Kali’s Child – A Search for An Autobiographical Ramakrishna.

Kali’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna, Jeffrey J. Kripal, University of Chicago Press, 1995

Kali’s child by Prof. Kripal was among the books I had been extremely eager to peruse but, until a few months ago, never had the opportunity to add to my collection of books and read. On page 2 of the book, the author reveals the hypothesis that he was attempting to prove in the course of his study. Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences, far from being simple samadhi with no involvement of lust were actually “profoundly, provocatively, scandalously erotic” but in this review, I am trying to show that the book failed to fully appreciate some substantial aspects of Ramakrishna’s life and only concentrated on the elements of Ramakrishna’s life that can be stretched or truncated in a Procrustean manner into the above-said hypothetical mould.

Ramakrishna, the spiritual guru of Ramakrishna movement spearheaded by Swami Vivekananda, was born into a family of meagre means in Bengal, India. Even though he attended school it is not mentioned in major books on his life that he had a proper education that could equip him with the knowledge of systems of Indian philosophy in general or their deeper meanings, nuances or practices. His best religious or philosophical education, before becoming a priest, would have been folk culture or hearsay from itinerant Sadhus he met as a child. Ramakrishna honestly said “I do not know the scriptures! I am not a scholar.”

Prof. Kripla’s work is based on a highly scholastic PhD dissertation that attempted to fit a folk religious figure into a Kantian, Freudian framework, that accepted some Katzian cultural constructs, through Tantric practices entrenched in Bengali culture of the 19th century and Western psychoanalytic ideas. Abandoning his attempt to look at Ramakrishna through “personal symbols” that bind his life with his cultural background, the author pigeon-holed the study into exercises like inventing a rather Tantric interpretation by combining eroticism with mystical experiences to bring Ramakrishna into the fold of his initial hypothesis. Ramakrishna was not a philosopher nor a scholar but a product of folk culture in Bengal, a simple-minded person who often described himself as a child. He simply interpreted the world as he saw it through his acquired knowledge. Mine is not a denial of the impact of psychological dimension but a call against over academizing.

Image of Kali – An iconographic masterpiece or a simple depiction of a Tantric Goddess?

Prof Kripla structured his ‘proof’ of the fundamental hypothesis about the homoerotic nature of Ramakrishna’s ascent to prominence around the stone image of passively reclining

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1 ‘Autobiographical’ person is a reference to a living person whose thoughts, beliefs, memories etc are known only to the person. See details in my Amazon Review of Sapiens. This idea resonates with Kantian “thing-in-itself”.

2 Please note that I simply call Sri Ramakrishna as Ramakrishna without even the slightest hint of disrespect.


4 p.33, Datta R.C, “The Original Biography of Sri Ramakrishna”, Ashram West Books, 2019
Siva and fearsome Kali, naked except for a garland of human heads and a waistband of severed hands, standing with her right foot on Siva’s chest (the plate facing the page 1 of his book). As long as I did not look for the details of the Dakshineshwar temple I only had Prof. Kripal’s depiction of the sexualised image of a naked Kali as a reference point. I was of the impression that this was the image Ramakrishna had in front of him when he was at the shrine of Kali. In the page describing the Kali’s image at Dakshineshwar, the author somehow omits the details of the Benares saree covering the image described in the passage of Kathamrita that he quotes on page 15. On the same page he paints a picture of a Siva reclining with an erect penis from somewhere else to probably give an unwarranted impression. The Dakshineshwar temple image only had a very passive Siva5 to whose image the learned author attaches an erotic significance arising from Tantric philosophy6.

The philosophical ideas behind the Kali’s image is far more beautiful that the sexualised image that Prof. Kripal intentionally or unintentionally portrayed. This reminded me on a point made by Prof. Vilayanur Ramachandran in his book “The Emerging Mind” about Chola Bronze of Siva’s cosmic dance7. Far beyond its literal meaning the image is a multilayered metaphor that the art critics in Victorian times failed to appreciate. Prof. Kripal even though far more culturally sensitive and appreciative of the Indian philosophy, failed to appreciate the deeper meaning of the image to Ramakrishna.

