

# Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal

## A Symposium in Honour of Prof. Joseph T. O'Connell

Saturday 1 June 2019

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

10.00-10.10	Welcome & Introduction <i>Dr. Rembert Lutjeharms &amp; Prof. Kathleen O'Connell</i>
10.10-10.50	Communitas versus structure: The Caste Vaishnavas (jāt/jāti vaiṣṇava) of Bengal <i>Prof. Jeanne Openshaw</i>
10.50-11.30	Varṇāśrama and Bhakti egalitarianism in the <i>Haribhaktivilāsa</i> <i>Dr. Måns Broo</i>
11.30-11.50	<b>BREAK</b>
11.50-12.30	Can Empirical Observation Influence Scriptural Testimony? An Exploration through Jīva Gosvāmī's <i>Sarva-saṁvādinī</i> <i>Prof. Ravi M. Gupta</i>
12.30-1.00	Reflections on <i>Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal</i> <i>Prof. Brian A. Hatcher</i>
1.00-2.30	<b>LUNCH</b>
2.30-3.10	Locating Bhaktivinoda's Vaiṣṇava Universalism <i>Prof. Abhishek Ghosh</i>
3.10-3.50	The Rise of Public Theology in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism <i>Dr. Sachi Patel</i>
3.50-4.10	<b>BREAK</b>
4.10-4.50	Fetishizing the Subversive <i>Prof. Tony K. Stewart</i>
4.50-5.30	The Poison of Power? Kavikarṇapūra on political power and devotion <i>Dr. Rembert Lutjeharms</i>

## Abstracts

### ***Communitas* versus structure: The Caste Vaishnavas (jāt/jāti vaiṣṇava) of Bengal**

*Prof. Jeanne Openshaw (University of Edinburgh)*

The so-called Caste Vaishnava (*jāt/jāti vaiṣṇava*) community of Bengal was a source of fascination for Joseph O'Connell. As he was aware, understanding of this apparently anomalous community is vitiated by lack of textual and field research, as well as confusion of categories. The argument of this paper is that consideration of an equally anomalous, and even less known institution, Vaishnava joint renunciation of a male and female pair (*yugal bhek*), can help account for the trajectories and other characteristics of this community.

### ***Varṇāśrama* and *Bhakti* egalitarianism in the *Haribhaktivilāsa***

*Dr. Måns Broo (Åbo Akademi)*

The voluminous ritual compendium *Haribhaktivilāsa* (ca. 1540) is often held to be the very epitome of Sanskrit orthopraxy within Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Sushil Kumar De wrote that its author not only accepts the *Varṇāśrama* system but that he exalts the Brahmans and deprecates the Śūdras (1986: 518). But how true is this? In this paper, I will take a look at how the author deals with questions of *varṇa* in the first four chapters of the *Haribhaktivilāsa*, examining in particular the ways in which the author creatively makes use of earlier sources to put across his message of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*.

### **Can Empirical Observation Influence Scriptural Testimony? An Exploration through Jīva Gosvāmī's *Sarva-saṁvādinī***

*Prof. Ravi M. Gupta (Utah State University)*

This paper explores the question: What is the relationship between scriptural authority and empirical knowledge in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology? In particular, what happens if scriptural and empirical knowledge do not agree with each other? Vedānta philosophers have largely agreed that the most reliable means of acquiring valid knowledge (i.e., *pramāṇa*) is *śabda*, namely, verbal testimony, and in particular, the scriptural authority of the Veda. Such testimony is regarded as without human authorship, revealing knowledge about matters that are beyond the purview of the senses. In the words of Jīva Gosvāmī, verbal testimony can overrule sensory perception (*pratyakṣa*) and logical inference (*anumāna*), since both of these are susceptible to misapprehension. Thus, Jīva asserts in his *Sarva-saṁvādinī*, *śabda* conveys ultimate truth, whereas the other *pramāṇas* are reduced to mere “shadows.”

At first glance, this can appear like a one-way street: *Śabda* can correct and overrule *pratyakṣa*, but *pratyakṣa* has no influence on our understanding of *śabda*, which is eternal, self-evident, and divinely revealed. Empirical observation becomes, at best, a means to confirm the claims of scripture, if it is not to be ignored altogether. A closer study of Jīva Gosvāmī's *Sarva-saṁvādinī*, however, reveals a much more nuanced and dynamic relationship between *śabda*

and *pratyakṣa*, where each actively influences the other. This paper will suggest that Jīva Gosvāmī creates space for empirical knowledge to coexist with scriptural testimony, and, to a limited extent, influence how we interpret scripture. As an attempt at constructive theology, this presentation will argue for a more dialogical relationship between the different *pramāṇas*, even if *śabda* maintains the upper hand.

