WORDS TO WIN

The Making of *Amar Jiban*: A Modern Autobiography

TANIKA SARKAR

kali for women

Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban
A Modern Autobiography

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The Changing World of Religion

I
Sansar and Ways Beyond It

Rashsundari was born and brought up to live out her life as an illiterate, upper-caste, rural housewife. Two things, however, worked on her and set her apart from her inherited conditions. One was her own times when a few women like her were able to acquire a new kind of education — a development that we shall explore in our next chapter. The other factor — our present concern — was her active, restless and questioning *bhakti* that drew together broken, fragmentary, half-familiar strands from multiple Hindu religious discourses. Her intellectual efforts succeeded in pulling them together into a whole narrative, though it was not a distinctive system or cosmology that emerged out of them. What is striking is the relationship she establishes between her individual understanding and her life — something that she brings out through a series of questions addressed to God. At first, they seem to lead nowhere in particular. In the end, however, we realise that entirely through the manner in which she poses the questions, she has been able to build up a striking vision of God and his designs for the human devotee.

By making her autobiography and her piety dependent upon each other, Rashsundari tried to make two statements. The fact of writing her life proved that it could not have been done without being the Chosen One of God. At the same time, she

needed to problematise her relationship with her household or *sansar* since, on the face of it, *sansar* seemed to define her entire identity. We need to explore the different meanings of *sansar* in Hindu religious discourses and also locate the forms of excess beyond it that were held out by strands within various theological traditions. We can then identify the ways in which *AJ* drew upon as well as departed from them.

Sansar is the realm of the householder, the stage of *garhasthya*, a vital middle phase in the four-stage life cycle. Only an ascetic may renounce the domain of worldly responsibilities. Rules for this life vary according to caste and gender differences. They are spelt out by the *Vedas* or the *Sruti* and by the subsequent sacred law codes — the *Smriti* literature.[1] The rules of prescribed and forbidden behaviour (*vidhi-nishedha*), constitute the essence of *dharma* or a pious existence for the householder. The woman enters *sansar* through the sacrament of marriage, the only sacrament that is available to her. For her, *sansar* is the unending flow of domestic work and responsibilities and of female rites and ritual observances.

In a broader theological sense, *sansar* is sustained by the rule of *karma*. This is the conviction that actions performed in one life bear results in subsequent ones, through a chain of rebirths. Only a strict adherence to the rules of *sansar* will eventually wear out the fruits of past action and release the human being from the *karmic* order and the chain of rebirths which is fundamentally painful. *Sansar* is thus the site of *dharma* as well as a site of trials. Rashsundari accepted this definition of *sansar* but there is surprisingly little use of the key term of *karma* in her text. She, however, uses some of the influential concepts connected with the various forms of excess beyond *sansar*, while modulating them in rather distinctive ways.

The *Upanishadic* sequels to the *Vedas* lay down the basic parameters of metaphysical speculation: the true nature of and relationships between the human self-soul, and the Creator.

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[1] Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol 4, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1961, pp 2-6.

While they do not contradict at all the rule of *vidhi-nishedha*, they do go beyond it. They postulate an ultimate and fundamental identity between *Brahman* or absolute reality and *Atman* or the individual self. The enlightened sage may, in a flash of revelation, grasp the non-division of experience, experiencer and object of experience. The revelation lifts him above time and space and the law of causation and fills him with bliss. Here is a latent possibility that spiritually the *karmic* order may be inverted and the absolute validity of a stratified world order undermined. The possibility, however, is immediately undercut by the explicit endorsement of the *karmic* order and its injunctions. It is also undone by the fact that the possibility of transcendence is entirely in the realm of ideas and is accessible to the enlightened sage alone.[2]

Post-Vedic brahmanical thinking also begins to introduce a very different theme; the reality of a personalised God, of the validity of human devotion for a separated and irrevocably-distanced Creator for whom the distance opens up a space for intense adoration or *bhakti*. The state of adoration is occasionally privileged even over the blissful realisation of non-separation. This strand was elaborated by yet another sacred text (*Bhagavad Gita)* that was a part of the *Mahabharata* and that was narrated as an event within the epic. Yet, simultaneously, the *Gita* was and remains, a text of great importance in itself. Its presence is essential for sanctifying spaces and times. Modern Hindus, for instance, take their oath in law courts on the *Gita*. On the one hand, it tried to shore up the *karmic* order, insisting on unquestioning adherence to injunctions on appropriate caste and gender roles, and prescribed such actions as the only basis for a religious life:

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[2] R.C. Zaehner, Hindu Scriptures (1967; Rupa edition, Calcutta, 1992); F. Max Mueller, ed, *The Sacred Books of the East*, Vol xxv, translated by Bubler (Cambridge University Press, 1886; Delhi reprint, 1964); Kenneth. W. Morgan, ed, *The Religion of the Hindus* (Delhi, 1987); also, especially Satish Chandra Chatterji, *Hindu Religious Thought* (n.a); U. Bhattacharyya, *Bharat Darshansar* (Calcutta, 1949); Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Literature in the Vedic Age*, vol 2 (Calcutta, 1986).

Karmanyevadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana (you can only perform the prescribed action, you may never consider its consequence). Overarching the given, inflexible prescriptions, on the other hand, is the exalting faith in a personalised God, embodied in Krishna who has a life story for the devotee to reflect upon and to adore. On the eve of the apocalyptic, epic battle among brothers, Krishna admonishes a demoralised Arjuna who hesitates to strike against his own kinsmen. He convinces Arjuna of his purely instrumental role within the *karmic* order that is ordained by Krishna himself. He physically demonstrates that it is his maw that continuously issues forth and swallows up all creatures, that Arjuna can cause nothing to happen, that Krishna himself is Time that destroys all. Arjuna's response to the revelation is devotion, not the intensely emotional kind that is associated with later Krishnabhakti, but a form of devoutness that is grounded in intellectual comprehension, in a form of *yoga*. However, the commitment to a particular person can open the doors to more emotionalised forms. Rashsundari, especially in her verses and her reflections, chooses an emotionalised articulation. Yet, she insists, her way to God was first found through intellectual understanding, through a reception of difficult religious concepts conveyed by her mother. Since the recitation of *Gita* would be an essential feature of life-cycle rites, especially the funerary and ancestral rites, Rashsundari would surely have received some knowledge about the inexorable rule of *karma* which functions through caste-ordaincd prescriptions, whose violation constitutes the fall of *dharma* or virtue, piety. She, however, does not derive any of the basic terms of her religious vocabulary from them. *Karma*, in her verses, refers to the weakness of devotional life in this birth and the resultant sinfulness; it does not refer to the essential category of caste-related *dharma*.

The note of intense adoration is framed by a yet higher order of truth: the true origin in and ultimate return of all selves to an undivided Absolute Reality. In her very first lesson on the nature of divinity, we find Rashsundari's mother referring to several distinct levels within the notion of God. We have here a

play on several different comprehensions of truth, none of which negates the other, but each is available to a particular kind of devotee, prescribing a different order of knowledge, action and social existence. Contradictions are acknowledged yet dissolved in the same move, without reaching a synthesis as a singular truth.[3]

Buddhism, from the 6th century onwards, had held out the possibility of a non-divided order of moral conduct, knowledge and action. It had also questioned the Vedic forms of religious life that centred around the performance of sacrifices and the social and caste hierarchies that were organised around them. With a fast-developing division of labour that saw a growth in the importance of classes engaged in agriculture and trade, Buddhist doctrines had some potential for social levelling.