This masterpiece of an image is wrought with far deeper philosophical idea than a simple Tantric depiction of an erotic play between Siva and Kali. It is disheartening to see ignoring the fact that the Ramakrishna might also have dwelt more on the deeper meaning than the sexualised Tantric idea. According to the verse LIX of Samkya Karika, like a dancing girl, Prkrti exhibits her dance only when Purusha is looking. As soon as Purusha stopped looking, she stops dancing for him. She may still dance for others who are still watching8. This metaphor makes Purusha both Brahman, the Absolute and Atman, the individual Self looking on. In Kathopanishad, Purusha is the ultimate cause and the end beyond all ends that merges with Avyakta9 (Mulaprkti) to become Para-Brahman. In light of this view, Prkrthi is Mulaprkrthi after manifestation (Vyakta). Prkrthi in union with Purusha forms the ‘creation’ that to be real, should be perceived by the knower10 via the intellect as differentiated identities. The perceiver to know, together with sense organs, mind, five elements, legs, hands etc, there also should be Purusha in the form of Atman. Prkrthi, the Existence as a combined entity embodying both Purusha and Prkrthi, becomes manifest to Purusha in the form of Atman co-existing with Prkrthi, the knower. Samkya Karika in the verse LI says that Bhavakaya (a creation of intellect) and Lingakaya (a creation of matter) co-exist and are interdependent. Purusha has to suffer the body of matter until the body ceases to function. Prkrthi suffers bondage, migrates and is finally released. Purusha is not under bondage, does not migrate nor is emancipated (verse LXII). The above references

5 Fig.10, Harding E.U., Kali: The black goddess of Dakshineshwar, Nichols-Hays, 1993
6 Tantric image in the Kali temple... is a naked goddess standing on top of the god” p. 22 Kripal J.J, “Kali’s Child”. This is at best a misleading description as the image was not of a naked goddess.
8 See the interpretation by F. Max Muller in the chapter on Samkya Philosophy in “The six systems of Indian Philosophy”
9 Avyakta is treated as a seed with the potentiality of a tree inside. But I here interpret it as objects in the dark that becomes visible in the light of perception.
10 This is my take on Ahamkara
seem to hint at the physical body and the Self or Atman. The reference to potter’s wheel that still moves even after the body departs indicates the persistence of Self. The Brahman has a duality in Purusha and Prkrti that must act in unison. The duality becomes multitude and the multitude is, in the deeper analysis, still the ultimate truth, Brahman. In this view, the ‘Prkrti’ is not manifest until perceived by the knower who embodies Purusha. What exists emerges through the interplay among the perceiver, the perceived and the knower. As Kenopanishad says the mind and organs are only evident through the power of Atman, that is same as Brahman. The philosophical view discussed above is anthropocentric, recursively layered and rather complex to decipher due to various loosely connected authorships.

Ramakrishna’s great gift was making these complex philosophical concepts accessible to masses. According to him, Brahman is same as Purusha or Sat (i.e. existence) while Prkrtri is Sakti or Cit (i.e. consciousness). Like milk and whiteness, Brahman and Sakti exist together. He also compares Prkrtri or Sakti to ‘Stri’ or femininity. Ramakrishna explained Purusha and Prkrti as the water of the reservoir and the ripples on it. When water is still, it is like Brahman or Atman. But when the ripples rise, Prkrti or creation emerges. This metaphor is simpler than the metaphorical dancing girl encountered above and supports his discourses about oneness of existence. Ramakrishna clearly rejected the implied duality of Purusha and Prkrti. Thus, it is very unlikely Ramakrishna would have imagined a passive Siva simply gazing at the creation in the form of Kali with an erect penis. Existence of such images is not questioned here. But the erect penis of Siva runs in the face of the concept of passive Purusha.

