Chapter II

Background of Bengal Vaiśṇavism: For a discernible history of an evolving theistic consciousness.

Introduction:

For an eventual justification of the extreme ontological height of divine love as embodied in Bengal Vaiśṇavism aptly described as a Bhakti-religion as having an underpinning bhakti-theory, this chapter tackles the critic’s contention that, bhakti never had been a part of a predominant religious consciousness characterised as devotional attitude in theism¹. This not only does discredit to the entire reasons behind the evolution of the distinctive spiritual consciousness associated with theistic Vedānta, but, following it, such an uncharitable contention is also designed to explain away Caitanyism as a religious cult not based on the true spirit of Vedānta which the critic thinks to be an exclusive domain of Advaita. The present chapter seeks to settle these issues.

The critic argues that monism and theism, and their corresponding bearings on bhakti, karma and jñāna are never to be understood to be mutually contradictory concepts as the western indologists think. That is, it is argued that, there is no discernible history of bhakti, at least as a predominant devotional attitude. The critic in holding this opinion is impelled by his advaita bias. While this may have some amount of truth, in as much as Vaiśṇavism had its precursor movement in the Bhāgavatism of the 6th and 5th century B.C.² (with Jainism and Buddhism), it can’t be denied that, bhakti as one knows today is symptomatic of theistic religious attitude, consciousness and belief system engendering the

medieval Bhakti Movement of which Gaudiya Vaishnavism is one of the manifestations. At the same time, on the plane of religious philosophy, the concept of bhakti is no more a mere devotional worship but as sadhya-bhakti or the fifth and highest pañcamapurusārtha, it is to be achieved as the summum bonum of human life. In addition to its being as the sādhana, when interpreted to be sadhya-bhakti, it is its own end. Its unique character consists in being interpreted as a self-engrossing dynamic amorous aesthetic sentiment of divine love (prema-bhakti). As it will become evident in the chapter IV, the “Ontology of Divine Love”, such an uncommon love believed to be the fifth puruṣārtha in no way comes into conflict with the view that, the Bhagavad is the Supreme Being.

Caitanya and his followers were not the first ones who conceived God in terms of love or a love-oriented metaphysics. The concept of love here is being spoken of from the context of bhakti. But, it was not them who for the first occasion treated the latter as sādhana as well as sādhyā. Yet, except in Caitanya’s religious philosophy, in all of them, the treatment of bhakti as a sādhyā is more or less only as an eulogy, rather than it’s being at the centre of a thoroughgoing ontology as it is the case for Bengal Vaishnavism. It is a logical corollary of conceiving sādhyā-bhakti as the pañcamapurusārtha, thereby, raising it to a higher spiritual plane, even going beyond mokṣa. The wholesome application of the aesthetics of the Alaṅkāra Śāstra (Indian Aesthetics) is a consequence of such a non-cognitive view of bhakti conceived in terms of being a dynamic divine amour.

In none of the other theistic traditions, the concept of bhakti had received the level of amorous aesthetic-emotionalism and ontological height as it is in the school under consideration. It is only in this sect that, an entire religion is created out of bhakti which paves the ground for a well developed bhakti-theory mainly from the perspective of aesthetics. This justifies us in treating bhakti-rasa in terms of its philosophical significance. It eternally remains phenomenologically objectified in the inter-subjective aesthetico-amorous experience of the Bhagavat and His parikaras (His eternal associates) in the transcendental histrionics of
nitya-līlā. But, while admitting that, the concepts of Bhakti-religion and Bhakti-
theory are only to be found in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, the critic has attempted to de-
authenticate it by taking it as an upstart religious cult that has no link to the
orthodox tradition of Vedānta. This is being done by attempting to showing that,
there is no discernible history of bhakti as a distinct stream of evolving theistic
religious consciousness. This makes the critic to maintain the view that, bhakti,
karma and jñāna are distinguishable but inseparable aspects of jnana
predominant integral process of sādhana leading to the realisation of the non-
dual Brahman as the only viable truth of Vedānta proper which is tantamount to
saying that, the so-called theistic schools of Vedānta are not proper Vedānta but,
Advaita and Advaita alone. Such a contention is not warranted by the pluralistic
nature of Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions. This is not to deny the fact
that, there were definitely stronger and powerful thoughts amongst them
overshadowing the weaker and smaller ones. But, nevertheless, theistic world
view and its devotional attitude definitely were emerging trends of religio-
philosophical undercurrents that had arose along with Jainism and Buddhism as
strong reactions to certain religious practices of brāhmanical religious order.³ This
is evident from the fact that, debates amongst the Vedāntins existed and still
continues so as to find out what constitutes the predominant sādhana amongst
the above three sādhanas.

Had there never been an issue of a claimed predominant sādhana, such a
long history of debate would not have been in existence as it is indicated by the
Gītā itself. This problem cannot be set aside by either blaming the western
indologists for making an artificial segregation amongst the three sādhanas or by
downgrading theistic Vedānta as pseudo-Vedānta. That, there existed attempts
to make a particular sādhana a primary path is not to reject the possibility that,

³ It is now a well known fact that, Jainism, Buddhism & Bhāgavatism arose as reactions to the
mechanical and highly gross ritualistic practices of the 6th to 5th centuries B.C. But the fact that, the
founders of these religions within the Brāhmanical religion were non-Brāhmīns appears to provide
us with certain clues to some of the reasons behind their rise. There are references in the Rg Veda
about the oppositions to rituals by some sections of the Kṣatriya caste. Though, this requires
further investigation, this contention is a plausible one. See Sircar, D.C., Religious Life in Ancient
they can be parts of an integral process of sādhana. Still, what decides in the ultimate analysis as to what should be the main or exclusive religio-ethical path is the particular metaphysical stand a school adopts. In this respect, Advaita and Acintyabhedābheda are the two opposite metaphysical stands which uphold jñāna and bhakti in their mutual exclusions when it comes to the question of the only means of highest spiritual attainment (whose nature would be radically different as it is interpreted by each of the system respectively).

In the light of what have been so far stated, this chapter aims at clearing certain misconceptions about bhakti in general and the one represented in the medieval Bhakti Movement in particular. It is assumed here that, the contemporary academic philosophers of India lack whole hearted interest and sympathy which would cause them to undertake serious philosophical enquiries into these areas.

In this respect mention may be made of Krishna Sharma who speaks about western indologists who took the three sādhanas as antagonistic to one another. While admitting that, generally speaking there may not be absolute antagonism, it is also to be accepted that, theistic systems give a more preference to the path of devotion, where as Pūrva Mīmāṃsā emphasise karma in the ritualistic sense. The position of the Gītā’s, though, is still subject to interpretation represents the spirit of grand synthesis between the three paths. Which path is the sole means leading to mokṣa is a matter of opinion?

Most of the scholars of classical or the contemporary times have jñāna bias. This as stated before, results in the neglect of theistic philosophies in general

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and Caitanya's counterpart in particular. The idea of jñāna karma samuccaya (synthesis of knowledge and action) recommended by bhedābheda and Acintyabhedābheda for different reasons. In the case of the former bhakti and karma are considered to be sub-servient to jñāna, in Bengal Vaishnavism, bhakti is to be completely devoid of jñāna and karma in their traditional forms. Whereas in contrast to Advaita, in Gauḍīya Vaishnavism right from the stage of sādhana-bhakti up to the extreme theological and metaphysical heights of sādhya bhakti, the character of an amorous and authentic devotional emotionalism is observable.

The extreme form of devotional emotionalism characterised by a constitutive aesthetics and its alleged antagonism to jñāna or cognitive method is quite understandable. This may not warrant any critic to not to be aware of the long checkered history of theistic devotional consciousness culminating in the bhakti-rasa of Caitanya. Therefore, while subscribing to the reality of the varied contextual socio-historical embodiments during the course of the continuous growth and developments of an identifiable theistic attitude of bhakti, in as much as it was one of its manifestations, Bhakti-religion of Caitanya was not a historically discontinuous religio-philosophical freak. The soundness of its theoretical presuppositions is altogether a different matter.

In the light of what have been discussed above, this chapter shall trace in brief the evolution of bhakti via its precursor devotional concepts as embodied in ancient movement like Bhāgavatism during the 6th and 5th century B.C. In order to accomplish the above task this chapter deals with the "Background of the Emergence of Gauḍīya Vaishnavism".

As it is already stated before, first of all the purpose here is to clear the doubt about the existence of a discernible history of bhakti. Secondly, it is also to reiterate the rootedness of the school as one of the sub-schools of theistic

7 Srinivasachari, P.N., The Philosophy of Visistadvaita, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1978, p. 357. Ramanuja also subscribes to the view of the need for synthesising karma kānda and jñāna, ibid, pp. 357-358.
Vedānta. By doing that, Gauḍīya Vaishnavism exemplifies the democratic, multiple or alternative realisability of the Vedāntic truth. Given the vastness and pluralistic nature of the Indian society, it would be a too idealistic and homogenising to be reductionist, and thereby resulting in the socially harmful denial of the dissenting ideations — a creative chance to be one of the rivulets of the dynamic history of the multi-cultural heritage of the nation. The endlessly dynamic and joyous expressions of the creative urge of the Divine of Caitanya's neo-Vaiṣṇavism find its practical in the further rise of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism.

The Historical Background of the Emergence of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism:

It may not be farfetched to say that, in addition to the first seed of devotion (bhakti) which was shown in the Rg Veda\(^8\); a much more vigorous socio-culturally and spiritually significant turning point of India's religio-philosophical tradition took place during the 6\(^{th}\) and 5\(^{th}\) centuries B.C. In his article "Evolution of Religio-philosophic culture in India"\(^9\) R.C. Majumdar refers to this historical episode. He writes about six broader historical periods during which successive religio-philosophic movements had gradually evolved. Theistic ideas were gradually taking shape during these periods. We shall refer only to the three periods of (1) "The Age of Revolt" (C. 600 B.C. to A.D. 300), (2) "The Paurāṇic Age" (C. A.D. 300-1200) and (3) "The Muslim period" (C. A.D. 1200-1757). The historical and social causations behind the rise of these revolutionary changes are well known. The task in hand is only to see where in them existed direct or indirect germinal ideas of devotion signifying a distinct religio-philosophical consciousness. The denial by the critic of any such possibility denigrates the ontological or existential values ascribed to prema-bhakti or Bhagavad-prīti which had come to pre-occupy as the mission of a life-time of the followers of Caitanya.

\(^8\) Majumdar, A.K., Bhakti Renaissance, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1979, p. 2. “Longing prayers are said to touch Indra who is longing just as a wife with desires gets her husband” Rg .1.62.22. This idea is exemplified in another hymn which says: "All my hymns in unison praise Indra: as wives embrace their husbands so do my thoughts embrace Indra the divine bestower of gifts. For the sake of a favour they cling to the liberal God (Indra) as wives do their lords, (as a woman) does her handsome lover”, Rg X. 43.1, and Br. Up. 4.5.6.

The rejection of a discernible history of bhakti removes the ground from the entire edifice of Bengal Vaiśṇavism and its offshoot Manipuri Vaiśṇavism\(^{10}\).

**The Age of Revolt (C. 600 B.C. – A.D. 300):**

The “Age of Revolt” had witnessed the evolution of three significant changes in the cultural and religio-philosophical heritage of India. They were the three major movements of Jainism, Buddhism and Bhāgavatism under the leaderships of Mahāvira (C. 497-467 B.C.), Gautama Buddha (C. 532-487 B.C.) and Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa\(^{11}\) respectively. The main underlying characters of religio-philosophical reformative tendencies observable in the movements spearheaded by them are summed up by Majumdar as follows:

1. “Belief in a personal God to be worshipped with devotion (bhakti), rather than an impersonal Absolute (Brahman) to be realised through meditation and knowledge (jñāna). 2. Broad practical view of everyday life, laying stress on morality and discounting the metaphysical discussions about God and Soul. Emphasis is layed on the control of will and emotion, and the right action of a man is regarded as the only means to his salvation. 3. A rational interpretation of all the problems of human life and an attempt to solve them by a co-ordinated system based on analytical reasoning. 4. Aversion to mechanical sacrificial performances as detailed in the Brahmanas and regard for the sanctity of animal life”.

