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A NOTE ON SRI KRISHNAPREM: A LITTLE KNOWN VAISHNAVA LUMINARY

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It was a great refreshment to read the letters of Krishnaprem—one feels there a stream from the direct sources of Truth that one does not meet so often as one could desire. Here is a mind that can not only think but see—and not merely see the surfaces of things with which most intellectual thought goes on wrestling without end or definite issue and as if there were nothing else, but look into the core. The Tantriks have a phrase *paśyantī vāk* to describe one level of the *Vāk-Shakti*, the seeing Word; Krishnaprem has, it seems to me, much of the *paśyantī buddhi*, a seeing Intelligence.¹

It is not surprising that the most conspicuous Gaudiya Vaishnava stories known in the West are those associated with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and Bhaktivedanta Swami. Second to these are the lesser-known yet persistent accounts in the West connected to saints of the Gaudiya Math established by Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. This article deals with what I deem is a mostly hidden Gaudiya story, that of Yogi Sri Krishnaprem and several of his associates.² I extend previous considerations of Krishnaprem as a human symbol of “cross-cultural adventuring”³ by reflecting on how an outsider can inspire insiders about their own insider culture. I also detail the outcome of the spiritual and ecological-natural experiments conducted in the Uttar Vrindavan temple in Mirtola, near Almora in what is now Uttarkhand, the temple in which Krishnaprem spent decades of his life.

Most of the late biographical details of Krishnaprem, a British national born as Ronald Henry Nixon in England on 10 May 1898, are known. They are worth repeating in brief for context and expansion. Nixon spoke little about his early

life, because, as tradition holds, after taking *sannyas*, he was dead to his former being. He joined the Royal Flying Corps at 18 and served during the First World War. Nixon enrolled in English literature in King's College, Cambridge University, UK after the war where he discovered Buddhism and became involved with the Theosophical Society.

Having become acquainted with many branches of Hinduism, especially Advaita Vedantic Hinduism of Shankara, after his studies Nixon wrote to the principal of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Chennai, India, seeking employment there. Through this connection, he secured at Lucknow University, Uttar Pradesh, a position as a professor of English literature.

Here Nixon became a connected man with the Indian world of letters and spiritual circles. He became friends with the vice chancellor, Dr. Jnanendra Nath Chakravarti, a close friend of Annie Besant's (of the Theosophical Society). It was in being accepted into the Chakravarti household that he met Mrs. Chakravarti, also known as Monika Devi, a leading socialite of Lucknow. Few could have imagined that this fashionable lady, a *dame de salon*, could be a God-intoxicated one, and one day in the not too distant future would renounce the world, shave her head and retire to the jungle in the Himalayan heights beyond Almora.

Although a charming hostess with access to the upper echelon of Lucknow society, Nixon quickly realized that she had an entirely different side to her. Mrs. Chakravarti was an avid Krishna-bhakta. In fact, she initiated Nixon into Vaishnavism and Krishna-bhakti—but only on the condition that he stay with her as a devotee forever. That he did. Nixon humbly enamoured many with his life long devotion to his guru. As Dilip Kumar Roy, Bengali poet, mystic, and musician *par excellence*, wrote about Krishnaprem when he was introduced to him in 1923 for the first time in Lucknow: "This is Ronald Nixon, Dilip, our brilliant professor—an English Hindu or a Hindu Englishman, if you like."⁴

Nixon followed Dr. Chakravarti's post-retirement move with his wife from Lucknow to Varanasi to the surprise of the British gentry of Lucknow to a lesser-paid position at the Varanasi Hindu University. In 1928, on consultation of her husband, Mrs. Chakravarti retired from her external life and took full *sannyas*, the act of complete renunciation, shaving her head and taking the name Yashoda Ma. Nixon quickly followed and took *sannyas* himself from Yashoda Ma and assumed the garb of a *sadhu* and the name Krishnaprem.

