

## Reconstructing tradition

By Rebecca Manring

Critical Book Review by Advaita Dās

When a friend offered to send me a copy of this book about Advaita Ācārya, my Prān Puruṣa (arch father) I hesitated accepting the offer, as I had very bad experiences in the past with non-devotee intellectuals giving their regarded opinion on transcendental matters. The book was said to contain many details about the social and sectarean standing of Advaita Prabhu, though, so I could not resist. Now I'm glad that I accepted the offer because, though it is a non-devotee work, Mrs. Manring has done a more thorough reading of the Advaita-books than I was able to do.

In the introduction Mrs. Manring claims that Advaita Prakāśa was not written by Īśāna Nāgara in 1568, but in the late 19th century by a descendent of Advaita Prabhu, Acyuta Caran Caudhuri Tattvanidhi. Oddly, whenever she quotes Advaita Prakāśa afterwards, she does ascribe it to Īśāna Nāgara. The claim that Advaita Prakāśa is not written by Īśāna is made by the mundane scholar B.B. Majumdar, though, who tried to reconcile differences between the book and the Caitanya Caritāmṛta (this has been dealt with in my essay 'In defense of the Advaita Vaṁśa' on my website). Mrs. Manring writes:

'Majumdar was operating from a historical positivist approach, that is, from the presupposition that the biographies were historical documents. This led him to believe that conflicting narrative accounts must represent deviations from truth.'

On page 125 Mrs. Manring reviews the Advaita Prakāśa and reiterates it is written by Īśāna. The Bengali publisher Satishcandra Mitra, when he republished it in 1926, also vowed it was an authentic scripture, written by an eye-witness of Advaita Prabhu's līlā for over 50 years, and it was written long before Caitanya Caritāmṛta. At the end of the book Mrs. Manring argues that the fact that Īśāna Nāgara's name is not mentioned in major granthas like Caitanya Caritāmṛta may be because he was just a domestic servant and not a public figure, or a big preaching Ācārya etc. Mrs. Manring notes that, though many books have been written about Advaita Prabhu, they are very rare, many of them

destroyed by germs, India's heavy climate and sheer neglect. I noticed that because, apart from Advaita Prakāśa, which is widely available, I failed to get any book about Advaita Prabhu anywhere in India. Mrs. Manring suggests that the books on Advaita Prabhu were not quoted by other Vaiṣṇava Ācāryas mostly because of their lack of availability.

Mrs. Manring sees Haricharan's Advaita Mangal as presenting a rasa-continuum, with Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa first appearing as Sītā and Advaita and then later as Śrīman Mahāprabhu. She also sees an evolution of Rasa in Gaura Līlā's historical sequence - Advaita (the first to appear) as Aiśvarya (which actually is not a *rasa*) Haridās Ṭhākura as *dāsyā*, Nityānanda as *sakhya*, Sītā devī as *vātsalya* and finally Mahāprabhu Himself as *mādhurya*. Interesting, but whether that was Haricharan Ṭhākura's intention or not is another question. It certainly is not explained like this by any major Gauḍīya Ācārya.

Proudly I read on page 14 that, unlike other branches of the Gauḍīya Sampradaya, the Advaita Parivāra did not yield to the influence of the British Christians that made itself felt in Bengal in the 19th century (when a non devotee uses the word 'orthodox' my ears prick up and I get all interested, because it means something actually genuine is coming up!) Vijay Kṛṣṇa Gosvāmī, Sādhu Baba's great-grand-uncle and great hero, was originally influenced by the neo-Christian Brahma Samāj, but later returned to his Vaiṣṇava roots and settled in Shantipur. He was a rock in the turbulent waters of colonial India.

On page 40 Mrs. Manring writes: "Nityānanda, the *avadhūta*, was a wild-eyed iconoclast with no respect for social convention. His devotion took a very different form than did Advaita's and he garnered, and still has, a tremendous following. Advaita was a caste-sensitive brahman, always careful to observe the relevant rules and restrictions.....in the first stage of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava movement the presence of an established and elderly scholar in the midst provided the group with some respectability. The loud ecstatic *kīrtana*-processions Caitanya led through the streets of Navadvīpa....hardly seemed models of priestly decorum." Later, Mrs. Manring concedes: "However, it seems unlikely that a young Caitanya,.....lost in religious ecstasy.....would have conceived the idea of including his parents' elderly friend in his *sarīkīrtan* simply for political expedience." Of course, at the time, including the honorable Advaita in the group might have socially benefited Mahāprabhu's movement, whether it was done deliberately or not. Mrs.

Manring's claim that only or especially Advaita Prabhu's followers are promoting orthodox brahmanism, is inaccurate, however. In my essay 'Who is a brāhmin, Guru and Sannyāsī' I have provided ample evidence that Nityānanda Prabhu and Mahāprabhu Himself also held up the same standard.

