

Chaitanya and the Vaishnava Poets of Bengal

John Beames

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CHAITANYA AND THE VAISHNAVA POETS OF BENGAL

THE INDIAN ANTIQUARY,
A JOURNAL OF ORIENTAL RESEARCH
IN
ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY, LITERATURE, LANGUAGES, PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, FOLKLORE,
&c., &c., &c.
EDITED BY
JAS. BURGESS, M.R.A.S., F.R.G.S.
VOL. II.—1873 [Bombay, Education Society's Press] {Scanned and edited by Christopher M. Weimer, May 2002}

CHAITANYA AND THE VAISHNAVA POETS OF BENGAL.
STUDIES IN BENGALI POETRY OF THE FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES.
BY JOHN BEAMES, J.C.S., M.R.A.S. &c.

THE PADKALPATARU, or 'wish-granting tree of song,' may be considered as the scriptures of the Vaish.nava sect in Bengal. In form it is a collection of songs written by various poets in various ages, so arranged as to exhibit a complete series of poems on the topics and tenets which constitute the religious views of the sect. The book has been put together in recent times, and takes the reader through the preliminary consecration, invocations and introductory ceremonies, the rise and progress of the mutual love of Radha and K.rish.na, and winds up with the usual closing and valedictory hymns.

Before beginning an analysis of this collection so remarkable from many points of view, it will probably be of some assistance even to those who have studied the history of Vaish.navism, if I state briefly the leading points in the life of Chaitanya, and the principal features of the religion which he developed, rather than actually founded.

Bisambhar (Vishvambhara) Misr was the youngest son of Jagannath Misr, a Brahman, native of the district of Sylhet in Eastern Bengal, who had emigrated before the birth of his son to Nadiya (Nabadwipa), the capital of Bengal. [Footnote: The facts which here follow are taken from the "Chaitanyacharitamrita," a metrical life of Chaitanya, the greater part of which was probably written by a contemporary of the teacher himself. The style has unfortunately been much modernized, but even so, the book is one of the oldest extant works in Bengali. My esteemed friend Babu Jagadishnath Ray has kindly gone through the book, a task for which I had not leisure, and marked some of the salient points for me.] His mother was Sachi Debi, daughter of Nilambar Chakravarti. She bore to Jagannath eight daughters who all died young; her first-born child, however, was a son named Biswarup, who afterwards under the name of Nityanand became the chief disciple of his more famous brother. Bisambhar was born at Nadiya in the evening of the *Purnima* or day of the full moon of Phalgun 1407 Sakabda, corresponding to the latter part of February or beginning of March A.D. 1486. It is noted that there was an eclipse of the moon on that day. By the aid of these indications those who care to do so can find out the exact day. [Footnote: There was an eclipse of the moon before midnight Feb. 18, O.S. 1486.] The passages in the original are:—

Sri K.rish.na the Visible became incarnate in Nabadwip,

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For forty–eight years visibly he sported;
The exact (date) of his birth (is) Saka 1407,
In 1455 he returned to heaven.
And again—

On the full moon of Phalgun at even was the lord's birth
At that time by divine provision there was an eclipse of the moon.
—*Ch. I. xiii. 38.*

In accordance with the usual Bengali superstition that if a man's real name be known he may be bewitched or subject to the influence of the evil eye, the real name given at birth is not made known at the time, but another name is given by which the individual is usually called. No one but the father and mother and priest know the real name. Bisambhar's usual name in childhood was Nimai, and by this he was generally known to his neighbours.

In person, if the description of him in the Chaitanyacharitamrita (Bk. I. iii.) is to be considered as historical, he was handsome, tall (six feet), with long arms, in colour a light brown, with expressive eyes, a sonorous voice, and very sweet and winning manners. He is frequently called “Gaurang” or “Gaurchandra,” *i.e.*, the pale, or the pale moon, in contrast to the Krishna of the Bhagvat who is represented as very black.

The name Chaitanya literally means 'soul, intellect,' but in the special and technical sense in which the teacher himself adopted it, it appears to mean perceptible, or appreciable by the senses. He took the name Sri K.rish.na Chaitanya to intimate that he was himself an incarnation of the god, in other words, K.rish.na made visible to the senses of mankind.

