

Chaitanya Vaishnava Devotion (*bhakti*) and Ethics Socially Integrative in Sultanate Bengal

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Abstract:The Vaishnava Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) movement inspired by Sri Chaitanya emerged and flourished in sixteenth-century Bengal during the reign of Sultan Husain Shah. It was a time when a *modus vivendi* had been established between dominant political and military Muslim elites and influential economic and professional Brahmanic Hindu elites. While each of these elite sectors of society possessed legal and religious resources for integrating diverse interests within a society, their respective resources for such integration differed markedly in underlying principles, the Muslim assuming egalitarian social solidarity with exclusive monotheism, the Brahmanic Hindu assuming stratified social differentiation with religious diversity. The present paper argues that the Chaitanya Vaishnava movement contributed positively to the otherwise limited integrative capacity of late Sultanate Bengal in which elite Muslim and Brahmanic Hindu principles for social integration tended to neutralize each other. The gentle (*madhurya*) humane kind of devotion or *bhakti* characteristic of Chaitanya and his followers engenders—then and now—a pattern of personal attitudes, ethics and theological norms that facilitate harmonious personal relations with individuals of differing status and convictions. It also provides legitimacy for selective participation in public affairs by deeming them to be religiously neutral, i.e., secular.¹

Introduction: Historical social context

The Bengali society into which Sri Chaitanya (1486-1533) was born and within which he inspired a massive resurgence of Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotion) to God as Krishna was a divided society. A large portion of the population of Bengal at that time could be considered at least to some degree Muslim, another large portion to some degree Brahmanic Hindu. But to what extent the indigenous base population, especially in the forested and less intensively cultivated areas, could be considered either Brahmanic Hindu or Muslim at that time remains unclear, at least to me. At the relatively more elite levels of society, however, the religious and socio-cultural distance between orthodox Muslims and orthodox Brahmanic Hindus was certainly more pronounced than at poorer or subaltern levels of the population. Among the latter, it is safe to say, indigenous pre-

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¹ The present essay derives for the most part from material previously published in O'Connell 1976 & 1993. But, as those publications are not readily available in Bangladesh and as the content is pertinent to our effort to stimulate study and research on religion in Bengal, it seemed appropriate to present it in a seminar in the University of Dhaka and to include it in this issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology*.

Brahmanic, pre-Muslim modes of religious life had survived to varying degrees modified by less or more accommodation to Brahmanic Hindu or Muslim religious, social and cultural patterns.

Any society, if it is to function well, requires some measure of socio-cultural integration that allows the different sectors of the population to cooperate and coordinate their activities in reasonably effective ways (Parsons 1965, 40). In modern societies it is primarily the legal system that serves best to integrate the diverse sectors and individuals of a society. In the case of more traditional societies, there may be systems of religiously legitimated norms and values that serve that function and underlie whatever legal system may be in place. In the case of Bengal under several Muslim dynasties, there were in fact two traditional major systems of religiously legitimated norms and values, each internalized within the respective Brahmanic and Islamic elites, namely *dharma-shastra* and *shariah*. Both systems (sometimes called 'Great Traditions') had in other regions proved to be effective instruments of socio-cultural integration of societies, even within societies that were internally divided and diverse. But the principles by which Brahmanic *dharma-shastra* and Islamic *shariah* organize their respective societies and effect internal integration differ sharply. The Brahmanic tradition integrates different and competing socio-cultural interests by restricting contacts between functionally and ritually distinct endogamous groups and by ranking them according to ascribed purity and actual power. The Islamic tradition, by contrast, integrates socio-cultural differences (ideally if not necessarily in practice) by including all Muslims in common ritual actions and imposing minimal common religious and social norms on all Muslims regardless of hereditary or other differences. By the sixteenth century A.D., both the Brahmanic and Islamic 'Great Traditions' were well represented in terms of cultural and other resources, cadres of religio-cultural professionals and masses of lay adherents. The rulers were Muslims and so were the dominant sectors of the military, but non-Muslims were prominent in business, learned professions and revenue collection and some held key posts in the Sultanate administrations. Neither system was dominant enough over the population at large to serve as the fundamental means of integrating the society as a whole. Indeed the more that either might be applied rigorously within the large portion of the population over which it had some influence, the more it might tend to alienate that portion from the other.²

