

Emotion in Bengali Religious Thought: Substance and Metaphor

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[Emotions in India] are more likely to be objectified or substantialized, than somatized as in China, or internalized, as forces, drives, or instincts [as] in the West. . . . Contrary to Western stereotypes about India, and contrary to the Western devaluation of emotion in the face of reason, India finds emotions, like food, necessary for a reasonable life, and, like taste, cultivatable for the fullest understanding of life's meaning and purpose.

—Owen Lynch, *Divine Passions*

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on Bengali ethnopsychology and some indigenous understandings of emotional events. The ethnological goal is not to relate or reduce the indigenous model to other theoretical perspectives but, rather, to examine how cultural and folk models interpret and express experience.

Emotion is variously viewed in both positive and negative ways in the Indian religious and philosophical traditions. In those traditions that are ascetic and emphasize mental control, emotions are distractions that need to be stilled. In those traditions emphasizing love of a deity, emotions are valuable but they must be directed and transformed.

This paper will begin by presenting a background on some early Indian traditions which understand emotion to be a distraction from clear perception and which also form a foundation for the “fluid” understanding of the world shown by later devotional traditions. It will then survey some of the major Sanskrit and Bengali terms used to express emotion. The paper will then move to a description of the *Alaṅkāraśāstra*¹ and the Bengali *Vaiṣṇava* and *Sahajiyā* devotional traditions, and comment on some differences between the Indian and Western approaches to emotion.

There is a stereotypical view in the West that Indian religion opposes emotion. This is because some of the oldest traditions in India Vedanta, Yoga and Āyurveda hold this position. However, it is important to note that these traditions are not dominant in modern India and have not been dominant for centuries. I will briefly discuss their views, however, to use them as background material.

Vedanta is the philosophy of the Vedic and Upanishadic texts. According to the *advaita* or monistic form of Vedanta, the ultimate state is a world-ground, a tranquil ocean of consciousness. It is disturbed by illusion (*māyā*), by the world of names and forms, which creates ignorance. Emotion is a part of that world of becoming, that changing universe which does not allow the person to perceive things as they really are, merged in *brahman* (infinite reality, knowledge, and bliss). The Vedantin seeks wisdom (*jñāna*) to the exclusion of emotion and renounces attachment to the illusory world. Emotion muddies the waters, disrupting awareness and distracting the sage.

A second ancient tradition is the classical yoga of Patañjali. In *sūtra* I.2 of the *Yoga Sūtras*, Patañjali gives the definition of yoga: “*Yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*” (Yoga is the control or dissolution of the fluctuations of the mind).² The mind is understood as a field or ocean of consciousness (*citta*), which is ideally peaceful and still. However, in most human beings it is full of changes, waves, and eddies. These changes, or fluctuations, are the *vṛttis*, which disturb the clarity of the mind. Some changes are of external origin, from the physical world, and some are internal, arising from memory and impression (*saṃskāra*).

According to Patañjali’s yoga, these memory impressions may become inclinations or propensities of the personality (*vāsanās*), accompanied by repeated habits of thought. The associated mental fluctuations become laden with emotion and are called *kleśhas*, impurities or afflictions. There are five *kleśhas*: ignorance, desire, hatred, fear (especially fear of death), and pride (the sense of the self as an individual entity).³ These should be avoided: The yogi should control his emotions, withdrawing his perceptions and concerns into himself as a turtle pulls his legs inside of his shell.

The mind is often compared to a river or ocean. According to the commentary of Vyāsa on Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, “The river called mind flows in two directions”⁴: toward the world of desire (*saṃsāra*) and toward the world of peace (called *kaivalya*, or isolation from the turbulence of daily life). The mind-stream, or river of consciousness (*citta-nadī*), needs to be directed and one-pointed, and one way to direct the river is to dam it through dispassion (*vairāgya*).⁵

A third source is Āyurveda, the medical tradition of India, which is based on the balance of the three humors in the body.⁶ When these liquids have left their normal channels, they become imbalanced (and are then called faults, *doṣhas*), and the person becomes ill. When the flow is imbalanced, the mind

can become intoxicated by these humors, and passions and mental disorganization may result.

According to Caraka, one of the most important writers in the *Āyurvedic* system, the person is born with three basic desires: the desire for life (self-preservation), the desire for wealth, and the desire for a good afterlife.⁷ Other emotions (envy, grief, fear, anger, pride, hatred) are due to confusion or perversion of the understanding (*prajñaparādh*).⁸ Confusion, when combined with lack of self-control and lapse of memory, causes humoral imbalance and mental and physical illness. The humors then attack the heart, and obstruct perception and sensation. This causes emotional disturbance and insanity, with their hallucination, delusion, and maladjustment to the social environment.⁹ Such disturbance may also be caused by strong desires that are unfulfilled.¹⁰ While dejection and grief aggravate disease, joy and contentment cure it.¹¹ Pleasure comes from organic equilibrium, and pain, from organic disequilibrium. Liquids link the system together, keep the bodily channels running smoothly, and balance the various aspects of the person.

These three traditions provide a basis for the negative view of emotion in India—a view that is different from that held by the popular culture and devotional religions of West Bengal.

THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTION

The process of coming to understand the emotional lives of people in different cultures can be seen first and foremost as a problem of translation. . . . The interpretive task, then, is not primarily to fathom somehow “what they are feeling inside,” . . . but rather to translate emotional communications from one idiom, context, language, or sociohistorical mode of understanding into another.¹²

Translation and interpretation between cultures, and between systems of thought and belief, are difficult endeavors. This section will not deal with all of the complexities of hermeneutics and cross-cultural communication, but will focus upon language and how it expresses the nature of emotion.

In the Sanskrit and Bengali languages, there is no exact term for emotion. The term used most frequently for it is *bhāva* or *anubhāva* (the physical expression of the state of *bhāva*). Sometimes the terms *rāga* or *ābeg* are used, which refer to intense emotions or passions. In the yogic literature we see the term *vedanā*, of Pali origin. It refers to a feeling, usually of a negative kind, such as pain or sorrow.