Because of ill health, it was suggested that Yashoda Ma live in a hill station. She chose Almora, Uttar Pradesh in the Kumaon Hills west of Nepal. Krishnaprem followed, initially living by begging door to door for alms. By 1930 they secured a piece of land at Mirtola, an isolated village about 20 kilometres from Almora.

They built a temple there, which they called Uttar Vrindavan. From here begins a special kind of Krishna devotional worship that eventually becomes melded with ecology largely unknown beyond the confines of the Almora Hills and the minds of certain people who were attracted thereto.

In the ensuing time, Yashoda Ma and Krishnaprem would travel several times to Vrindavan, the Krishna pilgrimage centre located 150 kilometers south of Delhi. In February 1931, Krishnaprem achieved the reputation of being the first Westerner ever to set foot in the famous Radharaman Temple. He met and spent time with Balkrishna Goswami from the same temple, an association that lasted several years and led to the Goswami visiting the Uttar Vrindavan ashram for six weeks in 1932.

It was noted that Krishnaprem was in charge of the worship in the temple and had adequate singing and drumming abilities on the tabla. Radhikamohanji was the temple deity and the place had a typically Gaudiya feel, with Yashoda Ma's Bengali influence and Krishnaprem's striving and soaring for the heights in Chaitanyite Vaishnavism. Balkrishna Goswami initiated Yashoda Ma with the Gopal and Gayatri mantras. Disciples and associates lovingly referred to Krishnaprem as "Gopal Da," with "da" meaning "elder brother" in Bengali.

Two other early inmates of the ashram were Motirani, the youngest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Chakravarty, and Dr. Alexander, a well-known English surgeon who left a prosperous worldly life to follow them. Life in the ashram was austere. They took only a single meal a day, and even gave up drinking afternoon tea, when the ashram could not afford to serve it to the labourers who worked in the ashram fields. There was no hot water available, even though the winters were very cold with heavy snowfalls. Krishnaprem slept on the floor on a single blanket, close to the side of Yashoda Ma. All the rest, including occasional guests, slept in their own apartments.

Krishnaprem was a great *guru-bhakta* and believed firmly that nothing could take the place of personal service to the guru for quick spiritual progress. His devotion to the guru was something rare in modern times, especially for an ex-professor and an intellectual of such high order. Yashoda Ma passed away on 2 December 1944 in the early 1940s and then her daughter, Motirani, the favorite disciple of Krishnaprem, in the 1950s. Krishnaprem died on 14 November 1965.

Mirtola, also known as Uttar Vrindavan, is en route to Pithoragarh from Almora. The ashram was later run after the guru passed in 1965 by Krishnaprem's disciple, Sri Madhava Ashish (Ashish Da) (1920–1997), born Alexander Phipps, a Scottishman, who also later settled in India. Ashish Da was an aircraft engineer assembling Merlin engines, who came to India in 1942 during World War II, and

met Sri Krishnaprem at Mirtola in 1946, and soon became his disciple. In the following years, Krishnaprem and Ashish Da coauthored many books including their two-part work on the Stanzas of Dzyan, contained in the Book of Dzyan, *Man, the measure of all things: In the stanzas of Dzyan*, and *Man, Son of Man*.

The Mirtola Ashram became a pilgrimage for Indian theosophists and started working extensively with the local communities pioneering hill farming techniques which he encouraged them to adopt, a work for which Ashish Da was awarded the Padma Shri in 1992 by the Indian government. Ashish Da died on 13 April 1997.

The ashram evolved a synthesized philosophy based on Eastern mystical thought from the *bhakti* and Vaishnava traditions, ideas of Sri Nisargadatta, and Western philosophies like that of G. I. Gurdjieff, Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky, and Jungian dream work, among others. Some of the noted disciples of the “Mirtola Ashram” are Seymour B. Ginsburg, the co-founder of the Gurdjieff Institute of Florida; Karan Singh, former Indian Ambassador to the United States and politician, and travel writer Bill Aitken.