There is relatively little explicit evidence of just what kind of legal system Husain Shah and other independent sultans of Bengal utilized in the face of the incompatibility of *dharma-shastra* and *shariah*. But for the sultans ruling in Gaur, the capital of Bengal during and around Chaitanya's time, it was imperative that they neither lose the loyalty of their own predominantly Muslim armies and *ulema* nor provide Muslim rivals a pretext for coup or invasion of Bengal in defense of Islamic

² For political, social and cultural history of Bengal under the independent sultans see: R.C. Majumdar 1966, 1973; Tarafdar 1965, 1986; Eaton 1993; S. Mukhopadhyay 1966; Karim 1977.

interests. On the other hand, the rulers were constrained to placate their Hindu subjects as well, lest the latter withdraw their services and expertise or emigrate or resist authority in other ways that would undermine the regime. The rulers thus had to keep in their service and maintain the loyalty of both Muslims and non-Muslims within the various sectors of military, administration and economy, often enough working alongside each other.

There were, however, obstacles of a religio-social kind that worked against such collaboration. Placing Muslims under the command of non-Muslims ran counter to certain Islamic norms and expectations. On the other hand, close contact with Muslims and exposure to their practices could jeopardize the ritual purity and social status of Brahmans and other high-caste Hindus. Those engaged in communally mixed enterprises thus ran the risk of being ostracized or otherwise penalized by the more restrictive guardians of their respective religio-social traditions and they might well even blame themselves as sinners. Accordingly, if communally mixed practical or secular activities were to flourish in pre-colonial Bengal unfettered by religion-based subjective and objective inhibitions, modes of religious faith that would allow and even legitimate such activities would be constructive. It was in this sort of situation that socio-culturally integrative potential of Chaitanya's Vaishnava *bhakti* movement could make itself felt. There is considerable evidence that the Chaitanya Vaishnavas, more as a by-product, perhaps, than as an explicit goal, did indeed offer a kind of religious life that for many Hindus of respectable castes facilitated their participation in communally mixed activities. And in other ways as well the Chaitanya Vaishnava movement can be seen to have fostered what there was of socio-cultural integration in pre-colonial Bengal (O'Connell 1970, 1976)

Objective of paper

In this paper I wish to concentrate on the typical personal religious experience cultivated by Chaitanya Vaishnavas, known as *bhakti* (devotion)—more precisely *prema-bhakti* (loving devotion) and articulate its relation to social values and ethics.³ These remarks thus are at the interface of Vaishnavas' theology (and their religious symbolism generally), psychology of religion and sociology of religion. I propose to sketch how the subjective personal values and behaviors fostered by *prema-bhakti* to Krishna tend (among other implications) to legitimate and in some respects even encourage congenial interaction among persons of differing religio-cultural mentalities as well as socio-economic and political interests. To do so, I first point out that Chaitanya Vaishnavas insist that personal self-understanding (one's 'identity') and values can and indeed must change through a genuine commitment to Krishna-*bhakti*. In other words, in

³For overviews of Caitanya's *bhakti* community and its teachings, see: S. De (1961); M. Kennedy (1925); E. Dimock (1966a) (1966b/1989); R. Chakraborty (1985); Kapoor 1978; Krsnadasa 1999; and for the accounts of Chaitanya's life, see Stewart (2010).

their efforts to save or rescue suffering humanity through propagation of *bhakti*, they strive to bring about what amounts to a personal transformation or 'conversion' that can fundamentally alter one's personality and values. Embedded in this process of 'conversion' to *bhakti* (akin to what Evangelical Christians would call being 'born again') is a distinctive ethos and ethical pattern. If I understand it aright, the ethos and ethics of Chaitanya Vaishnavas made them effective instruments of social and cultural integration in the midst of their otherwise divided and disparate contemporary Bengal. That integrative effect operated within both the hierarchically segmented Brahmanic Hindu socio-cultural system and the over-arching Hindu-Muslim-indigenous socio-cultural complex of sultanate Bengal. In principle the same kind of devotional religious transformation might be expected to have similar integrative implications in other historical contexts as well.

