

The spread of Vaishnavism in Burdwan: A historical background

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical development of Vaishnavism in Burdwan, West Bengal, India, from ancient times to the 19th century. The spread of Vaishnavism in the region is examined through various inscriptions, archaeological evidence, and literary works. The article highlights the influence of Sri Chaitanya and the role of the Burdwan Raj in promoting Vaishnavism, as well as the impact of the movement on the local population. The study reveals that Vaishnavism gradually developed in Burdwan under royal patronage, with the Nimbarka and Gaudiya communities playing significant roles. The article also discusses the contributions of notable figures such as Maladhar Basu and Haridas Basu, who helped shape the Vaishnavite tradition in the region. Furthermore, the article examines the various pilgrimage sites and places of worship associated with Vaishnavism in Burdwan, highlighting their importance in the development of the region's spiritual consciousness. Overall, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the historical background of Vaishnavism in Burdwan and its enduring impact on the region's culture and society.

Key words: Vaishnavism, Burdwan, Sri Chaitanya, Bengal, Nimbarka, Gaudiya

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INTRODUCTION

Vaishnavism, a significant tradition within Hinduism, has a rich history in Bengal, and this study begins by tracing the roots of Vaishnavism in Ancient India, highlighting the evidence of Vishnu worship and Vaishnava traditions during the Gupta era (4th – 6th century AD). It then focuses on the specific historical context of Burdwan district, where Vaishnavism flourished under the patronage of Burdwan Raj, saints, and poets. The continuous history of Bengal in ancient times is available from the Gupta era. The spread of Vaishnavism in ancient India during this period is proven by the evidence of various inscriptions of the Gupta era. These inscriptions show evidence of the Gupta rulers being devotees of Vishnu, that is, the stories of Vaishnavism became well known by the fifth century AD. Although the evidence that Vaishnavism was prevalent in this country even before the Guptas is found in the Shushunia Hill inscription of approximately the fourth century AD, where Chandravarman is called Chakraswami or a worshipper of Vishnu. On the other hand, the archaeological evidence of Paharpur proves that the mythological stories about Sri Krishna were prevalent in Bengal from the sixth and seventh centuries AD. Hence, Vaishnavism spread particularly in Bengal during the period of the Sena dynasty. King Lakshman Sena was a supreme Vaishnavism. From his time, at the beginning of the royal rule, instead of Shiva, the hymns of Vishnu were introduced. Later, from the time of Sri Chaitanya, the rise of Neo-Vaishnava religion was seen. In this way, from ancient times, Vaishnava religion was gradually developing under the patronage of kings and emperors, saints and ascetics and poets and writers, and Bardhaman district is no exception. Well-known activities of Vaishnavas are spread across different areas of the district.

Objectives

The main goal of the study is to find out a comprehensive exploration of the historical development of Vaishnavism in Burdwan and this study shades light on its evolution and spread in Burdwan. So to achieve that goal the following objectives are considered:

- I. To investigate the historical development of Vaishnavism in Burdwan.
- II. To analyze the role of key figures in shaping Vaishnavism in Burdwan.
- III. To examine the cultural and social impact of Vaishnavism on Burdwan.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of this historical analysis is to find out the answer of the question: What were the key factors that contributed to the spread of Vaishnavism in Burdwan district during the Gupta era and subsequent periods? How did influential figures like Maladhar Basu and Sri Chaitanya shape the development and propagation of Vaishnavism in Burdwan? What impact did Vaishnavism have on the cultural and social landscape of Burdwan district, particularly in terms of art, literature, and community life? How did the patronage of Burdwan Raj influence the growth and development of Vaishnavism in Burdwan district? What role did Vaishnava pilgrimage sites play in promoting the spread of Vaishnavism in Burdwan district? This study is based on both secondary as well as primary data sources. Necessary information from books has been consulted. Data sources has been collected through library, such as Uday Chand District Library (Burdwan), National Library (Kolkata), Central Library (The University of Burdwan). Collected information are analyzed and represented after through study of the Secondary and primary information. Overall, the methodology used in this article appears to be rigorous and well-suited to the research question. The steps followed in the study can be organized in the following manner:

