SONGS OF ECSTASY

Tantric

and

Devotional

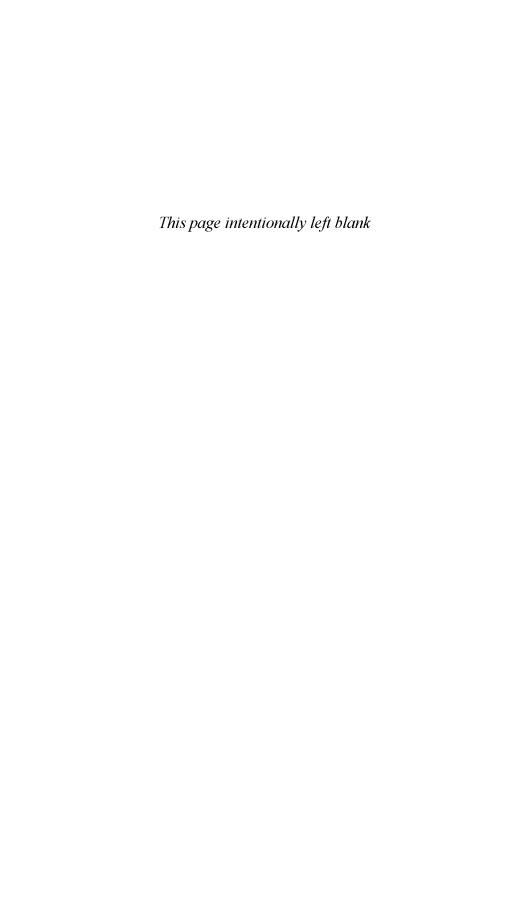Songs

from

Colonial

Bengal

HUGH B. URBAN

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Songs of Ecstasy

Tantric and Devotional Songs
from Colonial Bengal

Hugh B. Urban

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Contents

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A Note (or Apology) on Transliteration

Unfortunately, there is no standard or satisfactory system for transliterating Bengali script into Roman characters; indeed, there seem to be as many different systems as there are scholars of Bengali. After asking numerous authorities, both Western and Indian, I have found nothing but a wild diversity of idiosyncratic systems, nor have I ever come across a work that was entirely consistent within itself. On one side, authors who wish to emphasize the Sanskritic origins of Bengali use the same transliteration system as for *devanāgarī*: they distinguish between *v*'s and *b*'s and between different sibilants (*ś, ṣ, s*) and render all final open vowels. This purely Sanskritic system is perhaps the only truly "consistent" one, though it results in some rather bizarre constructions that have no real place in either the Sanskrit or Bengali languages (e.g., rendering the final vowel of a Bengali genitive inflection, such as *bhāvera,* which does not exist in Sanskrit and is not pronounced in Bengali). On the other side, those who wish to capture the actual sound of the Bengali language adopt a basically phonetic system: hence, all *v*'s turn into Bengali *b*'s, all sibilants become the Bengali aspirated *sh*'s, all final vowels drop off, and so on. This, too, produces some weird constructions—for example, *boishnab* for the Sanskritic *vaiṣṇava*—which are unrecognizable to most non-Bengali specialists. In sum, a purely Sanskritic system ultimately does violence to the uniquely Bengali character of the language, while a purely Bengali system is basically unintelligible to scholars of most non-Bengali traditions.

For my part, I have chosen to adopt a compromise system similar to that used by Jeffrey Kripal. As Kripal points out, Bengali writers, in their own self-representations, typically use a mixed system of transliteration, slipping easily back and forth between a Sanskritic and a vernacular:

> Because the culture itself rocks back and forth between venacular and Sanskritic transliterations, I too will alternate between the two options, trying as best I can to approximate the self-representation of the culture. . . . Such a system will no doubt strike the linguistically sensitive reader as a confused melange of broken rules and inconsistencies. I can only admit my compromises, note that they are at least partly a function of the culture's own history. (Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], xxxii)

No one, for example, ever writes the name "Ramakrishna" the way it is actually pronounced (i.e., "Ramkrishno"). Instead, the tradition frequently Sanskritizes itself, though usually only partially, and often quite incorrectly. Moreover, this eclectic compromise method is itself a reflection of the complex and syncretic history of the Bengali people—a people who wish to identify themselves with the rich traditions of Sanskrit literature while asserting the uniquely "Bengali" quality of their own very rich history and literary creations. This may strike most specialists as inconsistent and contradictory; but one could argue equally that a purely "consistent" and rigidly governed system would do an injustice to this tradition, which is itself highly diverse, pluralistic, and often (like every language) quite inconsistent. However, I adopt a few basic ground rules:

