

## *Speech delivered on the occasion of 521<sup>st</sup> birthday of Sree Chaitanya\**

*-Ajoy Roy*

A few minutes back we listened to a fascinating as well as charming devotional song infested with emotion that followed wonderful and spontaneous dancing with raising two hands pointing to the sky above. The chanting song was

*“Hare Krisna Hare Krisna, Krisna-Krisna Hare Hare,  
Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama-Rama, Hare Hare.”*

Dear devotees, let me begin with the words of Sree Chaitanya, ‘*Hare Krisna, Hare Krisna, Hare Hare,*’ that he introduced to the people of depressed community, so called *antajas*, low births and untouchables, and through this song I salute you. Good evening to you ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. President, the honourable chief guest justice Shaha and the learned speakers, I am really grateful to Sree Chaitanya Education & Cultural Society, the organizers of today’s function for asking me to be here with you this evening to pay tribute to one of the greatest sons of Medieval Bengal, nay for all time greats of Bangla, Sreemat Mahaprabhu Chaitnya Deva. I am particularly thankful to my junior colleague Mr. Govinda Chandra Mandal, Assistant Professor of Law, DU, the vice-president of *Sree Chaitanya Shiksa O Sanskriti Sangha* (Sree Chaitanya Education & Cultural Society), who first sought my permission if I could come to this function and address the gathering. I very politely declined the offer saying that I usually do not attend any religious function and more over I know very little of Sree Chaitnyadeva. But his insistence brought me here. Honestly speaking, I was greatly benefited and much enlightened to day compared to that of yesterday. May I humbly submit that I know nothing about Sree Chaitanyadeva, whom you so devoutly admire, follow his instructions and worship him as God incarnation (*abatara* of Lord Krisna) that I could say about him that you do not know. In fact, learned and Krisna devotee audience, you know much more than me. I should have sat with you instead of standing before you at the dais. Please excuse me for my ignorance.

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\* The speech was delivered at a discussion meeting on the life and teachings of Mahaprabhu Sree Chaitanya Deva held on March 9, 2007 on the occasion of celebration of 521<sup>st</sup> birthday of Sree Chaitanya. The meeting was organized by Sree Chaitanya Shiksa O Sabskriti Sangha, Bangladesh at ISKCON temple premise, Swamibug, Dhaka and presided over by Dr. Durgadas Bhattacharya, President of the Sangha with Retired Justice Gaur Gopal Shaha as chief guest. Other speakers were Mr. Momtauddin Ahmed, drama personality, Dr. Aravinda Shaha, Associate Professor, Islamic University, Kustia, Sreemat Charu Chandra Das Brhmachari, GS, ISKCON, Bangladesh, Sreemat Gopakrisna Das Brahamachari, Sreemat Navadwipa Dwija Gauranga Das Brahmachari (chairman, TMC, Yugal tila ISKCON Mandir, Sylhet). As I understand the word ISKCON stands for International Society for Krisna Conscience. The meeting was, I must say, had a large gathering of Chaitanya and Krisna devotees apart from common audience.

The announcer have introduced me as a scientist of natural sciences; I humbly submit that throughout my scientific career I spent my time in search of truth of nature and its laws to understand how mother nature conducts the business of the Universe. In this pursuit there is no place of God, not to speak of Sree Chaitanya and his doctrines. In that sense I am an agnostic (*Agneyabadi*) or a *nastika* (a non-believer). It might sound strange that a *nastika* standing before an audience mostly consisting of Krisna and Sree Chaitanya devotees. I feel very isolated and a fish out of water. This is not a very pleasant feeling. I admire your patience that even after my frank confession you agreed to listen to me. Please pardon me, if you can, if I utter anything about the great man that might hurt your feelings and sentiments, or if say any thing that is not true about him. Please correct me. I am sure you will bear me with my ignorance and indulge my shortcomings, as like true Krisna-Chaitanya devotees you will ‘see those utterances’ with your ‘eyes with touch of beauty of excuse’ (‘Ilgv my` i tPtL).

