

VAISHNAVISM, BRAHMANISM AND HINDU IDENTITY IN MEDIEVAL BENGAL

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According to available evidence, the worship of Krishna as a form of popular Hinduism originated in north-central India at least several centuries prior to the Christian era.¹ Since then the Krishna cult has furnished the basis of numerous sects and movements within popular Hinduism, and has been one of the most powerful forces in religious and cultural history on the Indian subcontinent. In the sixteenth century, in Bengal, there arose a highly organized and lately much studied sect of Krishnaite Hinduism, the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect. This movement and its sociohistorical basis will be the focus of the present paper.

Gaudiya Vaishnavas credit the foundation of their sect and its early leadership to the charismatic and saintly Caitanya, born Visvambhara Misra in 1486. After his death in 1533, the movement attributed to his vision and teachings took on the philosophical and theological apparatus of a distinct religion. Moreover, the Caitanyite or Gaudiya Vaishnava movement was phenomenally successful in eastern India, though it has by no means been confined to that area. The modern Hare Krishna or ISKCON organisation is essentially an offshoot of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and it is with the emergence of this offshoot or subject that Krishnaism can be said to have evolved today into a world religion.²

But despite its impressive advance during the more recent era, in its early history the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement operated amid unusual and turbulent material and political circumstances, as I will outline in some detail in this paper. Nonetheless, scholars of Indian religious history have by and large given little importance to the temporal conditions of medieval Bengal in their reconstruction of the early intellectual and social milieu of the Vaishnava movement there; instead, the impetus and inspiration for the movement is attributed by most present scholars to the charisma, activities and vision of a single religious leader. It is in this context that the religious historian AK Majumdar refers to Caitanya as "the founder of the last great Vaisnava sect".³ Edward Dimock credits "the intense and unprecedented revival of the Vaisnava faith in Bengal" of the 16th century to "the leadership and inspiration of Caitanya."⁴ Another scholar, S.C. Mukherji, characterizes the time preceding Caitanya as an era of "lamentable decadence of religious life and ideals in Bengal."⁵ Dimock⁶ cites early Gaudiya sources deploring the intemperance and gross standards of personal conduct, such as the practice of sacrificial rites and of bloodthirsty goddess worship, prevalent among the Bengali masses of Caitanya's period — masses that, the same Gaudiya sources assure us, were woefully ignorant of the divinity and grace of Krishna.

Despite the tenor of these views it is undeniable that Krishna did receive some form of popular worship in eastern India prior to the time of Caitanya. If nothing else, there is Jayadeva's 12th century poem *Gitagovinda* to provide evidence that Vaishnava lore had found a place in the consciousness of easterners prior to the rise of the Gaudiya movement. What is more, there is a massive song collection in archaic middle Bengali, Baru Candidasa's *Srikr̥ṣṇakīrtana*, that attests to Krishna's having been a popular hero of early eastern legend and romance. Even the literature

of the Gaudiya movement furnishes evidence that possibly Caitanya himself, and certainly his disciples and contemporaries, were aware of this text.⁷ I have discussed this in the introduction to my translation of SKK, which has been just published by Scholars Press. As I mention there, distinguished scholarly opinion has dated SKK to the late 14th century, making it the earliest surviving Krishna devotional literature in eastern India, and the only such work that predates Caitanya.⁸

Some writers, however, dispute SKK's antiquity and authenticity. A.K. Majumdar, for instance, comments that in view of the work's "gross nature" it must be concluded that "Most probably Caitanya had not read the SKK".⁹ Also, Sukumar Sen has claimed that SKK cannot be an authentic pre-Caitanya text because:

... the main note of the poem running through the whole of it is frankly erotic, so much so that it is really hard to believe that these songs had obtained approval from Caitanya.¹⁰

On the other hand, several scholars, including S.K. Chatterji, have held that SKK is the earliest, most important and one of the best of the Middle Bengali texts.¹¹ Still, the evidence furnished by SKK as to the antiquity and popularity of Krishna devotionalism in eastern India tends to be discounted, and even cautious religious historians, tracing the development of Bengal Vaishnavism, place overweening emphasis upon Caitanya's life and leadership. Typical is the view of the scholar S.K. De, who states:

