

JOSEPH T. O'CONNELL is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at St. Michael College, University of Toronto, Canada. He was educated at College of Holy Cross, Massachusetts and Government Sanskrit College, Calcutta. He took his Ph.D. from Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts); on 'Social Implications of the Gaudiya Vaisnava Movement'. Member of several academic organizations in North America, he has published a number of articles and edited books on Religion and Reform Movements in India, including (i) *Bengal Vaisnavism, Orientalism and Arts*, (ii) *Sikh History and Religion in Twentieth Century*, and (iii) *Presenting Tagore's Heritage in Canada*. His forthcoming books include *Biographies of Chaitanya as Sources for History, Sociology and Psychology of Religion; Vaishnava Community of Sri Krishna Chaitanya*; and *Krishna Bhakti in Bengal Society*.

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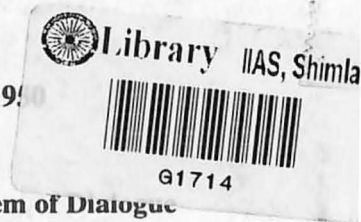
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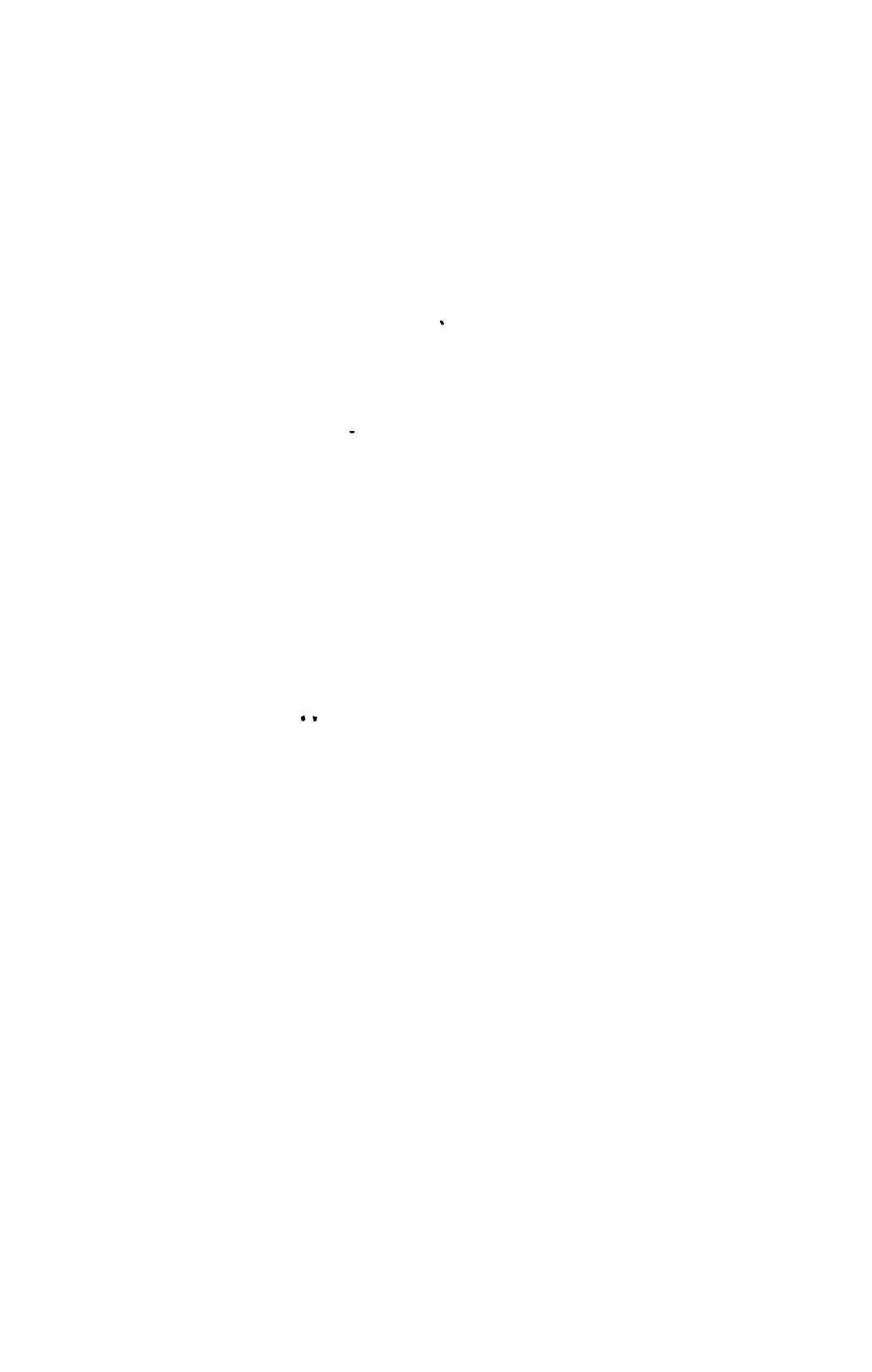
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AND
SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Case of Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇavas in Bengal



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INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY
RASHTRAPATI NIVAS, SHIMLA-171004
1993

First published 1993

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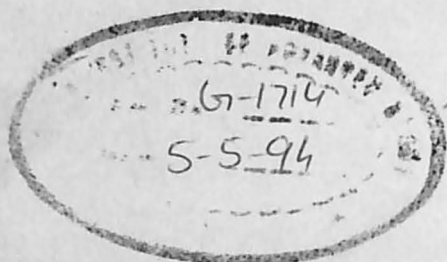
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Published by Deputy Secretary (Administration) for
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla - 171005

ISBN 81-85952-09-4

Price Rs. 40

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Library IAS, Shimla



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Lasertypeset at AJ Software Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd. and
printed at Elegant Printers, Mayapuri, New Delhi.

FOREWORD

The project on 'Socio-Religious Movements and Cultural Networks in Indian Civilization' was formulated by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in 1991-92 as a part of the celebration of its silver jubilee. The basic purpose of this project is to study religious movements, cultural centres and interpretations of sacred texts, which have influenced, and still influence, millions of people in the Indian subcontinent. The scholars associated with the project seek to explore the sociological as well as the ideological dimensions of the subjects of their study. Through these studies we hope to create a substantial corpus of humanistic literature dealing with the social and cultural history of Indian civilization. As a spin off, this literature would throw light on the contemporary scene.

Over a score of scholars working on the project are expected to complete their monographs by the end of 1995. A comprehensive bibliography is being prepared for publication at the same time as the monographs. A volume containing an overview of the main theme of the project would also be published. Two seminars with direct bearing on the theme will be held in 1993 and 1994, in addition to the seminars normally organized by the Institute every year. The proceedings of these seminars too will be published. The scholars working on the project meet periodically to discuss the progress of their work and the papers they prepare in connection with the project. Six of these 'occasional papers' were finalized in 1992. They are now all published.

I have enjoyed reading this paper by Dr. Joseph T. O'Connell on 'Religious Movements and Social Structure: The Case of Chaitanya's Vaishnavas of Bengal'. I feel sure that it will be of great interest to the general readers as well as the social historian.

April 13, 1993.
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla.

J.S. GREWAL



RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Case of Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇavas in Bengal

This paper focuses upon processes of change within the Hindu tradition embracing religious, social and cultural dimensions. It asks how, if at all, a major development in the religious dimension, namely a popular *bhakti* movement, may effect changes in the social dimension of the broad Hindu tradition. More specifically, it asks how, if at all, a particular *bhakti* movement, Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇava movement in Bengal, may have caused changes, including any structural changes in the prevailing Hindu society in Bengal, especially in the sixteenth century. Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇava movement is an appropriate case to inquire into, both because it produced a large and varied literature containing much relevant information and because there has been considerable scholarly work done on making such sources accessible for research in the sociology of religion. To place the inquiry into Chaitanya's *bhakti* movement in a comparative historical context and to relate the specifics of this case to broader issues of the relation of religious movements to Hindu society, the paper offers a cursory view of several better known movements in relation to their respective regional societal contexts.

'Hindu' versus 'Hinduism'

In this paper we use the word 'Hindu', an adjective, but not the abstract noun 'Hinduism'. This is deliberate. 'Hinduism' is a most problematic term, mainly because of the '-ism'. The particle '-ism' has a proper meaning. It indicates a systematic body of rational (or pseudo-rational) ideas and symbols constructed so as to channel thinking and/or action in a certain direction. In the intellectual-academic realm, there are '-isms' (e.g., rationalism, structuralism) channelling theory and research. In the political-economic realm, there are '-isms'

(properly called ideologies) guiding analysis and action (e.g., capitalism, communism). The particle '-ism' is quite apt in the names of ideologies and in principle the notion of '-ism' seems to characterize certain bodies of thought in the intellectual-academic realm.

In the religious and socio-religious realms, however, the notion of '-ism' is justified only in certain restricted situations. For example, it may be legitimate to use the notions 'Śrī Vaiṣṇavism' and 'Calvinism' when referring specially to the respective bodies of systematic theological thought used to guide religious behavior of Śrī Vaiṣṇava Hindus and Calvinist Christians. But it would introduce a distortion into our understanding if uncritically we were to consider the whole of Śrī Vaiṣṇava or Calvinist religious or socio-religious life as an '-ism'. That would be to reduce the whole (e.g., the Śrī Vaiṣṇava or Calvinist denominational tradition) to a part (i.e., the systematic theology produced within the tradition).