Shankara's monistic philosophy tried to grapple with the social and intellectual challenges of Buddhism on two simultaneous registers, denying, however, the softer alternative of devotion to a personalised God. He reinstated an authoritarian rule of *vidhi-nishedha* as the only *dharma* in the material, empirical world. While nothing at all may soften or modify the injunctions of the *sruti* and *smriti*, for one striving towards a higher order/meaning of existence, the *Upanishadic* parts alone are relevant. So we have a gradation of aspirants as much as a gradation within knowledge — the notion of *adhikarbhed*, fundamental to Hinduism. For one who seeks to understand the relationship between the human soul and Absolute Reality, *shabda* or the words of the *Upanishads* constitute the only appropriate source of knowledge (*praman*). Sense perceptions cannot comprehend *Brahman* or Absolute Reality since *Brahman* is entirely formless and attributeless. Any attempt at understanding through the senses will, therefore, impose a false form. The Vedic *karmakanda*, being preoccupied with empirical reality, is also inadequate for a sense of a reality

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[3] Zaehner, op cit; Bhattacharyya, op cit; Friedhelm Hardy, *Bhakti: The Early History of Krshna Devotion in South India*, Delhi, 1983.

unconnected with materiality. *Brahman*, moreover, is the eternal subject, the sole repository of pure awareness (*chaitanya*). The knower cannot be an object of knowledge since it will be absurd to conceive of the subject as object. It is equally absurd to conceive of *Brahman* as both subject and object since the two are, by nature, entirely opposed. What *shabda* can do is to rectify false knowledge or *abidya* and correct the boundaries of what is already known within limits. It cannot demonstrate *Brahman*.

If *Brahman* as self is not an object of perception, neither is he entirely unknown: Rashsundari says, who can have perfect knowledge of you?, implying that some kind of knowledge does exist. Shankara grounds this imperfect knowledge in the universal sense: "I exist". Had there been no self, the feeling could not have existed. That self is *Brahman*. However, such apprehension is limited or *samanya gyan*. More precise knowledge or *vishesh gyan* would resist the imposition of a sense-apprehended notion of the self (I know or I exist) on an understanding of *Brahman* who is beyond and without the senses.

Shankara also creates levels within truth. We begin to understand why an erudite scholar like Jyotirindranath was so excited by the nature of Rashsundari's mother's instructions: the terms of a graded religious truth reach out to the realms of the most complex philosophical traditions. At the lowest rung, there is a divine creator or *Ishwar*, but a higher truth lies with the conception of *Brahman* who is without form or attributes (*nirguna* and *nirakar*) but who is pure existence, pure consciousness, pure bliss — *sacchitananda*.Yet, there is an even higher reality that strips *Brahman* of these qualities, or rather, adds to them what is not existence, not consciousness, not bliss. That *Brahman* is a single essence, without any distinction between creator and creation. The world and the individual selves that seem to populate it are the function of *Brahman*'s *maya*, an illusion-bearing power which creates appearances. Owing to its operations, the self erroneously identifies itself with a being — material, finite, separated. One who has attained freedom from all bonds of attachments, who can distinguish

between eternal and temporal things and has control over the senses and the mind, may recover the forgotten truth of the essential oneness of all being. He can attain liberation from the *karmic* order *(moksha)* and he can even achieve it while he is still living in this world (*jivanmukti*).The attainment depends on a course of instruction from an enlightened preceptor.[4]

In the nature of things, the enlightened preceptor who has access to Upanishadic knowledge and the aspirant are both brahman males. Shankara's insistence on the absolute validity of the laws of the social world rules out the possibility that it may be otherwise. If eternal truth demonstrates the falsity of divided and conflicted egos, if it is grounded on the non-division of all beings from one another and from Absolute Reality, then the other part of Shankara's teaching makes sure that such knowledge is withheld from women, from low castes, according to *vidhi-nishedha*.

It is interesting that while the source of human sorrow is located in a stratified and self-divided world order, a transcendence is sought only in the realm of metaphysical knowledge. At the same time, the more the empirical world is left intact, the more intense is the metaphysical emphasis on the essential oneness of all selves. While Shankara's monistic philosophy belongs to the regions of immensely erudite speculation, the sense of a dichotomy between appearances and reality that is obscured by the force of *maya*, slid into a popular common sense, into a familiar vocabulary for talking about religious matters. Rashsundari's verses are resonant with this notion. Her religion, however, is entirely dualistic, postulating a firm division between Creator and creation. Nor is her Parameshwara without attributes or beyond the senses.

If ultimate knowledge is for the initiated, then what remains beyond it for the spiritual needs of the ordinary folk? Post-

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[4] Satish Chandra Chatterji, op cit; U. Bhattacharyya, op cit; Anantanand Rambachan, "Where Words Can Set Free; The Liberating Potency of Vedic Words in the Hermeneutics of Sankara" in J.R. Timm, ed, *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*, State University of New York Press, 1992.

Shankara devotional traditions or *bhakti* — with their accommodation of a personalised divinity with a form, attributes and a mythological life-story, provided the same excess beyond *sansar* that knowledge is meant to provide to the initiated. Both allow the aspirant to partly create her own religious life and thinking beyond the terms set by *sansar*, to found a realm of individual creativity and spiritual labour, the fruits of which cannot be expropriated.

Medieval *bhakti* movements, fructified by creative encounters with Sufi mystical traditions, restored the gap between the Creator and creation to allow devotional emotions to come into play. By the 15th century, there were four major modifications of absolute monism, leadng to four major *bhakti* sects. Ramanuj's *vishishtadwaitavad* (circa 11th century) claimed that the self is a part of Brahman but it is temporarily separated from it by *maya* whose removal through *bhakti* would lead to a reunification. Maddhvacharyya's Dwaitavad (circa 12th century), on the other hand, claimed that the self and the world are as real as Brahman and, within this duality, they are subordinate to Brahman. Nimbarka's *dwaitadwaitavad* (circa 11th–12th centuries) posits a dualistic non-duality which sees the self as different from Brahman in attributes and functions, yet it is dependent on Brahman, sharing in part of his attributes. The Bengali Vaishnavite canon — *achintyabhedabhed* of Gaudiya Vaishnav theology — was a variant of this school. Around the 15th–16th centuries, Ballabhacharyya proclaimed *vishudhhadwaitavad* which denied *maya* and restored all appearances to the single reality of Brahman, who, however, is merged in the figure of Krishna.[5]

In *AJ* we find fragments of all this at play, demonstrating not simply the circularity between erudite theological systems and popular beliefs, but also the operations of a self-created religious life that each *bhakt* may compose out of more dominant and coherent systems. What we have here is not the unconscious, long-term assemblage — bricolage — by collective "savage"

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[5] S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1961, pp. 3–6.

minds, but a highly deliberate and individualistic composition. Rashsundari seems to take a fundamental duality for granted, that is more extreme than that accepted by any of the major schools. Not only does her life stay separated from God's till the end, she is at pains to underline the contrast between the two at every point. All she hopes for is not a merger at the end of life, but "the attainment of his lotus feet" — recovery of a closer and more intimate form of subordination. It is, in fact, the contrast, the hierarchised differences in attributes, that compels devotion.

She uses *maya* in a very specific sense. At its source, it is more akin to the other, non-theological meaning of the Bengali word that denotes fondness, attachment to things or persons dear to one's life but who are, nonetheless, elusive. The poignancy that is associated with this kind of attachment is underlined through the entry of death, again and again, to terminate the precious and fragile attachment. It is the divinely ordained cruel finality of death, rather than *bhakti* or knowledge that teaches her to acknowledge this attachment as fundamentally transient and hence, illusory; to recover, in other words, the theological meaning of *maya*. The removal of the curtain of *maya*, however, reveals ultimate reality not as bliss or non-separation, but as a mangled human life whose every attachment has been hopelessly mauled by an inflexible, unalterable and inscrutable divine will.

