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# Chaitanya and the Evolving Shades of Devotion in Pada Kirtan

## **Abstract**

This article endeavours to explore how the implication of Bhakti, or devotion (which is the basic premise of Vaishnavism) has evolved in relation to the change in the depiction of Radha and Krishna's relationship in its enactment or performance, i.e. Kirtan from pre-Chaitanya to post-Chaitanya era. Chaitanya instrumentalised the ushering in of Bhakti cult in Bengal (sixteenth century A.D.) to protect the marginalised section of the society from the oppression of the orthodox Brahmins and the tyrannical proselytizing moves of the Muslim rulers of Turkish origin reigning in Bengal. Chaitanya revised the ancient Vaishnava tantra that already existed in Bengal and brought it under the canon of Bhakti which seemingly altered the concept of devotion in the Vaishnava order. In the process, Chaitanya emerged as a hero among his followers who initiated the worship of Chaitanya. Thus, in this context, the credo of devotion was redirected to a hagiographic alley that challenged the earlier democratic fervour prominent in the sect.

Chaitanya's conceptualization of 'Radha-Bhava-Dyuti' and 'Prembhakti' impacted the depiction of Radha and Krishna in Kirtans. Radha's positionality shifted from being an enamoured woman expressing her carnal passion, and the prototype of the female entity of Nature to an abstract representation; a term denoting a certain 'bhava' (feeling) of lovelornness. The notion of devotion altered from the equal surrender in their organic, transcendental union (based on the sexo-yogic philosophy of tantra) to a relationship of subservience and lordship. The visceral, erotic love lore of Radha-Krishna was subjected to erasure and replaced by absolute submission to the will of the Almighty to satisfy the conservative outlook of the mass followers towards religion.

This article aims for pragmatic approach to the chronological changes in the historical factors, the philosophical concepts and its evidencing body of performative literature that occurred parallel to one another. The fact that the implication of devotion has changed over time and that Vaishnavism has acted as a counter-current to mainstream religious wave in Bengal which can be derived from the study of its complexities.

## Introduction

Almost every non-monotheistic religious community in the world invests in some kind of mythical romance narratives featuring divine lovers: Isis and Osiris (Egyptian), Venus and Mars (Roman), Persephone and Hades (Greek), or Cupid and Psyche (Roman) to list a few. While most of the others have been relegated to a zone where they are most relevant as literary allusions, the tales of Radha and Krishna's love-sport still feature as active themes and leitmotifs of South Asian literature, parts of which are directly involved in the dissemination of religion, catering to the ritualistic performances. Vaishnava theology has always utilized an enormous body of literature thematically revolving around Radha and Krishna in an attempt to contextualize its ideas about devotion directed towards the Lord. These poeticized compositions are located under the corpus of Kirtan while Padabali-kirtan, geographically more specific to Bengal is, according to Guy L. Beck, "another very distinctive style of Pada-Kirtan found in Bengal and Orissa...most sophisticated form of devotional music in Bengal. It was adapted and modified from the slower Dhrupad style of Braj music by Narottam Das (1531-1587)" (Beck 2010, 585-589) to reach its present structure.

Devotion, as conceptualized by the followers of Vaishnavism has evolved over the ages. Chaitanya's contribution initiated a drastic change in the ideological paradigm of devotion within the Vaishnava sect in Bengal and simultaneously in the Bhakti Movement around sixteenth century A.D. Jaydev's *Gitagovinda*, one of the earliest extant Sanskrit compositions from the twelfth century A.D., provides the readers with an insight to the ancient form of Vaishnava culture prevalent in Bengal, while the implication of devotion in Chaitanya's philosophy of prembhakti (that he instrumentalized to unite the socially fragmented Bengalis of his times and revoke their lost spirit of independence) (Sanyal 2012, 42-50) is reflected in the padas of Narottam Das, an associate of Chaitanya's. A comparative study of the kirtan compositions the by two poets (Jaydev and Narottam Das) clearly highlights the dynamism in

the phenomenology of the term “devotion”. This gradual alteration in the implication of devotion might be mapped through the shifting locus of Radha’s representation in kirtans; analysing her depiction in *Gitagovinda* as well as the padabali (series of padas) kirtan of Narottam Das.

