Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal: "Subcaste" (Jāti) without "Caste" (Vārna)

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I. Introduction

Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavas, i.e., devotees of Lord Krishna inspired by Caitanya (1486-1533) in Bengal, numbered several million by the twentieth century. The vast majority of these participated in the domestic and social affairs of their natal endogamous groups (jāti), subcastes, within the Brahmanically ordered system of caste and stage of life (varṇāśrama-dharma), alongside other jati-members who might or might not share their Vaiṣṇava faith. A small number of Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavas, ascetics usually called Bairāgis, eschewed domestic and social affairs altogether, a common enough Hindu phenomenon. What makes the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava population somewhat unusual in this respect is the appearance of a third category of Vaiṣṇava. These generally claim to maintain domestic and social affairs within an endogamous group (jāti), but consider that group open to accretion by persons of any caste status. Moreover, they consider their jati, which they simply call the Vaiṣṇava jati, to be independent of and antithetical to the Brahmanically ordered caste system. This category, the Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas as they are called, numbering half a million persons early in the twentieth century, thus presents the anomalous phenomenon of a subcaste without caste, or in the more intelligible Indian terminology, a jati (endogamous group) apart from varna (rank classification).¹

This report on the Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas of Bengal is an introductory sketch only, a tangent of my main research on religious and social values of Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavas in the context of varṇāśrama-dharma. It is based on data furnished by ethnographic works, statistical accounts, census reports, Vaiṣṇava periodicals and books and articles on Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavas, supplemented by information and impressions gained during exploratory visits with Jāti-Vaiṣṇavas in Calcutta, Visnupur, Bankura, Krishnanagar, and Navadvipa, all located in Indian West Bengal.² I offer this report in spite of its limitations because the Jāti-Vaiṣṇava case illustrates how significant the functioning of religious factors can be in two important processes of social change in Bengali Hindu society. The first is generating and maintaining in a distinctive form a novel type of community, the non-varna jati of devotees. The second is the...
reverse process whereby the non-varna jati—or at least its socio-economic elite—gradually reconstructs itself to conform more closely with a varna-jati, without, however, explicitly acknowledging the social or ritual authority of Brahmans over Vaisnavas.

I would hope by this report to encourage social anthropological research on contemporary Jati-Vaisnava life and to invite further inquiry into the socially innovative and socially conservative potential of Vaisnava religious symbolism, practices and institutions. This report summarizes both the process of forming the minimally structured non-varna jati and the process of its reconstitution on varna lines. A separate paper will examine in detail the ways in which Vaisnava symbolism, practices and institutions (briefly noted herein) functioned to motivate and give definite shape to these processes.3

II. Origins and descriptions of the Jati-Vaisnavas

Even though it is likely that the Vaisnava jati goes back to the time of Caitanya, there is no mention of it in Gaudiya Vaisnava literature prior to the eighteenth century. By that time a story had become current that one Virabhadra, son of Caitanya’s mildly antinomian associate, Nityananda (patriarch of the most extensive lineage of Gosvami gurus), had admitted to the Vaisnava community a large number of shaven-headed persons, male and female. Many have interpreted these shaven-headed converts as former ascetics, perhaps from Buddhist orders; but at least as plausible, if the story has any foundation in fact, is that the shaven head merely indicates the extreme humility of servants at the quasi-court of the Gosvami. The earliest mention of Jati-Vaisnavas in Bengali literature may be the description of the settling of some Vaisnava mendicants upon a plot of land in the Kavikañkaṇa-candi of Mukunda-rama, a late sixteenth century non-Vaisnava text. For fuller descriptions of the Jati-Vaisnavas we have to wait till the nineteenth century.4

Professor Sukumar Sen, historian of Bengali literature, suggests two likely sources of membership in the Vaisnava jati: former ascetics and their offspring, converts from relatively low, but not the very lowest, Hindu jatis. He also proposes that among such former ascetics there may have been onetime Jainas or Natha yogis (who bore Jaina influences) since the custom of burial in a seated posture corresponds to Jaina custom. As an ongoing source of new membership he referred to the Bengali proverb: jāt hārāle baisnab (i.e., “Vaisnava after losing caste”). In the nineteenth century, again according to Professor Sen, many Jati-Vaisnavas were employed as domestic servants by high caste families (suggesting that these employers, at least, did not consider them a source of pollution). A number of literate Jati-Vaisnava women served as tutors in well-to-do families (including the Tagore family) and some such women copied manuscripts, as evidenced by the holdings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Some of the more able converts would eventually become catechists or gurus to their former caste fellows.