THE SPORT OF THE GODS: RELIGION AND SEXUALITY IN INDIA

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To inquire concerning the relations of religion and sexuality in India is to undertake a strenuous exercise in disciplined imagination. It involves entering emphathetically into the thought and value world of an exceedingly complex and diversified culture, different in many ways from all that is familiar to our sense and sensibility. The effort is the more enjoyable, however, because it involves strolling in luxuriant groves of Indian literary imagination, an exotic garden of images. Our topics, themes, motifs will come before us in the form of philosophy, of religious teaching, of literature, and of art, but we shall draw upon all of these sources, and most especially upon the vast background of Indian mythology upon which all these forms of expression, sophisticated and simple, have been erected.

The mythology of India is so luxuriant that it has never been fully gathered into any even approximately comprehensive collection. Within it there is no consistency. The powers, functions, epithets and activities of the gods and goddesses are so graciously and abundantly distributed and sometimes so sectarian in tone that no clear hierarchy or pattern can be established. There are basically three types of ancient literature to which we shall refer: (1) the *Vedas,* that is, the entire canonical literature; (2) the Epics, the two great mythological compendia (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*); (3) the *Puranas,* sectarian accounts of the various gods. In addition to these ancient literatures (covering a long period from about 1200 B.C.E. to about 1200 C.E.) we shall make use of poetry and similar secondary reflections about the themes of the basic literature, especially as they have occurred in the classical Gupta Age (300-700 C.E.) and in the *bhakti* movements or devotional cults of medieval India (e.g., since 1200 C.E.).

The most ancient strata of the Indian literary heritage, the *Rig Veda,* preserves numerous ritual songs to gods and goddesses, including Ushas, the goddess of the dawn. (*Rig Veda* VII:77, selected verses)

> She (Ushas) has shown brightly, like a youthful woman,
> stirring to motion every living creature.
> Agni (fire) has come to feed on mortals' fuel.
> She has made light and chased away the darkness.

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Turned to this All, far-spreading,
she has risen and shone in brightness with white robes about her.
She has beamed forth lovely with golden colors, Mother of cattle,
guide of the days she brings.[1]

* * *

Such hymns clearly recognize the bisexual imagery of the divine power and acknowledge the transcendental feminine. In fact, however, sexuality as a religious motif was already ancient in India before the Aryans with their chants and hymns, their Indra, Ushas and Agni, had crossed the Himalayas and descended into the valley of the Indus. The remains of the preceeding Indian civilizations have been recovered only by archeology, and the interpretation is disputable, but a large number of terra cotta female figures, found in many sites, and an elegant bronze statuette of a dancing girl, suggest the possibility of devotion to feminine and fertile power, while one of the seals is engraved with an image of a seated "yogi" showing, some think, an erect phallus. Without a narrative it is impossible for us to know certainly how the Indus Valley Civilization interpreted these symbols, but if we thought that this seal had come from a later age of Indian culture, it would at once be identified as Shiva—the yogic god—Lord of Beasts, whose *lingam* or phallus is the object of worship among all Shaivites. It seems an entirely plausible interpretation that some of the traditions of the Indus Valley and similar pre-Aryan civilizations, temporarily dislocated by the Aryan invasions and their traditions, persisted and survived and ultimately were reintegrated with the Brahmanical-Vedic traditions. Consistent with this interpretation would be the persistence of such symbols as the tree, snakes, feminine fertility figures (*yakshis*), and the lingam.

According to several Hindu mythological accounts there are two things which Shiva and Parvati, his consort, enjoy when they are together on Mt. Kailash—discussing philosophy and making love. Both sometimes lead to trouble. Both rise from the heart of the Hindu self-understanding. The polarity of the sexual and the anti-sexual, the erotic and the ascetic, is fundamental to the Hindu way. Cults cluster around the poles of this antinomy. Advaitic philosophy, yogic discipline, ascetic and academic religions discuss philosophy. *Bhakti* devotees of Shiva and Krishna are captivated by the ecstasies of love. The two extremes appear to refute each other; yet they support each other as well. Hindu creation stories present an example.

[1]"Hymn to Dawn," (R. V. VII:77), H. Daniel Smith, Ed., *Selections from Vedic Hymns,* R.T.H. Griffith, tr., (Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corp., 1968) p. 2.