## The Tantric Origin of Kirtan

Liturgical overtones have been perpetually observed in music in India. Derived from the root ‘Krit’; Kirtan denotes songs performed to eulogize the Supreme Lord and His deeds of valour. The tradition of singing panegyrics of gods and goddesses is ancient in India, however, Kirtan got its specific ecclesiastical purpose with the advent of the Bhakti movement in the country (Sanyal 2012, 42-50). Each of the Bhakti sects (Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Sikhism etc.) appropriated the form of the Kirtan in accordance with their ideologies. The art of kirtan is enrooted in the Vedic mantras that are derivatives of the sonic superstructure, Sabda-Brahman or the Sound Absolute (Beck 2010, 585-589). The functionality of kirtan inheres in the enactment of devotion. Beck quotes Selina Thielemann in order to establish the relation between music and devotion in regard to Vaishnava theology:

Selina Thielemann has affirmed the superiority of music in Vaishnava devotion, especially Kṛṣṇa-based traditions, with regard to its dialectic of expression and arousal: “Music and singing have been of central importance in the Vaishnava Bhakti movement since its very beginnings. . . In the theological sense, we may distinguish between offered and received music, between music directed to the divinity and music conceived through divine inspiration. Both poles of the dialectic constellation are carried forth by the underlying devotional element: a person endowed with devotion makes the musical offering out of love for God, and it is his devotion that enables man to partake of divine blessing in the form of music. It is important to note that the dialectic principle can work only in devotional religion, because it presupposes an active and two-sided relationship between man and the divinity.

The ancient tantric dialogue, *Radha tantram* elucidates the enchanting fable of Radha’s birth and the coveted Radha- Krishna love story. The text associates Krishna to Sabda-Brahman and Radha to the manifestation of Prakriti or Nature who is the primary receptacle and driving force of Krishna (*Radha tantram* 1876, 64). In the state of intangibility, Krishna is the formless Brahman. When he dons a perceivable formation, he is Sabda-brahman and in both states, Sabda-brahman and Param-brahman have Prakriti incorporated within their cosmic presence. In *Radha tantram*, Kattayani (mother goddess) prophesises “Padmini (the manifestation of Nature), a part of me, will descend upon Vrindavan in the avatar Radha.” “Prakriti Padmini is born as Radha on the bright lunar fortnight under the rising of the Pushya star (the star associated to the cancer zodiac sign).”

*Gitagovinda*, written in a direct tandem to *Radha tantram* too refers to Radha as the manifestation of Nature: “...he who is the best among the devotees of Padmavati [Padmini] (SriRadha), that poet Jaydev composes *Gitagovinda* that sings of the amorous play of SriVasudev (Krishna).” (Jaydev 1953, 337) *Gitagovinda* and the other Kirtans composed in the pre-Chaitanya era exemplify an anthropomorphic form of erotic love between the divine protagonists Krishna and Radha where adoration, longing, disappointment, pathos, and even

