divine, is the import of an anguished longing that seeks to recover this bliss of union as the lover treads the tortuous paths of the world. Yet, if it is central to the "mythopoetic romance of Sufism" (Lewisohn 2015, p. 150) that human souls become existentially "deracinated" from their pre-temporal abode of perfect proximity to God, it is also vital to the Sufi poetic tradition that this worldly separation marks no insurmountable *rupture* in the heart of the divine-human relation. As the Qur'ān affirms in Sūrah 50:16 ("We are nearer to him than the jugular vein"), God is immovably present to the human being—indeed, this ongoing ontological immanence is precisely what holds creation in being.[2] In various styles of Sufi poetry, this theological tenet of God's eternal intimacy to creation is meditatively moulded into the image of the divine lover's enduring presence to the finite beloved; God is "the first lover" (Usborne 1966, p. 27), and this love is paradigmatically manifested in and through the creative (and preserving) activity of God. As the Persian poet Ḥāfiẓ (1315–1390) asserts, "both human beings and spirits take their sustenance from the

[2] The seminal theologian and jurist Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) articulates in his *Mishk*āt *al*-Anwār (The Niche for Lights) the fundamental ontological "poverty" of created being, which exists only because it is continually infused with the light of being by the transcendent "Origin and Fountainhead of Lights" (Gairdner 2010, p. 20).

existence of Love" (Lewisohn 2015, p. 180). It is not, therefore, that the spiritual path binds the human aspirant to God through relational fibres that were formerly *dis*joint (and have been *con*joined for the first time)—rather, the specific, realised state of union that constitutes the Sufi telos represents a direct experiential *inhabitation* of a relationality that is always fundamentally existent.

This dynamic interplay between the metaphysical facticity of union and the spatiotemporal reality of separation is vibrantly enacted in the multiple "spirito-poetic" (Ali 2016, p. 9) tapestries of Indo-Muslim piety. Crucially, in the compositions of Punjabi Sufis, it is through an intricately fashioned *feminine* subjectivity that certain male poets inhabit (and versify) the affective intensity and the purgative purport of spiritual longing.[3] These poets temporarily suspend their masculine identities to imbibe and express the plight of the agonised *virahiṇī*, who comes to represent the archetypal devotee of the divine beloved as she yearns for the lost state of rapturous union. In the verses of Farīduddīn Ganj-i-Shakar (c.1175–1265), popularly known as Bābā Farīd,[4] the longing for God is explicitly presented as the longing of a bride/wife for her absent groom/husband: "had I known I was to separate, tighter would I have tied the bridal knot" (Sagar 1999, p. 88). The female lover passionately bewails her separation from her beloved, in whose absence she suffers intense physical and mental anguish: "I did not sleep with my love tonight and every bit of my body aches" (Petievich 2007, p. 6).

Just as Tagore poignantly versifies the *virahiṇī*'s torment over the privation of her beloved's amorous embrace ("waiting in desolation on my bed"), for Farid, too, the marital bed is no longer the site of unitive bliss; it has become, instead, a potent metaphor for the pangs of separation: "anguish my bed-frame, pain and suffering its woven twine, the ache of separation my quilt and counterpane" (Puri 1990, p. 47). Bereft of her beloved's embrace, the lonesome woman is plunged into an all-enveloping grief and yet remains determined to be united with her love: "my body an oven, my bones burning charcoal: but I shall go to my Love on my head if my feet fail" (Puri 1990, p. 78). Crucially, however, if at one moment the *virahiṇī* declares her unswerving resolve to *go out* and meet her beloved, in another instant, she realises that the one whom she seeks is never, in fact, separable from her: "I went searching for my Love and all the time my Love was with me" (Puri 1990, p. 79). The *virahiṇī*'s anguished pining for the seemingly distant beloved who is, in truth, immediately present to her thus echoes the Vaiṣṇava paradox that the devotee is oblivious to God precisely because of God's indwelling proximity.[5] This dialectic of the "intimate stranger" becomes especially significant in later poetic re-workings of the Hīr-Rāṇjhā motif,[6] wherein the absent beloved for whom Hīr yearns is also the one who dwells mysteriously in her midst (and with whom she is transcendentally united).

For Bābā Farīd, the intensity of the lover's pangs essentially betokens the lover's particular spiritual state, for the torment of separation can only pierce the hearts of those who *actively* long for union with the divine. If, as we saw above, the memory of one's pre-cosmic proximity to God is ineffaceably engraved upon every human soul, the one who yearns for God and experiences the pains of separation from the *non*-finite divine has truly come to inhabit this "memory" as a vitally embodied modality: "where separation does not torture, there mind and body are ground for pyres" (Puri 1990, p. 47). This recurrent poetic topos of suffering as indicative of the depth and the sincerity of one's spiritual love provides the generative impulse for the epigrammatic trope of the "sweet pathos" that permeates the devotional compositions of both Sufi and *bhakti* poets. The "disquieting" afflictions of love poeticized by Caṇḍīdās are to be understood, across these aesthetic-conceptual borderlines,

[3] The feminization of the spiritual quest after the divine is a common trope of Sufi literature. However, it is in the aesthetic and the spiritual sensibilities of *Indo-Muslim* poets that the pining female lover acquires a distinctively sustained literary identity.

[4] Bābā Farīd was the spiritual master of the revered saint Nizamuddīn Auliya (1238–1325). Farid's lyrics constitute "the earliest extant example of Punjabi writing" (Singh 2012, p. 3), and many of his couplets are enshrined in the Sikh *Guru Granth Sahib*.

[5] Al-Ghazālī explicates this theme of the divine hiddenness as a paradoxical concomitant of the divine immanence—in his *Kitāb al-maḥabba*, Ghazālī notes that, just as the bat cannot see in the daylight, not because light is absent but because it is ineluctably *present*, so too is the human eye "blind" to the splendour of God that shines forth immutably (Ormsby 2011).

[6] The tale of Hīr-Rāṇjhā occupies pride of place in the Punjabi literary and cultural imagination; since at least the sixteenth century, this tragic romance has been a favourite motif of Punjabi poets. The most popular rendition is Wāris Shāh's *Hīr* (1766), written in the narrative form of the *qissā*.

not as mere emotional excrescences (which are to be finally sublated into the "real" delights of union), but as integrally purgative modes of cultivating, through an active remembering, one's spiritual attunement to the divine absence-*in*-presence. It is therefore not in spite of but precisely because of her burning afflictions that the *virahiṇī* remains truly "alive" to the memory of her beloved and so to the desire for union with him.

Thus, just as Bābā Farīd prays that his sight may survive the dissolution of his body ("Feast, crows, on my wasting flesh, but leave, I pray you, my eyes that I may see my master" (Puri 1990, p. 68)), so too does Wāris Shāh yearn to behold the countenance of his divine beloved: "Waris Shah is anxious to see God's face even as Hir longed for her lover" (Usborne 1966, p. 193). The tale of Hīr-Rāṇjhā is crucially imbricated in a narratival nexus of distinctive religio-cultural motifs; Hīr's love affair with Rāṇjhā partakes in the specifically Islamic valences of the Yūsuf-Zulaikhā narrative[7] (Hīr is frequently cast in the mould of Zulaikhā as she is enraptured by the beauty of her beloved), even as Rāṇjhā, the cowherd whose enchanting melodies mesmerize the local townspeople, immediately evokes the image of the flute-playing Kṛṣṇa. Notably, just as the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa union is presented as eternally indissoluble, despite their vigorous pursuits of each other along the tempestuous vales of separation, so too is the temporal union of Hīr and Rāṇjhā granted a transcendental anchorage upon the slate of eternity. In Wāris Shāh's *Hīr*, Rāṇjhā asserts that the two lovers were bestowed upon one another on the Day of the Covenant: "on the day our souls said yes, I was betrothed to Hir. In the Tablet of Destiny, God has written the union of our souls" (Usborne 1966, p. 181). Taking Hīr as the archetypal feminine lover of God and Rāṇjhā as the divine beloved, the pre-cosmic origin of the Hīr-Rāṇjhā union symbolises the primordial covenantal bond between the divine and the human being, who, bearing the memory of this union, turns longingly to God just as Rūmī's reed-flute yearns for its original abode.

The notion that this transcendental "Yes!" (*balā*) implies also the acceptance of affliction (*balā'*) as the purgative concomitant of love is strikingly articulated by Bulleh Shāh: "O friend, I am struck by eternal love, that love from the beginning of time. It is frying me in a pan. The fried is being fried over again!" (Singh 2012, p. 91). The image of "frying" here denotes the existential anguish that the spiritual aspirant must endure as their ego-self is dissolved on the path of love in the experiential modality termed *fanā'* (annihilation). Hīr burns with the agony of separation from Rāṇjhā ("embrace me, Ranjha, for the fire of separation is burning me. My heart has been burnt to a cinder" (Usborne 1966, p. 162)), and she is slowly drained of her former beauty and vitality: "I am shedding flesh, reduced to a skeleton, my bones crackle" (Anjum 2016, p. 173). This dialectic of life and death is foregrounded by the Sufi poet, Shāh Husayn of Lahore (1539–1593)—as Hīr yearns for Rāṇjhā to re-enliven her moribund spirit, she declares: "because of you I die; to meet you would revive me" (Petievich 2007, p. 115). Hīr's "burning" away, therefore, not only represents the emotive intensity of the *virahiṇī*'s tormented longing but also is a metaphor for the progressive erosion of the lover's self-identity through absorption in the memory of her beloved. Hīr's "death" to her worldly self as she burns in the flames of separation is concurrent with her dynamic "revival" (*baqā'*) in the identity of Rāṇjhā.

This poetic iteration of the classical Sufi *fanā'-baqā'* dialectic, where *fanā'* pertains to the lover's loss of the ego-self and *baqā'* to the simultaneous *re*-birth or subsistence *in* the beloved, is vividly brought to life in Bulleh Shāh's verses. Hīr declares that she has, through repetitively calling on his name, become Rāṇjhā her*self*:

Calling, repeating, "Ranjha, Ranjha",

I've become Ranjha myself; everyone call me Dhidho Ranjha,

Call me Hir no more.

Ranjha's within me, I'm within him,

7 Sūrah 12 of the Qur'ān relates the story of Yūsuf and his brothers and provides a brief account of Zulaikhā's attempted seduction of Yūsuf. The tale of Yūsuf-Zulaikhā is re-worked by Sufi writers, most notably by the Persian poet Jāmī (1414–1492), into the archetypal allegory of the feminized soul's longing after God.

No thought of any other, it's not me calling,

It's he himself, assuaging his own heart. (Petievich 2007, p. 87)

This repetitive remembrance effects the gradual dissolution of Hīr's particularised self so that she abides firmly in, and even assumes, the identity of her beloved. The transmutative act of "naming" here recalls the centrality of *ḏhikr* ("remembrance" or "invocation") in the discursive elaborations and the ritual practices of the Sufis, wherein the purpose of the continuous recital of the names of God (and other sacred formulas) is to contemplatively attune oneself to the divine reality and so become experientially "absorbed in the Named" (Geoffroy 2010, p. 163). As a practice of remembering, the spiritual alchemy of *ḏhikr* re-orientates the human being to their primordial divine origin—the one who continuously invokes God's name becomes "extinguished in Him (*al fana' fī-l'madhkūr*)" (Geoffroy 2010, p. 164), just as they once bore perfect witness to God in pre-eternity.

This moment of "extinguishing", however, should not be understood as a pantheistic "collapsing" of the self *into* the divine; indeed, as we see in Bulleh Shāh's verses above, it is Hīr *herself* who paradoxically proclaims the dissolution of *her* identity and her *self*-transformation into Rāṇjhā. There remains, in other words, a particular "self" through which Hīr articulates her decisive *loss* of self. This paradoxical interplay between the overt declaration of "no self" and the authorial/narrative "self" that *expresses* this ontological dissolution of egoity becomes particularly significant in relation to the complementary modalities of *fanā'* and *baqā'*. In several Sufi formulations of the spiritual path, particularly that of Ibn 'Arabī, what is negated in the extinctive moment of *fanā'* is the notion of the ego-self as an autonomous entity that is substantively distinct from God. When the spiritual seeker abides in the state of *baqā'*, having been purged of their erroneous understanding of creation as composed of various self-subsistent entities, they behold all created phenomena as intimately sustained by, and finitely reflective of, their divine ground. On a more devotional register, we might affirm that the transfigured subjectivity that flows from the experience of *fanā'* is one that capaciously beholds the beloved everywhere and in all things. As Hīr meditatively utters the name of her beloved, she *re*cognises, much like the seeker of God, that the one for whom she longs is not straightforwardly separate from her.

If, therefore, in some literary compositions, Hīr declares that she must undertake the arduous journey *towards* her beloved, in others, she is exhorted by Rāṇjhā to simply lift the perceptual veil that prevents her from *re*cognising his intimate presence. Embodying Hīr's unrelenting resolve to actively *pursue* her distant beloved, Shāh Husayn writes: "The streams are deep, the raft is old and tigers stalk the landing. I must go to Ranjha's place; won't someone come with me!" (Petievich 2007, p. 101). As Petievich notes, these verses are strikingly "reminiscent of Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*" (Petievich 2007, p. 10) wherein Rādhā "does not just sit in passive suffering but, at one point, journeys through the jungle at night to meet Krishna" (Petievich 2007, p. 10). Hīr too, as she burns in the fire of her longing, does not simply wait for Rāṇjhā to return to her but resolutely traverses the treacherous landscape to be united with him. Yet, in Wāris Shāh's poem, Rāṇjhā questions his beloved thus: "Why are you searching outside, your lover is in your own house? Put off your veil, my beautiful bride and look if you cannot see your lost lover" (Usborne 1966, p. 143). Although this exchange between the two lovers occurs at a specific point in the narrative (namely, when Rāṇjhā arrives at Hīr's marital home in the guise of a *yogī/jogī*), we could understand Rāṇjhā's exhortation as a lyrical instantiation of the Sufi leitmotif that the divine beloved abides immanently *with* the devotee, whose renewed orientation to the divine marks only a loving attention to the Other who is always already near.

Thus, we hear echoes of the motif of, firstly, Rādhā's union with her "friend" (*bandhu*) after tortured moments of separation, and, secondly, of the *gopīs'* dance with their beloved flute-player—these moments of union varyingly instantiate, in specific instants of *felt* proximity, the foundational omnipresence of Kṛṣṇa. Rādhā's long sought-after union with Kṛṣṇa marks, paradoxically, the "coming together" of two lovers who are eternally conjoined, and for the *gopīs*, their enraptured swaying to the tunes of Kṛṣṇa's flute embodies their devotional at*tune*ment to the one who already dwells intimately in their hearts. If, in Shāh Husayn's verses too, the pangs of separation compel Hīr to travel outwards

and across the hostile terrain to locate her beloved, Rāṇjhā reminds Hīr that there is "no-*where*" to go in *search* of the one who is "now-*here*" and indeed ever-present to her. Yet, even as Rāṇjhā draws Hīr's attention to his unmediated proximity to her ("your lover is in your own house"), he acknowledges his mysterious imperceptibility by adverting to the "veil" that blinds his lover to him. Elsewhere, Hīr thus implores Rāṇjhā, "don't veil yourself in mystery, Beloved" (Petievich 2007, p. 49), and interrogates him sternly, "you and I cannot be separate, so why so coyly obscure yourself?" (Petievich 2007, p. 51).

Similarly, embedded in Sufi discourse is the image of the divine "veils", which varyingly preclude the immediate perception of God in and through created beings. The seeker longs for moments of "unveiling" (*kashf*) in which "spiritual realities" are directly perceived and thus the divine is more truly apprehended (Geoffroy 2010, p. 7). Through the paradoxical character of the *virahiṇī*'s active quest to *find* the one who is immediately (though obscurely) before and with her, we identify a particular feature of the search for God, namely, the dialectic of hiddenness and presence is a quintessentially energising modality of the path itself. The fact that Hīr is "veiled" from Rāṇjhā is precisely what animates her arduous journeying *to* him (as Bābā Farīd highlights, the mark of the true devotee is that they *feel* the torturous pains of separation). We might say that these experiences of a "concentrated" experiential union (both the furtive encounters of Hīr and Rāṇjhā and the human-divine proximity in the moments of unveiling) are intensively focalised *felt* instantiations of the abiding state of a "general" ontological union. As Bulleh Shāh affirmed, Rāṇjhā dwells inseparably within Hīr anyway, and the divine is never straightforwardly "removed" from the human.

The moments of Hīr's "concentrated" union with Rāṇjhā, however, just like the experiences of "unveiling" (*kashf*) for the Sufi, can never be conclusively held on to, and Hīr must bear the pangs of separation even as she delights in the rapture of union ("all sorrows dispatched since that herder's been mine!" (Petievich 2007, p. 55)). Just as Hīr cannot experience forever the bliss of *felt* "concentrated" union with her beloved Rāṇjhā, each *gopī* who longs after Kṛṣṇa's own heart must be decisively disabused of the illusion that Kṛṣṇa is dancing solely with her and so of the misconception that her individual subjectivity has exclusively and exhaustively "encased" the divine reality. Hīr, like the paradigmatic lover of Kṛṣṇa, must come to inhabit the truth that the one whom she seeks *is* invariably present to her, but that this immutable presence emphatically transcends the logic of finite localization. The dialectic of joy and sorrow in love is thus a necessary concomitant of one's search for the elusive beloved who can never be finally "domesticated" or "contained" in one's firm grasp. If God is the supreme *other* who is yet intimately *near*, the experiential flames of separation and the joys of union dynamically modulate one another so that the archetypal *virahiṇī* is impelled to pursue her (seemingly) absent divine beloved even as she dwells intimately and inseparably with him.

5. Conclusions

On the religious landscapes of al-Hind, God is the constantly receding horizon towards whom pilgrims progress along pathways of purgative love, energised by their divine beloved who is intimately present to them on their agonising quests. The creative appropriations of the visceral intensities of the *virahiṇī* motif by Indo-Muslim poets typify the dynamically vibrant patterns of conceptual cross-fertilisation across some pre-modern "Hindu" and "Muslim" scriptural worlds and socio-cultural sensibilities. As she actively pursues the heart of the matter who is her divine beloved, she must concurrently undergo a transfiguration in the worldly matter of her heart. The prototypical *virahiṇī* enacts, in historic time, a microcosmic *re*formation of the macrocosmic God–human duality that opens up in cosmic time, and it is through the silent strength of her "active passivity" that she treads on the tortuous paths where worldly ruptures can be healed.

By thus exploring some of the ways that this literary trope is enacted across the *bhakti* and the Sufi religious milieus, we delineate certain thematic resonances and shared poetic imageries that concretise the finite seeker's search for the non-finite beloved. Crucially, the enthusiastic adoption by Punjabi Sufi poets of the *virahiṇī* topos should not be read as a careless conflation of two distinctive symbolic streams and theological traditions—rather, their compositions embody a distinctively "indigenised"

form of Islamic piety, which draws on some key theo-aesthetic motifs of Hindu devotional literature in order to fashion a localized Sufi idiom.

Thus, we offer in this essay a specific instance of the *via media* that can facilitate a deeper understanding of agonistic patterns of imagining and inhabiting the world across Hindu and Indo-Muslim milieus. For far too long, the study of oppositions and exchanges across these milieus has been bedevilled—because of the pressures of both colonial inheritances and postcolonial conjunctures—by the ahistorical assumption that one must project *either* radical binaries *or* undifferentiated homogeneities. Instead, the *via media*, in the form of textually-grounded conceptual engagements, would not, on the one hand, reductively condense quotidian densities into monolithic oppositions between "Hinduism" and "Islam", and also would not, on the other hand, erase the socio-historical processes of active contestations through which idioms and affectivities continue to be received, reworked, and reconfigured. Such socio-political projections at the grassroots are, perhaps somewhat unwittingly, reflected in the hyper-compartmentalization of academic silos into *either* "Hindu Studies" *or* "Islamic Studies" (so that real-world figures such as Daulat Uzir Bahrām Khān, Mir Sayyid Manjhan, Amānat Rāy, and Rabindranath Tagore are neither *here* nor *there*). While these present-day disciplinary demarcations do have a salutary effect in generating systematic work on the fine-grained structures of specific texts, they can also deflect our attention from certain shared styles of being-*in*-the-world and belonging-*to*-the-world that continue to flourish, though again not without ongoing contestations, across various South Asian landscapes.

Thus, when the producers of the Bollywood movie *Pyaar Ishq Aur Mohabbat* (2001) were casting around for a title, it is possible that they did not accord any particular spiritual significance to the fact that these three words for love reflect diverse Indic roots and routes. However, as our essay demonstrates, this resonant triad (*pyār*, *'ishq*, *muḥabbat*) is not a linguistic happenstance—in the *longue durée* of various Indic milieus, the seeker's path, structured by an active cultivation of desire for God, is poetically imagined as the human lover's longing for an absent human beloved. Through this literary motif and its distinctively gendered manifestations, the very character of desire for divinity receives an embodied dynamism and a visceral intensity. The popularity of these styles of invoking the God of love and the love of God across South Asian sociocultural spaces would suggest that the currencies of love, while they remain densely rooted in the scriptural economies of *bhakta* Hindus and Sufi Muslims, also possess a certain measure of exchangeability because of which they continue to be transferred across these religious horizons into the many marketplaces of the world.

This exchangeability is structured by the central paradox that is a leitmotif of this essay—the "absent" beloved for whom the *virahiṇī* yearns (and for whom she often embarks on a perilous pursuit) is yet always *with* her. The temporary separations of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa can never dissolve their primordial union, just as Hīr and Rāṇjhā remain bound to each other by divine writ even as they must suffer the torments of worldly distance in their conditions of existential fragility. Just as the archetypal lover of Kṛṣṇa finitely participates in the play (*rāsa-līlā*) that is eternally enacted on the cosmic stage, so too is the *virahiṇī* of the Punjabi Sufi imagination constantly engaged in a dynamic "sport" with the object of her love who variously reveals and conceals himself in enchanting ways that cannot be antecedently willed nor decisively grasped by the female lover. We might say that these divergent affective poles of unitive joy and lonesome anguish participate in, and also finitely recapitulate, the "meta-historical" modalities of blissful witness (*balā*) and agonised separation (*balā'*) that are enfolded archetypally in the pre-eternal covenantal moment. In both *bhakti* and Sufi devotional universes, this lyrical configuration of the spiritual path as a temporally unfolding playfulness underscores the intractable otherness of the divine beloved, whose immutable presence to the human lover is felt precisely through the affective oscillations between the delights of intimate union and the ordeals of insufferable separation.

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Article

A Complex Ultimate Reality: The Metaphysics of the Four Yogas

Jeffery D. Long

School of Arts and Humanities, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, USA; longjd@etown.edu

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Abstract: This essay will pose and seek to answer the following question: If, as Swami Vivekananda claims, the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to God-realization and liberation from the cycle of rebirth, then what must reality be like? What ontology is implied by the claim that the four yogas are all equally effective paths to the supreme goal of religious life? What metaphysical conditions would enable this pluralistic assertion to be true? Swami Vivekananda's worldview is frequently identified with Advaita Vedānta. We shall see that Vivekananda's teaching is certainly Advaitic in what could be called a broad sense. As Anantanand Rambachan and others, however, have pointed out, it would be incorrect to identify Swami Vivekananda's teachings in any rigid or dogmatic sense with the classical Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara; this is because Vivekananda's teaching departs from that of Śaṅkara in some significant ways, not least in his assertion of the independent salvific efficacy of the four yogas. This essay will argue that Swami Vivekananda's pluralism, based on the concept of the four yogas, is far more akin to the *deep religious pluralism* that is advocated by contemporary philosophers of religion in the Whiteheadian tradition of process thought like David Ray Griffin and John Cobb, the classical Jain doctrines of relativity (*anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda*), and, most especially, the *Vijñāna Vedānta* of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, than any of these approaches is to the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Advaita Vedānta, in Vivekananda's pluralistic worldview, becomes one valid conceptual matrix among many that bear the ability to support an efficacious path to liberation. This essay is intended not as an historical reconstruction of Vivekananda's thought, so much as a constructive philosophical contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversations about both religious (and, more broadly, worldview) pluralism and the religious and philosophical legacies of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The former conversation has arrived at something of an impasse (as recounted by Kenneth Rose), while the latter conversation has recently been revived, thanks to the work of Swami Medhananda (formerly Ayon Maharaj) and Arpita Mitra.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; religious pluralism; Hinduism; Vedanta; Sri Ramakrishna; philosophy of religion; yoga

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1. Introduction

This essay will pose and seek to answer the following question: If, as Swami Vivekananda claims, the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to God-realization and liberation from the cycle of rebirth, then what must reality be like? What ontology is implied by the claim that the four yogas are all equally effective paths to the supreme goal of religious life? What metaphysical conditions would enable this pluralistic assertion to be true? Swami Vivekananda's worldview is frequently identified with Advaita Vedānta. We shall see that Vivekananda's teaching is certainly Advaitic in what could be called a broad sense. As Anantanand Rambachan and others, however, have pointed out, it would be incorrect to identify Swami Vivekananda's teachings in any rigid or dogmatic sense with the classical Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara; this is because Vivekananda's teaching

departs from that of Śaṅkara in some significant ways, not least in his assertion of the independent salvific efficacy of the four yogas.[1] This essay will argue that Swami Vivekananda's pluralism, based on the concept of the four yogas, is far more akin to the *deep religious pluralism* that is advocated by contemporary philosophers of religion in the Whiteheadian tradition of process thought like David Ray Griffin and John Cobb, the classical Jain doctrines of relativity (*anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda*), and, most especially, the *Vijñāna Vedānta* of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, than any of these approaches is to the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Advaita Vedānta, in Vivekananda's pluralistic worldview, becomes one valid conceptual matrix among many that bear the ability to support an efficacious path to liberation. This essay is intended not as an historical reconstruction of Vivekananda's thought, so much as a constructive philosophical contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversations about both religious (and, more broadly, worldview) pluralism and the religious and philosophical legacies of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The former conversation has arrived at something of an impasse (as recounted by Kenneth Rose),[2] while the latter conversation has recently been revived, thanks to the work of Swami Medhananda (formerly Ayon Maharaj) and Arpita Mitra.[3]

2. The Four Yogas in the Teaching of Swami Vivekananda: Independent Paths to Liberation

One of Swami Vivekananda's most distinctive contributions to Hindu thought, and to religious discourse more generally, is his systematization of the four yogas as four independent and equally effective paths to God-realization and liberation. As Swami Medhananda has argued, this view of the four yogas is foundational to Vivekananda's religious pluralism, at least in its mature form, as reflected in Vivekananda's teachings from late 1895 until the end of his life. " ... [I]n his lectures and writings from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda consistently taught the harmony of religions on the basis of a Vedāntic universal religion grounded in the four yogas."[4]

The four yogas, as presented by Swami Vivekananda, are four basic types of spiritual discipline whose purpose is to enable their practitioners to approach the ultimate goal of Vedāntic practice. This goal, which is variously denoted by Vivekananda as "God-realization," "Self-realization," or simply as "realization" culminates in the liberation of the individual soul—the *jīva*—from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This liberating realization is typically presented by Vivekananda in what could broadly be called Advaitic, or non-dualistic, terms as the awareness that one's true identity does not rest in the body, the mind, or the ego, but with the *ātman*: the true, divine Self (with a capital 's'). This awareness, however, is not simply a matter of cognition. It is not merely a matter of accepting and affirming the truth of a proposition stated in the Vedic scriptures. It is, rather, more akin to an embodiment: the "making real" (if we may take the word "realization" at face value) of this awareness in one's whole being. Indeed, Vivekananda asserts that one cannot finally "know", in the sense of mere cognition, the true nature of divinity; for our finite minds cannot ever fully grasp That which is infinite. Rather, one manifests this divinity as one's own essential nature. It is not so much that one *knows* it as that one *is* it. Vivekananda asks, "Can we know God?" He answers, "Of course not. If God can be known, He will be God no longer. Knowledge is limitation. But I and my Father are one: I find the reality in my soul."[5]

Why are there multiple spiritual practices, multiple paths toward the same realization? If the ultimate goal is one and the same for everyone—realization of and identification with our true, divine nature—then why is there not also one clear path to attaining it? The reason Vivekananda gives for the great variety of spiritual practices and paths that exist is the variety in human beings: "Every man must develop according to his own nature. As every science has its methods, so has every

1 (Rambachan 1994).
2 (Rose 2013, pp. 25–42).
3 (Maharaj 2018; Mitra 2014, pp. 65–78 and pp. 194–259).
4 (Medhananda 2020, p. 9).
5 (Vivekananda 1979, p. 323).

religion. The methods of attaining the end of religion are called Yoga by us, and the different forms of Yoga that we teach, are adapted to the different natures and temperaments of men."[6]

What are these yogas? "We classify them in the following way, under four heads:

(1) Karma-Yoga—The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty.
(2) Bhakti-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God.
(3) Raja-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through the control of mind.
(4) Jnana-Yoga—The realization of a man's own divinity through knowledge."[7]

Ultimately, there are, according to Vivekananda, as many yogas as there are individual beings seeking liberation. The four yogas are not intended to be mutually exclusive or, by themselves, exhaustive of the possible ways in which liberation might occur. They define, rather, four broad types or trends which are based on the personalities of those who take up the spiritual path. Most importantly for the purposes of this essay, all four of these types of practice are conceived by Vivekananda as independent and equally effective routes to the goal of realization. This is distinct from more traditional Hindu models, in which one yoga will be seen as the highest, with the others being seen as preliminary practices which lead up to it. In classical Advaita Vedānta, for example, jñāna yoga, the path of knowledge, is typically seen as the one effective path to realization. The other yogas can prepare one for knowledge by making one's mind into a fit receptacle for it. They are, one could say, purificatory practices; but they are not themselves independent paths to knowledge.

However, in numerous places in Vivekananda's *Complete Works*—the posthumous compilation of his published writings, his correspondence, the notes taken by others on his lectures, and media accounts of his lectures and other interactions with the public—Vivekananda affirms the idea that the four yogas constitute four independent and equally efficacious paths to liberation from death and rebirth. It is a consistent theme of his teachings, again, from late 1895 until his death in 1902. "You must remember", he states in his 1896 work, *Karma Yoga*, "that freedom of the soul is the goal of all Yogas, and each one equally leads to the same result".[8] Later in the same text, he writes:

> Our various Yogas do not conflict with each other; each of them leads us to the same goal and makes us perfect . . . Each one of our Yogas is fitted to make man perfect even without the help of the others, because they have all the same goal in view. The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha [liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth]. 'Fools alone say that work and philosophy are different, not the learned.' The learned know that, though apparently different from each other, they at last lead to the same goal of human perfection.[9]

3. The Diversity of Yogas and the Diversity of Religions: Yoga as a Religion

Although yoga involves many different methods, many forms of practice, the goal of all of these is seen by Vivekananda as being one and the same: realization of our inner divinity. This is the ultimate goal of all human beings, as well as the ultimate aim of all religions:

> The ultimate goal of all mankind, *the aim and end of all religions*, is but one–re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men

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6 Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid, Volume One, p. 55.
9 Ibid, pp. 92, 93. It should be noted that Vivekananda, characteristically of authors of his time, uses the terms 'man' and 'men' to speak of humanity and human beings. Although this is jarring to contemporary sensibilities, he should not be taken as referring exclusively to males. There is abundant evidence from his life and writings that he viewed women and men as equally capable of achieving realization. Interestingly, his native Bengali language is genderless, and is thus arguably better suited than the English of his time for conveying the expansive perspective of his thought.

> . . . Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English 'yoke,' meaning 'to join,' to join us to our reality, God. There are various such Yogas or methods of union–but the chief ones are–Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Raja-Yoga, and Jnana-Yoga.[10]

It is noteworthy that Vivekananda elides the differences between the non-dualist understanding of divinity as the nature of the ātman, or Self, and the theistic ideal of a personal God with just five words: "what amounts to the same". "The ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one–re-union with God, or, *what amounts to the same*, with the divinity which is every man's true nature".[11] For Vivekananda, the paradigm by which one conceives of divinity—as an inner or outer reality, as the divine Self within or as the Supreme Being who orders and maintains the cosmos—matters less than the fact that one does conceive of it and dedicates oneself to its realization, according to whatever conception resonates best with one's own understanding. This is consistent, as we shall see, with the teaching of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, as well.

Importantly, for Vivekananda, the diversity of yogas is inextricably linked to the diversity of religions. On Vivekananda's understanding, religion, for all intents and purposes, *is* yoga. And if there are many yogas, many disciplines that have the ability of leading their practitioners to God-realization, then it follows that many religions can do the same. Religions are, in effect, yogas.

It is noteworthy that Swami Vivekananda, in a passage where he essentially identifies yoga with religion, points out the etymology of the word *yoga*; both *religion* and *yoga* are, in their etymological roots, connected with the ideas of "union" or "re-union". The Latin root of *religion*—*religare*—literally means "to bind, to tie". Similarly, the Sanskrit root of the word *yoga*—*yuj*—also means "yoke, unite". In their initial meanings, both words refer to the literal act of tying, binding, or yoking—such as yoking an ox to a cart or tying a cow to a post. But both words have gradually come to refer metaphorically to a "binding" or "yoking" of a more profound kind: the binding or yoking of the individual self to its divine source, whether this is conceived, again, as a divine being—God—distinct from the self (as in bhakti yoga and theistic religion) or to one's own divine nature, which is distinct from one's "false", "illusory", or "lower" self, or ego (as in jñāna yoga and traditions, such as Buddhism, that are more focused on the realization of an impersonal truth than on a personal deity).

Although it has become a standard practice to translate the English word *religion* as *dharma* or *dharm* in Indic languages such as Sanskrit or Hindi, one could argue that it is truer to the original meanings of both *religion* and *yoga* to translate *religion* as *yoga*. Both words refer, in the thought of Swami Vivekananda, to the practices and total way of life employed in taking one to one's ultimate goal: to God-realization. Both vary in practice because, as Vivekananda says, "while the aim is one, the method of attaining it may vary with the different temperaments of men".[12] In the words of Mohandas K. Gandhi, "In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals".[13] This emphasis on religious pluralism, the idea of there being many true and effective paths to the realization of our inherent, potential divinity, shows Vivekananda's debt to Ramakrishna, his guru, whose central message was *Yato mat, tato path*: Each religion is a path to the realization of God. Ramakrishna famously claims:

> I have practiced all religions–Hinduism, Islam, Christianity–and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths . . . He who is called Krishna is also called Śiva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy, Jesus, and Āllāh as well–the same Rāma with a thousand names . . . God can be realized through all paths. All religions are

[10] Ibid, Volume Five, p. 292. Emphasis mine.
[11] Ibid, emphasis mine.
[12] Ibid.
[13] (Richards 1985, p. 156).

> true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope . . . It is not good to feel that one's religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only and not two. Different people call him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Shiva, and Brahman. It is like water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it 'jal,' others at another place and call it 'pani,' and still others at a third place and call it 'water.' The Hindus call it 'jal,' the Christians 'water,' and the Mussulmans 'pani.' But it is one and the same thing. Opinions are but paths. Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean . . . All religions and all paths call upon their followers to pray to one and the same God. Therefore, one should not show disrespect to any religion or religious opinion.[14]

Vivekananda's linking of the concept of *yoga*, of joining or of reuniting one with God, or "what amounts to the same",[15] of realizing the divinity which is already our true nature, with the concept of religion is a connection that has been made by others, notably Joseph Campbell:

> The Indian term yoga is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj*, "to link, join, or unite", which is related etymologically to "yoke", a yoke of oxen, and is in a sense analogous to the word "religion" (Latin *re-ligio*), "to link back, or bind". Man, the creature, is by religion bound back to God.

Campbell, however, discerns a distinction between these two types of joining, in terms of how they have been understood, historically, by the traditions which have affirmed them, differentiating between the theistic paths, or religions, of the West, and paths of realization such as Advaita Vedānta:

> However, religion, *religio*, refers to a linking historically conditioned by way of a covenant, sacrament, or *Qu'ran* [referring to the respective ways of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam], whereas yoga is the psychological linking of the mind to that superordinated principle "by which the mind knows". Furthermore, in yoga what is linked is finally the self to itself, consciousness to consciousness; for what had seemed, through māyā, to be two are in reality not so; whereas in religion what are linked are God and man, which are not the same. It is of course true that in the popular religions of the Orient the gods are worshiped as though external to their devotees, and all the rules and rites of a covenanted relationship are observed. Nevertheless, the ultimate realization, which the sages have celebrated, is that the god worshiped as though without is in reality a reflex of the same mystery as oneself. As long as an illusion of ego remains, the commensurate illusion of a separate deity also will be there; and vice versa, as long as the idea of a separate deity is cherished, an illusion of ego, related to it in love, fear, worship, exile, or atonement, will also be there. But precisely that illusion of duality is the trick of māyā. "Thou art that" (tat tvam asi) is the proper thought for the first step to wisdom.[16]

Campbell's differentiation of yoga from religion on the basis of his identification of yoga as being aimed at the realization of a divinity within, with religion being traditionally aimed at union with a God external to oneself through some historically mediating reality—"covenant, sacrament, or *Qu'ran*"—is not one which Swami Vivekananda seems to find particularly important. Again, for Vivekananda, if one realizes God through a devotional path, in which the divine reality is seen as a separate being from oneself—the path which Campbell identifies with religion—or if one realizes God through the path of knowledge, where divinity is seen as one's own nature—the path Campbell identifies with

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14 (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 35).
15 Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.
16 (Campbell 1959, p. 14).

yoga—does not affect the final outcome. Again, for Vivekananda, these two paths "amount to the same" thing.[17] For Vivekananda, yoga is religion and religion is yoga. What is true of one is therefore true of the other. If, therefore, it is true that many yogas can lead human beings to the same realization, it is equally true that many religions can do the same thing. The diversity and independent efficacy of the yogas is the basis for Vivekananda's religious pluralism.

Vivekananda sees the diversity of religions not as a problem to be surmounted, but as a positive advantage, for the variety of religions speaks to the variety of human dispositions, making a path available to a person of every disposition: "These are all different roads leading to the same center—God. Indeed, the varieties of religious belief are an advantage, since all faiths are good, so far as they encourage man to lead a religious life. The more sects there are, the more opportunities there are for making successful appeals to the divine instinct in all men".[18] The diversity of the yogas and the diversity of the religions arise from the same source: the diversity of human natures and temperaments as we each strive for the realization of our divinity.

"Yoga means the method of joining man and God. When you understand this, you can go on with your own definitions of man and God, and you will find the term Yoga fits in with every definition. Remember always, there are different Yogas for different minds, and that if one does not suit you, another may".[19] Vivekananda is here enjoining a non-dogmatic attitude in one's approach to the question of yoga and its ultimate purpose. If one finds that a particular method for realizing divinity does not work, due perhaps to one's specific life circumstances, or due perhaps to other factors, like one's culture, or one's previous experiences with religion, then other methods are available. It is not the quest for God-realization itself that is to be abandoned; but rather, one might need to adopt another method for achieving it. Even terms like *God* or *realization* may not be suitable for some people. For many, the word *God* implies a personal being who is in charge of the universe, and they find this concept inconsistent with their understanding of science or on the basis of their own life experiences. For others, *realization* may sound too impersonal or isolated. They may prefer terms like *loving union*, *receiving divine grace*, or *salvation*. The details of how one speaks of or conceptualizes these things do not finally matter, according to Vivekananda, so long as the method one uses is effective in drawing one nearer to the goal: so long as one actualizes the potential present in each method.

An example that Vivekananda gives of the diversity of Yogas being rooted in the diversity of human characteristics is Jñāna-Yoga, which he defines as "The realization of a man's own divinity through knowledge".[20] "The object of Jnana-Yoga", he says, "is the same as that of Bhakti and Raja Yogas, but the method is different. This is the Yoga for the strong, for those who are neither mystical nor devotional, but rational".[21] By 'the strong,' Vivekananda does not here mean that the practitioners of either bhakti yoga or rāja yoga—the disciplines, respectively, of devotion and meditation—are, in some sense, weak. But this yoga is for those who are confident in their own ability to reason through and to discern the reality of God through the powers of the intellect, without the aid of a divine grace bestowed from outside the self.

In bhakti yoga, one relies upon the grace of God, conceived as a being outside of oneself—though God is, on an Advaitic understanding, the Self beyond, or at the deepest level within, the empirical personality or ego which we conventionally conceive of as the self. Certainly, one may distinguish, even in Advaita Vedānta, with its non-dualistic perspective, a difference between the true Self and the false; for indeed, the practice of non-duality rests on this very distinction. In bhakti, the individual self or jīva—the living soul—is not unreal, but it is derivative from and dependent upon the divine Self—that is, God—who is conceived as the loving savior who rescues one from the sufferings of this

[17] Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Vivekananda, Volume Six, p. 41.
[20] Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.
[21] Vivekananda, Volume Eight, p. 3.

world. There is, furthermore, a lower self—the personality or ego—which is illusory and false and needs to be melted in the experience of divine love. Also, in rāja yoga, one sets aside the lower self and focuses solely upon the divinity within—the *puruṣa*—to the exclusion of all else. In jñāna yoga, the ego and intellect remain intact, but they deconstruct themselves through a systematic process which culminates, according to Vivekananda, in the same realization as the methods of devotion and meditation.[22] Each of these paths is for a different personality type. Some are more intellectually inclined, and confident in their ability to reason things through. Others are of a more emotional disposition and need to rely on a personal savior. And others are mystically inclined, wanting to set aside everything and have the direct experience of inwardness. Finally, there are the natural workers—the karma yogis—whose motivation is to get something positive done practically in the world. This inclination, too, can be channeled toward the highest goal, according to Vivekananda, through the practice of *seva*, or selfless service.

4. Making Sense of the Four Yogas as Independent and Effective Paths to Realization

If, as Swami Vivekananda claims, the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to realization and liberation from the cycle of rebirth (moksa), then what must the universe be like? What metaphysical conditions would enable such a pluralistic assertion to be true? What are the features of the ontology that must be presupposed by Vivekananda's claims about the independent effectiveness of the four yogas?

At first glance, Vivekananda's affirmation of the equal efficacy of the four yogas would appear to involve a problem of philosophical incoherence.[23] This is because each of the four yogas makes a set of assumptions about the ultimate nature of reality whose mutual compatibility is not obvious. The non-dualist understanding of divinity as one's own true nature, presupposed in jñāna yoga, and the theistic understanding of divinity as a God outside of oneself, presupposed in bhakti yoga, do not obviously "amount to the same" thing, as Vivekananda claims.[24] Indeed, adherents of these two paths have debated extensively throughout the history of Indian philosophy.

We have also seen that Swami Vivekananda also ties the diversity of the paths to realization—the diversity of the yogas—to the diversity of the world's religions. Each major religious tradition can be seen as, in essence, a variation on one of the yogas. Thus, Christianity comes to be seen as a form of bhakti yoga, Buddhism as a practice of jñāna yoga, and so on. This adds even further weight to the question of coherence. It is not only that each yoga, each of which can be traced to a different system of traditional Indic thought and practice, involves its own set of distinctive set of assumptions. Vivekananda is affirming the independent salvific efficacy of the world religions as a whole. All of their various worldviews thus come into play. How can traditions as disparate in their claims about the basic nature of reality as Jainism and Islam, for example, all be seen as efficacious paths to the same ultimate realization? This question of the coherence of this claim is faced by most pluralistic models of truth and salvation.

Thinking now just in terms of the assumptions involved in the yogas themselves, as conceived by Vivekananda, jñāna yoga, the spiritual discipline of knowledge, operates on the assumption, found prominently in the non-dualist or Advaita system of Vedānta, that there is an ultimate nature of reality that is beyond all concepts of name and form—that is *nirguṇa*—and that is identical with the fundamental essence of all beings. This ultimate reality, or *Brahman* is identical with the *ātman*, or the Self. Liberation arises from the realization that this is the case: the experience of a radical reorientation of one's sense of selfhood, uprooting it from the body, the mind, and the personality with which we conventionally identify ourselves and identifying instead with the unlimited spiritual essence

22 See (Davis 2010).
23 (Rambachan 1994, pp. 63–93).
24 Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.

of all existence, which is *anantaraṃ sat-cit-ānandam*—infinite being, awareness, and bliss. Indeed, these are the terms in which Vivekananda himself most often speaks, and, during a brief period of his career—"roughly, from mid-1894 to mid-1895"—he conceived of the process of realization as involving a series of steps leading from a dualistic worldview to non-dualistic realization.[25]

Bhakti yoga, the spiritual discipline of devotion, operates on the assumption that there is a Supreme Being, a personal ultimate reality, absolute devotion and surrender to whom will lead to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Supreme Being, as a being with whom one enters into a relationship, is distinct from oneself. This is unlike the ātman, which is not so much a being as it is being itself. Liberation, in bhakti yoga, is a result of divine grace and compassion, as found in theistic religions.

Karma yoga, the spiritual discipline of action, operates on the assumption that by serving the living beings in our midst, we cause our ego to become attenuated. We thus become selfless beings, free from attachment to the results of our actions. By becoming free from the illusion of selfhood, in the sense of ego, we become liberated. In Swami Vivekananda's terms, the essence of this ego is "self-abnegation". "The highest ideal is eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no "I", but all is 'Thou'; and whether he is conscious or unconscious of it, Karma-Yoga leads man to that end".[26]

According to Vivekananda, it is not even necessary for the practitioner of karma yoga to have any religious beliefs. This yoga can be aided, though, by the belief that one is serving God, who is present in the suffering beings that one serves. Again, the yogas are not seen as mutually exclusive, airtight compartments. Theistic karma yoga can therefore be seen as a type of devotional practice: serving God in others. But non-theistic karma yoga—attenuating the ego by giving oneself to the service of others—is also possible and is no less efficacious for those who are drawn to it.

Finally, rāja or dhyāna yoga, the spiritual discipline of meditation, operates on the assumption that, by stilling the thought processes that characterize our conventional waking state, we are able to gain access to and experience the true nature of reality directly, becoming fully absorbed into that reality and thus attaining liberation. This assumption is not radically incompatible with those made by the other yogas. To the extent, however, that rāja yoga is understood by Vivekananda as being continuous with the system of yoga taught in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, it does involve a set of views whose logical compatibility with the Advaita Vedānta presupposed by jñāna yoga is not immediately obvious: views such as the real existence of many *puruṣas*, or souls, as opposed to the undifferentiated unity of Brahman affirmed in classical Advaita Vedānta.

If one draws attention to the original Indian systems of thought which seem to provide the conceptual foundations for each yoga, Vivekananda's affirmation of the efficacy of all four yogas would seem to amount to the claim that the respective worldviews of Advaita Vedānta, the classical Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions, the teaching of the renunciation of the fruits of action (*karma-phala-vairāgya*) found in the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the eight-limbed (*aṣṭāṅga*) yoga of Patañjali are all true.

This is certainly not an impossible claim to defend. Indeed, one could argue that there are elements of each of these worldviews already affirmed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a text frequently cited by Swami Vivekananda, and that his teaching on the four yogas is simply an extension of a concept which is already present, at least implicitly, in this central text of the Vedānta tradition.[27] One could well see Vivekananda's teaching as a return to the pre-systematic Vedānta of the earliest Vedāntic texts, before this tradition was divided into branches based on its various interpretations, such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, and so on.[28] Vivekananda's teaching about the four yogas is consistent,

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25 Medhananda 2020, p. 24.
26 Vivekananda, Volume One, pp. 84–85.
27 The *Bhagavad Gītā* is one of the three texts making up the *prasthānatrayī*, or "triple foundation," of Vedānta, along with the collected *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahma Sūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa.
28 Indeed, Swami Medhananda identifies the teaching of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, with such a "non-sectarian" Vedānta. See (Maharaj 2018, pp. 15–16).

for example, with *Bhagavad Gītā* 12: 1—7, which claims that followers of jñāna yoga and bhakti yoga both reach God, though the path of jñāna is said to be the more difficult of the two for most spiritual aspirants.[29] Given, however, the history of polemics among adherents of these systems of thought—especially between Advaita and the various bhakti schools of Vedānta—the truth of this claim is far from obvious. Or perhaps we might say that the truth of this claim has been obscured by the tendency of the various schools of thought to take one particular approach and dogmatically elevate it above all of the others, rather than affirming the pluralism that is arguably implied by the primary Vedāntic textual sources.[30] Finally, as noted above, if one expands one's understanding of the yogas, as Vivekananda does, to encompass not only the Indic traditions on which they are most clearly based, but also the world religions and philosophies which operate with similar or analogous conceptions of the nature of reality, the question of how all of these systems can be both true and salvifically efficacious emerges with some urgency.

5. Truth, Salvific Efficacy, and the Blind People and the Elephant

To be sure, as Swami Medhananda notes, the truth of a worldview and the salvific efficacy of the spiritual practice in which that worldview operates are two distinct questions. Medhananda cites Robert McKim in this regard:

> Truth and salvation are very different matters. No particular position on the one entails or requires the corresponding position (or the most closely related position) on the other. For example, someone can consistently believe that members of some or all other traditions will, or can, achieve salvation, even in cases in which the distinctive beliefs associated with the relevant tradition, or traditions, are believed to be largely or even entirely mistaken.[31]

This is certainly true. A Christian universalist may, for example, believe that the saving love of Christ will ultimately bring all people to salvation, even those persons who have adhered to belief systems which are entirely false. Is believing the practice of the four yogas can take their sincere practitioners to the goal of liberating realization a belief of this kind? Does it imply that the worldviews with each of the yogas operate are all, in some sense, true, or is this an unnecessary assumption? Is the truth of the worldviews associated with the yogas irrelevant to their efficacy?

We have seen that, according to Vivekananda, the liberating realization to which the yogas take their practitioners is not of a *wholly* cognitive nature. It is not simply a matter of knowing and assenting to the truth of a proposition or a set of propositions. It does, however, have a cognitive dimension. It is not, to be sure, simply reducible to cognitive knowledge. As noted earlier, God-realization involves a transformation of the whole person: transformation that all of the yogas are able to effect, if practiced with diligence. But the intellect is nevertheless *part of* the whole person. It must, therefore, be the case that cognition plays some role in the transformative process.

Because there is *some* cognitive dimension to this transformation—because it does involve the realization *of something* at the cognitive level—it cannot be said that the question of truth is wholly irrelevant to the question of salvation for Vivekananda. Because the practice of the yogas involves

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[29] To be sure, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have not been the first Hindu thinkers to seek to reconcile the paths of jñāna and bhakti and their respective ontologies. Amongst the various systems of Vedānta, a prominent claim of many is that Brahman, the ultimate reality, is *bhedābheda*, or "both different from and one with" the reality of the world. Systems within this stream of thought include the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja (which affirms an organic rather than a non-differentiating unity between Brahman and the world), the Dvaitādvaita (duality and non-duality) of Nimbārka, and the Acintya Bhedābheda, or "inconceivable difference and non-difference" of Caitanya. Caitanya, specifically, the founder of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theistic system, was a major influence upon Sri Ramakrishna, and it is not unreasonable to see a current of Acintya Bhedābheda running through both his and Swami Vivekananda's thought.

[30] One could in fact argue that this pluralism is not only implied, but stated plainly in these sources, such as in *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:11, in which the divine Krishna states: "In whatsoever way living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths, Arjuna, lead to me." (Translation mine.)

[31] (McKim 2012, p. 8).

one's own dedicated activity and personal choice—unlike the gift of grace in which our hypothetical universalist Christian believes, which saves all regardless of their personal beliefs or actions—there can be beliefs which might militate against the process of personal transformation. These beliefs might include, for example, materialistic beliefs, or the belief that one's own ethnic group is superior to others, as opposed to a belief in the inherent divinity of all. Vivekananda did believe in a definite worldview, in terms of which the claim that the practice of multiple yogas, or multiple religious paths, could be salvifically efficacious makes rational sense. We have noted that the Vedānta of Vivekananda is broadly Advaitic: that is, it is not identical with classical Advaita,[32] but it does affirm the idea of the ultimate unity of all beings, and the indwelling presence of divinity within them.

What can be said of Vivekananda—as for his teacher, Sri Ramakrishna—is that there are truths which are essential to salvation, in the sense that the process of realization presupposes them, even if they are not fully grasped by all spiritual practitioners. The truth that there is, indeed, a spiritual reality at the core of one's being, and that all talk about and experience of this spiritual reality is not a mere projection, would be an example of such an essential truth. There are also truths which might be very helpful to spiritual practice, but that are in the end not determinative of whether one achieves the ultimate goal. The reality of the process of death and rebirth would be an example of a truth of this kind: for orthodox Christians and Muslims, for example, typically do not believe in this process, and yet their practices are salvifically efficacious. The fact that the process of rebirth, is something that occurs, according to both Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna—that reincarnation, in other words, is a real thing—does not prevent those Christians and Muslims who do not believe in reincarnation from attaining realization through their respective paths, because accepting the reality of rebirth is not ultimately as consequential to one's attainment of realization as other, more essential truths, belief in which is more central to the process of the transformation of character that is the point of the yogas. Finally, there are truths which are wholly irrelevant to the process of realization, except perhaps inasmuch as they function within a total way of life that is salvifically transformative. Specific historical claims, for example, that people of various religions take to be true would be of this kind.

Swami Medhananda has noted examples like these in the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna, where Ramakrishna clearly has a belief about what is actually the case in regard to a particular topic, but where a spiritual aspirant's assent to that belief is inconsequential to that aspirant's practice and their potential attainment of the ultimate goal. In regard to reincarnation, Mahendranath Gupta—the disciple of Ramakrishna who recorded his dialogues in the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*, which was later translated into English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*—expresses some doubt about this phenomenon:

> M. [Gupta]: "I haven't much faith in rebirth and inherited tendencies. Will that in any way injure my devotion to God?"

