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Role of Chaitanya towards a casteless society in Orissa

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Abstract

Chaitanya was great religious and Social Reformer in the 15th Century in India. He popularized the Bhakti Movement in India. He denounced caste system. Due to him Orissa got saved from the onslaught of Islamic rule. He accepted devotees from all strata of the Society. He introduced Kirtan or Mass Chanting in Hindu religion. This system minimized caste conflict in Orissa, as it exists in North and South India. Chaitanya movement had its impact on Indian Society. It breakdown orthodox Brahmanic domination over the society and proclaimed the dignity of everyman.

His teachings influenced the Pancha Sakha of Orissa who revolted against caste system in Orissa. The popularization of the Oriya Bhagabat which was written by Jagannath Das is another contribution of this movement. Bhagabat Ghar played an important role in spread of education in Medieval Orissa.

Keywords: Social Reformer, Kirtan, Pancha Sakha, Odiya Bhagabat, Bhagabat Ghara

Introduction

Intellectuals are the real architects of a nation. If we go through the pages of history we find many intellectuals who have shaped their country into a modern and civilized one. They have reformed their social, political and cultural history. An intellect means not only an educated fellow, an uneducated, illiterate can also be an intellect. An intellect creates new ideas, thoughts in the existing evils in the society, and revolts against social prejudices, exploitation and despotism. When we look back to intellectual history, we find they subjected every institution of the society to test the reason, which led to the idea of change and progress. When we turn pages of Orissa history we find such type of intellectuals who mainly fought against social injustice and inequality through removing caste rigidities and disabilities. They were instrumental in ushering social reforms and changes in the traditional conservative social setup of Orissa at different times. Their main aim was to purify and elevate the mind and therefore they adopted various means and methods to mentally prepare the people to accept changes.

Casteism in Orissa is very ancient, the origin of which can be traced back to the *Asokan* period. It existed during the *Bhaumakar*, *Ganga*, *Somavamsi* and the *Gajapati* period. This system exists till now, and has proved as one of the major hindrances to national and social progress. The caste system is very rigid in Orissa. The Caste prejudice had attained its zenith during the medieval period. Castes and sub-castes were responsible in splitting up the society, into many compartments. It suppressed the inferior class and protected the privileged class. It checked the economic and intellectual progress and created obstruction in the way of social reforms. In the economic field the caste system undermined the efficiency of labour. It fostered economic discontentment and social prejudices.

As has already been mentioned caste identity as a social institution continued over centuries in Orissa society. However, when we turn the pages of history of Orissa we find there had been movements against the caste system for ameliorating the condition of the lower caste people. It is interesting to note that the individuals who initiated the struggle to bring change and reform in the existing society were not necessarily Western educated rather were oriented with traditional knowledge. They in fact represented the aspirations of the common masses whose need was social justice and equality.

The first category of intellectuals who initiated the process of anti-caste struggle in Orissa had been mostly lower caste people. They were the pioneers known as "*panchasakha*" who tried to bring radical changes in the social structure of 16th Century Orissa through their writings, teachings and day to day activities. They initiated reforms through their intellectual discourses. They criticised Brahminism and the caste practices. They knew the miserable

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condition of the lower caste people in the social system through their own experience. The *panchasakhas* were Jagannath Das, Balaram Das, Achyuta Das & Jashobanta Das. Jagannath Das was a Brahmin and the four others were non-Brahmins. At that time non Brahmins had no right to enter the temples or writing holy Scriptures. Balram Das in his *Laxmipurana* however made an attempt to give access to the lower caste people into the temples. They tried to bridge gap between the higher & lower class. Chaitanya, also with his neo-Vaishnavism brought a setback to Brahmanism.

Sri Chaitanya was born on the 27 th February 1486 A.D in Nadia (*Navadweep*). He popularized Bhakti movement in India. He was one of the great religious reformer in 15 th century. He denounced caste system. Sri Chaitanya's cult spread far and wide in Eastern India creating virtually a social revolution. It had tremendous lasting effect in the society which saved Orissa from the onslaught of Islamic rule¹. Sri Chaitanya was never eager to formulate any doctrine for his faith in writing. Because of his outstanding personality people around him were impressed and became his devotees consciously. He never tried to establish any sect nor to deliver any lecture in the public gathering². Chaitanya due to his emotional absorption had no time or willingness to found a sect³. He never wrote anything for his sect except the poems. But sometimes he advised his followers on very many subjects. For example, to redeem the fallen mankind, the women, the untouchables and the illiterates. Though he was not aware of the fact that he had inaugurated a social movement yet he acted just like a social reformer⁴. Chaitanya's devotion was broad based and liberal. He was above the sectarian spirit of exclusiveness. The master declared that a person even if he be a Sudra is a true Vaishnava if he recites the name Krishna⁵. Chaitanya started kirtan, (mass chanting) with music in which there is no distinction of caste and other social distinctions⁶.

