

INTRODUCTION - Spread of Vaishnavism in Odisha:

Although it was Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu Himself who had initially turned Orissa and particularly Puri into a Vaishnava metropolis, after His passing much of the Vaishnava community centered around the development of Vrindavan, obscuring what little preaching zeal was left among the devotees of the east. To be sure, there were a few important "upholders of the faith" among the second generation Gaudiya Vaishnavas, such as Gopal Guru Goswami, Dhyanchandra and, according to some, the pancha sakha devotees, Ananta, Achyuta, Yashovanta, Balaram, and Jagannath. And, in Bengal, Jahnava Ma and Birabhadra were quite prominent. But not until the arrival of Shyamananda did Orissa become reestablished as the important holy place it had been in the time of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

The overthrow of Emperor Prataparudra's dynasty was no doubt a great hindrance to the further development of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement in the province, with the frequent change of dynasties, anarchy, and the subsequent succession of Pathan rule accompanied by its inevitable series of wars with the Moghuls. The people were severely subjected to plunder and torture both by its alien rulers and their enemies. The country as a whole was demoralized as a consequence of various adverse circumstances. There is no doubt that Gopal Guru Goswami and his disciples continued the Vaishnava movement for some time but it soon came to an end. Gopal Guru's disciples do not seem to have been as vigorous as an acharya ought to have been. Moreover, their activities were confined to Puri and its immediate surroundings, northern Orissa being free from their influence.

The temple of Jagannath was first desecrated by Kala Pahara and next by Pathan iconoclasts. The stronghold of Hinduism at Puri suffered brutal persecution at the hands of the fanatical Pathans who spared no pains to humiliate Vaishnavism in all possible ways. Orissa was then very badly in need both of great acharyas of extraordinary genius and also of a warrior class to deliver the Vaishnava religion. The former was wanted to inspire the people with religious vitality and bring back the moral life and courage of its population and the latter to secure and inviolate the Jagannath temple, the glory of Vaishnavism in eastern India....At this critical moment, Gaudiya Vaishnavism of western India sent its two worthy defenders in the persons of Shyamananda and Raj Man Singh, to restore the lost glory of Puri, the first Gaudiya headquarters established by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu Himself.

Raj Man Singh was the reputed disciple of Rupa-Sanatan, or, according to others, he was the disciple of Raghunath Bhatta Goswami. Moreover, since he was one of Akbar's chief generals

In effect, the two Vaishnava commandos, working separately, achieved significant harmony for the Gaudiya tradition in eastern India, accomplishing monumental tasks.

After the death of the great Pathan king of Orissa, Kutlu Khan (c. 1589-90), his sons and chief minister were compelled to sign a treaty with Raj Man Singh by which the Pathans agreed to relinquish the Jagannath temple to local Vaishnava leaders. This occurred, but only for a few years. With the death of the chief minister, the sons of the Pathan king again seized the temple. This demonstrative and unfair act infuriated Man Singh to such a degree that, although he was normally a peaceful man, he now considered physical expulsion. As time passed, he found no other alternative and obtained permission from Akbar to forcefully banish the Pathans of Orissa.

A vigorous war ensued on the banks of the Suvarnarekha. Man Singh led the armies himself and would not rest until all Muslim soldiers were driven far away from the home of Jagannath. The Raj forced the Pathans to flee and take refuge in nearby Cuttack, which he surrounded with his army on all sides. Placing all affairs in the hands of his assistants and deputies, he hastened to Puri to visit the temple and other holy places associated with the memory of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. He was greeted by Puri's afflicted citizens as a great saviour and eventually succeeded in returning the temple and much of Orissa to Hindu rule.¹⁹

If Man Singh liberated Orissa politically, allowing the citizens the necessary religious freedom to practice Vaishnavism, Shyamananda brought spiritual substance and inspiration to the people.

Everyone gradually recognized his excellent scholarship, courteous manner, and exemplary Vaishnava behavior. They came to see him as a great mystic, too, because his prolonged trances had become famous throughout the eastern provinces.

Reneti Kirtan

A significant feature of Shyamananda's movement at this time was the development of what came to be called the Reneti style of kirtan. This unique blend of classical kirtan music and Shyamananda's own brand of devotion originated in the Ranihati Pargana (the Midnapur District of present-day Orissa), and it is therefore sometimes referred to as Ranihati kirtan.

In its melodies and structure it is comparable to the traditional Hindustani Thumri pieces, well-known throughout India. But Reneti kirtan remained provincial and gradually became obscured by the famous Manohar-shoy style, popularized by the followers of Shrinivas Acharya.