The Charitamrita being composed by one of his disciples, is written throughout on this supposition. Chaitanya is always spoken of as an incarnation of K.rish.na, and his brother Nityanand as a re–appearance of Balaram. In order to keep up the resemblance to K.rish.na, the Charitamrita treats us to a long series of stories about Chaitanya's childish sports among the young Hindu women of the village. They are not worth relating, and are probably purely fictitious; the Bengalis of to–day must be very different from what their ancestors were, if such pranks as are related in the Charitamrita were quietly permitted to go on. Chaitanya, however, seems to have been eccentric even as a youth; wonderful stories are told of his powers of intellect and memory, how, for instance, he defeated in argument the most learned Pandits. A great deal is said about his hallucinations and trances throughout his life, and we may perhaps conclude that he was more or less insane at all times, or rather he was one of those strange enthusiasts who wield such deep and irresistible influence over the masses by virtue of that very condition of mind which borders on madness.

When he was about eighteen his father died, and he soon afterwards married Lachhmi Debi, daughter of Balabhadra Acharjya, and entered on the career of a *grihastha* or householder, taking in pupils whom he instructed in ordinary secular learning. He does not appear, however, to have kept to this quiet life for long; he went off on a wandering tour all over Eastern Bengal, begging and singing, and is said to have collected a great deal of money and made a considerable name for himself. On his return he found his first wife had died in his absence, and he married again one Bishnupriya, concerning whom nothing further is said. Soon after he went to Gaya to offer the usual pi.n.da to the *manes* of his ancestors.

It was on his return from Gaya, when he was about 23 years of age, that he began seriously to start his new creed. “It was now,” writes Babu Jagadishnath, “that he openly condemned the Hindu ritualistic system of ceremonies as being a body without a soul, disowned the institution of caste as being abhorrent to a loving god all whose creatures were one in his eyes, preached the efficacy of adoration and love and extolled the excellence and sanctity of *the* name, and the uttering and singing of *the* name of god as infinitely superior to barren system without faith.” Chaitanya, however, as the Babu points out, was not the originator of this theory, but appears to have borrowed it from his neighbour Adwaita Acharjya, whose custom it was, after performing his daily ritual, to go to the banks of the Ganges and call aloud for the coming of the god who should substitute love and faith for mere rites and ceremonies. This custom is still adhered to by Vaish.navas. The Charitamrita veils the priority of Adwaita adroitly by stating that it was he who by his austerities hastened the coming of K.rish.na in the avatar of Chaitanya.

I praise that revered teacher Adwaita of wonderful actions,

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By whose favour even the ignorant may perceive the (divinity)
personified.

—Ch. I. vi.

Thus in Sanskrit verses at the head of that chapter which sings the virtues of Adwaita: by in the Bengali portion of the same chapter it is asserted that Adwaita was himself an incarnation of a part of the divinity, e.g.—

The teacher Adwaita is a special portion of god.

And the author goes on to say that Adwaita was first the teacher then the pupil of Chaitanya. The probability is that Adwaita, like the majority of his countrymen, was more addicted to meditation than to action. The idea which in his mind gave rise to nothing more than indefinite longings when transfused into the earnest fiery nature of Chaitanya, expanded into a faith which moved and led captive the souls of thousands.

His brother Nityanand was now assumed to be an incarnation of Balaram, and took his place as second-in-command in consequence. The practice of meeting for worship and to celebrate “Sankirtans” was now instituted; the meetings took place in the house of a disciple Sribas, and were quite private. The new religionists met with some opposition, and a good deal of mockery. One night on leaving their rendezvous, they found on the door-step red flowers and goats' blood, emblems of the worship of Durga, and abominations in the eyes of a Vaish.nava. These were put there by a Brahman named Gopal. Chaitanya cursed him for his practical joke, and we are told that he became a leper in consequence. The opposition was to a great extent, however, provoked by the Vaish.navas, who seem to have been very eccentric and extravagant in their conduct. Every thing that K.rish.na had done Chaitanya must do too, thus we read of his dancing on the shoulders of Murari Gupta, one of his adherents; and his followers, like himself, had fits, foamed at the mouth, and went off into convulsions, much after the fashion of some revivalists of modern times. The young students at the Sanskrit schools in Nadiya naturally found all this very amusing, and cracked jokes to their hearts' content on the crazy enthusiasts.

In January 1510, Chaitanya suddenly took it into his head to become a Sanyasi or ascetic, and received initiation at the hands of Keshab Bharati of Katwa. Some say he did this to gain respect and credit as a religious preacher, others say it was done in consequence of a curse laid on him by a Brahman whom he had offended. Be this as it may, his craziness seems now to have reached its height. He wandered off from his home, in the first instance, to Puri to see the shrine of Jagannath. Thence for six years he roamed all over India preaching Vaish.navism, and returned at last to Puri, where he passed the remaining eighteen years of his life and where at length he died in the 48th year of his age in 1534 A.D. His Bengali followers visited him for four months in every year and some of them always kept watch over him, for he was now quite mad. He had starved and preached and sung and raved himself quite out of his senses. On one occasion he imagined that a post in his veranda was Radha, and embraced it so hard as nearly to smash his nose, and to cover himself with blood from scraping all the skin off his forehead; on another he walked into the sea in a fit of abstraction, and was fished up half dead in a net by a fisherman. His friends took it in turns to watch by his side all night lest he should do himself some injury.