There are quite a few inaccuracies in Mrs. Manring's book - in chapter 1 she contradicts herself by first saying that there are a disproportionate number of biographies of Advaita - compared to Nityānanda, but at the end of that chapter she says that there is so little about Advaita in Gauḍīya literature, and she opens chapter 2 by claiming that Haricharan's Advaita Maṅgal is regarded in the Gauḍīya tradition as the authoritative biography of Advaita Ācārya, while in fact it is the least accepted of all the biographies.

### ADVAITA MANGAL

Advaita Maṅgal describes how Vijay Purī, an elderly Godbrother of Mādhavendra Puri, and Advaita's maternal uncle, is sent to Navagrām by Madangopāl Himself to seek out the *bhakta avatāra* (Advaita) there. He appears to the newborn Advaita and tells him that Kṛṣṇa bhakti is not available anywhere, and that Madangopāl is waiting for Him in the bushes of Vṛndāvana. When Advaita arrives in Vṛndāvana in his youth, ten Vrajavāsī women alert Him of the whereabouts of Madangopāl one morning, and, after the unearthing of Madangopāl, Advaita teaches the local Vrajavāsīs the supremacy of Parakīya bhāva. He then proceeds in telling them in all detail how Paurṇamāsī initiated Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa into the Kāma Gāyatrī and how Their *pūrva rāga* pastimes took place. Returning to Śāntipur, Advaita becomes a famous Guru who one day announces that Mādhavendra Puripāda appeared to Him in a dream and told Him he would come to Śāntipur the very same day if He summons him with an offering of rice balls. And events transpire just as Advaita had dreamed - Gurudeva appears in Śāntipur and gives him *dīkṣā*. A challenging scholar (Digvijayi) comes to town and, after being defeated by Advaita, is the first one to call him 'Advaita'.

I remember when I wrote my book I found the different books about Advaita rather hard to harmonize both in sequence and in mood - especially Advaita Maṅgal was hard for me to understand, but it appeals a bit more to me now. Haricharan claims to have been

educated in Advaita's pastimes by Śrīnāth Ācārya, possibly Śrīnāth Cakravartī, the disciple of Advaita and Guru of Kavi Karṇapur.

When Advaita roared during his worship of mother Gaṅgā, performing *tapasya*, the Apsarās came to disturb His penance, and eventually took Him to Swarg. When Indra there told Brahmā about Advaita's *tapasya*, Brahmā decided to join Him in the Saṅkīrtan movement and took human birth there too (as Haridās Ṭhākur). Śyāmdās, who arranged and instigated Advaita Prabhu's marriage, also built Him a huge mansion with women's quarters.

Advaita Prabhu's *tapasya* and cries of love not only caused the descent of Śrīman Mahāprabhu, but also of all his eternal associates, like mother Śacī and Jagannātha Mīśra, the Lord's parents.

Haricharan Dās then narrates a story to show the non-difference between Śrīman Mahāprabhu and Advaita's eldest son Acyuta. After the two boys had gone swimming Acyuta had drunk all the milk meant for both the boys and Sītā devī slapped Him for it, leaving a big mark. When the boys sit down to eat the mark is still there and Sītā devī asks Gaura who made the mark on His cheek. Gaura replies: "You did! Acyuta drank the milk and you hit him! Acyuta and I are non-different!" Mrs. Manring rounds out her description of Advaita Mangal by narrating how Sītā-devī assumes as many forms as there are guests while serving a feast and suggesting that Advaita's refusal to accept the obeisances of young Nimāi is a part of an evolution from *aiśvarya* to *mādhurya*, which is not an uninteresting proposal actually.

In Advaita Mangal, which becomes more interesting to me now, after I read it sceptically before composing my book, Advaita Prabhu shows a four-armed form to the Digvijayī, Haridās, Śyāmdās and twice to Gaurīdās. It becomes a lot more understandable now why Sādhu Bābā also gave me this book to translate when he first asked me to preach Advaita Prabhu's glories in the west. It still does contain a lot of controversies, so I suppose Bābā expected me to select the interesting and credible parts from it only. I hope I did. Haricharan's equating Advaita Prabhu with Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself remains, of course, far-fetched; perhaps something just to read over and turn a blind eye to; it could be seen as an extreme glorification perhaps.

## PADĀVALĪ

Padāvalī means ‘series of songs’ and is a very important and popular *bhakti*-experience, especially in Bengali Vaiṣṇavism. Mrs. Manring quotes a sample or two in her book, and notes that most of the songs about Advaita Prabhu were not written by His own followers, members of His lineage. There are very few songs about Advaita Prabhu’s pastimes other than those that specifically deal with Mahāprabhu’s pastimes in which Advaita might have played a role. This one (her translation) is about Advaita Prabhu’s advent, written by Ghanaśyām Dās:

On the seventh day of the bright fortnight of the month of Māgh,  
The ocean of great bliss burst forth.

That moon Advaita descended from Lābhā’s blessed womb at the auspicious moment.

