

The Spread of Vaishnavism in Ramkeli and Beyond through Chaitanyadeva

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Abstract: *Chaitanyadev's Gaudiya Vaishnava religious movement had a significant theoretical and practical impact on the Medieval Period's cultural and religious worldview. In that scenario, his entrance in Gaur ushered in a new era in Bengalis' civic character. At the time, Gaur was the main administrative seat of Bengal, and Tantric and Islamic influences were very strong. He visited Ramkeli in June 1515 on his journey to Brindiban, most likely near the end of Hussain Shah's administration. The villagers were enthralled by Vaishnavism. His inspirational teachings inspired two brothers, Rup and Sanatan Goswami, to forego comfort and dedicate their lives to spreading the Krishna cause. Ramkeli is known as Krishnakeli, according to the renowned novel Chaitanyamangal by Jayananda. A large fair is celebrated every June to honour Chaitanyadev's visit to this locality. As a consequence of the idea of Chaitanya Deva, Vaishnavism flourished throughout North Bengal. Due to the Kheturi festival, this religion grew in popularity over time.*

Keywords: Tamaltola, Muslim domination, Gaur, Philosophy, Temple, Incarnation, Kheturi festival

Malda was a pivotal site in the growth of Vaishnavism in Bengal. Gaur Banga was the capital of pre-Islamic Bengal and also in the pre-Islamic gateway. Gaurpur is mentioned in the Panini source, and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* refers to it as a wealthy province in eastern India under the Mauryan Empire. The Gupta monarch Samudragupta was supposed to have ruled over the Gaur and Rarh districts in particular. Gaur was well-known as a territory of Bengal during Samudragupta dominion, according to the sixth-century book *Brihat Sanhita*. The copper plate was unearthed in Jagadishpur hamlet, Punthia police station, Rajshahi district, and is now preserved at the Barindra museum.¹ Vaishnavism was the dominant religion throughout the Gupta empire, and the Gupta emperors also alluded to themselves as Param Bhagavat. As a result, the religion expanded throughout India, and the Sena kings, who were Kshatriyas from Karnataka's Chandra dynasty, came to Bengal from Kannar in Southern India. During the reign of Ballal Sen, the king of the Sen dynasty, the empire was divided into five parts: Rarh, Barendra, Banga, Bagri, and Mithila, each with its ruler. According to Rajnikanth Chakravarti, his

realm included the Mahananda river in the west, the Brahmaputra river in the east, Kamarupa in the north, and the Ganges river in the south. Shaivism was the official religion at the time, although Vaishnavism had also contributed significantly. To compensate for the lack of Vedic Brahmins in Bengal, Adishura summoned five Brahma scholars from Kannauj and bestowed their dignity on them. As a result, they are the ancestors of the majority of Bengal's Rari and Barendra Brahmins today. The vast quantity of Vishnu idols shows that Vaishnavism has been widely practiced in Gaur since before the 7th century. Lakshman Sen, the king of the Sena clan, was a devotee of Vaishnavism. He assumed the titles of Paramavaishnava, Param Narsingh, and many others. Gaur was well-known as the Sena rulers' administrative capital. Lakshman Sen, the emperor of the Sen dynasty, transformed the capital of Gaur into Lakshnavati. That is to say, Vaishnavism was widely practiced in Malda territory even before the Sena ruled. Needless to say, throughout Sena's reign, this religion gained in popularity. Joydev popularised Vaishnavism during this time with his influential book, *Gitagovinda*. His description of Vishnu's tenth incarnation has become widely accepted across India. The Panchapasna (Sakta, Saurya, Ganapatyo, Vishnu, and Shaiva) were more widespread in Gaur before the advent of Sri Chaitanyadev. However, with the appearance of Sri Chaitanya Deva, a new vista in Bengal's ideological equilibrium was revealed in the propagation of Vaishnavism's pure vision. The spread of Neo-Vaishnavism shattered the rigid caste hierarchy controlled by the higher castes, setting the ball rolling for the lower castes' upward social mobility. According to Risley, Gaudiya Vaishnavism was avowedly created for the social and spiritual upliftment of disadvantaged people.²

