

**For the Love of God:  
Variations of the Vaisnava School of Krishna Devotion**

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Western pagans seeking for queer-positive themes & representations in Indian mysticism have tended to focus on popularized notions of Tantra, possibly due to Tantra's supposed emphasis on 'sacred sexuality.'

In this essay, I will outline some of the odder ideas & practices that are associated with the Vaisnava tradition –focusing on those lineages where there is – to a western, queer eye at least – some element of gender-liminality going on.

The Classical *bhakti* (devotional) Vaisnava tradition grew up around the medieval Bengali saint Caitanya (1486-1553) and his followers. Classical (orthodox) Vaisnava was drawn from Classical Vedic literature such as the *Bhagavata Gita*, the *Bhagavata Purana* and the Bengali *Gita Govinda*.

For orthodox Vaisnavas, Krishna is the primordial god and creator of the Universe. Krishna resides in a heavenly pastoral abode, sometimes known as the *Golaka* (Cow-land) to which all human souls yearn to return. In this idyllic realm, Krishna frolics with the *Gopis* – the beautiful young cowgirls whom he has enticed away from their husbands. Krishna was also accompanied by 'cow-boys', (*Gopas*) and although they do feature in various of the popular Krishna myths, their appreciation of Krishna's beauty was said to be 'chaste' (at least by the orthodox Vaisnavas). It is said that the Gopas experienced 'madness' caused by their grief of being separated from Krishna, just as Radha and the Gopis did. This is the 'divine love' (*premas*) as opposed to human passion (*raga*). I have seen occasional references to some Gopas described as *priya-nama-sakas* – 'effeminate' cowherd boys who assisted Krishna in his affairs with the Gopis.

A surviving celebration of Radha & Krishna's dalliances is the *gotipua* – a tradition (thought to have started in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century) of cross-dressing boy temple dancers (although they are said to only dance within the temple on particular occasions) who enact the Radha-Krishna oriented poems such as the *Gita Govinda*, and who in turn, have influenced the development of modern Orrisan Dance. A troupe of Gotipua acrobatic dancers visited Edinburgh in 2002, but the tradition is said to be waning in contemporary India. As a dance form, Gotipua employs not only acrobatic feats, but also highly formalised steps and mudras; each Gotipua troupe is led by a guru who teaches the form. According to some sources, Gotipua emerged as a reaction to the Mughal invasion of Orissa, which suppressed the existing tradition of female temple-dancers, and led to the tradition being continued by cross-dressed boys.



Much of Classical Vaisnava practice is concerned not only with singing and dancing the praises of Krishna, but also the belief that by identifying with the inhabitants of Krishna's heaven, devotees are able to return to an eternal loving relationship with Krishna, the supreme god. However, unlike Tantric traditions where devotees would identify with the god or goddess (or both), Vaisnava devotees only identified with Krishna's companions, and not the god himself. Devotees who identified with the Gopis and in particular, the female attendants of Krishna's consort, Radha, were thought to experience the most intense divine love, as they visualised the divine couple's erotic *lila* (play) in the heavenly world. This reflects a Hindu view that the relationship between the ideal devotee and deity is identical to that of the ideal woman. So, in order to become devotees, men must renounce their masculinity.

This should not be interpreted (as is often done by Western pagans seeking expressions of male-female complementary status in Indian religious practices) as giving prominence to women. If anything, this bhakti supports and reinforces the dominant gender hierarchy – so that 'service' becomes not only a matter of duty, but also the *only* source of authentic fulfillment, particularly for women. So a woman's dutiful love for her husband is reframed as the highest kind of devotion. Whilst there are numerous examples of males becoming female in Hindu mythology, there are far fewer instances of women becoming men, and these are usually portrayed negatively (see Wendy Doniger, 1980). Moreover, it was very difficult (and remains so) for women to become *bhaktas* (female devotees). One of the most famous bhaktas is Mira Bai, a 16<sup>th</sup> century female saint. Accounts of her life mention that her family (she came from the Rajasthani ruling class) disapproved strongly of her devotion to Krishna, reportedly locking her in her room and even attempting to kill her. Whilst the songs and poems of Mira Bai are still popular in modern India, and she is revered as a saint, her renunciate lifestyle, though admired, is still not held up as a model for women to emulate. Religious devotion, it seems, was a legitimate (though extreme) 'alternative' to marriage and family life for women.

