

## 6 The love of Viṣṇu

So far we have described the Sanskrit narrative traditions which developed in the north and focused on the religions of Viṣṇu reflected in that literature. Although it comes to have pan-Hindu appeal, the *Bhagavad Gītā* originated in the north, as did the cults of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa. However, there is a vast body of devotional literature, both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, from the south of India, composed in the Dravidian language of Tamil. While the Sanskrit material is important in understanding the development of theism in India, the Tamil literature had a deep effect upon that development and, in the south, its influence is equal to that of the Sanskrit material. The earliest Tamil literature developed before the onset of Sanskritization and so is originally quite distinct from Sanskrit literature. Sanskritization is the process whereby local or regional forms of culture and religion – local deities, rituals, literary genres – become identified with the ‘great tradition’ of Sanskrit literature and culture: namely the culture and religion of orthodox, Aryan, Brahmans, which accepts the Veda as revelation and, generally, adheres to *varṇāśrama-dharma*. Tamil began to be cultivated as a literary language around the third–fourth centuries BCE and a descriptive grammar of the early literary Tamil language, the *Tolkāppiyam*, was composed around 100 BCE by a Jain monk in southern Kerala, who seems to have been conversant with Sanskrit grammatical thinking.<sup>1</sup> From the first century CE to the first, and perhaps through to the sixth century CE, a tradition of bardic poetry developed which was gathered into a number of anthologies collectively known as the *Caṅkaṁ* literature.<sup>2</sup> Once established, Hindu Tamil culture thrived under the rule

of the Chola dynasty from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries CE and the Kaveri basin became as important in the development of Hinduism as the Chingle basin in the north.

The process of Sanskritization only began to significantly influence the north after the first few centuries CE and Tamil deities and forms of worship became adapted to northern Sanskrit forms. Yet, nevertheless, a thriving Tamil culture flourished and Tamilnadu became the central region for the development of Hinduism after the Muslim Mughals established their empire in the north. Enormous temple complexes, unsurpassed by any in the north, grew up at Cidambaram, Śīrangam, Madurai and Tanjavur. These became bastions of classical, orthodox Hindu doctrines and practices associated with brahmanical worship of the deities and with the cult of the deified king. In the process of Sanskritization, indigenous Tamil deities became identified and absorbed into Aryan, vedic deities. The Tamil deities Mudvalan and Tirumāl became identified with Śiva and Viṣṇu, Korravai the goddess of war with Durgā, and the important deity Murukan, with Śiva’s son, Skanda, the god of war.

### Tamil poetry and culture

Before the influence of Sanskrit or brahmanical culture, Tamil culture was itself very rich and any influences or cultural forms from the north were adapted and shaped by indigenous Tamil ways. With regard to devotional religion, there are two important factors which allowed its development in Tamil culture, namely Tamil poetry and the Tamil deity Murukan.

The earliest body of the Caṅkaṁ literature comprises two main groups, the ‘Eight Anthologies’ and the ‘Ten Songs’. These anthologies of bardic poetry have two central concerns: love and war. The class of love poetry is called *akam* (‘inside’ or ‘internal’), while the class of war or heroic poetry is called *puṇam* (‘outside’ or ‘external’). The class of love poetry is particularly significant for it classifies the inner emotions of love (*iri*) into five groups which correspond to five types of external landscape and their symbolic representations; correspondences which are furthermore identified with types of flower. These are love-making, which corresponds to a mountainous landscape, with the mountain flower that blooms every twelve years, symbolized by millet fields and waterfalls; waiting anxiously for the beloved, which corresponds to the seashore, symbolized by sharks and fishermen; separation, which corresponds to an arid landscape, with a desert flower, symbolized by vultures, starving elephants and robbers;

patiently waiting for a wife, which corresponds to a pastoral landscape, with the jasmine flower, symbolized by a bull, cowherd or the rainy season; and anger at a lover's infidelity, real or imagined, which corresponds to an agricultural, river-valley landscape, symbolized by a stork or heron.

The significance of this poetry is that we see within Tamil culture a strong tradition of emotional expression through verse and a pattern of stylized or culturally classified emotional states associated with love. This allows for the wholehearted adoption of *bhakti* and sets the scene for the poetry of emotional devotion so characteristic of Tamil religious literature, and for the development of an emotional *bhakti* which was to significantly influence northern Hindu culture. The Caṅkam poetry reflects an elite culture which propagated an ideology of a very this-worldly nature, depicting the ideal man living a married life, fighting, hunting and making love: a far cry from the ascetic ideal of the northern renouncer tradition. A lower level of society, which the Caṅkam literature hardly mentions, would comprise manual labourers, iron- and goldsmiths, carpenters, potters and farmers.<sup>3</sup>

