

THE POSITION OF CHAITANYA IN BENGAL VAISNAVISM

Ananya Roy Choudhury¹✉

Article Ref. No.:

18123111N1TMAY

Article History:

Submitted on 31 Dec 2018

Accepted on 18 Feb 2019

Published online on 19 Feb 2019

Keywords:

Bengal, Bhakti, Chaitanya,
Godhood, Krishna, Krishnadas
Kaviraj, Radha, Vaisnavism

Abstract:

Bengal Vaisnavism has been the focus of many scholarly works, In this paper, some of those aspects of Bengal Vaisnavism like role of Sri Chaitanya have been looked from a different perspective. Some scholars have written that Chaitanya was a figurehead of the religion and the movement was organised by his immediate devotees. On the contrary it has been found that his personality and spirit had a huge impact on the organisation of the movement. The initiatives taken by him have been discussed, which shaped the movement. It is true that the devotees attributed Godhood upon him and he was made the deity incarnated by the Navadvip devotees. Thousands of lyrical poems were written by contemporary poets, with Chaitanya as the focal point of these works and it also helped in sustaining the sect. Therefore, one cannot deny his omnipotence and everything in Bengal Vaisnavism seemed to have taken its form either through his life's example or based on his ideas. In the post Chaitanya period the movement definitely deviated from its ideas, particularly in context of guru disciple relationship. Nevertheless, it took its initial shape by placing Chaitanya in the centre and was also guided by him to an extent.

In Eastern India, especially in Bengal and Orissa, Sri Chaitanya created a stir through his *bhaktiprema* affecting a large number of people. The distinctive feature of this movement is that it did not become extinct like other religious upsurges and lord Chaitanya is still worshipped by *bhaktas* in Bengal. Some give credit to six Vrindavana *gosvamins* who produced a large number of religious scriptures, thus providing stability to the movement. Here we will discuss Chaitanya's role in sustaining and organising the

¹ [First Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor in History, Dr. Meghnad Saha College, Itanagar, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, INDIA; Email: ananyaroychoudhury87@gmail.com

movement. The question arises whether Chaitanya was a mere figurehead and his followers sustained it or Chaitanya actively participated in organising the movement and also discuss how Chaitanya was perceived by his followers.

Various initiatives in sustaining the movement

Vaisnavism was in some ways neither something new nor it became extinct in Bengal. It has been prevalent in the Epics and *Puranas*. Though Vaisnavism existed in Bengal, but Vaisnavism was given a completely new dimension by Chaitanya and his followers. Through their philosophy and teachings, Vaisnavism attained its zenith in this land. Sri Chaitanya through his philosophy of Krishna *bhakti* and *prema* became the forefather of Vaisnavism in Eastern India. Bengal Vaisnavas have always given importance to *bhakti* rather than *gyana* or knowledge and *karma*. *Bhakti* towards Krishna is considered the highest form of worship. But later on the concept of *bhakti* was transformed in the scriptures of Vrndavana *gosvamins*. Here *bhakti* was highly Puritan in character. "There was severe criticism of unethical conduct, individual and social delinquency." (Chakravarty, 1985). Chaitanya also asked his devotees to live a simple life; where Vaisnava ascetics were asked to live life by begging, to be strict vegetarians, not to enjoy good food or clothing and to always worship Krishna (Kaviraj, 1963).

These were general code of conducts of Vaisnavism and as Krisnadas was himself a student of Vrndavana *gosvamins* so he laid stress on them. But the whole of *Chaitanya Charitamrita* says that Chaitanya has given utmost importance to *nam-samkirtana*, to take the name of the lord. This was also a unique feature of Chaitanya Vaisnavas through which devotees also participated in it and made it into such a big phenomenon. He himself laid stress on unritualistic form of *bhakti*.