When we shift from the micro scale of particular denominational traditions with their respective systematic theologies to the macro scale of such complex phenomena as the Hindu, Christian, Buddhist or Judaic religious (even religio-socio-cultural) traditions, the notion of '-ism' becomes altogether inappropriate and positively distorting if applied to such traditions in their wholeness. Within the Hindu or the Judaic religious tradition, there may well be several discernible '-isms' (perhaps mutually conflicting ones), but to construe either tradition as a whole as an '-ism' is altogether inappropriate. The mischief – intellectual, religious, even political – that can follow from misconstruing such complex and ever-changing phenomena as religious (or religio-socio-cultural) traditions under the static reductionist category of '-ism' can be seriously destructive.

One can, of course, say that one uses the term 'Hinduism' (or any of the parallel '-ism' and '-ity' terms for other religious traditions) only as a shorthand for 'Hindu religious tradition' or something comparable, that one blots out of consciousness the explicit meaning carried by the particle '-ism'. All well and good, if one can really hold fast to this mental discipline and not inadvertently allow

the obvious meaning of the term to reassert itself. But what of one's reader or listener? Will he or she not take the term at face value and then be puzzled at the discrepancy between the complex ever-changing reality of the Hindu tradition and the implication of the term 'Hinduism', namely that what should be there is a static ideological or theological system? Is there not a risk that the conscientious Hindu reader may even feel compelled – unconsciously or deliberately – to transform Hindu religious (or religio-socio-cultural) life into an artificial construct fit to be called 'Hinduism'? I am inclined to follow the lead of such scholars as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and try to eliminate from academic and ordinary discourse such terms as are inappropriate to the point of being distorting of understanding and destructive of human living.¹

The adjective 'Hindu' is not without its own problems of definition, for the phenomena to which it applies are extraordinarily complex and ever-changing. But it has the great advantage over 'Hinduism' that it does not pre-determine in a blatantly distorting manner the way we perceive and construe the data of Hindu religious (and social and cultural) life. It is, of course, an outsider's term (as was 'Christian' originally), one used by Greeks and later Muslims and occidentals to refer to the relatively indigenous peoples of the Indus and beyond, i.e., of the Indian sub-continent, their religious, social and cultural ways of life. Though an outsider's term originally, 'Hindu' as an adjective and in compounds has been used sparingly in appropriate situations by Hindu writers for several hundred years.²

There is more to the meaning of 'Hindu' than a purely geographic-demographic indication. There appear to be underlying structures or patterns of relationship running

¹ The classical statement of Wilfred Cantwell Smith on the distortions arising from misuse of terminology in the study and conduct of religious life is his *The Meaning and End of Religion* New York: which occasioned much discussion, mostly pro, some con. The argument has been developed by him in several subsequent works, e.g. *Belief and History*, *Faith and Belief*, and *Towards a World Theology*.

² O'Connell, (1973), 340-44.

through and giving order to the extraordinary surface diversity of Hindu religious, social and cultural phenomena. The working definition of 'Hindu' that is employed herein assumes that there is an operative and discernible network of religious, social and cultural relationships binding together, however loosely, most of the 'relatively indigenous' (including the Vedic Aryans and those later newcomers who assimilated to prevailing Brahmanic Hindu tradition) peoples of the Indian sub-continent. Among the underlying structures and symbolic patterns permeating and holding together in its distinctive fashion this Hindu tradition, several seem to be especially crucial. These include: endogamous *jati*, hierarchical scheme of *varnas* (articulating asymmetrical relationships defined in terms of purity and pollution); Vedic texts and Brahman priesthood as paradigms for religious orientation; endless capacity to differentiate and integrate diverse phenomena within a complex but ordered network. One could discuss at great length what the optimal descriptive or working definition of 'Hindu' might be. That is not my intention in this paper. I simply offer the above as indicative of how I use the word 'Hindu' as I proceed to inquire into certain Hindu religious movements in relation to Hindu society.

Bhakti Movements and Social Change

The widespread and variegated phenomenon of popular *bhakti* movements presents a promising area to investigate as a source for impetus to change within the Hindu (religio-socio-cultural) tradition. The expression 'popular *bhakti* movements' in this paper refers to those several widely shared upsurges of religious fervor within the Hindu religious tradition wherein by means of vernacular languages (though sometimes employing Sanskrit also), especially for devotional song (but for other genres as well), men and women of emotional expressiveness and intense devotional conviction strove to experience and to share with others what they understood to be the saving love of God. In the process, they tended to minimize, deny or reverse – at least symbolically and within the realm of devotional exercises shared with fellow devotees –

inhibitions to intimacy and discriminations of social status.

The emotionally reserved and rather individualistically construed *bhakti* mediated through Sanskrit in the *Bhagavadgītā* would seem to fall outside this working definition of popular *bhakti* movements. Indeed the socially conservative injunction of Krishna that Arjuna should fight to preserve *varṇāśrama-dharma* would seem to preclude this mode of *bhakti* from contributing to social change. But even in the case of the *Gita* one would have to look at the actual historical applications of its teachings before reaching any judgment as to what its ostensible social impact in fact has been in different times and places. For the present paper, however, further consideration of *bhakti* in the *Gita* is omitted and attention restricted to vernacular *bhakti* movements, from the sixth century Ālvārs and Nāyanārs onward.

The specific contribution of this paper is concentrated in an examination of one *bhakti* movement in one region of India (and mostly in one century). But it is interesting – and in principle a legitimate procedure to follow where evidence permits – to situate the particular case (here the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava movement in Bengal in the sixteenth century) within a wider field of more or less comparable popular *bhakti* movements, and certain other popular religious movements somewhat akin to *bhakti* movements. This is easier said than done, however. Adequately thorough and rigorous studies of particular *bhakti* (and related popular religious) movements in relation to their historical social milieux are not yet available for some, perhaps most, of such movements, let alone a satisfactory comparative study of the whole gamut. But even so, a provisional scanning of several of the better known movements may turn up some interesting questions and issues for further consideration and bring into higher relief the distinctive features and implications of the particular case that is to be examined in detail.³

³ Among valuable brief surveys of popular *bhakti* movements are essays by J.T.F. Jordens and Eleanor Zelliot, and collections of studies edited by Jayant Lele and S.C. Malik.

Tamilnadu: Vaiṣṇava Alvars and Śaiva Nayanars

The social import of the Alvars and Nayanars, as distinct from their religious and literary import, remains relatively under-researched, though Narayanan and Kesavan have made a major advance in this respect. The fact that there were some saints of lower caste and of female gender among the Tamil poet-saints, their preference for the vernacular Tamil (which was, however, also a classical language) and the enthusiasms, even ecstasy, of some of their devotional gatherings suggest that in the strictly devotional realm there was some urge toward egalitarian intimacy, tending to neutralize social exclusiveness and discrimination. But this need not (and seems not to) have carried over into mundane social affairs. Whether so intended by the saints themselves or not, the very presentation in attractive Tamil form of *bhakti* to the deity conceived of in terms of the Brahmanic Hindu pantheon may be presumed to have enhanced Brahmanic religious and social influence in the south. Some Nayanars, at least, seem to have been conscious participants in the successful Brahmanic effort to break the influence of Jains and Buddhists in the south, the social outcome of which could hardly be other than a stronger Brahmanic position from which to urge greater social and religious orthopraxy and orthodoxy. The eventual assimilation of the more dynamic and popular Alvar and Nayanar *bhakti* into the relatively more static and elitist Śrī Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Siddhānta traditions would seem to constitute, socially, a yet more conservative redirecting of the energies released through *bhakti* in Tamilnadu.⁴

Karnataka: Vaiṣṇava Dāsas and Śaiva Liṅgāyats

In Karnataka two *bhakti* movements displayed quite different stances toward Brahman-dominated Hindu society. The Vaiṣṇava Dāsas, while in some instances (e.g., Kanaka Dāsa) decrying the caste system, by and large were ineffectual in bringing significant social changes, if indeed social change was even intended. K. Ishwaran, for one, characterizes the Dāsas as legitimizing

⁴ Narayanan and Kesavan, Yocum, and Hardy.

the inegalitarian social structures.

Contrastingly, Basavaṇṇa and his fellow Liṅgāyat Śaivas vigorously challenged the Brahman-dominated *varnasrama* system, rejected caste distinctions among their own members in mundane as well as devotional settings, and developed the ideological and organizational mechanisms necessary to consolidate and perpetuate their own alternatives to the prevailing structures of Hindu society. They did not succeed in winning over the majority of Hindus in Karnataka to their ways, but as a consolidated minority of some fifteen per cent they had an impact and still remain a force in religion, society and politics in the region. For their radical and schismatic relation to Hindu society, the Liṅgāyats have earned severe criticism from so conservative a student of Hindu society as Sridhar V. Ketkar. Ishwaran, by contrast, commends the indigenous 'modernity' of Basavaṇṇa, as summed up in the values of 'individuality, equality, rationality and community'. He also argues, with some persuasiveness, that were it not for the peculiar ideology and organizational resources of a Basavaṇṇa, the *bhakti* elements alone in the Liṅgāyat movement would not have been enough to sustain a viable alternative to Brahmanic Hindu social order.⁵

Maharashtra: Viṭhobā and the Wārkaris

Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* focussed upon the deity Viṭhobā at Pandarpur has had a long and impressive history in Maharashtra. The Wārkarī tradition of annual mass pilgrimage to Viṭhobā and the lyric and other devotional compositions in Marathi language are among its most salient features. There is considerable *a priori* evidence of a humane and social reformatory *élan* in the Marathi *bhakti* texts and in the Wārkarī pilgrimage: saints and poets of any caste, even the untouchable Chokhāmela, are revered; the songs decry caste discrimination and alienation of the poor, the pilgrimage itself has a powerful message of shared participation in the realm of *bhakti*. But it is not evident that apart from strictly devotional settings, the egalitarian message of solidarity had any substantial

⁵ Ishwaran, Ball, and Ketkar.

impact on Hindu social structures in Maharashtra. And, indeed, not so subtle discriminations persisted even within the Wārkarī pilgrimage itself (e.g., exclusion of untouchables from the temple of Vithobā, separate cooking arrangements en route, etc.). However, the *bhakti élan* may well have mellowed and humanized the way persons felt about themselves and for others as they carried on their daily affairs within the limits set by prevailing social (economic and political) structures.

