

# Male Radhas and Krishna Bhakti

By YOGI SIKAND

Of the three aspects of Krishna—Krishna as a child in the home of Yashoda, Krishna as a lover in the bowers of Brindavan and Krishna as a warrior on the battlefield of Kurukshetra—it is his role as a lover that has perhaps inspired most to attain the supreme heights of Krishna-bhakti or devotion to him.



In the Vaishnava Bhakti tradition Krishna has commonly been portrayed as lover or husband of the worshipper, the latter being conceived of as Radha or one of the other gopis of Braj. The name of the sixteenth century female mystic, Mirabai, immediately comes to the mind in this regard. Yet, interestingly, many great male saints in the Bhakti tradition have also approached Krishna, the object of their devotion, by emulating Radha and the other female companions of Krishna so closely that they began to see themselves as their very incarnations. This fluid and amorphous 'genderisation,' wherein one can play various gendered roles in different situations is one of the most beautiful, yet least understood, aspects of Krishna Bhakti.

The passionate devotion of Mirabai to Krishna appears to have reinforced the belief that Krishna could best be worshipped if the



devotee imagined himself to be a woman. Thus, one of the greatest of the Vaishnava mystics, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal, was considered by some of his followers to have in fact been an incarnation of Krishna's consort, Radha, herself. The mystic path of total devotion which he preached, in which singing

and dancing with gay abandon played a central role, encouraged many of his own followers to imagine themselves to be the gopis of Krishna. Nirad C. Chaudhari, in his book, *Hinduism*, observes that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's love for Krishna, 'resembled the perfidiousness of a young girl who had fallen in love with a

man but, though erotically excited, had not yet been united with him.' Chaitanya and his male disciples, in imagining themselves to be Krishna's female companions, were only following in the path of others before them. In his recently published book, *Krishna: The Playful Divine*, Pavan Varma writes that there are several passages in the Puranas which say that Krishna's gopis were actually men in their former life and that they were reborn as women in order to have a more intimate relationship with Krishna. In this regard, Varma quotes the Padma Purana, in which it is related that, "In former times, all the great Rishis living in the Dandaka forest, seeing Rama and Hari (Krishna) there, desired to enjoy them ... they all became women and were born in Gokula. Obtaining Hari through physical passion (kama), they thus found Him."

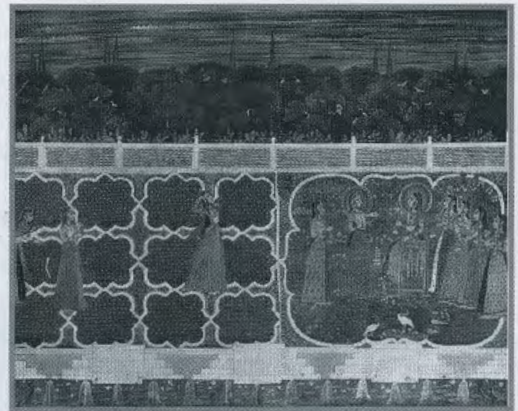
Some eminent male Krishna-worshipping saints are said to have taken on the role of Radha so completely that it led to what Varma calls the loss of their 'manhood.' For instance, the fifteenth-century Gujarati Vaishnava mystic, Narsi Mehta, wrote,

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

Likewise, the eminent Vaishnava saint of South India, Vedanta Desika, used to don the clothes of a woman while worshipping Krishna. An annual festival is still held in Madras in the saint's memory, in which his image, dressed as a woman, is taken out into the streets in a large procession. More recently, Swami Ramakrishna of Bengal is said to have taught that the best way to have a vision of Krishna was to approach him as a woman. Thus, Milton Singer notes in his *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes* that, "As an adult, Ramakrishna undertook a systematic discipline of devotion as a woman of Krishna ... For about six months (he) wore women's clothes and ornaments



(sari, gauze scarf, bodice, artificial hair) and mimicked the movements, speech, smile, glance and gestures of women." Such a path of devotion, when stretched to its extreme, led, in some cases, to Radha-worship, eclipsing devotion to Krishna himself. This was the case, for instance, with the Radha Vallabhi sect, founded by one Hita Harivansh (1503-1553). In the Radha Sudhaniti, Harivansh wrote that the love of Krishna was 'but a drop in comparison with (that of) Radha,' who was, as he put it, 'a veritable ocean of nectar.' Perhaps the most extreme sect in the tradition of Radha worship was that of the Sakhi-bhavaks of the late eighteenth-century. The Sakhi-bhavaks believed that they could worship Krishna only by imagining themselves to be gopis. K. Goswami, in *The Cult*, elaborates at length about the doctrines of this little-



known sect. He writes that the Sakhi-bhavak cult was particularly popular among men 'with an effeminate turn of mind,' and that their object of devotion was Radha, rather than Krishna. They considered themselves to be Radha's companions, 'with the idea of paying her homage and establishing an identity' with her. In the process, they adopted the manner of speech, gait, gestures and clothes that were commonly associated with women. They are even said to have periodically donned red clothes that signified the period of menstruation and passed three days in that state, after which, to 'purify' themselves, they took a ceremonial bath.

The models of 'masculinity' have changed today. Narsi Mehta, Sri Ramakrishna and the Sakhi-bhavaks may still be remembered by a fast dwindling number of people, but who among them would be willing to adopt their ways of expressing their devotion to Krishna? The melting into each other of 'masculine' striving and 'feminine' grace, the fusion of the masculine and the feminine principles to produce, as a result, a truly complete person, would today be mocked at as unmanly and disgustingly deviant. Krishna as the lover, it seems, has, in our times, given way to Krishna as the general on the battlefield. ▼

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