Was Chaitanya an organiser of his faith? This question has led historians to various opinions. According to Edward C Dimock, Chaitanya was neither an organiser nor a theologian. His interest was in the realization of the immediate presence of God. As a result, the actual shape that his sect took was almost entirely due to accident of social circumstances (C. Dimock, 1976). S.K. De also writes,

Although Chaitanya possessed great qualities of leadership and extraordinary power over minds of men, he did not at any time of his career concern himself directly with the organisation of his followers. If a cult or sect gathered around him, it was due to the charm of his personality and the powerful appeal of his evident devotion (De, 1942).

Perhaps Chaitanya did not affect directly the organization of the movement, but some of his initiatives provided the biggest organizational impetus to the movement. Here the question also arises how Chaitanya was seen by his devotees, and did it by any means help the movement to organise itself? It is also evident that Chaitanya Vaisnavism took its present form in the post Chaitanya period. So, the viewpoints of some of the socially, religiously, powerful devotees are also important in this respect.

Ascribed Godhood of Chaitanya

Chaitanya was ascribed godhood within his lifetime. This was a unique feature of Bengal Vaisnavism. He was looked upon as Lord Krishna himself. Later on the Vrndavana *gosvamins* deviated from this belief, probably because this was a challenge to the faith that Krishna was the supreme God (De, 1942). But the Bengali devotees always felt an affinity with the movement by believing Chaitanya to be Krishna. Krisnadas Kaviraj writes that the Krishna and Balarama of Vraja, pleased by the world, have taken the form of Lord Chaitanya and his associate Nityananda. They have illuminated the whole world by preaching *bhakti* (Kaviraj, 1963).

He also said that by worshipping Chaitanya the devotees were worshipping Krishna (Kaviraj, 1963). Chaitanya's childhood life is sometimes compared with that of Krishna. As

Krishna did *lila* with many of his consorts, Chaitanya was also doing that. He was seen bathing with his friends in the Ganges. When some girls arrived there to worship, he went and sat in their midst as lord Krishna did with *gopis* in Vrndavana.

Edward Dimock has made a very interesting point by saying – ‘in a sense what Chaitanya was and did is less important than what people thought what he was and what he did’ (C.Dimock, 1976). The biographers have given Chaitanya a kind of ‘godhood’ and that is maintained even in the modern age. But it is notable that they did not give the status of lord Krishna – the supreme deity – to anyone other than Chaitanya. So, undoubtedly we can say that Bengal devotees were inspired by Chaitanya; a person who was present among them and by seeing him the devotee could feel a sense of affinity with Krishna. Everything was not made up, though it is true that Chaitanya’s legend was replete with many supernatural incidents which were recounted by his devotees. But, it is also true that he was the figure head synonymous to Krishna *bhakti* at least to the Bengal devotees. This depiction helped other devotees to experience a direct contact with one they believed to be God.

Radhabhava

Chaitanya’s biographer has also ascribed Radha *bhava* to him. To the poets, Radha is a warm, soft, trustworthy woman in love. According to Janardan Chakravarty, Sri Chaitanya is best understood, when interpreted in the light of the emotion which is Radha’s. ‘Radha is *‘nityaparadvaya’*, the eternal, the highest, and with no second’ (Chakravarti, 1975). Jayananda in his *Chaitanya Mangala* has compared Chaitanya’s *bhava* to Radha’s *vairagin* image (Jayananda, 1312).

Chaitanya is seen dancing, sometime he is seen to have no sense and completely immersed in Krishna *bhakti*. His mood changes frequently – sometimes sleeping, sometimes eagerly wants *mahaprasad*, decorates himself with *kumkum*, *kasturi* etc. Krishnadas Kaviraj has given an instance when Krishna wanted to feel or taste Radha’s love. So he appeared in Navadvipa in the form of Chaitanya – who had a dual incarnation with himself (Kaviraj, 1963). Therefore the love episode of Radha-Krishna was celebrated by Bengal Vaisnavas. So Chaitanya’s affinity with Radha also made a section of the devotees, especially the women, to feel kinship with this form of Vaisnavism. Though Goddesses such as Kali and Durga were worshipped, Radha was closer to them. They felt the ‘nearer’ deity within Chaitanya. That is how Chaitanya received such central space within the heart of the devotees.