The term “*bhāva*” has many referents: The Monier-Williams *Sanskrit Dictionary* has four large columns of definitions for *bhāva*, and the *Bāṅgālā Bhāṣār Abhidhān* dictionary has two columns. Definitions in the *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* include mental state, mood, emotion, condition, love, friend-

ship, ecstasy, rapture, passion, inner significance, essence, and existence—thus covering a wide range of phenomena.

Bhāva is an emotional complex, a form of experience, with connotations of associated perception, thought, movement, and expression. It is a way of being, a sense of identity which may be individual or shared. It is believed in many of the Bengali devotional traditions that religious ecstasies can create waves of *bhāva* (*bhāva-taranga*), which can spread through crowds of people, causing them all to share in the ecstatic's intense emotions.¹³ The person who is *bhāvāveśh* is possessed by *bhāva*, either intensely emotional or taking on the *bhāva* (the emotion and identity) of a deity or other being. The person may be *bhāva lāgā* (affected by an emotion or idea), *bhāva prabaṇ* (emotional, sentimental, maudlin), or *bhāva bihbul* (overwhelmed with emotion or ecstasy). As terms derived from *bhāva*, *bhāvana* is thought, meditation, creation, and visualization, while *bhāvanā* is thought and contemplation but also worry and anxiety (the term is used in the Indian medical tradition for the repeated maceration, pulverization, and purification of herbal medicine—an interesting metaphor for analytic thought).

While doing fieldwork in West Bengal, in eastern India, from 1983 to 1984, I asked informants for definitions of *bhāva*. Some of these popular definitions follow:

Bhāva is that aspect of mind which deals with emotion and experience; it is a result of culture and personality. It is only emotion—it does not include images, which are only fantasy. Yogis may develop stages and faculties of *bhāva*. Any experience can be called a *bhāva*, but the highest *bhāva* is *brahmabhāva*, a state of realistic expectations, a poise in which a stable equilibrium is established. (Psychiatrist)

Bhāva is sentiment or emotion. It depends on the context—it may be used for poetry and art or for people—*dujon bhāva*, they are close. After fighting, children clasp fingers and say, "*Bhāva*, now we are friends." *Bhāva* is also inspired thought. (Grant administrator)

Bhāva has a material and a spiritual meaning. Its material meaning is love between a man and a woman, but spiritual *bhāva* is love of God by a devotee with all his mind and heart. (Insurance salesman)

Bhāva is very deep thought, deep in the heart, until one is lost within the self. The person becomes explosively pure in heart—he sees persons as other persons, such as all women as mother or sister. There are three stages of *bhāva* in the worship of *Śakti* (the Goddess)—*bhāva*, possession by *bhāva* (*bhāvāveśh*), and deep trance (*bhāva samādhi*). In *bhāva*, one becomes lost in memory and emotion. In possession by *bhāva*, one becomes lost from the material world and sees the heaven worlds. In the deepest trance of *bhāva*, one roams in the absolute (*ātman*). (Travel agent)

Bhāva is when different parts of the person come together, as when cooking Kashmiri chicken. Different spices are blended together to create a taste. In love affairs (*premer bhāva*), the parts of the soul are mixed together like spices. The soul and mind consult each other, along with the body, to decide about loving. Good worship (*pūjā*) creates good *bhāva* between the devotee and the goddess, if the person believes 100 percent. There is a relation of soul between the deity and the worshiper—they share the same actions, and adjust to each other, even if there was conflict between them at the beginning. (Store owner)

Informants show an understanding of various stages or levels of *bhāva*, usually shifting its focus (from worldly goals to divine ones) and its degree of intensity (from lesser to greater passion). All of these are understood to be forms or transformations of emotional states.

In the Bengali and Sanskrit languages, terms for emotion and thought, mind and heart, are not opposed. Indeed, most frequently the same terms are used for both. A term often heard, *mana*, means both mind and heart, as well as mood, feeling, mental state, memory, desire, attachment, interest, attention, devotion, and decision. These terms do not have a single referent in English, and must be understood through clusters of explicit and implicit meanings.¹⁴ Verbs based on *mana* include *mana kara* (to make up one's mind, to resolve or agree); *mana kāra* (to captivate the mind or win one's heart); and *mana kholā* (to speak one's mind or open one's heart).

A term used less frequently by informants, *hṛidaya*, means the heart as both organ and inner seat of feeling. The heart may be melted (when a play is *hṛidayadravakara*, touching or evoking pathos) or broken (the heart is pierced, *hṛidayabhedī*), and may overflow with an outburst of emotion (*hṛidayochvāsa*). A person unaffected by emotion may be called unfeeling or heartless (*hṛidayahīn*). The heart is also understood as a space or locale, in which persons or deities may dwell. Thus, we see the heart called a canvas for painting (*hṛidayapaṭa*), a shrine or temple (*hṛidayamandir*), a seat for a loved one or deity (*hṛidayāsana*), or a space as broad as the sky (*hṛidayākāśh*). As one informant described it, his heart was an empty box that needed to be filled. In poetry, the loved one may live in the heart as in a garden; and in worship, an aspect of the god may live there enthroned, surrounded by the devotee's love like an aura of light. The poet Rāmprasād Sen spoke of the "burning ground of the heart," and had visions of the goddess Kālī dancing there.¹⁵ In *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, the heart is a doorway to the worlds of the spirit, as the *anāhata chakra* (heart center).¹⁶

There are several other terms often used in discussing emotion. *Rāga*, a term more well-known in the West as a mode of Indian classical music, also means passion, ranging from love and attachment to anger and rage. It has the meaning of dye or color (especially red)—the soul is understood to be "dyed"

by passion, which permeates it like a dye permeates cloth.¹⁷ *Kāma* is desire, lust, and pleasure, while *prema* is selfless or spiritual love. *Ābeg* means tremendous force, passionate outburst, intense feeling, uneasiness, and suspense, while *anubhāva* refers to both power and physical expression of emotional states (such as tears and sighs). Yet emotion is *sūkṣmatā* (subtlety, delicacy, invisibility to the senses) as well as *komlatā* (gentleness, tenderness, softness). As *anubhuti*, it is both perception and intuition, realization and feeling.