Within this culture there was little idea of transcendence, as had been developed, for example, in the Upaniṣads. Rather, there is a concept of the divine or supernatural (*kaṭavul*) which can be manifested in possession states. A god mentioned in the Caṅkam anthologies is Murukan, a deity who is young, handsome and heroic, and who accepted blood sacrifice. He is a god of both war and of love. His cult may have been served by priestesses and the texts indicate a possession cult in which young women became possessed by the god and danced 'in a frenzy' (*veri aytal*).<sup>4</sup> Murukan later became identified with Śiva's son Skanda, the god of war, and absorbed into the Hindu pantheon. Yet his presence here shows, firstly, that this religion was far from the ascetic ideals of renunciation and world-transcendence propagated in the Upaniṣads and also by the renouncer traditions of Jainism and Buddhism, and, secondly, that the 'folk religion' which he seems to represent was important and had official, courtly sanction. Hardy makes the point that the cult of Murukan was not unlike folk religion in the north, and represented a 'very archaic and universally Indian form of popular religion of non-Aryan origin'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Parpola has argued that Murukan was a deity of the Indus valley civilization whose name is preserved in the Indus valley language.<sup>6</sup>

The possession cult of Murukan and a developed bardic tradition of love-poetry allowed for the easy absorption of a *bhakti* ideology from the

north and a transformation of it into a particularly Tamil form. Kṛṣṇa and the stories of Vṛndāvana begin to move south and infiltrate into the Caṅkam literature from as early as the third century CE. Kṛṣṇa becomes Māyōṅ and his mythical landscape of Mathura becomes translated into a Tamil landscape. The narrative traditions and cult of Kṛṣṇa become firmly rooted in the south, linking into patterns of culture already established. By the seventh century CE *bhakti*, as an intense, emotional love for a personal Lord, for both Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa and Śiva, embodied in a temple icon and expressed in narrative traditions, had developed in the south. This intense devotion was expressed in the poetry of the Vaiṣṇava Ālvārs and the Śaiva Nāyaṅārs, and was to influence later *bhakti* traditions both in the north and the south. Their songs are still recited in Tamil homes and in temples on public occasions such as weddings.

*Bhakti* traditions often reject institutionalized forms of religion, such as formal temple worship, yoga and theology, in favour of an immediate experience of the divine. Devotional forms of religion, particularly those which developed in the south during the early medieval period, tend to stress the devotee's emotional outpouring for his or her deity and the sense of losing the limited, self-referential ego in an experience of self-transcending love. This kind of devotional religion which emphasizes personal experience is often centred around a charismatic founder who is deified by the later tradition. The *bhakti* traditions which developed in the south, both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva, illustrate these general tendencies.

### The Ālvārs and the Tamil Veda

The Ālvārs, 'those immersed in god', are poet-saints, revered in Vaiṣṇava communities, who, between the sixth and ninth centuries, wandered from temple to temple in south India singing the praises of Viṣṇu. They helped to establish pilgrimage sites (particularly at the famous temple at Śrīraṅgam), to convert many people of all castes to the worship of Viṣṇu, and to help stem the growth of Buddhism and Jainism in the south. Tradition maintains that there were twelve Ālvārs,<sup>7</sup> the most famous of whom is Nammālvār and one of whom, Āṇṭāl, was a woman.<sup>8</sup> The Ālvārs came from the whole social spectrum of Tamil society. Nammālvār was from a low-caste farming family (*veḷḷāḷa*), while his disciple, Maṇṭrakavi, was a Brahman. Āṇṭāl was the daughter of a Brahman priest of the temple of Śrīvilliputtur, himself one of the Ālvārs. She came to be regarded as an incarnation of Viṣṇu's wife Śrī, and legend has it that she was absorbed into

Viṣṇu's icon in the famous Vaiṣṇava temple of Śrīraṅgam. The other Ālvārs were similarly regarded as incarnations of Viṣṇu or his deified regalia, the mace, conch, discus, *kaustubha* jewel, and ammonite stone (*śālagrāma*). The songs of the Ālvārs were collected in the tenth century by Nāthamuni, a theologian and a founding father of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community, in a collection known as the 'Four Thousand Divine Compositions' (*Nālāyira Divyaprabandham* or *Prabandham* for short). This collection proved to be very influential as a scriptural basis for the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas. It attracted a number of significant commentaries and had impact beyond the south in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism. Within this collection the most famous and influential text is the *Tiruvāymoli* of Nammālvār (c. 880–930), which contains 1,000 verses of songs to Viṣṇu – referred to by his Tamil name Māyōṇ ('the Dark One') – as both King and Lover, thereby reflecting the old Tamil poetic genres of *akam* and *puṇam*.

The *Tiruvāymoli* ('the ten decads') is regarded as equal to the Veda among Vaiṣṇavas and is called the 'Tamil Veda'. Indeed the Tamil tradition of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas is known as the 'Dual Vedanta' (*ubhaya vedānta*) because it reveres both the Sanskrit tradition from the Veda and the Tamil tradition of the Ālvārs. The Tamil Veda contains songs of emotional power, expressing the poet's devotion to Viṣṇu in many of the forms in which he is installed in the temples of Tamilnadu. These 'poems' were intended to be sung and so are more akin to bardic compositions than to the more formal Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*) of the court. In these poems Nammālvār conveys the idea of Viṣṇu's transcendence and formlessness and yet the Lord is also manifested in the form of icons in particular temples. The weeping, dancing and singing of the devotee, possessed by the god, is characteristic of emotional devotionalism, the devotion of longing (*vīrabha bhakti*), so characteristic of the Ālvārs and later devotees of Kṛṣṇa-Gopāla. This is a religion of longing, ecstasy and service to a personal Lord who is beyond the cosmos and yet present in the world in specific locations in the sacred geography of Tamilnadu. He is installed in temples and devotion to him must be seen in the context of temple worship (*pūjā*) to these specific forms. Indeed the forms of the Ālvārs themselves came to be treated as icons or manifestations of the Lord.

