

Sree Chaitanya: Or The Lord Gouranga and His Message of Devotion by: Dr. H.W.B. Moreno

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IN the great upheavals of the world, Goodness has always triumphed in the end and Evil has been cast under foot. In 1400 B.C., Krishna came into the world as a great incarnation, to put down Evil and to restore Good to all men. He denounced the sacerdotal monopoly of religion, bidding all to come unto him direct, even unto the very lowest, so that salvation may be made free unto all. In 600 B.C., Gautama Buddha came into the world teaching the Truth to all mankind that love and service were the supreme tests in life and that right thoughts, right deeds, right actions in the world alone would lead men in the way of perfect peace and enlightenment. In A.D. 798, was the advent of Sankaracharya, that great intellect who laid bare the teachings of the Vedas as contained in the system of Adwaita Philosophy. In the brief span of his life, consisting of only thirty-eight years, he wrote many and valued philosophical works. His learned commentaries on the *Vedanta* [Page 2] *Sutras*, Upanishads and the *Bhagavad-Gita* made him the undisputed leader among contemporary philosophers. His untimely death in A.D. 828, was felt as an irreparable loss to the whole intellectual world. His authoritative expositions of the Adwaita Philosophy, embodying the sublime teachings of Krishna in the *Gita*, revived the glory of the Krishna Cult. An impetus was given subsequently to the Visishtadwaita System of Philosophy, towards the latter part of the twelfth century, by the celebrated Philosopher and Preacher, Ramanuja, which made Vaishnavism or the Krishna Cult a highly favoured religion in India. The religious movements of Sankara and Ramanuja, in the course of the two centuries which followed, raised up a long line of worthy disciples and teachers which lasted to the close of the fourteenth century A.D.. Great theistic movements then sprang up, having for their object the conciliation of the different races in India, especially of the Hindu and the Islamic people. The great exponent of this teaching was Ramananda who came from the South; he flourished in the fourteenth century and preached in Hindi; admitting into his order peoples of all castes, or even if they were of no caste. He had twelve apostles or chief disciples; they included a Rajput, a currier, a barber and a Mahomedan weaver named Kabir. Kabir was the most celebrated of the twelve disciples of Ramananda. and lived about the end of the [Page 3] fourteenth century. He is said to have been Muslim by birth. He was, as all people said of him, "of Ram or Rahim".

Ramananda wandering from place to place in Northern India, proclaimed the equality of all men before God; Kabir carried his Master's doctrine through the length and breadth of Bengal. He laboured, like his Master, to gather together all castes and creeds in one common faith. He endeavoured to build up a religion which would embrace Hindu and Mahomedan alike. His voluminous writings contain ample acknowledgment of the fact that the God of the Hindu was also the God of the Mussalman. The moral code of Kabir was sublime as was his doctrine. It consisted of humanity, truthfulness and self-seclusion, living in obedience to the spiritual guide. The labours of Kabir may be placed between A.D. 1380 and 1420.

Throughout Bengal, Nadia is celebrated as the seat of Hindu learning and orthodoxy. Its fame rests upon its being an ancient seat of learning, which has exercised influence upon the politics, morals and manners of the Bengalees. It is yet noted as the centre of the great school of Hindu Logic. There, the far-famed Sree Chaitanya or the Lord Gouranga was born. There is a popular belief that his father came from Sylhet and settled at Nawadwip. According to certain writers, however, his ancestors were residents of Chandpur in Orissa. Early in the reign of the Orissa monarch [Page 4] Kapilendra Deva, 1434 to 1470, Madhukar Misra, a Vaidic Brahmin, had emigrated from Jajpur to Jeypore in Sylhet. His grandson, Jagannath Misra, settled at Nawadwip, to complete his educational career. There he married in 1470 a beautiful and accomplished girl named Sachi Devi, the daughter of Nilambar Chakravarti, a great Pundit. After the death of eight daughters in their infancy, they had a son named Biswarupa in 1480. On the full-moon night of the month of Palgun in March, 1486, on the occasion of the Holi Festival, when there was an eclipse of the moon, their tenth child was born, celebrated afterwards as the great Sree Krishna Chaitanya. He was named Biswambara, but affectionately called Nimai, because he was born in a shed under a Nim tree.

