

Defiled and deified

Profane and sacred bodies in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology

It is well known that there is no dearth of stereotypes when it comes to religion and the body. Christianity is a body-negative religion, Judaism is body-positive, ascetic practices automatically lead to a negative view of the body, and Eastern religions are more positive towards the body than Christianity. Such truisms are of little value. Still, they are voiced often enough to warrant occasional replies. In this little article, I will highlight one instance, from within the Hindu tradition, that offers an interesting take on how the conception of the body may vary greatly within one and the same religious tradition.

Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, also known as Bengali or Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, is the devotional movement of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti begun by Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya (1486–1533) in Bengal, India. Śrī Caitanya left next to no written legacy himself, but the so-called Six Gosvāmins, primarily Bengali ascetics who had migrated to Vrindavan in North India on the order of their master, made up for this by creating a voluminous corpus of erudite Sanskrit texts, which eventually came to form the unifying canon of literature for all of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. Their student was Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, and it is on his work that I will focus here (for some general introductions to Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, see, e.g. Chakrabarty 1985, De 1981 or Eidlitz 1968).

Kṛṣṇadāsa (ca 1528–1617) was a Bengali *vaidya* by birth, stemming from Jhamatpur near Naihati in Burdwan, West Bengal (for a comprehensive account of his life, see Dimock 1999: 26–37). He moved to Vrindavan as a young man, where he eventually received the title of ‘Kavirāja’ or ‘king of poets’ for his extensive and ‘aesthetically sophisticated’ (Stewart 2010) *Govinda-līlāmṛta*, a poetic description of a day in the eternal life of the dual deity of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Towards the end of his life, he was commissioned to write a work on Caitanya’s biography that would focus on the latter part of his life, to remedy this lack of the earlier (ca 1540) and immensely popular *Caitanya-bhāgavat* of Vṛndāvana Dāsa (for a short study of this work, see Śāstrī 1992).

Kṛṣṇadāsa fulfilled this task by writing the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. Unlike the texts of the Gosvāmins and his own earlier books, this one is in Bengali. It was probably finished around 1615. Only slightly smaller than the *Caitanya-bhāgavat*, the text consists of almost 24 000 lines; mostly simple *payar* couplets, but also numerous passages in *tripadi*-verse. In addition, the book contains over a thousand Sanskrit verses, quoted from an impressive range of religious, philosophical and aesthetic sources. The literary merits of the work are disputed (cf. De 1981: 52–3 and Sen 1992: 91–2), but its theological merits are clear. Through the life of Caitanya, Kṛṣṇadāsa popularised the teachings of the Gosvāmins in Bengali, presenting inclusive doctrines that made it possible to unite all the earlier, contending theological ideas of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism.

Standing as it does at the centre of Caitanya Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy, while at the same time being influenced by popular Bengali notions, it is natural to use Kṛṣṇadāsa's work as an entrance into the theology of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism. What, then, does Kṛṣṇadāsa have to say about the body?

It has often been argued (e.g. Doniger 1999: 170) that the basic Brahmanic ethos of the body is an obsessive preoccupation with regulating matter entering and leaving it. 'This terribly dirty body leaks both day and night from nine holes,' states Dakṣa's law (2.7). All bodily fluids must thus be vigilantly controlled, and bodily orifices carefully kept clean. Such statements can also be found in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava texts on ritual and *sadācāra*, correct behaviour (Bhaṭṭa 1986: *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa* 3).

Some parts of the body are considered inherently unclean, as for example the feet. Kṛṣṇadāsa offers an example of this in his *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*. A devotee is admiringly said to have discarded a whole batch of valuable, special coconuts because his servant touched them with the same hand that he had just previously touched the ceiling above a door with. 'People are always coming and going through that door, and the dust from their feet blows up and touches the ceiling. You touched the ceiling, and then the coconuts, so now they are contaminated and unfit to be offered to Kṛṣṇa.' (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.15.69–82.) What has happened here, then, is that the servant's impure body has come in the way of service to Kṛṣṇa.