lust in varying degree is evident. Here, one identifies devotion in the mutual surrender of the lovers leading to an ultimate, metaphysical union that vouches for a psychosomatic experience. Jaydev describes the multitudinous flavours in their love sport. Blinded in love Radha embraces Krishna: “Thrilled by the celebrations of Raaslila and blinded in her love for Krishna, Radha embraces him in front of the beautiful cowherd maidens. She tells him “How beautiful is your face and smeared with nectar” and kisses him passionately. May the smiling Krishna bless you” (Jaydev 1953, 385) Radha mourns her desertion from Krishna and also expresses her envy for the cowherd maidens (gopis) who partake in his lilas. Neglected and sequestered she despairs: “Perceiving Krishna engaged in celebration with the other cowherd maidens, Sri Radha fears the loss of her eminence in Krishna’s heart. She sits under a bush and while the bees buzz on, she complains to her friend sadly. She tells her that she has been deserted by Krishna for the other maidens yet she cannot forget him.” (Jaydev 1953, 385-386) Radha accuses Krishna of being an infidel to her: “SriKrishna! Your heart is as impure as your body. Why else would you cheat upon your love-sick devotee?” (Jaydev 1953, 369) Both *Gitagovinda* and *Radha tantram* present torrid illustrations of eroticism in their evocation of the relationship between Radha and Krishna. In *Radha tantram* Krishna flirtatiously comments: “I do not accept any other grant except love-making” (*Radha tantram* 1876, 294). In fact, Jaydev reconfigures Raasotsav as Kaamotsav, hinting at the significance of the organic and orgasmic aspects in their amore. Again, both the texts exemplify the union of the two souls accomplished through the fulfilment of somatic desires of one another; the oneness of their bodies and minds. While Radha expresses grief at being separated from her lover, Krishna too articulates his pensive state at being away from his beloved Radha: “SriRadha saw me playing with the Gopis and left me in anger; I have sinned, I could not stop her in fear; she has forsaken me in rage” (Jaydev 1953, 390). He even seeks her forgiveness: “Beautiful! Forgive me, come before me; I shall never commit such sin again; now I feel love-sick.” (Jaydev 1953, 351). “The sight of your body can cure disorders. It is filled with nectar and carnality /...Embrace me, redeem me of my sin, I am your devoted slave.” (*Radha tantram* 1876, 306-07) The cowherd maidens drenched in Krishna premrassa are identified by Jaydev as the earliest practitioners of prembhakti, a unique blend of love and devotion. Jaydev invests in enthralling yet serene description of Radha and Krishna’s union; the instance of their cross-dressing being an effulging evidence of it. “At dawn Radha’s friends see Krishna dressed in a blue saree and Radha wearing his olive-green attire. They begin laughing and teasing them while Radha feels embarrassed.” (Jaydev 1953, 368) Radha imagines: “Before embracing each other we shall consume the divine manna of each other” She dresses up like Krishna and asserts herself to be him in his absence to derive pleasure. (Jaydev 1953, 348) An essence of complete dissolution into one another and devotion can be defined through these lines: “If she rules over my heart, if I travel with her within my heart, then why I despair, why do I look for her without!” (Jaydev 1953, 350).

The early Vaishnavas considered Radha to be the Vaishnava prototype of Shakti sharing the same theological status as that of Krishna. While Shakta philosophy emphasised the superiority of the female force; “Vaishnavas regarded Shakti as the most essential attribute of Vishnu-Krishna, the Supreme God” (Schweig 2002, 421-444) further hinting at the inter-dependence in the Radha-Krishna love affair that treats passion and devotion as its two essential, irreplaceable attributes.

Other kirtans written during this period portray Radha's fear of being labelled as an infidel and outcast for being in love with Krishna and her grief at being chastised by her in-laws. Radha's anxiety negotiates with her dialectical portrayal as a human lover with traces of divinity. She expresses an anthropoid form of love and dedication towards her beloved which amalgamates corporeal desires and spiritual aspirations. Consequently, early Vaishnavism attracted devotees and followers (who were unschooled in complex brahminical philosophy) by virtue of verisimilitude, that is, in human identification of Radha and Krishna.

The intricate influence of *Radha tantram* upon the early Vaishnava cult has been aforementioned. Hiteshranjan Sanyal opines that this cult must be termed as Vaishnava tantra for its overlap with the philosophies of the esoteric cults prevalent during that era. Tantra is elemental in its consciousness involving a certain occult understanding of the body and explains a dual fold system of the universe: the male Bhagavan and the female Bhagavati. The individual male and female principles manifest themselves through human forms to achieve a single mould of consciousness. Sanyal comments, "Therefore, tantra practice is a combined effort of the male and the female" (Sanyal 2012, 97-98) explaining that the true union of the body and the mind of male and the female results into the demolition of the worldly ties which in turn ushers in the enlightenment of the soul. Being rooted in the principles of tantra, Vaishnava tantra invests in the concept of the two units: Rasa and Rati who find manifestation and establishment in the pair of Krishna and Radha. Krishna is Rasa while Rati is Radha and the Radha-Krishna premilila is performed in the hearts of every devoted worshipper. The devotee is redeemed through the realization of the bliss of love (*ananda*). The tenets of Bhakti infused into Vaishnava tantrism in an interesting way. The practitioners of this sect reworked upon the existing theology and portrayed Krishna as the Lord without whose blessing one cannot understand or experience love and Radha as the deity, the embodiment of love (Sanyal 2012, 97-98). This in turn deified the human representatives and gradually idealised the human form of love that Radha and Krishna shared, making it a divine prerogative to be worshipped.