II
Krishnabhakti

Bhagavat Puran (henceforth *BP*), composed sometime between the 9th and 10th centuries, tried a synthesis between monistic Advaita and theistic *bhakti*, in the process, however, giving Krishnabhakti its strongest emotional and aesthetic form. The Krishna cult itself is far older than this text and the notion of his divine sport or *leela* has been elaborated through *Harivamsa, Vishnupuran, Padmapuran* and *Brahmavaivartapuran*. The *BP*, however, introduced crucial reorientations and emphases within the cult which makes it the most sacred text for Bengali

Vaishnavs. It also renders Vrindavan — the pilgrimage on the Yamuna banks where Krishna's childhood and erotic *leela* was performed — the most sacred space for them.

We have, yet again, a spiralling of very different and simultaneous conceptions of divinity or Absolute Reality. The outer and final concentric circle is the notion of non-dual consciousness which is both immanent and transcendent and which is designated as *Brahman* or *Paramatman* (supreme soul). Rashsundari's usage of the word Parameshwara comes close to this word and its meaning. Yet, within an enclosed, second circle, the Supreme Soul is also the human self as well as all that which lies beyond it. It is all that the human self can be but be so only in broken snatches, through and in right knowledge. While asserting the primacy of knowledge, this level also creates the point of contact between the ultimate reality and the finite individual self. The contact is filled out when the self merges itself in the contemplation of Krishnaleela at Vrindavan. For, at the third, yet the most significant level, the supreme soul is apprehended as Bhagawan Krishna.

Creation comes into being when the creator wants to play with his own shadows. This desire is fulfilled through *yogamaya* which denotes the principle of plurality charged with divine majesty and with the potency of the Absolute. In *BP* the play is given a sensuous, continuous form. Krishna sports with humble cowherds of Vrindaban whose simple devotion and total surrender he finds more pleasing than the arrogance of learned brahmans. He also engages in a highly charged erotic play with thousands of *gopinis* or milkmaids who renounce their inhibitions and shame, the pull of *vidhi-nishedha* and of sanctioned relationships and norms, their possessive instincts, in their love for Krishna. What provides the charge to this image is the power and beauty of the arcadian chronotope, what Bakhtin would have called "a time of honey".[6] The eternal love, the blazing youth and beauty of the participants of the *leela*, the

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[6] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, ed. H. Holquist, Texas, 1981, p. 103.

poignant sweetness of Krishna's flute as he calls out to his lovers, the emotional and erotic intensity of the contact are played out among landscapes of unsurpassed beauty — making, subsequently, poetry and music the most effective medium of Krishnabhakti rather than theological canon.

Vrindavan is simultaneously a place in time and space as well as an eternal condition where the *leela* continues unendingly, playing on the themes of love, fulfilment and separation or *viraha*. For Krishna leaves Vrindavan for Mathura to claim his patrimony. He settles down as king and husband of many queens and as the agent who decides the course of the epic battle of the *Mahabharata*. He never returns to Vrindavan again. The pilgrimage differs from traditions associated with other major pilgrimages where the ritual journey and performances lead to certain concrete benefits for the pilgrim's lineage. The chief benefit of coming to Vrindavan, however, is to come closer to the sources of remembrance, to attain a more vivid sense of the sweetness and pain of that divine experience.

The *BP* introduces a pastoral idyll of endless love and ecstatic pleasure, of eternal music and fragrant flowers where *sansar* and its unbending *vidhi-nishedha* stand suspended. More, they seem to be inverted, for Krishna finds low caste cowherds better companions than brahmans, he invites married *gopinis* to seek pleasure with him. The devotee, through mere contemplation of such bliss, finds access to an image of surfeit. Would she even find the resources for a fundamental questioning of the laws of *sansar*?

I think that ultimately, the laws are not cancelled out. What the image of surfeit promises is, rather, a dream of the values of *sansar*, taken to the limits of their possibilities. We have God as a male lover who brings pleasure in equal measure to his many women devotees, a king who plays with shepherds. Here power dreams of such absolute hegemony that it can translate itself as love and fulfilment for the powerless — the human devotee, the low caste, the woman. God, however, remains a polygamous male king who will eventually leave the play behind. The devotee, the low caste, the woman will remain trapped in an inescapable condition of helplessness, *viraha* and pain where they

had always been placed. For them, there is no other way to God. The fleeting image of fulfilment was a rich surfeit, indeed. Its withdrawal and the eternal longing for a return to that blissful state of merger where all Vrindavan was united with Krishna, remains the closest posssible encounter with the Absolute.

It is generally considered that the *advaita* principle of non-separation between Creator and creation relegates the theme of separation to the realm of transient phenomena, that the purpose of *BP* is to create the image of non-separation or non-dualism through the erotic spectacle of *leela*. Freidelm Hardy, however, thinks that *viraha* induces an excess beyond this, that separation is no mere transient, purely human experience. *BP* goes beyond its predecessor *Harivamsa* to insert a final section on *viraha* with some deeper purpose that partly unwinds the design of ultimate non-duality. The whole *leela* expresses more than the reflection of Krishna upon the mirror of *maya* and the events signify more than mere games that he plays with himself. Hardy points out the sheer physical quality of eternal longing which is not to be found anywhere else in Sanskrit literature. He also underlines the fact that there is no image of a final union.

Rashsundari, as we shall see, does not use the imagery of the erotic play which might, then, carry on into a theological concept of non-separation. Yet, she reaches, perhaps, the same conclusions, from a contemplation of her own life, rather than God's. Her religion is essentially dualistic. In a novel departure as well as a retention of the form of *tatastha bhakti* that her autobiographical mode enables her to undertake, she is transfixed at the shores of her own life, she contemplates — not with bliss but with considerable pain — the games that God is playing with it. She is left with an inexorable sense of an insurmountable division within reality that is, moreover, structured by divine power on the one hand and by human suffering on the other.[7]

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[7] Freidelm Hardy, op cit; Thomas J. Hopkins, "The Social Teachings of Bhagabat Puran" and J.A.B.van Buitenen, "The Archaism of the Bhagabat Purana" in Milton Singer, ed, *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, University of Hawaii Press, 1966.

The Krishna of *BP* is a male figure who fills thousands of *gopinis* with equal bliss. Radha, as a separate, privileged figure, has not made an appearance as yet in this text. Religious imagination could not indefinitely sustain this unproblematic idealisation of polygamous patriarchy. Inexorable existential and social problems of pain and inequality re-enter subsequent narratives of Krishnabhakti and fracture it at different points. Later devotional texts, especially medieval Bengali *bhakti* lyrics, introduce the figure of Radha — splendid in her demanding love — who breaks up the undifferentiated mass of loving womanhood. She approaches Krishna with an angry, resentful love, straining against the basic asymmetry of the relationship, since Krishna must love others and must eventually leave her to eternal *viraha*. Her resentment forms a language through which the devotee articulates a sense of the arbitrariness of God's power over the world and of a human condition that is marked by inequality and *viraha*. A Sanskrit couplet, ascribed to the *bhakti* saint Chaitanya, expresses this resentful devotion in a language of unusual violence: "Let that immoral, faithless one come and ravish me."[8]

Even in the *BP*, and much more so in the later texts, problems of a patriarchal social order clash with the articulation of *bhakti* through an erotic mode. If an endless love play becomes the ideal repository for the most perfect relationship with the most desired being — that is, with God — then to be adequately demanding and challenging, to be worthy of a lifetime of yearning, that desire cannot be expressed through the conjugal condition where the love object is already attained. In *BP*, the *gopinis* were married women and post-Chaitanya Vaishnavism in Bengal adhered to the theory of *parakiya* or the adulterous nature of the Radha-Krishna relationship. At the Jaipur royal court, this school won a major victory over the *swakiya* or licit love school. Interestingly, the debate was repeated with the same results, at the Murshidabad court of Murshid Quli, the Muslim Nawab in early 18th century Bengal. The Nawab was a keen listener

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[8] *Chaitanya Caritamala*, op cit, p 616.

throughout the debate, and he concluded that the *parakiya* school had offered better arguments.[9]

Through the theory of illicit love or *parakiyatattva*, *sansar* acquires yet another meaning. It is the ensemble of licit relationships and sanctioned norms that bars Radha's way to Krishna. A paradox is set up: the world of patriarchal injunctions, insisting on the woman's unconditional surrender to unrequited monogamy, is her true *dharma*; yet her desire for Krishna is a call coming from God himself. The erotic situation corresponds to a spiritual problem, which it is meant to exemplify. Karma enjoins submission to *sansar*, yet *sansar* with its unendingly trivial demands and rigid prescriptions, is an impediment that thwarts a complete surrender to God, that makes God recede from the devotee. God calls out to her and goes back empty-handed since *sansar* is an obstacle that is divinely ordained. The paradox makes both God and the devotee weep. *AJ* introduces a mediated version of the paradox, since Rashsundari's *bhakti* must be expressed through an illicit desire for the written word which has an independent existence as an autonomous object of desire in itself.