In 1494, at the age of nine, he was invested with the sacred thread. Nimai's boyhood was notorious for his boyish pranks. He joined with other boys in clandestinely removing the fruits of orchards, indulging besides in other forms of pilferings; he teased little girls and even dared to disturb elderly Brahmins at their devotions by running away with their spiritual symbols, or by hastening away with their clothing while they were actually bathing. When he grew up he was placed in one of the neighbouring Sanskrit Tols. At that time his elder brother Biswarupa was to have been married at the early age of sixteen years, but the [Page 5] religious atmosphere of Nadia had already infected the mind of the elder brother. The night before his marriage the brother disappeared, for he had pledged himself to a life of asceticism. With a pilgrim's staff and begging bowl in his hand he set out on a spiritual quest and never returned to his grief-stricken home. This proved too much for the parents, and Jagannath Misra died of a broken heart in 1495.

Though Nimai still retained most of the vivacities of boyhood in his home at Nadia, he exhibited at the same time an extraordinary precocity of intellect. At the age of six or eight years, they say, he was engaged in disputes with men of learning, upon the intricacies of Sanskrit Grammar and Logic. At the age of eighteen years, at an age when many Brahmin youths would have been seeking entrance into a Tol, Nimai had acquired so great a reputation that he had established a Tol himself on the banks of the Bhagirathi River that flows by Nadia. Many pupils gathered round him, for he was famed for the brilliancy of his dialectics. Several of the incidents recorded of Nimai's life at this period relate to intellectual bouts, in which he defeated the famous scholars of his day coming from Benares and other well-known seats of learning. Nimai fully established his fame as a Pundit at that time by overthrowing Keshaba Keshmiri, an itinerant philosopher, who after winning many debates in other places of India had [Page 6] come to Nadia to add to his laurels. In his eighteenth year, in 1504, Nimai married Lakshmi Devi, the daughter of the celebrated Pundit Ballavacharya and entered the life of a householder continuing all the while as a religious preacher. By this time he had surpassed all other scholars of his time in erudition, especially as affecting the domain of Religion.

Later on he went on a successful scholastic tour in certain places of Eastern Bengal, which considerably enhanced his reputation. On his return he found that his wife had passed away having been bitten by a snake. To console his mother in her grief he consented to marry again Bishnupriya, the daughter of a Sanatan Pundit. This was in or about 1507. Soon after, securing the reluctant consent of his mother, he

started on a pilgrimage to Gaya to make the customary "pinda" offerings to his dead parent in 1508. This visit to Gaya was the turning point in his life. There under the influence of the venerable Vaishnava Saint, Iswara Puri, he adopted Krishna's great teachings of Faith and Devotion as inculcated in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

On his return to Nadia he immediately prepared himself for the great mission of his life. He condemned the ritualistic system of the Brahmins and preached Divine Love as expounded by Krishna as the only effectual means to salvation. Love was Divine Power [Page 7] which pervaded the Universe and was the only means whereby to possess happiness and spiritual wisdom. Even an outcaste was superior to a Brahmin if he had the Love of Krishna in his heart. It is only when men and women appear to be the same and sex loses all its charms that Divine Love can be realised. That supreme Love is the outcome of devotion to its adored and cherished Exemplar. To enforce the moral of his teachings by example, Nimai would go down often to the river and would help the old and infirm to carry their burdens or to wash their clothes, regardless of the rules of his caste. When anyone out of respect for his high caste hesitated to accept such service, he would say: "Do not, I pray thee, prohibit me; when I serve thee I see Hari or Krishna; these little deeds are sacred to Him as they are to me". Following closely the mandates of the *Gita*, he began to preach the doctrine of the equality and brotherhood of all men, denouncing the system of caste. Instead of the ritual of the orthodox Brahmin, he organised the Sankirtan or the harmonious chanting of Hari's name; this was performed by a party of singers and dancers headed by himself and his disciples. The fervour displayed at these Kirtans; or the glorification of the deeds of Krishna, gradually increased in intensity; even today it has been marked as the most distinctive feature of the creed of Chaitanya. He repeatedly insisted [Page 8] upon the miraculous effect of the Sankirtan in training the mind for Divine Communion and devoted much of his time to religious singing and dancing. There are innumerable instances of his followers swooning away in performing these feats of religious enthusiasm; Chaitanya himself was particularly subject to deep swoons, while in the act of performing these feats.

