

## Bengal Vaisnavism

The Vaisnava-Sahajiya cult is found in Bengal, and is part of the larger tantric *bhakti*, or devotional movements. The cult's roots can be traced back to the eleventh or twelfth century C.E., although the Vaisnava-Sahajiya cult rose as a separate entity in the sixteenth century. Because information about the cult is very difficult to find, this article will mainly discuss the Vaisnavas in Bengal as a whole and specify, where possible, the differences between the Vaisnavas and Vaisnava-Sahajiyas.

Caitanya (1486-1533), was a major figure in the development of the Vaisnavas. He was very instrumental in asserting the doctrine that the god Krsna is a supreme deity and not simply an incarnation of Visnu (Dimock 107-108). In his lifetime, Caitanya travelled through the South of India, and with him brought back many religious texts, including the *Brahma-samhita* and the *Krsna-karnamrta*. Although he did popularize the Krsna-centric *bhakti* movements, Caitanya was not the originator of the tradition in Bengal. Caitanya is believed by some to be either an incarnation of Krsna, or the god Krsna himself (Dimock 108). Some in the cult even see him as the ultimate divine figure in human form. Later biographers, such as Murari, even used events from Krsna's life to fill gaps in Caitanya's life (Stewart 1997 225). It is interesting, then, that Caitanya is only known to have written a total of eight devotional, not philosophical, verses (Dimock 109). Caitanya died in 1533, and there are very many mythical accounts of how this occurred. To those who believe he was a god, he did not die but ascended to heaven. While others claim he died of a foot infection (Stewart 1991 231). It was then left to other theologians and philosophers to write and outline the doctrine of the cult.

The six Gosvamins were theologians who were sent by Caitanya to Vrndavana, which was a holy place for worshipers of Krsna. There, they were supposed to establish a pocket of Vaisnavas, and also outline the basic doctrine of the movement (Dimock 110). These six men, most of whom knew Caitanya personally before his death, were extremely influential in establishing the doctrine and rituals of the Vaisnavas in Bengal (Dimock 110). However, according to Dimock, they rarely made mention of Caitanya and his divinity.

The main sacred texts of the Vaisnava-Sahajiya cult are the *puranas* and the Vedic texts. Of the *puranas*, the *Bhagavata* is considered the greatest by the Vaisnavas, as it tells the story of the life of Krsna (Dimock 108).

As mentioned above, the Vaisnavas and Vaisnava-Sahajiyas of Bengal believe that the one supreme god is Krsna. Krsna to them is not just an *avatara*, or incarnation of Visnu, but a powerful god himself. The overall doctrine of the Vaisnavas is explained extremely well by Edward C. Dimock in his article “Doctrine and Practice among the Vaisnavas of Bengal.” The following three paragraph explanation of doctrine is paraphrased from information on pages 113-115 of this article.

In Vaisnava belief, divinity bears three aspects of reality: Brahman, Paramatman, and Bhagavat. The true essence of the highest of these, Bhagavat, is Krsna. In the Bhagavat are “infinite energizing powers,” or *saktis*. These *saktis* are also divided into three groups: *svarupa-sakti*, *jiva-sakti*, and *maya-sakti*. The most divine of these three is *svarupa-sakti*. The *jiva-sakti*, evident by its name, has connections to the Creature, or the *jiva*. The *jiva* is found in all humans and is not fully in the divine, but also not completely without the divine. In contrast, the *maya-sakti* is the cause of both pain and

pleasure in the material world. It is felt only in the lower areas of life. Within the Bhagavat, the *jiva* shares the divine quality of pure bliss, or *ananda*. In order for the *jiva* to gain absolute bliss and complete independence from the *maya* (worldly existence), a person must be involved in *bhakti*, or devotion. Once this release takes place, the *jiva* is only affected by *svarupa-sakti*.

As Dimock explains, *bhakti* is “selfless dedication to the Bhagavat.” In *bhakti*, there must only be the desire to please the god Krsna, as opposed to the desire of the *jiva* to release itself from earthly pain, or to experience the complete bliss of the divine. To the Vaisnavas, knowledge, works, and ritual are not enough to secure absolute release, unless they are practiced in conjunction with *bhakti*.

The greatest quality expressed within the Bhagavat is “belovedness.” Earthly love is not as perfect as this “belovedness.” Therefore, only the pursuit of the love within Bhagavat can be truly satisfying, both to the devotee and the god. This mutual pleasure and love attracts the devotee to the god, and also the god to the devotee. Just as the *bhakta* (devotee) needs the god as the object of devotion, Krsna needs the devotee. By demonstrating Krsna’s beauty and sweetness towards the god through *bhakti*, the devotee allows Krsna to taste his own goodness. And through his love for the *bhakta*, Krsna understands his personal beauty. The *bhakta* assumes a worshipful attitude towards the god, which is known as *bhava*. The experience of the pure ecstasy that is the love relationship between Krsna and the *bhakta* is called *rasa*. The doctrine of the Vaisnavas goes much deeper than this; however, there is no place in this article for a full explanation.

The sexual imagery, doctrine, and practices of the Vaisnavas of Bengal relate directly to the stories of the *Bhagavata*. The Gopis in the *Bhagavata* are women who are the wives of others, but who still completely devote themselves to Krsna. In this devotional love, Krsna participates in “love play” with them (Dimock 123). Radha is the main Gopi in this story, and is often seen as the consort of Krsna. Also in the *Bhagavata* and poetic theory, women seem to be divided into two distinct categories: *svakiya* and *parakiya*. *Svakiya* refers to “she who is one’s own,” while *parakiya* refers to “she who is another’s” (Dimock 123). The Gopi in the story are *parakiya*. Because of this, their love for Krsna is considered pure and intense, as the desire to satisfy the beloved above one’s own pleasure can only result from a *parakiya* relationship.

To the Vaisnavas, the highest state and experience in earthly life is the act of sexual union (Dimock 125). One of the major separating factors between the orthodox Vaisnavas and the Vaisnava-Sahajiya sects is that the former use the imagery of sex only as symbolism, while the latter have ritualized the human erotic experience in tantric practices as an experience of the divine (Dimock 127). Through human coupling, devotees are able to experience first-hand the ecstasy and beauty of the god.

### **References and Further Recommended Readings**

- Dimock, Edward C. (1989) *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*. University of Chicago Press. (Recommended reading; not referenced in article)
- Dimock, Edward C. (1963) “Doctrine and Practice among the Vaisnavas of Bengal.” *History of Religions* (summer): 106-127.
- Stewart, Tony K. (1997) “When Rahu Devours the Moon: The Myth of the Birth of Krsna Caitanya.” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (August): 221-264.

Stewart, Tony K. "When Biographical Narratives Disagree: The Death of Krsna Caitanya." *Numen* (December): 231-260.

### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

Bengal  
Bhakti movements  
The Bhagavata  
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Radha  
Tantric practices (Hindu)  
Visnu

### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaisnava-sahajjya>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantra>

Written by Caitlin Jackson (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.