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been ferment among untouchables themselves in Maharashtra over their religious and social status, the considerable concern among others about the untouchables' welfare and/or their problematic relationship to the Hindu tradition. One specification of such ferment and concern has been consideration of whether and, if so, how the Wārkarī movement in the past contributed to either the amelioration or the perpetuation of untouchable disabilities and whether and, if so, how the Wārkarī *bhakti* tradition might affect untouchable or scheduled caste, especially Mahar, interests in the socially and politically more fluid conditions of the twentieth century. The move out of the Hindu tradition by B.R. Ambedkar and many Mahars and the phenomenon of Dalit literature both signify a negative judgment on the part of many Mahars and other scheduled caste persons regarding the impact of Wārkarī *bhakti* upon their social (and religious) interests.⁶

Academics and other intellectuals, especially those concerned about social and political change in a 'progressive' direction have interested themselves in the issue. Many would agree with Ishwaran, Ambedkar and the Dalits that the Wārkarī tradition in particular and *bhakti* movements in general serve to mystify and distract the oppressed, to legitimate and perpetuate oppressive

⁶ Scholarly discussion of the social import of the Warkari movement is especially plentiful. See the articles by Jayashree B. Gokhale, Turner, Jayant Lelc, Bhalchandra Nemade and Eleanor Zelliot in Lelc (1981); also Sardar, 101-38 Karve, 13-29. There is some new material on religion and society in Maharashtra in papers from a conference held at the University of Toronto, Canada in 1984; see Israel and Wagle; see also Jordens, 270-71.

social systems. Others, for instance Jayant Lele, argue that the intentions, if not the results, of Wārkarisaints were socially liberative; that their message brought a quantum of self-respect to untouchables and a mollifying of others' attitudes toward them; that there was and is embedded in the many-faceted symbolic message of the poet-saints more potential for social-economic-political liberation than could be effectively applied in pre-modern India and than most Western-oriented (Marxist and non-Marxist) social critics in India and abroad realize; and that the population of Maharashtra apart from the Western-oriented elite is still capable of responding to the imaginative power of Wārkaribhakti symbolism. If this is so, as seems plausible, if not proved, then even with the caveat of Ishwaran that *bhakti* alone cannot do what *bhakti* in conjunction with a more incisive social critique and more effective organizational resources can do, it becomes an open and intriguing question whether in a modern setting a genuine renewal of *bhakti* in Maharashtra (or elsewhere) might not take on the character of a Hindu 'liberation theology' and perhaps have marked impact on the social (and economic and political) structures of oppression from which the oppressed seek religious – and possibly mundane – liberation.⁷

⁷ 'Liberation theology' is a recent development within the Roman Catholic Church. It arises primarily from the efforts of Catholic priests, laymen and women in Latin America to put the Gospel message into practice in such a way as to criticize and overcome the social, economic and political forces that oppress the poor and weak. It involves a deliberate 'option for the poor' and may bring the moral force and institutional oppressed for liberation even where there is use of force against the oppressors. 'Liberation theology' is still in the process of formation and by virtue of its great stress on praxis is in principle always open to modification. For a standard exposition see Gustavo Gullerrez, (1970), 243-61; Fiorenza, 441-57; Roger Haight, 158-69; Samuel Rayan, 282-96; Fernandes, 442-63; Sahgal, 2. I acknowledge the assistance of Father Antony Kozhuvaanal, who is preparing a doctoral thesis in the Toronto School of Theology on M.K. Gandhi as a Hindu liberation theologian relevant to contemporary Christian liberation theology in India.

Hindi Region: Bhaktas and Sants

Within the extensive Hindi-speaking region of north and central India, there are many *bhakti* saint-composers (e.g., Mirā Bai and Sur Dās whose songs and stories have had deep and lasting impact upon millions. Some excellent studies in several languages explore the religious and cultural (especially literary) content and impact of these diffuse movements of *bhakti*. But as with Tamil *bhakti* movements, so with the Hindi *bhakti* and sant movements, there is relatively less thorough and rigorous research available on the social implications than on the religious and literary contributions of these movements. Nothing that I have seen suggests that *bhakti* movements *per se* in the Hindi area have had substantial impact for change in respect of Hindu social structures.⁸

Standing somewhat aside from the lyrical *bhakti* saint-poets is Tulsī Das, whose elaborate *Rāmcaritāmānas* has been a literary classic and religious archetype for Hindi-speakers/readers since the late sixteenth century. I am not aware of rigorous empirical research on the actual impact of Tulsī Das on Hindu society and social structures (as distinct from expositions of the views of Tulsī Das stated in his work). But from what studies on Tulsī Das I have seen it would seem that his views (and presumably their impact, however mild or emphatic) on society were generally conservative ones, stressing the positive values, transcendental and humane, of a traditional ideal of *varnasrama-dharma* leavened with *bhakti* to Rama.⁹

The so-called Sant *sampradāyas* of the Hindi region tend not to stress the active personal initiative of a saving Lord (nor do they favour meditation on the transcendent dramatic *līlās* of Lord, consort and entourage), and they are apt to be censorious of worship through images, all of which are cherished elements of typical *bhakti* piety. Yet brief consideration of them may not be out of place nor uninformative in this sketch of popular religious movements preceding or contemporary with the Chaitanya

⁸ For recent scholarship on Hindi *bhakti* see Callewaert, Thiel-Horstmann and Hawley.

⁹ Bharadwaj, Babincau, and Vaudeville.

movement in Bengal.

Some of the sants, most notably Kabir, were outspoken critics of Hindu (and Muslim) religious and social establishments and their idiom of critique has passed into the common wisdom of the Hindi-speaking population. It is not evident, however, that they intended or expected that their criticism would actually change the conditions cited. They may have intended simply to present a negative backdrop upon which to project the positive image of the true, simple, imminent piety they epitomized and propagated. Nor is it evident that the communities of followers, i.e., *panths*, that coalesced around or in the name of some of the Sants intended to affect Hindu society beyond securing a tolerable place for themselves to continue their mode of piety and way of life. Any appreciable impact upon the structures of Hindu society by these Sant *panths* would likely be concentrated in the lower strata and on the ill-defined margins of Hindu society.¹⁰

Punjab and the Sikhs

Close by the side of the Sants (and just a bit further removed from our working definition of popular *bhakti* movements) stand Guru Nanak and his Sikhs. They constitute the most striking North Indian example of a religious movement (if not exactly a *bhakti* movement) giving rise to developments from within Hindu society (mostly limited to the Punjab) which eventuate in conscious critique and practical rejection of Hindu society. From the time of Guru Nanak, Sikhs have dispensed with Veda and Brahman priest as paradigms for religious orientation in favour of sayings by inspired saints (*bhagatbānī*) and their own Gurus. Socially they rejected explicitly the *varna* scheme of classification of *jatis* and much of the consciousness of purity and pollution that is implicated in *varnasrama-dharma*. However, they retained

¹⁰ Vaudeville (1974), Hess and Sukhdev Singh, and Saraswati. A major collection of articles on Sants, including Kabir, Sikhs, Radhaswamis and some Maharashtrian saints is edited by Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod.

the institution of endogamous *jati* and in practice have been slow to eliminate discriminations against untouchables. Like so many Hindu *bhakti* movements, the Sikh movement has been more radically egalitarian and solitary in religious/devotional settings (e.g., eating together in *langar* – cf *Vaiṣṇava prasādam*) than in mundane situations. Yet slowly and by stages (and in response to dramatic, sometimes traumatic, upheavals in historical circumstances) the Sikhs did organize themselves into a community (*panth*) of married lay persons explicitly setting itself apart from Hindu society.

Culturally, however, there has been relatively less differentiation of a Sikh tradition from the broader Hindu tradition, and, ironically, least of all perhaps in the Dasam Granth attributed to Guru Gobind Singh (and his court), who in religious and social respects has been seen as a major architect of Sikh separate communal identity.¹¹

The evolution of the Sikh community is a subject currently receiving scholarly attention of the first order. But comparably rigorous research on Hindu society in the Punjab would be most desirable and might disclose very interesting processes and developments within Hindu society under the impact of the evolving Sikh community, with which it continued to be intimately engaged.

Observations

This brief sketch of *bhakti*, Sant and Sikh movements, partial and provisional as it is, invites a few observations. To begin with, there is evidently much variation (due, no doubt, to differences in conceptions of *bhakti* as well as differences of social context) in the relationship of *bhakti* (or related popular religious) movement to its environing Hindu (or Hindu-Muslim) society. No universal rule of thumb for such relationship is possible. However, it would seem that in cases most closely adhering to the working definition of popular *bhakti* movement the movement's social impact tends not to involve major structural changes, but rather modest modifications (e.g., softening

¹¹ Melcod (1968), (1975); Grewal (1969); Juergensmeyr and Barrier; and *Sikhism and Indian Society*.

of attitudes, making more flexible, but also more durable, (the existing norms) to and/or within the existing structures. But where there is a convergence of elements of *bhakti* and elements of a more mundane social agenda, conservative or progressive, the potential for sustained challenge to and structural change of Hindu society would appear to be much greater. The Sants generally seem to have been more explicitly critical of Hindu (and sometimes Muslim) social and religious establishments, but only the Sikh movement of Guru Nanak seems to have effected major changes to and separation from the enviroing Hindu society (and aspects of this may be attributed as much to traumatic historical circumstances and to Jāt tradition as to the imperatives of Sikh piety and theology).

