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Diet, Devotion and Identity: Vegetarianism and Food Politics in the Gaudiya Vaishnava Traditions of Bengal

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Abstract:

Food is a fundamental aspect of human survival and livelihood and therefore occupies an important place in history. This paper examines the food habits of the Vaishnavas in the 16th century Bengal, with particular emphasis on the influence of Sri Chaitanyadeva in promoting vegetarianism among followers and the society. It argues that food practices were closely intertwined with culture, society and politics, each shaping and influencing the other. Amidst political instability and religious tensions, Chaitanyadeva introduced and popularized Vaishnava culture in Bengal. His emphasis on vegetarianism and the collective consumption of prasadam fostered social cohesion and helped to bridge the divisions among social and economic groups. Through these practices, Chaitanyadeva sought to cultivate moral discipline, spiritual devotion and social harmony within society.

Discussion:

Food is a significant component of culture, reflecting social relationships, cultural traditions and economic conditions. It serves not only as a means of sustenance but also as an important marker of identity and social interaction. Beyond its nutritional function, food plays a crucial role in strengthening social bonds among individuals, communities and even nations. Consequently, food culture constitutes an integral aspect of human society. As Leon R. Kass observes in *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*, food is an indispensable part of everyday human existence. It reflects cultural preferences, lifestyles and social values while shaping patterns of daily life. Food is therefore much more than a means of survival; it is also a source of pleasure, comfort and security. Politics has also exerted a profound influence on cultural formation and transformation. This study seeks to examine how political developments shaped society and religion, thereby contributing to the emergence of new cultural practices in medieval Bengal. These cultural transformations eventually became integral components of popular culture. Before addressing the central theme of this study, it is necessary to review the major scholarly work on food history that have influenced the present research and provided the intellectual framework for this investigation.

K.T.Achaya's *A Historical Dictionary of Indian food* first sparked my interest in the study of food history. His work examines the diverse food traditions and culinary practices of India. In *The Story of Our Food* Achaya highlighted the rich variety of Indian cuisine while in *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* and *The Illustrated Foods of India*, he traced the evolution of Indian Food habits from prehistoric times through the colonial period to the modern era. Taponath Chakraborty provided a vivid account of food and drink practices based on ancient textual sources, while Nihar Ranjan Roy discussed the food culture of ancient Bengal in the broader context of Bengali society and culture. Utsa Roy explored the culinary traditions of modern Bengal. Scholars such as Lizzie Collingham, Chitrita Banerjee and Minakshie Dasgupta have also made significant contributions to the study of Bengal's food culture, particularly in the modern period. However, the culinary culture of the Vaishnavas in medieval Bengal received comparatively little scholarly attention. This relative gap in the existing literature inspired me to understand a study of this important aspect of Bengal's food history. Political developments have significantly influenced the evolution of food culture. The arrival of the Aryans in India led to a process of cultural interaction and assimilation between Aryan and non-Aryan communities. Similarly in medieval India, sustained contact between Hinduism and Islam resulted in important cultural exchanges. In Bengal, the political and social landscape underwent considerable transformation between the 13th and 16th centuries following the establishment of Muslim rule after the conquest of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khalji. During this period, Hindu society became increasingly orthodox and rigid in certain respect, leading many people to embrace Islam.

Historian Mamatajura Rahamana Tarafdara, in Hussain Shahi Bengal argues that the rise of religious movements such as Vaishnavism in Bengal can be understood, in part, as a response to the challenges faced by Brahmanical Hinduism under socio-political conditions. Vaishnavism, particularly in Gaudiya form, adopted a comparatively liberal and inclusive outlook that appealed to a broad section of society. These religious transformations also influenced cultural practices, especially food habits, leading to a new form of cultural synthesis and assimilation. The spread of Gaudiya Vaishnavism was closely associated with the efforts of Chaitanyadeva. Without his leadership and devotional message, the movement might not have achieved such widespread popularity. In this context the "Great Man" theory offers a

useful framework for understanding his role. As noted by Jagadananda Das in *Charismatic Renewal in Gaudiya Vaishnavism* (part 1), observes that the history of Gaudiya Vaishnavism may be interpreted through the lens of the “Great Man” model. Drawing upon the sociological categories developed by Max Weber, Das describes the “Great Man” as a charismatic leader who breaks with established traditions and proclaims a transformative new message. Chaitanyadeva’s leadership and spiritual charisma played a crucial role in shaping the Vaishnava movement in Bengal.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1533 AD), the founder of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement, was born at Nabadwip in present-day West Bengal during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah. Born into a Brahmin family, he was the son of Jagannath Mishra and Sachi Devi. His childhood name was Vishvambhara, though he became popularly known as Nimai. A distinguished scholar in his youth, Chaitanyadeva underwent a profound spiritual transformation after a pilgrimage to Gaya and dedicated his life to the worship of Krishna. He preached a form of Vaishnavism centred on devotion to Radha and Krishna, emphasizing *nam-sankirtana* (congregational chanting of God's name) as the path to spiritual liberation. His teachings challenged rigid caste barriers and attracted followers from diverse social backgrounds. At the age of twenty-four, he accepted *sannyasa* and spent most of his later life at Puri, the principal centre of his religious activities. Although he left no written works, his teachings were preserved by his disciples and later Vaishnava scholars. Through his religious movement, Chaitanyadeva exerted a lasting influence on the social, literary, musical, and culinary traditions of Bengal.