### **Chaitanya's Philosophy and its Impact on Kirtan**

Led by Advaitya Acharya, the fifteenth century Vaishnava cult was a resistance against the proselytization moves of the rulers of Turkish origin in Bengal. Ramakanta Chakravarty writes "there were some men in Navadwip who considered the old concept of Bhakti as a panacea for the current ills and evils" (Chakravarty 1977, 107-149). Chaitanya's foray to the Bhakti scene was governed by two predominant purposes to revitalize the Vaishnava ideology: launching a protest movement against the continued efforts of religious conversion conducted by Hussain Shah in Bengal and also to safeguard the rights of the lower caste Hindus who were marginalised by the dominant orthodox Brahminical order that existed in the contemporary society. "It is now generally admitted that the Chaitanya movement assumed the shape of a religious movement with a pronounced social purpose", comments Chakravarty (1977, 107-149). Born in the year 1468 A.D. in Navadwip, Chaitanya is the most prominent exponent of the Bhakti cult and the performance of Kirtan. His burgeoning popularity in Navadwip can be attributed to his subversion of the prevalent and pernicious caste and gender based discrimination. Chaitanya and his followers, men and women from every strata of the society, performed nagarkirtan; conducting processions across the town while singing kirtans. Hiteshranjan Sanyal refers to *Chaitanyabhagavat* as an evidence of the violence that the

performers of Nagarkirtan unleashed upon the ruler (Sanyal 2012, 42-50). However, Chaitanya was never interested in active violence and convinced his followers to renounce it.

Chaitanya undoubtedly played an pivotal role in conceptualizing the Vaishnava wing of the Bhakti cult. He preached simple and direct faith or bhakti. Inseparable absorption led to 'prem' which resulted into whole hearted bhakti and Chaitanya himself longed for a union with Krishna and identified himself with Radha. This state of his devotion is referred to as Radha-bhava-dyuti. Chaitanya stressed upon congregational worship through simple namasamakirtan. According to him, kirtan aroused anubhava in the human heart which ultimately expressed itself through devotion (Sanyal 2019, 12-20). Stressing on the cognitive understanding of devotion, Chaitanya's philosophy of prembhakti is majorly based on the Bhagavata philosophy. A close interpretation of the Bhāktiyōga chapter of the *Bhagavata Gita* reinstates the observation. Bhagavata contextualizes devotion as surrendering one's activities and their resultant aspirations including the desire for salvation to ensure union with the Lord at the end of his life (Majumdar 1996, 83-86).

Chaitanya utilized the principles founded in the *Bhagavat Purana* and the ideas metaphorically encapsulated in *Bhagavat Gita* as the basis of his concept of Radha-Bhava-Dyuti or the radiance of the Radha-like emotion that he felt and expressed during his performance of Kirtan. Radha-Bhava-Dyuti is a product of the evolution that the ancient Indian theory of Rasa underwent with the flourishing of the Bhakti cult. The theory of Rasa had a pre-eminence in any form of performance since "The major Upanishads describe Brahman as full of rasa (*raso vai sah*: Brahman as composed of emotional taste, pleasure). Hence the performing arts were closely connected to religion since they evoked rasa, which ultimately led to liberation or moksha" (Beck 2010, 585-589). The Kirtans composed in the Pre-Chaitanya era depicts the love scenes of Radha and Krishna conforming to the Adirasa: Rati Bhava manifested through Shringaar Rasa, bearing allegiance to the Vaishnava tantric elements of the Rasa and Rati. Systematic complication in the Post-Chaitanya era is evident in the kirtans composed during that time. Correspondent to the Krishna rati bhava is Bhakti rasa which is divided into five sub-categories: Shanta rasa, Dashya rasa, Sakhya rasa, Vatsalya rasa and Madhu rasa. The Shanta rasa refers to the renunciation of worldly attachments in order to devote oneself completely to the Lord. The Dashya rasa includes Seva or service to the lord and it denotes subservience to the Lord. The Sakhya rasa involves the Lord's response to his devotee; he emerges as his devotee's true friend. Vatsalya rasa refers to the relationship between the Lord and his worshipper where he realises that he is under the parental care of the Lord who loves him for his virtues and reprimands his faults. In Madhu rasa, the Lord is the desired while the 'worshipper' is the one who desires him (Chakraborty 1997, 3-37). The formulation of this philosophy works as a device to mould the consciousness of the worshipper channelling his concentration through his devotion towards the Lord.