Although the term Bengal Vaishnavism is not co-extensive with the religious system associated with the name of Caitanya and his adherents ... Caitanyaism ... is Vaisnavism *par excellence* in Bengal. ... It is difficult to say in what particular form Vaishnavism existed in Bengal before Caitanya.¹²

I would suggest that the difficulty S.K. De alludes to must be compounded to the extent that scholars are reluctant to examine material and ethical conditions for a Vaishnava movement in Bengal prior to Caitanya. Particularly worthy of scrutiny are certain factors of geography and social history, factors that — it can be argued — were causally related to the advent and progress of the Gaudiya movement. What is more, I shall claim that Caitanya could not have fomented the human and material conditions which gave rise to Bengal Vaishnavism as a socioreligious force, inasmuch as these conditions had been in the making for centuries before his time. Ironically, however, they are attested to by incidents in Caitanya's own life, as I'll demonstrate with examples.

The structure of the argument is basically two-fold: first, that the rise of some Hindu reform movement along the lines of Gaudiya Vaishnavism was inevitable, given the conditions in eastern India at Caitanya's time; secondly, that this revival had as its vehicle the already popular folk cult of the divinity Krishna, whose pre-existence is supported by an archaic vernacular tradition of lore and legend as exemplified by Srikrnakirtana. We will now proceed with these claims in order, beginning with an argument that relates the activities of the early Gaudiyas to the social and material conditions of early medieval Bengal.

One vital factor which has had a particular impact upon the pattern of human settlements in Bengal occurred between the 12th and 16th centuries AD. This was a major shift in the course of the Ganges River.¹³ Prior to the shift, agriculture and civilization tended to be concentrated in a narrow strip of territory running north and south in western Bengal. This was the Ganges' original course, presently the course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghley. About the twelfth century, after silting up its original

channel, the Ganges embarked on a gradual "Eastward March"¹⁴ which brought the eastern territories and their tribal inhabitants into first time contact with outside civilization.¹⁵ The shift was also responsible for opening up Bengal's underexploited eastern tracts to material development at the hands of entrepreneurs from the west.¹⁶

Coincident to the Ganges' movement toward and eventual convergence with the Padma River system in what is now Bangladesh came the onset of Islamic rule in Bengal. This process began with the conquest of the Hindu seat of power at Nadiya, in western Bengal, in 1204. The Ganges' gradual eastward shift worked hand in glove with Islamic designs for the economic and cultural assimilation of eastern Bengal. The culmination of these intertwined processes may be seen in the establishment of the seat of Moghal rule in the east, at Dacca, in 1610.¹⁷

During the period of these developments the locus of Hinduism in Bengal, socially and culturally speaking, did not shift substantially from its old base along the Ganges' original course. However, the Hindu community was profoundly affected by the new political and geographical realities, in several ways. The Muslim conquest deprived the Brahmanical authority structure of the political devices for upholding its own legitimacy. Also, the domination of the outsiders called the ritual purity of all caste Hindus who lived under their rule into question. And, finally, if not most importantly, the hegemony of Islam made the Hindus' adherence to their own religious practices conditional upon the pleasure of an alien authority. One event of Caitanya's lifetime attests to this:¹⁸ early in the days of Caitanya's movement the local representative of the Islamic powers, the kazi or Muslim magistrate, issued a prohibitive order against the religious practices of the Gaudiyas. Caitanya responded by leading a procession of followers *en masse* to the magisterial residence, where negotiations insured the privilege of the Vaishnavas to worship as they saw fit. This incident, documented in Caitanya's biographies, attests to the pressures that confronted the Brahmanical community of Bengal under Islamic rule.