Many followers of Gurdjieff teachings continued to visit the Ashram for several decades. Buckley tells us of the nature of Mirtola: “The ashram’s founder, Krishna Prem, had believed love to be the key fact of the religious life. I gathered that Ashish Da had moved beyond ritual devotion; for the rest of us it was deemed necessary.”⁵

Buckley notes the cold, the “unheated rooms,” and the nature of the spiritual path the devotees had committed to in Mirtola: “it wasn’t easy.” There is no doubt that Krishnaprem’s asceticism and takes on devotion and guru-bhakti trickled down into the ritual and physical patterns of Uttar Vrindavan.

Regarding Ashish Da’s writings, Desiraju tells us:

His writings cover three major themes—spiritualism, Kumaon and contemporary politics. His writings on Kumaon repeatedly stress the inevitable collapse of the village economy if population growth were to outstrip the carrying capacity of the land. The signs of collapse are all too evident—overgrazing, overfelling of forests, depletion of water sources, soil erosion, famine and migration. In his later writings he also addresses the question of possible solutions, recognising clearly that relocation is no answer to the problem of over-population. Thinker and philosopher that he was, to him the answer lay in the human mind and in change of attitudes.⁶

Here we see how Krishnaprem’s ideas, founded in the fertile soil of the Indian plains of Lucknow, Varanasi, and Vrindavan, ploughed with generous amounts of

Bengali-inspired *bhakti* philosophy, wound and found their way to the foothills of Himalayas.

Besides writing to Sri Dilip Roy and other seeking souls to help and guide them in their spiritual life, Krishnaprem gave the world several important books. As Krishnaprem writes in his preface to *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad*:

The point of view from which this book has been written is that the Kathopanishad is a practical treatise written to help us achieve a very real end. It is not in the least a compendium of Brahmanical speculations, something to be studied from a purely intellectual viewpoint. On the contrary, it is an exposition of the ancient road that leads from death to immortality, a road which is as open today as it was when our text was written. Being a real road the knowledge of it is not confined to any one country or to any one religious tradition.⁷

Here we read a burgeoning synthesis of ideas, an ambition to take Indian ideas beyond the shackles and restraints of any theological practice or spiritual conservatism.

It is advantageous to place the example of Krishnaprem's thinking in a broader critical context of lesser-known Vaishnavas. Haberman's consideration of Krishnaprem and his crossing of language barriers—he learned Sanskrit, Hindi, and Bengali—learning of traditional Hindu temple worship and cooking craft, and a confidence in performing and appreciation of the art of Krishna *bhajans* demonstrate that this yogi was in his humility a gifted soul. Krishnaprem is most likely the first *videshi* (foreigner) who attracted *deshis* (Indians) to his feet.

Krishnaprem appears in several volumes of collected stories of Indian saints. “He is the only foreigner, for example, to be listed among the celebrated saints of Braj in O. B. L. Kapoor's five volume *Braj ke Bhakta* (Devotees of Braj), and the kind of stories told about him are the kind that validate a devotee as an accomplished saint (*siddha*),” Haberman tells us.⁸

Krishnaprem was instrumental in shifting the doubting mind of many an occidentally touched Indian, the most notable being Dilip Kumar Roy. This is perhaps because where these Indians were looking West-ward, Krishnaprem was staunchly looking India-ward: “For myself though I can be tolerant to all countries, I have only one, and that strange to say, is not England but India.”⁹ His writing displayed his impressive knowledge and sharp grasp of complex spiritual and metaphysical subjects. He shunned publicity in any form.

Had it not been for Roy, posterity would have known little of Krishnaprem. After the latter's passing in 1965, Roy became Krishnaprem's main biographer. He wrote an entire biographical volume—*Yogi Shri Krishnaprem*—as well as dedicating

significant sections in his other works *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*¹⁰ and *Pilgrims of the Stars* to his relationship with Krishnaprem.