Conversion: self-criticism and self-surrender, followed by deliverance and transformation

There occurs again and again in Chaitanya Vaishnava literature and preaching the message that all persons—men and women, rich and poor, pure and impure—can and should be saved through the grace of God understood as Krishna (O'Connell 1981). That recurrent message contains a basic judgment about human character: that it is malleable, changeable. By 'conversion' here is meant a fundamental shift in self-image, a reassessment of values, a redirection of one's personal goals in life. Whether a person is already formally or nominally a Vaishnava, or for that matter a Brahman or any other sort of Hindu, does not really matter. He or she might even be a Muslim or a European foreigner. The 'conversion' intended here does not imply an external leaving of one religio-social community for another. Rather it is the interior change of heart, the deepening of commitment to loving God, that is crucial. The life stories of Chaitanya and his followers contain illustrative episodes where a repentant sinner confesses his sinfulness, submits himself at the feet of Chaitanya or a saintly Vaishnava and begs to be 'lifted up' (*uddhara*) from *samsara*, the sea or river of rebirth and redeath, to be delivered from sin and the grip of karma. There are also many pious hymns and short poems wherein even presumably pious Vaishnavas (like Narottam Das in the following extract) confess their failings and helplessness and beg for rescue and deliverance.

"O godly Vaishnavas, I make this confession (*nibedana*). I am very low (*adhama*), an evil-doer (*duracara*). Into the cruel sea of births-and-deaths (*samsara*), Fate (*bidhi*) has plunged me. Grab me by the hair and get me across (*kara para*). Fate (*bidhi*) is very powerful. It pays no heed to duty (*dharma*) and knowledge (*jnana*), but always entangles in the snares of action (*karma*). I see no sign of rescue (*trana*). All I see is suffering (*klesha*). In pain and without a master (*anatha*) I weep as lust and anger, greed and confusion, intoxication and pretence (*abhimana*) each pulls in its own way, so that my mind wanders like a blind man not knowing the right path (*supatha*) from the wrong one (*utpatha*). I have not held fast to true teaching (*sat mata*). My mind has sunk into falsity (*asat*). I have not placed my hope at

your feet. Narottama Dasa says 'I fear what I see and hear. Have mercy (*kripa*) and make me your own servant (*nija dasa*)'." [Narottama Dasa, *Prarthana*, no. 7 (1963)]

The Vaishnava conviction that a person can be changed fundamentally implies that one can and should break out of conventional self-images (artificial 'identities') supplied by the karma-driven 'accident' of one's birth, gender, occupation etc. These conventional self-images they consider mere *abhimanas*, roles that one plays or pretences that one assumes. They are not one's real self, though we tend to treat one's roles in social life as defining one's true identity. The Vaishnava conviction that a person's self-understanding or 'identity' can be changed fundamentally implies that one's ethical and behavioral patterns can be changed correspondingly. To the extent that one's ethics and behavior change, we may expect, the terms and quality of one's basic social relationships may be changed. This differs from the more traditional Brahmanical view that one's fundamental character is determined at birth and along with that one's basic social and occupational roles. But whereas it is traditional Brahmanical opinion that birth and character are fixed by one's matured or 'ripened' karma, which cannot be effaced, the Vaishnavas insist that even that 'ripened' karma can be wiped out, not by one's own efforts, they say, but by the grace or mercy, *krpa*, of God Krishna. Vaishnavas have faith that through the divine grace of Krishna, typically mediated by a saintly Vaishnava, human character can and should be changed for the better. And with character change should come the possibility of change in social relationships.

Chaitanya Vaishnava theology and conversion

Chaitanya Vaishnavas, surprisingly perhaps, glorify the present, supposedly degenerate, age, the Kali Yuga, as the age of Krishna's, of God's, most intimate self-manifestation in the person of Chaitanya, apparently, but only apparently, the perfect human exemplar of loving devotion (*prema bhakti*) to God. They have faith that the loving devotion revealed by Chaitanya is in principle available to all humans (and other beings as well) and can deliver them from sin and entrapment in recurrent rebirth, suffering and redeath. They have faith that the fundamental religious duty (*dharma*) of the present age, the Kali Yuga, is loving devotion to Krishna, and are convinced that, God willing, it is a relatively easy way to gain deliverance. Initially loving devotion to Krishna may be expressed in the simple and pleasing forms of song, dance and above all recital of Krishna's names, *nama-kirtana* (*nam kirtan*). Chaitanya Vaishnavas, accordingly, should live with a certain excitement and sense of religious purpose in the conviction that one's current human birth is a wonderful, though fleeting, opportunity to change the course of one's destiny, to put an end to mundane rebirths and redeaths. One does so by discovering, through divine mercy, who one really is, namely a loving servant of God Krishna, and by transforming one's self-image and behavior accordingly, again with the gracious help of Krishna or his advanced devotees.

