

## Historical Backdrop of the Sahajiya Vaishnava Community in Bengal

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**Abstract:** *The prime objective of my present research effort is to illuminate numerous dimensions of spiritual as well as regional history by exploring the historical backdrop of the Sahajiya Vaishnava community in Bengal. The fundamental ideology of Sahajiya Vaishnava doctrine was stoicism; the way to human emancipation was through a simple path based on austerity, love-religion, and unscriptural pursuit. It is to be said that during the post-Chaitanya epoch, the Vaishnava Sahajiya ideology was developed. There was a gradual infiltration of Tantrism into the Vaishnava spirituality preached by Nityananda Mahaprabhu and the followers of Narhari Das. So, the unity among the Vaishnava community in Bengal was destroyed. As a result, they were separated into different religious sects. The sensation of the deepest love streaming between Radha and Krishna, or 'Rasa' and 'Rati' as Vaishnava writers often describe them was the fundamental philosophy of Sahajiya Vaishnava. Since the Tantrics' and Buddhists' psychological Yogic Sadhana led to the development of the Vaishnava Sahajiya's emotional yoga asana of love, the Vaishnava Sahajiya's love culture has always been set up and based on the psychological Yogic Sadhana. Sahajiya's vibrant spiritual ideology within Vaishnavism arose and flourished in contemporary society. Then Birbhadra, the son of Nityananda, emerged as a messenger and messiah of emancipation for the Sahajiya followers. By looking for the divine in people, Sahajiya Vaishnavism worshippers, or "devotees," felt the vibration of human redemption.*

**Keywords:** Birbhadra, Love religion, Parakiya, Radha Krishna, Fundamental, Philosophy, Doctrine

The *Sahajiya* is a unique or distinctive religious community that worships and simply venerates God. The word "*Sahajiya*" comes from the Sanskrit language. It means "born with" and refers to a natural tendency that someone has had since birth. The *Sahajiya* have given priority to the attribute of love in their understanding of divine nature, stating that love is an inherent criterion of the Supreme Being that is obtained by the human because of his creation from the Supreme Being. It is to be noted that the *Parakiya* philosophy was manifested almost throughout the doctrine of *Sahajiya*. So, even solvation can't be brought

about by an outside force. Instead, a person must perfect himself to reach salvation. From the beginning through the post-Chaitanya period, it has been considered the chronology of the *Sahajiya* doctrine. The idea of *parakiya* can be traced in the Vedas and Upanishads, in certain Buddhist texts, and to the early stages of human civilization. And in Plato's writings, he supports the philosophy of pragmatic culture in the company of women while concentrating primarily on the intellectual element of amour. The *Sahajiya* philosophy is deeply embedded in the parakeet notion. The underpinnings of the *Sahajiya* spiritual culture's transcendental edifice are strong. For this reason, the words *sahajiya* and *parakiya* are used in almost the same sense. In Vaishnavism, the love of Radha and Krishna, which has a higher spiritual significance, has been interpreted identically. *The idea of Parakiya* is therefore a momentous factor both in the ideas of the *Sahajiyas* and of the later Vaishnavas of Bengal. The psychological components of the *Sahajiya* concept of the Vaishnava religious doctrine developed the psychological components of the *Sahajiya* concept. The main idea behind Sahajiya Vaishnava was that Radha and Krishna, or '*Rasa*'<sup>1</sup> and '*Rati*'<sup>2</sup> as Vaishnava authors call them, had a deep love for each other. We must keep in mind that the doctrine cannot be found in its current form among the *Sahajiya* of today. It's common for spirituality to change considerably in societal circumstances throughout the ages. Every religion in the world has undertaken significant improvements, and the form in which it first emerges can't be found with all its characteristic features in the subsequent stages of its development among its more enlightened followers. Because advancement is inherently dynamic, it necessitates a change to proceed. According to this universal law, we might expect the *Sahajiya* ideology to show signs of advancement at different points in time. So, this basic idea has been a way for society to change and move forward for a long time.