Gour, also known as Ramavati and Lakshmanavati, was most likely one of the Pala and Sen kings' royal capitals, but its recorded history does not begin until Muhammad-i-Bakhtiyar Khalji, the lieutenant of Qutubuddin Aibak of Delhi, conquered western and northern Bengal (Rarh and Varendra) in the year 599 of the Hijra, corresponding to 1202 AD. The monarchs of Bengal were Rai Lakshman Sen, who had renamed Gour Lakshmanavati after himself, and Muhammad-i-Bakhtiyar, who was marching east from Bihar through the south-eastern path. Captured at his capital of Nadia on the Bhagirathi River (now represented by Nabadwip a little further west of Krishnagar), Lakshman Sen fled to Lakshmanavati and then to Sunargaon in Eastern Bengal, where his descendants ruled for another century. When Lakshman Sen was 80 years old, the Muslims invaded his domain. Madhaba, Keshava, and Biswarupa were his three sons from his two wives, Basudevi and Ballava Devi. Halayudha Misra was his minister.³ So the history of Muslim domination began in this period and continued for roughly 400 years, until the Battle of Palashi in 1757. This long period of Islam had a massive effect on Maldah's spiritual practice. This religion had a far-reaching impact, particularly as a result of Islam and the state religion's conversion. The

peaceful livelihood of Sufi saints and saints was associated with it. However, when the Bengal rulers declared their independence, Firuzabad (Pandua) became the capital. Gaur's dominion remained powerful and rich for a long time, and it had no equality in India in terms of wealth and importance except in Delhi. The city was huge and well-known, and it was populated by wealthy individuals, high-born families, and people with a reputation for erudition. A sizable standing army was also stationed there.⁴ The personality of Gaur City reached its zenith of splendour during the reign of Barbak Saha. According to Faria-I-Suza, a Portuguese historian who visited Gaur in the mid-15th century, the avenues of Gaur were wide. During his tenure, a number of mosques were erected. The Hindus were not permitted to perform religious ceremonies, other gatherings, or festivals in Gaur by the orthodox Pathans. As a consequence, Hindus performed religious rituals along the Ganga's bank from Dwarbasini to Remkeli's end. As a result, Hindu settlement and development occurred in Ramkeli village.⁵ The religious and cultural traditions in this area were known as Gaur even before Sri Chaitanya Deva arrived, with names like Lakhanavati, Ramkeli, and Gaur.

Gaur's music lesson was the catalyst for his enlightenment. In the manner of practice songs, over forty ragas were mentioned. The effect of Gaudiya can now be observed in musicology. Among the names are Gauri, Baradi, Dhansi, Srirag, Turi, Parmonjari, Kamod, Vairabi Shankara, Bharon, Lalit, Saurastri, Gujjari, and Malashree. More ragas are mentioned in Charyagi, such as Karnati, Bhairabi, Kamod, Dhanshi, Ramkeli, Boradi, Mollar, Malashree, and so on. In the royal court of Lakshnavati, not far from the village of Ramkeli, Joydev narrated the love story of Radha Krishna through his Gitagovinda music. The Muslim invasion ended the Sen kingdom and the Gaur region's Hindu holy places, education, and other forms of culture. As a result, numerous temples, schools, *Chatupathis*, monasteries, and universities across the region were razed. With the conquests of Gaur and Lakshnavati in the final stages of Nadia's conquest, the Muslim empire was established. As a result, the Islamic victory flag was flown in cities and towns like Gaur, Ramkeli, Phulbari, Devgram, Lakshnavati, Kanchannagar, Pundranagari, Devkot, and others. The temple was destroyed here, as was the Sitapith of Patalchandi in Devkot. The Hindus' public feast suffered a setback when their big Hindu religion was disobeyed in the house. The Brahmins' power and influence were substantially reduced in both the political and religious arenas. The emergence of Chaitanyadev, on the other hand, had a significant impact on Hinduism's orthodox social fabric.⁶ Krishna Das Kabiraj mentioned Roop Goswami and Sanatan Goswami, as well as the issue of low caste. Kumardev, Sanatan's father, converted from Hinduism to Islam, according to some investigators. As per *Riazul Salatin*, Alauddin Hussain Shah invaded Orissa from the throne and captured all the provinces from Gaur to Orissa.⁷ Prior to the arrival of Chaitanyadev, however, the reputation of Nabadwip and Gaur as the greatest centres of Bengal had grown. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee

remarked that when the Turk Afghans emerged in Bengal, the basis of Bengali culture and intellect was strong enough. The Islamic ruling elite, i.e., Islamists, did not want him to be overthrown. The transformative ideology that was passed down through Chaitanyadevas' hands in religion, action, philosophy, music, knowledge, and literature is thought to be the most unique chapter in history.

Bengal's significant religious reformer, arrived at Gaur in June on his way to Brindiban, most likely near the end of Husain Saha's reign, and remained for a few days at Ramkeli, which is now known as Krishnakali. Rupa and Sanatana visited Chaitanya at Ramkeli and had a conversation with him. The visit of Chaitanya to Ramkeli is still commemorated by a large fair that takes place there every June. Sri Chaitanya Deva arrived at Gaur or Ramkeli and was able to awaken the people there. As a result, a large crowd began to congregate around Ramkeli, and the chanting persisted. Sultan Hussain Shah of Gaur received word of Chaitanyadev's arrival in Ramkeli. Amatya Keshab Khan told Gaurdhipati that;

*Who is to say that Gosain is a beggar monk?
Immigrants are bad tree-sitters.⁸*

After Chaitanya departed from Gaur, Rupa Goswami and Sanatana Goswami grew tired of worldly affairs and finally submitted his resignation to the emperor, who angrily ordered him to imprisonment in the state jail. Sanatana is said to have effected his escape from prison by bribing the jailor while Hussain Saha was engaged in an invasion of Orissa. The jailor's name is given as Shaikh Habboo, a resident of Fathpur. According to the Champak Kalika, a bribe of one lakh rupees was paid to the jailor. The *Chaitanya Charitamrita* puts the sum at some thousand. Rupa Goswami and Sanatana Goswami spent the last years of their lives in Brindiban, where they attained sannyasis and even greater reputation and honour than they had previously had as ministers.⁹

Anyone stopping at the nearby Gour Bungalow should pay a visit to Remkali, a small settlement located halfway between the Baraduari Mosque and the Piyasbari Bungalow. Chaitanya had stayed for a few days in this village, which is now known as Tamaltola. Between four keli kadambo trees, the tamal tree where he sat is still standing. The tree is presently surrounded by a raised platform on which an etched tablet representing Chaitanya reclining in meditation has been erected. There is also a footprint of the master's feet etched into the stone. It was said that there is also a large tank named Rupa Sagar, as well as four smaller tanks named Shyam kundo, Lalita kunda, Radha kunda, and Bishakha kunda, all of which are located on Ramkeli's sacred soil and the names of comparable tanks at Brindibana, it was said. According to local legend, Jiva Goswami, Rupa, and Sanatana Goswami's nephew excavated these four tanks in Tamaltola.¹⁰ Pilgrims gather from all over Malda and the surrounding districts to pay their respects. They are

predominantly Vaishnava Hindus, and their numbers have been steadily growing over the years. Worship is performed and feasts are served in Krishna's honour during the celebrations. Vaishnavas also take advantage of this opportunity to marry in exact accordance with Chaitanya's ceremonies, which last for five days.¹¹