The leading principle that underlies the whole of Chaitanya's system is *Bhakti* or devotion; and the principle is exemplified and illustrated by the mutual loves of Radha and K.rish.na. In adopting this illustration of his principle, Chaitanya followed the example of the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavat Pura.na, and he was probably also influenced in the sensual tone he gave to the whole by the poems of Jayadeva. The Bhakta or devotee passes through five successive stages, *Santa* or resigned contemplation of the deity is the first, and from it he passes into *Dasya* or the practice of worship and service, whence to *Sakhya* or friendship, which warms into *Batsalya*, filial affection, and lastly rises to *Madhurya* or earnest, all-engrossing love.

Vaish.navism is singularly like Sufiism, the resemblance has often been noticed, and need here only be briefly traced. [Footnote: Conf. Capt. J. W. Graham's paper 'On Sufiism,' *Bombay Literary Soc. Trans.* Vol. I. pp. 89 et seqq.; Rajendralala Mitra's valuable introduction to the *Chaitanya Chandrodaya* (Biblioth. Ind.), pp. ii–iv and xv; also Jones' 'Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus,' *Asiat. Res.* Vol. III. pp. 165–207; and Leyden, 'On the Rosheniah Sect, &c.,' *As. Res.* Vol. XI. pp. 363–428.—ED.] With the latter the first degree is *nasut* or 'humanity' in which man is subject to the law *shara*, the second *tarikah*, 'the way' of spiritualism, the third 'aruf or 'knowledge,' and the fourth *hakikat* or 'the truth.' Some writers give a longer series of grades, thus— *talab*, 'seeking after god;' 'ishk, 'love;' *m'arifah*, 'insight;' *istighnah*, 'satisfaction;' *tauhid*, 'unity;' *hairat*, 'ecstasy;' and lastly *fana*, 'absorption.' Dealing as it does with God and Man as two factors of a problem, Vaish.navism

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necessarily ignores the distinctions of caste, and Chaitanya was perfectly consistent in this respect, admitting men of all castes, including Muhammadans, to his sect. Since his time, however, that strange love of caste-distinctions, which seems so ineradicable from the soil of India, has begun again to creep into Vaishnavism, and will probably end by establishing its power as firmly in this sect as in any other.

Although the institution of love towards the divine nature, and the doctrine that this love was reciprocated, were certainly a great improvement on the morbid gloom of Siva-worship, the colourless negativeness of Buddhism, and the childish intricacy of ceremonies which formed the religion of the mass of ordinary Hindus, still we cannot find much to admire in it. There seems to be something almost contradictory in representing the highest and purest emotions of the mind by images drawn from the lowest and most animal passions.

“Ut matrona meretrici dispar erit atque discolor.”

So must also Vaishnavism differ from true religion, the flesh from the spirit, the impure from the pure. The singing of hymns about Radha and Krishna is much older than Chaitanya's age. Not to mention Jayadeva and his beautiful, though sensual, Gitagovinda. [Footnote: It is many years now since I read Gitagovinda as a text-book at college, but the impression I still retain is that it was in many parts far too warm for European tastes.] Bidyapati, the earliest of Bengali poets, and Chandi Das both preceded Chaitanya, and he himself is stated to have been fond of singing their verses. There was therefore a considerable mass of hymns ready to his hand, and his contemporaries and followers added largely to the number; the poems of the *Padakalpataru* in consequence are of all ages from the fifteenth century downwards; moreover, as Vaishnavism aspires to be a religion for the masses, the aim of its supporters has always been to write in the vulgar tongue, a fortunate circumstance which renders this vast body of literature extremely valuable to the philologist, since it can be relied on as representing the spoken language of its day more accurately than those pretentious works whose authors despised everything but Sanskrit.