Parakiya might be an adequate and effective vehicle for the logic of intense devotional imagination, but the form carries an ineffable and transgressive excess beyond the theological message. The *BP* itself tries various ways to contain it by furnishing several safe explanations. For instance, it says that the *gopinis* were first married to Krishna and then to their worldly husbands, so Krishna had prior claims to them. We find a curious echo of this belief in the marriage practices of a Vaisnav landlord family from Taras in East Bengal. Every daughter of the family is first ritually married to Krishna and is then wedded to the human husband, on the wedding day.[10] The *BP* also says that Krishna inhabits the bodies of *gopinis* as well as of their husbands, so it is always he alone who enjoys the women in a dual capacity, and

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[9] S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal, 1486-1900*, Calcutta, 1985; Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas*, Calcutta, 1989; Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, op cit.

[10] I owe this information to Prof. Pradip Sinha.

no real adultery, therefore, takes place. And, of course, the whole episode is also considered as a metaphor. In the late 19th century, Bankimchandra used elaborate linguistic sophistry to argue that Radha is a linguistic device rather than a mythological person.[11] The *BP* , moreover, warns that the episode cannot be taken as a model for human behaviour since extraordinary lives are entitled to extraordinary privileges. We are given, therefore, a divine biography which is the cornerstone of religious belief, but which carries no moral lesson for the devotee. On the contrary, it seems almost a summation of all possibilities that are put beyond the reach of the human devotee.

III
Chaitanyabhakti

Vaishnav faith in Bengal was conveyed very largely through a rich and evocative tradition of lyrical songs, composed between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and sung according to the Bengali musical genre of *kirtan*. Chaitanya had expounded on the importance of congregational singing of *kirtan* as the most significant and effective mode of worship that promised equal access to salvation to all manner of devotees. He emphatically denied the efficacy of caste-differentiated ritual or worship and he asked all devotees to join together in ecstatic singing and chanting of the holy name. Salvation was, in fact, to be easier for the lowly and ignorant, for women and shudras, for their hearts were not hardened by pride as were the hearts of arrogant brahmans. Salvation was also more easily available in this last and most degenerate age of kali. In his own lifetime, Chaitanya had invited the combined wrath of the brahman pandits of Nabadwip who tried to forbid the multi-caste congregational singing that Chaitanya had initiated as a public activity: the Muslim qazi favoured the brahmans and nearly brought about a riot-like situation by trying to enforce the ban

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[11] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, *Krishnacharitra*, *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol 2, Sahitya Sansad, Calcutta, 1954, pp 468-75.

on Chaitanya's followers who looted his property and burned his house in retaliation. The promise of spiritual equality through a shared and a collective ritual enabled Chaitanya and his largely upper caste acolytes to undertake a massive proselytisation campaign among low caste, yet socially and politically important groups — artisans, traders, manufacturers, tribal chieftains. Possibly, the success of Islamic proselytisation was seen to lie in its congregational life and its conviction in an unstratified spiritual order.[12]

Even though some post-Chaitanya sects and groups did violate brahmanical injunctions about caste and gender, on the whole, Chaitanya's *bhakti* was not meant to transform or significantly reorder social relations and practices. Unlike most *bhakti* saints of medieval India, he and his disciples belonged to upper-caste, affluent families. Chaitanya asked the brahman and highly erudite Goswami theologians settled in Vrindaban to compose a theological canon that would have authoritative power over Bengal Vaishnavs. The canon eventually curbed much of the rather anarchic, ecstatic tendencies that some of Chaitanya's own acolytes manifested in Bengal. In exchange for receiving canonical status for the Goswami doctrines, the Goswamis eventually agreed to accept Chaitanya as a deified object of worship who was supposed to be an embodiment of Krishna and Radha together within the same body-mind. In Bengal, the Gauraparamyavadi groups saw him as a deity in his own right. He was widely worshipped as an incarnation of Krishna and Rashsundari also refers to him as *avatar.*[13]

For the Vaishnav householder, brahmanical norms continued to rule.[14] Mendicant and deviant orders were looked down

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[12] Hiteshranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas*, op cit; *CB*, op cit, p. 249.

[13] Hiteshranjan Sanyal, op cit; Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaisnavism in Bengal*, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Calcutta, 1985.

[14] On an important distinction beween Hindu religious belief and social organization, see Maya Burger: "The Hindu Model of Social Organization and the Bhakti Movement: The Example of Vallabha's Sampradaya" in R.S. McGregor, ed, *Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research 1983–1988*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

upon, even by respectable Vaishnavs who were careful to tighten up the order of *vidhi-nishedha* even further to indicate their difference from the mendicants. Individual devotion was to be initiated and carefully modulated by gurus, mostly from upper castes. On the whole, caste hierarchies were observed. Around the early 19th century, an intermediate caste Vaishnav *bhakt* in Khulna came to acquire great fame and power among local traders and merchants for his preaching of *bhakti*. He owned the idol of a child Krishna who, on a stormy night, asked him to build him a house to keep out the cold. When Balakdas, the *bhakt*, chastised his deity for trying to turn his mind to material possessions, the holy child, according to Balakdas' hagiographer, simply burrowed into his bosom and whispered: " Father, I am so cold." The devotee then gave in and inspired his wealthy disciples to build a fine temple. This is a rather unusual example of *bhakti* where the adult male's activist devotion is inspired by fatherly love towards the child-Krishna. Generally, the child Krishna is associated more with the worship of women devotees. The Mahishya guru also preached unequivocal devotion to brahmans and taught his low-caste followers about how to observe proper deference to upper castes.[15]

Chaitanya had asked brahmans to cultivate humility and service as part of the techniques for the formation of a Vaishnav self. The attributes of an ideal woman or peasant, thus became the attributes of an ideal Vaishnav. Moreover, his hagiographies describe his frequent bouts of anger against arrogant brahmans who are ensnared by sterile learning or by empty ritual and who have no love in their hearts: they are called "*pashandis*" or sinners.[16] However, the spirit of service and humility, when enjoined upon brahmans, did not entail actual social levelling or renunciation of power. It was restricted to a certain style or mode of address to the world. On the other hand, the shudra and the woman, for whom humble service was, in any case, socially

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[15] Satyendranath Basu, *Siddha Mahatma Balakdaser Jibani*, Calcutta, 1913.