The first and fourth features are more pertinent to the issue being discussed. Except the disagreement on whether the Absolute is personal or impersonal, both theistic Vedānta and non-theistic (Advaita) Vedānta, and the two heterodox systems share the common ground in rejecting the efficacy and

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\(^{10}\) This is because; the authority of a school of Vedanta is based on the prasthānatraya doctrine. This in turn gives authenticity to a school in addition to its own logical consistencies. Manipuri Vaiśṇavism during the King’s time used to be a state religion. Till today it is the main religion of the state.

\(^{11}\) His historicity is still controversial. [http://www.epicindia.com/magazine/Culture/the-lost-city-of-dwarka](http://www.epicindia.com/magazine/Culture/the-lost-city-of-dwarka). The excavation process was started under the aegis of ASI, the Government of India in the 80s. It was repeated very recently. Also see the reports of The Morien Institute, Marine Archeology-New Underwater Discoveries, July-December 2007.
appropriateness of rites and rituals, and gross and unsavoury widespread practice
of animal sacrifice as championed by the Pūrva Mīmāṁsakas. Though, the
upholders of monism accept devotion as one of the necessary components of
sādhana, since, at the end, what prevailed as the only means to mokṣa were
meditation and knowledge. Thus, the worship of a personal God in a predominant
spirit of devotion was a reaction to exclusive and aristocratic spiritual aspirations
whose truth content and means towards it being metaphysically abstract
requiring intellectual rigor were beyond the comprehension of common men.

The concept of bhakti in its rudimentary form which we are familiar with
today may not be entirely unrelated to similar concepts of Jainism and Buddhism.
The concept of non-violence (ahīṃsā) (though not unknown to the ancient Vedic
society, as it should be in almost all the culturally advanced societies) which was
adopted as the main religio-ethical path along with its associated ideal values and
the idea of compassion (karuṇa) of these two heterodox systems, somehow,
might have had its impact on the gradual evolutions of the more matured notion
of bhakti. God being not admitted in these systems, the idea of worship may not
be applicable to them if it is taken in the theistic sense. The Jainas, as a matter of
principle, based on its godless metaphysics, did not accept the concept of grace.
In the case of Buddhism, it is possible that, bhakti or devotional worship existed in
the Mahāyāna sect where the Buddha came to be elevated to the level of a deity.

In spite of the fact that, there is dissociation of the theistic sense of
worship from the heterodox concept of non-violence, still love and truth are its
positive nature. Hence, the idea of compassion as one of the cognates of love, in
some way may be relatable to similar connotations of bhakti. Thus, with the rise
of theism where the absolute is conceived in personal term, devotional worship,
piety and prayer might have developed as its logical corollary. Still, Krishna
Sharma is of the contention that the mutually contrasted concepts of monism,
dualism, theism and atheism (in the sense of impersonal absolute) are
unwarranted alien ideas introduced into the Indian tradition by the western
ideologists. His intention behind this view is to delegitimise a discernible history
of bhakti. His concession given to Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism that, Bhakti-religion and Bhakti-theory are its unique contributions towards the country’s religio-cultural heritage, while at the same time debunking a discernible history of bhakti, only does more disservice to the very historical basis of the development of bhakti evolved in its highest emotive form in the system. The following section would show that this view is not true as per the available historical fact as they are brought out many scholars in the field.\(^{12}\)

According to the experts who had worked in the field, the earliest reference to the idea of worship was made in relation to God Rudra in the Ṛg Veda.\(^{13}\) The concept of God was further evolved into God Śiva in the Śālarudriyā\(^{14}\), where he is described as ‘malevolent and benevolent God’. Such an idea of God surely would have evoked religious feelings of worship and prayer, which later on might have transformed through centuries of enculturation into a matured sense of sublime sentiment of devotion or religious piety. It is quite possible that, the first beginning of a theistic system is evident when Svetāsvatara Upaniṣad identifies impersonal Brahman with God Rudra-Śiva.

The depiction of Rudra-Śiva as the only God — ‘the great soul whose work in the universe — (and as one who) dwells in the heart of man’\(^{15}\). Some aspects of the religious attitude of theism are to be found in the description of God as one who is ‘knowable by faith, love, or the pure heart. Having known (Him) one attains eternal peace’\(^{16}\). These and many evidences would lend support to this view. The religious consciousness which emerged from these examples of theism paved the way for the further evolution of Bhāgavatism during the 6\(^{th}\) century B.C.

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\(^{16}\) Ibid.
The Evolution of Bhāgavatism:

In the religion of Bhāgavatism, we see transformation from the intellectual, contemplative and mystic-intuitive worship (at least in some later Upaniṣads) of the Absolute Brahman to that of the devotional worship of personal God 'whom an average man can love and comprehend'\(^1\). Here, one finds the origination or crystallisation of monotheism. The re-conception of an impersonal Absolute Reality in terms of personal deity was the starting point of revolutionary changes of the earlier intuitive metaphysical abstractions. It may be considered as the laying of the seed of egalitarian social outlook. It acts as the opening of the flood-gate of an erstwhile inaccessible spiritual realm to the ordinary folks. The vernacularised socio-cultural embodiment of the medieval Bhakti Movement on the plane of the lower strata of society is one such legacy inherited right from the time of the above revolutionary changes. Therefore, while admitting the inevitable contextual variations, all these reveal that, a theistic trend of devotionalism was in the process of evolution till it crystallises in the form of the contemporary Vaiṣṇavism. That, there were definite historical religio-philosophic dialectical movement is evident from what is stated below.

The conflict between the upholders of personal and impersonal Absolute reality was indicated by the ongoing controversies between the believers of difference (bheda) and non-difference (abheda). As some kind of downgrading, the followers of the later concept make a distinction between aparāvidya (lower knowledge) and parāvidya (higher knowledge). This was being done by making a qualitative distinction between bheda sruti and abheda sruti. The distinction between Śruti and Smṛti is also made accordingly. All these were designed as conceptual structural frame work, so as to establish the thesis of non-dualism which as a reductionist ontology does violence to the pluralistic nature of India’s cultural heritage.

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\(^1\) Ibid., p. 36.
Rāmānuja and following him other theistic religious thinkers did not subscribe to the above demarcation. They had considered all the available scriptural texts as equally important. Notwithstanding, the logical merits or demerits of the respective philosophical presuppositions of the theistic Vedānta and non-theistic Vedānta (Advaita Vedānta), what is to be noted here is the reality of an emerging voice of relegio-philosophic dissent which was a reaction to an impersonal thesis. Some form of antagonism between cognitive religio-ethical modal (jñāna) and non-cognitive or emotive counterpart (bhakti) cannot be therefore, avoided. Because, under the cognitive modal of jñāna, though, the emotive modal of bhakti was still employed as an auxiliary means at the initial stage, it has no continued application right upto the last stage of salvation. In this respect Madhusūdana Sarasvatī\textsuperscript{18} was an exception amongst the non-dualists. But, being a confirmed and celebrated Advaitin, his views of bhakti is to be accepted with the required qualification. It is an acknowledgement of the characteristic rise of the theism of Bhāgavatism during the historical period under consideration that Majumdar says "These three religious movements were not isolated events, (and) these were (also) similar to other movements and all these were the products of the age."\textsuperscript{19}

As a forerunner of the medieval Vaiṣṇavism or the Bhakti Movement, the Bhāgavata religion of the 6\textsuperscript{th} Century B.C. substituted the impersonal Brahman by God-Hari. The traditional forms of worship viz., yajña and tapasya (austerities) were conceived as inefficacious for the attainment of Hari, the God of gods. In addition to these changes, denunciation of the rampant ritualistic practice of sacrificing animals and the pursuit of abstract knowledge (jñāna) of the Absolute Being ‘... constituted a fundamental break from the accepted creeds and beliefs\textsuperscript{20} of the era. What is relevant for a subsequent treatment of the ontology

\textsuperscript{18} Madhusūdana Sarasvatī wrote his less known work: Bhagavadbhaktirasāyana. See R.B. Patankar’s article: Madhusūdana Sarasvatī’s Śrī Bhagavad-Bhaktirasayana in India’s Intellectual Traditions, edited by DAYA KRISHNA, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, first published 1987, this revised and enlarged edition 2003, pp. 170-190.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{20} Ch. Up., 6-17.
of divine love of the thesis is the emergence of the identification of the Godhead Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva of the Yādava-Vṛṣṇi-Sātvata clan\textsuperscript{21} with the Rg-Veda Viṣṇu. This historic-religio-philosophic event is necessary for reconstructing the theoretical assumptions of conceiving bhakti as its own end.

The above identification or change had occurred during the reformatory period of 400-200 B.C.\textsuperscript{22} This epoch exhibited five chief landmark developments in the cultural history of India. Out of these five, the third and the fourth may be mentioned in the light of the requirements of this chapter. They were winning over the Bhāgavata sect for the orthodox faith by the identification of Kṛṣṇa with the Vedic God Viṣṇu and (the) popularisation of the remodelled religion and philosophy by means of epic like the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata”. The Bhāgavata religion was finally transformed into a great religion of the orthodox Hindus.

The Bhāgavata religion, thus grew imbiping within it the pastoral and amorous story of Kṛṣṇa legend as the pastime of a cowherd boy (Gopa) which was perhaps, added in the early century of Christian era.\textsuperscript{23} But, Rādhā’s story was added only at a later date and this name was not used as referring to the chief Gopī of the Rāsapaṇcadhyāy of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Still, as it is very popularly done by the modern scholars in the matters of faith in Her divinity, that, the romantic and theologicopastoral narratives relating to dalliance with Kṛṣṇa as aesthetically portrayed in the nitya-līlā as it became the central focus of the bhakti-religion of the neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal and Manipur, must not be explained away as a subsequent interpolation to sub-serve sectarian belief. In the subject matters of religious philosophy what is significant is that, ultimately it is a case of faith. That, one seeks some plausible modal of rational justification is an altogether different issue. Her non-reference in the pre-medieval theological narratives of the Bhāgavata religion centered on the Viṣṇu or Narāyana-tattva

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
must not be the ground for discrediting the erotic-theological account of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. One may question only the aspects of theoretical self-consistency of such a faith and not in terms of its absence in the texts of the remote past.

No paraṁpara²⁴ oriented religious thought like Vedānta cannot be held as a sacrosanct and “once for all” blueprint already pre-determined in every detail in respect of its ideas and doctrines by some single system building mastermind in some ancient past so as to preclude any possible room for future creative deviation as it is done by the scholars of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. The pluralistic religio-philosophic tradition of India is so diverse and comprehensive that, no matter how much logico-theoretical and ethical weaknesses a particular belief system has, it is democratic enough to accommodate such a system. This view sets the background for a continued discussion on the subsequent rise of Vaiṣṇavism during the medieval time.