Creation stories in Indian literature are so numerous and varied that their very multiplicity suggests that the significance lies in the underlying, abstract philosophical pattern. The fundamental materials for philosophical reflection on creation are found in some of the hymns of the *Rig Veda.* These poems (mostly in Book X) suggest that the origin of the universe lies in an undifferentiated unity, to which neither "exists" nor "does not exist" applies. This singularity stirred; breathless, it began to breathe. The term *Brahman* is the philosophical expression of the first notion (singularity), while *karma* (to act) and *prana* (to breathe) are involved in the second. This initial action remains undiscriminated and chaotic but *tapas* (heat, warmth) arises in the primeval possibility, and warmth gives rise to desire, which is the essence of Purusha, the Cosmic Spirit. The *devas,* minor gods or divine powers, led by Indra, are products rather than producers of the world. With the concept of creation through "sacrifice" (*yajna*), of a pervading cosmic order, *dharma* or *rita,* and the Goddess Vac (Speech), who makes the pattern known, we have the basic concepts necessary for some two millenia of philosophical and religious speculation. Much of this speculation involves notions of sexuality. We may look at a few of these themes as visualized both philosophically and dramatically (mythologically).

1. The Theme of Unity

An undifferentiated singularity is an inexplicable, unformulatable matrix. The nearest thing to a formulation is some form of androgyny. A poet puts it briefly as the young son of Shiva, Skanda (Kartikaya), is frustrated in his babyhood wish.

> Long may the Lord of the Peacock (Skanda) be victorious,
> who, as a pampered child, sought to sleep
> between his parents, but whose wish,
> from their being of one body, failed.[2]

It is impossible to be simply human. Sexuality is rooted in the nature of things. One can only be female human or male human; the general must always be exemplified by the specific, which contradicts its generality. Sexuality is not a social invention. It is a biological fact. Androgyny is not a biological fact. It is a psychological or metaphysical interpretation. The creative matrix out of which flow the existential, biological specifics cannot itself be characterized by the differentiations which will be produced. To think of god as creative source im-

[2]Subhanga (?), Daniel H.H. Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyakara's Treasury* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) p. 71.

plies recognition of the feminine as well as the masculine, and to recognize them in a bi-polarity which all gendered pronouns distort. Gender is absolutely fundamental to the Sanskrit language. Without knowing the gender of stems no translation is possible. The three genders, masculine, feminine and neuter, are not always signs of physical sex.

"Gender infers function, sex infers form; so that an individual may be masculine from one point of view and feminine from another. In general, masculine gender implies activity and procession, female gender passivity and recession, the neuter a static or absolute condition. Essence and nature are respectively m. and f., logically distinct, but 'one in God,' who is 'neither this nor that' and therefore 'It' rather than 'He' or 'She' specifically."[3] The point which was being explained in this footnote by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy deals with the character of those gods who could be thought capable of being personifications of the ultimate matrix of the real. Heinrich Zimmer shows that those gods with specific limiting functions (e.g., Agni, Vayu, Indra, even Brahma) are not sufficiently multivalent. Of Brahma he says:

> In Hindu mythology Brahma personified exclusively the positive aspect of the life-process of the universe, and is never represented as destroying what he has produced. He symbolized, in a one-sided way, merely the creative phase, pure spirituality. In his myths he does not exhibit, through a multitude of mutually antagonistic attitudes and activities, such an ambivalent, self-contradictory, enigmatic character as would render him fit to represent in personalized form the paradoxical, all comprehending nature of the Absolute. Vishnu and Shiva, on the other hand, as well as the Goddess, Mother of the World, are strongly visualized as both terrible and benign, creative and destructive, hideous and comely. All three are thus eminently qualified to represent the Ultimate Plenum.[4]

What the neuter gains in accuracy, it loses in power.

2. The Unity Divides

The androgynous form contains the energies, the inexplicable power of thought and act which creativity requires, but androgyny remains infertile. The poet Nilapata sets this irony into a poem in honor of Kama, the God of Love, whose only defeat had been at the

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[3]Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, footnote inserted in the posthumous edition of Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symobls in Indian Art and Civilization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1946) p. 123.

[4]Heinrich Zimmer, *ibid.*, p. 124.

hand of Shiva, but even then only after his intoxicating arrow of desire or lust had penetrated Shiva's austerity. Kama says:

So now this Samkara (Shiva),
whose asceticism is known through all the world,
fearful of absence from his mistress,
bears her in his very form. (androgyny)
Victory to Love,
who with these words
presses Priti's (Pleasure's) hand and falls to laughter.[5]

So sterile androgyny—more complete in theory than in the creative act—gives way to authentic sexuality, to nouns and pronouns clearly 'he' and 'she', no longer either neuter 'its' or sterile 'boths'. Rajasekhara's song to Kama celebrates, not the defeat by which Shiva burned his body to make him wax and wane as the "bodiless companion of the moon," but his success with Shiva, and thereby with all creation, the invention of sexual procreation.