The *Sahajiya* philosophy has been classified into two categories the Buddhist *Sahajiya* and the Vaishnava *Sahajiya*. The Buddhist *Sahajiyas* originated from the Vajrayana Buddhist community's philosophy. The Buddhist *Sahajiya* community in Bengal rose to prominence during the Pala period between the 8th and 12th centuries CE. But the re-awakening of Hinduism took place during the Sen period, and they secretly gradually took refuge in society for various social, political, and religious reasons. After the Turkish conquest of Bengal, the *Shahajiya* relocated to Bengal's outskirts. They even took refuge in Nepal and Bhutan. The concourse of Radhakrishna with the propagation of Vaishnavism was widely disseminated in Bengal from the reign of the Sena rulers. The religious thought of the people who were inspired by the *Sahajiya* ideology was well-established and based on a number of mysterious pursuits. After the Sen period, all of these essential and popular mystical endeavours were gradually concentrated into Vaishnavism. The "*Saha*" ideology, or epistemology, was compiled in Vaishnavism in this fashion. The "*Vaishnava Sahajiya*" philosophy transmitted the "Buddhist

*Sahajiya* doctrine that had previously dominated.<sup>3</sup> After the advent of Sri Chaitanyadev, this Vaishnava simple pursuit has emerged with new energy, aspirations, and characteristics. But it's important to remember that the seeds of this simple idea developed and grew during the pre-conscious epoch.

The narrative of Sri Krishna's Vrindavan *Leela* has been prevalent in Bengal for time immemorial. Since the eighth century, the interwoven or combined narrative of Radha Krishna's *Leela* has efflorescence in several Bengali literary works. Joydev composed *Gitagovinda*, *Lilashuk*, and *Krishnakarnamrit* was written by Bilbamangal, apart from this, diversified poems have been written in an endeavour to highlight the form of Radhakrishna's *Leela* and had popularized the philosophy. During Sen's reign, the story of Radha Krishna's *Leela* was extensively disseminated through poetry and prose.<sup>4</sup> There was extensive dissonance between the upper class and the lower class in society. The caste-ruled society was divided into Brahmin "*Achariniya*" and *Shat-sudra* "*Anachari*". Since the advent of Islam, various complications and problems have arisen in Hindu society, especially the trend of expulsion from religion due to Muslim contact, which has increased fatally. All these masses were expelled from Hindu society, and due to such social shocks and disasters, many ethnically deviant Hindus were forced to convert to Islam. Gradually, this tendency of metamorphosis became the social norm in society. At that time, almost all lower-class people in society were illiterate, ignorant, and socially exploited; on the other hand, they lacked social rights in terms of religious tradition or practice. In the sixteenth century, under the patronage of Chaitanyadev, devotional accomplishments of the so-called lower castes were described as auspicious or superior to those of the devout upper-caste Brahmins. 'চণ্ডালোপহী দ্বিজ শ্রেষ্ঠ হরিভক্তি পরায়ন' God's pursuit became the main philosophy of God's accomplishment through *Harinam Sankirtan*. Sri Chaitanya Deva's life philosophy has flourished in the pursuit of abandonment and renunciation. As a consequence of his religious ideology of compassion, prosperity, and sympathy for all living beings, people of different faiths and castes became more captivating. Many people were fascinated or enchanted by his spiritual philosophy, which he propagated for the common masses. Many downtrodden and ignored people of Hindu society adopted the Vaishnava faith he preached. The ambience of society was obsessed with action less with various programs of Shakti and *Tantrik* metaphysics, in this way simple "*Harinamaibakebolam*" only sound had been disseminated extensively. Chaitanyadev's devotional philosophy had become the universal religious faith of the common people. Simple, ostentatious devotional Vaishnava religion was gradually like the Tantric method of Bengali Vaishnava philosophy and was gradually able to take a unique position. Chaitanyadeva wished to elevate the religion and community through liberalism and mass influence.<sup>5</sup> The *Sahajiya* have also received the Vaishnava thought of the several stages of theological life with meagre alterations. There are three main stages in a person's spiritual journey:

such as *pravarta*, or the first stage; *Sadhaka*, or the middle stage; and Siddha, or the final stage of perfection.<sup>6</sup>