Sri Chaitanya introduced *kirtan* as the means for developing love and devotion for Krishna which is unique in Hindu religion. Some of low Hindu caste people were not allowed to mix with upper caste people. They were even not allowed to enter the temple and worship the God and to recite Vedas or Puranas. The Hindus had no system of common mass prayer or worship as Muslims and Christians have. Hindu worship was all along individual whatever be it's method. But the mass chanting of *kirtan* is one type of common mass prayer like that of Muslims. This system minimized caste conflict in Orissa as it exists in north and south India. *Kirtan* kept intact the rural society. Social reformers have adopted the method of kirtan in the tribal areas to bring them to the path of Hinduism⁷. The greatest contribution of Chaitanya was the introduction of *Naganakirtana* in group consisting of people from all castes and creed. The *Nagarkirtan* centering round Chaitanya attracted people in large numbers. Through this method he reached the masses to the extent no other saint could. As a result all the people of different caste mingled into one stream which gave a great death blow to the existing serious caste system in orissa⁸. Sir Chaitanya Mahaprabhu propounded an ideology which was far above such small matters as caste, creed geographical boundary. To a question as "who am I" he gave a very simple answer to it thus " I am not a Brahman, Kshatrya, Vaisya or Sudra. I belong to no caste, in fact I am a servitor's servitor of *Lord Sri Krishna*, who is ocean of all bliss⁹."

Chaitanya said that no caste and no race were beyond the

pole of salvation. He held that all men are alike capable of faith and that all castes by faith become equally pure. The bhakti that characterized Chaitanya's teaching could easily accommodate the psychological and emotional needs of the simple rural dwellers since it provided them with direct access to Hindu deities without the all too restrictive mediation of the Brahmins or strict Brahminical precepts concerning purity¹⁰.

With the Bhakti movement of Sri Chaitanya the Radha-Krishna cult received new impetus and it's popularity reached a new height under his influence¹¹. The Bhakti movement through *sankirtan* was very popular and had a remarkable effect on the then socio-religious order of Orissa and Bengal. This reform offered enough scope to the followers of Chaitanya to mould the pattern of literature accordingly. The *Panchasakhas* particularly played an important role in this matter and preached this new religion in such a way that every corner of Orissa was influenced by it and the literature and social life of Orissa came completely under it's spell.

As per writer *Krishna Das* "The essence of Chaitanyanism is that "if a creature adores Krishna and serves as his guru he is released from the meshes of illusion and attains to Krishna's feet and leaving these and the religions and social system based on caste helplessly takes refuge with Krishna". *Chaitanya* thus condemned the whole ritualistic system of priests and preached faith in Hari. According to him, worship consisted in love and devotion, Song and dance producing a state ecstasy in which his presence is realized. All men were competent to perform worship irrespective of caste and creed¹². *Chaitanya* was also above the principles of caste segregation and is said to have admitted many Muslims and Hindu lower castes to membership and to have regarded all worshippers of Krishna as equal¹³. It is also worth to note that several distinguished disciples of *Chaitanya* were traders by caste. A.N Chatterjee¹⁴ states that *Chaitanya* had declared in public that he is endeavouring to build up a new society based upon the principle of social equality. He was successful in attempting to break down orthodox Brahminic domination over society and proclaimed the dignity of every man. He helped in the upliftment of the lower ranks of the society and the unlettered masses by carrying some *sankirtans* to their doors. The movement through *sankirtan* was very popular and had a remarkable effect on the then socio religious order of Orissa. The tenets of this faith were incorporated into the cult of *Jagannath*. This reform moulded the thinking of the *Panchasakhas* who particularly played an important role in this matter and preached this in such a way that every corner of Orissa was influenced by it & the literature and social life of Orissa came completely under it's spell¹⁵.

Impact of Chaitanya Movement in society:

Chaitanya movement is not only a religious movement but it was also a socio-cultural movement as it deeply influenced the socio-cultural life of India. Before his renunciation of the worldly life, Chaitanya was a beloved friend of the distressed, the poor, the down trodden and the low born untouchables. At the time of arrival of Sri Chaitanya the cruelty of casteism was strong. Sudras were not allowed to take part in any sort of debate on religion. The reading of the Vedas and Vedantas were confined to the Brahmins. But Sri Chaitanya in his teachings emphasized the abolition of the difference among the people. So people of every sect

including Muslims were allowed to join the *sankirtan* party. He himself embraced Rai Ramananda Sanatana and Yavan Hari Das without caring to consider their caste and community^[16]. He was strongly of the view that even a *chandala* is not to be despised as *chandala* if he is attached with the name of Krishna and that a Brahman is not to be respected as a Brahman if he is dishonest. Chaitanya movement had attempted to breakdown orthodox Brahmanic domination over the society and proclaimed the dignity of every man. For these steps of Chaitanya large number of people were attracted towards this new cult. Chaitanya was also responsible and successful in bringing about the unity of community through his religious preaching^[17].