As Prof. Kripal also noted, there is a strong possibility that the concept of the play between Purusha and Prakriti is depicted in Kali’s image. Siva with open eyes is looking at Kali who cannot stop her dance due to his gaze. Purusha has to suffer the physical body (created in Prkrti) until it ceases to function. Prkrti in her many forms suffers bondage and migrates until she is liberated. By keeping her foot on Siva, the unchanging Purusha, Kali is not allowing the physical world to cease to exist. Note that Kathopanishad says that the Atman is hidden in the heart where Kali in the image place her foot. Atman and Brahman is the same. The union is established in the iconography through the foot not through a sexual union. As everything disappears in blackness, Kali is black. If Kali represents Mahakali in Mulparkrti state, the best way to depict the state of affairs at the moment of union with Purusha is the blackness in which everything is hidden. This is a masterpiece in iconography rather than a mundane depiction of sexualised Tantric idea. Mother, the progenitor, becomes the one who sustains. As there is no written references, the true symbolism may not be in the exact form described above. But, given the significance of symbols in Indian iconography (for

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11 Sivananda, Swami, Essence of Principal Upanishads, The Divine Life Society, 1980
12 Kathopanishad says that the soul of an ant is same as the soul of an elephant; the soul of all being is identical.
13 p99-100, Datta (2019)
14 See Chapter 2, Harding (1993)
15 Ramakrishna says “The Tantras speak of Mahakali and Nityakali. When there was no creation, no moon, no sun, no planets, no earth – nothing but deep darkness – then there was only the formless Divine Mother Mahakali living with Mahakala.” p. 73, Gupta M.N., “Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita” Vol 1. http://www.kathamrita.org/kathamrita, Retrieved 18 Mar 2020. He also says that she is dark because she is far away. However, the previous explanation somewhat resembles Mulparkrti concept.
example, see the previous reference to bronze of the dancing Siva) the above is a very probable interpretation.

For Ramakrishna the image does not represent what it literally shows. The following is what he said to M, the author of Kathamrita.

“Well, should one not make it clear to those who worship images that God is not the image and that while worshiping, they should keep God in view and not worship the clay?”

Surely Kali’s image had a Tantric background. But it is also likely that it had the roots in Samkya and Vedanta philosophies we discussed earlier. Kali may be the transformed dancing girl dancing for the Purusha. It is disheartening to see such a meaningful imagery in a form debased by sexualising it due to its association to the vamachara or left-handed Tantra. For millions of worshippers, it is just a depiction of Kali, the cosmic force devoid of any sexual imagery. Born into a culture venerating her, any ordinary devotee would not dare to see her as a sex object. Arguing about deep rooted Tantric ideas and their influence on Ramakrishna and the culture he grew up in, Prof Kripal perhaps ignored the folk religion that did only see the power of Kali not the sexiness of Kali. Perhaps, he did not notice the saree covering her at the temple.

Genius of Ramakrishna ignored?

Swami Vivekananda once said the following about his guru, Ramakrishna: “this great intellect never learnt even to write his own name, but the most brilliant graduates of our University found in him an intellectual giant.”

Genius and education do not need to go hand in hand. According to Chambers dictionary, genius is someone who has outstanding creative or intellectual ability or person who exerts a powerful influence on another. According to experts, “Geniuses are usually sure about what they want to do, single minded, committed, and they have a firm sense of direction.”

The above definitions coupled with his creativity discussed below, in my view, places Ramakrishna in the fold of the genius.

Ramakrishna had been so single-minded in the pursuit of his goal to achieve God-realisation, whatever it meant for him, and ignored women including his young wife and the wealth that he could have otherwise earned, Kamini-Kanchana. Datta devoted a whole chapter in his book to narrate the story of Ramakrishna’s relative, Hriday who was so cross with Ramakrishna for not taking material offerings from the devotees. He, taking woman as Universal Mother was Kali’s child who would be happy to suck a woman’s breast thinking it was his mother’s.