(His father) Kubera Paṇḍit was thrilled,

And gave various gifts to brāhmins and the poor

He raced into the childbirth-room and saw his son’s face

And his heart rejoiced

All the people of Navagrām came running, and told each other

They had never seen a child like this.

Miśra in his old age, as the result of his good deeds,

Got a jewel of a son like this.

The gods rained flowers down upon them,

There has never been anything like it

The sound ‘victory! victory!’ filled the world

Ghanaśyām proclaims this great glory

## MISCELLANEOUS ADVAITA-BOOKLETS

Mrs. Manring then continues in chapter 3 of her book with reviewing other booklets about Advaita Prabhu, starting with the Advaitoddeśa Dīpikā, written by Devakīnandan Dās, said to be a disciple of Kṛṣṇa Miśra Prabhu. He claims that Advaita Prabhu is the cowherd boy Ujjvala, Śrī Kṛṣṇa as the son of Vasudeva, Viśākhā (we follow him in that), Sampūrṇā Mañjarī (that was also claimed in Advaita Maṅgal) and Sadāśiva (we follow him in that too). This is quite a different picture from what Sādhu Bābā had given me - he said Advaita Prabhu is Madhumaṅgal (instead of Ujjval) in *sakhya rasa*, Mahāviṣṇu (instead of

*pūrṇatara* (2nd class) Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā, though perhaps Devakīnandan and Haricharan see them as one and the same), and Rati Mañjarī (instead of Sampūrṇa Mañjarī, which would make no sense. If Advaita Prabhu is so prominent in Gaur līlā, how could He be a totally unknown and unmentioned *mañjarī* named Sampūrṇa instead of the famous and foremost Rati Mañjarī?) Mrs. Manring tries to reconcile Advaita being equated with Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā by making the point that Yogamāyā (Sītā devī) appeared along with Śrī Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā in Kāmsa's dungeon. Interesting in any case is that Sītā and Advaita did appear historically before Mahāprabhu, as Yogamāyā always appears before the Lord Himself does. In our branch of the family Sītā and Advaita are considered one tattva and are thus both Yogamāyā.

In both Advaitoddeśa Dīpikā and Advaita Mangal Sītā devī is called Kanaka Sundari, which Mrs. Manring attempts to explain as follows: 'This Golden Beauty is not one of the *mañjarīs*, but she is instrumental in facilitating the love play of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa....In Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Abhidhāna Haridās Dās describes her simply as Rādhā's maidservant.' It may be just another aspect or name of Yogamāyā. In the end of her review of the Dīpikā Mrs. Manring reveals that Devakīnandan is actually a son of Balarām Gosāi's third wife, though he claims allegiance to both Kṛṣṇa Miśra and Balarām Miśra. Balarām became the head of a branch which claimed Advaita Himself was actually the Supreme Lord (rather than Mahāprabhu. This is called *advaita-pāramya vāda*), whereas Kṛṣṇa Miśra (from whom Sādhu Bābā descends) accepted Mahāprabhu as supreme. The *advaita-pāramya vādīs* seem to have moved to Assam, but they are now extinct.

The booklet Advaita Svarūpāmṛta, by Kānudeva Goswāmī, confirms the *svarūpas* that were ascribed to Advaita Prabhu in Advaita Mangal and Advaitoddeśa Dīpikā, but nonetheless, equating Sītādevī with Rādhā is clearly off the tracks, even if it is done so in three separate books by three separate authors. For starters, if Advaita would be Kṛṣṇa in Mathurā, how would He match with Rādhā in Vraja? I wonder if there was any relation between Haricharan, Devakīnandan and Kānudeva, in *dīkṣā*, *śikṣā* or genetically. Kānudeva does confirm the equation of Sītā and Paurṇamāsī, which we also maintain.

Mrs. Manring reminds us that the Sanatkumār Saṁhitā, quoted by many a *bābājī* as an authoritative text, has actually only a few chapters left in existence (which makes one

wonder if the remaining text ever existed), which happen to be the ones about *rāgānugā bhakti* and *aṣṭakālīya līlā*.

Advaita Ācārya has also not been spared by the *sahajīyās* - like all others in Gaura *līlā*, illicit sexual practises have been falsely ascribed to him too, particularly in a booklet named Advaita Sūtra Korchā, in which they claim Mādhavendra Puripāda personally instructed him in the sexual rites with other men's wives - too sick to elaborate on, of course. Mrs. Manring suggests, probably rightly so, that the *sahajīyās* hijack each associate of Mahāprabhu, projecting and ascribing their perversions on them to gain respect and credibility, a 'political ploy'. Fortunately such booklets are totally unavailable and only respectable literature on Advaita remains on the market.