#### Later Vaiṣṇava traditions

The poetry and ecstatic *bhakti* of the Ālvārs influenced later traditions and was adopted by devotees in different regions and at various temples

throughout the land. The *Bhāgavata Purāna*, composed in Sanskrit in the south, was influenced by Tamil devotionalism, as was Sanskrit devotional poetry and northern forms of Vaiṣṇavism, particularly in Bengal. Devotionalism, especially in the south, emphasized the expression of emotions, rather than their control through yoga, and emphasized the body as a sacred locus of the Lord in the world, in contrast to the gnostic vision of the body and senses as the prison of the soul, expounded by some systems such as Sāṃkhya. The *bhakti* tradition placed emphasis on the body, the emotions and the embodied forms of the Lord which could be seen and worshipped, rather than on the idea of the soul's world-transcendence, cognition, and the abstract, transpersonal *brahman*. Some of the most fervent *bhakti* poetry was in Tamil, but there were also more philosophical texts in Sanskrit such as the *Bhakti Sūtra* of Śāṅḍilya (eighth century CE). Yet *bhakti* always retained an emotional dimension and placed emphasis on affective experience rather than cognitive understanding. The Nārada *Bhakti Sūtra* (possibly twelfth century) says that Kṛṣṇa should be worshipped in varying degrees of emotional attachment: from perception of the Lord's majestic glory to experiencing the various emotions associated with the roles of Kṛṣṇa's slave, his companion, his parent and finally his wife.<sup>9</sup>

The early medieval period saw the rise of regional kingdoms and the popularization of brahmanical ritual and mythology which sometimes came to be fused with regional and local traditions, and expressed in vernacular languages. A number of traditions developed in Vaiṣṇavism during the medieval period. Many of these traditions are associated with a particular individual saint as their founder, though most of the earlier ones, as Fuller has observed, probably evolved gradually over a long period. Claiming descent from a particular saint is, however, important in order to establish a pupillary succession and so validate the tradition's authenticity. These orders also needed to locate themselves in a wider social context and needed the support of the laity and, particularly, the patronage of the king.<sup>10</sup>

Within Vaiṣṇavism, four traditions or *sampradāyas* are highlighted, based respectively on the teachings of Rāmaṇuja (c. 1017–1137), the famous Śrī Vaiṣṇava theologian; Madhva (thirteenth century), the dualist theologian; Vallabha (1479–1531), the 'pure non-dualist'; and Nimbārka (twelfth century) who emphasizes total surrender to the guru. The historical reality of the development of Vaiṣṇavism is, however, more complex

than this. The most important order in the south, directly influenced by the Ālvārs, was that of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas. This in turn influenced devotion to Kṛṣṇa in Bengal, or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, and the cult of Viṭhobā or Viṭhala in Maharashtra, as well as the orders, just mentioned, founded by the Vaiṣṇava theologians and saints, Madhva, Nimbārka and Vallabha.

The term 'sect', 'order' or 'tradition' is a rough equivalent of the Sanskrit term *sampradāya*, which refers to a tradition focused on a deity, often regional in character, into which a disciple is initiated by a guru. Furthermore, each guru is seen to be within a line of gurus, a *santāna* or *paramparā*, originating with the founding father or possibly the deity. The idea of pupillary succession is extremely important in all forms of Hinduism as this authenticates the tradition and teachings; disputes over succession, which have sometimes been vehement, can be of deep religious concern, particularly in traditions which see the guru as the embodiment of the divine, possessing the power to bestow the Lord's grace on his devotees. With initiation (*dīkṣā*) into the *sampradāya* the disciple undertakes to abide by the values of the tradition and community, he or she receives a new name and a mantra particularly sacred to that tradition. A *sampradāya* might demand celibacy and comprise only world-renouncers, or it might have a much wider social base, accepting householders of both genders and, possibly, all castes including Untouchables.

These *sampradāyas* developed within the wider mainstream of brahmanical worship based on the Smṛti texts, especially the Purāṇas. Smārta worship (based on *smṛti*) was itself pervaded by forms and ideas derived from non-vedic revelation, the Tantras, but incorporated these forms in a respectable, vedic, way. Indeed the Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas* generally located themselves within the context of Smārta worship, particularly the Śrī Vaiṣṇava and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava traditions which are squarely in the vedic, puranic tradition, yet which nevertheless have absorbed many elements from the non-vedic Tantras.

A number of devotional attitudes to the personal absolute developed, often associated with different *sampradāyas*. The relationship between the disciple and the Lord could be one of servant to master, of parent to child, friend to friend, or lover to beloved. The Bengali Vaiṣṇavas, for example, regarded the attitude of the lover to the beloved as the highest expression of devotion, while the sect of Tukārām viewed the devotional relationship as one of servant to master. However, what is significant here is that the relationship between the devotee and the Lord is modelled on human rela-

tionships and that the Lord can be perceived and approached in a variety of ways: the love of God takes many forms.