Another manifestation of the changing political and sociogeographical situation of the era was the increased importance of the eastern districts in the social and economic life of the country. The Hindu mainstream, concentrated in the western districts, was obliged to look on as the political and demographic epicenter of Bengal gradually shifted eastward. Moreover, in connection with this shift, the tribals occupying the eastern territories came into a position to be assimilated into the greater Bengali society. These tribals had previously, according to Richard Eton, "had but the lightest contact with the Hindu religious or caste structure"; and they, to the exclusion of the Hindus in the west, were the principal targets of Islamic conversion.¹⁹

Faced with an increasing body of indigenous converts to a previously alien religious and cultural system, Hindu society in Bengal had come to be trivialized numerically as well as neutralized politically by the end of the fifteenth century. In response to this, standards of ritual purity and obedience to traditional Brahmanical authority were sought to be reinforced within the community, and with a vengeance. As S.K. Mukherji describes the situation at and just before Caitanya's time: "The tyranny of the foreign ruler was . . . accompanied by the greater oppression of dominant Brahmanism with its conservative outlook and despotic spirit." Moreover, "Minute rules and restrictions of an unchanging and stringent code of religious and social duties were prescribed . . ."²⁰ Although the intent was to hold the Hindu society of Bengal intact, the tightening of ritual restrictions and caste rules largely seems to have accelerated the disintegration of the community by alienating some of its most creative and enterprising members.

For an illustration of this point we need look no further than the case of the brothers Rupa and Sanatana. These were contemporaries, and eventual followers,

of Caitanya. Moreover, they were men of scholarly acumen and refined Brahman upbringing.

Notwithstanding, the two brothers had consorted with Muslims by taking employment in the court of the ruler Husein Shah; and, consequently, were regarded as fallen Hindus — ineligible for the caste privileges to which they had been born. Yet they won rehabilitation and distinction in the highest echelons of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement, becoming important theologians and philosophers of the sect after Caitanya's death.

Medieval Bengal had many Rupas and Santanas. After the Muslim conquest, practical necessity obligated many educated Hindus to seek employment outside their community. The Muslim court, for its part, had a demand for servants of high calibre; i.e., Hindu entrepreneurs and administrators who, with their efficiency and skills, could be utilized to further the economic and political objectives of Islam. As an increasing number of caste Hindus acceded to this need, Hindu religious authorities increasingly responded by reclassifying these persons on a par with untouchables.

Clearly, the tossing out from Hindu society of its most elite and industrious members was a practice the community could not afford to pursue indefinitely. In addition, the impending assimilation of the tribal masses in the east was at issue. It must have been plain by the close of the fifteenth century that the tribals would obtain some place in the life of the country, with or without the cooperation of the Brahmanical Hindus.

In sum, a convergence of trends was gaining momentum, one that could end in only one of two ways: with the extinction of Brahmanical Hinduism itself, or with a massive restructuring of Brahmanical religious doctrine and social ethic.

It would be impractical and unnecessary here to elaborate on the well known revolution which Gaudiya Vaishnavism brought about in Hindu religious doctrine and practice.²¹ However, the changes which the movement inspired in social ethic merit discussion. I will argue that Gaudiya Vaishnavism was neither unbrahmanical nor anti-brahmanical, even though, as a social institution, its willingness to accommodate its followers at the expense of traditional orthodoxy is well documented.

It is known, for one thing, that from its inception Caitanya's movement accepted the dispossessed and outcasted. What is more, the movement has tended to provide adherents with a definite place within a reconstituted social order. Gaudiya Vaishnava doctrine is emphatic that neither personal background nor social circumstances are bars to spiritual attainment. Historically, the movement has broken with traditional orthodoxy by permitting persons of extremely varied backgrounds to embrace the faith, including fallen Hindus, untouchables, and even occasional recanting Muslims. Still, this does not mean that all members are admitted into the Vaishnava community on precisely the same basis. The social makeup of the Gaudiya movement over the centuries has a definite and revealing outline.²²

Geographically, Vaishnavism has acquired the bulk of its adherents in an area where Islam was also highly successful: the lower Gangetic delta of eastern Bengal.²³ This would suggest that, after Caitanya, Bengal Vaishnavism broke with the Hindu tradition centered on the old course of the Ganges, and that the community adapted its expansion as the demographic, cultural and economic epicenter of Bengal shifted to the east.²⁴

Sociologically, too, Bengal Vaishnavism has tended to follow the general pattern of Islam, though with some particular differences.²⁵ Like Islam, Vaishnavism has acquired its numerical base in Bengal among agriculturalists, artisans and service castes. It has been traditionally under-represented, however, at the two extremes of the caste continuum. In contrast to Islam, Vaishnavism has hardly any representation

among the lowest ranking menial and laboring castes. Also relatively few in number are Vaishnavas from the highest Hindu castes.