Ramakrishna was amazingly creative in his thinking despite his meagre education. One example is his explanation about Purusha and Prkrti discussed above. It was not a metaphor

18 p14, Howe, M. J, Genius Explained, Cambridge University Press, 1999
out of the scriptures about dancing girls but something that people commonly encounter in daily life. There are so many other illustrations to this ability of Ramakrishna both in Datta’s and Gupta’s books on his instructions to devotees. Another example is when he was asked about the existence of good and evil in the world? Ramakrishna said that Brahman is not affected by neither good nor evil that only troubles the ‘embodied beings’. His example was about the light of a lamp that allows a person to read Bagavatha (one of the scriptures) or forge a document with criminal intent but remains unaffected by the person’s action. He once said:

“Water and ice – one is without form, the other with form. That which is water becomes ice when it is cold. With the heat of knowledge, ice melts into water. In the cold of devotion, water turns into ice.”

Let us take a step back and think a little. Knowledge leads to the formless while the devotion creates the form that the devotee worships. Another gem of a metaphor is the following:

“When ‘I-ness’ vanishes, who remains to look for it? Who is there to tell what the inner feeling and experience of the real nature of Brahman is?

A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. As soon as it went into the water, it melted and became one with it. Then who was there to tell about it?

A sign of the highest spiritual knowledge is that a person becomes silent. The salt doll of ‘I-ness’ gets dissolved in the sea of Sat-chit-ananda – not a trace of differentiation remains.

It is evident from Kathamrita he used the same metaphors in various places and perhaps, one can argue that there had been a stockpile of such metaphors. This may also be due to the fact that the Kathamrita is a rambling text that repeats same incidents in various guises in different volumes. Irrespective such a surmise, Ramakrishna seemed to spontaneously use metaphors pregnant with meaning, in the appropriate place and by doing so he could take his messages across to many devotees. The following episode in Datta’s book for his spontaneity is baffling. Once a gardener at Dakshineswar asked Ramakrishna, “What on earth is undefiled”. Ramakrishna answered that experiencing Brahman is not defiled and can never be defiled. I believe that is a sign of true genius.

When we ignored this important dimension of Ramakrishna’s personality, he could even be thought of as no more than a sailboat floating on a sea of repressed homosexuality. He made judgement calls on tasks he was asked to perform by his adopted teachers like Brahmani and Totapuri. He only selected what he could perform within his convictions. He refused to ask boons from Kali for himself or for others quoting a vision of a big woman in a sari defecating. Datta says even though Ramakrishna was not a learned man, he understood Sanskrit verses, could speak about philosophy, psychology or science. This tells us that Ramakrishna was more than a

20 p471, Gupta M.N., “Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita” Vol 3
21 p104, Gupta M.N., “Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita” Vol 3
22 He seemed to interpret faeces in the vision as the boons. p.256 Gupta M.N., “Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita” Vol 3.
23 p195, Datta(2019). It is noteworthy that Datta was a trained chemist of some standing in his society.
simple product of feelings but a deep thinker. He had been a man of ideas and self-control. Thus, even though he rejected lust and greed he did not totally refuse the authority that came with his position as a mystic devoted to a cause. He perhaps thought of authority as transforming for his devotees and thus, guiding them in the right path. He also envisioned the high esteem, Keshab Sen was held in, for himself. He achieved all this in his own way. He was all provided for by his devotees, had people to even massage his feet at his call or listen to his utterances any time. Before his death he tacitly acknowledged devotees around him at the time worshiping him as Kali. Why would not it be that his drive behind his personality was to secure his place in history? We know from various anecdotes he adored Caitanya, another Vaisnava mystic from Bengal, who lived in 16th century. Perhaps, like Caitanya whose devotion to Krishna almost bordered on “madness” with frequent loss of consciousness, Ramakrishna wanted to be a similar devotee, but, of Kali. And he persisted and achieved it. A quality of genius is persistence.

Homoerotism – Imagined or Real?

In this section I will try to propose several alternative explanations to counter the arguments about homoerotic nature of Ramakrishna’s mysticism. If these proposals show some merit then, Prof. Kripal’s proof of his thesis about the advent of Ramakrishna, the mystic, dissipates into the space of many possibilities and lose its relevance.