The Rise of Vaiṣṇavism in the Paurāṇic Age (C. AD 300-1200):

As the continuation of the older Bhāgavatism (Bhāgavata religion)²⁵ the theistic religion became organised and thus Vaiṣṇavism arose to be one of the chief faiths of the Paurāṇic age. The social vacuum provided by the downfall of Jainism and Buddhism²⁶ was somehow filled up by the synthetic religion in the form of Vaiṣṇavism. It was a synthetic religion in the sense that, it was reconciliation between, the Vedic faiths and sectarian ideas. Vaiṣṇavism in fact, was only one of the many prevailing sectarian cults like Śāktaism and Śaivism etc. According to Majumdar, faiths, practices and doctrines of Vaiṣṇavism and other sects were systematised link with the old Grha-Sūtras describing Vedic rituals and sacrifices. The Purāṇas were parable and story oriented narratives designed to

²⁴ Belief in the successive perpetuation of the Indian religious and philosophical traditions – especially in the school of Vedānta, just as Kṛṣṇa says: evam paraṁpara prāptam rāja ṛṣiyoh viduh, sā kaleyena yogah proktaḥ purātanaḥ, Gītā, 4.2.
²⁵ Sundaram, P.K., Advaita and Other Systems, University of Madras, General Editor: Dr. S. Balasubramaniam, 1981, p. 106-108, Śaṅkara in the introductory chapter of his Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya, 1.1.1, criticises Bhāgavata Dharmā along with all the other schools as his pūrvapakṣa. This also shows that, it was definitely a popular religion during his time.
inspire and attract the popular or ordinary cross sections of the society. To that extent, it is different from the more esoteric and subtle speculative philosophical debates present the theology of the new sect with the old philosophical and cosmological beliefs in the background.27

There are two most important developments of Vaiśnavism during the period under review. The first is the growth of Pañcarātra Sarhītās (108 in number, A.D. 600-800)28 which give a complete exposition of the faith, beliefs, and practices of the movements, secondly the Gopāla-Kṛṣṇa saga finds evolved into the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa cult. This aspect of the developments is historico-culturally significant, because, few centuries after, the celebrated work of Jayadeva – the Gita Govinda and other erotic-theologically charged Vaiśnava folk musical literatures like Padāvalis well flourished in the eastern India comprising Orissa, Bihar and Bengal. Such a socio-cultural landscape where the popular religious atmosphere is reverberating with amorous-aesthetic imaginations with the Gopi-Kṛṣṇa legend was quite fertile and conducive source of inspiration for the Gauḍīya scholars. The wide spread Tāntric-sexual practices in the entire stretch of the northern, western and eastern regions of India right from Kashmir (and Nepal), Gujarat, Orissa, Bihar and Bengal might have created the convenient sub-soil for the literal and symbolic application of sexual elements.

That, the birth of a definite theistic consciousness was taking place is evident from an inter-relative study of Vaiśnava Purāṇas. There is a difference in the ways in which the story of Kṛṣṇa is depicted in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, the Harivaṁśa and the Bhāgavata. While in the first two Purāṇas His story as a cowherd boy and youthful exploits are described, in the last Purāṇa, heralding a

27 Ibid.
28 Pañcarātra Sarhītās and Early Vaiśnava Theology, A Translation and Critical Notes from Chapters on the Theology in the Ahirbudhnya Sarhītā, by Mitsunori Matsubara, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, First Edition Delhi, 1994. This book gives a detail exposition of topics relating to the relationship between Pañcarātra tradition and the Bhāgavatas, monotheism, personal and impersonal expects of Brahman, and discourse on the Brahman of the six qualities (Bhagavān) and the causation of the world etc, from the Supreme Being and the extant as well as its rise.
turning point or as a mark of deepening religious attitude in the history of Vaiṣṇavism both his cowherd life and amorous deliance with the Gopīs in all their details are picturesquely described. Along the time of this departure from the morally sterile earlier religious philosophies, bhakti in these Purāṇas is thus portrayed through the work. Majumdar states — “The fervent emotionalism which characterizes medieval Vaiṣṇavism has its origin in this really great work.”

In addition to the fact that, the widespread and increasingly popular scenario of devotionalism, more or less was a counter reaction to the uncompromisingly reductionist advaitism of Śaṅkara, the then political and social atmosphere were compelling the ordinary people to take recourse to seeking refuge in the sectarian but creative religious experimentation. The medieval Bhakti Movement, perhaps, was such socio-religious response to the political chaos of the era. This religious mass movement having its own socio-cultural implications most probably started from south India during the 10th century A.D.

Southern Vaiṣṇavism (A.D. 500-A.D. 1100):

It is generally believed that, the first possible inception of the medieval Bhakti Movement took place in south India. There is theory which proposes that, the migration of a particular group of Yādava clan to the Andhra region paved as the bridge for the continuity of older Bhāgavatism from the North to the South. Given that, this theory is not viable or unsupported by evidence, during the period; the south Indian religious skyline was already filled with the pure spiritual fervor reverberating with the pure devotional songs of the sixty-four Śaiva Nāyanmārs and the Vaiṣṇava Ālwārs. They were singing saints belonging to the different cross section of the society comprising kings, woman and coblar etc. This socio cultural profile of the said singing saints can’t be but, the sign of the egalitarian nature of Bhakti Movement. Such a pan-class expression of devotion based spiritual communion is a mark of inclusiveness of the movement. The tales of their mystic religious experiences and purity of their heartfelt devotional

outpourings were captivating the popular religious imaginations of the common folk. Their use of vernacular language had thrown open an entire floodgate of spiritual treasure to them.

The entire wealth of spiritual knowledge earlier confined only to the select few mainly the elitist Brāhmin scholars were then, made available in the medium of the local language they were familiar with Kulaśekhara Ālwār who was a king and Andāl a woman were well known saints. The task of actual philosophical reconstruction of south Indian Vaiṣṇavism began with Rāmānuja’s grandfather Nāthmuni (A.D. 1010 or 1011). The soul stirring and lyrical devotional outpourings of the twelve Ālwārs30 (A.D. 500-900) marked by purely emotional and deeper spiritual conviction inspired and gave impetus to intellectual conviction to a new breed of philosophically trained scholars who were themselves men of deep spiritual tendencies. Thus, the first edifice of theistic Vedānta or Vaiṣṇava philosophy as an alternative or a more existentially wholesome version of Vedānta was established by Yamunācārya based on the praśthānatrya doctrine. Rāmānuja, who as his student made a critical exposition and rational justification of the said theism by refuting Śaṅkara’s Advaita-vāda and māyāvāda. His powerful “seven-fold-arguments” showing the untenabilities of māya (saptavidhānupapattīḥ) shook the very formation of Śaṅkara’s Advaitavāda31. This was an ontologically necessary task to restore a realistic world view where bhakti as a medium of divine-human interface is made possible in the true sense of the term. Bhakti as a personal spiritual communion between God and men is no more a Chimera even in the ultimate spiritual plane. It is famously said elsewhere, that, Rāmānuja restored to man his lost individuality from the cold and impersonal realm of the Absolute Brahman.

31 Prof. R. Balasubramanian, former Director, RIASP, Madras University, having taught Rāmānuja’s philosophy for a long time, made this point during his classes on Advaita Vedānta during 1985-1987. This researcher was his student. See Grimes, John, The Seven Great Untenables (Saptavidhā-Anupapattīḥ), Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1990.
Nāthmuni was responsible for collecting the songs of Ālwaṛs, organising the Śrī Vaiśṇava sect and popularise it among the masses. As a retiegio-philosophoical doctrine, it is known as Viśiṣṭadvaita. Though, Rāmānuja’s pioneering works in this field could have been treated as independent accomplishments, still to a certain extent, they were influenced and informed by the mystical experience of the divine love of the Ālwaṛs. He was followed by Madhva in Kanada who gave profuse commentaries on the praṇāhīnas and the Bhāgavata and established his philosophy of dualism (Dvaita Vedānta). Despite the alleged theoretical and logical deficiencies of their works when compared with Advaita of Śaṅkara, the tag Vedānta though theistic, cannot be denied to them. As alternative religio-philosophical systems of Vedānta, they brought out their respective world views where devotional love was treated as means of the loving relation between a personal God and His creatures.

There were centuries-long philosophical polemics between the scholars of theistic and non-theistic systems of Vedānta. The main contention of the former would be that, within a world view based on a distinctionless and relationless conception of reality no meaningful spiritual love could take place. The history of Indian philosophy is laden with the evidence of theism as an identifiable stream of religious consciousness which was never comfortable with metaphysics where everything lapses into the homogeneous stillness of the pure being. It is in this context that, the popular view that Rāmānuja had restored the individuality of the human self from the impersonal Absolute of Śaṅkara.

The philosophical views of Rāmānuja and Madhva had inspired many subsequent Vaiṣṇava thinkers and saints, and thus, being morally empowered, they took courage to give their own non-Advaitic interpretation of Vedānta philosophy. Majumdar rightly observes that, a new land mark in the history of

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Tamil Vaiṣṇavism (read south Indian) is in the rise of Acāryas as a School of philosophers.

Rāmānuja prescribed the worship of Vāsudeva as per the old Pañcarātra doctrine. He recognised His four vyuhas and identified Him with Viṣṇu and Narāyana. His sect of Śri Sampradāya or Śri Vaiṣṇavism did not worship Gopāla Kṛṣṇa. Based on the Pañcarātra and the Tāntric philosophy he recognised Śri (Lakṣmi), Bhu (Earth), and Lilā as the (divine) consorts of Viṣṇu. The concept of Lilā meaning sport or play carries a lot of theological and metaphysical significance for its subsequent development into the concept of nitya-lilā in the religious philosophy of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism.

As independent commentators of the praśṭhānātraya (Bhāṣyakār) and their being located in an era when the six darśanas and the two heterodox schools were established, their ideas and doctrines were reflective of the times contemporaneous philosophical issues. To be qualified as philosophical as well as religious sects, their schools had fulfilled all the accepted conventional norms. Many of their philosophical ideas anticipate the modern philosophical problems. For instance, Rāmānuja's severe criticism of Śaṅkara's concept of māyā in his theory of the "Seven fold untenability of the nature of māyā is (saptavidhānupapātaḥ) still relevant today. According to Prof. R. Balasubramanian Rāmānuja's relentless refutations of māyā shook the very foundation of Advaita metaphysics, and the subsequent response by the followers of Śaṅkara, bear the marks of the maturity of Indian Philosophical debate. Rāmānuja's strong criticism of Advaitavāda finally led him to take the position of epistemic realism where he was certain that, no human experience is relationless or non-relational, and therefore, he would pronounce the verdict that, Śaṅkara's metaphysical concept of "pure consciousness" (cīn-mātra or jñāna-mātra), pure-existence (sattā-mātra) and pure-bliss (ānanda-mātra) etc. are impossibilities. It is evident from the difference between Śaṅkara's proposition of "Brahman is" and Rāmānuja's

counterpart of “Brahman has”. The stress laid on the two terms “is” and “has” and their respective philosophical implications are paradigmatic in nature.

The above ideas are not only relevant for the possibility of theism, but also that, through a reconstruction of a new line of philosophical enterprise other than Advaita Vedânta, without at the same time, going outside the ambit of Vedic authority, they had initiated a new creed of philosophy and laid the foundation for the Vaiśṇavism as we are familiar with today. Thus, Vaiśṇavism was established on firm philosophical grounds; both as a popular religious sect and philosophical creed, it continued to spread towards other parts of India. By the time it reached north India it became a saving grace in disguise, a socio-cultural avenue for the release of a confused collective psyche and a spiritual rejuvination of a people bettered by centuries of various alien rules. It is quite possible that, in the face of the prevalent mechanical and gross religious practices and abstruse philosophical underpinnings, people found Vaiśṇavism as an appropriate medium for the regeneration of their long bruised, subjugated and decaying ethico-religious sensibilities. The simplicity of ideas expressed through vernacular languages made the medieval Vaiśṇavism more democratically participatory in nature than the elitist religious philosophy epitomised by the intellectually subtle and austere Advaitism of Śaṅkara. The highly technical nature of Saṃskīt language in which all the complex philosophical polemics were held, acted as a cultural wall against any inclusive approach to religious pursuits. Due to the use of vernacular language, this socio-cultural barrier was absent in the case of Bhakti Movement.