### On Chaitanya Deva

Where should I begin ? It is usually assumed that Sree Chaitanyadeva, popularly addressed as *Mahaprabhu* (the Great Lord) by his countless followers throughout the world, was born on the day of February 18, 1486 AD. <sup>(1,2)</sup> However, according to *Krishnadas* <sup>(3)</sup> he was born on the lunar phase of full moon in the month of Falguna (*Falguni Purnima*) in the year of 1407 Saka corresponding to 1485 AD <sup>(4)</sup>. At this time, the period of transition and uncertainty in history of Bengal, Saifuddin Feroz Shah (1486 –1489) was the Sultan of Bengal.

He died in 1533 AD at the age of only 47 years. Again there is some controversy because according to his contemporary biographers, Mahaprabhu left the world for good on 7<sup>th</sup> lunar day of full moon (*Sukla Saptami*), Sunday of Asara (July) in the year 1455 Saka, corresponding to 1533 AD. The historian Rakhaldas Bandopadhyaya wrongly quoted it as 1534 AD. The difference between AD and Sakabda is 78 years.

As you know, Chaitanya’s ancestors having family title Misra migrated from Orisa (to Srihatta (Sylhet). Misras were Brahmins belonging to Vedic sect. The great grand father of Chaitanya Madhukara Misra settled at village Baraganga in Sylhet. <sup>(5)</sup> But Misras were not happy in Sylhet because of the political uncertainty, fear of religious intolerance in Muslim ruled Sylhet and prevailing famine. Chaitanya’s father, Jagannath Misra and his father in law Nilambar Chakravorty migrated to Navadvip, a well-known centre of Sanskrit studies in Bengal. Chaitanya whose family name was Biswamvar was born in Navadvipa as second son of Jagannatha Misra and Sachi Devi. His elder brother senior to him by 11 years, Biswarupa left home at the age of 16 years. It is learnt that Jagannathj-Sachi couple had eight daughters in between Biswamvar and Biswearupa, all died at tender age. Biswamvar was nicknamed as Nimai, who was also affectionately called as Gauranga because of his fair complexion.

Sree Chaitanya flourished during the period 1486 –1533 AD. The period almost coincided with the Husain Sahi dynasty (1494 – 1538 = 44 years), though short lived,

was one of the glorious periods in the history of Bengal.\* The Period is only comparable to great Palas, who ruled Bengal more than 400 years, and to a lesser degree of extent Senas. Professor MR Tarafdar opined that socio-political life in this period has great significance and influence in the history of Bengal. Husain Shahi kings were known for their tolerance, liberalism and secular attitude to all section of his people. In fact with their direct patronage Bengali language and literature began to take its firm shape and style. Writers started writing in native language rather than classical Sanskrit. The new branch of literature came to be known as Gauriya Shahitya sprang out of which Vaisnava literature (*Vaisnava padavalis*) was the most significant component. During this period Bengali literature flourished along with the Bengali nation composed of Hindus and Moslems in its rudimentary form with its own distinctive language, literature and history began to emerge. It was the greatness and farsightedness of the Husain Shahi kings who appointed a large number of court officials from meritorious and capable Hindus, nor did they introduced *jijia tax* to the Hindus, that was in practice in the rest of Muslim ruled states in India including in the Sulatante of Delhi. Gauranga If Pala period is considered as the formative period of Bengali people gradually developing a local Bengali dialect through Charyapadas, and Bengal making a mark as a distinct separate unit with signs of blooming Bengali nation in future, the Husain Shahi period must be treated as maker of a new Bengal consisting of two major elements the Hindus and Muslims.

Chaitanya was fortunate that he developed his modern Bhakti cult in a liberal socio – political environment. But never the less Sree Chaitanya had to face the challenge of expanding Islam through its political and military strength on the one hand and devotional and emotional Sufism. Plus he had to fight orthodox Braministic caste-ridden Hinduism too. Often he was more challenged by orthodox Hinduism rather than Islam. It appeared, apart from minor clashes at Navadwip between Quazi's forces and the processionists of Chaitanya followers, when the Quazi banned the procession. Husain Shahi kings were never opposed or hostile to Chaitanya-ism. Was Sree Chaitanya known to Alauddin Husain Shah (1494 – 1519), the first king of the dynasty? According to Brindaban Das, <sup>(6)</sup> Sultan of Bengal knew about Chaitnaya's newly found *Bhakti Cult*, as Sultan is believed to have said to Keshav Khan,

Ô-Mj vK j B mŁ Ki "b KxZ@  
 wK wei t j \_vKb, th j q Zvi gb | |  
 KvRx ev tKvUvj ZvntK tKvbtv Rtb |  
 wKQyewj t j B Zvi j BgyRxeb | | 0

(Let him perform Kirtan with divine happiness,  
 or let him live isolated, whatever he wants.  
 If the Qazi, or any royal officer disturb him,  
 I will take his life.)