The four-volume compiled letters *Sri Aurobindo to Dilip*, a substantial contribution to modern yogic scholarship explicating the guru-disciple relationship and connection involving art and poetry between Sri Aurobindo and Dilip Kumar Roy, features substantial mention of Krishnaprem.¹¹

Krishnaprem and his subtly presented philosophies, most publicized through his letters, met with great approval from well-known figures like Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi, with the latter commenting to his disciples that Krishnaprem was “a wonderful blend of *gyani* (knowledge) and *bhakti* (devotion) in one person.”

As Roy notes in his chapter entitled “Sri Aurobindo vis-à-vis Sri Krishnaprem”: “It is not often that highly-evolved personalities meet and react favourably to each other.”¹² This was the case with Sri Aurobindo and Krishnaprem. There are numerous mentions throughout Roy’s writings of this fondness. Another anecdote of Sri Aurobindo is worth mentioning:

Krishnaprem’s letter is as refreshing as its predecessors; he always takes things by the right end. And his way of putting them is delightfully pointed and downright, as is natural to one who has got to the root of the matter.¹³

A noteworthy personal development is the triangle that evolved involving Sri Aurobindo’s Western-inspired yet staunchly Indian integral yoga, Roy’s poetic, musical, and literary genius, and Krishnaprem’s humble yet complex theoretical explications about the nature of his own *sadhana* and that of his predecessors and contemporaries. After all, it was Krishnaprem who encouraged Roy to seek both spiritual and intellectual refuge in Sri Aurobindo’s mystic ideology: “Read his *Essays on the Gita*. Every Indian who loves the *Gita* should read it.”¹⁴

What is significant about this cooperation is how philosophically fond and individually accepting to each other these great souls eventually became. It is this nexus of collaboration which spanned several decades across pan-Indian network—Mirtola, Pondicherry, and Pune. What developed in and from the spiritual and ecological enquiries undertaken in the Mirtola Uttar Vrindavan temple link what are perennial environmental concerns with the status of then early modern Vaishnavism. Hints of similar philosophical eclecticism and their association with natural principles are present in contemporary Vaishnavism-inspired ecospirituality like that of the Vrindavan Ecological Concept.¹⁵

In order to contextualize what took place in Mirtola, what came to be Krishnaprem’s final resting place, and the philosophy which Krishnaprem himself

dubbed *bahya-puja* or “external worship,” it is essential to dip into his private correspondence, especially that between Krishnaprem and Roy which started in the 1920s and continued up Krishnaprem’s death in 1965. Although Dilip Roy only visited the ashram very rarely, he corresponded with Krishnaprem throughout his lifetime. And Dilip was successfully guided by him, as well as by his own guru, Sri Aurobindo, to whom Dilip was in the habit of sending each letter received from Krishnaprem.

Sri Aurobindo thus developed a high regard for Krishnaprem, and always commended his views to Dilip. In this stream of letters too voluminous to summarize here, Krishnaprem puts Roy at ease by portraying Hinduism and Krishna worship as a process of opening doors and dissolving boundaries. The key insight which Krishnaprem continually expounded and used as a salve to appease Roy’s oftentimes emotional outbursts based in his passionate and well-known Bengali temperament in times when he felt hard pushed to go on with *sadhana* was a single, simple line: boundaries are necessary to realize there are no boundaries. In other words, “Where there is self there is no Krishna and where Krishna is, there can be no self.”¹⁶

Although a lot of hagiographies treat their subjects with almost excessive reverence, and while Roy’s personal, existential, and irrational-cum-spiritual hardships are present on virtually every page of his letters to Krishnaprem, not terribly much is known about the specifics of Krishnaprem’s inevitable doubts. There must have been many. Granted, he does openly explicate the nature of the human condition, of being perfectly imperfect, and of being bound to this world with one foot in the other. It appears he soared the heights, something to which others attest when they read his writings. Still, one is left to wonder of the many stories of the flesh and the carnality Krishnaprem must have come up against during his mystical escalations.