Nam-Samkirtana meetings

Though Chaitanya himself was more immersed in his deep emotional ecstasy, but some of his initiatives deeply affected the movement and also the people surrounding it, thus giving an impetus to the organising initiatives. Of these ideas of *kirtana*, gatherings were of primary importance. Later on pilgrimage and growing literature which placed him in the central position also organised the movement to a great extent. The first initiative of Chaitanya Vaisnava movement that impacted the most number of people, was *kirtana* meetings. Scholars of Chaitanya Vaisnavism have given great importance to these. Ramakanta Chakravarty writes that *kirtanas*, characterised by fervour of devotion, were unique, the emotional element was so great that people forgot caste distinctions when they participated in them. ‘The *kirtana* songs violated untouchability with impunity. But the movement was not directed against the aristocracy, rich men and Brahmans were called upon to join it.’ (Chakravarty, 1985). Joseph T. O’Connell has suggested that,

The Chaitanya Vaisnava conception of lila also affirm that the human devotee may directly visualize these divine pastimes and may attune his or her heart to the same mood or taste (rasa) that is being relished by Krishna and his divine entourage...to the extent that individuals train and

transform themselves through the sadhana or remembering themselves as participating in the lilas of Krishna and Chaitanya, they are internalizing and thereby institutionazing, the core value orientation of the Chaitanya Vaisnava movement (Connell, 1999).

Chaitanya did not create *kirtana*, for it was known long before his day. But it is true that he transformed it. This was a new contribution to *bhakti*; and its' continuance in the sect after Chaitanya marked off the Bengal Vaisnavas as possessing a distinct characteristic. Scholars have laid stress in the *kirtana* initiatives of Vaisnavism as an organising force.

The biographers of Chaitanya have given example of how the *kirtana* emerged from deep emotional ecstasy of Chaitanya. Vrndavan Das in his *Chaitanya Bhagvata* had described the first *bhava* and *kirtana* of Sri Chaitanya after he returned from pilgrimage of Gaya. He is described as an eager for Krishna, always taking his name. His emotional attachment was so much that the poet compared his crying with the flowing of the Ganges. He had sacrificed all of his pride and was always taking the name of Krishna. (Thakur, 2001). He then started taking the name of *Hari* and the devotees gathered around him. After this the biographers have given many instances following the *kirtana* of Chaitanya. He is seen crying in the streets of Navadvipa taking the name of Krishna, clinging on to some of his devotees. This created sympathy among them and they also gathered and participated in Chaitanya's emotional ecstasy. These devotees sacrificed their wealth, family, and friends, became Chaitanya's companions. All of them participated in the *kirtana* gatherings (Thakur, 2001).

Initially *kirtana* was organised as a private affair and was held in the house of the devotee named Sribasa but later on Chaitanya instructed Vaisnava devotees to develop it in a larger way. He wanted to preach *Harinam* even to the lower castes, and to the women. Jayananda mentions that Chaitanya even wanted to erect temples to organise *irtana* thus giving it an institutional form (Jayananda, 1312).

The distinctive feature of Chaitanya's *kirtana* was that it was unritualistic. He made the path leading to the deity easier. Jayananda mentions that one day Chaitanya said that Krishna was unique among gods, as he is the path of salvation for every devotee. Even merely by taking Krishna's name, the devotee is honoured by everyone. There was an endeavour to give *bhaktas* due respect too. *Kirtana*, pilgrimage, hearing Krishna's name, meeting with *mahantas* was the way of Krishna worship (Jayananda, 1312).

Jayananda has described that Chaitanya preached *kirtana* by going to every house of Nadia himself. He attributed *kirtana* the highest status in comparing with *Veda*, *Brahma*, *gyana*, and *aswamedh yagna*. By propagating this view he surely deviated from traditional Hinduism as in traditional Hinduism *Veda*, *Brahma*, knowledge and rituals like *yagnais* given the highest position. The Sense of participation by the devotees in the phenomenon through the means of *kirtana* was initiated by Sri Chaitanya himself. This definitely sustained the movement to some extent. The *kirtana* was later held in a more organised manner starting with the historical assembly at *Kheturi* organised by Narottam Das (Mukhopadhyay, 1990).