As it is normally defined, homoerotism is harbouring desire for homosexual encounters. One of the arguments Prof. Kripal makes is about Ramakrishna’s derision towards Kamini-Kanchana that was usually translated as lust and gold. Prof. Kripal thinks that Kamini only can mean a sexually active woman and Ramakrishna’s disciples intentionally mistranslated it as lust and gold to obfuscate Ramakrishna’s attitude to sex with women. It is true he perhaps did not consume his marriage to Sarada Devi or did resist all sexual encounters with women organised by his relative, Hirany, Brahmani and his patron, Mathur Babu. Thus, it is natural to wonder whether he was a closet homosexual. Prof. Kripal also was very concerned about Ramakrishna placing his feet on the lap of young male devotees such as Naren who later became Swami Vivekananda. He rightly points out that Ramakrishna mentioned his ‘excitement’ when seeing youthful male devotees. Ramakrishna himself said that he was so close to Ram Mallick and were hanging out with him day and night when they were about sixteen seventeen. They even used to sleep together. The people in the village used to say that if one of them were a woman they could have got married.

Ramakrishna often said that during a period of sadhana, he cross-dressed as a woman for a

24 He once said “A religious text is like the words of a letter, and the Lord’s word is like the words of the letter writer.” Words can be different to God’s thoughts. P.302 Gupta M.N., “Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita” Vol 3
25 The author of this review recognised authority, specially, charismatic authority and devotion to a higher ideal are among key traits for religious leader who could attract followers. Ramakrishna was amazingly successful in this regard in a time without many means of publicity. See Chapter 2. Arachige D, The Lure of NOMA, Ocean Publishing, 2009
26 p178, Datta (2019)
27 Chapter xxxii, Dasgupta, S in Vol 4 of A History of Indian Philosophy discusses Caitanya. Like Ramakrishna Caitanya never left any philosophical writings. Unlike Ramakrishna he studied Sanskrit and scriptures.
29 p339, Gupta M.N., “Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita” Vol 3
while and he expressed the view in several occasions that his nature was feminine while Naren had a male nature. These relationships can purely be platonic and anecdotes non-consequential thus attaching unnecessary significance can be counterfactual.

**Tantra might not have aroused homosexual tendencies in him**

In my view, Prof. Kripal knowingly or unknowingly contradicts himself. He finds Ramakrishna was mostly influenced by Tantra⁴⁰ that he learnt from Brahmani and from the culture he grew up with. According to Prof. Kripal, Tantra is the mystico-erotic link between Ramakrishna and the scaffolding of his religious views. Tantra as it had been popularly practised in India is completely heterosexual and see Prkṛti or Sakti in women – a worship of the woman as God. Swami Vivekananda once said the following to a Bengali audience: “The Bengali shastras are the Vamachara Tantras. They are published by the cartload, and you poison the minds of your children with them instead of teaching them your shrutis” ³¹

On what basis can Prof. Kripal link, in the absence of clear evidence, a person so impacted by a philosophy deeply entrenched in heterosexual practices with homoerotic mindset? It is not impossible but is a convoluted argument. For argument sake, Ramakrishna could have started a religious trend to worship man in the form of God if he wanted as means to fulfil his homosexual desires. Brahmani once brought in a Karthabaja man, Chandra Nath, for his Sadhana³². But Ramakrishna became unconscious. Like Prof. Kripal we could assume that Brahmani who brought women to Ramakrishna, could have brought a man as well. Even though he worshiped a female deity and practised sadhana as a woman, Ramakrishna was not enlightened enough to equally treat women in the socio-cultural sphere³³. Ramakrishna was against women because he thought they helped bind men to the worldly duties through family, taking them away from God. But his reference, at least in my reading of his remarks about the issue, was more to the human desires, not lust, in general. Perhaps, he wanted to see more of an adoring crowd of men around him and women through their household demands kept them away. This questions the argument that he avoided women for the only reason that he harboured homosexual desires. It can also be said he disliked women because he was probably molested by them in his childhood. His village, perhaps like other places in Bengal in his time, had many followers of Radhanatra and Ramakrishna, being a handsome boy with a free spirit could have been the victim of women of this sect³⁴. He mentioned that in his village, he had women like the oil-woman Bhagbathi and Shari Pathar, Kartahabaja women worshiping a living person as God.