Rāmānuja had conceived bhakti as a synthesis of jñāna and karma. He recommended the practice of rituals of the Pūrva Mīmāṁsā side by side following the path of bhakti in the form of upāsana meditation. Madhva was against pure devotional emotionalism; hence, bhakti-yoga and jnana-yoga are to be practiced together, the former without the latter would be blind emotionalism and the latter without the former would be dry intellectualism\textsuperscript{34}, and “Unlike Rāmānuja,

\textsuperscript{34} Ramachandran, T.P., Dvalta Vedanta, Arnold Heinemann, 1976, p.112.
Madhva did not believe that a combination of \textit{karma} and \textit{jnana} (\textit{jñāna-karma-samuccaya}) is possible\textsuperscript{35}. Nimbārka’s rendering of \textit{bhakti} in emotional terms in a re-emergence of the old and pure \textit{bhakti} of the Bhāgavata School. Such devotional emotionalism has to be seen in the light of the becoming prominence of Rādhā-tattva for the first time.

Few words need to be said about the traces of \textit{jñāna} in Rāmānuja and Madhva’s theistic philosophies. The strong streak of rational approach in their theories was natural outcome of their need to penetrate into the powerful superstructure of Advaita as a \textit{pūrṇapakṣa}. Just as the highly developed logical structure which they were seeking to demolish, so also, Rāmānuja and Madhva had to be equipped with the same epistemic and logical tools for entering into meaningful philosophical debates with an almost invincible opponent like Śaṅkara. No doubt, the epistemic and logical method of a system necessarily is always in conformity with the nature of a metaphysical presupposition for which they have been designed to justify. Therefore, they cannot be expected to be purely non-cognitive, just as it is the case in Gauḍīya thought. There is a non-accidental co-relation between the explicit abandonment of the traditional modal of rational approach towards philosophical issues and adaptation of aesthetics by the Gauḍīya scholars on the one hand and the erotic-aesthetic devotional emotionalism which is taken right into the very heart of the statico-dynamic Absolute Being – Kṛṣṇa-tattva by them.

\textbf{North Indian Vaiśṇavism: Nimbārka’s sect.}

The link between south Indian Vaiśṇavism and north Indian Vaiśṇavism was served by Nimbārka’s sect (1200 A.D.). His sect flourished after Rāmānuja. He established a system of Vedānta known as dvaitādvaitavāda or bhedābhētavāda. It bore the ideational bridge between Viśiśṭādvaita and Dvaita. He did interpret \textit{bhakti} more in terms of devotional emotion unmixed with \textit{jñāna} and \textit{karma}. This was in a way anticipation of similar but more radical conception in Gauḍīya

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 110.
Vaiṣṇavism later on. He wrote his works in Sāṁskrit. He composed the Vedāntaparijātasaṇurābhā, a short commentary on Brahmāsūtras and a minor work named Siddhāntaratāta which is also called Dašasloki. Following Rāmānuja he also speaks about Kṛṣṇa as having Vyuhas. He seems to anticipate Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in emphasising the special characters of Kṛṣṇa in saying that, “He is known as Vareṇya or adored by all, because he has a holy celestial body and bodily qualities, such as beauty, tenderness, sweetness and charm” All these are Aprākṛta or non-material. The next thing about his ideas is his reference to Rādhā in the stanza V of the Daśasloki in which he offers prayer to Her and says that, She is always surrounded by female friends (Gopiṣ).\(^{36}\) His conception of bhakti come very close to that of Rāmānuja and there is no distinctive contribution to the nature of bhakti.

**Vallabhacārya’s Vaiṣṇavism:**

The next important sect of Vaiṣṇavism is that of suddhādvaita of Vallabhacārya (1479-1531). His religio-metaphysical position of suddhādvaita is considered by him to be the more authentic interpretation of the nature of highest Upaniṣadic reality – Brahman or Ātman. Thus, it is contrasted from Śaṅkara’s nirguṇa Brahman. He did not admit the concept of māyā of Śaṅkara and believed that, the whole world of matter and souls are real and are only a subtle form of God\(^{37}\). Special mention may be made of his three works – Anubhāṣya – commentary on the Brahma-Pravāha-Maryāda\(^{38}\). These contain most of his philosophical ideas.

Vallabhacārya seems to make a co-relation between his conception of self in terms of its classification and the nature and types of bhakti in relation to puṣṭimārga. One of his classifications of souls is into: 1. Puṣṭi souls, 2. Maryāda souls and Pravāhika souls. “All these are different from one another in their


\(^{38}\) Ibid.
origin, nature and final end. They all issue from God with their differences. These three souls are emanating from the Ānanda kāya (bliss-body) Vāk (word) and mind of God respectively.

"The way of life and salvation (not the same with the traditional concept of mokṣa) preached by Vallabha is called puṣṭimārga. God’s grace gives puṣṭi (nourishment) and poṣana (strength); and hence the name puṣṭi-mārga or the way of grace. The bhakti generated by special grace is known as puṣṭi-bhakti."\(^{40}\)

Unlike in Caitanya’s philosophy, karma or ritualistic deity is a must for the maryāda souls who emanated from the Vāk or the word of God are being controlled by law and not be grace. This is the reminiscent of Rāmānuja’s emphasis of karma and the Gītā’s advices to follow Vedic rituals for those also are attached. But through repeated efforts, the maryāda souls by performing ritualistic duties in the spirit of renunciation (niṣkām-bhāva) they reach aksara (vestibule) of God after which they attain at His supreme abode. The pravāhika souls who are originated from the mind of God are the samsāric jīvas. They governed neither by grace nor law. They are in continuous motion (pravāha).

Since, we are dealing with only the aspects of the philosophy of Vallabhacārya, we shall not dwell on his four types of bhakti (Pravāha puṣṭi-bhakti, maryāda puṣṭi-bhakti, puṣṭi puṣṭi-bhakti and sūdha puṣṭi bhakti). But, few words need to be mentioned about the fourth bhakti: sūdha puṣṭi-bhakti or the purest kind of devotion. On the plane of this devotion, the spiritual aspirant performs kīrtana singing and praising the holy name of God. They develop a strong passion for and attachment of God. This ripe condition of love and āsakti (attachment to God) is called Vyāsana. “The fruit of this devotion is admission into the eternal sports or Lilas of Sri Krishna.”\(^{41}\)

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
\(^{40}\) Ibid.
\(^{41}\) Ibid.
What is a matter of interest in the light of the purpose of the thesis is Vallabha’s view that, the supreme goal is not mukti or emancipation. The highest goal is eternal service of Lord Kṛṣṇa and participation in His sports in the celestial Vṛindāvana. Some of the devotees become Gopas and Gopis and join the sports in the celestial Vṛindāvana⁴².

It means that his form of Vaiṣṇavism gives prominent place to worship in the feminine mood which is similar to Caitanya School’s Gopi-bhāva or Rūpāṇuga-bhakti. According to Majumdar, certain religious ideas and practices of this sect involve gross observations of ritualistic worship of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. An exalted position is also accorded to the Guru and the cult has a form of worship which requires joining in the literally enacted nitya-līlā of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa at the residence of the Guru. These questionable practices are considered to be the cause of moral degradation of the sect. In this context, Majumdar observes that, “Bengal Vaiṣṇavism was saved from this degradation by the famous Caitanya – “Sri Gourāṅga” (A.D. 1485-1533), a contemporary of Vallabha.

Leaving aside these ethical issues pertaining to amorous implications of bhakti both in Vallabha’s sect and also in Caitanya’s system, what is to be acknowledged is the ripening and deepening of a historically evolving stream of theistic devotion of Vaiṣṇavism. By the time this religious consciousness becomes a life time’s mission of Vallabha and Caitanya its aesthetic-emotivisation reaches its extreme depth in the case of the latter. In respect of socio-cultural aspects of the form of Bhakti Movement represented by Vallabha’s sect, its egalitarian outlook is seen from the fact that, he had many followers from the lower caste community. Right from Nimbārka onwards upto Vallabhacārya the evolution of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend and its associated concept of bhakti can easily discerned which would eventually culminate in the extreme form of phenomenological consciousness of divine amour of Caitanyaism.

⁴² ibid., also see, Op. cit., Bhandarkar, pp. 78-82, see Marfatia, Mrudulal., The Philosophy of Vallabhacārya, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1967, for the detail exposition of the concept of Pusti or the Doctrine of Grace and the concept of bhakti, vide: pp. 70-90.
Socio-Cultural genesis of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism:

That, the genesis of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism did not happen in socio-cultural and historical vacuum, would necessitate to examine them in brief in order that, some explanations may be offered as the reasons for the ingrained amorous element symbolic or otherwise of the sect’s concept of aesthetic and emotive bhakti. This methodological approach is also based on the fact that, Gauḍiya or Bengal Vaiṣṇavism sustained by the uncommon religio-mystical experience of Caitanya (1486-1534) was also one of the medieval movements. At the same time, it is not presupposed here that, on the theoretical or philosophical plane the uncommon reconceptualisation of a classical concept of bhakti in terms of its interpretation as divine amour, is not amenable to be subjected to a socio-cultural and historical investigation. But, a pure philosophical study of such a religious idea would render it irrelevant and improper. Yet, the fact of socio-cultural, political and historical embodiment of religio-philosophical expressions of human existence cannot be denied at all, such an approach here is deemed justified. This thesis also leaves the controversies surrounding the amorous elements of religion as an open ended issue, and can’t be seen purely in the light of the conventional notion of immorality of mixing sex with religion. It would be like trying to judge one of the parts of a machine independent of the machine’s entire framework. Thus, when seen against the larger canvas of the entire metaphysical picture of a system, sexual element of religious language may come to acquire an altogether new meaning other than the conventional ones.

In spite of India’s being a land of Kāmasūtra, The Anaṅga Ranga and Koka Śāstra, Tāntric maithuna and the Śāktas and Sāhajiyā cults, the graphic

representation of copulating couples against the backdrop of the sacred space of Khajuraho temple. Indian classical philosophical traditions and even their contemporary adherents still have a definite verdict that, sex is inherently immoral, and therefore, it should be transcended. The majority of the spiritual program in general is not being designed to include it as a positive value of human nature and men's highest spiritual ideal. The four hierarchically arranged values of puruṣārtha are religio-socially structured so as to dovetail every human aspiration towards their transfiguration in the summum bonum of mokṣa. The psychophysical expressions of ordinary desires like sexual tendencies and other pleasures are not sought to be suppressed but are channelised towards the attainment of the ideal of mokṣa. The problem of the Gauḍīya conception of bhakti lies in that, sexual elements–symbolic or constitutive still persisted. The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava scholars were apprehensive about the ethical angle of madhura-rasa or śṛiṅgar-rasa–especially the controversies relating to the question whether svakīyā-rasa is superior to parakīyā-rasa or vice versa.