Joseph T.O’Connell in his article “Chaitanya Vaishnava Devotion (Bhakti) and Ethicises Socially integrative in Sultanate Bengal,” argues that Bengal during the Sultanate period witnessed the emergence of a *modus vivendi* between the politically and militarily dominant Muslim elites and the economically influential Brahmanical Hindu elites. Although both groups possessed religious and legal frameworks capable of fostering social integration, their approaches differed significantly in their underlying principles. According to O’Connell, Muslim society emphasized egalitarian social solidarity rooted in exclusive monotheism, whereas Brahmanical Hindu society was characterized by a stratified social order that accommodated religious diversity. These contrasting yet coexisting social and religious systems shaped the cultural and social environment of Bengal during the period and provided the broader context within which Chaitanya-led Vaishnava movement emerged and flourished.

Chaitanyadeva faced strong opposition from orthodox sections of society, yet he successfully promoted unity among people of different castes and religious communities through the Bhakti movement. He taught that devotion to Krishna could transform an individual's character and foster compassion, humility, and moral discipline. At a time of social and political uncertainty in Bengal, his message of devotion and inclusiveness helped create a harmonious devotional community. Vegetarianism formed an important aspect of Vaishnava practice. Influenced by the concept of *sattva*, Chaitanyadeva encouraged the consumption of simple vegetarian foods, which were believed to promote purity, self-control, and spiritual awareness. Vaishnava ideology emphasized non-violence, humanity, and restraint from intoxicants and other harmful habits. Through these teachings, Chaitanyadeva sought to inspire ethical living and spiritual reform, exemplified by the celebrated transformation of Jagai and Madhai into devoted followers. Food became an important instrument of social and cultural reform during the time of Chaitanyadeva. Rather than relying on violence or confrontation, he promoted vegetarianism and the consumption of *sattvic* food to encourage moral discipline, self-control, compassion, and spiritual awareness. By discouraging intoxicants and emphasizing ethical living, he sought

to transform human behaviour and address social evils. Through this non-violent approach, food served as a powerful medium for fostering social harmony and moral regeneration in Bengal.

Chaitanya Charitamrita provides a vivid account of the meal served to Sri Chaitanyadeva at the residence of Advaita Bhattacharya. It is mentioned that Chaitanyadeva had fasted for three days, prompting Advaita Bhattacharya to invite him for a meal. In the fifth chapter of Madhyalila, Krishnadas Kaviraja offers a detailed description of the arrangements made for this occasion. Similarly, Chaitanyadeva was also invited to the house of Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, where the meal was prepared by the mother Sathi, Sarvabhauma's daughter. The text states that Bhattacharya returned home and instructed his wife to prepare an elaborate feast. She happily undertook the task, as all the necessary ingredients were readily available in the household. Bhattacharya himself gathered various leafy vegetables, fruits and other essential items required for cooking. The narrative further emphasizes her culinary expertise and familiarity with the art of preparing food. Through this description, the text offers valuable insights into the domestic food culture, culinary practices and hospitality associated with the Vaishnava community of the period.

Prasadam, or sanctified food, occupies a central place in the Vaishnava tradition. Devotees do not merely consume prasadam; they honour it as the mercy of the Lord. In the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Madhavendra Puri realized that food offered to Gopala becomes spiritually transformed after being accepted by the deity. According to Srila Prabhupada, the value of an offering lies not in its material worth but in the devotion with which it is made. Thus, anyone, regardless of caste or social status, can offer even a simple fruit to the Lord with sincere faith. Vaishnava belief also regards charanamrita, the sacred water associated with Krishna, as spiritually purifying and capable of cleansing one's sins through reverent acceptance. The Vaishnava diet included a wide variety of vegetables such as kushmanda (ash gourd), mankochu (arum), neem leaves, brinjal and mocha (plantain flower). Pulses particularly mudga dal (green gram), also formed an important part of their daily meals. Owing to their commitment to the principle of non-violence (ahimsa), Vaishnavas generally avoided masura dal (red lentil). Some devotional traditions associated its reddish colour with aggression and therefore considered it unsuitable for consumption. The Vaishnava movement emerged during a period of political and religious turmoil in Bengal and actively promoted ideals of peace, compassion and nonviolence. Consequently, dietary practices were often shaped by these ethical and spiritual considerations.