1. The basic system is fundamentally Sanskritic, though tailored to the peculiarities of the Bengali language. This is intended, first, to make this book reasonably accessible to scholars of Sanskrit and other Indian languages, and, second, to preserve as much of the feel of the Bengali language as possible.
2. Therefore I follow the Sanskrit distinction between *v*'s and *b*'s and between different sibilants, and I render vowels in their Sanskrit form (*a* and *ā* instead of the Bengali *o* and *uh*).
3. Final *a*'s on genitive or locative constructions are not rendered, because this produces a form that makes no sense in either Bengali or Sanskrit. Thus, I use *Bhāver,* not *Bhāvera.*
4. Words of clearly Perso-Arabic origin are not Sanskritized: thus Pīr does not become Pīra, and terms like *gorib* ("poor") are not rendered as *goriva.*
5. Proper names are left more or less as pronounced and not Sanskritized unless that person has rendered his own name Sanskritically in English publications. Thus I refer to "Āulcānd" and "Dulālcānd" rather than "Āulacānda" and "Dulālacānda." This will no doubt produce a number of unsatisfactory contradictions—but no more than most native Bengalis produce when they attempt to render their own names into English.

Abbreviations

Citations in *The Economics of Ecstasy* and in this book refer, first, to the original text and page number (e.g., KG 1 or BG 66) and, second, to the section and song number in this book. Hence, BG 160; II.1 refers to *Bhāver Gīta*, 160, translated in this volume, chapter II, song number 1.

BG *Bhāver Gīta,* ed. Śāntirañjan Cakravartī. Calcutta: Indralekha Press, 1399 B.S. (1992).

BG (1882) *Bhāver Gīta,* ed. Romeścandra Ghoṣe. Calcutta: Aurora Press, 1289 B.S. (1882).

EE Hugh B. Urban. *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

KDA Manulāl Miśra. *Kartābhajā Dharmer Ādi Vṛttānta Vā Sahajatattva Prakāśa.* Calcutta: Author, 1925.

KG *Kartābhajā Gīta.* Bengali manuscript no. 964, Bāṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat Library (Calcutta), 1228–33 B.S. (1821–26 CE).

SS *Sahajiyā Sāhitya,* ed. Manindra Mohan Bose. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1932.

STP Manulāl Miśra. *Sahaja Tattva Prakāśa.* Calcutta: Author, 1309 B.S. (1902).

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Translator's Note

"The Secret Mastery of Difference"

The translator is the secret master of the difference of languages, a difference he is not out to abolish, but rather, he puts to use as he brings violent or subtle changes to bear on his own language, thus reawakening within it the presence of that which is at origin different in the original. (Maurice Blanchot)

This book is a companion volume to another book, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal,* also published by Oxford University Press. Whereas *The Economics of Ecstasy* engages the theoretical issues of secrecy and concealment, as it played in one particular Tantric sect known as the Kartābhajās, the *Songs of Ecstasy* is a body of translations meant to accompany the first text. Together, I would hope, these two volumes open up a surprising and revealing new window, both onto the world of colonial India and onto the larger issues of secrecy, discourse, and power in the history of religions as a whole. Those of you who have already read *The Economics of Ecstasy* may therefore wish to skip over most of chapter 1 (this volume), which summarizes the main arguments of the companion book.

From the outset, however, I should also admit the limitations of this book. The songs translated here are surely among the most difficult and most esoteric songs known in the Bengali language. They are, moreover, songs that are clearly rooted in a specific social and historical context: the context of colonial Calcutta at the dawn of the nineteenth century. Hence, rather ironically, a huge amount of the language and imagery of these songs no longer has much relevance to contemporary Kartābhajā practitioners, who will often either ignore or else strongly reinterpret the language drawn from a century before. A large portion of the Kartābhajā songs, for example, use the imagery of the British East India "Company" (*kompānī*), imported goods from England, and the mercantile trade in the bazaars of the colonial center—little of which has any meaning for contemporary devotees. Therefore, in my own attempts to make sense of these enigmatic songs, I have had to go back and resituate them within the context of colonial Calcutta and its environs at the dawn of the nineteenth century. And in so doing, I have often had to disagree in many fundamental ways—though always respectfully—with the interpretations of contemporary Kartābhajā devotees, for whom much of this early colonial language is no longer relevant and is often ignored or covered over. To read these songs historically, therefore, often means to read them against the grain of the ways in which they are read and used by disciples today.[1]