Bhakti, then, for Krishnaprem, involves a jump into the “inexplicable otherness of the absurd.”¹⁷ In crossing and dissolving boundaries and leaping into the what-everness of everything, Krishnaprem enjoins us to laugh, let go, and cry: “There is nothing sober about Krishna. He maddens where He touches and so His worshippers leap where others—at least some others—can only walk, a dignified cap-and-gown sort of walk.”¹⁸

Learning about the lives of lesser-known Vaishnavas and devotees offers understandings into the evolution of personal devotional practices and their associated smaller and larger religious traditions and movements. The examples of Krishnaprem, Dilip Kumar Roy, the Mirtola Ashram, Ashish Da, and the resultant synthesis of Krishna-bhakti ideas are worthy additions to the corpus of Vaishnava studies.

Endnotes

1. Sri Aurobindo, letter to Dilip Kumar Roy, March 17, 1932 in *Sri Aurobindo to Dilip* [4 volumes], *Volume 1 1929-1933*, edited by Sujata Nahar, Michel Danino, and Shankar Bandyopadhyay. Mysore: Hari Krishna Mandir Trust, Pune & Mira Aditi, 2003, p. 180. Also available online.
2. Both names “Krishnaprem” and “Krishna Prem” are present in the literature. I use the former.
3. David L. Haberman, (1993) “A cross-cultural adventure: The transformation of Ronald Nixon,” *Religion*, 23.3, 1993: 217-227.
4. Dilip Kumar Roy, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram: Pondicherry, p. 329.
5. Martin Buckley, 2008, *An Indian Odyssey*. Hutchinson: London, p. 121.
6. Keshav Desiraju, 1998, “The scientific sadhu—review of *Relating to Reality* by Madhava Ashish,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, 25(2/3): p. 167.
7. Sri Krishnaprem, 1940, *The Yoga of the Kathopanishad*. Ananda Publishing House: Allahabad, p. 5.
8. Haberman, *ibid.* p. 220-221.
9. Dilip Kumar Roy, 1975, *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan: Bombay, p. 134.
10. It was intended to call a section of this article “Sri Krishnaprem Came to Me, Sri Dadaji Came to Me,” that is, “Krishnaprem came to me, Dilip Kumar Roy came to me.” This title would have been an allusion to Roy’s 1952 book, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*. Great souls and their philosophies have a habit of coming to the seeker at the right time. Krishnaprem and Roy, affectionately known as Dadaji to his intimates, both came to this author during a two-week stay at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry in early 2003.
11. *Sri Aurobindo to Dilip* [4 volumes], *Volume 1 1929-1933*, edited by Sujata Nahar, Michel Danino, and Shankar Bandyopadhyay. Mysore: Hari Krishna Mandir Trust, Pune & Mira Aditi. Also available online.
12. Roy, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 321.
13. Sri Aurobindo, letter to Dilip Kumar Roy, April 6, 1932 in *Sri Aurobindo to Dilip*, *Volume 1 1929-1933*, p. 189.
14. Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi, 1973, *Pilgrims of the Stars*. Macmillan: New York, p. 95.
15. See Joshua Nash, 2015, “Vrindavan: The human sanctuary,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 24(1): 55-66; Joshua Nash, 2012, “Re-examining ecological approaches to Vrindavan pilgrimage,” in Manderson, L., Smith, W. & Tomlinson, M. (eds), *Flows of Faith: Religious Reach and Community in Asia and the Pacific*. Springer: Dordrecht & New York, 109-121; and Joshua Nash, 2016, “The Shrī Hari Vansh Mantra-Yantra: Sacred sound, symbolic representation, and Vrindavan environmentalism,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 24(2): 137-145, for details of the Vrindavan Ecological Concept.
16. Letter from Krishnaprem to Dilip Kumar Roy, 30 January 1931, in *Sri Aurobindo Came To Me*, p. 147.
17. Haberman, p. 225.

18. Letter from Krishnaprem to Dilip Kumar Roy, 22 March 1945, in *Sri Aurobindo Came To Me*, p. 237.

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