Along with the discovery that one's real identity is to be a servant of God Krishna comes the insight that whatever else one may be, or seem to be, biologically, psychologically, socially, is but a pretense (*abhimana*), the playing out of roles. Sometimes certain roles are helpful ones, if they enable a person to cultivate one's devotion to Krishna, but often they are not. In the experience of deliverance, or rescue, the Vaishnava devotee is expected to see that his or her position in the profane or secular world, whatever may be its prestige or shame, is in an ultimate sense unimportant. This includes not only occupational roles, like making-money, doing research or for that matter pulling a rickshaw or scavenging through rubbish, but such traditionally respected socio-cultural roles as being a learned Brahmin (O'Connell, 1981).

This does not mean, however, that as a consequence of realizing one's true nature as a devoted servant of Krishna a Chaitanya Vaishnava simply gives up his or her other roles or flaunts in public a newly found freedom to violate standard social norms. Chaitanya was not a Henry Derozio (1808-31) nor his disciples as outrageous as the boys of Young Bengal. Rather it means that at a basic level of one's personality there should collapse, or at least begin to dissolve, both the pretentious ambitions and the frustrating inhibitions that stem from externally imposed standards, such as the conventional privileges and restrictions of ascribed caste, Brahman, Shudra or whatever.

It should be evident that such a devaluation of inherited or even achieved external status in favor of an internal identity as loving devotee of God (and recipient of God's love and mercy) would be attractive to persons of low socio-cultural status. It should mean for them enhanced self-respect as well as enhanced respect from fellow devotees, including those of higher socio-cultural standing. Indeed much has been made of this raising of respect for the disrespected and disenfranchised through popular *bhakti* movements. To what extent such enhanced respect on devotional grounds translated into mundane social, economic and political liberation of the downtrodden is another matter that merits closer scrutiny. I do not want to inter into that here though I have done so elsewhere (e.g., O'Connell, 1993). But what may not be so obvious, but still significant in social historical terms, is that the Vaishnava devaluation of external roles or pretences would seem to have been attractive as well to those Brahmans and other Hindus of high caste who may have wished to participate at high levels in economic, administrative and other areas of public life in the company of non-Hindus under Sultanate rule in Bengal.

Sultanate rule, of course, did not conform to the ideal Brahmanical pattern of political-military rule by Kshatriya kings guided by learned and pious Brahmans. Moreover, looked at from an orthodox Brahmanical perspective, participation at close quarters with those of allegedly polluting character

and habits (e.g., slaughtering cows, consuming meat and alcohol, disrespecting Brahmans and in times of conflict desecrating sacred images and temples) could result in ritual pollution that might result in loss of status or expulsion from one's caste (*jati*). For those for whom such norms still were believed to have divine sanction there might also be a debilitating sense of sin and guilt. There were many Hindus, Vaishnavas and others, especially those of higher caste, who had the ability and opportunity to advance within a sultanate regime or cooperate with it. But this could result in ritual contamination due to contact with the allegedly dangerous and potentially polluting sultans and their Muslim staffs. For such Hindus it could be a liberating experience to discover by the grace of Krishna that one's true identity, the only identity that really counts, is to be Krishna's loving servant, whatever might be the risks to one's social status.

Since both one's worldly enterprises and one's deference to Brahmanical norms of ritual purity and legitimate occupation could be seen as mere roles—to be assumed or disregarded as circumstances and the cultivation of *bhakti* require—tensions between the two should begin to lose significance. Likewise, any grounds for guilt and shame should begin to dissolve. A person's genuine task in life, according to Chaitanya Vaishnava teachings, is the cultivation of devout service to Krishna whatever may be the historical, occupational or other mundane situations in which the devotee finds or places him- or herself. And indeed we do find a large number of Chaitanya's contemporary associates significantly involved in or closely associated with Husain Shah's administration (Chakrabarty, 1985).

Chaitanya Vaishnava Ethos and Ethics

When a person is instructed about what it means to be a servant of God Krishna, the instructions are not confined to teaching about Krishna himself and the rituals for his worship. There are also instructions about the virtues that shape the character of a devotee (i.e., a devoted servant of Krishna). And there is guidance regarding the sort of attitudes and sentiments that should be cultivated to make one's service more devout and more pleasing to Krishna. Ideally these are to be nurtured and deepened throughout one's life, especially through the mutual good influences that come of associating with other devoted servants of Krishna. Taken together these virtues, attitudes and sentiments constitute a distinctive Vaishnava ethos and ethics that characterize the way Vaishnava devotees should relate to other persons, in the first instance to fellow devotees, but more generally to human beings at large.

