



## Medieval Vaisnavism in Orissa: A Study on Sri Chaitanya-Charitamrta and Chaitanya Bhagavata

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The process can be viewed with the application of an interdisciplinary approach made by the writings of researchers, philosophers, historians, ideologists, archaeologists and anthropologists. So far as the historical sources in history is concerned, it bears the testimony of an eye witness or mechanical device for a historian as well as a researcher for the reconstruction of the history of a region, religion, philosophy, economy and the socio-cultural management of the people. Therefore the social and cultural history of Orissa has been passing through a long passage of time, e.g. ancient, medieval, modern, where the use of the sources is highly required. It is the fact that the cultural trend of ancient Kalinga (Orissa) was started by the Kalinga Sadhabpuas, through the brisk overseas relation with South East Asian countries before the great Kalingan war of 261 B.C. The cultural status of Orissa took a new lease of life with the commencement of Bhakti movement in medieval period through the critique interpretation of Vaisnavism and its philosophy. The refined and purest form of Vaisnavism in medieval Orissa is the contribution of Sri Krsna Chaitanya and his message of love, brotherhood and classlessness. The prime objective of this study is to make a critique assessment on the two biographies of Sri Krsna Chaitanya e.g.,

Chaitanya Charitamrta and Chaitanya Bhagavata for revisiting the medieval Vaisnavism in Orissa. Besides it intends to highlight “Neo-Vaisnavism” and the tribal concept which have transmitted themselves through intellectual as well as cultural trend followed by the scholars before the advent of Sri Krsna Chaitanya.

Cultural traditions and intellectual enrichment signal the development of a region as well as a civilization. The civilizational world records all these in the unforgettable pages of history in general and in the annals of the people in particular. In fact exploration and explosion of vibrating wisdom knowledge and intellect continues unabated in the minds of the philosophers, historiographers and researchers despite the changing of the ruling dynasties. Historical, literary and the epigraphic records of any race, nation or country, culture generally serve as first hand source materials of history. Yet there may remain some lacunae which is filled with an almost unexplored area of our knowledge that is biography. This may constitute the missing links of history or even support to the historical facts. Therefore historical sources would also be explored for the proposed study.

The socio-cultural and the religious history of Medieval Orissa is reflected by some



schools of thought like the colonial school, nationalist school and the school of recent trends in history. We see the upheaval of religious pursuits in the domain of Vaisnavism in Orissa during the royal patronage of Matharas in the Fifth century A.D., as marked the beginning of a glorious epoch in the history of Vaisnavism. But before its emergence in eastern India was developed in south India by the popular saint poets called *Alvars*, who represented the rise of Vaisnava philosophy through collective songs called *Prabandhas*. For the first time in the history of the religions, they put stress on purity of heart, soul and mind, humanism and complete devotion through *bhajans* and personal efforts. This noble concept was also popularized through the idealist school of thoughts in 19<sup>th</sup> century history of Modern India by Kant, Dayananda, Tagore and Gandhi. According to them “human personality is of supreme value and constitutes the noblest work of God.” It means exaltation of the self which leads self realization through Four Fold Path for reaching this goal in *Jnana* (knowledge), *Bhakti* (devotion), *Karma* (duty) and *Yoga* (meditation) etc. We find these above mentioned concepts in *Chaitanya Charitamrta* written by Murari Gupta in form of Bengali language in 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Vaisnavism in Medieval Orissa has been broadly represented by a psycho-social habit of its people in relation to myth, rituals and functioning in a corporate way, borne out of culturally fashioned habit responses. By 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century one finds here the supremacy of Vaisnavism in crucible cultural forms. Because it was the first attempt of Sri Chaitanya where the common masses jumped to the religious stream irrespective of caste, creed, economy and colour. Historically though, this process is traceable in Orissa right from the time of Ramanuja’s influence as if

petered down from Jayadeva’s time till Sarala Dasa and Ramananda, this dormant state was dynamically activated by Chaitanya. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Vaisnavism has been characterized by the critique, interpretation of literary sources including Sanskrit texts, manuscripts and biographies of both Oriya and Bengali. Thus “Orissa became such a strong hold of Chaitanya faith that today in the name of Gauranga is more commonly revered and worshipped among the masses in Odisha than in Bengal itself Kenedy, before illustrating it I should point out one thing that Orissa was the soft land of above the conservativeness and narrow bigotry of sectarianism as it directly recognized Sri Krsna Chaitanya’s wonderful influence and impact in comparison to that of South. This reveals the *bhakti* movement of Krsna cult in Orissa. Then the process of Vaisnavism in Orissa started with a good mission. This process of development welcomes the deteriorated condition of the supremacy of Brahminism and its stronghold on Oriyas fairs and festivities.

The literary sources reflect an intensification of the development, evolution and genesis of Vaisnavism in medieval Orissa. The sources like *Kalasa Chautisa* of Vatsa Dash, *Kesabakoili* of Markanda Das, *Oriya Mahabharata*, *Sarala Mahabharat*, *Jagamohan Ramayana*, *Oriya Ramayan* of Balaram Dasa, *Virat Gita*, *Brahmananda Bhugola*, *Vedanta Sara Gupta Gita*, *Amar Kosa Gita*, *Vaula Adhyaya*, *Sunyasamhita*, of Achyutananda, *Prema Bhakti Brahma Gita* of Jasobanta Dasa, *Sunyanama Bheda* and *Hetu Udaya Bhagavata* of Ananta Dasa, *Vedaparikrama*, *Kamala Lochan Chautisa*, *Tulabhina*, *Gajanistaran Gita*, *Kaliya Dalana*, *Artha Koili* of Jagannatha Dash, the Oriya biographies like *Jagannatha Charitamrta* of Divakar Dasa, *Mahaparva Prakash* of Kanhei Khuntia, *Charan*



*Sudhanidhi* of Raja Govinda, *Gaura Krsnodaya Kavya* of Govinda Deva throw light on the multi dimensional aspects of Vaisnava Philosophy and the characteristics of Vaisnavas.