In Classical Vaisnava doctrine, the erotic loveplay of Krishna was largely interpreted in allegorical terms. Although Krishna himself engages in numerous adulterous affairs, this was interpreted as an allegory for god playing with his creation. Human beings should not therefore, seek to mimic Krishna's passions, and should observe the rules of caste and family values. This viewpoint is still echoed by contemporary Krishna devotional movements such as *The International Society for Krishna Consciousness* (ISKCON):

"Krishna says in the Bhagavad-gita that He is sex according to religious principles. So that sex, within marriage for having a nice Krishna conscious child, is very



good. But otherwise sex, be it homosexual or heterosexual is simply meant for the pleasure of the senses of the people involved. It is not being done for the service and pleasure of Krishna. So it is not allowed in Krishna consciousness.

In Krishna consciousness sex is for having nice God conscious children and such sex is Krishna Himself and is very glorious. But other sex is illicit sex and it is prohibited for a devotee. At the time of initiation a devotee has to accept vows including “no illicit sex” which that means no sex except within marriage for having children. It seems to some to be an almost impossible task as we are so attached to sex and think it is so important... But a devotee experiences a higher taste, a greater pleasure. A devotee fully engaged in Krishna consciousness under the direction of a bona fide pure devotee spiritual master is constantly enjoying a greater pleasure than sex from serving Krishna. So for him sex is not a very important thing at all.”

“... So having sex is not at all satisfying, one simply wants more and more sex and even if he gets it he is still not satisfied and the results are actually very bad. There are so many diseases and a man loses his energy, strength and determination if he loses too much semen.”

Madhudvisa dasa, quoted from [krishna.org/Articles/2001/01/00239.html](http://krishna.org/Articles/2001/01/00239.html).

This rather suppressive view of human sexuality has recently come under scrutiny due to a multi-million dollar lawsuit launched against ISKCON by forty-four former Krishna students who claim that as children, they were abused both physically and sexually, at schools run by the Society, located in both the USA and India. Also, Gay & Lesbian members of ISKCON have founded the *Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association*, which advocates the understanding of Gay & Lesbian issues using a “third gender” typology that they argue, is present in the Vedas.

Madhudvisa’s comment regarding men losing ‘energy’ through sex (particularly through the loss of semen) is itself worthy of exploration. The Indian belief that loss of semen through sex dates back to the time of the *Upanishads*, and still retains its power today. Gananath Obeyesekere has coined the term “cultural disease” in referring to the Indic concern with semen retention – which is often synonymous with the maintenance of good health, life expectancy, and the production of sons. Male ‘virility’ therefore requires that semen be conserved.

According to Ayurvedic theory, semen is accumulated slowly, as a by-product of digestion, and males have only a limited supply. A popular belief (again stemming from the Ayurvedic texts) is that one drop of semen is equal to one hundred drops of blood. It is said to take 28 days (i.e. a lunar month) for the food ingested by males to become semen.



Coupled with these beliefs regarding male seed is the belief that sexual intercourse is actually potentially dangerous to men, as a woman who is older, younger, or more powerful than a man, can potentially ‘drain’ him of his vital essence (i.e. his *Sakti*, which resides in male semen). In the popular imagination, women appear to have a potential vampiric quality – their mere presence, even as male imaginative images, may be enough to drain a man’s vitality. Hence celibacy is equated with health and longevity, not just for ascetic yogins (which tends to be the Western expectation), but as a general cultural imperative. Loss of semen through *any* type of sexual activity (including masturbation and nocturnal emissions) is considered harmful, both spiritually and physically, and thus are sources of anxiety.

## Tantric Vaisnava Variations

### The Sahajiya

The Vaisnava Sahajiya flourished in Bengal, Assam and Orissa between the 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For these Tantrics, Krishna was not a supreme being, uninvolved and distant, but the inner divine aspect of man, whilst his consort, Radha, was understood to be the inner divine aspect of woman. However, the Sahajiya were not content with merely visualizing the love-play of Krishna and his consort in heaven, but espoused the view that men and women should make love in order to attain the condition of *Sahaja* – a term usually translated as ‘spontaneous’ or ‘primordial’. Sahajiya practices (*sadhanas*) were devised in order to help devotees attain the *sahaja* state of liberation. These *sadhanas* – much to the horror of orthodox Vaisnavas – included ritual sexual intercourse and pursuing adulterous relationships. According to Glen A. Hayes, there were three stages of Sahajiya practice. Beginners (*pravata*) used the standard Bengali Vaisnava devotions – singing, dancing, and chanting praises to Krishna, accompanied by the practice of divinizing the body and identity as one of Krishna’s followers. The second and third stages (*sadhaka* – accomplished and *siddha* – perfected) related to the use of the more obviously tantrically-inspired erotic practices. According to the Sahajiya tradition, this required a guru who should, ideally, be a woman. The Sahajiya believed that all women were teachers, and that men should learn from them. Further, drawing on the many dalliances of Krishna for inspiration, for the Sahajiya, the ideal female partner for the male devotee was a woman denoted as *parakiya* – belonging to another. Such risky, forbidden liaisons were said to heighten the passions of love.