[16] See *CB*, op cit, where this term is continuously used to refer to brahman opponents at Nabadwip.

obligatory, had to undergo a double confirmation of their appointed stations and gestures: as Shudra/women and as Vaishnavs for whom lowliness is a condition for salvation.[17]

Though the *raganuga bhakti* of Bengali Vaishnavs, patterned on the unbearable longing for Krishna among his Vrindaban associates, was the most privileged form of devotion, *Vaidhi* or more ritualised forms were also enjoined upon householders: services to the household deity, worship of the family guru, fasts, chanting and singing holy names, congregational feasts and music and pilgrimages. These would often constitute all of women's devotion and even women in the mendicant orders would engage primarily in the idol's daily services. Though they were often literate and some of them were reputed to be learned in theology, there is no evidence that they wrote or contributed to the substantial corpus of Bengali Vaishnav literature. Sects were sometimes led by the wives of the founders and the wives of Nityananda were prominent organisers. One of them was credited with miracle-making powers. Several hagiographies of Chaitanya describe women's adoration and record moments of obeisance.[18] Women themselves, however, have not left records of their spiritual quest, their states of devotional experience. *AJ*, in fact, is a rare and important articulation of that.

V
Other Modes of Bhakti

Rashsundari's sensibilities possibly drew from non-Vaishnav sources of belief as well, since no hard boundaries segregated the two dominant sects — the Shaktas and the Vaishnavs — from each other. She, in fact, deliberately feminises divinity once or

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[17] "The ideology of obedience has a particular pointedness for women which it lacks for men because it coincides with their prescribed roles." See Lyndal Roper, "Feminine Piety in 15th Century Rome: Santa Francesca Romana" in Obelkovich, Roper and Samuel, eds, *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1987.

[18] Ramakanta Chakravarti, op cit, pp 174-83.

twice, addressing her as the principle of Shakti or fundamental energy that is embodied in the Great Mother who presides as either Durga or Kali, the two aspects of the consort of Shiva.[19] Shakta devotional traditions are chiefly iconic — the two great annual worships in Bengal relate to the worship of Durga and Kali — and musical, with a rich corpus of songs especially from the 18th century.

Durga is a figure of majestic splendour, both as a divine mother and as demon slayer. A particular category of Shakta songs, known as *agamani*, however, also visualise her as a little girl, the beloved daughter of the mountain deity Himalaya and his wife Menaka. Married off to Shiva who chooses to live like a feckless mendicant surrounded by spirits, she can visit her parents only for three days a year. For the rest of the year, her mother yearns for her, alternately worrying about her plight and recalling the happier days of her charming infancy. In a land where the male child is practically a god, and the daughter is doomed to be an outsider to the natal lineage, whose compulsory, preferably hypergamous marriage is notoriously hard to fix, the mother–child relationship is almost universally celebrated as a mother–son connection. Agamani songs were the only trope which accorded the daughter a place within the affective/imaginative order.[20] Rashsundari's references to her absence from her mother's life are filled with the bitter longing of the daughter together with the vicariously-experienced emotions of her own mother. However, curiously enough, she makes no mention of her own emotions about parting from her married daughters, one of whom had died in childbirth. This seems related to a carefully-organised narrative economy where the strongest emotional experiences are carefully distributed, so

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[19] See Sashibhushan Dasgupta, *Bharater Shakti Sadhama O Shakta Sahitya*, Calcutta, 1957, pp. 74–149.

[20] These were composed in profusion by major lyricists like Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya and Ramprasad Sen in the 18th century. See Prabhatkumar Goswami, ed, *Hajar Bachharer Bangla Gan*, Saraswat Library, Calcutta,1969, pp 231-37. Also Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*.

as to avoid repetition and blurring. About *viraha* or separation, the earlier sections, centred on her own relationship with her mother, have all that she needs to convey. For the later sections, the most powerful human experience of pain is that of death — and, curiously enough, her love for her children is described almost exclusively through her experience of their death.

The Shakta tradition, therefore, allows a fuller and more rounded configuration of both the woman and of viraha than do Vaishnav lyrics which confine both to the erotic realm alone. Shakta songs contain yet another genre which similarly concerns itself with a different, and possibly more extended relationship between God and the devotee than is captured through the erotic devotional emphasis of Vaishnavism. Vaishnavism, too, has a rich vein of devotional experience around Yashoda's love for the enchantingly mischievous infant Krishna. That, nonetheless, is a one-dimensionally happy mode, without the more complicated expressions of Agamani songs, where similar descriptions of a naughty little girl are always overlaid with the pain of imminent separation. Nor is the filial mode most privileged in Gaudiya Vaishnav canon and in the lyrical/musical tradition whose most memorable achievements are in the erotic mode.

The 18th century was a particularly troubled and uncertain time for Bengal: quick dynastic change, repeated invasions by Maratha marauders, transition to colonial rule, decline of handicrafts, a catastrophic famine and the prolonged devastation of agrarian life that began with colonial rule. A magnificent crop of *shyamavishayak* or songs dedicated to Kali were composed at the time that focus on the terrible uncertainties of human existence. Kali is the fierce aspect of Shakti, embodied in a goddess who ranges around the cremation grounds with bands of skeletal spirits. She is lean, black, terrifying to look at, voraciously hungry and feeding on human sacrifices. She is portrayed as standing on the body of her husband Shiva. She is the exact reverse of all aspects of the nurturing mother figure who has her beautiful breasts, flowing robes and associations with bounteousness: in Kali, they are replaced with a cadaverous

nakedness, a prominent lolling tongue that some scholars identify as a substitute penis, with absence of feminine shame or sensitivity to polluting elements. Yet, for the devotee, she is quintessentially the mother, the true mother.[21] In an utterly amazing move of inversion, all accepted meanings of motherhood are turned askew. She is not so much the wicked mother who will be replaced by the nurturing one. She is the only mother that the devotee acknowledges, that he longs for. He is completely uncertain about the possibility of her mercy or grace, he complains about her terribly inscrutable will and her total capriciousness that does not discriminate between the good and the bad child. Yet his surrender to her is complete and so is his love for her. He wants no other mother.[22]

While this is an exemplar of the nature of devotion which must know the inscrutable and unjust condition of divine power prior to the act of surrender, it is also perhaps an acknowledgement of the nature of human existence itself if it is taken out of a religious teleological frame. It affirms the insatiable thirst for this very life among human beings. Shyamavishayak songs range across a diversity of concrete human experiences: poverty, starvation, social hierarchies and human disregard and indifference. Rashsundari, as I said before, overturns the meaning of *tatastha bhakti* by contemplating her own life more than she dwells on God's sports: or, rather, she examines her own life as evidence of his *leela*. The descriptions through which she links her life with divine sports are very often drawn from the stark, terrifying, dark world of Shakta images rather than the fragrant and erotic pleasures of Vrindaban. They

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[21] David Kimsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 116–30.

[22] For a selection of songs, see *Hajar Bachharer Bangla Gan*, op cit; also see Rachel Mc.Dermott, "Bengali Songs to Kali" in Donald Lopez, ed, *Religions in India in Practice*, Princeton Readings in Religion, Princeton University Press, 1955, pp. 55-56. Her account, however, has a rather uncomplicated image of the goddesss as the perceived nurturant figure. Also Jogendranath Gupta, op. cit.

have more to do with the tears of cruelly-separated mothers and daughters, with starvation, with loneliness and unspoken fears, with the terror and the pain of death. They have nothing to do with the everlasting, idyllic unions and lovers' quarrels that resonate in the Vaishnav songs and lyrics.