However, it's worth noting, that Vaishnavism in Bengal was not originated from Bengal. Joydeva's, Chandidasas', and Vidyapati's lovely songs about Radha and Krishna's love religion were well-known in Bengal even before Chaitanyadeva's appearance. Even though Chaitanyadeva established a neo-Vaishnava movement by presenting a fresh interpretation of the old faith, the Vaishnava tradition of the region had a huge and varied influence on him. Chaitanyadeva's reconstruction of Bengal Vaishnavism was both homogeneous and complicated, and while it may be tied to the history of Vaishnavism's growth and development in general, Caitanyaism's dogmas and spiritual practices are no less integral components of the same. It is a mistake to speak of the great saint as a social reformer, even though his life and teachings had innumerable societal consequences. He dared to preach a religious freedom message that included everyone in the cult of loving devotion. Naturally, this struck a chord in the hearts of the common people. The streamlining of religion was one of the most remarkable elements of this neo-Vaishnavism.<sup>7</sup>

In the post-Chaitanya period, numerous Goswamis established Chaitanya's philosophy in the Gaudiya Vaisnava doctrine by adopting well-planned principles through manifold scholarly presentations.<sup>8</sup> It can thus be claimed that the Chaitanya epoch was the timeframe in which the Bengali community and culture had attempted to recover from centuries of accumulated impurity and darkness. According to Ghulam Murshid, in his book "*Hazar Bacharer Bangali Sanskriti*" Chaitanyadev preached the message of love religion, and equality in Hindu society by striking at the impenetrable wall of caste that had been created over the ages.<sup>9</sup> Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, the wave of devotional movement swept over almost the exhaustive Indian territory. The notion of devotion originated from the Upanishads. It later became a versatile religion, which was marked by a kind of liberal determination toward the conventional religion. The basic features of which were the feeling of universal brotherhood and the secular ambience of religious practice. The Bhakti religion, which is closely associated with Vaishnavism, developed an alternative and coherent ideology against the orthodoxy of mythological Brahmanism dogma. As a result, the *Sahajiya* ideology had a profound effect on the lower classes of society. At the commencement of Chaitanyadev's spiritual activities in Nabadvipa, Nityananda and other important devotees involved the lower-class people of the society including Sweeper, Tanner, Chandaland other depressed class people in this movement.<sup>10</sup>

Radhakrishna's inherent and twin combination or union is the main chant of Vaishnava *Sahajya* doctrine, which is the absolute philosophy. The main fundamental principle of this union was profound spiritual or