Accordingly, if one is interested only in the most fundamental of challenges and changes to Hindu society (e.g., rejection of *vamasrama*, elimination of *jati*, etc.) then *bhakti* movements may not offer so promising a field of inquiry. But if one is concerned to understand Hindu religion and society as these have existed and, with more or less modification, still persist in India, and if one is prepared to look into modest modifications to and within the structures of Hindu society, then popular *bhakti* and related movements provide a very promising area for inquiry. They have been deeply implicated in those processes which render Hindu society so resilient, so receptive to minor changes while resisting fundamental transformation. The *bhakti* movements themselves are in part responses to experiences of evil, frustration, injustice, etc. which generate tensions and pressure for social change. They are often repositories of diverse information (if we have the patience and imagination to listen and decode it accurately) not preserved elsewhere on their respective social environments and the ways they articulated their commitment to *bhakti* with those environments.

The Chaitanya *bhakti* movement, to which we now turn, is a *bhakti* movement (popular but with elite concerns as well) jealous of its deeply satisfying mode of experiencing *bhakti*. The subtle and pervasive ways it accommodated to its Hindu (and also Muslim) social environment and in the

process rendered that environment more conducive to cultivation of its mode of *bhakti* are quite interesting and deserving of scrutiny. How substantial or ephemeral were the changes wrought upon Bengali Hindu society in the sixteenth and later centuries we may consider at the end of the enquiry.

Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇava Bhakti Movement in Bengal

The popular *bhakti* movement animated by Chaitanya, i.e., Sri Krishna-Chaitanya (born Viśvambhara Miśra at Navadvīp, Bengal; 1486-1533) was precocious among *bhakti* movements for the quantity, quality and range of devotional literature it spawned (in Bengali and other vernaculars as well as in Sanskrit). The several lengthy religious biographies of Chaitanya alone contain a wealth of information on hundreds of Chaitanya's contemporaries and on aspects of the early sixteenth century social context (all selected and interpreted, of course, through the one-pointed eye of faith in Chaitanya as Lord Hari descended to save mankind through propagating loving devotion to Himself). This is fortunate, because Persian records of the Husain Shahi dynasty have been almost entirely lost. Chaitanya's movement extended beyond Bengal, especially to Orissa and parts of Assam and the hill states on the periphery of Bengal, as well as to the great pilgrimage and meditational site of Vraja (Mathura-Vrindavan region along the Yamuna), but the present enquiry is restricted to Bengal, as each region presents a different social (and political) context. An expanded study of the social impact of Chaitanya's movement in its several quite different regional settings would, of course, be well worth undertaking.¹²

¹² Of the copious bibliography on Chaitanya's *bhakti* movement the single most valuable introduction in English probably remains De (1961). Dimock (1966) is insightful and engaging, though it seems to err in identifying certain of Chaitanya's contemporary associates as heterodox *sahajiyas*. For social implications of the movement see: Raychaudhuri (1953), Sanyal (1981), Chakraborty (1985). Most of the exposition of the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement in this paper is drawn from the author's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 'Social Implications of the Gaudiya Vaisnava Movement, Harvard, 1970; and from several published articles to be

Chaitanya's *bhakti* movement in a number of respects resembles the *bhakti* tradition of Maharashtra, and, indeed, Mādhavendra Puri, the *parama-guru* of Chaitanya and *guru* of several of Chaitanya's associates is reported to have regularly travelled the South India - Pandarpur - Bengal route. In both cases, there is broad popular participation transcending caste differences. In both cases, there are saints of different castes, including the lowly, though Chaitanya's movement seems to have had relatively a greater preponderance of Brahmans in positions of leadership than did the Wārkarimovement. The public chanting parties or *saṃkīrtan*, so much associated with Chaitanya's evangelization, are reminiscent of Nām Dev's. There is respect for the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Bhagavad-gīta* in both traditions, but the Chaitanyaites give much greater stress to the former. Likewise both worship forms of Krishna, but for the Bengalis it is Krishna, the cowherd boy in love with Rādhā and the gopis who epitomizes the perfection of 'sweetness' (*mādhurya*), i.e., divine love from which the inhibiting awareness of divine might (*aiśvarya*) is set aside in meditation and other devotional exercises. The Chaitanya devotees in Bengal seem to have given relatively greater emphasis to the development of devotional literature in many genres and in both vernacular and classical languages, whereas the Wārkaris, while also producing devotional literature of quality (mostly in the vernacular), gave a greater emphasis to the annual mass pilgrimage to Pandarpur. Chaitanya devotees on a smaller scale made an annual pilgrimage to Puri to visit Chaitanya himself for several years. Thereafter they never had any single common focus for pilgrimage, though they maintained a de-centralized pattern of gathering at holy places at holy times to celebrate their devotional solidarity.

The Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava movement had a two

noted below. Two forthcoming publications will be relevant to the present discussion: one being the 1985 Biman Bihari Majumdar Memorial Lectures by the author, to be published by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta; the other a collection of studies by various scholars, Indian and foreign, *Chaitanya and the Vaishnavas of Bengal*, edited by Hitesranjan Sanyal and the author, to be published by K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta.

generation period of creativity and authority in which the theological and institutional bases for the movement ever after were set. At the core of the 'apostolic', better called 'avatāra', generation was Krishna-Chaitanya, himself enthusiastically acknowledged by his followers to be the divine Hari (Viṣṇu, Krishna) descended as the *avatara* bearing the religious pattern (*dharma*) appropriate for the *kali yuga*, namely, loving devotion (*prema bhakti*) to God. This devotion is to be expressed in public, to be propagated among all and sundry, by loudly chanting the divine names, 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna....' The widely shared conviction of God's historical presence as *avatara* gave to Chaitanya's movement a symbolic and emotional unity of focus, to say nothing of intensity of enthusiasm, perhaps not found in other *bhakti* movements.

There is another modality of Chaitanya that progressively became more significant, especially among the more meditationally and theologically more sophisticated devotees. That is the intense experience of what are called *gopī-bhāva* and *Rādhā-bhāva*, namely, the amorous devotional sentiments appropriate to the cowherdess (*gopī*) lovers (on the transcendental plane of *līlā*) of Krishna and specifically the ultimate perfection of such love epitomized in Rādhā. So intense and authentic were Chaitanya's experiences of these feelings that it became the conviction of some of his intimate associates, and eventually of much of the movement, that he was not only Hari descended to save the world, but a combined Krishna-Rādhā *avatāra* allowing Krishna to taste his own sweetness and experience the love that the divine sweetheart Rādhā feels for him. I stress the distinctive Rādhā-Krishna *mādhurya* (sweetness, delicacy, gentleness) aspects of Chaitanya *bhakti* because in the experience of devotees in that movement, *bhakti* is more than the basic salvation of all and sundry through taking the divine names. That is but the prelude to what becomes a meditational, aesthetic, devotional journey of progressive refinement and interiorization. Whatever stance the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas took regarding Bengal society, it was with an eye to securing conditions within which this sort of *mādhurya bhakti* might be cultivated. Accordingly, it should not be

surprising that though Chaitanya *bhaktas* extolled the saving of women, Shudras and sinners, they were, if anything, even less inclined than the Wārkaris to engage in open conflict with powers enforcing social rules in Bengal. Their means were subtler than that.

Deliverance of Women, Shudras and Sinners

If there is one message that sums up the meaning and purpose of Chaitanya's *bhakti* movement in Bengal at the most popular level, it is that God Hari has mercifully descended as Chaitanya to deliver (from all manner of evil) all of humankind (and perhaps other living beings) especially (those more unfortunate ones) women, Shudras and sinners, if only they will respond to His grace. There is no doubt that this refrain has sunk deeply into the psyche of Bengalis, devotees and non-devotees as well. But what does the affirmation mean? We ought not aim for too narrow and unequivocal an answer, for this affirmation, this 'good news' to use a Christian phrase, is not a mere policy statement, even less an analytic observation on *bhakti* in relation to social structure. It is a profession or confession of faith in Sri Krishna-Chaitanya. It means more (and in a way less) than what its words would convey in a more mundane, empirically verifiable context. That from which the unfortunate are to be delivered extends beyond, though in some respects it includes, the sufferings and disabilities of their physical and social situation. And the state into which they hope to be delivered transcends the good things of this world, though it may in some way include these as well (as in the palpable satisfactions of affectionate comradeship among fellow devotees even in this lifetime). The imagery with which devotees in Chaitanya's movement speak of their own and others' desperate entanglement with evil and of the longed for state to which they hope to be lifted up is pregnant with unspecified cognitive and emotive meanings waiting to be given specific form and force in particular concrete situations. As the situations may differ markedly so may the applications of the symbolically pregnant,

multi-valent proclamation of deliverance.¹³

In twentieth century writings on Chaitanya and his followers there has been a fair amount of uncritical romanticizing whereby idyllic, radical, or liberal-reformatory intentions have been read into these proclamations of faith without convincing examination of the sixteenth century evidence. There have been the more negative, even cynical, commentators as well, who see only psychological compensation or deliberate manipulation of simple-minded women and Shudras, again without convincing marshalling of the available sixteenth century evidence. Both perspectives, by the way, tend to pass over in silence the sinners – who are the primary target of Chaitanya's saving grace – in their haste to determine the fate of women and Shudras. Probably the sinners are neither idyllic enough to fit the romantic's nor simple-minded enough to fit the cynic's preconceptions!