## Locating Bhaktivinoda's Vaiṣṇava Universalism

*Prof. Abhishek Ghosh* (Grand Valley State University)

In this paper I offer an overview of my larger project tentatively titled *Hinduism and the World: Contending Universalisms in Colonial India and Bhaktivinoda Thakur* where I discuss Bhaktivinoda's formulation of *bhakti* universalism and engagement with four knowledge disciplines emergent in colonial India: critical historiography, comparative religion, continental philosophy, and natural sciences. These knowledge disciplines, I argue, were some of the key sites that upheld such Eurocentric universalism, and knowledge production in these fields was used to formulate the ideas of civilizational difference. It was the British government and the Orientalists who set up the research institutions and disseminated information about ancient (and not-so-ancient) India's past. Very often such agents of colonialism romanticized the grandeur of India's bygone years and used their research to illustrate the dismal status of India's present to justify their civilizing mission in the subcontinent. They were, however, barely self-reflective about the fact that their particular Western historical and cultural contexts strongly influenced their own rationalism and empirical epistemologies. Despite the intellectual drawbacks of such essentialism, civilizational paradigms were a normative mode of interpreting intellectual, political, cultural, and religious encounters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I further suggest that we locate Bhaktivinoda not just as a Vaiṣṇava theologian, but rather, as a Hindu thinker who broadly envisioned a dharmic affective community based on his intellectual perspectives on Dayananda Saraswati, Sri Ramakrishna, and comments on Vaiṣṇavas expressing solidarity with left and right wing tantrikas.

## The Rise of Public Theology in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

*Dr. Sachi Patel*

Despite the prolific authorship within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition, it had not produced a single text that addresses the theological basis for engagement with public or social systems, nor any that offer guidance or insight into how a practitioner might behave or integrate into such environments. Nor have they in any substantial way referred to politically orientated texts such as the *Dharma-śāstras*. The tradition's most prominent texts relate instead to philosophical expositions on themes such as *bhakti-rasa* or devotional aesthetic sentiments. However, in the early-eighteenth century, suddenly a series of works are fashioned to rationalize and promote a system of integration with the socio-political circumstances of their

time. This fascinating period within Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava history witnesses the production of specialized treatises that provide theological foundations to endorse and encourage responsible public conduct grounded on notions such as *karma* and *varṇāśrama*. The political manoeuvrings of this historical era became a critical factor in invoking the production of these texts, and consequently these works reflect the interests and concerns of Jaisingh II, the ruler of a precolonial North Indian polity, the Kachvāhā dynasty. The texts were specific tools employed by the tradition to address the apparently contradictory mandate to reconcile responsible public engagement with the esoteric transcendent nature of bhakti practices, formulating a public theology which placed at its centre *bhakti* practice. Through examining this innovation, I extract the perspectives of critical figures in this period, king Jaisingh II, and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava scholars enabling me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the exact nature of public theology for this tradition in this compelling era.

## Fetishizing the Subversive

*Prof. Tony K. Stewart (Vanderbilt University)*

I had a number of conversations with Joseph T. O'Connell in the 1980s as I was finishing my dissertation, and it was surprising to me at the time how focused he was on negating the observation in *The Place of the Hidden Moon* where Edward C. Dimock suggested that Nityānanda and some of his followers seemed to have had *sahajiyā* associations. As Dimock reported, the lists in the avowedly *sahajiyā* text of the *Vivarta vilāsa* of Akiñcan Dās number about twenty disciples, whose names very closely matched those found in the *Caitanya caritāmṛta* of Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāj and the *Bhaktiratnākar* of Narahari Cakravartī. These conversations with Joe and several other curious provocations prompted me to write the long-circulated, but only now about-to-be-published essay on sex and secrecy in the politics of the scholarship on the *sahajiyās*, currently retitled “The Power of the Secret: The Tantalizing Discourse of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Scholarship,” forthcoming in the volume edited by Ferdinando Sardella and Lucian Wong titled *The Legacy of Vaiṣṇavism in Colonial Bengal* (Routledge). There was never a moment that I did not reckon that both *sex* and *secrecy* were pivotal issues, generating nearly intractable epistemological and ethical binds—but in retrospect, that essay was not really about the *politics* of the study as my initial title suggested. The constant chatter among those who were studying *sahajiyās* and related *tantrik* groups suggested that the real political issues were among scholars, not practitioners. After some reflection, I suspected that Joe's—and a host of other scholars'—gripping obsession had all the earmarks of a *fetish*. So, on that whim, I began to examine the Freudian model of the fetish, which would seem to present some obvious interests. But it became glaringly clear that the fetish also has a Marxian twist that played into the institutions of higher education and publishing—there, finally, was the politics. This presentation seeks to trace the ever-so-slow germination of the politics driving the study of these elusive religious communities.

## The Poison of Power? Kavikarṇapūra on political power and devotion

*Dr. Rembert Lutjeharms (Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies)*

Although written decades after the death of king Pratāparudradeva, the Gajapati king of Orissa, Kavikarṇapūra claims that the *Caitanya-candrodaya-nāṭaka*, a drama on the life of Caitanya, was commissioned by the king. In so doing, Kavikarṇapūra sees himself as part of the vibrant Vaiṣṇava literary culture that was sustained by the Gajapati court. As Sheldon Pollock has argued, literary patronage often served political ends, and poets at the court did ordinarily not just delight the king but also praised his political prowess. The Gajapati court was no exception to this, and prominent Vaiṣṇava poets at the court, such as Rāmānanda Rāya and Jivadevācārya Kaviḍiṇḍima, wrote profoundly devotional works about the divine, transcendental play of Kṛṣṇa, that also paid homage to Pratāparudradeva's worldly and martial power. In this paper I will explore the way Kavikarṇapūra looks upon Pratāparudradeva's reign, and political power more generally, in the *Caitanya-candrodaya*, and I will examine how he sees worldly power in relation to the devotional reign of Caitanya and his devotees, by comparing Kavikarṇapūra's views with those of those Gajapati poets he wishes to be associated with.