theological love. The *Sahajiya's* theory of the '*parakiya*' element concentrated the Vaishnava spiritual doctrine in several ways. In this context, Haraprasad Shastri has emphasized that the formerly Buddhist middle class who belonged at the lower level and the spiritual theory of Vaishnava '*Sahajiya*' had propagated and spread among the lower class conservatives. So where did the *Sahajiya* or Sahajahan community go? They have either accepted Vaishnavism or converted to Islam. It is to be noted that the *Guru Bhajan* idea of the Vaisnavas has been adopted from Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> The erotic interactions between men and women in Hindu Tantra and Buddhist *Sahajiya* pursuits were particularly yoga- and wisdom-oriented. As a consequence of the propagation and proliferation of love religion in Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, love or affection was incarnated and illuminated in *Sahajiya* Vaisnava religion in particular.<sup>12</sup> Riskey's Tribes and Castes of Bengal, has commented that "this section of the Vaishnava community is treated as though it were a separated caste." This is most likely because it has no caste system and does not observe the *smarta* principles, which are the foundation of Hindu society's social and domestic life. In this sense, it is a completely Vaishnava community that practices exclusively Vaishnava rituals in their everyday lives. This differentiates it, although it is a group of householders from the *grihastha* class of the sect. It has its distinct marriage rituals, for example, widow remarriage is permitted, and divorce is practised. Among them, remarriages are legitimated following divorces as well. The community has no *gotra*, but they claim to have received an *Achyutagotra* from Krishna himself. Among them, fifteen families played prominent roles, such as the Nityananda family, the Shyamachand family, the Jagdish Pandit family, and others. The lack of *smarta* ceremonies in marriage has caused discontent because their marriage is not considered valid under Hindu law.<sup>13</sup> According to H. Riskey Vaishnavism in the form of races called '*Sanyogi*' and '*Bantasi*' Vaishnavism people of various castes used to become '*Jat*' *Vaishnav* after being initiated into Vaishnavism. They are moreover segmented into several communities and live separately. Marital relations between Vaisnavas from different communities are forbidden. There would have been no hurdles in the way of marriage if the husband had given his own communal mantra to the bride and the bride accepted it. *Goswami* or *Gosai* was recognized as the social leader of the *Jat* Vaishnavism in Bengal. For initiation and maintaining the social discipline of the *Jat* Vaisnavas, the entire province of Bengal was divided into numerous regions. The person responsible for the management of each region was called *Gosai* and *Adhikari* assisted *Gosai*. *Faujdar* to cooperate with *Adhikari* and the *faujdar* was moreover mentioned as *Khuro*. On the other hand, *Chharidar* used to assist *Khuro*. There was a provision for those who were initiated to share their donation proportionately among all the gurus. Originally, *Jat* Vaisnavas were household Vaisnavas, and their teaching method was very ordinary, simple, and unpretentious. The guru used to whisper the '*ekakshari*' mantra into the ears of his upcoming disciple and he would hand over to the devotees the *Dori*,

*Kaupani*, and *Bahibas*, the garland of *tulsi* around his or her neck and the coconut shell, or *Karanga*, in his hand. Child marriage was recognized by the *Jat* Vaishnavas. According to Riskey, among the *Jat* Vaisnavas, carnal intercourse of an adult unwedded girl was not given much importance. However, the initiation occurs before the marriage. Marriages were performed without regard for the scriptural precepts of the prevalent Brahmanical religion. The guardian of the daughter used to donate the daughter. The bride and groom used to complete the marriage by exchanging mutual *konti*. Widow marriage was prevalent among the *Jat* Vaishnavas, but when widows remarried, the donation of daughter ceremony was not performed.<sup>14</sup> Guru Gonsai used to offer Chaitanyadev sandalwood flowers. Chaitanyadev would have been bestowed a *Malsabhog*

In the post-Chaitanya epoch, the substitute of the Vaishnava religion in Bengal was due to the monopoly of the *Sahajiya* sect. Judging from the historical point of view, Radha's alienism theory was reinforced in the pre-Chaitanya and post-Chaitanya periods through the narration of *Leela's* beauty in the writings of several Vaishnava poets in such a way that it could not be suppressed in the theory alone. As a result, Radha Krishna's *Leela* had been consecutively introduced among the devotees through alienism theory. In the post-Chaitanya epoch, GaudiyaVaisnavism flourished in the way alluded by RoopGoswami, Sanatan Goswami, and Jeev Goswami. Therefore, Vrindavan Goswami's doctrine, epistemology, and ideology were the refuges of Vaishnavism on the other hand *Shrikhandwas* also a sacred place.<sup>15</sup> Devotees of Gaudiya Vaishnavism are the worshipers of the Radha-Krishna twin. After the *Kheturi* festival slightly different activity or discipline was implemented in the Vaishnava community. In Vaishnava shrines and hermitages, many provisions, such as Chaitanya Puja, Krishna Puja, *Chaitanyacharitamrita*, and *Chaitanya Bhagavata* scripture text, were propagated.<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence, idol worship of Bishnupriya and Chaitanya Deva became popular at Nabadwip. The devotees and offspring of Nityananda placed a high value on Gaur Nitai, and they were initiated to venerate the Gour-Nitai combination. Gadadhar's disciples decided to worship Gaur-Gadadhar as well. The conflict between the followers of Nityananda and the followers of Advaita intensified. Sita Devi, Advaityo Mahaprabhu's wife, introduced the '*Sakhi*' sadhana. Nityananda's wife, Jahnavi Devi, Nityananda's wife and the chief lady of the *Kheturi* festival, likewise propagated contrary views. Nityananda's adopted son, Banshi Badan Chattopadhyay, developed *Rasraj Sadhana*. As a result, gurus from various sections grew eager to build their own separate religious beliefs and implement their unique practices. That is why, in the occurrence of Vaishnavism in Bengal, numerous splits and individual groups emerged. It is said that Nityananda's wife Jahnavi Devi and son Birbhadra wanted to set up separate Vaishnava centres and ideologies. And they also tried to rule Bengal with their unique Vaishnava ideology by exerting their unlimited influence. Birbhadra initiated the *Nedas-Nedis* sect,