[32] In referring to "classical Advaita" and differentiating Vivekananda's views from it, I am acknowledging the scholarly consensus which notes significant differences between Vivekananda's teachings and those teachings that have been attributed to Śaṅkara. As Rambachan, already cited earlier, explains, for Śaṅkara, at least in the texts which are undisputably attributed to him, the hearing and correct understanding of the teachings of the *Vedas* in regard to the nature of Brahman and Ātman form a sufficient basis (*pramāṇa*) for the knowledge that gives rise to liberation. The *śabda pramāṇa*, or basis for knowledge in the form of the authoritative words of the *Vedas* forms, at least as Rambachan reads Śaṅkara, the sole necessary condition for liberating realization. To be sure, Vivekananda does not deny that a sufficiently evolved soul might, upon hearing and comprehending the words of the *Vedas*, attain instant realization. Vivekananda, however, conceptualizes the *Vedas* differently than Śaṅkara does, seeing these texts as the record of the experiences of the enlightened seers (*ṛṣis*) who first received them. Śaṅkara, in keeping with the earlier teaching of the Mīmāṃsā school of thought, sees the *Vedas* as *sui generis* and *apauruṣeya* (literally "not-man-made") knowledge. Vivekananda differentiates between what he calls the "eternal *Veda*" which consists of the sum total of metaphysical truth and the books which are known as the *Vedas*, thus opening up the possibility that these metaphysical truths might be apprehended through means other than the Vedic texts. See (Rambachan 1994; Long 2016).

> Master [Sri Ramakrishna]: "It is enough to believe that all is possible in God's creation. Never allow the thought to cross your mind that your ideas are the only true ones, and that those of others are false. Then God will explain everything".[33]

Similarly, with regard to the traditional Vaiṣṇava doctrine that God periodically manifests on the earthly plane as an incarnation, or *avatāra* (literally, "descent"), Sri Ramakrishna believes that this doctrine is true. He does not, however, regard such belief as essential to the path to realization. As Medhananda points out:

> ... [H]e [Sri Ramakrishna] upholds the traditional Hindu view ... that God incarnates as a human being in every age. According to Sri Ramakrishna, ordinary people can learn to cultivate *bhakti* [devotion] by witnessing the ideal *bhakti* of *avatāras* ("Incarnations") such as Caitanya. Sri Ramakrishna also teaches that devotion toward an *avatāra* is sufficient for spiritual liberation ... On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna points out that there are many spiritual aspirants who do not accept the *avatāra* doctrine, such as Advaita Vedāntins and those like Kabīr and followers of the Brāhmo Samāj ... Are Advaitins and Brāhmos soteriologically handicapped because they reject the avatāra doctrine? Sri Ramakrishna answers with an emphatic "No": "The substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless [*vyākul*] for Him. It doesn't matter whether you believe in God with form or in God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates as a human being. But you will realize God if you have that yearning [*anurāg*]. Then God himself will let you know what He is like".[34]

Swami Vivekananda, like Sri Ramakrishna, sees religions as consisting of certain core ideas which are central to their practice, and so to reaching the eventual goal of God-realization. But this does not mean that every single claim of these religions must be affirmed equally as true:

> Each religion, as it were, takes up one great part of the universal truth, and spends its whole force embodying and typifying that part of the great truth ... [W]e are all looking at truth from different standpoints, which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on. We are viewing truth, getting as much of it as these circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our own heart, understanding it with our own intellect, and grasping it with our own mind. We can only know as much truth as is related to us, as much of it as we are able to receive. This makes the difference between man and man, and occasions sometimes even contradictory ideas; yet we all belong the same great universal truth. My idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind ... You have seen that each religion is living ... At one time, it may be shorn of a good many of its trappings; at another time, it may be covered with all sorts of trappings; but all the same, the soul is ever there, it can never be lost.[35]

Truth, therefore, for Vivekananda, as for Ramakrishna, is distinct from salvific efficacy, but it is also not entirely irrelevant to it. There is the larger truth of existence to which all human beings are oriented in various ways, and then there is the truth as we perceive it, each conditioned by our varying circumstances. An excellent analogy for the nature of truth in the thought of these figures is the ancient Indian parable of the blind people and the elephant, which Sri Ramakrishna narrates:

> Once some blind men chanced to come near an animal that someone told them was an elephant. They were asked what the elephant was like. The blind men began to feel its body.

[33] Nikhilananda, p. 259.
[34] (Maharaj 2018, pp. 104–5). The quotation within this citation is from Nikhilananda, p. 449.
[35] Vivekananda, Volume Two, pp. 365, 366.

> One of them said the elephant was like a pillar; he had touched only its leg. Another said it was like a winnowing-fan; he had touched only its ear. In this way the others, having touched its tail or belly, gave their different versions of the elephant. Just so, a man who has seen only one aspect of God limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else.[36]

The first extant version of this parable in textual form is from the *Tipiṭaka*: the Pāli canonical texts of Theravāda Buddhism (specifically, from *Udāna* 6.4:66—69). In this version, one of the disciples of the Buddha comes to him with his mind full of confusion after hearing the members of various schools of thought debating the nature of reality. The Buddha responds to his disciple's confusion by telling him this story, the moral being that reality bears more complexity than can be articulated in a single worldview (*diṭṭhi*). One should therefore not be excessively attached to any given view.

In the *Kathāmṛta*, Ramakrishna tells this story in order to explain to a Vaiṣṇava interlocutor that, contrary to the views of those who argue either that God is formless or that God has a form, both affirmations are true. According to Sri Ramakrishna, one who has perceived God directly, in contrast with one who only adheres to the dogma of a particular tradition, will understand the deep complexity of the divine reality and not be, again, excessively attached to any given view to the exclusion of all others. Dogmatism is thus a marker of spiritual immaturity:

> Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, "One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Krishna", or, "Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kāli, our Divine Mother", or, "One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion". This is pure dogmatism. The dogmatist says, "My religion alone is true, and the religions of others are false". This is a bad attitude. God can be reached by different paths. Further, some say that God has form and is not formless. Thus they start quarrelling. A Vaishnava quarrels with a[n Advaita] Vedantist. One can rightly speak of God only after one has seen Him. He who has seen God knows really and truly that God has form and that He is formless as well. He has many other aspects that cannot be described.[37]

Ramakrishna then tells the story of the blind men and the elephant, as cited above, to illustrate the idea that God has many aspects: an aspect with form, a formless aspects, and "many other aspects that cannot be described", that cannot even be confined by such concepts as *form* and *formlessness*.

The person who can see, and so who is thus in a position to explain to the blind people that they are each partially right and partially wrong—that they have each captured a real portion, but only a portion, of the elephant—is, in Ramakrishna's use of this image, the person who has truly "seen God". The blindness of the blind people rests in their adherence to dogmas in the absence of any experience of the divine reality *in its wholeness* to justify that adherence.

The blind people may, indeed, have some direct experience of the divine reality, but it is limited to those aspects of this reality that are affirmed in the teachings of their particular traditions. As is argued in constructivist accounts of religious experience, the precise phenomenal character of a mystical experience tends to be shaped by the assumptions, beliefs, and practices of the tradition to which the mystic adheres. Theistic religious practice will therefore tend to issue in theistic religious experiences: experiences that involve a personal God. Non-theistic religious practice will similarly tend to issue in forms of experience in which the personal God is absent. Also, the theistic practices attached to a particular tradition will tend to issue in experiences of God as conceived in that tradition. A Vaiṣṇava mystic will therefore tend to have an experience of Kṛṣṇa, and not of Jesus, and a Christian mystic will tend to have an experience of Jesus, and not of Kṛṣṇa. Similarly, with non-theistic practices, the experience of non-dualistic realization in Advaita Vedānta and the experience of *satori* in the Zen

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36 (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 191).
37 Ibid.

Buddhist tradition, while certainly sharing many common features, are nevertheless described in phenomenologically different terms.[38] None of these, according to Ramakrishna, are experiences of the divine reality in its totality, though each is a valid experience of a *portion* of that reality.

Through the centuries, the story of the blind people and the elephant has been used by Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu teachers to convey the same basic points: that reality cannot be fully encompassed by any one worldview, that there is some truth in many worldviews, and that one should therefore not indulge in bitter conflict with those whose views differ from one's own.

At the same time, each of these articulations has tended to work with an implicit assumption that there is a true worldview which would correspond to the elephant in its totality: a worldview from which the claim that views tend to be partial and incomplete can be coherently made (like the perspective of the person who has seen God, in the teaching of Ramakrishna, or the awakened perspective of the Buddha, in Buddhist versions of this story, or of the Jina, in Jain versions). The understanding, in each case, is that there is an ultimate truth of existence. There is an elephant that is really *there* and that possesses certain features. But perceiving only a portion of the elephant is not inimical to one's eventually realization of the truth in its totality, so long as one is not dogmatic and insistent that one's limited, relative perspective alone must be the whole, absolute truth.

In Jain thought, this story becomes a way to illustrate the concept that reality is *anekānta*: that is, "many-sided", or complex. This is a central Jain teaching about the essential nature of being: *utpāda-vyāyava-dhrauvya-yuktaṃ sat*, or "Being is that which undergoes arising, perishing, and endurance".[39] Some philosophies affirm the nature of being as arising and passing away, whereas others affirm the nature of being as continuity or endurance. Jain thought affirms both aspects.

The ontological conception of reality as complex entails the epistemic understanding that it can be viewed in many ways, from many valid perspectives. These perspectives are known in Jain thought as the *nayas*. Because one's grasp of truth is conditioned by the perspective that one uses to perceive it, one should express views about the nature of reality not as absolute generalities—as claims which are true in all times, places, and circumstances, and in regard to all aspects of reality—and certainly not in a way that is dogmatic or insistent, but in a way that is attentive to the specific assumptions one utilizes in arriving at one's conclusion. Claims about the ultimate nature of reality are true *syāt*: that is, in a certain sense, or from a certain point of view, and not absolutely. In the words of Bimal Krishna Matilal, according to Jain thought, "Add a *syāt* particle to your philosophic proposition and you have captured the truth".[40] One can see Jain thought as expressing a sensibility not unlike that of Ramakrishna, when he asserts that making dogmatic assertions and quarreling about the nature of reality are habits to be avoided.

Mohandas K. Gandhi was very fond of citing the story of the blind people and the elephant as a way to convey the same basic idea that we have seen expressed by Ramakrishna and by the Jain and Buddhist traditions: that there is truth in many views and that one must therefore have humility whenever one asserts one's perspective. Even those with whom one may disagree are in possession of a portion of the truth:

> It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the elephant ... Formerly I used to resent the

[38] See (Hick 1989, pp. 292–95).
[39] Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 5: 29 (translation mine).
[40] (Matilal 1981, p. 61).

> ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me *and vice versa*.[41]

Most recently, comparative theologian John Thatamanil has made effective use of this same story, in much the same vein as Gandhi, as an allegory for the process of inter-religious learning and the reformulation of one's own beliefs on the basis of such learning. For both Thatamanil and Gandhi, this story invites one to engage in dialogue with those whose perceptions of reality are different from one's own, to learn from them, and also to teach them:

> As I walk around the elephant with the guidance of others and learn from them (*comparative theology*), I retain elements of my warranted belief that the elephant is like a giant fan, but I am prepared to supplement that belief as necessary. I see now that the others' judgments are also warranted. That recognition compels me to revise my initial account of other elephant surveyors and their claims (*theology of religious diversity*). As I begin to recognize the validity and truth of other accounts of the elephant, I acknowledge that my account of ultimate reality, as first formulated, was partial even if that knowledge was granted to me by way of [divine] revelation. I am compelled to recognize that my earlier account of ultimate reality stands in need of revision (*constructive theology*). When others told me that I was mistaken to say that the elephant was a fan, they were right even though they were wrong to dismiss the truth of my position. There are good grounds to hold that my neighbors can often see me not only better than I can myself, but they are sometimes in a position to discern the limitations of my seeing. Now, I can also see how they came to believe that the elephant was a rope.[42]

While the image of the blind men and the elephant is beautiful and effective for conveying the idea that reality is always more than any given worldview can encompass, and that we would all do well to exercise epistemic humility when making assertions about the nature either of divine reality or of existence as a whole, there are also skeptical questions that can be raised about just how apt this image is, particularly as an image for a divine or ultimate reality, whose existence can itself be questioned. Kenneth Rose notes:

> It could, after all be the case that materialism is correct despite all the arguments, experiences, and realizations that religious people produce as evidence to the contrary. To put this in terms of the famous Jain and Buddhist parable of the blind people and the elephant, there may not actually be an elephant there for the blind people to touch, since even the people telling them that they are touching an elephant may also be mistaken, deceived, or subject to an illusion.[43]

In short, one could question whether the elephant itself is really "there", or is a mere projection.

Even if one grants that the perceptions of religious people are not wholly delusory, but that there is some kind reality to which they all point beyond themselves, and which each really does, to some extent, grasp, one can also ask whether the many realities perceived by diverse traditions are, in fact, the parts or portions of a singular entity. One can question, in other words, Swami Vivekananda's claim that the many yogas, the many religions, really all do lead to the same goal of re-union with God, or God-realization. Thatamanil describes this affirmation as a hypothesis which must be tested, and as a hope which underlies the practice of dialogue:

> . . . [T]he hope that the various traditions refer to the selfsame reality is a working and contested hypothesis. Traditions may, after all, be oriented to entirely different realities. Of course, every allegory falls short. In the case of religious diversity, the point must be readily granted: there are no omniscient knowers.[44]

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41 (Gandhi 1981, p. 30).
42 (Thatamanil 2020, p. 12).
43 Rose, p. 35.
44 Thatamanil, p. 9.

Thatamanil's last point is an important one, as it contests an assumption made, as we have already seen, by many who have traditionally utilized this image. That is the assumption that there is in fact a point of view from which one can say that there is an elephant which is being perceived only partially by the adherents of diverse worldviews. There is Sri Ramakrishna's person who has seen God in God's wholeness. There is the awakened perspective of the Buddha which makes one aware of the futility of grasping at views. Finally, there is the perspective of the enlightened Jina of Jainism, which reveals the complex nature of reality, and which is, indeed, affirmed in this tradition to be an omniscient perspective.

One might, of course, affirm, on the basis of religious faith, the idea that there are omniscient knowers: that Sri Ramakrishna, or the Buddha, or the Jinas of Jainism, such as Mahāvīra, or Jesus, were such beings. One would then still be left with the fact, though, that even an omniscient being, when communicating with the non-omniscient beings (such as the rest of humanity) will be limited by non-omniscient human imagination and the languages to which it has given risen. Alfred North Whitehead, in affirming that the first principles of existence can, indeed, be apprehended, tempers this affirmation with an understanding of the limits of language:

> There is no first principle which is in itself unknowable, not to be captured by a flash of insight. But, putting aside the difficulties of language, deficiency in imaginative penetration forbids progress in any form other than that of an asymptotic approach to a scheme of principles, only definable in terms of the ideal which they should satisfy.[45]

Perhaps the "elephant" of ultimate truth could be conceived, also, asymptotically, as an ideal which religions and worldviews constantly approach, but which they never fully realize (unless there is indeed such a state as omniscience, but even this state would have to be conveyed in language).

There is, of course, a belief within Indic and other traditions that ultimate truth can be conveyed non-linguistically. The Digambara Jain tradition, for example, affirms that Mahāvīra did not teach in words, but through a divine sound, or *divyadhvāni*, which his disciples then translated as Jain teaching.[46] There is also, of course, the famous account of Sri Ramakrishna passing on all of his knowledge to Swami Vivekananda with a touch. As with much of religious experience, though, such revelations are only fully and immediately available to those who receive them. The rest of humanity must depend upon verbal accounts.

6. Discerning the Outline of the Elephant: The Ontology of the Four Yogas

Granting that any perfect representation of ultimate truth is always going to be incomplete, and that the approach to truth, at least through linguistic and conceptual means, is going to be, at best, asymptotic, is it possible to discern, at least to some extent, what reality must be like if it really is the case, as Swami Vivekananda affirms, that the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to God-realization?

Some suggestion of the answer to this question is already implicit in the foregoing discussion of the nature of reality that is implied if one takes a non-dogmatic approach to diverse worldviews as expressing partial, but incomplete, insights into ultimate truth. The picture that emerges is one of reality that is complex.

As mentioned previously, each of the four yogas involves a set of assumptions about the nature of existence. Affirming the efficacy of all four yogas therefore involves affirming a conception of reality which enables all of these assumptions to be true.

Furthermore, Vivekananda identifies the yogas with the world's religions, and affirms that just as many yogas can lead to realization, so can many religions. The same thing, therefore, must be said

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45 (Whitehead 1978, p. 4).
46 See (Kabay 2013, pp. 176–93).

about the world's religions: that Vivekananda's pluralism entails a conception of reality which enables the central ideas or themes of each religion to be true. We have already seen that Swami Vivekananda, like his guru, Sri Ramakrishna, avoids the difficulties of a self-defeating and self-contradictory relativism by avoiding the claim that all of the claims of every religion must be true in the same respect and at the same time. There are the core claims of the religions and there are their "trappings", which can change with time. The resulting worldview must therefore entail that the basic affirmations of the religions—those which would correspond to the essential ideals with which the yogas operate—are all, in some sense, true. Again, this is a conception of ultimate reality as possessing or being made up of many different forms and aspects.

Tentatively, then, we can say that if the four yogas are independent and equally efficacious paths to God-realization, then reality must include a feature which corresponds to the impersonal ultimate reality of traditions such Advaita Vedānta, Jainism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This would be the facet of ultimate reality accessed by those who practice a form of the jñāna yoga, the way of knowledge. It must also include a feature which corresponds to the personal Supreme Being of theistic traditions such as Vaishnavism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This would be the facet of ultimate reality accessed by those who practice a form of bhakti yoga, the way of devotion. It must also include a feature that corresponds to the living entities which populate our shared human experience: the suffering beings for the sake of whom one practices compassion and engages in service. This would be the facet of ultimate reality accessed by those who practice a form of karma yoga. It is also important to note that accessing this facet of reality does not require religiosity in a traditional sense, as involving belief in either a Supreme Being or ultimate principle. As Swami Vivekananda affirms, it involves, at minimum, subordinating one's ego to the good of all. Secular philosophies which aim at some vision of human flourishing can also, therefore be included in the vision of reality which the independent efficacy of the four yogas presupposes. Finally, this model of reality must include the real possibility of accessing the deeper nature of existence through the process of quieting our mental processes—the *citta-vṛtti-nirodha* affirmed in the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali (*Yoga Sūtra* 1: 2).

The resulting overall picture of reality which results from the incorporation of these features into it is akin, in many respects, to the Whiteheadian process worldview articulated in the *deep religious pluralism* of such contemporary thinkers as David Ray Griffin and John Cobb.[47] This worldview is a form of *naturalistic theism* which affirms the reality of God as a cosmic mind whose "whose mutual implication with the remainder of things secures an inevitable trend towards order", in the universe.[48] This cosmic mind can be seen to correspond, in many respects, to the Supreme Being of most theistic religions. This mind forever envisions an eternal ideal of creativity which it then makes available to the actual entities making up the cosmos. This eternal ideal or cosmic principle corresponds to the idea of an impersonal ultimate reality found in such traditions as Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Daoism. Then, there is the cosmos of actual entities themselves, which corresponds to the sacred reality of the cosmos as found in indigenous, nature-oriented traditions from around the world. On this basis, deep religious pluralists in the Whiteheadian tradition argue, one can see diverse religions as paths which are distinct in their orientations toward reality, just as the yogas involve distinct ways of approaching existence. Yet, all can co-exist within a single coherent worldview.

Finally, the worldview implied by the independent efficacy of the four yogas is also close to the worldview presented in the *Vijñāna Vedānta* of Swami Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, as it has been reconstructed by Swami Medhananda (formerly Ayon Maharaj).[49]

Deep religious pluralism has been articulated, at least in part, as a criticism of and an alternative to monistic or "identist" pluralistic models which insist that the many paths must lead to the same

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[47] See (Griffin 2005).
[48] (Whitehead 1967, p. 115).
[49] See (Maharaj 2018).

ultimate goal. One could yet raise a question, in reply to this critique. Even if we do see the goals toward which the different paths aim as distinct from one another—with Advaitic realization, for example, being a qualitatively and phenomenologically distinct experience from being born again in Christ, and with differences even obtaining internally to the various broad types of yogic path, with Advaitic realization also being different, in important respects, from Zen awakening—if one is going to affirm even the co-existence of these diverse goals within a singular, coherent account of reality, it is necessary to develop some conception of how they all might fit together.

To be sure, this is precisely what deep religious pluralists, at least those in the Whiteheadian process tradition, do, correlating the impersonal acosmic ultimate reality of impersonalist paths with Whitehead's principle of creativity, the personal ultimate reality with the ever-emergent God of naturalistic theism, and the cosmos of living beings with the collective actual entities that make up the concrete cosmos at any given moment. In the end, it seems that the question of whether one should speak of the religions as being oriented toward distinct ultimate realities, or toward distinct facets of one, complex ultimate reality may involve a mere difference of emphasis. Certainly, for Vivekananda, and for thinkers, like John Hick, who have similarly developed models which see the world's religions as being oriented toward a single ultimate reality and goal, the emphasis has been on the side of the equation which emphasizes what holds the cosmos together as a singular unity. The corrective move of deep pluralism is certainly a welcome one, to the extent that affirmations of the ultimate unity of the goals of the religions can tend to flatten out or disregard genuine areas of difference. Rather than rejecting the concept of unity altogether, however, one can, instead, see the initial positing of unity as a thesis, to which deep pluralism is the antithesis, and conclude with the synthetic view that the goal is one, but that it can take many forms–realization of an ultimate truth, loving union with a personal divine reality, an experience of harmony amongst all beings making up the cosmic organism, and so on–in terms both of the phenomenology of the experiences it involves and the facets of ultimate reality to which these experiences are oriented. What all of these diverse experiences share in common is a deep and clear apprehension of the true nature of reality, which is ultimately beyond the capacity of words and concepts to express in its full totality.

7. Conclusions

It has become understandably fashionable in scholarship on Swami Vivekananda, particularly if one considers the extent to which he has been exalted in modern Hinduism, to seek to find fault with this figure and to contest the many assertions that have been made about him by his devotees. Fair criticism should, of course, be welcome, even by Vivekananda's devotees, for this is precisely what he, himself taught: not that he should personally be worshiped, but that his teachings should be studied and put into practice:

> My name should not be made prominent; it is my ideas that I want to see realized. The disciples of all the prophets have always inextricably mixed up the ideas of the Master with the person, and at last killed the ideas for the person. The disciples of Sri Ramakrishna must guard against doing the same thing. Work for the idea, not the person.[50]

At the same time, just as the thesis of the ultimate unity of the goal of all religions is one that can be tempered by the antithesis of deep religious pluralism, resulting in a synthesis which is able to preserve the core insights of both, in the same way, critical scholarship on Vivekananda can be met with a more refined understanding of his teachings that does not reject their basic premises.

[50] Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 68.

Amongst the scholarly assertions that have become increasingly commonplace about Swami Vivekananda are the claim that (a) his teaching is radically different from that of Sri Ramakrishna, and that (b) his teachings are ultimately incoherent and lacking in philosophical rigor.[51]

The hope of this essay is that it has at least suggested that these claims have been overstated: that there are, indeed, important correlations that can be made between Sri Ramakrishna's and Swami Vivekananda's conceptions of the nature of truth (as involving an absolute dimension that is ultimately greater than any single worldview can encompass, and a relative dimension which is amenable to diverse range of representations and interpretations), and that the resulting ontology is not, in fact, incoherent, but is, indeed, an attempt to reconcile worldviews and practices which are all too often pitted against one another by the forces of irrational dogmatism: of inter-religious violence and hatred.

> I propound a philosophy which can serve as a basis to every possible religious system in the world, and my attitude toward all of them is one of extreme sympathy—my teaching is antagonistic to none. I direct my attention to the individual, to make them strong, to teach them that they are divine, and I call upon them to make themselves conscious of the divinity within. That is really the ideal—conscious or unconscious—of every religion.[52]

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[51] In regard to the differences between Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, a prominent one which has not been discussed here is the very prominent role of the Goddess Kālī and of Tāntric thought and practice more generally in the life and teachings of Ramakrishna and their relative absence in the teaching of Vivekananda. To be sure, this is a significant difference between them in terms of the way they presented themselves and their ideas to the world. It does not, however, seem to have any impact upon their shared affirmation of multiple paths to ultimate reality and a corresponding pluralistic ontology, which is the main focus of this paper.

[52] Vivekananda, Volume Five, pp. 187–88.

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Was Swami Vivekananda a Hindu Supremacist? Revisiting a Long-Standing Debate

Swami Medhananda †

Program in Philosophy, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Educational and Research Institute, West Bengal 711202, India; sw.medhananda@gmail.com

† I previously published under the name "Ayon Maharaj". In February 2020, I was ordained as a *sannyāsin* of the Ramakrishna Order and received the name "Swami Medhananda".

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Abstract: In the past several decades, numerous scholars have contended that Swami Vivekananda was a Hindu supremacist in the guise of a liberal preacher of the harmony of all religions. Jyotirmaya Sharma follows their lead in his provocative book, *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism* (2013). According to Sharma, Vivekananda was "the father and preceptor of Hindutva," a Hindu chauvinist who favored the existing caste system, denigrated non-Hindu religions, and deviated from his guru Sri Ramakrishna's more liberal and egalitarian teachings. This article has two main aims. First, I critically examine the central arguments of Sharma's book and identify serious weaknesses in his methodology and his specific interpretations of Vivekananda's work. Second, I try to shed new light on Vivekananda's views on Hinduism, religious diversity, the caste system, and Ramakrishna by building on the existing scholarship, taking into account various facets of his complex thought, and examining the ways that his views evolved in certain respects. I argue that Vivekananda was not a Hindu supremacist but a cosmopolitan patriot who strove to prepare the spiritual foundations for the Indian freedom movement, scathingly criticized the hereditary caste system, and followed Ramakrishna in championing the pluralist doctrine that various religions are equally capable of leading to salvation.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; Jyotirmaya Sharma; Hindu nationalism; Hindutva; religious pluralism; religious inclusivism; caste system; Sri Ramakrishna

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1. Introduction

For decades now, there has been heated debate about whether Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) was a Hindu fundamentalist who paved the way for right-wing Hindu nationalist movements. It is indisputable that many right-wing Hindu organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) view Vivekananda as one of their chief inspirations (Beckerlegge 2003, 2006a; Nicholson forthcoming). The key question, however, is whether this is a case of misappropriation.

Some scholars have contended that Vivekananda's views have strong Hindu fundamentalist overtones and implications.[1] Dixit [1976] (2014), for instance, claims that Vivekananda, in his support of caste distinctions and the "inequitous social system" (p. 32), provided "an ideological rationale to the politics of Hindu communal movements" (p. 39). More recently, Baier (2019, p. 255) has argued that Vivekananda's ideas "still exert a formative influence on contemporary, religiously tinged Indian nationalism."

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[1] See, for instance, Nandy [1973] (2014), pp. 293–94; Dixit [1976] (2014), pp. 38–39; Gupta [1973] (2014), pp. 271–72; Hansen (1999, pp. 69–70); Patel (2010, pp. 107–8); and Baier (2019).

By contrast, numerous scholars have argued that Hindutva ideologues have misappropriated Vivekananda.[2] For instance, Beckerlegge (2003, p. 54) has shown, through a careful examination of some of the foundational texts of the RSS, that RSS figures like M.S. Golwalkar and Eknath Ranade drew "selectively upon Vivekananda's ideas" and pushed to extremes "emphases and refrains that are softened within the context of Vivekananda's recorded teaching as a whole." Likewise, Raychaudhuri (1998) convincingly challenges the "stereotyping of Vivekananda as a militant Hindu" (Raychaudhuri 1998, p. 2) by clarifying the late-nineteenth century colonial context within which Vivekananda articulated his views on Hinduism.

Still others have adopted an intermediate position, identifying both liberal and Hindu supremacist strains in Vivekananda's thought. Sen (1993, p. 335), for instance, finds an "apparent contradiction" between Vivekananda's "professed Catholicism and Universalist appeal" and his "faith in the superiority of Hinduism." Likewise, Nicholson (forthcoming) has argued that Vivekananda was highly critical of the existing hereditary caste system but was also "both a Hindu supremacist and an inclusivist," who viewed Vedānta as "the fulfillment of all other religious paths."

One of the latest contributions to this ongoing debate is Jyotirmaya Sharma's provocative book, *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism* (Sharma 2013a).[3] Sharma (2013a, p. xv) attempts to prove that Vivekananda was "the father and preceptor of Hindutva" by defending three main claims. First, he contends that Vivekananda, in spite of his reputation as a liberal champion of the harmony of all religions, was actually a Hindu supremacist who considered Hinduism—and Advaita Vedānta in particular—to be superior to all other religions. Second, according to Sharma, Vivekananda more or less favored the existing hereditary caste system. Third, he argues that Vivekananda consciously deviated from his guru Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), who placed religious paths on an equal footing and taught a *bhakti*-oriented spiritual philosophy rooted more in Śākta Tantrism than in Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta.

This article challenges all three of Sharma's main theses by critically assessing his textual justification for them and by clarifying and contextualizing Vivekananda's views on Hinduism, religious diversity, the caste system, and Ramakrishna. Section 2 makes the case that Vivekananda was not a Hindu fundamentalist but a cosmopolitan patriot who laid the spiritual foundations for the independence movement by instilling in his fellow Indians—who had become demoralized and ineffectual under British colonial rule—not only strength and self-confidence but also a reverence for their own ancient spiritual heritage and an openness to learning from other countries. Section 3 argues that Vivekananda's views on the harmony of religions actually evolved. For a brief period from mid-1894 to mid-1895, he did sometimes relegate non-Hindu religions to lower stages in a hierarchy culminating in Advaita Vedānta. However, Sharma and other scholars have failed to recognize that by late 1895, Vivekananda abandoned this hierarchical Advaitic doctrine in favor of the more egalitarian doctrine that every religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas, each of which is an equally effective path to salvation. Section 4 presents evidence that Vivekananda both prophesied and welcomed the demise of the existing hereditary caste system and sought to restore what he took to be the *original* caste system, based not on heredity but on a person's natural tendencies, which can be modified through one's own thoughts and actions. Section 5 challenges Sharma's thesis that there was a "rupture" between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, who—Sharma claims—viewed his guru's spiritual experiences as hallucinations and refused to accept Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation. Sharma, I argue, overlooks a crucial incident that took place two days prior to Ramakrishna's death which led the young Vivekananda to repudiate his earlier skepticism about Ramakrishna's divinity and spiritual

[2] See, for instance, Mukherjee [1973] (2014); Raychaudhuri (1998); Bose (1998); Beckerlegge (2003); Rambachan (2005); and Long (2012).

[3] The Indian edition of Sharma's book was retitled *Cosmic Love and Human Apathy: Swami Vivekananda's Restatement of Religion* (Sharma 2013b).

stature. Finally, Section 6 identifies some of the major methodological flaws in Sharma's approach to Vivekananda and summarizes the arguments presented in Sections 2–5.

2. Hindu Supremacist or Cosmopolitan Patriot?

According to Sharma, Vivekananda paved the way for the Hindutva movement by promoting Hindu nationalism, asserting the superiority of the Hindu race, and vilifying the West. Let us examine some of Sharma's evidence for these claims. Claiming that Vivekananda's "indictment of the West" was "searing, categorical, and final," Sharma ascribes to Vivekananda the view that "the Westerner is an asura" and that the "the West believed in matter alone and was 'addicted to the aggrandisement of self by exploiting others' countries, others' wealth by force, trick and treachery'" (Sharma 2013a, p. 121). Sharma refers here to a passage from Vivekananda's essay, "The East and the West" (1900), but Sharma *reverses* Vivekananda's intended meaning by taking the passage out of context. Vivekananda begins the essay by sketching dramatic portraits of the stereotyped and superficial ways that Indians and Westerners often view one another. The "English official," he writes, tends to see Indians as "the embodiment of selfishness" and as having a "malicious nature befitting a slave" (CW5, p. 442).[4] By contrast, the "Indian" tends to view the "Westerner" as "the veriest demon (Asura)," "believing in matter only," and so on (CW5, p. 442). However, what Sharma fails to mention is that in the very next paragraph, Vivekananda remarks: "These are the views of observers on both sides—views born of mutual indiscrimination and superficial knowledge or ignorance" (CW5, pp. 442–43). In the remainder of the essay, Vivekananda goes on to *critique* these stereotyped views and to present a more nuanced account of what he sees as the complementary ideals of India and the West: namely, that the "national ideal" of the West is "dharma," ethical living based on the dignity of labor, while the national ideal of India is "mukti," spiritual liberation and fulfilment (CW5, p. 443–55). As we will see, this is just one of many instances where Sharma, by taking Vivekananda's statements out of context, ascribes problematic views to Vivekananda that he never held.

To be sure, Vivekananda himself sometimes referred to "the materialism of the West." Take, for instance, this passage: "I believe that the Hindu faith has developed the spiritual in its devotees at the expense of the material, and I think that in the Western world the contrary is true. By uniting the materialism of the West with the spiritualism of the East I believe much can be accomplished" (CW7, p. 284). However, two points are worth noting. First, his position is more nuanced than a monolithic essentialism, since he does *not* claim that the West is exclusively materialistic and India is exclusively spiritual. Rather, he claims that the West emphasizes the material "at the expense of" the spiritual, and vice-versa. Moreover, as in the passage cited in the previous paragraph, he sees materialism and spirituality as complementary rather than antagonistic ideals. Second, Vivekananda views Western "materialism" not as a demonic addiction to matter but in *positive* terms as scientific and technological advancement, social equality, humane living conditions, and so on. For instance, in an 1897 lecture, he refers to the "materialism of Europe" and then remarks: "Materialism has come to the rescue of India in a certain sense by throwing open the doors of life to everyone, by destroying the exclusive privileges of caste, by opening up to discussion the inestimable treasures which were hidden away in the hands of a very few who have even lost the use of them" (CW3, p. 157).

Sharma cites a passage from Vivekananda's 1897 lecture on "The Future of India," in which he urges his fellow Indians to worship "Virāṭ" (that is, God in the form of the universe): "This is the only god that is awake, our own race—'everywhere his hands, everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything.' All other gods are sleeping. What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all round us, the Virāṭ?" (CW3, pp. 300–1). Pouncing on the phrase "our

[4] Throughout this article, all references to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* will be abbreviated as follows: "CW," the volume number, then the page number. References to the Bengali edition of Vivekananda's complete works, *Svāmī Vivekānander Vāṇī o Racanā*, will be abbreviated as follows: "BCW," the volume number, then the page number.

own race," Sharma (2013a, p. 137) claims that Vivekananda was a Hindu nationalist who encouraged Indians to worship Virāṭ in the form of the "Hindu masses alone" as "the only god that was awake and worthy of worship." Here again, Sharma distorts the meaning of the passage by taking it out of context. In the sentences leading up to this passage, Vivekananda chastises his fellow Indians for their slavish mentality:

> [I]f one of our countrymen stands up and tries to become great, we all try to hold him down, but if a foreigner comes and tries to kick us, it is all right. We have been used to it, have we not? And slaves must become great masters! So give up being a slave. For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. (CW3, p. 300)

The context makes clear that Vivekananda was trying to arouse self-confidence, dignity, and pride in his fellow Indians, who had internalized a slave mentality under British colonial rule. His timeframe of "the next fifty years" is also significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that he had a very specific and finite purpose for emphasizing the regeneration of Indian pride and self-confidence in the contemporary context of the British colonial predicament. Hence, it would be a serious mistake to interpret such passages as paving the way for Hindu supremacism. Second, it is striking that Vivekananda made this comment about "the next fifty years" in an 1897 lecture, since India would go on to gain independence *exactly* fifty years later in 1947.

In an 1894 letter to his brother disciples, he clarified what he meant by the worship of Virāṭ as follows:

> If you want any good to come, just throw your religious ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God—every being that wears a human form—Virāṭ and Svarāṭ [God in the form of the individual]. The Virāṭ form of God is this world (*ei jagat*), and worshipping it means serving it (*tār sevā*)—this indeed is work, not indulging in ceremonials. Neither is it work to cogitate as to whether the rice-plate should be placed in front of the God for ten minutes or for half an hour—that is called lunacy . . . Now the Lord is having His toilet, now He is taking His meals, now He is busy on something else we know not what . . . And all this, while the Living God is dying for want of food, for want of education! (CW6, p. 264; BCW7, pp. 52–53)

Vivekananda's definition of the "Virāṭ form of God" as "this world" as a whole makes clear why Sharma is mistaken in equating "Virāṭ" with "the Hindu masses alone." In fact, contrary to Sharma's rather serious charge of "human apathy" against Vivekananda,[5] Vivekananda's call to worship Virāṭ embodies the social activist dimension of his philosophy of "Practical Vedānta" (CW2: 291–358): we should worship God first and foremost in *human beings* by serving the poor and needy. Moreover, he explicitly credited his guru Ramakrishna for first teaching him the doctrine of "*śivajñāne jīver sevā*" ("serving human beings knowing that they are all manifestations of God") in 1884 (Saradananda [1919] 2003, p. 852).[6]

Sharma's misinterpretation of Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist stems, in part, from a fundamental weakness in his broader approach to Vivekananda—namely, his astonishing historical amnesia regarding Vivekananda's late-nineteenth century context. As Krishnan V. (2014) quite rightly observes, Sharma "writes as if Vivekananda and Ramakrishna exist in some ahistorical transcendental space, while complaining at the same time that Vivekananda's views are ahistorical."[7] Raychaudhuri (1998) and Bhattacharya (2012) have convincingly shown that it is impossible to appreciate the nuances of Vivekananda's views on Hinduism and Vedānta without taking into

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5 I have in mind here the title of the Indian reprint of Sharma's book: *Cosmic Love and Human Apathy* (Sharma 2013b).
6 For detailed discussion of Vivekananda's Practical Vedānta and its roots in Ramakrishna's teachings, see Maharaj (2020).
7 Zutshi (2014, p. 159) also faults Sharma for his lack of attention to Vivekananda's historical context.

account three interrelated aspects of his late-nineteenth century historical context: the British colonial rule of India, aggressive Christian missionary efforts to convert Hindus, and the ubiquity of gross misconceptions and stereotypes about Hindu practices in Western countries. Through his articulation and defense of Hinduism, Vivekananda encouraged Indians to "give up being a slave" (CW3, p. 300) by appreciating, and taking pride in, their own great spiritual heritage. At the same time, he strove to correct wildly mistaken views about Hinduism in the West and to counter Christian missionaries who were bent on converting Hindus to Christianity. For instance, when he was lecturing in America, he was often confronted with the question, "Do the people of India throw their children into the jaws of the crocodiles?" (CW4, p. 201).

Rambachan (2005) has convincingly shown that the Hindu nationalist V.D. Savarkar's narrow definition of Hinduism in terms of "nation (*rashtra*), race (*jāti*) and culture (*sanskriti*)" is diametrically opposed to Vivekananda's much broader conception of Hinduism as "a distinctive worldview with a relevance and appeal that transcends ties of nationality, race and culture" (p. 127). Vivekananda, as Rambachan (2005, p. 125) notes, consistently defined a Hindu not in terms of ethnicity or blood but as "a person who subscribes to the doctrines and practices of Hinduism." For instance, in his 1893 "Paper on Hinduism" (CW1, pp. 6–20) and his 1897 lecture "The Common Bases of Hinduism" (CW3, pp. 366–84), Vivekananda propounded Hinduism in terms of a set of shared philosophical doctrines such as the divinity of all human beings, reincarnation, and the ideal of realizing God. As Rambachan (2005, p. 127) points out, since Vivekananda understood Hinduism in doctrinal rather than ethnic terms, he—unlike Savarkar—had no difficulty embracing non-Indians such as Sister Nivedita into the Hindu fold.

Sharma (2013a) is only one of several scholars who have viewed Vivekananda's refusal to become involved in politics as a sign of his status quoism and of his indifference to the colonial plight of his fellow Indians.[8] Dixit [1976] (2014) claims that Vivekananda was an "exponent of political inaction" (29) who "viewed the global empire of England as a boon to the Hindus" (26). In fact, however, Vivekananda was unsparing in his criticism of the injustice and cruelty of British colonial rule. In a conversation with some American friends in August 1893, he remarked that the English "have their heels on our necks, they have sucked the last drop of our blood for their own pleasures, they have carried away with them millions of our money, while our people have starved by villages and provinces" (CW7, p. 280). Moreover, Sen (1993, p. 292) rightly faults Dixit for overlooking the possibility that Vivekananda made "political gains ... through work that was not overtly political."

Indeed, those who fault Vivekananda for his political inaction overlook entirely what might be called his "spiritual politics." In stark contrast to later Hindutva ideologues, Vivekananda consciously distanced himself from politics while striving to prepare the *spiritual foundations* for enduring political change and social reform.[9] As he put it in an 1894 letter to Alasinga Perumal, "I am no politician or political agitator. I care only for the Spirit—when that is right everything will be righted by itself" (CW5, p. 46). From Vivekananda's standpoint, political action is doomed to be superficial and ineffective unless it is grounded in a more fundamental spiritual transformation. Accordingly, in an 1895 interview held in London, he remarked that "religion is of deeper importance than politics, since it goes to the root, and deals with the essential of conduct" (CW5, p. 200).

Significantly, even though Vivekananda eschewed direct political intervention, a whole host of Indian freedom fighters—including Bose (1935, pp. 29–30); Pal (1932); Rajagopalachari (1963, p. xiii); and Nehru (1949)—specifically credited Vivekananda for his pivotal role in preparing the moral and spiritual foundations for the independence movement by instilling self-respect, dignity, and pride in his fellow Indians. For instance, Nehru (1949, p. 197) made the following remark about Vivekananda in a speech delivered two years after India's independence:

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[8] See, for example, Dixit [1976] (2014) and Nandy [1973] (2014).
[9] Long (2012) is one of the few contemporary scholars to have highlighted this point.

> He was no politician in the ordinary sense of the word and yet he was, I think, one of the great founders—if you like, you may use any other word—of the national modern movement of India, and a great number of people who took more or less an active part in that movement in a later date drew their inspiration from Swami Vivekananda.

Nehru proves to be much more nuanced and historically sensitive than Sharma in his understanding of Vivekananda's key role in late-nineteenth century British-ruled India. Ironically, Sharma's charge of "human apathy" (Sharma 2013b) against Vivekananda could be more appropriately leveled against Sharma himself, who ignores one of the most traumatic chapters in India's history. Sharma is only able to paint Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist by overlooking his colonial situation and his crucial role in inspiring self-confidence and pride in a subjugated people.[10]

Sharma and other critics of Vivekananda have also ignored his cosmopolitan outlook, his radical openness to other cultures and his eagerness to "learn whatever is great wherever I may find it" (CW6, p. 234; BCW6, p. 250). Recently, Madaio (2017, p. 9) has made a convincing case that Vivekananda was a "cosmopolitan theologian" who creatively engaged with both Western and indigenous Indian sources in order to develop a distinctive Vedāntic worldview. In fact, in a candid 1897 letter to Mary Hale, Vivekananda remarked about his own cosmopolitan identity: "What am I? Asiatic, European, or American? I feel a curious medley of personalities in me" (CW8, p. 395). Similarly, he often insisted that he was not just an Indian but a citizen of the world: "I belong as much to India as to the world, no humbug about that" (CW5, p. 95). Far from vilifying the West, Vivekananda encouraged his fellow Indians to learn from other nations:

> Several dangers are in the way, and one is that of the extreme conception that we are *the* people in the world. With all my love for India, and with all my patriotism and veneration for the ancients, I cannot but think that we have to learn many things from other nations ... At the same time we must not forget that we have also to teach a great lesson to the world. We cannot do without the world outside India; it was our foolishness that we thought we could, and we have paid the penalty by about a thousand years of slavery. (CW3, p. 272; emphasis in the original)

Vivekananda was prescient in recognizing the "danger" of holding the "extreme" view that Hindus are "*the* people in the world"—which is precisely the kind of rhetoric favored by later right-wing Hindutva ideologues. It is telling that Sharma fails to address this important passage, which explicitly denounces the Hindu supremacist attitude Sharma ascribes to Vivekananda. In the passage, Vivekananda goes on to contrast Hindu chauvinism with a cosmopolitan form of patriotism that combines a "veneration for the ancients" with a broadmindedness and an openness to learning from other countries. He thereby anticipated the contemporary philosopher Appiah (1997, p. 618) conception of the "cosmopolitan patriot," who balances an openness and receptivity to other cultures with a patriotic love for her own country, with its "own cultural particularities."[11] It is perfectly in keeping with such a cosmopolitan patriotism that Vivekananda scathingly criticized British colonial rulers for their cruelty and plundering while also acknowledging that the British rule of India had the "one redeeming feature" of bringing India "out once more on the stage of the world" (CW8, p. 475).

Sharma's misinterpretation of Vivekananda as the "father" of Hindutva, then, stems not only from his failure to take into account Vivekananda's late-nineteenth century colonial context but also from his mistaken conflation of Indian patriotism with Hindu supremacism, which leads him to overlook the spiritually-grounded cosmopolitan patriotism actually espoused by Vivekananda.

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[10] Bhattacharya (2012, p. 379) succinctly explains this aspect of Vivekananda's historical role.
[11] I discuss Vivekananda's cosmopolitan outlook in greater detail in Maharaj (2020, pp. 185–86) and in the introduction to my book manuscript in progress, "Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism."

3. Vivekananda's Views on Religious Diversity: Inclusivist or Pluralist?

Although it is uncontroversial that Vivekananda championed the "harmony of religions" (CW2, p. 377), there has been a great deal of scholarly controversy concerning precisely *how* he harmonized the world religions. In 1983, the Christian theologian Alan Race proposed a threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism that has been extremely influential in shaping recent discussions of religious diversity (Race 1983). Scholars of Vivekananda have debated where in this typology to place his views on religious diversity.

Many scholars argue that although Vivekananda may *seem* to have championed the pluralist doctrine that all religions have equal truth and salvific efficacy, he actually subscribed to a "hierarchical inclusivism," according to which different religions occupy different stages leading to the highest truth of Advaita Vedānta.[12] As Gregg (2019) contends, Vivekananda was "no simplistic pluralist, as portrayed in hagiographical texts, nor narrow exclusivist, as portrayed by some modern Hindu nationalists, but a thoughtful, complex inclusivist" (1), who upheld "the superiority of a monistic, *Advaita Vedanta* interpretation of reality" (120). Likewise, Sharma (2013a, pp. 230, 249) claims that while Ramakrishna was a genuine religious pluralist who placed all the world religions on an equal footing, Vivekananda parted ways with his guru in holding the inclusivist view that each of the various world religions corresponds to one of the three stages of Vedānta: Dvaita (dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified nondualism), and Advaita (nondualism). Unlike Gregg, however, Sharma claims that Vivekananda's Advaitic inclusivism was in the service of a Hindu supremacist agenda. According to Sharma, the "liberality attributed to Vivekananda is only in name" (Sharma 2013a, p. 239), since he actually believed that Hinduism—and Advaita Vedānta in particular—was the only truth and that non-Hindu religions "were mere sects with inadequate notions of God" (Sharma 2013a, p. 157).

By contrast, some scholars claim that Vivekananda held a consistently pluralist stance that did not privilege either Hinduism or Advaita Vedānta over other religions.[13] For instance, according to Mitra (2018, p. 45), Vivekananda "was neither a supremacist nor an inclusivist" but a "pluralist" who appealed to "Vedānta" as the underlying basis of all religions but did not equate Vedānta with "the philosophical school of Advaita Vedānta."

Meanwhile, still other scholars argue that Vivekananda's position on the world religions combines elements of both pluralism and inclusivism.[14] For instance, Long (2017, p. 256) claims that Vivekananda's views occupy "a position on the boundary between inclusivism and pluralism."[15] Similarly, Paranjape (2020, p. 102) characterizes Vivekananda's position as "a combination of pluralist and inclusivist."

It is worth noting that scholars in all three of these camps, in spite of their differences, adopt a *synchronic* approach to Vivekananda, since they assume that his views on religious diversity did not evolve significantly from 1893 to 1901. By contrast, Green (2016, p. 150) and Beckerlegge (2006b, pp. 220–21) adopt a *diachronic* approach, arguing that he advocated a pluralist stance between 1893 and 1894 but later shifted to a more inclusivist Advaitic position beginning in 1895.

The first step in adjudicating this debate is to note that different interpreters of Vivekananda have employed the terms "inclusivism" and "pluralism" in a variety of ways, and often without sufficient conceptual precision or consistency. As McKim (2012) and Griffiths (2001) have shown, it is crucial to distinguish questions about the *truth* of religions from questions about their *salvific*

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[12] Inclusivist interpreters of Vivekananda include Hacker [1971] (1977); Neufeldt (1987, 1993); Halbfass (1991, pp. 51–86); Barua (2014, 2020, pp. 266–69); Raghuramaraju (2015); Rigopoulous (2019); Baier (2019); Gregg (2019); and Nicholson (forthcoming).

[13] See Elkman (2007); Bhajanananda (2008); Mitra (2018, pp. 44–46); and Maharaj (2019).

[14] See, for instance, Aleaz (1993, esp. p. 214); Schmidt-Leukel (2017, pp. 55–58); Long (2017, pp. 249–61); and Paranjape (2020, pp. 114–48).

[15] In a more recent article, Long (forthcoming) puts this same point in a different way by claiming that "Vivekananda's theology of religions contains an element of the 'perennial philosophy'—the idea of a shared conceptual and experiential core existing within the mystical strands of the world's religions—and an element of 'deep religious pluralism.'"

efficacy. Questions about truth concern the extent to which religions provide an accurate account of reality. Questions about salvific efficacy concern the extent to which religions are effective in leading to salvation (however salvation and effectiveness are understood).

McKim (2012, p. 8) rightly notes that positions on truth and salvific efficacy are logically independent:

> Truth and salvation are very different matters. No particular position on the one entails or requires the corresponding position (or the most closely related position) on the other. For example, someone can consistently believe that members of some or all other traditions will, or can, achieve salvation, even in cases in which the distinctive beliefs associated with the relevant tradition, or traditions, are believed to be largely or even entirely mistaken.

Hence, it is perfectly possible for a pluralist about salvation to be an inclusivist or even exclusivist about truth. In scholarship on Vivekananda, I believe there has been a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding concerning his views on religious diversity, in part because scholars have not been sufficiently careful about specifying whether they are defining pluralism and inclusivism in terms of truth, salvific efficacy, or both.

I define the three basic positions on the question of salvific efficacy as follows:

> *Exclusivism about Salvation* (ES): Only one religion has a high degree of salvific efficacy, and no other religion has any salvific efficacy at all.
>
> *Inclusivism about Salvation* (IS): Multiple religions have salvific efficacy, but one of them has greater salvific efficacy than all the others.
>
> *Pluralism about Salvation* (PS): Multiple religions have an equally high degree of salvific efficacy.

With respect to doctrinal truth, it is important to specify which religious doctrines are being considered. For present purposes, I am concerned with doctrinal truth with respect to fundamental claims about ultimate reality (with the subscript "f" standing for "fundamental"). The definitions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are then as follows:

> *Exclusivism about Doctrinal Truth*$_f$ (ET_f): The doctrines about ultimate reality in one religion are true, while contradictory claims in other religions are false.
>
> *Inclusivism about Doctrinal Truth*$_f$ (IT_f): The doctrines about ultimate reality in only one religion *R* have the most truth, but the doctrines about ultimate reality in other religions have some truth as well, though not as much truth as *R*.
>
> *Pluralism about Doctrinal Truth*$_f$ (PT_f): The doctrines about ultimate reality in multiple religions are equally true.

In light of these definitions, it should be clear that it is perfectly possible to be a salvific pluralist (PS) but a doctrinal inclusivist (IT_f). In fact, I would argue that no coherent salvific pluralist position can avoid being doctrinally inclusivist, since salvific pluralism presupposes the truth of some kind of doctrinal metaframework which explains *how* multiple religions can lead to the same salvific goal.

With these definitions in place, I will defend a new diachronic interpretation of Vivekananda's views on religious diversity, arguing that they *evolved* significantly from 1894 to 1896.[16] While I follow Green (2016) and Beckerlegge (2006b) in adopting a diachronic approach, I disagree with their assumption that Vivekananda's final position was an Advaitic inclusivism. Through a chronological examination of Vivekananda's lectures and writings, I have found that he grounded his doctrine of the harmony of religions in the three stages of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Advaita only for a brief period

[16] I defend this diachronic interpretation in much greater detail in my book manuscript in progress, "Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism."

from September 1894 to May 1895.[17] By late 1895, Vivekananda abandoned this hierarchical approach in favor of the more egalitarian Vedāntic view that every religion corresponds to at least one of the four Yogas—namely, Jñāna-Yoga (Yoga of Knowledge), Bhakti-Yoga (Yoga of Devotion), Karma-Yoga (Yoga of Works), and Rāja-Yoga (Yoga of Meditation)—each of which is a direct and independent path to salvation. On this basis, he defended not only a full-blown salvific pluralism (PS) but also the radical cosmopolitan ideal of enriching our spiritual lives by learning from, and even practicing, religions other than our own.

