

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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The Person of Rāmānanda Rāya: Penetrating Insight in Biographical Memory and Literary History

Rāmānanda Rāya (1480-1550) was a court poet under the patronage of King Pratāparudra of Orissa (1497-1540). His main work was a Sanskrit play – the Jagannāthavallabhanāṭaka. Its narrative concerns Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā falling in love at first sight and the rejections that ensue until the two finally come together. Rāmānanda focuses intensely on questions around hidden truths: Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa constantly exchange coded messages and signals that are prone to misunderstanding – one can never tell if the other is truly in love. Through the framework of love, the play explores the problem of deciphering hidden truths regarding a person’s internal conditions.

Some time after this play’s composition, Rāmānanda met Caitanya. Decades later, several hagiographies of Caitanya, including the Caitanyacaritāmṛta (1615), recall and relate a dialogue between the two in which Caitanya learns the truth of his own birth as both Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. Rāmānanda’s penetrating insight into Caitanya’s internal conditions makes possible this realization.

In his Karṇānanda (1607), a hagiography of the world around Śrīnivāsa Ācārya, Yadunandana Dāsa relates a story in which Śrīnivāsa loses consciousness and cannot be revived until his closest disciple, Rāmacandra Kavirāja, arrives. Rāmacandra has a penetrating insight into Śrīnivāsa’s internal conditions, diagnoses the matter and enables Śrīnivāsa’s return to consciousness. Yadunandana compares Rāmacandra to Rāmānanda on the basis of this ability to recognize hidden truths, with the hint that Rāmacandra may actually be the rebirth of Rāmānanda.

This paper reads these texts together, arguing that the early Gauḍīyas build the person of Rāmānanda around this capacity for insight into a person’s internal conditions. Picking up this thread not only helps reconstruct the early Gauḍīya memory of Rāmānanda, but also bridges the gap between this memory and the poet himself. Later-day hagiography and Rāmānanda’s own writing come together to reveal a shared concern with insight.