The terms for thought, or cognition, often imply emotion. We have the word *cinta*, meaning thought, idea, and cogitation, with associated meanings of anxiety, worry, and fear. *Dhāraṇā* means idea, conception, memory, belief, impression, as well as feeling, and is associated with the term *dharaṇa*, the act of holding, catching, wearing, carrying (thought is “borne” in the mind). *Anubhāva* means knowledge, perception, and realization but also feeling, and *kalpanā* refers to thought and imagination.

We see in these terms and definitions that emotion is a powerful force which is at the same time subtle and delicate, invisible to the senses yet capable of generating physical expressions, associated with perception, intuition, and realization. There is no sharp distinction between emotion and cognition. Thought is associated with knowledge and discrimination, and the mind grasps and holds memories and ideas. Yet thought is associated with feelings, especially anxiety,¹⁸ as well as imagination.

Bhāva in itself is a complex term with a range of meanings, from a broad understanding of experience and identity (*bhāva* as a way of being) to a specific *bhāva*, an emotion or thought that is clearly defined. Using the same term for these events shows that the range of experience—emotion, mood, identity, mental state—is understood as a continuum rather than a collection of distinct and opposed categories. Both emotion and thought are part of the wider category of *bhāva*.

THE METAPHORS OF EMOTION: FIRE AND WATER

Swept away by rivers of love
 (swelling floods of their desire)
 Torrents dammed by their elders
 (propriety all parents require)
 Close they stand, anxious but still
 (hiding passions, restraining sights)
 Lovers drink nectars from the blossoms
 (the love that pours from lotus eyes).

*Amaruśataka*¹⁹

Metaphorically, emotion has been linked with both fire and water in Indian religious literature. I think that a brief exploration of these metaphors would

give some insight into the nature of emotion in the Bengali devotional traditions.

The metaphor of emotional heat is an old idea in India, going back to Vedic times (2000-1500 BCE). Vedic sages, or *ṛishis*, sought to control *tapas* (the universal energy of creation and destruction). *Tapas* comes from the Sanskrit root *tap*, whose most literal meaning is “to be hot” or “to create heat.”²⁰ The heat of *tapas* could transform both the world and the person, and its dynamic forms include lustful heat, jealous heat, devotional heat, sorrowful heat, and the heat of hatred and anger. The sage was believed to be capable of burning animals and people with his glance if angry—the emotion would return to its original form as heat. *Tapas* is also the heat of the sacrifice and the force behind creation, linking together the divine and human worlds. In the Vedic creation hymn, the “*Nāsadiya Sukta*” (*Rig Veda* X.29.4), desire (*kāma*) is born out of *tapas*.

While the energy of *tapas* is closely linked with desire and emotion, the term also refers to an ascetic practice used to suppress emotion. Ascetics try to “burn away” their emotional lives in the heat of *tapas* generated by meditation, and their worldly feelings are given up into the fire of the “inner sacrifice.” Thus, they accumulate *tapas* as transformed emotion, and this *tapas* can give power, energy, and religious experience. The practice of *tapas* enables the sage to be indifferent to desire. Even today, some practitioners walk naked and cover themselves with ash from the burning ground to show how their emotions have been burnt away.

In the later *bhakti* (devotional) traditions, passion is said to burn the hearts of devotees, causing the person to be “on fire” for the god. Some saints have stated that their bodies would burn with fever for the deity for months or years on end. Rāmakṛiṣṇa Paramahansa, a recent Bengali Śhākta²¹ saint, could not touch other people during his meditation on the deity, because his body was physically burning from passion, and he had to wear a sheet when approaching others. The Vaiṣṇava saint Vijayakṛiṣṇa Goswāmin, who rebelled against a Western education to return to yogic and devotional practices, felt unbearable heat during meditation. The desire for insight showed itself as *nāmāgni* (the fire of the Name of God), which he said caused his body to burn and his limbs to separate off and later return together. Saints in meditation are said to be “heated”; Ānandamayī Mā’s disciples reported that her body caused great heat wherever she sat.²²

The physical body is understood to be subject to mental and emotional heat. The Vaiṣṇava saint Siddha Kṛiṣṇadās was a visionary for whom the world of Kṛiṣṇa’s paradise was more real than the physical world. He would often see Kṛiṣṇa’s consort goddess Rādhā in visions, but when she refused to appear to him anymore, out of intense sorrow and force of will he set his body on fire.²³ We see a similar theme in the idea of *satī*. Many people in the West have heard of the Indian ritual in which the widow climbs on the funeral pyre of

her husband, to die with him in the flames. In several early variants of the mythic story, the woman Satī was intensely angry and sorrowful over her father's poor treatment of her husband Śhiva, and she set herself on fire solely by yogic power. In this case, the visible fire was the expression of her inner emotions.²⁴ The chaste wife also has this power: In the Tamil story Shilapadikāram, a woman whose husband was wrongfully prosecuted caused the city to burn down.²⁵

There are many folk beliefs that link emotion and heat. However, we also see the development over time of a link between emotion and liquid. The heart burns but it also melts; the person is on fire but softens. In the *Ṛig Veda*, *rasa* can be any fluid, but it is especially the fluid of life, associated with sexuality, passion, and blood.²⁶ The Vedantic "ocean of consciousness" uses a watery metaphor, as does the yogic "river of mind." As the tradition of *bhakti* grew up, heat became associated with the pain of separation, and water, with the joy of love in union. Remedies for the "burning sorrow" of separation included garlands, wet compresses, moist sandalwood paste, and cool breezes. The beloved "cooled the heat" of the lover, and the waves of love represented the forces that drew the lovers together. While earlier metaphors of emotion focused on heat, the focus later shifted to water and/or liquid, which came to be seen as an emotional vehicle in its own right.

THE NATURE OF EMOTION: *BHĀVA* AND *RASA*

Having thoughts of intense passion about you (Kṛiṣṇa), the deer-eyed woman is immersed in an ocean of passionate bliss (*rasa*), fixed in meditation.