The *Padakalpataru*, to keep up the metaphor of its name throughout, is divided into 4 *sakhas* or 'branches,' and each of these into 8 or 10 *pallabas* or smaller branches, 'boughs.' It should be explained that the kirtans are celebrated with considerable ceremony. There is first a consecration both of the performers and instruments with flowers, incense, and sweetmeats. This is called the *adhibas*. The principal performer then sings one song after another, the others playing the drum and cymbals in time, and joining in the chorus; as the performance goes on many of them get excited and wildly frantic, and roll about on the ground. When the performance is over the drum is respectfully sprinkled with *chandana* or sandalwood paste, and hung up. Several performances go on for days till a whole Sakha has been sung through, and I believe it is always customary to go through at least one Pallab at a sitting, however long it may be. The Bengali Kirtan in fact resembles very much the Bhajans and Kathas common in the Maratha country, and each poem in length, and often in subject, is similar to the Abhangas of Tukaram and others in that province.

The first Pallab contains 27 hymns, of these 8 are by Gobind Das, 8 by Baishnab Das, 3 by Brindaban Das, the rest by minor masters. Brindaban Das and Parameshwar Das were contemporaries of Chaitanya, the others—including Gobind Das, who is perhaps the most voluminous writer of all—are subsequent to him. Of the hymns themselves the first five are invocations of Chaitanya and Nityanand, and one is in praise of the ceremony of Kirtan. There is nothing very remarkable in any of them. Number 5 may be taken as a specimen, as it is perhaps the best of the batch.

“Nand's son, lover of the Gopis, lord of Radha, the playful Syam:

Is he, Sachi's son, the Indra of Nadiya, the heart-charming dwelling of gods and saints; victory to him who is love embodied to his own beloved, hail! hail to him who is the joy of the existence of his well-beloved! hail to the delight of the eyes of his comrades in Braj! hail to the charm of the sight of the women of Nadiya! hail! hail to Sridam, Sudam, Subal, and Arjun, [Footnote: Names of Chaitanya's disciples.] bound by love to him whose form is as a new cloud! hail to Ram and the rest, beautiful and dear companions! hail to the charmer, the incomparable Gora (Chaitanya)! hail to the mighty younger brother of Balam! hail! hail to Nityanand (who is) joy (personified)! Hail to him who destroys the fear of good men, the object of the hope of Gobind Das!”

I would call attention here, once for all, to what is one of the principal charms of Vaishnava hymns, the exquisitely musical rhythm and cadence. They seem made to be sung, and trip off the tongue with a lilt and grace

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which are irresistible.

This hymn is interesting as shewing how completely Chaitanya is by his followers invested with the attributes of, and identified with, K.rish.na; it has no other special merits; nor anything specially interesting from a philological point of view as it is nearly all Sansk.rit.

The next six are in praise of the sect itself, of Adwaita, and the principal disciples. That on Adwaita by his contemporary Brindaban Das gives a lively picture of the old Brahman, then follow seven in praise of the Kirtanias or the old master-singers—Bidyapati, Jayadeva, Cha.n.di Das; then four on K.rish.na and Radha, containing only a succession of epithets linked together by jay! jay!

The twenty-third begins the adhibas or consecration, and is curious less for its language than for the description it gives of the ceremonies practised. It is by the old masters Parameshwar and Brindaban, with the concluding portion by a younger master Bansi. The poem is in four parts and takes the form of a story how Chaitanya held his feast. It runs thus:—

23. Atha sankirtanasya adhibasa.

“One day coming and smiling, sitting in Adwaita's house, spake the son of Sachi, having Nityanand with him and Adwaita, sitting in enjoyment, he planned a great festivity. Hearing this, smiling with joy, Sita Thakurani coming spoke a sweet word: hearing that with joyful mind the son of Sachi spoke somewhat in regard to arranging the festival. 'Listen, Thakurani Sita,[Footnote: Sita was the wife of Adwaita.] bring the Baishnabs here; making pressing invitation to them: whoso can sing, whoso can play, invite them separately, man by man.' Thus Gora Rai speaking gave orders for an assembly: ' Invite the Baishnabs! Bring out the cymbal and drum, set out full pots painted with aloes and sandal-paste: plant plantains, hang on them garlands of flowers, for the Kirtan place joyfully. With garlands, sandal, and betelnut, ghee, honey, and curds consecrate the drum at evening-tide.' Hearing the lord's word, in loving manner she made accordingly various offerings with fragrant perfumes: all cried 'Hari, Hari!' thus they consecrate the drum; Parameshwar Das floats in enjoyment.”

Of the remainder of the adhibas I give merely a paraphrase omitting the numerous repetitions.

2. Having prepared the entertainment she invites them, “kindly visit us, to you and Vaish.navas, this is my petition, come and see and complete the feast;” thus entreating she brought the honoured guests, they consecrate the feast. Joyfully the Vaish.navas came to the feast: “to-morrow will be the joy of the great festivity, there will be the enjoyment of the singing Sri K.rish.na's sports, all will be filled with delight.” The merits of the assembly of the devotees of Sri K.rish.na Chaitanya singeth Brindaban Das.

