

PREFACE

Brought up in a traditional Hindu household where religious rituals and ceremonies formed part of my family calendar, I have long been familiar with the numerous polychromes of S̥rī Rāmakṛṣṇa's famous photograph (see the frontispiece) which he himself certified as the perfect representation of a *yogī* in *samādhi*.¹ Such pictures were and still are part of the tapestry of Gods, Goddesses, and Godmen adorning the walls of the sanctum (*thākurgar*) in the home of every Hindu family in Bengal and most probably elsewhere in India. I also remember having read avidly the serial "Param Puruṣ S̥rī S̥rī Rāmakṛṣṇa" by Acintya Kumār Sengupta in the popular Bengali monthly *Masik Vasumati*. Sengupta's colorful and slightly exaggerated retelling of the celebrated *Kathāmṛta*²--he was a great novelist--made an abiding impression on my adolescent mind and I became interested, for some time, in reading the lives of other Hindu saints and prophets. I distinctly recall my freshman year at the Presidency College (Calcutta), when hagiography seemed more meaningful than history.

My evolution from adolescence to adulthood was marked by a growing detachment--worse, disenchantment--with prophets and Godmen and an increasing interest in the lives of practical men of affairs and intellectuals--men who grappled with the mundane problems of individual and collective life. In other words, I became a hopeless addict of history. Till today my love affair with Clio continues. Thus I come to study the spiritual odyssey of Rāmakṛṣṇa as an academic historian and a biographer.

Needless to mention, the present study is an exercise in psychobiography or, more generally speaking, psychohistory. Although a relative newcomer to the family of Clio, psychohistory has had an impressive record.³ This psychobiography has attempted for the first time to probe Rāmakṛṣṇa's psyche and early life. Admittedly the latter still remains obscure there being absolutely no other evidence than the master's personal reminiscences. However, there are occasional allusions to his childhood experiences at home and in his village community. These are valuable data for reconstructing Gadādhara's psychic evolution. My own academic training and scholarly experience as a biographer have enabled me to make use of psychoanalytic methods and insights for analyzing "narcissistic" personality. Like all great men in history S̥rī Rāmakṛṣṇa was "possessed by fantasies of omnipotence, dream of limitless greatness."⁴ A noted Sanskritist trained in clinical psychoanalysis, Professor Jeffrey Masson once observed that "there is severe psychopathology in Ramakrishna." He, however, has not produced a fuller

study of this saint except suggesting a comparison between him and the German mystic, Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911), in a paper presented to the American Psychoanalytic Association in Denver (May 1974).⁵ My contribution seeks to provide a historian's intrepid endeavor to fill the gap.

I have freely used the works of specialists in psychology and psychoanalysis as well as human sexuality. I am of course fully responsible for any misinterpretation of their conclusions. In this respect I am happy to acknowledge the initial guidance into the relevant literature by my colleague, Professor Maxine Warnath of the Department of Psychology. Likewise I have benefited from the works of numerous scholars in religion, sociology of religion, and mysticism, including the contributions by specialists in Hinduism and Hindu mysticism. My work has also benefited from the helpful critique of two anonymous readers. I am especially grateful to Namita and Dr. Tushar Nag of Portland (Oregon), who very generously lent me the five volumes of the *Kathāmṛta* not easily available in this country.

Last but not least, I am, as in the past, deeply indebted to my family. My daughter Jayashree helped refine some of my arguments and expressions. My wife Sati has contributed substantially to my endeavor with her spirited discussion on various Hindu religious personalities as well as by her suggestions for a number of readings used in this work. Above all, she has always unfailingly provided a perfect sanctuary for her exasperated husband suspended perpetually, as it were, between the Scylla of his ambition to be a perfect teacher and the Charybdis of his fantasy to be a perfect researcher and writer.

While my dilemmas in respect of classroom teaching and writing will remain forever unresolved, I can, nevertheless, justify my present enterprise on the basis of two considerations. In the first place, in attempting to examine Rāmakṛṣṇa's spiritual experiences on secular criteria I am reminded of Freud's dictum that "there is no one so great that it would be a disgrace for him to be subject to the laws that govern normal and pathological activity with equal severity."⁶ Secondly and finally, even at the risk of offending the sensibilities of believers and followers I offer my honest interpretations of the Rāmakṛṣṇa phenomenon in the spirit of a Roman statesman, orator, and writer, who had once declared: *omnia quae dicenda sunt libere dicam*--"all that has to be said I will say freely," and, I might add, fearlessly.

Monmouth, August 12, 1990

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NOTES TO PREFACE

1. Romain Rolland, *Prophets of New India*, tr. E. F. Malcolm-Smith (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1930), p. 276. For a definition and analysis of *samādhi* see ch. VII below. Rāmakṛṣṇa's premonastic name was Gadādhara Paṇḍita.

2. *KM; M-KM; PPR*.

3. For the usefulness of psychohistory and psychobiography see William M. Runyan, "Progress in Psychobiography," *Journal of Personality*, LVI, 1 (1988) and Carl N. Dengler, "Should Historians be Skeptical about using Psychological Methods?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 27, 1987).

4. Joseph M. Woods, "Some Considerations on Psychohistory," Geoffrey Cocks & Travis L. Crosby, eds. *Psycho/History: Readings in the Method of Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 114. See also the articles by Hans Meyerhoff (pp. 17-29), Lloyd deMause (pp. 50-67), Rudolph Binion (pp. 68-77), Robert Coles (pp. 83-108) cited above in Cocks & Crosby, eds. *Psycho/History*.

5. J. L. Masson, "Schreber and Freud" (unpublished) cited in J. Moussaieff Masson, *The Oceanic Feeling: The Origins of Religious Sentiment in Ancient India* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1980), p. 34. Reportedly J. [Jeffery] L. [Lloyd] Masson changed his name to J. [Jeffrey] M. [Moussaieff] Masson in 1975.

6. Sigmund Freud, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood" cited in Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), p. vii.