Jayadeva, *Gīta Govinda*, VI.10

The most extensive analyses of emotion in Indian religion and philosophy have probably come from the writers of the *Alaṅkāraśāstra*, the Sanskrit literary tradition which focuses on aesthetic experience, and from the *Vaiṣṇava* tradition, which emphasizes religious emotion. For both traditions, aesthetic emotion is *rasa*, which is experienced by the person of taste (*rasika*) during identification with a dramatic character or situation. According to the *Alaṅkāra*, the spectator is totally involved in the dramatic event, and feels an emotion that is powerful, extraordinary (*alaukika*), yet impersonal and generic. It is joyful rather than pleasant or painful, and brings a sense of wonder. In some ways, it is similar to the religious goal of realization of Brahman. Viśvanātha writes that aesthetic enjoyment requires subconscious impressions (*vāsanās*) which support an emotional disposition.²⁷ Aesthetic emotions have a variety of effects on consciousness.²⁸

The writers of the *Alaṅkāra* describe permanent emotions and temporary ones. They base their organization of emotions on those of Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra*: love, mirth, grief, anger, energy (zeal), fear, disgust, and wonder.²⁹ These permanent emotions (*sthāyibhāva*) are dominant, and cannot be

suppressed by other emotions. According to Śiṅga Bhūpāla's *Rasārṇava-sudhākar*, "They are permanent emotions, which transform other emotions into themselves, even as the ocean transforms the waves into itself."³⁰ The transitory emotions (*vyabhichāribhāva*), according to Śāradātanaya's *Bhāvaprakāśhana*, appear and disappear within the permanent emotions as waves appear and disappear in the ocean, contributing to its excellence.³¹ They are like bubbles in the ocean, or like beads or flowers of a garland, and they help, promote, and strengthen the permanent emotions they ornament. Some of the transitory emotions include shame, exhilaration, dejection, eagerness, apathy, ferocity, and anxiety.³² In the first chapter of his *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata compared the aesthetic experience to eating—as spices add flavor (*rasa*) to the main dish, which is enjoyed by the gourmet, so the permanent emotion in drama is spiced with transitory emotions and literary ornaments, to be enjoyed by the connoisseur (*rasika*).

The sentiment of *rasa* is a transformation of the basic, more "concrete" emotion of *bhāva*. The term *rasa* means sap, juice, liquid essence, and taste, and is often translated as flavor, relish, mood, and sentiment. Emotional *rasa* can be tasted and appreciated.³³ When emotions become *rasas*, they may be viewed as art objects, and combined in aesthetic fashion. They may blend harmoniously with each other (*sandhi*), arise and disappear, or conflict with and inhibit one another. This conflict is called *rasābhāsa*, and is understood to result in a semblance or imitation of a true emotion. It is a damaged, inferior, or incomplete sort of emotion, tainted by pride or power or generated by some inappropriate source. The conflicts that may generate such a damaged emotion could include the clash between parental and erotic love or the emotions of disgust and fury combined with the attitude of loving service. They are called "compound emotions" when several transitory emotions arise in quick succession, especially when some are inhibited by others.

From this perspective, the *bhāva* is a "raw" emotion, not cooked or transformed into an aesthetic emotion. In order to transform the emotion, an internal distancing is needed from the emotion, so that the experiencer also becomes an observer, in some ways a "witness-self," as described in Vedantic philosophy.

Rasa is characterized by impersonality or generalizing (*sādhāraṇikāraṇa*), the distancing of the person from both the object and from his or her own emotions. In *bhāva*, the person experiences emotions directly; while in *rasa*, he or she empathizes and observes the emotion and situation, feeling *as if* he felt the emotion but not being involved enough to feel it directly. It is impersonal, generic, the experience of a type.³⁴ As De states,

Generality is thus a state of self-identification with the imagined situation, devoid of any practical interest and, from this point of view, of any relation whatsoever with the limited self, and as it were impersonal.³⁵

The feelings of the poet or actor are also excluded from the aesthetic experience. The elements of particular consciousness are expunged in order to create generalized emotion, valuing universals more than particular acts. Emotions are not undergone; instead, the aesthete is both observer and participant.

Bhāva is a personal emotion; *rasa* is an impersonal or depersonalized emotion, in which the participant is distanced as an observer. Why is a depersonalized emotion considered superior to a personal one? Because the aesthete can experience a wide range of emotions yet be protected from their painful aspects. Emotion is appreciated through a glass window, which keeps out unpleasantness. Though the glass is clear, thus allowing a union of sorts with the observed object, the window is always present, thus maintaining the dualism. This becomes important for the religious dimensions of *rasa*, where the duality between the worshipper and the god (an important concept in *bhakti* devotion) must always be maintained.

The Bengali Vaiṣṇavas also value *rasa*, but they emphasize its religious aspects. In the Vaiṣṇava understanding of emotion, *bhāva* becomes *bhakti rasa* (devotional sentiment). The religious goal is not liberation but rather love, and the devotee must go beyond dramatic emotion to become filled with religious emotion. The connoisseur (the *rasika* or *sahṛidaya*, the person with heart), who can truly appreciate the fine points of the arts, becomes the devotee (*bhakta*), tasting the forms of joy brought by the god Kṛiṣṇa. He or she is both observer and participant. The aesthetic experience is universal, *bhedābheda*, simultaneously individual and eternal, material and spiritual, impersonal and passionately involved.

In *bhakti* yoga, emotion becomes discipline—the emotions are generated and transformed consciously, especially in that form of practice known as *rāgānugā bhakti sādhana*.³⁶ There is a sort of “ladder of emotion” which one must climb to the highest emotional states, and it is described in two important texts, the *Bhaktirasāmṛitasindhu* and *Ujjvala-Nīlamaṇi* of Rūpa Gosvāmin. While the former text (*The Ocean of the Nectar of Devotional Love*) looks at the earlier stages of religious emotion and its transformation, the latter text (*The Blazing Sapphire*—a pun on the god Kṛiṣṇa) focuses on the more advanced states of mystical love.