But these *kirtana* gatherings received vehement opposition from the worshippers of Kali. The incidents related to this also illuminate another characteristic of Chaitanya – that he defended his faith and his devotees. One of them put red flowers and goat's blood in front of a house in which Vaisnava meetings were held. Krisnadas has mentioned that a *Saktaupasak* put the ingredients of Kali worship in front of Sribasa's house; where *kirtana* was being held (Kaviraj, 1963). He also writes that the person was soon struck with leprosy and took refuge with Chaitanya. While, Chaitanya taking an aggressive position did not want to help him and sent him to Sribasa instead for an apology (Kaviraj, 1963). What is significant here is that though Chaitanya was nonviolent in his manner but he appeared to be very protective of his faith (Kaviraj, 1963).

According to Krisnadas, the *Navya Naiyaik* also opposed the *kirtana* gatherings as for them it was a deviation from traditional Hinduism. They accused Chaitanya of being intoxicated and *kirtana* was an expression of that. They did not want to preach the name of God as it was against their faith. According to them, Nimai (Chaitanya's another name) was distorting Hinduism (Kaviraj, 1963, p. 94). This was the basic contradiction between Chaitanya and *pashandis* as all of them were very sensitive of their honourable position in society, which was maintained by keeping a distance from the general masses. But Chaitanya made the populace a part of his emotional experience and they reciprocated by taking part in this religious phenomenon. Citing these incidents, later devotees hoped that they would be guided by leaders who would not be estranged from them.

Views of Chaitanya's Associates

Chaitanya in his lifetime became the leader of the sect, though he was also recognized by Vaisnavas of Navadvipa as a deity. This strong support base of Chaitanya, lead by Advaita Acharya, helped to gather more people around Chaitanya, thus making Vaisnavism popular as compared to *Sakta* or other sects. According to Joseph T. O'Connell, Chaitanya's mode of leadership could be the paradigm for 'charismatic authority'-

"a mode of authority based upon the unusual qualities of an individual; rather than upon traditional status or legal authorization and upon the willingness of others to acknowledge that personal authority. This perpetuation of charismatic authority combined with traditional institutional authority was fostered systematically by the development of a dense repertoire of 'soft' symbolic means of institutionalization."
(Connell, 1999, p. 217)

It is very much true that Chaitanya had a charismatic authority. In addition he was accepted by a strong set of followers. There was a religious lacuna in Navadvipa. Vrndavan Das has given the example of how some pundits like Advaita Acharya were mourning the situation in Navadvipa before the coming of Chaitanya. He mourns that people are very materialistic and no one worships Krishna. The masses have taken the folk goddess Vasuli as their emancipator and they were also worshipping *jakha*, a monster who drank alcohol and eat meat (Thakur, 2001). There was a section among Vaisnavas who neither wanted to acknowledge *Sakta* worship nor wanted to worship the local Goddesses. So when Chaitanya was experiencing emotional ecstasy, they found Krishna within him. Their Vaisnava faith was rejuvenated and they gathered around Chaitanya and acknowledged his charismatic authority (Thakur, 2001) - *Advaiterkarane Chaitanya avatar*. Another instance is given by Vrndavan Das where Chaitanya is worshipped by Advaita as Sri Krishna. The day he realised that Chaitanya was actually Krishna, though being senior to him, he washed Chaitanya's feet and worshipped him with flower and other offerings (Thakur, 2001).

So, the Vaisnavas like Advaita upheld Chaitanya as the incarnation of Krishna, sometimes Krishna himself. Chaitanya was becoming a myth within his lifetime where Vaisnavism took an organised form surrounding his charismatic presence.