During the contemporary times, scholars like S.K. De and many others criticise and wrongly charge Caitanya of heralding a tradition of mixing sex with religion. De is the opinion that, though as a saint, personally Caitanya did not indulge in gross sexual practices in the name of religion; he nevertheless had contemplated on vicarious pleasures. The critic argues that, “The history of religion teaches us an important lesson. It is that many exaggerated importance to the female element in the religion, or the association of religion with amorous elements, even though inspired or prompted by the highest spiritual motive and

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47 “Many of the specimens of Indian art make use of sex symbolism which however should be viewed in the overall context of the true spirit of Indian thought which draws no distinction between sacred and profane. Thus, the relation of the individual soul to God or the cosmic Self is often conceived in terms of the passionate adoration of a woman for her lover. The actual embrace of the Divine figures represents the complete surrender of the soul to God. This may perhaps be said of many of the “mithun” (erotic) figures at Khajuraho”, by Ranjan K. Ghosh: Indian Art - Some Philosophical Musings, http://www.museindia.com, Issue 15, Sep-Oct 2007, ISSN: 0975-1815, G S P Rao: Editorial. This article discusses in detail various aspects of Indian art in relation to its erotic context as well as its spiritual settings.
backed by metaphysical or mystical interpretations, is sure to lead to the degradation of its followers. This is best illustrated by the fate of the Śākta and Rādhā Kṛṣṇa cult."

Majumdar states that “But the merit of Caitanya lies in the fact that, he elevated the passion of the couple to a high spiritual plane and stressed the emotional at the cost of the ceremonial (and rational) side of religion; His piety; devotion; and fervor introduced a pure and spiritual element in Vaiṣṇavism which offers a bright and refreshing contrast to that promulgated by Vallabha”\textsuperscript{48}.

Majumdar, nevertheless gives credit to Caitanya by stating: “But the merit of Caitanya lies in the fact that, he elevated the passion of the couple to a higher spiritual plane and stressed the emotional at the cost of the ceremonial (and rational) side of religion; His piety; devotion; and fervor introduced a pure and spiritual in Vaisnavism which offers a bright and refreshing contrast to that promulgated by Vallabha”

Rāmākānta Chakravarti, in his paper Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal, traces the genesis of the erotic element in the sect’s religious-philosophy. Finally, he shows that, it was through the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva (12\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.), the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (10\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.), Padma Purāṇa and Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa (7\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.), Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism came to acquire the character of erotic devotionalism. “Jayadeva had put considerable emphasis on erotic aspect of Radha-Kṛṣṇa worship. Ramakanta also cites Suniti Kumar Chaterjee who says that, Jayadeva’s theme was most probably influenced by a form of “Vernacular lyric drama”. “It is quite reasonable to suppose that Jayadeva’s motive was not unknown to contemporary Bengal. Poor pilgrims sang the songs of Rādhā and Madhava”\textsuperscript{49}.


These facts prove the socio-cultural and historical causation of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, though it had its origin in the pristine pure bhakti of Rāmānuja. The amorous character of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism is more or less an unconscious determination by the forces of history which was shaping the evolving theistic religion. Caitanya is to be given the credit for preventing those socio-ethically undesirable elements of the prevailing erotic devotionalism. This again is a questionable idea, because, the element of divine amour is in the very heart of the madhura-rasa conceptualised in the sect.

As it was also proved by the fatal incident relating to the biographical account of junior Haridas (Cchota Haridās) his followers took pains in absolving any unethical element in the religious order of Caitanya. That, even if in the due course of time Bengal Vaiṣṇavism became degraded, at least, in some post-Caitanya sub-sects like, Sāhajīyā cults, it was in spite of him. This is because; the contemporaneous socio-cultural milieu of Caitanya was filled with tantric sexual practices among the Śākta and Buddhist cults. Caitanya’s biography also recorded frequent tussle between his sect and the followers of the Śākta cult.

Some Resistance to Caitanya’s Movement:

Caitanya’s bhakti-andolan (Bhakti Movement) also faced some resistance from the orthodox Brāhmaṇ priests and scholars\(^\text{50}\). His movement was perceived as attempting to usher in transformations into the conservative practices of the conservative Brāhmaṇical religion. The well-known incident of Caitanya’s defiance of the public notice of the Kāzi of Nadia is one such reaction to the resistance from the Brāhmaṇ orthodoxy. Caitanya Caritāmṛta recorded about defiling of the venue of Saṅkīrtana by placing items usually offered to the goddess Kali much to the annoyance of the bhakta. As per a complaint submitted by a Brāhmaṇ priest

\(^{50}\) Chaterjee, A.N., Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya: A Historical Study on Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism, S.K.Datta Associated Publishing Co., New Delhi, p. 46. “The conservative Brahmans of Navadvipa were bound to oppose all this since Saṅkīrtana assemblies were resulting in free association of all castes, including the pariahs. Their opposition however, had no effect on Viśvambhar”. Caitanya had expressed his pleasure to Nityānanda for the latter’s making the low caste people to participate in the Saṅkīrtana—“Nic-jāti patita adam jāti jan/ tomā hoite sobhār hoite vimochan/” Cf, Vṛndāvanadās, Antya, as quoted in ibid. pp. 551.
who thought it was not proper to chant the holy names (solonam or sixteen holy names of Kṛṣṇa) in public, loud singing of the divine names accordingly was banned. This is interpreted by some modern scholars as the sign of the manliness of Caitanya and is viewed as the first civil disobedience in the socio-cultural history of India.

Even if this phenomenon is considered as an exaggeration, still that it is being mentioned in detail in his biography indicates the reformatory dimension of the Caitanya movement. The fact that, many amongst Caitanya’s followers were people belonging to the lower strata of Bengal and Orissa\(^{51}\) including prominent Muslim member like Senior Haridās (initiated name) shows that, the very simplicity, participatory and inclusive nature of his movement based on a concept of bhakti interpreted as the Yuga-Dharma is beyond doubt.

While the aforesaid is more in the social plane, Caitanya was rebuked and ridiculed to be unbecoming of one who is in the renounced order of life – sanyāsā. He was chastised for indulging in unmanly devotional emotion resulting in frequent bouts of mystical and sentimental ecstatic outbursts. He was charged with deviating from a sanyasin’s traditional duty of spending his time in reflective and contemplative studies of religious texts (śravaṇa, manana and nididdhyāsana etc.). His historically, unprecedented religio-mystic experience and prolonged ecstasies took his entire time and energy. His God-Intoxicated spiritual personality was far from the traits of critical scholastic aptitude expected of an ekadaṇḍi sanyāsi of the Śaṅkarite order to which he belonged\(^{52}\). This socio-religious expression of his characteristic persona of spiritual mysticism, coupled with the absence of the habits of traditional intellectual engagement expected of a sanyasi goes hand in hand with the sect’s non-cognitive or aesthetic rendering of the classical notion of bhakti. This perspective is significant for the subsequent philosophical treatment of divine love conceived in aesthetico-emotive terms.

\(^{51}\) Mukherjee, Prabhat. History of Caitanya Faith in Orissa, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 62-68.

\(^{52}\) Sanyāsa order of Caitanya is said to be belonging to Śaṅkara’s saṅpradāya, though in practice he does not follow the necessary norms of Śaṅkara’s sanyāsa order.
His kind of phenomenal religious experience, the Charisma of his highly contagious religious personality engaged in spreading the fire of Śaṅkūrtana-Mahā Yajña\(^{53}\) accompanied by chanting and dancing amidst his close associates and followers belonging to a cross section of his contemporaneous society including even Muslims and members of the lower caste, perhaps, were perceived as a treat to the exclusivity and aristocratic mainstream Brāhmanical religion. This, most probably is the reason behind the complaint lodged by the Brāhmin priest to the Kāzi of Nadia.

It was based on such an uncommon religious experience of Caitanya, just as it was also in the case of Rāmānuja whose Śrī Vaiṣṇavism or Viśiṣṭādvaita was inspired by the pure emotional lyrical outpourings of divine love of the Ālwārs, the Goswāmis of Vṛndāvana led by Rūpa Goswāmin established the religio-philosophical tenets of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism according to which bhakti ceases to be mere devotional worship and piety, but was treated as the aesthetico-erotic divine sentiment of bhakti-rasa ripened into madhura-rasa ending the eternal process of the mahābhāva of Rādhā. They were given specific instruction and guide lines to do so by their revered master Caitanya. One important thing to be noted here is that, the aesthetic orientation of the Gauḍīya concept of bhakti prepares the ground for the socio-cultural embodiment of divine-human-interface. This is facilitated by the communicative power of aesthetic experience (rasānubhava). The re-enactment of the nitya-līlā in the form of Śaṅkūrtana makes

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\(^{53}\) Śaṅkūrtana-Mahā –Yajña is believed to be the Yuga Dharma or the Dharma of the Iron Age, kali yuga. This may be explained with reference to two texts of the Bhāgavata, 1.1.2 & 1.1.14. These two texts bring out one very crucial aspect of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism which consists in conceiving God in terms of mystical sound or words. The first text of Bhāg.1.3.43, sva dhāma upagate ...after the Lord has returned to His eternal abode the entire Bhāgavata is considered to be the Bhagavat Himself-His own Self manifestation as the saving Grace of the people of Iron age. The second text: 1.1.14: "āpannab sarīṣṭāṁ ghorāṁ yannāṁ vivaśognan/ tataḥ sadyo vimucyeta yadvibhetti svayam bhayam-"living being who are entangled in the meshes of birth and death can be freed immediately by even unconsciously chanting the holy name of Kṛṣṇa which is feared by fear personified". This translation is of Op. cit., Bhāg. Bhaktivedānta. Both these texts refer to līlā-kīrtana and nāma-kīrtana. Just as Kṛṣṇa says in the Gātā: "I am Om among mystic sounds", and that He incarnates Himself in the form of His holy names. Thus Nāma-Śaṅkūrtana is one of the nava-vidhā-bhakti-nine forms devotional practices. Also see Vaisnava Vedanta (The Philosophy of Śrī Śiva Gosvāmi), by Mahānāmabrata Brahmachārī, Dasgupta & Co. (P) Ltd., Calcutta,1974, pp.223-235.
the experience of divine love here and now on earth. This particular character of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism is also echoed by other forms of medieval Bhakti Movements. The case of Sūrdās and Mirābāī were some of the examples which may be cited in this respect.

There are still other issues to be examined about the said medieval Bhakti Movements with reference to those identifiable features in terms of which they are being grouped together and referred to by a single category as such a movement. This is necessary for bringing out in brief the reasons behind their having an undercurrent of religio-philosophical attitude characterised by devotionalism which can’t be reduced to a mere ingredient of an integral process of sādhana. By this, it does not mean that, ideationally they are homogenous or even that, they are radically different from each other. Though, not monolithic, they have points of convergence as well as divergence, and are speakable in terms of their having a link in some sense, to the first dawn of the theistic religion of Bhāgavatism during the six century B.C.

Therefore, as already stated, at the very outset, of the medieval Bhakti Movement may have the identifiable features pertaining to the questions viz: i) Firstly, there are points of similarities among the medieval Bhakti Movements, (ii) secondly, similarity does not mean one to one correspondence or identity; hence they also have dissimilarities and (iii) thirdly and lastly, Caitanya Movement posses its distinctive character. These queries were more or less answered by what have been stated before. Hence, they will not be further entertained. The main of point of similarity is their adherence to bhakti. As for their distinction some may say that, saints like Nānak believes in nirguna-bhakti. But these things will be considered as contentious issues. The thesis shall emphasise on their common features rather than their variations if any.

Majumdar sums up the common characters of the medieval Bhakti Movement thus: “(1) preaching in vernacular which gave a great impetus to the movements, (2) ignoring caste distinctions and admitting even the lowest caste
into their fold; and (3) definitely rejecting rites and purity of the heart. Of all these the success of Bhakti Movement has been mainly and rightly attributed to the use of Vernacular language. As it was already stated before, an entire spiritual treasure which was earlier inaccessible to the lay people because of the linguistic wall created by a highly technical and scholastic language as Sanskrit is suddenly thrown open to them. The local or regional languages facilitated an avenue for socio-cultural emancipation of the ordinary people.