There are two books named Advaita Vilāsa, one by Vīreśvara Prāmāṇik, a compilation from 1899, apparently compiled on Bijay Kṛṣṇa Goswāmī's request, and an older one by an unknown Narahari Dās, which is not considered authoritative by Haridās Dāsī. It more or less gives the regular stories on Advaita. There is even a booklet about Advaita for children, named Advaitācārya, written by Amiya Kānti Datta from Śrīhaṭṭa (Advaita's birth region where he may still be popular). At the end of the book Mrs. Manring learns that Prāmāṇik might have edited the books afterwards. Advaita Ācārya has also been the source of inspiration for many a *padakartā* (Bengali songwriter) like Balarām Dās, Locan Dās, Ghanaśyām Dās, and Mrs. Manring provides nice English translations of the songs.

### VIJAY KṚṢṆA GOSWAMI

On page 111 Mrs. Manring starts discussing Advaita Prabhu's most famous descendent, Bijoy Kṛṣṇa Gosvami (see my blogs of May 23, 2007 and April 19, 2006) adding more details to his biography, for me at least. So it is described (quoting from Bishnu Charan Dasa's 'Life of Vijay Kṛṣṇa') that when his mother Swarṇamayī Devī was pregnant with him she had wondrous dreams. She was in the backyard when the time for his birth approached. She fainted as her labor began, awakening to find the child in her arms and the placenta nearby on the ground. Later, when Vijay studied in Kolkata, his room-mate ripped him off so badly that he had to hit the streets begging for food, and later took another room with that same fellow after he (the roommate) had lost all the stolen

money by gambling. It is then that he joined the Brahmo Samāj in 1866 (aged 25). Interestingly, Mrs. Manring claims (p.113): ".....if Vijay Kṛṣṇa is to be held up as a model Vaiṣṇava, then he must of course be dualistic in his religious approach. His hagiographers are all admirers if not disciples. They use this portion (of nondualistic practise) of (his) life to demonstrate the seductiveness of monism. None directly criticizes this approach, but all are clearly more interested in their subject's return to his family's religious origins (of bhakti)." And, on the following page, "Many of Vijay's hagiographers describe his involvement with the Brahmo Samaj as a necessary step back to the devotional practises of his earlier days...."

Vijay's seven commandments, which he preached from Gandaria Ashram in Dhākā, are listed on page 117:

1. Never indulge in self-praise
2. Never speak ill of others
3. Nonviolence is a great virtue
4. Have compassion for all
5. Place implicit reliance on the scriptures and the holy men
6. Avoid, like poison, what is incompatible with the tenets of the scriptures and the saints
7. Egoism is the worst enemy

About the time that Vijay Kṛṣṇa lived in Bāblā (his beautiful abode outside of Śāntipur) Mrs. Manring provides the following anecdotes (p.118): "Villagers would often hear beautiful devotional music at this spot but could never find the people who were singing. Vijay Kṛṣṇa said the music was echoing from Caitanya's time." And: "One day as he meditated here at Bāblā, Vijay Kṛṣṇa noticed a dog's unusually persistent interest in one particular spot. Curious, Vijay began digging at the same place, and found a pair of wooden sandals and a set of brass pots used for worship. When he saw 'Kamalākṣa' (Advaita Prabhu's birthname) carved on the sandals he realized they were Advaita Ācārya's own belongings. To sanctify the place and commemorate the important discovery, he had a small temple built, elevated so that worshipers must climb a flight of stairs to enter. The artifacts have been enshrined beneath the temple images....Vijay Kṛṣṇa suggested to the dog that he now give up his body, since his life's work was done.

The next morning people found the animal's corpse on the riverbank." Towards the end of his life Vijay Kṛṣṇa Goswāmī instructed his disciple Gopāl-candra Goswāmī to ask Vireśvar Prāmāṅik to compose a work on the life of Advaita Ācārya, and he produced the Advaita Vilāsa, which (I have not read it myself) appears to be a regular compilation taken from the major Advaita-biographies, with the exception that it claims that Lābhā Devī committed Satī after her husband Kuber Paṇḍit passed away.

### ADVAITA BĀLYA LĪLĀ SŪTRA

In chapter 5 of the book Mrs. Manring casts some doubts on Lauḍīya Kṛṣṇadāsa's Advaita Bālya līlā Sūtra, saying that the Sanskrit verses are sometimes out of metre and wonders why the book is never quoted elsewhere. I think the logical response to that would be, 'Caitanya Bhāgavat and Caitanya Caritāmṛta focused on Mahāprabhu – there was simply no place there for digressions into Advaita's personal pastimes.' To the Sanskrit issue I would reply that perhaps Lauḍīya Kṛṣṇadās (King Divyasimha) was not really a Sanskrit-crack, so he might have made mistakes here and there. Later on, Mrs. Manring acknowledges that the Advaita Bālya līlā Sūtra is mentioned in the Advaita Prakāśa (*saṁskṛte racilā prabhura bālya līlā sūtra*, 3<sup>rd</sup> verse before last of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter). Not only that, most if not all material of the Bālya līlā Sūtra has been covered by Advaita Prakāśa, which makes it the best hagiography available about Advaita Prabhu, both in quality and in quantity. After the razing of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhyā in December 1992, Muslims in Bangladesh retaliated by razing the major library in Sylhet (Śrīhaṭṭa, the birthplace of Advaita Prabhu in current Bangladesh), thereby destroying the – possibly – only leftover copies of the Bālya līlā Sūtra and Sītā Caritra.