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\* Husain Shahi dynasty : (1) Ala uddin Husain Shah (1494 – 1519); (2) Nasir Uddin Nusrat Shah (1519-32); (3) Ala Uddin Firuz (1532); (4) Ghiyath Uddin Mahmud (1532 –38)

By any standard Sree Mahaprabhu Chaitanya are all time greats of not only of Bengal but also of India. Rabindranath, being overwhelmed with Chaitanya's love for humanity, particularly for the backward communities, once said, *"from among us, the Bengalis, Chaitanya was born. He did not live within a specified and limited framework, but he adopted humans as his own. He enlightened Bengal with his universal love for humanity. At that time the words like samya (equality), bhatribhav (brotherhood) etc yet to be coined. When each one was busy with his personal form of devotion and attached to narrow school of thought, how could he utter at that time, "I have been beaten, may be I would receive more, but so what, - why should I not love them?"* Tagore expressed his surprise admiring his courage and devotion to love for human beings.

### Cult of Sree Chaitanya : Vaisnaism

Chaitanya (1486 - 1533) did not originate Vaisnaism which constituted for many centuries before him an important element in the religious life of Bengal. The vaisnaism had its origin in one of the ways of being united with *Brahma* mentioned in Bhagbat Geeta, the *Bhakti* yoga. *Bhakti-marg*, i.e. the path of devotion is one, which is very popular among the common mass. God is treated as loving, personal and approachable, not as distant formless entity (*nirakara*). The path of devotion could also be traced in *Bhagavat Purana*, a most widely read religious books of the Hindus, which depicts the life of Lord Krishna. Sree Chaitanya picked the thread of Bhakti cult from these holy books which he read thoroughly during his education, and gave a new dimension to it and made it popular among the common mass, first within Navadvipa, then it spread like a wild fire crossing the boundaries of Bengal in all sides. However, we must admit that Vaisnaism or the Bhakti cult is not a new phenomenon in Bengal. Bengali Hindus from time immemorial had been practicing three forms of Hinduism, the traditional Brahmanistic cult based on Vedic scriptures, the Shaktism derived from materialism and Vaisnaism. It is historically recognized that Jayadeva (a court poet of Laksaman Sena) popularized Radha-Krishna cult through his charming poetic works like Gita-Govinda. The devout followers of Vaisnaism, the Sena kings definitely created an atmosphere and time for the arrival of Sree Chaitanay. The works of Chandidas on Krishna (his melodious *padavalis*) and those of Vidyapati of Mithila though had contributed in the development of Vaisnaism in Bengal, but it is needless to say that Chaitnya provided the real life, spirit, and shape of typical Bengali style of Viasnaism, which really touched the Bengali sentiments. His teachings are universal love for human beings whatever humble origin it might have, kindness to all rich or poor and love for the almighty as one's personal friend and lover. Chaitnya's message has been very rightly described by the words described by the organizers: Shiksa, Sanskriti, Seva, Shanti (শিক্ষা, সংস্কৃতি, সেবা, শান্তি)

### How he became Chaitanya

As we said, Chaitanya, born in a Brahmin family of Navadvipa, a centre of Sanskrit studies in Bengal, lost his father at infancy, had his education in traditional Sanskrit institutions. He began his career as a typical Sanskrit teacher and showed prominence. As is known after his accidental death of first wife Lame, he married Visnupriya whose love Chaitnaya cherished vary much as love of Radha towards Krishna.