The *Bhagavata Purana* mentions the overflow of emotions during the performance of Kirtan which is intricately linked with Vaishnava worship (BP 11.14.24): "The man who is filled with love for Me [*bhakti*], whose voice falters with emotion, whose heart melts within him, who weeps often and sometimes laughs, who sings aloud [*udgayati*] and dances unabashed, purifies the world." Chaitanya too indulged in the outpouring of the emotions while singing Kirtans. His views substantiated by *Chaitanya Bhagavat*, Sanyal writes that while performing Kirtans Chaitanya would "hold someone's feet, climb someone's shoulders, again embrace

someone and weep.” (Sanyal 2012, 32). Intriguingly, Jaydev elucidated similar reaction in Radha when she longed for Krishna: “Radha’s Lord! You are a good doctor. Srimati (Radha) suffers from the fever of sorrow, she is falling into fits often, sometimes she is delirious, sometimes feeling tremors, sometimes tired, sometimes sitting up anxiously, sometimes lying unconscious. If you give her medicines her life will be saved otherwise not, you are our only hope” (Jaydev 1953, 355) Therefore, Chaitanya identified himself with Radha, as an embodiment of the union of Radha and Krishna and he felt the Radha’s emotions or Radha bhava. However, there is a basic difference between these inceptions of experience though the exteriorization seems similar. Radha expressed her despair and longing for Krishna when he was away from her while engaged in amorous games with the cowherd maidens of Vrindavan. On the other hand, Chaitanya’s emotions stemmed from his feeling of being one with the Lord. The concept of Radha-Bhava-Dyuti denies Radha the status of an individual and transforms her into an abstract, a nomenclature for a specific feeling emotion when one is entirely subsumed by the aura of his subject of worship.

### **Narottam Das’ Kirtans**

Chaitanya identified himself with Radha, a subservient, ‘devoted’ worshipper of Krishna and not a lover in the anthropological understanding of the term. This can be substantiated by Radha’s depiction in Narottam Das’ series of Kirtans. Das’ depiction of Radha and Krishna undoubtedly has an alienating impact upon the readers precisely due to their disjunction from reality; it successfully impressed upon their minds that divine love is beyond any human attributes like passion and sexuality. Das writes in the voice of Radha: “Shyam<sup>1</sup> has many women friends besides me/ Yet, I cannot speak ill about him. / Why friend don’t you let me die/ I understand you are not saddened by my grief. /...I cannot spend a moment without Kanu/How should I spend all these days. /The most intense pain in my heart remains/ I cannot see him at my death.” These lines stand in sharp contrast with the despair of Radha in *Gitagovinda* where Radha expressed a mix of agony and anger while here in Narottam Das’ depiction of Radha’s despair, she is completely resigned; she is hurt yet she does not complain about her lover, she even contemplates death.

Chaitanya’s conceptualization of prembhakti necessitated certain justifications based on Vedantic philosophy. Krishna is known as Sachhidananda, a term that can be dissected into Satt-Chitt-Ananda. Radha is considered to be the hladini shakti of the Ananda fragment of Krishna. A part of the entirety she is the icon of bliss or ananda. Therefore, Radha is one significant block out of plenty that constructs the eponymous figure of the Supreme Lord, the signifier of the macrocosm. Interrogations regarding Krishna’s morality and Radha’s fidelity disturbed the Vaishnava followers. Graham M. Schweig comments on the problematics of projecting Krishna as a seductive lover and Radha, a married woman expressing her carnal desires for her beloved:

Indeed, it is his identity as the divine lover of the cowherd maidens from the village, including his divine consort Rādhā, that challenges the question of ethics. The Caitanya school considers the play of the amorous and erotic Kr̥ṣṇa with Rādhā and the other cowherd maidens, as the ultimate display of pure love between deity and devotee. At the same time though, Kr̥ṣṇa is understood as the originator of all religious and ethical principles (dharma). For some scholars, even

among specialists in the Caitanya tradition, it has been confounding how God, the source of dharma, can also be the amorous deity of Kṛṣṇa whose affairs with the Gopis appear unethical (2002, 421-444).