After Advaita Prabhu's disappearance, Īsāna Nāgara returned to East Bengal, got married and had children (though he was already 70 years old). He passed away shortly afterwards, but not before making many disciples. His eldest son Puruṣottama also made many disciples. The family became known as Nāgara-Advaitas (not to be confused with Gaura Nāgarīs) and were considered part of Sītā-Advaita's family. On page 166, while reviewing Advaita Prakāśa, Mrs. Manring tells us that Advaita's original Madangopāl-deity, which he found under the bushes at Vṛndāvana's Advaita Vat, is actually in the Madangopāl temple in Śāntipur but is locked up in storage because it is too old and worn to be worshipped.

A common misunderstanding among worldly scholars is that there was some kind of feud between Nityānanda Prabhu and Advaita Prabhu. Mrs. Manring shares this opinion, writing that Īśāna Nāgara “....throughout this episode....puts seemingly mean-spirited words in Nityānanda’s mouth and conciliation in Advaita’s”. However, in ch.15 and 16 I can find only one such exchange in each, neither of them showing any other exchange than one of mutual love. The Bengali text of Advaita Prakāśa rather speaks of Advaita’s Premer Rosh (loving anger). Throughout the manifest pastimes of Mahāprabhu Nītāi and Advaita were confirmed the best of friends, it is clear from all the scriptures on Mahāprabhu.

Another common misunderstanding among the scholars, Mrs. Manring included (she suggests so several times in this book), is that Advaita Prabhu was an actual *advaita-vādī* (non-dualist), although it is said in all the devotional scriptures that He only preached *advaita-vāda* or *jñāna vāda* to get a loving punishment from Mahāprabhu. Apparently the academics see this as a devotional embellishment of the actual truth instead of an actual devotional truth. In her description of the passing away of Nityānanda, at the end of Advaita Prakāśa, Mrs. Manring blunders again by suggesting that Vīrabhadra was humiliated by having to serve the leaders of Nityānanda’s group during the *viraha utsava*. She calls it a ‘subtle attack’ (by Īśāna on the Nityānanda followers), perhaps not understanding that in Vaiṣṇavism service is a privilege and not a humiliation. Her idea is contradicted almost immediately hereafter by the narration of Vīrabhadra Prabhu asking initiation from Advaita Prabhu, and Advaita sending him back to his own mother, Jāhnavā, for *dīkṣā* instead.

Mrs. Manring also accuses Īśāna Nāgara of making Advaita instead of Mahāprabhu the instigator of the *bhakti cult* but this is not fair – in all other scriptures, like Caitanya Bhāgavat and Caitanya Caritāmṛta, Advaita is also described as being an active *bhakti*-preacher before Mahāprabhu’s advent – if He were not so, why would He even have bothered to invoke Mahāprabhu’s advent in the first place? Her claim that some, like Īśāna, have presented Advaita Prabhu as superior to Mahāprabhu in every sense needs to be seen in the context of *bhāvollāsa*, wherein a devotee develops greater love for an associate of the Lord than for the Lord itself. Several times in her book, Mrs. Manring

suggests there is a kind of gender discrimination in that mostly males are allowed to do *mañjarī* practises, but this is pertinently untrue.

A new controversy for me is the Śrī Advaita Abhiśāpa, 'Śrī Advaita's curse', a booklet written by one Kiran-chānd Daraveśa (sounds *sahajīyā* to me), saying that Advaita Prabhu cursed Mahāprabhu for not staying in Nadīyā after taking *sannyāsa* and thus hurting His loved ones. He would have to be born again to satisfy Advaita's desire for his company. Because He spent 10 days at His (Advaita's) place after taking *sannyāsa* in Katwa He would get a ten-generation grace period, and then He (Mahāprabhu) would have to take birth in Advaita's family. This is a prediction of the advent of Vijay Kṛṣṇa Gosvāmī, who was born in Advaita Prabhu's 10th generation. Mahāprabhu, according to this booklet, graciously accepts the curse, saying He can never be without Nityānanda and Advaita and that He will appear in a large form wearing dreadlocks (exactly fitting Vijaya's description). This story does not appear in any other scripture and could be understood as a glorification of Vijay Kṛṣṇa Gosvāmī only.

About amplification or 'accretion' of the hagiographies, Mrs. Manring writes (p. 200) something interesting:

"Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas often view such textual accretions not as extraneous padding and certainly not as anything suspect, but as further elaboration of the truth contained in a given work. This elaboration may include exaggeration or even downright creative license to make the author's point about the stature and status of his protagonist. Such textual accretions are not regarded as dishonest but as reflections of the author's wholehearted devotion to his subject. Further, the actual author stands to accrue some karmic benefit by contributing to the good reputation of his subject – and by doing so in a way that is clearly not designed to garner that author any fame or other benefit."