Notwithstanding, the Brahman element unquestionably comprises the apex of the Gaudiya community. Caitanya himself was a Brahman, a Brahman who is said to have adhered to the rules of his own caste, and who did little to sway others from obedience to theirs.²⁶ Likewise, among the six lieutenants he deputed to the northern India town of Vrmdavana to provide the religion with a liturgical and theological basis, five, including Rupa and Sanatana, had been born into the Brahman caste. The same held of many leading figures of the Caitanyite movement who remained in Bengal.²⁷

Gaudiya Vaishnavas to this day exhibit a strong affinity for Brahmanical social standards and also enjoy a certain degree of identification with Brahman social ranking in the public consciousness.²⁸ This even applies to the movement's recent spinoff, the Hare Krishna organization. Its more adept participants receive initiation as Brahmans, and it is only from their ranks that cooks are recruited for the feeding of the membership.²⁹

It follows, then, that however hostile Caitanya and his companions may have been to the orthodox component of Hindu society — and Caitanya's biographies make clear that there was considerable tension between his followers and Bengali Hindu orthodoxy in the movement's earliest days — nevertheless the Caitanyite movement is not and has never been an anti-Brahmanical movement. It has functioned, instead, to bring about a revision in Brahmanical standards, both in religious doctrine and in social ethic.

What I wish to suggest is that this revision came about when, faced with the catastrophic prospect of the total extinction of the Brahmanical Hindu community, the progressives of the Bengali Hindu elite took advantage of a pre-existing, popular cult of the deity Krishna as the hero of legend, folklore and romance, and used this cult to promote a restabilization of community identity and re-establishment of Brahmanical ethical values and authority. The text *Srikrnakirtana* which was referred to earlier does suggest the antiquity of a folk dimension to Vaishnava faith in Bengal. Also, the text shows clearly the popular nature of the pre-Caitanya Krishna cult there. However, there is a problem with using SKK as evidence that the early Caitanyite movement drew on some such pre-existing Bengali Krishna cult.

The problem is not that Vaishnava scholarship largely rejects a pre-Caitanya dating of the text; the evidence for the early dating is strong, and the arguments against it can be shown to be weak and unscientific.³⁰ The problem is not SKK's dating, which is definite even if controversial. The problem is that this text is one which Vaishnava scholarship, not to mention the present Vaishnava community, rejects. That the text undeniably predates Caitanya and reflects popular tastes, lore and tradition in itself does not establish that Caitanya and his contemporaries drew on that tradition. On the other hand, if Caitanya and the other early Gaudiyas did not draw upon some earlier popular eastern Indian tradition, then to determine whence and by what reasoning the cult of Krishna was incorporated into their philosophy and theology is problematic.

Srikrnakirtana is evidently the only surviving pre-Caitanya Vaishnava text in the Bengali vernacular. In the view of some it is also the most grossly erotic text in the Bengali vernacular. To be sure, eroticism *per se* is nothing unusual in Indian devotional literature, least of all in Vaishnava poetry; witness *Gitagovinda*. But the eroticism in *Srikrnakirtana* goes beyond mere description of characters' physical charms, or suggestion of their psychological scenarios as is the mainstay of Jayadeva's poem.

Srikrnakirtana contains detailed accounts of the sexual intercourse of Radha and Krishna. The dialogue, moreover, includes lurid teasing, suggestive banter and swapping of the coarsest of insults. One character of the text, the go-between Barayi, is an obvious caricature of the *sakhi* character of *Gitagovinda*; Barayi is portrayed as an aged woman of grotesque demeanor, familiar with magic spells and formulas and, what is more, a seasoned procuress.