The *Bhaktirasāmṛitasindhu* has the devotee begin with ritual action (*vaidhi bhakti*) and progress to ritual emotion (*rāgānugā bhakti*). Through physical action and imaginative visualization, the devotee builds a soul, a spiritual body composed of love, which can experience emotion more intensely than can the ordinary personality. The *bhāva* becomes deepened, and the heart is softened. Emotion becomes intense love (*prema*), and there is continual focus of attention on Rādhā and Kṛiṣṇa, the divine couple. The highest state, called the “greatest emotion” (*mahābhāva*), has the person experience all possible emotions simultaneously, including the opposite emotions of separation and union, in passionate delirium (*mādana*). As O. B. L. Kapoor states,

Mādana has the unique capacity of directly experiencing a thousand different kinds of enjoyment of union with Kṛṣṇa. . . . It presents these multifarious experiences of union simultaneously with multifarious experiences of separation (*viyoga*) involving craving (*utkanthā*) for union.³⁷

The “ladder of emotion” includes *sneha* (a thickening of spiritual love, when the emotion gains a consistency and taste like clarified butter or honey); *māna* (sulking and hiding emotion); *praṇaya* (deep sharing and confidence); *rāga* (intense passion, also defined as the person being totally concentrated upon the desired object); *anurāga* (in which the beloved appears eternally new); and *mahābhāva* (the experience of emotion so intense and complex that all extremes of emotion are felt at once). In the orthodox Bengali Vaiṣṇava tradition, only Rādhā may experience the state of *mahābhāva*, though her companions and their handmaidens may share in her emotional states. Indeed, these handmaidens (*mañjaris*) are said to feel Rādhā’s emotions a hundred times more intensely than she does, for they are not as personally involved (selflessness is understood to increase sensitivity to the divine).³⁸ The devotee may also share in these states by visualizing the mythical situations and characters in which they occur.³⁹

These states of intense emotion are expressed by ecstatic bodily changes (the *sāttvika bhāvas* or *sāttvika vikāras*). There are eight of these: trembling, shedding tears, paralysis, sweating, fainting, changing skin color, faltering voice, and hair standing on end. Like the transitory emotions, these symptoms are understood to develop and intensify the permanent emotions, and they are an extreme form of emotional expression (*anubhāva*).⁴⁰ The term “*bhāva*” is also used for the five basic roles, or emotional relationships, through which the devotee may relate to the deity: through friendship, parental love, service, peace, and erotic love. Among the Bengali Vaiṣṇavas, *bhāva* is the emotional ground for subtler and more complex emotional states.

But it is among the Sahajiyās, the unorthodox, tantric branch of Vaiṣṇavism, that we find the most literal notion of emotion as substance. Sahajiyās also value *rasa*, but their understanding of the term is different from the more traditional Bengali Vaiṣṇavas. They practice sexual yoga, literally living out the relationship of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, the deity and his consort, in order to share in their emotions and experiences. Such practice involves maintaining dispassion within a setting of greatest passion, “diving deep without getting wet.” By such rituals, lustful and earthly emotion is transformed into spiritual love. The process has been compared to cooking:

To find nectar
Stir the cauldron
On the fire—
And unite the act of loving

With the feeling of love.
 Distill the sweetness
 Of the heart
 And reach the treasures.⁴¹

Here *rasa* is a literal fluid, which is heated, stirred, and concentrated, a fluid of pure emotion which is condensed during the practice—the sexual fluid, which can be transformed into new life or spiritual love. There is less focus on observation, and more on practice. All other emotions are secondary to those of love, which is viewed as the basic, or primordial, emotion. The emotional fire in the woman ripens the liquid *rasa* in the male; as the *Vivarta Vilāsa* states,

Now hear about the nature of (the physical) woman. Just as milk is usually boiled with the help of fire, so the Gosvāmīs have utilised the fire that is in woman (for the purpose of purifying the passion).⁴²

As S. B. Dasgupta states, the Sahajiyās believed *rasa* to flow “perpetually from the eternal Vṛindāvana to earth, manifested as the stream of *rasa* flowing to and between men and women.”⁴³ Sexuality and love linked the devotee with the heavenly Vṛindāvana, and passionate emotion showed the presence of heaven on earth. As milk is churned into butter, so the *rasa* of love for Rādhā and Kṛiṣṇa is churned by sexuality into more intense and condensed states, becoming a pure substance of joy. As the *Premānandalahari* states, “If there is no *rāga* [passion], there can be no union.”⁴⁴ Emotion is directed and transformed.

Thus, in these three traditions we see an evolution of ideas about emotion: It has changed from an abstract aesthetic principle to an intense style of relating with a deity to a sexual fluid which is the essence of God.

CONCLUSIONS

Bhāva is like filling a pail full of tap water—when it fills up, the sound will be changed. The body is a vessel which can understand things, and whenever you feel or understand something, you have a sort of *bhāva*. But it is not called “*bhāva*” until it is overflowing. . . . When the pail flows over, the eight *sāttvikā bhāvas* emerge—the eight ways of overflowing. These are divine, supernatural events. *Bhāvas* are temporary because the body is full of pores. It is like a beautiful glass with holes in it—there is leakage. You put water in it and it comes out. The body is made in such a way, that whatever you fill it up with, it will come out. Feelings (*bhāvas*) and highest feelings (*māhābhāva*) come out through the pores of the body. But the memory is an energy that remains. (Interview, Śhākta practitioner, Calcutta)

There is a wide range of theory in Indian philosophical and religious thought on the nature of emotion. However, if we wish to generalize, there tends to be a different understanding of the nature of emotion in India than

that held in the West. Emotion, like consciousness, tends to be substantial rather than conceptual, more like the early Christian notions of *ousia* (being or essence), the transformation of a common substance.

In the *bhakti* traditions of Bengal, emotion is the path to God, and is thus sacred. Rather than trying to eliminate emotion, the goal is to intensify that emotion until it becomes powerful, overwhelming, the center of the devotee's being. There is a natural tendency for that love to increase, "as the ebb tide rises into high waves at the rising of the moon." Human emotion is transformed into divine emotion: It is boiled, thickened, purified, and redirected. Emotion is a means to an end, and often it does not matter which emotion is being emphasized. Hatred of the god (*dveṣha-bhāva*) gives the same focus on the deity as loving like a parent (*vātsalya-bhāva*), and both emotions can bring the devotee to paradise.⁴⁵ Indeed, powerful enough emotion can influence the deity's will, even bring him to earth, for love can control the gods and make them slaves of their devotees.