Still, in the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Kṛṣṇadāsa focuses on another kind of body, as illustrated in the following story.

Sanātana Gosvāmin decides to visit Śrī Caitanya in Puri, Orissa. On the way from Vṛndāvana, he drinks bad water and contracts a disease, which gives him itching, weeping sores. He decides to end his sufferings by means of a ritual suicide, throwing himself under Jagannātha's chariot; the 'juggernaut'

that so captured the British colonial imagination. When Caitanya first meets Sanātana in Puri, he wants to give him a hug, but Sanātana declines, both because of considering himself fallen from his Brahmin status and because of his oozing sores. Caitanya then forcefully embraces him. Later, Caitanya confronts Sanātana with his desire to commit suicide, and forbids him to do so, both because it will not help him to attain love of Kṛṣṇa—the ultimate goal of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism—but also because, and I quote,

You have surrendered unto me, so your body is my personal property. Why should you want to destroy another’s belongings? Have you no regard for right and wrong? Your body is my principal instrument—through this body I shall carry out many tasks. (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 3.4.76–8.)

During later encounters, Caitanya keeps embracing Sanātana despite his oozing sores, and this gives Sanātana no peace of mind. The next time the two meet, Caitanya again forcefully embraces Sanātana, who now speaks up.

I came here for my benefit, but what I am getting is the opposite. I am not capable of service, but rather commit offences day after day. By nature I am low-born, wicked and a reservoir of sin. If you touch me, that will be an offence on my part. Further, blood and pus oozes from my body, but still you touch me by force, so that all of this smears your body. You have not the slightest aversion to touching me, but this my offence will ruin everything. Because of this, nothing good can come from my staying here. (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 3.4.151–5.)

Caitanya replies:

You consider your body disgusting, but to me your body appears just like nectar. Your body is spiritual, never material, but you think of it from a material viewpoint. And even if it were material, you should not neglect it, for matter should never be considered good or bad. . . . The body of a Vaiṣṇava is never material. The devotee’s body is made of *cid-ānanda*, wisdom and bliss. At initiation, the devotee surrenders his self, and at that time, Kṛṣṇa makes him the same as himself. In this spiritual body of *cid-ānanda*, he then worships Kṛṣṇa’s feet. (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 3.4.172–4, 191–3.)

Caitanya then again embraces Sanātana, whose body is immediately healed of its sores, and shines like gold.

In other words, everyone has an ordinary material body, which is neither good nor bad from the perspective of Kṛṣṇa-bhakti, but when someone becomes an initiated devotee of Kṛṣṇa, his or her body is mysteriously transformed into a spiritual body, even though ignorant people may not see the difference. It is with this practitioner's body (*sādhaka-deha*), then, that the practitioner worships Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. This corresponds with the well-known Hindu adage 'only Śiva can worship Śiva'—in order to be able to interact with the divine, the devotee first has to become divine him or herself (see e.g. Flood 2006: 108–16).

However, for Kṛṣṇadāsa, there is a third body still. While serving Kṛṣṇa with the body by means of the standard rituals of bhakti, such as hearing and chanting, the devotee internally, within his or her mind, worships Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in their eternal, heavenly Vṛndāvana. This mental, visualized body is called the divine body (*divya-deha*), or the body of the perfected one (*siddha-deha*) and is attained when the practitioner takes up the mood (*bhāva*) of one of Rādhā's and Kṛṣṇa's eternal servitors in divine Vṛndāvana (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.8.222, 2.24.134).

Now, this divine Vṛndāvana is described in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava works in great detail. What will strike the reader first is how earthly everything seems. Rustic while at the same time extremely luxurious and opulent, it is something like the idealized romantic garden of Marie Antoinette, but at least on the surface, there is nothing otherworldly about this divine abode. So it is with the players in this drama: Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa and their friends, relatives and attendants are described in painstaking detail. Kṛṣṇadāsa's *Govinda-līlāmṛta* (11) contains a description of Rādhā's beauty, running up to almost 150 verses, and that describes her body literally from top to toe. The bodies of the divine couple's attendants—and thus the mentally visualized bodies of their earthly devotees—are similarly described. The feet of such bodies are not only clean, they are fit to be worshipped.