While it is important to remember that there is a strong element of personal seeking and devotion within *bhakti* traditions, the forms that this devotion will take have been moulded by the devotee's place within the social hierarchy, that is by caste and gender. Even though at an ideological level most *bhakti* traditions have maintained that caste and gender are immaterial to devotion and final salvation, nevertheless some are more tolerant of non-discrimination on the grounds of caste and gender than others. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas, for example, while not excluding lower castes and women, restrict lower-caste access to their temple at Śrīraṅgam, while other sects such as the Raidāsīs are themselves low-caste. The most important Vaiṣṇava orders and cults are:

- the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas located in Tamilnadu whose centre is the temple at Śrīraṅgam, for whom the theology of Rāmānuja is particularly important.
- the Gauḍīya or Bengali Vaiṣṇavas located mainly in Bengal, Orissa and Vṛndāvana. They revere the teachings of the Bengali saint, Caitanya, and focus their devotion on Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.
- the cult of Viṭhoba in Maharashtra, particularly in the pilgrimage centre of Pandharpur. Their teachings are derived from the saints (*sant*) Jñāneśvara, Nāṁdev, Janābai etc.
- the cult of Rāma located mainly in the north-east at Ayodhya and Janakpur and associated with an annual festival of Rāmlīlā in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* is performed. The ascetic Rāmānandī order is devoted to Rāma and Sītā.
- the northern Sant tradition; while not being strictly Vaiṣṇava, worshipping a transcendent Lord beyond qualities, this tradition nevertheless derives much of its teachings and names of God from Vaiṣṇavism. Especially venerated are Kabīr and Nānak, the founder of Sikhism.

#### THE ŚRĪ VAIṢṆAVA TRADITION

The Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition, which developed in Tamilnadu, inherited a dual vision of the universe: on the one hand, the northern Sanskrit tradition of the Pāncarātra and puranic worship of Viṣṇu, with its emphasis on the Lord as the transcendent cause and sustaining power of the cosmos,

and, on the other, the southern Tamil tradition of longing devotion to a personal Lord installed within specific temple icons. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas therefore revered sacred scriptures in Sanskrit, both the Vedas and the Pāñcarātra Āgamas or Saṃhitās, and the Tamil songs of the Ālvārs. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas also revered a line of teachers (*ācārya*) who functioned as theologians and interpreters of the tradition and as hierarchs of the order. The first of these *ācāryas*, and the founder of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas, was Nāthamuni (tenth century CE) who collected the songs of the Ālvārs in his *Prabandham*. While his emotional and aesthetic inspiration came from the Tamil poet-saints, Nāthamuni's main intellectual inheritance was the Sanskrit philosophical tradition, particularly the Vedānta, and theologies of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the Pāñcarātra Āgamas. He is attributed with founding the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition and legitimated the tradition by establishing a lineage with the Tamil Ālvārs. Nāthamuni is said to have gone on pilgrimage to Vṛndāvana in the north, the Vaiṣṇava religious centre and mythological home of Kṛṣṇa, where he received a vision of Viṣṇu in the form Maṅgaṇār, the icon in his local temple in Tamilnadu. In the vision the god told him to return to his home town. He did so and became an administrator, firstly in the temple of Maṅgaṇār and later in the Viṣṇu temple at Śriraiṅgam which became the centre of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community. Nāthamuni's grandson, Yāmuna, became the next Śrī Vaiṣṇava *ācārya*, noted for his defence of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas as having revelatory status and of the Pāñcarātra ritual as being equal to orthodox brahmanical rites.<sup>11</sup>

The most famous Śrī Vaiṣṇava leader, whose influence was to extend throughout Hinduism, was Rāmānuja (c. 1017–1137). He did not directly meet Yāmuna, but became the recognized leader of the community, developing a Vaiṣṇava theology and interpretation of the Vedānta tradition in the light of his theism, which became known as 'qualified non-dualism' (*viśiṣṭādvaita*; see p. 243). Rāmānuja wrote in Sanskrit, but he was influenced by the *bhakti* poetry of the Ālvārs. His favoured disciple, Pīḷāṅ, wrote a commentary on Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoli* in a language which was a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil, *manipravāla*, thereby elevating the status of the Tamil text, the first text in a Dravidian language to have commentary written on it. Pīḷāṅ, who was a Sūdra, implies here that caste is not an impediment to salvation.<sup>12</sup>

Salvation or liberation for the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas was conceived as transcending the cycle of reincarnation (*samsāra*) and karma and going to Viṣṇu's

heaven (*vaikuntḥa*) at death, where the soul is united with the Lord in a loving relationship, while yet maintaining its distinction. This state is achieved through attachment to the Lord and detachment from the world, or, more specifically, through the religious practice (*upāsana*) of devotion and service (*seva*) to the Lord in one of his incarnations in temple icons (*arcāvātāra*). There is also a path of total surrender (*prapatti*) in which the devotee gives himself up to the Lord who saves him through an act of unmerited divine grace (*śaraṅagāti*). In the former there is some emphasis on effort and human agency, in the latter the emphasis is entirely on the grace and agency of the Lord.