The Sahajiyas developed an extensive sexual alchemy around bodily fluids, and also had a unique model of the subtle body that differed markedly from most Saivite and Sakta Tantric sects. The latter is described at length in Hayes' essay.

### **The Sakhibhava**

I first came across references to the Sakhibhava cult in an article by James M. Martin entitled "I'd Radha be Krishna: Some Thoughts on the Sakhibhava sect of India." Martin quotes a passage from Hasting's *Encyclopedia of Religion and Morals*:

"The Sakhibhavas are a branch of the Radhavallabhis (q.v.), small in number and of little importance. They carry to extremes the worship of Radha, Krishna's mistress, whom they look upon as his shakti, or energetic power. The men assume the character of Radha's sakhis, or girl friends, and, to enforce the idea of the change of sex, assume female garb, with all women's manners and customs, even pretending to be subject to the catamenia. Their aim is to be accepted as genuine sakhis in a future life, and thus to enjoy a share of Krishna's favors. They are of ill repute, and do not show themselves much in public. According to [H. H.] Wilson, they are to be found in Jaipur and Benares and also in Bengal. Some of them are wandering mendicants. They appear to have been numerous in the 17<sup>th</sup> century."

Martin observes that the above passage acts to marginalize and downplay the significance of the Sakhibhava due to their 'transgressive' sexuality.

Vern L. Bullough notes that the Sakhibhava held that only Krishna was truly male, and that every other creature was, essentially female, subject to the pleasure-play of Krishna. According to Bullough, female devotees of the sect offered their 'sexual favours' freely to anyone, believing that all their partners are manifestations of Krishna. Male devotees affected the dress, behavior and mannerisms of women, including an imitation of menstruation (during which time they withdrew from worship) and took the 'female' part in sexual intercourse, offering it as an act of devotion. Bullough does identify male Sakhibhava with the term, Hijra, which slightly confuses the issue.

Just as orthodox Vaisnavas viewed the Tantric Sahajiyas with horror, so too the Sakhibhavas were held up as an example of 'degenerate' behavior, Devdutt Pattanaik, in *The Man Who Was a Woman and other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* notes that the Sakhibhavas were more likely to be viewed as objects of derision and amusement rather than honored for their devotion:

"When a male ascetic of the esoteric Sakhi-bhava order dresses up as a woman in order to be closer to the supreme divine principle who is perceived as the male god Krishna, he often ends becoming the object of amusement and ridicule rather than awe



and appreciation. The average Vaishnava family, while fervently worshipping Krishna ... would not empathize with their son's desire to become a Sakhi."

### **The Khartabhaja**

The Khartabhaja appear in Jeffrey J. Kripal's *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*. From Kripal's description, the Khartabhaja appear to be another Tantric manifestation of orthodox Vaisnava ideas. The leader of the sect, Vaishnavacharan, taught that "if one can worship God in an image [then] why not in a living man?" For Vaishnavacharan, such worship led to the complete knowledge of God's play in man. The Khartabhaja cult took the form of a community, possibly composed of both men, women, and *Hijras*. According to Kripal, Vaishnavacharan's teachings had some influence on Ramakrishna, and it is from Ramakrishna's teachings that Kripal has pieced together what little is known of Khartabhaja practice. For example, Kripal (quoting Ramakrishna) writes:

"Vaishnavacharan liked to look at pictures of men, for they aroused in him feelings of tenderness (*komala*) and love (*prema*)."

This practice was also used by female Khartabhajas – through loving a chosen man, identified with God, they could attain the divine. Ramakrishna railed against such an idea in his teachings, speaking against the women who take lovers and end up 'scandalously pregnant.'

### **Sources:**

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