In one section of SKK, Krishna compels Radha to submit to him sexually after detaining her in the guise of a revenue official (*Danakhanda*, Episode of the Tax). Another section (*Naukakhanda*, Episode of the Boat) has Krishna forcing himself on Radha under the implicit threat that he will otherwise allow her to drown in the Yamuna River. Krishna replicates his body (in *Vrmdavanakhanda*, Episode of the Vrmdavana Gardens), not to dance with the dairymaids as per the traditional description of *raslila*; but in order to take the cowmaids into separate arbors and have his way with every one of them, to the unlimited outrage of Radha.³¹

These contents, and more, have likewise provoked the outrage of a significant segment of the Bengali community. This is why *Srikrnakirtana*'s potential for the investigation and reconstruction of the milieu of pre-Caitanya Bengal Vaishnavism has been suppressed, suppressed under the weight of scholarly conviction that the text can have nothing to do with the Caitanyite movement, that it is so inimical to the standards of piety and taste propounded by Caitanya that its very authenticity must be questioned. Above all, this text is contradictory to the Gaudiya movement's image of itself. It is an image carefully cultivated in the movement's liturgical writings and in biographies of Caitanya, and it is this image of Gaudiya Vaishnavism which is usually accepted uncritically by scholars of the movement both Western and Eastern. Yet there is evidence from within the movement itself that, among the original adherents, standards of literary taste, at least, were less fastidious.

According to S.K. De,³² a number of Caitanya's contemporaries and followers composed literary pieces on the Radha-Krishna theme for entertainment. For instance, the degraded Brahman brothers Rupa and Sanatana, together with their nephew Jiva, contributed to this body of writing, as did several other early Gaudiya Vaishnavas. It may accordingly be assumed that these works were written for the approbation of others in the movement and were not considered inconsistent with Vaishnava piety. However, De has provided summaries of many of these pieces, making clear their comic and erotic content. They include themes also found in *Srikrnakirtana*, such as Krishna demanding amorous favours in lieu of revenues from the dairymaids; Radha stealing Krishna's flute; Krishna replicating himself to make love to Radha's friends; etc.

One work of this class, available in a recent critical edition, is a play called *Danakelikaumudi* or "Moonlight on the Sports of Tax-Collecting" by Rupa Goswami³³ — the Rupa mentioned earlier. His play "Moonlight" portrays Krishna's activities as a bogus revenue agent; and thus it is essentially another treatment of the tax episode that occupies quite a prominent place in the SKK. As in the SKK version, Rupa's version likewise has Krishna accosting Radha with the help of an older cowherd woman as the dairymaids travel together to market. After this opening, Rupa's play is largely taken up with the protracted dispute that occurs between the two sides, carried on with much erotic double entendre and suggestive bantering. At one point, for instance, Krishna tells Radha that he is anxious to perform a "great service" for her — *uruseva*, a pun on "attendance on the thighs". In turn, the older woman character suggests that Radha raise her garment a bit and satisfy Krishna with a glimpse of her breasts. At this, all the young women turn on the older lady in irritation and denounce her as a *dubuddhie*, a dirty minded woman. At length

the play comes to an end as Krishna is placated with the promise of a tryst with Radha that evening.

The point of this is that present scholarship tends to downplay the existence of a class of erotic and comic interpretations of the Radha-Krishna legend by the early Gaudiya Vaishnavas. Nevertheless such a body of writing exists, and the significance of this literature for reconstructing the intellectual origins of the movement is, of course, considerable. It demonstrates, for one thing, that eroticism and irreverence in the recounting of Krishna's adventures are no grounds *per se* for excluding a work from the Bengal Vaishnava tradition. From Rupa's contribution in particular, it is apparent that Caitanya's own associates appreciated such material, and more: they composed it. This fact provides strong evidence, in turn, that Gaudiya Vaishnavas drew on an earlier, popular Krishnaite tradition of eastern India as a vehicle for the propagation of their ethical, social and religious doctrines. This Krishnaite folk tradition of religious belief naturally underwent great revision at the hands of the Gaudiyas. Its original popular character is nevertheless proven by the literature which Rupa and the other early Gaudiyas composed for entertainment — literature which, in thematic and stylistic structure, has obvious affinity with a pre-existing Bengali tradition of popular Krishnaite lore as represented by Baru Candidasa's *Srikrnakirtana*.

