

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF SRI CHAITANYA

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Abstract

An eminent luminary in the firmament of medieval Bangladesh's life, society, and culture was Sri Chaitanya. Through his influence, an unprecedented mass awakening emerged in the material, spiritual, earthly, religious, and social spheres of life in Bangladesh. By disseminating his doctrine of divine love, Sri Chaitanya united a society fragmented by caste and class distinctions into a single bond of human fellowship. Likewise, he ushered in a new current in Bangladesh through the Bhakti movement, transforming the religious and cultural landscape. To analyse and evaluate the profound and far-reaching influence of Sri Chaitanya, the present study has been undertaken.

Keywords: Sri Chaitanya, Gaudiya Vaishnav Dharma, Premavada Bhakti-vada, Nabajagaran.

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INTRODUCTION

A primary reason why the history of literature and society in Bengal transitioned from the murky quagmire of convention to a glorious realm of love, beauty, and spirituality is the advent of Vaishnava religion and literature—the ultimate source of which was 'Shachi-r Nandan Gora,' Sri Chaitanya Dev himself.

The unprecedented flood of emotion stemming from Sri Chaitanya's philosophy of love infused new conviction, passion, and hope into the earthly, emotional, and mortal lives of the people of Bengal. A surge of vitality, a resonant hum of life, and a vibrant pulse began to stir within society's collective psyche. It marked an awakening of humanity, a spiritual unveiling, and a thrill of love—long before the modern era arrived or the concept of human dignity had even been fully realised. Many have likened this all-encompassing evolution of the Bengali mind and consciousness to a Renaissance.

Historian Jadunath Sarkar wrote, "The Renaissance which we owe to English rule in the 19th century had a precursor, a faint glimmer of dawn no doubt, two hundred and fifty years earlier."¹ From the sixteenth century onwards—through the passing centuries and even today—that flood of his philosophy continues to flow through society and the public consciousness. Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "Just as a time arrives in human society after the monsoon season when the air is thick with the vapour of emotion, Bengal experienced a similar state following the advent of Sri Chaitanya."²(trans.)

Cantered around a single individual, there emerged such an unstoppable outpouring of devotion, such an intimate sense of loving kinship, such a close touch of divinity, such a profound expression of humanity, such remarkable intellectual prowess in philosophy and doctrine, such inexhaustible strength of renunciation and endurance, such deep religious consciousness, and such a widespread social movement — phenomena that truly stir the very depths of our understanding.

To fully grasp the profound and multifaceted impact of Sri Chaitanya on this social movement, it is essential to understand the political, social, cultural, and religious landscape of that era. Political Life—The era, society, and land upon which Sri Chaitanya sang the praises of a renewed vision of life were far from pleasant. The shock of Turkish invasions then subdued Bengal and Bengali society, and the political horizon was shrouded in the gathering clouds of ceaseless turmoil. An atmosphere of anarchy prevailed, fueled by warfare, sudden rebellions, and the tyranny of feudal landlords. The sixteenth century witnessed both the zenith and the decline of Pathan rule, alongside the astonishing rise of Mughal governance. Control of the throne frequently shifted between Pathans and Mughals, while rebels would sometimes assassinate the Sultan, unleashing chaos across the land. The lust for power tore royal families apart, and the majesty of the throne was tarnished by wickedness and misrule.

Religious Life—In those days, Puranic and Tantric religious practices were widespread in Bengal. Society was steeped in Shakta and Tantric doctrines, with the worship of Shakta deities being commonplace.

Writings by Vrindavan Das reveal:

"Basali pujaye keha nana upachare.

Madya mangsho dia keha jaksha puja kare."

Religious observance had become little more than a hollow display of pomp. The practice of religion was confined to external rituals, adherence to formal rules, and ostentatious ceremonies meant for public show. The focus was not on 'pleasing the senses of Krishna' (*Krishna-indriya-priti-iccha*), but rather on the hedonistic 'desire to please one's own senses' (*atma-indriya-priti-iccha*). Vrindavan Das wrote:

"Rama drisstipate sarbalok sukhe base.

Volume-10 | Issue-3 | March 2024

Byarthakal jay Matra babyahar rase.
Krishnam bhakti sunya sakal sangsar.
Pratam kalite hailo babhishya achar."⁴

Moreover, although Navadwip had gained renown as a centre for the study of *Navya-Nyaya* (New Logic) during that period, that fame was confined to the realm of dry, intellectual scholarship. Social and Cultural Life—The class divide that had emerged during the Sena era—separating the *Varnashrama*-governed Brahmin-Kayastha society from the lower strata—persisted into this period. Society was in turmoil due to rigid social codes involving notions of ritual purity, untouchability, the fear of losing caste through contact with Muslims, and the threat of social ostracism. Under the oppressive weight of feudalism, human dignity was largely trampled upon, and the practice of slavery became rampant. In the markets of medieval Bengal, trade was not limited to commodities; human beings were also bought and sold. Furthermore, society was plagued by immorality, debauchery, and illicit conduct. As Vrindavan Das wrote:

"Bhakshya bhojya gandha malya bibidha basan.
Khaia ta sabhasange bibidha raman.
Bhinna loke dekhile na hoy tar sanga.
Ateko duar dia kare nana rango."⁵

Consequently, a vast segment of Hindu society—comprising the downtrodden, the reviled, the neglected, the humiliated, and the scorned—abandoned the decaying Hindu social order. They rallied beneath the green flag of Islam—bearing the crescent moon—and became estranged from their former fold.