It was learnt that Sree Chaitanya was initiated with Krishna Mantra by his spiritual guru great ascetic named Iswara Puri, perhaps at Gaya when Chaitnya was there performing Pitripurusha-Karma. At this time there was a sudden change in his life. A feeling of deep devotion towards Krishna appeared and apparently he became unconscious, the state was described by his followers as *bhava samadhi*. Then on, he became a devotional preacher of Krishna cult, as he understood. A new life was infused in him saturated with love for Krishna and characterized by emotional songs and dances and mystic trances which became the striking features of his life and behaviour. He was then joined by many including Nityananda, Adwaita. The musical worship *Hari-Krisna nama Kirtana* was publicly performed and popularized so much that it became a challenge to Brahministic orthodox style of worship of Hinduism. The Navadwip Brahmins were opposed to Chaitnay cult, which found expression of persecution on him in many forms including those adopted by Jagai-Madhai. In this context, even under severe persecution, he uttered when his persecutors attacked causing severe bodily injuries, “*Merechha Kalasir Kana, tai bole ki prem devo na.*” This reminds us the eternal message of Jesus. In making his new bhakti-marg, he received active cooperation from many important persons, who later on became his disciples, such as Rupa and Santan, Nityananda, Adwaita etc. and king of Orissa. After Chaitanya was initiated into monastic order by Keshava Bharati in 1510, He under took an extensive tour of India that covered southern, western parts including Mathura and Vrindavaban, the cradles Krishna Cult, being revitalized by his presence. These extensive tours had significance influence in forming his own cult and philosophy of a new Vianaism, which had its root in Bengal, later to be known as Chaitanya-ism. The essence of this philosophy is the Bhakti marg i.e only through devotion and love for Krishna one can have Nirvana, the union with the lord Krishna and one can feel the bliss of joy as one gets in the sexual union with her love partner. A total submission to lord Krishna through Katrina is the path to reunite with the Nirguna Brahman in the Kali era.

His mantra is the *Harinam* and *Krisnanam* : *Hare Krisna, Hare Krisna, Krisna-Krisna, Hare Hara; Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare*. It engulfs the essence of piety, full of joy and zest expressed by the devotion and faith. The devotion must be the total love and submission to the Lord Krisna- a submission that symbolizes a love-stricken maiden to her lover. His teaching is remarkably simple and may sometimes appear as childlike simplicity at the same time wonderfully idealistic. According to his concept of Bhaktism, all are equal to in God’s eyes. He was totally anti doctrinaire, and thus had no faith in Vedic rituals that could bring in Moksa. He used to say, “You want to love God ? It is quite simple, love your fellow beings.” This universal message found expression in Vivekananda in later days, who said, “*Jibe Prem Kare Jei Jan, Sei Jan Sebichhe Iswara.*”. To Chaitanya, Lord Krisna is the source, support, and end of the world; and devotion mixed with emotion is the *Bhakti* that was far more efficacious in obtaining spiritual peace than knowledge, meditation charity and even virtue.

Though Chaitanya’s new form of Bhakti cult is looked upon as closely associated with the history and tradition of Vaisnaism in general, Sree Chaitanya does not appear to have developed a theological or philosophical system for his followers, perhaps intentionally. His teachings however have been found expression in *Shiksha-Astaka*.

- May the recital of Name of Krishna be triumphant, this clears the mirror of the mind.
- extinguishes the great forest-fire of existence
- spreads the rays of the white lily of welfare
- maintains the life of learning which is like nectar
- swells the ocean of happiness
- enables the tasting of full bliss at every step
- baths the whole soul.

His form of devotion is now known as Ragabuga (iVwbbM). Love for Krishna with an intense emotion, is thus the fundamental principle of the faith of Chaitanya.

It is often asked how far Chaitanya-ism was influenced by Islam. Had he had a meaningful interaction with Islamic Pandits or Sufis. The records say that he had almost no contact with Islam. Although he was believed to have taken part in religious debates with many Hindu and Buddhist Pundits, he had not encountered any Alem or Sufi. But even then many suggested that his cult have some similarity with some aspects of Islam. His preaching of equality to human beings, it is alleged is an indication of Islamic influence. It may be said that Chaitanya's cult though brought Brahmins, learned men, socially highly placed men, rich and poor and other castes including untouchable, even Muslims, Sree Chaitanya did not deliberately attacked casteism nor he aimed its elimination. He only preached that to the eye of Krishna every one is equal, and every one has the right to Krishna sankirtan, the way to unite with Krishna.