This dichotomy in Krishna's character is explained through the Bhagavata concept of Viswaroopa. In the *Bhagavata Gita*, the Viswaroopyoga precedes the Bhaktiyoga. Krishna being the Purna (complete) avatar of Vishnu, he is the all-encompassing Lord who has every aspect of the universe inherent within himself. The Viswaroopyoga explores this concept through Krishna's revelation of himself to Arjun at the Kurukshetra battlefield. And, Radha too is redeemed of her status of an infidel as she harbours in her heart the pure love which a true devotee has for her deity. Thus, a prominent rift is created between the devotion and passion and their attribution in relationships. The ideologies establish that they are opposing experiences and dwell in separate kinds of relationships that cannot be concocted into one.

### **Gaudiya Vaishnavism and Hagiography**

A philosophical division in the cult organised by the direct followers of Chaitanya ensued after his departure to Orissa to embrace the life of an ascetic; the Vrindavan circle and the Navadwip circle developed unique characteristics that separated one strain from the other. The Vrindavan circle or Brajamandala was better known as the Gauriya Vaishnava Sampradaya. Headed by the six Gosvamis selected by Chaitanya himself and entrusted with the duty of spreading Vishnavism in Vrindavan, this circle believed that Kṛṣṇa is the Upeya (aim) and he can be reached through the Upaya (path) who is Chaitanya. They associated with Chaitanya, in his ascetic phase and his concept of Radha-Bhava-Dyuti remained their inspiration. The Brajamandala referred to two kinds of songs as a part of the worship: kirtan and Raganuga as a part of their ritualistic performance. Kirtan was designated to the householders who practised Vaishnavism and was a part of Vaidhi Bhakti, a simpler form of the religion which did not involve the complexities of sainthood. Raganuga, related to the complex theory of the Rasa system, was for those who took holy orders and accepted sainthood. Most strikingly, the Brajamandala interpretation of Vaishnavism passively challenged the democratic fervour, the basis and purpose of the movement, through its introduction of the rule-book, *Hari Bhakti Vilasa* which reintroduced social stratification and the idea of diksha (Beck 2010, 585-598). The Navadwip circle or Gauramandala was more of a regional phenomenon that believed in Gauraparamyavada where Chaitanya was analogous to Vishnu, the Supreme Being and they deviated from mainstream Krishna worship. Hagiographic in nature, Gauraparamyavada denoted the worship of Chaitanya as the Lord, the human embodiment of the supreme cosmic force. Idols of Chaitanya were also installed by the Gauramandala. Raganuga held similar signification to them, however, no hierarchical system existed within this strain.

The hagiographic notions that developed in the Gauramandala rendered the Vaishnava concept of devotion a new dimension. His social contribution, his feisty involvement in organising a socio-religious movement and his inclusive, democratic views which made him accept the marginalised people of the caste-ridden society: the poor, uneducated, menial labourers and the women; contributed to the construction of Chaitanya's heroic image. Mesmerized by his abilities and the simple concepts of religious faith which he propounded



people deified Chaitanya whose aura gained prominence over religious philosophies (Sanyal 2012, 21). Critics were surprised noting that Chaitanya was the first to carve out his own idol. Hiteshranjan Sanyal records that Chaitanya carved out an image of himself and Nityananda on a block of neem wood and gave it to his follower, Gauridas as a parting memento while Chaitanya's wife, Vishnupriya formally initiated the worship of Chaitanya idols (Sanyal 2012, 66). Chaitanya hailed himself as the divine manifestation and his followers, convinced of his divine attribute, accepted him as their leader (Sanyal 2012, 30). He divided his followers into smaller units entrusting each group with a specific role in the performance of kirtan. They were known as Sampradaya and Chaitanya incepted the formation of sects though he was quite indifferent towards the formation of a well-defined, law-abiding organisation. The hagiographic principle paved its way into the composition and performance of kirtan evinced by 'Chaitanya-kirtan' and the 'Gaurachandrika' passages of Padabali-kirtan. The impetus of Chaitanya-kirtan was to validate and emphasise upon Chaitanya's divine affiliation. Narottam Das began his padabali with a long prayer dedicated to Chaitanya and the other Goswamis of Vrindavan: "Hail the feet of the Gosanchis (Goswamis)/ By their blessings I shall live my life./ Chant Hari (Kṛṣṇa) with joy, people of Vrindavan/ devoting your hearts to the feet of the Vaishnava saint-teacher.(Chaitanya)" (Vidyaratna 1953, 289). Das dedicated a considerable section of his padabali in Chaitanya's prayer and glorification: "One who treasures the two padas of Gauranga<sup>2</sup>, knows the redemptive power of Bhaktirasa/ One who hears the sweet lilas of Gauranga, his heart is purified." (Vidyaratna 1953, 295)