Pilgrimage

Among the systematizing schemes, pilgrimage to a greater part of Eastern India and also to other places played a distinctive role. O'Connell writes that,

"While the Chaitanya Vaisnavas were remarkably effective in institutionalizing their distinctive 'value orientation' (premabhakti to Krishna), they did so while avoiding 'hard' (example:- centralised, coercive, politicized) means of institutionalization. Rather they developed an impressive array of 'soft' symbolic means, such as devotional literature

and sadhana practices; and a medium means of institutionalization, such as a loose network of guru-disciple relationship coordinated with myriad sacred places.” (Connell, 1999, p. 07)

Within this, pilgrimage undertaken by Chaitanya had an important role. Krishnadas Kaviraj mentions the popularity of Chaitanya even outside Bengal. Kaviraj writes that all of Varanasi adored Chaitanya. Many sages came to visit him. Wherever he went from any temple to the banks of Ganges, people followed him and they were immersed in the name of Krishna. The people participated in *kirtana* with him. (Kaviraj, 1963) It is not that Chaitanya did not face opposition there, *Mayavadins* of Benaras condemned Chaitanya’s *nam-samkirtana*. They thought him to be an ascetic who did not have any religion but only possessed *bhava* or emotion.

Vrndavanjaite prabhurohila Kashite

Mayavadigon tare lagilan indite (Kaviraj, 1963, p. 408).

Avoiding them, Chaitanya preached *namsamkirtana*. People gathered around him in all these places and by *namsamkirtana*, he preached *bhakti*. According to Janardan Chakravarty, he took his own people, the *Gaudians*, out of Bengal and created a greater Bengal. Varanasi, Prayag, Mathura, Gujarat and Deccan came closer to Bengal in cultural sense.’ The difference of language stands in the way of a greater Bengal whose poetic medium became the beautiful brajabuli, which had a literary growth in this vast culturally unified area’. (Chakravarti, 1975, pp. 51-52) Chaitanya passed a greater part of his life at Puri in Orissa. Vaisnava devotees in the later years went for pilgrimage to Puri to see Chaitanya and deity Jagannatha -

Prabhu kahe gau dekeho deshantare

Sob asia cheratha jatra dekhi bare (Kaviraj, 1963, p. 504).

According to O’Connell, ‘this contributed to the sense of intimacy with him that influenced the sacred biographies and lyrics (*padavali*) of Chaitanya and devotees who never met him, also felt an immediate affective bond with them’ (Connell, 1999, p. 225). These initiatives made Chaitanya more popular among his devotees. In later years, many temples were erected in some of these places. So, Vaisnavism got a more organised platform. Chaitanya occupied an important position, he initiated some measures and some were the handiwork of his devotees. O’Connell also writes that pilgrimage to see Chaitanya at Puri also permitted regional leaders from Bengal to understand what was and was not the acceptable form of *bhakti* thus helping them to overcome differences (Connell, 1999, p. 225). He was actually a leader in every sense. Apart from the places that Chaitanya went for pilgrimage, his birthplace Navadvipa became an ‘emotive symbol’ for the Vaisnavas (Connell, 1999, p. 220). Navadvipa was already a centre of education for the *Navya-Naiyaiks*. Chaitanya preached *bhakti* here in the initial years. In the later years of Bengal Vaisnavism some of the gurus such as Srinivas Acharya travelled a lot in southern Bengal. These leaders used to visit each other’s residences, and Nityananda and Chaitanya’s birthplace. In this manner they created a sense of solidarity among themselves (Chakravarty N. , 1960). What is important in this respect is that the places which had any connection to any of the incidents of Chaitanya’s life, attained the status of a pilgrimage centre. Not only Chaitanya’s birthplace but also his place of initiation in Katwa became important centres for Vaisnavas. Narahari Chakravarty writes in *Bhaktiratnakar* that Narottam Thakur has visited Katwa with great emotion (Chakravarty N. , 1960).

The devotees felt that they are meeting Chaitanya himself and thus attained great satisfaction. So, though Chaitanya did not have any hereditary lineage, this place became a pilgrimage for the Vaisnavas and in the process helped in the continuation of the sect.