3

As such, the Songs of Ecstasy raise, in the most acute way, all the critical debates in contemporary translation theory and in the problem of crosscultural understanding as a whole. First, and most basically, they raise the question of whether we ever really *can* translate a body of esoteric texts—that is, texts deliberately concealed within highly enigmatic and encrypted language. As Arthur Schopenhauer put it, "Poems cannot be translated, they can only be rewritten, which is always quite an ambiguous undertaking"—and this undertaking is perhaps only infinitely more ambiguous and complex in the case of specifically esoteric poems.[2] Originally designed to be transmitted in narrowly controlled channels between masters and disciples, the Songs of Ecstasy are intended to generate an intense experience of gnosis and spiritual ecstasy, something that cannot be communicated in ordinary exoteric language. Some scholars, such as Edward Conze, have therefore concluded that the esoteric discourse of Tantra simply cannot—and ethically, *should not*—be translated or understood by anyone other than initiated insiders: "There is something both indecent and ridiculous about the public discussion of the esoteric in words that can be generally understood."[3]

Second, these songs also raise the larger ethical issue of translation in a postcolonial—and some would say, *neocolonial*—world order: namely, *should we even try* to penetrate, uncover, and translate the esoteric teachings of a formerly colonized people, recasting them and thereby assimilating them into the now globally hegemonic discourse of American English? What right does yet another American scholar have to come and tell Indians what their religious and cultural traditions "*really* mean?" In his work *Kālī's Child,* for example, Jeffrey Kripal attempted to delve into the secrets of the great Bengali mystic, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, by retranslating the original Bengali texts and unveiling some of the saint's deep sexual conflicts and homoerotic impulses. This same book, which won a major award from the American Academy of Religions, faced intense controversy, scandal, opposition, and finally censorship among the Indian community itself, many of whom felt that it was yet another example of Western cultural imperialism and exploitation.[4]

Yet, as Jacques Derrida aptly observes, *every* original text, no matter what its historical or cultural origin, not only can be but, in a certain sense, *demands* to be translated. For every text is to some degree incomplete, lacking, divided, and torn within itself. No text is entirely self-transparent or self-sufficient but, rather, requires a supplement, another text, to comment on and interpret it, however incompletely and inadequately. "The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original which will complete itself in enlarging itself . . . And if the original calls for a complement, it is because at the origin it was not there without fault, full, complete, total, identical to itself."[5] Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the case of the Songs of Ecstasy, which are, in themselves, some of the most confusing and mystifying texts in the history of Bengali literature, whose meaning is uncertain and fiercely contested, not only by outsider scholars, but also by members of the Kartābhajā community itself. Hence, not only can these songs be translated, but they also in a sense insist on some sort of rendering

into an alternative discourse—even while always remaining at some fundamental level untranslatable and inscrutable.

In a similar way, of course, the translation cannot claim to be a total, complete, and transparent mirror of the translated text but must also be recognized as divided and plural within itself. Its aim is not to cover over or correct but, rather, to *reveal and explore* the cracks, conflicts, and fault-lines within the foreign text:

> A translation is never quite faithful, always somewhat free, it never establishes an identity, always a lack and a supplement, and it can never be a transparent representation, only an interpretive transformation that exposes multiple and divided meanings in the foreign text and displaces it with another set of meanings, equally multiple and divided.[6]

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the songs translated here. Not only are these songs clearly the work of many authors over a long period of time, and not only do these songs contain many apparent contradictions and seeming absurdities within themselves, but there have also clearly been many profound disagreements among the Kartābhajās themselves as to precisely what these songs mean. In the course of my research in West Bengal and Bangladesh, I encountered a tremendous variety of interpretations of even the same song or the same verse, reflecting the many different factions and schisms within the community over the last 200 years. Hence, my translations are not intended to smooth over these conflicts, schisms, and contested interpretations but, rather, to *expose and highlight* them through my own often conflicted and confused encounter with this tradition.

As Blanchot points out, a truly good translations is one that recognizes the ultimate difference and otherness of the foreign text. As the "secret master of difference," a good translator not only acknowledges but celebrates that difference, using it in order to view his or her own language in a new light, to stretch, to challenge, and at times to shatter the conceptual structures that comprise his or her own world. A similar point was made by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay, the "Task of the Translator," where he quotes Rudolf Pannwitz:

> Our translations, even the best, proceed from a false premise. They want to germanize Hindi, Greek, English, instead of hindi-izing, grecizing, anglicizing German. They have a much greater respect for the little ways of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign work. The fundamental error of the translator is that he maintains the accidental state of his own language instead of *letting it suffer the shock of the foreign language. . . .* He must *widen and deepen his language through the foreign one.*[7]

The Songs of Ecstasy, I hope, will force us to reimagine some of our own most basic categories—the categories of secrecy and esoteric discourse, the status of the subaltern within a situation of political rule, and the relation between religion and economics, spiritual ideals and the secular marketplace.