About 200 years after Rāmānuja's death, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community had split into sub-sects called the 'northern culture' (*vaiṭṭakalai*) and the 'southern culture' (*tenkalai*). The *vaiṭṭakalai* emphasized the Sanskrit scriptures and salvation through traditional *bhakti-yoga*, that is devotion to the temple icon, while the *tenkalai* emphasized the Tamil scriptures and surrender to the Lord by his grace. These two theologies became known as the 'monkey' and 'cat' schools respectively. In the 'monkey' school, salvation is achieved by both effort and grace; the devotee clings to God through his effort, while the Lord saves him, as a baby monkey clings to its mother as she moves through the trees. The 'cat' school, on the other hand, emphasized the grace of the Lord, claiming that the devotee is saved only through grace, as a mother cat picks up her young and carries them without any effort on their part. This distinction is brought out in two understandings of a passage in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (18.66), the famous *carama-śloka*, which reads 'Abandoning all laws seek shelter in me alone. I will save you from all sins. Do not fear.' The *tenkalai* understood this passage to mean that there were two distinct paths, traditional *bhakti-yoga* and the esoteric, superior, path of surrender (*prapatti*). On the other hand, the *vaiṭṭakalai* theologian, Vedāntadeśika (1269–1307), maintained that the verse referred to two groups of people, those who are twice-born and liberated through the performance of ritual devotion and those of lower castes who cannot perform ritual devotion in the temples, and so are liberated through surrender.<sup>13</sup>

The Śrī Vaiṣṇava community, consisting of Brahmins and non-Brahmins, existed within the wider social context of Brahmins who adhered to the puranic worship of Viṣṇu and other deities, namely the Smārtas, and non-Brahman castes who worshipped and became possessed by local village deities. The Śrī Vaiṣṇavas encompass high-caste levels of

Sanskrit learning and theological tradition, while at the same time having a wide popular appeal even amongst lower castes. Yet while the devotionalism of the Ālvārs had been ecstatic, the devotion of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas was controlled, occurring in the context of formal temple ritual. This ecstatic dimension in *bhakti* traditions did not, however, die out with the Ālvārs but developed in northern Vaiṣṇavism, particularly in Bengal.

#### GAUḌĪYA VAIṢṆAVISM

Devotional traditions focused on Kṛṣṇa the Cowherd developed in northern India, and found articulation in Sanskrit devotional and poetic literature as well as in more popular devotional movements, particularly around Vṛndāvana and in Bengal. The form of Vaiṣṇavism which grew in Bengal (Gauḍīya) developed a theology which laid great emphasis on devotion and the love relationship between the devotee and Kṛṣṇa. Although in Śaivism a direct correspondence between the devotee and Kṛṣṇa, the aesthetic had been perceived, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition developed a theology in which the categories of aesthetic experience, described in classical poetry (*kāvya*), came to be applied to devotional religious experience. By the early medieval period, there was a thriving tradition of courtly love poetry in Sanskrit, a poetry which was ornate and baroque, expressing prescribed emotions in a particular form. In the court of the Bengali King Lakṣmaṇasena (c. 1179-1209), Jayadeva, a poet under his patronage, composed a famous poem, the *Gītāgovinda*, about the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā his mistress.<sup>14</sup> Jayadeva is a high-class poet in the classical *kāvya* tradition, who used the formal conventions of *kāvya* – the prescribed vocabulary, the ornamental language and the stock metaphors – to express the love of Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa and, by implication, of the devotee for Kṛṣṇa. As with courtly poetry generally, the theme of the poem is the union, separation and reunion of the lovers. While the theme of the poem is the forest for their love-play, the lovers yet know that with the dawn they must be separated, a fact which causes great longing (*viraha*) until their next meeting. This tradition of poetry focused on the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā continued, particularly with the Bengali poetry of Caṇḍīdāsa and the Mathili verses of Vidyāpati (fourteenth/fifteenth century).<sup>15</sup> Their poetry, written from the point of view of Rādhā, expressed her deep emotional longing for Kṛṣṇa, as the devotee longs for the Lord. Caṇḍīdāsa beautifully expresses the essential longing, characteristic of *bhakti*, when he describes Rādhā hearing the sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute. He writes:

#### The love of Viṣṇu

Let us not talk of that fatal flute.  
It calls a woman away from her home  
and drags her by the hair to that Shyam [i.e. Kṛṣṇa].  
A devoted wife forgets her spouse  
To be drawn like a deer, thirsty and lost.  
Even the wisest ascetics lose their minds  
And the plants and trees delight in its sound.  
What then can a helpless, innocent girl do?<sup>16</sup>

However, the figure who did most to promote Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* was Kṛṣṇacaitanya or simply Caitanya (1486-1533), who is regarded as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in one body. He generated a tradition which continues to this day, and in the West is manifested as the Hare Kṛṣṇa movement. Caitanya was brought up in a Vaiṣṇava Brahman family where he had a conventional Sanskrit education. In 1508 he went to Gaya to perform a memorial rite for his deceased father. There he had a conversion experience induced by a south Indian renouncer who initiated him into the worship of Kṛṣṇa. He returned to his home town of Navadvīpa (Nabadwip) in Bengal where he began to worship Kṛṣṇa with a group of devotees by singing or chanting his praises. He began to experience ecstatic or possessed states of consciousness. In 1510 Caitanya took formal vows of renunciation and moved to the pilgrimage town of Puri in Orissa where Kṛṣṇa is worshipped as Lord Jagannātha in the famous temple. Each year, during his annual festival, the Lord Jagannātha is paraded out of the temple in a huge processional carriage. Caitanya and his followers would accompany the carriage, dancing and singing the Lord's praise. Caitanya spent the remainder of his life at Puri, worshipping Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and frequently going into ecstatic states.<sup>17</sup>

