

Radha

Introduction

Radha is usually recognized in direct association with the Hindu god Krsna. Known as one of the gopi cow-herd milkmaids of Vraja, Radha's strong and passionate love for Krsna is the main story of this goddess. Radha becomes a primary example of love for the lord that followers relate to. For many devotees, the strength and unconditional love that Radha has for Krsna is one to be imitated. "The love affair of Radha and Krsna in the devotional context becomes a metaphor for the divine/human relationship"(Kinsley 82).

Early History

The character of Radha is not fully developed until relatively late in the Hindu tradition. Before Jayadeva's *Gitogovinda*, Radha is only referred to briefly. Although the references are short, they are unquestionably clear in the fact that they are referring to Radha. The *Padma-*, *Brahma-vaivarta* and *Devi-bhagavata-puranas* give in-depth descriptions of Radha and Krsna's relationship (Kinsley 82). Although the adulterous aspect of Radha is not addressed in any of the earlier references, the theme of love in separation is a central one in all of the references. For example in the *Venisamhara* of Bhatta Narayana (date to around 800 CE), Radha is described as becoming angered while making love to Krsna and choking on her tears as she leaves him. In the *Dhvanyalokalo-cana* (early 10th century), Radha is saddened because Krsna must leave Vraja to go to the village of Mathura to begin his adult life, and is described as weeping

pitifully. She is also mentioned in Ksemendra's *Dasavatacarita* (1066 CE) as barely able to speak as Krsna is leaving for Mathura (Kinsley 82). Another notable characteristic that is uniform in all of the early references to Radha, is that they are always in direct connection with Krsna. The passages do not refer to her strictly individually and it is only her love for Krsna or his love for her that is talked about. Because Radha is known as the young girl who is passionately in love with Krsna, and their exemplifying love through separation, there is room for speculation that their affair was an illicit one. There is evidence that she belonged to another, and went against societal norms and risked being judged by the community by entering into this illicit relationship.

Krsna

Before any mention of Radha, Krsna is described as being the subject of irresistible beauty and charm to the village women of Vraja. They are described as married women who have household duties, but when they hear the flute of Krsna calling them to the woods, they cannot resist. They run to Krsna in such frenzy, that they abandon their household duties and their husbands to rush to his side. The woods of Vraja, where the women run to, to meet Krsna, are described as beautiful, forever spring and considered to be heaven on earth. It is important to understand the relationship between these women and Krsna before seeing how his relationship with Radha develops. It is clear that the message portrayed in these passages is that his love is not exclusive, in that he loves all of the women, and encourages them all to love him in return. The correlation from this theme to religious devotees is that those who are

truly devoted to the lord are encouraged to act like the Gopis. When they hear his call, they should abandon all their duties to be with him and let nothing come in between their relationship. An aspect of Radha's relationship with Krsna that is discussed, is the jealousy that escalates when Radha is aware of Krsna spreading his love with others.

Jayadeva's Gitagovinda

It is in this twelfth century text that Radha is first presented as a central character. She is singled out as Krsna's favorite, but the text mainly deals with Radha searching for Krsna and the emotions of longing, jealousy and sorrow she feels. Where previous texts about Krsna have a more joyous, playful tone, the *Gitagovinda* is written in a sad and distressed voice, with Radha expressing the pain caused from her separation from Krsna, painting images of obsessive love. The following is a translated excerpt from Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, exemplifying Radha's distress and sorrow that comes hand in hand with her devotional love for Krsna:

My heart values his vulgar ways,
Refuses to admit my rage,
Feels strangely elated,
And keeps denying his guilt.
When he steals away without me
To indulge his craving
For more young women,
My perverse heart
Only wants Krisna back.
What can I do? (Olson 255)

Although it is not clearly stated, it is hinted that Radha is married to another man. When the two lovers meet, their meeting is in surrounded by secrecy, in dark woods, and with an implied eye of disapproval by society. It is, however, very clear that

Krsna is not married to Radha, as she speaks in jealousy of the love he gives to all the other women. Despite her jealousy, she risks the chance that she may be socially ostracized from the community and the “dangers of the night, the woods and public censure” (Kinsley 86) to be with Krsna.

Even though Radha’s affair with Krsna seems improper, the love she has for Krsna is appropriate as a “devotional metaphor” (Kinsley 89). Some theologians argue that illicit love is given freely, without a sense of obligation. In comparison, being married to someone has a sense of legal obligation and those in a marriage are constrained within the parameters of a marriage. The common view is that married love can be mundane or dull and in contrast, illicit love is filled with excitement and ecstasy. Therefore the relationship between Radha and Krsna is comparable to the human-divine relationship. The obstacles that are faced by Radha, so that she can love Krsna, prove to strengthen and increase her love for him. She gives him the selfless love that he desires. For devotees, love for Lord Krsna is held to be irresistible, extraordinarily beautiful and overpowering.

Worship

The earliest evidence of Radha worship can be found sometime between 1486 to 1533 (Wulff 196). Her earliest images can be found in temples in Bengal and Vrndavana, but are not restricted to these areas. Images of Radha usually include her as being paired with Krsna. It is considered that when a devotee is worshipping Krsna, he is also worshipping Radha at the same time. “Devotees can share in the blissful experience of

Radha and Krishna in sexual union by playing the role of friends of the divine couple”

(Olson 232). The high degree of Radha’s importance can be verified in Vrndavana, where the use of the vocative form of her name is used as a standard greeting (Wulff 196).

Radha’s love “...symbolizes the religious ideal of selfless, unswerving devotion to God...”

(Wulff 196). Today she is worshipped through images, her name, and performances that tell the love story of Radha and Krsna.

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