which originated from the Buddhist community in the late seventeenth century and was included in the Gaudiya Vaishnava religion. Birbhadra was greatly influenced by Jahnvi Devi. Birbhadra's contribution is unforgettable in the history of Gaudiya Vaishnava's progressive society. To know the context of various incidents about Birbhadra, one has to rely on books like *Prembilas*, *Narottam Bilas*, and *Bhaktiratnakar*. Besides, Rao, a follower of the Vaishnava *Sahajiya* religion, has given details about him. Upendranath Bhattacharya comments that a section of the lower class who did not convert to Islam despite being socially excluded, but came to the shelter of Vaishnavism while maintaining the Buddhist *Sahajiya Sadhana*, is called *Neds Nedis*. According to Haridasa Dasa, the 1200 *Nedas* (shaven-headed males) were 1200 prisoners of the Muslim ruler of Dacca. They were set free and converted by Virabhadra, and these *Neds* later married. *Nedis* was the name given to their spouses (shaven-headed females). Only four of the *Neds* from the beginning did not marry. These four men, led by *Gokulananda*, disseminated Vaishnavism throughout Rarh, East Bengal, and the Sundarban region.<sup>17</sup> The people of this community were included in Vaishnavism by Birbhadra.<sup>18</sup> Birbhadra inherited the radicalism of his father. It was manifest in his conversion of two thousand and five hundred Buddhist monks and nuns.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually, it became apparent that the *Neds-Nedis* group had a serious influence on the Vaishnava society. This group of '*Nedra-Nerids*' merged with a smaller Vaishnava *Sahajiya* stream that had previously influenced Bengal. In this fashion, in the post-Chaitanya period, the Vaishnava *Sahajiya* sub-community was composed on an extensive scale with renewed vigour. Love was considered a sacred discipline by the *Sahajiya* Vaisnavas. As a result, the hegemony of the *Sahajiya* sect was developed as the fundamental basis for Vaishnavism adoption in Bengal in the post-Chaitanya period. It is easily divided into different branches such as *Aul Baul*, *Kartabhaja*, *Sai Darbesh*, *Churadahri*, *Jat Gosai*, *Smarta*, *Atibari*, *Sokhi*, *Panchasokha*, *Kishorivajan*, *Guruprodashi*, *Haribolia*, *Paramhangsha Saja*, *Nathbhoya*, *Jugalbhajan*, *Adwaibadi*, *Ashramrodhi*, *Maddhabirodhi*, *Sebaparadhi*, *Baishnabparadhi*, *Namaparadhi*, *Dhamapdhari*, *Dada O Ma*, *Haridash*, *Spastadayak*, *Ramballavi*, *Saheb Dhani*, *Khushi Biswasi*, *Jaganmohani Community*, *Rat Bhikari*, *Balarami*, *Saddhini*, etc.