At the mercy of Narottam Dutt, the Zamindars of the mighty Barandro were converted to Vaishnavism. Even the bandit zamindars of Barindra were converted to Vaishnavism, especially Chand Roy, Harishchandra Roy, Banamali Chatta, and Govinda Barua. Vaishnava gurus organised the Kheturi festival in Kheturi village, Rajshahi district, Bangladesh, to propagate and popularise Vaishnavism in North Bengal. Even after Chaitanyadev arrived in North Bengal, powerful Bamachari was widely practiced. That is why, rather than this religion, the Kheturi festival was designed to awaken Vaishnava doctrine among them. Between 1610 and 1620, the Kheturi festival was performed. Janhyobidebi, Birbhadra's mother and Nityananda's wife, played a significant role in the ceremony. There were also poets like Gyanadas, Kamalakar Pipilai, Minketan, Ramdas, Balramdas, Vrindavandas, and others. Chaitanya Pujan, Krishna Pujan, Kirtan, and Mahatsab were some of the festivities that took place during the Kheturi festival. Furthermore, Brindiban Das' *Chaitanya Bhagavat* and Krishnadas Kabiraj's *Chaitanyacharitamrita* were revered in Vaishnava temples and festivities. Sri Krishna, Ballabi Kant, Brajmohan Radhakanta and Radhamohan were worshipped as deities.¹² Birbhadra Goswami, the son of Jahnava Devi, was influential in the propagation of Vaishnavism. Many Buddhist followers were converted and initiated into Vaishnavism together with Birbhadra. They were given the name Nera because of their shaven heads. Under the influence of the leader, Narasimha, all of these converts generated numerous problems at the same time.¹³ All of these misled people were brought back into the social stream and baptised into Vaishnavism thanks to Birbhadra. That was calculated by James Wise. At the time, 84 percent of the people in the Dhaka district practiced Vaishnavism or Krishna worship.¹⁴ As a result, it can be inferred that there was a considerable influence in the Dhaka district. Birbhadra took a break in Malda's Gayeshpur on his way back from Dhaka. The arrival of Gayeshpur Birbhadra on the banks of the Mahananda prompted the Vaishnava worshippers to go insane. As word of Birbhadra's arrival spread, a huge number of Vaishnava devotees arrived, kicking out the *kirtan Leela*. Durlav Chhetri, Keshab Chhetri's son, was born in Gaur. The Sultan's bodyguards were led by Keshab Chhetri. When Chaitanyadev arrived in Ramkeli, he met Keshab Chhetri and is said to have been initiated into Vaishnavism as well. Durlav Chhetri, the son of Keshab Chhetri, endowed Birbhadra with a lot of meditation and property. Sri Ramakrishna, a descendent of Birbhadra, later built Sripat in this vicinity.¹⁵

The Sakhi Bhava Vaishnava community is another form of Vaishnava faith that has been embraced, propagated, and garnered popularity in Malda