Hail to the family priest of womanhood,
who consecrates them for the sport;
to the disembodied boon companion of the moon,
who with his flowered arrows
overcame the god of gods;
Hail to the stage director of the play of sex.[6]

3. The Shiva Myth Cycle

The primary Shiva myths come before us in a tangle of versions.[7] In one archaic tradition we have the marriage of Shiva and Sati, daughter of Daksha. Daksha, who represents the Aryan-Brahman-Vedic tradition of the power of priestly sacrifice, had no use for Shiva, whose ways were untidy and ascetic, but his daughter had fallen in love with the yogi-god and insisted on marrying him. Later, Daksha held a major sacrifice, to which he pointedly failed to invite Shiva. Shiva was indifferent to the slight, but when Sati learned of the affront she regarded it as an intolerable insult to her husband and determined to use her "daughter's right" to go home without an invita-

[5]Nilapata, Daniel H.H. Ingalls, tr., *Sanskrit Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 119.
[6]Rajasekhara, *ibid.*
[7]No single work has yet untangled the network of Shiva stories to be found in the major Indian sources (the *Mahabharata* and the *Shaiva* Puranas). The most comprehensive and satisfactory attempt so far is in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973) but even her erudite and complex study cannot impose a simple order on the thousands of stories in hundreds of different sources in the Shaiva tradition. The outline provided in these paragraphs is my own simplification and arrangement of the basic story framework.

tion. Shiva did not object, but he warned her that he would be maligned. While home, her father renewed his charges against Shiva, her hubsand. "Though unwilling, I still gave you, daughter, to that impure and proud abolisher of rites and demolisher of barriers. He roams about in dreadful cemetaries, attended by hosts of ghosts and goblins, like a madman, naked, with dishevelled hair, wearing a garland of dead men's skulls and ornaments of human bones, pretending to be auspicious, but really inauspicious, insane, beloved of the insane, lord of ghosts, a being of essential darkness." (Note: This passage with its puns and twisted epithets, e.g., *'shiva'* means 'auspicious', reflects the tensions between the orderly, priestly, caste-oriented religious life and the ascetic, salvation-oriented religion which Shiva/Sati represent.) Sati, infuriated at the insult to her husband stepped upon the altar fire of her father's sacrifice and offered herself (the original *suttee*, Sati) as sacrifice to Shiva. Shiva appeared and in anguish destroyed the sacrifice, took the corpse of Sati on his shoulder and wandered off through the three worlds. Knowing that the world could not long endure the anguish of Shiva, Vishnu, using his discus, cut off parts of the corpse as Shiva walked aimlessly about. The places where the parts of her body fell have become the 108 holy places of traditional pilgrimage in India. Finally, Shiva realized that the weight was gone and paused to meditate. In the place where her *yoni* (vagina) fell, he took the form of a *lingam* (phallus) and peace was restored in the universe.

However, in the continuing struggle among the *devas* and the *asuras,* the gods had been usurped, and only a son of Shiva would be able to defeat the demons. Sati was reborn as Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, but Shiva was still too engaged in austerities (*tapas*) to be interested in her in spite of her superlative beauty. Parvati also became an ascetic, and by a combination of her magnificent austerities and an arrow from Kama, she aroused his passion. At the interruption of his meditation Shiva flashed anger from his third eye and burned Kama's body away, but sexuality had returned, and Shiva and Parvati began to make love. During these aeons of dalliance, and at her request, Shiva revived Kama, though only to wax and wane with the moon. While they were so absorbed, the demons on earth became even more powerful. Worried that a son of Shiva, produced after such prodigious effort, would be a threat to the universe, the gods sent Agni, in the form of a parrot, to interrupt their love making. Although Agni tried to be as delicate as possible, the interruption was necessarily an embarrassment and disaster. Parvati cursed the wives of the gods all to be barren, the semen of Shiva was delivered to the fire of