Scriptural writings

In the initial years, Vaisnavism was not shaped by any complex scriptural writings, but it also did not deny the necessity of it. We get the information from *Chaitanya*

Bhagabata that Chaitanya was a very learned person and had a keen interest in education. When he was ordered by his father to discontinue his studies in his childhood, he protested and demanded education. Then his father took him to Gangadas to study. He had a very sharp intellect and he used to be very argumentative student. He used to oppose the explanations of his guru and again established the same argument (Thakur, 2001).

According to Ramakanta Chakravarty his intellect might have helped him master some of the intricacies of *Navya-Nyaya* (Chakravarty R. , 1985). Chaitanya argued with some of the *Naiyaiks* by making *bhaktirasa* as his weapon. This also helped his followers to understand *bhakti*. Ramakanta Chakravarty also writes that the movement was anti-intellectual. Scholarship had no place in *kirtana*. Doctrines and tenets were not discussed (Chakravarty R. , 1985). It is true that *kirtana* was free from any scholastic discussion. But, Krisnadas Kaviraj also writes that Chaitanya himself sent Santana *gosvamin* to Vrndavan and Rupagosvamin to Mathura. Later they became one of the famous Vrndavan *gosvamins* and prepared scriptural writings for Vaisnavism. Though Chaitanya never involved himself with hard scriptural writings but instructed both his disciples Rupa and Sanatana *gosvamin* to contribute here. But, later on these *gosvamins'* writings deviated from Chaitanya's main line of *bhakti* and became more ritualistic.

Literatures establishing Chaitanya in the central position

The above mentioned initiatives were taken by Chaitanya helping to strengthen Vaisnavism in Bengal. Another initiative which was taken by some *pada* writers, produced a vast corpus of literature situating Chaitanya as the central character in them. Though Chaitanya might not have composed anything himself, but these works were influenced by him, established him as the central character of Bengal Vaisnavism. The life of Chaitanya became the most popular subject. The oldest biography, *Srikrishna Charitamritam* was composed by Murari Gupta in Sanskrit. Kavi Karnapura composed a drama called *Chaitanya Chandrodaya*. The first biography in Bengali was *Chaitanya Bhagabata* written by Nityananda's disciple Vrndavan Das. Lochan Das also composed a biography of Chaitanya called *Chaitanya Mangala* based on Murari Gupta's original works. It was composed in the first half of the sixteenth century and stressed a peculiar doctrine *gauranagarvada* propounded by Narahari Sarkar. Jayananda wrote another biography called *Chaitanya Mangala*. Only this biography mentions Chaitanya's death. Most authoritative of all Chaitanya's biographies was Krisnadas Kaviraj's *Chaitanya Caritamrita*. This book was written in the latter half of the sixteenth century. As he was a student of the Vrndavan *gosvamins'*, this book contains some of the theories preached by the *gosvamins*. Chaitanya was the main personality in these books. It seems from Krisnadas's account that Chaitanya was not comfortable if anyone worshipped him as a deity or created a *kirtana* song in his name. Rather he wanted the devotees to take the name of *Krishna*. When people came to visit him and cried *jai Krishna chaitanya* he wanted them to say *haribol* (Kaviraj, 1963).

This humble approach of Chaitanya attracted more devotees towards him, who could see a religious leader who did not want to be eulogized; rather he wanted his faith in Krishna to be propagated. But Chaitanya's later biographies tried to project him as an incarnation of Krishna or Krishna himself. It is also true that these biographies perpetuated Chaitanya's appeal and Krishna *bhakti* for the later generation.

Apart from these biographies, there were thousands of *padas* written by more than a hundred lyricists. The main theme of these *padas* is the love episode of Radha and Krishna based on the allegory about the spiritual relation of god with his power of delighting himself as well as his worshippers. But, a number of these *padas* also mentioned Chaitanya - sometimes worshipping him as Krishna himself, sometimes as dual incarnation of Krishna. This literature gave Chaitanya the identity of a religious leader and Chaitanya gave the poets the subject matter of those *bhakti* poems. O'Connell has thus rightly stated

that, 'As a whole, *Chaitanya* Vaisnavas and especially their more prominent figures have been atypically literate and literary group' (Connell, 1999, p. 234).