Traditionally, the body has been compared to a vase or pot, and the soul (*jīva*) is incarnate within it. Emotion occurs within the soul but can be manifest in the body. It is inward (*antar* or *mānasa*) when not expressed and outward (*bāhya*) when shown by the physical body. As the Shākta practitioner stated in the introductory quotation, the body is like a pail that can be filled up with *bhāva*. The body as vessel of the soul is an old idea in both East and West. The practitioner later stated that the pores can be "plugged" by concentrating on love of the Goddess and chanting mantras, which maintains the intensity of the emotion.

We have looked at a wide range of beliefs about emotion in religion and folklore, and we can ask, What is the value of emotion? Let us examine some ideas from this paper.

1. Bengal tends to study emotions in ways that the West does not. The aesthetic and devotional traditions focus upon intense emotions and the disciplines which generate them. Emotion is a sea rather than a puddle or a few stray droplets, and it is studied by participant observation, by disciplined individuals who view emotion from the "inside." From the perspective of *rasa*, it is best understood in its pure and intense forms, while Western philosophy tends to focus on secular, everyday emotion rather than ecstatic or extreme emotion (though William James comes to mind as an exception). If we accept the liquid metaphor, one is more likely to understand fluid dynamics by the study of water in oceans and lakes than by studying puddles and droplets.

2. Emotion is identified by metaphors of both substance and space. It can be intensified, shared, transferred, deposited in physical locales.⁴⁶ Emotion is neither an involuntary response nor cognition and belief, but a transformation of the substance of consciousness. The Indian universe is a fluid one, a complex network of interactions between various forms of substance, according to many modern anthropologists. As Marriott states,

Matter that is subject to such variations may well be called “fluid,” and indeed Hindus generally refer to the world they must live in as “(that which is) moving” (*jagat*) and as a “flowing together” (*samsāra*). . . . It and its inhabitants are generated by, and constituted of, more or less malleable substance that is continually moving in and out of them.⁴⁷

Mind and emotion are no exception to this “wholly substantial and fluid world,” and they tend to be understood through metaphors of flowing and water. They may also be located spatially, such as in the “space of the heart,” as a throne or box or shrine. As substance, emotion is accessible to mind and heart, and there is no absolute separation between aspects of the self. Substance gives access, for viewing emotion as intangible and invisible also makes it inaccessible.

3. Emotion can act as an aid to concentration, helping to focus the mind rather than acting as a distraction. Passion can direct the mind and fasten it upon its object. In the stories of Kṛiṣṇa and the *gopīs*, or milkmaids, who loved him, their fascination for him is often described as meditative, and Rādhā’s passion for Kṛiṣṇa is often compared to yogic concentration. The love object is the focus of the mind, for there is no split between thought and feeling. Remembrance (*smaraṇa*) involves *mana*, which is both mind and heart, and it is directed to a single end, so that even thinking of anything else becomes difficult. Depending on how it is used, the same emotion can distract from concentration or be a means of mental control, and limit or increase knowledge.

4. The “hydraulic model” of emotion is differently understood in Bengal than in the West. Superficially, it is much like Freud’s notion of the id, whose energies overflow into the conscious mind. A good Bengali description of *bhāva* using the hydraulic model was given by a woman ecstatic to describe her own experiences:

When something is boiled in a closed vessel, there comes a stage when the vapor will push up the lid and, unless force is used, the vessel cannot be kept covered anymore. In a similar manner, when, while being engaged in *japa* (chanting) or some other spiritual exercise, a wave of ecstatic emotion surges up from within, it becomes difficult to check it. This ecstatic emotion is called “*bhāva*.” It emerges from deep within and expresses itself outwardly.⁴⁸

Her description follows Robert Solomon’s rendering of the “hydraulic metaphor,” in which emotion is a force within the person, filling up and spilling over. It is based on theories ranging from the medieval humours, animal spirits, and bodily fluids, to the Freudian theory of the dynamic and economic forms of psychic equilibrium within the person, where the ego holds back the repressed libidinal forces pushing for release. He finds that, in Western philosophy, this approach has served to limit the range and importance of the emotions, for it

relieves the person of responsibility. The emotions are inflicted by causes beyond human control or are bottled up like volcanic lava, and they render the person passive.⁴⁹ As he states,

The key to the hydraulic model is the idea that emotions and other passions (or their determinants) exist wholly independent of consciousness, effecting (or “affecting”) consciousness and often forcing us to behave in certain discernible ways.⁵⁰

In Bengal, however, the hydraulic model has opened and expanded the concept of emotion, for it has been tied in with spirituality. The key statement might be rephrased: The emotions are normally independent of consciousness, but the person may gain access to the sources of emotion and direct them to gain certain discernible ends. Unlike Freudian psychology, the Bengali model does not understand the psyche as a closed system. People may undergo emotions but also generate, control, and share them, to gain access to the emotional sea that lies beneath the conscious mind. Different emotions may be combined, or many experienced simultaneously. Because the person has access to the source of emotion, there can be no freedom from responsibility or use of emotion as an “excuse” for unacceptable behavior.

5. Emotions can be controlled and combined to become something analogous to art objects. Rather than passions or disturbances, emotions may be aesthetic objects, which are arranged as dominant and transitory, central and peripheral, clashing and ornamental, as an artist might arrange different color relationships on a canvas. Emotions are, in a sense, colors (*rāga*), which define and structure experience as art. During the dramatic performance, the emotions represented by the actor are experienced by the observer, who is simultaneously a participant. As the trained observer is aware of the subtlety and interplay of emotion, he or she becomes involved in what might be called “performance art.” It is a conscious awareness of his or her own shared dramatic experience, which is paradoxical because it is both close and distanced. Raw, “concrete” emotions can be transformed into aesthetic and religious ones.