3. First set up the plantains, array the full pots, adorned with twigs of the mango; the Brahman chants the Vedas, the women shout jay! jay! and all cry Hari! Hari! Making the consecration with curds and *ghi*, all display their joy; bringing in the Vaish.navas, giving them garlands and sandal-paste, for the celebration of the Kirtan; joy is in the hearts of all, hither come the Vaish.navas, to-morrow will be Chaitanya's kirtan; the virtue of Sri K.rish.na Chaitanya's name, and the indwelling of Sri Nityanand singeth Das Brindaban. [Footnote: The poet's name is inverted to make a rhyme for Kirtan in the preceding line.]

4. Jay! jay! in Nawadwip; by Gorang's order Adwaita goes to prepare the consecration of the drum. Bringing all the Vaish.navas with sound of “Hari bol,” he initiates the great feast. He himself giving garlands and sandal-paste, converses with his beloved Vaish.navas, Gobind taking the drum plays ta-ta-tum tum, Adwaita lightly clashes the cymbals. Hari Das begins the song, Sribas keeps time, Gorang dances at the kirtan celebration. On all sides the Vaish.navas crowding echo “Hari bol,” to-morrow will be the great feast. To-day consecrate the drum and hang it up, joyfully saith Bansi sound victory! victory!!

Having thus concluded the initiatory ceremonies in the 1st Pallab, the 2nd Pallab begins the real “Kirtan.” It contains 26 hymns by masters who are mostly of comparatively recent date. Of the old masters Gobind Das and Cha.n.di Das alone appear in this Pallab. We now commence the long and minutely described series of emotions and flirtations (if so lowly a word may be used) between Radha and K.rish.na, and this Pallab and in fact the whole of the first Sakha is on that phase called “purbaraga” or first symptoms of love. In No. 2, Cha.n.di Das represents two of Radha's Sakhis, or girl-friends, whispering together as they watch her from a distance (the punctuation {i.e. colon (:)} refers to the caesura, not to the sense):

“She stands outside the house, a hundred times restlessly she comes and goes: depressed in mind, *with* frequent sighs, she looks towards the kadamba jungle. Why has Rai (Radhika) become thus? serious is her error,

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she has no fear of men, where are her senses, or what god has possessed her? Constantly restless, she does not cover herself with the corner of her robe: she sits still for a while, then rises with a start, her ornaments fall with a clang. Youthful in age, of royal descent, and a chaste maiden to boot: what does she desire, (why) does her longing increase? I cannot understand her motives: from her conduct, this I conceive, she has raised her hand to the moon: [Footnote: She has formed some extravagant desire.] Cha.n.di Das says with respect she has fallen into the snare of the black one (K.rish.na).”

This poem vividly expresses the first symptoms of love dawning in the girl's heart, and from a religious point of view the first awakenings of consciousness of divine love in the soul. It is difficult for the European mind, trained to draw a broad distinction between the love of God and love for another human being, to enter into a state of feeling in which the earthly and sensual is made a type of the heavenly and spiritual, but a large-souled charity may be perhaps able to admit that by this process, strange though it be to its own habits and experiences, there may have been some improvement wrought in the inner life of men brought up in other schools of thought; and my own experience, now of fourteen years standing, enables me to say that Vaish.navism does, in spite of, or perhaps in virtue of, its peculiar *modus operandi*, work a change for the better on those who come under its influence.

Two more hymns on the same subject follow, and in No. 5 Radha herself breaks silence.

“In the kadamba grove what man is (that) standing? What sort of word coming is this: the plough of whose meaning has penetrated startlingly the path of hearing? With a hint of union, with its manner of penetrating making one well-nigh mad: My mind is agitated, it cannot be still, streams flow from my eyes: I know not what manner of man it is who utters such words: I see him not, my heart is perturbed, I cannot stay in the house: My soul rests not, it flutters to and fro in hope of seeing him: When she sees him, she will find her soul, quoth Urdbab Das.”

I have left myself no space to finish this Pallab, or to make remarks on the peculiarities of the language, which in the older masters would more properly be called old Maithila than Bengali. It is nearly identical with the language still spoken in Tirhut, the ancient Mithili, and in Munger and Bhagalpur, the ancient Magadha, than modern Bengali. As the Aryan race grew and multiplied it naturally poured out its surplus population in Bengal, and it is not only philologically obvious that Bengali is nothing more than a further, and very modern development of the extreme eastern dialect of Hindi. All these considerations, however, I hope still further to develop at some future time.