This paper is intended to provoke a rethinking of certain matters that have long passed unchallenged in scholarly approaches to medieval Bengal Vaishnavism. If it has been successful, it should have at the very least suggested the need for a reappraisal of Caitanya's role in religious developments in eastern India. The principal role he has played historically has been that of a religious symbol. Furthermore, his leadership, charisma and personal piety indisputably have been reflected in the success of the Gaudiya movement. It is too much, however, to credit him with the inspiration for the Krishnaite socioreligious revolution in Bengal. As discussed in this paper, the inspiration for such a movement did not and could not lay in the personality of a single man. Rather, it can be attributed to converging factors of social, physical and economic history. The pressures exerted by these factors upon the Bengali Brahmanic community were enormous; religious and social reform were mandatory for the very survival of Hinduism. A pre-existing, popular cult of Krishna, supernatural hero of lore and romance, became the vehicle of socioreligious reform in Bengal. The resulting movement proved successful in expanding the community's social base without sacrificing Brahmanical authority and values. In the final analysis, a movement along these lines was inevitable in medieval eastern India, whether or not Caitanya had trod the soil.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jan Gonda, *Visnuism and Sivaism: A Comparison* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), chs. 2-3; Suvira Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaisnavism* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), ch. 2 "Sources"; Sir R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Benares: Indological Book House, 1966); Hemachandra Raychaudhuri, *Materials for the Study of the Early History of the Vaishnava Sect* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920).

2. The Hare Krishna (ISKCON) organization was founded in New York in the mid nineteen-sixties by an adherent of Caitanyite Vaishnavism. This individual, commonly known under the name of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, was originally named Abhay Charan De and was born in Calcutta on September 1, 1896. Some Indian scholars have been quick to recognize ISKCON as the continuation of and heir to the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement. For instance, O.B.L. Kapoor's *The Philosophy and Religion of Sri Caitanya* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1977) is subtitled *The Philosophical Background of the Hare Krishna Movement*. In the Preface,

Kapoor credits Bhaktivedanta Swami with going over a prepublication draft of the text. Since the latter in fact deals entirely with the medieval Gaudiya sect, it is clear that the author regards the ISKCON leader as the contemporary spokesperson for the Gaudiya tradition.

3. A.K. Majumdar, *Caitanya: His Life and Doctrine* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), p.25.

4. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p.25.

5. S.C. Mukherji, *A Study of Vaisnavism in Ancient and Medieval Bengal* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1966), pp.161-162.

6. Dimock, *Place*, p.112.

7. The biography *Caitanya-caritamṛta* of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, completed approximately in 1615, states that Caitanya listened with approbation to the songs of Candidasa on several occasions. *Vaisnava-tosani*, a commentary on *Bhagavatapurana* by Caitanya's associate and disciple Sanātana, mentions Candidasa in connection with the names of two of the actual episodes of *Sṛkṛṣṇakīrtana*. For further discussion and critical evaluation of such evidence see Klaiman, *Singing the Glory of Lord Krishna: Baru Candidasa's Sṛkṛṣṇakīrtana* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, for the American Academy of Religion, 1984), Introduction.

8. See *inter alia* Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), vol. 1. The introduction to Klaiman, *Singing the Glory*, contains some discussion of problems of the text's dating. For an extended treatment of the topic see Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bania sahityera itibṛtta*, 3d ed. (Calcutta: Modern Book Agency, 1970-), vol. 1 (in Bengali).

9. Majumdar, *Caitanya*, pp.78-79.

10. Sukumar Sen, *Chandidas* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1971), p.13.

11. Since its discovery in 1910 followed by its publication (various editions since 1916, principally by the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat of Calcutta), *Sṛkṛṣṇakīrtana* has received almost simultaneously the richest scholarly praise as well as the most damning criticism. Whereas S.K. Chatterji in *Origin and Development*, p.129, compared it to the works of Layamon, Orm and Chaucer in English, Sukumar Sen in *Chandidas*, p.52, attributes to *Sṛkṛṣṇakīrtana* a quality of "coarseness", saying that its tone is "jarred at times by obscenity". On the other hand, Bandyopadhyay asserts in *Itibṛtta*, 1:348, that *Sṛkṛṣṇakīrtana* "is a work of unprecedented choiceness, not only for the middle ages, but for the whole of Bengali literature" (my translation of the original Bengali: *sṛkṛṣṇakīrtanākabya sudhu madhyayuge nahe, samagra banla sahityera ekakhani abhinaba upadeya grantha*).