**Bhakti Renaissance:**

We have already referred to the continuity of an evolving theistic devotionalism right from the rise of Bhāgavatism right down to the medieval Bhakti Movements. This thread of devotionalism which did not receive and predominant attention from the majority of six orthodox schools (śad-darsanas or Āstika) became a popular religious upsurge during the medieval era. The rigorous intellectual acumen and subtle and hairsplitting philosophical debates amongst the classical thinkers hardly had any room for the common devotional sentiment. Therefore, it may not be farfetched contention to say that, the normal spiritual needs and socio-cultural aspirations of the majority of the people were left high and dry. It is not to counter the merits of the high philosophical traditions. At the same time, the ethico-religious provisions of these systems being embedded in a caste oriented social and political structure were not percolating down to the laity. It means that, as it has been very often charged against a highly philosophical system Advaita that, its dizzy theoretical heights seldom is practically conducive. The theory-praxis gap of the śad-darsanas, from the context of socio-political perspective is found manifest in some form of socio-cultural uprising manifested in the form of Bhakti Renaissance.

Thus, A.K. Majumdar speaks about the phenomenon of “Bhakti Renaissance” pertaining to the above theory-praxis gap. The term “renaissance”

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55 Majumdar, A.K., Bhakti Renaissance, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1979, p. V.
means “rebirth” i.e. rebirth of the “old and pure bhakti” of bygone era. This era may be either that of Bhāgavatism or the periods when the Bhakti Sūtras or the Bhāgavata (Purāṇa) were written and must have been in some manner comparable to the ages of Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha or Chaitanya. It means that, during the intervening period, bhakti most probably lost its character, popularity and strength. It perhaps, got overshadowed by the hectic efforts for winning debates and system building (abstract intellectualism as contracted from existentialism) enterprises of the classical philosophers. This may be the reasons behind the fact that, Rāmānuja and Madhva also for the first time successively had challenged the powerful superstructure of the edifice of Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara, could not by temperament and habits of intellectual exercise free their conceptions of bhakti from jnana and karma. This is in spite of the traditional controversy about the question as to which of the three sādhanas is predominant one. This issue is evident even in the text of the Gītā itself where they are interpreted in a syncretic manner, though, it is internally ambiguous enough to keep the commentators and readers reflecting on the possible focus of its central teaching. Yet, these facts would not in any way stand in the way of showing the historically emerging trend of theistic devotionalism as one such distinctive religious choice of a section of a disgruntled and spiritually disquiet people. This sense of spiritual pathos is because of over-essentialisation of normal and concrete existential needs and demands of humanity. Therefore, it is too early to dismiss bhakti renaissance as mere irrational emotionalism.

Thus, the gradual lessening of the cognitive (rational) aspect of bhakti right from Nimbārka to Caitanya was evident from their decreasing engagement in the rigour of logic chopping exercises as it had been a common intellectual past time of the debates of the Indian inter school dialogues. No doubt, as an attempt of post facto philosophical reconstruction, Jīva Gosvāmin was entrusted with the said task by his uncles – Sanātana and Rūpa. His works Śaṭ-Sandarbhas and

other related works were the results of this attempt. The pure aesthetic theory of bhakti-rasa of Rūpa treated exhaustively in his Bhakti-Rasāmṛta-Sindhu and Ujjvala-nilamāṇi was provided with a philosophical justification by developing the metaphysical doctrine of acintyabhedābheda-vāda.

The Gauḍiya scholars believed that, the Bhāgavatam was the natural commentary of the Brahma Sūtra, and Jīva’s Śaṭ-Sandarbhās were treated as the commentaries on it. For them, this belief is based on the fact that, for the age of Kali the Bhāgavatam is the sole source of spiritual guidance. Thus, they took their works as exhaustive. Since, it did not settle the matter of the acceptance of their contentions by other schools; the movement had to wait till the arrival of Baladeva Vidyābhūṣana in the 19th century for offering a philosophical justification of its belief through his commentary on Brahma Sūtra named – Govinda Bhāṣya58. Otherwise, by design and being determined by the nature of bhakti they interpreted, an austere ratiocinative approach towards it would be methodologically incompatible. This goes hand in hand with the sect’s wholesale adoption of the technicalities of Alaṅkāra Śāstra (Indian Aesthetics) and Rūpa’s categorical statement where he decides tarka-tarkāṇudaraḥ in his Laghubhāgavatāmṛtam. In the light of western philosophical tradition, this methodological orientation (observable in the act of relinquishing rational method and simultaneous application of aesthetic method), may be seen in relation to the conflict between essentialism and existentialism.

But, it is not to argue that, bhakti and other paths like karma and jñāna are mutually irreconcilable. Nor is it necessary to presume as it is normally done, that, “the pure sentiment of bhakti” is totally bereft of jñāna if jñāna does not necessarily mean in the conventional sense. This will be shown elsewhere through

58 Prabal Kumar Sen’s Book Review on Philosophical Reflections by G.C. Nayak in The Journal of Indian Academy of Philosophy, vol.XLI, Nos. 1 & 2, 2000, pp.120-121. Sen refers to Baladeva’s works including his Gītā Bhūṣana (comm. on the Gītā) and other writings. Nayak’s chapter II (pp.103-116) deals with the ideas of Baladeva. Sen states that, in including such a chapter Nayak has brought out previously unknown facets of thinkers.
the idea of the Gaudiyā conception of bhakti as a form of non-cognitive knowing or 'emotive knowing'. It is enough if we assume that, even if it is granted that, the medieval notions of bhakti may be classified into nirguna-bhakti and saguna-bhakti, the purity of their underpinning devotional emotion may be taken to be the predominant character of each kind of bhakti. In this sense, the idea of "renaissance" is applicable to the epochal emergence of the medieval Bhakti Movements. It means that, they share a common platform while keeping in view of their individual variations. Hence, the criticism that, "Bhakti Movement was not a unified or homogeneous movement and that they do not have a "common denominator" do not any more hold water. Thus, "Bhakti Movement" is not to be treated either as a concoction of the western indologists or as mere descriptive term for methodological convenience. Still, the refutation of the critic's contention does not tantamount to the rejection of individual distinctiveness of the movements.

Special feature of Caitanya Movement: Śaṅkīrthaṇa Mahāyajña, the Religion of the Iron Age.

Speaking about the special character of Caitanya Movement may or may not carry any sense of superiority to other contemporaneous counterparts. Since, various aspects of its social manifestations have been already dealt with; this section shall focus on the nature of religious and mystical experience of the master himself. His ceaseless bouts of rapturous and ecstatic bouts of ecstatic mystic-religious experience had been vividly described by his biographers.

The peculiarity of the Caitanya movement can be understand from the fact that, the entire convictions, faith and dedications of the entire lives of his close associates who had become instrumental for spreading his spiritual message forward were inspired by the sincere and purity of the scope and depth of the nature of his spiritual experience. The entire strength, activities and direction of the move were, drawn from his religious experience. His experience was the affirmation of an eternal truth claim here and now on earth. His followers acted
bared on his standing instructions and teachings. The charismatic and towering spiritual personality of Caitanya was not sufficient to launch a religio-philosophic movement and sustain its tempo on full gusto even after his departure from this world. We can easily understand the power and spiritual depth of Caitanya’s mystical experience from the life live engagement of an array of his dedicated followers for spreading his spiritual message.

The missionary zeal of the movement is so strong that, as per their beloved master’s standing instructions and wishes, Vṛṇḍāvana an obscure and long forgotten forest area was rediscovered and popularised as a famous pilgrimage centre. It is not for any other reasons that, the six Goswāmins led by Sanātana and Rūpa came to be known as Vṛṇḍāvana Goswāmins. Under their able and influential personality the earthly Vṛṇḍāvana was re-excavated popularised and turned into a spiritually baffling holy place physically engendering a re-imagination or enactment of the nitya-līlā in the hearts of the bhaktas. It was because of the influence of Rūpa and Sanātana that, in A.D.1590 Rāja Man Singh of Amber built the Śrī Govindaji Temple there59. The earthly Vṛṇḍāvana thus became spiritually alive and thriving with the imaginatively re-manifested nitya-līlā. This re-enacted nitya-līlā was made possible by the vividness and realism of Caitanya’s mystico-religious experience of the same.

This mediation via the mystico-spiritual experience of Caitanya or his very life, as it is believed in Gauḍīya tradition, to be the androgyneous embodiment of the mahābhāva of Rādhā while internally is the self same Kṛṣṇa, is foundational to the erotico-aesthetic re-enactment of the divine couple’s eternal but dynamically self actualising transcendental love. But for the mysterium tremendum of Caitanya’s historically unprecedented mystico-religious experience, the earthly Gokul Dhām would have lapsed into the forgotten past. The phenomenological nature of such an experience of divine-love is no where attempted to be socio-culturally and spiritually re-visualise as in Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism.

The continuous theologico-histrionics of the divine sport of bhakti-rasa in the Nața-Śaṅkīrțaṇa of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism which is an offshoot of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal, the ritual-theatrical step of the “commencement of rāga”, rāga-houba⁶⁰ (in Manipuri) during which the bodies of the Pañcatattva⁶¹ are aesthetico-theatrically and ritualistically invoked and reconstructed is a meeting point between Navadvipa-lilā and Vṛṇḍāvana-lilā. This meeting point is known as “Berighāṭ”⁶². This theatrico-ritualistically important and unavoidable starting point of the Nața-Śaṅkīrțaṇa as a performing art is a must for the authentic devotional revitalisation of the nitya-lilā. In Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism it is an established position that, no authentic nitya-lilā could take place without the mediation of Caitanya and his close associates who are believed to be the personification of the different parikaras of Kṛṣṇa. This is being followed in every ritualistic detail in Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism.

In addition to the belief that Caitanya is the personification of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa combined, the rest of the members of the Pañcatattva starting from Nitynānda, Advaita, Gadādhara and Śrīvāsa etc. are also believed to be the personification of the first eight Gopīs (Aṣṭa Sakhis). Hence, invoking their divinities with Caitanya in their midst is the pre-condition for the re-encatment of nity-lilā. As a rāgānungra-bhakti the said semi-ritualistic and aesthetic reconstruction of imageryi bodies by the Naṭasingers after the invocation of the divinity of Caitanya and his associates by the presiding eminent Brāhmaṇ of the “Rāsamandala” (Mândapa Mapu) – a process somewhat like a prologue known as

⁶⁰ “Some philosophical implications of the Rāga-Houba in Nața-Saṅkīrțaṇa”, a paper presented by P. Milan Khangamcha in the National Seminar on “Manipuri Literature, Language and Culture and, Hotel Nirmala, Imphal, February 26-28, 2010. This paper was thematically in continuation of the paper “The Significance of the Sixty Four Rasas in Manipuri Vaisnavism” presented in the National Seminar on Manipuri Language: Its contribution to Science, philosophy and culture, Held at Hotel Nirmala, Imphal, July 10-12, 2009. Both the seminars were organized and sponsored by the Centre for Studies in Civilisation, New Delhi.

⁶¹ “Pañcatattva” refers to the five religious personalities starting from Caitanya followed by his four immediate disciples or followers: Prabhu Nityānanda, Śrī Advaita, Gadādhara and Śrī Vāsa. The well known verse: Śrī Kṛṣṇa Caitanya prabhu nityānanda/ Śrī advaita Gadādhara Śrī Vasād’di Gauḍa bhakta vṛnda/ is about these five divine personas. The word ādi which means etcetera refers to the rest of the bhaktas of Nabadvipa.

“Joy bhai” is essential condition. Because, the possible authetic re-experience of the semblance of bhakti-rasa during the rāgānuga sādhana entirely rests on this process of rāga-houba. The literary modal of a story within a story and so on would better illustrate this authetic-theological process. In Manipuri Vaisnavism, this process is so ardently and ritualistically observed that, “rāga-houba” is a well known religious concept ingrained in the minds of the local people. Disturbing this starting point of the Nata-Śaṅkīrtana is strictly prohibited, and if observed by transgression, it is considered to be inauspicious for the family for which the devotional ritual is performed.