A final form of excess beyond sansar was constituted by body-centred cults and sects. Their base is constituted by Tantric philosophies which have a Shakta as well as a Vaishnav variant. Certain *sahajiya* lower-caste, esoteric, popular religious sects, some of which were loosely affiliated to Vaishnavism, also aspired to trap divine energies, even divinity itself, within the human body, through ritualised violations of purity-pollution taboos, and through secret and forbidden forms of sexual rites. They proclaimed the primacy of bodily sense-perceptions over scriptural knowledge. Propagated largely through songs that encoded their rites and theories, their philosophy of *dehavad* had become familiar to 19th century villagers, even though upper castes, on the whole, considered them deviant and contemptible. The full extent of their lore would be known only to the initiated, but their songs and the broad outlines of their movements would not be unfamiliar to most.[23]

AJ, as we shall see later, uses fragments from *dehavad*, but the influence is limited. Even though the body-centred philosophy, with its defiance of caste and pollution taboos seems an attractive and liberating form of excess over *sansar*, a lot of their texts reveal that the female body and emotions were supposed to be used in an instrumental capacity, for filling the male body with extraordinary powers which would eventually liberate it from all desire for the woman. Nor were they unmarked by the deep-seated conviction in the innate depravity of the woman which characterised upper caste codes.

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[23] Sudhir Chakravarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday O Tahader Gan*, Calcutta, 1985; Manindramohan Basu, *The Post Chaitanya Sahajiya Cults of Bengal*, nd, Calcutta reprint, 1980; Sakti Nath Jha, "*Cari Candra Bhed: Use of the Four Moons*" in Rajat Kanta Ray, ed, *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1995.

IV
Vaishnavism in Modern Times

The routinisation of charisma that had begun in Chaitanya's own lifetime, proceeded vigorously in the next few centuries. On the one hand, there was a consolidation of canon, of institutions, of ritual and of temple-building. On the other hand, there were waves upon waves of proselytisation in new regions, among fresh social groups. A "Hinduisation" of pantheistic or tribal and untouchable religious practice was accomplished through Vaishnav preachings. As segments that were as yet weakly-integrated with the brahmanical mainstream were incorporated, some low-caste sects and popular religious movements — loosely associated with Radha-Krishna worship — developed radical cosmologies and deviant ritual practices. They overturned pollution taboos but were otherwise quietist. In the early 18th century, the dissident Sahebdhani sect that grew up in Nadia and subsequently spread to Jessore and Burdwan, took Chaitanya as the ruling saviour figure. But it composed a highly intricate web of deviant ritual and openly mocked caste taboos.[24]

In the 19th century, the new middle classes would often move across class and caste barriers to experience the forbidden pleasures of the more libertarian orders. The Kartabhaja sect, first popularised among low castes in Nadia, also attracted extremely erudite sections of the *bhadralok*: the poet-cum-bureaucrat, Nobin Sen, visited the festival. The newspaper *Somprakash* reported in 1864 that about sixty-five thousand people had attended the annual festival of the sect at Ghoshpara where Calcutta literati would mingle with crowds of prostitutes. (Benoy Ghosh) The sect trained women preachers — *ma-gosains* — who radiated out into Calcutta middle-class households. The leader of the sect was invited, along with Vivekananda, to attend the World Conference of Religions in 1893, but he could not

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[24] Sudhir Chakravarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday O Tahader Gan*, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 23–37.

go since he did not have the resources.[25] Wandering Bauls, whose esoteric practices were encoded in songs of great beauty and mystical resonances, began to attract a middle class following.[26]

While the tension between respectable and deviant orders that the Chaitanya movement had produced was one kind of paradox that accompanied the growth of Bengali Vaishnavism, there was yet a deeper paradox in the relationship between the inner and the outer in the Vaishnav construction of the self. A new and deep emphasis grew about the inner light of faith, a self-realised conviction, often to be held on to against the disapproval of the world, similar to the love that Radha had for her lover. A great deal was made of the continuous and private relationship between the devotee and his God. So we may say that Vaishnavism stimulated a radical sense of interiority and a highly individuated form of devotion — or, conversely, a devotion-centred selfhood in the individual. At the same time, the parameters of the devotional imaginary were already worked out in detail by the sectarian gurus through a highly developed textual tradition of the aesthetics of religious feeling: the several *bhavas* or moods induced by the categories of *rasa* or aesthetic stimuli. So was a behavioural model — supposed to reflect the inner qualities of the transformed Vaishnav self — worked out in detail.

Through a circular movement, then, canonical paradigms of belief, practice and mood were laid out, according to which the devotee would regulate her inner life as well as her external behaviour. At the same time, the devotee's altered belief and practice would supposedly indicate and reflect inner convictions. While this enables a reliance on external authorities — texts, temples, gurus, idols — it simultaneously creates a perception

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[25] Sudhir Chakravarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday O Tahader Gan*, op cit, pp. 27-40.

[26] Sudhir Chakravarti, *Sahebdhani Sampraday*, op cit; Sudhir Chakravarti, *Bratya Lokayata Lalan*, Pustak Bipani, Calcutta, 1992; Debendranath De, *Kartabhaja Dharmer Itibritta*, Calcutta, 1990.

about the possibilities of self-fashioning as well as the fashioning of a faith of one's own.

Nineteenth century metropolitan Calcutta, however, reoriented Vaishnav practices and aspirations in novel directions. In early colonial Bengal, the new revenue arrangements under the Permanent Settlement had massively disrupted the older zamindari establishments that used to be predominantly Shakta in their religious orientation. The new landed fortunes were very often founded by affluent Vaishnavs — the rajas of Cossimbazar, of Posta, of Shobhabazar. Some of them funded a spree of temple building in the new colonial metropolis of Calcutta where most of the temples were, indeed, Vaishnav ones. They also undertook the construction of notable temples at Vrindaban. Occasionally, the new and somewhat small-scale landed patrons would come from relatively low castes. They would try to manipulate brahmanical establishments to reduce the ritual gap between themselves and the upper castes, to introduce a modicum of ritual levelling of status. Motilal Sil, for instance, asked a Brahman Sabha in the mid-century to modify hierarchical extremes. When the Sabha refused to consider his request, he tamely accepted their decision. A more robust Vaishnav, Bhairabchandra Datta, however, challenged and repudiated brahmanical authority through his radical tract, *Vaishnavbhaktikaumudi*. It was appropriately printed by the Pashandadalan Press in Calcutta in 1834, for *pashanda* was the name given to brahman opponents of Chaitanya by his disciples and the name of the press meant the Oppressor of Pashandas.

In outlying towns, important festivals were financed by low caste but rich devotees as a way of acquiring status. Vaishnavs were very visible, even combative in the emergent modern public spaces. In 1834, the colonial government had imposed a ban in Calcutta on noisy Vaishnav processions and public singing. In 1835, however, the ban had to be withdrawn, thanks to the intercession of Radhakanta Deb. Vaishnavs also learnt quickly about how to become adept with the new communicational and institutional modes of public life. Print culture soon became a major resource and between 1818 and 1829 — just at the

moment of its emergence — several Vaishnav classics were printed. A little later, the cheap Battala presses began to turn out translations and new religious writings in great profusion and at low prices, for low-income and rural markets. Dissident sects like the various Sahajiya groups printed their literature on a vast scale. In the last decades of the century, the *Amritabazar* group of Sisir Ghosh, began to compile, edit and publish sacred manuscripts. A Vaishnav journalism developed quite early. In 1831, Brajamohan Chakravarty founded the weekly paper, *Bhagabatsamachar*, and he was followed by several others in Dacca, Tripura and other places.

As Vaishnav monastic orders or *akharas* grew, so did more modern forms of urban religious association. They had a formal membership and organisational structure, rather than the loose, ad hoc congregations of older times. Calcutta formed the *Haribhaktipradayini Sabha* in 1852. The plague scare in 1898 stimulated a large crop of *Harisabhas* in Calcutta and its suburbs.[27]

Proselytising acquired new teeth and made fresh conquests through modern forms of social service and philanthropy. The Vaishnavs moved towards the marginalised and dishonoured groups of society to knit them into the Hindu fabric. In the late 19th century, Vaishnav reformers were working among Calcutta scavengers and prostitutes and others were spreading the faith among untouchable peasants in Faridpur and Jessore. Namasudra peasants, inspired by a variant of Vaishnavism, developed their own self-respect movement around the Matua religious sect.[28] Modern Vaishnavism, therefore, had a large sprawl, spanning very diverse social segments, assuming widely different shapes and purposes and adapting to new technological and organisational possibilities with considerable confidence.