Although Caitanya was not the founder of an order in a formal sense, by writing a commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra*, he nevertheless firmly established Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and determined its style and flavour. The central focus of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava devotion is the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, a love which is strongly erotic, though with an eroticism which is regarded as transcendent and not worldly. The eroticism of Gauḍīya devotion is perhaps not dissimilar to the 'bride-mysticism' (*brautmystiké*) of Christian mystical theology. Indeed, liberation for the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas is the constant, ecstatic experience of the divine love-play (*līlā*) between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in a spiritual or perfected body. This erotic love and attraction between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is 'pure love' (*prema*) as opposed

to an impure worldly love pervaded by selfish desire (*kāma*).<sup>18</sup> Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Lord (not simply an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu) who creates, maintains and destroys the cosmos over and over again. Rādhā is Kṛṣṇa's 'refreshing power' through which the cosmos is manifested, and although they are united, they are yet distinct. Indeed the relationship between the Lord as the 'holder of power' (*śaktimat*) and Rādhā as his power (*śakti*), and between the devotee and the Lord, is characterized as 'inconceivable difference-in-identity' (*acintya-bhedaḥbhedā*).

This relationship is manifested in the world in the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and an erotic devotional theology was developed by six of Caitanya's disciples, known as the Gosvāmīs, focused on this relationship. This theology may have been influenced by a tantric Vaiṣṇava sect, the Sahajiyas, who maintained that ritual sexual union could overcome duality and reflect the divine union of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, a tradition which developed into the low-caste, antinomian and ecstatic Bauls.<sup>19</sup> The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, however, rejects these practices as a misunderstanding of a profound spirituality. The works of the Gosvāmīs are, indeed, highly orthodox in the sense that they accept the authority of the Veda, but they include within the category of revelation the Purāṇas, especially the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Although much of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* contains reference to Kṛṣṇa's love-play with the *gopīs*, it does not mention by name Rādhā who only appears with the *Gītāgovinda* and in later literature and visual art. In Vaiṣṇava mythology, she is an older married woman and the love between her and Kṛṣṇa is conventionally adulterous. Rādhā leaves a shadow of herself by her husband's side and goes out at night, pulled by the sound of Kṛṣṇa's flute, to meet him. This is theologically important and relates to a distinction in Sanskrit poetics between love-in-union (*svakīyā*, 'one's own woman') associated with marriage, and love-in-separation (*parakīyā*, 'another's woman') associated with adulterous love. The former is characterized by lust (*kāma*) and union, the latter by pure love (*prema*) and longing (*viraha*). In loving Kṛṣṇa, Rādhā disobeys wifely duty (*strīdharmā*) (see p. 65), for the love of God transcends social obligation. The love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is love-in-separation characterized by longing – as the soul's longing for the Lord is the highest human spirituality.

Rūpagosvāmī wrote two important texts in Sanskrit on Kṛṣṇa devotion, the *Ujjwala-nīlamanī* ('The Splendid Blue Jewel') and the *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* ('The Ocean of the Immortal Nectar of Devotion'<sup>20</sup>).

Here aesthetic categories which had been developed in Sanskrit poetics were applied to different kinds of devotional emotion and experience. According to Sanskrit poetics, emotion (*bhāva*) can be transformed into aesthetic experience (*rasa*): for example, grief can be transformed into the experience of tragedy, humour into comedy, and sexual desire into the experience of the erotic. Similarly, sexual desire can be transformed into erotic or 'sweet' love (*śṛṅgāra*- or *madbhūra-bhakti*) for Kṛṣṇa: the sublimation of human sexual love into divine, or transcendent, erotic love. This passionate all-consuming love for Kṛṣṇa is called, by Rūpagosvāmī, *rāgānuga-bhakti*, in contrast to devotion in which the devotee follows rules and injunctions (*vidhi*) laid down in scripture, called *vaidhi-bhakti*. In *rāgānuga-bhakti* Kṛṣṇa can be as close and intimate with the devotee as a lover, whereas in *vaidhi-bhakti* Kṛṣṇa is perceived as a powerful and majestic king. Both paths lead to salvation, though passionate devotion is higher than the more formal approach and leads directly to Kṛṣṇa.