The most important contribution of Chaitanya in organising Vaisnavism was his spirit; which enabled the cult to be cohesive to a large extent. His spirit is best expressed through the only poem he has written, *shikshastaka* (the lesson in 8 verses). Like other religious leaders he did not contribute through scriptural writings. (Mukhopadhyay, 1990, pp. 2-3). Here Chaitanya writes -

1. *By polishing the mirror of hearts, by quenching the conflagration of existence, by scattering the moonbeams that helps the lily of salvation to blossom, by awakening the life of the bride of knowledge, by causing the sea of bliss dispensing pure nectar and by cleansing the soul, the chant of the name of Krishna ever triumphant.*
2. *Feeling as lowly as a blade of grass, more forbearing than a tree, forgetful of his own importance but acknowledging the same in others, a man should chant the name of god.*
3. *My eyes would be shedding tears, my voice would be choked with emotion, my limbs would be bristling in ecstatic joy: When could this happen to me while chanting thy name.*
4. *A moment seems long as an aeon; my eyes resemble rain clouds. The whole world appears empty, as I am separated from my god.*
5. *These verses describe the true spirit of Chaitanya. His eagerness for god and agony of not obtaining him was synonymous. Rather than ritualistic, he wanted a devotee to be more humble like 'a blade of grasses, more forbearing than a tree'. These qualities would not only make a good devotee but teach him to be a good, humble person himself. Throughout his life he preached these principles. The phenomenon might have occurred in a medieval setting but it was also ahead of the time.*

Political Associates

A phenomenon like Vaisnavism affected a large number of people. Chaitanya's relationship with political leaders too has an interesting paradigm. The good bond he shared with political leaders influenced this powerful section of society. These influential people in turn persuaded many others to join the movement. Vrndavan Das in *Chaitanya Bhagabata* mentions big land holders such as Ramchandra Khan who was attracted by Chaitanya. Vrndavan Das describes how Ramchandra Khan accidentally met Chaitanya and paid him his regards. The latter asked Ramchandra how in a time of political turmoil he could reach Orissa. Ramchandra made arrangements for Chaitanya's journey (Thakur, 2001).

Vrndavan Das also describes the meeting of Chaitanya with the king of Orissa Prataparudra Deva. Initially he had some reservations about Chaitanya, but later the misgivings were cleared and he became a Krishna devotee. Interestingly, Chaitanya asked him not to preach his name; in fact he wanted king Prataparudra Deva to promise him that he would not do so or else he would desert the place (Thakur, 2001). Chaitanya might have wanted to devote himself to a much personalised form of *Bhakti*, but by *nam-samkirtana* it did not remain a personal worship, as it created interest and propagated it among the masses.

Chaitanya's protective position

The general conception about Chaitanya is that he was very humble and non violent person. But both Krishnadas and Vrndavan Das have given the example of Chaitanya being very attacking in times - especially in protecting his faith. These incidents might have instilled a feeling of security among the devotees and the common man; in the medieval

period this also helped to popularise the sect. As the people were leaning towards the belief, that here was this *dharma* to protect them, at least in the sphere of religion. In this sense Chaitanya attracted a large number of devotees towards Vaishnavism. Krishnadas writes that once by hearing the name of Nrisimha – Krishna’s incarnation, he has taken the *gada* and went out in the town to attack the *pashandis* or *Navya-Naiyaiks*. But after he regained sense, he dropped that *gada* and went into depression. Though Krishnadas analyses this in terms of supernaturalism; but it is also an act manifesting Chaitanya’s human behaviour. He might have been so disturbed by the *Naiyaiks* who tried to stop the *kirtana* or had taken many mischievous steps against the Vaisnavas so that he lost his patience and temper. Another very striking episode was the confrontation of Chaitanya and a group of Vaisnavas with a Muslim *qazi* who wanted to stop the *kirtana* and other Vaisnava religious gatherings. Vrndavan Das has provided details of this incident (Thakur, 2001). *Krishnadas* mentions it but acknowledges Vrndavan Das as the source. Once the *qazi* went to a *kirtana* and broke the instruments and told *Vaisnavas* not to proceed with any *kirtana* further; he threatened them with conversion to Islam if this continued. Hearing this Chaitanya was very angry and asked his devotees to continue. Large number of people went to the *qazi’s* house and attacked it. Here Vrndavan Das mentions that Chaitanya ordered his devotees to break the *qazi’s* house and put it on fire (Thakur, 2001). How much of this was true or Vrndavan Das exaggerated it - we do not know for sure. Later on Chaitanya settles down the *qazi* by his argument (Kaviraj, 1963).