**Why not Ramakrishna a man of Sexual Aversion³⁵?**

Prof. Kripal was determined to find a psychoanalytic explanation for Ramakrishna’s advent. But that may not be the only explanation. Any psychological condition becomes a disorder only when “it causes marked distress or interpersonal difficulty³⁶”. In Ramakrishna’s case he

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³⁰ “Ramakrishna’s world was thus a Tantric world, secretly structured around the upside-down, mystic-erotic union of Siva and Sakti’ p313. Kripal (1995)
³² p53, Datta (2019)
³³ p159, Datta (2019)
³⁴ Prof. Kripal also acknowledges this possibility in his book
³⁶ p480, ibid
perhaps harboured an aversion for sex, a known disorder in case of many sexually active people, that might have had links to his concern of releasing semen in order to achieve higher states of consciousness. Ramakrishna believed that not releasing semen gave men special powers.

“The discharge of semen dissipates a person’s strength. But there is no harm in nocturnal emission. That semen is from food”

We need to remember he repeatedly said he did not approve of vamachara Tantric practices comprising of sex with a woman in the form of living God but praised the practice of worshiping woman like a child would treat the mother. That is why Ramakrishna can well be called Kali’s child. If we now look at his aversion to women as discussed above and aversion to vamachara Tantric practices one can feel more confident about the fact that Ramakrishna had an acquired aversion towards sex. He might have developed it due to childhood trauma or some other factor connected with a genuine desire for god realisation.

**Naren was not an object of Ramakrishna’s sensual desire?**

Naren came to Ramakrishna as a youth while attending university. He was a not a meek follower of Ramakrishna. He used to question him at various instances about topics including Tantric philosophy. Ramakrishna who held Naren in high esteem because of his spirituality said the following about him in 1882.

> “Just see what qualities Narendra has! He sings well, he can play musical instruments, and he is well-educated. He has also conquered his senses. He says he won’t marry. His mind has been turned towards God since childhood.”

He in a state of samadhi also said:

> “I had great longing to see you. You will attain the goal. Do come here once in a while. Well, what do you prefer? Knowledge, or love and devotion for God?”

Naren answered he would prefer devotion to God.

Prof. Kripal implicitly suggests that Ramakrishna had a homosexual desire for Naren and thus, was often anxiously waiting for him to come to Dakshineshwar. This can be the characterisation of their relationship more suited to the book’s narrative. Let us assume that Ramakrishna had some mystic powers and profound insights as Datta and Gupta implied in their biographies. The perception of the devotees about his mystic powers in addition to his austerity and religious discussions might also have brought crowds to him. If we are inclined to accept this mystical ability, we can link his preferential treatment towards Naren with what Naren later became. Naren was the flagbearer for Ramakrishna’s legacy after Ramakrishna’s demise. Ramakrishna became an international figure due to a large extent to Swami Vivekananda. Thus, if we tear the veil of homoeroticism, we see a person of

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remarkable foresight in Ramakrishna. Sometimes, we sadly resist accepting the ability of humans to have ‘noetic’ insights unplumbed by the discursive intellect\(^{40}\).

**What if Ramakrishna was a true mystic?**

Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy defines, in a simplified sense, mystical experience as ‘unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense- perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.’