Agni, but he could not bear it and threw it to the Ganges, who put it in a clump of reeds from which it became the six star constellation and the son, Skanda (Kartikeya), God of War, thus born without feminine gestation. The great power of Shiva's *tapas* had been diminished by the aeons of loveplay, so he went off to restore his ascetic powers. While off in the forest he tested the austerities of some forest sages by seducing their wives, including Mohini, the seductive, feminine form which Vishnu had taken. When the sages discovered the seductions of their wives, and Mohini made them aware of their own vulnerability to similar indiscretions, their anger turned to fury and they cursed Shiva that his *lingam* should fall off. Shiva consented to this curse on condition that the *lingam* should then become the universal object of their worship. Finally, he visited a group of heretic sages and there performed the sport of his cosmic dance, by which his energy destroyed and then re-created the universe.[8]

4. Philosophical implications

This constellation of myths obviously has many purposes and values. Through the balancing of curses, gods do not continue to proliferate. Only in the taking of various forms (sometimes on earth, sometimes elsewhere) will the gods modify their actions and never their essential character. There can be no new gods, only new forms of old ones. In this Shiva cycle we see the powerful ambiguity of the erotic and the ascetic. He is simultaneously the master and the victim of desire. Both he and Parvati represent the absolute of the anti-sexual, ascetic life, the freedom and power attained by austerities and total renunciation. At the same time they are also symbols of absolute sexuality, the phallus and vagina in perpetual embrace, the consecration of estatic union and amorous play. Their devotees are exponents not of moderation but of excess, of the freedom which lies outside of all rules of prudence, expediency and decorum. The social rationalization of this ambivalence works out in the basic Hindu conceptions of the stages of life and alternatives of value. In this orthodox view, the *brahmacarin*, or student stage of chastity and learning, is succeeded by the householder stage in which desire gives rise to pleasure and pleasure finds fulfillment in union. This fulfillment of desire by satisfaction ultimately becomes repetitious and unsatisfying and then may

[8]Statues of the Nataraja, Shiva as cosmic dancer, may be found in most major collections of Asian art in museums (including an excellent example in the Denver Art Museum, 5th floor). These sculptures depict some phase of this episode. The absence of genitals on this image is not due to prudery by Indian artists, but to the fact that the story occurs after Shiva has consented to the loss of the lingam that it might become the object of universal veneration.

be succeeded by the stage of the holy sage, the iconoclastic *sinnyasin*, himself embodiment of the god and therefore beyond all affection, pleasure or disappointment. The goals of pleasure (*kama*), security (*artha*), and personal responsibility (*dharma*) which were appropriate to the earlier stages are set aside for the higher, indeed the highest goal of freedom, liberation (*moksha*).

A second philosophical reflection emerges from the recognition implicit in the myths that sexuality is the nature of existence, of change, of the world of coming and going, where acts have consequences. Every god has both maculine and feminine forms: Vishnu and Lakshmi, Shiva and Parvati, Brahma and Sarasvati, Indra and Indrani. Wherever one appears the other is implied. In classic philosophy this is interpreted as the division between two aspects of all creativity, the image or *form* and the *energy*. The energy is *Shakti*, the feminine. The power by which the gods create is always contained in their feminine aspect. The energy of the universe is *Devi*, the Goddess, the Mother, *Shakti*. In their masculine aspect alone, the gods are powerless to create. From the *Rig Veda*, in which the *sound* of the *mantra* (the sympathetic magic by which the sacrifice is efficient) is feminine, the Goddess Vac, to the tantric texts which enjoin the worship of the *Shakti* as embodiment of all power, there is consistent repetition of the theme. Creative power is in the feminine. The form and the energy must get together. Poets are more successful than philosophers in expressing this. Vacaspati sings a song to Sarasvati's (Goddess of Culture and Music) long necked lute and refers to austerities.

> You climb upon her swelling breasts
> and touch her shapely and alluring thighs.
> Nay more; she puts her arm about you,
> her hand delighting you with skillful stroke.
>
> Oh, stem of the lute,
> for what austerities
> are you rewarded thus?[9]

5. Sexuality in the devotional cults

The full, evocative power of sexuality employed for religious purposes is to be found in the tradition of the *bhakti* cults, the devotional movements of ecstatic god-realization, found in both Shaivite and Vaisnavite forms, but most familiar to us in the devotion to Krishna. There is in this tradition an interesting devotional exercise called

[9]Vacaspati, Ingalls, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

"ringing the changes." This practice takes its authoritative text from a verse of the *Bhagavadgita* in which Arjuna speaks to God (Krishna) and says:

> Bending down and prostrating my body,
> I ask Thy grace;
> Thou, O Lord, shouldst bear with me
> as a father to his son,
> as friend with friend,
> as a lover to his beloved.[10]

The richer source of this sentiment and practice is the whole body of myth concerned with Krishna, which includes his birth, infancy and late adolescence as well as his mature role as Prince, friend of the Pandavas, and incarnation of Vishnu.