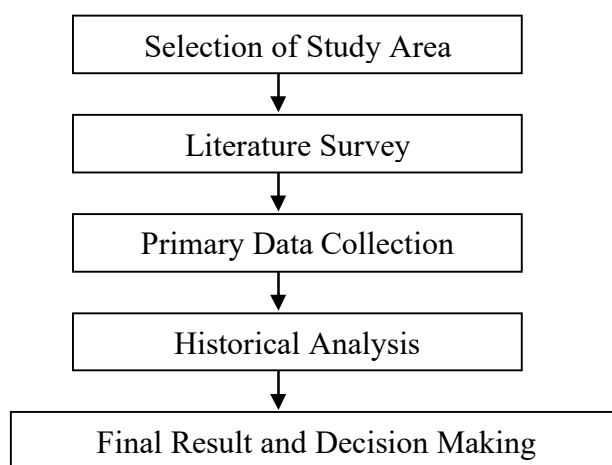


Fig1 : Flow Chart of methodology adopted to this study

RESULTSTS AND DISCUSSON

In an ancient copperplate inscription from 500 AD in Mallasarul village of Burdwan district, a Vishnu idol with a wheel is seen along with the names of some Vaishnava personalities.¹ This proves that Vaishnava avatar worship was prevalent in Burdwan too. Many Vaishnavas lived in Kuleengram and Shrikhande of Burdwan even before the advent of Chaitanya. The influence of Vaishnava religion was flowing in a lively stream here. Maladhar Basu of Kuleengram was awarded the title of 'Gunaraj Khan' by the Sultan of Bengal, Barbak Shah. Between 1473-1480 AD, Maladhar composed 'Shrikrishna Vijaya' based on the story of 'Bhagavata Purana'. It is also said that under the influence of the wealthy Basu family, who were high-ranking in the court of the Sultans, the lower caste inhabitants of Kuleengram became devotees of Vaishnavism. During the time of Sri Chaitanya and the subsequent period, Vaishnavism, influenced by the ideology of Chaitanya, actively flooded the lowest and marginalized classes of the people. In this way, a social activity of Vaishnavism developed everywhere.² Even in the nineteenth century, the sphere of Vaishnavism literature and culture did not disappear here. The poet Haridas Basu, a descendant of Maladhar Basu, preserved this tradition. Moreover, Haridas's contribution was also outstanding behind the 'Kirtaniya Samaj' that developed in Kuleengram under the influence of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's love religion.³

In the dark Middle Ages of the 15th century, when the common people were restless due to Brahminical exploitation and oppression in Bengali social life, the name of Maladhar Basu of Kuleengram in Burdwan remains memorable among those who rebelled against the prevailing customs.⁴ Moreover, when Maladhar Basu composed Sri Krishna Vijay, Muslim rule in Bangladesh was strong. In the riots that took place in Bangladesh in the early days of this Muslim rule, Hindus were more busy with self-defense than self-promotion. At that time, just as monasteries and temples were being destroyed, an attempt to convert ordinary Hindus to Islam was also very noticeable. Many people converted to Islam out of fear and the urge to survive. Bengali Hindus were terrified under this pressure for almost two centuries. It was against such a historical background that Maladhar Basu of Burdwan took up writing, adopting Bhagavatiya Sri Krishna. He realized that the weak Bengali nation needed an expression of heroism. In this case, the

heroic Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita could inspire the Bengali nation. Inspired by this sense of nationalism, he presented the heroic Krishna, or God himself, to the Bengali nation.⁵

Although Vaishnavism originated in Nabadwip in Nadia district in the 16th century, the asceticism of Sri Chaitanya Dev under Keshav Bharati in Katwa in 1510 AD made Katwa in Burdwan district known as a hotbed for the propagation and spread of Vaishnavism. Of the 76 Vaishnavism Sripatas mentioned in the Gaudiya Vaishnavism Dictionary compiled by Haridas Das, 50 percent are located in the Katwa subdivision and 25 percent in the Kalna subdivision.

Table 1: Apart from the areas adjacent to Katwa and Kalna, centres of Vaishnavism were established in various parts of Burdwan district, including :

Description	Location
Pilgrimage Site Of Vaishnavism	Daihat, Munhali, Akaihat, Singi, Agradwip, Baghranpur, Belga, Shrikhand, Shitalpur, Majhigram, Naihati, Mamgachi, Latagram, Vidyanagar, Baghnagara, Baragachi, Singarkon, Chapahati, Jhamatpur, Matishwar, Denur, Bhaita, Sar, Kandara, Palsit, Barabelun, Kogram, Dadhia, Bairagitala, Kuleengram, Maro, Dakshinkhand and Kanchannagar (Burdwan town)

Source: Bandhopadhyay, Pulakkumar (ed.), Vaishnavteertha-Kuleengram, Parul Prakashani, 2012.

