

The Musical Associations of Devotional Poetry in Eastern India

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GENERALLY SPEAKING, Rama and Krishna, the twin glories of Vaishnava faith and devotion, often more Krishna than Rama, and there too, frequently, rather the Krishna of the Vrindavan episodes than his counterpart in Mathura, held the entire eastern India spellbound throughout the period starting roughly from the early fifteenth century and ending almost with the first visible signs of the impact of English education in the nineteenth century. The tangible forms through which the spell worked and exerted itself on the imagination of the country included not only a vast literature, both creative and interpretative, but also, particularly, a wide variety of performing arts. Of these latter, an overwhelmingly large proportion was devotional poetry set to music and sung ceremoniously.

The first evidence of Vaishnava lyrical poetry in Bengali is found in the last decades of the fifteenth century, though Avahattha verses on the Vaishnava theme written in Bengali can be traced to two centuries earlier. Much of the Vaishnava lyrical poetry in Bengal is not written in Bengali, but in Brajabuli, an ornate poetic diction used by the poets of Mithila which the Bengali poets, as a considerable number of Vaishnava poets from elsewhere also, avidly cultivated. These poems, being all songs, are inseparable from melody, but even when they are not sung and are merely recited, the sonorous language in which they are clothed lends to them the immediacy of an inescapable musical intonation.

Mithila, located in a region which at that time was not under the direct control of Muslim rulers, attracted scholars from neighbouring provinces including Bengal. Mithila also served then as an impetus to lyrical tendency in the poetry of Bengal and elsewhere, as an unbroken tradition of Vaishnavism in general and of Vaishnava lyrical poetry in particular was found to be flourishing there.

These lyrics in Bengali, dealing almost exclusively with the unwedded love of Radha and Krishna, are sung in a peculiar musical style known as *kirtana*—a style prevailing since early times but elaborated and developed by Narottam Das in the second half of the sixteenth century. Later, during the seventeenth century, two lighter styles of *kirtana* evolved, absorbing much from folk traditions and presenting a totally new and very expressive musical form.

The divine passion of Chaitanya (1486 – 1533), the great Vaishnava saint and initiator of a new school, lent a special spiritual meaning to Radha's love for Krishna. This explains why the best of Vaishnava songs in Bengal were composed by the direct followers of Chaitanya who had seen the master. Among the best known poets of this genre in Bengali are Murari Gupta, Chandidas, Balaramdas, Jnandas and Govindadas Kaviraj.

It was either in imitation of, or in reaction to, Vaishnava poetry that the much later devotional songs of the Mother Goddess, including those bearing the signature of the eighteenth-century poet Ramprasad, or the still later compositions of the Kabiwallas like Nidhu Babu came to be written. But in comparison to the intricacy, beauty and grandeur of Vaishnava poetry, these later specimens look like feeble remnants of a glorious heritage.

In the adoration of the goddess Kali, a host of other poets and composers joined the example set by Ramprasad Sen. Among them, notably, was Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and whose songs rank next to Ramprasad's in excellence. Quite a few Muslim poets also joined, individually, this ardent group of composers singing the glory of the Mother Goddess.

Even the Bauls, sometimes described as the mystic Vaishnavas of Bengal, are very much a part of the same mainstream. The 'Vaishnava' part of the flow, so to say, in this many-splendoured and multi-hued current, is marked by a considerable force though the ascetic as well as esoteric practices of the Bauls—which means, literally, 'mad fellows'—are an indistinct mixture of ideas and ideologies pertaining to three separate sects, the Vaishnavas, the Sufis, and the Sahajiyas. On the other hand, in matters of content as well as expressions and similes used, the Baul songs of Bengal have a great affinity with the compositions of the saint-poets from northern India. One of the greatest Baul singers and composers was Lalan Fakir (1774 – 1890) who, it is said, authored more than ten thousand songs in a span of about one hundred years of his active life.

One of the earliest and greatest inspirations to Vaishnava poetry in eastern India was undoubtedly Vidyapati Thakura (1360 – 1448) of Mithila, musician and author of timeless repute, who wrote in three languages (Sanskrit, Maithili Avahattha and Maithili) works of various kinds including plays and narrative poetry. But it is as the poet of Maithili lyrics on the Radha-Krishna theme that he has achieved universal recognition. Because of the excellent quality of these lyrics he had the unique distinction of being naturalized in the two sister literatures of Hindi and Bengali. His influence on the

poets of Assam and Orissa was no less significant.