Vrndavan Das’ description here goes against Chaitanya’s nature. Ramakanta Chakravarty has explained this incident as one of Chaitanya’s organising initiatives (Chakravarty R. , 1985). Although being non- violent, Chaitanya was never ready to hear anything against his faith and stood by it against any opposition. Scholars might find a ‘communal’ angle to the incident. R.C. Majumdar has analysed this incident as a show of manliness by Chaitanya which has not been given any importance by historians (Majumdar, 1973). Edward. C. Dimock has written in this context, ‘when in the biographies, Chaitanya is arguing with one Muslim or another, he treats his antagonists just as he treats the *vedantis* and other Hindus: rather than telling them that they are wrong he tells that they have misinterpreted their own scriptures’ (Dimock, 1976). But this process also highlights an urge for protecting his beliefs, and for organizing a movement. Most importantly, Chaitanya did not want to confine Vaishnavism to any particular caste or creed; rather he wanted to popularise it among the masses. At least in the sphere of religious rights, every person was equal in Chaitanya Vaisnavism - certainly in the initial years. Later on a hierarchy emerged in the form of guru-disciple relationship but that did not affect Chaitanya Vaisnavas when he was alive. He exercised the *sakhyabhava* or open friendly mood with his fellow devotees; they in turn bestowed godhood upon him.

Chaitanya Vaisnavism gave respect not only to god but also to the devotees. Vrndavan Das writes; devotees are equal to god, god acknowledges defeat to *bhakti* (Thakur, 2001). This was the basic theme of *bhakti* movement in medieval Bengal. Chaitanya might not have been a formal organiser of the sect, but the movement grew by situating him in a central position. The most important thing is that he made devotion accessible to man by loving care and taught them, by his personal example.

REFERENCES:

- Chakravarti, J. (1975). *Bengal Vaisnavism and Sri Chaitanya*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society.
 Chakravarty, N. (1960). *Sri Sri Bhaktiratnakar*. (S. N. Vidyasagar, Ed.) Kolkata: Gourio Mission.
 Chakravarty, R. (1985). *Vaisnavism In Bengal: A Historical Study*. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay.

- Connell, J. T. (1999). 'Chaitanya Vaisnava Movement: Symbolic means of Institutionalization'. In J. T. Connell, *Organizational and Institutional Aspects of Indian Religious Movement* (pp. 234-235). Shimla: Manohar Publishers and Distributers.
- De, S. (1942). *Early History of Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*. Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers Limited.
- Dimock, E. C. (1976). Hinduism and Islam in Medieval Bengal. In R. V. Baumer, *Aspects of Bengali History and Society* (pp. 1-12). New Delhi: Vikash Publishing House Ltd.
- Dimock, E.C. (1976). *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*. Chicago: The university of Chicago Press.
- Jayananda. (1312). *Chaitanya Mangal*. (N. B. Nath, Ed.) Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.
- Kaviraj, K. (1963). *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. (S. Sen, Ed.) New Delhi: Sahitya Academy.
- Majumdar, R. C. (1973). *History of Medieval Bengal*. Calcutta: G. Bhaduri and Co.
- Mukhopadhyay, D. (1990). *Religion Philosophy and Literature of Bengal Vaisnavism*. . Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation.
- Thakur, V. D. (2001). *Chaitanya Bhagabat*. (S. basu, Ed.) Kolkata: Deb Sahitya Kutir.