In the nine-volume *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, I have found only four lectures and writings—all dated between September 1894 and May 1895—in which Vivekananda harmonized the world religions on the basis of the three stages of Vedānta: the "Reply to the Madras Address" (CW4, pp. 331–53), written in September 1894; the lecture "The Religions of India" (CW1, pp. 329–32), delivered in New York on 30 December 1894; the lecture "Soul, God and Religion" (CW1, pp. 317–28), delivered in Connecticut on 8 March 1895; and a letter to his disciple Alasinga Perumal dated 6 May 1895 (CW5, pp. 79–83). Vivekananda's May 1895 letter to Perumal contains what appears to be his final attempt to explain the harmony of religions on the basis of the three stages of Vedānta:

> All of religion is contained in the Vedānta, that is, in the three stages of the Vedānta philosophy, the Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita; one comes after the other. These are the three stages of spiritual growth in man. Each one is necessary. This is the essential of religion: the Vedānta, applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds of India, is Hinduism. The first stage, i.e., Dvaita, applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe, is Christianity; as applied to the Semitic groups, Mohammedanism. The Advaita, as applied in its Yoga-perception form, is Buddhism etc. (CW5, pp. 81–82)

In this passage, Vivekananda places Buddhism on an equal salvific footing with Advaita Vedānta, but he places all devotional religions on a lower salvific footing by conceiving them as lower stages on the way to the highest Advaitic stage of realization. Moreover, since he makes the very strong claim that all three stages are "necessary" for our "spiritual growth," all practitioners of devotional religions *must* eventually go on to attain Advaitic realization before they can attain the highest salvation. His position in this May 1895 letter, then, is not so much salvific pluralism (PS) as an Advaitic salvific inclusivism (IS).

To be sure, Vivekananda did continue to teach the three stages of Vedānta in subsequent years, in both India and the West—for instance, in his 1896 lecture on "The Vedānta Philosophy" at Harvard University (CW1, pp. 357–65) and in his 1897 lecture on "The Vedānta in All its Phases" in Calcutta (CW1, pp. 322–54). Crucially, however, after May 1895, he never again appealed to the three stages of Vedānta *in the specific context of the harmony of religions*. Instead, in his lectures and writings from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda consistently taught the harmony of all religions on the basis of a Vedāntic universal religion grounded in the four Yogas.[18]

Toward the end of his lecture on "The Methods and Purpose of Religion" delivered in London on 14 May 1896, he provided an especially succinct explanation of how the Vedāntic framework of the four Yogas harmonizes all religions:

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[17] For a helpful chronological list of Vivekananda's lectures, see Hohner and Kenny (2014).

[18] In chronological order, his lectures and writings relating to the harmony of religions from late 1895 to 1901, all of which appeal to the four Yogas, are as follows: "Abou Ben Adhem's Ideal" (7 December 1895; CW9, pp. 482–83); "The Ideal of a Universal Religion: How It Must Embrace Different Types of Minds and Methods" (12 January 1896; CW2, pp. 375–96); "Four Paths of Yoga" (essay written during his first visit to America [exact date not known]; CW8, pp. 152–55); "The Doctrine of the Swami" (19 January 1896; CW9, p. 484); "The Ideal of a Universal Religion" (31 January 1896; CW, pp. 484–87); "Sri Ramakrishna" (fall 1896; CW4, pp. 160–87 [title in CW: "My Master"]); "The Ideal of a Universal Religion" (4 March 1896; CW9, pp. 487–88); "Philosophy of Freedom" (21 March 1896; CW9, pp. 489–91); "Ideal of a Universal Religion" (26 March 1896; CW9, pp. 493–96); "The Methods and Purpose of Religion" (14 May 1896; CW6, pp. 3–17); "The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion" (28 January 1900; CW2, pp. 359–74); "Hinduism and Sri Ramakrishna" (1901; CW6, pp. 181–82, BCW6, p. 3).

> The plan of Vedānta, therefore, is: first, to lay down the principles, map out for us the goal, and then to teach us the method by which to arrive at the goal, to understand and realise religion. Again, these methods must be various. Seeing that we are so various in our natures, the same method can scarcely be applied to any two of us in the same manner. We have idiosyncrasies in our minds, each one of us; so the method ought to be varied. Some, you will find, are very emotional in their nature; some very philosophical, rational; others cling to all sorts of ritualistic forms—want things which are concrete ... If there were only one method to arrive at truth, it would be death for everyone else who is not similarly constituted. Therefore the methods should be various. Vedānta understands that and wants to lay before the world different methods through which we can work ... Take any path you like; follow any prophet you like; but have only that method which suits your own nature, so that you will be sure to progress. (CW6, pp. 15–17)

In his exposition of the Vedāntic universal religion throughout this lecture, the "three stages" of Vedānta are conspicuously absent. Instead, in the first sentence of this passage, he specifies that the Vedāntic universal religion has three fundamental components: (1) the "principles" underlying all religions, (2) the "goal" of all religions, and (3) the various "methods" by which we can all reach this goal. Earlier in the lecture, he explains that the "grand principle" of Vedānta is "that there is that One in whom this whole universe of matter and mind finds its unity," known as "God, or Brahman, or Allah, or Jehovah, or any other name" (CW6, p. 11). Notice that Vivekananda does not privilege Advaitic Brahman over the personal God in any way. For Vivekananda, the same infinite impersonal-personal God is conceived differently by different people, and called by various names, depending on their temperament and individual circumstances.

Indeed, contrary to Jyotirmaya Sharma, I believe there is strong evidence throughout the *Complete Works* that Vivekananda rejected Śaṅkara's view that the ultimate reality is *exclusively* impersonal and without attributes (*nirguṇa*) in favor of Ramakrishna's more expansive view that the ultimate reality is *both* impersonal (*nirguṇa*) and personal (*saguṇa*), and *both* with and without form.[19] Just as Ramakrishna taught that the impersonal "Brahman" and the dynamic personal "Śakti" are "inseparable" (*abhed*) (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 84; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 134), Vivekananda repeatedly asserted that "our religion preaches an Impersonal Personal God" (CW3, p. 249).[20] Moreover, he explicitly credited Ramakrishna with teaching him the insight that "we may have different visions of the same truth from different standpoints" (CW4, p. 181). A clear implication of this statement is that Vivekananda followed his guru in placing devotional religions on an equal footing with Advaita Vedānta, since all religions conceive the same impersonal–personal God from different, but equally valid, standpoints.[21] According to Vivekananda, the "goal" mapped out by Vedānta is the salvific "realisation" of the impersonal-personal Infinite God in whatever aspect or form one prefers (CW6, pp. 13–14).

Finally, Vedānta teaches that there are various "methods" for attaining this common goal of God-realization. Crucially, he does not privilege any one method over all the others. Instead, he claims that any given religious practitioner will make the most rapid spiritual progress by adopting the method that best suits his or her particular "nature"—be it "emotional," "philosophical," "ritualistic," or otherwise. Although he did not explicitly explain these various methods in terms of the four Yogas in the long passage cited above, he did so in numerous other lectures and writings from 1896 to 1900. Take, for instance, this passage from his lecture on "The Ideal of Karma-Yoga" delivered in New York on 10 January 1896:

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[19] I defend this claim in Maharaj (forthcoming) and, in more detail, in chapter 2 of my book manuscript in progress, "Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism."

[20] For similar statements, see (CW3, pp. 335–36 and CW2, p. 319.)

[21] In chapters 1 and 3 of my book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (Maharaj 2018), I argue that Ramakrishna taught an expansive, world-affirming philosophy of "Vijñāna Vedānta" that ascribes equal ontological status to the impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti and that upholds the equal salvific efficacy of theistic and non-theistic religious paths.

> The grandest idea in the religion of Vedānta is that we may reach the same goal by different paths; and these paths I have generalized into four, namely those of work, love, psychology, and knowledge. But you must at the same time remember that these divisions are not very marked and quite exclusive of each other. Each blends into the other. But according to the type which prevails, we name the divisions ... We have found that, in the end, all these four paths converge and become one. All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to one and the same goal. (CW1, p. 108)

According to Vivekananda, we can reach the same goal of God-realization through "different paths," which he generalizes into the four Yogas: Karma-Yoga ("work"), Bhakti-Yoga ("love"), Rāja-Yoga ("psychology"), and Jñāna-Yoga ("knowledge"). Two points are worth noting. First of all, he is careful to emphasize that his division of paths into the four Yogas is not meant to be restrictive or exhaustive. Indeed, in an essay entitled "Four Paths of Yoga" which he wrote at some point during his first visit to America, he explicitly notes that there may be religious paths that do not fall neatly into any one of the four Yogas. As he puts it, the "Yogas, though divided into various groups, can *principally* be classed into four ... " (CW8, p. 152; emphasis added). His view seems to be, then, that most, but not necessarily all, of the various religious paths can be grouped into one of the four Yogas. Second, he notes that the four Yogas should not be understood as air-tight compartments. Each Yoga, as he puts it, "blends into the other," since each Yoga contains elements of the other three Yogas to varying degrees. Moreover, the frequently overlapping nature of the Yogas reflects the fact that no human being exclusively embodies only one personality type. Nonetheless, he claims that most human beings exhibit a prevailing "type" or "tendency," which corresponds to one of the four Yogas, while also having other tendencies to a lesser extent.

From late 1895 on, Vivekananda consistently harmonized the world religions on the basis of the four Yogas rather than the three stages of Vedānta. Moreover, he argued that this Vedāntic framework of the four Yogas provides the philosophical basis for salvific pluralism (PS). His argument for salvific pluralism proceeded in two basic steps. First, he claimed that every world religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas. As he put it in his 1896 lecture "Sri Ramakrishna," "A man may be intellectual, or devotional, or mystic, or active; the various religions represent one or the other of these types" (CW4, p. 178).[22] Second, he consistently affirmed that each of the four Yogas has equal salvific efficacy. For instance, in a class on "Karma-Yoga" given on 3 January 1896, he declares:

> Each one of our Yogas is fitted to make man perfect even without the help of the others, because they have all the same goal in view. The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Mokṣa. (CW1, p. 93)

Salvific pluralism follows directly from Vivekananda's two premises: since each Yoga has equal salvific efficacy, and each of the major world religions corresponds to one of the Yogas, all of these religions have equal salvific efficacy. Accordingly, in his 1896 lecture "Sri Ramakrishna," he explicitly affirms that each religion "has the same saving power as the other" (CW4, p. 182).

He would often invoke an analogy of a circle and its many radii to illustrate his salvific pluralist position—for instance, in the following passage from his January 1896 lecture "The Ideal of a Universal Religion":

> If it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us *must* reach that centre. And at the centre, where all the radii meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach there,

[22] He similarly claims, in his undated written piece "Four Paths of Yoga," that "each religion represents one" of the "systems of Yoga" (CW8, p. 152).

> differences there must be. All these radii converge to the same centre. One, according to his nature, travels along one of these lines, and another, along another; and if we all push onward along our own lines, we shall surely come to the centre, because, "All roads lead to Rome." (CW2, pp. 384–85; emphasis in the original)

By likening the various religions to different "radii" converging toward the same "centre" of God-realization, he affirms salvific pluralism, since the circumferential endpoints of all the radii are equidistant from the center, which indicates that the various religions have equal salvific efficacy. Each radius, representing one particular religion, is different from all the other radii, since different religions are suited to different natures. Nonetheless, since every religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas, each of which has equal salvific efficacy, all religions also have the same salvific efficacy (PS).

In his lectures from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda also consistently affirmed pluralism about *truth* (PT_f)—as, for instance, in this passage from "The Ideal of a Universal Religion" (1896):

> We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing. . . . Suppose we all go with vessels in our hands to fetch water from a lake. One has a cup, another a jar, another a bucket, and so forth, and we all fill our vessels. The water in each case naturally takes the form of the vessel carried by each of us . . . So it is in the case of religion; our minds are like these vessels, and each one of us is trying to arrive at the realisation of God. God is like that water filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel. Yet He is One. He is God in every case. (CW2, p. 383)

From Vivekananda's perspective, various religions provide apparently conflicting conceptions of God because the same God is conceived in a variety of ways by people of varying natures. Hence, different religious conceptions of God are actually complementary, since they all describe the same ultimate reality from "different standpoints." Just as it would not make sense to say that a jar holds water better than a cup does, it is wrong to claim that one religion's conception of God is truer than that found in other religions. Hence, by means of this analogy of water and differently shaped vessels, Vivekananda affirms a pluralist stance toward various religious conceptions of ultimate reality (PT_f).

It is, of course, perfectly possible to accept PT_f and PS and still maintain that there is little or no need to learn from religions other than one's own. After all, if my own religion is as salvifically efficacious as any other, why should I even bother to learn about other religious paths? For Vivekananda, however, the Vedāntic universal religion based on the four Yogas provides a philosophical rationale for deepening salvific pluralism into what I call "religious cosmopolitanism"—the endeavor to learn from, and assimilate the spirit of, other religions.

For present purposes, I would emphasize two key dimensions of Vivekananda's religious cosmopolitanism. First, since different religions provide different, but complementary, accounts of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality, every religious practitioner can enrich and broaden her understanding of God by learning about other religions. From Vivekananda's standpoint, we can all think of God in the way we prefer, but we should never *limit* God to what we can understand of Him. In his undated lecture "Sri Ramakrishna: The Significance of His Life and Teachings," he notes that he learned this insight from his guru: "If there is anything which Sri Ramakrishna has urged us to give up as carefully as lust and wealth, it is the limiting of the infinitude of God by circumscribing it within narrow bounds" (CW7, p. 413). According to Vivekananda, the greatest help in remaining alive to God's infinitude and illimitability is to acquaint ourselves with various religious views of ultimate reality, ranging from the loving personal God of theistic traditions to the Śūnyatā of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the impersonal nondual Brahman of Advaita Vedānta.

Second, in his lectures beginning in 1896, he explicitly highlighted the cosmopolitan implications of his Vedāntic framework of four Yogas. Take, for instance, this passage from his "Lessons on Bhakti-Yoga" held in London in the summer of 1896:

> We want to become harmonious beings, with the psychical, spiritual, intellectual, and working (active) sides of our nature equally developed. Nations and individuals typify one of these sides or types and cannot understand more than that one. They get so built up into one ideal that they cannot see any other. The ideal is really that we should become many-sided ... We must be as broad as the skies, as deep as the ocean; we must have the zeal of the fanatic, the depth of the mystic, and the width of the agnostic ... We must become many-sided, indeed we must become protean in character, so as not only to tolerate, but to do what is much more difficult, to sympathise, to enter into another's path, and feel *with him* in his aspirations and seeking after God. (CW6, pp. 137–38; emphasis in the original)

For Vivekananda, even though any one of the Yogas can take us to salvation, we can accelerate our spiritual progress and develop a "many-sided" personality by combining the four Yogas. Moreover, since each religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas, and the ideal is to combine all four Yogas to the fullest extent, the greatest help in realizing this ideal is to learn from—and, indeed, even *practice*—religions other than our own. Hence, Vivekananda's doctrine of the four Yogas serves as the basis for a radicalized version of what contemporary theologians call "multiple religious belonging" (Oostveen 2018; Drew 2011). While remaining firmly rooted in our own religious tradition, we should strive not only to incorporate the spiritual practices of other religions into our own practice but also to remain open to all the new religions that are yet to come.

He makes this point forcefully at the end of "The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion" (1900):

> Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion ... I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one.
>
> Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future ... We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. (CW2, pp. 373–74)

According to Vivekananda, the perfect embodiment of this religious cosmopolitan ideal was his guru Ramakrishna, who had practiced multiple religions and fully harmonized all four Yogas. As he puts it, "Such a unique personality, such a synthesis of the utmost of Jñāna, Yoga, Bhakti and Karma, has never before appeared among mankind" (CW7, p. 412).

One final nuance in Vivekananda's position should be noted. McKim (2012, pp. 105–6) rightly argues that there is necessarily an "inclusivist dimension to pluralism," since the very acceptance of pluralism about the doctrinal truth of different first-order religions (PT_f) entails a *second-order inclusivism* about truth (IT_f):

> According to pluralism about truth, one can look to the other relevant religious traditions to supplement the account of reality offered by any single tradition, thereby arriving at an account of reality that is more complete than that proposed by any particular tradition ... Someone who embraces the full pluralist account will be an inclusivist with respect to the particular accounts of the various traditions that are being accommodated in that account. The truths of any particular tradition, however significant they may be, are incomplete and hence second-class in comparison with the more comprehensive picture offered by pluralism and are incorporated within the comprehensive pluralist analysis ... Actually, someone who asserts PT2 [pluralism about truth] wears two hats. She is a member of a religious tradition, and she believes that tradition to do very well in terms of truth and believes other traditions

to do equally well. But she also subscribes to a deeper truth, a metalevel truth that other members of her own tradition, not to mention members of other traditions, may not be aware of. As a pluralist, therefore, she feels she understands the situation of others better than they themselves understand it.

McKim's cogent reasoning here can be applied easily enough to Vivekananda's approach to religious diversity. According to Vivekananda's first-order PT_f, many first-order religions—including all the various Hindu sects, Christianity, Islam, and so on—have equally true doctrines about ultimate reality. However, he justifies PT_f by appealing to a second-order Vedāntic "universal religion"—what McKim calls a "metalevel truth"—which is *inclusivist* with respect to the truth of all first-order religions. According to Vivekananda's Vedāntic universal religion, different religious accounts of the ultimate reality are equally correct, because they are different but complementary ways of viewing the same infinite impersonal-personal God.[23] This Vedāntic universal religion is inclusivist with respect to truth insofar as it provides an account of ultimate reality that is *more comprehensive* than the partial accounts of ultimate reality found in any given first-order religion. For Vivekananda, while different first-order religions typically correspond to only one of the four Yogas, the Vedāntic universal religion encompasses all *four* Yogas. Bearing in mind this distinction between first- and second-order levels, we can say that Vivekananda establishes the equal salvific efficacy (PS) and doctrinal truth (PT_f) of numerous *first-order* religions on the basis of a *second-order* Vedāntic inclusivism about truth (IT_f). That Vivekananda himself was aware of the second-order inclusivist dimension of his first-order religious pluralist position is clear from numerous passages in his lectures, such as his inclusivistic statement in his 1896 lecture "Sri Ramakrishna" that all religions are "part and parcel of the one eternal religion" (CW4:187).[24]

From late 1895 onward, then, Vivekananda envisioned an ideal future in which all religious practitioners would "wear two hats" (to use McKim's apt phrase): they would belong to a particular first-order religion of their choice while also accepting the second-order Vedāntic universal religion. They would also be religious cosmopolitans who strive to broaden their understanding of the ultimate reality and enrich and deepen their spiritual practice by learning from, and even practicing, religions other than their own.

4. Vivekananda's Views on the Caste System: Conservative or Progressive?

Vivekananda's views on caste have been extensively discussed and debated in the scholarly literature. On the one hand, Raychaudhuri (1998, pp. 8–9) and Long (2012) have emphasized Vivekananda's strong criticisms of the existing caste system in India.[25] According to Long (2012, p. 82), "Vivekananda was quite clear, and characteristically blunt, in his rejection of caste and caste-related practices such as untouchability." On the other hand, scholars such as Dixit [1976] (2014) and Baier (2019) have argued that Vivekananda largely favored the hereditary caste system. For instance, according to Dixit [1976] (2014, p. 30), although Vivekananda advocated the abolition of the "religio-cultural privileges of the Brahmins," he nonetheless supported the existing "framework of the caste system" and "was not above traditional caste prejudices" (Dixit [1976] 2014, p. 32). Not surprisingly, Sharma (2013a, pp. 171–90) follows Dixit in painting Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist who wanted to preserve the existing caste system in India with only a minor "readjustment" (Sharma 2013a, p. 185). Sharma (2013a,

[23] How does Vivekananda account for Buddhist traditions that deny the existence of an ultimate reality altogether? While I do not have the space here to discuss this important question, I address it in detail in a chapter of my book manuscript in progress, "Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism." In brief, Vivekananda holds that while non-substantialist Buddhist traditions are mistaken in denying the existence of an ultimate reality, they are nonetheless as salvifically efficacious as any of the other major world religions.

[24] Similarly, in his 1897 "Reply to the Madras Address," he claims that "all the other religions of the world are included in the nameless, limitless, eternal Vedic religion" (CW4, p. 343).

[25] Sen (1993, p. 331) acknowledges Vivekananda's criticisms of the hereditary caste system while also faulting him for agreeing with "the graduated social importance that tradi tional Hindu society placed on various kinds of work."

p. 138) further contends that Vivekananda "had an idealized view of the priestly caste and of the brahmins and always held them as an ideal indispensable for India." He sums up his understanding of Vivekananda's position on caste as follows: "Neither the brahmin nor caste as an institution ought to be condemned or be subjected to reform" (Sharma 2013a, p. 181).

Very recently, Nicholson (forthcoming) has convincingly argued that Sharma's interpretation of Vivekananda's views on caste is based on "a limited, partial reading of Vivekananda's works." Indeed, in opposition to Sharma, Nicholson has shown how Ramakrishna's "world-affirming Advaita" philosophy led Vivekananda to criticize Śaṅkara for his casteism and to recognize that "the ethical ramifications of non-dualism are the complete elimination of caste distinctions."

In this section, I will build on Nicholson's critique of Sharma by further clarifying Vivekananda's views on caste and identifying specific instances in Sharma's book where he misinterprets or outright falsifies Vivekananda's statements on caste. At the same time, I will try to break new ground by highlighting an important aspect of Vivekananda's views not discussed by Nicholson—namely, Vivekananda's appeal to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* in support of his key distinction between the existing hereditary caste system and the "original" idea of caste based on one's inherent qualities.

Let us first examine more closely Sharma's interpretation of Vivekananda's attitude toward the Brahmin caste:

> Brahmins, as long as they remained within the limits of orthodoxy, were to be looked upon as the spiritual mentors of the Hindus. Any trace of deviation from the path of the Vedas was immoral and unreasonable. This is what the brahmins did: because of their greed for power and in order to keep their privileged positions intact, they introduced non-Vedic doctrines into Hinduism ... His [Vivekananda's] frequently quoted diatribe against brahmins is directed against those among them who deviated from the path of Vedic orthodoxy. (Sharma 2013a, p. 174)

According to Sharma, Vivekananda idealized Brahmins as the spiritual leaders of Hindus and only condemned them when they strayed from "Vedic orthodoxy." In fact, however, there are countless passages from Vivekananda's work—none of which are even mentioned by Sharma—which indicate that Vivekananda faulted Brahmins not primarily for their deviation from the Vedas but for their greed, selfishness, and thirst for power, which led them to oppress and exploit the lower castes. Far from idealizing Brahmins, Vivekananda was often scathing in his criticism of them, referring to them in an 1892 letter as "Rākṣasas [demons] in the shape of the Brahmins of the Kaliyuga" (CW8, p. 290). In an 1894 letter, he attacked Brahmins for their cruel exploitation of the poor and their heartless indifference to their plight: "A country where millions of people live on flowers of the Mohuā plant, and a million or two of Sadhus and a hundred million or so of Brahmins suck the blood out of these poor people, without even the least effort for their amelioration—is that a country or hell? Is that a religion, or the devil's dance?" (CW6, p. 254; BCW6, pp. 322–23).

He frequently condemned Brahmins for their "priestcraft" and their "social tyranny,"[26] going so far as to claim that the protracted foreign rule of India was the karmic consequence of "Brahmin and Kshatriya tyranny":

> Priestcraft is the bane of India. Can man degrade his brother, and himself escape degradation? ... The mass of Brahmin and Kshatriya tyranny has recoiled upon their own heads with compound interest; and a thousand years of slavery and degradation is what the inexorable law of Karma is visiting upon them. (CW4, p. 327)

Indeed, in his creative piece "Matter for Serious Thought"—originally written in Bengali as "*Bhābbār Kathā*"—Vivekananda sketches a satirical portrait of a Brahmin named "Bholā Purī":

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[26] For similar criticisms of priestcraft, see (CW4, p. 368 and CW1, p. 428).

> Bholā Purī is an out and out Vedāntin—in everything he is careful to trumpet his Brahminhood. If all people are about to starve for food around Bholā Purī, it does not touch him even in the least; he expounds the unsubstantiality of pleasure and pain. If through disease, or affliction, or starvation people die by the thousand, what matters even that to him? He at once reflects on the immortality of the soul! If the strong overpower the weak and even kill them before his very eyes, Bholā Purī is lost in the profound depths of the meaning of the spiritual dictum, "The soul neither kills nor is killed" [*Bhagavad-Gītā* 2.20] ... He, too, has evidently thought the Lord more foolish than ourselves. (CW6, pp. 192–93 [translation slightly modified]; BCW6, pp. 34–35)

This passage stands as a direct refutation of Sharma's claim that Vivekananda only faulted Brahmins when they deviated from "Vedic orthodoxy." Significantly, Vivekananda singles out for attack Bholā Purī's attempt to provide a "Vedāntic" justification of his cruel indifference to, and exploitation of, the poor and weak by citing passages from scriptures like the *Gītā*. It is clear that Vivekananda was not afraid to attack even the Vedic orthodoxy of Brahmins, when they used it as a means of justifying exploitation and cruelty. Tellingly, Sharma does not address *any* of the passages just cited from the *Complete Works*, which undercut his thesis that Vivekananda "idealized" Brahmins and only faulted them when they preached non-Vedic doctrines.

Let us now assess Sharma's other claim that Vivekananda wanted to preserve the existing caste system with only a minor "readjustment." Sharma overlooks the fact that Vivekananda repeatedly draws a sharp contrast between the "original system" of caste and caste "in its degenerate state," as in this passage not addressed by Sharma:

> Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India's progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas ... From the time of the Upaniṣads down to the present day, nearly all our great Teachers have wanted to break through the barriers of caste, i.e., caste in its degenerate state, not the original system. What little good you see in the present caste clings to it from the original caste, which was the most glorious social institution. (CW5, p. 198)

It is clear that Vivekananda was opposed to the present caste system based on heredity and even prophesied—indeed, welcomed—its demise with the "advance of ideas." In a passage from his 1899 essay on "Modern India" not mentioned by Sharma, Vivekananda articulated his position on this issue even more explicitly:

> Even the sons of the "Nagara Brahmanas" are nowadays getting English education, and entering into Government service, or adopting some mercantile business. Even orthodox Pandits of the old school, undergoing pecuniary difficulties, are sending their sons to the colleges of the English universities or making them choose the callings of Vaidyas, Kāyasthas, and other non-Brahmin castes. If the current of affairs goes on running in this course, then it is a question of most serious reflection, no doubt, how long more will the priestly class continue on India's soil ... [T]he Brahmin caste is erecting with its own hands its own sepulchre; *and this is what ought to be*. It is good and appropriate that every caste of high birth and privileged nobility should make it its principal duty to raise its own funeral pyre with its own hands. (CW4, p. 458; emphasis added)

Contrary to Sharma's claim that Vivekananda idealized and favored the Brahmin caste, Vivekananda consistently maintained that the hereditary Brahmin caste would be abolished and that it was "good and appropriate" for Brahmins to raise their own "funeral pyre." This passage also directly refutes Sharma's unfounded claim that Vivekananda never called for hereditary Brahmins to take up the professions of non-Brahmin castes (Sharma 2013a, p. 183).

In an 1893 letter, Vivekananda was even more scathing in his condemnation of the hereditary caste system:

> All the reformers in India made the serious mistake of holding religion accountable for all the horrors of priestcraft and degeneration and went forthwith to pull down the indestructible structure, and what was the result? Failure! Beginning from Buddha down to Ram Mohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste all together, and failed. But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality . . . With the introduction of modern competition, see how caste is disappearing fast! No religion is now necessary to kill it. (CW5, pp. 22–23)

Vivekananda made four important points in this passage. First, he criticized the existing hereditary caste system in no uncertain terms, remarking that it was "filling the atmosphere of India with its stench." Second, he noted that all past attempts by religious reformers to abolish the caste system had ended in failure. Third, he claimed that the hereditary caste system would die a natural death due to "modern competition," as a result of which many Brahmins were beginning to take up non-Brahmin professions. Fourth, he indicates that the original caste system, which he favored, was based not on heredity but on "social individuality"—an idea, as we will soon see, that he explained in greater detail elsewhere. This more dynamic and socially beneficial original caste system later "crystallised" into the present caste system based rigidly on heredity. This passage makes clear why Sharma is mistaken in claiming that Vivekananda favored the hereditary caste system.

In an 1895 letter, Vivekananda both prophesied and welcomed the demise of the existing hereditary caste system and advocated its replacement by the *original* caste system, which he took to be based not on heredity but on the principle of "variation" (*vicitratā*):

> Now, take the case of caste—in Sanskrit, Jāti, i.e., species. Now, this is the first idea of creation. Variation (Vicitratā), that is to say Jāti, means creation. "I am One, I become many" (various Vedas). Unity is before creation, diversity is creation. Now if this diversity stops, creation will be destroyed. So long as any species is vigorous and active, it must throw out varieties . . . Now the original idea of Jāti was this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his Prakṛti, his Jāti, his caste; and so it remained for thousands of years . . . Then what was the cause of India's downfall?—the giving up of this idea of caste. As *Gītā* [3.24] says, with the extinction of caste the world will be destroyed. The present caste is not the real Jāti, but a hindrance to its progress. It really has prevented the free action of Jāti, i.e., caste or variation. Any crystallized custom or privilege or hereditary class in any shape really prevents caste (Jāti) from having its full sway; and whenever any nation ceases to produce this immense variety, it must die . . . Let Jāti have its sway; break down every barrier in the way of caste, and we shall rise . . . This variety does not mean inequality, nor any special privilege. (CW4, p. 372)

Here, Vivekananda contrasts the existing hereditary caste system with the original idea of caste, which was based on the "freedom of the individual to express his nature." From Vivekananda's perspective, each person has a unique nature and temperament, determined by the nature of her thought and behavior earlier in this life as well as in previous lives. The original caste system, he claims, recognized this natural variation among people and prescribed different social duties to different people, based on their natural tendencies and talents. Crucially, Vivekananda points out that the recognition of "variety" does *not* entail "inequality" or "special privilege." Hence, Sharma (2013a, p. 183) is wrong when he accuses Vivekananda of holding that "differentiation and inequality" are "natural and desirable." On the contrary, Vivekananda's actual position is that while *differentiation*—i.e., variation—is natural, *inequality* is neither natural nor desirable. As he puts it elsewhere, "I am clever in mending shoes, you are clever in reading Vedas, but that is no reason why you should trample on my head" (CW3, p. 245). Moreover, far from favoring the existing hereditary caste system, Vivekananda goes so far as to trace "India's downfall" to the replacement of the original caste system with the hereditary caste system.

Sharma, in the course of his attempt to prove that Vivekananda privileged the hereditary Brahmin caste, claims that during the celebration of Ramakrishna's birthday in 1898, Vivekananda gave the sacred thread only to hereditary Brahmins, "even lapsed Brahmins," but he only gave the Gāyatrī Mantra, and *not* the sacred thread, to "non-brahmins" (Sharma 2013a, p. 186). But here is what Vivekananda actually said on that occasion:

> Every Dvijāti (twice-born) has a right to investiture with the holy thread. The Vedas themselves are authority in this matter. *Whoever* will come here on this sacred birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, I shall invest him with the holy thread. (CW7, p. 110; emphasis added)

Vivekananda noted that the Vedas hold that every "twice-born"—that is, all Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas—are entitled to receive the sacred thread. However, he then went on to declare that on the occasion of Ramakrishna's birthday, *everyone without exception*—including Śūdras—will be given the sacred thread. By failing to address this passage, Sharma misrepresents the entire incident. On that day, Vivekananda deliberately flouted Vedic strictures by giving the sacred thread to everyone who came to Belur Math, including non-Brahmins.

Sharma (2013a, p. 180) makes one further claim regarding Vivekananda's views on caste that requires interrogation: "Was it then possible for a shudra to acquire learning and become a brahmin? Vivekananda's answer is emphatically in the negative . . . " Here again, Sharma fails to address crucial textual evidence that contradicts his claim. Let us consider, for instance, this dialogue between Vivekananda and his childhood friend Priyanāth Siṅha:

> Once I went to see Swamiji while he was staying in Calcutta at the house of the late Balarām Basu. After a long conversation about Japan and America, I asked him, "Well, Swamiji, how many disciples have you in the West?"
>
> Swamiji: A good many.
>
> *Q.* Two or three thousands?
>
> Swamiji: Maybe more than that.
>
> *Q.* Are they all initiated by you with Mantras?
>
> Swamiji: Yes.
>
> *Q.* Did you give them permission to utter Praṇava (Om)?
>
> Swamiji: Yes.
>
> *Q.* How did you, Mahārāj? They say that the Śūdras have no right to Praṇava, and none has except the Brahmins. Moreover, the Westerners are Mlecchas, not even Śūdras.
>
> Swamiji: How do you know that those whom I have initiated are not Brahmins?
>
> Myself: Where could you get Brahmins outside India, in the lands of the Yavanas and Mlecchas?
>
> Swamiji: *My disciples are all Brahmins!* I quite admit the truth of the words that none except the Brahmins has the right to Praṇava. But the son of a Brahmin is not necessarily always a Brahmin; though there is every possibility of his being one, he may not become so . . . *The hereditary Brahmin caste and the Brāhmaṇya qualities are two distinct things* (*brāhmaṇjāti ār brāhmaṇer gūṇ–duṭo ālādā jiniṣ*) . . . As there are three guṇas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—so there are *guṇas* which show a man to be a Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya or Śūdra . . .
>
> *Q.* Then you call those Brahmins who are Sāttvika by nature.
>
> Swamiji: Quite so. As there are Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—one or other of these *guṇas* more or less—in every man, so the qualities which make a Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, or Śūdra are inherent in every man, more or less. But at times one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees, and it is manifested accordingly . . . *Naturally, it*

> *is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste into another*. (CW5, pp. 376–77; BCW9, pp. 263–64; emphasis added)

This passage shows just how wrong Sharma is. Vivekananda, as a Hindu with a liberal cosmopolitan outlook, did not hesitate to consider even his Western disciples "Brahmins," since he conceived Brahminhood not in terms of heredity but in terms of a person's inherent qualities. Conversely, Vivekananda also noted that not all hereditary Brahmins are *true* Brahmins, because they lack the *sāttvika* qualities characteristic of the true Brahmin. He refers here to the doctrine of three *guṇas* (roughly translated as "qualities") of Nature (*prakṛti*) accepted by Sāṃkhya and Vedānta. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* elaborates in detail how a preponderance of one or the other of these three *guṇas* manifests as various traits of human character. A *sāttvika* person exhibits ethical and spiritual virtues such as tranquility, compassion, and self-control, while a *rājasika* person has a more active and passionate nature characterized by lust, anger, restlessness, and egoism. A *tāmasika* person exhibits qualities such as laziness, inertia, fear, and delusion.[27]

It is clear, then, that Vivekananda understood caste in what he took to be its original sense as natural "variation," and *not* in terms of heredity. Moreover, the italicized final sentence directly contradicts Sharma's claim that Vivekananda denied the possibility that a hereditary Śūdra can become a Brahmin. For Vivekananda, it is a logical consequence of his three-*guṇas*-based conception of caste that it is always possible to change "from one caste to another," since we can enhance or diminish the predominance of a particular *guṇa* by modifying our own thoughts and actions. Hence, from Vivekananda's perspective, a hereditary Śūdra may either *already* have the qualities of a true Brahmin if she is sufficiently *sāttvika* in nature, or a hereditary Śūdra can *attain* the qualities of a true Brahmin by engaging in *sāttvika* behavior for a sufficient period of time.

Nicholson (forthcoming) acknowledges Vivekananda's key distinction between the existing caste system and the "original" caste system but notes that there is "little historical evidence" for his "revisionist understanding of the ancient Indian social order." On this issue, however, I believe Nicholson's interpretation of Vivekananda requires some nuancing and correction. Let us examine, first, the following important passage from Vivekananda's 1889 Bengali letter to Pramadadās Mitra, which Nicholson does not address:

> I have another question: Did Ācārya Śaṅkara discuss the *guṇa*-based conception of caste (*guṇagata jāti*) mentioned in *Purāṇas* like the *Mahābhārata*? If he does, where is it to be found? I have no doubt that according to the ancient view in this country, caste was hereditary (*vaṃśagata*), and it cannot also be doubted that sometimes the Śūdras used to be oppressed more than the helots among the Spartans and the blacks among the Americans! As for myself, I have no partiality for any party in this caste question, because I know it is a social law and is based on *guṇa* and *karma* (*guṇa- eboṅg karma-prasūta*). It also means grave harm if one bent on going beyond *guṇa* and *karma* cherishes in mind any caste distinctions. (CW6, p. 210 [translation modified]; BCW6, pp. 229–30)

Vivekananda states here that he believes that "caste was hereditary" even in ancient India. At the same time, he claims that some ancient scriptures like the *Mahābhārata* advocated a non-hereditary, "*guṇa*-based conception of caste." Hence, he seems to infer from these scriptures that the original system of caste was based on the *guṇas* but that it quickly degenerated into a hereditary caste system. As he put it in his 1900 Bengali essay "*Prācya o Pāścātya*" ("The East and the West"), "I accept that the *guṇa*-based caste system was the original one; unfortunately, a *guṇa*-based caste system degenerates into a hereditary one within two to four generations (*guṇagata jātī ādi, svīkār kori; kintu guṇ ducār puruṣe vaṃśagata hoye dāḍāi*)" (CW5, p. 456 [translation modified]; BCW6, p. 124).

[27] The *Gītā* explains the three *guṇas* in detail in chapters 14, 17, and 18.

Although Vivekananda does not refer to any specific verses from the *Mahābhārata* that suggest a *guṇa*-based conception of caste, he was likely thinking, in part, of the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and the snake Nahuṣa in the Vanaparvan of the *Mahābhārata*. In this dialogue, Nahuṣa asks "who is a brahmin?", and Yudhiṣṭhira replies: "He is known as a brahmin, king of Snakes, in whom truthfulness, liberality, patience, deportment, mildness, self-control, and compassion are found ... The marks of the *śūdra* are not found in a brahmin; but a *śūdra* is not necessarily a *śūdra*, nor a brahmin a brahmin. In whomever the brahmin's marks are found, Snake, he is known as a brahmin; and in whom they are not found, him they designate as a *śūdra*" (Van Buitenen 1965, p. 564). Nahuṣa then replies: "If you judge a brahmin by his conduct, king, then birth has no meaning, my dear sir, as long as no conduct is evident." Yudhiṣṭhira replies as follows: "I think ... that birth is hard to ascertain among humankind, because of the confusion of all classes when any man begets children on any woman ... Therefore those see the truth of it who know that conduct is the chief postulate" (Van Buitenen 1965, p. 564). As Matilal [1989] (2002, pp. 141–43) has discussed, this passage from the *Mahābhārata* explicitly rejects a hereditary conception of caste in favor of one based on one's inner qualities and conduct.

Moreover, in the 1889 letter quoted in the previous paragraph, Vivekananda's remark that the original conception of caste was specifically "based on *guṇa* and *karma*"—a conception, as we have just seen, that is endorsed by Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*—strongly suggests that Vivekananda also had in mind the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which is, of course, part of the *Mahābhārata*. In 4.13 of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa declares, "The four *varṇas* [castes] were created by Me according to the divisions of *guṇa* and *karma*" (*cāturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭaṃ guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ*). In 18.40–44, Kṛṣṇa explains this *guṇa*- and *karma*-based conception of caste in greater detail. Verse 18.41 states that "the works of Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras are divided according to the qualities (*guṇas*) born of their own inner nature" (*brāhmaṇakṣatriyaviśāṃ śūdrāṇāṃ ca parantapa | karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāvaprabhavair guṇaiḥ*). In 18.42–44, Kṛṣṇa then goes on to detail some of the main qualities of each caste: Brahmins exhibit qualities such as purity and self-control, Kṣatriyas valor and generosity, Vaiśyas an aptitude for mercantile and agricultural work, and Śūdras an aptitude for service.[28]

Vivekananda is hardly alone in taking these verses from the *Gītā* to endorse a non-hereditary conception of caste based on one's inner qualities and conduct. As Llewellyn (2019) has discussed, both Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi also interpreted these *Gītā* verses in a similar manner.[29] More recently, Matilal [1989] (2002, p. 143) has argued that "a comment such as *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* (in accordance with the division of 'qualities' and actions) is to be regarded more as a criticism of the existing heredity-bound caste system, than an assertion of an already existing practice." Whether the *Gītā* endorsed a non-hereditary conception of caste is, of course, a controversial matter, but for present purposes, what is important is that Vivekananda's non-hereditary interpretation of the *Gītā* is not wildly implausible or idiosyncratic.

Nicholson (forthcoming), as we have seen, claims that there is "little historical evidence" for Vivekananda's view that the original caste system was not based on heredity. While it may be true that there is little or no *direct* historical evidence for an original non-hereditary caste system, Nicholson overlooks Vivekananda's argument that passages on caste in scriptures like the *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* themselves constitute at least *indirect* historical evidence for the existence of an original caste system based not on heredity but on inner qualities and conduct. Moreover, Nicholson's own assumption that "[t]he *Gītā* explicitly supports the division of society into the four *varṇas*"—which he understands in hereditary terms—is at least as controversial as the non-hereditary interpretation of the *Gītā*'s conception of caste advocated by Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Matilal, and others.

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[28] It is also significant that in the passage from an 1895 letter cited earlier in this section, Vivekananda explicitly referred to verse 3.24 of the *Gītā* in support of his view that the "cause of India's downfall" was the "giving up" of the "original" idea of caste based on the "freedom of the individual to express his nature" (CW4, p. 372).

[29] Tapasyananda (1984, p. 139) also argues that the concept of *cāturvarṇya* in the *Gītā* "is not the caste system ... solely based on birth" but "a division based on the natural constitution of man arising from the dominance of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas ... "

In a recent article, Baier (2019, p. 236) follows Jyotirmaya Sharma in claiming that Vivekananda advocated "a reinvigoration of the Brahmin caste and a reform of the caste system (but not its abolishment)." Baier adduces as evidence Vivekananda's statement that "Brāhmanhood is the solution of the varying degrees of progress and culture as well as that of all social and political problems" (CW4, p. 309; Baier 2019, p. 237). However, in light of my argument in this section, it should be clear that Baier makes the same two mistakes as Sharma. First, Baier fails to recognize that Vivekananda explicitly contrasts the "hereditary Brahmin caste" with "Brāhmaṇya qualities," which he defines as ethical and spiritual traits deriving from *sattva-guṇa* (CW5, pp. 376–77). Second, Baier overlooks the many passages in which Vivekananda both prophesies and welcomes the day when hereditary Brahmins would raise their own "funeral pyre" (CW4, p. 458). More generally, social critics of Vivekananda like Baier, Dixit, and Sharma have not paid sufficient attention to Vivekananda's key distinction between the existing hereditary caste system and an "original" caste system based not on heredity but on one's qualities and conduct.

5. Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: Rupture or Continuity?

A major theme running through Sharma's *A Restatement of Religion* is that there was a "rupture" between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and that they occupied "two worlds" that were largely "incommensurable" (Sharma 2013a, p. xiii). His argument for such a rupture has both a philosophical and a biographical dimension. From a philosophical standpoint, Sharma claims that Ramakrishna accepted a world-affirming, *bhakti*-oriented Tantric philosophy and placed non-Hindu religions on an equal footing with Hinduism (Sharma 2013a, pp. 38–81), while Vivekananda broke with Ramakrishna both in championing Śaṅkara's world-denying philosophy of Advaita Vedānta and in asserting the superiority of Hinduism to other religions (Sharma 2013a, pp. 91–101). Sharma's argument in this regard is hardly new, as numerous earlier scholars have already argued for such a philosophical rupture between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, including Devdas (1968, pp. 12–39); Neevel (1976); and Matchett (1981).

Recently, several scholars have challenged certain aspects of this rupture thesis. For instance, Beckerlegge (2006b, pp. 113–20); Nicholson (forthcoming); and I (Maharaj 2020) have all argued that there is a major continuity between Ramakrishna's world-affirming Advaitic teachings and the ethically-oriented "Practical Vedānta" championed by Vivekananda. Likewise, in Section 3 of this article, I have contended that Vivekananda followed Ramakrishna, rather than Śaṅkara, in two key respects. First, Vivekananda propounded a world-affirming Vedāntic philosophy that upholds the ontological inseparability of nondual Brahman and the dynamic personal Śakti. Second, he affirmed the pluralist doctrine that all the major world religions are equally effective paths to God-realization, since they all correspond to one of the four Yogas, each of which is a direct path to salvation.

However, there is also a more novel biographical dimension to Sharma's "rupture" thesis, which I will critically examine in this section. At various points in his book, Sharma (2013a, pp. 102–16 and passim) argues that Vivekananda, on a personal level, had serious doubts about Ramakrishna's spiritual stature and accomplishments. According to Sharma, "Narendra [Vivekananda's pre-monastic name] *always* thought of his Master's trances as hallucinations, a figment of Ramakrishna's imagination" (Sharma 2013a, p. x; emphasis added). It is indisputable that Narendra *did* seem to think that Ramakrishna's visions were hallucinations up to some time in 1884. In fact, Ramakrishna himself, in a conversation with Narendra and other visitors on 9 May 1885, remarked: "At Jadu Mallick's garden house Narendra said to me, 'The forms of God that you see are the fiction of your mind.' I was amazed and said to him, 'But they speak too!' Narendra answered, 'Yes, one may think so'" (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 826; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 772). However, Sharma is wrong in claiming that Narendra "always" considered his guru's visions to be hallucinations. Sharma overlooks the fact that Vivekananda himself, on several occasions, explicitly stated that while he had *initially* doubted the veracity of Ramakrishna's visions, he later came to accept their veracity. For instance, on 8 April 1887, Narendra remarked as follows to his brother disciples Mahendranāth Gupta and Rākhāl: "At first I

did not accept most of what the Master said. One day he asked me, 'Then why do you come here?' I replied, 'I come here to see you, not to listen to you'" (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 1137; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 984). The crucial words here are "At first," which clearly indicate that he later came to accept Ramakrishna's visions and teachings.

Later, in a private conversation with his disciple Sister Nivedita on 29 May 1899, Vivekananda mentioned that a specific incident in 1884 led him to accept the reality of Śakti and the veracity of Ramakrishna's divine visions:

> S. [Swami Vivekananda] "How I used to hate Kali and all Her ways. *That* was my 6 years' fight, because I would not accept Kali."
>
> N. [Nivedita] But now you have accepted Her specially, have you not, Swami?
>
> S. I *had* to—Ramakrishna Paramahamsa dedicated me to Her. And you know I believe that She guides me in every little thing I do—and just does what She likes with me. Yet I fought so long.—I loved the man you see, and that held me. I thought him the purest man I had ever seen, and I knew that he loved me as my own father and mother had not power to do....His greatness had not dawned on me then. That was afterwards, when I had given in. At that time I thought him simply a brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and things. I hated it—and then *I* had to accept Her too!
>
> N. Won't you tell me what made you do that Swami? What broke all your opposition down?
>
> S. No that will die with me. I had great misfortunes at that time you know. My father died, and so on. And She saw Her opportunity to make a slave of me. They were her very words.—"To make a slave of you." And R.P. [Ramakrishna Paramahamsa] made me over to Her—–Curious, He only lived 2 years after doing that... Yes, I think there's no doubt that Kali worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her Own Ends. You see Margot I cannot *but* believe that there is, somewhere, a Great Power that thinks of itself as Feminine and called Kali, and the Mother!———And I believe in Brahman, too . . . (Basu 1982, p. 157)[30]

Vivekananda explicitly notes here that he had initially thought that Ramakrishna was a "brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and things," but that an incident in 1884 led him to accept Ramakrishna's greatness and his visions of Kālī. While Vivekananda does not explain the specific incident in detail, he does provide several clues as to what transpired. Two pieces of information indicate that the incident took place some time between March and December 1884. He mentions that Ramakrishna "only lived 2 years" after the incident, and Ramakrishna passed away on 16 August 1886. Vivekananda also states that the incident occurred just after his father had died, and we know that his father Viśvanāth Datta died on 25 February 1884 (Paranjape 2015, p. xlvi). It is also significant that during this overwhelming incident, Ramakrishna made Vivekananda a "slave" of Kālī, clearly indicating that the incident led him to accept the reality and supremacy of Śakti. Accordingly, Vivekananda told Nivedita that he felt that Kālī "guides me in every little thing I do."

Strangely, while Sharma (2013a, p. 12) briefly mentions the first part of this important passage, he mistakenly claims that "the 'fight' lasted all the years Vivekananda had known him [Ramakrishna]," completely ignoring the second half of the passage, where Vivekananda explicitly mentions that an incident "2 years" prior to Ramakrishna's death made him *accept* Śakti and the veracity of Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences. When taken as a whole, the passage also lends further support to my argument in Section 3 that Vivekananda—contrary to Sharma's claim—followed Ramakrishna, and not Śaṅkara, in upholding the Tantric doctrine of the inseparability of nondual Brahman and the dynamic Śakti.

Sharma also tries to demonstrate a "chasm between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda" (Sharma 2013a, p. 112) by arguing that Vivekananda, unlike devotees like Giriścandra Ghosh, never accepted

[30] For a slightly different version of the same conversation, see (CW8, p. 263).

Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation. In support of this claim, Sharma cites several statements of Narendra from 1885 to 1886, which suggest that he looked upon Ramakrishna not as an *avatāra* but as, at best, a "godlike man" (Sharma 2013a, p. 113). Sharma does acknowledge that Narendra, on certain occasions, did explicitly accept Ramakrishna as an incarnation—as, for instance, when he told Ramakrishna on 15 March 1886, "All created things have come from you" (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 1026; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 945; cited in Sharma 2013a, p. 113). However, Sharma claims that such statements should not be taken at face-value:

> In the months leading to Ramakrishna's death, when directly confronted by his Master on issues where they had serious disagreements, Vivekananda would invariably agree in order not to cause the ailing Ramakrishna any grief. But once removed from Ramakrishna's presence, he would affirm his own position clearly. (Sharma 2013a, p. 113)

In the first sentence of this passage, Sharma asserts, without a shred of evidence, that any time that Narendra expressed his agreement with Ramakrishna's views, he did so in order to avoid upsetting his ailing guru. In fact, Narendra was never afraid to speak his mind in front of Ramakrishna, as is clear from the fact that on 11 March 1885, Narendra, when debating with Giriścandra Ghosh in Ramakrishna's presence, refused to accept the very possibility of God incarnating as a human being. Ironically, Sharma (2013a, pp. 110–11) actually discusses this debate between Narendra and Giriścandra in some detail, which undercuts his own unsupported claim that Narendra would agree with Ramakrishna's views in his presence only to avoid upsetting him.

More fundamentally, Sharma's discussion of the question of whether Narendra accepted Ramakrishna as an incarnation suffers from a serious methodological flaw: he cites various statements made by Narendra in 1885 and 1886 in non-chronological order, instead of examining whether and how Narendra's understanding of Ramakrishna *evolved* from 1885 to 1886 (as Vivekananda himself later attested). Indeed, when we examine Narendra's statements chronologically, we find that Narendra consistently doubted the possibility of God incarnating as a human being up to the end of 1885 or early 1886. On 27 October 1885, Narendra, in Ramakrishna's presence, told Doctor Sarkār: "I do not say that he [Ramakrishna] is God. What I am saying is that he is a godlike man" (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 979; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 904). Indeed, as Vivekananda himself later remarked, doubts about Ramakrishna's divinity continued to linger in his mind until two days before Ramakrishna's death on 16 August 1886, when the following watershed incident took place (tellingly, an incident not mentioned by Sharma):

> One day while he [Ramakrishna] was staying at the Cossipore garden, his body in imminent danger of falling off for ever, by the side of his bed I was saying in my mind, "Well, now if you can declare that you are God, then only will I believe you are really God Himself." It was only two days before he passed away. Immediately, he looked up towards me all on a sudden and said, "He who was Rāma, He who was Kṛṣṇa, verily is He now Ramakrishna in this body. And that not merely from the standpoint of your Vedānta!" At this I was struck dumb. (CW6, p. 480)

There is overwhelming textual evidence that after this decisive incident on 14 August 1886, Vivekananda consistently looked upon Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation. For instance, in an 1894 letter to Swami Shivananda, Vivekananda wrote in an impassioned tone:

> My dear brother, that Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was God incarnate, I have not the least doubt . . . Whether Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa was born at all we are not sure; and Avatarās like Buddha and Caitanya are monotonous; Ramakrishna Paramahamsa is the latest and the most perfect—the concentrated embodiment of knowledge, love, renunciation, catholicity, and the desire to serve mankind. So where is anyone to compare with him? He must have been born in vain who cannot appreciate him! My supreme good fortune is that I am his

> servant through life after life. A single word of his is to me far weightier than the Vedas and the Vedānta. (CW7, p. 483; BCW7, p. 50)

Here and elsewhere, both in private and public, Vivekananda unambiguously affirmed that Ramakrishna was not only a divine incarnation but the last and greatest of all incarnations.[31] For Vivekananda, Ramakrishna was superior to all previous divine incarnations because of his liberal acceptance of all religious paths, his harmonization of *bhakti* and *jñāna*, his compassion, and his renunciation.

Such textual evidence should suffice to disprove Sharma's thesis that there was a personal "rupture" or "chasm" between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Sharma's fundamental mistake is to assume that Vivekananda never evolved beyond his initial skeptical period—up through late 1885 or early 1886—when he doubted the veracity of Ramakrishna's divine visions and was reluctant to accept Ramakrishna as an incarnation. As I have argued, however, this assumption is unwarranted, since Sharma not only fails to address the watershed incident on 14 August 1886 that convinced Narendra that his guru was an incarnation but also ignores the countless statements made by Vivekananda *after* Ramakrishna's passing—in recorded dialogues and writings from 1887 to 1901—which clearly indicate that he looked upon Ramakrishna as the greatest of all divine incarnations. In short, Sharma's non-chronological approach leads him to overlook the gradual evolution of the young Narendra's attitude toward Ramakrishna—the kind of evolution that is typically present in a *guru-śiṣya* (master–disciple) relationship.