Various preparations were made from mashkalai (black gram), which was commonly used to prepare pakodas and vadas. Pakodas were also prepared from vegetables such as kushmanda. Another popular dish was sukta, a bitter vegetable soup made from neem leaves and other bitter herbs. Contemporary devotional literature indicates that dried neem leaves were frequently used in preparation. The Chaitanya Charitamrita also records a diverse range of vegetable preparations enjoyed by Vaishnavas. Fried paneer fritters, known as chenavada were prepared by shaping fresh paneer into small ball and frying them. Pakodas made from arum, pumpkin and gourd were also widely consumed. Mashkalai and mudga dal were commonly used in the preparation of fritters and vadas. Among grains, shaali rice enjoyed particular popularity and Sri Chaitanyadeva is described as being especially fond of this variety. The text further notes that pure yellow-coloured ghee was commonly served with shaali rice, highlighting the richness and diversity of Vaishnava food culture in the 16th century Bengal. Sweet dishes occupied an important place in the Vaishnava dietary tradition. Thickened milk or kheer, curd and various preparations made from rice, milk and sugar were commonly consumed. To

enhance the flavour of the latter preparations, generous quantities of ghee were added. A mixture of condensed milk or mango juice was particularly popular. Likewise, a combination of milk, parched rice and banana was considered a favourite delicacy among the Vaishnavas. The Vaishnavas required suitable containers for the preparation and distribution of food. However, poorer members of the community could not afford expensive utensils like their wealthier counterparts. Consequently, food offered to Lord Krishna as bhoga was often prepared in simple metal vessels and served on plantain leaves. Plantain leaves were frequently shaped into bowl like containers and used for distributing food among common people. Mixtures of rice, milk and sugar were commonly offered to the deity in clay pots, reflecting the simplicity and accessibility of Vaishnava food practices.

After meals, the Vaishnavas customarily used various substances to cleanse and freshen the mouth. Sannyasis generally refrained from chewing betel leaves and instead consumed cloves or cardamom. The Chaitanya Charitamrita mentions that cloves and cardamom seeds were regarded as effective mouth fresheners, while buds of sacred basil (tulsi) were also widely used. The avoidance of betel leaves among many Vaishnavas was associated with their emphasis on non-violence and ascetic discipline. Thus, the choice of post-meal mouth fresheners reflected both religious values and dietary customs within the Vaishnava community. Like fish and meat, garlic and onions are also prohibited in the Vaishnava diet. According to Dr. Robert E Svoboda, a noted authority on Ayurveda that garlic and onions are both rajasic and tamasic and are forbidden to yogis because they root the consciousness more firmly in the body. From the Vaishnava perspective, such foods are thought to stimulate passions and material desires, thereby hindering spiritual advancement. Consequently, Vaishnavas avoided not only non-vegetarian food but also onions and garlic, promoting a vegetarian dietary practice that emphasized purity, self-discipline and non-violence. This dietary ideal was also regarded as a means of fostering social harmony and minimizing conflict within the society.

Chaitanyadeva sought to preserve the Brahmanical social order at a time when the growing influence of Islam was perceived by many orthodox Hindus as a challenge to the existing social and religious structure. One of the underlying objectives of his propagation of Vaishnavism was to revitalize Brahmanical traditions by presenting them in a more accessible and appealing form. This approach was particularly significant in a society where rigid caste practices and social discrimination had alienated many lower-caste groups. As a result, a section of the population embraced Islam in search of greater social equality and dignity. Through the inclusive message of Vaishnavism, Chaitanyadeva attempted to attract these marginalized groups and reintegrate them into the broader Hindu social framework. His emphasis on devotion, equally before God and collective participation in religious practices made the movement highly appealing to the common people and contributed significantly to its widespread popularity.

Food is not merely a substance consumed for sustenance; it carries profound social, cultural, economic and political significance. Throughout history, food has often been employed as an instrument of power and political influence. In this context, the work of Robert Paarlberg, *Food Politics, what everyone Needs to Know* is particularly significant, as it provides valuable insights into the political dimensions of food including issues of hunger, food security, agricultural policy and the use of food as an instrument of power and governance. The non-violent movement initiated by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was not the first of its kind in Indian history. Earlier, both Gautama Buddha and the Mauryan emperor Asoka had advocated the principles of non-violence and compassion. However, the social and cultural context of 16th century Bengal was markedly different. Bengal was predominantly inhabited by non-

vegetarian communities, making the promotion of vegetarianism a challenging task. Vegetarian practices remained largely confined to the Vaishnava community. Nevertheless, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's extraordinary spiritual charisma transcended these limitations. He was revered by people of all castes, creeds and religions and his message of devotion, love and social harmony attracted a wide spectrum of society.

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