Besides the Oriya literature on medieval Vaisnavism, we get a glimpse of historical dichotomy in the philosophical interpretation of Gaudiya Vaisnava philosophy and the manifold activities of Sri Krsna Chaitanya, who had an extraordinary religious personality. The two Bengali biographies *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and *Chaitanya Charitamrta* were mostly embellished and invented stories with critical approach to Vaisnava philosophy. Here one question arises, what is Vaisnava philosophy? By Vaisnava philosophy, we mean the science of visualizing and testing the truth by a Vaisnava. *Samkhya, Patanjala, Vaisesika, Nyaya and Purva Mimamsa*- these five systems of philosophy have given prominence to reasoning and diversified from any kinship with God and definite attempt to attain bliss by eschewing earthly miseries. This is categorically mentioned in the above two biographies. The first biography, *Chaitanya Bhagavata* throws light on Sri Krsna Chaitanya an apostle of socio-religious and philosophical reformation of Medieval Orissa; written by Vrndavana Das in 1550 A.D. As a social reformer, therefore he called himself as *Mlechhas*(Muslims) during his *kirtan* party. It is in Prabhat Mukherjee's words "Sri Krsna Chaitanya who accepted himself as an incarnation of Hari and other are unsocial being." But some times he has been criticized by the historians like S.K. De, B.B. Majumdar as the destination of human life namely *Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha in Gaudiya Vaisnavism*. These are undermined. But the biography *Chaitanya Charitamrta preaches that love is more important than the four worldly values which is*

mentioned in early times. This love which means, love to yourself first and to the mankind second must transcend the four *purusartha* and is therefore termed as the *pancham* or fifth *purusartha*. In the words of Krsna Das, Sri Krsna Chaitanya, who reported "The Supreme value of life *Purusartha* is love that relates to Krsna and compared to this the four other values are significant." This has been supported by Rupa Gosvami. Thus, by upholding eternal love for God of the Fifth *Purusartha*, the *Gaudiya Vaisnavas* explored the earlier myth of attainment of salvation from the world miseries as the supreme goal and endeavour of human life.

Mostly *Chaitanya Charitamrta* propounds the knowledge that Sri Krsna Chaitanya urged upon his disciples to remain seriously committed to moral values. In his preaching, we find a great deal of moral precepts. That a devotee or disciple or a true Vaisnava must remain truthful, reserved, gentle, calm and quite, passion and balanced; he should have no possessive instincts, seek refuge in God, must have control over his senses, but respect and trust worthy to others irrespective of caste, sex and colour. Even today we find a large number of sacred Vaisnava Ashramas in nook and corner of Orissa are established for the spreading of Radha-Krsna cult through the *kirtan* procession. Where the Oriya Vaisnavas are staying for the celebration of Sri Krsna *Chaitanyas* mission and Vaisnava festivities. What Chaitanya directly advocated in order to the virtues of a Vaisnava. Krsna Dash Kaviraja in his *Chaitanya Charitamrta* has recorded. "A true devotee should shun evil company and agnostics. He should leave *Varnasrama Dharma* and humbly take refuge in Krsna the supreme Lord."

So far as the importance of medieval Vaishnavism in Orissa is concerned the



following chant which has been written by Syamasundar Dasa in *Sri Vaisnava Chandrika* in 1937 shows;

*Vaisnava Charitamrta Kari Asvana  
Anyathasepaye Braje Yuga Lachharan  
Tahari Asvate Dutta Kari Chhite  
Seba Kari Prema Seva Namane Dharame*

The above chant signifies, if any body does service to mankind will be liberated from the cycle of rebirth and resides in the abode of Lord Krsna. Therefore the philosophy of Vaisnavism and the teachings led by Sri Krsna Chaitanya got widely spread to the nook and corner of Orissa and soon it became the state religion. Sri Krsna Chaitanya's missionary activities were mainly carried out in three centres in India namely Orissa, led by Himself, Bengal, led by Nityananda Prabhu, Vrindavana led by Sri Gosvami. This philosophy had a great impact on all the sects belonging to the lower strata to the higher one.

### Conclusion:

The above study reveals medieval Vaisnavism in Orissa is an integral aspect of *Bhakti* movement, which determines the socio-cultural life of the people of Orissa. As a multicultural pluralistic form it brings the co-existence in equilibrium in realistic sense taking into consideration. Thus Sri *Chaitanya Charitamrta* and *Chaitanya Bhagavata* provide a critical approach to the Medieval Vaisnavism in Orissa. So Sri *Chaitanya Charitamrta* and *Chaitanya Bhagavata* constitute a perennial stream of medieval document of mature theological scholarship which are by no means easy or elegant to read and which perhaps present Chaitanya and his simple impassioned out look on a different perspective. Both were written in a same lucrative motive that the popularization of

Radha-Krsna cult known as the Neo-Vaisnavism.

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