When we do consult the available sources to learn what was happening in the social life of devotees of Chaitanya we find that while the proclamation of Chaitanya's divine zeal to rescue women, Shudras and especially sinners is conspicuous, there is little or no interest in showing how women or Shudras (or sinners) had their social or economic status raised by virtue of divine grace and *bhakti*. The question of practical or mundane social uplift or liberation from oppressive economic conditions just does not arise. One can, however, gather some information indirectly from what is said and not said, for instance about women, in the literature, especially the somewhat garrulous hagiographical texts.

Certain women were indeed treated with great respect, especially Sacī, the mother of Chaitanya, Viṣṇupriyā, his surviving wife/widow, and the wives of major male devotees. On the other hand, in Chaitanya's generation all the leading figures in any policy-making sense seem to have been male, though certain women, such as Advaita Ācārya's wife Sītā, gave initiation to circles of devotees which included males. One woman, Jāhnavā Devī, the junior, childless wife of Nityānanda (an erstwhile ascetic

¹³ O'Connell (1981), 124-35.

associate of Chaitanya who married late in life), not only had male disciples of her own, but effectively took charge of coordinating Vaiṣṇava activities in Bengal after the death of her husband. Another woman, Hemalālā Devī, daughter of an important Brahman *guru*, Srīnivās Ācārya, was herself a *guru* and seems to have wielded considerable authority in south-west Bengal in the movement's third generation. Thereafter it is difficult to find women of such prominence in the movement, though it should be said that among males also, after the second or third generation, there is much less scholarship and evangelization of heroic proportions and charismatic influence.

As the enthusiasms of the early movement settled down to more *staid* transmission of cherished modes of piety and learning, the traditional subordination and defence of women to men seem to have established themselves among Chaitanya devotees as elsewhere in Bengali Hindu society. However, a recent study by Donna Wulff of the place of women in Bengali society as reflected in Vaiṣṇava *padāvalī-kīrtan* (devotional song) indicates that despite the formal subordination of women, there is considerable scope for women of strength and ability, not to speak of charm, to exert more influence on Bengali society, even in ordinary times, than a cursory view of formal relationships might suggest. This surely is no less so in the case of Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas among whom there is so much stress upon 'sweetness', humility and loving service (and other allegedly typical female qualities) as the ideal to be sought even by males. Indeed, according to the theology of the movement, all mere humans are ultimately female vis-a-vis the Lord. The prominence of Rādhā, Krishna's loving consort, would seem to further reinforce the sense of value of being female and having by nature those qualities thought to be characteristic of devotion at its best. However, we must be on guard against applying in a simplistic way the religious poetic symbolism of the devout/divine female to mundane social situations. Even in Vrindavana, where Rādhā is hailed before Krishna, the roster of famous saints is almost entirely male (though nameless Vaiṣṇava widows, many, no doubt, saintly, abound there) and the leadership of temples, *maths* and

āśrams likewise is very much in male hands. Very sensitive observation and analysis are required before such connections may be made with any degree of credibility.¹⁴

With respect to Shudras we have much the same situation as with women. While Chaitanya's own affection and concern for the devout Shudra (or even Muslim or ex-Muslim, viz., Harīdas) is presented as the mode of devotion to the fellow devotee, there is little or no attention in the copious Vaiṣṇava texts to social uplift or economic improvement. In the rare case where a Shudra (usually of a high *bhadralok jati*, e.g., Narottama, a Kayastha) had Brahman disciples this was presented not as a precedent for making Shudras normal *gurus* of Brahmans, but as testimony to the extraordinary sanctity of the particular saint. Chaitanya himself, while personally affectionate to devout Shudras was careful, even as a *sannyāsi*, to take his meals in the homes of Brahmans. And he deferred to the circumspect wishes of certain devotees of low or defiled caste when they asked to be excused from eating together with devotees of higher caste who had been gracious enough to invite them.

It is not my intention, when noting the absence of evidence of concern for mundane social uplift and economic improvement of women and Shudras (and sinners!) in the sixteenth century texts, to minimize the impact of Chaitanya and his movement may have had on the self-esteem of women and Shudras in the privacy of their own hearts, within their own circles, in gatherings large and small of fellow devotees, and even in the wider area of social interaction. But there is a wide difference between matters of self – and other – esteem and matters of ascribed social status and *de facto* economic class. Each area has its importance and none should be left out of consideration. But it is altogether unjustified to confuse them or to assume that a development in one area implies its analogue in the other. The closest that the sixteenth century texts come to endorsing socio-economic reform is

¹⁴ Wulff (1985), 11-28; other articles in the same volume also dealing with feminine symbolism in the Chaitanya movement are those by Basanti Choudhry, Donald R. Tuck, Tony K. Stewart, and David L. Habaerman.

the encouraging of hospitality to fellow Vaiṣṇavas and offering of alms to Vaiṣṇavas (and even others) in particularly acute need. Both the offering of hospitality and alms within the community and the enhancing of personal esteem are significant commitments and could, conceivably, become points of departure for more radical efforts at altering economic and social structures that induce and perpetuate poverty and human degradation. But there is no evidence I am aware of that the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement of the sixteenth century made that radical departure (with the partial exception of the *Jāti-Vaiṣṇava* phenomenon), nor that it has become characteristic of the movement up to the present.¹⁵

Community of Vaiṣṇava Bhaktas

Implicit in the foregoing remarks on deliverance of women, Shudras and sinners is the importance of mutual support and the experience of solidarity within the (spiritual or moral) community of devotees (Vaiṣṇava *samāja*, *bhaktavṛnda*, *sampradāyā*). This is worth noting because one might think that the intensely personal and voluntary character of *bhakti* signals an individualized, privatized kind of experience. This is not the case, however, at least with popular Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* movements. *Bhakti* is indeed personal and has an interiorized dimension, but it is not individualistic, not isolating. Quite the contrary, the personal in Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* is thoroughly social, a communally mediated and cultivated kind of experience. This is suggested by the very word *bhakti*, from the root *bhaj*, meaning to share or be participated in. It is evident also from the prominence of communally shared modes of experiencing and propagating *bhakti*: public *samkīrtan* chanting, group *bhajans*, acceptance of the neophyte into spiritual kinship with fellow devotees. Much of Vaiṣṇava discipline (*sādhna*) is dependent upon mutual support among devotees. Even advanced Vaiṣṇava saints, whose interiorization of *bhakti* through many hours of secluded *bhajan* is much developed, continue to be part of the wider Vaiṣṇava community, depending upon others for begged

¹⁵ Raychaudhuri (1357/1950), 14-40; O'Connell (1970), *Passim*.

food (*madhukari*), dwelling, if possible, in the vicinity of other Vaiṣṇava saints in the sacred Vraja (Mathura-Vrindavan) or Navadvīp (Bengal) regions, offering guidance to less advanced devotees and sharing their most intimate meditative experiences with affectionate fellow devotees of similar aptitude (*sajātiya-sniigdha-sādhu-saṅga*).

The organizational forms that the community of devotees in Chaitanya's tradition assumed were marked by economy and decentralization and the utilization of familiar traditional institutions. No one was acknowledged as successor to Chaitanya; no central executive body emerged.¹⁶ Yet a remarkably coherent and effective network of responsible leadership and guidance rapidly took shape: *gurus* and scholars, ascetics and house-holders, musicians and poets, maintainers of hostels, *asrams* and temples. The network was thickest in Bengal and Orissa and in the Vraja region, but in principle it could extend anywhere. Though the core leadership was largely Brahman and the greatest concentrations of devotees were in the castes of middle status, the community reached out to persons of any caste and even to some tribal peoples. There developed a pattern of sub-infeudation, as it were, whereby a devotee of lower status could be authorized (*adhikāri*) by a Brahman *guru* (*Gosvāmī*) to initiate and instruct others of yet lower status, thus expanding the community geographically and socially while protecting the Gosvamis from compromising their reputation for ritual purity in the view of Brahmanic Hindu society.

All devotees of whatever social status were welcome to attend festivals (*mahotsavas*) and songfests (*kirtans*) and to share in the ritual eating of consecrated food (*prasadam*). However, all of this sharing tended to be concentrated in devotional ceremonial situations: at

¹⁶ It was reported to me recently that there is some evidence that Chaitanya may have designated Gopala Bhatta, a South Indian who settled permanently at Vrindavan at Chaitanya's request, to be his successor. I have not yet been able to assess this evidence, but it remains clear that the movement as a whole did not acknowledge anyone as Chaitanya's successor, though many in Bengal considered Nityananada to be practically Chaitanya's alter ego and the foremost propagator of *bhakti* after Chaitanya's retirement at Puri.

special places, on certain days, in the company of fellow devotees. But devotees of different *jatis* (and *fortiori* different *varnas*) did not, and did not expect to, intermarry (with the striking exception of the Jati-Vaiṣṇavas, to be discussed below), nor were the prevailing restrictions to inter-caste dining lightly over ruled. Theoretically this was not because the Vaiṣṇavas 'believed in' the restrictions of *varnasrama-dharma*, but because, for the sake of maintaining social order (*lokasaṃgraha*) and to avoid misunderstanding and controversy, they were prepared to accede to the outward forms of *varnasrama-dharma* wherever and so long as these defined the prevailing social order.¹⁷

The devotees of Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇava movement thus maintained a two-faced or two-tiered stance toward social relationships: egalitarian affectivity with fellow devotees in devotional (sacred) situations; inegalitarian functionality (even with fellow devotees) in mundane (profane) situations. This stance may not have been heroic from the viewpoint of social ethics, but it was neither confused nor inconsistent, nor, for that matter, peculiar. Most, if not all, human communities distinguish between the proper mode of relationship for those closely bonded (by kinship, religion or other primary factors) and the proper mode for those not so intimately related. The Chaitanya *bhaktas* were, and are, quite clear and consistent and self-conscious, down to fine detail, in their definition of the zone of devotional (sacral) solidarity. Beyond that zone they tended to play the roles called for by social convention, though not necessarily with any commitment to such conventions.¹⁸

For devout Vaiṣṇavas there was no doubt as to which zone and which roles were the more real and valuable and which merely conventional, contingent upon birth and social context. One upshot of this distinction of zones of (devotional/sacred vs. profane) social relationships was that the Chaitanya *bhaktas*, notwithstanding the effusive,

¹⁷ O'Connell (1976), 33-52.