In interpreting bhakti-rasa and taking it to the social plane as a live performance of Yuga-Dharma in Caitanya’s form of congregational chanting and singing the glories of the nitya-liñā therein, he had engendered a previously unmanifested dynamic spiritual truth a re-confirmation or affirmation of the conventional religious maxim that God is love. Just a Gandhi turned the statement “God is Truth” into “Truth is God”, we may also adapt this way of looking at by saying that “Love is God and not God is Love”. There are certain inherent theological and metaphysical evidence for this in the philosophy of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism which shall be dealt with in the relevant chapter. It may be briefly stated here as the non-cognitive objectivity of divine love as its being emotively represented in the phenomenological cum existential intersubjectivity of the human divine interface.

The next significant feature of Caitanya Movement is the description of it as a Bhakti-Religion which would further justify the claim that, as a religio-philosophical system a fully fledged bhakti-theory is possible only in it. We shall briefly discuss the aspect of Bhakti-Religion as it is concerned with practice. We have more or less attempted to show that, the history of Indian philosophy of religion, had an uninterrupted meandering stream of theistic devotion, gradually increasing its scope and depth till it culminated in the rise of an exhaustive in the sense that it is no more one of the sādhanas but as the only means as well as end. The justification for the idea of Bhakti-religion consists in the fact that, it has its
own sets of established beliefs, practices and doctrinaires to be followed by its adherents. For instance, it has detail rules for worshiping deity mainly in the Hari Bhakti Vilāsa of Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Goswāmin. Similarly many other minor works exists in the sect of Gauḍīya tradition. Though not in the conventional sense, the process of institutionalising the sect’s religious order began with establishing a pattern of monastic system. During the modern times it had become more formal with the setting up of Gauḍīya Mat and its offshoot ISKCON. The monks of these sub-sects of Gauḍīya religion can be traced right up to the Goswāmins or the direct Nabadvipa associates of Caitanya.

As a system of religion based on a thorough going bhakti-rasa, it has found its pinnacle in the regionalised and institutionalized sub-Gauḍīya religion of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism. Though, Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism as far as its philosophical context is concerned is derived from Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal, in the matters of deity worship and Naṭa-Śaṅkīrtana performance it has integrated many mainstream brāhmaṇical rituals. It has a well created semi-theatrical and ritualised performance of the theme of the nitya-līlā which came to acquire a formal religious order, strictly followed as a necessary part of the Hindu sarṅskāra (purificatory rites) observed by the Meitei Hindus. The Meitei Hindus will hardly perform any religious ceremony under the different types of sarṅskāra without the accompaniment of Naṭa Śaṅkīrtana. This is based on the concept of Yuga-Dharma believed and followed in the form of congregational chanting (nāma-kīrtana and līlā-kīrtana) and singing the glorious pastimes of Rādhā and kṛṣṇa and their parikaras (līlā-kīrtana) began by Caitanya and his direct disciples. The way

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63 Op. cit., De, Chapter VI: Ritualism & Devotional Practices, pp. 448-541. In addition to Hari Bhakti Vilāsa, Sat Kṛiyā sāra Dīpikā and a complete set of ethical norms are also being laid down. These make the sect a sub-Hindu religion based on ritualised concept of bhakti. Ritual here does not mean in the sense of Pūrva Mīmāṁsā. It only conveys the idea of a devotional practice becoming formal.

64 Gauḍīya Mat was established on the basis of the vision of Bhaktivinod Thakur (1838-1914) whose earlier name was Kedarnāth, Op. cit., Jaiva Dharma, preface. Also see: Vaiṣṇavism-Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gauḍīya Tradition, Edited by Steven J. Rosen, Forwarded by Edward C. Demock, Jr., Folk Books, New York, 1992, pp. Preface and Forward, pp. i-ix.

65 ISKCON was established after A.C. Bhaktivedānta landed at Boston, U.S. in 1965 after which it spread throughout the world.
how this basic idea is recreated ingeniously with ethnic folk cultural patterns resulting in the new internationally well known religio-theatrical performance of Naṭa-Śaṅkīrtana and Rāsa-dance⁶⁶. These are not performed as entertainment renditions but as a Yuga-Dharma for the deliverance of the suffering humanity of the Iron Age (Kaliyuga)⁶⁷.

In the theology of Gauḍīya dharma or Bhakti-religion, the advent of Caitanya’s divine persona with his entire associates as the different incarnations or personifications of the parikaras of nitya-liṅga is linked to the purpose of the Śaṅkīrtana as a Yuga Dharma. Caitanya as the combined form (yugala-mūrti) of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, and his associates had appeared on earth to teach devotional love personally and also to bestow the nectarine bliss of chanting and singing the glories of God and His divine sports upon the spiritually alienated (vaśmukhya) people Iron Age.

The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas believed that, the loud congregational chanting of the sixteen holy names of the Bhagavat — “Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, kṛśna Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare// Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare///” is the only available means (upāya/sādhana) for saving the drowning mankind from the ocean of samsāra in the age of Kali. It is the conclusion of one of the Upaniṣads, that, these sixteen holy names (solonām) will destroy all the evils effects of the

⁶⁶ The originality of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism consists in the fact that, Rāsa-Dance is an extension of Naṭa-Śaṅkīrtana. It is something like a play within a play or a play unfolding of another play. This is a restatement of what has been said in reference no. 69. While this is for Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism, more on a larger canvas also in similar fashion, John Stratton Hawley writes about “Every Play a Play Within a Play” in The Gods at Play, Lila in South Asia, Edited by William S. Sax, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp.115-130.

⁶⁷ The dictionary meanings of Śaṅkīrtana: “1. Praising, applauding. 2. Glorification (of a deity), and 3. Repeating the name of a deity as a pious or devotional act” convey the meaning of devotional practice, vide: Saṃskṛt English Dictionary, New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2000. The suffix “sa” carries the sense of a collective spiritual practice or the congregational devotional activities. As a form of religious practice, it operates on the public domain. This is significant for the performance oriented nature of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism which Caitanya and his followers did in their own ways. Bhakti-rasa as its main religious sentiment ceases to be a mere esoteric spiritual experience but; something experienced in and through the intersubjectivity of devotional consciousness. Also see, The Bhagavat Gītā As it Is, The Bhaktivedānta Book Trust, New York, and Ch. 9.14. In the glossary (p. 876) to his commentary A.C. Bhaktivedānta says that, Śaṅkīrtana Yajña is the Dharma of the Iron Age.
Iron-age, and there is no other sādhana to save the suffering humanity from the wheel of existence (iti śoḍaśaka nām nām Kali Kalmaśa nāśanam, nāṭah parataḥ upāya sarva vedeṣu dṛṣyate, Kalisāntarān Upaniṣad). Tukarāma considered kīrtana to be the holy river Gaṅga and its is regarded by him as “a counter current of purification, in as much as Gaṅga, rising from the lotus-feet of Viṣṇu, comes downward on earth for the purification of the mortals, and the stream of bhakti, in kīrtana, rising from the heart of moral man, goes upward and reaches the feet of Hari for His delection”.

The concept of kīrtana as such is not a new one, and it is mentioned in the Rg Veda (1, 159, 3), the Bhāgavata Purāṇa—Kalau tad hari kīrtanāt, (XII, 3, 55) and as the second of the nine modes of worship (VII, 3.55) and the Gītā (4, 11). Of these nine modes of worship, the first śravana – listening to the glory of God and Kīrtana as singing of his pastimes and glories are interrelated to each other. In Caitanya’s religion, these were further developed and an entire theological program is established out of them. Caitanya Caritāmṛta (1, 2, 233), Caitanya Bhāgavad (Adi, VIII, 25), and Bhakti-Rasāmrita-Sindhu (1, 2, 234), Karma Sandarbhā Tīkā and Siksāṣṭaka highlight Kīrtana.

That, Śaṅkīrtana is not a new invention by Caitanya is also proved by Krṣṇa’s own declaration in the Gītā where He elaborates the nature of the bhakti sādhana. He exhorts: “Always chanting My glories (Sotatam kīrtayanto mām) endeavouring (yatanaṭaḥ ca) with great determination or vow (dṛḍha vratāḥ), bowing down (namasyantah ca) before Me or unto Me (mām), these great souls perpetually (nitya-yuktah) worship Me (mām upāsate) with devotion (bhaktyā)⁶⁸.

Kīrtana has two meanings. Ordinarily it means laudatory recital, verbal and literary of the names and qualities of a person. But its technical meaning consists in the repeated utterances of the name and description of the qualities of the divine being or beings. Krṣṇa states elsewhere in the Gītā that, He is pleased by the discussion amongst the pious and great souls about His greatness, activities

and the mystery about His birth. He reiterates that, those who know the truth about His birth in the human form and transcendental activities will not be born again after they die and they will attain Him only: janma karma ca me divyamevaṁ yo vetti tattvataḥ/tyaktvā dehaṁ punarjanma, naiti māmeti so’arjuna⁶⁹.

The contention of Bhakti-Religion in the context of Saṅkīrtana as Yuga-Dharma has significance from the standpoint of its social embodiment. The nature of its dynamic social manifestations is necessarily preceded by or proceeds as its underlying psycho-social element from the aesthetico-religious imaginative consciousness. There is an entire philosophical meaning embedded in it. One such meaning is pertaining to the concept of nāmāvatāra – advent of the Bhagavat – the Supreme Being in the form of His Holy Names. This is a well known position of Gauḍiya Vaiṣṇavism. In the Iron Age God in Vaiṣṇavism is identified with His divine names. They are imbued with spiritual powers to awaken the dormant devotion in the heart of the bhaktas. This way of conceiving human divine interaction is supported by the Śāstra⁷⁰.

Chanting the holy names and singing the pastimes of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in the congregation of the bhaktas facilitate social communion. This is in contrast to the solitary nature of meditative and intellectual oriented rigour of the jnāna-mārga. The concept of sarva-mukti – the “salvation of all” may not be possible in the individualistic pursuit of mokṣa which in the Advaitic sense is the realisation of

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⁶⁹ Ibid., 4.2.

⁷⁰ This is supported by the Gitā, 10. 35: “Of the hymns in the Sāma Veda I am Brhat-sāma, and of poetry I am the Gāyati. Of months I am Mārgaśīra [November-December], and of seasons I am flower-bearing spring”-brhatsāma tathā sāmnām gāyatī cchandasāmhaṁ/māsāṁ mārgaśīro haṁrūṭanām kusumākarāḥ/35//, The Bhagavat Gitā As it Is, Tr. & comm. by A.C. Bhaktivedānta, The Bhaktivedānta Book Trust, Los Angeles, 1983, p. 545. Also see Pandit, M.P., Japa, Dipti Publications, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry - 2, 1959, reprint 1991, p.8. Pandit speaks about the efficacy and the textual evidence of the authenticity of chanting or reciting holy names from the perspective of japa (repetition of a mantra). He states the effectivity of Nāma Japa thus: “The tradition of Japa in India goes back to the ancient times of the Rishis of the Veda. ‘Knowing, speak His Name’, enjoins Dirghatamas (Rv. 1.156.3). ‘Of all the Yajnas I am the Japa Yajña’, declares Lord Krishna to Arjuna (B. Gitī X.35). ‘Japa yields the fruit of all other Yajās’, states the Tantrasāra”. There are many textual evidences which may be cited in support of the efficacy of Nāma Japa.
the ever-attained (nityasiddha) identity between the finite self and the Absolute self as in the statement – jīvo brahmaiva nā paraḥ. Here, the aim is individual salvation which in the parlance of Gauḍīya philosophy is tantamount to being selfish. According to Gauḍīya religious philosophy, sādhyā-bhakti or the paramabhakti as the highest form of spiritual love is not based on one’s personal salvation. The true devotee is unconcerned about his personal emancipation but prays that, he may be always in the eternal service of the Lord. This psycho spiritual attitude of self transcendence associated with the god-centric devotional service has its own socio-cultural consequences. The social outlook of a devout Vaiṣṇava in respect of his or her world view, self perception in relation to other fellow beings, spirit of non-violence, humility and forbearance and many more values are the direct manifestations of one whose concrete existence is inwardised or a state of perpetual spiritual awareness where his constitutional position as the eternal servant of kṛṣṇa: “jīver svarūpa hoi, kṛṣṇer nitya dās” is realised. This requires a transformation on the plane of religio-phenomenological consciousness from a godless life (Vaimukhya where one’s life turned away from god) to a god-centered existence (Sāmukhya). In the language of Kierkegaard, one’s life becomes a project based on the “work of love” where one’s existence is no more inauthentic but authentic. The element of spiritual subjectivity here is not socio-culturally vacuous but is the very source of a dynamic social discourse.