About this time he made the acquaintance of the famous scholar Adwaitacharya, and was joined ere long by an ascetic named Nityananda. who soon became his leading disciple. Chaitanya's greatest achievement at this time was the reclamation of the two Brahmin drunken rowdies, Jagai and Madhai, two notorious sources of evil-doing in the city. Chaitanya had also meekly to withstand the rebuffs and scoffings of the orthodox sacerdotal party, because of his universal toleration and piety, although the people as a mass followed him on all sides. The ever-increasing number of his disciples rendered some sort of organisation essential to the Mission; so to his two great disciples Nityananda and Adwaitacharya he taught: "Give the people the lesson of Faith and Devotion in Krishna, down to the very Chandalas". To Nityananda, he said: "Go to Bengal and freely proclaim the Gospel of Devotion and Love". The Brahmin aristocracy of Nadia, though unmoved by the emotional fervour of the young reformer's religious teachings, were greatly perturbed by the excitement it caused [Page 9] among the people of all classes, especially among those of the lower castes who followed him with enthusiasm in his religious processions. Nimai's open defiance of caste rules disgusted the pedants; the excited crowds of singers and dancers outraged their sense of propriety. Finding that their threats of spiritual pains and penalties were of no avail, they appealed at last to a neighbouring Mahomedan Kazi, to enforce respect for the ancient traditions and customs by prohibiting Nimai's noisy demonstrations. The Kazi complying with their request issued an order forbidding any more Sankirtan processions. On the evening of the same day, Nimai with a band of followers went to the Court House and started the Sankirtan service near by the Kazi's own door. The offended Magistrate came out in rage to demand explanation of this open defiance of his order; but, seeing the young Brahmin standing meekly in the midst of the crowd with his

face lit up with divine ecstasy, he was so moved with compassion that he cancelled the prohibitory order he had made and sent the people away with his good wishes.

Chaitanya freely admitted even Moghuls and Pathans into the band of his followers and invested them with the sanctity which few even of his Brahmin followers would have ventured to grant. Not a few Mussalmans were to, be found among his disciples. According to reliable records a Mahomedan Governor of Bengal became one of his [Page 10] devout adherents. Among his other disciples were ten Pathan troopers. He had greater difficulty in overcoming the scepticism and intellectual pride of his fellow Brahmins than in dealing with the seeming callousness of the masses. It was this opposition which finally induced him to give up his home at Nadia and start on a fresh pilgrimage. In 1509, at the age of twenty-four, he got himself initiated under the celebrated ascetic and scholar Keshav Bharati and adopted the name of Krishna Chaitanya, by which name he hence became known. His mother seeing him with the shaven head of a Sanyasin was beside herself with grief; she feared that Chaitanya like her other son would be lost to her for ever, but Chaitanya with the utmost tenderness, clasping his mother's feet, consoled her. He promised to reside in future wherever she would bid him. He would continue to respect her wishes as he had always done before. It was then agreed between mother and son that he should make Puri his place of residence in future, so that his mother might easily get news of him and might even at times be able to see him. Thus it was that at the age of twenty-four years, a few years before Martin Luther began his famous attack upon the abuses of the Church of Rome, that he set out on his great pilgrimage chanting the verses: " I too shall cross the vast and troublous ocean of life by Devotion, to find rest in the haven of Supreme Being, as the sages found of yore by [Page 11] service performed at the lotus feet of Mukunda or Krishna".

In the year 1509, Chaitanya began implicitly to follow the life of an ascetic and shortly after went to Puri to visit the Holy Shrine of Jagannath. His strict avoidance of all public display and his simple life of devotion and genial communion with all, both high and low, made him a great leader among the people of Kalinga. He and his disciples did not at first attract much notice, but his conversion of Sarva-Bhauma, a renowned Brahmin scholar and the Minister of Pratapa Rudra, the King of Orissa, brought him into prominence. There also the King and his Queen, Chandra Kala, became his disciples. After staying for some time at Puri, Chaitanya started in Vaisakh, or April, 1510, for the South. This pilgrimage, though undertaken with a view to visiting only the holy places, was marked all along the way by many incidents of intense piety and devotion. He preached Vaishnavism wherever he went and met with signal success. In the beginning of his pilgrimage he healed and cured a Brahmin leper which added to the wonder and amazement of all. In the Godaveri District at Rajahmundry, Ramananda Rai, a learned Vaishnava scholar and mystic, who was also a Minister of the Orissa King, after several learned discourses with Chaitanya, became one of his devoted followers. Leaving Rajahmundry, Chaitanya journeyed down [Page 12] to the southernmost places of pilgrimage. He visited the Tirupati Hills and Conjeevaram, reaching at last Srirangam on the bank of the Cauveri. There he stayed for the space of four months.

