

# Chaitanya and Gaudiya Vaishnavism: His idea of Equality Peace and Harmony (1486-1533)

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## Abstract:

This paper focuses on how Chaitanya's Gaudiya Vaishnavism helped in establishing social equality and brotherhood through his kirtan beyond caste creed and religion. This paper seeks to figure out that when Chaitanya was born the condition of India, particularly Bengal was very complex politically socially and religiously. Politically Delhi Sultanate was at the doorstep of decline and Mughals were all set to rule India. The social condition was very complex as well. The society was divided into different castes and classes. There were religious clash among different religious groups more particularly Hindu and Muslim. In such circumstances Chaitanya played a very vital role in establishing social equality and brotherhood through his ideas of social equality and brotherhood.

**Keywords:** Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Equality, Brotherhood, Peace, Sankirtan

## Introduction

"If you want to understand today you have to search yesterday," Pearl S. Buck (1872-1973). The statement of Pearl S. Buck is present in every branch of History. There are many theories and approaches to study India and its culture. Among these theories, The Great Man Theory is very important to study India and its culture. This particular theory basically believes that history moves by the actions of Great men. There are as many as 700 verses in *Bhagavata Gita*. Among them 4.7 is very important where Krishna says to Arjuna.-

*"Yada Yada hi dharmasaya glanir bhavati bharata,  
Abhiyutthanam adharma-saya todatamanam srjamy aham"*<sup>i</sup>

It means whenever there is decline of righteousness and increase in unrighteousness at that time I manifest myself on the earth. This kind of notion is present in almost every branch of Hinduism whether *Vaishnavism*, *Shaktism* and *Shaivism*. But these are expressed in different forms. The role of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu may be analyzed according to Great Man Theory. His idea of Brotherhood and equality beyond the caste creed and religion brought a kind of revolution in society. He dedicated his entire life in establishing brotherhood equality and peace and harmony by ignoring the social and religious background of the people.

The Indian religious life is characterized by the existence of a number of theistic orders and personal approach of followers of theistic order to their deity of worship is "distinguished by an intense love and

devotion and sense of absolute surrender to God, the technical name for which *Bhakti* explained as ‘exceptional attachment or *paranuraktir*.’<sup>ii</sup>

The idea of *Bhagavata* gained some currency towards the end of 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D in Bengal as evident from *Mallia Grant* that of the king Jayanaga of Karnasuvana ( Murshidabad) is referred to as a great *Bhagavata*.<sup>iii</sup> But the antiquity of worship of *Vasudeva – Krishna* as a divinity may be traced back to the time of 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.<sup>iv</sup> .The form of Vaishnavism developed by Chaitanya is termed as *Neo-vaishnavism or Gaudiya Vaishnavism*. The specialty of this sect “Lay in their having evolved an intensive devotion and love for God from out of the sweet and graceful relation of young Krishna with *gopis* (Cowherd girls) and Radha.<sup>v</sup>

### Meaning of Gaudiya Vaishnavism Movement

Before we understand what role played by Chaitanya and the time, we must peep into the meaning of the *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* movement which he initiated to bring about the revolutionary change in society. The word Gaudiya used in the sense of ‘Gauda’ Region of Bengal. But many historians refuted this logic. They considered Gaudiya not to refer Bengal but to ‘*Gauda Mandala*’, the sacred space of the area. But few other historians like Rosen J. Steven opined that the word Gaudiya derived from ‘Guda’ which imply the sweet relationship between *Radha and Krishna*.<sup>vi</sup>

### Social Political and Religious condition

Chaitanya played a significant role in establishing social equal and brotherhood through this his Sankirtan beyond the caste, creed and religion. There is no doubt he was not only a social reformer of the period also but also his idea of social equality and brotherhood was different from the other social reformer of the period. Chaitanya was born in 1486 at Nabadwip when the condition was very complex politically, socially and religiously. Politically contemporary literature of the period shows that the power of Delhi Sultanate under Lodi was at the verge of decline and *Mughals* were getting ready to rule India. After the decline of Sena dynasty in Bengal many invaders wanted to establish their foothold in Bengal but failed. The political condition of Bengal changed because *Bhaktiyar Khalji* invaded Nabadwip and captured political power from last rulers of Lakshaman Sena dynasty <sup>vii</sup>.The social condition of Bengal was also very complex before and during Chaitanya. Society was divided into various caste and class more particularly among Hindus. Religiously there was ideological conflict as the majority of the rulers were Muslims were the ruled were Hindus. Most of the Muslims rulers wanted to expand Islam in India. The Muhammadan ruler of Bengal was alien to race, religion and culture. The side effect of this was religious persecution of which let to decline of culture.<sup>viii</sup> The iconoclast Muslim rulers of Bengal vehemence against the Hindus subjects and their practice of idolatry.<sup>ix</sup> The religious practice and festivals of Hindu were intolerable to them. This it is clear that the political and religious condition of Bengal during Medieval age was insecure and trouble.<sup>x</sup>

### Role of Chaitanya and his Movement

The mission of Chaitanya was “to make even the lowliest god-minded. He wanted the people free from all social barriers and political bondage and racial doctrinal inhibitions. To him there was no difference between a Brahmin and low caste sweeper as both lived in god and god lived in both. According to him the

best and easiest way to kindle the later spark of the divine in man is to become god minded by taking the name of god in spirit of humility, devotion and selflessness.<sup>xi</sup>

In this connection we must note that Chaitanya did not accept the high position of position of Brahmins because of their lack of proper knowledge and devotion in one way and indulgence in vice in other way as reflected in the writings of Vrindaban Das:

“*Chandala Cahndala nahi jadi Krishna bale*

*Bipra nahi bipra jadi asatpathe chale*”<sup>xii</sup>

Its means if a *Chandala* (a low caste) adores Krishna he will no longer be treated as such, similarly a Brahmin (Priestly class) will no longer be treated as such if he indulges in all sort of vices.