6. Disciplined emotion can generate new personalities which are highly valued. The person may not be able to determine his or her secular personality, based as it is on past events, but he or she can build a soul, a spiritual body that is sculpted out of emotion. This alternative personality, or “subtle body,” is composed of the emotions of love, and represents the person’s ideal self.

The idea of such a self has often been dismissed as “split personality,” or multiple-personality disorder, by Western observers. However, it is interesting to note that, in the West, the focus upon alternate selves has been on multiple-personality disorder generated by trauma, by abuse or events too painful for the

person to bear, and, earlier on, demonic personalities that possess the person involuntarily.⁵¹ The *DSM III* psychiatric manual's description fits the Indian case in many ways:

A. The existence within an individual of two or more distinct personalities, each of which is dominant at a particular time. B. The personality that is dominant at any particular time determines the individual's behavior. C. Each individual personality is complex and integrated with its own unique behavior patterns and social relationships.⁵²

The Western alternate personalities are considered to be pathological, a result of trauma. Emotion cannot be deliberately used and controlled to create a new personality—such generation is an involuntary and unconscious event.

From the Indian devotional perspective, developing an alternate self based on emotion is a creative act, building a spiritual body made out of overflowing love. This *siddha deha* (perfected body) or *prema deha* (body of love) becomes the true self of the person, and is believed to continue after the death of the physical body. The alternate self is generated by will rather than by pain, and emotion is utilized rather than repressed or endured. In this understanding, emotion is the foundation of identity, the substance from which it is constructed.

Thus, emotion is a means to an end in the Bengali aesthetic and devotional traditions, and that end is the good life. Emotion is not a passive response but an active eros, involving meaning, beauty, and creativity, which structures both self and world.

Notes

1. Note on transliteration: The Indian terms in this paper have been written in Sanskritized Bengali, to make them more accessible to Hindi and Sanskrit speakers. However, as the audience for this article will not be made up primarily of Indologists, I will transliterate terms as phonetically as possible (rather than follow the Sanskrit conventions). I will retain the diacriticals, however, for those who wish to research the Sanskrit and Bengali etymologies. Thus, Kṛṣṇa becomes Kṛṣhṇa, ṛṣi becomes ṛṣhi, *Alaṅkāraśāstra* becomes *Alaṅkāraśhāstra*, and so on.

2. See Arya 1986, *Yoga Sūtras* I.2.

3. Ibid., II.3. It is debated among scholars whether the sense of individuality is more a problem of ignorance (as personality and individuality are not ultimate truth) or of pride (too much focus on the illusion of individuality).

4. Ibid., I.2.

5. Ibid., I.12, Vyāsa's commentary.

6. The three humors or basic elements (*dhātus*) of Āyurveda are *vāyu*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. *Vāyu*, or *vāta*, is associated with movement, nerves, and muscles; *pitta* with enzymes, hormones, digestion, and temperature; and *kapha* with liquids and plumpness. *Kapha* also regulates the other two humors. Imbalance of humors may be endogenous (due to such factors as heredity and degeneration) or exogenous (from such causes as drugs, poison, accidents, unclean food, and animal bites).

7. Sharma and Dash 1983, *Caraka Samhita*, I.11.20.

8. Ibid., I.7.38.

9. Ibid., II.7.4.

10. Ibid., I.11.45.

11. Ibid., I.25.40.

12. Lutz 1988, 8.

13. Such waves are described in many Bengali biographies of *siddhas*, or saints. For example, the Vaiṣṇavite saint Vijayakṛiṣṇa Gosvāmin and his devotees were described as dancing in waves of *bhāva*, which became a “sky-high typhoon.” See his biography in McDaniel 1989.

14. The following terms and definitions come from the *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* (Dasgupta 1983).

15. In India, the dead are not buried but, rather, are burned at the *śmaśāna*, or burning ground. To compare the heart to a burning ground means that all earthly concerns have been left behind, as the corpse is left behind by the spirit, and a total devotion to the goddess has taken their place.

16. In the meditational system of *kuṇḍalinī yoga*, the person is understood to have a body composed of energy (*śakti*), which exists invisibly within the physical body. This body is composed of seven centers (*chakras*), which are located along the spine and are foci of meditation. These centers are interpreted in different ways by different practitioners, but the heart center is usually associated with emotion, compassion, and respiration.

17. We see a similar range of meanings to the term *rāga* in the Japanese term *iro* (Chinese *se*). *Iro* means color and sensual pleasure, among other things, and includes such derivatives as *irogonomi* (sensuality, lust); *iroke* (coloring, shade, passion, romance); *irozome* (dyeing, dyed); and *irokoi* (love, sentiment). See the term *iro* in Nelson 1974.

18. There is a special kind of madness in Bengal, colloquially known as “study-*pāgal*,” or study-insanity. Informants told me that too much thinking is dangerous, that it upsets the balance of the mind, and that it could result in grave mental and physical illness. I was told quite firmly that I needed more emotion and less thought in order to be healthy. This is the “folk” view, which separates thought and emotion and finds emotion to be especially important in women.

19. Siegel 1983, *Amaruśataka* 104.

20. Kaelber 1989, 3.

21. Śhāktas are worshippers of the Goddess in West Bengal, primarily the goddess Kālī in her form of Mother of the Universe.

22. Heat is often colloquially associated with negative emotion. In the Indian tradition of touching the guru's feet, the devotee is understood to get rid of his bad karma—the guru's feet absorb it like a sponge. When gurus have been touched by people with strong anger, hatred, or desire, they will often complain that their feet are burning from the passions of their devotees. Several gurus in Bengal mentioned this to me as one of the problems of the profession.

23. This story was told to me by an informant. There are many stories of Vaiṣṇava devotees who burned themselves while serving Kṛiṣṇa and Rādhā in their paradise and who returned to their physical bodies and saw that their physical hands were burned.

24. Variants of the story of Satī are found in the *Mahābhārata* and in the *Devībhāgavata*, *Kālikā*, *Matsya*, *Padma*, *Kūrma*, and *Brahmanda purāṇas*, though the most well-known version comes from Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*. These variants are discussed in Sircar 1948.