Among the ethical virtues most stressed in the formation of Vaishnava devotional character are humility, non-violence, and control of sensual appetites. Other virtues and attitudes may be seen as reinforcing and giving refinement to these. Typical examples of Chaitanya Vaishnava

conversion from heedless sinfulness to realization of one's relationship as servant of Krishna depict the transformation of an unreformed sinner, one who is arrogant, violent and addicted to meat, alcohol and unrestrained sex, into a fledgling devotee who eschews all of this. In practice, Vaishnavas in the tradition of Chaitanya have in fact for the most part been vegetarians and have abstained from alcohol if ethnographic reports and general public opinion can be believed. Among merely nominal Vaishnavas, of course, especially in recent times, these abstentions may not be observed so strictly, but traditionally the abstentions seem to have been adhered to fairly strictly, especially by Vaishnavas in middle to elite classes of society.

The importance of sexual and other sensual restraint among mainline Chaitanya Vaishnava devotees, unfortunately, has been obscured somewhat by confusion of their restrained discipline with the transgressive ritual practices of Tantric Sahajiya Vaishnavas (Dimock 1966/1989), by the ambiguities and different types among the 'casteless' Jati Vaishnavas (Das 1986, 1993; O'Connell 1982) and by misconstruing the meaning of amorous symbolism in the Radha-Krishna motifs that are so central to Chaitanya Vaishnava conceptions of loving devotion (*prema-bhakti*). The consistent message of mainline Chaitanya Vaishnavas' devotional theology (as stated in Sanskrit and in Bangla texts), as well as their socially informative sacred biographies and hagiographies, is that strict norms of sexual conduct, proper respectively to married and celibate devotees, along with overall sensual restraint, are endorsed and expected to be observed in practice.

The modesty or humility of Vaishnavas in Bengal has been proverbial, to the extent of their being satirized in Bangla literature and theatre for *boishnab-binay*. This self-effacing humility springs from the realization that one is essentially a servant, a *dasa* or *dasi*—strictly speaking a servant of God Krishna, but a servant just the same. This sense of service and the humility that goes with it find their immediate expression or exercise in relations with fellow Vaishnavas, giving respect and even devotion to whom is said to be more pleasing to Krishna than respect and devotion directed directly to Krishna himself. Since Vaishnavas believe that Krishna is within every living being's soul as its inner ruler and enjoyer, there is good reason to treat with humble respect even the most unimpressive (in mundane terms) of fellow humans, whether Vaishnava devotees or not. A classic expression of their positive valuation of humility, forbearance and service is a verse in Sanskrit attributed to Chaitanya himself and endlessly repeated by and about Vaishnavas:

**"Hari [God, understood as Krishna] is ever to be praised by one who is as humble as the grass, as forbearing as a tree, who though deserving of praise gives praise to others."
(Rupa Goswami, *Padyavali* 32)**

The readiness of Chaitanya Vaishnavas to show respect and their complementary willingness to overlook insult and arrogance by others tend to deflect or defuse incidents and situations that might otherwise be demoralizing or become occasions for conflict. This would include situations where disparity of caste status or communal affiliation might otherwise be the occasion of conflict and alienation. To the extent that a habitual attitude of tolerant humility and readiness to be of service can be internalized by those who must interact with one another in potentially antagonistic situations, it should facilitate positive social inter-action in all sorts of problematic situations. If law may be deemed a 'blunt instrument' to effect integration among disparate sectors of a society, tolerant humility and readiness to be of service may be deemed 'subtle instruments' of such integration. We should not, of course, assume that all or most of those who declare themselves to be devotees have deeply internalized these and other virtues ideally typical of Chaitanya Vaishnavas. It would be hard enough to attempt an empirical quantitative survey of such internalization and its outcome in changed relationships with others even by studying Vaishnava devotees now living. It is impossible to do so for the past. Yet it is reasonable to chart the direction in which such virtues would tend to shape the character of persons and thereby affect their inter-personal relations to the extent they are or were internalized.