Where, then, lies the perfection of these bodies? In contrast to classic Hindu descriptions of the bodies of the gods, the bodies of the residents of divine Vṛndāvana do touch the ground and perspire, they even bathe, sleep and eat—Kṛṣṇadāsa includes long, mouth-watering descriptions of feasts in both of his major works (e.g. *Govinda-līlāmṛta* 4.23–63; *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.15.199–243). It is not that these bodies are perfect; they are the bodies of the perfected ones. The perfection of these people lies in their being perfectly attuned to the service of the divine couple, ready to offer them their bodies and

their very lives. The spiritual ideal of the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava practitioner is a pre-pubescent serving maid of the divine couple, ready to fulfill their smallest needs (for more on this, see Haberman 2001).

What is the body, then, for Kṛṣṇadāsa? It may be anything, from an obstacle to divine service, to its instrument, both in this life and the next. It is also an object of worship—in fact, by far most of the instances of words in Sanskrit or Bengali indicating body in the texts of Kṛṣṇadāsa refer to the forms of Caitanya and Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, that are described with loving, painstaking detail. The differences between these types of bodies may or may not be apparent to an outsider, and indeed, the body need not be physical at all.

Such a conception of the body must surely indicate an aversion to ascetic practices, must it not? No. While Kṛṣṇadāsa does regale his readers with descriptions of Caitanya and his companions feasting, he also offers examples of extreme asceticism among Caitanya's devotees. Raghunātha Dāsa Gosvāmin slept less than two hours a day and ate only half-rotten rice, rebuking himself for such sensuous indulgence (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 3.6). Rūpa and Sanātana Gosvāmins slept just as little under a tree here or there, but at least they ate a few chickpeas and some dried bread (*Caitanya-caritāmṛta* 2.127–30). While these three are a small minority among the personages of the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, they become more striking when it is kept in mind that Kṛṣṇadāsa presents these three as his gurus, and as exemplary devotees, whose behaviour everyone should follow.

Now, these ascetic, strictly celibate, male practitioners inwardly worship Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa as young girls, eager to vicariously participate in the divine couple's amorous play. One is perhaps not too surprised by this contrast having drawn keen suspicion from British scholars of the Victorian age. Quoting a Dr Wise, H. H. Risley, an Indian civil servant writing on the castes and tribes of Bengal in 1892 writes that the mendicant Vaiṣṇavas are

Of evil repute, their ranks being recruited by those who have no relatives, by widows, by individuals too idle or depraved to lead a steady working life, and by prostitutes. . . . A few undoubtedly join from sincere and worthy motives, but their numbers are too small to produce any appreciable effects on the behaviour of their comrades. (Risley 1998: 344.)

Other authors were more specific in singling out the 'sensuous meditations' of these ascetics as being the reason for their depravity—a depravity marked in particular by lax bodily, sexual morals (see Kennedy 1993). While orthodox Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theologians drew a sharp line between acts and be-

haviour in the mentally conceived body of a perfected one and in the outer, practitioner's body, this line was blurred in the numerous heterodox Caitanya Vaiṣṇava sects that sprung up in the centuries following Kṛṣṇadāsa (see e.g., Dimock 1989). While frowned upon by theologians, there is little evidence that common people viewed them with the disdain of the colonial scholars above until 'learning', if you will, the correct way of seeing them from their masters. Whether or not this led to any positive change in the case of the widows and prostitute above is highly doubtful; more probably the result was opposite. But that is another article altogether.

To conclude: by this little example from the Hindu tradition, I have wished to highlight some of the complexities inherent in terms such as 'the body', or 'body-negative spirituality'.

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