6. Conclusions: Debating Vivekananda's Legacy

This article has challenged Sharma's book-length argument that Vivekananda was a Hindu supremacist who favored the existing caste system, denigrated non-Hindu religions, and deviated from Ramakrishna's more liberal and egalitarian teachings. Along the way, I have also shown that Sharma's arguments throughout his book are vitiated by three serious methodological flaws. First, Sharma has a tendency to "cherry-pick" statements from Vivekananda's corpus without paying sufficient attention to their context and without taking into account relevant statements in other places in his work. As a result, he often distorts, and sometimes even outright falsifies, Vivekananda's views. Second, Sharma discusses Vivekananda's remarks about Hinduism in an ahistorical vacuum, ignoring his late-nineteenth century colonial context. Third, Sharma is not sufficiently attentive to the ways that Vivekananda's views on certain issues evolved in the course of the 1880s and 1890s.

While this article has focused on Sharma's book in particular, my broader aim has been to shed new light on Vivekananda's views on Hinduism, religious diversity, caste, and Ramakrishna. Section 2 made the case that Vivekananda's nationalistic statements, when properly contextualized, reveal him to be not a proto-Hindutva ideologue but a cosmopolitan patriot who strove to prepare the ethical and spiritual foundations for the independence movement by encouraging his fellow Indians to give up their "slave" mentality and to appreciate India's great spiritual heritage while also assimilating the best ideas and values from other countries.

Section 3 defended a new diachronic interpretation of Vivekananda's views on religious diversity. Through a chronological examination of his lectures and writings, I found that it was only for a brief period—roughly, from mid-1894 to mid-1895—that he harmonized the world religions on the hierarchical basis of the three stages of Vedānta. As far as I am aware, no scholar has recognized that from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda consistently harmonized the world religions *not* on the basis of an Advaitic hierarchical inclusivism but on the more egalitarian basis of the four Yogas, each of which he took to be a direct and independent path to salvation. Accordingly, he echoed Ramakrishna in

[31] For instance, Vivekananda also refers to Ramakrishna as the greatest of incarnations in a letter to Swami Brahmananda dated 4 October 1895 (CW6, pp. 345–47; BCW7, pp. 139–40), a letter to his brother disciples dated 27 April 1896 (CW7, p. 496), and in his 1901 Bengali essay, "*Hindudharma o Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*" (CW6, p. 185; BCW6, p. 5).

affirming that all religions have "the same saving power" (CW4, p. 182) and conspicuously refrained from privileging Advaita Vedānta over non-Advaitic paths.

Section 4 built on recent scholarly work to militate against the view—held by Sharma and others—that Vivekananda more or less favored the hereditary caste system. Vivekananda, I argued, not only scathingly attacked the existing caste system but also prophesied and welcomed its demise. At the same time, he advocated its replacement by the "original" caste system based not on heredity but on one's inherent qualities (*guṇas*) and conduct (*karma*)—a system which, he claimed, was advocated in scriptures like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Finally, Section 5 highlighted the evolution and maturation in the young Narendra's attitude toward Ramakrishna, as he gradually moved away from his initial skepticism and came to look upon his guru as the greatest of all *avatāras*, one who was unparalleled in his catholicity and renunciation.

In the current academic climate, it has become fashionable to knock prominent Hindu religious figures off their saintly pedestals. While Vivekananda is certainly not above criticism, I hope to have shown that some of the more serious criticisms that have been leveled against him by Sharma and others are based on an inaccurate or partial understanding of his rich and multifaceted corpus.

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Article

From *Līlā* to *Nitya* and Back: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vedānta

Arpita Mitra

Assistant Professor, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol 713340,, India; arpitamitra2016@gmail.com; Tel.: +91-837-782-6551

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Abstract: There has been a long-standing academic debate on the religious orientation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṁsa (1836–1886), one of the leading religious figures of modern India. In the light of his teachings, it is possible to accept that Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas were Vedāntic, albeit not in a sectarian or exclusive way. This article explores the question of where exactly to place him in the chequered history of Vedāntic ideas. It points out that Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly referred to different states of consciousness while explaining the difference in the attitudes towards the Divine. This is the basis of his harmonization of the different streams within Vedānta. Again, it is also the basis of his understanding of the place of *śakti*. He demonstrated that, as long as one has I-consciousness, one is operating within the jurisdiction of *śakti*, and has to accept *śakti* as real. On the other hand, in the state of *samādhi*, which is the only state in which the I-consciosuness disappears, there is neither One nor many. The article also shows that, while Rāmakṛṣṇa accepted all of the different views within Vedānta, he was probably not as distant from the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Ādi Śaṁkara as he has been made out to be.

Keywords: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa; Vedānta; Ādi Śaṁkara; Advaita; Upaniṣads; *brahman*; *ātman*; *Śakti*; *vijñāna*; *samādhi*

1. Introduction

There has been a long-standing academic debate on the religious orientation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṁsa (1836–1886), one of the leading religious figures of modern India. He looked upon himself as a devotee and child of Kālī; many of his sayings and spiritual experiences attest great devotion to Vaiṣṇava figures such as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Caitanya; a more engaged reader is likely to find in his ideas a substratum of Vedāntic thought—the idea of the transcendence, as well as immanence of the absolute Godhead; and finally, he had something of his own to add to all of this. Given the richness of his teachings, it has been variously argued, for example, that he was a follower of Tantra (Neevel 1976; Zimmer 2008), at best a form of *tāntric advaitism* (Neevel 1976), or that the core concept taught by him was *vijñāna*, which was both 'mature bhakti' and 'fuller knowledge' (Devdas 1966), or that he proffered a kind of *samanvayī vedānta*, harmonizing the various strands within Vedanta itself (Chatterjee 1963). It has also been argued recently that Ramakrishna's teachings can be best described with the capacious and non-sectarian concept of *vijñāna vedānta*, which, among other things, accepted the immanent aspect of the Divine as being as equally real as its transcendent aspect (Maharaj 2018). In the light of his teachings, it is possible to accept that Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas were Vedāntic, albeit not in a sectarian or exclusive way. This is the point of departure in this article, which focuses on where exactly to place Rāmakṛṣṇa in the chequered history of Vedāntic ideas.

In order to demonstrate that the question at hand is not an isolated question, but rather has broader implications for the history of Hinduism, the following pointer is in order. In Hinduism, what is the room for creativity without losing authenticity? As pointed out by Carl Ernst: "Since the Protestant

Reformation, the dominant concept of religions has been one of essences unconditioned by history. The nature of religious traditions can best be understood, from this perspective, by analysing religions into their original components." (Ernst 2005, p. 15). This model of understanding religion in terms of its 'original' components is also applicable to the way in which the history of Hinduism has been looked upon by certain scholars. A case in point is near at hand: the label 'Neo-Vedanta', which has been used for a long time by both critics and admirers to describe the teachings of Rāmakṛṣṇa's own disciple, Swāmī Vivekānanda (1863–1902). The term was used from different vantage points—critics used it to describe what they considered to be a departure from 'original' Vedānta, and admirers used it to highlight Vivekānanda's unique contribution in re-defining the scope of Vedānta. The point that was nonetheless missed is: "Neo- has been the 'Hinduism' of each century now for the last thirty-five" (Smith 1979, p. 216), and so is the case with Vedānta[1]—'Neo-' has been the Vedānta of each age for the last several centuries. In other words, this model does not recognize that Vedāntic ideas too have evolved over time, albeit keeping the Upaniṣads as the constant reference point. Hence, the prefix 'Neo-' only serves as a tool to delegitimize the historical transmutation of religious ideas, but does not help in understanding the dynamics of the historical evolution of religion.

Without creativity, no new spiritual wave can be potent; we thus have to concede some kind of newness in Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings. On the other hand, emerging traditions within Hinduism, in order to have lasting appeal and legitimacy, also have to be based on what practitioners recognize as the *philosophia perennis* of Hinduism. This paper will, thus, explore the ways in which Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas relate to the long history of Vedānta, and what new light he had to shed on it, especially in the light of his own spiritual experiences.

The article is divided into the following sections: the next section discusses what Vedānta is; the section after that gives a brief overview of Rāmakṛṣṇa's core teachings and scholarly opinions about them, with reference to their Vedāntic orientation; and the penultimate section will attempt to locate Rāmakṛṣṇa in the history of Vedāntic ideas.

2. What Is Vedānta?

Vedānta is an internally diverse and constantly evolving philosophico-theological tradition within Hinduism. The term 'Vedānta'—which literally means the end portion of the Vedas—originally referred to the Upaniṣads, which indeed formed the later portions of the Vedas (Chatterjee and Datta 1948, p. 395). Gradually, the meaning of the term expanded to include all thought that developed on the basis of the Upaniṣads. Today, Hindu tradition understands by the term 'Vedānta' a particular corpus of texts: the *prasthāna traya,* or the three authorities; that is, the Upaniṣads, which form the *śruti prasthāna*; the *Brahmasūtras*, attributed to Bādarāyaṇa, which form the *nyāya prasthāna*; and the *Bhagavad Gīta*, which forms the *smriti prasthāna*. Even this categorisation developed over time. In his *prakaraṇa grantha*, *Vedāntasāra*, Sadānanda refers to the Upaniṣads, as well as the *Śārirakasūtras* (the *Brahmasūtras*) and other texts (unspecified) that help in understanding the Upaniṣads, as constituting Vedānta (*vedānto nāmopaniṣatpramāṇam tadupakarīṇi śārirakasūtrādīni ca—Vedāntasāra* I.3). The *Vedāntasāra* might have been composed sometime around the 15th century AD (Nikhilananda 2014, p. 10). Loosely speaking, all of the other treatises, like the *bhāṣyas* (commentaries), *vārttikās* (sub-commentaries), *prakaraṇa granthas* (explanatory treatises), and so on, that were composed to aid the understanding of the *prasthāna traya* are also referred to as Vedānta. Besides these, there are several other texts—like the *Yoga Vāśiṣṭha*, the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and others—that articulate Vedāntic ideas.

As mentioned, of the *prasthāna traya*, the Upaniṣads form the *śruti prasthāna*; that is, they contain the revelation of supersensuous knowledge. The Upaniṣads cannot be reasonably dated. They contain many statements that appear contradictory. In order to demonstrate the coherence of these statements,

[1] I do not use the terms 'Hinduism' and 'Vedānta' interchangeably. This paper will only focus on Vedānta, but at the same time, the history of Vedānta is a part of the history of Hinduism.

the *Brahmasūtras* were composed as a systematic exposition of the philosophy and theology articulated in the Upaniṣads. This belongs to the category of the *sūtra* literature that developed as a particular genre of texts meant for the systematization of philosophical views. The *Brahmasūtras* were composed anytime between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD. The concise style of this aphoristic literature again led to the need for the writing of commentaries and sub-commentaries for further explanation. In due course, there developed divergent opinions about the content of the *Brahmasūtras* and the Upaniṣads. As philosophical views proliferated in India, both within the tradition of Vedānta and outside it, doxographical works were composed. By the medieval period, Indian philosophy, designated by the term *darśana*, came to be divided into several schools, one of which was 'Vedānta'. In the context of the philosophical schools, the word Vedānta refers to the school that grounds itself completely in the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. 'Vedānta', as referring to this philosophical school, is the most commonplace use of the term, but it is nonetheless a narrow usage. Again, there are divergences within this school as well; there are various sub-schools, whose key ideas and differences will be discussed below.

What is the mainstay of Vedāntic thought? The true self of the human being is designated by the word *ātman*, which literally means 'self'. This *ātman* is neither born, nor does it die; it is unborn, constant, eternal and primeval; it is not killed even when the body is killed (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.18). It knows no old age or decay (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). It is eternal because it is not the effect of any cause. It does not originate from anything (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.18). It is "pure and effulgent" (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5). It is free from all evils (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5), and is beyond hunger, thirst, pain, sorrow and delusion (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). It is ever unattached and free (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). This *ātman* is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). This *ātman* is omniscient and all-knowing (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* II.2.7). It is of the nature of bliss (*ānandarūpam*) (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* II.2.7).

What is the locus of this self? It has entered into the bodies up to the tip of the nails (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7) and resides there (*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5). The *ātman* in the body is homologous to a razor in a case (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). Just as the fire which sustains the world is at its source, similarly the *ātman* is at the source of the body (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). This self is within all (*eṣa ta ātmā sarvāntarah*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1). In every being, it is innermost (*antaratаram*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.8); it lies deep within one's heart (*antarhṛdaye*) (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* III.14.3–4), and it is hidden in the heart of every being (*nihito guhāyām*) (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20).

How do we know this self which is hidden? This self has been described as '*neti*, *neti*' ('not this, not this') (that is, no direct description is available); it is imperceptible (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). Nobody can see the *ātman* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). When it is viewed, it is seen only in its aspects, performing certain functions (like speaking, seeing, etc.); therefore, all such vision is incomplete. This self cannot be known through the senses, the mind, or the intellect, because it is not an object. All knowledge presupposes a split between the subject and object of knowledge, where the knower is the subject and the known the object. But the *ātman* is not an object of knowledge (for instance, like a table or a chair). It can, therefore, never be known in the same way as we know an object. On the other hand, it is through the self that objects of knowledge are known. It is through the self that all is known (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). The self is, therefore, the eternal subject of all knowledge. As Yājñavalkya put it to Uṣasta: one cannot see that which is the witness of the seeing; one cannot hear that which is the hearer of hearing; one cannot think that which is the thinker of thought, know that which is the knower of knowledge—this is the self that is within all (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.4.2).

There then arises the question: how do we know the Knower (*vijñātāramare kena vijānīyāt*)? Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyī that one smells, sees, hears, speaks, thinks, or knows something when there is duality; when oneness is realized, what should one smell and through what, what should one see and through what, etc.: "through what should one know That owing to which all this is known—through what, O Maitreyī, should one know the Knower?" (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.4.14). The self-existent

one (*svayambhu*) made the senses outgoing; that is why one sees the outer objects but not the inner self (*antarātman*); a certain wise man (*dhīrah*) desiring immortality turns his sight inwards and sees the self within (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* IV.1). The self cannot be attained through study, intellection, or hearing; it can be known only through the self to which the seeker prays; it is known when the self reveals its true nature (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.23). It is the desireless man who perceives the glory of the self (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). It is by knowing the self that one knows all. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.1.4 gives the analogy of knowing all that is made of clay by virtue of knowing a lump of clay. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.1.5–6 repeats the same point by using the analogies of gold and objects made of gold, and a (iron) nail cutter and all other iron objects. In all these verses, Uddālaka Āruṇi's refrain to his son Śvetaketu is that all transformation (*vikāra*) is in name (*nāma*) only; the reality in these three cases are clay, gold, and iron, respectively. In other words, names and forms are ever changing, but the substance is the same; it is constant, and therefore, it is the only reality (*satyam*).

What is the relationship between *ātman* and *brahman* (the ultimate indivisible cosmic being)? *Brahman*, after having created (the universe) entered into that very thing; it became the formed and the formless, the sentient and the insentient, etc. (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.6.1). Since there cannot be two infinite, eternal, omnipotent entities, there is, in effect, only one reality (*ekam sat*), which is the reality of all that exists. Hence, the Upaniṣadic *mahāvākyas* like "*tat tvam asi*" ("that art thou") declare the identity of *brahman* and *ātman*. The same qualities and attributes are used to describe both *brahman* and *ātman*. *Brahman* is the ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of the speech, eye of the eye, etc. (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.2). *Brahman* is that on account of which knowledge itself is possible. The ancient people say that *brahman* is indeed different from the known and above the unknown (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.4). It is neither known nor unknown, because anything that is known is limited, and on the other hand, *brahman* being unknown would make knowledge itself an impossibility. *Brahman* cannot be uttered by speech, comprehended by the mind, seen with the eyes, and so on (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.5–9). The indivisible *brahman* can only be perceived by the one, engaged in meditation, whose mind has become pure and whose intellect is favorable (*Munḍaka Upaniṣad* III.1.8).

It is mainly regarding the nature of *brahman* and the nature of its relationship with *jīva* (embodied soul) that the various sub-schools of Vedānta differ in opinion. Among the many schools of Vedānta, the most well-known are Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita. According to Advaita, *brahman* is not only the 'efficient cause', or the *nimittakāraṇa,* but also the material cause (*upādānakāraṇa*) of the universe. In other words, *brahman* is not merely the cause behind creation; *brahman* is also the very stuff out of which the universe is made. *Brahman* is pure consciousness (*jñānasvarūpa*), devoid of all attributes (*nirguṇa*) and beyond all categories of the intellect (*nirviśeṣa*). Advaita does not reject personal theism: it merely says that the personal God is not the ultimate truth. According to Advaita, *brahman*, in association with its power *māyā*, appears as being qualified (*saguṇa* and *saviśeṣa*), that is, as *īśvara* (the Lord), who is the creator, preserver and destroyer of this world which is His appearance. The Advaita Vedānta *prakaraṇa grantha*, *Vivekacuḍāmaṇi* describes *māyā* as the power of the Lord (*parameśaśakti*), as beginning-less (*anādi*), and as being made up of three *guṇas* (*triguṇātmikā*). It is *māyā* by whom the phenomenal universe is produced. She can only be inferred from the effects she produces. She is neither existent, nor non-existent, nor both; she is neither the same, nor different, nor both; she is neither composed of parts, nor an indivisible whole, nor both. She is indescribable (*anirvacaniyarūpa*). Just as the mistaken idea of a rope as a snake is removed by the discriminative discernment of the rope, similarly, *māyā* is destroyed by the realization of the pure (*śuddha*) and one-without-a-second (*advaya*) *brahman* (*Vivekacuḍāmaṇi*, verses 108–110). *Māyā* has two aspects: one that obscures (*āvaraṇa*) the real Self, and the other that projects (*vikṣepaṇa*) the non-self.

Rāmānuja of the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition did not accept this doctrine of *māyā/avidyā,* and offered a seven-fold objection (*saptavidhā-anupapatti*) to it. *Brahmasūtra* IV.1.3 says "*brahman* is realized as one's own *ātman*". Both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita accept this aphorism, but they interpret the meaning differently. Advaita claims the absolute identity of *brahman* and *ātman*; Viśiṣṭādvaita proffers an organic

unity that preserves both unity and difference. Rāmānuja thus gave the concept of 'identity in and through and because of difference'. For him:

> . . . unity means realization of being a vital member of [the] organic whole. God or the Absolute is this whole. He is the immanent controller . . . God is the soul of nature. God is also the soul of souls. Our souls are souls in relation to our bodies, but in relation to God, they become His body and He is their soul. The relation between the soul and the body is that of inner separability . . . (Sharma 1987, p. 346)

In *Vedārthasaṁgraha* verse 93, Rāmānuja states: "*Brahman*, whose body is formed by animate and inanimate beings, who in his gross form is divided by distinctions of names and forms, is presented in the effect. This disunited and gross state of Brahman is called the creation." On the other hand, for Madhva of Dvaita Vedānta, God is only the efficient cause of the universe, but not its material cause. For him, difference is so great a fact that he advocates five kinds of differences—that between soul and God, between soul and soul, between soul and matter, between God and matter, and finally, between matter and matter. According to Dvaita Vedānta, God is the repository of infinitely good qualities; He is the creator, preserver, and destroyer; He is transcendent, as well as immanent as the inner controller; the human soul is, by its nature, conscious and blissful, but is subject to pain and imperfections on account of its association with the body, sense organs, and minds, etc. In the Dvaita scheme, matter, souls, and God are three distinct entities.

It is important to note that many schools (*sampradāya*) of Vedānta are in fact theistic. Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaitādvaita, Dvaita, Śuddhādvaita and Acintyabhedābheda belong to the Vaiṣṇava lineage. The Advaitin, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, was a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. The Advaitin, Appayya Dīkṣita, was an avowed Śaiva. Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, on the other hand, attempted a fusion of Śrī Vidyā ritualism with Advaita Vedāntic theology. Hence, in the case of Rāmakṛṣṇa too, it would be helpful not to look at Vedānta and *bhakti* as competing categories. Rāmakṛṣṇa was both Vedāntin and *bhakta*, and there is no contradiction between the two.

3. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Core Teachings

Before discussing Rāmakṛṣṇa's core teachings, let us briefly discuss his spiritual practices. As is well-known, he performed *sādhanā* (spiritual training and practice) according to Tantra (with Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī as *guru*), Vaiṣṇavism (five-fold attitude of *śānta*, *dāsya*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya* and *madhura* towards God), as well as Vedānta (with Totā Purī as *guru*). During his Vedānta *sādhanā*, he attained *nirvikalpa samādhi* with great ease, and also received *sannyāsa* from Totā Purī. Thereafter, he also took initiation from the Sufī Govind Rai, and performed *sādhanā* according to Islam. All of his various spiritual practices came to fruition in spiritual experiences and visions of the highest order. He also had visions of spiritual figures like Jesus Christ.

Since Rāmakṛṣṇa's core teachings are well-known, I will only summarize them briefly here. Firstly, both *nitya* (eternal, not subject to change) and *līlā* (play, representing that which is changing all the time) belong to the same entity; the one who is *akhaṇḍa sacchidānanda* (indivisible Existent-Consciousness-Bliss) assumes different forms for *līlā*. The same idea is expressed in a different way: *brahman* and Kālī are identical and inseparable; when it is static, we call it *brahman*, when it is active in play, we call it *śakti*. *Brahman* is *aṭala*, *acala*, *sumeruvat*—that is, unmoving. But the one who has an unmoving aspect also has a moving aspect—that moving aspect is *śakti*. Secondly, God is both *saguṇa* (with qualities) and *nirguṇa* (beyond all qualities); *sākāra* (with form) and *nirākāra* (without form); and much more. Thirdly, it follows from the preceding idea that God can be reached through a variety of paths, and all paths are equally salvific.

Fourthly, one first reaches the *akhaṇḍa* by the process of '*neti, neti*' ('not this, not this'): God is not this world, not the creatures, not the 24 cosmic elements; after reaching the *akhaṇḍa*, one sees that it is God who has become all this—the world, the creatures and the 24 cosmic elements. The analogy is given that one climbs to the terrace using the stairs and leaves one step behind every time; after one

reaches the terrace, one sees that the terrace and the stairs are made of the same material. Lastly, after one has climbed up to the terrace, it is possible to climb down and be at a lower storey. This is true of the *vijñānī*, who knows God in a *viśeṣa* manner. There are exceptional souls (*īśvarakoṭis*), who can remain in the body even after *samādhi* (in the case of others, the body dies after 21 days of *nirvikalpa samādhi*). A *vijñānī* is one who comes back from *samādhi*, and sees God as being immanent in this world, and lives in this world whilst assuming a personal attitude of being a devotee ('*bhakter āmi*'), servant ('*dāsa āmi*'), or child of God. A *vijñānī* comes back from *samādhi* mainly for the purpose of *lokaśikṣa*, or the dissemination of spiritual knowledge among the people. *Vijñānīs* are mostly *bhaktas*. Examples of *vijñānī* are Nārada, Sanaka, Sanātana, Sananda, Sanat Kumar, Śukadeva, Prahlāda, Hanumāna, and Rāmakṛṣṇa himself. Śrī Caitanya had both *brahmajñāna* in *samādhi* and *premābhakti* (a higher form of love for God). Śaṁkara also came back after *samādhi* with the I-consciousness of knowledge ('*bidyār āmi*') for the purpose of *lokaśikṣa*. A *vijñānī* sees God not only within, with eyes shut in meditation, but also all around, with eyes open—a *vijñānī* moves effortlessly from *līlā* to *nitya* and back. Rāmakṛṣṇa contrasts the state of the *vijñānī* with that of the *jñānī*, who merely realizes the transcendent *brahman*. These are Rāmakṛṣṇa's principal theological teachings.

Scholars find it difficult to accept that Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings were completely aligned with those of the philosophical school of Advaita Vedānta. For instance, Heinrich Zimmer is of the following opinion:

> Both the Tantra and popular Hinduism accept the truth of Advaita Vedānta but shift the accent to the positive aspect of māyā. The world is the unending manifestation of the dynamic aspect of the divine, and as such should not be devaluated and discarded as suffering and imperfection, but celebrated, penetrated by enlightening insight, and experienced with understanding. (Zimmer 2008, p. 570)

In this sense, Zimmer considers Rāmakṛṣṇa to be a follower of Tantra. Walter Neevel, too, is of the opinion that "Rāmakrishna is an advaitin but ... his non-dualism must be viewed from the perspective of a tantric *advaita*, not that of Śaṅkara." (Neevel 1976, p. 86). Nalini Devdas, however, takes the opposite view, and finds Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings about the supreme *brahman* to be closer to Advaita than to Tantra (Devdas 1966). This article will not deal with the question of Tāntric elements in Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings. However, it should be noted that, while Rāmakṛṣṇa performed full *sādhanā* in the Tāntric fold as well, he never prescribed Tāntric methods in his teachings. On the other hand, he had reservations about certain Tāntric practices as being unsuitable for most spiritual aspirants.

Devdas identifies *vijñāna* as the core concept in Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings (Devdas 1966). Recently, Ayon Maharaj[2] argued that Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vedānta can be best described as Vijñāna Vedānta, characterized by the acceptance of both the transcendence and immanence of God, among other things. I will not debate about the nomenclature 'Vijñāna Vedānta'—whether we should give Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vedānta a new name at all, or not. As far as the conceptual content of Vijñāna Vedānta is concerned, I accept all of the six central tenets of it, as identified by Maharaj (Maharaj 2018, pp. 27–45). However, Maharaj posits this Vijñāna Vedānta as being sharply in contrast with Śaṁkara's Advaita Vedānta:

> Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta ... is a *world-affirming* Advaitic philosophy that contrasts sharply with Śaṅkara's world-denying Advaita Vedānta. For Śaṅkara, the sole reality is the impersonal nondual Brahman, so *jīva*, *jagat*, and *īśvara* are all ultimately unreal. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, the sole reality is the Infinite Divine Reality, which is equally the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti. Unlike Śaṅkara, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that both *jīva* and *jagat* are *real* manifestations of Śakti, which is itself an ontologically real aspect of the Infinite Reality. (Maharaj 2018, p. 40, emphasis in original)

The following section of the essay will mainly engage with this argument and test its validity. This question has special significance in the debate on Rāmakṛṣṇa Vedānta, because it will help in

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[2] Now known as Swami Medhananda.

ascertaining a correct understanding of Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas, as well as determining his proper place in the history of Vedānta.

While Ayon Maharaj includes, in his concept of Vijñāna Vedānta, a harmonizing approach to all theological views within and outside Vedānta, it is worthwhile to examine this 'harmonizing' aspect of Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vedānta separately. Satis Chandra Chatterjee used the expression '*samanvayī vedānta*' to describe Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas as "being a synthesis of all schools of Vedānta" (Chatterjee 1963, p. 105). Chatterjee, too, engages with a comparison of Śaṁkara's and Rāmakṛṣṇa's views on the impersonal (Absolute) and personal God, that is, *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa brahman* (Chatterjee 1963, pp. 109–12). He, too, is of the opinion that, according to Śaṁkara, *saguṇa* or lower *brahman* is real only empirically, but unreal in relation to the Absolute, which is beyond all *upādhis*. On the other hand, Chatterjee explains that Rāmakṛṣṇa considered *brahman* and *śakti* to be non-different. There should be no difficulty in accepting the validity of both these arguments independently. However, I would like to argue that, when they are contrasted against each other, they do not give us the correct assessment, because firstly, they do not represent Śaṁkara's and Rāmakṛṣṇa's views on a strictly corresponding subject, and secondly, both of the views presented are but partial. A few pages later, Chatterjee refers to the fact that Rāmakṛṣṇa showed the validity of all of the views that depend on the level of consciousness from which it was perceived. In this, Chatterjee finds a 'rational basis' for Rāmakṛṣṇa's reconciliation of the conflicting systems of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita (Chatterjee 1963, p. 122). This is, I would like to argue, key to understanding Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas. It will be taken up for elaborate consideration in the next section.

Before proceeding with a fuller engagement with these issues in the next section, a few words of qualification are in order. Ayon Maharaj also provides a set of Interpretive Principles that one should follow while analysing Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings. Of these, Interpretive Principles (1) and (4) directly concern us here. The first principle states: "Instead of appealing to external philosophical doctrines or frameworks, we should strive to understand Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings on their own terms." (Maharaj 2018, p. 19). I agree with this principle so long as we do not forget what was pointed out in the Introduction to this essay: despite the room for creativity, emerging traditions within Hinduism have to be based on what practitioners recognize as the *philosophia perennis* of Hinduism. Here, it would be useful to remember Vivekānanda's remark about his *guru*: "Ramakrishna came to teach the religion of today ... He had to go afresh to Nature to ask for facts ... Shri Ramakrishna's teachings are 'the gist of Hinduism'; they were not peculiar to him. Nor did he claim that they were ... " (Vivekananda 1921, pp. 75–76). Vivekānanda seems to be making two contradictory statements, but when one understands the balance between the two, one would understand Rāmakṛṣṇa correctly both in his individual capacity and in terms of his proper place in the history of Hinduism.

Maharaj's Interpretive Principle (4) says: "Sri Ramakrishna's nonsectarian attitude allows him to accept the spiritual core of various philosophical sects without subscribing to all the doctrines of any sect in particular." (Maharaj 2018, p. 23). Agreeing with this in principle, my attempt here is not to prove whether Rāmakṛṣṇa was ultimately an Advaitin or not. He did harmonize various seemingly contradictory elements, but I doubt if this act of reconciling or combining different systems was deliberate. Perhaps a better way of understanding him is to recognize that he followed different paths and discovered the underlying principles of each system, the harmony of which he was able to recognize in the light of his own spiritual experiences. This last point about the centrality of his spiritual experiences is acknowledged by Maharaj too, and this is what we need to keep in mind while reading Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa.

It is possible to argue that, instead of refuting any accepted teaching within Hinduism, Rāmakṛṣṇa showed the proper place of each and explained the factors owing to which there seem to be differences. Two contradictory teachings can be equally accepted only when the differences in their underlying perspectives can be understood.

4. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vedānta

Ayon Maharaj clearly interprets Śaṁkara Advaita Vedānta as world-denying; that is, according to this framework, the universe, living beings and the personal God are empirically real but ontologically unreal (this is a reference to the *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality in Advaita Vedanta). In other words, Śaṁkara does not give ontological parity to *nirguṇa brahman* on the one hand, and *jiva*, *jagat* and *saguṇa brahman*, on the other hand. This is Maharaj's principal premise for distinguishing between Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's position and that of Advaita Vedānta. While this is the standard accepted view about Advaita Vedānta, there is some room for disagreement. I would like to argue that the idea of a devaluation of *saguṇa brahman* in the thought of Śaṁkarācarya[3] has generally been an over-interpretation.

The Upaniṣads talk about both transcendence and immanence in the context of *brahman*. Therefore, firstly, let us see what Śaṁkara has to say in his commentary on a few such representative verses. Let us see, for instance, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.6.1, which says that *brahman*, after having created (the universe), entered into that very thing; it became the formed and the formless, the sentient and the insentient, etc. Śaṁkara says in his *bhāṣya*:

> ... it is *the one Brahman* ... *that became* ... *all this* that there is—all modifications, without any exception, starting with the visible and the invisible, all of which are the features of the formed and the formless—, there being no existence for any of these modifications of name and form *apart from* that Brahman. (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 358, emphasis added)

In other words, the world of name and form has no existence independent of *brahman*, which is one, and which itself has become this world of name and form. Finally, Śaṁkara summarizes: " ... this Self must be accepted as existing, since It is the cause of space etc., *exists in this creation*, is lodged in the supreme space within the cavity of the heart, and is perceived through Its diverse reflections on the mental concepts." (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 359, emphasis added). Then, there is *Īśā Upaniṣad* 8, which says: "He is all-pervasive (*paryagāt*), pure, bodiless ... transcendent (*paribhū*), and self-existent (*svayambhū*) ... " (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 15). Śaṁkara, in his commentary, accepts that the Self is all-pervasive, 'like space', and explains the concepts of *paribhū* and *svayambhū* thus: "*Paribhūh* is one who exists above all (transcendent). *Svayambhūh* means he who exists by himself. He, the all, becomes (*bhavati*) by Himself (*svayam*) all that He transcends, and He is also the Transcendental One. In this sense He is *svayam-bhūh*, self-existent." (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 16). Do these explanations speak of a denial of the immanence of *brahman*?

In support of his argument, Maharaj cites Śaṁkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.i.11[4], where Śaṁkara "distinguishes the "*upāsya*" Brahman, the personal God who is worshipped and contemplated, from the "*jñeya*" Brahman, the impersonal nondual Reality which can only be known", and also claims that "the *upāsya* Brahman is associated with unreal "*upādhis*" (limiting adjuncts), while the *jñeya* Brahman is entirely devoid of *upādhis*." (Maharaj 2018, p. 36). Let us examine the verse. In the context of a discussion about *brahman* being the cause of the universe, Śaṁkara says:

> Brahman is known in two aspects—one as possessed of the limiting adjunct [*upādhi*] constituted by the diversities of the universe which is a modification of name and form, and the other devoid of all conditioning factors and opposed to the earlier ... it is *in the state of ignorance* that Brahman can come within the range of empirical dealings, comprising the object of meditation, the meditator, and so on ... Although *the one God*, the supreme Self,

[3] Whether or not Śaṁkara considered *saguṇa brahman* as unreal, it did not hinder him from saluting *saguṇa brahman* (usually Śrī Hari) at the beginning of many of his treatises. Even if we consider these as "attributed" works, it clearly demonstrates that the Advaita tradition accepts such salutations. Such intellectual inconsistency is unlikely in the case of Śaṁkara.

[4] Maharaj cites 1.i.12, but he is, in fact, discussing 1.i.11. The verse number cited is erroneous. Here, we shall follow the correct verse number, that is, 1.i.11.

> is to be meditated on as possessed of those qualities, still the results differ in accordance with the quality meditated on, as is stated in the Vedic texts ... one hears about the Self—unchanging and ever homogeneous though It is—that there is a difference in the degrees of Its manifestation of glory and power, that being caused by *the gradation of the minds by which It becomes conditioned* ... Thus also it is a fact that, although the knowledge of the Self results in instantaneous liberation, yet its instruction is imparted with the help of some relationship with some conditioning factor. Accordingly, although the relationship with the conditioning factor is not the idea sought to be imparted, still from the reference to the superior and inferior Brahman the doubt may arise that the knowledge refers to either of the two ... although *Brahman is one*, It is spoken of in the Upaniṣad as either to be meditated on or known (respectively) with or without the help of Its relation with the limiting adjuncts. (Gambhirananda 2011, pp. 62–64, emphasis added)

Instead of focusing on the unreal nature of *upādhis*, let us look at what Śaṁkara is trying to say in its totality, and in context. Firstly, he clearly says that *brahman* is one; that is, whatever is appearing as *saguṇa brahman* is nothing else but *nirguṇa brahman* in a particular form. In essence, *brahman* is *nirguṇa*; when it manifests itself, it takes a form—this form (including the *upādhis*) is unreal, but the substance itself is not unreal, because the substance is none other than *brahman* itself. Elsewhere, Śaṁkara gives full legitimacy to both the 'higher' and 'lower' *brahman*, which are in reality only one. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* II.ii.8 says: "When that Self, which is both the high and the low, is realized, the knot of the heart gets untied, all doubts become solved, and all one's actions become dissipated" (pp. 131–32). Here, one is talking of the Self that is both high and low (*parāvare*). Śaṁkara's commentary on this part says: "when that One, the omniscient and transcendent—who is both *para*, the high, as the cause, and *avara*, the low, as the effect—is seen directly as 'I am this'"; it is then that all this happens (the knot of the heart gets untied, doubts are quenched etc.) (Gambhirananda 2012, p. 132).

Secondly, in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.i.11, Śaṁkara is also referring to a gradation of minds and a state of ignorance, as opposed to a state of knowledge. This is about differences in levels of consciousness. The gradation of minds leading to a difference in the perception of the *saguṇa brahman* clearly indicates that even *saguṇa brahman* is perceived differently by different aspirants. The state of ignorance that Śaṁkara refers to is the state before God-realization. We will have the occasion to return to these issues in the following discussion on Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa.

Rāmakṛṣṇa's core teachings are clearly Vedāntic (not in an exclusive sense though), and are especially similar to those articulated in the Upaniṣads, which are also based on the spiritual experiences of the *ṛṣis*. As mentioned in the scriptures, he too said that one cannot describe *brahman* in words; *brahman* can only be described in terms of *taṭastha lakṣaṇa*; for example, Ghoṣapallī can only be described as being situated by the bank of the Gangā (Gupta 1990, p. 582). *Nirguṇa brahman* is beyond description, because description entails the use of adjuncts which are limiting, and *brahman* is, in essence, infinite. He says: "What Brahman is cannot be described. Even he who knows It cannot talk about It. There is a saying that a boat, once reaching the 'black waters' of the ocean, cannot come back." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 268) He also gives his well-known analogy of the salt doll which went to measure the sea and never came back, because salt got dissolved into the sea (Gupta 1990, p. 53). In other words, after *sakṣātkāra* (in *samādhi*), who is left to describe *brahman*? What exactly happens in *samādhi*? Referring to the *saptabhūmi* (seven planes of existence) as mentioned in the Veda, Rāmakṛṣṇa says that *samādhi* occurs in the seventh plane, where the mind is annihilated (*maner nāśa*) (Gupta 1990, p. 136). The mind, according to Vedānta, is subtle body, that is, finite matter. In *samādhi*, this finite mind gets dissolved. What exactly happens in *samādhi* cannot be described in words (Gupta 1990, p. 136). The very instrument by which to describe it—that is, the mind—is itself annihilated. In the state of *samādhi*, body-consciousness (*dehabuddhi*) disappears, and so does the perception of multiplicity (*nānā jñāna*) (Gupta 1990, p. 249).

Rāmakṛṣṇa says elsewhere:

> As long as a man analyses with the mind, he cannot reach the Absolute. As long as you reason with your mind, you have no way of getting rid of the universe and the objects of the senses—form, taste, smell, touch, and sound. When reasoning stops, you attain the Knowledge of Brahman. Ātman cannot be realized through this mind; Ātman is realized through Ātman alone. Pure Mind (*śuddha mana*), Pure Buddhi (*śuddha buddhi*), Pure Ātman (*śuddha ātmā*)—all these are one and the same. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 802)

He is in effect saying the following: firstly, the mind is not the instrument for the realization of *brahman*, because the mind perceives objects, and *brahman* is not an object (refer to the discussion in Section 2, above). Secondly, *ātman* can only be realized through *ātman*. This is an Upaniṣadic teaching (see Section 2). He mentions elsewhere that the *ṛṣis* of yore had the *sakṣātkāra* of *śuddha ātmā* through the *śuddha ātmā* (Gupta 1990, p. 897), and again, that the *ṛṣis* had the *sakṣātkāra* of *caitanya* (pure consciousness) through *caitanya* (Gupta 1990, p. 889). Thirdly, he is saying that *śuddha mana*, *śuddha buddhi* and *śuddha ātmā* are the same thing. The ordinary mind is impure (due to the presence of desires) and finite; it cannot be the same as *ātman*. It is only when this mind undergoes a particular kind of transformation through purification that it can be said to be the same as *ātman*. Fourthly, *ātman* cannot be known through the ordinary mind, but it is accessible to the pure mind: the Infinite cannot be known through this mind, but it can be known through the pure mind (Gupta 1990, p. 889). Elsewhere, Rāmakṛṣṇa says: "God is realized as soon as the mind becomes free from attachment [*āsaktiśūnya*]. Whatever appears in the Pure Mind is the voice of God ... because there is nothing pure but God." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 178). Therefore, fifthly, whatever occurs in the purified mind is the voice of God, because God is the only pure entity in this world. By implication, this means that, after God-realization, one's embodied I-consciousness disappears; what remains is only the reality of God. Lastly, a mind that is free from desire and its resultant attachment is the pure mind.

Now, let us turn to the other aspect—which is '*āmi*', that is, embodied or subjective I-consciousness. In ordinary contexts, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa advises common people to adopt the attitude of *bhakti* and retain the I-consciousness of a devotee, child or servant of God, because it is very difficult to get rid of this I-consciousness, especially for ordinary people in the *kali yuga,* where materialism is naturally heightened. When he speaks of I-consciousness in the context of *vijñānīs*, he is speaking about the same thing in a different context. In such instances, he says that if the body remains after *samādhi*, the *vijñānī* has to live with something, so he lives by adopting a particular or a variety of *bhāvas* (attitudes) towards God: *bhakter āmi* (the I of the devotee), *bidyār āmi* (the I of knowledge), *bālaker āmi* (the I of a child), *dāsa-āmi* (the I of a servant vis-à-vis God as the master), or *rasika-āmi* (the I of an enjoyer of God) (Gupta 1990, p. 870). He explains:

> Why does such a lover of God retain the 'ego of Devotion'? There is a reason. The ego cannot be got rid of; so let the rascal remain as the servant of God, the devotee of God. You may reason a thousand times, but you cannot get rid of the ego. The ego is like a pitcher, and Brahman like the ocean—an infinite expanse of water on all sides. The pitcher is set in this ocean. The water is both inside and out; the water is everywhere; yet the pitcher remains. Now, this pitcher is the 'ego of the devotee'. As long as the ego remains, 'you' and 'I' remain, and there also remains the feeling, 'O God, Thou art the Lord and I am Thy devotee; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant.' You may reason a million times, but you cannot get rid of it. But it is different if there is no pitcher." (Nikhilananda 1942, pp. 708–9)

> Elsewhere, he gives this important analogy: "Water appears to be divided into two parts if one puts a stick across it. But in reality there is only one water. It appears as two on account of the stick. This 'I' is the stick. Remove the stick and there remains only one water as before." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 170)

The I-consciousness, in the ordinary context, refers to the I-consciousness before God-realization. This is what Śaṁkara refers to as the 'state of ignorance' (see above). On the other hand, the case of

the *vijñānī* refers to the I-consciosuness after God-realization. Śaṁkara has an equalivalent concept in the *jīvanmukta*. This is a well-known Advaita Vedāntic concept. Ayon Maharaj equates the dry *jñāni* with a Śaṁkara Advaitin (Maharaj 2018, p. 39). What about the *jīvanmukta* then? Does the *jīvanmukta* not perceive immanence of God? If we consider the case of the *jīvanmukta*, we shall see that, in this framework, *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not the last word, it is not the *final* stage; it is simply the method through which to reach *advaita brahmajñāna,* which enables one to perceive God in everything. It would also be wrong to conceive of the *jīvanmukta* in association with *nirguṇa brahman* alone. One may refer to *Jīvanmuktānandalahari* verse 7, which clearly states that the *jīvanmukta*, at times, chants the name of *Śakti*, at times that of Śiva, at times that of Viṣṇu, at times that of Gaṇapati, and so on.

Coming back to the issue of the two kinds of I-consciousness, it should be noted that these are clearly two different states. It is necessary to mention that, in *bhakti yoga*, the process is two-way. Rāmakṛṣṇa clearly says that 'I am devotee, you are God', 'I am your servant, you are my master'—these are attitudes towards the divine by the adoption of which one attains God. Again, after attaining God, one cultivates similar attitudes towards God (Gupta 1990, p. 138). Secondly, the 'I' of a *vijñānī* after God-realization is different from the ordinary I-consciousness. The latter is a materialist 'I', embroiled in attachment to *saṁsāra*; whereas the *vijñānī* only has the form of an 'I', it is in effect insubstantial, and has undergone a complete transformation. After coming into contact with the philosopher's stone, the sword becomes a golden sword—only the form remains that of a sword, but it is not possible to cut anything with that sword anymore (Gupta 1990, p. 138). Only a mark of 'I' remains (*ahaṁkārer dāgamātra thāke*) (Gupta 1990, p. 138). When one has seen God, his/her entire being is transformed after that experience.

The only state in which I-consciousness is absolutely erased is *jaḍasamādhi* (even in *cetansamādhi* or *bhāvasamādhi*, a little bit of 'I' remains so that God can be 'enjoyed'). When asked if the "I of the devotee" never goes, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa replied:

> Yes, it disappears at times. Then one attains the Knowledge of Brahman and goes into samādhi. I too lose it, but not for all the time. In the musical scale there are seven notes: sā, re, gā, mā, pā, dhā, and ni. But one cannot keep one's voice on 'ni' a long time. One must bring it down again to the lower notes. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 481)

The reason for discussing I-consciosuness is that it is really this that makes all the difference. In the state of *samādhi*, where there is no I-consciosuness, there is no world either, and no attribute of *brahman*. Either one leaves the body after this experience, or one comes back. Now, if one comes back, one again enters the field of I-consciousness. So, again, one has to come back to the domain of name and form (*nāmarūpa*), and attributes of God. On the other hand, since this is a transformed I-consciousness, it enables one to see God as being immanent in this world. We have available from Rāmakṛṣṇa's own words the description of such an experience:

> Kacha[5] had been immersed in nirvikalpa samādhi. When his mind was coming down to the relative plane, someone asked him, 'What do you see now?' Kacha replied: 'I see that the universe is soaked, as it were, in God [*jagat jena tānte jare rayeche*]. Everything is filled with God. It is God alone who has become all that I see. I do not know what to accept and what to reject.'" (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 851)

This is the perception of a *vijñānī*. Thus, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's definitive position was the following: " . . . one should realize both the Nitya and the Līlā and then live in the world as the servant of God. Hanumān saw both the Personal God and the formless Reality. He then lived as a devotee of God, as His servant." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 851).

Therefore, the difference in the attitude towards the Divine—even in the case of the same person—is owing to the difference in the levels of consciousness. This is the real meaning of the different states

[5] An ancient sage, son of Bṛhaspati.

of consciousness, as expressed in the analogies of Prahlāda and Hanumāna. When Prahlāda had *tattvajñāna*, he would be in the state of '*soham*' ('I am He'); when he had *dehabuddhi*, he would have the attitude of 'I am your servant' towards God (Gupta 1990, p. 983). Again, "Once Rama asked Hanuman, 'How do you look on Me?' And Hanuman replied: 'O Rama, as long as I have the feeling of 'I', I see that Thou art the whole and I am a part; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant. But when, O Rama, I have the knowledge of Truth, then I realize that Thou art I, and I am Thou.'" (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 105) Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa also explains his own case:

> But, my dear sir, I am in a peculiar state of mind. My mind constantly descends from the Absolute to the Relative, and again ascends from the Relative to the Absolute ... The manifold has come from the One alone, the Relative from the Absolute. There is a state of consciousness where the many disappears, and the One, as well; for the many must exist as long as the One exists. Brahman is without comparison ... Again, when God changes the state of my mind, when He brings my mind down to the plane of the Relative, I perceive that it is He who has become all these—the Creator, maya, the living beings, and the universe. Again, sometimes he shows me that He has created the universe and all living beings. He is the Master, and the universe His garden. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 307)

Rāmakṛṣṇa says elsewhere:

> You see, in one form He is the Absolute [*nitya*] and in another He is the Relative [*līlā*]. What does Vedānta teach? Brahman alone is real and the world illusory. Isn't that so? But as long as God keeps the 'ego of a devotee' [*bhakter āmi*] in a man, the Relative is also real. When He completely effaces the ego, then what *is* remains. That cannot be described by the tongue. But as long as God keeps the ego [*āmi*], one must accept all. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 801)

Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly gives the caveat: " ... as long as 'I-consciousness' [*ahambuddhi*] remains, one cannot but feel that it is God Himself who has become everything." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 652). Again: "So long as 'I-consciosuness' exists, a man cannot go beyond the Relative." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 851). *Ahambuddhi* goes only in *samādhi*. Now, how many people can go into *samādhi*, and how many can continue to stay in *samādhi*? Thus, the one who has had God-realization and those who haven't all have to accept the play of *śakti* as real. Rāmakṛṣṇa explains:

> The jnānis, who adhere to the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedānta, say that the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, the universe itself and all its living beings, are the manifestations of Śakti[6], the Divine Power. If you reason it out, you will realize that all these are as illusory as a dream. Brahman alone is the Reality, and all else is unreal. Even this very Śakti is unsubstantial, like a dream. But though you reason all your life, unless you are established in samādhi, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of Śakti [*śaktir elākā*]. Even when you say, 'I am meditating', or 'I am contemplating', still you are moving in the realm of Śakti, within Its power. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 134)

The very next statement is "Thus Brahman and Śakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn." Therefore, we see two things. Firstly, he simply shows that, with the singular exception of the state of *samādhi*, we are—all the time—operating within the jurisdiction of *Śakti*. So long as that is the case, how can we say *śakti* is unreal? Secondly, *brahman* and *śakti* are not two different entities—they cannot be—even according to Advaita, because that being the case would negate the *ekamadvitiyam* quality of *brahman*. That would, in fact, come close to Sāṁkhya philosophy, positing the separate entities of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, and no longer remain within the scope of Vedānta. If we add up these two points, what we get is: there is only one Reality, *brahman*,

[6] The Vedantins call it *māyā*.

which—when it becomes active in play—we call *śakti*, and unless we reach this *brahman* in the state of *samādhi*, we are always operating within the domain of *śakti*.

One more point before we move to our conclusion. Let us consider this dialogue from the *Kathāmṛta*:

> [Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa]: Each ego may be likened to a pot. Suppose there are ten pots filled with water, and the sun is reflected in them. How many suns do you see?
>
> A Devotee: Ten reflections. Besides, there certainly exists the real sun.
>
> Master [Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa]: Suppose you break one pot. How many suns do you see now?
>
> Devotee: Nine reflected suns. But there certainly exists the real sun.
>
> Master: All right. Suppose you break nine pots. How many suns do you see now?
>
> Devotee: One reflected sun. But there certainly exists the real sun.
>
> Master (*to Girish*): What remains when the last pot is broken?
>
> Girish: That real sun, sir.
>
> Master: No. What remains cannot be described. What *is* remains. How will you know there is a real sun unless there is a reflected sun? (Nikhilananda 1942, pp. 776–77)

What is the purpose of this analogy? It is always with reference to the Relative that we speak about the Absolute as being real and the Relative itself as being unreal. However, in a state where the Relative ceases to exist (in *samādhi*, for instance), there exists only one indescribable entity. Then, with reference to what should we say that it is the opposite of unreal? The Absolute also needs the Relative in order to be deemed as Absolute; where there is no Relative, there is only one Existence, and neither a real Absolute nor an unreal Relative. This is also what was meant in the quotation above: "There is a state of consciousness where the many disappears, and the One, as well; for the many must exist as long as the One exists." (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 307).

Thus, we clearly see that Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly refers to different states of consciousness while explaining the difference in attitude towards the Divine. As was rightly pointed out by Chatterjee (1963), this is precisely how he harmonized the various strands within Vedānta, that is, by showing the proper place of each idea, and by providing an explanation for the differences. This may be called Rāmakṛṣṇa's original contribution to Vedānta. The concept of *vijñāna,* too, is remarkable, but it is possible to trace the precedents of this concept (for instance, *jīvanmukti*) and, more importantly, actual examples. It should be noted that most of the examples of *vijñānīs* that Rāmakṛṣṇa himself gave are really from long, long ago. As such, it may be surmised that the experience and the practice already existed: he simply gave them a name and an explanation.

Secondly, he also showed that—so long as one has I-consciousness—one is operating within the jurisdiction of *śakti*, and has to accept *śakti* as real. On the other hand, in the state of *samādhi*, which is the only state in which the I-consciosuness disappears, there is neither One nor many. I do not claim that Rāmakṛṣṇa was exclusively an Advaitin. He accepted all of the different views within Vedānta. He was grounded in the spiritual experience of *advaita* or non-dual consciousness as it is obtained in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, but that is not the only state in which he remained—he moved effortlessly from *līlā* to *nitya* and back. However, I argue, it is possible that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa comes closer to Śaṁkara than most scholars are willing to concede. Their ideas may not be *absolutely* identical, but there seems to be greater correspondence than is usually acknowledged owing to a partial understanding of Śaṁkara. It is possible to argue that the difference between Śaṁkara and Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa is one of emphasis. Śaṁkara's focus seems to be more on the transcendental aspect of *brahman*, and this could be owing to his historical circumstances. However, he never denies immanence. We saw above that, in his commentary on the *Īśā Upaniṣad*, he says "He, the all, becomes by Himself all that He transcends." In other words, transcendence and immanence, Absolute and Relative—we cannot think of one without thinking of the other. Transcendence implies immanence; otherwise, it would indicate two realities—one that transcends and another that is transcended. Coming back to

Śaṁkara, he himself was an *īśvarakoṭi* who had come back from *nirvikalpa samādhi*. The same Śaṁkara who was the Advaita Vedāntin commentator on the *prasthāna traya* was also the organizer of the Hindu religion on the ground, and is believed to have himself installed the *śrī cakra* at Devi Kāmākṣi's feet in the Kāmākṣi temple in Kanchipuram. Śaṁkara himself was a great harmonizer of many apparently contradictory elements within Hinduism. It may not be far-fetched to argue that we, in fact, need a better assessment of Śaṁkara now—a better assessment of his contribution to the development of Hinduism, as well as a better understanding of his philosophy. It is possible to do the latter especially in the light of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings, rather than the common approach which is vice versa (that is, interpreting Rāmakṛṣṇa with reference to Śaṁkara), because Rāmakṛṣṇa's explanations shed invaluable light on all of the ideas that preceded his.

5. Conclusions

The following observations may thus be made in conclusion. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas are clearly Vedāntic, as it would be possible to show through a comparison of his teachings and the key Vedāntic ideas elaborated above. Firstly, as is found in the Upaniṣads, he accepted the transcendent–immanent one-without-a-second Reality which cannot be known through the ordinary mind. Secondly, while it has been generally accepted that Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings are aligned with those of the Upaniṣads, many scholars think his ideas are different from those of Śaṁkara. However, it was shown above that they are not as different from each other as is generally believed. Thirdly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was grounded in the experience of *advaita* or non-dual consciousness, but he accepted all other states of consciousness vis-à-vis the Divine as equally true; as such, he found the doctrines of the competing philosophical schools of Vedānta acceptable. He harmonized these mutually-conflicting statements in the light of the fact of different states of consciousness. Finally, recognizing this idea of differences in states of consciousness is crucial not only for understanding this harmonization, but also for understanding his complete position regarding the nature of *śakti*. According to Rāmakṛṣṇa, so long as one is within the realm of I-consciousness, one is within the scope of *śakti*, and cannot consider it to be unreal. This *śakti* is non-different from *brahman*. Hence, the same Reality which the Upaniṣads call *brahman*, Rāmakṛṣṇa endearingly called Kālī.