It is sometimes pointed out that Hal (nVj) (the ascetic state of mind), Jhikar (iRiKi) (repeated utterance of the name of Allah) and sima (iMgV) (gatherings of devotees, especially the Sufis for musical performance) bear similarity with dasa (Kv), Krisnanama (KObVg) and Kirtana (KIZB) practiced by the Chaitanya followers. I consider these apparent similarity is superfluous- philosophically the two schools differ considerably. Only similarity that is of significance is the submission to almighty Allah in Sufism and total submission to Lord Krishna in all forms of Vaisnaism. Another intriguing question is asked what was the relation between Chaitanya's authority and the political power of Husain Shahi Kings. Chaitanya biographers of later periods in order to highlight the Chaitanya's credibility as a preacher of his cult, said that he brought many Muslim devotees to his Bhakti cult. If it had reached an alarming position, surely, he would have faced the challenge of the Islamic nobility and Moulanas. It is rather opined that Husain Shahi rulers took a softer attitude towards Chaitanya-ism. On the other hand Husen Shahi rulers took a stern attitude against orthodox Brahminism led Hinduism. On the part of Chaitanya, he also did not take a hostile attitude towards Islam in general and the Muslim political power. Although it must be said that the later Vaisnaism took rather more militant view against Islam and many of the works of later Vaisnaism such as of Krisnadas Kabiraj, Jayananda and Ishana Nagara <sup>(3, 5, 7)</sup> criticized Islam and its many doctrines and practices. As for example, Ishana Nagara says, "The *Shastra* of the Muslims is against reason. Those who follow that *Shastra* are known as the *yavanas* .

The omnipresent Supreme Being is without any beginning. His body is full of six virtues, pure and *satvamaya* (or possessing the quality of goodness). The study of the *shastra* which regards Him as mild and shapeless, leads to the increase of *maya* (illusion) and *moha* (delusion).”

### Post Chaitanya Vaisnavism.

The post chaitanya vaisnavism developed in two lines one following school of Brindavana and the other one at Navadvipa School. Six Goswamis of Brindavana often claimed that at the instructions of their Guru Sree Chaitanya they systematized the doctrines and dogmas of Vaisnavism. Their monumental works in Sanskrit embody the elaborate philosophy, theology and ethics of the Krishna cult, with which the Bengal Vaisnavas were acquainted not before the beginning of the seventeenth century.

On the other hand Navadvipa school of vaisnavism developed centering the life and works of Chaitanya in Navadvipa, they witnessed. Their theology and *Rasa-Shastra* ( *īmkv̄ṛṇ* ) is a much later development. Chaitanya was a living reality to his Navadvipa followers, was regarded as *Parama Tatta* ( *ḥig ZĒḥ* ) or the ultimate reality and as such the object of direct worship. To the followers of Chaitanya he is one of the avatars of Visnu and came to the world to save the mass from the evil. Brindavana Das gave a long list of Avatars: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nṛsiṃha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Hanuṃtara, Budha, Kalki, Vyasa, Krishna, and Chaitanya.

Followers of Chaitanya consider life of Chaitanya at Navadvipa as a counter part of Krishna's at Brindavana. Many say that *radha bhava* of Chaitanya is the manifestation of the incarnation of both Radha and Krishna in Sree Chaitanya of fifteenth century.

The greatest contribution of Sree Chaitanya was that he saved the Hinduism from its extinction at least from Bengal through his newfound *Bhaktibad*. The challenge of disarray and chaos of Hinduism prevailing at that time in Bengal, created on the one hand by the strict code of Brahminism and casteism, and on the other all embracing power of Islam with all its attractive dogma of equality, supported by royal power could not be met with traditional Hinduism. The neo vaisnava movement led by Sree Chaitanya cut across the barriers of casteism and ritualistic stricken Hinduism and reached to the common mass irrespective of their caste origin. Vaisnavism thus threw a direct challenge to Islam at that time and called back the fleeing Hindus to its own fold. Hindus found a welcoming platform in neo *Vaisnavism* where all from *Brahmins* to *Sudras* could meet and worship together lord Krishna through devotional songs. The greatness of Sree Chaitanyadeva lies in that even though he wrote not a single line in Bengali, he was the pivotal character in creating rich Vaisnava literature that helped in shaping the future Bengali language and literature. Surely I adore this aspect of his greatness, but surely I have no faith in the divinity and spiritual aspect of his Bhaktism. I hope that you will excuse me for this, if I hurt your feelings.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for giving me a patient hearing so long.

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