Vidyapati's Krishna, it has been said, has nothing divine in him and his sports with the Gopis of Vrindavan, specially Radha, are of a particularly sensuous nature, which has led many to draw a parallel between Vidyapati and Jayadeva. There is a belief that the image of Radha which emerges in Vidyapati's songs has its source not so much in the *Bhagavata Purana* as in the *Brahma-Vaivarta Purana*.

Shifting our attention to the neighbouring province of Assam, we find that what contributed outstandingly to the development of Vaishnavism there in general and the Vaishnava literature in Assamese in particular was the unique personality of Sankaradeva (1449-1569) whose ancestors, strangely, were all Shaktas and, equally strangely, at the time of whose appearance the tantric forms of worship dominated that region. Starting his missionary activities, he lost no time in establishing his new faith *Ekasarananamadharma*, preaching supreme surrender to Vishnu, and set up *satras* (monasteries) and *namghars* or congregational prayer halls for daily devotional recitations (*nam-kirtan*). The prayer halls were also used for performing religious dramas and evangelical services. Since he drew inspiration chiefly from the *Bhagavata*, which he also translated into beautiful Assamese, Radha, who plays a vital role in the Vaishnava literature of other provinces, does not appear at all in the whole of the literature left behind by Sankaradeva.

The two branches of Assamese literature which Sankaradeva pioneered were Bargit, devotional songs, and Ankiya-nat, one-act plays, both new literary types in Assamese which, as in Bengal, used Brajabuli for expression, the Brajabuli here becoming a mixed dialect of Maithili and Assamese. In both these forms he discovered a most effective means to propagate his cult. The Bargits and Ankiya-nats composed by him and his disciple Madhavadeva formed the principal stream of Assamese devotional writings, which was joined by several other tributaries in course of time.

Farther east, in Manipur, all are now Vaishnavas following the Bengal school of the faith, though the influences of other faiths that once prevailed over their country have not completely disappeared. Thus during Lai Haraoba dance festivals, to cite but one example among many, entire villages participate in honouring the pre-Vaishnava gods and goddesses of the Meiteis, leaving aside for a week or so the strict Vaishnava form of prayer.

It is said that in the beginning of the eighteenth century one Santadas Babaji, a Bengali Vaishnava of the Chaitanya school, reached Manipur and so charmed the whole population there including the king with his melodious *kirtana* singing the glories of

Radha and Krishna, that in no time Vaishnavism became the royal faith in Manipur, much as Nabadwip, the birthplace of Chaitanya in Bengal, became for the Manipuris a holy centre for pilgrimage. Likewise, the Vaishnava texts from Bengal, the *Bhaktirasamritasindhu* and *Ujjvalanilamani* in particular, became the subject of their intense study.

The supreme expression of Manipuri Vaishnavism can be found in Rasa Lilas and the old and new schools of Samkirtana, the latter a sung form of worship and prayer regulating the entire life-cycle of a Manipuri.

In Orissa, the southernmost part of the eastern India, yet another grand Vaishnava country, the religious ferment was contemporaneous and took similar forms of artistic expression witnessed elsewhere in the neighbouring provinces, such as devotional lyrics, sung narrative poetry, Jatra, recitations by *kathakars*, etc. For centuries two outstanding personalities—one a saint and the other a poet—dominated over the artistic horizon of this Vaishnava ferment.

The saint, once again, was Chaitanya who, coming from Bengal in 1510, permanently settled down in Puri and exerted a hypnotizing influence over the Oriya masses. Even to the famous author-saints numbering five and known as Pancha-sakhas or the five comrades (namely, Balarama Das, Jagannatha Das, Ananta Das, Yasovanta Das and Achyuta Das) who were more or less his contemporaries, Chaitanya proved to be an unprecedented fountainhead of spiritual rejuvenation.

The other personality, who was a poet, was Jayadeva who, claimed both by Bengal and Orissa, lived in the thirteenth century and wrote in Sanskrit. He was the illustrious author of *Gita-Govinda*, by far the earliest work of literature introducing the Radha-Krishna theme as distinct from the Krishna-Gopi theme. The *Gita-Govinda ashtapadis*, merged with the song form of early Oriya known as *chautisa*, are still very much sung and recited in Orissa.

As an example of the glorification not only of Krishna but also of Rama, the Oriya form of ballad singing known as Dasakathia can be cited. The name is derived from the wooden clappers called *dasakathi* or *rama-tali*, which are the sole musical instruments used to accompany the singing. The text most used here is the Oriya *Vichitra Ramayana*.

Thus, it is interesting to see how, even in the matter of sheer forms of physical expression, devotion often takes on a near-uniform speech and outward gestures that are close to identical in a variety of languages and regions. □