I applaud this but would like to add the condition of *rasābhāsa* and *viruddha siddhānta* to it – additions and elaborations are alright as long as they do not contain bogus philosophies or perverted flavours.

## SĪTĀ CARITRA

Next Mrs. Manring starts reviewing *Sītā Caritra*, by Lokanāth Dās (not the famous Lokanāth Gosvāmī), which is intriguing, because I searched for this booklet for long in India without ever finding it. It is filled with anecdotes rather than with a chronological biography, and is a newer text, since it mentions Caitanya Caritāmṛta. In chapter 2 of this booklet *Sītā Devī* crosses the river to Navadvīp to visit the newborn Nimāi. She casts a spell over mother Śacī so that she can speak with the baby out of his mother's hearing. The baby reaches out to *Sītā*, calling out 'Rādhā!' *Sītā* immediately understands that the infant is actually Kṛṣṇa, but also that he thinks he is in a different time and place, back in the cowherd village of Gokula. *Sītā* tells Him that she is not Rādhā but the brāhmin wife of Advaita, and that He (Kṛṣṇa) is now born in Navadvīpa with a golden body....Nimāi then claims that *Sītā* is Yogamāyā who precedes Him in each birth (which is more on the mark). *Sītā* protests, reiterating that she is not the divine Rādhā but simply someone who wants to serve Rādhā's feet. Chapter three deals with Nimāi's studies at Advaita's school and chapter 4 deals with the relationship between Nimāi and Acyuta, Advaita's eldest son. Here the story in Advaita Prakāśa is repeated, that Acyuta eats some food which had been meant for offering to Nimāi, but instead of bananas (as in Advaita Prakāśa) here it is cream. In chapter 5 Nimāi leaves Advaita's home after completing His studies there, and Kṛṣṇa Miśra announces that Nimāi will eventually take sannyasa and who will be His sannyasa Guru. Chapter 6 describes how Mahāprabhu, after His disappearance, appears to *Sītā Devī* and consoles Her. Chapter 7 deals with Nandinī and Jaṅgalī, *Sītā-devī*'s two male disciples who had a mystical gender change to qualify for *dīkṣā* from Her. Sakhī-bhekhī groups try to incorporate *Sītā* and Advaita into their group by quoting this instance as proof that they are doing the right thing, but of course this is just a special pastime and a special mercy of *Sītā devī* upon Nandarām and Yajñeśvara, men who would otherwise not qualify as Her disciples. It does not set a standard or create a precedent; indeed the practise of cross-dressing has never again occurred in Advaita Prabhu's lineage. Mrs. Manring writes (p. 204): "When *Sītā* reminds the pair of the gender requirement for discipleship, the two disappear, returning a short time later dressed as cowherd girls, with braided hair, anklets, bangles, skirts and bodices. They announce that the practise of Rādhā-*mantra* has affected a sex-change in them. To prove that they are no longer male they disrobe and *Sītā* sees that they are, indeed, female. So great was their devotion to Her that they were ready to give up their male gender for Her."

Chapter 7 and 8 are controversial because they conflict with the teachings of Sādhū Bābā that we did not receive Rādhā- Gaura- or Guru-*mantras* from Advaita Prabhu, while in these chapters Sītā devī is described as bestowing them upon Nandarām and Yajñeśvara. Whether this was an exceptional situation, an interpolation or just falsehood that invalidates (this part of) the book is unclear. Later on in the book, perhaps somewhere in chapter 12, a very young girl gives birth to a boy of which she says it is Nandinī's son, which is strange since Nandinī is supposed to have had a mystical gender change. Afterwards, the boy is never mentioned again, nor is this mysterious story to be found in any other biography of Sītā and Advaita.

In the final chapter of the Sītā Carita we learn of Jaṅgalī's similar, though even more puzzling experiences. "The local governor... has come to investigate the reports he has heard about this strange woman. Jaṅgalī warns the governor that if he touches her he will die. He ignores the warning and commands his attendant to remove the woman's garment. Jaṅgalī prays to Sītā and then, no matter how much cloth the attendant unwinds from her body, still more remains. Jaṅgalī, good disciple that she is, keeps her mind focused on Sītā's feet and Sītā, in the form of Jaṅgalī's garment, protects her disciple... Jaṅgalī's death-curse then takes effect on the governor – blood flowed from his mouth and his strength drained out of him. He fell to his feet and begged forgiveness and even asks his erstwhile victim to punish him." Mrs Manring here suggests the governor is a European but I fail to see how this could be, since the British only arrived in India some 200 years later. The final chapter of Sītā Caritra is really undermining its credibility as it apparently gives credence to superstitious myths on the Sundarbans and its 'protecting deities' Dakhin Ray and Boner Bibi, that protect travellers against ferocious tigers in the forest. In the story Dakhin teams up with his Muslim enemy Boro Khan Gazi with an army of fakirs to test Jaṅgalī and Sītā is supposed to be Devī who rides a tiger (that much is true). Of course this final chapter may have been added to the book later by others. Three chapters are dedicated to Īśāna, who sees Kṛṣṇa in baby Nimāi and wonders what his (Īśāna's) role could be in Gaura līlā, since Kṛṣṇa had Himself brought all His friends and relatives along to Bengal. Īśāna explains that in Kṛṣṇa-*līlā* he had been Rādhikā's maternal grandmother (Mukharā), who somehow got entangled with all of Kṛṣṇa's naughty pastimes with the *gopīs*. Then, when Nimāi takes *sannyāsa*, he asks Īśāna to take care of His elderly mother and His young wife. So I suppose this is the other Īśāna, the personal servant of Śacī-mātā, and not the servant of Advaita Prabhu. It's confusing really – were there two Īśānas