It was Chaitnaya who transformed *Samkiratan* singing into a powerful mass medium.<sup>xiii</sup> It was not an easy task; he had to face many problems. He was treated by some ‘*Padus*’ or student who was probably criticized his way of life. Even he had to face social ostracism. Chaitanya was not aware of the fact that he had inaugurated a social movement yet he acted just like a social reformer.<sup>xiv</sup>

Chaitanys’s devotion was broad based and liberal. He was above the sectarian spirit of exclusiveness. The master declared that a person even if he recites the name of Krishna. Chaitnaya idea of *Samkirtan* brought feeling of togetherness among the people.

Chaitnaya was also above the principle of caste segregation and is said to have welcomed both Hindus and Muslims by giving them equal opportunity. A.N Chatterjee states that Chaitnaya had declared in public that he is endeavoring to build up a new society based on upon the principle of social equality.<sup>xv</sup> He very much successful in breaking down the *Brahamanical dominance*. He helped in the upliftment of lower class of society and devolved mutual understanding among the people.

Thus in a very short span of time Chaitanya’s idea became very popular among the people. This new faith of Chaitanya introduced a revolutionary change in the ideas and practice of the caste in Bengal. This new faith accepted adherents from all classes of people. The common platform was open to all high or low, rich and poor, Hindus and Muslims. Chaitnaya did not try openly to do caste systems, but he attempted to unto its evil effect directly, he respected the casteism of priesthood but did not hesitate to bury with his own hand the dead body of Haridas, a Muslim by birth.<sup>xvi</sup> The practice of deep rooted untouchability was discarded as evident from the story of *Kalidasa*, Uncle Raghunath Das who ate remnants of food eaten by a Sudra Vaishnava. This change attitude in the realm of ideas was truly revolutionary. It was for the first time in the literary history of Bengal, there was an attempt to glorify man instead of god, to deal with fact in place of fancy.<sup>xvii</sup>

It is not out of the place to mention here that Gaudiya Vaishnavism had its impact on people outside the order of Bengal. This new faith was accepted in Orissa in general. The faith also found a place in Assam towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century due to effort of Shankar Deva who met Chaitanya at Puri and received inspiration from him. Even in present time the impact of Chaitanya’s faith has been notice among the Americans as evident from the foundation of the International society for Krishna consciousness (ISKON). The founder of the ISKON Acharya Prabhupad also expressed it in the same way. He said that being inspired by the ideals and philosophy of Srikrishna and Chaitnyadev, they were trying to fulfill their spiritual goal and to inspire others to take the course.<sup>xviii</sup> Thus Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Chaitnaydev has

ever been influencing not only the life and activities of Bengalees but also having a wider appeal as evident from our study.

In this way Chaitanya Deva opened a new horizon of dynamic India by ensuring social equality and universal harmony. He came as torchbearer of knowledge in the world of ignorance and superstitions. He marched forward for the well being of the people. Under Chaitanya Deva's influence reformation came in the field of religion, society, politics and economy through the ages. The justification of Sri Chaitanya's life lies in his is renunciation. For all this he was a spiritual of one's deeds, sentiment and Society and also a social. Bipin Chandra Pal a renowned freedom fighter and scholar has a referred to two revolutions in India, one is the Pan -Islamic renaissance of the 16th century and other is the European renaissance.<sup>xix</sup> The influence of Sri Chaitanya in Bhakti movement was extremely great and for reaching. The ideals of Sri Chaitanya Deva reached the hearts of both commoners and revolutionaries in 19<sup>th</sup> century through Gaudiya Vaishnava literature which a sense of national feeling.

In conclusion it is to be notes that Sri Chaitanya's teachings to a great extent, saved humanity through harmony. His introduction of Sankirtana as a medium of mass worship or prayer was proved very unique. So far the Hindus had no sytem of common mass worship or prayer as Muslims and Christians have, Sankirtana is the mass-chanting of the name of Hari (Krishna) with music and accompaniment of drums and cymbals in which there is no distinction of castes and other social barriers. Mass worship takes place in all big temples. It is generally conducted by priests. The method practically minimized the caste conflicts and barrier which so long stood as a hindrance to the Hindu society and encouraged the low class's people to Islam where no caste distinction is. Thus as a result of Chaitanys's preaching caste distinction were relaxed and the submerged classes came to have a new sense of human dignity with realization that though despised by men of upper classes they would be loved by God if they could worship him with devotion. This was a great achievement of Gaudiya vaishnavism of mainly based on the cult of Bhakti and Sankirtan preached by Sri Chaitanya Deva. Thus Chaitnya played tremendous role in establishing peace and harmony among the people when the condition of India was very complex from each side and he made a country very gratified i.e. India.

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