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Why Śrīdhara Svāmī? The Makings of a Successful Sanskrit Commentary

Ravi M. Gupta

Department of History, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322, USA; ravi.gupta@usu.edu

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Abstract: Śrīdhara Svāmī's commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, called *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* and composed sometime between the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, has exerted extraordinary influence on later *Bhāgavata* commentaries, and indeed, on Vaiṣṇava traditions more generally. This article raises a straightforward question: "Why Śrīdhara?" Focusing on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, particularly Jīva Gosvāmī, for whom Śrīdhara is foundational, we ask, "What is it about Śrīdhara Svāmī's commentary—both stylistically and theologically—that made it so useful to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and other *Bhāgavata* commentators?" This question, to the extent that it can be answered, has implications for our understanding of Śrīdhara's theology as well as the development of the early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, but it can also lend insight into the reasons for Śridhara's influence more generally in early modern India.

Keywords: Śrīdhara; Bhāgavata; Purāṇa; commentary; Caitanya; Gauḍīya; Vaiṣṇavism; Jīva Gosvāmī

1. Introduction

Śrīdhara Svāmī's commentary on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, called *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* and composed sometime between the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries, has exerted extraordinary influence on later *Bhāgavata* commentaries, and indeed, on Vaiṣṇava traditions more generally. Subsequent commentators on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are consistently aware of, and often deeply engaged with, the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*. This is particularly true of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentaries by Sanātana Gosvāmi, Jīva Gosvāmī, Viśvanātha Cakravartī, and others, but also to a lesser extent Vīrarāghava Ācārya's Śrīvaiṣṇava and Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha's Dvaita commentaries.[1] Śrīdhara's outsize, although not universal,[2] influence becomes further evident as we move to vernacular commentaries on the *Bhāgavata*

[1] B.N.K. Sharma writes that there are a "couple of indications" that Vijayadhvaja was acquainted with Śrīdhara's commentary, as seen in the former's commentary on BhP 2.9.31. Sharma surmises that "Śrīdhara Svāmin was more or less a contemporary of Vijayadhvaja." (Sharma 1981, pp. 458–59).

[2] Vallabhācārya's *Subodhinī* commentary is either unconcerned with or dismissive of Śrīdhara. For instance, Śrīdhara regards the essential *Bhāgavata* to consist of four verses spoken by Viṣṇu to Brahmā (2.9.32–35), whereas Vallabha points to all seven verses of Viṣṇu's speech (2.9.30–36) (Joshi 1974). Furthermore, Anand Venkatkrishnan (2018) argues that a tradition of *Bhāgavata* interpretation in Kerala, beginning with Lakṣmīdhara, author of the *Amṛta-taraṅginī* commentary, was independent of Śrīdhara.

and derivative works, such as Bahirā Jātaveda's Marathi commentary, *Bhairavī*,[3] and Viṣṇupurī's anthology of *Bhāgavata* verses, called *Bhakti-ratnāvalī*.[4]

Śrīdhara's pervasive influence has meant that scholars of the *Bhāgavata* have tended to assume his reading as the natural sense of the text. Daniel Sheridan argues that scholarly overreliance on Śrīdhara's commentary "does a disservice to Śrīdhara, who has not been studied in his own right by contemporary critical scholarship" (Sheridan 1994, p. 47). In other words, by assuming Śrīdhara's reading as natural, we ignore his genius in offering an interpretation of the Purāṇa that dominated the subsequent commentarial tradition. Sheridan therefore calls for further study of Śrīdhara Svāmī and his commentary, which, he says, would lead to "understanding of the reason for the great authority of Śrīdhara's ostensibly Advaitin commentary within the later Vaiṣṇava schools" (Sheridan 1994, p. 47). Indeed, despite Śrīdhara's inestimable influence on Vaiṣṇava traditions from the fifteenth century onward, he remains an enigma for both theologians and historians of Vaiṣṇavism. Śrīdhara is generally regarded as a *sannyāsī* within Śaṅkara's Advaita tradition,[5] and yet his predilection for *bhakti* has made him a torchbearer for Vaiṣṇava commentators. In the mid-sixteenth century, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava thinker Jīva Gosvāmī acknowledges Śrīdhara's enigmatic theology by suggesting that "the most excellent, esteemed Vaiṣṇava Śrīdhara Svāmī" sometimes included nondualist views in his commentary in order to entice Advaitins to appreciate the greatness of the personal Deity.[6] Śrīdhara himself adds to the confusion by stating that he wrote his commentary on the insistence of his *sampradāya*.[7] Here, we will set aside questions of commentarial intent and formal affiliation, and instead attempt to answer Sheridan's call by examining Śrīdhara's theological standpoint and its influence on later commentators.

This article raises a straightforward question: "Why Śrīdhara?" Focusing on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, particularly Jīva Gosvāmī, for whom Śrīdhara is foundational, we shall ask, "What is it about Śrīdhara's commentary—both stylistically and theologically—that made it so useful to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and other *Bhāgavata* commentators?" This question, to the extent that it can be answered, has implications for our understanding of Śrīdhara's theology as well as the development of the early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, but it can also lend insight into the reasons for Śridhara's influence more generally in early modern India.

2. Why Choose an Advaitin?

The first matter that looms before us is the question of Śrīdhara Svāmī's Advaita leanings. Jīva Gosvāmī was clearly aware of the *Bhāgavata* commentaries found within the Mādhva school of

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[3] Madhavi Narsalay and Vrushali Potnis-Damle write, "It is thus amply clear that the *Bhairavī* is based on the *Bhāvārthadīpikā* . . . . Bahirā has high regard for Śrīdhara. This is evident from the many respectful references to Śrīdhara throughout his commentary on the 10th as well as the 11th *skandhas*. He addresses Śrīdhara as Tikāprakāśabhāskara (*Bhairavī* 11.10.7), Jñānarūpabhāskaru (*Bhairavī* 11.24.5), Samartha (*Bhairavī* 11.7.1), Āchārya (*Bhairavī* 11.77.8), Haridāsa (*Bhairavī* 10.6.212), Yogapāla (*Bhairavī* 10.43.2), Avatāripuruṣa (*Bhairavī* 10.1.59), Sākśātkārī (*Bhairavī* 10.1.60), Ātmajñānī (*Bhairavī* 10.1.59) and Jivanmukta (*Bhairavī* 10.1.61). He also refers to Śrīdhara as guru (*Bhairavī* 11.20.5) out of deep respect. Bahirā likens himself to a beggar waiting for leftovers, but still in search for Śrīdhara's bowl (*Bhairavī* 11.87.17)." (Narsalay and Potnis-Damle 2018, p. 155).

[4] S.K. De writes, "One of the closing verses of this work [*Bhakti-ratnāvalī*] apologises for any departure the compiler might have made from the writings of the great Śrīdhara; and there can be no doubt adout [sic] Śrīdhara's influence on the work." (De 1961, pp. 18–19)

[5] Edelmann (2018) and Sukla (2010, pp. 13–22), following earlier authors, suggest that Śrīdhara Svāmī was the abbot of an Advaita monastery in Puri, Odisha. Nevertheless, Śrīdhara's institutional and sampradāyic affiliation is still a question requiring further historical research.

[6] Jīva Gosvāmī writes in his *Tattva-sandarbha:* "Our interpretation of the words of the *Bhāgavata*, representing a kind of commentary, will be written in accordance with the views of the great Vaiṣṇava, the revered Śrīdhara Svāmin, only when they conform to the strict Vaiṣṇava standpoint, since his writings are interspersed with the doctrines of Advaita so that an appreciation for the greatness of bhagavat may be awakened in the Advaitins who nowadays pervade the central regions etc." (Elkman 1986, p. 119).

[7] *sampradāyānurodhena paurvāparyānusārataḥ | śrī-bhāgavata-bhāvārtha-dīpikeyaṁ pratanyate* (verse 4 from the opening *maṅgala* verses of the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*).

Dvaita Vedānta. He mentions Madhva's *Bhāgavata-tātparya-nirṇaya* by name in his *Tattva-sandarbha*, and if we are to accept B.N.K. Sharma's dating of Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha (fl. 1410–1450), then the latter's complete commentary, which closely follows Madhva's work,[8] was well established by Jīva's time. Furthermore, in his six-part *Bhāgavata-sandarbha,* Jīva argues forcefully against the core philosophical positions of classical Advaita,[9] and yet he takes the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*—which by Jīva's own account shows clear Advaitic tendencies—as foundational for his theological project. Jīva follows—indeed, reiterates—Śrīdhara's interpretation for almost every *Bhāgavata* verse he quotes. Why?

We could, of course, point to Śrī Caitanya's well known statement in Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* (3.7.133–34) that any commentary not based on Śrīdhara is illegitimate:

> I know the *Bhāgavata* by Śrīdhara Svāmī's grace. Śrīdhara Svāmī is the *guru* of the world, and I take him as my *guru*. If you arrogantly write anything to surpass Śrīdhara, people will not accept such confused meanings.[10]

No doubt this would have been a significant factor for Jīva. Nevertheless, such an explanation only shifts the problem back by a generation, for we might ask the same question of Caitanya: "Why Śrīdhara?" Furthermore, pointing to the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* is a tad circular, for this canonical account of Caitanya's life is deeply influenced by the theology of the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs, including Jīva himself.[11]

Another way in which scholars have attempted to resolve this question is by claiming that Jīva only pays lip service to Śrīdhara (because of Caitanya's insistence) and that, in fact, Jīva is not committed to Śrīdhara because of the latter's Advaita leanings. This line of thought is put forth by Stuart Elkman, building upon similar reasoning by S.K. De (1961). Elkman writes:

> . . . it seems likely that Jīva's claims to follow Śrīdhara represent more a concession to Caitanya's beliefs than a personal preference on his own part. In actual fact, Jīva follows Śrīdhara on only the most minor points, ignoring all of his Advaitic interpretations . . .
>
> (Elkman 1986, p. 180).[12]

Elkman and De's argument is grounded on two assumptions that turn out to be suspect, namely, that Śrīdhara's institutional affiliation makes him the type of Advaitin that Jīva argues against in his writings, and that therefore Jīva's use of Śrīdhara must be nothing more than a "concession" on "the most minor points." We shall address the first assumption in due course, but as for the second, we can note here that a careful reading of Jīva's *Bhāgavata-sandarbha* and *Krama-sandarbha* simply does not support Elkman's view. Jīva quotes, paraphrases, or draws salient points from the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* nearly every time he comments upon a *Bhāgavata* verse in his *Bhāgavata-sandarbha*. Jīva follows Śrīdhara's interpretation in most cases, but when the latter's Advaita tendencies create difficulties for Vaiṣṇava dualism, Jīva finds ways of supporting Śrīdhara's interpretation—first, by harnessing the Caitanyaite *bhedābheda* theology (emphasizing the nondifference side) to create space for nondualist interpretations,

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8 See B.N.K Sharma's analysis of the relationship between Madhva's *Bhāgava-tatātparya-nirṇaya* and Vijayadhvaja's *Pada-ratnāvalī* (Sharma 1981, p. 458), as well as the latter's dates (p. 456).

9 See, for example, Jīva's *Paramātma-sandarbha, anuccheda* 105, for a refutation of the doctrine of *adhyāsa,* superimposition (Gupta 2007, pp. 174–77).

10 All translations from Sanskrit and Bengali sources in this article are my own, unless stated otherwise.

11 See, for example, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's prayer to Rūpa Gosvāmī (Jīva's uncle) at the end of nearly every chapter of the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta.* Kṛṣṇadāsa also names all six Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana, including Jīva, as his *śikṣā-gurus,* from whom he has received instruction (1.1.35–37).

12 The polarization of Caitanya and Śrīdhara on one side and Jīva on the other is derived from S.K. De, the author of *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal.* De writes: "It is our impression that Caitanya could not have been such an anti-Śaṅkara as depicted by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja. The Kavirāja, however, is careless enough to give us a rough idea as to what Caitanya's metaphysics could possibly have been when he makes Caitanya ridicule Vallabha Bhaṭṭa for differing from Śrīdhara's commentary on the *Bhāgavata*, and says that Śrīdhara was 'Jagad-guru.'" (De 1961, p. 151). Since the Gosvāmīs' writings were the most important theological source for Kṛṣṇadāsa, Elkman extends De's polarity by replacing Kṛṣṇadāsa with Jīva, in opposition to Śrīdhara and Caitanya.

and second, by layering atop Śrīdhara an alternate interpretation that is more appropriate to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.[13] In essence, Jīva functions as an interpreter of Śrīdhara—explaining and expanding his ideas, clarifying ambiguities, rereading him in light of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, and resolving potential theological conflicts, but never "ignoring" him, as Elkman suggests.[14] Kiyokazu Okita finds a similarly complex dynamic at work in the *Krama-sandarbha,* where Jīva sometimes follows Śrīdhara exactly (Okita 2014, p. 82), sometimes diverges from him (p. 104), and occasionally fills in ambiguities (p. 122), but always works hard to show his conformity with Śrīdhara (pp. 105, 123). Okita concludes that given "the fact that Jīva was aware of Madhva's works," it is striking "how much attention he pays to Śrīdhara's commentary" (p. 124).

So the question remains: how are we to make sense of Jīva's commitment to Śrīdhara, given the latter's Advaitic tendencies? Perhaps the real problem lies with the question itself, which presupposes hard boundaries between dualism and nondualism, static conceptions of *sampradāya* affiliation, and normative notions of what constitutes Advaita and Vaiṣṇava. These reifications have led many to express surprise at Śrīdhara's devotional theology *despite* his Advaita affiliation, or Caitanya's rejection of *māyāvāda despite* his love for Śrīdhara, or Jīva's frequent use of the *Bhāvartha-dīpikā despite* his commitment to "pure Vaiṣṇavism." Michael Allen has recently called for a broadening of our understanding of Advaita Vedānta, to include not only "a received canon of Sanskrit philosophical works," such as those of Śaṅkara and Maṇḍana Miśra, but also "narratives and dramas, 'syncretic' works blending classical Vedāntic teachings with other traditions, and perhaps most importantly, vernacular works ... " (Allen 2017, p. 277)[15] This larger world he calls "Greater Advaita Vedānta," and he includes Śrīdhara Svāmī within it.[16] Although Allen intentionally leaves the boundaries of this world fuzzy, he suggests that "the acceptance of *māyāvāda*, or illusionism, might provide a useful touchstone for determining how deep the influence of Advaita Vedānta runs in a given work" (Allen 2017, p. 293). If that is the case, then we will need to leave out the canonical Caitanya Vaiṣṇava texts from this rubric, as *māyāvada* is unacceptable to all of them.

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the early theologians of the Caitanya school were actively engaged with the Advaita tradition, freely borrowing key ideas and terminology. After all, the doctrine of *acintya-bhedābheda* includes *abheda,* nondifference, as one of its key components, even if it is preceded by *bheda*, or difference. In his *Bhāgavata-sandarbha,* Jīva is quite happy to adopt concepts from Advaita theologies, including the notion of a *kevala-viśeṣya* Brahman,[17] an unattributed, transcendent reality that would have been anathema to Rāmānuja; the possibility of *jīvan-mukti*, liberation while living; the categories of *svarūpa-lakṣaṇa* (essential characteristics) and *taṭastha-lakṣaṇa* (contingent characteristics) to describe the nature of Brahman;[18] and the insistence that ultimate reality is nondual (*advaya*)[19] and thus all beings are part of Kṛṣṇa's nature, an idea quite unacceptable to Madhva. Each of these concepts is developed differently than in classical Advaita Vedānta, but each also represents a choice on the part

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13 For examples of both these dynamics at work in Jīva's relationship with Śrīdhara, see the section "Svāmī and Gosvāmī" in Gupta (2007, pp. 65–84).

14 On a few occasions, Jīva does directly contradict Śrīdhara when the latter's Advaitic statements become impossible to harmonize with Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, as we shall discuss later in this article. However, Elkman's example of Jīva refuting Śrīdhara (in *Tattva-sandarbha, anuccheda* 60) turns out to be based on a misreading of the Sanskrit. As Gupta (2007, pp. 77–80) shows, *anuccheda* 60 is a fine example of Jīva functioning as an interpreter of Śrīdhara, affirming Śrīdhara's interpretation and then redeploying it in the service of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology.

15 Venkatkrishnan has argued along similar lines: "Instead of assuming the coherence of Advaita Vedānta as school of philosophy, and singling out individual authors for their deviations from a norm, we might instead consider the tradition itself fragmented and fractured" (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, p. 234).

16 Allen remarks, "The degree of Advaitic influence in Śrīdhara's commentary has been debated; ... Without entering the debate, I might simply note that much hinges on how broadly Advaita Vedānta is defined." (Allen 2017, p. 292, n38).

17 See *Bhagavat-sandarbha, anuccheda* 3: *arūpaṁ pāṇi-pādādy asaṁyutam itīdaṁ brahmākhya-kevala-viśeṣyāvirbhāva-niṣṭham.*

18 See Jīva Gosvāmī's *Paramātma-sandarbha, anuccheda* 105.

19 The insistence on an ultimate, nondual reality is grounded on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.11, "Knowers of reality declare that reality to be nondual consciousness, called 'Brahman,' 'Paramātmā,' and 'Bhagavān.'" This verse is crucial for Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology, for it simultaneously affirms the singular nature of Divinity while also introducing distinctions within him, thus leading to the doctrine of *acintya-bhedābheda.*

of the early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians to not only engage with, but to also adopt concepts from, a tradition whose soteriology they rejected.

Take for example, the notion of *jīvan-mukti*. Rūpa Gosvāmī defines it quite differently from the way it is understood in Advaita Vedānta,[20] but his use of the concept nevertheless represents something significant; Rūpa could have just as easily rejected the possibility of *jīvan-mukti* altogether, as does Rāmānuja, whose influence is strongly felt in other ways within early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology.[21] Along similar lines, Rūpa and Jīva are willing to accept the possibility of a state of liberation, namely, *sāyujya-mukti,* where the individual experiences a state of ontological oneness with Brahman—similar to the way in which Madhusūdana Sarasvatī describes *sāyujya-mukti* (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 397). The Gosvāmīs regarded such a state as extremely undesirable for a *bhakta,* but they affirmed its possibility nonetheless. As Rembert Lutjeharms has shown, "the consistent attempt to make space for the experiences of the Advaitins among early Chaitanya Vaishnava theologians seems particularly remarkable" because it forces them to "relinquish" the term *mokṣa* to the Lutjeharms (2018, p. 403).

We shall give one last example: Jīva Gosvāmī, in his commentary on the third aphorism of the *Brahma-sūtra,* accepts Śaṅkara's interpretation of *śāstra-yonitvāt,* namely, that Brahman is the source of scripture, even though this interpretation is rejected by both Rāmānuja and Madhva. Jīva's theology takes an eclectic approach toward other Vedāntins,[22] and he was working in a milieu where Advaitins were innovative, *bhakti*-oriented, and open to practices of *kīrtana*.[23] We see evidence of this milieu in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta,* where Kṛṣṇadāsa describes a debate between Caitanya and an erudite Advaita *sannyāsī* of Benaras, Prakāśānanda Sarasvatī. When he meets Caitanya, Prakāśānanda presents a social argument against *kīrtana*, but not a philosophical one; he praises *bhakti* as salutary and pleasing, but objects to Caitanya engaging in public singing and dancing in the company of sentimental commoners, instead of studying Vedānta among his *sannyāsī* peers.[24] Indeed, the religious landscape in which early Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas flourished was saturated with an Advaita that was itself saturated with Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*.[25] Lutjeharms lists no less than twenty-two *sannyāsī* companions of Caitanya who possibly belonged to an Advaita order, as Caitanya himself did (Lutjeharms 2018, pp. 401–2).

Seen in this context, Śrīdhara's commitment to Vaiṣṇava-*bhakti,* Caitanya's commitment to Śrīdhara, and Jīva's skillful ease in harmonizing Śrīdhara's Advaita with Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology—all become less of a surprise and less of a problem.

3. When *Not* to Choose Śrīdhara

Nevertheless, the "Why Śrīdhara?" question persists. As we have seen, the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs are adept at adopting elements of Advaita that are suitable to their theology. But they are not Advaitins, and there are limits to their willingness to walk that path. What then do we make of Jīva's statement

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[20] See Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (1.2.187): *īhā yasya harer dāsye karmaṇā manasā girā nikhilāsv apy avasthāsu jīvan-muktaḥ sa ucyate,* "One whose every effort—in mind, speech, and action, and in all circumstances—is in the service of Hari, that person is called *jīvan-mukta,* liberated while living.")

[21] For example, Jīva's commentary on the first five sutras of the *Brahma-sūtra* (found in Paramātma-sandarbha, anuccheda 105 and translated in Gupta 2007, chp. 7) often quotes from Rāmānuja's *Śrī-bhāṣya*. Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Gosvāmī's *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa,* the main Caitanya Vaiṣṇava ritual manual, also displays the influence of Śrīvaiṣṇavism.

[22] For a detailed discussion of the sources of Jīva's Vedānta theology, including Śrīdhara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, and Śaṅkara, see Gupta (2007, chp. 3).

[23] See Venkatkrishnan (2015b).

[24] See *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 1.7.66–70, and especially 1.7.101: "Do *bhakti* for Kṛṣṇa—we're all happy about that. But why don't you study Vedānta? What's wrong with it?" Venkatkrishnan describes a similar argument against *kīrtana* in the writings of Anantadeva of Benaras in the late sixteenth century—an argument that Anantadeva rejects. "The opponent here concedes that the public act of devotional singing may be accorded scriptural sanction, but only for those who do not belong to the three self-appointed upper classes. *Bhakti* in the opponent's eyes is not an activity suited to the serious, scholarly lifestyle of the Brahmin." (Venkatkrishnan 2015b, p. 155)

[25] See Friedhelm Hardy's well-known 1974 article for a discussion of Advaita's development in relation to South Indian *bhakti* as well as Bengal Vaiṣṇavism.

that he only accepts Śrīdhara in so far as his views are consistent with pure Vaiṣṇavism? What does Jīva mean by the "pure Vaiṣṇava thesis" (*śuddha-vaiṣṇava-siddhānta*), and which "doctrines of Advaita" (*advaita-vāda)*, interspersed in Śrīdhara's commentary, does he find unacceptable?[26] Centuries later, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedāntist Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa describes Śrīdhara's Advaitic statements as "meat on the end of a hook, meant to lure fish" (Elkman 1986, pp. 119–20). What, exactly, is the meat?

Given the presence of multiple influences in Caitanya theology, B.N.K. Sharma's claim that "pure Vaiṣṇavism" refers to Madhva's Vedānta appears untenable (Sharma 1981, p. 528). I would suggest, rather, that Jīva can find a way to incorporate nearly all of Śrīdhara's Advaitic statements into Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology except for those that employ Advaita theories of illusion, particularly the notion of *māyā*. The problem is not with *māyā* as the Lord's illusive power; that, indeed, is quite compatible with the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava concept of *śakti,* Kṛṣṇa's multifaceted energies. Rather, the problem lies with *māyā* when, in Jīva's eyes, it is "weaponized" by Advaitins to deny the transcendent reality of Kṛṣṇa's form, the eternal individuality of living beings, and the substantive nature of this world, thus precluding the possibility of *bhakti* in the liberated state. As Caitanya says in his conversation with Sārvabhauma Bhāṭṭācārya, "Bhagavān has a blissful form replete with six kinds of majesty, and you call him formless? ... Listening to the commentary of a *māyāvādī* destroys everything!" (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.6.152–69).[27] Indeed, it is in the context of discussions about *māyā* that Jīva argues against Advaita in both *Tattva-sandarbha* and *Paramātma-sandarbha*,[28] speaking strongly against *adhyāsa* and *āropa* (superimposition), *vivarta* (apparent transformation), *eka-jīva-vāda* (a single living being), *pratibimba-vāda* (doctrine of reflection), and other concepts grounded in Advaitic ideas of ignorance and illusion. He dedicates significant space in the *Bhagavat-sandarbha* to arguing that Bhagavān and his abode, associates, and accoutrements are nonmaterial (*aprākṛta)* and inherent to the Lord's nature (*svābhāvika*).

To be sure, Śrīdhara himself is not keen on "weaponizing" *māyā*. He often explains *māyā* as the veiling, multi-faceted power of the Lord, without recourse to heavyweight Advaita terminology. He repeatedly misses opportunities to discuss *avidyā, āropa, anirvacanīya, vivarta, upādhi,* and the rope-snake metaphor. Take, for example, his commentary on *Bhāgavata* 1.7.6, a verse that describes how *bhakti-yoga,* as taught in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, can remove living beings' ignorance. The verse is crucial to Jīva's argument for the *Bhāgavata's* supremacy as scripture, but the verse is also susceptible to Advaita theories of ignorance. In his commentary, Śrīdhara explains *māyā* as follows: "The Lord, who possesses all *śaktis*, who knows everything, who has an eternally manifest, supremely blissful form (*svarūpa*), controls *māyā* by his knowledge-*śakti*. The living being ... is bewildered by the Lord's *māyā*." Śrīdhara follows this with a quotation from Viṣṇusvāmī describing the Lord's powers of knowledge and bliss. Finally, Śrīdhara offers two verses—presumably of his own composition—in praise of the man-lion *avatāra,* Nṛsimha: "The one who controls *māyā* is the Lord, and the one pained by her is the living being .... We praise Nṛhari, who continually delights with his own *māyā*."[29] This, indeed, comes close to the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava understanding of *māyā* as the Lord's *śakti.*

When, however, the opportunities become impossible to ignore, Śrīdhara offers attenuated or ambiguous forays into Advaita notions of ignorance. Here is a good example: The sage Nārada, speaking in verse 1.5.27, states, "I perceive that this *sat* and *asat* have been fabricated by my *māyā*

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[26] *tad-vyākhyā tu samprati madhya-deśādau vyāptān advaita-vādino nūnaṁ bhagavan-mahimānam avagāhayitum tad-vādena karvurita-lipīnāṁ parama-vaiṣṇavānāṁ śrīdhara-svāmi-caraṇānāṁ śuddha-vaiṣṇava-siddhāntānugatā cet tarhi yathāvad eva vilikhyate.* (*Tattva-sandarbha, anuccheda* 27).

[27] *ṣaḍ-aiśvarya-pūrṇānanda-vigraha yāṅhāra/hena-bhagavāne tumi kaha nirākāra ... māyāvādi-bhāṣya śunile haya sarva-nāśa.*

[28] See *Tattva-sandarbha, anucchedas* 34–44 and *Paramātma-sandarbha, anuccheda* 105.

[29] *anarthopaśamaṁ sākṣād bhakti-yogam adhokṣajelokasyājānato vidvāṁś cakre sātvata-saṁhitām* (Bhāgavata 1.7.6)*Bhāvārtha-dīpikā: etad uktaṁ bhavati—vidya-uaktya māyā-niyantā nityāvirbhūta-paramānanda-svarūpaḥ sarva-jñaḥ sarva-śaktir īśvaras tan-māyayā saṁmohitas tirobhūta-svarūpas tad-viparīta-dharmā jīvas tasya ceśvara bhaktyā labdha-jñānena mokṣa iti. tad uktaṁ viṣṇu-svāmin—hladinyā saṁvid-aśliṣṭaḥ sac-cid-ānanda īśvaraḥ. svāvidyā-saṁvṛto jīvaḥ saṁkleśa-nikarākaraḥ. tatha—sa īśo yad-vaśe māyā sa jīvo yas tayārditaḥ. svāvirbhūta-parānandaḥ svāvirbhūta-suduḥkha-bhūḥ. svādṛg-utthaviparyāsa-bhava-bhedaja-bhī-śucaḥ. man-māyayā juṣann āste tam imaṁ nṛ-hariṁ numaḥ. ity ādi.*

upon me, the transcendent Brahman." For an Advaitin, this verse offers an irresistible opportunity to expound a theory of superimposition. As Anand Venkatkrishnan points out (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, pp. 49–50), none other than the thirteenth-century Hemādri, author of the *Kaivalya-dīpikā* commentary on the *Bhāgavata-muktāphala,* seizes this verse to discuss the rope-snake metaphor. But Śrīdhara nearly avoids the matter altogether, glossing "this *sat* and *asat*" as "these gross and subtle bodies," "my *māyā*" as "my ignorance (*avidyā*)," and explaining that "fabricated" means that the body is not substantial or essential.[30] In other words, the body is a product of the living being's own ignorance, although the living being is in fact Brahman. This highly limited application of superimposition of the body upon the self is something any Caitanya Vaiṣṇava can live with.

Occasionally, however, Śrīdhara becomes more explicit in his application of Advaita theories of illusion, and as far as I can tell, these are the only moments when Jīva directly rejects Śrīdhara's interpretation (instead of simply layering an alternative interpretation, which Jīva does often). A good example of Śrīdhara in a sharper register is the *Bhāgavata's* opening verse, which provides ample opportunities for nondualist interpretation. In the third line, Śrīdhara interprets *vinimaya* as *vyatyaya*, the false appearance of one element in another, like a mirage seen on a hot surface, water seen in glass, and glass appearing like water—examples that are typically Advaitic.[31] Even here, Śrīdhara does not bother to spell out a theory of illusion. Rather, he seems to assume the core concepts of classical Advaita Vedānta as a general background to his work, without feeling the need to delineate or defend them. For him, the essential point is that the world (which he alternately calls true, *satya,* and false, *mithyā*) finds its basis in the true reality of Brahman, who has the power to dispel all confusion. Nevertheless, the implication of Śrīdhara's metaphors is that the world is mere appearance, and Jīva finds this unacceptable. He comes down strongly against this view, calling it a fictitious interpretation (*kalpanā-mūla*), but never mentions Śrīdhara directly, as he is usually wont to do.

> Since the interpretation given here is based on the *śruti*, other fictitious interpretations are automatically defeated. In those interpretations, fire and the other elements, which were indicated in a general way [in the verse], are explained in a particular way. This does not please the grammarians. If this was what the *Bhāgavata* meant, it would have said "like water in a mirage" and similarly for the other elements. Moreover, in that [incorrect] view, the threefold creation [*trisarga*] is not born from Brahman in the primary sense of the word "born". Rather, the word *janma* is taken in the sense of superimposition (*āropa*).[32]

At this point, Jīva presents several arguments in quick succession as to why superimposition cannot constitute the relationship between the world and Brahman. The disagreeable commentary he is referring to is clearly the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* (1.1.1), which states: "*Vinimaya* is transposition—the appearance of one thing in another. That [appearance] passes as reality because of the reality of its substrate [i.e., Brahman]. In this regard, the perception of water in fire, that is, in a mirage, is well known."[33]

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[30] The full verse from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is as follows:*tasmiṁs tadā labdha-rucer mahā-matepriyaśravasy askhalitā matir mamayayāham etat sad-asat sva-māyayāpaśye mayi brahmaṇi kalpitaṁ pare* (1.5.27)The entirety of Śrīdhara Svāmī's comments on this verse is as follows: *priyaṁ śravo yasya tasmin bhagavati labdha-rucer mamāskhālitāpratihatā matir abhavad ity anuṣaṅgaḥ. yayā matyā pare prapañcātīte brahma-rūpe mayi sad-asat sthūlaṁ sūkṣmaṁ caitac charīraṁ sva-māyayā svāvidyayā kalpitaṁ na tu vastuto 'stīti tat-kṣaṇam eva paśyāmi.*

[31] The relevant portion of Śrīdhara's comments on *Bhāgavata* 1.1.1 is as follows: *satyatve hetuḥ. yatra yasmin brahmaṇi trayāṇāṁ māyā-guṇānāṁ tamo-rajaḥ-sattvānāṁ sargo bhūtendriya-devatā-rūpo 'mṛṣā satyaḥ. yat-satyatayā mithyā-sargo 'pi satyavat pratīyate taṁ paraṁ satyam ity arthaḥ. atra dṛṣṭāntaḥ — tejo-vāri-mṛdāṁ yathā vinimaya iti. vinimayo vyatyayo 'nyasminn anyāvabhāsaḥ. sa yathā 'dhiṣṭhāna-sattayā sadvat pratīyata ity arthaḥ. tatra tejasi vāri-buddhir marīci-toye prasiddhā. mṛdi kācādau vāri-buddhir vāriṇi ca kācādi-buddhir ityādi yathāyatham ūhyam.*

[32] *tad evam arthasyāsya śruti-mulatvāt kalpanā-mūlas tv anyārthaḥ svata eva parāstaḥ. tatra ca sāmānyatayā nirdiṣṭānāṁ teja-ādīnāṁ viśeṣatve saṅkramaṇaṁ na śābdikānāṁ hirdayamadhyārohati. yadi ca tad evāmaṁsyata tadā vāryādīni marīcikādiṣu yathety evāvakṣyata. kiṁ ca tanmate brahmatas trisargasya mukhyaṁ janma nāsti kintv āropa eva janmety ucyate.* (*Paramātma-sandarbha, anuccheda* 105).

[33] See note 31 for the Sanskrit.

Despite such instances of Advaitic concepts emerging in the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*, there is broad consensus among scholars that Śrīdhara Svāmī is not a radical nondualist.[34] In his excellent study of Śrīdhara's commentary on the *catur-ślokī* (the four essential verses of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as determined by commentators), Okita finds that Śrīdhara's theology was "closer to Rāmānuja's nondualism" (Okita 2014, p. 75), as Śrīdhara sometimes affirms the reality of the world and at other times moves closer toward Advaitic understandings of *māyā* (Okita 2014, p. 123). Sharma finds similar variance (Sharma 1981, pp. 458–59). Indeed, as we have seen above, it is impossible to place Śrīdhara within any predefined Vedantic system, as he moves fluidly and unapologetically from Advaita-leaning positions to more dualistic views.[35] This fluidity makes the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* enticing to a broad spectrum of commentators, from a variety of sectarian backgrounds, across the subcontinent.

We have argued here that we must take seriously the fact that Jiva too, with his *acintya-bhedābheda* theology, is halfway to nondualism, and this makes Śrīdhara an easy choice—except, of course, when the choice is not easy, requiring a delicate interpretive dance on Jīva's part. We have argued that the acceptability of Śrīdhara's theology is dependent largely on his stance toward Advaitic theories of illusion. On the one hand, Śrīdhara's reticence to build an Advaitic theory of *māyā*, even when there are opportunities to do so, makes it possible for Jīva to use him as a foundation for Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology. On the other, when Śrīdhara does venture in the direction of *māyā*, risking the reality of the world and the individuality of the self, we encounter the boundary that Jīva draws in *Tattva-sandarbha*: "Our interpretation ... will be written in accordance with the views of the great Vaiṣṇava, the revered Śrīdhara Svāmī, only when they conform to the strict Vaiṣṇava standpoint." (Elkman 1986, p. 119).

4. Why Śrīdhara? The Question Revisited

But we have spent much too long on the question of Śrīdhara Svāmī's Advaitic tendencies and the effect that those tendencies have on his status as the canonical Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentator. Surely, there must be other reasons for Śrīdhara's appeal, other ways in which we can answer the question, "Why Śrīdhara?" Indeed there are, and we will now go through them more briefly.

First, we must note Śrīdhara's special regard for the *Bhāgavata* itself. The second verse of the Purāṇa proclaims the text's distinctiveness and preeminence: The *Bhāgavata* is free of fraudulent *dharmas*, truthful in content, salutary for listeners, and productive of God's presence in their hearts. The third line raises a rhetorical question: "This beautiful *Bhāgavata* was written by the great seer. What then (is the use) of others (*kiṁ vā paraiḥ*)?"[36] Śrīdhara interprets "others" as "other scriptures (*śāstraiḥ*)," and provides a detailed argument for the *Bhāgavata's* superiority to the entire gamut of scriptural texts, including those of the *karma-kāṇḍa* (Vedic ritual), *jñāna-kāṇḍa* (philosophical), and *devata-kāṇḍa* (devotional) genres. The *Bhāgavata*, he says, "is superior to all scriptures, including the three *kāṇḍas,* because it perfectly conveys their meaning. Therefore, this book should be heard continuously."[37] Indeed, Śrīdhara's conviction in the *Bhāgavata's* preeminence is evident in chapter 87 of Book 10, where the Vedas praise Viṣṇu and thus implicitly accept their subordinate status to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Śrīdhara, who is normally brief and pointed in his comments, waxes eloquent in this chapter, ending his commentary on each verse with his own verse composition in praise of Nṛsiṁha. There is little doubt that Śrīdhara accords to the *Bhāgavata* a privileged position above other sacred

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[34] For example, see De (1961, pp. 17–18), Okita (2014, chp. 3), B.N.K. Sharma (1981, p. 128), Sheridan (1994, pp. 58, 65), and Hardy (1974, p. 32).

[35] Ananta Sukla (2010, pp. 74–76) argues that Śrīdhara's theology draws from a variety of traditions, including Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Śākta, Vedānta and Sāṅkhya, and he rarely criticizes thinkers from any of these traditions. Sukla (2010, p. 19) also points to the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā's* third opening verse, which honors the "two Lords, Mādhava and Ūmādhava [Śiva]."

[36] *dharmaḥ projjhita-kaitavo 'tra paramo nirmatsarāṇāṁ satāṁvedyaṁ vāstavam atra vastu śivadaṁ tāpa-trayonmūlanaṁśrīmad-bhāgavate mahā-muni-kṛte kiṁ vā parair īśvaraḥsadyo hṛdy avarudhyate 'tra kṛtibhiḥ śuśrūṣubhis tat-kṣaṇāt* (*Bhāgavata* 1.1.2)

[37] Śrīdhara Svāmī begins and ends his commentary on BhP 1.1.2 as follows: *idānīṁ śrotṛ-pravartanāya śrī-bhāgavatasya kāṇḍa-traya-viṣayebhyaḥ sarva-śāstrebhyaḥ śraiṣṭhyaṁ darśayati . . . tasmād atra kāṇḍa-trayārthasyāpi yathāvat pratipādanād idam eva sarva-śāstrebhyaḥ śraiṣṭhyam, ato nityam etad eva śrotavyam iti bhāvaḥ*

texts, a stance that likely contributed to the *Bhāgavata's* meteoric rise as the preeminent scripture for subsequent schools of Vaiṣṇavism.[38] This regard for the *Bhāgavata* is not to be assumed in other early commentators; Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha, whose commentary would have been available during Jīva's time, interprets the third line of the *Bhāgavata's* second verse differently. He says, in essence: "This beautiful *Bhāgavata* was written by the great seer [Vyāsa]. What then is the point of dharmic texts written by others (*aparaiḥ*)? The other Purāṇas shine only as long as the beautiful and highest *Bhāgavatam* is not visible."[39] He leaves it at that, not comparing the *Bhāgavata* to any texts beyond the Purāṇas. Another early *Bhāgavata* commentator, Lakṣmīdhara, does provide an elaborate argument for the Bhāgavata's preeminence in his *Amṛta-taraṅginī* commentary,[40] but his praise for the *Bhāgavata* is accompanied by an ardent engagement with the classical Advaita theories of illusion,[41] which would have rendered the commentary unacceptable to most Vaiṣṇava writers.[42]

A second feature of Śrīdhara's commentary that would have made it particularly appealing to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas is the central place he accords to Kṛṣṇa in his theology. Let us examine that verse in Book 1, chapter 3, which is of consummate importance to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas and which Jīva considers to be the *mahā-vākya*, controlling thesis, of the entire *Bhāgavata*,[43] because it establishes Kṛṣṇa as the original Lord, the source of all other divinities: "These [aforementioned *avatāras*] are parts and portions of the Supreme Person, but Kṛṣṇa is Bhagavān, the Blessed Lord, himself."[44] Śrīdhara does two interesting things in this commentary: first, he provides a hierarchical typology of *avatāras* that would have been of great interest to early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians, who develop this into an extensive *avatāra* classification system. Śrīdhara tells us that some *avatāras* are *aṁśas* (parts) of the Supreme Lord, whereas others are *kalā* (smaller portions) and *vibhūtis* (powers). He then gives examples of each type, explaining that Matsya and other (major) *avatāras* are omniscient and omnipotent, but they manifest their *śaktis* only inasmuch as is useful for their roles. Others, such as the four Kumāras, are possessed by powers of the Lord, such as knowledge, as are appropriate to their respective positions. The second task Śrīdhara takes up in this verse is to explicate the particular position of Kṛṣṇa, and from a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava standpoint, he could not have done it better. "Kṛṣṇa is indeed Bhagavān, none other than Nārāyaṇa. Because he manifests all *śaktis*, he is the culmination of all [*avatāras*]."[45] Although Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas would regard Nārāyaṇa as a portion of Kṛṣṇa, Śrīdhara is halfway there: he places Kṛṣṇa at the head of all *avatāras* and identifies him with their origin, Nārāyaṇa. By way of contrast, we can again point to Vijayadhvaja's comments on this verse, where he takes the word *kṛṣṇa* as merely a reference to Viṣṇu's blackish complexion (*megha-śyāma)*, and takes particular care to

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[38] As Christopher Minkowski (2005) shows, by the time of Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara, the seventeenth-century author of the *Bhārata-bhāva-dīpa* commentary on the *Mahābhārata*, the authority and status of *śruti* and *smṛti* were being reversed, with *smṛti* texts, particularly the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, bolstering the status of the Vedas rather than the other way around. See Gupta (2006) for a discussion of Jīva Gosvāmī's role in this *śruti-smṛti* reversal process.

[39] The relevant section of Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha's commentary on *Bhāgavata* 1.1.2 states: *kiṁ viśiṣṭe. mahā-muni-kṛte aparaih kiṁ vā ... tathā coktaṁ rājante tāvad anyāni purāṇāni satāṁ gaṇe yāvan na dṛśyate sākṣāt śrīmad-bhāgavataṁ param iti. ... mahā-munir vyāsaḥ sākṣānnārāyaṇaḥ tena kṛte praṇīte ... dharmādi-kathanaiḥ kiṁ vā prayojanam.*

[40] See Lakṣmīdhara's commentary on the *Bhāgavata's* second verse. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this reference. Lakṣmīdhara also provides an argument for the *Bhāgavata's* (and the Purāṇas') preeminent status in his *Bhagavan-nāma-kaumudī,* a text that was quoted appreciatively by Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, chp. 3).

[41] In his commentary on the first verse of the *Bhāgavata,* Lakṣmīdhara employs and defends a panoply of Advaita concepts, including *bimba-pratibimba, vivarta, anirvacanīya, mithyā-jagat,* and *cid-eka-rasa.* See Venkatkrishnan (2018) for a full discussion of Lakṣmīdhara's engagement with Advaita Vedānta as well as other salient features of his commentary.

[42] The relationship between Lakṣmīdhara and Śrīdhara is not entirely clear. Venkatkrishnan notes that, among other confluences, "the first chapter of the BNK [*Bhagavan-nāma-kaumudī*] can be considered an elaboration of Śrīdhara's brief and scattered comments on the power of the divine name into a full-fledged theology" (Venkatkrishnan 2015a, p. 72). On the hand, Lakṣmīdhara's *Amṛta-taraṅginī* commentary, Venkatkrishnan says elsewhere (Venkatkrishnan 2018, p. 55), "seems to show no awareness of *Śrīdhara's* writing whatsoever."

[43] For a detailed discussion of the role of *mahāvākyas* in Jīva Gosvāmī's theology, see Aleksandar Uskokov (Uskokov 2018).

[44] *Bhāgavata* 1.3.28: *ete cāṁśa-kalāḥ puṁsaḥ kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayamindrāri-vyākulaṁ lokaṁ mṛḍayanti yuge yuge*

[45] *kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān nārāyaṇa eva āviṣkṛta-sarvaśaktitvāt sarveṣāṁ prayojanam*

identify the referent as Śeṣaśāyī, the Lord who lies upon the serpent Śeṣa, calling him the *mūla-rūpī*, the original form.[46] There is no interpretive space here for a Caitanya Vaiṣṇava commentator.

We could point to other elements in Śrīdhara's theology that make him appealing to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas, such as his discussion of the power of Kṛṣṇa's name in the Ajāmila episode,[47] or the beginnings of a theory of *bhakti-rasa* in his commentary on *Bhāgavata* 10.43.17.[48] But in the interest of space, we shall limit ourselves to one final observation about Śrīdhara's commentarial method that may explain his appeal not just among Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas but among readers of the *Bhāgavata* more generally.

Despite the theological choices and innovations we have documented above—that demonstrate Śrīdhara's creative voice as a commentator—his exegetical method is more restrained than most commentators who succeed him. Śrīdhara's word definitions and grammatical parses tend to be what one would suspect on a first reading of the verse, with little recourse to obscure etymologies or creative resolutions of *sandhi*. The alternative interpretations, beginning with *yad vā,* that so delight later *Bhāgavata* commentators are less frequent in the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*, even when there is ambiguity in grammar or *sandhi*. Take, for example, the second verse of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that we examined above. Vīrarāghava and Vijayadhvaja give several alternate explanations of words throughout the verse,[49] placing it carefully within the theological frameworks of their own traditions, and thus both commentators have much to say on this important verse. Śrīdhara, on the other hand, offers an alternative gloss to but a single word and does not acknowledge any ambiguity in *sandhi.* This makes his comments relatively short (although still rather long by his own standard). Śrīdhara's creative exegesis and theological digressions become even less frequent and more limited in scope as we move further into the Purāṇa. There are, of course, exceptions to Śrīdhara's typical brevity and exegetical restraint, most obviously in his commentary on the *Bhāgavata's* first verse,[50] where he offers alternative interpretations of several words, along with two ways to resolve the *sandhi* of *trisargomṛṣā*.[51] But even here, Śrīdhara is remarkably restrained compared to most other commentators, who sometimes offer multiple, unrelated interpretations of the entire verse, spanning several pages. Indeed, the first verse receives some of the longest and most complex commentaries of any verse in the *Bhāgavata*.

We can offer one more example of Śrīdhara's commentarial restraint, from Book 3, chapters 15–16 of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—the story of Jaya and Vijaya's fall from grace. Jaya and Vijaya serve as Viṣṇu's attendants, guarding the innermost gates of Vaikuṇṭha. When the four child-sages, the Kumāras,

[46] Another interesting feature of Vijayadhvaja's commentary on this verse is that he explicitly rejects the possibility of gradations of *avatāras* (as Śrīdhara outlines) as well as simultaneous difference and nondifference between the Lord and the *avatāras* (as the Caitanya theologians claim for certain kinds of *avatāras*). Rather, Vijayadhvaja insists that all *avatāras* are nondifferent from each other and from the *avatārī*, the original Lord Viṣṇu. The relevant portion of his commentary on 1.3.28 runs as follows: *ete śeṣa-śāyinaḥ parama-puruṣasya svāṁśa-kalāḥ svarūpāṁśāvatāraḥ na tatrāṁśāṁśināṁ bhedaḥ pratibimbāṁśavat. kiṁ uktaṁ bhavati. kṛṣṇo megha-śyāmaḥ śeṣa-śāyī mūla-rūpī padma-nābho bhagavān svayaṁ tu svayam eva na śākhiśākhāvat bhedābhedopīti bhāvaḥ.*

[47] See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Book Six, chapters 1–3, for the story of Ajāmila's life and near-death experience. Gupta and Valpey (2016, chp. 13) provide an overview of multiple commentaries on this episode, focusing on the commentators' discussion of the power of the divine names.

[48] *Bhāgavata* 10.43.17 describes the different ways in which Kṛṣṇa was perceived when he entered Kaṁsa's wrestling arena in Mathurā. In his commentary on this verse, Śrīdhara immediately introduces the concept of *rasa*: "Bhagavān, who is the embodiment of the multitude of all *rasas* beginning with amorous love, appeared in accordance with the wishes of each person there, and not in his fullness to everyone. . . . The *rasas* which were manifest in the wrestlers and members of the audience are delineated in order by this verse, '[The *rasas* are] wrath, wonder, amorous love, mirth, heroism, compassion, terror, disgust, tranquility, and devotion (*bhakti*) with love (*prema*).'"

[49] For example, Vīrarāghava writes: *yad vā matsara-śabdaḥ kāmādīnāṁ pradarśanārthaḥ śama-damādy-upetānāṁ mumukṣūṇāṁ dharmaḥ.* (*Bhāgavata* 1.1.2). See note 39 above for other relevant portions of Vijayadhvaja's commentary on *Bhāgavata* 1.1.2.

[50] As mentioned above, Śrīdhara's commentary on the Śruti-stuti (*Bhāgavata* Book Ten, chapter 87) is also unusually long and complex.

[51] The *sandhi* of *trisorgomṛṣā* can be resolved as *trisargaḥ mṛṣā* "the threefold creation is false," and *trisargaḥ amṛṣā* "the threefold creation is not false." This, of course, has significant theological ramifications, and Śrīdhara incorporates both interpretations into his comments.

arrive at these gates seeking to see the Lord, the gatekeepers turn them away, not recognizing the boys' greatness. The sages become angry and curse the gatekeepers to fall to earth and take three successive births as demonic enemies of Viṣṇu. Jaya and Vijaya instantly recognize their folly and repent, as Viṣṇu hastens to the scene to resolve the situation and give the sages what they had longed for—an audience with the Lord. At this point, the sages also feel deeply remorseful for their angry behavior, but Viṣṇu is unperturbed; he reassures both sides that all this was part of his divine plan. He asks Jaya and Vijaya to accept the curse and requests the sages to ensure that the gatekeepers' return to Vaikuṇṭha is swift.[52]

The story of Jaya and Vijaya's fall from Vaikuṇṭha has intrigued commentators because it demonstrates what is said to be impossible—a liberated devotee of God falling from his divine abode to earth. This is the question that occupies commentators: Did Jaya and Vijaya truly deserve to be cursed and to fall from their posts in heaven? Who is to blame for their cursing—the four child-sages, the gatekeepers, Viṣṇu himself, or some combination of the three parties? The *Bhāgavata* itself incriminates different individuals at various points in the story, and the commentators duly acknowledge the text's attributions of guilt. But each commentator also has his own sense of what went wrong and who is truly at fault. Vallabhācārya, for example, makes note of the fact that although Vaikuṇṭha has seven gates, the sages were able to pass through six without difficulty.[53] The first six gates represent Viṣṇu's six excellences—majesty, strength, fame, beauty, wisdom, and renunciation—which the sages were qualified to perceive. But the Kumāras did not possess the quality necessary to enter the seventh gate, namely *bhakti*. Thus, even before the sages have uttered any curse, Vallabha makes it clear that the sages did not deserve to be there, and so the gatekeepers cannot truly be blamed for obstructing their path.[54] Nevertheless, the gatekeepers were not entirely innocent, says Vallabha, for they harbored pride in their status as the Lord's attendants, and pride is the characteristic quality of demons.

The other Vaiṣṇava commentators tend to be less critical of the sages at the outset, but they too shift their sympathies to Jaya and Vijaya later in the story. Jīva takes the word *avadhārya* ("ascertained") to indicate that the gatekeepers had not recognized the four naked boys and thus their offense was unintentional. Vijayadhvaja says that the gatekeepers' immediate repentance shows that they were not at fault.[55] When Viṣṇu beseeches the sages to make his attendants' exile short, the Vaiṣṇava commentators note the Lord's heartfelt concern for his devotees. When Viṣṇu finally takes blame upon himself, by claiming that he ordained the curse, Viśvanātha declares that both sides were faultless, since the entire event was set into motion by the Lord for the purpose of intensifying his loving relationships with his devotees.

All throughout the episode, Śrīdhara seems not to have a stake in the argument. He sticks closely to the *Bhāgavata's* explicit attribution of guilt, emphasizing the sages' qualification and the

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52 The story of Jaya and Vijaya is one of the few narratives to be told twice within the *Bhāgavata*, in Books Three and Seven. In its second iteration, the story serves as part of an answer to the question of whether God behaves partially when he kills some and saves others. Kṛṣṇa's slaying of the hateful king Śiśupāla, we are assured, was in fact a blessing in disguise, because Śiśupāla was one of the two gatekeepers, and this was his last birth on earth as a demon. But this explanation of Śiśupāla's death simply pushes the question further back in time—did Jaya and Vijaya truly deserve to be cursed and to fall from their posts in heaven? This is the question that interests commentators in their commentaries on the Jaya-Vijaya episode.

53 See Vallabha's remarkable commentary on *Bhāgavata* 3.15.27: "Here the sages passed through six gates without lingering, but at the seventh they saw two celestial beings holding clubs. Both were of equal age and they were beautifully dressed with the most excellent crowns, earrings, and armlets."

54 But what do we make of the *Bhāgavata's* statement, in 3.15.31, that the sages were most deserving (*svarhattamāḥ)* of visiting Vaikuṇṭha? Vallabha explains that because the sages were *jñānīs* (men of wisdom), they were certainly more deserving than mere ascetics or others with good behavior. Even for them, however, entering the Lord's private chambers would have been a major transgression (presumably because they were not yet devotees, as discussed above), and allowing this to happen would have been a mistake on the part of the gatekeepers. To protect both sides from this offense, the sages were forbidden entry into the Lord's private chamber.