Many scholars, poets, writers and talented people were born in these regions. They have immersed countless people of the district in the flood of Vaishnavism through their literary practice. These places, known as Vaishnava pilgrimage sites (Shripat), played an important role in the development of people's lifestyle and spiritual consciousness. As a result, people of different castes, creeds and communities of the district were influenced by Vaishnava religion.⁶

In the case of the town of Burdwan, the Burdwan Raj deserve special credit for the spread and propagation of Vaishnavism. Incidentally, out of the six types of Vaishnavism in the whole of India, only two types (Nimbarka community and Gaudiya community of Chaitanya) are found in the town of Burdwan. This community was able to expand its religion in this town with the financial support and patronage of the Burdwan Raj. The main place of worship of the Nimbarka community is the Mohanta Asthyal in Rajganj of the town, whose main deity is Raghunath Jiu. The Burdwan Raj, Kirtichand (1702-1740 AD) was the creator of this Mohanta Asthyal. Starting from the Jhulan and Dol festivals, all the festivals of Vaishnavism were celebrated here with great pomp. On the other hand, the main place of worship of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism was the Burdwan palace. The main deity of this sect is Radhavallabha Jiu. They (Nimbarka and Gaudiya sects) used to celebrate all the religious festivals of Vaishnavites in the town of Burdwan.⁷

Apart from the patronage of the Burdwan Raj, Gaudiya Vaishnavism was also seen spreading in the old Burdwan town, Kanchannagar, under the patronage of the devotee poet and poet-painter Govinda Das. It is known from the local history of Burdwan that Sri Chaitanya Dev accepted the hospitality of Govinda Das, the birthplace of Chaitanya's companion, and chanted the name of Harinam on the streets of Kanchannagar. Since then, Kanchannagar became known as a pilgrimage site (Govindadham) of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Since then, the Gaudiya Vaishnavism community found their base in the town of Burdwan.⁸ However, at that time, the town of Burdwan was under the control of the Pathans, so the growth of Vaishnavism could not be observed in that way. The Vaishnavism began to flourish during the reign of the Burdwan Raj. The Rajas of Burdwan used to help people of all religions along with practicing their own religion. Not only that, the Burdwan royal family established many Vaishnavism idols in the town.⁹ Thus, under royal patronage, Vaishnavism gradually spread in the town of Burdwan.

CONCLUSION

In the end, it can be said that the spread of Vaishnavism in Burdwan district has a rich and diverse history, dating back to the ancient period. The tradition of Vishnu worship in Bengal is quite ancient, with evidence of its practice available from the fourth century AD. From the fourth century to the fifteenth century, Vaishnavism and Vishnu idols were almost uninterruptedly present in the religious and social life of Bengal and Bengalis. Basically, the religious preferences of various kings, emperors or rulers and the influential social classes were one of the main regulators and driving forces of the religious evolution of different eras and periods. Thus, Vaishnavism was prevalent in the pre-Chaitanya period, but during the rise of Sri Chaitanya and its immediate aftermath, this new Vaishnavism of the new era spread very

rapidly in Bengal. Burdwan district was no exception. The significant of key figures such as Maladhar Basu and Sri Chaitanya in shaping the development of Vaishnavism in Burdwan. Maladhar Basu's composition of "Shreekrishna Vijaya" based on the Bhagavata Purana, and Sri Chaitanya's asceticism in Katwa, contributed to the spread of Vaishnavism in the region. In addition to various poets, writers, scholars of the district, and the Burdwan Raj played an important role in this. In the case of the town of Burdwan, the important role of the Burdwan Raj in the propagation and expansion of Vaishnavism can be seen. Particularly Burdwan Raj Kirtichand (1702-1740 AD), played a significant role in promoting Vaishnavism by establishing places of worship in various parts of the town, celebrating festivals, and supporting the community. In this way, Vaishnavism gradually developed in the city and district of Burdwan, influenced by the patronage of Burdwan Raj, saints and ascetics, poets and writers. The tradition of Vaishnavism in Burdwan continues to be an integral part of the region's cultural and social heritage, shaping the lives of people from different castes, creeds, and communities.

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