Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

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The Story of Bengal's Greatest Bhakti Saint

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juggernaut

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For Ma, wherever you are

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Author's Note

This is not a scholarly biography of Chaitanya. Rather, it is an attempt to present his life as a story which appeals to people more than five centuries after his birth. The earliest accounts of Chaitanya's life and times, written either by contemporaries or younger people who knew him well, are more hagiographies than biographies. However, they contain valuable information and details about the man and his message, the important events of his life and the significant steps he took on his journey towards becoming a transformative religious figure. The two best-known works are the *Chaitanya Bhagavat* by Brindaban Das and the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* by Krishnadas Kabiraj. Both provide intimate, human details about Chaitanya, including his youthful high spirits,

the warmth of his relationships with friends and followers, the depth of his affection for his mother, the food that he appreciated and enjoyed eating with his disciples, and his deeply immersive love for Krishna – all of which add immediacy and realism to a figure who lived in medieval Bengal but still remains an iconic presence in Bengali culture, faith and history, regardless of whether he is perceived as a god or a man.

Prologue

In our house the flowers of the kadam tree were the most abiding, pleasurable symbols of the monsoon. Spherical, saffron-coloured clusters of tiny blooms, they filled the damp air with a scent that was sweet without being cloying, and lasted throughout the season. The tree itself was a remarkable specimen, three stories tall, with a rugged trunk encircled by a stone altar my grandfather had built. When it was in full bloom, the dark-green foliage, profusely dotted with round blossoms, under the deep slate-grey of the monsoon sky was a sight that many passers-by stopped to admire.

It was the presence of the tree that had made my grandfather purchase the extensive parcel of land on which he built his house. In Vaishnav literature, the kadam is an integral part of the legends about Krishna. Countless descriptions of

Krishna as a child playing under the kadam, of him as a young man flirtatiously engaging with gopis or milkmaids, waiting for his beloved Radha as he sat under the kadam and played seductive melodies on his flute, or swaying with her on a flower-decked swing attached to a kadam branch on the night of the full moon have accrued to lend a spiritual–mythical aura to a beautiful tree. For a devout Vaishnav like my grandfather, this particular kadam was an auspicious emblem, perhaps an indicator of divine blessing for the family.

By the time I was born, the tree had become the central pillar in a walled garden that was bordered by smaller trees and shrubs, with an area in the middle that was meticulously kept free of vegetation. Several times a year, this space would see an assembly of people – my grandfather's friends, colleagues and associates – who gathered for singing kirtan or Vaishnav devotional music. During the rainy season, a makeshift canopy was erected to protect the singers, the musical instruments and the rough carpets on which they sat. Some of the music consisted of pala kirtan, derived from medieval Bengali lyrics about

Krishna and his beloved Radha in Brindaban, or Brajadham, as it was often called. But most of the time the singers lifted their voices to perform naam kirtan, a repetitive chant of Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, set to beautiful ragas appropriate to the hour of the day or night. On special festive occasions, as on that of Jhulan, which took place in the middle of the monsoon season, these sessions would last for twenty-four hours – from late morning to the morning of the following day. The singers and instrument players took turns, coming inside the house for rest and refreshment. Participation was entirely democratic, including both trained singers and rank amateurs, even those who could barely hold a tune. Out of consideration for our non-Vaishnav neighbours, no instrumental accompaniments were used after midnight and even the singers lowered their voices as much as possible.

As a child, I eagerly awaited these twenty-four-hour music fests which kept the adults, especially my mother, grandmother and aunts, totally preoccupied. They were responsible (with the help of the servants) for creating lavish vegetarian meals that were offered to all who came.

The enveloping redolence of the food – especially that of the cinnamon–cardamom–ginger–ghee-scented khichuri – blending with the sound of music from the garden created, for me, a realm transformed. Our house, normally filled with the vociferous racket of a contentious, often angry family, became a strangely serene space.

Before each twenty-four-hour kirtan session, my grandmother would go down to the garden to set up the altar under the kadam with the appropriate religious symbols, and I always went with her to watch. A simple alpana pattern was painted on the altar with rice flour paste. Incense sticks were lit and wreathed the kadam trunk in fragrant wisps of smoke. Two glass-fronted paintings, brought from the house, were propped up against the tree trunk to face the space where the singers would sit. My grandmother draped each with a thick garland of tuberoses and I was allowed to arrange kadam flowers and their glossy leaves in front of them. One painting was of Krishna and Radha, he draped in a yellow dhoti and she in a night-blue sari, entwined by the symbol of Om. The other depicted a man wearing a saffron dhoti, a scarf round his neck,

his face raised to the sky, arms lifted above his shaven head which indicated his monkhood. His eyes half-closed and his lips curved in a gentle smile gave his face an expression of rapture that seemed to belong to another world. To me, he was an intriguing and fascinating figure, for although a man, he was worshipped along with Krishna the god. How could that be, I often wondered. Each time I asked, my grandmother would tell me stories about a man who was born centuries ago in an ordinary Brahmin family like ours and who experienced extraordinary revelations that led him to an awareness of Krishna that was so potent and so intimate that it almost made him the same as Krishna. His name was Chaitanya, or, as she called him, Chaitanya Deb – Chaitanya the god.