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[27] Ramakanta Chakravarti, ibid, pp 385-401.

[28] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal: The Matua Sect and the Namasudras" in Rajat Ray, ed, *Mind, Body and Society*, op cit., pp. 152–92.

V
New Religious Orientations

Contrary to received wisdom, the religious world of the modern, English-educated *bhadralok* did not arrogantly insulate itself from plebeian, popular religious culture. In fact, as we have seen, sections of the middle class sought out their festivals, their songs and their gurus. An educated landed family in the village of Doyhata in Bikrampur put itself at the service of a low caste preacher with a violent, chiliastic vision and performed a form of human sacrifice to usher in a golden age.[29] Ramakrishna, an illiterate poor brahman, found eager disciples among the most active and famous social reformers and literary figures of Calcutta.[30]

Rashsundari seems equidistant from the plebeian as well as from the middle class forms of devotion. There are a few fragments of *dehabad* in her book. And yet, a scion of the reformist and literary family of the Tagores wrote the preface to her book. Obviously, she knew of one and she had a lot to say to the other.

In a series of interlinked studies of 19th century middle class religious movements, Sumit Sarkar has established an interesting pattern. He shows a regular oscillation between a this-wordly, dynamic, practical activism and high reason on the one hand, and a softer, fervent, ecstatic, quietist religious expression on the other. Rammohun Roy moved away from an early rationalism that derived largely from Islamic monotheism to a more tempered and pragmatic theism. The shift occurs among the iconoclastic defiant young Derozians whose uncompromising adherence to the rule of reason got softened, in their old age, into more acceptable forms of mainstream religions. The pattern reached a peak in the 1870s–80s, when a childlike, instinctive

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[29] Sumit Sarkar, *Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal — Writing Social History*, Chapter 6, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 186–215.

[30] Sarkar, "Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti", ibid., pp. 282–353.

and emotional form of devotion, conveyed through the quotidian images and metaphors of an inspired and illiterate guru, Ramakrishna, were valorised over textual knowledge and activism.[31]

AJ and other statements on religion by 19th century women, however, indicate another trajectory that is not aligned to this pattern, and that, in fact, deviates sharply from it. For they search for texts, for understanding reached through the path of knowledge, for the ability to express their dialogues with God through writing. The divergence is immensely significant, for women's religion is supposed to be spontaneous, unlearned, instinctive. Moreover, they — again, supposedly — inhabit more comfortably the regions of seeing and hearing rather than reading and writing. We shall come back to the implications of this difference in the section on education.

The movements between a practical religious activism and a self-absorbed emotionalism had combined to create a new possibility in modern religion: the saturation of the profane world and of practical action — philanthropy, social work, reform — with religious significance, their encompassing and absorption within the religious domain. The secular public sphere understood itself as essentially religious. This was something radically new. Older notions of *dharmic* behaviour had, indeed, ruled over householder existence, but those had been externally prescribed regulations. Now, the connection between the everyday and the sacred had to be understood and worked out by individuals. This was quite different from a more mechanical pantheistic understanding that postulates that everything in this world contains a part of God. For the new understanding was intrusive, transformative, and sought to change the self and the world to bring them in conformity with God. We have something like a re-enchantment of the world, the packing of the mundane with the sacred — but this was

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[31] Sarkar, ibid; also "The Pattern and Activity of Early Nationalist Activity in Bengal" in his *A Critique of Colonial India*, Papyrus, Calcutta, 1985, pp. 37–57.

something that each devotee had to accomplish in each lifetime. Modern religion becomes, thereby, a constant intellectual effort, a ceaseless cognitive activity.

VI
Hagiographies, Manuscripts and Recitations: Vernacular and Popular Modes of *Bhakti*

Chaitanya *bhakti* introduced a new form of religious literature in Bengal — hagiographies celebrating lives of saints and of great devotees. Chaitanya, however, was revered by his hagiographers as more than a saint — he was called a reincarnation of God in his own right. Rashsandari's secret reading was inspired by an unquenchable thirst for the Bengali hagiographies of this genre. It was a desire shaped by three elements. For Vaishnav households, manuscripts were freely available and were regarded as the heart of their sacred canon; they were Bengali texts, deliberately written to educate a wide cross-section of devotees in matters of Chaitanya's life and Gaudiya Vaishnav teachings; being sung, recited, explained and amplified continuously, they could reach out to non-literate devotees most successfully.

There were earlier biographies of Chaitanya that were written in Sanskrit by Bengali poets in the early decades of the 16th century. Their impact, however, was extremely limited. Vrindaban Das' *Chaitanya Bhagabat* (*CB*) was the first three-part biography written in Bengali and it was a momentous event in the religious and literary history of Bengal. Worshipped as a sacred text and renamed as *CB* to indicate its closeness to *BP*, it self-consciously structured the early part of the narrative to evoke memories about Krishna's childhood, so as to reinforce the divinity of the saint. Part of its veneration seems to derive from a new concern about historicity that might have something to do with Muslim court chronicles. Dates and places are precisely mentioned and the authenticity of sources is carefully vouched for. Vrindaban Das himself was close to Chaitanya's lifetime, his mother had been personally blessed by the saint as a child, and the poet belonged to a Vaishnav family of great importance. He

heard tales about Chaitanya's childhood from the saint's oldest disciple Advaita, and he attributed the importance of his narrative to the privileged oral accounts that only Advaita could have recounted.[32] Vrindaban Das often insisted: "I write only what I have heard from *bhakts*" — that is to say, heard from men in the know.[33]

Each *adhyay* or section in *CB* begins with a hierarchised invocation of sacred Vaishnav names: *Shrikrishnachaitanyanity-anandadvaitachandraya Namah* — Salutations to Krishna, Chaitanya, Nityananda and Advaita, the last two being foremost disciples of Chaitanya. The importance of the sect and of its gurus is evident. In fact, *CB* is also a biography of most of Chaitanya's disciples. Next comes an obeisance to the sect — *Shrichaitanyapriya gosthi* — to the sect dear to Chaitanya. We have an acute understanding of the organisational importance of the sect and its proselytising leaders. *CB* is a deeply sectarian text, full of violent fulminations against faithless opponents of Chaitanya and the Muslim qazi of Nabadwip who tried to curb the sect. Chaitanya himself appears to be violently dogmatic, ready to smash his opponents in argument and disputation and to physically coerce brahmans, Muslim qazi and disobedient disciples alike. He carries a metaphorical sword in his hand. It is significant how little Rashsundari's narrative derives from the book that she was longing to read. Her devotion valorises the path of understanding, it is completely non-sectarian and she refers neither to Krishna nor to Chaitanya in her colophons: she solicits help from Saraswati, the goddess of learning who carries a book in her hand. This is a most un-Vaishnav invocation. There is never a mention of the order of Vaishnavs, to congregations or sects or to gurus. On the other hand, *CB*'s celebration of the kali age as a time when the saviour is born, is carried into *AJ* and is recast as the praise for her own times when women are freer.

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[32] Asit Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla Sahityer Itibritta*, Vol 2, third edition, Modern Book Agency, Calcutta, 1983, pp 306-69. See also Bimanbehari Majumdar, op. cit.

[33] *CB*, op cit, p. 3.