It was well-documented that Ramakrishna fell into trance states very often, for example, when singing devotional songs\(^{41}\) or while looking at the image of Kali. He lost consciousness and remained motionless. He said in his discussions with devotees that when in samadhi person’s individuality disappears and merges with the Absolute, a distinctly unitive experience. Compare this to what Lord Tennyson wrote to his friend Mr Blood as quoted by William James in the chapter on Mysticism in his book “The Varieties of Religious Experience”

“This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently, till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words”

As William James writes, these states are “transient” and only last for a while. Ramakrishna also said that these states were not stable and faded as if one could not stay on the same musical note forever. It is not clear whether he gained any wisdom through all these states of samadhi. He never seemed to have preached anything while in samadhi. But when he came out of samadhi he used to talk to the devotees, as an example, the discussion about Naren quoted above. But we should not discount the gravity of his discussions about deep philosophical ideas in Hinduism. An almost illiterate man with no formal education in scriptures other than what he heard could explain Vedantic ideas in such a scholarly manner with metaphors to match. It is baffling to understand how a homoerotic tortured soul, as Prof Kripal argued him to be, could become such a scholarly person who rejected money and luxury for a simple role of adoring a Goddess as a priest. The cultural context that Prof Kripal professed to adhere to, was abandoned to academize the subject and the author became a purist ignoring folk mentality in South Asia that is full of beliefs in the supernatural. If the context one studies a folk hero is not the context the ordinary people place their hero in, then there is disconnect between the study and the studied. People followed Ramakrishna for his presumed abilities, supernatural or mystical, like his discursive utterances on deep philosophy, often in simple terms. His frequent trances had made him a figure larger than life as Datta alluded. They perhaps wondered about his aversion to money, too.

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\(^{40}\) The italicised wording is largely borrowed from the renowned Harvard psychologist, Prof. William James

\(^{41}\) Note that Ramakrishna like Caitanya often engaged in kirtan or devotional singing and dancing
Conclusion

As we discussed at the outset Prof. Kripal wanted to show that Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences were essentially erotic. After reading the book I did not feel that the good professor ended up proving what he set out to do. With a lot of assumed connections, he concluded what he wanted. That does not mean the evidence he showed had merit that could go unchallenged. As we discussed he painted for us an image of Kali from a Tantric “textbook” rather than what Ramakrishna paid his homage to at the Kali temple. Furthermore, he ignored the message repeated by Ramakrishna that he assumed the form of child, not a ‘hero’ who followed the vamachara Tantra and thus, never followed Tantra with its full sexual connotations. He yet followed philosophical underpinnings of Tantra around Kali worship. Ramakrishna dissuaded his followers including Naren from looking at women as sex objects and encouraged them to see the universal mother in the woman. He also clearly stated that following Radhatantra was like entering a house through the latrine. It is strange how Pro. Kripal, ignoring these well-documented discussions in Kathamrita, claimed that Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences were erotic. Was it not good science if one accepted what another person asked his followers to do rather than inventing artificial constructs through means like interpretation of his dreams and visions, that were not as obvious?

Secondly, Prof. Kripal willingly or unwillingly ignored Ramakrishna’s genius that he could have misused to fulfil his hidden erotic wishes in devious ways if gratification of desires was his sole drive. I believe Ramakrishna’s genius is a key to his success as a guru and the drive to become who he was. He shaped by the tantric disregard for the entrenched caste system could extend his reach to many people from diverse backgrounds. Because of his Vedantic views of non-duality he saw oneness of everything including the opposites such as good-bad, socially accepted-unaccepted etc. By living as a family man among his devotees he could meet many people that an ascetic could not have encountered.

Lastly, as I listed in the previous section, there had been several other possibilities to understand Ramakrishna that Prof. Kripal overlooked to prove his hypothesis. By doing so, Prof. Kripal substantially undermined the value of his work as a rational study of his subject, an uncut gem of many facets. This also might have tarnished the image of a genuine mystic whose only wish was to help people partake the mystical experiences he enjoyed. Assumed content around various incidents mentioned by various biographers or claiming that the devotees and disciples were not forthcoming with all the truth about Ramakrishna’s life could not be a part of an evidence-based proof. Thus, I believe that “Kali’s child” fell well short of a proof that Sri Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences were actually “profoundly, provocatively, scandalously erotic”. To reconstruct the autobiographical Ramakrishna from the historical Ramakrishna may well be a task logically impossible.

Darshi Arachige; July 2020