No matter how often I heard these stories, I still wondered how a man could become a god. Inside the house, a different portrait, hanging in my grandparents' bedroom, further complicated the issue. In this one, Chaitanya, looking heavenward, stood beside a man dressed in a similar saffron dhoti, with his eyes focused on Chaitanya. The expression on this second man's face was nothing short of adoration, and yet it was different from

the intense, otherworldly exaltation that marked Chaitanya's face. He was Nityananda, the best-known disciple/follower/friend of Chaitanya, according to my grandmother. And I found it intriguing that she did not consider him a god, even though his connection with Chaitanya was intimate enough for them to be called brothers. At the beginning of each kirtan session, in the garden or in the house, the lead performers always sang an invocation, not to Krishna himself, but to these two men, affectionately given the names of Gour and Nitai, asking them to bless the assembly and accept the adoration of the singers and devotees. The invocation was purely vocal. None of the instruments – harmonium, khol and/or pakhawaj (drums), chiming cymbals or the stringed esraj – was used as accompaniment. It always had a magical effect of silencing all surrounding clamour, as listeners and performers readied themselves for the kirtan to come. And when that started, the chorus of voices and instruments rising to the sky through the branches of the kadam inevitably sent a thrill through me.

I was not allowed to go into the garden once the singing commenced. But on lesser occasions,

when a smaller group of singers gathered in the large room on the first floor for an evening of kirtan, I had the freedom to stand near the door or sit quietly in a corner of the room and listen until it was my bedtime. The music was no less thrilling inside the house. And there was the added fascination of being able to observe the people who were there. As they sang through the evening hours, the Hare Krishna chant rose and fell in countless melodic variations, while the khol players sometimes stood up to perform extraordinarily intricate beats, each responding to the others as if a dialogue was being carried on in parallel to the singing. And sooner or later – this is what I anticipated most eagerly – several singers would also stand, raise their arms just like Chaitanya in the painting and start swaying hypnotically to the rhythm of the music. Most were men, and no one in the family found it odd or comic to watch these normally serious, middle-aged or elderly professionals, some of them still wearing the jacket and tie they had worn to work, abandon themselves to such an intensity of spiritual expression. But there was also a woman, her affluence evident from her

glittering jewellery and expensive saris, who had no qualms about casting aside traditional decorum and joining the dancers. Her way of wearing the sari provoked subdued smiles among the women in my family. The shoulder end was always much too long and almost swept the ground like a train as she walked – something of which she seemed supremely unaware. As she swayed to the music, her intense absorption, her half-closed eyes and the slight smile that curved her lips gave her a look that was almost exotic, markedly different from the primness and reserve that marked the faces of the other women present. One of my uncles referred to her as the golden doe, after the magical creature described in the Ramayana. But another gave her a moniker we all adopted – The Duchess. Despite finding her slightly ridiculous, I could not deny her fascinating quality. It was always a disappointment when she didn't show up.

The evenings ended with the joyful, celebratory practice called 'harir loot'. My grandmother would come in with a large brass platter containing batashas – small candies made with dropped sugar syrup – and throw up handfuls into the air. As the batashas came down like confetti, all

the participants went down on their hands and knees, trying to gather as many as possible. An element of friendly competition was on display even as grown men and women were overcome with childlike merriment. I had an edge in this game of capture, being the smallest and nimblest person on the ground. When my grandmother's platter was empty, I always had more batashas than anybody else – my loot, my booty, my gift from the lord – nestling in my skirt which I had gathered up like a pouch.

The central figure in most of these performances, however, was a man who never got up, never raised his arms, nor displayed any overt religious emotions. He sat on a small carpet, usually bare-chested except for the sacred thread, his lean body held ramrod-straight, the expression on his hollow-cheeked face one of deep concentration. This was my grandfather's guru, a man of ascetic habits and intense spirituality. I don't know when the two had first met, but whenever he came to stay at our house, all the energy seemed to flow out of everyone and be concentrated around him. He never stayed for long. A few days' visit would be followed by an extended absence before the next

one. But I noticed that during those few days, there were no arguments or open discord between my uncles and aunts. He had inducted my grandfather in the faith and practice of Vaishnavism as preached by Chaitanya, a faith based on bhakti or loving devotion instead of rigid asceticism or elaborate ritual. As a child, I did not know what exactly this meant, but what entranced me about him was that he was a writer and composer of the most exquisite lyrics about Chaitanya. Aside from the traditional kirtans, my family also frequently sang these songs which conjured up images of a beautiful, self-forgetful seeker. Trying to visualize a man so in love with the divine that his face was continuously bathed with tears of longing as he walked the streets looking for his beloved, I felt a love for Chaitanya that was sustained by the pure ardour of childhood, even though faith and reverence were too complex for me.

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Many years later, when I had stopped looking at the world with the simple regard of a child, when my grandfather and his guru were long gone,