12. S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), pp.1,8.

13. See N.D. Bhattacharya, "Changing Courses of the Padma and Human Settlements," *National Geographic J. of India* 24.1-2 (March-June, 1978), pp.63-65.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Richard M. Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India," in *Islam and the History of Religions*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

16. According to the Gaudiya movement's standard biographies even Caitanya, as a young Brahman teacher not yet converted to Vaiṣṇavism, made a financially successful teaching tour of eastern India. For details see Majumdar, *Caitanya*.

17. For a concise treatment of Islam's cultural and material repercussions in Bengal see Richard M. Eaton, "Islam in Bengal," in *Bengal: The Islamic Heritage*, ed. George Michell (London: Art and Archaeology Research Papers, 1983).

18. This episode is reported in biographies of the saint and in several secondary sources, including Kapoor, *Philosophy and Religion*, p.24, and Majumdar, *Caitanya*, pp.108ff.

19. Eaton, "Approaches," prepublication copy, p.7.

20. Mukherji, *Study of Vaisnavism*, p.162.

21. See *inter alia* De, *Early History*, chs. 4-6; Majumdar, *Caitanya*; Dimock, *Place*, chs. 4-5.

22. For one of the most detailed existing treatments of the demographics and internal organization of the Caitanyite movement see Joseph Thomas O'Connell, "Social Implications of the Gaudiya Vaisnava Movement" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1970).

23. Nicholas, "Vaisnavism and Islam," pp.39-40.

24. Significantly, the largest single Vaiṣṇava community in Bengal comprises a depressed agricultural caste situated in the eastern region, the Namasudras (Candalas). For an account of the socioreligious and political history of this community see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Caste and Politics in Eastern Bengal: The Namasudras and the Anti-Partition Agitation, 1905-1911" (Occasional paper, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, 1981).

25. Nicholas, "Vaisnavism and Islam," p.40.
26. De, *Early History*, pp.108-109; Dimock, *Place*, p.79.
27. They included Nityananda, Advaita Acarya, Srivasa Pandita and his grandnephew Vmdavana-dasa, Gadadhara Pandita, and Srinivasa; see De, *Early History*, pp.72, 30-31, 79, 48 and 60.
28. Surajit Sinha, "Vaisnava Influence on a Tribal Culture," in *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, ed. Milton Singer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp.64-89.
29. Faye Levine, *The Strange World of the Hare Krishnas* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1974).
30. See Klaiman, *Singing the Glory*, pp.1-22 ("Introduction").
31. Complete synopses of *Srikrṣṇakīrtana* are carried in Sen, *Chandidas*; in Klaiman, *Singing the Glory*, pp.15-16; and in M.H. Klaiman, "Vanamali as Forest Gardener: The *Srikrṣṇakīrtana*," in *Proceedings of the 1981 Bengal Studies Conference*, ed. Ray Langsten (East Lansing: Michigan State University, South Asia Series Occasional Paper 34, 1983), pp.9-11.
32. De, *Early History*, ch.7 ("The Literary Works").
33. Rupa Goswami, *Dana-keli-kaumudi* ("Moonlight on the Game of Tax Collecting") ed., trans., and with commentary by S.N. Shastri (Indore: Bharati Research Institute, 1976).

Related works by the author of this paper

1. *Singing the Glory of Lord Krishna: Baru Caṇḍīdāsa's Srikrṣṇakīrtana*. Chico, CA: Scholars Press (American Academy of Religion Classics in Religious Studies No. 5), 1984.
2. "Religious Revolution and Religious Tradition: the case of Vaishnavism in Bengal." *South Asia* 6,2: 28-38 (1983).
3. "Masculine Sacrality." Forthcoming in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan).