

Premānand's Object of Devotion: The Search for *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti* in the Svāmīnārāyaṇ Sampradāy

By the end of the seventeenth century, *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti* or Kṛṣṇa devotion, had been carefully claimed and assumed by the four Vaiṣṇav *sampradāys* in the North. Long after this wave had settled, a new surge rippled the bhakti waters of the Svāmīnārāyaṇ Sampradāy in Saurashtra and Gujarat at the dawn of the nineteenth century. This chapter explores the shifting metaphysical understanding of Kṛṣṇa within this new Vaiṣṇav *sampradāy* through its significant and celebrated poetry corpus. This first-ever close reading and detailed survey of the community's preeminent poet, Premānand's, poetry suggests that there was a conscious theological act to centralize and often replace Kṛṣṇa during specific liturgy, festivals, and performances. Hence, Premānand (1789-1855) did not understand Svāmīnārāyaṇ to stand in for Kṛṣṇa or vice versa, but rather that there was a specific theological strategy involved in appropriating one deity over the other in specific instances. This conscious act of theological positioning played a critical role in developing the community's theological and social identity during its formative years. Premānand's ability to implement this strategy while creating some of the most diverse bhakti poetry in over a dozen languages and several musical genres places him at the center of the *Sampradāy's* literary and performative center. This study helps raise questions about this new Vaiṣṇav community's relationship with the earlier four: What conditions and factors play a role in mediating this *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti* and Kṛṣṇa's metaphysical position? Did *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti* endure these changes within the *sampradāy*, or was it effectively eclipsed by something different altogether? Finally, how does locating *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti* within this *sampradāy* help us understand the *sampradāy's* engagement with the earlier 'four' Vaiṣṇav communities and the much discussed Bhakti Movement?