The theory of Bhakti that had its development till the time of Sri Chaitanya was applied in practice throughout his life. He thought that lord Krishna resides in every being and that was a firm conviction with Chaitanya^[18]. Being distressed at the sorrow of mankind including the poor low born untouchables, Chaitanya renounced the world and embraced ascetism^[19]. The noblest achievement in Chaitanya's life was an extending of the right to the love of God to all including the backward section of the society^[20].

Balaram Das, Yosavanta, Achyutanada and Ananta were non- Brahmanis and Ramananda was a Karana. Other followers of Chaitanya like Syamananda was a cultivator by caste and Vidyabhushan was a Khandait^[21]. Chaitanya never spoke against the *Varnasrama* dharma, but in action he proved to be a great reformist as he struck at the root of untouchability.

The movement however attempted to break down orthodox Brahminic domination over society and proclaimed the dignity of every man as possessing within himself a particle of divine soul^[22]. Of course there were lesser number of women than men in the faith of Chaitanya cult but their cultural upliftment was promoted by Chaitanya allowing them to read Sastras. *Madhvi Dasi*, *Gouri the Pattamadhavi* who were the devotees became renowned in the society. Another striking influence of Chaitanya's teaching and preaching is that people from lower classes became the gurus who initiated people of all classes, high and low, men and women and consequently formed a particular lineage. Among them were *Shyamananda*, *Rasikananda*, *Hari dayananda* etc^[23]. In the primary days of Chaitanyaism the Brahmins did not like the Chaitanya movement which was dominated by Sudras. However on the long run the Brahmins could not resist the overwhelming popularity of the *Chaitanya* faith and many of them took the Vaishanava surname 'Das'^[24].

The popularization of the *Oriya Bhagabat* is another contribution of Chaitanya movement in Orissa. *Bhagabat* helped in the spread of literacy and moral values among the inhabitants of Orissa. *Bhagabat* which was written by Jagannath Das on palm leaf^[25] is generally known as *pothi*. The *Bhagabat Pothi* was kept in a house located in the middle or the corner of the village. The house popularly known as *Bhagabat Ghara* was built and maintained by the villagers themselves. However, the house was used as a community hall by the villagers. The people of all castes assembled and in the evening where the *Bhagabat* was read and discussed widely. The village folks got relaxation of the days labour by listening to the stories and morals of the *Bhagabat*. Thus it was a centre of attraction and gradually became a centre of learning and education^[26]. In some

villages the *Grama Chatasala* (village school) allowed other lower caste children to read in the premises of the *Bhagabata Ghara* but the sitting arrangements for them with quite separate^[27]. The people irrespective of all castes and creed became keenly interested in educating their sons who could recite *Bhagabat* at the time of their death. It was wide belief that the soul could attain *Vaikunthapur* (the heavenly abode of Lord Vishnu) if the person listened to the *Bhagabat* at the time of his death. This was also another reason of wide spread of primary education in Orissa^[28]. It is remarkable that the Census Report of 1900A.D. shows the literacy rate of Orissa was adequately higher than that of any other state of India^[29].

Bhagabat Ghara was used for a number of purposes by the inhabitants of that village. There was not a single big village which had no *Bhagabat Ghara*. However as a community hall it became a centre of education and entertainment and a hall for village assembly, court of village judiciary (popularly known as *panchayatas*) and also a guest house for the visitors.³⁰ During day time the *Bhagavat Ghara* functioned as a school and in the evening the people used to assemble here to listen to the *Bhagavat*. Every day the *namasankirtan* was performed by the village folk and thereafter the *Bhagavat* was recited and discussed. However the *Bhagavat* had a great impact upon the people of Orissa and the *Bhagabat Ghara* served the multi purpose programme of the village^[31]. This established an egalitarian society in the villages of Orissa. Chaitanya's mission was to reconstruct an egalitarian society under the banner of the name Hari, where there could be no distinction between the ruler and the ruled, the learned and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, the Brahmana and the sudra, the Hindus and the Muslims. Sri Chaitanya did throw up a challenge to the age-old traditional Hinduism that often indulged in lifeless rites and rituals advising the people to devote themselves towards one God^[32].

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