Non-violence, inoffensiveness

The relative non-violence or inoffensiveness that is characteristic of Chaitanya Vaishnavas illustrates in practice their doctrinal affirmation that the proper religious duty, *dharma*, of the present age is loving devotion, *prema-bhakti*. In the much cited episode of the conversion of the drunken brothers, Jagai and Madhai, it is reported that Chaitanya (as divine) was on the verge of destroying the pair for having injured the saintly Nityananda, when the latter and others interceded. They pointed out that since loving devotion is the purpose of Krishna's descent in the form of Chaitanya—and not the killing of demons or chastising the unrighteous—harsh punishment is not called for. The sinner would better be won over to devotion by means of loving devotion, and so it turned out, we are told (O'Connell 1970, Stewart 1995).

The theological-cum-spiritual ideas and symbolism of the Chaitanya Vaishnavas give the highest priority to Krishna's amorous sports, *lilas*, with Radha and the cowherd girls, the *gopis*, in the idyllic transcendental realm called Goloka.⁴ There the mood of 'sweetness', *madhurya*, predominates over the mood of dominance, *aisvarya*. Throughout the infancy and childhood sports of Krishna and amid his adolescent amorous pastimes in Goloka (and, it is said, when he

⁴ There are many primary and secondary sources that present the theological symbolism of the Chaitanya Vaishnavas. The most widely acknowledged primary source is Krishnadasa Kaviraja's *Caitanya Caritamrta*, best translated by Dimock and edited by Stewart 1999. Reliable secondary sources include: De 1942/1961; Nath 1958-59; Kapoor 1978; A.K. Majumdar 1978; Wulff 1984; Haberman 1988.

briefly manifests himself on earth in the Vraj region around Mathura and Vrindavan), Krishna for the most part (though not always) manifests his sweet and gentle aspects and hides his awesome divine power, the display of which would intimidate his transcendental friends and sweethearts as well as those human devotees who read, hear and meditate upon these *lilas*. For those devotees who dwell in meditation upon such *lilas*, their quality of sweetness and gentleness, i.e., *madhurya*, may be expected to permeate their values and personality intimately. But even for the more casual Chaitanya Vaishnava and indeed the general populace of pre-colonial Bengal, the songs, dramatizations and visual artistic expressions of these *madhurya*-saturated themes must have had some degree of impact in refining their aesthetic-emotional sensibilities and making less harsh their inter-personal relationships. It may be noted that there were many Bengali poets bearing Muslim names who chose to compose and sing songs of the Krishna-Radha theme (Bhattacharya 1962).

The ethos and ethics implicit in Chaitanya Vaishnava devotion and the literature, music and visual arts that evoke and express it were (and still are) such as to endorse and enhance mutual tolerance, sensitivity and non-violence. Appropriately, Vaisnavas typically are vegetarian and shy away from occupations and activities that of their nature breed or depend upon violence. Conversely, there is very little in Chaitanya Vaishnava devotional writings that would encourage assertiveness, confrontation or outright violence. There is, of course, the theme that Krishna may become angry when his devotee is mistreated and may come to the defense of that devotee, as in the story told in Purana texts wherein Vishnu appeared in the form of a hybrid man-lion and killed the demonic father of a devout boy (but none the less a demon by birth), Prahlada. But that was long ago in a different yuga or age, not in this present Kali Yuga.

By contrast, in cases in the present Kali Yuga—the Kazi who harassed Vaishnavas in Nadia, Jagai and Madhai who injured Nityananda, ‘Jaban’ Haridas, who, having been born and/or raised as a Muslim, was beaten at the Qazi’s insistence for reciting Vaishnava names of God rather than Muslim ones—the effective response to violence against Vaishnavas was reconciliation. (Vrindavanadasa, 1961; Krsnadasa 1999). There is no single incident that I know of recorded in their literature of a Chaitanya Vaishnava devotee in Bengal having died a martyr’s death. The exemplary saints and heroes in the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition are not warriors and martyrs, but saintly devotees, men and women of inoffensive mood and behavior.