CB was meant for teaching the ordinary *bhakt* the story of Chaitanya's life in simple, vivid poetry. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* (henceforward *CCM*), on the other hand, was commissioned by the Vrindaban theologians to narrate Chaitanya's life, as well as to communicate and explain the doctrines of the Goswamis in Bengali. Krishnadas Kaviraj was sent to Vrindaban by Nityananda to form a bridge between the movement and its theology. *CCM* is the most authoritative and exhaustive account of the life of Chaitanya and of the religion.[34] It discusses the preferred *raganuga* model of devotion and it explains the theology of *parakiya* love. Although Radha is missing in *CB*, she is an important figure in *CCM*. It also is a detailed history of sect-formation and of the different strands within the Vaishnav faith and movement. Krishnadas retains the invocations from *CB*, and he also cites short, Sanskrit couplets and amplifies the meaning in Bengali. He puts down the various Sanskrit couplets that are ascribed to Chaitanya and that comprise the core teachings of the prophet. The book conveys a strong sense of the land of Bharat where people have a special vocation: to be good and faithful Vaishnavs. Rashsundari talks of the futility of her own life every time she mentions her birth in the land of Bharat. Obviously, she has in mind the vocation that she thinks that she has failed to live up to. *CCM* condenses this vocation into the recitation of the holy names of God and his incarnations which are enough, in the age of kali, to bring salvation: *Harenama harenama harenama kevalam; Kalou nastyeba nastyeba nastyeba gatiranyatha* (Only the name of Hari, there is no other way out in kaliyug). All scriptural knowledge is thickened and dissolved into the name. Chaitanya himself had mastered the path of knowledge, had transcended and had left it behind for simple faith and love. His devotees need not repeat the effort, they may adhere to the end-product of the long process.

The explicit message is, nonetheless, undercut by the medium through which it is communicated — a learned theological

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[34] Asit Bandyopadhyay, ibid.

tome. This instantiates the paradoxical relationship between knowledge and unlearned faith that is forever unresolved in Vaishnavism. For we have here texts that are meant to be read — and not by pandits alone, but by the common folk. Both texts are fast-flowing, easy to understand and to memorise. Written in the *payar* metric structure, each line of the verse has twelve words and every two lines compose a complete statement — in form, very close to prose sentences. Rashsundari's unfamiliarity with prose texts could have been offset by the structure of these verses.

Neither text was printed before the end of the 19th century, and Rashsundari could only have read them in manuscript form. We have no way of knowing how old the manuscripts at her home might have been, but sacred texts were being copied by hand well after the introduction of print, down to the end of the 19th century.[35] Her versions might, however, have been quite old ones. Vaishnav manuscripts began to be copied in great profusion by the 17th century, and quite a few of them were later unearthed among low caste and poor rural households. According to Hiteshranjan Sanyal, low castes, indeed, were the most numerous consumers for such manuscripts.[36]

Dineshchandra Sen claims that he began to look for manuscripts when he wanted to write an essay for a prize that had been instituted by the Calcutta University in 1891. His initial searches found rich rewards in Comilla homes of "artisans, weavers, blacksmiths and baniyas..." His servant, Ramkumar Datta then found more of them in his Bankura village. He would go on regular trips, funding himself with sales of cheap and popular Battala pulp literature to village readers, out of the proceeds of which he would buy up manuscripts. While Calcutta

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[35] I owe this piece of information to Subhadra Ganguly. She, however, has found that copiers received only daily meals and very little remuneration by that stage. Clearly, this was due to the competition from print, although the very orthodox still objected to putting sacred words through the polluting print medium, and preferred to read holy books in manuscript.

[36] Hiteshranjan Sanyal, op cit, p. 234.

University set up a special manuscript library out of such collections in 1910, the Asiatic Society bought about four hundred handwritten books. Abanindranath Tagore, the famous artist of the Bengal School, was an avid buyer, attracted by their illuminated wooden covers and so was Chittaranjan Das, the leading nationalist and Swarajist politician. He later donated two thousand works to the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library.[37]

I examined a copy of the first section of the *CB* — the *Adikhanda* — in the Calcutta University collection. Made of countrymade, heavy, *tulat* paper that would be stained with an arsenic solution, each page was about 14″ × 4.75″ in size. The heaviness of the paper probably protected it from ageing. Each page contains not more than ten to twelve lines. A copy of the *CCM* that I saw had pages that were very similar in size — 13.5″ × 4.5″ . It contained even fewer lines — about nine to ten on each page. Both were made up of loose sheets, pressed between wooden slats. They were bound up in red cloth and tied with string. Even opening the book would thus be a long and complicated procedure, and the pages would have to be taken out one by one, read and replaced — just the way Rashsundari had done. Each page would have very little written on it, so reading would be enormously time-consuming and cumberome. Each section of a book could only be copied down on several different books. Both the manuscripts that I saw were late 17th century ones. Both had been located in Bankura.[38]

The staining with sulphate of arsenic gave these manuscripts a long life.[39] Yet, the fact that each book would be divided into many manuscript texts or *punthis*, would mean a major storage problem. Individual houses would not be able to contain very many of them, and public recitations would have been their major mode of transmission. Much of Vaishnav doctrine was

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[37] Sen, Introduction to *The Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Manuscripts*, Vol 3, University of Calcutta publication, 1928.

[38] Ibid, pp 414, 396. Dates, 1696 and 1681 A.D. respectively.

[39] J.C.Ghosh, *Bengali Literature*, Oxford University Press, London, 1948, pp. 29-31.

orally disseminated at a fairly high level of comprehension and conceptualisation. Ritual occasions within households or local congregations organised public recitations and commentaries — *katha* and *path* — as well as devotional music where singing would often be interrupted to read aloud a doctrinal point and then the song would be resumed to explain it. Texts were, therefore, ubiquitous, penetrating even oral and musical performances. The *BP*, for instance, would be recited over a month continuously, with readings in Sanskrit every morning and explanations and Bengali commentaries every evening.[40] This way, an unlearned listener gained what had been termed in another context as "phonetic competence" — an overall understanding over whole blocs of Sanskrit passages. At the same time, she would also acquire "linguistic competence" over each word that was read out and explained in Bengali.[41]

I would suggest that this notion of dual competency may be stretched from the realm of words to that of concepts. The simultaneous exposure to Sanskrit and to Bengali, to chaste and erudite as well as to familiar, colloquial words, created a phonetic grasp over complex conceptual statements as well as a literal linguistic competence over each idea from vernacular expositions. Popular religious songs and literature often move with effortless ease into knotted theological problems.

There was, then, an ubiquity of sacred texts that established a visible, powerful bond between reading and piety. Snatches of recitations would penetrate into women's quarters. At the same time, the notion of a shared culture cannot be pressed too far. Ordinary labouring people and women were often excluded from a systematic cultivation of religious interest, even from its oral traditions, by lack of leisure and by rules of seclusion. Rashsundari has written about the pain of that exclusion.

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[40] W.J. Wilkins, *Modern Hinduism: Being an Account of the Religion and Life of the Hindoos in North India*, 1887, New Delhi reprint, 1987.

[41] See Paul Singer, "Book of the Hours and the Reading Habits of the Later Middle Ages" in Roger Chartier, ed, *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 1989.

Women who were interested in a more complete understanding, were simultaneously stimulated and frustrated by occasional but imperfect access to religious discourses.

Excited by such desires and fears, Rashsundari worked out a double-edged stance vis-a-vis her *sansar* and her identity. She underlined her submission and her unqualified success here. At the same time, she took care to indicate that a deeper truth lay veiled behind this apparent reality, this partial truth, this *maya* that was her *sansar*. By evoking this contrast, she wrested for herself an interior space which was her faith. She prised open both *sansar* and faith to accomodate a new figure: the serious yet domesticated woman *bhakt* who creates her autonomous religious understanding all by herself, a faith that is carefully insulated from all that the woman's *sansar* had on offer. And also a faith that can only be expressed through the forbidden activity of writing a book.