The Spirituality of the Subaltern

The Historical Context and Literary Significance of the Songs of Ecstasy

See all the subjects dwelling under the Emperor and the Minister;
in this world, everyone's filled with bliss!
They appear to be high or low class men
but this is only an illusion—they're all equal;
whether Hindu or non-Hindu, they all worship God.
. . . Look: united in Love, all these animals, birds, men, and living beings,
are overwhelmed with the Ecstasy of Love! (BG 93; II.61)

As the title *Bhāver Gīta* implies, the songs translated in this volume are a genre of deeply mystical, esoteric songs (*gīta*), composed in the Bengali language, and centered around the experience of religious ecstasy (*bhāva*).[1] The theme of intense spiritual emotion or ecstatic outpouring through song has a long, rich history in Bengal, dating back to the oldest known texts written in Bengali and continuing to the present day in folk traditions such as the songs of the wandering "madmen," the Bāuls. Yet in the case of the *Bhāver Gīta*, this tradition has undergone a series of profound transformations in a changing sociohistorical context. First, these songs are the most sacred text of one of Bengal's most enigmatic sects—the Kartābhajās, or Worshipers of the Master.[2] As such, the songs of the *Bhāver Gīta* are clothed in the Kartābhajās' unique form of esoteric language, drawn in large part from the older traditions of Indian Tantra. Second, composed at the dawn of the nineteenth century in the area around Calcutta, these songs are also clearly the product of the British colonial era, incorporating a vast amount of imagery drawn from the marketplaces of the imperial city. In the songs of the *Bhāver Gīta*, the experience of ecstasy is by no means a purely disembodied, otherworldly state; rather, it is a profoundly *embodied* kind of ecstasy, rooted in the most immediate experiences of the human body, society, politics, and economics.

Amid the long, rich history of literature in Bengal, few traditions remains so poorly understood or so sadly neglected by contemporary scholarship as the Kartābhajās and their songs. Founded by a semilegendary holy madman named Āulcāṅd, who is said to have been Śrī Caitanya in the disguise of a Muslim fakir, the Kartābhajās represent the most important later branch of the Sahajiyā tradition which survived in colonial Bengal. In many ways the Kartābhajās are a tradition much like the Bāuls—that eclectic tradition of folk singers who had long been denigrated until they were rediscovered by Rabindranath Tagore in the early

twentieth century.[3] Indeed, at the height of their power in the nineteenth century, the Kartābhajās were more numerous and more powerful than the Sahajiyās, the Bāuls, or any other of Bengal's "obscure religious cults." A variety of authors have commented on the importance of the Kartābhajā songs, which represent both a unique form of Bengali song and a highly influential body of religious thought. No less an authority than Sukumār Sen even compared them with the songs of the great poet and national hero, Rabindranath himself:

> Among the songs there is some philosophy, but its value is not as great as their unusual simplicity and the originality in their composition. . . . There is no influence from the high-class *sādhubhāṣā*. The unrestricted emotion of Sahaja is expressed with the simple language of the spoken word. . . . Within these songs flows the life blood of Bengali literature which one cannot see anywhere prior to Rabindranath.[4]

Yet despite their acknowledged importance, the songs of the *Bhāver Gīta* have never been studied in any critical way by modern scholars; indeed, some have suggested that a careful study of the *Bhāver Gīta* remains one of the most needed projects in the study of Bengali literature.[5]

One of the primary reasons for the neglect of the Kartābhajās is the long history of scandal, slander, and controversy that has surrounded the sect from its inception. Above all, the Kartābhajās have been attacked because of their alleged associations with the practices of Tantra—a highly esoteric tradition, notorious for its antinomian practices, which came under intense criticism during the colonial era.[6] As a suspected "Tantric" movement, the Kartābhajās were fiercely attacked for their violation of caste laws, mingling of social classes, and use of sexual rituals. In the face of the changing moral norms of British rule and the reform movements of the Bengal Renaissance, the Kartābhajās were identified as one of the worst examples of all the polytheism and licentiousness believed to have corrupted Hinduism in modern times. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were reduced to a sad laughing stock and object of ridicule. In response to this criticism and controversy, therefore, the Kartābhajās tended to conceal their teachings in profoundly esoteric forms, composing some of the most obscure, deeply encoded, and difficult songs in all of Bengali literature. As another respected historian, D. C. Sen, put it, the songs of the *Bhāver Gīta* are like the songs of birds—mysteriously beautiful, yet generally unintelligible to the uninitiated.[7]

Perhaps most striking is that not only do these songs employ a wide range of esoteric mystical imagery, drawn from the Sahajiyā and other Tantric traditions of medieval Bengal, but they also clothe this Tantric imagery in a huge amount of idiosyncratic economic discourse, the mercantile terminology drawn from the teeming marketplaces of colonial Calcutta. Throughout these songs, the metaphor of the marketplace (*bājār*) is the dominant trope and recurring motif. And even more audaciously, the Kartābhajās also appropriate the image of the British East India Company itself. Hailing themselves as the "new Company" or the "poor