55 See Jīva's and Vijayadhvaja's commentaries on *Bhāgavata* 3.15.35. The verse is as follows: "When the sages uttered these terrible words, the gatekeepers realized [*avadhārya]* that this was a *brāhmaṇa's* curse, which cannot be counteracted by any number of weapons. The servants of Hari became very fearful and immediately fell to the ground, grasping the sages' feet in desperation."

gatekeepers' mistake.[56] When the text says that the gatekeepers' conduct was displeasing to the Lord, every commentator must explain why it was displeasing. Śrīdhara simply looks to the next chapter, where the fault is identified as disrespect of *brāhmaṇas*.[57] He moves with the narrative, apportioning blame as it is handed out by the text—first to the gatekeepers for insulting *brāhmaṇas* (3.15.30), then to the sages for cursing two sinless persons (3.16.25), and finally to Viṣṇu for making this part of his masterplan (3.16.26). Śrīdhara makes little attempt to harmonize these conflicting accounts of culpability and causality, focusing instead on the verse at hand and its immediate narrative context.[58]

5. Conclusions

We have explored the question "Why Śrīdhara?" from two directions. First, we asked, "What was it about early Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology that made it amenable to Śrīdhara Svāmī?" and second, "What was it about Śrīdhara that made his work so attractive to Caitanya Vaiṣṇava authors (and a wide variety of other commentators)?" As we attempted to answer these questions, we saw the historical and theological confluences that made Śrīdhara Svāmī and the Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas residents of a shared religious landscape, while carefully noting the boundaries between them. We also studied Śrīdhara Svāmī's distinctive commentarial voice, often presenting itself in paradoxical forms—his creativity as an exegete alongside his restraint, his focus on Kṛṣṇa together with his theological fluidity, and his insistence on following the flow of the text along with his resistance to harmonizing it.

There is a conversation in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* that is worth noting here, for it indirectly points to these facets of Śrīdhara's method. A Vaiṣṇava named Vallabha Bhaṭṭa visits Caitanya and expresses his dissatisfaction with the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā*: "I cannot accept Śrīdhara's explanations. He explains things by accepting whatever he reads wherever he reads it. There is no consistency [in his explanations], and therefore I do not accept him as the master (*svāmī*)." (3.113–114). Although couched as a criticism here, these features of Śrīdhara's work—attention to a verse's context, little attempt at achieving theological consistency, the lack of an easily-identifiable theological system, reticence toward conspicuous exegetical creativity, and the resulting brevity—have helped make his commentary virtuously synonymous with the plain sense of the *Bhāgavata* in the eyes of later authors.

And yet there is commentarial play in Śrīdhara's conservative method—a willingness to dance between opposing poles of dualism and nondualism, to push the boundaries of *sampradāya*, to dabble in emerging theories of *bhakti-rasa*, to follow the *Bhāgavata's* narratives wherever they might lead. That playfulness allows Śrīdhara to write a lucid commentary and himself remain an enigma, to be claimed by all and belong to none. Perhaps Jīva was right in comparing Śrīdhara's commentary to a casket of jewels, hiding a *cintāmaṇi* gem from the eyes of all who were indifferent to its value.[59] For whether one followed Śrīdhara's lead or resisted him, indifference, it seems, was not an option.

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56 See *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* 3.15.30 and 3.16.26.

57 *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* 3.15.30: *vāta-raśanān nagnān vṛddhān api pañca-varṣa-bālakavat pratīyamānān. ca-kārād ājñayā ca. askhalayatāṁ nivāritavantau. na tat skhalanam arhantīti tathā tān. aho atrāpi dhārṣṭyam ity evaṁ teṣāṁ tejo vihasya. bhagavato brahmaṇya-devasya pratikūlaṁ śīlaṁ yayoḥ.*

58 In our attempt to determine the reasons for Śrīdhara's influence, we might note another fruitful area of inquiry, namely, the social networks that conveyed the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* across much of the subcontinent less than a century after its composition, drawing the attention of those who were his near-contemporaries, such as Bahirā Jātaveda in Maharashtra and Vijayadhvaja Tīrtha in the south. At present, we know precious little about the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā's* socio-political context, its precise location of origin, or the intellectual networks that drew texts and their authors from Orissa (where the *Bhāvārtha-dīpikā* was presumably composed) to other parts of the subcontinent. We hope further research will shed light on these questions, although they lie outside the scope of this article.

59 See Okita (2014, p. 103).

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Article

'Locating Viṣṇupriyā in the Tradition': Women, Devotion, and Bengali Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Times

Santanu Dey

Department of History, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math (An Autonomous College under University of Calcutta), Howrah 711202, India; sd.history@vidyamandira.ac.in

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Abstract: This article tries to map the gender element in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism by focusing on the evolution of the image of Viṣṇupriyā, Caitanya's second wife, as it progressed from the pre-colonial hagiographic tradition to the novel theorization of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā dual worship in the colonial period. It explores the varied ways in which certain segments of educated Bengali intelligentsia actively involved in reassessing Vaiṣṇavism in colonial times disseminated the idea that Viṣṇupriyā was not just a symbol of unwavering devotion, of resolute penance, and (after Caitanya's death) of ideal widowhood, but also deserved to be worshiped by Bengalis along with Caitanya as a divine couple. The article contends that while the ways of biographic imaging of Viṣṇupriyā reveals the fissures and frictions within the colonial Vaiṣṇava reform process, it also highlights various continuities with pre-colonial strands of Vaiṣṇava thought.

Keywords: Bengal; Vaiṣṇava; colonial; gender; women; Srīkanḍa; *gaura nāgara vāda*; Viṣṇupriyā

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1. Introduction

Bengali Vaiṣṇavism evolved as a heterogeneous and plural religious tradition that drew its primary, although not exclusive, inspiration from the medieval *bhakti* saint ŚrīKṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533), also known locally as Viśvāmbhar, Nimāi, Gaura, and Gaurāṅga. Over the course of the last half a millennium or so, Bengali Vaiṣṇavism has emerged and sustained itself as one of the most popular religious strands within Bengal beside the mélange of Śaiva–Śākta–Tāntrika belief systems. Yet, the exact ways in which female saints, female believers, and feminity as a whole have been conceptualized within the theology, belief, ritual performance, and praxis of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism suffers from lacuna and is an area that warrants historiographical attention.[1] There exists ample historical data in *pānda* or temple servitor records and the colonial archives to show that large numbers of Bengali women from the medieval period onwards adhered to Vaiṣṇava rituals, participated in festivities, went on pilgrimages and even relocated to Vṛndāvana in north India to spend their widowed lives. However, despite this almost ubiquitous historical presence, academic study on female saints, personalities, and believers in general within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava movement has, barring a few exceptions, been

[1] The role and position of women in the evolution and functioning of religious cults and traditions across the world has been a fruitful area of research under the genre of gender and feminist history. Over the course of the last half a century or so, there have been fascinating studies on several aspects of gender and its intermeshing within varied religious traditions of South Asia. Some scholars have tried to explore the role of goddesses and women broadly within the Hindu tradition (Wadley 1977; Leslie 1992; Patton 2002; Khandelwal 2004; Pinchtman 2007; Pauwels 2008; and Bose 2010) and on some distinct institutions such as the *devadāsi* system of temple-based female servitude (Kersenboom-Story 1987). Others have done focused research on the emergence of female voices within the early medieval South Asian *bhakti* outpourings such as by Andal and Akka Mahādevī, and also in the medieval devotional movements of North India by the Varkari *santakaviyatris* of Maharashtra and by Mirabai (Kamaliah 1977; Daheja 1990; Ramaswamy 2000; Hawley 2012; and Daukes 2014). Women mystics and Sufi shrines in India have been studied by others (Pemberton 2010). In the colonial period, several women-centric guru cults began to proliferate, and these have been studied at some length by researchers (Hallstrom 1999; Warrier 2005).

conspicuous by its absence (Brezezinski 1996, pp. 59–86; Chakrabarti 2002, pp. 85–95; Manring 2005, pp. 193–219; Ray 2014, pp. 285–303; and Bandyopadhyay 2015).[2]

This paper explores one facet of the gender element in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism by mapping the ways in which Viṣṇupriyā, Caitanya's second wife, was viewed over the course of several centuries from the early modern to the modern period. I attempt to look at how she figures in some of the early modern hagiographies of the tradition and the multiple ways in which her life was constructed through numerous *padas* (poems), Sanskrit *stotras* or eulogies, journalistic essays, theatrical plays, biographies, rituals, and icon-making by educated *bhadralok* intellectuals in colonial Bengal. The idea that the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the resurgence of a reformist spirit among educated Bengali Vaiṣṇavas who reassessed the regional Vaiṣṇava legacy in new ways has gained importance among recent scholars (Yati Maharaj 1980; Fuller 2003; Dey 2015; Bhatia 2017; and Sardella and Wong 2020). It seems that manuscript collection drives across rural Bengali households in the late nineteenth century led to the 'discovery' of hitherto-unknown Vaiṣṇava manuscripts, as well as new versions of known manuscripts, and their subsequent publication by the printing presses began to satiate readers' reading appetites. Academic as well as religious interest among a large section of Bengali Hindu middle classes led to an ever-increasing printing drive that involved the publication of periodicals, books, lithographic paintings, etc. Within this literary public space, the dissemination of religious literature, especially through Vaiṣṇava hagiographies and biographies of almost all major and minor personalities connected to the on Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition, attained a sense of urgency (Dey 2015, pp. 113–93). The modes through which images of Viṣṇupriyā were circulated in the public domain in colonial Bengal included the specifically modernist instruments of print and literary journalism[3] on the one hand, and the urban performative stage where dramas were staged, on the other. On the whole, there seems to have been a broad transition of Viṣṇupriyā from an incidental and scattered mention in the hagiographical corpus of the early modern era to a much more nuanced and sympathetic concern for her worth within the tradition by the Bengali Vaiṣṇava propagators of the colonial era. Building upon the information available in pre-colonial source materials, these modern biographies on Viṣṇupriyā began to connect, collate, and expand her life-story as a pious woman imbued with divinity. Some even went to the extent of consecrating *yugal-murtis* or idols of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā as a deity-couple, thereby propagating her worship along with Caitanya as a divine pair and as His eternal counterpart. By the mid 1930s, Viṣṇupriyā made it to the pages of a book on ideal women of India—alongside the devotional *bhakti* proponent Mirābāi (1498–1556), the eighteenth century Maratha Queen Āhilyābāi Holkar (1725–95), and the nineteenth century Bengali zamindari scion Rānī Rāśmoṇi (1793–1861)—for her exemplary dedication (Mukhopadhyay 1935, pp. 11–25). A similar historicizing impulse can be seen in another twentieth century work which tried to construct a historical chronology for Viṣṇupriyā where none existed within the sacred literature[4].

What contributed to this increased currency and prominence of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā conjugal worship at the cusp of the twentieth century? What does this reveal about the nature of the colonial Vaiṣṇava legacy? By looking at Viṣṇupriyā in the backdrop of the colonial Vaiṣṇava reform process, I

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[2] For instance, we are yet to read a sustained research on how Bengali Vaiṣṇava personalities like Caitanya and his disciples interacted with women or how women were portrayed within Vaiṣṇava scriptures and hagiographical literature in the same way as gender has been studied in other major religious traditions. Such studies have been done with regard to other religious traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Harris 1984; Heger 2014; Jardim 2014).

[3] It is curious to note that several Vaiṣṇava journals carried feminine appellations such as *Śrī Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā, Vaiṣṇava Saṅginī, Vaiṣṇava Sevikā, Sajjan Toṣanī, Śrī Śrī Viṣṇupriyā -Gaurāṅga*, etc., which not only reflected traditional notions of Vaiṣṇava humility and selfless service towards the Vaiṣṇava community, but also tried to conform to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theological principles of *Rāgānuga bhakti*, according to which devotees adopt a feminine love relation to god as the highest form of divine adoration (Dey 2020b, p. 32).

[4] The *Vaiṣṇava Digdarśiṇī*, which tried to construct a historical chronology of lives and events within the Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition in the early twentieth century, mentioned 1496 as the year of Viṣṇupriyā's birth. Viṣṇupriyā was considered as Satyabhama in Śrī Kṛṣṇa Līlā, and her father Sanātana Miśra was King Satrājit during Brajalīlā. In a similar manner it placed 1505 as the date her marriage to Caitanya and 1510 as the date of his saṃnyāsa (Adhikari 1925, pp. 29, 37, 48).

try to engage, albeit in a tentative and tangential manner, with the vexed yet enmeshed dynamics of gender, sexuality, love, and affection within the Bengali Vaiṣṇava movement. Through an exposition of the Śrīkhanḍa and the Bāghnāpāḍā traditions in the early modern era, the second section will show how these heterodox schools of thought within Bengali Vaiṣṇavism conceptualized devotion to Caitanya and the ways in which their theological imaginings diverged from the mainstream. The third section will discuss the early images about Viṣnupriyā as it emerged in the pre-colonial sacred biographical literature, including those put forward by members of the Śrīkhanḍa group. The fourth section contextualizes the emergence of Viṣnupriyā as a biographical subject in the colonial times in the midst of varied controversial debates within Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions. Contemporary discourses regarding the supposed degeneration of Vaiṣṇava society as a result of the infusion of slack sexual mores will also be mapped. The final section probes the modes and processes through which *yugal-arcanā*, or the worship of Gaura–Viṣnupriyā as a deity couple, was theorized by Haridās Gosvāmī, the most vociferous proponent of this ideal will be analyzed. This section will identify the ways in which pre-colonial notions were altered, remolded, and recast in a colonial milieu.

Scholarly reassessments of Vaiṣṇava traditions during colonial times have generally been analyzed from binary standpoints; between western-educated/modernist versus traditionalist prisms (Fuller 2005), and between conservative Gauḍīya versus devotional nationalistic perspectives (Bhatia 2017). Drawing upon and expanding existing research that seeks to problematize reassessments of Vaiṣṇavism as a coming together of *bhadralok* concerns that substantiated and validated pre-colonial conservative Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava normativity (Wong 2018; Dey 2020a), I contend, although from a slightly different perspective, that prioritizing the Gaura–Viṣnupriyā image in the public sphere in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal by some proponents such as Haridās Gosvāmī was a deeply contested process. It not only provided scope for the deification of a historical persona alongside Caitanya, but apparently, also raised uncomfortable ethical and doctrinal challenges to normative Vaiṣṇava perspectives by reifying and selectively revitalizing patently non-conformist perspectives, especially those belonging to the Śrīkhanḍa and Bāghnāpāḍā schools from pre-colonial times. The Gaura–Viṣnupriyā hypothesis of the colonial era also brought to the fore many unresolved controversies from the pre-colonial times. These controversies—for instance, the long-standing schism over the doctrinal primacy of *Svakīya* versus *Parakīya* love, or questions pertaining to the extent of predominance to be accorded to Caitanya's divine personality (which in turn was connected to schisms regarding the legitimacy of *Gauramantra* or an independent ritual basis for Caitanya for purposes of initiation)—had been simmering for centuries within the layers of the tradition. One may contend that these old issues gripped Bengali Vaiṣṇava followers of the colonial period in new ways and led to formulations being put forward in a new garb and for a new time. It is relevant to bring the history of such debates, discordant voices, and ruptures within the academic ambit for a deeper understanding of the transformative tendencies within Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions in colonial times.

2. Vaiṣṇava Theology, Hagiographies, and Diverse Imaginings of Devotional Love: Śrīkhanḍa and Bāghnāpāḍā Schools

Bengali Vaiṣṇava culture as it emerged over the course of the early modern period was a surprisingly literate culture with a vast array of theological scriptures, ritual treatises, sacred biographies, and numerous verse compositions (*padas*) for use in congregational *kirtana* songs. Texts were initially produced mostly in Bengali and Sanskrit in Bengal by local disciples of Caitanya or his acolytes such as Vṛndāvana Dās, Jayānanda, Locana Dās, Kavikarṇapūra, and Murārī Gupta among others. In the sixteenth century, numerous theological and ritual texts in Sanskrit and Brajabhāṣā (a mixed variant spoken in the Braja region of Mathura-Vṛndāvana) began to be written in Vṛndāvana by the group of six Gosvāmīs—Sanātana, Rupa, Jīva, Raghunāth Bhaṭṭa, Gopāl Bhaṭṭa, and Raghunāth Dās. Indeed, the distribution and copying of manuscripts formed an indispensable element of its history, and its scriptures are replete with examples of what may be called a culture of literacy. Cultures of literacy and circulation of texts and ideas were quite developed even in the pre-print era in different parts

of Islamicate South Asia (Pollock 2006 and Ganeri 2011). Pollock contends that the 'distribution of scholarly works demonstrates unequivocally that as late as the early eighteenth century, in the disciplines where Sanskrit intellectuals continued to maintain control, old networks of vast circulation and readership were as yet intact' (Pollock 2001, p. 413). Perhaps, the case was not very different for the copying and circulation of Vaiṣṇava manuscripts written in middle Bengali or Brajabhāṣā. Scholars have identified in this proclivity towards manuscript publication and transmission of texts in pre-colonial times an attempt at community cohesion whereby a loosely integrated Vaiṣṇava society aspired to acquire standardization with regard to theology and rituals (O'Connell 2000). Tony Stewart has convincingly demonstrated how the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja became a model form—the 'final word', so to say—for binding the community of believers (Stewart 1999, p. 53). The fact that very little textual variation exists in the extant copies of this text across India shows that Vaiṣṇava textual transmission was of an unusually high order. As Vaiṣṇava texts were written, copied, and circulated among groups across Eastern and Northern India, some texts like the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* acquired centrality within the tradition.[5]

Pre-modern cultures of literacy, however, did not offer the means or perhaps access to produce texts by anyone and everyone.[6] While the existence of an entrenched societal hierarchy meant that Brahmins retained a privileged access to literacy, it was not an entirely closed system.[7] Even when manuscripts were written by individuals, their circulation and acceptance by others within the tradition depended on a high level of authorial competence. Such competence derived not merely from one's literary and linguistic skills, but also upon one's aesthetic knowledge and appropriate theological grounding, what may be termed as a sort of religious *weltanschauung*. It was a combination of these qualities that enabled a text to attain legitimate status among territorially scattered groups of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas. There are several instances when texts written by disciples were rejected by others for their supposed 'incorrect' interpretation.

Bengali Vaiṣṇavism accords primacy to the idea of passionate devotion. In the scale of devotion, an elaborate schema of five successive stages was worked out by Vaiṣṇava theologians—beginning with *śānta* (quiet meditation), through the *dāsya*, *sākhya*, and *vātsalya*, or the emotional realisation of servant, friend, and parent, respectively, until with ever-deepening feeling one is swept into a passionate ardour of *mādhurya* or loving sweetness of passion for the lover. The *bhāvas* or devotional moods exhibited by Caitanya were 'entextualized' by biographers in diverse ways, and these were later formalised by the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs. Kṛṣṇadās's achievement was that he rearranged the attitudes from, what Tony Stewart states, 'a horizontal continuum of equally possible forms of divinity to a graded hierarchy of preferred forms' (Stewart 2010, p. 102), that gave importance to *mādhurya bhāva* or mood of passionate love as the highest form of god realization.[8] Kṛṣṇadās's hypothesis of Caitanya as an androgynous synthesis of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa made the *mādhurya* element the 'hierarchically dominant' frame of reference for later theologians to imitate (Stewart 2010, p. 181). As recent researches about other theologians such as Kavikarṇapūra show, the rasa of love—the rasa of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa—is one of the most devotional moods, 'which is awakened in the devotee upon contemplating God's

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5 Tony Stewart considers that the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* became almost like a 'charter document' of the Vaiṣṇavas and became a 'tool for organizing the community'. This was because the book 'recognizes by name the major lineages central to the emerging group, identifies the biographies of Caitanya that were to be followed, provides synopses of the key Sanskrit works of Rupa and Jīva Goswamin and others in the Vaiṣṇava community . . . , and outlines the basis for all levels of ritual practice'.

6 Indeed, the author of a Vaiṣṇava work titled *Nabarādhātattva Nirūpan* by Narottam Dās instructs in a couplet that the manuscript is to be kept locked up, away from the prying eyes of the uninitiated: 'Let none but your disciples see this book, Hide it away and guard it as preciously as your life' (Bhattacharya 1981, p. 26).

7 Even among the six Gosvāmī theologians at Vṛndāvana Raghunāth Dās was a kayastha who hailed from a rich landholding zamindari family of Saptagram in the Hooghly district of Bengal.

8 The *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* unequivocally states that *mahābhāva* or the supreme emotion is the quintessence of *prema* or love (*CC Madhya lilā*, *8*). However, it was also quick to distinguish that love and lust are completely different: 'The signs of *kāma* and *prema* are different, as iron and gold are different in their true natures. Desire, love for satisfaction of one's own senses—this is called *kāma*. But the desire for the satisfaction of the senses of Kṛṣṇa—this has the name *prema*' (*CC Adi. 4.140–141*).

non-worldly worldly play' (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 176). The idea of embodiment is regarded as critical within various *bhakti* traditions (Prentiss 1999; Holdrege 2015; Hardy 1983). *Viraha bhakti* in particular, is regarded by Friedhelm Hardy as an 'aesthetic-erotic-ecstatic mysticism of separation' (Hardy 1983, pp. 36–43). Within Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava traditions, there exists a distinction between *prakaṭ līlā* (manifest play) where *gopīs* of Vṛndāvana lament the agony of separation from Kṛṣṇa and the *aprakaṭ* or *nitya līlā* (un-manifest but eternal play) which allows them to eternally remain united with Kṛṣṇa as expressions of his *hlādinī-śakti*. This allowed theologians such as Jīva Gosvāmī in his *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* and *Ujjvalanīlamaṇi* to pattern Gauḍīya devotion through the visualization of an eternal embodiment in *vigrahas* (idols), *parikaras* (servants), *līlās* (sports), and *dhāmas* (sacred abodes) (De 1961, pp. 166–224; Holdrege 2015). A fuller exposition of the intricacies of rasa and stages of devotion within Bengali Vaiṣṇava theology is beyond the scope of the present paper.

In terms of belief and faith, there existed a variety of alternatives among the varied segments of Caitanya's followers, ranging from the *Gaura nāgara vādīs* (who worshipped Caitanya in the spirit of the Gopī's love for Kṛṣṇa) propagated by Narahari Sarkār and his disciple Locana Dās of Śrīkhaṇḍa in the Burdwan District of Bengal; the *Gaurapāramya vādīs* (belief in the divinity of Caitanya as the supreme godhead) propagated by Gadādhar; the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmī tradition of *Kṛṣṇa pāramya vāda* (belief in the supreme godhead of Kṛṣṇa) (Kennedy 1925, pp. 149–52; Majumdar 1959, pp. 178–79; Sanyal 1985 and Stewart 2010, pp. 99–105) and the Sahajīyā Vaiṣṇava notions of physical sexo-yogic union (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 113–46; Dimock 1966, pp. 1–40). Among these, the strand represented by Narahari Sarkār, an elder contemporary of Caitanya (who became a leader in his own right) who worshipped Caitanya as a *nāgara* or paramour of the women of Navadvīpa and was regarded by the group as a personification of Madhumati (one among the eight primary associates of Rādhā) (Ṭhākur 1954, pp. 99–101). This perspective came to be known by the interchangeable terms *gaura nāgara vāda* and *nadīyā nāgara vāda*, while the attitude itself was referred to as *gaura nāgara bhāva* and *nadīyā nāgarī bhāva*, and the proponents of this view were termed *gaura nāgara vādī* and *nadīyā nāgara vādī.* Narahari composed a large number of songs in which the libidinous conduct of the ladies of Navadvīpa at the sight of Caitanya is highlighted (Ṭhākur 1954, pp. 51–61). In the *Madhya Khaṇḍa* of his *Caitanya maṅgala*, Locana Dās elaborated the physical attributes of Caitanya in an explicit form and also portrayed the intense desires that it aroused among the women of Nadiya:

> 'Who churned that nectar to make the butter out of which was fashioned Lord Gaura's body? Who kneaded and strained the nectar of the worlds to fashion the love Lord Gaura feels? Who, mixing together the yogurt of infatuation and the nectar of love, fashioned Lord Gaura's pair of eyes? Who, gathering the sweetest honey, fashioned Lord Gaura's soft words and sweet smile-filled speech? Who, stirring together many flooding streams of sweet nectar, fashioned Gaura's golden complexion? Who, gathering together the froth of the sweet liquid, fashioned Lord Gaura's limbs? Who anointed Gaura's limbs with the paste of lightning? Who anointed Gaura's face with the paste of moon [light]? Which sculptor fashioned Gaura's wonderful form from the clay of exquisite handsomeness? Overwhelmed by the fragrance of the lotus flowers that are Gaura's hands and feet, the shining moon on all full-moon nights weeps. The twenty nails on Gaura's fingers and toes fill the world with light, the light that gives sight to persons blind from birth. I have never countenanced such an enchanting and lovable Gaura. Gazing at His form men assume the nature of women and weep! How could women tie up their hearts [and resist loving Gaura]? Whose heart is not delighted by Gaura's playful pastimes, which is the sweetest nectar of all nectars? Who anointed Gaura's face with the paste of amorous playfulness? Unable to see His face, I weep. Who didn't draw on Gaura's forehead the rainbow with sandalwood paste? All married women, whether ugly or beautiful, yearned to touch Gaura's form. They adorned the temple of their love with jewels. Seeing Gaura's playful pastimes, these women, overcome with desire, weep. They cannot always gaze on Him, even from the corners of their eyes, yet their eyes flutter like birds to see Gaura. Understanding their thirst to gaze at Him and fulfil their desires graceful Gaura walks

very slowly. Even women of respectable households flee from their homes, the lame run and even atheists and offenders sing Gaura's glories. Rolling on the ground everyone weeps, no one is able to stay peaceful and composed. Gaura's glories have unlimited sweetness! Some run out to see Him; others embrace each other in the bliss of spiritual love, while others dance and laugh in wild abandon. Attracted by the breeze bearing the fragrance of Gaura's form women of respectable families encourage all to rush to see Him! The women of Nadiya weep as they gaze at Gaura's moon-like face streaming with tears. Their hearts became filled with love, with hairs of their bodies erect and their hearts always thinking about Gaura.' (Dās 1892, pp. 168–69)[9]

The Śrīkhaṇḍa group was an intensely devotional body of believers who believed in according more prominence to Navadvīpa than Vṛṇdāvana and to Caitanya than Kṛṣṇa within their narratives. This Śrīkhaṇḍa school seems to have been quite a large body consisting of members such as Jagadānanda Paṇḍit, Kāśī Miśra, Raghunandan (son of Narahari Sarkār's elder brother Mukundadās), Locana Dās, Puruṣottama, Vāsu Ghosh, Gadādhar Paṇḍit, Gadādhar Dās, Sivānanda Sen, and Kavikarṇapūra (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 191).[10] The suggestion that Kavikarṇapūra was part of the Śrīkhaṇḍa group, since in his *Gauragaṇoddeśadīpikā* he listed his father Sivānanda Sen in between Narahari Sarkār and Mukundadās (father of Raghunandan), has recently been contested. It is suggested that although Kavikarṇapūra may have had sympathies to Narahari's views early in his life, he 'does not refer often to Narahari and the Śrīkhaṇḍa group, and his drama does not contain any descriptions of Gadādhara and Caitanya's love nor any passages in which he depicts Caitanya as the object of amorous love' (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 54). Texts written by their adherents in the colonial period such as *Śrīkhanḍer Prācīna Vaiṣṇava* by Gaurguṇānanda Ṭhākur reaffirm that Caitanya invested Narahari Sarkār with the authority to spread the faith in the Śrīkhaṇḍa region (Ṭhākur 1954, pp. 25–26). It is regarded that Narahari and his brother Mukunda also enjoined upon the members of the Śrīkhaṇḍa group to follow certain ethical ideas such as looking upon every man as a friend, reform of sinners by acts of kindness, repudiation of vanity, egoism, and ambition, the practice of austerity, simplicity and non-violence, etc (Ṭhākur 1954, pp. 25–26). However, the libidinous exposition of Caitanya's godhead that was espoused by Narahari Sarkār was increasingly disapproved of by both Advaita and Nityānanda, and it seems that it was not followed in the same manner or intensity by Narahari's followers such as Ciranjīva Sen. But that did not stop the Śrīkhaṇḍa Vaiṣṇavas from spreading their *gaura nāgara vādī* ideal in the rural belt of Burdwan region in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Ṭhākur 1954; Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 198–200).[11] As Tony Stewart points out, the *gaura nāgara vādī* ideal 'would prove to be one of the very few instances in the early history of the movement that open conflict was recorded, and it would simmer quietly only to bubble up at critical junctures later in the tradition's history, never fully resolved' (Stewart 2010, p. 151).

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[9] *Amiyā mathiyā kebā, nabanī tuli go, tāhāte gaḍila Gora dehā / Jagat chaniyā kebā, rasa niṅgariche go, ek kaila sudhui sulehā // anurāger dadhi, premār saṅjana diyā, kebā pātiyāche āṅkhi dutī / tāhāte adhik mahu, lahu lahu kathā go, hāsiyā balaye guṭī guṭī // akhaṇda pījūṣa dhārā, ke nā āutila go, soṇār baraṇ haila cini / se cini māḍīyā kebā, pheṇī tulilā go, hena bāso Gorā-aṅga khāni // Bijūrī bṅaṭīyā kebā, gā khāni mājila go, cāṅd mājila mukh khāni // lābanya bṅaṭīyā kebā, cit nirmāṇ kaila, aparūpa premār balani / sakal pūrṇimār cāṅde, bikala haiyā kāṅde, kara pada padmer gaṅdhe / kuḍiṭī nakher chaṭā jagat ālā kaila go, āṅkhi pāila janamer āndhe // emon binodiyā Gora, kothāo dekhi je nāi, aparūp premār binode / Puruṣa prakṛti bhābe, kāṅdiyā ākul go, nāḍī kemane mon bāṅdhe // sakal raser rase vilāsa hṛdaya khāni, ke nā gaḍāila raṅga diyā / madan bṅaṭīyā kebā, badan gaḍila go, bini bhābe mo molu kāṅdiyā // Īndrer dhanukhāni, Gorār kapāle go ke nā dilā candaner rekhā / kūrūpā surūpā jata, kūler kāminī go, dui hāt kari cāhe patha // raṅger mandir khāni, nānā ratna diyā go, gaḍāila baḍa anuraṅge / līlāy binodkhelā, bhāber ābeśe go, alasala jvar jvar gāye // kūlabatī kūla chāṛe, paṅgu dhāola bhare, gūṇa gāye āsur pāṣṇḍa / dhūlāy lotāṅyā kāṅde, keha sthir nāhi bāṅdhe, Gorāgūṇa amiyā akhaṇḍa // dhāore dhāore bali, premānande kolākuli, keha nāce aṭṭa aṭṭa hāse / suśilā kūler bahu, se bale sakale jāu, Gorā-aṅga-rūper bātāse //.*

[10] Narahari, a member of the *vaidya* (physician) caste by birth, strongly advocated that Gadādhar and Caitanya represented the female and the male principle of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, respectively. This view contained within it homoerotic proclivities and became the kernel of a small sub-sect known as the Gadāi-Gaurāṅga sect (Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 190–91).

[11] In particular, Jāhnavā Devi, Nityānanda's second wife, was on working terms with Narahari Sarkār, Mukunda, and Raghunandan, and the sixteenth chapter of the *Prema-vilasa* states that she met them after returning to Bengal from Vṛṇdāvana (Dās 1891, pp. 130–31). It was on her suggestions that Srinivas Acarya was sent to Vṛṇdāvana.

Another major Vaiṣṇava center came up in the late sixteenth century in Bāghnāpāḍā area of Kalna in Burdwan district of Bengal. It was set up by Rāmachandra, the grandson of Vamśīvadana Chattopadhyay and foster-child of Jāhnavā, and thus shared a special relation with a line of the Nityānanda branch. As Ramakanta Chakrabarti contends, they developed a distinct theology which was linked to the ideas of the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs, but was at the same time aligned with a Tantrika-Sahajīyā overtone (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 257). The legends and theology of the Bāghnāpāḍā Vaiṣṇavas are elaborated in two apocryphal works known as the *Muralī vilāsa* of Rājaballabh Gosvāmī and *Vamśī Sikśā* of Premadās Miśra (Gosvāmī 1961 and Premadās Miśra n.d.). According to the *Vamśī Sikśā*, which is divided into four *ullāsas* or segments, Caitanya teaches Vamśīvadana the secrets of *Rasarāja* worship. It states that Caitanya had an *antaraṅga* (secret) form of devotion apart from the *bāhiraṅga* (external) prescriptions for the general public (Gosvāmī 1993, pp. 477–92).[12] The core of the *rasarāj* concept regards Kṛṣṇa as the supreme God who is the fount of all rasas. This internal worship consists of devotion towards the *Rasarāja* Kṛṣṇa who is *sat-cid-ānanda* (in eternal bliss), whereby he eternally savors his pleasures with Rādhā and the other gopīs who are His eternal wives (Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 257–74). Rādhā being Kṛṣṇa's *hlādinī-śakti* (the power which makes Kṛṣṇa relish pleasure) manifests the elements of *kampa* (tremors of love), *asru* (tears of love), *pulaka* (thrill of love), *stambha* (depths of love), *asphutavacana* (whispers of love), *unmād* (madness), and the like. As spelt out in the third *ullāsa,* Caitanya describes himself as *Rasarāja* Kṛṣṇa (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 270) and one who realizes this *Rasarāja* nature of Kṛṣṇa is the real *Rasika*. While some scholars have denounced these texts as later forgeries due to their numerous historical inconsistencies and Sahajīyā nature (Majumdar 1959, pp. 468–77), others contend that these were, in all probability, lineage-based interpretations of the theories propagated in the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (Gosvāmī 1993, p. 481; Chakrabarti 1985, pp. 266–67). While *Rasarāja* is a widely prevalent concept among the Sahajīyās and Bāuls of Bengal (Das 1992) and the language and vocabulary of the *Vamśī Sikśā,* especially its reference to *puruṣa-prakṛti* (Male and the female principles) and *linga-yoni* (male and the female reproductive organs) does seem to manifest a Tantrika/Sahajīyā symbolism, Ramakanta Chakrabarti opines that the use of the *Rasarāja* concept in the *Vamśī Sikśā* probably signified an attempt towards acculturation and accommodation of certain select Sahajīyā concepts within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology by a particular Vaiṣṇava circle (Chakrabarti 1985, p. 274). In the eighteenth century, Vaiṣṇava Sahajīyā theories were further developed in texts such as Ākiṅcana Dās's *Vivarta-vilāsa* (Gosvāmī 1993, pp. 497–520).

Over the course of the early modern period, several texts beginning with Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja's *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* and later by Narahari Chakrabarti's *Bhakti-ratnākar* and Nityānanda Dās' *Narottama vilās,* a standard form of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism—a 'brahmanically-aligned Vaiṣṇava normativity' (Wong 2018, p. 57) that was anti-Sahajīyā in outlook had come to be established. However, other interpretations, especially those of a Sahajīyā variety, remained in circulation despite their apparent marginalization from mainstream Bengali Vaiṣṇava currents. As Tony Stewart has shown, even with Kṛṣṇadās's strong guiding hand, 'some later theories did survive and follow their own line of development, producing results that Kṛṣṇadās probably never envisioned' (Stewart 2010, p. 59). Contrary to colonial accounts of the Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition that emphasise the diminishing importance of gosvāmī leadership in the post-*Bhakti-ratnākar* period (e.g., Kennedy 1925, pp. 76–77), there is evidence of a number of gosvāmī srıpats or centres with large popular followings until well into the colonial period. Referencing the cases of Śrīkhanḍa and Bāghnāpāḍā, Bhatia concludes: 'It seems obvious that some of these shripats flourished, gained disciples, ran schools, and became rich centres of Vaishnava doctrine and practice, by the mid-to late nineteenth century' (Bhatia 2017, p. 74). Let us now turn to the ways in which Viṣnupriyā was portrayed within the hagiographical literature of early modern Bengal.

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[12] *Bāhiraṅgabhāve harekrishna rām nām / pracārilā jagamājhe Gauraguṇadhām // Antaraṅgabhāve antaraṅga bhaktagaṇe / Rasarāj-upāsana karilā arpane //.*

3. Women and Vaiṣṇavism: Viṣnupriyā in Pre-Colonial Contexts

In the history of the Vaiṣṇava movement in Bengal, the followers of Caitanya were mostly married householders (such as Advaita, Nityānanda, most of the Gopālas, and Śrīnivāsa Ācārya, among others), and their preaching led numerous men and women to become natural followers of the tradition in vast swathes of rural Bengal from the sixteenth century onwards. However, there were also several adherents (such as the six *Gosvāmī* theologians at Vṛndāvana—namely, Sanātana, Rupa, Jīva, Raghunāth Bhaṭṭa, Gopāl Bhaṭṭa, and Raghunāth Dās—along with Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja, Narottama Dās, and others), who adhered to the ascetic ideal.[13] Theoretically at least, the Vaiṣṇava tradition does not valorize or discount one's marital status as a precondition for one's spiritual quest nor does it consider one's gender or social identity as a handicap in the path to salvation. Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* alone is considered as the *sine qua non* for a devotee. There is indeed no explicit mention in the scriptures debarring women from taking up *harināṃ*, and the graphic descriptions of congregational *sankīrtanas*, fairs, festivities (*mahotsavs*), and pilgrimages in the works of the medieval Vaiṣṇava hagiographers often show women participating in them with full vigor.

Within the hagiographic literature, however, we seldom come across individual women, apart from a few notable exceptions, aspiring for or attaining independent worth as female gurus within the tradition. However, there were many who indeed attained immense privilege and acclaim as Vaiṣṇava gurus in their own right. In this context, the most deserving names are those of Gangā Devī (daughter of Nityānanda and wife of a Brahman named Mādhavāchāryā who spread Vaiṣṇavism in parts of Bengal); Sītā Devī (wife of Advaita Ācāryā who rallied with her son Acyutānanda after the death of Advaita to provide leadership to the Advaita disciplic lineage at Shantipur in Nadiya and later became the subject of two texts, *Sitācaritra* by Viṣṇudās Ācārya and *Sitāguṇakadamba* by Lokenath Dās); Jāhnavā Devī (daughter of Suryadās Sarkhel and Nityānanda's second wife); Hemlatā Ṭhakurāni (daughter of Śrīnivāsa Ācāryā); and Mādhavī Devī (sister of the Odiya Vaiṣṇava Śikhi Māhiti). Among these personalities, Jāhnavā Devī perhaps went on to achieve the greatest fame as a leader of the sect for some time, and organized the crucial gatherings known as the Kheturī Māhotsavs. There were also some women poets among the early modern Bengali padavali writers such as Rāmi, Rasamoyī Dāsī, Dukhinī, Indumukhi, Sivā Sahacarī, and Mādhavi Dāsī (Banerjee 1994) who achieved some amount of distinction.

On the basis of a comparative survey of varied Bengali Vaiṣṇava scriptural/hagiographic narratives, Uma Bandyopadhyay suggests that noteworthy female Vaiṣṇavas in India numbered around sixty-nine, ninety-six, seventeen, ten, and thirty in the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and the nineteenth–twentieth century, respectively (Bandyopadhyay 2015).[14] As far as Caitanya's interactions with women are concerned, Amiya Sen contends that 'Caitanya related to women in various ways, depending upon their age or social standing' and while he didn't have inhibitions intermixing with older women (such as Mālinī Devī or Sītā Devī) or young girls of Navadvīpa, he maintained a self-conscious distance from adult women, especially after his ascetic vows (Sen 2019, pp. 141–42). Caitanya's reluctance to speak to or even meet women after his ascetic vows is indeed harped upon by the standard hagiographies. This may be illustrated by referring to specific textual examples. For instance, Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja in chapter two of the *Antya Līlā* of his *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* mentions how Caitanya chastised his ardent disciple Choto (Junior) Haridās for begging premium quality rice from Mādhavī Devī (sister of Śikhi Māhitī) at Puri.[15] Caitanya remained inflexible on the point of

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[13] Bimanbihari Majumdar estimates that almost fifty-four ascetics are mentioned in the hagiographies (Majumdar 1959, p. 568). The ascetic ideal itself is an extremely durable and resilient one within Indian traditions right from the Vedic times (Kaelber 1989; Olivelle 1992; Bronkhorst 1998; and Olson 2015).

[14] This statement, however, needs to be qualified by the fact that the mere mention of a female member in the textual sources, whether as mother, wife, sister, daughter, or relative or friend of an important male Vaiṣṇava does not automatically elevate her into a worthy initiated Vaiṣṇava.

[15] *Prabhu kahe vairāgi kare prakṛti-sambhāṣaṇ/dekhite nā pāri āmi tāhār badan //.*

punishment and did not relent despite the requests of his other disciples that finally led the forlorn Choto Haridās to give up his life at Prayag (modern Varanasi). Kṛṣṇadās extols this incident as an exemplary episode that 'led his disciples to give up conversation with women, even in their dreams' (Sen 2002, pp. 170–71).[16] Again, in chapter twelve of the *Antya Līlā* of the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, Kṛṣṇadās mentions that when Parameśvara Dās, a sweetmeat seller and a childhood acquaintance of Caitanya came to meet him at Puri along with his wife, Caitanya felt hesitant, although he did not express it openly out of love for his friend (Sen 2002, pp. 213–14).

However, several other sacred biographies show that Caitanya had not completely shunned his interactions with women. For instance, the *Saṃnyāsa Khaṇḍa* Chapter XV *sloka* 20 of Jayānanda's *Caitanya maṅgala* depicts that Caitanya had food at Advaita's household at Shantipur that was served by Sita Devi and other women of the family even after renunciation (Jayānanda 1971, pp. 141–42). Again, in the *Utkala Khaṇḍa* Chapter IX *sloka* 14–15, Jayānanda states that when Caitanya went to Cuttack, he bestowed his own garland to Candrakalā, the chief queen of King Pratāparudra Devā, and instructed her to recite the name of Hari (Jayānanda 1971, p. 153).[17] The editors of Jayānanda's *Caitanya maṅgala* contend that 'such descriptions were responsible for the loss of popularity of this book among the orthodox Vaiṣṇavas' (Jayānanda 1971, p. xxxvi). While it is evident that Caitanya usually avoided direct interactions with women as an ascetic, a complete textual censorship of his interactions or conversations with women, it seems to be in hindsight, more a reflection of the conservative mindset of the hagiographers of the post-Caitanya period than a historical attitude of the Lord himself.

Among Caitanya's two wives, his first wife Lakṣmīpriyā, who is identified with Rukmiṇī in the *Gauragaṇoddeśadīpikā* (Brezezinski 1996, p. 64), died young due to a snakebite at Navadvīpa while Caitanya was touring his ancestral home in Sylhet (modern Bangladesh). Jayānanda, in his *Caitanya maṅgala*, described details of Caitanya's marriage with Lakṣmīpriyā as well her exquisite cooking abilities (*Nadīyā Khaṇḍa 34, 45, 46, 54–62*). However, nothing more is said about her by the biographers than that she was a devoted wife who fulfilled her household duties and on one occasion cooked for a large group of monks who were invited for lunch at their house (*Caitanya Bhāgavata Ādi*.14.14–19). Viṣṇupriyā, as Caitanya's second wife, is given more importance in the hagiographies, as she was the one who saw his renunciation into an ascetic. She is mentioned in a wide variety of hagiographic texts such as Murārī Gupta's *Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (or simply Murārī Gupta's *Karcha*), Vṛndāvana Dās' *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, Locana Dās' *Caitanya maṅgala*, Jayānanda's *Caitanya maṅgala*, and Īśāna Nāgara's *Advaita Praka*śa among others.

Viṣṇupriyā is regarded as Bhūśakti (Mother Earth) and Satyabhāmā (consort of Kṛṣṇa) in her previous lives (Bandyopadhyay 2015, p. 248). Even in Kavikarṇapūra's *Gauragaṇoddeśadīpikā* (Sloka 47), Viṣṇupriyā is considered as the daughter of Mahāmāyā Devī and the Vaiṣṇava devotee Sanātan Miśra, who in his previous birth was King Satrājit (Kavikarṇapūra 1922). The sources explicitly mention that Viṣṇupriyā's birth was celebrated with pomp and éclat. Vṛndāvana Dās, for instance, in sloka 44-45 of the fifteenth chapter of the *Ādi Khaṇḍa* portion of his *Caitanya Bhāgavata* states that Viṣṇupriyā was a *param sucaritā* (extremely well-mannered) and a personification of Lakṣmī and Jaganmātā (Earth Goddess) (Das 1984, p. 319). He further mentions in sloka 46 that from her childhood, Viṣṇupriyā used to daily bathe twice or thrice in the River Ganga and always expressed devotion towards her parents and Lord Vishnu. The *Padakalpataru* contains numerous verses explaining Viṣṇupriyā's progress into a teenager when she made a positive impression on Caitanya's mother, Śacī Devī.[18] Śacī Devī, on her

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16 *Mahāprabhu kṛpāsindhu ke pāre bujhite/nija bhakte daṇḍa kare dharma bujhaite // dekhi trās upajilā sab bhaktagaṇe / svapneo chārilā sabe strī-sambhāṣaṇe.* What is even more striking is the fact that the elderly ascetic Mādhavi Devī was counted along with Rāya Rāmānanda, Svarupa Gosvāmī, and Śikhi Māhitī as the three and a half followers of Rādhārāṇī by no less a person than Kṛṣṇadās Kaviraja (*Chapter II Antya Līla sloka 104–5)*.

17 *Rājār sateka strī pradhāna Candrakalā / Gauracandra dilā tāre galār divya mālā //Harināma dilā tāre Caitanya Gosāin / Nīlāchale gelā rātre uddeshya nā pāi //.*

18 Chapter fifteen of the *Adi Khaṇḍa* of the *Caitanya Bhāgavata* contains detailed references to Śacī meeting and being impressed with Viṣṇupriyā during her daily journeys to the bathing ghat in Navadvīpa and finally through the mediation of the

part, had been concerned about the future of her son, especially after Lakṣmī Devī's death. Murārī Gupta, in the thirteenth and fourteenth *svarga* (chapters) of the first *prakrama* (segment) of his *Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, details Viṣṇupriyā's marriage with Caitanya. Jayānanda's *Caitanya maṅgala* too, described the details of the marriage ceremony (*Nadīyā Khaṇḍa 63 to 66*). Locana Dās in the *Ādi Khaṇḍa* segment of his *Caitanya maṅgala* described the exuberant physical beauty of Viṣṇupriyā on the day of her marriage with the words that she 'reflected a golden hue and glowed like lightening'.[19] Both Vṛndāvana Dās and Locana Dās refer to the elaborate rituals and festivities that followed the marriage. Vṛndāvana Dās goes to the extent of stating that even the gods like Brahma expressed their approval by 'showering flowers on the couple'. However, Caitanya's journey to Gayā and his gradual spiritual turn after his return to Navadvīpa led him to lose interest in worldly affairs. Among the biographers, only Locana Dās in the *Caitanya maṅgala* (*Madhya Khaṇḍa*) describes the couple as having spent the last night of their married life together on the same bed.[20]

Almost none of the early modern hagiographers mention anything substantial about Viṣṇupriyā after Gaurāṅga took his ascetic vows, barely a year or so after his second marriage. She is described as a distraught young bride who silently remained devoted to her lost husband. Jayānanda refers to her mental agony on hearing Caitanya's desire to take up renunciation (*Caitanya maṅgala, Vairagya Khaṇḍa 13, 14, 15,* and *22*) and later the deep distress felt by both Śacī and Viṣṇupriyā after Caitanya's renunciation (*Caitanya maṅgala*, *Saṃnyāsa Khaṇḍa 9* and *12*). Most texts mention that Caitanya enquired, respected, and even met his mother Śacī Devī after taking up saṃnyāsa, but he did not for once mention the name of Viṣṇupriyā. Kavikarnapura's *Caitanya-candrodaya-nataka* contends that Caitanya taught true renunciation to the world by renouncing the external world as well as the inner world of desires.[21] The early medieval texts, however, are as important for what they state as for their silences. It is worth remembering that Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāja's magnum opus *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* (CC 1.16.23) mentions Viṣṇupriyā only in one passing reference (Stewart 2010, p. 159). For the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs, theological teachings about Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa were far more important than any analysis of Caitanya's pre-ascetic marital relations. As Gauḍīya theologians began to place increased importance on Caitanya as the personification of Rādhā's mood (*bhāva*) and luster (*dyuti*), the role of Viṣṇupriyā as a feminine consort almost receded from the theological (although not historical) sense. Bengali hagiographers like Vṛndāvana Dās, on the other hand, mention them as the 'main *āsrayas* or vessels of emotion in dramatizations of his life, which traditionally end with his renunciation, *Nimāi–Saṃnyāsa*' (Brezezinski 1996, pp. 64–65).

However, the idea of Caitanya's preeminence as a god unto Himself—*Gauraparamyavada*, literally meaning the Supremacy of the Golden One—and not just as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, also found ready acceptance within segments of Bengali Vaiṣṇava imagination (Stewart 2010, pp. 57–58). They tried to frame Caitanya as a *Svayaṃ Bhagavān* or one who contained within himself all possible forms of divinity (Stewart 2010, p. 86). Some devotee disciples such as Gadādhar and Narahari Sarkār even conceived themselves as Gopīs in relation to Caitanya. There was also a parallel development of the idea that Caitanya was a paramour par excellence just like Kṛṣṇa (*Nadīyā nāgarī bhava*). In fact, most of the depictions of Viṣṇupriyā that exist in medieval Vaiṣṇava literature originate from the hands of those belonging to the *Nadīyā nāgari bhāva* tradition cultivated at Śrīkhaṇḍa, a town to the North

matchmaker Kāśināth Miśra arranged for Gaurāṅga's marriage proposal to Viṣṇupriyā's father Sanātana Miśra (Das 1984, pp. 312–32).

19 Locana Dās, *Caitanya maṅgala:Adi Khaṇḍa*, Slokas 107–110 '*Viṣṇupriyā r anga jini lākhbān sonā, jhalmal kare jena tarit pratimā*' (Dās 1892, p. 138).

20 Bimanbihari Majumdar considers that Locana Dās based this interpretation on an Oriya poet Mādhava's text *Caitanya vilāsa*, and this fact was also supposedly testified to be true by Vṛndāvana Das from his mother Narayani Devī, who was present in Caitanya's house on the night prior to his saṃnyāsa. Majumdar, however, does not accept this suggestion to be true (Majumdar 1959, pp. 275–77).

21 In Act One of this work, Kali yuga foretells that 'He (Caitanya) will marry his beloved wife, the unparalleled Viṣṇupriyā, a portion of [the goddess] *Bhū*, and to reveal the teachings of renunciation he will abandon her, while he is still very young' (Lutjeharms 2018, p. 107).

West of Navadvīpa in Burdwan district of Bengal. As Tony Stewart has pointed out, this 'ascendency of the erotic' is seen within some post-Caitanya commentators, especially in the works of Narahari Sarkār, Locana Dās, and Narahari Chakrabarti (Stewart 2010, pp. 139–88). The lamentation of Śacī and Viṣnupriyā was the subject of at least thirty-four *padas* classified separately by Jagatbandhu Bhadra in his *Gaurapadatarangini* (Stewart 2010, p. 159). Locana Dās extolled in glowing terms the intimate details about Viṣnupriyā's physical beauty (*Caitanya maṅgala* 2.4.105–21). Locana Dās regarded Viṣnupriyā as Lakṣmī, the wife of Vishnu (*Caitanya maṅgala* 2.4.162).

As noted earlier, most hagiographers show that Caitanya began to display signs of godliness and was worshipped as such by his followers during his lifetime. With the attainment of deeper roots by Vaiṣṇavism, *arcā-mūrtis* (worshipable physical images) of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa were set up that channelized patterns of liturgical worship through *vaidhi bhakti* or ritualized devotion based on the prescriptions of the *Haribhaktivilas*. Consecrating idols for his worship was a development that also occurred during Caitanya's lifetime. Murārī Gupta mentions Viṣnupriyā, in sloka eight of the fourteenth chapter of the fourth segment of his *Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, as the first person to set up an idol of Caitanya (Gupta 2009, pp. 284–87).[22] Almost at the same time, other images such as a Gaura–Nitāi idol was established by Gauridās Paṇḍit (*Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 4.14.12–14). It is rumoured that a Caitanya idol was also set up at Dhaka Dakshin in Srihatta (Sylhet, Bangladesh) in the early sixteenth century. The *Bhakti-ratnākar* mentions the establishment of three images of Caitanya, at Vṛndāvana by Kāśīśvar Paṇḍit, at Śrīkhaṇḍa by Narahari Sarkār, and at Katwa by Gadadhar Dās, respectively. The same text mentions that Narottama Dās set up Gaura–Viṣnupriyā idols at Kheturi (Majumdar 1959, pp. 562–64). Later on, many other images, terracotta figures, panels, and temples dedicated to Caitanya cropped up in various parts of Bengal (Sen 2019, Appendix D). Narahari Sarkār, who had his seat (*Śrīpāt*) at Śrīkhaṇḍa in Burdwan district, during his last days desired to create a Viṣnupriyā image and initiate a prayer dedicated to Gaurāṅga–Viṣnupriyā (*yugal bhajan*). This was ultimately fulfilled by his disciple Raghunandan Ṭhakur or his son Kānāi Ṭhakur. However, it was his most illustrious disciples, Locana Dās and the pada composer Vāsudev Ghosh, who spread this idea further (Adhikari, *Digdarśiṇī*, pp. 13–14). In fact, numerous padas or verses were dedicated to specific emotions of Viṣnupriyā for Gauracandra paralleling those of Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa, for instance, *viraha* during spring, monsoon, and winter apart from twelve-monthly *viraha* of Viṣnupriyā and also verses on the specific emotions expressed by Caitanya (Ray 1897).[23] Pada composers also expounded on the natural elements of Caitanya's glory as a cloud, as a river, the construction of a marketplace, as a tree, and also as the condensed form of all avatars. However, as Jan Brezezinski correctly surmises, the *gaura nāgara vādīs* never attempted to pattern their devotion to Caitanya in the way of Viṣnupriyā, although there is a deity of Viṣnupriyā that is worshipped at Śrīkhaṇḍa (Brezezinski 1996, Cf.8).