It was against this backdrop that the advent of Sri Chaitanya heralded a new dawn and ushered in a golden age for the Bengali people. Chaitanya Deva embodied the concentrated essence of the divine nectar churned from the very soul of the Bengali people—

"Bangalir hiya amiya mathia Nimai dhareche kaya."

The fragile state and moral decline of society deeply troubled Sri Chaitanya. He pondered:

"Kemate asob jib paiba uddhar.
Bisay sukhete sab majil sangsar."⁶

Consequently, Sri Chaitanya safeguarded society by disseminating the religion of divine love and uplifting a society that was sinking into degradation. He proclaimed that love and devotion constitute the essence of all religions. In the eyes of God—or Hari—there are no distinctions of caste, *varna* (social class), or hierarchy between high and low. He regarded a devout individual from a so-called low caste as superior to a high-caste Brahmin devoid of devotion. He declared that God is One and Unique, and that God Himself has incarnated as Sri Krishna. Chanting the Holy Name is the supreme method of worshipping Him; Krishna and His Name are identical:

"Jei nam sei Krishna bhajo nistha Kari.
Namer sahite achen apani Shrihari."⁷

This philosophy of the Holy Name embodies the doctrine of *Pranava* found in the *Shruti* (Vedic scriptures).

This philosophy of the Divine Name is rooted in the *Pranava* (Om) doctrine of the *Shruti* scriptures; the *Taittiriya Shruti* declares, "Om is Brahman." The far-reaching influence of the glory of the Divine Name—championed by Sri Chaitanya—became evident in later times. The essence of this glory even shaped the spiritual realisations of the world-renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore. The poet wrote:

"Rayecha tumi akatha kabe
Jibanmajhe sahaj hobe—
Apani kabe tomari nam dhanibe sab kaje."⁸

Sri Chaitanya proclaimed that rituals, festivals, sacrificial fires, and animal offerings were merely external formalities; the simple, effortless chanting of the Divine Name was the ultimate truth. The glory of the Divine Name united people from all walks of life under a single spiritual umbrella. Many marginalised individuals within Hindu society embraced the Neo-Gaudiya Vaishnava faith introduced by Sri Chaitanya. Amidst the ostentatious atmosphere of Shakta Tantric practices, the melodious chant "Harer Namaiva Kevalam" (The Name of Hari alone is the way) rose. The *Kirtan* (devotional singing) that began in the courtyard of Srivas spilt onto the city streets, transforming into a grand *Sankirtan* (congregational chanting). Thousands of men and women joined in; an unprecedented spiritual awakening swept across roads, fields, and every corner of the land:

"Khaite shuite jatha tatha nam loy.
Desh kalniyam nahi sarba Siddhi hoy."⁹

Melodies transcended the confines of the home to reach the open streets; the focus shifted from the individual to the collective embrace of the masses. A sea of humanity surged with the waves of music. In this context, Rabindranath Tagore wrote: "The voice reflected the inner emotion—a cry that sought to dissolve everything into a single unity, Volume-10 | Issue-3 | March 2024

bathed in tears. it was not merely the plaintive, seated lament of a lovelorn woman in a secluded chamber; rather, it was the cry of the entire universe, voiced by one overwhelmed by love while standing beneath the vast blue sky."10 (trans.) Consequently, while, on the one hand, it was said that "Shantipur is submerged, swept away by the floodwaters of the Nadi," on the other, it ignited an awakening of mass consciousness across the whole of Bengal.

The *Kirtan* tradition introduced by Sri Chaitanya fostered equality by eradicating social disparities. Rigid social structures based on caste and class crumbled, and the light of a sublime, universal love for humanity illuminated the land of Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "At that time, Bengal lay in a remote corner of the world; the concepts of equality and fraternity had not yet been coined; everyone was preoccupied with their own daily rituals and *Chandi-mandapa* (village prayer halls).

How, then, did such words emerge—
'I have taken blows,
and may take more;
does that mean I shall
withhold my love? Come.'"11(trans.)

The stream of Sri Chaitanya's philosophy of love flowed beyond the borders of Bengal, spreading far and wide. Qualities such as humility, modesty, nonviolence, compassion, love, and deep empathy emerged within the Gaudiya Vaishnava community. Such profound examples of humility are rare outside the Vaishnava fold—
"Trinadapi sunichena truriba sahisnuna.
Amanina manadena kirtaniya sadahari."12

Under the influence of Sri Chaitanya, Vaishnava philosophers created a vast corpus of Sanskrit and Bengali literature. Biographical narratives (*Charit-sahitya*) and Vaishnava lyric poetry (*Padavali*) were composed. Drawing inspiration from the divine pastimes of Gaura (*Gaura-lila*), Vaishnava poets penned new verses known as *Gaurachandrika* and songs centred on Gauranga. Bengali literature witnessed a vibrant use of metaphors, poetic embellishments, and rhythmic structures. Thus, a new horizon opened up in medieval Bengali literature, which had previously been dominated by the worship of *Mangal* deities.

In conclusion, the advent of Sri Chaitanya represented the manifestation of fulfilment amidst the void of Bengali life—a flash of light piercing the darkness. He not only unlocked the inner world of the Bengali people but also built a bridge of friendship connecting them with the rest of India.

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