Krishna, the human form of Vishnu, was born to subdue the power of evil and make room for the good. At birth he was transferred from the prison where his mother, Devaki, was kept prisoner of her brother, the evil Kamsa, to an idyllic pastoral countryside where he was reared as her own by his foster-mother, Yasoda. He was an impish child, delight of family and village, who evoked an overflowing motherlike-love from all who knew him. His play invariably served to quell demons, but seemed not to be directed to that or any other end. As a boy, his companionship was its own reward. He protected those who lived and played with him, but they did not love him for that reason, but just for what he was. As a young man he awakened every mood of affection and delight among the *gopis,* the girls who tended cows with him. His flute enchanted them to abandon their homes and meet him in the autumn night, to sing and dance and engage in every amorous delight. To "ring the changes" one must imaginatively transpose one's self through both sides of each of these roles—to think of or love god as if he were your baby, as if he were your friend, as if he were your lover, and to be loved by him in each of these roles as infant, friend and beloved of God. This devotional exercise requires one to shift through the full range of emotional perspectives on the relationship between God and the Self. It is in the lover/beloved mode that the *bhakti* movement finds its most absorbing imagery.

The underlying motif of this tradition may be interpreted as a stylized sequence of events in a romantic episode, as sublimated or transformed into an allegory of the relation of soul and god.

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[10]*Bhagavad Gita,* XI, 44; Eliot Deutsch, tr., *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) p. 100.

The initial stages of romance are so subtle that only those in the right frame of spirit will be sensitive to their gentle persuasion. The poet, Kalidasa, reflects this exquisite but faint fragrance of love. He speaks for the man:

> When I was present she cast aside her glance
> and laughed at conversation that concerned me not.
> restrained in what she did by her good breeding,
> she neither showed her love nor quite concealed it.[11]

From such subtle intimations of delight, the mood moves on to intrigue, messages, or invitations to enjoyment. Sonnoka speaks on behalf of Krishna at the milking:

> "Go on ahead, milkmaids, taking home the pots already full.
> Radha will follow later when the older cows are milked."
> May Krishna, who by subterfuge thus made the cattle station
> deserted but for Radha and for him,
> the god, the foster-son of Nanda, steal away your ills.[12]

From coy glances and inviting smiles, through intrigue and sweet games, love surges toward its consummation. Reserve has place in early stages, but soon is tossed to the winds along with modesty and reputation, as devotion becomes unreserved. Radha sings of Krishna:

> At the first note of his flute
> down came the lion gate of reverence for elders,
> down came the door of dharma,
> my guarded treasure of modesty was lost,
> I was thrust to the ground as if by a thunderbolt.
>
> Ah, yes, his dark body posed in the tribhanga pose
> shot the arrow that pierced me;
> No more honor, my family lost to me,
> my home at Vraja lost to me,
> Only my life is left—and my life too
> is only a breath that is leaving me.
>
> So says Jagadananda-dasa.[13]

It is in love that the paradoxes of life are sometimes most fully and undeniably experienced. What might be otherwise disgraceful

[11]Kalidasa, Ingalls, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
[12]Sonnoka, *ibid.*, p. 84.
[13]Jagadananda, Edward C. Dimock, Jr. and Denise Levertov, trs., *In Praise of Krisna* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967) p. 28.

becomes a mark of full delight and power, the passive and the active roles reverse, the 'no' and 'yes' are curiously interchanged, a subtlety not lost on poets. There is no clear line to draw between the religious and the secular. These sentiments are fully reflected in the *puranic* literature, in temple architecture and art, and in some forms in the behavior of the sects. But we must realize that to stop the story here—at consummation—is not a Hindu way. Western cultures cherish the fulfilment of satiation, and call it the end, but Hindu reflection knows that satisfaction is but the taste which makes the absence poignant. Love goes on to lovers' quarrels, to separation, to agonies of hope and frustration, to ecstasies of reunion and reconsummation. Some of the most eloquent imagery in Indian literature expresses this sentiment of the loss of ecstasy and hope. For example, Radha says to Krishna, through his messenger who has brought word of a delay in his return.