The main practices of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas to achieve their soteriological goals were the ritual practices of repeating the names of Kṛṣṇa (*nāma japa*), singing hymns (*kīrtana*), worship of temple icons or the *tulasī* plant sacred to Viṣṇu, and, on the path of *rāgānuga-bhakti*, visualizing Kṛṣṇa's acts, particularly the love-play of Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs* (*līlā smaraṇa*). After initiation the Kṛṣṇa devotee would perform worship in the morning, afternoon and evening. This would involve repetition of Kṛṣṇa's names, such as the famous Hare Kṛṣṇa mantra – *hare kṛṣṇa, hare kṛṣṇa, kṛṣṇa kṛṣṇa, hare hare, hare rāma, rāma rāma, hare hare* – followed by libations for the ancestors and making offerings.<sup>21</sup> The name of the deity embodies his essence, so by repeating it the devotee is invoking his presence. At death the devotee will serve Kṛṣṇa in a perfected spiritual body (*siddha-deha*) in one of the Lord's spiritual abodes.<sup>22</sup>

#### OTHER KṚṢṆA SECTS

Other Vaiṣṇava *sampradāyas* similarly maintained an element of erotic mysticism. Vallabha (1479–1531) founded a tradition centred on the worship of Kṛṣṇa the Cowherd after receiving a vision of Kṛṣṇa. He wrote commentaries on the *Brahma Sūtra* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and constructed a theology which is a fusion of monistic and devotional ideas, calling his way the 'path of grace' (*puṣṭimārga*) and his doctrine 'pure non-dualism' (*suddhādvaita*). Vallabha identifies Kṛṣṇa with the absolute (*brahman*) and maintains that the world is not illusory (*māyā*) but is real

and is identified with Kṛṣṇa. Liberation occurs, with Kṛṣṇa's grace, through following a path comprising a series of stages until the devotee, as in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, becomes part of his play (*līlā*), though unlike Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism the Puṣṭi Mārga is non-renunciatory, comprising only householders. While maintaining an erotic dimension, the main focus of Puṣṭi Mārga devotion is on Kṛṣṇa as a child and the devotee as the parent. The Puṣṭi Mārga is particularly large in western India, its main temple being at Nathdvāra in Rajasthan.<sup>23</sup> An important order developed from the Puṣṭi Mārga in the nineteenth century, the Swaminarayan movement, whose followers take refuge in the sect's founder Swaminarayan, rather than in Kṛṣṇa.<sup>24</sup>

Several other orders focus their attention on the erotic pastimes of Kṛṣṇa. The Rādhāvallābhīs founded by Hariyaṁśa (1585) concentrate their worship on Rādhā, while an offshoot, the male sect of the Sākhi Bhāvas, who still exist, dress in women's clothing and adopt female mannerisms in order to emulate the *gopīs*. Lastly, the Viṣṇuśāmis should be mentioned, founded in the twelfth century, famous for a Sanskrit text by one of their devotees, Bilvamaṅgala: the *Kṛṣṇakārmāmṛta* ('The Nectar of the Acts of Kṛṣṇa').<sup>25</sup>

#### THE CULT OF VIṬHOBĀ

Vaiṣṇava devotionalism spread northwards and local deities, associated with the great Hindu gods, became the focus of devotional movements. In Maharashtra, situated by the eastern seaboard within the northern Sanskrit cultural sphere yet strongly influenced by the Dravidian, were a number of Vaiṣṇava devotional movements which can broadly be described as Sant traditions. The term *sant* means 'good man' and refers to saints from all castes who lived between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. They taught a path to liberation through devotion to the Lord's name (*nām*), devotion to one's guru, and the devotional meetings or *satsaṅg* ('the community in truth'). The Vaiṣṇava Sants taught devotion to the Lord as a personal being installed in temples, with qualities (*śaṅga*), though another Sant tradition based in the Punjab, from which Sikhism developed, taught devotion to an abstract Lord beyond qualities (*nirguṇa*).

In Maharashtra, within the general Sant category, several devotional traditions were established. The Mahānubhāva Sampradāya, founded by Chakradhār Swami in the thirteenth century, worshipped only Kṛṣṇa,

while the most important sect, the Vārkarī Panth ('The Pilgrims' path'), was centred on the worship of Viṭhobā whose main temple, the focus of an important pilgrimage, is at Pandharpur in southern Maharashtra. A devotional literature in Marathi, a Sanskrit language, developed in the writings of a number of Marathi saints, notably Jñāneśvara (thirteenth century), Nāmdev (c. 1270–1350), Tukārām (c. 1568–1650), Janābai, Eknāth (c. 1533–99) and Rāmdas (1608–81), all except Rāmdas belonging to the Vārkarī tradition.<sup>26</sup> By the seventeenth century the Vārkarīs were the most important sect in Maharashtra and the famous King Śivaji, the scourge of the Mughal Aurangzeb, is said to have met Tukārām and been initiated by Rāmdas.

Jñāneśvara is sometimes considered to be the founder of the Vārkarī Panth, though worship of Viṭhobā predates him. He wrote a Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the *Jñāneśvari*,<sup>27</sup> which shows influences of – apart from Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* – Advaita Vedānta and the Nāths (see p. 98). His text extols devotion to the Lord and to his guru who, says Jñāneśvara, rescued him from the ocean of worldly existence. For Jñāneśvara liberation is merging with the Lord, though the individual devotee can never comprehend his immensity. Nāmdev is not only revered as a saint in Maharashtra but in the Punjab as well, and some of his verses have found their way into the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the *Ādi Granth*. Tukārām is perhaps the most revered saint in Maharashtra, who stressed the love of the Lord as the path to liberation and the necessity of the dualism between the devotee and the Lord in order for love to develop. As with many other Sants, Tukārām advocated singing the Lord's praise and a meditational devotionalism in which one attains liberation by sitting in meditation and repeating the Lord's name (*nām*) – a teaching which is common to the Sant traditions of the north as well. In contrast to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, erotic imagery is not used by the Maharashtra Sants and the pure devotion (*prema-bhakti*) which they advocate represents the Lord as a loving parent rather than a lover.