In the famous Vishnu Temple, he one day noticed a crowd collected round a Brahmin who was reciting the stanzas of the *Gita* to them with intense rapture, while he appeared heedless of the ridicule and laughter which greeted the numerous mistakes he was committing as he went on reciting. Touched at the sight, Chaitanya gently accosted the ignorant reciter: "Tell me, Sir", he asked, "what meaning do you find in these words to inspire you with such rapture?" The Brahmin replied: "Sir, I am an ignorant man and do not know the meaning of the words that I repeat, but my heart is all the while filled with rapture when I picture before me the glorious scene of Krishna expounding Divine Truth to the mighty Arjuna; I always

behold Him when I read". Embracing the Brahmin, Chaitanya rejoined: "You are truly worthy to read the *Gita*, as you have understood the essence of its meaning".

From Srirangam Chaitanya went to Madura, thence to Udipi, a sacred Vaishnava city. Visiting the holy places of Rameswaram and rounding his journey by Cape Comorin, he went northwards. Passing through Travancore, Ramgiri, Chital, the Nilgiris and Gujrari, he crossed the Tapti or Narbada and visited Baroda, Ahmedabad, [Page 13] Somnath, and Junagadh. At last he arrived at Dwarka, and stayed there for about a week. He then went back to Puri. Early again in 1514, Chaitanya made a short tour over Bengal, visiting his mother there and strengthening the faith of his dropping followers. In 1514 he visited Brindaban and Mathura, thereby fulfilling the desire of his heart, because he was enabled to look upon the actual spots where Krishna had sojourned. It was a journey which gave him intense ecstasy. It was at Brindaban that there took place the celebrated interview between him and the brothers Rupa and Sanatan. These two brothers were descended from a Prince of Karnata who had settled in Bengal, where his descendants had become naturalised. Edified by Chaitanya's learned exposition of the Cult of Krishna they became throughout their lives his staunch disciples. His longings thus being satisfied at Brindaban, Chaitanya at length returned to Puri by way of Benares. Disciples and admirers from many places came to visit him there. He enlightened them by his learned discourses as also by his many acts of piety and humanity.

Implicit faith and incessant devotion were ever his guiding principles; and he found Kalinga a promising field for the early promulgation of such doctrines. Pratap Rudra received him with great veneration and soon became one of his devout followers. Chaitanya looked upon the Lord Jagannath [Page 14] as an object of real love and became ardently attached to His shrine. When caste distinctions raised inextricable barriers against the wide system of proselytism he had adopted, Chaitanya following the sublime text of the *Gita* solemnly declared that Jagannath was the Lord of the world. Every one, therefore, within the sacred precincts of His Temple was equal in every way to his neighbour, and the holy rice offered to the image could be touched and eaten by everyone without let or hindrance. Everywhere the passionate outpourings of his spirit kindled a great flame of religious fervour among the common folk. The doctrine of Eternal Love made a strong appeal to them all, more than any intellectual argument that would be employed. Chaitanya travelled throughout the greater part of India, and everywhere he was regarded by his followers as an incarnation of Krishna himself, being worshipped as a Deity. The duties performed in his daily life during this period bore significant. After a morning bath in the sea with his disciples, he devoted his time till noon in untiring adoration of Jagannath in the Temple. Distributing the offerings of "prasad" to his disciples, he partook of them himself. After a little rest, his afternoons were spent in pious discourses on the sublimity of Krishna's Divine Love. The evening and the early part of the night were spent with his disciples on the sea-shore or at the Temple, chanting Kirtans or Bhajans, that is [Page 15] Sacred Songs; which made him so famous among his followers and spread his fame even to this day. In his congregation he joined together both rich and poor alike, the learned with the ignorant, the Brahmin with the Untouchable, showing no distinction of caste or creed. Even Pratap Rudra, the Ruler of Orissa, was often found in this holy confederation. Chaitanya associated with all alike, teaching, controlling and edifying everyone with his discourses, his morals and the high example he displayed of self-abnegation.