¹⁸ Analysis of the experience, structures and boundaries of community among Chaitanya *bhaktas* is the subject of the Biman Bihari Majumdar Memorial Lectures mentioned in note 12. Also O'Connell (1970), Chap. V.

emotional quality of their *bhakti*, in act conceived of mundane society in sixteenth century Bengal in a relatively secular, modern way, in the sense to be discussed presently.

Paradox of Bhakti as Inducing a Hindu Form of Secularity

The term 'secular' can mean many things. One meaning is that certain areas of human endeavour (e.g., occupational, political, some sectors of social relationships) are treated as religiously neutral, not carrying traditional or other sacredness, not having a ritual quality, not being required (or prohibited) on religious grounds. Using 'secular' in this sense it is possible to say that the spread of *bhakti* in the Chaitanya movement allowed Vaiṣṇavas to treat various areas of endeavour other than *bhakti* itself as relatively 'secular', because to the extent that sacredness was concentrated in *bhakti* and activities associated with *bhakti*, it was withdrawn from (or denied to) other areas of human activity.¹⁹

Stated somewhat differently, the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas, affirm that the normative order, or *dharma*, of the present age is loving devotion (*prema-bhakti*). This affirmation carries the implication that the old order based on caste and stage in life (*varnasrama-dharma*) is, at least relatively and in theory, obsolete. The whole system of endogamous groups, ministered to by Brahmans, responsible for ascribed occupations under the authority of a pious Kṣatriya king, was by the sixteenth century in Bengal an obsolete ideal, appropriate in the past, from the Vaiṣṇava viewpoint, but lost in this age beyond retrieving. At the political level this was obviously the case. For four hundred years, non-Hindus had ruled Bengal and the future looked no different. At the social level of *varna* and *jāti*, the disintegration was not so complete. But Vaiṣya and Kṣatriya *varnas* were practically extinct in Bengal and standards generally were thought to have slackened.

The Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas, however, did not seek to dismantle what was left of the truncated, theoretically

¹⁹ O'Connell (1974), (1976), (1979).

obsolete, Brahmanical social and ritual system; they were by no means militant social revolutionaries. What they did do was to deny in principle that the Brahmanical social-ritual system as such had any special sanctity. To the extent that the system was there and functioning in a truncated fashion they accepted it and followed its usages, except where these ran directly counter to the demands of *bhakti*. For instance the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas were quite ready to accept the services of Brahmans to perform the sacraments of the life-cycle (*saṁskaras*), but they drew the line against performing (or having performed on their behalf) purificatory penances (*prāyaścitta*). The reason is this. It is a cardinal conviction of Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas that the only one who can sever the cords of *karma*, binding one to sin, is Krishna. To undergo a *prāyaścitta* would be tantamount to denying Krishna as one's unique Saviour. In place of *prāyaścitta* administered by Brahmans expert in the *dharmasāstra*, the Vaiṣṇavas provided for recitation of the names of God or such devotional tasks as sponsoring a festival for Vaiṣṇavas (*mahotsava*), under Vaiṣṇava supervision, but which Brahmans would be invited to attend.

In like manner the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas accepted and used the Muslim dominated political system and followed the career opportunities the system provided, with the reservation that should it ever become oppressive of Vaiṣṇava devotion they might withdraw participation and support. The retirement of Rūpa and Sanātana (two of Chaitanya's most learned and experienced disciples) from Husain Shah's inner circle seems to have been in part a protest against a proposed campaign against Orissa, the Hindu dominated state surrounding the Jagannātha temple at Puri, where Chaitanya was to spend his last eighteen years. Religiously committed to no one particular paradigm for social and political affairs, the Vaiṣṇavas, whose religious anchorage is interiorized in *bhakti*, are in a position to judge the merits of any system and to participate or not as their conscience and common sense dictate.²⁰

²⁰ O'Connell (1983), 289-313.

Related to the 'secularity' introduced by *bhakti*, is the 'denominational' character of the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava community of devotees. I use 'denomination' in the sense defined by Talcot Parsons in his study of 'Christianity in Modern Industrial Society.' There he observes that the denomination as a form of religious community is distinct from, though akin to, both church and sect. Like the church type of religious organization, the denomination assumes some differentiation between the distinctly religious sphere of concern and the more secular sphere, a differentiation that the typical sect does not admit. On the other hand, like the sect, the denomination assumes voluntary individual commitment as the basis of membership, not birth, citizenship or any ascribed criterion. (However, in generations after Chaitanya the factor of birth became in practice, if not in theological theory, a major determinant of membership.) Since the denomination is a relatively late or modern development in the history of Christian religious organizations, emerging well after the Reformation itself, it is all the more interesting to find certain key aspects of the denomination present in the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava movement in the sixteenth century.

If we shift attention from the formal shape of the denomination to the overall attitudes toward participating in what I have called secular endeavours, the parallel with the Christian denomination, especially of the Calvinist sort, weakens. There seems to be no phenomenon within Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* comparable to the hard driving 'worldly asceticism' of Calvinist Christians (or of the Liṅgāyats, as Ishwaran presents them). Nor is there much emphasis upon a 'conception of calling' such as Max Weber has noted in the teachings of Martin Luther. The few explicit endorsements of strictly secular endeavours that I have noted in Chaitanyaite texts are advices to princes to rule justly and mildly, to the wealthy to support the poor and pious, and to subjects to pay their taxes and keep the peace, more suggestive of medieval Catholic social ethics than of the Calvinist 'worldly asceticism' that allegedly led to (but was never claimed by Weber to be the same as) 'the spirit of Capitalism'. The sole public

endeavour in which Chaitanya *bhaktas* are persistently urged to engage actively is the propagation of *bhakti*.

It should be borne in mind, however, that being Vaiṣṇava is but one dimension, albeit the most fundamental one in the eyes of the true believer, of an individual's life. He or she continues to exercise in some way or other those dimensions of life pertaining to family, caste, occupation and the like so long as these do not violate *bhakti*. The absence of a somewhat secular 'conception of calling' from the distinctively Vaiṣṇava complex of a person's values does not necessarily imply an indifferent stance before secular affairs by Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas. The family, caste or occupation may provide the appropriate values. The interplay in a person's life of the values embedded in *bhakti* and the values traditional to a particular family, *jāti*, occupation, etc. deserves careful study, but lies beyond this inquiry. At any rate, it would seem that one major contribution of Chaitanya's *bhakti* movement to a pluralistic, yet relatively integrated, and somewhat secular medieval Bengali society was the withdrawal of sacredness from ascribed paradigms of social, political or occupational organization.

This desacralizing of areas of public and semi-public activity meant that Vaiṣṇavas in Bengal could with less misgivings participate in affairs that were not guided by Brahmanic norms, risk contamination by contact with low caste and non-Hindu persons, accept without undue regret the apparently permanent political-military dominance of Bengal by Muslims and generally in good conscience come to terms with the novelties of their contemporary secular world, i.e., of the *Kali yuga*. This desacralizing of traditional socio-religious paradigms, this passive delegitimizing, if I may coin a phrase, seems to me to be the single most fundamental impact of Chaitanya *bhakti* upon Hindu society in Bengal. The impact is subtle but pervasive and predisposes Vaiṣṇavas to accept in principle, if not positively agitate for, an indeterminate range of changes in society should other factors precipitate such changes.

Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal: Unobtrusive Radicals

It was ethnological surveys and census reports of Bengal in the late nineteenth century which first called attention to the existence of a surprisingly large number of Hindus (c. 500,000) claiming to be Vaiṣṇava in *jāti* as well as by devotional commitment. Furthermore these Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas (or Jātīgata-Vaiṣṇavas, Jāt-Boiṣṭam, Grihi-Vaiṣṇavas) insisted that their *jāti* was outside the *varna* system; not below the system, not in a state of having been excluded or degraded, but voluntarily and for religious reasons standing apart from *varnasrama*. This large minority of Vaiṣṇavas in Bengal, well-integrated into the Chaitanya tradition, constitutes a radical alternative to the normal (as practiced by a few million Vaiṣṇava Bengalis) policy of continuing to observe the practices of and maintain solidarity with one's natal *jāti* (within the *varnasrama* system) for mundane social purposes.²¹

Who are these Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas and how did the *jāti* come about? There is no unambiguous reference to Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas, even in the copious Bengali Vaiṣṇava texts, before the nineteenth century. But there is reason to think that this inconspicuous group goes back to the time of Chaitanya, if not before. The Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas seem to have varied origins, but the archetypal progenitors are said to be erstwhile Vaiṣṇava ascetics (i.e., *Bairāgis*, *Babājīs*) who subsequently opted for marriage, but who were disinclined or unable to return to their natal *jātis*. Into the simple, explicitly Vaiṣṇava pattern of their conjugal *jāti*-life they carried over as much as possible of the spirit and forms of their prior ascetic devotional life, for example, the Jāti-Vaiṣṇava initiation of newcomers, burial rather than cremation, and other practices. But the *jāti* is an open one, with little restriction as to who may come: converts from other religious orders, individuals fleeing or expelled from other *jātis*, couples wishing to marry against family or *jāti* wishes, orphans, foundlings, children born out of wedlock, widows and unfortunates.