In the years following Caitanya's saṃnyāsa, Viṣnupriyā led a pious life of service to her aged mother-in-law and became an ideal widow, although it does not seem that she took an active leadership role. Nonetheless, she continued to be a silent source of religious aura and living place of pilgrimage during that time.[24] Jagadānandās' *Advaita Prakāśa* describes that Viṣnupriyā adhered to the ideal of strict austerity: Rising early each morning before daybreak with Śacī and bathing in the river Ganga, remaining indoors the entire day. Devotees would never see her face except when she came to eat, and no one heard her speak. Viṣnupriyā adhered to a strict diet and ate only the remnants

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22 *Prakaśarūpeṇa nijapriyāyāḥ Samīpamāsādya nijaṃ hi mūrtiṃ// Vidhāya tasyaṃ sthita eṣa Kṛṣṇaḥ sā Lakṣmīrūpa ca niṣevate prabhuma //.*

23 These included a very detailed explanation of varied attitudes or states such as *chintā-daśā* or worried-condition, *Jāgaran-daśā* or awake-condition, *Udbeg-daśā* or anxious-condition, *pralāp-daśā* or frantic babbling condition, *vyadhi-daśā* or afflicted condition, *unmād-daśā* or maddened condition, *moha-daśā* or enthralled condition, *Bhāvollāsa* or overflow of emotion, *samriddhimān sambhog* or heightened sexual condition, *samriddhimān sambhoger rasodgār* or explosion of rasa, and so on. They also composed verses on the moods of Caitanya during various periods of the day from early morning (*prātahkal-līlā*), afternoon (*madhyanya-līlā*), evening (*sāyankālocita-ārati*), and night (*rātri-bilās and ratri-līlā*) (Ray 1897, Vol. 3, contents). For an in-depth analysis of various rasas and their categories within Vaiṣṇava theology see (Das 2000, pp. 179–309).

24 *Bhakti-ratnākar* (Chapter 4) refers to Śrīnivāsa Ācārya's visit to Viṣnupriyā at Navadvīpa on his way to Vṛndāvana (Chakrabarti 1888, pp. 121–48).

of Śacī's food, and spent all her time absorbed in rapt repetition of the Holy Name while looking at the image of Caitanya. Viṣnupriyā took the path of austerity designated by Caitanya with utmost seriousness—placing a grain of rice in the clay pot after each completion of the sixteen names of Kṛṣṇaand, and later cooking and consuming only those grains (Brezezinski 1996).[25] It is relevant that some later histories of the movement, such as the *Muralīvilāsa* (fourth chapter), refers to Viṣnupriyā's close relations with Nityānanda's second wife Jāhnavā Devī and her importance played a role in the adoption of Rāmachandra as a foster-child by Jāhnavā. Viṣnupriyā is also regarded to have inaugurated the worship of a Caitanya image around which numerous legends arose.[26]

Almost nothing is known about when Viṣnupriyā left her mortal body, although there are suggestions that she ultimately merged in the idol of Caitanya at Navadvīpa (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 57) as early as 1573 (Bhattacharya 2001, p. 388) or as late as 1589 CE (Maitra 1960, p. 141). It is believed that Caitanya's image and footwear worshipped by Viṣnupriyā have come down through the family lineage of her brother Jādavācārya or the latter's son Mādhava Miśra in present day Navadvīpa at the Dhameshwar Mahaprabhu temple[27], which was recognized in 2006–7 as a heritage building and continues to form an essential place of pilgrimage for devout Vaiṣṇavas (Maitra 1960, pp. 143–44; Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 58). There are other temples dedicated to Viṣnupriyā in Navadvīpa too that encode a sacred spatial topography to the town.

4. Vaiṣṇavas, Women's Issues, and Sacred Biographies: Retrieving Viṣnupriyā in Colonial Times

Bengali Vaiṣṇavas actively participated in the process of public propagation of religiosity with the onset of the new technology of print. A substantial number of printed texts from the early nineteenth century publishing complex of Baṭtala in North Calcutta were reprints of manuscripts and mostly Vaiṣṇava in content.[28] Over the course of the nineteenth century, the cheap availability of printed Vaiṣṇava devotional literature had a positive impact on the dissemination of Vaiṣṇava texts and ideas. Print also seems to have enabled an integration of sacred communities through new networks of readership (Fuller 2003; Bhatia 2017, pp. 124–60; Dey 2020b). Networks of readership gave visible expression to a middle-class Bengali public sphere, reiterating the link between education, service (*cākri*), and cultural production (Ghosh 2006; Mitra 2009). Print facilitated the emergence of new forms of individuality through new literary genres such as autobiographies, biographies, journals, and novels.[29] Scholars contend that as India entered the colonial phase, pre-colonial hagiographical traditions began to be 'supplemented, and to some extent supplanted, by a new form of biography, in which greater attention was given to complexity of character and personal motivation, to specific places and events, and to their role in shaping and explaining individual lives', but at the same time, 'modernity did not replace traditional life histories so much as recast them' (Arnold and Blackburn 2004, p. 8). It was in this historical context that sacred biographies about members of the entire Vaiṣṇava hagiographical personae, including Viṣnupriyā, began to circulate in the Bengali literary sphere.

[25] This image is repeated in Chapter five of the *Prema-vilāsa* by Nityānanda Dās, in the *Bhakti-ratnākar* of Narahari Kaviraj, (4.48–52), and the *Vamśī sikśa* of Premadās Misra.

[26] The *Vamśī Sikśa*, which is a history of the Gosvāmīs of Bāghnāpāḍā, mentions that after Caitanya's renunciation, Viṣnupriyā had abandoned food and drink until He appeared to her (and Vamśīvadan Ṭhākur) in a dream, telling her to have an image of himself carved in the margosa tree under which Śacī had sat to suckle him (Premadās Miśra n.d., pp. 161–62).

[27] The Dhameshwar temple received patronage from Manipur King Bhagyachandra and later from Guruprasad Ray, the Bhagyakul zamindar of Dhaka in the nineteenth century (Bhattacharya 2001, pp. 387–91; Sarbadhikary 2015, pp. 57–59).

[28] The catalogue of Bengali books published by Reverend James Long in 1855 shows that the number of Bengali titles in print was only 20 in 1820, and 50 in 1852, but the number moved up to 322 in 1857 with 6,56,370 copies (Long 1855, pp. 100–2). By 1825–26 there were around forty presses in operation in Calcutta alone. He listed that among Bengali books a considerable number related to Vaiṣṇava issues.

[29] Literary biographies have had a longer and more visible presence in Indian literary traditions, beginning probably with the *Harṣacārita* of Bānabhaṭṭa in the seventh century, the *Rāmacārita* of Sandhyākarnandi in the eleventh/twelfth century, and the *Periyāpurānām* (a Tamil compendium of Saiva poet saints) attributed to Cekkilar in the twelfth century. Around the same time, a parallel tradition of Indian Islamic hagiographies, including compilations of conversations of Sufi saints and Pirs, began to be written in Arabic and Persian.

There exists quite a large corpus of poems composed on Viṣnupriyā in the periodicals of the colonial period.[30] A number of plays were also written specifically about her, such as Śiśir Kumār Ghosh's *Nimāi Saṃnyāsa* (1899), Matilal Ray's *Nimāi-Saṃnyāsa Gītābhinay* (1912), Kaliprasanna Vidyāratna's *Nimāi Saṃnyāsa Gītābhinay* (1931), and Yogeścandra Caudhurī's *Śrī Śrī Viṣnupriyā* (1931). We also find the composition of *stotras* (Sanskrit eulogies or hymns) in her memory coined as *Viṣnupriyā stotram* (Sarkār 1914, pp. 1–4). The biographies on her in the colonial period, such as Rasikmohan Vidyābhuṣan's *Gaura-Viṣnupriyā* (Vidyabhuṣan 1917); Vaikunṭhanāth De's *Viṣnupriyā Caritamṛtā* (1917); *Viṣnupriyā* by Niradāsundarī Dāsī (1913); and Vidhubhuṣan Sarkār's *Viṣnupriyā* (in two volumes in 1915 and 1926, respectively) not only encode her life in vernacular narratives, but also attempt to expand and fill in greater factual details within the episodic vignettes about Viṣnupriyā's life as provided by the medieval hagiographers. While Niradāsundarī Dāsī, a Vaiṣṇava widow from East Bengal, found personal empathy within the pathos experienced by Viṣnupriyā, other writers tried to put forward Viṣnupriyā as a biographic subject with vivid details. Although such literary liberty verged on the margins of biographic fiction, nevertheless, they are important to us, for they reveal the strategies and methods adopted by bhadralok writers of the colonial period to imbue a new sacred imagery for Caitanya's '*Priyājī*, as Viṣnupriyā was affectionately referred to by them.[31] She was referred to as the 'Divine Consort' of Caitanya and as 'the principal personage in Gaura Leela'. She was also referred to as the 'perfect embodiment of womanhood and the highest ideal of all womanly attributes and devotional feeling' (Sarkār 1926, preface). A versified narrative in 1917 entitled *Viṣnupriyā Caritamṛtā* by Vaikunṭhanāth De contended that 'Śrī Śrī Viṣnupriyā is Śrī Caitanya's *Svakīyā Mahiṣī* (own legitimate wife). She had been incarnated in this world in order to propagate the *māhātmya* (greatness) of the ideal of *patibrātya dharma* (devotion to one's husband)' (De 1917, preface). Furthermore, the *Amrita Bāzār Patrikā* gave the opinion in 1926 that:

> 'We are charmed to see ... that Sree Vishnupriya, the representative of all the beings, went through most unbearable but self-imposed suffering and pangs of separation from her Lord only for the salvation of humankind. It thrills every heart, purifies every soul, ennobles every spirit and translates man to the Supreme region of love which is the "Sumnum Bonum" of human life' (Sarkār 1926, Preface)

One of the trends visible in this period is to emphasize the *Navadvīpalīlā*—denoting the first phase of his life at Navadvīpa—as a foundational phase of Caitanya's life. This phase ended with his ascetic renunciation or *Nimāi-Saṃnyāsa*,which was portrayed as an emotional watershed—a 'soteriology of loss' according to a recent scholar (Bhatia 2017, p. 3)—not just for his immediate family (Śacī and Viṣnupriyā); but also his followers at Navadvīpa, and by extension, for the people of Bengal. This prioritization can be seen couched within a vivid sentimental and affective narrative set in placein the 1890s with Śiśir Kumār Ghosh's multi-volume *Amiya Nimāi Carit*, *Lord Gaurāṅga, Or Salvation for All* and his play *Nimāi-Saṃnyāsa.* The latter reproduced the heart-wrenching sorrow that Viṣnupriyā and Śacī experienced as a result of Caitanya's renunciation (Ghosh 1899). From this perspective, an imaginative and idealistic conflation was made, from individual *viraha* (love in separation) into *viraha* for the entire collective Bengali nation, and was expressed by several authors in the early twentieth century imploring Caitanya to return once more to Bengal. Conversely, they also pleaded Bengali readers to accept Caitanya as their *prāner prabhu* (God of their hearts). There was also a trend to regard

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[30] A number of poems were published in the *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*. 'Shri Viṣnupriyā r Khed', *Shri Shri Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*, 8.2, p. 66; Nagendrabāla Dāsi, 'Biyogini Viṣnupriyā', *BP*, 8.2, 1898, pp. 81–82; 'Viṣnupriyā r Bidāy Dāna', BP, 8.3, pp. 97–98; 'ŚrīPriyāji'r Ākṣep', BP, vol. 8, no.3, p. 98.

[31] It seems that the term *priyā* as the suffix within Viṣnupriyā's name and the Bengali term *priya* that refers to someone dear, beloved, or favorite seems to have been deployed consciously by bhadralok writers to emphasize this loving relationship between Caitanya and Viṣnupriyā.

Caitanya as a son of the soil (*gharer chele* and *gharer thākur*) and infuse an incipient nationalist spirit among Bengalis to regard him as their natural choice.[32]

Interest in Viṣnupriyā was generated particularly by the nationalist-cum-Vaiṣṇava devotee Śiśir Kumār Ghosh (1840–1911) and a small group of writers attached to him—including Haridās Gosvāmī, Haridās Dās, and Rasikmohan Vidyābhuṣan, among others—who wanted to memorialize Caitanya in the image of a Bengali householder and not merely as a worshipper of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa or the ascetic Gaurāṅga (Bhatia 2017, pp. 124–60). Incidentally, Binodinī Dāsi (1863–1941), a *jāt-Vaiṣṇava* courtesan, scaled great heights on the Bengali stage and even received blessings from Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsa (1836–1886), the revered saint of Dakshineshwar, for her emotional portrayal of Caitanya in Girish Chandra Ghosh's play *Caitanya līlā* in 1884. A particularly poignant poem advocating the worship of the sacred duo of Caitanya and Viṣnupriyā was christened as '*Yugal Milan*' (Meeting of two lovers) and was published in the *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā* in 1898[33].

'Today, Gauracandra sat on a bejewelled throne,
[along with] our prosperous Viṣnupriyā on his left;
Priyaji's face is like the full moon
Her heart is brimming with happiness and a smile on her lips;
With devotees encircling them while singing praises for *Gaura*,
Gadādhar and Narahari are fanning the couple with fly-whisks;
Some are embalming the couple with fragrant sandalwood paste,
All devotees are adrift in a flood of bliss;
Some are adorning the couple with garlands of jasmine,
Nityānanda Prabhu is holding an umbrella over their heads;
Mother Śacī is floating in a sea of happiness,
and she is blessing the couple with rice and *durb*ā grass;
With Gaurāṅga, whose appearance is beyond compare,
Viṣnupriyā on his left, whose beauty I can't describe;
Today, Gaura-Viṣnupriyā are meeting as a couple (*yugal-milaṇa*),
[O devotees] make your lives successful by perceiving this wonder![34]

As the poem suggests, readers were being encouraged to view the reunion of Caitanya and Viṣnupriyā along with Śacī and other principal disciples as if to commemorate the eternal aura of the divine bond.[35]

In this period, many older debates within Bengali Vaiṣṇavism that had remained unresolved during the pre-colonial era resurfaced in the colonial period and were played out in a far wider arena of the print-based public sphere and in front of a far bigger reader-based audience. Many of these strands had a direct bearing on the Gaura–Viṣnupriyā worship that will be dealt with in the next section. One such debate pertained to the doctrinal primacy of *Svakīya* versus *Parakīya* love (Sen 2019, pp. 146–47). Was Kṛṣṇa married to the gopīs of Vṛndāvana or not? What sort of relation existed between

32 (Bipin Biharī Sarkār Bhaktiratna 1916).
33 'Yugal Milan', *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*, 8.4, p. 145; 'Yugal Rupa', *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*, 8.5, pp. 235–37; 'Śrī Priyāji'r Ganer Vandana', *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*, 8.6, pp. 241–42.
34 *Āj, basilen Gauracandra ratna-siṅhāsane / Viṣnupriyā dhanī mor basilen bāme // Priyājīr mukha jena pūrṇimār śaśī / hṛdaye nā dhare sukha mukhe mṛduhāsi // bhaktagaṇa gheri gheri gorāguṇa gāy / Gadādhar Narahari cāmara ḍhulāy // sugandhi candana keha day dṅuhu aṅge / bhāsilen bhaktagaṇa sukhera taraṅge // mālatīr mālā keha dṅuhu gale day / Nityānanda Prabhu chatra dharilā māthāy // Śacīmātā bhāsilen sukhera sāgare / dhānye durbbā dena putra badhumār śīre // eke ta Gaurāṅga rūpera nāhika tulanā / tāhe vāme Viṣnupriyā ki diba tulanā // Āj, Viṣnupriyā Gaurāṅger yugala milana / Janama saphala kara hera re nayana //* Anonymous, 'Yugal-milan', *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*, 8.4. p. 145.
35 Another poem mentioned how Caitanya sent a sari gifted to him by the King of Orissa, Pratāprudra Deva on the occasion of Nandotsav to Viṣnupriyā through the hands of his trusted disciple Svarupa Dāmodar. 'Prabhu-prerita Sari', *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā*, 8.7, 1898, p. 289.

Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa? Without delving into the details, it may be surmised, that Rupa and Sanātana forwarded the parakīyā doctrine of the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa* regarding the dalliances of the cowherd Kṛṣṇa with the milkmaids of Vṛndāvana. Their nephew Jīva apparently favored the svakīyā view, possibly following discontent among the Vaishnavas of other orders at Vṛndāvana. In divergent versions of this narrative (Burton 2000, pp. 101–15), it seems that the parakīyā perspective grew stronger under the guidance of men like Visvanāth Cakravarthi and Baladeva Vidyabhuṣan. Despite two public contestations at Jaipur in 1719 and 1723, these issues were discussed without any fruitful outcome. The Jaipur king, Maharaja Jai Singh II, finally sent his emissary Kṛṣṇadeva Sārvabhauma to establish the svakīyā doctrine in Bengal. However, he was defeated in a debate with Rādhāmohan Ṭhākur. The Gosvāmīs of Vṛndāvana had established that aesthetic pleasure and passionate devotion could be derived more effectively, not from within relations of marital love, but from love outside or beyond such relations. The Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa legend achieved tremendous regional and vernacular variations both within and outside Bengal (Beck 2005)—a further analysis of which lies beyond the scope of the present paper. In the early nineteenth century, Bengali folk cultural deities such as Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa underwent a 'domestication' process, whereby they were de-sacralized and profanized by a host of culture-producers such as painters, singers, performers, and dancers within the family kinship-based social milieu of Bengal in the early colonial period (Banerjee 2002, p. 90).

The Svakīyā–Parakīyā debate and its fallout on societal morals was an issue of great interest even in the nineteenth century. To early Christian missionaries, such 'immorality' was unbecoming of a religious tradition.[36] Many colonial commentators opined that the Vaiṣṇava choice of Rādhā's love for Kṛṣṇa as an object of devotion represents an apparent contravention of ideas of 'chastity and fidelity of Indian womanhood' (Kennedy 1925, pp. 108–9).[37] Notions of obscenity circulating among educated middle class Bengalis in colonial times (Banerjee 1987) assumed importance among Vaiṣṇava reformers too, to sanitize their tradition from the slur of immorality (Dey 2015; Wong 2018). The idea of 'religious decline' in the sense of loss of zeal and character among Vaiṣṇavas and the penetration of lust (*kāmukata*) within the tradition were internalized to a great extent. As one periodical in 1926 mentioned:

> 'The scriptures prescribe very strict rules of conduct for ascetics regarding association with women. They are to be shunned entirely- by the body (*deha*), the senses (*indriya*), the mind (*man*) and also the intellect (*buddhi*). The way in which Caitanya adhered to this prescription of asceticism is without parallel in the annals of human history. He was so cautious that he avoided using the word *strī* and instead referred to them as *Prakṛti*. Women devotees did not have the right to come in front of him- let alone converse with them; they could only look at him from afar and offer their obeisance.'[38]

Various nineteenth century discourses had been negatively stereotyping the Vaiṣṇava society as a refuge for illicit women and portraying gosvāmī leaders as active participants in this illegitimate

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[36] In a rather dismissive tone, Reverend William Ward (1769–1823) of Serampore depicted Kṛṣṇa's wanton revelry, sexual excesses, and immorality. Even his childhood pranks came up for severe castigation as 'deliberate acts of falsehood and theft'. He considered the "distinguishing vice" of the Vaiṣṇavas to be 'impurity, as might be expected from the character of Krishna, their favourite deity, and from the obscene nature of the festivals held in his honour' (Ward 1815, pp. 302–3).

[37] Kennedy stereotypes the fact in the following words: 'That something, which in the Hindu wife and mother is looked upon with the utmost abhorrence, should be chosen as the most fitting representation of religion, is, to say the least, a strange procedure. The explanation turns upon the place of marriage in Hindu society. Rarely, if ever, is it a romantic attachment, the result of love's free play, for matches are arranged by the elders and the young people concerned are only passive agents. After marriage, whether love develops or not, the whole round of wifely duties and devotion are enjoined upon the woman by sacred law. Therefore, says the Vaiṣṇava apologist, the love of the wife can hardly serve as the symbol of unfettered devotion. Whereas the Hindu woman who gives herself to romantic love outside the marriage relation risks her all (sic). She gives everything that makes the life worthwhile in the abandonment of her devotion. Thus, she becomes the most fitting symbol of the soul's search after God. Radhika is the supreme symbol of this passionate love' (Kennedy 1925, p. 109).

[38] This is mentioned by Gopiballabh Biswas. 1926. 'Śrīmanmahaprabhu o Varṇaśram Dharma', *Sonar Gaurāṅga*, 3.11: 653–59. In his *Sajjan Toṣani*, Kedarnath Datta castigated the non-Vaiṣṇava behaviour of adopting the ascetic guise (*kāch/besh dhāran*) as exemplified by sects such as the Kapindri, Churādhāri, and Atibadi. Their attempts to personify divinity represented the worst form of moral corruption (Dey 2020b, p. 38).

exercise.[39] The empirical data supplied by the Decennial census conducted by the British from 1872 onwards, which regularly returned higher numbers of female Vaiṣṇavas than males, furthered the notion of Vaiṣṇava society as a class dedicated to sexual impropriety. This gender imbalance was explained variously by colonial ethnographers. Some like W.W. Hunter considered that couples in love against their families' wishes, destitute lower caste elderly women without social support, and men seeking 'concubinage' joined the ranks (Hunter 1877, pp. 55–58). James Austin Bourdillon, who prepared the Bengal section of the Census of 1881, put the Vaiṣṇava strength in the province at 262,638 males and 305,394 females, attributing the high presence of females as a result of the unrestricted entry of prostitutes (Bourdillon 1883, p. 139). Such views were reiterated by successive Census observers such as C.J. O'Donnell in 1891 and Edward Gait in 1901. Others, like Melville Kennedy, almost echoed the official view that most women of this trade took to Vaiṣṇavism in order to hide their caste status. He saw some social justification that 'much of the *vairagi* life of the Vaiṣṇavis (female ascetics) is really a system of widow remarriage without the recognition of society' (Kennedy 1925, p. 172).

However, everything was not grim about the tradition. Certain alternate positive images of Vaiṣṇava women also circulated in colonial discourses. They were regarded as transmitters of a literary culture in pre-colonial and early colonial times, almost as a precursor to and anticipating the idea of women's education in colonial times. One author in the early twentieth century stated that 'They (women) were not merely the gainers from the stimulation to education,...but there also seems to have been in this Vaiṣṇavism an embryonic recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of women's personality which must be called distinctive' (Kennedy 1925, p. 85). It seems that education became a mark of this sect right from the initial spread of the movement and remained so till at least the early nineteenth century. William Adam's *Second Report on vernacular education in Bengal* for 1835–38 mentions that the only exception to the almost universal illiteracy among females in Bengal is to be found among the mendicant Vaiṣṇavas, who could read and write and regularly instructed their daughters. Adam stated that Vaiṣṇavas were the 'only religious body of whom, as a sect, the practice is characteristic' (Basu 1941, p. 189).

Modernist organizations such as the Gauḍīya Maṭh usually veered clear of engaging directly with gender issues. However, some institutions such as Priyanath Nandi's *ŚrīKṛṣṇa Caitanyatattva Pracārinī Sabhā* in the early twentieth century had taken the cue from the Brāhmo movement in allowing women participation in its institutional proceedings albeit with separate seating arrangements. In fact, Nandi's wife Pramadāsundarī Kṛṣṇadāsī of the Kumārtuli Mitra family was an initiated disciple of Madhusudan Gosvāmī, the *sebait* (priest) of the Rādhāraman Jiu temple of Vṛndāvana and an active member of the institution till her untimely death in 1920 (Dey 2020a, p. 63).

There was another debate relating to the extent of precedence to be accorded to Caitanya's *avataric* personality, which was in turn connected to schisms regarding the legitimacy of *Gauramantra* or an independent ritual basis for Vaiṣṇava initiation (Majumdar 1959, pp. 435–40). The issue had simmered on for centuries, with the Śrīkhanḍa group legitimizing its practice while other groups considered it an anathema. This debate assumed importance within public debates from the late-nineteenth century onwards when Śiśir Kumār Ghosh's *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā* from Calcutta took a favourable view while the *Caitanyamatabodhinī Patrikā* from Vṛndāvana castigated such innovation. Members of the traditional Advaita lineage of Shantipur such as Nīlamaṇi Gosvāmī contended that only the sanctioned ten-syllable Gopalamantra was legitimate for initiation. Members of this lineage went on to issue *vyāvasthāpatras* (religious circulars) condemning the Gauramantra and the spurious texts (including the *Advaita Prakaśa*), which propagated it as a blasphemy. Many contemporary journals such as the *Viṣnupriyā Patrikā* of Śiśir Kumār Ghosh propagated this viewpoint (Dāsya 1898).

[39] Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutum Pyeṅcār Nakśā* states that Sonāgāchi, the prostitute quarters of Calcutta, were under the jurisdiction of one Vaiṣṇava Mā Gosāin of Simla locality in North Calcutta (Nag 1991, p. 96).

These debates had deep implications for the Gaura–Viṣnupriyā dual worship program, as innovations in modes of worship were usually sneered upon by mainstream Vaiṣṇava lineages.

5. Prioritizing *Yugal-arcanā*: Haridās Gosvāmī and Deification of Viṣnupriyā in Colonial Times

The stitching together of new narratives on Viṣnupriyā by biographers of the colonial period not only allowed her to emerge as a biographic subject—imbued with a sacred aura, a divine personality, and as a true companion of Caitanyain the path of religiosity—but some of them also put forward a new theological perspective of Gaura–Viṣnupriyā as a *yugal-avatāra* (divinely incarnated couple), who needed a separate mode of worship (*yugal bhajan* or *yugal arcanā*). Just as Lakṣmī-Nārāyan, Sītā-Rām, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, and others are worshiped in their *yugalasvarupa* or couple form, similarly Gaura–Viṣnupriyā are worthy of dual worship. One biographer even posited that just as Rāma had made Sītā suffer in the *tretāyuga*, Kṛṣṇa did the same to Rādhā in the *Dvāparayuga,* similarly Caitanya made Viṣnupriyā suffer in the *Kalīyuga*, thereby drawing a spiritual equivalence among the three divine pairs (Sarkār 1915, Preface). Haridās Gosvāmī asserts that although generations of Vaiṣṇava writers have produced literature about Caitanya, they have not written anything about Viṣnupriyā, apart from describing her marriage and Caitanya's didactic lectures to her on the virtues of asceticism immediately prior to his *saṃnyāsa*. He contends that just as Caitanya's intense devotion to Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa was to teach people the spiritual techniques to savor the feelings of divine love, Viṣnupriyā's intense pangs of *viraha* (separation and longing) for Caitanya contained within it the essence for enabling a devotee's *hitārtha* (welfare), *āsvādan* (tasting/experiencing), and *bhajansādhanāśikśārtha* (teaching the ways of *sādhanā* or worship). Thus, Haridās contended that Viṣnupriyā's laments, too, qualified to be treated as divine *līlā* (Gosvāmī 1914). In effect, the new mode of worship propagated by some in the colonial period hinged on the larger question of autonomy of worship within Vaiṣṇava circles. Were new ways of innovative worship to be permitted?

Gaura–Viṣnupriyā worship does seem to have attained considerable prevalence in the second and third decades of the twentieth century (Gosvāmī 1914). In a series of articles, the periodical *Visvabandhu* in 1919 relates the visits of its editor Vidhubhuṣan Sarkār to different places of East Bengal and Tripura and the setting up of Gaura–Viṣnupriyā icons at those places.[40] The biographical compilation of Haridās Gosvāmī refers to several tours conducted by him in East Bengal where he cites instances of Vaiṣṇava devotees accepting Gaura–Viṣnupriyā worship and even public celebrations commemorating the marriage ceremony of Gaura–Viṣnupriyā icons (Gosvāmī 1963, pp. 191–210). In a passionate appeal to his readers intended to promote the efficacies of such worship in a section titled *Upadeś śatak* in his journal *Viṣnupriyā-Gaurāṅga*, Haridās stated:

> 'Viṣnupriyā, who dwells in the heart of Gaurāṅga, is the divine potency of the Lord; She is also the supreme goddess . . . she is the essence of pure, selfless and transcendental devotion. If you want to witness the personification of devotion then meditate upon the image of Viṣnupriyā. She is the goddess of the domestic establishment for all Vaiṣṇava householders-their LakṣmīDevī. Worshipping her daily along with Gaurāṅga will ensure that your home will be safe from all problems-your residence will emerge as a centre of devotion and be prosperous like the establishment of Lakṣmī' (Gosvāmī 1926, p. 11)[41]

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[40] 'Chuṭir Ānanda', *Visvabandhu,* 1, 1919, pp. 117–55. 'Jhulan o Janmāsṭhamīr Ānanda',*Visvabandhu*, 1, 1919, pp. 367–84 and pp. 433–44. There are several temples dedicated to Viṣnupriyā–Gaurāṅga at Navadvīpa, at Sambalpur in Orissa, a Śrī Viṣnupriyā Gaurāṅga sevashram at Rādhākund in Vṛndāvana, and at Rishra in Howrah district. Today, Viṣnupriyā is also the name of a halt station near Navadvīpa in the Katwa-Howrah train line.

[41] *'Śrī Śrī Gaurabakṣa-vilāsinī Viṣnupriyā devī Śrī Gaurāṅgaprabhur svarūp śakti; tinio parameśvari. . . . tini parābhakti svarūpinī. Yadi bhaktidevī'r śrīmūrti dekhite cāo – Śrī Śrī Viṣnupriyā devīr Srīmūrtir dhyan kariya. Tinii grihi Gaurbhakta Vaiṣṇaver gṛhādhisṭātrī Lakṣmī devī. Śrī Śrī Gaurangasundarer sahit tṅahār svarūp-śakti bhaktirūpinī Śrī Viṣnupriyā devīr nītya pūja kariya, tomār sarbāpad dūr haibe,- gṛhe bhakti o Lakṣmīr bhāṇḍar haibe'*.

The connection of Viṣṇupriyā with Lakṣmī is significant since the latter was identified within Hindu Bengali culture with notions of abundance, wealth, beauty, and prosperity (Chakrabarty 1993, p. 7). One must keep in mind that notions of domesticity, conjugality, and love were undergoing a transformation in the colonial environment. In an era when companionate marriages among Bengali Hindu bhadralok were becoming more relevant and prescriptive texts regarding the ideals of the housewife and about desirable forms of marriage and domestic life were circulated in the printed domain, the idea of conjugal worship seemed fitting. Conjugal life still hinged on uninhibited patriarchy—'the husband is god on earth, the lord and master to whom the wife must offer unquestioning bhakti' (Raychaudhuri 2000, p. 352). Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's (1820–1891) crusade to rehabilitate widows through scriptural and modern legal sanction in the mid-nineteenth century had also brought to the fore the plight of the Hindu widows. Although no direct connections can be drawn with these historical facts, the value systems contingent to such a context probably had an impact on the formulations of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā worship.

Haridās Gosvāmī was one of the most vocal ideologues who promoted the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā hypothesis. He was born in 1867 in the village of Dogachia in Nadia district of Bengal in a Brahmin family. Many of his family members, including his father, were *kathaks* or professional narrators of mythological/scriptural traditions who originally hailed from Panch Khand village near Dhaka Dakshin in Sylhet District of Bangladesh. His father was employed as a *kathak* in the aristocratic household of the Pal Chaudhuri zamindars of Ranaghat in Nadia district. In most of his works, Haridās refers to his lineage from the medieval *pada* composer Dvija Balarāmdās' family at Dogachia in Nadia.[42] He took an active role in the literary propagation of Vaiṣṇavism and published a large number of works related to the Caitanya heritage, including, *Gaura-Gītikā* (1912), *Bāṅgalir Ṭhākur Śrī Gaurāṅga* (1914), *Nitāi-Gaura Śrīvigraha Līlā Kāhinī* (1922), *Mahāprabhur Navadvīpalīlā* (1917), *Mahāprabhur Nīlācalalīlā* (1923), and *Śacīvilāp Gīti* (1925). There was also a set of biographies on Viṣṇupriyā, namely, *Viṣṇupriyā Carita (1913), Viṣṇupriyā Sahasranām stotra* (1922), *Viṣṇupriyā Maṅgal* (1933), and *Gambhīrāy ŚrīViṣṇupriyā* (1933), and a single work on Lakṣmīpriyā, Caitanya's first wife, titled *Lakṣmīpriyā Carita* (1915). For some years from 1926 on, he also edited the monthly devotional journal *Viṣṇupriyā Gaurāṅga*.

It seems that Haridās Gosvāmī was quite an eclectic Vaiṣṇava who tried to consciously cultivate his connections with a variety ofVaiṣṇava sripats and individuals.[43] Haridās also attended the *virahotsav* or death anniversary celebrations of Narahari Sarkārat Śrīkhaṇḍa in 1926, where he interacted with Rākhālānanda and Gaurguṇānanda Ṭhākur and other members of the group including Visvesvar Bābāji, the author of *Rasarāj Gaurāṅga Svabhāva*. He mentions that 'By the *kṛpā* (grace) of the Ṭhākurs' of the Śrīkhaṇḍa group one can receive *darśan* and visualize the sweet *rasarāj* image of *Nadiyānāgar kiśora* Gaurāṅga' (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 233). It is significant that in this context, Haridās mentions that 'I am not sure whether anyone from the group opposing Gaurāṅga's *nāgari bhāva* was present or not. But if one of their members were present then he would surely have realized the *mahān prabhāb* (significance), *māhatmya* (glory) and the *cittākarṣak* (enthralling) nature of Narahari Sarkār's songs. If by following his [Narahari's] *bhajan path* one has to go to hell even that would signify attainment of supreme approbation!' (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 237). He even advised the critics opposing the Śrīkhaṇḍa

[42] Haridās had a transferrable job in the colonial postal department, where he ultimately rose to the position of Post-master that took him to various places across India. It was while holidaying at Motihari in Bihar, at his brother Gurupada's place, that Haridās became aware of his family connection with the medieval Vaiṣṇava pada writer Dvija Balaramdas (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 141). He had already been impressed after reading Śiśir Ghosh's *Amiya Nimai Carit* and had personally come in contact with Ghosh. In 1923 or thereafter, he took retirement from colonial service and devoted his life to religious service at Navadvīpa. Incidentally, Haridās had a daughter named Sushila Devi whose husband Anandamay Bhattacharya died of kalazar in little over two years into their marriage. Thereafter, Haridās kept his widowed daughter with him. His personal empathy for his daughter's plight must have certainly heightened Haridās's sympathy for Viṣṇupriyā.

[43] Such persons included Vamsidas babaji (a detached recluse Vaiṣṇava of Narottama Das's lineage), Basanta Sadhu (a fellow believer of *nagari bhava* from Tripura affiliated to the Nityānanda tradition), and Nityagopal Gosvāmī (a descendant of Viṣṇupriyā's brother's lineage at Navadvīpa). As a part of his social service programme, Haridās set up a free medical camp at Navadvīpa in 1926 known as *Viṣṇupriyā dātabya cikitsālaya.* He vigorously campaigned in favour of vegetarianism among gosvāmī Brahmins and personally led campaigns to raise funds for the construction of a pilgrim lodging house at Ajmer and for providing civic amenities at Vṛndāvana (Gosvāmī 1963, pp. 356–58).

group in the public literary sphere to attain salvation by visiting Śrīkhaṇḍa in person and witnessing the purity of their path. Thus, Haridās was full of praise for the *nāgari bhāva* emotion and tried to justify its greatness within the contemporary Vaiṣṇava public sphere.

It is significant that inspite of propagating the virtues of *nadīyā nāgarī bhāva,* Haridās couched his views within parameters of sexual morality that had become the norm of *bhadralok* responses in the colonial period. In his *Viṣnupriyā- Gaurāṅga* journal he stated:

> 'I have said before that keeping illicit woman-partners by devotees of Gaura, whether they are *vairagis* (ascetics) or *gṛhis* (householders), is a sign of fake Vaiṣṇavism. Many educated Vaiṣṇavas have already become cautious about its pitfalls. They are realizing that the poison which they had consumed from *sādhu-veśī pākhaṇḍis* (counterfeit gurus) have led them far away from Mahaprabhu's true path of *visuddha* (pure) Vaiṣṇava teachings. They are extremely sad and ashamed that the fallen gurus who keep the company of illicit women have been the cause for a decline of their own religiosity. It is indeed depressing that so many shameless *śiṣya-vyāvasāyī* (disciple-businessmen), householder-guru-gosains, marketers of idols and fake religious leaders have converted the pure Vaiṣṇava religion desired by Mahaprabhu into a business. But such men will never be able to fully stop their illicit relations with women since their religious-business is intimately connected with it' (Gosvāmī 1963, p. 357)

The essential crux of the theological paradigm designated as *Viṣnupriyā tattva* by Haridās Gosvāmī was that there existed parallels between Viṣnupriyā's *Gambhīra līlā* at Navadvīpa with Caitanya's *Gambhīra līlā* or activities as exhibited at the place of his residence at Kāśi Miśra's house in Puri (Gosvāmī 1914; Gosvāmī 1933, Preface; Vyakaraṇtīrtha 1932, pp. 1–15). As Caitanya's preachings at Puri were intended to teach devotees specific aspects of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa bhakti, in a similar manner, it was an urgent necessity to unveil the teachings of Viṣnupriyā at Navadvīpa for the general welfare of all living beings (Gosvāmī 1933, preface). He contended that Viṣnupriyā is the *ābaran* (external garment) while Caitanya is the *mūla tattva* (fundamental theory), and both are equally important for worship by devotees. He pleaded with his readers to accord Viṣnupriyā her rightful place within Vaiṣṇava worship. She was not only *bhaktisvarūpa* and embodied the *hlādinī-śakti* of Caitanya, but also personified *dāsyabhāva* (devotion through service) towards him. In a surprising reversal of *svakīyā-parakīyā* duality, Haridās contended that since Caitanya represented the conjoined form of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa, it is Viṣnupriyā alone, being his *hlādinī-śakti* (the lord's divine pleasure potency), who can bring pleasure and happiness to him. In this framework, Viṣnupriyā enjoyed complete theological equivalence with Rādhā: 'Just as Caitanya and Nityānanda were Kṛṣṇa and Balarama respectively, so was Viṣnupriyā an incarnation of Rādhā'. Gosvāmī asserted that if *Navadvīpadhāma* (the abode of Navadvīpa), the *Navadvīpa parikara* (associates of Caitanya at Navadvīpa), and the *Navadvīpalīlā* (the divine sports at Navadvīpa) were to be regarded as *nitya* (eternal), as they are formulated within Gauḍīya theology, then factually speaking, it should be equally impossible to deny not just the eternal presence of Viṣnupriyā in Navadvīpa, but also the validity of Caitanya's worship in the emotion of *mādhurya bhāva*. In a direct defense of *Nadīyā nāgari bhāva* tendencies, Gosvāmī raised the question: 'Who is there to stop one if he feels *kaminī bhava* (physical attraction) towards the *Rasarāja* Caitanya (who is in a constant state of erotic bliss)?' (Gosvāmī 1933, Preface). Responding to the challenge of those who questioned how Caitanya could, being in *Svakīya bhāva* as the husband of Viṣnupriyā, be conceived and worshipped in the mood of *mādhurya bhāva* (blissful emotion) by a devotee, Haridās countered that from a devotee's perspective, the adoption of a *Rāgānugā bhāva* (inwardly generated passion)—that is the highest form of devotion—never seeks to establish the devotee's personal relation with the lord even in a *parakīyā* paradigm (whereby spiritual experiences are savored by the devotee as an unmarried feminine lover of the Divinity). It only prescribes one to adopt the attitude of a *sakhī* or a *maṅjarī* (a form of worship where the devotee assumes the mood of a female servant of the *gopīs*) and assist in the *līlā* (celestial sport) of the divine couple. If this is the case, then obviously in a *svakīya* paradigm (whereby spiritual experiences are savored by the devotee as a married feminine lover of the Divinity) the devotee should adopt the same attitude of a *sakhī* (friend) of Viṣnupriyā in assisting the eternal satisfaction of

Caitanya and Viṣṇupriyā (Gosvāmī 1933, preface). This represented a radical alteration of theological perspectives prescribed by the Vṛndāvana Gosvāmīs. In effect, Haridās tried to approximate his formulations to the essence of the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā relationship as an eternal bond much like the timeless union of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa. As Tony Stewart points out, the followers of the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā *līlā* portray the relation as 'healthy and socially acceptable', one that promoted 'an ideal of love that did not undercut social mores' (Stewart 2010, p. 160). In fact, with time the entire paraphernalia of Rādhā with her aṣṭasakhīs (Eight primary friends) and sixty-four *maṅjarīs* (female servitors) was replicated for Viṣṇupriyā (with her inner circle eight friends namely, Kāncanā, Manoharā, Sukeśī, Candrakalā, Amitā, Surasundarī, Premālatikā, and Sakhī Viṣṇupriyā) by apocryphal texts such as *Śrī ŚrīGaura-Viṣṇupriyā Aṣṭakālīya Smaraṇa Manana Paddhati* (Maitra 1960, pp. 122–23).

An examination of the specific terminologies deployed by contemporary writers to refer to Viṣṇupriyā reveals the strategies of deification involved. While Caitanya was referred to as *Viṣṇupriyānātha* (the Lord of Viṣṇupriyā), Viṣṇupriyā herself was identified as *svarṇa-kānti-sampannā* (having a body of golden hue), *Gaurabakṣa-vilāsinī* (literally one who dwells in the heart of Caitanya), *Bhakti-svarūpinī* (personification of devotion), *Premānanda-vṛddhi-kārinī* (one who magnifies the bliss of love), *Dayāmayī* (Merciful), *Kṣemāṅkarī* (an epithet used for Parvati/Durga meaning one who brings about welfare of all beings), *Navadvīpa-svarūpa* (one who personifies the sacred territory of Navadvīpa), *Cīramangalmayījagadjananī* (Mother of the world who bestows eternal auspiciousness), and *Kalikalūṣa-nāśinī* (as the destroyer of the contamination of the Kali Age) (Sarkār 1914, pp. 1–4; Sarkār 1915, preface; Gosvāmī 1914, Preface). There were some appellations such as *Rasikā, Rasarūpā*, and *Rasamayī* (filled with passion), which pointed back to the conceptualization of *Rasarāja* as formulated in the *Vamśī Sikśā* mentioned earlier in Section 2. On the whole, however, most epithets elevated Viṣṇupriyā to the level of a Goddess. Some usages, such as those about Viṣṇupriyā's glowing body color, even paralleled Caitanya's description as *Gaura*.

However, by its very nature, the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā hypothesis violated the basic tenets of the seemingly illicit affairs of Kṛṣṇa as developed by generations of Vaiṣṇava theologians. It remained marginalized within Bengali Vaiṣṇava discourses since it contained within it a contradictory potential—it could be subverted for passionate ends of physical fulfillment that the tradition despised, and at the same time, it was theologically inferior to the Parakīyā conception (Stewart 2010, p. 160). Haridās Gosvāmī tried his best to circumvent both these possibilities by trying to synthesize a sanitized notion of *Nadīyā nāgari bhāva* whereby the eternal svakīya relation between Caitanya and Viṣṇupriyā was projected as a correlate of the eternal relation of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa. He attempted to insert and prioritize the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā *tattva* within the theological frame of Vaiṣṇavism, keeping all other parameters intact. However, the very innovativeness of this motley formulation itself became the reason for its lack of popular appeal among the wider Vaiṣṇava community. It appears that the new version of *yugal-arcanā* or *yugal-bhajan* of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā (Gosvāmī 1914; Vyakaraṇtīrtha 1932, pp. 1–15) veered rather close to esoteric conceptions of *yugal-sādhanā* that were already well established within Vaiṣṇava–Sahajīyā circuits (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 113–46). Many of the terminologies and concepts used by Haridās Gosvāmī directly alluded to *Nadīyā nāgari bhāva* tendencies in pre-colonial Vaiṣṇavism. Thus, the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā theorization was vigorously contested and denounced by conservative quarters.[44]

[44] Apparently, a spate of articles were published in different journals such as *Śiśir*, *Ānandabazār*, and *Hitabādī* by men such as Vaikunṭhanāth De, Rādhāballabh Caudhurī, and Manīndracandra Nandi, the zamindar of Saidabad in Nadia and the patron of the *Śrī Gaurāṅga Sevaka* journal. *Śiśir* raised the alarm that 'Is it not a sin and a crime to preach such immorality about Caitanya in the name of religion and religious practice?' For instance, Yogendracandra Deb, the editor of the *Śrī Śrī Sonār Gaurāṅga* published from Comilla in East Bengal, led a concerted backlash against the 'fabricated' narrative of the *navya Gaura nāgari vādīs* (neo-*Gaura nāgara vādī*) attempts in 1926 (Deb 1926, pp. 665–82). Deb felt compelled to take a stand as he contended that many educated Bengalis in their simplicity were being duped by the apparently 'sweet' views of this group. The crux of the arguments posited by his journal was as follows: First, they argued that the new version was distorting established ritual practices of worshipping Caitanya, Advaita, and Kṛṣṇa. They specifically objected to the statement ascribed to Haridās Gosvāmī that Bengali Vaiṣṇavas regarded both Kṛṣṇa and Caitanya as complete godheads

Interestingly, in hindsight, it seems that the argument for a national devotional culture through the *Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā* by Śiśir Kumār Ghosh among others was not merely an exposition of a modernist regional cultural expression as some historians would like to frame it (Bhatia 2009, pp. 225–91). It also played a crucial role in allowing contemporary relatively marginal proponents to voice their own opinions. Ideologically, for instance, some contributors to the *Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā*, such as Haridās Gosvāmī and Jāgatbandhu Bhadra, were clearly non-mainstream in their approach. Bhadra's Vaiṣṇava anthology *Gaurapadatarangiṇī* is a classic expression of diverse shades of poetical writings including Sahajīyā themes. Haridās Gosvāmī himself had high regard for Śiśir Kumār Ghosh, as his biography shows, and it is quite revealing that Ghosh was considered by him as 'a believer of *viśuddha* (pure) *Nadīyā nāgarī bhāva*'. After Ghosh's death in 1911, Gosvāmī decided to continue the former's unfinished work and even dreamt of Ghosh's soul entering into his body (Gosvāmī 1963, pp. 174–75).[45] Marginal and non-conformist views also found an expression in the pages of some other periodicals such as *Vaiṣṇava Sanginī*.[46]

It is difficult to document exactly when the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā dual worship program lost relevance in the twentieth century but there is reason to believe that it could not emerge as a spontaneously accepted popular notion. Although, there may be found some Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā temples in certain parts of Bengal even today, they do not enjoy much prominence within the tradition. In all probability, the spread of Gauḍīya Maṭhs and other affiliate monastic establishments in the twentieth century gradually squeezed out from the mainstream such divergent alternate imaginings.[47] It should be noted, however, that women perform a critical element in the religious activities and *seva* of institutionalised Vaiṣṇava temples—they take part in ritual fasts, prepare and serve food for the deity which is partaken later as *prasad*, lead women's congregational devotional singing, and so on and so forth. This has been documented for the Radharaman Temple in Vṛndāvana in the modern period (Case 2000, pp. 45–62). In the audiences' quest to 'see divinity', Viṣṇupriyā still plays a crucial role in the *aṣṭayama līlā* or the eight day performances dedicated to Caitanya organized by members of the patron family of the Radharaman Temple (Case 2000, pp. 111–50). It is also true that *līlākīrtan* players across rural Bengal still sing the Caitanya *līlā* episodes that feature Viṣṇupriyā during specific times of the year. Given the fact that Vaiṣṇava conceptions across various layers of beliefs are superbly mobile—'a *goswami's* or *babaji's* sense of Vṛndāvana travels with him in his imagination; a *sahajiya's* sense of place travels with her in her body; an ISKCON devotee experiences the pleasures of serving Vrindavan wherever she renders her devotional service; and all Bengali Vaiṣṇavas experience Vrindavan's spiritual/sonic

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(*Svayam Bhagavan*). Secondly, they objected to Haridās Gosvāmī's contention that 'A hundred thousand Rādhās were not equal to one Viṣṇupriyā. A hundred thousand Rādhā-bhāva condenses to create the basis for Viṣṇupriyā *tattva*.' The third objection was against Haridās Gosvāmī's acceptance of the view about Caitanya's deliverance of prostitutes such as Satyabālā referred to in the apocryphal text *Gobindadāser Kaḍchā*. They severely castigated Gosvāmī for claiming that the Vaiṣṇava hagiographers have shown that *Svakīya* and *Parakīya bhāvas* are seen in the case of both Gaurāṅga as well as Kṛṣṇa. Lastly, they critiqued the supposedly immoral bearing of Haridās Gosvāmī's celebration of the *māhātmya* (glory) of *Parakīya* practice among *Sahajīyās* and *Kiśorībhajana* among others at Navadvīpa (Deb 1926, pp. 665–82). Similar views were expressed by other conservative writers as well.

45 It is incidentally important in this connection to note that Śiśir Kumar Ghosh and his family members were proponents of occult beliefs in mesmerism, clairvoyance, and séances, and experimented with techniques to communicate with the world of the dead (Bhatia 2020). For instance, in the article *Ātmār parakāyā prabeś* in the *Viṣṇupriyā Patrikā* of 1898 (vol. 8.1 pp. 41–48), the issue of transmigration of souls into the bodies of other living persons was discussed in the context of members of the Brajalīlā entering the bodies of their devotees.

46 Thus, in the *Vaiṣṇava Sanginī* in 1912, we find Gaurguṇānanda Ṭhākur, who published the text *Śrīkhander Prācīna Vaiṣṇava*, contributing a poem titled *Gaura Kalankini* (Unchaste women for Gaura), and in the same vein Haridās Gosvāmī wrote *Piriti Mahimā* (The Glory of Love).

47 Bhaktivinod Ṭhākur (1838–1914), along with his fellow associate Jagannātha Dās Bābāji, had initiated the worship of Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā at Yogpith temple in Mayapur in 1893. His son Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874–1937), the founder of the Gauḍīya Maṭh, while accepting the legitimacy of the *Gauramantra*, conducted debates at Kasimbazar in Murshidabad on 24 March 1912, where he defeated the *Gaura nāgara vādī* standpoint of Gaurguṇānanda Ṭhākur of Śrīkhaṇḍa and started the worship of *Śrī Guru Gaurāṅga Gāndharvikā Giridharī* across sixty four maṭhs during his lifetime (Sardella 2013). It appears that the Gauḍīya Maṭh under the inspiration of Saraswati and his emphasis on asceticism skirted any alternate imaginings of Caitanya's pre-ascetic relations even with his wedded wives.

bliss in the sites of their musical performances' (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 216)—it is evident that devotee imaginations regarding Vaiṣṇava personalities would also be similarly complex and varied. Ascetic institutional establishments such as the Gauḍīya Maṭh, however, usually do not directly engage with women's issues or provide avenues for female asceticism of the type visible, for instance, in other modern Hindu orders such as the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission (which is the female counterpart of the Ramakrishna Mission). But modern Vaiṣṇava maṭhs such as the Caitanya Sāraswat Maṭh, among others, do celebrate the appearance Days (*tithis*) of several pious Vaiṣṇava women, including Śrī Viṣṇupriyā, in their ritual calendar.[48]

6. Conclusions

The entanglements of a sentiment of love and devotion within Bengali Vaiṣṇavism led to a number of significant fallouts, some of which were perhaps unintended, within various layers of opinions, both within as well as outside the tradition in the colonial era. For most middle-class Bengali Vaiṣṇava bhadralok sympathizers, Caitanya came to represent a humanist quotient reflective of the flexibility and liberalism inherent within Bengali culture. For scholars of literature, the Vaiṣṇava celebration of love and the humanist spirit in the literary domain of the early modern period was portrayed as the most fruitful and constructive phase in the constitution of the Bengali language and literature (Sen 1896, pp. 147–219).[49] There were also dissidents who harbored suspicions that the spread of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal and its dominant stress on love and emotion historically engendered effeminacy within Bengali society that did not augur well for its political future. For instance, the noted historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar contended that 'by its exaltation of pacifism and patient suffering . . . it [Vaiṣṇavism] sapped the martial instinct of the [Bengali] race and made the people too soft to conduct national defense' (Sarkar 1943, p. 222). In the backdrop of this fractured receptivity regarding the legacy of the tradition as a whole, it is only to be expected that notions about Viṣṇupriyā would also necessarily remain contested.

In sum, it is difficult to draw a simplistic connection that increased prominence to writing biographies of women associated with Caitanya by educated *bhadralok* writers in the age of religious reformism during colonial times automatically led to a greater urgency to women's issues within the Bengali Vaiṣṇava movement. At the same time, it is a testament to the elasticity and flexibility of the Vaiṣṇava tradition that newer images regarding Viṣṇupriyā could still be expounded and even eulogized by some sections in colonial times. As the preceding discussion has revealed, the Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā sacred biographic image-building exercise was ultimately critiqued by some contemporaries as a deliberate deviation from mainstream Vaiṣṇava theological perspectives. For them, such an ideal essentially meant pandering to pre-colonial sectarian and divisive agendas—a selective revitalization of *gaura nāgara vādī* perspectives—that needed to be shunned. I have tried to provide a glimpse of these supposedly marginal viewpoints that usually remain lost from mainstream academic discourses.