25. As the story describes it: "Suddenly, with her own hands, she twisted and tore her left breast from her body. Then she walked three times round the city, repeating her curse at each gate. In her despair she threw away her lovely breast, which fell in the dirt of the street. Then before her there appeared the god of Fire, . . . and the city of Madurai . . . was immediately hidden in flames and smoke" (Adigal 1965, 131-32).

26. For a description of the role of the fluids, see the chapter titled "Sexual Fluids in Vedic and Post-Vedic India" in O'Flaherty 1982.

27. Viśvanātha Kavirāja, *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, as cited in Sinha 1961. It may be noted that Viśvanātha felt that philosophers were incapable of aesthetic enjoyment, as they are devoid of innate emotional dispositions. Dharmadatta echoes this opinion—persons devoid of emotional dispositions cannot appreciate art: They are "as good as a piece of wood, a wall, and a stone in the theatre hall" (Sinha 1961, 166).

28. According to Dhanañjaya's *Kāvyaśāhityamīmāṃsā*, erotic and comic emotions cause the blooming (*vikāśa*) of consciousness; emotions of courage and wonder bring about the expansion (*vistāra*) of consciousness; horror and fear cause the agitation (*kṣobha*) of consciousness; while fury and pathos produce the obstruction (*vikṣepa*) of consciousness (Sinha 1961, 169).

29. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is usually dated not later than the sixth century CE, but may have elements as old as the second century BCE (Gerow 1977, 245).

Such divisions of basic emotions are also seen in Western thought—for example, in Silvano Arieti's (1970) concepts of first- (protoemotions), second-, and third-order emotions. He includes tension, fear, appetite, satisfaction, and rage as first-order emotions.

30. Cited in Sinha 1961, 175.

31. *Ibid.*, 207.

32. *Rasa* theory also describes the causes and effects of emotion in great detail. Briefly, the dramatic emotions contain several aspects. The *vibhāva* is the stimulus or cause of emotion (such as persons and events presented); the *anubhāva* is the involuntary reaction or physical effect of emotion; and the *vyabhichāribhāva* is the associated, temporary feeling or transitory state which may accompany the permanent emotion (*sthāyibhāva*).

33. According to Bharata, the moment of gustatory *rasa* occurs when the eater rests after the meal with a smile of satisfaction, appreciating the individual tastes merging into a general mood of happiness. This is similar to the aesthete appreciating the different aspects of a drama, which merge together.

34. The *bhāvas* and *rasas* relate as follows:

<i>Bhāva</i>	<i>Rasa</i>
love	erotic
humor	comic
grief	tragic
anger	furious
energy	heroic
fear	fearful
disgust	terrible
astonishment	marvelous

A ninth, peaceful emotion has been added to this list by later writers, though it has been much debated (as insufficiently intense).

35. See De 1963, 21.

36. This practice involves imitation of the *anubhāvas* to generate passionate feelings within the practitioner, based on the emotions of the original Kṛṣṇa devotees of Braj. The goal of the practice is the generation of a new identity—that of a handmaiden of Kṛṣṇa's consort Rādhā—composed of emotion (selfless love, or *prema*). For a detailed analysis of this practice, see Haberman 1988.

37. Kapoor 1977, 210.

38. According to the *Govinda-līlāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāj, the companions (*sakhīs*) of Rādhā are “like flowers and buds of the vine of love which is Rādhā,” and when Rādhā experiences the joy of Kṛṣṇa’s love, her companions’ experience of that joy is one hundred times greater than her own. See Kavirāj (463 *Gaurabda*). Because they are detached from ego and desire, they are more open to deeper forms of love, and can experience these intensely. Thus, detachment (from ego and desire) paradoxically leads to intensity.

39. There are special meditations which lead to experience of these intense emotional states. In the *mañjari sādhana*, the devotee identifies himself with one of Rādhā’s handmaidens, while in the *gaur līlā sādhana*, he identifies himself with the servants of Caitanya Mahāprabhu, a fifteenth-century Bengali saint believed by devotees to be a joint incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. See McDaniel 1989.

40. They differ in that the *sāttvika bhāvas* are composed only of *sāttva guṇa*, and, as such, are purely spiritual emotions. There may be one or two at a time, or more than five may manifest themselves at once (in this case, the *sāttvika bhāvas* are said to be blazing, or *uddīpta*). While some of these may be caused by other events (such as sweating caused by heat or fear), the more of these bodily changes that appear, the greater the likelihood that the person is experiencing intense emotion.

41. A poem by Erfan Shah (Bhattacharya 1969, 55).

42. Quoted in Bose 1930, 76.

43. Cited in Dimock 1989, 168; from the *Śrīrādhār-krama bikāśa*.

44. *Ibid.*, 195.

45. Probably the most famous example of *dveṣha-bhāva* is King Kaṁsa, the god Kṛṣṇa’s evil uncle and sworn enemy. He ended up going to Kṛṣṇa’s paradise because of his great passion for the god (even though that passion showed itself by threats on Kṛṣṇa’s life). The evil wet nurse Pūtanā was also blessed, though she put poison on her breast to kill the infant Kṛṣṇa. When anger, pride, lust, and the like are directed toward the deity, they are purified and eventually transformed into love. The attention is more important than the ethical considerations.

46. There is a set of folk stories (told to me by several informants) that speak of a sage meditating in a cave who has tried for decades to gain intense love for the deity but leaves discouraged. A new young sage comes into the cave, begins to meditate, and is overcome by love and gains enlightenment in a short period of time. He has gained the love and dedication of the previous sage, who left them in the cave.

47. Marriott 1990, 18.

48. Ānandamayī Mā, in Bhajji 1978, 68.

49. See Solomon 1976.

50. *Ibid.*, 146.

51. In multiple-personality disorder, the selves are highly segregated dissociative states, developed during childhood as a response to severe trauma, usually repeated child abuse. Research indicates that the trauma must occur relatively early and that emotion and memory retrieval are bound to these dissociative states (thus protecting the child from a flood of painful memory and emotion). The most frequent alter-personalities are frightened children, though the most common chief complaint is depression. See Putnam 1988; Braun and Sachs 1985.

52. See American Psychiatric Association 1980.

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