Selective accommodation to Brahmanic socio-cultural and social norms

Despite their theoretical withdrawal of sacral legitimation from anything not contributory to *bhakti* to Krishna, Chaitanya Vaishnavas (at least as reflected in their sixteenth-seventeenth century

texts) were circumspect and accommodating when relating to Brahmans and Brahmanic socio-ritual norms (O'Connell, 1993). Their copious literature records relatively little evidence of hostility of Vaishnavas toward Brahmans generally. What we do find, however, is considerable criticism by Vaishnavas of the practice of animal slaughter by a class of ritual priests of Shakta cults. And the latter stand accused of retaliating by ritually defiling the house of a Vaisnava. Scattered throughout the sacred biographies of Chaitanya we also find some harsh words about '*pasandis*' (hypocrites), who often are Brahmans. But these are usually isolated remarks about particular individuals, not criticisms of Brahmans or Brahmanical norms generally. There are also reports in the same texts of hostility towards the Vaishnavas by certain unnamed Brahmans in Navadvip. These are said to have falsely reported (to no avail) to the royal court at Gaur that the Vaishnavas were planning to raise up Chaitanya as a Brahman claimant to the throne (Jayananda 1905, 11; Vrndavanadasa 1961, 1.3.11 & 2.23.415). They allegedly advised that he be killed and they are accused of themselves having tried to murder the close associate of Chaitanya in whose residence the Vaishnavas used to gather for *kirtan* recital and dramatic reenactments of Krishna's *lilas*. The motive attributed to these Brahmans was fear lest boisterous demonstrations of Krishna-*bhakti* by the Vaishnavas would rouse the ire of the Muslim authorities resulting in reprisal against Brahmans in the town (Vrndavanadasa, 1961).

Outside Navadvip town, however, there seem to have prevailed reasonably good relations between the Chaitanya Vaishnavas and Brahmans at large. One reason for this would likely have been that, with certain exceptions, Brahmans stood to gain, or at least not lose, professional patronage as the Vaishnavas' influence spread. The latter, most of whose eminent leaders were themselves Brahmans, regularly invited Brahmans to grace festivals and expected them to continue to perform the various rites of passage and other domestic rituals for Vaishnava client families, provided these were done in forms compatible with Vaishnava norms. Vaishnava gurus generally confined themselves to the roles of initiating gurus, preachers, spiritual advisors and officiants at specifically devotional functions. As more and more groups and individuals at the periphery of the Brahmanic Hindu religio-cultural and social system modified their indigenous ways in a manner more congenial to both Vaishnava and Brahmanic norms of purity and respectability (like giving up meat and alcohol and reforming sexual/marriage customs) due to Vaishnavas' propagation of Krishna-*bhakti*, these same 'reforming converts' would become more suitable as clients for the Brahmans in ritual contexts beyond the strictly devotional.

Where the Vaishnavas drew a line against accepting Brahmanic ritual services was where doing so would implicitly or explicitly violate a fundamental Vaishnava principle. One such type of Brahmanic ritual that they opposed is the purificatory penitential rite of *prayascitta* (Rupa Goswami 1961, v. 1.2.64). According to Vaishnava faith, only Krishna can overcome bad karma,

not a Brahmanical rite of purification. Accordingly, in place of *prayascitta*, Vaishnavas would organize a ceremony of their own to mark Krishna's removal of a penitent's bad karma, the ceremony usually involving singing divine names in *kirtan* fashion and feeding Vaishnavas, Brahmans and others in festival called *mahotsava* / *mahotshab*. Another banned practice or category of practices is animal sacrifice.

Final Comment on the Chaitanya Vaishnava perspective on participating in secular affairs

To the extent that Chaitanya Vaishnavas are committed devotees (*bhaktas*) they are not as such bound to any particular paradigm for mundane social and political affairs. Their fundamental religious commitment, their faith or trust (*shraddhā*) is concentrated in *bhakti* to Krishna, an interior commitment of the heart in the form of loving devotion to God. They are not, however, by and large, anarchists or antinomians. Most do acknowledge the domestic and wider social responsibilities of lay ('householder') Vaishnavas to help maintain order in mundane social, economic and political affairs. They call this *loka-samgraha*, 'holding the world together'. But they maintain an independent position from which to judge the merits of any particular social, economic or political system (whether or not it claims Brahmanic, Islamic or any other sacral legitimation),... to influence it in what they deem constructive ways,... to participate in it or not—as their Vaishnava-formed conscience and practical judgment dictate. This is in fact a religious justification for participating in public mundane affairs on 'secular' terms, or in other words a Vaishnava Hindu religious warrant for public secularity in Muslim-dominated Sultanate Bengal. But their theological justification for critical responsible participation in secular affairs is not limited to the particularities of Sultanate Bengal. It would apply at any time and in any place, though the terms of participation would vary depending on the circumstances of the particular time and place.

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