province. The forest *tota* was at the heart of this witnessing attitude. Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar stated that the worship of Radha, more prominently than that of Krishna, has given rise to a sect whose members assume the garb of women with all their ordinary manners.¹⁶ Gayeshpur Vaishnavism spread among the local impoverished castes such as Polly and Bagdi. In their endeavour, Nandi and Jangali, two devotees of Sita Devi, Adwitya Acharya's wife, founded an ashram in Maldar Janggalitola. Babaji's clothing was worn by unmarried Vaishnavas who worshipped here.¹⁷ In order to make new friends, men would disguise themselves as women. Radha, according to the Gaudiya Vaishnava scriptures, used to take on Krishna's form. Witness worshipers used to be known as Goswamis, but it was later discovered that they were known as Thakuranis. That is to say, the term Thakurani was coined to represent the witness's achievement. To put it another way, rather than taking the title of Goswami, the desire to assume the title of Thakurani grew. Mrs. Supriya Goswami, Mrs. Chanchali Goswami, Mrs. Malati Priya Thakurani, Mrs. Madhyapriya Thakurani, and Mrs. Anandapriya Thakurani were among the notable Vaisnavas of Sakshibhava. The Vaishnavas of Sakshibhava did not marry. They used to adopt a child to safeguard the family, and when she grew up, she became a nobleman first, then a woman, and then a devotee of Krishna Bhajan. The fundamental goal of their accomplishment was to become Lord Krishna's buddy. In 1809, Buchanan Hamilton remarked on the Vaishnava importance of the location, stating that "in the region of Gaur, at a site known Janggalitola is the main seat of the Sakshibhava Vaishnavs who dress like girls, assume female names, and dance in honour of God."... Sita Thakurani, Adwaito's wife, is claimed to have formed the order. Janggali, a Brahman, and Nandani, a kayastha, were the first two people to take up the order of Sakshibhava. Only his disciples, who are Vaishnavas who shun marriage, remain in this region because Janggali was never married. In Sankranti, Vaishnavism festivals are still held at Jangali Tota near Gaur. However, Sakshibhav's historical tradition is no longer alive and well, as this branch has nearly died out after Mrs. Ahlyarani left Sakshibhav and was initiated.¹⁸

Ramkelli's Vaishnava religion, or devotional movement, once surged in the form of a new island. At Ramkeli, Rup and Sanatan Goswami were built the Madanmohan temple, which is still in use today. In 1838, the temple was reconstructed. This temple also houses idols of Sri Chaitanyadev, Nityananda, and Aditya Acharya, among others. The splendour of the ritual held at Madan Mohan temple is still remembered today. In a ritual centred on this temple, devotees who are admitted into Vaishnavism donate Matripind. This tradition continues to this day among many classes of people in Gaur. In the Malda district's rural parts, Khotta is a widely spoken language. They are all of the Muslim ancestries. They are mostly found in the Malda district's Kaliachak, Harishchandrapur, Ratua, and Manikchak divisions. This language, which is a combination of Hindu, Urdu, and Bengali, is a mixture of Hindu, Urdu, and Bengali. The six Goswamis took Sri Chaitanya's ideal Gaudiya

Vaisnava worldview to the stage of popular activity throughout his life and death. Roop Goswami, Sanatan Goswami, and Jiva Goswami were three notable Goswamis who lived in the Malda district. Ramkeli was turned into Vrindavan under their influence. Ramkeli became not only a flourishing town but also a symbol of religious and cultural prosperity, owing to their intervention. As a result, the skies and the air were filled with an overflowing stream of adoration for Krishna. According to Bipin Chandra Pal, "This great Vaishnava upheaval spawned a continental mass movement in India." Sri Chaitanya's movement also contributed significantly to the emancipation of Bengali Hindus from the various social evils that they had been subjected to in the old Brahminical society. All of this had a significant impact on the uplift of the Bengali people.¹⁹

The greatest Bengali leader of all time, Sri Chaitanyadev, came in the sixteenth century to Ramkeli in the Malda region and consecrated this land. Many changes in the cultural environment of this region occurred as a result of the presence of this great man. He sought to clean up the accumulated dirt of the previous 500 years, including tragic events in history and culture, religious prejudice, and economic and social disparities, equitably and democratically. In other words, he desired to incorporate both the intelligent social structure and the devotion-ruled society. He delivered the life-giving mantra of liberty to the disregarded by destroying the Islamic aristocracy's royal arrogance. That is why, as a consequence of his advent in East India, democratization was established; all of his dynamics laid the foundation for democratic spirituality. Many changes occurred in the mainstream of Vaishnava society after Chaitanya's death. Chaitanyadev believed that by progressing along the path of knowledge and reason, he would be acknowledging the pundits' erudition, seating the worthy in seats of proper dignity, and engaging them for the benefit of human freedom.

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