in Advaita Prabhu's household then, the servant of Śacī-mata as well as the Īśāna adopted earlier by Advaita Prabhu, who wrote the Advaita Prakāśa? Or is there only one? Anyway, according to this account, Śacī-mātā and Viṣṇupriya pass away shortly after Mahāprabhu and Īśāna then turns to Advaita Prabhu and offers his services to Him. He gets 'bugs', possibly lice, on his head, that start feeding on his blood, and very much like the leper Vāsudeva, places each of them back on his head if they fall off, afraid they will run out of food. Out of compassion Sītā Devī then places her hand on his head, making all the bugs instantly disappear.

In the following chapter (11) Advaita's family travels to Nīlāmbara's house for a celebration with the entire Vaiṣṇava community. Four disciples, including Īśāna and his friend Jānu Rāy, carry Sītā in a palanquin on their shoulders. Jānu wants the two to carry Sītā by themselves so they can get all the credit and Īśāna agrees, though he knows they should not do this. Jānu thinks he will one day be rewarded for the pious deed, but Sītā understands what is going on, gets out of the palanquin, rebukes him and rejects him 'for contemplating God's awesome majesty instead of having a more personal relationship with the divine' (?). Sītā says Jānu's family will always remain attached to *karma kāṇḍa* and never achieve pure *bhakti*. Mrs. Manring suggests that Sītā's order to Īśāna to marry (again, which Īśāna is this?) is perhaps like a punitive order. As a last act, Īśāna reconciles Kṛṣṇa Miśra with his mother (although the cause of their conflict is not mentioned).

### KṚṢṆA MIŚRA

Next, a controversy is discussed about the maternity of Kṛṣṇa Miśra Goswāmī – it seems only Advaita Prakāśa (though it is my family's main digest) claims that he is the son of Sītā-devī (but given for adoption to Śrī-devī), while all other biographies of Advaita Prabhu seem to claim he is the only son of Śrī-devī. This may require some further investigation. Mrs. Manring suggests that Īśāna wrote this because 'The son of a secondary wife like Śrī usually is considered to have a less legitimate claim to inheritance than his half-brothers by the chief wife. Only householders can inherit, however, and four of Advaita's six sons had chosen monastic lives.' From Advaita Prakāśa it's clear that, of the two only *gṛhastha*-sons of Advaita, Kṛṣṇa Miśra inherited the deity worship and Balaram Miśra inherited financially. Mrs. Manring: "That second son (Kṛṣṇa Miśra), according to Advaita Prakāśa, though generally recognized as the only son of Śrī, is actually the son of Lakṣmī (Sītā) and Mahāviṣṇu. Śrī, generally understood to be Kṛṣṇa

Miśra's mother, is identified with Lakṣmī only secondarily, by association with her sister Sītā, who, Īśāna had already told us, was found in a lotus in a marsh by her father when she was a child. That is, Sītā IS the goddess Lakṣmī. Obviously the torchbearer of Advaita Ācārya's lineage is Sītā-Lakṣmī, not the more obscure Śrī. Īśāna needs to make Sītā Kṛṣṇa Miśra's mother....to help bolster his position that Advaita Ācārya was actually the most significant member of Navadvīpa-*līlā*." I find this largely unfounded speculation, especially the last assumption.

Finally, Premvilāsa, Advaita Prakāśa and Narottam Vilāsa all indicate that mother and sons were initially at odds but eventually reconciled. Ramākānta Cakravartī suggests that Advaita Ācārya's following split into at least three rival groups following the leader's death – one led by Sītā, one by Acyuta and the third by the younger sons and Kāmadeva. According to the Premvilāsa and the Sītā Caritra the rift between Sītā-devī and Kṛṣṇa Miśra was mended through the efforts of Īśāna and Jānu at a *kīrtan*-festival. Mrs. Manring suggests that Raghunāth and Dol Govinda, Kṛṣṇa Miśra's two sons, were named reincarnations of Gaura-Nitāi in an attempt to reunite the *sampradāya*. Mrs. Manring also suggests they appeared to console Advaita Prabhu, who suffered the pangs of separation from Gaura-Nitāi so much.