Organised by Narottam Das the Kheturi mahotsav was a congregation of the varied strain and sampradayas of Vaisnavism. At Kheturi,<sup>3</sup> Das introduced the distinct style of Leela kirtan that begins with a Gaurachandrika and narrates the childhood and the plays of Krishna in Vrindavan. It was at this time that Narottam Das installed and ordained six idols: five of Radha-Krishna and one of Vishnupriya-Chaitanya (Sanyal 2012, 42-45). There was a strong effort to equate Radha-Krishna to Vishnupriya-Chaitanya and to compare their significance. It is not unknown if the later Vaishnavas were always perturbed by the fact that Radha and Krishna were lovers and not a married couple. This was an attempt to confine them in the institution of marriage making the entire tale more comfortable and acceptable to their contemporary society. Narottam Das' primary objective was to attract more people towards the Vaishnava faith by placing Radha-Krishna and Vishnupriya-Chaitanya on the same level. Since, the common people who joined the Vaishnava cult were largely uneducated the facets of the faith explained through familiar human representatives posed higher affective economy upon them.

## Conclusion

A close analysis of Pada-kirtan implicitly defines how the suggestion related to the context of devotion changed gradually with time. Devotion being central to the Vaishnava theology, it is important to analyse the changing notions of it in order to interpret the philosophy on which Vaishnavism is based and the purpose of conceptualising it, both in the pre-Chaitanya and the post-Chaitanya era. Krishna has always been considered as the avatar of the Supreme Almighty on earth; therefore, his position remains unmoved. He is in fact the controller and designer of all the happenings in the universe and that justifies his worldly actions on earth, even the ones which seem apparently socially unacceptable. But, Radha has

had multiple associations over the ages and that has altered her connotation as a concept. Radha who had her inception in tantra and Shakta philosophy and was an equal participant in the Radha-Krishna love story, is reduced to a signified abstraction, a feeling of despair that she experienced in Krishna's absence. Her other feelings and emotions giving her a human identity under the over-arching canon of divinity are almost negated. There is a sense of minimalism in such portrayal and it is obviously in conformation with the socio-political and cultural facets of the contemporary society.

The tales of Radha-Krishna have been interesting irrespective of time, while the theme has been explored and exploited for religious necessities and literary pursuits. Vaishnavism as a religious faith exists all over India, and has attracted millions of followers abroad. The love of Radha-Krishna has appeared, not only in Pada-kirtan, but also as the subject of literary works and musical composition ever since Dhamail<sup>4</sup> songs, *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali*<sup>5</sup> and in a plenitude of popular songs of various genres, as a proof of the lasting lore of this eternal love story.

## Notes

1. Krishna is often addressed by other names such as Shyam and Kanu. According to Hindu mythology, Krishna has as many as one hundred and eight names.
2. Chaitanya is known by different names likes Gauranga and Nimai. His original name was Bishambar Mishra.
3. Kheturi Mahotsava was a religious festival organized by Narottam Das at Navadwip with an endeavour to unite the various sects and strains of Vaishnavism that developed after Chaitanya had shifted to Puri.
4. Originating in Sylhet, Dhamail is a kind of folk song performed at weddings. Dhamail includes dance and the playing of various percussion instruments. The songs were mostly composed by Radha Raman.
5. Inspired by the works of Chandidas, Rabindranath Tagore composed this series of Vaishnava lyrics. Published in the year 1884 it was the poet's first attempt at using the Brajabuli dialect; a blend of Bangla and Maithili which is unique to the composition of Vaishnava poems.

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