The mighty king of Nadia, Maharaja Krishnachandra Roy, was a staunch adherent of the Shakti religion and obeyed or respected the *Smriti* discipline. He refused to acknowledge or obey Chaitanyadev as a manifestation of Krishna or Vishnu. Similarly, a considerable segment of Nabadwip's intellectuals were non-Vaishnava *Smriti* followers. "*Kshitishvanshabali Charitam*," written by Dewan Kartikeya Chandra Roy, has described the history of the Krishnanagar royal dynasty. It is mentioned that Krishnachandra Roy was hostile towards the Chaitanya worshippers. To mitigate the dread of King Krishnachandra, even the idol of Sri Gauranga was kept hidden under the soil for a long time. Chaitanya worshippers used to venerate the idol of Chaitanya in a very clandestine manner.<sup>20</sup> However, in some cases, diverse religious properties

were offered to facilitate the worship of “Gopal-Thakur” under Krishnachandra’s direction. The *Harihar* temple in Gangabas and the *Yugalkishoreshrine* in Nadanghata were remarkable in this regard. He was, nevertheless, an orthodox Tantric and Shaktism worshipper. Nabadwipa’s scriptural provision was well known as the provision of the entire Bengal during that period. The *PanditSamaj* of Nabadwip bestowed on him the appellation of *Samajpati*. As a consequence, Nadia’s *spandit* community was also contemptuous and hated “*Jat-Vaishnava’s*”. The Vaishnavas were cornered at the birthplace of Mahaprabhu during the reign of Krishnachandra.<sup>21</sup> However, *Shakti Ras* was widely worshipped among the Vaishnava *Rasas* of *Vaishnavatirtha Navadoipa*, and that trend is still flowing nowadays. During Krishnachandra’s reign, Nabadwip, also known as ‘*Vaishnavatirtha,*’ had a limited number of Vaishnava shrines and hermitages.

### Notes and References

1. *Rasa* literally means “nectar, essence, or taste” in Indian aesthetics. It refers to the artistic flavour of any visual, literary, or musical work that elicits an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience yet cannot be articulated in words.
2. *Rati* is narrated as the most delightful or beautiful girl or goddess to have ever lived. She is a faithful consort of Kamadeva, the deity of love, and the two are frequently worshipped together as a goddess of desire, lust, and passion. *Rati*, like every great lady, is more than meets the eye, and her life story is even more fascinating than her appearance.
3. Upendranath Bhattacharyay, *Banglar Baul O Baulgan*, Orient Book Company, Calcutta, 1364 Bengali era, p. 127
4. *Ibid*, p. 262
5. *Ibid*, p. 280
6. N. N. Bose, *The Post Chaitanya Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, University of Calcutta, 1930, p. 7
7. S. C. Mukherjee, *A Study of Vaishnavism in Ancient and Medieval Bengal*, Kolkata, 1965, pp. 173, 174
8. *Ibid*, p. 280
9. Golam Murshid, *Hazar Bacharer Bangali Sanskriti*, Kolkata, Abashor Prakashana, 2005, pp. 81, 82
10. Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, *Banglar Bhakti Andoloner Poribartoner Dhara*, Kolkata, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 16, 17
11. Bhupendranath Dutta, *Vaishnav Sahitye Samajtattwa*, Kolkata, Chirayata Prakashini, Second edition, 2011, p. 57
12. Upendranath Bhattacharyay, *op.cit.*, p. 358
13. M.T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement : A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal*,



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14. Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *Bange Baishnab Dharma*, Kolkata, Ananda Publishers, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 2013, p. 144
15. Nanigopal Goswami, *Chaitanya Uttar Juge Gauriya Baishnab*, Kolkata, Karuna Prokashini, Calcutta, 1379 B.S., p. 165
16. Ibid, p. 88
17. Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *op.cit.*, p. 180
18. Upendranath Bhattacharyay, *op.cit.*, p. 251
19. Ramakanta Chakrabarty, *op.cit.*, p. 179
20. Saibal Sarkar, *Maharaja Krishnachandra O Samakal*, Kolkata, Mudra, 2019, p. 86
21. Rajatkanta Ray, *Palassir Sarajantra O Sekaler Samaj*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Kolkata, Ananda Publishers, 2008, p. 78