Marriage among Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas is very simple, an exchange of garlands presided over by a Gosvami, in many

²¹ O'Connell (January-April 1982), 13-28; Das (April 1986), 112-27.

cases by the same Brahman Gosvamis who have been the mainstay of the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava community at large in Bengal. What minimal life-cycle rites there are do not follow the Brahmanic *samskara* pattern, but are adaptations to a domestic social purpose of rites proper to devotional discipline. In the not too distant past many Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas were employed or semi-employed in a wide range of minor capacities at Vaiṣṇava temples, *maths*, Gosvami residences and pilgrim hostels and in the making of religious artifacts and providing such devotional services as singing *kirtan*. Some were themselves *adhikaris*, subaltern *gurus* with their own flocks of disciples.

The Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas evidently existed in considerable obscurity, presumably by mutual consent of themselves and the dominant majority of devotees remaining in the *varnasrama* system, until publication of the 1901 Census of Bengal. That document, for the first and last time, included a Government-devised table of *jāti* rankings, from the purest of Brahmans down to the most degraded *jātis*. The Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas, especially the more prosperous householders among them, were shocked to find their group ranked down in the fifth of a seven-fold descending order of status. On the eve of the next decennial census an elite group among them spurred on by one of their own most learned members, Madhusūdan Dās Adhikāri of Elati, in Hughli District, organized the Vaiṣṇava Jātiya Sammelan, presided over by Gosvamis of the Nityananda lineage, their ultimate *gurus*. The Sammelan (assembly) petitioned the government to rectify its error by acknowledging that the Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas belong outside the *varna* system, but are equal to or at least just beneath the Brahmans in status. The Sammelan also proposed sweeping changes in the *jāti* itself; a moratorium on conversions; compilation of a social register of all members; institution of rituals approximating those found in *dhramasastra*.

The status-conscious leaders of the Jātiya Vaiṣṇava Sammelan did not quite renounce their fundamental affirmation to be free of the *varnasrama* system, but they very markedly shifted the values and practices of at least the more prosperous sector of the *jāti* away from the

more idyllic, somewhat antinomian, traditional ideal toward a much more conventional, structured ideal more suggestive of the Brahman than of the Vaiṣṇava Bairāgi. The government never repeated its exercise of a descriptive ranking of *jātīs*, but neither did it amend its earlier findings. The Vaiṣṇavas Jātiya Sammelan seems to have petered out leaving Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas somewhat divided, but not acrimoniously so, in their current practices, some generally following the traditional Bairāgi-modeled pattern, some, especially the younger and more prosperous, tending toward the revised, somewhat Brahmanical pattern.

The existence and size of the Vaiṣṇava *jāti* witnesses to the capacity of the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement to generate a new, distinctive social community at the mundane (though Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas prefer not to think of their *jāti* as mundane like other!) level when a need is perceived and where there are no strong countervailing forces that would discourage such a development. It is also interesting to note the ability of the Gosvamis to draw from the repertoire of Vaiṣṇava symbolism and devotional practices those elements needed to define the minimal social and ritual characteristic of the new *jāti* and to note the evident success of this rather *ad hoc* arrangement.

In different social situations the same shared commitment to *bhakti* can lead to quite varied social strategies, quite different ways of relating the protean spiritual/moral community of Vaiṣṇava devotees to the exigencies of the prevailing social (and economic and political) milieu. We have already seen two markedly different strategies articulated simultaneously and without conflict by the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas, one for the benefit of those blessed or burdened with membership in a *varnasrama jāti*, one for those not so blessed or burdened. There was yet a third strategy proposed, not acted upon, but interesting nonetheless. At the same meeting of the Vaiṣṇava Jātiya Sammelan at which it was decided to put a moratorium on further conversions, one Haripada Dās Ādhikārī (who at some point in his life seems to have been a Gandhian) offered a counter-proposal. He proposed that instead of holding to a moratorium the Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas should open and extend their *jāti*, making it the proto-

typical caste-free social community to which the whole Indian population might repair! The proposal did not carry, but that it was proffered at all further illustrates the flexible character of the spiritual/moral community of devotees as it seeks for its optimal relationship with more mundane levels of social relations in changing historical contexts.

A yet more recent development, geographically remote from Bengal, but in direct continuity with the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement, demonstrates yet another strategy for relating Vaiṣṇava community to mundane social exigencies. In North America the Vaiṣṇava disciples of the late Swami A.C. Bhaktivedānta (i.e., ISKCON, International Society for Krishna Consciousness) have discovered that in order to maintain the sort of devotional life they aspire to, they need to formulate for their married devotees, who constitute the bulk of their membership, some form of domestic social relationships that are fundamentally different from those prevailing in North America. The North American ISKCON devotees, ironically, but not inconsistently with the basic Chaitanya stance toward mundane society, are opting to do just the opposite of what the early Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas chose to do. In a radically different historical setting the ISKCON devotees are experimenting with way of introducing into North America a modified version of the *varnasrama* system as the basic model for their own community's more mundane (though they too, like Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas, prefer not to think of their own social life as mundane) level of domestic social relationships.

In their experiments at adapting to North American (and other Western) settings a non-hereditary form of *varnasrama* and one that does not make purity and impurity the basis of discriminations of status and esteem, the ISKCON devotees are carrying forward in a more dramatic fashion an earlier twentieth century initiative by Swāmī A.C. Bhaktivedānta's own *guru*, Swāmī Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī. In Bengal and elsewhere in India he strove through his Gauḍīya Maṭh to establish a revised form of *varnasrama-dharma* in that sector of the Chaitanya *bhakti* tradition over which he exerted some

influence. A further ramification of this particular line of reworking the relationship of spiritual/moral Vaiṣṇava community to the more mundane social realm is taking place as ISKCON devotees, Indians and foreigners, try to implant their peculiar version of *varnasrama-dharma* in India itself. In India, unlike in the West, this mode of Vaiṣṇava *varnasrama-dharma* serves not to mark off the community of devotees from an enviroing society into which they do not wish to be re-assimilated, but to facilitate communication with the enviroing Hindu society, presumably at the risk of assimilation.²²

These current developments we are not in a position to examine at length here. I mention them, however, both to encourage further study in this direction and to confirm the general observation that the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement conceives of itself as fundamentally detached from any given social environment, Hindu, Muslim, Western or other. Depending on circumstances and in the interests of *bhakti* and of the community of *bhaktas*, the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement may accede to, reject, or modify currently prevailing social patterns. It may also generate new social groupings at a relatively more mundane level. These newly generated groups may utilize more traditional or more novel patterns or mechanisms as circumstances suggest and wisdom (or the lack of it) directs.

Before offering some concluding assessments of the extent and manner of the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement's influence for social change in Bengal, I would like to enumerate, but not elaborate, several respects in which the movement seems to have reinforced specific social groupings within Bengali Hindu society.

²² ISKCON views on *varnasrama-dharma* appear *passim* in their many publications. The subject also arose in a four-day conference of scholars examining ISKCON (at New Vrindavana, West Virginia, July, 1985), the papers of which may be forthcoming. The biography of Swami A.C. Bhaktivedanta, *Sriḷa Prabhupada-Lilamṛta* in several volumes has been compiled by Satsvarupa-dasa Goswami. See also Eleanor Zelliot.

Bhakti in Relation to Particular Groups within Bengali Hindu Society

Although the theologically justified level of Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava communal solidarity transcends *jātī* and other mundane distinctions, it is evident that shared commitment to *bhakti* tends to reinforce the solidarity and interests of numerous smaller groups definable in mundane terms: particular leadership and patron groups, particular *jātīs*, sections of *jātīs*, informal alliances of *jātīs*, etc. In such situations the interests of *bhakti* (individually and/or collectively conceived) inevitably converge with more mundane interests in some respects and diverge from them in others, thus introducing strains and risks of distortion. Mixed motivations and compromise of values are endemic to such situations. It would be simplistic to ignore either the devotional/idealistic elements or the mundane/pragmatic elements in situations of convergence of *bhakti* and the interests/solidarity of mundane group or class. Effective sociological study of religious phenomena will sort out and examine the inner-relations of the various operative factors and not turn a blind eye in either direction, nor arbitrarily reduce the one to the other. The following sketch of several areas of convergence of *bhakti* with the interests and solidarity of mundane groups does not attempt to analyse in detail the various factors and their relationships. It simply points to areas where such analysis would be pertinent and indicates in a general way the profile of such convergence of *bhakti* with mundane interests in the case of the Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava movement.

1. *New class of religious leaders.* Widespread popular acceptance of Chaitanya's modes of *bhakti* to Krishna carried with it a religious, but also social and to some modest extent economic, prominence for those identified as saints and other leaders of the movement. There were modest shifts of patronage from *smṛtā* Brahmins and more emphatic shifts from animal-sacrificing Śakta priests to Gosvamis and other Vaiṣṇavagurus and functionaries. The core leadership in the movement was predominantly Brahman, but Kayasthas and Baidyas were prominent from the beginning and gradually, and at greater remove from the core of the movement, Shudras of lesser status,

but reputed to be pious and able, acquired local prestige and modest income. In many cases heredity became the principle of transferring leadership from one generation to the other, so certain families and lineages (and the villages and shrine complexes associated with them) secured a vested interest in maintaining the respect and patronage of disciples.