While for highly orthodox Smārta Hindus, low castes and women are excluded from spiritual liberation and forms of worship, for the Maharashtra Sants caste and gender are not obstacles. Although Jñāneśvara was a Brahman, many other Maharashtra Sants were low-caste: Nāmdev was a tailor and Tukārām was a Śūdra. There were also a number of women saints in the Vārkarī tradition, though generally the images of women in the poetry of Eknāth and Tukārām are negative,

presenting woman as the temptress and distractor from the male's path of detachment from the world. Notable women Sants are Jñāneśvara's sister Muktabai, who was an initiate of Nāth Yoga, and Janabai, the maid-servant of Nāmdev, whose verses to Viṭhobā sometimes address him as a woman, Viṭhabai.

That Janabai could address Viṭhobā as a woman demonstrates the ambiguity of the god. While he is generally male, he is sometimes female and referred to as a mother. While he is generally associated with Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, he is sometimes associated with Śiva, thereby blurring the distinction between Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva. Indeed the cult of Viṭhobā goes beyond sectarian divisions and the two pilgrimages each year to his temple at Pandharpur attract a wide cross-section of the community. Up to 6,000 people are attracted to the more important of the pilgrimages during *aśādha* (June–July), though caste divisions during the pilgrimage are not entirely eradicated.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE SANT TRADITION

While the Vaiṣṇava Sant tradition developed in Maharashtra, focused on devotion to a *saguna* form of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, further north, and especially in the Punjab, another Sant tradition developed which advocated devotion to a *nirguna* Lord as the ineffable absolute without shape or form, the source and support of the cosmos, by whose grace beings are liberated from the cycle of birth and death. This northern Sant tradition drew on Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, Sufism and Nāth Yoga, whose terminologies can be found within Sant literature, but rejected external ritual, emphasizing, rather, the personal experience of a transcendent Lord, beyond form. Like the Maharashtra Sants, these northern Sants composed devotional songs in vernacular languages, namely forms of Hindi and Punjabi. Among the most famous Sants are Kabīr, Nānak, Mīrābāi, Raidās and Dādu. Many of these were low-caste, such as Raidās who was an untouchable leather-worker (*chamār*)<sup>29</sup> and Kabīr who was a weaver.<sup>30</sup> However, not all were of low status: Nānak was a 'warrior' (*khatrī*) and Mīrābāi a princess. Some of the Sants spawned traditions which continue to the present, most notable, of course, being Sikhism from Guru Nānak, but there are also Raidāsī, Dādūpanthī and Kabīrpanthī.

The teachings of the Sants are preserved in collections of poetry in their respective languages and in the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the *Ādi Granth*. The songs of these Sants would have circulated around north

India during the sixteenth century, being sung at various temples by wandering bards, as would probably have happened in the south with the songs of the Ālvārs and Nāyāṅgārs. The most popular and influential of the Sants was Kabīr. Kabīr (1398–1448) was born into a weaver family in Benares who had converted to Islam one or two generations prior to his birth. Tradition maintains that his guru was the Vaiṣṇava Rāmānanda, who was in the Rāmānuja lineage, though if Rāmānanda was born in 1299, as one text suggests, it is highly unlikely that Kabīr, born almost 100 years later, could have met him. He was influenced by Nāmdev and by the poetry of the Śaiva woman saint, Lallā (fourteenth century). Kabīr's poetry is quite distinctive. One of its striking features is his use of stark images in 'upside-down language' (*ulāvāmsī*), such as 'the cow is sucking at the calf's teat', used to shock his audience out of complacency and to convey the idea that the Lord is ineffable and beyond everyday logic. He is critical of caste, maintaining that it is irrelevant to liberation, and highly critical of Hindu and Muslim religious practices and doctrines current at his time. He writes: 'The Hindu says Ram is the beloved, the Turk says Rahim. Then they kill each other.'<sup>31</sup>

While there are, of course, individual differences between the northern Sants, there are common themes in their teachings. The soul is trapped in the world governed by Death or Time (*kāl*) and illusion (*māyā*), and must return to the Lord through the meditative devotion of repeating his name (*nām simran*) and by the grace of the guru. Through this repetition the soul will perceive the light of God, hear the divine 'unstruck sound' (*anāhata śabda*) of the Lord, and rise up through the hierarchical cosmos, back to its true abode (*sach-khand*). The names for the Lord used by the Sants are generally Vaiṣṇava, such as Rām, Mādhav, Kṛṣṇa and Hari, though sometimes the more Śaiva names of Nātha or Umāpati might be used and even the term Allah is sometimes referred to.

#### THE CULT OF RĀMA

While the term Rām is used by the Sants to refer to the transcendent Lord, in the Rāma cults the term refers to the Lord as he was incarnated in King Rāma, the hero of the *Rāmāyana*, king of Ayodhya. Devotion to Rāma, as well as his monkey commander Hanumān, became widespread in northern India during the medieval period. Centres of Rāma worship are found in Janakpur, the legendary birthplace of Sītā, and Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, Rāma's legendary birthplace and capital of his kingdom. Indeed