Goswāmīs in Śāntipur insist that Sītā devī fought against the tendency among Advaita's followers (which, if true, could have only been associates of her own children) to elevate Advaita Prabhu to the position of the Supreme Lord himself, thereby bypassing Śrīman Mahāprabhu.

A golden saying in this book I find 'The saint is a human being, but one possessed of superhuman qualities" (p.219)

## EPILOGUE

In the epilogue Mrs. Manring quotes a Bengali devotee saying (rightly) about the many contradictions between the biographies: 'There is no way of knowing which one is right or wrong. Scholars of the tradition seem to have no more interest than the academic in establishing the accuracy of one account and the error of all the others. Rather they viewed each text as its author's paeon to Advaita Ācārya, testimonies to the devotion of their creators." Personally I would follow what the Guru has told me and what makes obvious sense. On the age of the biographies, Mrs. Manring says that 'the grammar of the middle Bengali of the Advaita Maṅgal, Advaita Prakāśa and the Sītā Carita appears to be

consistent with the grammar of the language of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.....”, though “a good modern scholar of Bengali could certainly reproduce the earlier forms of the language in his own compositions.....scribes have been known to ‘correct’ texts as they copied them.” The old system of hand-copying texts of course left room for both error and interpolation, but there’s no reason to believe that the bulk of books like Advaita Prakāśa especially is not genuine biography. Nowhere in this book is a death-blow given to either sceptics or believers of the biographies. On p. 242 Mrs. Manring again suggests the Advaita Prakāśa could have been written around 1896 only, but if that were so, whence all the details about Advaita Prabhu’s life – how could they have been known so many centuries later? Mrs. Manring writes (p.243): “Acyuta-caran (Chaudhari) writes in his introduction to the Bālya līlā Sūtra that after Advaita’s death his then-elderly former household servant Īśāna Dās went to Lauḍa to propound Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and write a book about Advaita’s life at Sītā Devī’s request. Īśāna took (apparently the sole exemplar of) the Bālya līlā Sūtra along with him far to the east to use as a reference for details of the early portions of Advaita’s life that he himself had not witnessed. Thus....the Bālya līlā Sūtra remained hidden in Lauḍa until it came to his (Acyuta Caran’s) attention in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.” On page 248 Mrs. Manring reminds us that Lauḍa (NE Bangladesh) was and is a remote place, so most devotees had simply never heard of the Bālya līlā Sūtra. At the end of the day, it is the faith and devotion that counts (though I insist that the unique detail and quantity of the Advaita Prakāśa-narrations establish it as a genuine scripture).

Apart from a unique insight in rare books on Advaita Prabhu, Mrs. Manring also treats us on a report of her field trip to the actual birthplace of Advaita, in Sylhet (Śrīhaṭṭa, NE Bangladesh), towards the end of the book (p.230), at the base of the distant mountains of India’s Meghālaya state. Apparently the place is lost and the village of Navagrām is now divided by one of the many constantly shifting rivers of the Bengali delta, though there is still a small temple at the birthplace where service is going on (at least in 1994). The place is just a small village with mud- and cowdung huts near a bamboo jungle and a beach – it sounds like the same rustic sweetness as rural Vraja. It is extremely hard to find and to reach and no Vaiṣṇava pilgrims go there. Some simple worship is still going on there, though, and the locals have not forgotten Prabhu Advaita. Earlier, Mrs. Manring described Advaita’s home in Śāntipur, Bāblā, as ‘no longer on the riverbank, but a small tributary still flows next to it. The place is especially beautiful, with

mango- and other trees hanging very low and small boys herding their cows and goats around them. One almost expects to see Kṛṣṇa Himself dance out from behind one of the trees, playing His flute.” Yours truly can confirm the place is as beautiful – having been there once in October 2003.

On page 247, Mrs. Manning defends Advaita Prakāśa against doubts raised by her colleague B.B. Majumdar, that it has so many detailed birthdates, while this is not the custom in Vaiṣṇava hagiography, and that, therefore, it could be a later work than is claimed. Mrs. Manning: “However, the culture displays an intense interest in dates for ritual and astrological purposes, so, while an abundance of dates in an Indian text may be unusual, it is not entirely surprising that an influential family would keep track of the dates of birth of its sons. The Advaita Prakāśa purports to have been written at the request of Sītā Devī some thirty years after Caitanya’s death...five years after Advaita’s death, by which time concern of succession and legitimacy were beginning to arise within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava community. The dates, especially of the births of Advaita Ācārya’s sons, would have helped to establish rights of sectarian succession. Other texts in the Advaita corpus also mention dates.....Although, as Majumdar points out, this interest in historical precision is unusual in South Asia, it seems to have been important to members of Advaita’s branch of the community.”

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