The social structure and relation become an external functional expression of a “work of love” of a bhakta. Saṅkīrtana as a Yuga-Dharma is a project of love with a clear cut socio-religious goal. The egalitarian and catholicity of Bhakti Movement consist in restoring the socio-religion rights to a larger majority of the populace who were earlier living under the looming oppressive shadows of socio-cultural exclusions and subjugations. They were restored with their basic human dignity and self-respect enabling them to redefine their selfhood in a more secured spiritual environment. A Vaiṣṇava is not supposed to be identified by his or her caste, creed, sex community and race, and social status. But, how far such socio-cultural consequences of the congregational chanting of Saṅkīrtana would
translate themselves into economic and political rights of the redeemed bhaktas is a mood question which cannot be answered here. Nevertheless it is also a pertinent issue of the medieval Bhakti Movement or even its precursor movement Bhagavatism. The egalitarian character of Caitanya movement is still in vogue in its modern forms of Gaudiya Math and ISKCON.

The dictionary meanings of Saṅkīrtana viz: “1. Praising, applauding, 2. glorification (of a deity) and 3. Reaping the name of a deity as a pious devotional act”\(^{71}\). The suffix “sa” connoting the meaning congregation indicates that, Saṅkīrtana is a collective spiritual practice. According to A.C. Bhaktivedānta Svāmī Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, Saṅkīrtana-Yajña is “...the sacrifice prescribed for the age of Kali (the Iron Age as per the belief of the Vedic religious tradition); that is, congregational chanting of the name of, fame and pastimes of the Supreme Personality of Godhead”\(^{72}\). What is important is the socio-cultural implications of this religio-ethical requirement of the theistic devotion of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism developed in full form by Caitanya and his followers. As stated already this was recreated by the King Bhāgyachandra\(^{73}\) as an erotico-aesthetic and semi-ritual\(^{74}\) theatrical performance of Naṭa-Saṅkīrtana and Rāsa-Dance (of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism) as the fundamental practical or socio-religious rendering of the Rasa-Śastra of Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal.

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\(^{73}\) “Banyan Repertory Theatre’s Rajarshi Bhagyachandra Radical Ultra Discourse in the Theatrical Easel” by Manindra Konsam in An Encounter with M.C. Arun’s Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, Op. cit., p. 226. The king is also known as Meldingu Chingthangkhomba. He ruled during 1761-1778 with few months’ interruption in the year 1763. These dates of the king’s coronation as well as the short break of his rule are different from that of 1759 as the coronation year and the 1762 as the short break as they are given by in “Bhagyachandra”, by Prof. Gangmumei Kamei, p. 2 Ibid, 1762 is the year of coronation according to http://www.search.com/reference/Manipur and http://www.mapsofindia.com/manipur/history/king.html.

\(^{74}\) “Bhakti”: A contemporary Discussion, edited by Daya Krishna, Mukund Lath & Francine E. Krishna, ICR, New Delhi, 2000, p.142. Shri Shrivatsa Goswami during the process of the dialogue on bhakti says that, “nitya rāsa...was built to a ritual design. This is the ritual of rāgānuga-bhakti, not Vedic bhakti. I call it the ritual of rituals when the Gopīs are attending to the divine couple who are resting after the peak of dance, these are their station-Yogapitha, carefully designed and assigned to them”.
The integration in the Naṭa-Ṣaṅkīrtana performed during the śrāddha ceremony of the indigenous metempsychosis is a creative contribution of the king Bhāgyachandra to India’s rich and diverse religio-cultural heritage. The idea of Saṅkīrtana as a Yuga-Dharma was translated into a still thriving living local religio-cultural tradition without violating in the process the basic tenets of the aesthetic and theologico-metaphysical structures of Guāḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Its local ethnic form is the hallmark of Manipuri Vaiṣṇavism. Thus, as the last frontier of the continuing streams of Guāḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, not only Caitanya movement is perpetuated, but also the religious experience of divine love by Caitanya is creatively reaffirmed as a living religious order.

The socio-religious communion engender!ed by the medieval Bhakti Movement of which Saṅkīrtana Mahāyajña is an expression is contradictory to the unchangeable orthodox social system and the accompanying ritual practices. Ritualism necessitates the expertise of Brāhmaṇ priests and scholars wielding enormous social and cultural power and authority. For ensuring a mutually agreeable modal of power sharing between Brāhmaṇs and Kṣatriyas, there is a marriage of convenience between them. This practical modal helps in smooth social organisation, regulation and control. The writings of smṛti texts from time to time as per the need and demands as and when they arose were aimed at achieving this purpose. Stringent punishment, social ostracism and extreme forms of violence would follow any acts of violating the established socio-religious practices. How can one imagine that, religious freedom to bring unobstructed changes would be possible in such conditions of socio-cultural rigidity? The reality of the formalised social exclusion and segregation would not be a very conducive atmosphere if not impossible to deliberately attempt to usher into a form of socio-religious communion.

What have stated above has direct bearings on Saṅkīrtana as congregational devotional practice required as a duty to be performed in lieu of the elitist and socially exclusive jñāna and formalistic ritualism of karma. The concept of devotional practice as the highest duty or para-dharma will surely
come into conflict with such a social system based on these mārgas. Caitanya had faced resistance to his devotional worship in the form of nagar-saṅkīrtana. This innovative religious practice was most probably interpreted by the cast Brāhmīns to be an affront to their conservative exercise of socio-cultural authority and power. The exclusiveness of Caitanya’s sense of bhakti naturally was perceived as a threat to the traditional domain religious authority. The following is the brief outline of this fact and is necessary for understanding the notion of Saṅkīrtana as Yuga-Dharma. The text of the Bhāgavata – “sa vai pumsāṁ paro dharma yato bhaktiradhokṣaje . . .” points this idea. The same text considers bhakti to be “… the most satisfying function of the soul” — ahaitukya apratihatā yayā ‘tman samprasiddatā”75. Kṛṣṇa in Skandha Purāṇa says to Udhava “Devotion to me is highest end – lābho madbhaktiruttamaḥ”76. O. B.L. Kapoor, quotes Caitanya’s view that, bhakti is the only means for the attainment of the supreme Lord. In the Caitanya Caritāmṛta (CC, Madhya, XX, 121), Caitanya cites the following text from the Bhāgavata: na sādhayati mām yada na sāmkhyam dharma uddhava/ na svadhyāyastapastvāgo yathābhaktirmamorjita/ (Bhāg., II, 14, 21) – “It is not possible to attain me through jñāna, yoga, renunciation, penance, study of the scriptures or the performance of duty in the same manner in which it is possible to attain me through Bhakti”. In the same way it is said: “bhaktyāhaṁekāya grāhyah śrāddhyaṁ tman priya satām” – “I can be attained only through Bhakti, not through any other means”77. The collective assertion of Saṅkīrtana as Yuga Dharma when occurs in the same social space, is bound to enter into a contested religio-cultural space. This provides us with theoretical modal for interpreting religious reformation as continuous with social reformation, and accordingly religious rights are not discontinuous with social rights. Their distinction can only be made for analytical clarity, and not as descriptive categories of some incorrigible religious and social realities.

75 Bhāg., 1. 2. 6.
76 Skandha Pūrāṇa, II. 9. 40.
Pointing to the social bearings of Saṅkirtana popularised by Caitanya and his close associates, Majumdar sums up as follows "...(it) was not unknown before them; but what seems to be the unique contribution of this immortal pair (Caitanya and Nityānanda) is that emphasis which they placed on it, the consequent enthusiasm with which the masses acclaimed it...(in this) new congregational and revivalistic mode of worship, the distinction of caste, which thrive on rituals and other formal modes of worship, were almost done away. The Brāhmaṇa and the cobbler, the rich and the poor, met on a common platform, so far as the celebration of God's name was concerned".78

The non-acceptance of caste system and gross adherence to ritualistic practices by Bhāgavatism, Jainism and Buddhism, and also medieval movements would go against the contention of the distinction between the two rights, i.e. "social rights" and "religious rights". Hence, it may not be tenable to hold that, religious rights do not lead to social rights irrespective of their caste, creed, gender and social status etc. As already stated, Jainism and Buddhism did reject caste system and ritualism because of their excessive social consequences. This led to their refusing to accept Vedic authority. This has a political dimension; through conjuring up Vedic authority, the Brāhmaṇas as educators, priests and law givers or arbiters of laws, social conventions and ethical norms were enjoying authority and power over the larger section of the society. Ritualism and caste social structure and relation go hand in hand with social exclusion, dominance and many undesirable social consequences. It is well known about the rampant animal sacrifices, even human sacrifice and nīyoga79—the abominable social practice of impregnating a male-issue less widow or women by her male relatives or some Brāhmaṇas. Many more socially and ethically unpalatable practices can be cited in order to show the ugly side of the height of Vedic ritualism. It would be wrong to argue that, it was only theistic schools or the heterodox schools which were against ritualism. Uttara Mīmāṁsā or Vedānta by definition right from the

beginning was against Karma-Mimāṃsā or Pūrva- Mimāṃsā's doctrine of ritualistic ethics. The Gitā and Śaṅkara were vehement in their refutations of ritualism. It was only Rāmānuja and Vallabha Cārṣya who tried to integrate karma to bhakti. But the reason for the non-acceptance of karma by Śaṅkara or Gitā is different from that of Jainas and Bauddhas. Their criticism of ritualism follows from their concern for its social and moral fallouts.

It may not be wrong to say that, the tendency to undermine the egalitarian outlook of Bhāgavatism and medieval Bhakti Movement by caste Brāhmins or by classical philosophers through their denigrating of bhakti as for those who are mentally weak; jñāna for the intellectually and mentally superior endowed with strong will power is one of way of expressing their apprehension of losing their traditional power stronghold. They were, perhaps not ready to easily reconcile to the prospect of compromising their power interests institutionalised through their monopoly of knowledge and absolute reign over the matters of religion. This cannot be seen to be something unrelated to various social issues. No matter the reasons cited by the proponents of jñāna and ritualism, it is highly possible that, the denial of the right to study the Vedas to the Surdas is sidestepped through or subsumed under the rejection of the efficacy of jñāna and rituals by the saints of Bhāgavatism and Bhakti Movement.

These are some of the ways in which the importance of Bhakti-religion or Saṅkirtana as based on the highest of spiritual love as the saving grace of mankind are to be understood. This form of Mahā-Yajña is the social and cultural manifestation of an overflowing abundance of a dynamic divine-love which inundates and infuses the hearts of the recipient bhaktas.