> From the time our eyes first met our longing grew.
> He was not only the desirer, I not only the desired:
> passion ground our hearts together in its mortar.
> Friend, do not forget to recall to Krishna, how it was with us then.
>
> Then we required no messenger,
> sought only each other's lips for our love.
> It was the god of love himself who united us,
> he of the five arrows. . . .
> But now my lordly lover has learned new manners, now he sends you,
> herald of his indifference!

And then the messenger responds:

> When you listened to the sound of Krishna's flute, I stopped your ears.
> When you gazed at the beauty of his body, I covered your eyes.
> You were angry.
> O lovely one, I told you then that if you let love grow in you
> Your life would pass in tears.
> You offered him your body, you wanted his touch—
> You did not ask if he would be kind.
>
> And now each day your beauty fades a little more;
> How much longer can you live?

You planted in your heart the tree of love,
in hope of nourishment from that dark cloud. (*krishna*= dark)
Now water it
with your tears,

Says Govinda-dasa.[14]

Ultimately the reunion must be such that separation is no longer possible, and this is the quest of the *yogi*, the reunion of the Self, the realization of identity (or ecstatic union) with the principle of change which is beyond all changing. So the image of erotic love, enduring separation and finally realizing its own possibility of fulfillment only in a love of god, becomes not human eros, but devotion, *bhakti*, not limitation but freedom, not *kama* but *moksha* after all. The social rationalization is always the *dharma* due to each, to follow lust where lust must lead, but then *to make wisdom out of the misery* which results. Bhartrihari gives us two poems which express this marvelous multiplicity of values.

In a mundane existence, vapid and transient,
Men are wise who find two refuges.
They spend some time with minds submerged
in the fluid elixir of wisdom.
The rest belongs to tender mistresses
whose breasts and hips embody pleasure's luxury,
mistresses aroused to lust by caresses
Concealed in their laps of ample flesh.[15]

And then the monk sums it up with a typical Indian view:

Should I sojourn in austerity on a sacred river's bank?
Or should I, in worldly fashion, court women of high grace?
Or drink at streams of scripture the nectar of rich verse?
In life as transient as a flashing glance,
I can choose no single course.[16]

In this literary and devotional tradition sexuality is not primarily useful for its metaphysical values in explaining things, but is employed to evoke, express, generate a *rasa*, a mood, feeling, an inner climate of devotion itself. That person whose sentiments are incomplete, confined, inexperienced or shallow must learn to live through to maturity

[14]Ramananda Ray, *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.
[15]*Bhartrihari: Poems*, Barbara S. Miller, tr., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) p. 67.
[16]*Ibid.*, p. 125.

in the religious life, a maturity which will succeed that of the sexual life, but for which sexuality is an appropriate introduction.

There is, of course, a whole side of Indian life and thought which has hardly been mentioned here. It is reflected in the *Laws of Manu* and other legal texts which seek to establish an absolute, patriarchal, Brahman dominated, caste-ordered society, in which women have no authentic independence or co-responsibility. Yet curiously it was within this apparently sterile, legalistic, patriarchal structure that a wide range of permissive social forms such as prostitution, *devadasis* (temple girls), concubinage, and festival suspensions of rules, as well as all the erotic mythology, art, architecture and poetry to which we have referred flourished. It is perhaps because of the spirit squelching rigidity of Manu's tradition that we get the spirit opening ravishment of the poems and erotic sculpture of the medieval era.

Hindus use the word *lila*, sport, play, spontaneous enjoyment, to describe the central achievements of their deities, Shiva's cosmic dance by which the world was destroyed and recreated, and Krishna's amorous adventures in Vrindavan. This sport has creation, devotion and liberation as an outcome, but not as an intention. The expressions of sexuality in the myths are indeed the sport of the gods, and they reflect the sport, the spontaneous enjoyment, of men and women, and are a mode for evoking the sensibility appropriate to the fulfillment of the cosmic experience. Hindu religion has never completely engaged in fleeing life nor in submitting to its endless cycles. Spirit evolves. Hinduism is a comprehensive view which teaches the exaltation of creative play. Bhartrihari says:

> Whirling in samsara,
> Every man who dies is born again;
> But he alone is truly born
> Whose birth exalts his race.[17]

For Hinduism, both erotic sexuality and its sublimation in asceticism exalt the race. The knack is in the timing, to know just how and when to give each its proper due. This knack comes only to one who is able to know the whole creation as the momentary by-product of creative play, of a dance, or an amorous interlude, which has its own joy as its only purpose, but creation as its consequence.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 57.