Alternate frames of perceiving a divine pair in Gaura–Viṣṇupriyā, in a sense, largely came to symbolize the pathos, emotionalism, and national culture of the Bengali people. At this level, the emphasis on Viṣṇupriyā, as Caitanya's eternal counterpart, helped to recast and filter her image from the rather fleeting presence within the pre-colonial hagiographical literature to a celebration of new modernist *bhadralok* sensibilities of divine conjugality. At yet another level, Viṣṇupriyā also came to personify and validate traditionalist notions of self-less devotion and faithfulness to her mother-in-law and her lost husband; of resolute patience, perseverance, and penance in the name of religion; and of

[48] http://www.scsmath.com/events/calendar/index.html accessed on 14 October 2020 at 17.25 hrs (IST).
[49] The blurb of a relatively recent fictionalized historical novel on Caitanya has this to say regarding the legacy of the era: 'Early modernity in India had its origin in the fifteenth-sixteenth century. At least in Bengal, many features of an urban/civil culture can be witnessed during the Caitanya era. If one removes the colonial lens, one may clearly witness the early modern glory of *Gaura-banga* (Bengal). An urban spirit, trading prosperity, a desire to travel, an attempt of the regional to merge with the national, social mobility of the middle and lower classes, and increasing participation of the masses in a caste-less manner in social movements-many such elements combined to inaugurate a form of pre-colonial modernity during Caitanya's time.' (Mitra 2012; front cover blurb).

ideal widowhood (after Caitanya's demise). Thus, the colonial era threw up a mélange of possibilities in imaging Viṣnupriyā, most of which could not finally find approbation from mainstream Vaiṣṇava traditions. Nevertheless, it enables us to fruitfully explore an interesting aspect within the relatively under-trodden field of women and gender studies within Bengali Vaiṣṇava traditions.

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Article

Shani on the Web: Virality and Vitality in Digital Popular Hinduism

Varuni Bhatia

School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560100, India; varuni.bhatia@apu.edu.in

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Abstract: What do god posters circulating online tell us about the practice of popular Hinduism in the age of digital mediatization? The article seeks to address the question by exploring images and god posters dedicated to the planetary deity Shani on Web 2.0. The article tracks Shani's presence on a range of online platforms—from the religion and culture pages of newspapers to YouTube videos and social media platforms. Using Shani's presence on the Web as a case study, the article argues that content drawn from popular Hinduism, dealing with astrology, ritual, religious vows and observances, form a significant and substantial aspect of online Hinduism. The article draws attention to the specific affordances of Web 2.0 to radically rethink what engaging with the sacred object in a virtual realm may entail. In doing so, it indicates what the future of Hindu religiosity may look like.

Keywords: digital Hinduism; god posters; Shani; Hindu images; Hinduism and mediatization

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The power of digital media impinges on everyday life in contemporary times with ever-increasing scope and intensity. The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has brought this fact into sharper relief than, perhaps, ever before. Needless to say, this enhanced digitality has also permeated the sphere of religion and religious rituals. How different religions reformulate ritual practices in the light of the pandemic and the theological and doctrinal implications of such reformulations is a topic for a different discussion. No doubt, such discussions are already happening and will take place increasingly in the days to come. What this extraordinary moment has allowed, however, is to retrain our attention on the mediated nature of religion. This understanding of technology as constitutive of religions and religious practices, what Jeremy Stolow calls "deus in machina"—God in and as the machine (Stolow 2013)—has come to stay with us for the foreseeable future.

Digital religion is a rapidly expanding academic field of enquiry. According to Heidi Campbell, at the most fundamental level, scholars of digital religion consider how "digital media is used by religious groups and users" for the propagation of religious doctrine and the abetment of religious practices. At the same time, scholars of digital religion also pay attention to the "*reimagining of religion* offered by unique affordances within these new media and spaces" (Campbell 2017, p. 16, emphasis added). When compared to Abrahamic religions, such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam, studies on Hinduism and new media technologies have been relatively sparse. Notable exceptions that exist focus on the use of new media by Hindu organizations, the performance of Hindu rituals online, particularly relating to online *puja*, broadcasting festivals, and the online congealment of different faith communities (Karapanagiotis 2010, 2013; Herman 2010; Scheifinger 2010). Within this body of scholarship, there is a broad consensus that online worship does not, and cannot, replace the 'real' thing for a range of reasons—spatial, embodied, as well as ontological. Digital religiosity, this body of scholarship contends, can operate only as a temporary and partial substitute for actual worship. However, as Stewart Hoover alerts us, we ought to remain wary of positions that either 'essentialize' or 'particularize' the relationship between digital technology and religion, where online religion serves either as a "poor substitute of actual and authentic role played by religion" or "stand[s] in for prior means of mediation" (Hoover 2012, p. 266).

Through its attention on Hindu religious imagery circulating online and over social media networks, this essay is a commentary on the operationalization of Web 2.0 in smartphone devices in India and the use of its interactive capacities in religious contexts. Within media and communication studies, Web 2.0 has three distinguishing features: "it is easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text" (Lovink 2011, p. 5). In the early days of digital religion, scholarship on Hinduism online, for reasons that had to do more with digital infrastructure, was located primarily within diasporic Hindu communities and their use of the internet to access rituals, sacred spaces and specialized Hindu religious materials from their particular sect or region. Only very recently has scholarship on digital Hinduism being conducted from the vantage point of India (Zeiler 2020). Meanwhile, the rapid permeation in India of the cellular phone has massively widened the base of individual participation in processes of mass circulation of user-generated media in the last few years (Jeffrey and Doron 2013). In a scenario where market scale and competition render smartphone prices and data plan costs increasingly cheaper at the bottom end, it becomes imperative to track how digital affordances are transforming everyday religious practices in India, particularly since 2016.

Kathinka Froystad in her study of the rapidly transforming realm of information and communication technologies in the city of Kanpur in north India notes that "smartphones were often [the] very first introduction to the internet" for most young men, and women, from working-class contexts (Froystad 2019, pp. 125–26). Froystad notes that in 2017, India had 432 million internet users of which 300 million were smartphone owners (Froystad 2019, p. 124). This peculiar infrastructural aspect accounts for much of the vast difference between online manifestations of faith in the diasporic Hindu digital arena and the same in India. It indicates why similar concerns regarding purity, authenticity, and community around the use of digital devices for religious purposes that are so consequential within diasporic Hindu contexts are not key concerns with regard to Hindu online practices in India. Instead, cultures of virality, that form a significant component of online activity with respect to a smartphone device, emerges as a key practice. It is this aspect of interactive online religiosity that I explore further in this paper. The social structures and economic arrangements consequent of digitalization of information and communication technologies—what Manuel Castells calls 'network society' (Castells 2004)—make this moment a decidedly new one with regard to religion as well. Media convergence and intermediality, interactivity and hypermedia, virality and amplification of content that is as much curated as it is spontaneous, new cultures of work and leisure enabled by networked devices, etc., have significantly reconfigured the matrices and modalities of religious practice. These new forms of religious participatory and virality cultures are both products of and processes that characterize web interfaces that exploited and realized the full potential of Web 2.0—social media networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok, or ShareChat, the platform that I focus on in this paper.

In the context of expanding techno-medial frontiers and Hinduism, the bulk of the existing scholarship deals with the vocal and aggressive presence of Hindu right wing content on the web, with the so-called 'internet Hindus', with their hate-speech, misinformation, and the politics of offense (Gittinger 2015; Mohan 2015; Udupa 2018; Banaji 2018). One of the lesser explored aspects in this article is digital publics. A focus on digital publics will allow us to re-interrogate the purported 'split publics' of analog media (Rajagopal 2001) from a digital perspective and invite us to think how devotional content often operates infrastructurally for political content. While it is undoubtedly difficult to cleanly parse out piety from politics, devotion from power relations, and belief from identity at all times, it remains necessary to not reduce the plethora of online Hindu content to its most extreme, i.e., hate-speech of religious right wing groups, organizations, and bots. In other words, while recognizing the importance of this scholarship in mapping and critiquing how Hindu religious content online often dovetails with majoritarian extremism in the Indian context, I suggest that it is as important to look beyond an all-exhaustive hermeneutic of suspicion in interpreting such content.

1. Research Method and Ethics

This article analyses images of Hindu divinities that circulate over various digital social media networking platforms. It seeks to understand the source of their sensual charge and the formal elements they deploy to excite and affect the sensorium. The primary virtual 'site' of my research is ShareChat—a social media platform that operates in a variety of Indian regional languages. The platform is popular amongst tier 2 and 3 cities in India, and amongst India's vast vernacular language publics. I limit myself to online content that is primarily user-generated and participatory. Content shared on the specific platform that I focus on often 'goes viral,' i.e., it is 'seen,' 'liked,' and 'shared' multiple times by users over more than one platform. The platform itself allows for content to be shared directly over WhatsApp. For the purposes of this article, I focus on god posters dedicated to Shani that circulate on this platform, and on other public online sites, such as YouTube.

Given the subject matter of my study, i.e., digital god posters or Hindu memes on a regional language social media platform, I had to make certain important decisions regarding two key issues related to social media research. One, the question of intellectual rights and two, the question of privacy and anonymity. In its technical aspects, a digital god poster is an image macro, i.e., an image superimposed with some kind of a text. Image macro is a technical term for what we currently in everyday conversation understand to be internet memes, "a piece of culture ... which gains influence through online transmission" (Davison 2012, p. 122). In common-sensical understanding, as well as in scholarship, memes refer primarily to humorous content. However, image macros that seek to involve themselves in other kinds of affect than satire, humor, ridicule or disgust—those that speak of love, piety, or simply good wishes—are also ubiquitous on social media. Hindu god posters online can be understood to circulate as memes of the non-humorous kind. Davison argues that internet memes are defined by their lack of attribution—an aspect quite clearly discernible in the circulation of Shani images online that I have been examining. Authorship and copyright are almost impossible to track down, and the same set of images are often variously montaged together to produce new religious memes. Davison contends that non-attribution is a generative feature of the internet meme and affords it the replicability and virality that is necessary for its continuation. In their non-attribution, god posters online are similar to devotional poetry from the Bhakti period, where the question of authorship remained secondary to the act of transmission.

In late October/early November 2019, my research assistant, Neeta Subbiah, and I archived a total of 53 images of Hanuman and Shani, both individually as well as together, that were being regularly circulated on the Indian social media platform and file sharing app, ShareChat. Our choice of deity and the social media app were both informed by what we had set out to study—i.e., the prevalence of different aspects of popular Hinduism online and what that can tell us about the intersection between religion and new media technologies in contemporary India. Given this interest, we found the peculiar intersection of Shani, the malevolent deity, and ShareChat, a uniquely Indian social media app optimized for use on an android smartphone, to be particularly propitious for our purpose. Our choice to focus on this particular social media platform was informed by its decidedly user-driven content, easy shareability as an affordance built into the app, and its popularity amongst non-English speaking users in India.

Despite the rich archive of digital god posters dedicated to Hanuman and Shani that we produced, we soon realized that in the absence of tracing copyright, it would be impossible to use these images in either an academic or any other forum. These images, however, are stock images that circulate not merely on ShareChat and through it, but on WhatsApp. They also accompany online news reports, blogs, and articles on popular Hinduism, especially on the topic of vows and observances in honor of Shani. Similarly, the same images are often used in multiple YouTube videos on the legend of Shani and instructions on how to worship him. Given this dense intermedial exchange and media convergences of Shani's images online, I decided for the purposes of this article, to use only those images that are available publicly on the internet. Each one of the images I use here, however, has been used to produce a god poster and an image macro and 'shared' on ShareChat.

The main theme of my article revolves around the question: how have various aspects of popular Hinduism adapted to the digital turn in religion? Given their highly localized circulation, the strong presence of priestly intermediaries, the often variegated myths and legends associated with these deities, and the absence of a prominent, representative institution or organization, how have these regional Hindu deities fared online? Even a cursory glance at vernacular Hindu content online, particularly on apps and other file sharing, social media sites, immediately reveals that a vast amount of this comprises locally prominent, secondary, and tertiary deities. That is, those deities which Philip Lutgendorf in his study of Hanuman calls mid-level, mediating divine beings. Deities who are seen to occupy the space between the human world and the world of the Great Gods. In order to exemplify this contention regarding quotidian Hindu religiosity on vernacular social media networks in India, I explore and analyze the online life of such a deity—the powerful but malevolent Shani. However, to properly appreciate the specificity of Shani's digital dwelling, it is necessary to briefly situate him in his pre-digital context.

2. Shani and the *Navagrahas*

Shani is a planetary deity, one of the *navagrahas* (nine planets) within Hindu astrology. *Navagrahas* are a set of nine heavenly bodies that include Surya (sun), Chandra/Soma (moon), Mangala (Mars), Budh (Mercury), Brihaspati (Jupiter), Shukra (Venus), Rahu, and Ketu, as well as Shani. The discourse of comparative religions identifies Shani with the planet Saturn of the Graeco-Roman astrological system. Like Saturn, Shani too has a day of the week set aside for him—*Shanivar* (literally, Shani's Day), corresponding to the Saturday of the western planetary week. The Sanskrit term *graha* literally means "that which possesses", and hence, according to Hindu astrology or *jyotish*, these nine planets are considered to be able to "possess" and effect profound influence on people's destinies depending upon the planetary charts that they are born under (Lochtefeld 2001, pp. 608–9). Like many other Hindu deities, the planets too are anthropomorphized and, in the process, emerge as deities with human form and myths and legends that demand worship and propitiation. They are deeply feared and highly regarded in the everyday practices of millions of Hindus in myriad of ways. From the drawing up of astrological charts (*kundali*) to a range of religious vows and austerities (*vrats*), the direction of one's home and hearth, the choice of the appropriate life-partner, or determining the auspicious time (*muhurtam*) to conduct an important task—all of these decisions are taken only upon a careful study of planetary positions and their influence on an individual by many Hindus all over India, as well as globally.

Navagrahas are ritually propitiated by Hindus before beginning any auspicious or important task and during times of distress (Pugh 1986). Judi Pugh noted that the *navagrahas* circulated thickly and densely in Banaras and neighboring regions, as calendar and bazaar art lithographs, ritual pamphlets, almanac covers, as well as roadside *murtis*, indicating their popularity in Hindu worldview and practices (Pugh 1986, p. 55). *Navagraha* shrines can be found dotting the southern Indian landscape that I currently inhabit, a little outside of Bangalore, at the cusp of the Tamil Nadu–Karnataka border. Often, these shrines accompany a temple devoted to Shiva. The *navagrahas* are placed in a row or in a circular formation with Surya at the center of the arrangement. Gopinatha Rao in his comprehensive study of Hindu iconography mentions that the *navagrahas* are "invariably placed in a separate *mandapa* having a pediment about three feet in height; and no two of them are made to face each other" (Rao 1971, p. 300). Amongst the *navagrahas,* Shani occupies a unique place as being widely worshipped individually. Unlike the rest of the *navagrahas*, we find temples dedicated to Shani/Shanidev/Mahashani as the sole deity. In Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, where Shani shrines are prominently located, the deity is sometimes depicted as an aniconic, black stone. One of the most important Shani temples today is in Shingnapur in the Ahmadnagar district, Maharashtra. This uncovered shrine consists of an altar to Shanidev, represented by a tall, black, aniconic stone. A few years ago, this shrine found itself in the middle of a controversy over allowing women inside the shrine precincts. Following a

court order in 2016, the trustees of the temple now allow women inside the shrine.[1] The shrine hosts a remarkably well-maintained website, with relevant information for both first-time visitors as well as better-informed worshippers.[2]

In traditional iconography, however, Shani is not an aniconic deity.[3] His iconographic characteristics are clearly mentioned in texts, faithfully (and, sometimes, not so faithfully) represented in temple sculptures. Shani's characteristic is the color black. He is dark-complexioned and wears black clothes. Additionally, as Gopinatha Rao mentions, "he [is] short in stature and somewhat lame in one leg. He should have two arms" (Rao 1971, p. 321). Rao acknowledges the prevalence of differences amongst classical Hindu texts of iconography with regard to Shani's depictions. At times, it is recommended his two hands hold a staff and the *varada* (blessing) pose, respectively. Other texts recommend that his hands holds prayer beads instead of the blessing pose. Similarly, some texts show him seated on a bed of lotuses, while others prefer him riding an iron chariot drawn by eight horses.

Popular iconography, however, deviates considerably from these textual recommendations, as we shall see presently. Indications of this can be seen in a devotional song by Muthuswami Dikshitar, one of the famed trinity of Carnatic music, from the eighteenth century. Dikshitar's hymn refers to Shani as the son of Surya and brother of Yama. His body is described as being 'of dark luster, like collyrium', according to a translation by musicologist and Carnatic musician, Govinda Rao. He rides the crow as his vehicle and adorns blue attire and jewelry made of blue stones. Dikshitar's hymn is perhaps representative of popular iconographic representations of Shani from the same time. This is true particularly for its reference to the crow as Shani's 'vehicle.' It seems much more likely that the crow is a symbolic representation of Shani's lameness and maleficence as mentioned in the classical texts of Hindu iconography. The term for crow in Sanskrit, *kakah*, is also used to describe a lame as well as a crooked man (Apte, p. 553). This (Figure 1) pen and ink sketch of Shani from a column of the Minakshi Temple in Madurai from the early nineteenth century clearly depicts Shani's close association with the crow (mistakenly identified as a raven in the sketch). However, it also deviates considerably from descriptions of Shani in texts of classical iconography. In this image, Shani is depicted with four arms and not two. He holds a noose (*pasha*) and a trident (*trishul*) in his upper two hands, while his lower right hand is in the *abhaya* (fearless) pose.[4] The lower left had holds an unidentifiable object, perhaps a string of beads or a *kamandala* (water pot).

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[1] Shani Shingnapur Temple lifts ban on women's entry. Available online: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/shani-shingnapur-temple-lifts-ban-on-womens-entry/article8451406.ece. *The Hindu*, 8 April 2016. (accessed on 12 August 2020). And Alok Prasanna Kumar. Women and Shani Shingnapur Temple: A Brief History of Entry Laws and how Times are Changing. *Firstpost*, 12 April 2016. Available online: https://www.firstpost.com/india/women-in-shani-shingnapur-brief-history-of-temple-entry-laws-and-how-times-are-changing-2723582.html (accessed 12 August 2020).

[2] https://www.shanidev.com/about-us.html (accessed on 3 August 2020).

[3] I am grateful to Sarada Natarajan for the key insights, citations, and references around classical iconography of Shani discussed in this and subsequent paragraphs. Private conversation with Sharada Natarajan, 3 August 2020.

[4] Personal communication from Sarada Natarajan dated 3 August 2020.

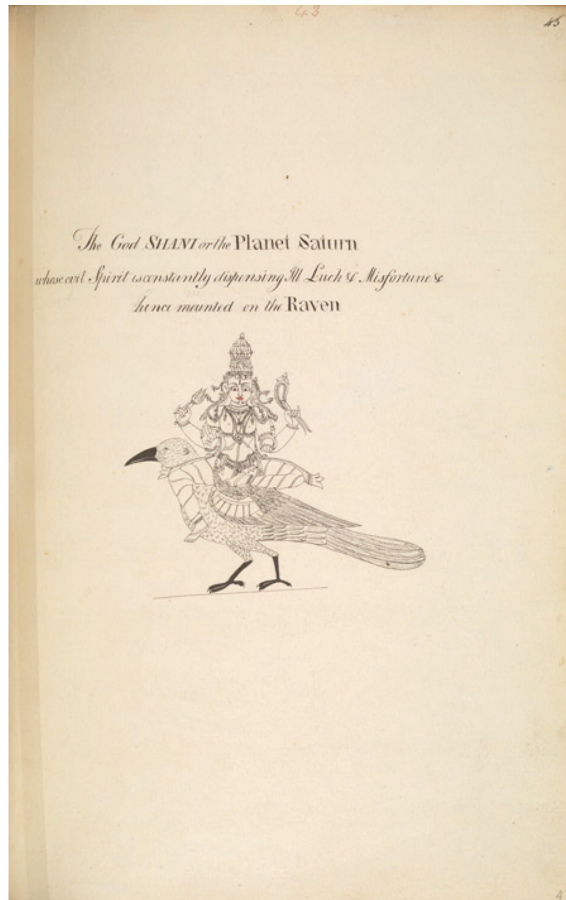

Figure 1. Pen and ink sketch of Shani from Minakshi Sundareshvara Temple, Madurai, from 'Album of 51 drawings (57 folios) of buildings, sculpture, and paintings in the temple and choultry of Tirumala Nayyak at Madura.' Date: c. 1801-05. Artist: Anonymous. Source: British Library.

According to Hindu astrology (*jyotisha*), Shani is a malevolent and vindictive planetary deity. He is capable of causing a range of unfortunate and undesirable outcomes, from long-term illnesses to childlessness to loss of wealth and fame. As a planetary deity, Shani is easily angered and his 'evil eye' (*drishti*) or disposition (*dasha*) can last from seven and a half (*sadhe sati*) to as long as fourteen years—in all probability, a tally based upon the number for years it takes for the plant Saturn to complete a revolution of the sun (Lochtefeld 2001, pp. 608–9). In popular imagination, and in classical textual sources, Shani is intimately associated with the color black. Hence, it is considered inauspicious by many Hindus to transact in the secular realm in any object of that color on a Saturday. Instead, many believers will offer black-colored objects, such as sesame seeds, black cloth, and iron, to the planetary deity on this day of the week (Lochtefeld 2001, pp. 608–9). Shani represents a fundamental ambivalence within Hinduism between benign/auspicious and malevolent/inauspicious deities. Shani also illustrates the presence of tertiary deities—those fearful, fitful, and powerful gods that have the ability to make or break one's fortune but lack the capaciousness, omnipotence, and omnipresence of the great, Puranic gods and goddesses. Finally, Shani also represents what Christopher Fuller characterizes as 'popular Hinduism,'—those non-textual, practice-based aspects of Hinduism that exist in contemporary India,

in addition to text-based philosophical and metaphysical explanations, on the one hand, and the theological and social aspirations of modern reform movements, on the other hand.

However, there also exists an intimate relationship between the *navagrahas* and primary Hindu gods. Shani's close associations are with Hanuman and Shiva. Philip Lutgendorf notes how vanquishing Shani (or Mahashani) is a significant part of the legend around Hanuman. Hanuman myths commemorate that his birth occurred either on a Tuesday (*Mangalvar*, ruled by Mangala) or on a Saturday (*Shanivar*, ruled by Shani). Hanuman's birth legends seal his ability to control the *papa griha* (sinful planet) Mangal and the *krura griha* (cruel planet) Shani, respectively (Lutgendorf 2007, p. 186). Shani's legends as they appear in his *vrat katha*, however, associate him closely with Shiva, as well as fellow planetary deity, Surya. Here, he is associated with Surya and Chhaya as their son and the brother of Yama, the Hindu god of death. Often, his bazaar art iconography, where he is depicted holding a trident, a *damru* or hand-drum, and riding a bull, seals his association with Shiva (Pugh 1986).

3. Shani and Popular Hinduism on Web 2.0

A bricolage of images, borrowing from older traditions of chromolithographs, photographs, as well as the cinematic image, make up for a majority of Hindu devotional content that circulates online. However, every Saturday, Shani lords over the Internet. His images proliferate on ShareChat as well, accompanying the day-specific greetings, under the hashtag *shubh Shanivar* ('have an auspicious Saturday') or *jai Shani Maharaj* ('Hail Lord Shani'). These images can be broadly bunched under three categories: one, images of Shani alone; two, images of Shani alongside another Hindu deity, mostly Hanuman, and sometimes Shiva, and three, images of Shani's shrine. The last ones overwhelmingly are of the aniconic black stone Shani image from the Shingnapur Shanidev temple in Ahmadnagar district, Maharashtra (Figure 2). The anthropomorphized images, however, are less concerned with established textual and iconographic fidelity and more indebted to popular perceptions of and legends associated with the deity.

Figure 2. Aniconic Shani from Shingnapur Shanidev Temple. Source: *Zee News*.

Apart from the aniconic stone image from Shingnapur, two kinds of Shani imagery is most popular (Figures 3 and 4). The first one draws upon the horror sensorium to depict Shani in greyish blue tones, riding on an oversized, frightful crow, his eyes turned upwards (Figure 3). Shani's legend

shows him to be favorably disposed towards the color black. Hence, the use of darker shades is not unusual. However, this image also actively builds upon popular depictions of horror, in cinema and graphic novels, for the effect of fearsomeness it wishes to induce amongst its viewers. The second one depicts him in bright colors, often blue and red, sporting a golden crown—no different from other generic Puranic deities (Figure 4). It reminds us, Judy Pugh notes in the context of printed posters of the *navagrahas*, that 'popular iconographic illustrations mute, even obscure the planets' malevolent dispensations' (Pugh 1986, p. 56).

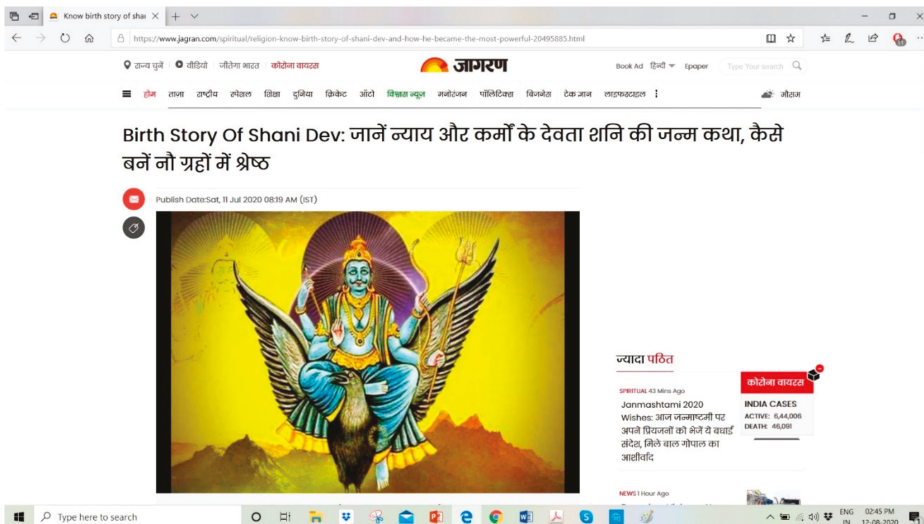

Figure 3. Shani riding the crow. Source: *Jagaran.*

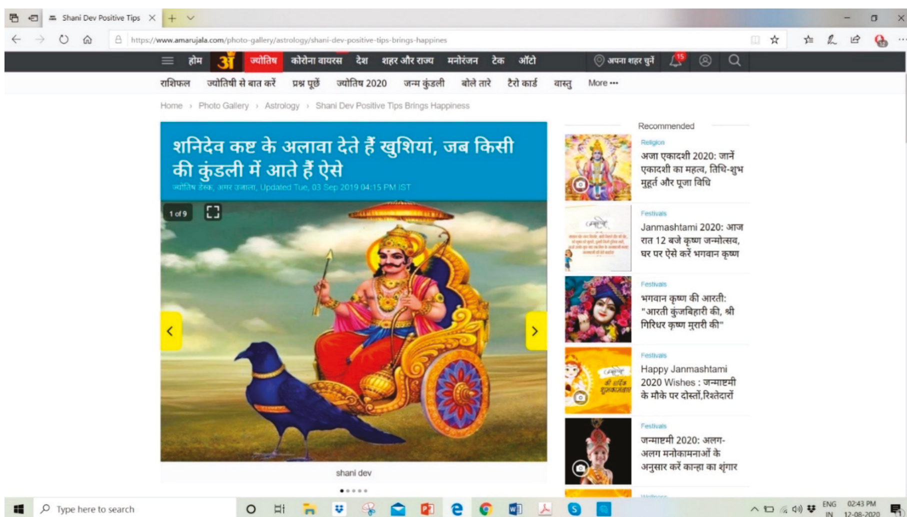

Figure 4. Shani riding a golden chariot. Source: *AmarUjala.*

These three figures form the bulk of Shani imagery that circulates online. They are then digitally modified, montaged, and turned into god posters and internet memes by users that circulate richly

each Saturday (Figure 5). At times, Shani's planetary aspect is closely integrated into the overall representation (Figure 6). This is done by drawing upon existing cosmic kitsch, easily available for use as a background in a montage. At other times, a more pastoral aesthetic is preferred (Figure 7). Media convergence and modularity that digitalization affords means that images from the print era down to the absolutely contemporary figural representations of Hindu deities in graphic novels—all can be found circulating on social media platforms. However, most content is basic in its production quality and can safely be characterized as digital kitsch, characterized by its 'cheap ... repetitive and imitative' aspects (Jain 2007, p. 173).

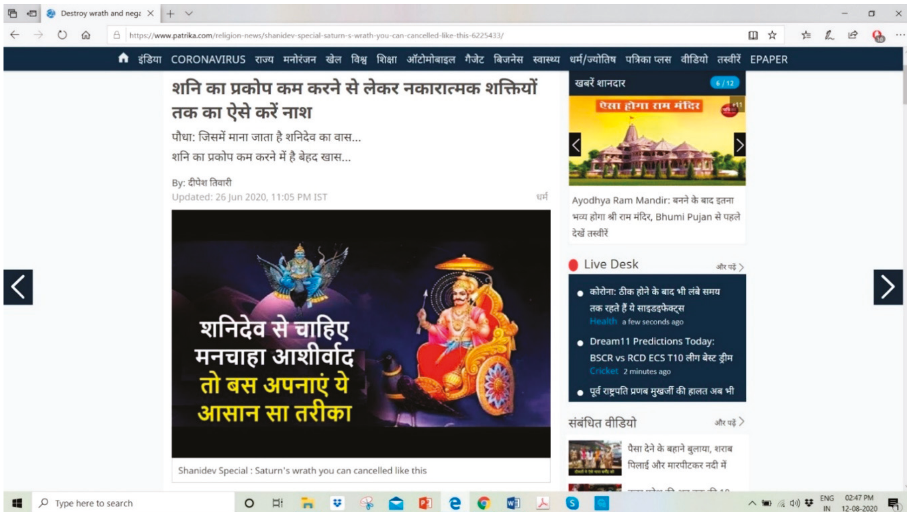

Figure 5. Shani montage and meme. Source *Patrika*.

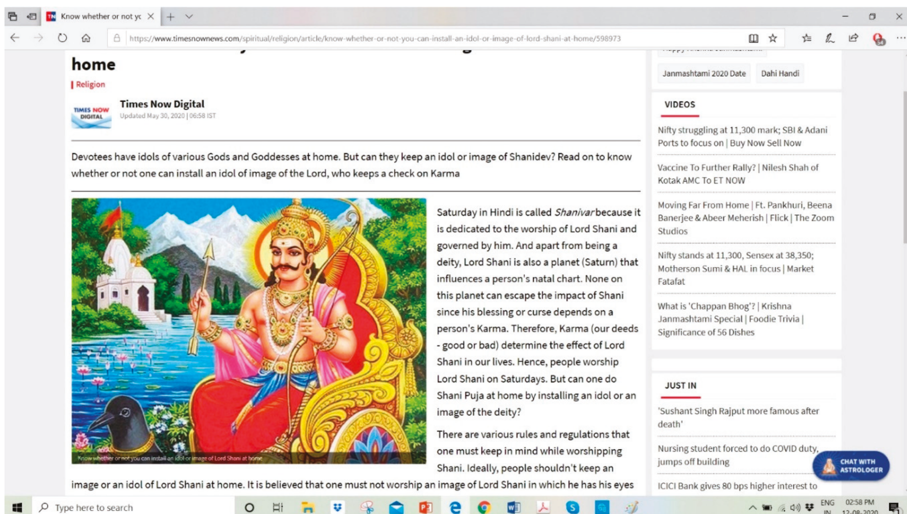

Figure 6. Shani with a pastoral background. Source: *Times Now Digital*.

Figure 7. Shani with cosmic kitsch background. Source: *ABP* Digital.

Shani imagery in bazaar art, Pugh argues, rests upon a conscious 'semeiotic heterogeneity' whereby his malevolence and his power remain ambiguously intertwined with each other. This kind of heterogeneity can be seen most clearly in his vehicle—a black buffalo, otherwise reminiscent of Yama, the god of death, but which was often mistaken by devotees to be the bull associated with Shiva (Pugh 1986, p. 59). Digital images of Shani, which can be seen as transposition of the printed image on the digital medium, continue with this kind of semeiotic dissimulation and plurality. Anthropomorphized images often correspond closely to his mythical status as a *navagraha* with a fearful countenance and ability to do harm. The 'ambiguous' counterpart of such images are those that depict him as a solemn and just judge, handing out commensurate punishments for one's sins. The harbinger of unbridled maleficence and misfortune, which is how Shani is understood in Hindu astrology, sits uneasily with cheery Saturday greetings that occasion the circulation of his image on ShareChat. Hence, his malefic, vindictive aspects are often mitigated by a gentler representation.

The presence of Shani on social media is especially aimed at ritualistic Hindu audiences. Although the images are not worshipped in the same fashion as one would conduct at a regular temple or domestic altar. These images indicate that the digital medium is a unique platform for the extension and continuation in new forms of various aspects of popular Hinduism. Central to this is the scope of 'play' that the technology affords. Digital images can be tagged with metadata, linked with hypertexts, superimposed with salutations and propitiations, and discussed in 'below the line' comments. They invite and produce virtual participatory cultures of religiosity amongst people who may otherwise never encounter each other. The engagements are of what social media theorists, following the lead of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, call 'phatic' communication (Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012; Boyd 2012). This type of communication maintains social engagement without conveying meaning or substance. Most images, thus, are followed by repetitive comments such as 'jai shani maharaj' or 'shani dev ki jai' that seek to reinforce the primary message.

That online images buttress offline ritualized activity, rather than replace it in any fashion, is evidenced by the kind of information that sometimes accompanies the image. Thus, one can find posters containing dense narratives and legends, instructions to worship, as well as contact numbers of *pandits*, astrologers, and other ritual specialists who could potentially help users with a *puja* or some other religious task. One such poster circulating on ShareChat urges viewers to worship Shani to get rid of their problems under the hashtag #we_solve_all_your_problems. The 'problems' too are clearly

mentioned and consist of challenges in love and marriage as well as professional rivalries and set-backs. Sometimes, such posters even mention names of the specific *pujas* that can be conducted, and their purpose and efficacy. A single digital poster is, thus, able to carry out multiple functions—sacred as well as secular.

Digital religious content often facilitates intermedial conversations that lead to important kinds of media convergences. These convergences fundamentally define contemporary religious publics in India that simultaneously circulate over multiple digital platforms while having access to other mediated forms of the same content. What existed in an older media form (i.e., print and analog) passes into new (digital) media, now armed with new affordances. For instance, a popular YouTube channel, Spiritual Activity, dealing with Hindu rites and rituals with 1.2 million subscribers carries a video narrating Shani's *vrat katha* (Figure 8).[5] Similarly, the religion, culture, and lifestyle supplements of regional language and English newspapers also carry articles on Shani's legends on certain days associated with this deity. Such content may be in addition to chapbooks and ritual manuals, calendar art images, and other such ephemera that Shani-afflicted Hindus may have in their homes. To wit, on 1 August 2020, Navbharat Times, Patrika, and Jagaran—some of the most popular Hindi dailies in India—all carried Shani's *vrat katha*.[6] This date was particularly significant for Shani worshippers. It marked the thirteenth day of the month of *shravan* in the lunar calendar when observances and austerities are customarily undertaken in the honor of Shiva to mitigate accumulated sins (*pradosh vrat*). However, on this occasion, the date happened to fall on a Saturday—the day of Shani. The day, thus, turned into Shani *trayodashi*, when, according to legend, Shiva himself fasted to propitiate Shani. In recognition of this compounded ritual significance, the day's newspapers urged readers to additionally read Shani's *vrat katha* if they were keeping the *pradosh vrat*.

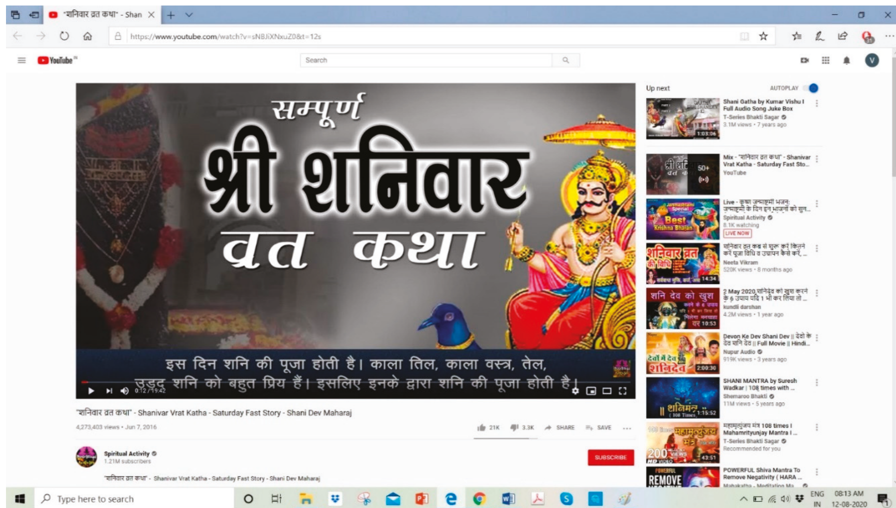

Figure 8. Screenshot of YouTube video 'Sampoorna Shanivar ki vrat katha' by the YouTube channel Spiritual Activity, with 1.2 million subscribers.

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5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNBJiXNxuZ0&t=12s (accessed on 12 August 2020).

6 Shilpa Shrivastava (2020a), "Shani Pradosh Vrat Katha. https://www.jagran.com/spiritual/puja-path-shani-pradosh-vrat-katha-importance-and-significance-read-this-story-20579360.html (accessed on 3 August 2020). Tanvi (2020). Shanidev ke prakopon se mukti paane ke liye har shanivar karen vrat aur padhen yeh katha. Available online: https://www.patrika.com/religion-news/shanivaar-vrat-katha-and-shani-puja-mahatva-in-hindi-5696809/ (accessed on 3 August 2020). Divyangana Shrivastava (2020b). Shani Vrat Katha. Available online: https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/astro/dharam-karam/moral-stories/know-shanivarvrat-story-or-katha-72886/ (accessed on 3 August 2020).

The Shani *vrat katha*, like other similar *kathas* that depict a cycle of misfortune followed by a happy ending, are not new in the Hindu context. We find many such *vrat kathas*, often addressed to a 'regional' deity, such as Shitala, Manasa, Shashthi, Santoshi Ma, or Satyanarayan, to name a few from the north and eastern Indian Hindu religious context (Wadley 2005). The pattern of storytelling in these *kathas* invariably follows the (mis)fortunes of a wealthy, upright, god-fearing, and moral human being who is punished for failing to pay attention to a particular deity or for her/his arrogance stemming from their successful status. Often, the misfortune is a result of facing the ire of a non-primary Hindu deity. Social media platforms like ShareChat are typically ill-suited to host long narrations of such legends in entirety—the latter circulate extensively on audio–visual content sharing platforms, such as YouTube. However, the images that circulate on all these different platforms provide pictorial or mnemonic prompts to Shani posters that also circulate on these and other platforms (Figure 6). Repetition is key, both oral–aural repetition as well as pictorial and mnemonic one. The poster, thus, serves as a metonym for the legend, which also interpolates users undergoing some or the other kind of personal misfortune.

This indexicality is mutually legible across different apps and social media platforms. For example, the images that accompany the narration of a Shani legend on YouTube are either the same or similar to the ones that circulate on ShareChat on Saturdays. Conversely, the latter is a clue to a specific Shani legend, whose audio narration one can search for and identify on YouTube.

The online presence of Shani, thus, is a powerful reminder that popular Hinduism in the form of local deities, special vows, *vrat kathas*, and astrology finds new pathways to remain relevant in the present times. It alerts us to dimensions of online sacrality that have remained understudied thus far. We see that digital affordances of Web 2.0, especially as a result of convenient access to the smartphone, inexpensive data plans, apps, and social media platforms that target a regional language user base, make it possible for deities, such as Shani, and the entire edifice of popular Hinduism that comes with it easily accessible on the digital medium. As noted by Arvind Rajagopal in the context of cinema and television, here too the mediated public is a strongly religiously informed one (Rajagopal 2001).

4. Virtuality, Virality, and Digital Corpothetics: Online Images of Hindu Deities

The divine image has a unique provenance within the sensorium of Hindu religiosity. No discussion of media, religion, and modernity in India has remained impervious to the presence and power of the image across a historical range of media—from sculpture and iconography to print, film, television, and the internet (Davis 1997; Pinney 2004; Rajagopal 2001; Jain 2007). In this section, I interrogate the circulation of Hindu images on the digital medium within the related frameworks of performance, embodiment, and (im)permanence to understand where, if at all, the sacred charge of these images lie. Ritually consecrated Hindu images are 'animate beings' (Davis 1997, p. 7). Can this vitality be translated onto the digital medium? What kinds of performative acts would be needed for digital images to be rendered 'animate?' What role does media sensorium play in the process of animating an image—virtually, as well as ontologically? Moreover, how long does its animated charge last on the digital medium? These questions become particularly significant to ask in the present context, because the digital image in its virtuality marks a definitive transformation from older forms of Hindu images.

Hindu images are evidence of 'concrete theism' (Waghorne 1985, p. 2). The ritual of *puja* is 'the basic formal means by which Hindus establish relationships with their deity' (Courtright 1985, p. 33). Hindu idols, variously called *murti*, *pratima*, or *vigraha*¸ go through the process of formal consecration whereby a priest ritually 'establishes' the image after which the idol is no longer merely a representation of the deity; it now *is* the deity. Scholars have argued that the act of worship or *puja* remains central to the production and circulation of Hindu images over a variety of mediascapes—from stone and metal images that can be consecrated to god posters that often hang in homes, offices, and vehicles. In his analysis of posters of Hindu gods, Daniel Smith notes that the primary purpose of these images was to be displayed in 'places of honor, often wreathed with flower garlands' (Smith 1995, p. 24). The *puja* ritual engenders a particular kind of relationship between the deity and the devotee that is

repetitively reproduced—often on a daily, weekly, monthly, or annual basis. The act of worship is a performative and embodied act involving a vast sensorium including visual, oral-aural, tactile, and olfactory dimensions. *Darshan* or exchange of the gaze is one of the most important aspects of *puja*, fostering that special connection between deity and devotee (Eck 1998). *Darshan* privileges the visual component of Hindu devotional sensorium and is also the most easily translatable across various kinds of visual media. Philip Lutgendorf had, thus, argued that the act of *darshan* lay at the heart of the popularity of the television Ramayana. The *Ramayan* 'was a feast of *darsan* ... conveyed especially through close-ups' (Lutgendorf 1995, p. 230).

However, is it possible to imagine lives of Hindu images outside of their ritual purpose? The easy and cheap availability of lithographs and chromolithographs since the late nineteenth century have ensured that not all divine images have been considered sacred. Some, as a result of their 'mechanical reproduction' as commodity objects are rendered into ephemera and excess before they can attain a sacred charge. Media anthropologists like Kajri Jain remind us of precisely such a dimension when considering the mass production of Hindu images used in and as commercial posters, greeting cards, advertisements, and bazaar and calendar art. Jain argues that in the context of such mass produced images, the god image circulates more as a commodity than a sacred object (Jain 2007). Jain, however, draws a distinction between god posters as commodity object, such as advertisements and calendars, and in bazaar prints, where they are more likely to be used for worship. Hence, in her analysis of god images circulating in the largely vernacular marketplace, the performative act of worship or *puja* retains its centrality. *Puja* differentiates between god posters circulating as a sacred image and a commodity object. The ontological (theological) is, thus, mediated by the performative and the embodied (ritual).

Digital god posters are in many ways no different from printed god posters. Some are downloaded and kept on one's devices; others are made into screensavers, while a large number of them simply disappear into a virtual cloud after the most perfunctory and phatic engagement. At times, these online posters may be used for ritual worship, although arguably that is not their primary usage. What, then, explains the dense circulation of these images and posters in the digital public sphere in India? If these posters do not operate as sacred objects, what is their purpose? In looking for answers to these questions, I propose we turn to performative acts vis a vis specific kinds of images. Thus, for instance, an image situated at a domestic altar or at a temple's sanctum requires *pranapratishtha* (consecration) as its primary performative act, followed by the ritual of daily *puja.* A chromolithograph on a calendar, or an offset print in the form of a greeting card, on the other hand, is meant to be distributed and circulated. Only in certain specific contexts does it assume a sacred charge, if the user or receiver of the image chooses to attribute divinity to it—again through performative acts. The type of performative acts that define engagement with digital posters is fundamentally different from printed images and posters. Digital acts assume a radically different type of embodiment—an embodiment that primarily depends upon the use of fingertips on a digital device and a heightened audio-visual sensorium.

It is possible to argue that the mediated forms of divinity in the Hindu context have progressed from permanence to *im*permanence over the long arc of history. With the appearance of 'new' forms of media, and the shift from stone and metal to print, cinema, and more recently the digital, we are able to discern a move from long-lasting materials to make the sacred image to less durable and impermanent materials. Nonetheless, it is also important to remember that idols were, and continue to be, constructed out of material that could easily decay and decompose. This practice can be seen today in the context of annual, recurring public festivals, such as Durga Puja in West Bengal and Ganesh Puja in Maharashtra. Idols are especially made for these kinds of festivals, consecrated for worship, and ritually immersed in water bodies at the end of the period of worship. Similarly, in the context of the printed image, there is no dearth of sacred ephemera—often seen in the form of abandoned prints and photos underneath tress, or floating pitifully in lakes and other water bodies. Such close association with a cyclical and recurrent process of ritually re-establishing the divine image leads James Preston to conclude that impermanence is fundamental to the Hindu relationship to divinity and its material forms (Preston 1985, p. 12). Is it possible, then, to think of about virtuality as yet

another dimension of impermanence? According to Geert Lovink, impermanence is characteristic of Web 2.0 since 'the object of study is in a permanent state of flux and will disappear shortly—the death of everything cannot be denied' (Lovink 2011, p. 7). Unlike the comparably longer life of the printed image, the digital image is marked by its transience, especially in relation to the user–subject. For while it is true that nothing really ever decays or dies on the internet, virtual objects do disappear. This disappearance can be due to a host of reasons. The sheer profusion of online content and the speed of its creation and circulation is one of them. Another reason, one that has to do with digital infrastructure, is that hyperlinks that enable content retrieval may either 'break' or be 'scrubbed'. Whatever the case, online content is forever in danger of being 'lost' to retrieval.

Digital images are transient in a fundamentally disembodied fashion. Older Hindu images could be stolen, destroyed, disfigured, decayed, bought and sold, and even labelled and placed in museums as artifact (Davis 1997, p. 7). However, in all of these desacralizing acts, the feature of a strong, embodied relationship to the object remained central, tying it, in a paradoxical and ironical fashion, to the embodiment inherent within the act of worship itself. However, the virtuality that marks the digital image ensures that all it takes for the image to disappear is a click or a scroll. Hence, the virtuality of online Hindu images that I speak of is not merely characterized by its impermanence; it is also marked by its disembodiment. In their study of online *pujas*, both Heinz Scheifinger and Nicole Karapanagiotis raise the problem of embodiment vis a vis online worship. Karapanagiotis finds that most ISKCON devotees, for example, imagine the virtual god image to be ontologically akin to an *utsava murti*—an image especially created for use outside the confines of a temple (Karapanagiotis 2013). Scheifinger notes that digital sensorium abets a simulation of the embodied aspects of an actual *puja* ritual by allowing the user to light a lamp, offer flowers, or ring a bell at the click of a button (Scheifinger 2010, p. 209). He concludes that while disembodiment is built into digital *pujas*, the 'act of seeing' or *darshan* maintains the basic postulate of embodiment even in virtual spaces. In her analysis of *darshan*, Diana Eck too maintained that the act of seeing was fundamentally an embodied act, where 'seeing' is a form of 'touching' as well as 'knowing' (Eck 1998, p. 9).

Shani's digital presence, however, challenges the well-worn theory of the centrality of the gaze vis a vis Hindu deities. Customarily, devotees are not meant to exchange gaze with a Shani image, and installing a Shani image at home altars is traditionally prohibited. According to legends, Shani's gaze is able to cause eclipses and blow off the heads of newborn children—as had happened to Surya and Ganesha, respectively. Hence, many (though not all) printed as well as digital images depict his eyes as upturned or askance, rather than looking straight at the viewer. On the digital medium, dramatic special effects are often deployed to underplay the 'evil eye' of Shani, such as giving him red, opaque eyes. Shani's online presence allows us to think of embodiment vis a vis digital images of Hindu gods outside of the predominant framework of *darshan* and through the analytics of media sensorium.

Here, I find Christopher Pinney's use of 'corpothetics' to be illuminating with regard to the religious sensorium produced in online god posters and memes. Speaking of Hindu god posters in the print era and mythological cinema from later on, Pinney contends that the 'sensory, corporeal aesthetics' of these films abolish the space for contemplation and replace it with an aural–visual sensory overload (Pinney 2002, pp. 355–69). This sensory overload is produced with a thick use of special effects whenever divinity is being depicted on screen. Even a cursory glance at digital god posters shows a remarkable density of Hindu popular corpothetics. They consist of photomontages, graphic art and design, and the use of animations on image macros and digitally produced videos, all available for downloading, sharing, commenting, and liking. The images that circulate apply a wide range of technical special effects—such as Photoshop, graphic art and design, animations, background music—to grab the user's attention in an increasingly phatic social media world. Digital technology allows images of deities to sport animate, glittering halos around the head, rich ornaments on the body, pulsating lotuses, throbbing *prasadam*, and smoky incense at the feet. Glitters adorn the screen and sometimes fall from the sky, and lamps light up. Quick edits and cuts in videos shared online ensure that the viewer is never looking at the same image for more than a few seconds

during the video. The animated image may be accompanied with background music playing a lively *bhajan*, whose aural sensorium is more reminiscent of Bollywood dance mixes rather than a *satsang* gathering. Digital images such as these, while undoubtedly transacting in the aural–visual sensory realm, produces a sensorium that extends beyond these limitations. They are replete on vernacular digital platforms, such as ShareChat, from where they permeate deep into circulation through linked platforms, such as WhatsApp. Cursory evidence suggests that the denser the sensorium, the more viral the image/video goes.

This brings us to the key affordance that the digital medium allows for—that of virality. Virality is not just a characteristic of new media and Web 2.0—it is its very life breath. Social media theorists contend that the critical break between older forms of (print and analog) media and new (digital) media lies along the axis of user participation. Passive audiences have given way to active producers of content. In addition, as producers, users do not merely upload original content, they also participate in its circulation using the liking and sharing options, placing hashtags, writing comments, and adding text. Virality, user-generated content, participatory cultures, and 'the people formally known as the audience' are some of the ways in which social media theorists have conceptualized the user–producer interface of digital cultures and digital publics (Mandiberg 2012, pp. 1–12; Rosen 2012, pp. 13–16). In analyzing Hindu digital content online, especially with regard to new kinds of mediatization of religion, these aspects of digital sociality are key to examine.

Cultures of virality come with minutiae forms of embodiment, and operate implicitly as performative acts vis a vis Hindu digital imagery. Every 'like,' 'share,' and 'comment,' howsoever phatic, produces multiple channels of devotional communication across platforms, constantly reproducing a digital devotional public in its wake. This movement of images across platforms and devices through performative acts such as 'liking' and 'sharing' generates the vitality that animates the virtual god image. This combination of embodiment and participation that constitute cultures of virality serves to animate Hindu images that circulate online whereby the divine image attains liveness and vitality. These performative acts transform the virtual image into a vital one—one that is able to move and transfer its energies and blessings from one user–producer to another in a series of 'likes' and 'shares'. Sharing is implicitly built into the digital practice of religiosity and explicitly urged on some image macros that I have come across. Virality of these images, then, serves to reinforce vitality and thereby mitigate their virtuality.

5. Conclusions

This article is an initial exploration of god posters online. In the process, it provides insights into a vast and rapidly transforming world of digitally mediated religious practices in India since the smartphone revolution of 2016. It seeks to explore popular practices of contemporary Hinduism in India from the perspective of mediatization of religion to understand 'social and cultural processes through which a field or institution to some extent becomes dependent on the logic of the media' (Hjarvard 2011, p. 120). Digital Hinduism, the article argues, is only the proverbial newest kid on the block of a longer history of the mediatization of religion. The process of mediatization of Hinduism arguably began with the arrival of print technology in the nineteenth century. By examining a long history of Shani imagery—in iconography, sculpture, pen and ink sketches, devotional poetry, print, and online—the article traces how technological aspects of mediatization necessarily produce a rupture from older experiences and practices. It invites readers to reflect upon how various forms of mediatization offer different affordances that influence the manner in which sacred images and devotees interact with each other.

Transformations in the religious realm that this article takes as its point of departure cannot be seen outside of the kind that impact digital technology exerts on secular dimensions of life: from entertainment to news, sports to gaming, consumer behavior to sociality. In this article, I outline four key infrastructural aspects and affordances of digitalization that have fundamentally impacted Hindu religious practices in the contemporary times. One, the proliferation of the smartphone as

a commodity and the availability of inexpensive data plans have allowed for the specific kinds of online practices that have developed in India—such as religiously themed greetings and messages that circulate densely over WhatsApp. Two, cross-platform sharing and intermedial dialogue that, I argue, lies at the heart of media transformations of religious practices. A Shani devotee can now, using digital technologies available to her, find ritual experts, follow vows and observances, conduct a *puja* remotely, listen to the *vrat katha*, and send a Shani-themed greeting—all at the click of a button. She, as the user–participant in digital religion, need not think about how her acts are simultaneously producing content, consuming it, and distributing it. Third, media convergence remains key in this process of digital transformations. Older media forms and images, such as posters from the print era and special effects from cinema, continue to circulate in new media platforms in a modified fashion. Thus, god posters are often image macros that bring together older posters and photographs using Photoshop, graphic art and design, and a superimposed text. Finally, I argue that virality lies at the heart of digital religiosity in contemporary Hinduism. Virality brings together embodiment and performance in a single, phatic gesture of a 'like' or a 'share.' In doing so, virality fundamentally contributes to the vitality and lifeness of the sacred object within digital Hinduism.

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