2. *Prominent lay patrons.* Closely related were the wealthy patrons who sponsored festivals, built temples and *aṣrams* and generally supported the acknowledged spiritual (ascetic or married) leaders. The composition of this category has been quite fluid: in Chaitanya's day it was apt to be Hindu revenue farmers or Hindu officials in the administration of Husain Shah. In certain marginal areas where Hindu *rājās* were allowed to rule under Muslim sovereignty there were several cases of such conspicuous patronage as to suggest desire for Vaiṣṇava legitimation of the *rājā* and his line. Throughout the movement's history *zamindārs* (large landlords) and businessmen of means have been substantial contributors and in modern times civil servants, including senior police officers, and political aspirants have joined them as prominent supporters. It may be presumed that in many, if not all, cases enhanced prestige and even material advantage accrues to those reputed to be munificent in their expression of piety. However, it should be borne in mind that the bulk of financial patronage of the Chaitanya movement (which has never been notoriously wealthy) probably has been at all times in the form of very modest contributions from a very wide spectrum of devotees of limited means.

3. *Entire jātīs, some with occupational stake in bhakti.* A scanning of ethnological surveys, statistical surveys and census reports discloses that many Hindu *jātīs* in Bengal were reported to be entirely or virtually entirely Vaiṣṇava (in the Chaitanya tradition) by religious persuasion. This discovery is somewhat surprising in view of the theoretical ideal of personal acceptance of grace, and not hereditary ascription, as the beginning of a life of *bhakti*. It is less surprising in view of the tendency of *jātīs* to foster solidarity and common attitudes through shared rituals.

The fact of *jāti* wide adherence to *bhakti* indicates both the effectiveness of such collective piety in insuring the transmission of some degree of *bhakti* from generation to generation and the suitability of *bhakti* as a means of reinforcing *jāti* solidarity at the affective level, so long as the membership is virtually all Vaiṣṇava and thus able to share in the devotional celebrations.

In a number of cases the all-Vaiṣṇava *jātis* have traditional *jāti* occupations that serve particular functions within the repertoire of Vaiṣṇava devotional activities, e.g., garland makers, sweet makers, cowherds, certain musicians, and, of course, the *Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas*. It seems likely that the economic self-interest of such groups, as well as their corporate morale, stands to gain from their wholehearted participation in the *bhakti* movement. It would be in their interests to support the vitality of the movement as a whole as this would mean enhanced demand for their services. There would also be certain constraint against deviating from good Vaiṣṇava practices lest individually or collectively they lose the reputation for purity and piety requisite for their being deemed suitable to contribute to Vaiṣṇava affairs.

4. *Upward mobility of jātis and parts of jātis.* There is scattered evidence in ethnological statistical and census reports that many *jātis* considered their maintenance of Vaiṣṇava standards or their corporate 'conversion' to a Vaiṣṇava way of life to be integral to a *jāti*-wide effort to maintain or enhance the *jāti*'s reputation and status. Scattered evidence of this merging of *bhakti* with *jāti* uplift may be found in the traditional accounts maintained by many *jātis* and in greater detail in modern (especially in the wake of the 1901 Census of Bengal) publications of such *jātis*. One of the most remarkable of the *jātis* whose zealous adherence to Chaitanya *bhakti* has for centuries gone hand in hand with a persistent effort to secure enhanced social status is the Subamabarīk (gold dealers). Legend has it that in the reign of Baḥl Sen, before the Turkish conquest of Bengal, the Subamabarīks, till then a respected goldsmith-financial *jāti*, were officially – and in their eyes quite unjustifiedly – downgraded by the King. Ever since, they have striven to maintain high standards

of purity and education and to seek restoration of their once honourable status within Hindu society. In the early sixteenth century, they were reputed to be the most enthusiastic of all the *jātīs* in responding to Nityananda's propagation of devotion to Krishna-Chaitanya in Bengal, especially through financial support. One of their own men, Uddhāran Datta, was reputed to be a great saint in his own right. Their patronage of Vaiṣṇava Gosvamis and their elusive search for acknowledgement of higher status have continued into modern times.

A related phenomenon is the differentiation of sub-groups of some *jātīs* (usually of quite low status) or tribal groups at the margin of Hindu society. In a number of cases, the ethnological and related reports indicate that the elite group within such low ranking *jātī* or tribe has affirmed Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* and adopted such Vaiṣṇava practices as vegetarian diet and abstinence from alcohol (usually along with other practices generally considered respectable in Brahmanic Hindu society, e.g., prohibition of widow remarriage, etc.). In some cases, the elite Vaiṣṇava sub-group maintains restricted social intercourse with their unregenerate *jātī* or tribal fellows. In other cases, it splits off entirely to form its own more upwardly mobile reformed *jātī*.

The three *bhadralok jātīs*, the Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas, display no such *jātī*-wide adherence to or rejection of Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇava movement. Their far greater sophistication and access to cultural and material resources as well as greater diversity of occupation, habitation and religious orientation preclude such homogenous behaviour. However, there is scattered, though not yet systematically examined (so far as I am aware) evidence, that many Baidyas and Kayasthas in certain localities – and indeed some groups of Brahmans of relatively secondary influence – with cooperation from *jātīs* of the middle rank, found in their common espousal of *bhakti* the basis of a loosely coordinated but broadly extended religio-social alliance.

This informally conceived alliance of the Vaiṣṇava minority among Brahmans, Baidyas and Kayasthas and the majority of the middle and upper status Shudra *jātīs*

in Bengal seems to have provided a more flexible religious-cultural framework for accommodating social and economic activity by Hindus than that offered by more rigorous *smārta* Brahmans and traditional Śākta ritualists. In particular, those Hindus apt to be engaged in business and professional activity in contact with non-Hindus, Muslim or foreign, and in general those more ready to adapt to the opportunities furnished by changing circumstances could find a more congenial ambiance and significant moral/social support by adherence to this subtle religio-social Vaiṣṇava network or alliance. To say this does not imply that religious devotion and satisfaction were not present and operative in the lives of many of those involved. But it does imply the presence of multiple, and sometimes competing, interests and of mixed motives. For the better understanding of the religious dimension of human life, as well as of social structures and processes generally, an exacting analysis of how the various factors impinge upon one another is to be desired.

Concluding Observations

How then, if at all, did Chaitanya's Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* movement change Hindu social structures in sixteenth century (or later) Bengal? In terms of outright rejection or drastic alteration of prevailing patterns of kinship, *jāti*, *varna* and other fundamental components of Hindu social order, very little. Nor have there been noteworthy economic-political upheavals traceable to the upsurge of Krishna-Chaitanya *bhakti* in Bengal. What we do find, however, are numerous adjustments to and shifted emphases within the existing social order attributable to the pressure of *bhakti*. Even more noticeable are distinctive Vaiṣṇava emphases in terms of moods, attitudes toward self and others, and the valuations placed on those social structures, institutions and practices in which they did in fact participate. This differential between quite restrained alteration in overt social practice (apart from the sacral zone of strictly devotional activities) and quite emphatic advocacy of a distinctive complex of moods, attitudes and values is understandable in view of several related factors: religious commitment in the distinctive

form of *prema bhakti* (loving devotion) characterized by *mādhurya* (sweetness, delicacy, spontaneity) accompanied by a positive aversion for power and conflict; prominence of Brahmans as religious leaders and middle caste (and middle class) lay patronage/membership (low caste and lower class devotees being welcome within the fold, but rarely found in positions of influence, and warrior devotees being rare); and the fact of entrenched Muslim military-political supremacy carrying the ever-present threat of reprisal should the *modus vivendi* become threatened.

In spite of these factors of restraint, we do find a number of innovative moves by Chaitanya Vaiṣṇavas on the borderline of religious and social relationships: occasional, but celebrated, acceptance of non-Brahmans as *gurus* by Brahmans, of women as *gurus* by men, of community leadership by certain women and Shudras in the sixteenth century; rejection of *prayascitta* and some other related Brahmanic practices; modifications to *jāti* practices and bases of *jāti* solidarity in terms of *bhakti*; implication of *bhakti* in the process of upward mobility. The most significant overt modifications to Hindu society in Bengal attributable to the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement would seem to be two. On the one hand, there was the coalescence of an informal and loosely articulated network or 'alliance' of the Vaiṣṇava minorities among the *bhadralok jātis* and the bulk of the *jātis* of middle status. On the other, there was the generation of the unique Jāti-Vaiṣṇava group, self-consciously lying outside the *varnasrama* system altogether.

Chaitanya Vaiṣṇava advocacy of distinctive moods, attitudes and values undoubtedly affected the tone or quality of social life in Bengal, even when these 'soft' factors were effectively deflected from upsetting entrenched structures of wealth, power and mundane prestige. Exuberant advocacy-cum-demonstration of living devotion and sweetness, especially through music and literature that may be shared by Bengali-speakers not themselves Vaiṣṇava, (nor even Hindu) may be presumed to have impressed itself on the psyches of those exposed to the movement in its more vibrant phases. Enhanced self-esteem and respect for others ('women, Shudras and

sinners'), preference for accommodation rather than confrontation, predilection for the aesthetic and emotionally expressive, all must have affected in some degree the experience of living in Bengali Hindu society, however difficult (or for the past, impossible) it may be to devise ways of measuring such an impact.

Linking institutional changes with changes of mood, attitude and value is what I have called the 'passive delegitimation' of traditional Brahmanic social structures, i.e., stripping away their claim to sacral status in deference to the ultimate sacrality of *bhakti*. This passive delegitimation, while not requiring (not even encouraging) the jettisoning of established practices if these offer no positive affront to *bhakti*, nevertheless in principle lays open the Brahmanic system to modification or rejection as well as retention or reinstatement in whole or in part, depending on historical circumstances and the interests of *bhakti* as perceived by the *bhaktas* of time and place. The subtle but fundamental desacralizing of ascribed Brahmanic structures, including *varnasrama-dharma*, seems to have facilitated Vaiṣṇava Hindu participation in changing, pluralistic, 'secular' contexts. I consider this to have been the most significant change (for good or ill) effected upon Hindu society in Bengal by the Chaitanya *bhakti* movement.

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