As years rolled on, his religious trances almost overwhelmed him. On many an occasion he showed an utter disregard of life, although appeals were made by his friends and disciples who were anxious for his safety. Once on the lonely shores of Puri, he was visited by a beatific vision which enrapt him for some

time. On another occasion he beheld the hosts of Heaven appearing before him dancing on the blue waves; to meet them in his ecstasy he actually plunged into the deep, crying out in delight; fortunately, however, he was rescued in time. This was in his forty-third year, in the year 1528. On several occasions he tried to batter his head against the stone walls of the Temple so as to end his life and meet his beloved Krishna beyond. Under such prolonged mental exertions and self-inflicting torments, his physical frame began to break down, about the beginning of the year 1533. [Page 16]

At last in July , 1533, while dancing and singing Kirtans at the Bijoya of the Car festival, his left toe was pierced by a sharp stone that lay on the road. Beholding this he turned to Adwaita and said that he was soon to leave this mortal coil. Shortly after, he bathed in the water of Narendra Tank. "This is the last time", he said affectionately to his followers, "that I shall do so". On Saturday, the sixth day of the moon, the pain caused by the wound became very acute, he was forced to take to his bed and lie in a garden nearby the Tank. It was here that he told his followers that it was time that he should bid goodbye to them forever. On the next night, at 10, true to what he had predicted, he passed away at the age of forty-eight years. It was a Sunday night on the seventh of the moon in July, 1533. Meteors, they said, fell to the earth, as he passed away. On hearing the news of his demise, his mother Sachi Devi, his wife Bishnupriya, and his foremost disciples Nityananda and Adwaita Acharya swooned away in grief, while his other followers became mute in their intense sorrow. It was Nityananda who first essayed to console the body of mourners by declaring to them: "We shall keep his name for all time imperishable; nay, he will be immortal. There shall be no more distinction among us, as between Chandalas or Moslem; in the realm of Bhakti or Love, there shall be no difference of caste; for, all are one". [Page 17]

Chaitanya's doctrine is but a popular declaration of the sublime teachings of Vaishnavism. It is an emphatic assertion of the equality of men before God. No caste or race is beyond the pale of salvation. The transcendental Quietism which Chaitanya points to, requires five stages to attain that which leads to intimate communion with the Deity. The first stage is indifference to the world; the second is active service of God; the third is personal friendship with the Deity; the fourth is a tender affection for Him as is the attachment between parent and child; the fifth is an ardent devotion or love such as the forest nymphs or Gopis had for their Divine Lover, Krishna.

Hand in hand with faith goes love; in the earlier stages of our spiritual life this love is as a servant would show towards his master, or as a friend for a friend. Such love, however, gradually ascends or develops into that higher affection which a father possesses for his child, ending at last in the perfect love found between a husband and wife or a faithful lover for the beloved one. This holy love is devoid of any sensual taint and consists of complete devotion, as is the part of the wife to her ever-loving lord, her all-in-all in this world and hereafter.

The system of thought as expounded by Chaitanya is largely prevalent to this day in Orissa and in certain parts of Bengal. The dogmas of Bhakti were not unknown at Banga and Kalinga before [Page 18] his time, but Chaitanya's preachings did much to popularise them. The great end of this system consists in nothing more than an entire freedom of ourselves from the frailties of the body. Devotion or Bhakti was first promulgated by the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. It was Sankaracharya who gave a wide circulation to the mysticism involved in Bhakti. He was followed by Jayadev in Bengal and Ramanuja in Southern India, who were expositors of this Cult in the twelfth century. Then came Ballabhacharya, Madhavacharya and Ramananda who helped to usher the great mission of Chaitanya in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, who in his turn completely changed the character of Vaishnavism. Songs, music

and dancing replaced the repetition of the Mantras; old Sanskrit prayers gave place to prayers made and understood in the vernacular of the locality; and service to the images of Krishna in varied forms replaced what was before found in the established ritual. Even the name whereby the followers of the new Faith were known was changed from Vaishnavas to Bhaktas, or the followers of the Bhakti Creed.

The influence of Chaitanya's teaching spread so wide that it was even felt by the great Akbar, when he attempted to reconcile Islam with Hinduism in the common Cult of Din-Ilahi. Vaishnavism as expounded by Sree Chaitanya can be practised alike by the married and the unmarried, no one [Page 19] being excluded by reason of caste or creed. The philosophy inculcated by its Founder still commands unstinted respect among all those who have taken upon themselves to study closely the underlying principles that explain how it is only through Love that the eternal verities are manifest to all in every age and clime.